

The Plots Against the President
FDR, a nation in crisis, and the rise of the American Right

Sally Denton

Las Vegas: NevadaSmith Press, 2019. ISBN-10 : 1733658009 (p/back)

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Plots? Plural? Think of Franklin D. Roosevelt and plots, and the so-called Business Plot¹ is the only one that comes to mind. Therefore, any book that promises a plethora of plots is parapolitical catnip; and Denton's is that book – or at least the only one staking that claim right now. First things first: lots of the titular plots are not really anything you would usually identify as a formal plot. They are mostly (but not exclusively) spontaneous machinations, currents, and manoeuvrings. So, if you're hoping that this book will contain evidence of multiple high-level conspiracies, each as advanced and complex as the Business Plot, then you should adjust your expectations before purchasing. The adjustment will be worth the effort, because Sally Denton's book is written in a sophisticated but uncomplicated way that puts the Business Plot into context and by doing so makes it comprehensible. In the long run, Denton might even manage to coax orthodox historians into examining this episode properly at last.²

The opening chapter is a portrait of Roosevelt with biographical background. This will annoy readers who want to delve into the technical stuff, but none of it is laid on very thick and the information provides political orientation that is helpful and even important in understanding the rest of the book. For example, would many modern readers be familiar with the concept of *noblesse oblige*? Or – if they were familiar with it – relate it to modern American society, let alone see how it could apply to a US president? In an age when Donald Trump can be called presidential, such social attitudes seem as obsolete and irrelevant as duelling and chivalry. Denton sketches out FDR's character with concision and clarity, and then heads straight into her story. There are multiple paths through this book, and the reader should bear in mind that this review can not and does not discuss all of them.

Having equipped the reader with a sort of psychological profile of

¹ See, for example, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/01/13/fdr-roosevelt-coup-business-plot/>>.

² Her book, *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America 1947-2000*, co-written with Roger Morris, was reviewed in *Lobster* 44.

Roosevelt, Denton immediately finds a 'perfect' villain in Herbert Hoover. This deft characterisation of FDR's presidential predecessor is something of a mild shock. Received opinion has Hoover down as an out-of-touch bumbler, hopelessly ill-equipped to tackle the Great Depression even as it descended around him.³ Not here, though. Even taking into account the author's need for a compelling baddie in the tale, Hoover comes across as a nasty piece of work – callous, spiteful, and vindictive. Denton doesn't have proof that the Depression was exacerbated by Hoover's personal contempt for the lives of working-class Americans, but her narrative creates a tapestry of convincing circumstantial evidence. Her assessment of Hoover himself is the star exhibit.⁴

But villains can be victims too, and it's a mark of Denton's even-handedness that she shows how Hoover had his own run-ins with the deep state. The author goes into quite some detail about the pivotal moment when Hoover's downfall began in earnest, ushering Roosevelt into the White House. This was the infamous 1932 rout of the 'Bonus Army' at Anacostia, when the US military was called in to remove the homeless and unemployed First World War veterans thronging Washington D.C.⁵ In Denton's telling, Hoover was originally badgered into taking action by General Douglas MacArthur. While he was enthusiastically carrying out the orders he had procured from Hoover, MacArthur ignored an unexpected telegram from Hoover ordering him to desist. The result approximated a Peterloo Massacre for the newsreel era, and cinema audiences across the USA hissed their disgust as they watched footage of their own soldiers bludgeoning impoverished war veterans.

³ Per Denton, one of Hoover's grand visions for tackling the depression was to commission an uplifting national poem to inspire the nation. This was surreal enough at the time, but imagine the public reaction to a president who proposed something like that today.

