

Dealing with Disappointment in Democracy

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IN CONDITIONS HANDSOME AND *Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990), the American philosopher Stanley Cavell identifies what I take to be a critical requirement for democracy.

Cavell writes of the need to respond to the “inevitable failures” of democracy “otherwise than by excuse or withdrawal.”¹ “Inevitable” is for me a crucial word here. I take it to mean that the failures of democracy recur; they don’t come and go with one presidential election, one Supreme Court decision or appointment, one act of Congress. Excusing the failures of democracy, or disengaging from political participation as a result of them, gives up on democracy and lets disappointment harden into hopelessness. Cavell goes on to praise Ralph Waldo Emerson for seeing that the “training and character and friendship Emerson requires for democracy” are necessary “as preparation to withstand not its rigors but its failures” (56): necessary, in other words, to keeping “the democratic hope alive in the face of disappointment with it,” disappointment that keeps coming back. Emerson, Cavell adds, is “forever turning aside to say, especially to the young, not to despair of the world” (56).

I want here to explore here how responding to disappointment in democracy can get beyond making excuses for its lapses or opting out. I will be drawing on two very different books published independently of one another in 2004. One of these books—Philip Roth’s novel *The Plot Against America* (published September 30, 2004)—has already attracted renewed interest in light of the 2016 presidential election. Many readers have recast *The Plot Against America* as a remarkably accurate prophecy of populist demagoguery paving the way for fascism, despite Roth’s disclaimer that he never meant the book to be a warning, let alone a prediction.² The other book I will be using—Danielle Allen’s philosophical study *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (published September 6, 2004)—is more sanguine about the prospects of democracy. It also deserves rereading, not despite its cautious optimism but because of it.

Both Roth and Allen look back at recent American history. Roth imagines what might have happened if Charles Lindbergh had run for president against Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1940 and won, on an isolationist, America First platform sympathetic to the German Nazi leaders, against participation in what became World War II, and hostile to

what Lindbergh calls the self-interested “passions and prejudices of other peoples”—most notably “the Jewish people”—who were advocating for American intervention against Nazi Germany.³ *The Plot Against America* pictures fascism emerging from within America democracy, as later recalled by the narrator, not-so-coincidentally named Philip Roth, a seven-year-old child at the time of Lindbergh’s election who watched the terrifying events of the day disrupt the previously placid lives of his extended Jewish family.

Allen looks back at September 4, 1957, a traumatic day in the life of a 16-year old African-American girl, Elizabeth Eckford, who tried on that day to attend the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, as authorized by the 1954 Brown decision, only to be stopped by a mob of angry white citizens, who cursed her and called for her lynching. According to Allen, photographs of Elizabeth’s quiet suffering at the hands of the hate-filled people attacking her shamed other Americans into realizing that American democracy should be better than this ugly scene. The vitriolic local reception of Elizabeth, Allen writes, “fired public opinion in favor of the civil rights struggle” and “forced a psychic transformation of the citizenry.”⁴ That transformation, Allen adds, is not yet complete and the road from 1957 to the present (2004) has continued to be “a rocky one” (8). But after that disgraceful moment in 1957 “there could be no turning back” (8). Allen writes to dislodge ingrained, but vulnerable, patterns of racial distrust that still keep Americans from working together to shape a shared future. Although Allen understands the serious challenges that beset the path to racial equality, she remains hopeful. In her view, America “long ago abandoned modes of citizenship” that perpetuated racism “by means of domination, acquiescence, hypocrisy, and the production of invisibility” (19). Allen writes *Talking to Strangers* to hasten the development

of new forms of democratic citizenship still struggling to be born in 2004 but feeling more possible than they did when Elizabeth unsuccessfully attempted to enter Central High School.

These very different takes on American democracy—one imagining American democracy giving way to fascism, the other seeing democracy ultimately triumphing over an especially ugly eruption of racial hatred—complement one another. Roth’s novel provides ample reason for disappointment in democracy and probes the temptation to excuse or withdraw from a world that turns its back on democratic values. Allen’s study makes a strong case for not despairing of the world, for keeping democratic hope alive in the face of well-founded discouragement. Whereas Roth brings out the vulnerability of democracy, Allen highlights its resiliency. Taken together, *The Plot Against America* and *Talking to Strangers* make a timely point that I will be reinforcing in this essay: giving up on American democracy is as self-defeating as taking it for granted.

It Can Happen Here

Before looking more closely at these two books, I should acknowledge that I cannot say why they were published within weeks of one another in 2004. Each book seems detached from its immediate historical context. As one indication of this distance, neither book mentions what for many would have been the defining event of the early 2000s: the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which set the stage for President George W. Bush’s war on terrorism. This distance from the present, however, is not a weakness but a strength. It allows Roth and Allen to arrive at insights into democracy that function as reminders proponents of democracy will always benefit from.

Giving up on American democracy is as self-defeating as taking it for granted.

Allen is a classicist by training, and her book reflects her deep indebtedness to classical political thought, especially Aristotle. Allen concludes her book with a hypothetical letter to the Faculty Senate of the university where she taught at the time, the University of Chicago. In the letter, she expresses her concern that the university is primarily represented in the Hyde Park area by its expanding police force. What if, she asks, funds financing this expansion were redirected to initiatives more conducive to building community trust in the university and more in keeping with the university's educational mission: for example, setting up off-campus satellite sites where neighborhood residents could take classes, consult with faculty on legal issues and other matters, and use otherwise unavailable information technology. Although these are serious proposals on Allen's part, by her own admission they are more illustrative than pragmatic or comprehensive. Allen calls her recommendations "a first sketch for a utopia" (175), or a community that would not need university police because by implementing what she calls practices of political friendship, the community members would peacefully resolve issues or keep them from escalating into crises requiring the intervention of force. For Allen, encouraging political friendship across differences should be a central effort of democracies everywhere and always. She reinforces this point by stepping back from Hyde Park and the University of Chicago and shifting her attention to ancient Athens, specifically noting the Athenian emphasis on "treating strangers well on the grounds that we are related to one another in more ways

than we know" (185). Talking to strangers becomes a quintessentially democratic attitude toward others Allen is adapting to her own community, her "polis," as she puts it, where "race and class have made it difficult for us to see [our] connections" (185) to one another—difficult, but not impossible.

