

“What-If” Thinking: Imagining Alternative Histories as a Way to Know

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I’ve found it useful to engage in a “what-if” thought exercise. The idea is to imagine what it would be like now if what happened in the past had happened in some other way, to envision an alternative history and see what it implies. I find it heuristic: it makes what has gone on in the past, and what’s going on now, and what could and should go on in the future, clearer; it puts things in better perspective. In this context, I’m dealing with public, or collective, history, the kinds of events and ideas and people that historians and other social scientists write about, but this thought technique can also be employed with private, personal matters. For example, I have been reflecting on what my life might have been like if at thirteen I had chucked my all-consuming organized sport interest—playing on the teams and attending to the exploits of college and pro athletes—and focused instead on developing my mind.

I’ll use a 2004 novel by the highly honored Philip Roth (1933–2018), *The Plot Against America*, to illustrate what I’m referring to by public what-if thinking.¹ Roth imagined what it would have been like for Jews in the U.S., including his own family—the book is written from fictional character Philip Roth’s perspective—if aviator hero Charles Lindbergh had been elected president in 1940 defeating Franklin Roosevelt.

In the novel, as he did in real life, Lindbergh speaks out against U.S. intervention in the war then raging in Europe and criticizes the “Jewish race” for promoting it to serve its interest in destroying Germany. Lindbergh wins in a landslide as the Republican candidate with the slogan “Vote for Lindbergh or vote for war.”

Once in office, Lindbergh signs a treaty with Germany agreeing not to interfere with that country’s expansion in Europe and

a similar treaty with Japan with reference to its expansion in Asia. Lindbergh's heretofore concealed anti-Semitism comes out in the open. A new government program, the Office of American Absorption (OAA), sends Jews, including Philip's older brother, to live with families in the Midwest and South to "Americanize" them. The brother comes to view his family contemptuously as "ghetto Jews." In time, entire Jewish families are uprooted and relocated. Prominent Jewish radio personality Walter Winchell criticizes the Lindbergh administration's actions and is fired by his sponsors and then murdered.²

When returning to Washington after delivering a speech, Lindbergh's plane goes missing and German State Radio offers evidence that it is part of a Jewish plot to take control of the U.S. government. Jewish public figures including Henry Morgenthau Jr. and Herbert Lehman are arrested.

These events unleash anti-Semitic hatred throughout America and wide-spread anti-Semitic rioting ensues. Close to home, the mother of a Roth family friend is robbed and beaten by Ku Klux Klan members who then kill her by setting fire to her car with her in it. And so on; you get the idea.

The New York Times review of *The Plot Against America* called it "a terrific political novel" and "creepily plausible." It won the Society of American Historians' James Fennimore Cooper Prize for Best Historical Fiction and the Sidewise Award for Alternative History.

Roth's novel and the idea of alternative history came to mind for me while reading a biography of Madison Grant (1865–1937), *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* by Jonathan Peter Spiro.³ The book is Spiro's doctoral dissertation and is as even-handed as can reasonably be expected if one hopes to get a Ph.D in today's highly politicized-to-the-left university. Spiro obviously was highly diligent researching his topic, and he thinks and writes clearly. He could have been more disciplined about what to leave out of the

book—the term “too much information” came to mind—and I would have liked more story-telling flair; I felt as if I were reading, well, a doctoral dissertation. But the book was worth my time, and it prompted this writing. Take this as a qualified recommendation to check it out, probably at a university library. It’s expensive at Amazon.

Madison Grant was a Yale-educated, independently wealthy, American patrician. He had a law degree, but he never practiced law or pursued any conventional career. The best label I can think of for him is republican (with a small “r”) citizen, rather like the Founders were; Washington and Jefferson didn’t see themselves as career politicians like, say, Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden, but rather as citizens of the republic.

Madison was tirelessly active in conservation efforts and a proponent of what was called scientific racism. Reading along in the Spiro book, I couldn’t keep up with all the organizations he started or participated in to promote his causes, which was particularly admirable because, though he didn’t announce it, he was crippled with arthritis. He is best known for founding the Bronx Zoo; his conservation work, including saving the redwoods in California; and, in 1916, authoring the book *The Passing of the Great Race*.⁴ The great race referred to is the white race, or more particularly northern European-heritage whites Grant called Nordics.