⁴ Hoover's presence in Denton's narrative is strikingly like that of the avaricious banker Henry Potter in Frank Kapra's 1945 movie *It's a Wonderful Life*: baleful, necessary, and absolutely compelling. This isn't just a flippant observation. Apart from the vague similarity of the names 'Henry Potter' and 'Herbert Hoover,' Potter first appears in Kapra's film in scenes depicting the year 1928, which is when Hoover was elected president. In the 'What-if' history that unrolls in the Kapra movie, Potter takes over and debases the hero's home town of Bedford Falls. As James Stewart's character sees to his horror, the town has even been rechristened as Potterville – an explicit reference to the name 'Hooverville' that was mockingly applied to depression-era shanty towns. There is also a strong physical resemblance between Hoover and Potter, the latter being embodied by a rather brutal-looking Lionel Barrymore. All this subtext might have escaped movie critics, and didn't concern Denton when she was writing about Hoover, but it's utterly unlikely that it was missed by theatre audiences at the end of the Second World War.

⁵ The 'Bonus Army' soldiers were demanding the early payment of their war service bonus, which officially wouldn't fall due until 1945 – a schedule that had seemed reasonable enough when it was drawn up, long before the Great Depression struck.

Hoover later refused to dismiss MacArthur for his disastrous insubordination. Stating (as Denton does) that this was seen by contemporaries as a sign of Hoover's personal weakness, creates a mild paradox: if Hoover was so weak, then why did he order the clearances in the first place? Denton doesn't go very far into this, but with just a minimum of unfolding, a completely viable interpretation appears. MacArthur stuck faithfully to Hoover's original orders, later turning a Nelsonian blind eye to Hoover's panicky eleventh-hour telegram. MacArthur had no time for civilian vacillating, so he gave Hoover exactly what he had originally asked for and messed it up magnificently (a MacArthur hallmark). The Anacostia debacle inevitably cost Hoover the election. Sudden awareness of his own political misjudgement must have been the reason Hoover belatedly tried to call off the Anacostia clearance while it was in progress: if he had had a speck of compassion in him, he would never have gone along with it in the first place.

Nor is it any good to pin the blame solely on General MacArthur, for egging Hoover on with false intelligence about communist infiltration of the protests. Hoover had other and better sources of information available, but chose instead to rely on someone who drew out his worst tendencies.⁶ President Hoover was also aided and abetted by his infamous namesake, who appears throughout Denton's book. In 1932, J. Edgar Hoover was 37 years old, but Denton shows he was already an unmistakable tyrant-in-waiting. J. Edgar fed President Hoover a steady diet of bogus warnings about how the famished war veterans were really communist revolutionaries, with aircraft and machine-guns at their disposal. Such claims were patently ludicrous at the time, and J. Edgar could not have offered the president any evidence for flat-out lies. Again, better sources were available but President Hoover ignored them. This was not weakness on the president's part. Stupidity is the most charitable explanation, but others are available.

Denton's narrative seethes from start to finish with political intrigues. She delineates one especially enjoyable instance from Hoover's 'lame duck' period after he lost the 1932 election. At the time, the handover 'grace period' after a presidential election and before the winner's inauguration was almost three months. In the twelve long weeks between trouncing Hoover in November and then finally moving into the White House in March 1933, Roosevelt found himself unexpectedly cornered. Hoover graciously invited FDR to observe and participate in presidential affairs, as a kind introduction to the role. Of course,

⁶ Denton cites a survey by the Veterans' Association, which proved that 94 per cent of the Bonus Army were genuine WWI servicemen, 67 per cent of whom had fought in Europe, and 20 per cent of whom were disabled as a result. This survey was published while the Bonus Army was still encamped at Anacostia.

the kindness and graciousness were for public consumption only. 'We now have [Roosevelt] in a hole that he is not going to be able to get out of', smirked one member of Hoover's cabinet. Faced with a lose-lose choice between being seen as a passive and ineffectual political amateur, or being seen as complicit in failed policies that the electorate had resoundingly rejected, Roosevelt chose the former. As it turned out, he'd made the right decision, on a personal level at least. The Depression worsened sharply over the Christmas and New Year period, and FDR's popularity remained undiminished while public hostility to Hoover and his failed policies got steadily deeper. The lame duck had, so to speak, cooked his own goose. But it was during this critical handover period that someone tried to kill Roosevelt.

