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Luthin: American Demagogues, Twentieth Century / Straight: Trial by Television

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AMERICAN DEMAGOGUES, TWENTIETH CENTURY. By Reinhard H. Luthin, with an introduction by Allan Nevins. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1954. Pp. xi, 368. \$5.00.

TRIAL BY TELEVISION. By Michael Straight. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1954. Pp. 282. \$3.50.

THESE two books from the same publisher may well be read together. Indeed the final demagogue portrayed by Mr. Luthin is Joseph McCarthy. Mr. Straight's book takes up in detail the crowning achievement of the Senator's demagoguery and comes as an appropriate sequel to the former volume. Both books are easy to read and factually accurate. The first contains an elaborate bibliography on its subjects; the second is graced with a number of revealing caricatures of the *dramatis personae* of the Army-McCarthy hearings by Robert Osborn. Both rate high on the scale of intellectual integrity and good reporting. At the same time, it must be said that both writers express freely their opinions on the events and persons they write about; they mix fact and comment generously. In other words, both books are "slanted"—honestly "slanted," in the sense that the facts upon which opinion is based are accurately stated, but nevertheless written from a point of view which is hostile to the principal personalities involved. Neither Luthin nor Straight makes any attempt to conceal his attitude, and, since the facts are neither misstated nor distorted, the reader may make his own judgment whether the authors have defamed the men they write about or themselves.

Of the eleven demagogues discussed by Luthin, five are furnished by the South (Long, Bilbo, Talmadge, and the two Fergusons), one by the Southwest (Murray), three by the East (Hague, Curley, and Marcantonio), and two by the Middle West (Thompson and McCarthy). Of course, in the first half of this century the nation produced many others who could stand toe to toe with this team and match demagogueries—Tom Hefflin, Cotton-Ed Smith, Gerald L. K. Smith, Father Coughlin, to name a few who come first to mind. But the author's list is as good as any, and his selections, individually and collectively, disclose about all of the trade equipment. The list represents just about every evil in American political life: lying, cheating, corruption, quackery, melodrama, ham-acting, buffoonery, and the degradation of political processes.

Once in a while it will appear that one of these characters does something decent. This tends to confuse people. Long built good roads and new schools—some of them way up in the bayous and in the hinterland of Louisiana as well as in the southern part where most of the votes were. And there was considerable similarity between Marcantonio's political speeches and his voting record. It may be recalled that Mussolini made the trains run on time. This was good for travelers, but it turned out, on the whole, to be a lousy way to run a railroad. Such items are negligible in the demagogue's balance sheet and should be disregarded. It is even urged sometimes by people who should know better that McCarthy alerted the nation to the dangers of Communism. This, of course, is sheer nonsense. He didn't even invent McCarthyism. He

has always been a Joe come lately. Before the country ever heard of McCarthy, congressional committees were making fools of themselves, the Federal Government had concocted a loyalty program which debased the Bill of Rights, state legislatures were passing loyalty-oath statutes, the American Legion was conducting witch hunts in the schools, and housewives were ruining talented artists by charges of communism which they could not prove.

"What is a demagogue?" asks Mr. Luthin. He answers the question this way: "He is a politician skilled in oratory, flattery, and invective; evasive in discussing vital issues; promising everything to everybody; appealing to the passions rather than the reason of the public; and arousing racial, religious, and class prejudices—a man whose lust for power without recourse to principle leads him to seek to become a master of the masses."¹

A further and more important question may be asked. What is it in American society which, generation after generation, produces such a crop of demagoguery? The answer here, too, is to be gleaned from Mr. Luthin's book and is summarized by Professor Nevins in his introduction: It "not infrequently springs, in part or in whole, from some wrong, some neglect, some falsehood, for which society bears a responsibility. Had the federal government given the Western farmers credit at reasonable rates and proper freight-rate regulation, Mary Ellen Lease would never have made trouble in Kansas. Had the Proper Bostonians been kinder, juster, and more fraternal in their attitude toward immigrant neighbors, Jim Curley would never have administered their city from a penitentiary."²

