

PREQUEL

AN AMERICAN FIGHT AGAINST FASCISM

RACHEL MADDOW

Overall Rating:



Did you complete the book?

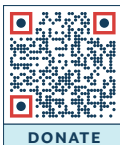
Yes No Almost

What was your overall opinion of the book?

What was your favorite part of the book?

What did you not like?

Your favorite quote:



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THEMES

01. Considering the interconnected themes of American isolationism, antisemitism, and fascism in the lead-up to WWII, do you believe that it was possible for these ideologies to occur independently or were they inevitably intertwined?

02. How does Rachel Maddow's narrative style influence your perceptions of historical events and figures? Does the blend of wry humor and meticulous research soften the harsh realities of history or illuminate them in a new light?

03. What were the motivations of individuals who were drawn to fascist ideologies in *Prequel*? Consider both personal and societal factors.

04. The Nazis used both censorship—for example, in the PCA's censorship of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*—and extensive propaganda to influence the US. How does censorship and propaganda shape public discourse?

05. *Prequel* tells the story of determined individuals who worked to counter fascism, often despite the resistance of US officials and authorities. Are government policies and actions in countering the spread of fascist ideologies effective?

06. How effective is investigative journalism in uncovering and exposing hidden facets of history?

07. What role does media literacy play today? Was the historical context presented in *Prequel* and its relevance to interpreting news in the digital age effective?

08. How does media ownership and corporate interests impact journalistic integrity today?

09. What ethical considerations and challenges do journalists face when reporting on controversial or sensitive historical events today?

10. Does fear and insecurity shape public opinion and political movements the same today as it did in *Prequel*? How?

11. What role do charismatic leaders play in the spread of fascist ideologies?

KEY FIGURES

12. Throughout the book, we see figures like **Henry Ford** espousing antisemitic views while being celebrated for their contributions to American society. Do you believe that our societal recognition of these figures should consider both their accomplishments and their darker tendencies?

13. *Prequel* conveys a powerful image of those drawn to authoritarian figures, like **Philip Johnson** and **George Sylvester Viereck** and their fascination with Hitler. Why do you think individuals in democratic societies are attracted to such authoritarian figures? Are there any current figures who remind you of these men from history, and if so, who are they and why?

14. Think of **George Sylvester Viereck's** success in spreading Nazi propaganda in the US. Can we draw parallels between the unchecked dissemination of information then and the spread of disinformation in our current digital age?

15. Given that **George Sylvester Viereck** attempted to use his influence over powerful men for personal gain, how might such manipulation be related to the current era of political lobbying and the 'swamp' of governmental corruption many Americans are concerned about today?

16. The figure of **Huey Long** demonstrates how the allure of power can be manifested on a domestic level, even in the context of a democracy. In what ways did Long's reign reflect the authoritarian nature of fascism, and do you believe it was more of a symptom or a cause of the broader cultural shift at the time?

17. Do you think **Huey Long's** popularity was fueled more by his charisma and promises of bridging economic inequality or his blatant disregard for democratic principles?

18. Can a character like **Huey Long** with his populist, yet corrupt practices be labeled decisively as either good or evil?

19. Rachel Maddow presents the story of **Leon Lewis**, a less prominent individual, yet one whose actions demonstrate a strong commitment to democratic principles. In what ways does Lewis's story challenge our widely held notions about fame and influence in America? Can his role be seen as a catalyst in the fight against fascism?

20. Is democracy truly under threat, and if so, can we effectively tackle it the way **Leon Lewis** did, or will we require a different approach?

SELECT QUOTES

“ The few paragraphs summing up his life neglected to mention his grueling, thankless, and ultimately successful decade-long enterprise to reveal and destroy the most dangerous agents of Hitler-inspired fascism in America. But he did do that, and it’s not too late to shout it to the rooftops.

