

MONTANA PROFILE

The Montana Roots of “The Plot Against America”

When the acclaimed novelist Philip Roth published his best-selling book “The Plot Against America” in 2004 the novel was widely praised as a masterpiece of historical fiction. The Society of American Historians gave Roth its historical fiction prize and Paul Berman, writing in the New York Times, lavished praise on the book calling it a “terrific political novel,” at turns “sinister, vivid, dreamlike, preposterous and ... creepily plausible.”

Roth’s novel, a tale of a fascist takeover of America in 1940 where rampant anti-Semitism prevailed, has now reached the small screen as an HBO series that, as one reviewer noted, “imagines a counterfactual history in which Charles Lindbergh, campaigning on a promise of ‘America First,’ defeats Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election and, colluding with Hitler, embarks on a program of government-sponsored anti-Semitism and Jewish resettlement.”

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In Roth’s telling, Montana’s once powerful Senator Burton K. Wheeler becomes Lindbergh’s vice president and eventually the “acting president.” During a period of widespread anti-Semitic riots he imposes martial law and orders the arrest of prominent American Jews. Roth’s revisionist account of how fascism came to America 80 years ago resonates anew in our time when a president with authoritarian instincts and a penchant for stoking division dominates American political life.

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It was inevitable that Roth’s revisionist account of how fascism came to America 80 years ago would resonate anew in our time when a president with authoritarian instincts and a penchant for stoking division dominates American political life. HBO’s timing could hardly have been better.

But there is, as there always is, a good deal more to the story of “The Plot Against America” and the roots of the story go back to Montana in the 1940s and to another book with the same title as Roth’s novel. That book, described by one U.S. senator in 1946 as “one of the vilest and most contemptible and obscene works ever to be published,” was an election year hit piece aimed at the state’s eternally controversial Senator Wheeler.

That “lurid, libelous” book had a subtitle: “Senator Wheeler and the Forces Behind Him” and purported to detail how Wheeler, a Butte Democrat and Montana’s senior senator, had “Hitlerized Montana” by encouraging “American Nazism in Action.” The book was one of the great smears in American political history, branding Wheeler as an American Nazi and anti-Semite. The book’s allegations were spread across Montana through fliers and print pieces and eventually by release of the book that was full of sensational prose, garish illustrations and provocative cartoons. None of it was true, but it nevertheless contributed to Wheeler’s political defeat in 1946.

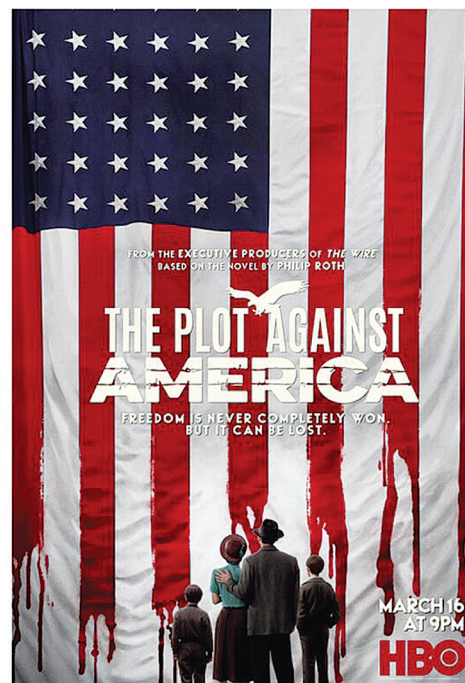
Wheeler was no Nazi, but was a committed, passionate opponent of war and by 1940 had come to believe that President Franklin Roosevelt was not leveling with the American people about his desire to see the United States enter World War II. Wheeler’s non-interventionist beliefs originated with his Quaker mother and were informed by his own experiences in Montana during World War I when state officials effectively suspended civil liberties for anyone who opposed that war. Speaking German was banned, books were destroyed, and many Montanans were arrested and imprisoned on dubious charges of hampering the war effort. Wheeler was appalled by the hysteria and fought against it to the point of losing his job as United States attorney.

