

“America First”: We Have Seen This Movie Before

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As a young boy, Arthur N. Lehmann, was one of tens of thousands who, at their parents' urging, joined The Hitler Youth in the 1930s. Decades after the war that killed most of them, he wrote, “I had been called upon by my Fuhrer to participate in making my country great again. ... What was there for a ten-year old to question?”

Anything can be perverted, including patriotism and religion. In the 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin twisted both at The Shrine of the Little Flower Church in Royal Oak, Michigan. “The radio priest,” as he was known, was always in the news, spurring a sick ideological movement called “The Christian Front.” His weekly audience numbered some 30 million, about a quarter of the nation's adult population. Listeners were told that that Hitler was justified in persecuting Jews, Italy's strutting fascist dictator, Mussolini, received glowing reviews, and Coughlin praised Spain's fascist Franco, who, in the 1930s “ruled by the gun” and was responsible for the deaths of 100,000. (Hitler sent Franco aircraft, bombs, and other new weapons to test them on civilians in preparation for his own upcoming war.)

One rally of The Christian Front drew 15,000, where a certain George Deatherage raged from the podium, “I am not content to walk in the footsteps of Christ. I will walk ahead of him with a club!” (We are now hearing white Christian nationalists say that Christ was “too weak and too woke.”)

Another big name promoting racial slanders and conspiracy theories was none other than Henry Ford. In the 1920s, in addition to his factories, he owned a newspaper called The Dearborn Independent, which was routinely filled with headlines such as “The International Jew: The World's Problem.” Copies were available at every Ford dealership, and the latest issue was placed on the front seat of every Model T driven off the lot. For two years, his paper serialized the most toxic antisemitic document, ever, The Protocols of Zion. Then, he published it in four volumes. In the 1925 first edition of Mein Kampf (My Struggle), Hitler praised the racist industrialist and said in a 1931 interview. “I regard Henry Ford as my inspiration.”

Consider, too, the world-famous American Charles Lindburgh, idolized for his dramatic 1927 solo flight across the Atlantic. In the US of the 1930s, no one was a bigger fan of the burgeoning “patriotic” movement called “America First.” Under that slogan, he campaigned to keep America from entering WWII, thinking that Hitler would be victorious in Europe. In May of 1941, Lindburgh was the headliner speaker at the America First rally that had 23,000 people jammed into New York's Madison Square Garden and another 15,000 outside. (Goggle “A night at the Garden,” a brief archive film to see 40-foot-tall banners picturing George Washington flanked by swastikas.) After Pearl Harbor was attacked, Lindburgh, the great pioneering aviator, applied for an active service commission in the Air Force –and was rejected.

The other main speaker at the Garden event boosting America First was US Senator Burton K. Wheeler, a Democrat from Montana. Supporters of the cause included Montana Republican US Representative Jacob Thorkelson. In addition, two dozen members of Congress were involved in a scheme using envelopes bearing their own return-address labels (which could be sent out to constituents under their free mailing privileges). In this way, pro-Nazi propaganda blanketed the country: teachers, ministers, newspaper editors, and officials in state and local government were deluged with hundreds of thousands of items printed by a Nazi organization in Germany to justify Hitler's invasion of other countries and to prevent us from standing in the way—all at taxpayer expense. “How does that grab you?”

All of this, and more, was part of the original fascist-friendly “America First” movement. Thus, Trump's drumbeat of the phrase is not new but part of another deliberate effort to camouflage abusive power as patriotism. To “make America great, again,” Trump and his acolytes are also censoring and rewriting unsavory parts of our past, while stoking fear, prejudice, and resentment against many nonwhite others who, to them, are not “real” Americans, anyway.

As the saying goes, calls for violence have no place in our society, but no one has done more of that than Donald Trump and his devotees, even suggesting the death penalty for opponents. Onetime campaign manager and chief presidential advisor Steve Bannon said they should have their heads displayed on pikes outside the White House; Trump never disagreed. (Even C. Kirk once said that Biden, “honestly, should be sent to prison or given the death penalty.”) Roll the tapes. So, concerning references by myself or others to Hitleresque behavior: can't we learn from what Germany discovered too late, about keeping silent in the face of undeniably dictatorial language and actions? Thousands of our historians, university presidents, judges, and legal experts are aghast at what is happening, and many are speaking out.

We should all be able to recognize the authoritarian --in fact, unamerican-- tones and actions emanating from this administration on a weekly basis ...because, indeed, we have seen this movie before.

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