It is on such social and economic abuses that demagoguery thrives. "Curley denounced Brahmins, 'downtown realty pirates,' and the New Haven railroad; Bilbo, the Delta planters and Yankee capital; Thompson, the Chicago traction companies, British aristocrats, and those who lived on Lake Shore Drive; Murray, the 'interests' in 'the shadow of Wall Street'; Hague, the railroads; Talmadge, the utility interests; Ferguson, the 'Rent Hog' and the 'Interest Hog'; Marcantonio, the 'Wall Street imperialists' and the 'Four Hundred'; Huey Long, the Standard Oil Company."³ The demagogue may make a lot of noise, but ordinarily he is not heard until depression and economic hardship goad desperate men to believe anyone who will promise them relief.

If there is lack of balance in *American Demagogues*, it is not that the charlatany of the demagogues is overemphasized; it is that the conditions which give rise to them are, perhaps, underemphasized. There were, indeed, "downtown realty pirates," Wall Street "interests," "Rent Hogs," utility "interests," the "Standard Oil Company"; and they were all fleecing the "people." The demagogues were, by and large, crooks and shysters, by no means averse to "doing business" with the "interests" while preaching and posing as "men of the people." But, as the author himself states, speaking of the 1890's to 1914, "it was an age made to order for exploitation by the demagogues."⁴ Unfortunate-

1. LUTHIN, *AMERICAN DEMAGOGUES*, TWENTIETH CENTURY 3 (1954).

2. *Id.* at xiv-xv.

3. *Id.* at 307-08.

4. *Id.* at 4.

ly, in almost any age, there are conditions "made to order for exploitation by the demagogues." To this, add the political insecurity caused by the balance of power tactics which have dominated international intrigues for a century, and an additional avenue is opened up for demagoguery.

And so, each nation and every civilization has had them—the Greeks first coined the name. So long as there is international unrest or economic and social exploitation of large masses, there will be political exploitation by those who seek mastery over the masses. Our own country has done better than most to eradicate the economic conditions which make demagoguery profitable. Ironically, however, we have produced somewhat more than our share of demagogues, our own unique, indigenous varieties. But whether it is a tobacco-chewing senator, riding on a bale of cotton behind a mule; a renegade priest inveighing against the Roosevelt Jews; a phoney war hero, in one breath denouncing "twenty years of treason" and in the next berating an authentic war hero; or a Prince-Alberted voice denouncing a Wall Street "crown of thorns" and "cross of gold," they all follow the same pattern, adapted to their particular social and economic environment.

Although the author of *American Demagogues* senses the basic issues of demagoguery in the United States, he perceives the antidote through a glass darkly. "To prevent the rise of demagogues, citizens of all and no political parties in a free society must be ever on the alert; they must take more interest in public affairs and deeply scrutinize their candidates for elective office."⁵ Well, so they must! But first, we must recognize that a democracy is peculiarly vulnerable to the demagogue's assault. The etymology of the words gives the clue. In a political community organized on totalitarian principles, the government and its licensees have a monopoly. But in a democratic society, demagoguery is a free enterprise. Anybody can go into business, whether he comes from a small Wisconsin town, the metropolitan East, or the cotton fields of South Carolina. The Bill of Rights gives a fanatical Terminiello the same protection as men of good will and good sense. Demagoguery is one of the prices for a free society, and although at times the price appears high, it is not too high.

In the long run, to curb this evil we have to rely on the good sense of the man next door. The course of events will be uneven. For a time a Klan or a Bund will flourish, a McCarthyism will appear to take the field. But only for a time and, as history goes, for a very short time at that. The good sense of the ordinary citizen will prevail. As Professor Nevins points out, we have never had a President who remotely approached the role of the demagogue although we had a three-time presidential candidate who mastered the role, and we have a current aspirant who is practicing hard. The "good sense" of the citizen, of course, gets better with tutelage. With political maturity, the masses become their own masters and the demagogues' pastures are less green.

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5. *Id.* at 319.

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