Wheeler also opposed any form of imperialism, particularly the kind of colonialism represented by the British Empire, and he was convinced that there were limits to American power. He often warned of the dangers of the U.S. assuming it could intervene militarily anywhere in the world.

First elected to the U.S. Senate in 1922, Wheeler consistently opposed an expansionist U.S. foreign policy whether that policy was advocated by a Republican like Calvin Coolidge or a fellow Democrat like Roosevelt. He was in the classic American tradition a dissenter against war and his personal and political independence came to both define his legacy and empower his enemies. It caught up with him in 1946.



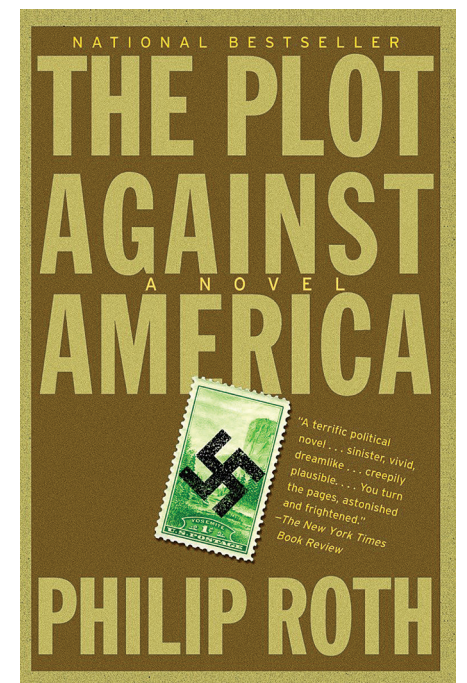
Senator B. K. Wheeler in Washington, D.C.



THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA

In writing my biography of Wheeler, I spent many hours trying to piece together the story of how a Brooklyn lawyer and writer for hire by the name of David George Plotkin – he wrote under an assumed name, George David Kin – happened to come to Montana to write his attack piece on Wheeler. I wanted to figure out who paid Kin to write the original “Plot Against America” and why.

The trail was long cold, but the available



evidence points to what one writer has called a well-crafted piece of “political dynamiting,” an attack so massively filled with innuendo and blasphemy as to be both outrageously unbelievable and amazingly effective.

There is an old adage in politics that “your friends die, and your enemies accumulate” and by 1940 B.K. Wheeler had accumulated many enemies, including FDR, the powerful and popular president, and a galaxy of influential voices in the media.

As the political debate intensified in 1940



Roth's account of a celebrity-turned-politician winning the presidency on a platform of fearmongering and "othering" proved more prophetic than he could have predicted. HBO ordered "The Plot Against America" series in November 2018, exactly two years after the election of Donald Trump and mere weeks after a mass shooting at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue killed 11 congregants.

(At left) Senator Wheeler was on a speaking tour when he visited Butte in April 1941. A crowded house at the Fox Theater listened as he explained why he was against the United States involvement in World War II.

and 1941 over U.S. aid to the beleaguered British Empire – Britain was nearly broke and standing alone against nightly Nazi air raids on London and other cities – Wheeler toured the country insisting on American preparedness but rejecting any U.S. intervention in the widening European war. To critics the position was tantamount to support for fascism. Wheeler's patriotism was questioned repeatedly, even from the White House.

Wheeler's venues of choice to rally public opposition to U.S. involvement in another European war were dozens of appearances organized by the grassroots, non-interventionist America First Committee (AFC).

The organization organically blossomed in 1940, largely under the leadership of university students in the Northeast and by 1941 had more than 800,000 members from coast to coast, including prominent Americans like future president Gerald Ford and future Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart.