Grant was based in New York City and hobnobbed with everybody who was anybody, most notably Teddy Roosevelt. As I got into the Spiro book, I became intrigued about Grant’s personal life — who he was, what he was like, how he lived — but I got next to nothing about that. Spiro noted that the usual personal sources historians rely on—letters, diaries, recollections, etc.—were very sparse with Grant. While he was well known in his time, he was guarded about his personal life and tended to stay behind the scenes. Grant never married and by his pictures looked to be a bit of a dandy. I wondered if was gay and wanted to keep that quiet. I flashed on

Bayard Rustin, the gay black civil rights activist from the '60s, who also was well known but at the same time unknown, both prominent and hidden. Just a thought for what it's worth

What I'll do for the rest of this writing is use Grant to represent a perspective on who whites are and what they ought to be, and on what America is and ought to be. To that, I'll add an account of a failed Civil War-era proposal by Abraham Lincoln to repatriate freed slaves to Africa or Central America. Then some rhetorical what-if questions that come to my mind. All of this is to set up some what-if reflection for you to do that I hope will be of worth to you.

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Drawing on *The Passing of the Great Race* and Spiro's biography, I see three main ideas capturing the essence of Madison Grant's outlook: a focus on race with the contention that Whites are the most admirable one; Nordics as an endangered species; and the affirmation that the U.S. is a Nordic nation and should stay that way.

Focus on race, whites the most admirable. Grant offered that to make sense of human history it is best to look at things through a racial lens. It's race that makes the whole thing go, as it were. He wasn't an egalitarian; he viewed races as hierarchically ordered. In today's parlance, Grant would be labeled a white supremacist, or more particularly, a Nordic supremacist. He deemed Nordics to be the best of the best: explorers, adventurers, aristocrats, artists, poets, philosophers, original thinkers, creators, organizers, civilization builders. His big qualifier: Nordics are all that if they aren't duped and maneuvered into being less than they are.

From the Spiro book:

Whereas other historians have looked at the past and seen everything from nations clashing to genders attaining consciousness, Grant's gaze penetrates beneath those surface irruptions to perceive that the history of mankind is actually a tale of the evolution, migration, and confrontation of races. Thus, for example, he explains that the empire of Alexander

crumbled when the pure Macedonian blood mixed with Asiatic blood; he shows that the division of Roman society into patricians and plebeians was actually a manifestation of the racial conflict between Nordics and Mediterraneans; he demonstrates that the long decline of the empire of Spain was caused by the progressive dilution of the germ plasm of the Gothic race; and so forth. Indeed, the more Grant contemplates the *longue durée*, the clearer he sees that the lesson is always the same, namely, that race is everything. . . . The evolutionary explanation for [Nordic's] splendor is [the harsh] climatic conditions that produced a strong, virile, and self-contained race. Grant invests his masterful Nordics with overwhelming masculine attributes. Other traits that are peculiarly Nordic are loyalty, chivalry, and veracity, as well as a love of efficiency. The Nordics are inherently individualistic, self-reliant, and jealous of their personal freedom. Nordics excel in literature and in scientific research. "In fact," declares Grant, "the amount of Nordic blood in each nation is a fair measure of its standing in civilization."⁵

Nordics are an endangered species. Grant was trained as a lawyer, but at heart he was a zoologist. To him, human beings were animals in a habitat. While he saw the physical make-up of races as the prime determining factor in what the human animal is like, he didn't discount the impact of environmental conditions. The human environment—habitat—includes social and cultural as well as economic and political conditions. Grant saw Nordics as a species in danger that needed to be protected just as do elks and caribou. In his time, he saw them being overrun and outbred and submerged by immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. He saw Nordics adopting what he viewed as base desires, passions, and behaviors and becoming less dignified and honorable.

Grant worried about the economic reality and urbanization in his time. Spiro:

In North America, the habitat to which they are well acclimated, the Nordics are passing from the scene. In colonial times, the environment that confronted the settlers was an untamed continent, and survival entailed clearing the forests and fighting the Indians—tasks for which Nordics were eminently suited. But the United States has changed from an agricultural to manufacturing society, and the type of man that flourished in the fields is not the type that thrives in the factory. The truth is that dark, little immigrants can operate a machine and navigate a sweatshop and prevail in a ghetto better than the Nordic blond, who needs exercise and air. Grant is forced to admit that from the point of view of race, the environment of his homeland is leading to the survival of the unfit.⁶

Politically, Grant feared Nordics losing their freedom and being dominated and exploited within a corrupt and authoritarian system controlled by a ruling class hostile to them and their interests.

It wasn't so much that Grant contemplated the literal extinction of Nordics. More, it was akin to the majestic wolf becoming a tamed, domesticated house pet, rolling over on command and wagging its tail in hopes of being patted on the head and tossed a table scrap. Metaphorically, that is what will mark the passing of the great race.