I will be returning to Allen's argument, but for now want to note that in *The Plot Against America*, Roth similarly steps back from his immediate world, like a viewer moving away from a painting to see larger patterns that zooming in on the painting would obscure. Like Allen, Roth is more interested in arriving at an enduring perspective on democracy than in responding to the specific events of the day. When the novel first appeared, some reviewers combed through recent developments, searching for provocations that might have triggered Roth's worries about fascism: seeing, for example, echoes of Lindbergh-the-heroic-aviator in President George W. Bush landing on the carrier Abraham Lincoln in flying gear on May 1, 2003 and proclaiming Mission Accomplished in Iraq; or finding proto-authoritarian restrictions on democratic freedoms in the 2001 Patriot Act; or detecting incipient anti-Semitism in some critics of the war on Iraq who were then blaming Israel and President Bush's Jewish advisors for the invasion. I take these examples from Paul Berman's thoughtful October 3, 2004 review of the novel. Berman goes on to say that despite these possible allusions to recent events, the novel "is not an allegorical tract about the present age, with each scene or character corresponding to the events of our own time."⁵ Instead, Roth's novel reimagines the past to highlight a point about the fragility of American democracy that previous writers have also insisted on, including Sinclair Lewis in his 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, which chronicles the damage done by a demagogue elected president. For Roth, the reminder that it can happen here will always be timely.

That reminder recurs in the American literary heritage Roth is drawing on.

Full-blown fascism, to be sure, erupts in *The Plot Against America* only towards the end of the novel, after President Lindbergh and his plane have disappeared and Vice President Wheeler has taken over as acting president. By full-blown fascism, I mean how, citing the danger to national security posed by the Jews allegedly responsible for Lindbergh's mysterious vanishing, Wheeler imposes martial law and a national curfew, sequesters First Lady Anne Morrow Lindbergh in Walter Reed Hospital, authorizes the arrests of dissident leaders, and shuts down independent radio stations and newspapers. These authoritarian measures arrive late in the novel because they could not have come earlier. They represent the culmination of several previous developments that make them possible. This is one of the novel's most important points: in an established democracy, as opposed to an unstable, coup-plagued society where democracy is struggling to take root, fascism does not burst on the scene but sneaks up on leaders and citizens.⁶ What was once unthinkable becomes permissible only because democratic norms have been incrementally weakened to the point where they can no longer ward off the threat. One of the leaders most opposed to Lindbergh, New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia, courageously calls out Lindbergh's receptivity to fascism, his admiration for Hitler, and his "dyed-in-the-wool" anti-Semitism (304), which are now running "rampant throughout this great land" (305). "It can't happen here?" La Guardia asks. "My friends, it is happening here" (305). "It" is fascism, and Lindbergh is laying the groundwork for its emergence, despite the disclaimers of some of his backers and the denials of Lindbergh himself.

Crucially, in *The Plot Against America* the descent into fascism is enabled by the anti-Semitism festering in American society long before Lindbergh decides to run for

president. At the outset of the novel, the narrator, Philip, recalls his family enjoying a safe, quiet life in New Jersey that made them proud and grateful to be Americans. Although a cause for concern, anti-Semitism lurks in the background or hovers around the edges of their steady lives, taking the form of Father Coughlin's despicable 1930s radio broadcasts from Detroit, Henry Ford's diatribes against Jewish bankers and international Zionists during World War I and the following two decades, the Ku Klux Klan's terrorism against Jews and African-Americans in the South, and memories of Irish gangs before World War I "armed with sticks and rocks and iron pipes" and "seeking vengeance against the Christ-killers" in the Jewish Third Ward of Newark (293)—to name only a few examples of lingering anti-Semitism Roth mentions. In addition to these still-worrisome virulent strains of anti-Semitism, Philip's parents are aware of quiet quotas curbing Jewish admissions to colleges and professional schools, tacit restrictions denying Jews promotions in nearly all corporations, and longstanding prohibitions against Jewish membership in numerous social organizations. But although Philip's parents know anti-Semitism persists, they are not unduly alarmed by it. Before Lindbergh's election they feel their minority status, but they aren't disabled by it. They can manage their awareness of anti-Semitism and keep it in proportion, away from their children, rendering it a source of pain rather than terror, an example of unfairness that could conceivably recede, if never go away, as times change.

Things do change in the novel, though not for the better, with the onset of World War II. In *The Plot Against America*, disillusionment with World War I makes some Americans skeptical about participating in yet another potentially devastating, remote conflict. On the face of it, there is nothing unreasonable about this reluctance to go to war again. But the availability of anti-Semitism—and

the willingness of a charismatic presidential candidate to tap into it—turns the anti-war effort from a possibly defensible choice into an angry crusade.

The charismatic presidential candidate is Lindbergh, a widely admired celebrity whom the public lauds as a “no nonsense realist and plain-talking man” (184), “lean, beloved, [and] handsome” (184), a “rugged individualist” (30) with a “low-key, taciturn, winning way” (179). Lindbergh’s refreshingly unorthodox campaign adds to his widespread appeal. Lindbergh’s likability paves the way for his electoral victory but does not by itself account for it. Here is the formula for his political success: he pins a perceived external threat (the danger of America entering the European war) on an already marginalized minority group: the Jews who are advocating for the United States to side with Britain and oppose Nazi Germany.

Lindbergh acknowledges that “a few far-sighted Jewish people” (13) realize the danger of going to war.

But the majority still do not...We cannot blame them for looking out for what they believe to be their own interests, but we must also look out for ours. We cannot allow the natural passions and prejudices of other peoples to lead our country to destruction. (13)

Far from endangering American democracy, Lindbergh claims he is going “to preserve American democracy by preventing America from taking part in another world war” (30) and by refusing to let self-interested “other peoples”—the un-American, pro-war Jews—impose their destructive will on the largely Christian majority. “Our” interests, he tells his adoring audience, must triumph over “theirs.” “We”—the majority—have the right to rule, and “we” must put America first, stopping the seditious enemies from within who elevate the priorities of their own group ahead of the general good. Staying out of the war abroad thus acquires new urgency by Lindbergh

linking it to winning a war at home: a war against a selfish minority who pose an even greater threat to America than Hitler, whose attack on Russia has made him, in Lindbergh’s eyes, “the world’s greatest safeguard against the spread of Communism and its evils” (83). Some of Lindbergh’s supporters, such as the German-American Bund, take the further step of identifying Communism itself with Judaism, pledging “to combat the Moscow-directed madness of the Red world menace and its Jewish bacillus-carriers” (176).