“ Rauschnig’s testimony, in other words, was that the Nazi game plan aimed to disunite the United States by tearing at the weakest political and cultural seams in American society: the divide between haves and have-nots, fear and hatred of immigrants, white supremacist race hate, and antisemitism.

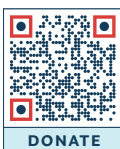
“ I move that in view of your honor’s attitude this afternoon—the way you looked at me and condemned me, you have become so prejudiced against me, it will be impossible for you to sit in fairness in this case, both as arbiter and in judgment—that you disqualify yourself.

“ One big appeal of fascism, if nothing else, was its unapologetic embrace of cruelty. Cruelty towards others, coupled with hypersensitivity towards any slight to oneself.

“ In blunt terms, Huey was threatening that any federal government officials coming into the state of Louisiana would risk arrest and imprisonment for doing so. It was a big F-U to FDR, and to the whole idea of the sovereignty of the U.S. government.

“ Then, too, there was Long’s seemingly limitless appetite for and accretion of authority. ‘A perfect democracy can come close to looking like a dictatorship,’ Huey told one reporter, ‘a democracy in which the people are so satisfied they have no complaint.’ He was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1930, but insisted he could simultaneously hold on to the governorship until 1932, when he installed his chosen puppet. And why shouldn’t he? Who was going to stop him?

“ The evidence will show that they intended to abolish the Republican and Democratic parties. The evidence will show that they intended to abolish freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom from arrest without cause, and all the other civil liberties guaranteed us by the constitution.



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CAST OF CHARACTERS, In order of appearance

GEORGE SYLVESTER VIERECK German immigrant, American citizen, Nazi agent

PHILIP JOHNSON American fanboy of Hitler and fascism who became one of the world's most renowned architects

HUEY LONG Louisiana pol who gave America a 1930s test-drive for dictatorship

LAWRENCE DENNIS author of *The Coming American Fascism* and similar treatises; a man with an unexpected and hidden personal history

FATHER CHARLES COUGHLIN the antisemitic Catholic "Radio Priest" with an audience in the tens of millions

ARNOLD ERIC SEVAREID cub reporter in Minneapolis who went on to become a famous and erudite CBS News commentator

WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY who believed he had been visited by Jesus, multiple times; pined after the job of America's Hitler

HENRY ALLEN violent white supremacist who once tried to "purchase" the Ku Klux Klan

LESLIE FRY promoter of the Illuminati, the New World Order, and other fantasies she pitched as real; gave the toxic Protocols of the Elders of Zion to Henry Ford

LEON LEWIS antifascist spymaster of Southern California, American hero

GEORGE DEATHERAGE American fascist who sought advice from the German embassy, and got it

GENERAL GEORGE VAN HORN MOSELEY a man big enough to make a play to be the American fñh-rer, but small enough that he was not willing to risk his U.S. Army pension to do it

CHARLES B. HUDSON Nazi-supported antisemitic pamphleteer who came to Washington from Omaha to buck up General Moseley

JOHN C. METCALFE German American newspaper reporter who went undercover to investigate Nazis all across America

LEON TURROU FBI special agent who sparked a new kind of cinema in Hollywood

JOHN F. CASSIDY who led an armed insurrectionist group, complete with automatic rifles from a local U.S. military armory and handmade bombs; considered himself a good, God-fearing Christian

CAST OF CHARACTERS, In order of appearance (cont)

O. JOHN ROGGE Justice Department prosecutor who was up to his eyeballs in fascist/Nazi treachery for more than a decade

SENATOR ERNEST LUNDEEN (AND HIS WIFE, NORMA) George Sylvester Viereck's first collaborators inside Congress

HARRIET JOHNSON, PHYLLIS POSIVIO, EDWARD CORNEABY Senate staffers who dropped the dime on the Lundeens

HENRY HOKE direct-mail advertising guru who helped uncover a remarkable Nazi plot inside Congress

SENATOR BURTON K. WHEELER powerful U.S. senator with friends in even higher places