Who remembers Giuseppe Zangara today? He is an unknown to the general public, and even aficionados of assassinations would be hard-pressed to say much about him. He can be swiftly summed up and dismissed as an incoherent Italian-American bricklayer, with a mysterious and incurable stomach problem which he blamed on capitalists (as a class). In his own telling, Zangara's maddening internal pains eventually drove him to shoot at the president-elect. Denton's work goes into impressive detail about the 15 February 1933 attack and its aftermath, and – refreshingly – about the perpetrator too. The material Denton has excavated indicates very strongly, but does not prove, that while Zangara was almost certainly the sole gunman, he was not the lone nut widely portrayed in the sensational newspaper coverage of the day. This is a pity, because she overlooked one bit of evidence in her own book that offered a significant breakthrough. This is discussed below.

Within 48 hours of the shooting, and with Zangara in custody, five Italian bricklayers in New Jersey were arrested as suspects. The incriminating evidence was a letter, apparently found discarded in a Newark gutter, which one of the men had written to the others, lamenting Zangara's failure:

With my most sincere regrets, [I] am forced to tell you of my brother bricklayer's unsuccessful attempt on the life of our president-elect [. . .] It seems a shame that we have in our midst a man with such poor aim. I do believe we should have a place where we could all go and practise up on our shooting, as it looks like an open season on presidents and politicians.

Not finally damning, but very hard indeed to explain away. What happened next? Nothing, apparently, and the reader searches in vain for further details – as, presumably, did Denton. Quite separately, Zangara's murky personal connections set off alarm bells in Philadelphia, where a federal prosecutor

passed a promising lead to the State Attorney in a letter dated 21 February. He claimed to have information that tied Zangara to a prominent Italian trotskyite, Carlo Tresca, who was at that time reportedly hiding out in Los Angeles ('under the protection of a high-ranking Sicilian Mafia chief', no less). What happened next? Again, apparently nothing.

The final chance to crack the case came while Zangara was on Death Row. His execution was scheduled for just 10 days after sentencing, and throughout that time Zangara was held – as decreed by the Governor of Florida himself – totally incommunicado. The prison warden, understandably curious about this draconian isolation, disobeyed the governor's decree and talked privately with Zangara at great length. He came to the conclusion that Zangara was 'a member of a secret Italian terrorist organisation, similar to the Mafia, called Camorra', and that the attempt to kill FDR was related to Camorra's codes of vengeance. What happened next? Nothing, because Zangara was killed in the electric chair and his secrets died with him. His last words included: 'Viva Italia! Viva Camorra!'

The inquiring prison warden had got tantalisingly close to the truth, and Denton has missed an open goal a mile wide. While not as well-known as its Sicilian counterpart, Camorra was and still is the Campanian Mafia. Zangara wasn't a lone nut, he was a gangster, and his insistence that he acted alone was dictated by the underworld's rule of Omerta. A provincial prison warden's ignorance about Camorra, nearly a century ago, is understandable. A C21st researcher's failure to type an unfamiliar foreign word into a search engine is . . . almost unforgivable.

Zangara had been arrested, investigated, tried, sentenced, re-tried, re-sentenced, and executed in the space of just five weeks.⁷ The day after the shooting, the Secret Service had announced that Zangara was 'a member of a recognised Anarchist group, making its headquarters in Paterson, New Jersey'. But the day after that (the same time those five unidentified Italian bricklayers were arrested in New Jersey), the Secret Service suddenly brushed off Zangara as 'a lonesome, morose character [. . .] with no particular grudge against the government.' The Secret Service had obviously pulled rank for some reason, bringing police investigations to a halt.⁸ Denton's summation of the non-investigation of Zangara's intriguing background, and of the diverted rush to

⁷ Zangara was originally tried for attempted murder and sentenced to 80 years hard labour. Soon after that, he was tried for murder, because one of the bystanders hit by his bullets – Chicago mayor Anton Cermak – died when his wound became gangrenous.