“Keep America out of the Jewish War” (177) proves to be an immensely popular rallying cry, with something for just about everyone. Lindbergh’s hard-core Republican supporters, his base, buy into his message every step of the way. Still others—Democrats as well as Republicans—sign on despite their misgivings about the anti-Semitism undergirding Lindbergh’s anti-war stance. For these supporters, some of them prominent Jewish leaders, calling the European war “Jewish” gives them pause instead of intensifying their commitment to Lindbergh. But they swallow their discomfort and excuse their support in a variety of ways: by accepting Lindbergh as a duly elected president and using the democratic electoral process to legitimize him; by letting their opposition to the war override their uneasiness with his bigotry; and by trusting that the courts, the Congress, and public opinion will keep Lindbergh’s animosity toward the Jews in check—keep it on the level of ugly campaign rhetoric, something Lindbergh says to attract and keep voters as opposed to something he enacts as government policy.

One Jewish leader in particular, Rabbi Bengelsdorf, goes to great lengths to explain how he can be one of the “few far-sighted Jewish people,” as Lindbergh would have it, who oppose the war and back Lindbergh. Bengelsdorf goes so far as to say, “I want Charles Lindbergh to be my president not in

spite of my being a Jew but because I am a Jew—an *American Jew*” (36). Casting his lot with America overrides the anxiety Bengelsdorf criticizes in other, less trusting and not-so-assimilated Jews. According to Bengelsdorf, even Lindbergh’s comfort with Hitler, Mussolini, and other foreign dictators can be redeemed as his siding with allies who will help protect America against Soviet communism, not expose it to destructive foreign wars. Thanks to Bengelsdorf and others, Americans could be reassured that with Lindbergh’s election

nothing had changed other than that FDR was no longer in office. America wasn't a fascist country and wasn't going to be... There was a new president and a new Congress but each was bound to follow the law as set down in the Constitution. They were Republicans, they were isolationist, and among them, yes, there were anti-Semites—as indeed there were among the southerners in FDR's own party—but that was a long way from their being Nazis. (55)

This exoneration of Lindbergh grades his anti-Semitism on a curve and shields it from stiffer opposition by setting it apart from unabashed Nazism. One of Philip’s relatives calls Bengelsdorf’s attempt to normalize Lindbergh “koshering [him] for the goyim” (40): that is, making it safe for otherwise discomfited non-Jewish voters to play down or look away from Lindbergh’s anti-Semitism and support him with a clear conscience because a Jewish leader was backing him, too. A fanatically loyal base, joined by more or less enthusiastic moderate voters, makes Lindbergh’s support broad as well as deep, with polls showing that he “continued to be supported by a record eighty to ninety percent of every classification and category of voter, except the Jews” (243).

Philip’s family and some of their friends are among the outliers. As I noted earlier, Philip’s family at the outset of the novel identify themselves as Jews and Americans, while

remaining aware that Father Coughlin and others stigmatize their Jewishness and reject their claim to belong. With Lindbergh’s election, this peripheral anti-Semitism enters the mainstream. Disturbing but avoidable anti-Semitic background noise turns into hateful comments Philip’s family now hears every day, from politicians, commentators and journalists, and random other people, as when on a vacation to Washington, D.C. strangers on two separate occasions call Philip’s father a “loud-mouthed Jew” because of his outspoken praise of Roosevelt and disgust for Lindbergh. Repulsed by the opposition to Lindbergh expressed by Philip’s father, one elderly lady swears, “I’d give anything to slap his face” (65).

From being at home in America, Philip’s family members and friends thus become unwanted aliens, newly aware of their Jewishness, feeling vulnerable and exposed by it, even sometimes ashamed. Philip recalls how, as a nine-year old child after Lindbergh’s election, he began to learn what not to talk about, how to lie low and deflect attention, as if he had something to hide or disavow: “I must already have begun to think of myself as a little criminal because I was a Jew” (167). Roth vividly captures the frustration, isolation, disbelief, and fear that grip Philip’s family after Lindbergh is elected president. “They live in a dream, and we live in a nightmare” (76), his exasperated father exclaims of Lindbergh’s supporters. “Can you believe these people?” he asks. “This fascist dog is *still* their hero” (126). Making matters even more intolerable, “these people” include members of Philip’s own family: his aunt Evelyn, who falls in love with Rabbi Bengelsdorf and shares his enthusiasm for Lindbergh; Philip’s cousin Alvin, who enlists in the Canadian army to fight in the war, only to return maimed, embittered, and disillusioned with the Jewish cause; and Philip’s older brother Sandy, who sides with Lindbergh and his aunt Evelyn. Sandy calls his father a dictator even

worse than Hitler because he won't let him attend a Lindbergh White House dinner. Sandy mocks what he dismisses as his father's alarmist, paranoid overreaction to Lindbergh. "You people," he screams at his own parents, are fools for buying into the groundless hysteria opponents of Lindbergh are spreading (230-31).

For that outburst and others, Sandy's mother smacks him across the face, not once but twice, and his father threatens to kick him out of the house, much as he angrily ejects Evelyn from a contentious family dinner and gets into a vicious fight with Alvin. With "Lindbergh's spirit hovering over everything" (75), invading vacation trips and family get-togethers as well as dominating politics, Philip's close-knit family comes apart. Invective and insults destroy conversation; violence takes over when persuasion fails. Even within the family, dialogue across political differences has become one more casualty of the extreme polarization that has infused every aspect of life and made peaceful coexistence between anti- and pro-Lindbergh citizens untenable.

No longer a begrudgingly tolerated minority but now openly besieged and despised, Jews who oppose the massively popular Lindbergh have few opportunities for resistance. A rag-tag volunteer militia called the Provisional Jewish Police gets put together but no one expects this "handful of flops," this collection of "the callous and the obtuse and the mentally deficient," to provide any serious protection (271). Moving to Canada comes up as a possibility, only to be rejected by Philip's father, who asks, "Why don't *they* leave?" (197): "Then *we* will have a wonderful country" (197). But they aren't going anywhere and Philip's parents can no more get them to leave or change than they can control their own Lindbergh-supporting son, no matter how many times they slap him or yell at him. Powerless, "all the Jews could do was worry" (55). At one point, Philip fears that his father

has committed suicide because he couldn't take any more of Lindbergh's anti-Semitism or do anything about it. The situation has become that desperate.

