

Preface

Lawrence Dennis, much touted as the “brain” behind U.S. fascism, had “hair” that was “wooly, dark and kinky. The texture of his skin,” said John Roy Carlson, who interviewed him face-to-face in preparing his best-selling book of 1943, “is unusually dark and the eyes of Hitler’s intellectual keynoter of ‘Aryanism’ are a rich deep brown, his lips fleshy.” It was also reported, in words replete with multiple meaning, appropriate for the racially ambiguous, that Dennis was “born in Atlanta ‘of a long line of American ancestors.’”¹ Encountering him a few years before, in 1927, when he was a highly placed U.S. diplomat with postings ranging from Europe to Latin America, a *New York Times* journalist was taken by his “tall, trim powerful build with close cropped bristly hair and [skin] deeply bronzed by the tropical sun.”²

PM, the voice of the left-led “popular front” referred to Dennis as “the tall swarthy prophet of ‘intellectual fascism,’” as they too danced nimbly around his suspected racial origins,³ as did the historian from the other shore, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who termed him—apparently metaphorically—a “dark and saturnine figure.”⁴

Charles Lindbergh was quite attuned to the “rivalry of the races”; indeed, suggests one perceptive analyst, he had “displayed an obsession with race—its improvement, its degradation, its superior and inferior elements”—with the African deemed decidedly to be among the latter. He was passionately concerned with the ability of the “‘White race to live . . . in a pressing sea of Yellow, Black and Brown.’” Such lunatic notions had not halted his ascension to the status of being deemed a “superhuman figure,” a “‘demigod,’” according to one star-struck onlooker.⁵ But even Lindbergh’s signal achievement—his transatlantic flight—was dripping with racial animus. For it was flight and air power, he thought, that guaranteed that a “white” minority could dominate the colored, which is why he was hostile to war between Berlin and Washington since it distracted

from the true mission: “it is our turn to guard our heritage,” he said, “from Mongol and Persian and Moor, before we become engulfed in a limitless foreign sea. . . . we can have peace and security,” he exclaimed, “only so long as we band together to preserve that most priceless possession, our inheritance of European blood, only so long as we guard ourselves against attack by foreign armies and dilution by foreign races.”⁶

Such bizarre ideas had not endeared him to U.S. Negroes. One of their leaders, the moderate Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, disliked him because of his alleged refusal to shake hands with Negroes and his failure to meet with the black man who found his kidnapped son’s remains—after the child had been murdered in the “crime of the century”—and because his family hired European, as opposed to Negro domestic servants.⁷

Yet, it is unclear how Lindbergh would have reacted if he had realized that the man whose hand he embraced, Lawrence Dennis, had African “blood” flowing in his veins—he was a walking example of “blood dilution”—and had begun life as a celebrated “Negro” child preacher.

Lindbergh found Dennis to be a “striking man—large, dark-complexioned, strong and self-assured.” The controversial aviator, who had fascist leanings all his own, was taken aback when he laid eyes on the silken Dennis. It was “rather a shock, when one sees him for the first time, especially in a room in Washington,” a city of rigid racial segregation, “for one is so unprepared for his type. He would seem more in place at some frontier trading post along the eastern border of Europe.” Lindbergh, who had firmly held ideas about white supremacy and racial purity, “tried” as they “talked” to “fathom the nationality of his ancestors.” But Dennis, a product of Exeter and Harvard, could perform “whiteness” with the best of them, with his elegant manner, his refined accent with echoes of pastoral New England though he had been born in gritty Jim Crow Atlanta, his honed and precise diction, his Ivy League dress and manner, his utter confidence in the rightness of his beliefs—his evident patrician veneer dismissed doubts about his origins in the same way that a similar façade, evinced by a latter-day conservative, William F. Buckley, Jr., eroded any residue of doubt in the North Atlantic about his Irish Catholic origins.

Actually “performance” is an all too apt term to describe Dennis’s deportment for, to continue the analogy, a Hollywood actor of African ancestry inexorably is slotted for “black” roles, while one of European background has access to a broader array of opportunities. “I am in favor of opportunity for all persons and races,” Dennis said tellingly at one

point, “but I believe fundamental differences between persons, races and nations are inevitable and must forever persist.”⁸ Given this gloomy view, unsurprisingly Dennis opted for the opportunity provided by crossing the “color line.”