⁸ And the Secret Service had a seemingly unimpeachable alibi for doing so in the Zangara case, because in 1913 the service's presidential protection duties had been expanded to cover presidents-elect, too.

judgment, has the depressingly-familiar ring of political truth.

With the economy struggling for survival, democracy under attack, a long and leaderless interregnum, and the very fabric of American society frayed, it was in the interest of Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, J. Edgar Hoover, and Congress to rapidly paint Zangara's act as an isolated eruption by a deranged man. [Roosevelt advisor Raymond] Moley felt it imperative to downplay Zangara's political connections, telling the *New York Times* that Zangara was neither 'socialistic' nor 'anarchistic' but that he had 'a fixed idea of opposition to all heads of government'. Privately, Moley admitted that he believed Zangara to be sane and a man of considerable intelligence, and that he [i.e. Moley] 'felt it was desirable to avoid, so far as possible, any hysteria on the subject of radicalism'.⁹

Due to the dearth of known surviving evidence (to say nothing of having completely missed the Camorra connection), Denton can't really go far into any rational motives that might have driven Zangara's attack.¹⁰ She identifies a commonality between Zangara and various anti-Mussolini campaigns that were being cooked up by Italian-Americans. Mussolini had been in power in Italy since 1922 and was widely admired across the world as a reforming moderniser. This is something today's readers would do well to remember. When Zangara shot at Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler had only been Chancellor of Germany for a fortnight, and fascism was not yet seen as a toxic ideology. A large exodus of anti-fascist Italians had emigrated to America after Mussolini seized power in 1922. Again, this could have led Denton back to the Camorra connection. Mussolini was determined to uproot and ultimately destroy the Mob, and many of those fleeing Italy were so-called 'Made Men'.

Zangara himself arrived at Ellis Island in 1923. He soon applied for US citizenship, but (he later claimed) only so that he could join the bricklayers'

⁹ Much the same reasoning was of course deployed in Nicholas Katzenbach's infamous memo of 23 November 1963. It was deployed more forcefully by Lyndon Johnson when he pressurised Earl Warren into whitewashing the JFK case. It seems likely that this 'Don't Scare the Horses' alibi had been tried and tested long before 1933.

¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, Zangara is depicted as nothing but a classic 'lone nut' in Robert Donovan's 1955 book *The Assassins*, which in Alan Dulles's hands became a tool for framing Lee Harvey Oswald, as discussed in *Lobster* 81 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/81/the-lincoln-kennedy-psyop/>>.

When Zangara stood trial, the defence requested a lunacy commission to probe the would-be assassin's sanity. It reported back only that Zangara had psychopathic tendencies, but adjudged him legally sane and fit to stand to trial. This finding was not contested by Zangara's defence team, nor by Zangara himself.

union and get paid work. Did Zangara's membership of Camorra begin in Italy, or after he joined an American trade union? Given the timeline, both options seem equally plausible. Either way, Mob infiltration of US unions means that the discarded letter found soon after the shooting (and the five consequent arrests), starts to make a grim kind of sense. J. Edgar Hoover's bizarre lifelong refusal to admit that the Mafia existed could help explain the cover-up, but Zangara's paid-up membership of the Republican Party poses hair-raising questions on another level entirely.¹¹ It borders on tragedy that Denton didn't spot the Camorra clue and follow it.