America is a Nordic nation and should stay one. According to *The Passing of the Great Race*, the Founding Fathers of the United States were Nordic. They created a political system—a constitutional republic—suited to Nordic people, who flourished under an arrangement rooted in the values, and virtues, of personal freedom and responsibility. America offered the opportunity and challenge to make something worthwhile out of one's life free from government dictates. While this political arrangement served early America, it wasn't to be equated with America. America was a racial stock of people, Nordics.

That changed. Spiro:

[According to Grant,] Nordic blood was kept pure in the New World because the settlers had a strongly developed sense of race consciousness. And then, in a fit of humanitarian madness, the old stock threw it all away. The Civil War put a severe, perhaps fatal, check to the development and expansion of this splendid type. The reasons were threefold. First, the rise of sentimentalism during the antislavery agitation proved inimical to Nordic racial consciousness and weakened taboos against miscegenation. Second, the war itself, like all wars, was dysgenic; it destroyed great numbers of the best breeding stock on both sides [625,000 deaths, one out of four young Southern men]. And third, the prosperity that followed the war attracted hordes of immigrants of inferior racial value. . . . Grant understands that factory owners have a vested interest in encouraging the New Immigration, but is dumbfounded by the naïve sentimentalists who actually welcome the influx of social discards and provide them all manner of charitable assistance.⁷

America, contends Grant, is becoming someone else's place, not Nordics' place; accommodative to others' ways and needs, not Nordics' ways and needs. America is no longer us. That has to end.

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This writing is about perspectives not specific proposals, but briefly, a couple of examples from the 1920s that reflect a Grantian outlook.

Immigration control. The Immigration Act of 1924 established immigration quotas based on the composition of the U.S. population in 1890 and had the effect of greatly reducing immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, which especially affected the entry of Italians, Greeks, Poles, Slavs, and Jews. President Calvin Coolidge was quoted as saying, "I am convinced that our present economic and social conditions warrant a limit on those to be admitted." In an

article entitled “Whose Country is This?” Coolidge reflected the White racial consciousness of the time:

There are racial considerations too grave to be brushed aside for any sentimental reasons. Biological laws tell us that certain people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides. Quality of mind and body suggest that observance of ethnic law is as great a necessity to a nation as immigration law.⁸

The Eugenics movement. Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911) coined the term “eugenics” to describe improving the human race through controlled breeding. The eugenics movement was very prominent in ’20s America and involving prominent establishment figures in addition to Grant, such as Margaret Sanger, Theodore Roosevelt, and John Harvey Kellogg.

Spiro:

Eugenics harmonized with Grant’s concurrent development of wildlife management. There was no duality in his life, no conflict between this espousal of conservation restriction and his preaching on behalf of eugenics and immigration restriction.⁹

Grant was instrumental in forming the Eugenics Committee of the United States. Its advisory committee declared its mission to be “protecting America against indiscriminate immigration, criminal degenerates, and race suicide.” Among its activities were promoting miscegenation laws, the sterilization of defectives, and birth control.

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Needless to say, if Madison Grant were alive today, he wouldn’t be getting any presidential medals of the sort bestowed on Philip Roth or giving any commencement day speeches. His outlook and activities are alien, if not downright scary, to modern sensibilities.

He was influential for a time, but his ideas didn't win the day. He's been dropped down the memory hole of history. A lot of things account for that, including Adolf Hitler declaring that *The Passing of the Great Race* was his favorite book; that was an endorsement Grant didn't need. But the story of Grant's ultimate disfavor can't be told without reference to the number one "anti-Grant" of them all, Franz Boas.

Franz Boas (1858–1942) was a German-born professor at Columbia University for forty years. He has been called the father of American anthropology. His many graduate students became faculty members in universities throughout the U.S. and spread his gospel to untold numbers of students, and they controlled the discourse in scholarly journals and dominated the professional association in that field. Arguably, Boas was the most influential academic in the social sciences ever.

Spiro:

Boas was the antithesis of Madison Grant. Whereas Grant was the scion of an aristocratic American family and displayed all the attitudes and privileges implied in that heritage, Boas was the product of an upper middle-class German household in which, as he put it, "the ideals of the revolution of 1848 were a living force." His progressive Jewish parents raised him with a firm belief in the dignity of the individual and the equipotentiality of all humans. Boas rejected Grant's division of mankind into biologically distinct and hierarchical subspecies. He challenged not only the superiority but the very existence of the Nordic race. He denied that there was any correlation between the physical characteristics of a population and its mental and moral traits. The latter, he asserted, were created by the culture in which an individual was raised, not his germ plasm. On a theoretical level the debate between the Grantians and the Boasians pitted the defenders of heredity against the proponents of environment. But for all that, it was difficult not to notice that at heart it was a confrontation between the

ethos of native Protestants and the *zeitgeist* of immigrant
Jews.¹⁰

Long story short, Boas won the battle.