Surrendering to Dennis’s bedazzling performance of “whiteness,” Lindbergh “concluded that some” of his “ancestors” “might have come from the Near East”—perhaps he would have surmised years later that he was as “white” as, say, the Lebanese-Americans Ralph Nader and Marlo Thomas or as “white” as the contemporary singer, Norah Jones, who describes herself using this privileged term though her father is South Asian. Thus, with the obstacle of Dennis’s possible tinge of the tar-brush swept aside, Lindbergh surrendered and could now affirm enthusiastically, “I must get to know Dennis better. He has a brilliant and original mind—determined to the point of aggressiveness. I like his strength of character, but I am not sure how far I agree with him.”⁹

“Lucky Lindy” came to agree with Dennis more and more. In fact, says one biographer of the charismatic man who for a time defined celebrity, Lindbergh’s “arguments and phraseology had some striking parallels with Hitler’s and even more those of Lawrence Dennis” with whom he was to be in “frequent contact.” There was “no doubt that the flier had read and been strongly influenced by Dennis’ books.”¹⁰ Late in life, Dennis—rarely hesitant to trumpet his own presumed assets, perhaps as a defensive reaction to being deemed arbitrarily to be part of an “inferior race”—recalled warmly that there was a “paragraph” in a Lindbergh book “about me in which he says I have a brilliant and original mind.”¹¹

Dennis’s paradigmatic relationship with Lindbergh also revealed another defensive trait of his: he often derided the intelligence of those who were part of the presumed “superior race,” perhaps as a defensive reaction to the hand that fate had dealt him. In fact, his less than exalted opinion of the nation’s “racial” majority helps to explain why he felt the United States would benefit from the rule of a fascist elite, headed by those like himself. How could Dennis have faith in the intellect of, say, the white working class when it often preferred to align with its bosses who were of the same “race” than those of their class of a different “race”?

Thus, Lindbergh, Dennis sniffed, “was and is not an intellectual or a thinker,” he “is not interested in politics or sociology and never was”¹²—unlike Dennis himself who, if nothing else, was a man of ideas. The prominent social scientist, Bertram Gross, told Dennis as his career was in its twilight, “I have been re-reading some of your books, which are

remarkably impressive from many points of view”¹³—this was a widely held viewpoint about Dennis, in stark contrast to his own opinion of so many others.

But it was left to Anne Morrow Lindbergh, spouse of the famed flyer and an intellectual force in her own right, to capture the complexity that roiled beneath Dennis’s curiously “bronzed” skin and agitated his febrile brain. He was a “hard, brilliant, assertive man,” she confided to her diary. It was rumored that he was a ghost-writer on her behalf, though her biographer denies this adamantly. Still, she found him “most interesting,” though “the things people say about him” led her to expect “the devil incarnate.”¹⁴

“But though very brilliant he did not seem hard, and I would say that far from being assertive, he was rather reserved and extremely sensitive. He was very interesting and that first talk [he gave] seemed sound and sensible. His brilliance carries you along ‘with the greatest of ease.’ I only find myself disturbed by that curious downward pout of the mouth that is almost like the terrible mouths of the Greek masks for ‘tragedy.’ He has suffered, this man, and been badly hurt—why, I don’t know, and it seems to have left him with that curious grimace (terribly revealing, changing a whole face in a flash) and with no love of mankind as such.” Here is where Ms. Lindbergh, no slouch in her advocacy of their commonly shared politics, parted company with the “hard” Dennis. “Perhaps this is not fair,” she suggested, “and I am judging too quickly. But I feel in what he says a profound bitterness—the ring of the ‘People is a great beast.’ This is where I leave him.”¹⁵