Lindbergh and his plane disappear in early October 1942, never to be seen again. During his short term as president, he keeps his promise to stay out of the European war. In addition, he continues his overtures to Hitler and other foreign despots. At home, he establishes an Office of American Absorption, which, under the auspices of a program called Just Folks, launches relocation initiatives aimed at dispersing Jewish communities and "encouraging America's religious and national minorities to become further incorporated into the larger society" (85). Under Lindbergh's watch, FBI surveillance of suspected dissidents, including Alvin and Philip's father, is ramped up. Whereas Lindbergh's supporters applaud these steps, his opponents see them as ominous proto-fascist attacks on Jews and others. These anxious but isolated opponents of Lindbergh wonder how far he will go or, more exactly, how far his fervid backers will let him go. The capacity of these supporters for accepting everything Lindbergh does seems limitless. As Roth observes, Lindbergh could have announced that, following a White House dinner with the Nazi foreign minister, "the First Lady would be inviting Adolf Hitler and his girlfriend to spend the Fourth of July weekend as vacation guests in the Lincoln bedroom of the White House and still have been cheered by his countrymen as democracy's savior" (179-80). Anything now seems possible: Lindbergh's supporters have given him a blank check. As Walter Winchell, one of Lindbergh's most trenchant critics in the novel, asks, "And who's next [after the Jews], Mr. and Mrs. America, now that the Bill of Rights is no longer the law of the land and the racial haters are running the show?" "Who else among us is no longer welcome in Adolf Lindbergh's Aryan America?" (229).

As mentioned earlier, the premature end of Lindbergh's presidency allows Acting President Wheeler to step in and answer Winchell's questions. Under Wheeler, hints of fascism mushroom into the real thing: imposition of martial law, shuttering of radio stations and newspapers, arrests of oppositional leaders, and so on. What is striking about Wheeler's actions is how easily and quickly he takes them. A cowed, fearful majority is prepared to support him and a battered, largely Jewish minority lacks the power to thwart him.

The triumph of fascism feels so inevitable, plausible and effortless that Roth has difficulty figuring out how to reverse it. As many readers of *The Plot Against America* have noted, the ending of the novel has a rushed, deus-ex-machina feel about it. On October 16, 1942, First Lady Anne Morrow Lindbergh speaks up in opposition to Wheeler and secures "the speedy dismantling by Congress and the courts of the unconstitutional Wheeler administration" (319), which had lasted only eight days. On November 3, 1942 Democrats retake the House and Senate and Roosevelt gets reelected president in a landslide victory. And in December 1942 America enters the war without a dissenting vote in the Senate and House, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war on the United States by Germany and Italy. Here is how the narrator recalls the rapid succession of these events:

But then it was over. The nightmare was over. Lindbergh was gone and we were safe, though never would I be able to revive that unfazed sense of security first fostered in a little child by a big, protective republic and his ferociously responsible parents. (301)

That "big, protective republic" did not turn out to be so hospitable after all. Its sudden restoration as a democracy strikes me as lucky, not earned. I find it tempting to reimagine a novel that itself reimagines history: if the revered Lindbergh had attempted Wheeler's all-out suspension of democracy, he might have pulled it off.

Reconstituting Democracy

At one point in *The Plot Against America*, young Philip hears this typically explosive exchange between his brother Sandy and their mother.

"Lower your voice!" and the tension of the day now so overwhelmed her that she lost her temper, and to the boy she had so painfully missed all summer long, she snapped, "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"But you won't listen," he shouted. "If it wasn't for President Lindbergh—" (96).

"That name again!" (96), Philip recalls feeling. He is sick of hearing about Lindbergh, thinking about him, worrying what he'll do or say next, listening to others arguing endlessly about him. "I would rather have heard a bomb go off than to have to hear one more time the name that was tormenting us all" (96). Philip can neither escape talk about Lindbergh nor stop it from permeating every corner of his life.

In "The Frightening Lessons of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*" (2017), Richard Brody picks up on how Lindbergh saturates everyday life in Roth's novel. As Brody observes, Roth "shows how, unbeknownst to a child who has the good fortune to be raised in peace and freedom, so much of daily life depends invisibly but decisively on politics."⁷ With that insight in mind, I turn now to *Talking to Strangers*, where Danielle Allen, by contrast, shows how citizens interacting in everyday life can put pressure on politics.

Here is a key comment signaling the political importance Allen attaches to ordinary interactions among citizens. For reasons I will be exploring shortly, Allen argues that trust is essential to a democracy. She adds,

Trust is not something that politicians alone can create. It grows only among citizens as they rub shoulders in daily life—in supermarkets, at movie theaters, on buses, at amusement parks, and in airports—and

*wherever they participate in maintaining an institution, whether a school, a church, or a business. How can we successfully generate trust in all these contexts? (48)*⁸

Allen's caution that trust is not something "politicians alone can create" reflects her realization that the 1954 Brown decision did not by itself guarantee Elizabeth Eckford admission to Central High School on September 4, 1957. The Brown decision and the Constitutional principles it applied did not make a dent in the racist attitudes of the angry white citizens who kept Elizabeth from going to school that day. In returning to this history, Allen aims at countering the disappointment that sets in when progress stalls. She is reminding us that legislation, court decisions, and elected officials by themselves cannot resolve social crises and sustain democracy without citizens in their everyday lives doing their share.

For democracy to flourish, "powerful citizens" (the title of Allen's concluding chapter) need in their daily interactions with one another to fortify the trust essential to democracy, in tandem with effective leaders and supportive institutions. To clarify what she means by "powerful citizens," Allen draws a striking contrast between an insecure child and a confident adult as they confront others in public life. As Allen notes, parents often tell their children what her mother instructed her, namely, "Don't talk to strangers." It's too dangerous and risky. The image of intimidated, cautious children reappears when Allen goes on to say, "Eyes that drop to the ground when they bump up against a stranger's gaze belong to those still in their political minority" (161)—those still afraid, in other words, to look others in the eye and meet them on equal terms. "Still in their political minority" here means not just being outnumbered but also feeling not yet mature, powerful, or self-assured enough to participate on an equal footing with others in political life, to speak up, and to hold one's own, even when facing opposition.

Fearful people dropping their eyes to the ground recalls young Philip in *The Plot Against America* learning to keep things to himself after Lindbergh's election, to make himself small, inconspicuous, and silent, lest he trigger the wrath of the much more numerous and powerful pro-Lindbergh adults he is encountering. This shrinking from engagement results partly from Philip's youth (he is nine years old) and partly from his becoming aware of his increasingly stigmatized ethnic minority status, which pushes him to the margins of public life, reducing him to an outcast with no way back to the community that is ostracizing him. It's exactly the retreat anti-Semitic, pro-Lindbergh forces want to bring about.