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As I was reading the Spiro book, I free-associated to something I remember reading years ago writing a review of a book on Abraham Lincoln. It was to the effect that Lincoln favored repatriation of the freed slaves. I took a break from reading about Grant to checking it out online.

An article I found said that there is evidence that Lincoln hoped freed slaves would return to Africa or emigrate to Central America.¹¹ In 1862, he met with a delegation of freedmen to lay out his plan. While at the time, Liberia was the destination for many freed Blacks, Lincoln thought that going south made more practical sense. He suggested that, with the help of government funds, freed slaves relocate and colonize Central America, noting that its climate was closer to their “native lands.” He told the delegates:

Your race is suffering in my judgment the greatest wrong inflicted on any people. But even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race. You are cut off from many of the advantages which the other race enjoys. The aspiration of men is to enjoy equality with the best when free, but on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. Go where you are treated the best.

You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between any other two races. Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think your race suffers very greatly by living among us, while ours suffers from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side. If this is admitted, it affords a reason why we should be separated.

The article I read said the members of the delegation didn't take to Lincoln's proposal.

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Now to What if? Let's assume an alternative history. The U.S. is a racially conscious white country with Madison Grant's mindset, not Franz Boas's. Blacks bought Lincoln's idea and colonized Central America; almost none are in the U.S. now. What would things have been like in this country and what would they be like now? What would Americans have been like and what would they be like now, including you and me? And where does this speculation lead — what do we do collectively, what do you and I do individually?

I planned on doing some heavy duty pondering about all this to put in this section, but that didn't happen. Three questions came up, and I really didn't work with them much at all.

The three:

Would 425,000 have died? 425,000 young Americans died in World War II. It wasn't pleasant to do, but I tried to imagine 425,000 bodies in a huge pile. I bet Grant wouldn't have been big on crossing the Atlantic and slaughtering Germans—whites killing whites--and blowing things up. What if we had stayed out of it, let Germany and the Soviets fight it out in Europe, and left Japan alone with their oil and everything?

Would I have written that article on Kyle Rittenhouse? The past couple of weeks, I wrote about the trial in Kenosha, Wisconsin. And before that, I wrote about the killing of a black teenager by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri and the trial of Derek Chauvin in the death of George Floyd.

Would Jim would have felt forced to move? I grew up in Saint Paul, Minnesota and went to grade school and high school with my close friend Jim in the West End part of the city. I left the area after grad school and have stayed in touch with Jim over the years. He and his wife had a nice home there, which I visited when I came back to town to see my brother. The demographics of Saint Paul have changed drastically, and as it's turned out, diversity has had its

downsides for the West End—gangs, crime, clutter, violent protests, and racial animosity toward whites like Jim (“Racist!”). Carjackings have gotten especially prevalent recently and Jim has been looking around every time he got in his car. It came to the point where Saint Paul wasn’t Jim’s place anymore and this year he and his wife sold their home and moved to Stillwater, Minnesota, a small town 25 miles away. Jim reports that the move has worked out well. He sent a picture he took during one of his daily walks that looked good to me. The thought came to me that maybe for whites who can manage it, it’d be good to do what Jim did—pack up and leave. Apart from getting away from the fussing and fighting, harking back to Grant, perhaps rural and small-town life best suits whites’ nature.

What did I do about any of that? I wrote this up, but mostly I responded to my reflections such as they were with “I’m tired of this stuff.” I suppose that’s why I cut the thinking off short. The most notable things I’ve done recently are stream a documentary on the late Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman and watch a movie he directed back in 1963.¹²

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Back to you. So: The U.S. is a racially conscious white country that looks at things as Grant did rather than Boas. Blacks aren’t around. What are the implications of that in both the public realm and in your private life? What do we do? What do you do?

Endnotes

1. Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (Houghton Mifflin, 2004).
2. I wrote an article about Winchell. See, “World War II and the Walters (Lippmann and Winchell)” *The Occidental Observer*, posted October 27, 2017.
3. Jonathan Peter Spiro, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (University Press of New England, 2009).
4. Published by Charles Scribner Sons.
5. Spiro, pp. 145-149.

6. Spiro, p. 153.
7. Spiro, p. 150.
8. See my article, “Where is Calvin Coolidge When We Need Him?” The Occidental Observer, posted March 30, 2019.
9. Spiro, p. 136.
10. Spiro, pp. 297-298.
11. D.L. Chandler, “President Lincoln Urged Freedmen to Return to Africa on This Day in 1862” NewsOne, posted August 14, 2013. <https://newsone.com/2677362/abraham-lincoln-blacks-to-africa/>
12. The documentary was “Bergman Island” and the film was “Winter Light.”