Unlike Ms. Lindbergh, I parted company with Dennis well before then—though I remained fascinated by the possibility that his turn toward fascism may have been spurred by his less than elevated view of the nation’s majority, not least because of their dimness in perceiving their own interests. Yet, when I first heard of the story of how the “brain” behind U.S. fascism was a “Negro” who was “passing,” I was intrigued—but I resisted exploring this story further, for writing about Dennis inexorably means explaining him and I was not interested in explaining a “fascist.” It was fine with me if he were misunderstood. But after thinking a bit more and scrutinizing Dennis more carefully, I decided to embark on this project, not to explain or rationalize his ideology—despite Dennis’s attempt to construct a kind of “fascism with a human face,” a dark-skinned person of socialist views such as myself, would have been an early victim of *any* kind of U.S. fascism—but, instead, to try to shed light on how Jim

Crow, an ideology that was a close cousin of fascism, may have driven Dennis to political extremities and infected his thinking. For Dennis's fateful decision to place distance between himself and U.S. Negroes, and his insensitivity to Jewish-Americans as an outgrowth of his fascination with fascism, could not obfuscate Ralph Bunche's weighty assertion that "'should America develop its own brand of Fascism, which presumably would be an intensification of much that now exists in the South, both the Negro and the Jew would provide handy scapegoats.'"¹⁶ Thus, I suggest that Jim Crow is the key to unraveling his still mysterious decision to "pass" for white, just as the persistence of Jim Crow helped convince him that fascism in the United States was inevitable.

Still, unraveling this tangled skein has not been a simple task for there remains a lingering enigma surrounding Lawrence Dennis. He did not tell his own daughter, who he professed to love dearly, about his "racial" background and avoided answering questions when she pressed him.¹⁷ He was an extremely guarded person. Precisely why he chose to cross the "color line" remains unclear. Still, Dennis did write voluminously and was in contact with a number of leading figures who have left behind impressions and writings of their own which help to explain why and how he could very well be described—other than W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., or, perhaps, Ralph Bunche—as the most influential U.S. "Negro" of the twentieth century.

Most U.S. "fascists," argues Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "were figures in a sideshow, without significance," but there was "one intellectual" who "brought to the advocacy of fascism powers of intelligence and style which always threatened to bring him . . . into the main tent." The man he had in mind, Lawrence Dennis, had "Goebbels-like qualities. His style was clever, glib and trenchant."¹⁸

Later it was to be said that Dennis's rocky road to fascism was paved by a rebuff from the White House of Franklin D. Roosevelt, which supposedly angered him by rebuffing him in his effort to get a top post. But it was early in the advent of the New Deal that the president himself told Dennis directly how "grateful" he was and how "very kind" it was for Dennis to "say about me" such "nice things."¹⁹ But later the true temper of the New Deal attitude to one of their sterner critics from the right was revealed when the FDR confidante and one of the leading members of his cabinet, Harold Ickes, termed Dennis contemptuously as the "brains" behind U.S. fascism.²⁰

Whatever the case, the fact is that despite his views on fascism, Dennis was influential in leading U.S. circles. This was partly due to his own strenuous effort, as he attracted the rich and famous, almost as if this was a shield against being unmasked as a “Negro”—for certainly none in the latter group would be circulating in the elevated circles in which he traveled.

Thus, M. S. Eccles, the powerful chair of the Federal Reserve in Washington—the Alan Greenspan of his era—told Dennis in 1939 that he was “very much interested to read” his influential publication, the *Weekly Foreign Letter*, “most of which coincides with my general viewpoint”; indeed, he gushed, “it was a pleasure to see you when you were at [a recent] luncheon and I trust I may have an early opportunity of meeting with you again.”²¹ Dennis had recalled later that he had “first made the acquaintance of Governor Eccles of the Federal [Reserve] System back in March 1932 when both of us read papers the same morning before a Senate Committee on the causes, course and cure of the depression. As our views and recommendations had so much in common,” commented a self-satisfied Dennis, “we conceived a high regard for each other which has not diminished.”²²

The fabulously wealthy corporate baron, Cyrus Eaton, was also a “regular reader” of Dennis’s words²³ and Secretary of State and uber-lawyer, John Foster Dulles, likewise sampled Dennis’s handiwork.²⁴ Dennis conceded that he “only influenced Taft,”²⁵ speaking of the son of a president and stalwart of the GOP right-wing. Another top GOP potentate, Senator Arthur Vandenberg, admitted similarly, “I *partially* agree with Dennis” (emphasis in original).²⁶