In contrast to defensively recoiling from others, Allen imagines at the other extreme "how the most powerful citizen in the United States"—the United States President—experiences talking to strangers. Presidents, she suggests, find these encounters not threatening but "empowering." For United States presidents, Allen goes so far as to say, "the polity holds no intimidating strangers":

Presidents greet everyone and look all citizens in the eye. This is not merely because they are always campaigning, but because they have achieved the fullest possible political maturity. Their ease with strangers expresses a sense of freedom and empowerment. At one end of the spectrum of styles of democratic citizenship cowers the four-year-old in insecure isolation; at the other, stands the president, strong and self-confident. The more fearful we citizens are of speaking to strangers, the more we are docile children and not prospective presidents; the greater the distance between the president and the rest of us, the more we are subjects, not citizens. Talking to strangers is a way of claiming one's political majority and with it, a presidential ease and sense of freedom. (161)

This stirring advice urges us to move beyond "insecure isolation," fearful acquiescence, and cowering self-concealment toward the full exercise of our rights as

democratic citizens, much like Elizabeth setting out to attend Central High School that day in 1957. Allen urges us to claim our political majority, our right to participate and matter, not by helplessly complying with what people in power demand of us but by asserting ourselves with the assuredness and “sense of freedom and empowerment” that put presidents at ease with strangers. All citizens in a democracy should share this presidential confidence and should see themselves as “prospective presidents,” not as forever docile subjects. Allen’s exhortation echoes the encouragement offered by Emerson and other classic American writers committed to strengthening participation in American democracy. “Trust thyself,” Emerson similarly tells his readers in “Self-Reliance.” Democratic citizens should step forward like adults, “not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors.” The self-confidence Emerson is encouraging recalls for him “the nonchalance of boys who are sure of dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one.”⁹ Democracy requires that level of assertiveness.

Instead of disdainful lords and sure-of-themselves, nonchalant boys, Allen invokes United States presidents as her model for interacting with others. But as both Emerson and Allen realize, none of these models is perfect. *The Plot Against America* brings home the point that there is a spectrum of styles of presidential leadership as well as of democratic citizenship. The examples of Lindbergh and Wheeler show that some presidents can be invested not in creating trust among citizens but in destroying it. These presidents capitalize on bigotry and brand some citizens as aliens who should be feared, silenced, and suspected. They want these targeted people, stigmatized as threatening strangers, to feel anxious, to avert their gaze from the more powerful, and to retreat in shame and fear, as Philip does. In addition

to attacking some people, these presidents solicit the unwavering loyalty of others, who feel grateful that their leader, like a protective guardian, has shielded them from the outsiders they distrust. Unending fear, stoked by Lindbergh/Wheeler-like divisive presidents, ends up reducing all citizens to infantilized subjects, either dependent on the leader for protection or shrinking from his wrath.

Racism is toxic to democracy, Allen reminds us, in part because it destroys trust.

Even under these dark circumstances, citizens can exert their authority and keep alive the democratic values their elected leaders are betraying—or so I want to argue, extending Allen’s emphasis on powerful citizens regenerating trust in their everyday interactions with one another. *The Plot Against America* illustrates what I mean here by dark circumstances, but I can cite *Talking to Strangers* as well. Allen’s chief historical example of attempted social change—Elizabeth trying to attend school—revives the vilification of others that the fictional Lindbergh/Wheeler regime unleashes. In Allen’s example, angry local residents block progress at the expense of a young woman attempting to go to school as a unanimous Supreme Court decision authorized her to do. “Unanimous” is worth emphasizing because even a bipartisan ruling turns out to be ineffectual in forestalling the fierce opposition the decision triggers. As Elizabeth walks to the school, community anxiety, fear, and hatred collide with a young woman’s hopes, rights, and excitement—and the hostile community wins, at least initially. Protest signs reading “Race Mixing is Communism” and “Stop the Race Mixing March of the Anti-Christ” add

to the racist invective pouring down on Elizabeth as she heads back to her bus stop defeated, her entry into the school denied. Elizabeth has done what Allen says a citizen in a democracy should be entitled to do. She has acted on her rights, tried to claim her political majority, and lost.

Ideally, citizens stay engaged in a democracy not because things always go their way but because when they don't, these citizens retain hope for the future.

A second historical example from *Talking to Strangers* echoes this disgusting incident and offers a sobering lesson for believers in American democracy. Allen cites a June 2000 *New York Times* story noting a rise in the nation's unemployment rate, "with blacks and Hispanics absorbing most of the loss" of jobs. This story is juxtaposed with another one on the same page showing Wall Street investors cheering the news because they hope the slowing economy will mean that the Federal Reserve might be finished raising interest rates. For Allen, mixed responses like these are the norm, not the exception, even in a democratic society, which at any given moment resembles a zero-sum game more than we might care to admit. A snapshot of American society at any one time, like the opposed stories on the *New York Times* page, is going to include winners and losers, with the very same development enabling some people to come out ahead while others fall behind. In a chapter entitled "Sacrifice, a Democratic Fact," Allen argues that the distribution of wealth, power, and

advantage will inevitably be uneven at any given time in a society, a painful fact that is especially difficult to accept in a democracy: "The hard truth of democracy is that some citizens are always giving up things for others" (28-29). This is a hard truth because citizens rightly bring to democracy expectations of fairness, respect, and consideration, only to be periodically disappointed, as Cavell also reminds us in the passage I quoted at the outset. Our sense of autonomy is always getting waylaid by compromises with others who push back against what we pursue; our right to consent is always coming up against outcomes that appear out of our control.

I appreciate how Allen does not sugarcoat this recurrent experience of loss. The people protesting Elizabeth's admission to Central High School felt deeply aggrieved, wronged by what they regarded as a remote Supreme Court decision hostile to their values. They resented having to share with others what they regarded as their school, and they took out on Elizabeth their loss of control, fear of change, and outrage. The depth of their feelings does not in any way excuse their reprehensible behavior. But it does pose a problem that finally getting Elizabeth enrolled in the school was not by itself going to resolve.

Elizabeth's eventual admission as a student also was not going to make up for what happened to her on that shocking day. Her treatment by citizens in her community was disgusting, abusive, and terribly unfair. Although in hindsight her sacrifice may have one day enabled larger gains, for example by the civil rights movement, it still can't be explained away or minimized. Her pain that day shadowed whatever progress may have resulted from it.

