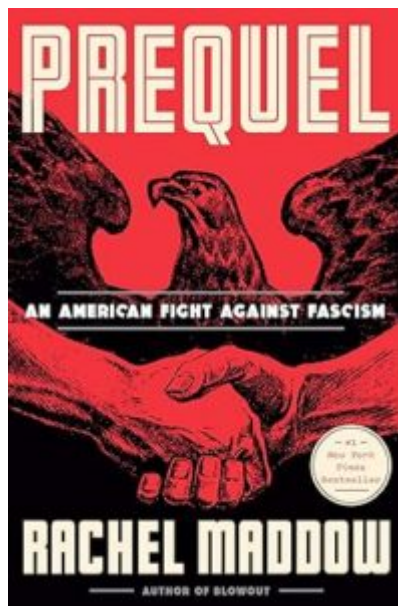


It Might Have Happened Here

written by Wayne Price | August 14, 2024



Television commentator Rachel Maddow has written an engrossing book about U.S. fascism. Maddow's book does not discuss the current U.S. political situation and the rise of fascist-talking politicians, but it is an indirect commentary on this deadly situation. As such it provides useful insights while suffering from the weaknesses of liberalism.

Maddow does not quite define "fascism." I would call it a movement to overthrow limited representative democracy, such as exists in the U.S., and to replace it with a one-person, one-party, dictatorship, while still maintaining a capitalist economic system. By the late 1930s, there were explicit fascist organizations in the United States. "A violent, ultra-right authoritarian movement, weirdly infatuated with foreign dictatorships, with detailed plans to overthrow the U.S. government. . ." (pp. xxviii-xxix).

Besides the (Nazi) German Bund and Italian-American Fascists and the Ku Klux Klan, there were also Silver Shirts, the Knights of the White Camilla, the Brown Shirts, the Christian Front, the American White Guard, America First Party, American Nationalist Party, and an effort to get these and other groupings to work together under the American Nationalist Confederation.

Their antisemitic and white supremacist ideology was spread by industrialist Henry Ford. Ford's newspaper reprinted the fraudulent "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and spread its poison widely. Father Coughlin was a "radio priest" with a vast audience. He too spread Jew-hatred along with anti-unionism and anti-communism widely throughout the country. The authoritarian politician who came closest to national power was Louisiana's Huey Long. Corrupt, charismatic, and demagogic, Long had built a brutal system in his home state and was sure to challenge Franklin D. Roosevelt for the presidency—until he was gunned down in 1935.

U.S. fascism grew out of widespread racism, antisemitism, nativism, certain religious views, and anticommunism. Big business had a history of organizing "volunteer" forces to violently break strikes. But U.S. fascism was also promoted by Nazi Germany. Germans printed large amounts of propaganda that they shipped to the United States to be distributed by fascist organizations and other friends. The Germans paid big bucks to Americans who would do their best to keep the United States out of the world war. Quirky individuals went back and forth between Germany and the United States, carrying the good word about Hitler. Maddow goes into interesting detail about some

of these U.S. fascists and pro-Nazis.

The bottom-up fascist movement had friends in high places. Their views overlapped with respectable isolationist politicians, especially Southern segregationist Democrats but also Republicans. Friendship with Hitler and the superiority of the white race were already their core beliefs. They too took money from the Germans or their agents. Their support included using their congressional franking privilege to let fascist propaganda—native fascist leaflets and printed-in-Germany pamphlets, for example—go free through the mails. Some prominent isolationist Congresspeople let fascists write their speeches for them—which were then published in the *Congressional Record* and mailed out by the ton for free. Meanwhile, they ran interference for fascists whenever there was a threat of a legal investigation.

Besides the spreading of propaganda and the building of mass organizations, U.S. fascists made various efforts to accumulate weapons (sometimes stolen from U.S. armories). They made various plans for seizing power locally or nationally, some of which came frighteningly close to action, as Maddow spells out.

Oddly enough though, Maddow does not mention the so-called Business Plot (or the Wall Street Putsch). Big businesspeople were furious at Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, including taking the U.S. off the gold standard. An agent of big capital approached General Smedley Butler, then a popular retired general. He was offered money and troops (including the American Legion). They wanted him to overthrow F.D.R. and establish himself as dictator. Butler exposed the plot to the newspapers and a congressional committee.

The committee concluded: "In the last few weeks of the committee's official life it received evidence showing that certain persons had made an attempt to establish a fascist organization in this country. There is no question but that these attempts were discussed, were planned, and might have been placed in execution when and if the financial backers deemed it expedient" (in Katz 2022¹).

Maddow proudly points out the few bold anti-fascist journalists, government agents, and volunteer investigators who uncovered the web of fascist plots. These people, with little reward or recognition, did important work in exposing the fascist network. (She does not mention Carlo Tresca, the anarchist, who fought fascism in the Italian-American community.)