SENATOR ROBERT RICE REYNOLDS rip-roaring pro-fascist pol with some novel ideas about restricting immigration

DILLARD STOKES Washington Post reporter with a knack for being in the right place at the right time

WILLIAM POWER MALONEY hard-charging and cantankerous Justice Department prosecutor

GEORGE HILL George Sylvester Viereck's "keyman" inside Congress

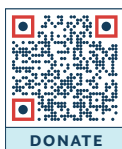
REPRESENTATIVE HAMILTON FISH Hill's boss, who was on good terms with senior officials in Hitler's Germany but detested Franklin Delano Roosevelt

LAURA INGALLS the most famous and accomplished female pilot living in 1940; also a paid Nazi agent

ELIZABETH DILLING who did yeoman's work popularizing "Red Scare" tactics long before Joe McCarthy came on the scene, with financial backing from Henry Ford

LOIS DE LAFAYETTE WASHBURN an antisemitic activist so convinced of her own explosive power that she sometimes called herself T.N.T.

SENATOR WILLIAM LANGER nicknamed "Wild Bill" for good reason, the best friend a Nazi agent could have in



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KEY TERMS (1/3)

Antisemitism

A form of prejudice, discrimination, or hostility directed against Jews as an ethnic, religious, or racial group. Antisemitism has deep historical roots and has manifested in various forms over centuries, ranging from religious persecution and economic discrimination to violent pogroms like *Kristallnacht* and, ultimately, the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Antisemitism can manifest in stereotypes, conspiracy theories, discriminatory practices, and acts of violence against individuals or institutions associated with Jewish identity. *Prequel* explores the rise of antisemitism in the US leading up to World War II.

Authoritarianism

A form of government or leadership, authoritarianism is characterized by a strong central authority and limited political freedoms. In an authoritarian system, power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader, a small group of individuals, or a ruling party, often without meaningful checks and balances or democratic processes. The governing authority typically makes decisions without significant input or participation from the general population. Key features of authoritarianism include the suppression of political opposition, restrictions on civil liberties, limited freedom of expression, and a lack of independent judiciary. The leader or ruling party in an authoritarian system often maintains control through coercion, censorship, surveillance, and sometimes by using military or security forces to quash dissent. Authoritarian regimes can exist in various political, social, and cultural contexts, and they may arise for different reasons, including concerns about stability, a desire for centralized control, or the concentration of power in response to perceived threats. In *Prequel*, pro-Nazi Americans like **Philip Johnson** and **Lawrence Dennis** yearned for an authoritarian dictator to take over the US government. Louisiana politician **Huey Long** was an American example of an authoritarian-style leader.

Communism

A sociopolitical and economic ideology, communism advocates for a classless and stateless society in which the means of production are collectively owned and controlled. At its core, communism envisions a society without private ownership of property and in which wealth and resources are distributed according to ability and need. **Karl Marx** and **Friedrich Engels** articulated the theoretical foundations of communism in the 19th century, primarily in their seminal work *The Communist Manifesto* and later expanded upon this in *Das Kapital*. **Marx** envisioned communism as the end goal of historical development, following the transitional stage of socialism, in which the working class (or proletariat) would seize control of the means of production and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. Over time, as social and economic inequalities were eradicated, the need for a centralized state would wither away, leading to a truly communist society.

In practice, the aspect of control has prevented the full actualization of **Marx's** vision. Various countries have attempted to implement communist ideals, most notably the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and others. However, the application of communism inevitably deviates from its theoretical foundations, leading to different interpretations and implementations.

KEY TERMS (2/3)

Communism (cont.)

In *Prequel*, Maddow describes the communist movement in the US as not having much strength relative to its reputation; many US citizens were skeptical or even fearful of communism. However, communists in the US did not exercise much political power, and when they did, they used it to agitate for workers' rights and the rights of the marginalized.

