

BOOK REVIEW

At a Moment of Electoral Equipose: A Review of *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis.
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There are events in the life of a country that everyone remembers. For those of a certain age, the Kennedy assassination. For a younger generation, 9/11. And then there are the smaller moments that each of us carry which would find their way into a memoir if we were so inclined to indulge in one.

One memory that I cannot forget is the morning after the presidential election of 2016. I was walking to work, carrying my usual worries of patients, writing projects, and the day's meetings when my reverie was interrupted by the loud roar of a large half-truck with oversized wheels dangling a huge TRUMP flag off its stern. The driver looked at me with contempt (or was it disdain?) and sped away flagrantly breaking the speed limit. He was showing off because he could. His guy had won, and he felt entitled to break the placid calm of Upper East Side elites. I imagined he had a shotgun hanging over the rear-view window.

So much for my imagination. Ok, he may not have had a shotgun in his cab. But his glare, at least for me, felt like “the shot heard around the world.” That phrase penned by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his poem, “Concord Hymn” to commemorate America's fight for independence seemed ironic.¹ This shot was fired in the opposite direction. Not for democracy, but back toward autocracy, the very thing American patriots rebelled against in 1775.

No one heard the fusillade that I imagined that morning. It was a private moment which froze me in place and then prompted me to action. I asked myself, what exactly was going on? Could America, this place that my grandparents came to as immigrants for freedom, could *that country* which had treated us so well turn toward autocracy? Or worse, toward fascism?

And as importantly how did this happen? How did a TV personality impersonating a successful businessman become the 45th president of the United States? How did a country that had elected its first Black president 8 years earlier drift so far?

These were the preoccupations that worried me as I walked to work. My usual concerns were dwarfed by something far more consequential, the preservation of American democracy. I thought of Franklin's adage, that we have “a Republic” but only “if you can keep it.”² Would democratic institutions hold? Would we see profiles in courage reminiscent of Edward R. Murrow's take down of Joe McCarthy during the Red Scare of the 50's?³ Or bipartisan pushback embodied by Senators Sam Ervin and Howard Baker of the Senate Watergate Committee?⁴

No one seemed to have any answers in those early days. Not the pundits on MSNBC who sometimes seemed more impressed with their clever clown-car characterizations of the new administration than the lurking existential threat. Trump made good TV fodder whether broadcasts originated from the left or right. We became enthralled with all sorts of distractions about crowd size at the inaugural while the media was demonized for promulgating “alt-facts,” an oxymoron which described the unreality of a dawning autocratic age.⁵

I needed guidance. Pundits began to invoke Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*,⁶ a 1935 novel describing the dystopian rise of Fascism in America. Lewis, the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature is better known for his classics *Mainstreet*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith* a gem of a book which describes the life of an idealistic young doctor turned researcher.⁷ But all of a sudden *It Can't Happen Here* became the rage as a playbook of how it *could* happen here. I ordered a paperback copy but must confess that I did not read it until the summer of 2024.

It was just too much to follow the news about the Trump Administration and then have the discipline to read a novel about a brewing dictatorship. I wanted my “outside” reading to distract me from the news. And besides, the need for a primer seemed to diminish over the 4 years of the Trump administration: the first impeachment; the upholding of the election results by the courts; the Biden victory; and the

inauguration after the terror of 6 January. Although deeply shaken, the institutions of democracy held, and we were on our way toward keeping the legacy of Lexington and Concord alive. I am not sure if Emerson would be proud, or just relieved, but it seemed less pressing to pick up the novel.

But as we approached the Biden-Trump rematch, the terror of that early morning walk returned in full force. A Trump victory seemed inevitable, an outcome that became more terrifying after the disastrous first debate and the assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania. The Republican Convention seemed more like a coronation and Trump even tried to appear sympathetic following his brush with death. It was finally time to read *It Can't Happen Here*.

I will be honest. It is a hard book to get into. Lots of characters, lots of digressions into the political machinations of an emerging version of American fascism. It has the complexity of a *Russian* novel with its political intrigue, subplots and narrative forays. It will be a tough go for the modern reader more accustomed to tweets than the thickets of an American novel from the first third of the 20th Century.