As I have been stressing throughout this essay, loss—along with the disappointment, anger, and discouragement it spawns—keeps coming back in a democratic society, shaking our confidence in it. Here is why trust is essential to democracy. Ideally, citizens stay

engaged in a democracy not because things always go their way but because when they don't, these citizens retain hope for the future: hope that the system will be ultimately fair to them, that the sacrifices they are making today will be offset, if not overcome, by opportunities on down the line. Citizens who stay committed to a democracy, in other words, trust that others won't permanently exploit or forget them, that the status quo is not terminally rigged against them, and that they are not going to come out on the short end over and over again. Healthy democracies, that is to say, deal with the disappointment they continuously generate by keeping "winners" and "losers" fluid, always open to reconstitution, not hard-and-fast divisions. In vibrant democracies, the majority rules while accepting the provisional status of their ascendancy and making sure that no group's legitimate priorities get forever lost or put permanently on hold. As Allen says very well, "The central challenge for democracy is to develop methods for making majority decisions that, despite their partiality, also somehow incorporate the reasonable interests of those who have voted against those decisions, for otherwise minorities would have no reason to remain members in a democratic polity" (xix). Winners in a democracy should always be looking out for those currently on the losing end, making sure they have a good reason to keep playing the game.¹⁰ As an example of winners looking out for others, picture the investors described earlier applauding an economic downturn while keeping in mind the workers the downturn hurts, say by making sure an adequate safety net keeps these workers from giving up.

This need to keep "winners" and "losers" open to change reminds us why racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of prejudice are lethal to democracy: they freeze what ought to be the free circulation of loss and opportunity, locking the haves and the have nots into fixed roles, presumably legitimized

by invidious racial, ethnic, and other differences. When interracial antagonism persists, it puts everyone on edge, those at the summit of the social hierarchy as well as those kept at the bottom. Each group eyes the other with suspicion, uneasiness, and fear, and they can only imagine their future together as at best a tense standoff or at worst an out-and-out struggle for self-preservation. Neither scenario makes good on the democratic hope that we can benefit from sharing the world the others.

Racism is toxic to democracy, Allen reminds us, in part because it destroys trust. As she puts it, "At its best, democracy is full of contention and fluid disagreement but free of settled patterns of mutual disdain. Democracy depends on trustful talk among strangers and, properly conducted, should dissolve any divisions that block it" (xiii). Democracies, in other words, depend on citizens feeling safe with one another, willing to entrust their fate to others serving on juries, voting in elections, enforcing laws, and maintaining institutions. But when racial, gender, and other divisions undermine that trust, democracies degenerate into power struggles. Talk across differences devolves into the mutual accusations, violence, and shouting matches that tear apart Philip's family, not to mention the curses rained down on Elizabeth as she walks to school.

No one is more entitled to disappointment in democracy than members of marginalized groups who, like Elizabeth, experience the full brunt of racism and are understandably inclined to lose hope that the majority will ever treat them fairly. Allen astutely pictures these groups facing a range of options, all of which I see surfacing in *The Plot Against America* when Philip's family struggles with disillusionment in an America where anti-Semitism is getting the upper hand.

In the first option mentioned by Allen—the most optimistic option—distrust of the electoral majority on the part of stigmatized

groups is somehow overcome and converted into trust. For the moment, I will let “somehow” stay vague here and the passive voice evade how this happens. But first I want to note how *The Plot Against America* approaches this outcome when toward the very end of the novel, American democracy comes back to life and ends the short-lived imposition of fascism. We don’t, however, see the Jewish community’s intensified distrust of the Christian majority growing into trust. The lingering suspicions felt by Philip’s family are one more sign that the rapid-fire series of events restoring democracy are more fortuitous than achieved. The sudden resumption of democracy leaves intact the disenchantment that the Lindbergh election and Wheeler administration have bred. Even though “the nightmare was over,” Philip will never again be able to revive “that unfazed sense of security” he felt as a little child (301). The final chapter of the novel is accordingly entitled “perpetual fear,” echoing its first sentence: “Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear” (1). Anxiety, uneasiness, and suspicion are here to stay in Philip’s life.

Withdrawal from the community that has turned against them can be another option for groups whose trust in democracy has been shaken. Some Jews do leave the United States in *The Plot Against America*, usually by going to Canada. Although leaving America tempts Philip’s family, they decide to stick it out, determined somehow to reclaim their right to count as Americans. But their determination to stay is always riddled with second thoughts about going away and leaving behind the hostility that they face.

In still another option mentioned by Allen, an oppressed group can rebel against the larger community and fight back. In *The Plot Against America*, resistance to Lindbergh comes from a few courageous leaders such as La Guardia and columnist Walter Winchell who publicly protest against his policies.

Angry individual citizens, especially Philip’s father, also continue to voice their opposition in heated conversations with friends and family members. But outright collective rebellion against Lindbergh never breaks out. Large scale protests and acts of civil disobedience are rare, partly because Lindbergh’s opponents understandably feel powerless and partly because some of them still hold out hope that the next election will put a stop to what is going on.

In one more option, the state uses military and police force to clamp down on the groups it seeks to exclude. For the dominant ruling group, recourse to force is always tempting, especially when they fear some slippage in their hold on power. In *The Plot Against America*, as we have seen, Acting President Wheeler takes this option by declaring martial law, an extreme measure ostensibly justified by riots breaking out against Jewish communities, synagogues, and businesses in several cities after Lindbergh disappears. Wheeler also arrests oppositional leaders on the fabricated grounds that anti-Lindbergh forces are somehow responsible for Lindbergh’s disappearance.

I called the first possible outcome—the conversion of distrust into trust—the most optimistic because as Allen points out it “alone suits democratic practice” (xix). This outcome expands and diversifies the majority to include the marginalized groups some members of that majority want to shut out. In this option, the claim of these groups to political majority, their bid to count as citizens, finally gets welcomed, not rejected. Opening up schools, elections, occupations, and public spaces redefines despised outsiders as trusted fellow citizens. The challenge I am addressing in this essay is how to bring about this resolution in a disappointing society that has broken down and is headed in an anti-democratic direction. To borrow from *The Plot Against America*, how can this democratic outcome be achieved in a world

where distrust is supplanting trust, hatred is shattering community, and a divisive president is stirring up ethnic tensions, cheered on by a xenophobic majority, a compliant Congress, and some complicit cultural and political leaders?

A striking quotation from Ralph Ellison provides the epigraph to Allen's book and points the way toward resisting a democratic society succumbing to fascism. In "Working Notes to Juneteenth," Ellison writes of America, "This society is not likely to become free of racism, thus it is necessary for Negroes to free themselves by becoming their idea of what a free people should be." By acknowledging that American society "is not likely to become free of racism," Ellison is confirming the claim that is my starting point in this essay, namely, that American society is always going to arouse not only hope and pride but also disappointment, rejection, and anger, in this case by perpetuating racism, one of the most destructive impediments to democracy. Ellison finds, however, even from within the imperfect context of American society possibilities for liberation, which he describes as oppressed groups becoming "their idea of what a free people should be": modeling, in other words, the kind of community they want the larger society to become.