The most interesting way in which Denton discerns Mussolini's shadow hanging over the Zangara case is the contemporary belief – held by many respectable upper-class Americans at the time – that whoever succeeded Herbert Hoover as president would have to use unconstitutional means to have any hope of ending the Great Depression.¹² The Grand Old Man of the Op-Ed Column, Walter Lippmann, always ready to moralise the high and mighty in private too, was one voice among many that warned Roosevelt that he 'may have no alternative but to assume dictatorial powers'. At the time, as Denton reminds the reader, communism was the biggest worry in America, while fascism – widely imagined to be a form of purified hypercapitalism – was 'not only venerated but also avant-garde'. It transpired that the 1932 election which put FDR in the White House also handed the Democratic Party unassailable majorities in both chambers of Congress, and so Roosevelt managed to pull America out of its nosedive without doing anything too tyrannical. But in the long gap between the 1932 election and the 1933 inauguration, no-one outside Roosevelt's inner circle would have known about FDR's plans, which left public speculation to run riot. It doesn't take great insight to see that the thought of a dictatorial US president, propping up Mussolini's regime in Italy, would have occurred to anti-fascist Italians living in America.¹³

And so we reach the climax and destination of Denton's narrative, the Business Plot. To summarise what you'll find in this book, Denton handles

¹¹ The aforementioned Carlo Tresca was another Italian refugee, and was regarded as Mussolini's fiercest American critic. This automatically arouses suspicion about why Tresca was under Mafia protection when Zangara shot at FDR.

¹² Cf. Britain's King Edward VIII, who as Prince of Wales in 1933 notoriously remarked: 'Dictators are very popular these days. We might want one in England before long.'

¹³ It may or may not be significant that the other US politician explicitly touted as an American Mussolini, Roosevelt's implacable foe Huey Long, was himself shot to death in September 1935. He was planning to launch a presidential campaign for the following year's election.

things professionally and straightforwardly. Her work provides a roll-call of all the key evidence needed to refute sceptics who claimed (and still claim) that whistleblower Smedley Butler just made the whole thing up. She gives chapter and verse on the solidity of the plot, and manages to get some way into identifying the participants and revealing their motivations. If you were hoping for a grand exposé that explains everything, then you will not be satisfied. But if you wanted all the core details that establish the veracity of what Smedley Butler claimed, then you will not be disappointed either. To go further would probably take years and years of scurrying around the US, exhuming and examining uncatalogued personal papers lost in university archives. There is only so much that one author can humanly do, and in doing even quite a basic job Denton has still done far more than most previous authors on the topic.

To conclude on a grumble about something that's obviously not Sally Denton's fault, this book is difficult to follow because it is full of glitches that go well beyond run-of-the-mill typographical errors. People's names keep changing slightly, for example, and every few pages there is a sentence cut in half by a misplaced paragraph break. The cause of the problem is exposed on page 83, where the surname of Raymond Moley appears as 'iVIoley'. This is not a typo that any human being would make. At some stage in production, apparently, Denton's text was processed by some kind of optical character-recognition software – probably in 2019 when this paperback edition was being recomposed from the original 2012 hardback.¹⁴ It must have been an attractive option, for whatever unfathomable reason, but it is harder to forgive the publisher for not double-checking what the software produced.

Careless decanting of the hardback text into an edition with different pagination might also explain why this paperback has no index. Perhaps it would have been too much like hard work to go through and revise the index, and therefore no-one did. Some books don't need an index. This book really, absolutely, definitely does – and the publisher deserves a clip round the ear-hole for dereliction of duty.

Has Sally Denton written the definitive book about the various plots against Franklin D. Roosevelt? No, clearly she has not, and it's unlikely (to my mind) that she even set out to do so in the first place. The definitive book on the FDR plots would be much larger, mind-bogglingly complex, and would not be aimed at a general readership. Historians being what they are, such a book would undoubtedly pull its punches and beat around as many bushes as possible. As a journalist, Denton has done a proverbial 'first draft' of this dark and dangerous area of US history. First drafts are seldom perfect. Weighing her

¹⁴ Bloomsbury Press, New York; ISBN 978-1-60819-089-8

book's qualities against its faults, she has done an absolutely outstanding job. Ten years on, and we are still waiting for the historians to rise to her challenge.