But the effort pays off, in large part because we come to know Doremus Jessup, the small-town editor of *The Daily Informer*, the local paper serving Beulah, Vermont. We witness America's fall through his eyes, which become ours. Like most of us who read this journal, he is terrified by the prospect of American fascism.

Jessup is a liberal everyman, democratic with a small "d," with wide-ranging tastes and interests. Lewis takes on a tour of his study perched atop the Jessup home as an introduction to Doremus's life of the mind. It is an amiable space, "an endearing mess of novels, copies of the *Congressional Record*, of the *New Yorker*, *Time*, *New Republic*, *New Masses*," road maps, an old typewriter, a couple of comfortable leather chairs and the "complete works of Thomas Jefferson, his chief hero" and the poetry of Sandburg.⁸ It was an intellectual's refuge equipped with the complete *Oxford English Dictionary*, a bunch of fountain pens and horn-rimmed glasses with an outdated prescription. You can smell the pipe smoke and want nothing more than to be Jessup's friend and to pet his dog, Foolish.

But not everyone in Beulah is Jessup's friend. Underneath the Norman Rockwell veneer, Beulah is a fractured place, much like America today. There is class stratification and disgruntled citizens like Jessup's handyman, Shad Ledue, who has made a career of loafing and envy. There the "elites" own half the town. Jessup is stuck in a very small middle of this all-American mess, where a small cadre of professionals, clergy, and academics form a small nexus of open-mindedness, and a vision of life that is more than material survival on the one hand, and vulgar materialism on the other.

These divisions have always been part of American life but are usually submerged by enough prosperity for everyone to get their fill. But 1935 America was no ordinary time.⁹ The nation is in the grips of the Depression and the people are desperate for change, making for a dangerous combination. In Sinclair Lewis's America, Franklin Roosevelt is in decline politically and Senator Berzelius (Buzz) Windrip emerges as the Democratic nominee. A mid-western populist educated in a "Southern Baptist college, of approximately the same academic standing as a Jersey City business school and a Chicago law school..." He is a gregarious pol "who drank Coca-Cola with the Methodists, beer with the Lutherans, California white wine with the Jewish village merchants – and, when they were safe from observation, white-mule whisky with all of them."¹⁰

Windrip controls his state's political machinery and surrounds himself with people who remind the modern reader of Stephen Bannon, Stephen Miller, and Roger Stone. His lieutenant Lee Saranson is an especially scary figure who has neither principles nor political ideology. Like his boss, all interactions are purely transactional. He was truly spooky, "his eyes were sparks at the bottoms of two dark wells."¹¹

The rhetorical backbone of Buzz's campaign was a document entitled, "Zero Hour – Over the Top" in which the candidate hollers that "we've got to change our system a lot maybe even change the whole Constitution (but change it legally, and not by violence) to bring it up from the horseback-and-corduroy-road epoch to the automobile-and-cement period of today. The Executive had got to have a freer hand and be able to move quickly in an emergency, and not be tied down by a lot of dumb shyster-lawyer congressman taking months to shoot off their mouths in debate."¹² All of this was promoted under the guise of patriotism, invoking the "Founding Fathers of this great land back in 1776!"¹³

Autocrats always say what they mean and do what they say. After all, *Mein Kampf* outlines Hitler's plan for Germany under National Socialism. And Buzz Windrip outlined his plan precisely: He would

change the Constitution and consolidate power using the very democratic institutions he sought to destroy as he formulated an oligarchy. Along the way he would make a grab for power by insulting opponents and saying they were dumb, thus undermining deliberations and the democratic process. Does this sound familiar?

The operational plan guiding this “legal” insurrection was a document entitled, *The Fifteen Points of Victory for the Forgotten Men*.¹⁴ These forgotten folks are reminiscent of Hillary Clinton’s “deplorables” in the 2016 campaign who became the backbone of Trump’s MAGA movement. Under the false flag of populism, the plan seeks to consolidate economic and political power for Windrip and his cronies.