This is a crucial shift in emphasis. Instead of waiting in frustration for others to change (as when Philip's exasperated father says of Lindbergh's unwavering supporters, "Can you believe these people?" [see above, 6]), Ellison urges us to explore what we can achieve on our own from within the oppressive circumstances we want to transform. Although attempts at persuasion continue, Ellison encourages advocates for democratic change not to hold back until others are ready to join them but instead to go first, to strike out on their own and exemplify the values they hope more people will one day embrace.¹¹ Persuasion gets supplemented, not by ineffectual force,

as when Philip's put-out parents slap their Lindbergh-loving son, but by the power of example, as when Elizabeth rises above the angry mob blocking her way to Central High School.

I applaud how Allen takes Ellison's injunction and translates it into our implementing here and now in our everyday relations with others what she calls the practices of political friendship.¹² By "practices of political friendship," I take Allen to mean, among other things, displaying to others—strangers very much included—the good will and mutual respect friends show one another; demonstrating to others a willingness to share power and take turns exercising control; making sure in our relationships with others that concessions even out over time, as opposed to one party always giving in to the other. In the spirit of political friendship, Allen notes, "each friend moderates her own interests for the sake of preserving the friendship" (126)—moderates her own interests, not suppresses them, for the sake of sharing the world with others and affirming their interdependence.

Allen has in mind the practices, not the feelings, of political friendship. She is not saying we should all suddenly pretend to be the best of friends, and she faults sappy Hollywood interracial buddy movies for suggesting that the contrived attainment of fellow feeling solves everything. In the everyday interactions that Allen is recommending, we are talking to strangers, not attacking or shunning them but also not presuming unearned intimacy with them. In these interactions, tensions and disagreements are invariably going to surface without, however, exploding into acrimonious, no-holds-barred battles. Mutually acceptable resolutions are going to get pieced together, not once and for all but day in and day out, as conflicts flare up, get worked through, and die down, only to come back to life again.

Allen, in short, is proposing that we treat strangers as we ideally treat our friends: respectfully working things out with them, not automatically turning them into enemies, as we shop together in crowded supermarkets, work together, and, in general, “rub shoulders in daily life” (see above, 9). Allen is right to remind us that over time these everyday interactions help shape public attitudes and put pressure on elections, legislative hearings, and other activities we may be inclined to seal off in some independent political realm. As Allen concludes, “Political order is secured not only by institutions, but also by ‘deep rules’ that prescribe specific interactions among citizens in public spaces; citizens enact what they are to each other not only in assemblies, where they make decisions about their mutually intertwined fates, but also when, as strangers, they speak to one another, or don’t, or otherwise respond to each other’s presence” (10). The influence on politics of how citizens respond to one another in everyday life is admittedly gradual, subtle, and cumulative, more like the impact of daily exercise than dramatic life-saving surgery. But tending to the “deep rules” of a society slowly but surely delimits how far political leaders can go, whether these leaders are promoting democratic values or subverting them. Even under the most challenging circumstances, everyday interactions with others can regenerate mutual trust and help counteract top-down assaults on it.²³

The Plot Against America indirectly illustrates this point when, as we have seen, it shows fascism gaining momentum by monopolizing the everyday interactions I have been describing. Earlier I cited Richard Brody’s sharp observation about how in *The Plot Against America* “so much of daily life depends invisibly but decisively on politics.” I think this is the case not because it has to be, but because Lindbergh’s election in the novel is so sudden and unanticipated that it swamps everything else and suffuses every

conversation, like an unpredicted, devastating storm people can’t get off their minds. The sudden end of the Lindbergh nightmare means that citizens in their everyday interactions have not yet had the chance to repair trust in one another: hence the residual uneasiness Philip feels even after Roosevelt’s landslide reelection. Earning the restoration of democracy at the conclusion of the novel, making it stick, will depend not only on responsive institutions and thoughtful leaders but also on citizens implementing democratic values in their daily dealings with one another.

I noted earlier that the power of example can supplement persuasion. Allen rightly makes much of the moving example Elizabeth sets as she tries to enter what she now has a right to call her school, despite the vitriolic denials of the community that is obstructing her. Elizabeth’s dignity, composure, and quiet anguish stand in sharp contrast to the racist invective swirling around her. Elizabeth’s dress, which she herself made for the first day of school, is especially important in this scene. The dress is partly made of equal black and white squares, a checkerboard pattern that Allen interprets as representing the post-segregationist future that the Brown decision intended to achieve. Allen calls the dress Elizabeth’s flag for the project of reshaping American society: the only form of speech available to Elizabeth at the time but forceful nevertheless in its impact on others and in fortifying Elizabeth’s own resolve. “The important thing,” Allen says, is

that the symbolic required real power, real fashioning, on Elizabeth’s part. Her ability to subdue matter to form with her skirt no doubt helped secure her belief in the possibility of doing the same with her fellow citizens, and her conviction that eventually she and they would together reweave their social fabric. The dress may well have reassured her of her ability to help reform the future. (23)

As Elizabeth walked silently to and from the school, her homemade dress became her way, “the only one available to her, of talking to strangers” (23), whether the community members who were shouting at her or the viewers watching from afar. For Allen, the dress—simple, handmade, self-designed—“provides an example of the powerful inventiveness that belongs to the true democratic citizen” (24).

With Elizabeth’s dress as an example, I see Allen encouraging us to reconceive how we can influence others—not just through verbal arguments, emotional outbursts, or top-down directives but also through works of imagination: pictures, gestures, stories, and, in Elizabeth’s case, a personally made dress. “Happily,” Allen goes on to say, “a photographer was there to amplify what Elizabeth had to say” (24) that September day: “happily,” because that photographer’s art extended the reach of Elizabeth’s example in ways she could never anticipate or count on. Just as happily, I would add, the larger community was ready to allow Elizabeth’s quiet heroism to move them into eventually supporting the civil rights legislation needed to reinforce the Supreme Court Brown decision.

I am not drawing a straight line from Elizabeth’s dress to the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Many other forces had to do their part to let Elizabeth’s experience serve as impetus for advancing a larger cause. Although not an all-powerful weapon, Elizabeth’s dress plays a role both in affecting others and in bolstering Elizabeth’s own determination to keep at the extremely hard work she was engaged in. Abstracting the passage of legislation from the complex process enabling it shortchanges what citizens can do along the way to promote democratic progress. I would go so far as to say that Elizabeth’s story illustrates how social change typically occurs, not in one fell swoop but when others are primed to pick up on cues to act and go

further wherever these prompts may occur. Kwame Anthony Appiah makes this point well when he calls into question “the myth of self-deliverance.” As Appiah notes, a minority group under assault “isn’t a colony that can rise up and overthrow the forces of oppression on its own.” Instead, “it needs the help of other people who recognize the struggle for equality as a moral one, universally binding.”¹⁴ With *Talking to Strangers* as my guide, I have been suggesting that everyday interactions can fortify this readiness to join the struggle for equality. A homemade dress can play a role, too.