But Maddow does make clear how difficult it was to overcome U.S. fascism. From just before to after World War II, she explains, the powers-that-be did not want to penalize fascist lawbreakers. Their friendly politicians again interfered with trials and committee hearings. Even non-fascists, such as President Harry S. Truman, had ties to the old isolationists and segregationists, which they did not want to disturb. By the end of the war, domestic fascism was no longer an issue, in the opinion of the establishment, so it could be swept under the rug.

Maddow's story ends with the immediate aftermath of World War II. The story of the ultra-right in the United States might have continued into the Cold War, the anti-communist hysteria promoted by Senator McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover, with the collaboration of Truman and the Democrats. This story would also include the John Birch Society, the American Nazi Party, the White Citizens' Councils, and the revived KKK. At the period's beginning, the Communist Party declared that the U.S. was on the brink of fascism and sent its leaders into hiding or exile. As it turned out, they were wrong, mainly because of the post-war prosperity.

Rachel Maddow does not understand the connection between fascism and capitalist democracy. In general, big business prefers capitalist democracy. This permits factions of the capitalist class to fight out their differences and decide on government policies, without bloodshed. It lets them fool

the working population into believing that it is a free people who control the state. But at certain periods of decline and tension, if the bosses feel too threatened, they will switch to support of fascism. In any case, the capitalist class is never totally afraid of fascism (even when they prefer liberal democracy) because it would allow them to keep their wealth and power.

On the other hand, the ruling rich are utterly opposed to any kind of “communism” (socialism, collectivism, anarchism). They fear that such movements would take away their capital, their industries, their factories, their mansions, their private jets, their bought-and-paid-for politicians and police, and so on. This, they believed, should never be allowed to happen. (To working people, there is an enormous difference between the democratic takeover of capitalists’ property by workers and the seizure of the capitalists’ property by a state bureaucracy, as was the case in Stalinist Russia and Maoist China. But to the capitalists, losing their wealth is the only thing that matters.)

Maddow also takes for granted the viewpoint of those who wanted the U.S. to enter the war. She sees this as the good, anti-fascist, side. No doubt she is right that isolationist politicians—Democrats *and* Republicans—appeared to be unconcerned about Nazism; some were even pro-Hitler. But a great many ordinary U.S. workers and farmers were against getting into another world war for perfectly good reasons. They had seen how one war had led to another. They were aware that the British Empire, the French Empire, and Stalinist Russia were not fighting for international democracy and freedom.

The most advanced, radical workers knew that the U.S. rulers also did not care about peace and freedom; they wanted to replace Britain as the dominant global imperial power (as was done). Nor was the U.S. state fighting racism, with its segregated army, its Japanese internment camps, and its exclusion of Jewish immigrants. This does not justify sympathy for Nazi Germany nor isolationism. But a perspective of revolutionary internationalism is beyond Maddow’s framework. (See Price, 2015.²)

U.S. fascism did not “catch on” in the 1930s or 1940s, despite its various “achievements.” Unlike the case of ruling classes in Germany, Italy, and Spain, the U.S. ruling class had a mass of wealth—a layer of “fat” so to speak—which these other countries did not have. Despite the Great Depression and the increase in workers’ struggles, the U.S. rich were not forced to turn to a terroristic dictatorship. The world war led them to unparalleled levels of profit and world domination, for several decades.

Rachel Maddow, in this fascinating book, sees the danger of American fascism arising from time to time, but driven back by the bravery and patriotism of ordinary U.S. citizens. She calls her account a “prequel,” implying that these events foreshadowed the current rise of authoritarian politics in the United States. The vile Donald Trump threatens the foundations of constitutional democracy, supported by one of the two major parties and tens of millions of people, with foreign help (mainly from Russia this time). Once again, there is “a violent, ultra-right authoritarian movement, weirdly infatuated with foreign dictatorships, with detailed plans to overthrow the U.S. government. . . ” (pp. xxviii-xxix).

In 2020, the U.S. ruling class—even in decline—still had enough wealth and stability to reject the need for fascism. Most of big business (also referred to as the “donor class”) did not donate to Trump. Most of the military top brass and the leaders of the “intelligence community” did not support a coup. Without the people with money and the people with guns, a coup was not possible. (The year 2020 has been called “the stupid coup.”)

But the time may come when the very wealthy might feel threatened by economic stagnation, wars, ecological catastrophes, and other indications of social collapse—and might turn to authoritarianism

as a safeguard. They might feel the need to drastically cut the standard of living of the working class even further than today. History has demonstrated the potential for a dangerous fascist movement, even here in “freedom-loving” America (in fact, U.S. fascists present themselves as lovers of “freedom”).

The further decline of U.S. and world capitalism may one day lead to a new threat of fascism. If so, it will take more than a small number of honest and brave individuals to defeat. It will take more than relying on the Democratic Party establishment. It will take a mass movement of working people and all those oppressed to beat it back and to create a new and truly democratic, free, society.

Notes

1. Jonathan M. Katz. 2022. “The Plot against American Democracy That Isn’t Taught in Schools.” *Rolling Stone*.
2. Wayne Price. 2015. “The Meaning of World War II, An Anarchist View; The Imperialist War and the People’s War.”