Its planks consolidate the banks and the stock markets under a Federal Central Bank appointed by the president *without* Senate confirmation with an aim to nationalize all sectors of the economy for the “Profit of the Whole People.” Add to that a promised \$5,000 stipend to all citizens—a promise that is never kept. The unions are similarly subsumed under a “League of Forgotten Men,” again controlled by a commission appointed by the president.¹⁵

Have no fear, it *reassures* the reader that there is “absolute freedom of religion so long that “... no atheist, agnostic, believer in Black Magic, nor any Jews who shall refuse to swear allegiance to the New Testament, nor any person of faith who refuse to take the Pledge to the Flag, shall be permitted to hold any public office or to practice as a teacher, a professor, lawyer, judge, or as a physician, except in the category of Obstetrics.”¹⁶ A page out of the Spanish Inquisition or Hitler’s Germany with an ironic twist given current restrictions in the post *Dobbs* era.

Antisemitism and white supremacy are recurring tropes, just as they have become our current dog whistles. Jews, who are heralded as the greatest supporters of the League “will continue to prosper and to be recognized as fully Americanized, though only so long as they continue to support our ideals.” Blacks are categorically prohibited from voting, participating in the professions, holding public office, and teaching in anything but grammar schools. They are also taxed at 100% of incomes above \$10,000 per year.¹⁷ So much for generational wealth in the Windrip administration...

Women fare no better. Any woman who is employed in the workplace, except in “peculiarly feminine spheres” such as nursing and beauty parlors, is to be dispatched back to the home for “their incomparably sacred duties as home-makers and as mother of strong, honorable future Citizens of the Commonwealth.”¹⁸ Childless cat ladies, beware!

The final point calls for the absolute destruction of the constitutional balance of power using the Constitution to cannibalize itself:

Congress shall, immediately upon our inauguration initiate amendments to the Constitution (a), that the President shall have the authority to institute and execute all necessary measures for the conduct of the government during this critical epoch; (b), that Congress shall serve only in an advisory capacity calling to the attention of the President and his aides and Cabinet any needed legislation, but not acting upon the same until authorization by the President so to act; and (c), that the Supreme Court shall immediately have removed from its jurisdiction the power to negate, by ruling them to be unconstitutional or by any other judicial action, any or all acts of the President, his duly appointed aides, or Congress.¹⁹

There you have it: the decapitation of Madisonian democracy in a lethal paragraph so short as to appear to be an excerpt from a banal snippet of legislation. But it is a plan to transform the presidency to a dictatorship and remove Constitutional guardrails ensuring the separation of powers. Jessup understood that “any gang daring enough and unscrupulous enough, and smart enough not to *seem* illegal, can grab hold of the entire government and have all the power and applause and salutes ...” I wondered if the authors of *Project 2025*²⁰ had *Fifteen Points* in mind when they penned their blueprint for American autocracy. Sometimes life does imitate literature.

But before any of that could occur, Windrip had to win. And he did by force of his “common man” personality and by force itself. Violence is never far from his methods. Jessup first witnessed this eruption when he visited New York to cover the 1936 Democratic convention for *The Daily Informer*. En route to Madison Square Garden, he encounters a group of Windrip’s Minute Men, or M.M.’s, walking down 8th

Avenue. The M.M.'s are described by the movement as a "marching club" of young men dedicated to their chief. Their name evokes the American Revolution, and their uniforms are emblazoned with a five-pointed star, "because the star on the American flag was five-pointed whereas the stars of both the Soviet banner and the Jews – the shield of David were six-pointed."²¹ No matter that the Soviet star also had five points, it was good "to simultaneously challenge the Jews and Bolsheviks – the M.M.'s had good intentions, even if their symbolism did slip a bit."²²

The M.M.'s attired in white shirts distinguished them from "degenerate European uniforms of tyranny." As Windrip elaborated, "Black shirts? Brown shirts? Red shirts? ... All these degenerate European uniforms of tyranny! No Sir! The Minute Men are not Fascist or Communist or anything at all but plain Democratic – the knight-champions of the rights of the Forgotten Men – shock troops of Freedom."²³

But innocuous they were not. On 8th Avenue, Jessup saw an elderly man challenge a bunch of M.M.'s shouting, "To hell with Buzz! Three cheers for F.D.R.!"²⁴ That unleashed M.M.'s who "burst into hoodlum wrath" beating the old man, "his face, suddenly veal-white, laced with rivulets of blood." As he fell to the ground eight of the thugs continued to kick him with "thick marching-shoes." In response, Jessup "wriggled away, very sick, altogether helpless."²⁵