Responding to the Inevitable Failures of Democracy

I started out this essay endorsing Stanley Cavell’s comment on the crucial need to respond to the “inevitable failures” of democracy “otherwise than by excuse or withdrawal.” As we have seen, *The Plot Against America* imagines a major failure of democracy: the election of a divisive leader with autocratic leanings who is willing to exploit anti-Semitism, intensify fear, court foreign dictators such as Hitler, and ease the way for fascism. Excuses for accepting Lindbergh abound in *The Plot Against America*. Some rabid supporters of Lindbergh embrace him without a second thought. Other supporters, however, arrive at rationalizations for backing him, for example, by arguing that his anti-war position justifies stomaching his anti-Semitism, or by reducing his anti-Semitism to a merely rhetorical campaign strategy aimed at getting votes. The complicity of these supporters, enabled by the special pleading they indulge in, shows why excusing the failures of democracy is so devastating. After all, Lindbergh is just being Lindbergh. But his acquiring presidential power, far from toning down his anti-Semitism, magnifies its impact. Electing him president, no matter

how his supporters justify it, permits anti-Semitism to flourish and make new inroads into politics, everyday life, and culture. Especially when reinforced by Allen's reminder that racism is radically at odds with democracy, *The Plot Against America* underscores this crucial point: in a democracy, racism in a leader is inexcusable and disqualifying—period. It can't be worked around, normalized, or subordinated to some greater goal without doing serious damage. The harm racism sooner or later does to a democracy cancels out any attempt to make do with it.

If costly rationalizations for supporting Lindbergh proliferate in *The Plot Against America*, the temptation to withdraw from a backsliding democracy makes itself felt in *Talking to Strangers*. The failure of democracy that concerns Allen occurs when a society allows those who come out ahead and those who fall behind to become hard-and-fast categories. Racism again plays a major role in segmenting society that way. Seeing the system stacked against them, people who keep coming out on the losing end sometimes imagine escaping the system, say by moving elsewhere or by dropping out of political life. Both options promise relief from the pain and frustration of continuing to hope for fair treatment, only to be disappointed over and over again. Allen counters the temptation to withdraw by expanding our sense of how we can make a difference in politics to include what we can do in everyday life to promote change, without waiting for

others to come along. Voting, taking political stands, and influencing legislators remain necessary to democratic progress—but not sufficient. They do not exhaust how we can influence politics. In addition to allowing our everyday interactions with others to count politically, Allen renews our appreciation for what we need to do outside of politics to sustain our determination to stay engaged. When Elizabeth sewed her dress, she wasn't wasting her time.

I return to young Philip's weariness when he listens to yet another argument over Lindbergh: "That name again!" he groans (96). As children sometimes do, Philip is registering and voicing what other characters are also feeling: he is inundated, at a saturation point, discouraged. Lindbergh is achieving one goal of autocratic leaders, which is to dominate every conversation and sap our energy, monopolize our attention, and crowd out what we can do to counteract them. The incessant drumbeat of "Lindbergh" is making Philip feel even more powerless. I am suggesting in this essay that we should trust the weariness Philip is feeling and use it, not as a reason for retreating from politics but as an incentive for nurturing what Lindbergh-like leaders try to destroy, namely, the practices of political friendship in everyday life that feed the resiliency of democracy. After reading *The Plot Against America* and *Talking to Strangers*, we would be foolish to underestimate the threats that endanger American democracy. But we would also be foolish to let these threats have the final say. A

Notes

1. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 18. Subsequent references are to page number and are inserted in the text.
2. Judith Thurman, "Philip Roth E-Mails on Trump," *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2017. Roth goes on to call Donald Trump's election more improbable than Lindbergh's. According to Roth, Lindbergh was at least a celebrity with genuine accomplishments whereas Trump is "just a con artist."
3. Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 13. Subsequent references are to page number and are inserted in the text.
4. Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3. Subsequent references are to page number and are inserted in the text.
5. Paul Berman, "The Plot Against America," *New York Times Book Review*, October 3, 2004.
6. Several recent studies have reinforced this gradualist picture of authoritarianism emerging from within societies that have allowed democratic institutions and values to erode. See, for example, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).
7. Richard Brody, "The Frightening Lessons of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*," *The New Yorker*, February 2017.
8. Alex de Tocqueville also emphasized the importance to democracy of citizens developing trust in one another through everyday interactions. See his classic study *Democracy in America*, Volume 1, Chapter XVII: "Principal Causes Which Tend to Maintain the Democratic Republic in the United States" (1835). Other writers who have extended Tocqueville's point include Robert Putnam (whom Allen cites), especially in *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993) and *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). I see Allen applying this line of thought to the disappointing aftermath of the Brown decision as well as reminding us how classical thinkers, in particular Aristotle, also explored "how the expertise of friendship [could] be brought to bear on politics" (140).
9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950). pp. 146-47.
10. In *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt call forbearance one of the "soft guardrails" of American democracy (9). By "forbearance," they mean something similar to what I describe as winners looking out for losers or, in the words of Levitsky and Ziblatt, elected leaders resisting "the temptation to use their temporary control of institutions to maximum partisan advantage" (9).
11. In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* Cavell similarly speaks of redirecting our energy from "restraining the bad" in others to "releasing the good" in ourselves (18). Cavell goes on to offer this beautiful tribute to the potential power of example: "a philosopher will naturally think that the other has to be argued out of his position, which is apt to seem hopeless. But suppose the issue is not to win an argument (that may come late in the day) but to manifest for the other another way...a shift in direction, as slight as a degree of the compass, but down the road making all the difference in the world" (31).
12. Allen draws on Aristotle, in particular his *The Art of Rhetoric*, in fleshing out the practices of political friendship. But she also cites what may be a more familiar source: the work on negotiation undertaken by the Harvard Negotiation Project (she mentions *Getting to Yes* [1981] by Roger Fisher and William Ury). I think the literature of dispute resolution continues to be an underutilized resource for observers concerned about the future of democracy.
13. For a brilliant recent example of how talking to strangers might work, see Claudia Rankine's account of her conversation with a fellow passenger on a plane in "Brief Encounters with White Men," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 21, 2019.
14. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Stonewall and the Myth of Self-Deliverance," *New York Times*, June 23, 2019.