Democracy

Democracy is a political system in which power resides with the people, who either participate directly in decision-making or elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf. A democratic system emphasizes individual rights, the rule of law, political pluralism, and periodic elections to ensure accountability and a peaceful transfer of power. In a democratic society, citizens have the right to express their opinions and influence decisions that impact the community or nation. In *Prequel*, Maddow notes that Nazi propaganda aimed to destroy Americans' faith in democracy, disuniting and destabilizing the US to make it more susceptible to a revolution and eventual authoritarian rule.

Fascism

In contrast to democracy, fascism is a political ideology and system characterized by authoritarian and nationalistic tendencies, extreme centralized power, dictatorial leadership, suppression of dissent, and often, the promotion of aggressive nationalism and racism. It typically opposes liberal democratic laws and individual freedoms, instead embracing a strong state-led control over society and the economy. Historically, fascist regimes have arisen because of charismatic leaders who use propaganda and force to maintain control. Notable examples include **Mussolini's** regime in Italy and **Hitler's** Nazi regime in Germany during the 20th century. The term "fascism" frequently describes authoritarian and ultranationalist movements or governments. As Maddow notes in *Prequel*, US supporters of the Nazi party were pro-fascist and believed that fascism was a superior form of government to democracy.

Isolationism

Isolationism is a foreign policy approach in which a country seeks to minimize its involvement in international affairs and avoid entanglement in the political and military conflicts of other nations. A nation adopting isolationism typically focuses on its own domestic concerns and aims to limit political and economic interactions with the outside world. This approach may involve avoiding alliances, refraining from participation in international conflicts, and prioritizing national sovereignty and independence. Isolationist policies are often driven by a desire to maintain autonomy, avoid the costs and risks of foreign entanglements, and concentrate on domestic priorities. Historically, the term is associated with periods when countries, such as the US during parts of the 19th and early 20th centuries, chose to pursue a more independent and reserved stance in global affairs. *Prequel* shows that leading up to and during World War II, Nazi propaganda and pro-Nazi US citizens often used isolationism as a way to advance the antisemitic, fascist aims of the Nazi party.

KEY TERMS (3/3)

Populism

Populism is a political approach or style that seeks to appeal to the concerns and interests of the general population, often by presenting itself as a champion of the people against an alleged elite or establishment. Populist leaders or movements typically emphasize a direct connection with the common citizens and claim to represent their grievances. Populism can manifest across the political spectrum, adopting different ideologies and strategies. Key features may include anti-establishment rhetoric, a focus on simple solutions to complex issues, and a charismatic leader who claims to embody the will of the people. While populism can serve as a tool for political mobilization, it has been associated with challenges such as oversimplification of problems, polarization, and the erosion of democratic institutions in some cases. In *Prequel*, **Huey Long** epitomizes a populist leader.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Rachel Maddow Presents: Ultra [Podcast]

<https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-presents-ultra>

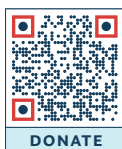
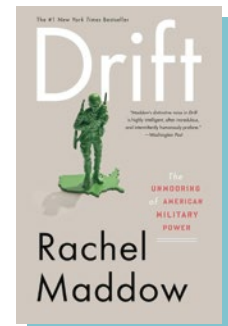
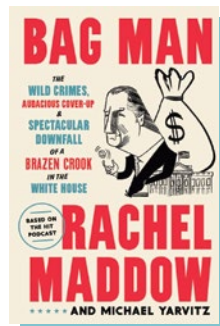
Sitting members of Congress aiding and abetting a plot to overthrow the government. Insurrectionists criminally charged with plotting to end American democracy for good. Justice Department prosecutors under crushing political pressure. Rachel Maddow Presents: Ultra is the all-but-forgotten true story of good, old-fashioned American extremism getting supercharged by proximity to power.

When extremist elected officials get caught plotting against America with the violent ultra right, this is the story of the lengths they will go to... to cover their tracks.

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