Jessup's dread was our dread when we watched helplessly on January 6 when Capitol Police were brutalized by Proud Boys, the very real descendants of the literary M.M.'s. Both para-military groups operated under permissive power structures which encouraged terror and condoned violence. Long before Trump famously told the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by,"²⁶ Windrip implored his:

... own boys, the Minute Men, everywhere in America! To you and only you I look for help to make America a proud, rich land again. You have been scorned. They thought you were the 'lower classes' ... They told you were no good... I tell you that you are, ever since yesterday noon, the highest lords of the land - the aristocracy – the makers of the new America of freedom and justice. Boys! I need you... Stand fast. Anybody tries to block you – give the swine the point of your bayonet!²⁷

That phrase, "make America a proud, rich land again" eerily presages the mantra of the MAGA movement today.

As the Windrip Administration gets underway, things go from bad to worse. The M.M.'s become increasingly brutal. Shad Ledue, Jessup's handyman, still full of class resentment, is elevated to a Commissioner of the M.M.'s charged with running the town that once ridiculed him. He becomes part of an M.M. network which soon sets up prison camps and takes over the administration of government at all levels.

It is all very intentional. Under the guise of efficiency, Windrip eliminates the states in favor of regional governments, thus ridding us of the protections of federalism. Along the way, colleges and universities are closed with the professoriate pushed aside and often imprisoned in concentration camps. Deportations begin. Anti-intellectualism reigns. Dartmouth College, now part of the *Northeastern Province*, is appropriated to run district three which includes what was formerly known as New Hampshire and Vermont. The "District Commissioner merely chased the Dartmouth students out and took over the college buildings for his offices to the considerable approval of Amherst, Williams, and Yale."²⁸ The collegiate rivalries would be sophomoric if not for the gravity of the appropriation.

When Jessup and other local editors are called to Dartmouth to discuss media portrayals of the Windrip government, he sees the College's transformation. The district commissioner has turned the College's library into a "new viceregal lodge"²⁹ while the labs are in shambles, with broken glassware all about. The editors are kindly implored to write favorably of the new regime, but the implicit message was clear: should they stray, what happened to that storied college could happen to them.

When a professor from the Rockefeller Institute and a New York rabbi are brutally murdered by Windrip's thugs, Jessup can no longer contain his indignation. He writes an expose in the *Informer*. He knows it would cause trouble and is terrified about what might happen, but he publishes it anyway. In short order, the M.M.'s come to the paper and arrest him. A show trial soon follows. When his physician son-in-law appeals for clemency, the presiding judge ridicules his protestations and says to Shad, "I

should think we'd heard enough from the Comrade, wouldn't you, Commissioner? Just take the bastard out and shoot him."³⁰ There is a slight struggle as the good doctor is taken away until, "from the courtyard, the sound of a rifle volley, a terrifying wail, one single emphatic shot, and nothing after."³¹ It is that simple, a life is taken. An objection silenced.

That passage made me tremble. What might be the consequence of *my* writing this essay? If democracy prevails, this piece would be an obscure paper likely to be forgotten as soon as it is published. But should the election go the other way, might it condemn me? I never imagined I would have to ask that question. But it should not be a surprise because the most powerful aspect of fascism is the internalization of fear. It is ubiquitous when a democracy dies.


That is the power of *It Can't Happen Here*. It is so real, the parallels to modern America so prescient, that its story becomes ours. And it is a story you will need to read for yourself. I will neither reveal Jessup's fate nor that of his America because that narrative indeterminacy parallels our own historic moment. As I wrote in early October 2024, we still do not know how things will turn out and *whether it will happen here*.

To invoke a bioethics metaphor, we remain in electoral equipoise³²: the election is tied and either outcome is equally plausible. But whatever the outcome, the undercurrent threat to democracy remains, whether overt or not. And so too the countervailing spirit of American Liberalism persists. That ethos is embodied in Doremus Jessup who rebelled against tyranny as native as a 4th of July celebration. We must hope that his ideals never die so that democracy might survive.³³

Notes

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13. See note 6, Lewis 2014:30.
14. See note 6, Lewis 2014:61.
15. See note 6, Lewis 2014:61.
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