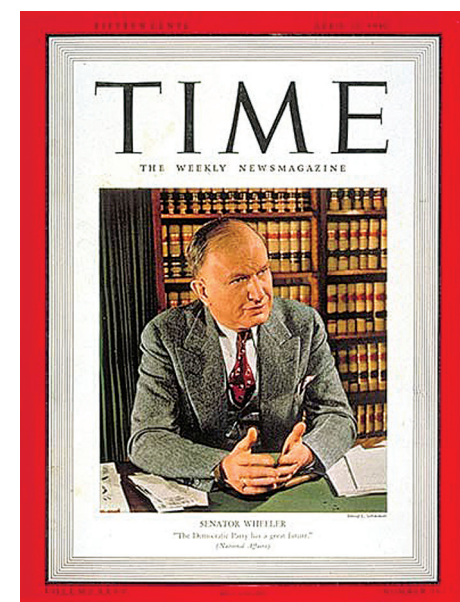
At two of the largest America First events Wheeler shared a platform with Lindbergh, the famous aviator. The two men, offering a kind of shadow foreign policy to counter Roosevelt's desire to aid Britain, were ever more linked in the public mind. When Lindbergh delivered a disastrous, anti-Semitic speech at a rally in Des Moines, Iowa in September 1941 America First and anyone associated with the group was forever tainted as anti-Semitic.

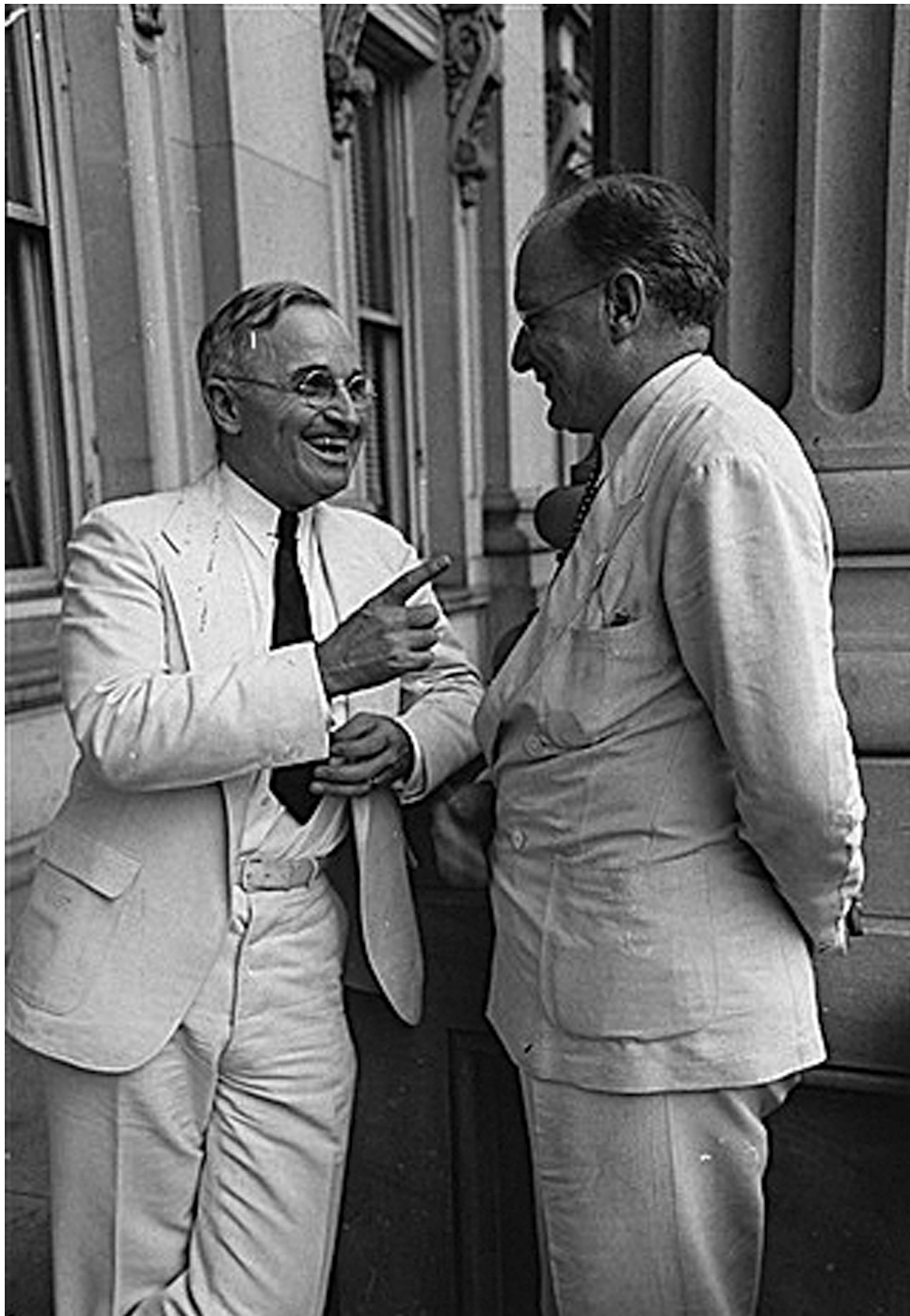
Wheeler – and America First – were slow to condemn pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic infiltration of the anti-war movement and Wheeler never explicitly condemned Lindbergh's comments, but there is thin evidence that the Montanan was any kind of religious bigot. Throughout his political life he condemned discrimination and deplored intolerance.

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In the days before social media or cable television, some of the most influential voices in the country were found in newspapers and magazines.





There is thin evidence that Senator Wheeler (shown above at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. in 1939 with fellow Senator Harry S. Truman, from *LIFE* magazine) was any kind of religious bigot. Throughout his political life he condemned discrimination and deplored intolerance. In a 1941 letter to a prominent American Jewish leader, Wheeler lamented a “rising tide of intolerance in this country” and said the tide would only be stemmed by addressing underlying social and economic problems.

In a 1941 letter to a prominent American Jewish leader, Wheeler lamented a “rising tide of intolerance in this country” and said the tide would only be stemmed by addressing underlying social and economic problems. “The danger to America,” he wrote, “lies within – it lies in the fact that large numbers of our people are still ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed.”

Wheeler hardly helped his own cause by publicly condemning the prosecution in 1942 of a group of political activists, some of whom were clearly Nazi or fascist sympathizers, in what came to be known as “The Great Sedition Trial.” Wheeler denounced the views of those accused and rejected their incendiary language, but as a First Amendment absolutist he defended the right of American citizens to criticize their government.

There is ample proof that German propagandists did attempt to influence American public opinion in this period – the British government did the same – but no evidence exists that Wheeler knowingly aided the Nazi effort. The fact that he was advocating a policy of “letting the dictators fight it out,” after Stalin’s Soviet Union and Hitler’s Germany went to war in 1941, a policy that he believed would keep the country out of war but has been equated by some as doing Hitler’s bidding.

When Japanese aircraft attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on

December 7, 1941, isolationism, historically the prevalent American foreign policy position, effectively died along with more than 2,400 American military personnel. Wheeler had lost his battle to keep America out of another world war, but the effort to define him as somehow un-American for opposing war and that he was racially or religiously intolerant persisted, up to and including the Philip Roth novel.

THE POWER OF THE PRESS

In the days before social media or cable television, some of the most influential voices in the country were syndicated newspaper columnists who also appeared regularly on national radio. Personalities like Walter Winchell and Drew Pearson were not strictly speaking journalists, but more akin to gossip columnists who reached a mass audience with their interpretation of daily headlines. Each man reached millions weekly in print and over the air and each harbored a profound dislike for Wheeler.

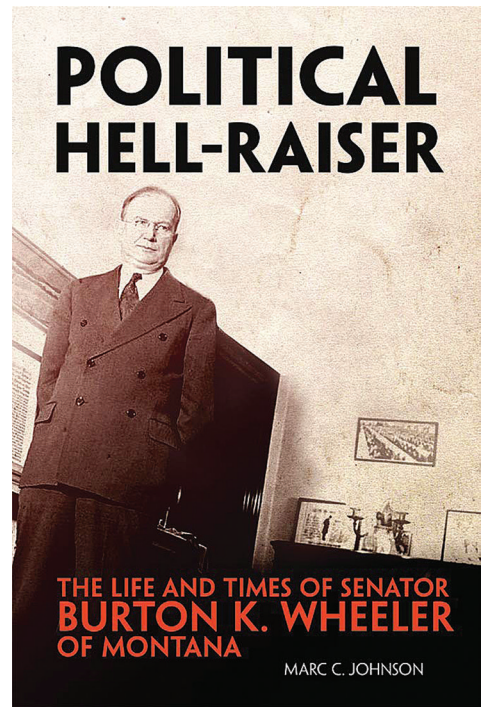
Pearson, who one critic called “one of the skuzziest journalists to ever write a story,” was a frequent conduit for anti-Wheeler information, almost certainly provided to him, at least occasionally, by Roosevelt’s allies. In one column late in 1940, Pearson quoted a private conversation between Wheeler and his wife to the effect that Lulu Wheeler, whose dislike for FDR was, if anything, stronger than her husband’s, was appalled – “with fire in her eyes,” Pearson wrote – to learn that another non-interventionist senator planned to endorse Roosevelt’s election. Pearson quoted Mrs. Wheeler saying, “And if you ever do such a thing, Burton, I’ll walk out of the house and leave you!”

It’s hard to imagine that Pearson, whom Wheeler described as “that little black animal which has a white stripe up its back,” had any real insight into the dynamics of the Wheeler marriage and political partnership, but nevertheless the story was printed in hundreds of newspapers. Pearson also lavished coverage on allegations made by O. John Rogge, an assistant attorney general in the Justice Department who investigated Nazi activities in the United States and eventually made public allegations against Wheeler, labor leader John L. Lewis and other anti-war activists. Rogge essentially charged that Wheeler and others had committed sedition by opposing war, but had escaped prosecution by the government.

Rogge was eventually fired in 1946 by Attorney General Tom Clark, likely on orders from President Harry Truman, for violating departmental policy by, as one writer noted, trying “a sedition case ... in the newspaper by innuendo and association.” Pearson, however, defended Rogge’s conduct and criticized Wheeler and Truman, who were long-time close friends. Truman had profound disagreements with Wheeler on foreign policy, but the blunt-spoken president liked and admired the Montanan’s independence and integrity. It seems inconceivable that Truman would have defended a closet Nazi.

All of this takes us back to that earlier version of “The Plot Against America,” the anti-Wheeler book published to coincide with Wheeler’s re-election campaign in 1946. The origins of the disreputable volume were officially investigated by a Senate committee in the summer of 1946, with a public hearing in Helena just days before Wheeler lost the Democratic primary election that ended his political career.

An old Wheeler foe, John E. Kennedy, a long-time aide to another Wheeler nemesis,



Montana Congressman Jerry O’Connell, claimed that he financed the book and was listed as “publisher.” I was able to confirm that Kennedy, desperately seeking funding to print the attack piece, made a frantic appeal to the political action committee of the Congressional of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a major labor group that had once supported Wheeler, but actively worked against him in 1946. Correspondence in the CIO archives indicates the labor federation rejected Kennedy’s overtures, but nevertheless he found the cash elsewhere and the first Plot Against America went to press.

The Senate committee heard testimony that a Missoula coffee shop owner paid several thousand dollars to print the book, he said, as a financial investment. That explanation seems fanciful and is almost certainly a cover story obscuring the real source of the money behind what the great Montana writer Joseph Kinsey Howard called “one of the worst books ever written” about a politician.

It is said that victors write the history and those who opposed Wheeler’s brand of foreign policy non-intervention and anti-imperialism have largely written the history of the pre-World War II anti-war movement. Wheeler provided plenty of material for his detractors and they used it zealously to define his legacy. Roth’s novel, as provocative and entertaining as it remains, is hardly history and it is not a realistic portrayal of Wheeler, just as the earlier Plot Against America was a fabricated account of a complicated and controversial man and his era.

In reading the book or watching the HBO series, it’s worth recalling what Roth himself said about his storytelling. “Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life,” Roth said in a 1984 interview with the Paris Review. “There has to be some pleasure in this life, and that’s it.”

Enjoy Roth’s book and the television series, but know that the real story – the factual history – is just as amazing. ★

—MARC JOHNSON

Marc C. Johnson’s book Political “Hell-Raiser: The Life and Times of Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana” was published in 2019 by the University of Oklahoma Press. He is currently working on a book on how independent expenditure campaigns have remade American politics and the U.S. Senate since 1980.