It was in the early 1930s that Dennis captured even more headlines when Senator Hiram Johnson, the powerful politician from California, invited him to testify before the similarly muscular Finance Committee. By then Dennis was well on his way to being regarded as a dissident, an elite intellectual who had come in from the cold, and the solon informed him that “you will have no sympathy from the government,” nor “little approval from the committee, but, as my mail indicates a very decided support from those you don’t know,” that is, “the great inarticulate mass.” Senator Johnson sought “to prove by your testimony the whole iniquitous course of lending to Latin America,” and it was through such high profile appearances where he provided expert opinion on profound though technical matters that Dennis began to attract attention nationally in a way far outstripping most “Negroes,” who were pigeonholed, at best, into narrow “race” matters.²⁷

Dennis was known widely for his pointed views about economics; thus, John Maynard Keynes “invited me to lunch,” he recalled, “when I was in London in 1936.”²⁸ Some were immune to Dennis’s charms, however; Keynes’s fellow Londoner, Harold Laski, the left-wing intellectual, told him bluntly, “when I received your earlier letter I did not realize that you implied that Fascism is a solution of American problems.” Horrified, he continued, “as I am myself a Socialist I doubt very much whether anything I can say would be of interest to you,” so he concluded irritably, “I think, on the whole, I will not waste your time.”²⁹

All were not so resistant to Dennis’s blandishments, however. As William F. Buckley, Jr., was ascending to prominence, he and Dennis “had nearly an hour together. He knew a lot about me,” said the gratified Dennis.³⁰ The disreputable anti-Semite, Willis Carto, expressed “keen anticipation” at the prospect of “meeting” Dennis and “appreciated” the latter’s “hospitable offer of accommodation” at his comfortable home in western Massachusetts.³¹ From the other end of the political spectrum, long-time Socialist leader, Norman Thomas, admitted that “I like Dennis personally and respect his brains” though adding balefully, “I was very sorry when he called himself an American fascist.”³²

“Alice Longworth, the daughter of Teddy Roosevelt,” Dennis effused, “often took me over to her house for a meal.”³³ Before his popularity began to sink as a direct result of World War II, Dennis told a colleague in the chic and exclusive Newport, Rhode Island, “I was at dinner last night at Mrs. Longworth’s in Washington. Senator [Burton K.] Wheeler and his wife were also there.”³⁴ Even in 1955, when Dennis’s influence was presumably at its nadir, he still could assert, “I had a nice visit with Burt Wheeler in Washington recently. He sees eye to eye with me on about everything political.”³⁵ Like an undercover secret agent, Dennis regularly penetrated circles to which virtually all “Negroes” were barred.

Joseph P. Kennedy, patriarch of a powerful Massachusetts-based political dynasty, sought to “to assure” Dennis that “we follow your opinions with great interest in every proposition.”³⁶ Dennis liked to flaunt his myriad connections with ruling elites; this was part of a lifelong effort of his to stress “class,” where his credentials were impeccable and his footing sure and keen; to be sure, he spoke quite a bit on “race,” but not as an insider but as a seemingly disinterested patrician. There were added reasons for this trait for as one colleague said of him, he had “the Olympian attitude that I have found extremely irritating in some Exeter-Harvard men,”³⁷ but this colleague may not have recognized that Den-

nis's demeanor may have been a defensive reaction to being grouped arbitrarily with an "inferior race."

Whatever his attitude, when the president of the well-financed utility, Southern California Edison, was in need of contacts at high levels, it was Dennis who graciously decided to "link you with a number of others like General [Robert] Wood, Joseph P. Kennedy and Herbert Hoover."³⁸

Similarly, Dennis told an interviewer in 1967 when the Kennedy glow already was shining brightly, that he "went to call on him [Joseph Kennedy] several times in Massachusetts"; he also "called on him once or twice down in Florida. He had a very high regard, I think, for me," said the confident Dennis. "He spoke well of me"; yes, he continued, there was a "very keen friendship" between the two men, since "our views coincided very much because Kennedy was very much what was called an isolationist."³⁹ Dennis maximized his influence by frequently donating his books and other published writings to numerous college and high school libraries, a munificence that was facilitated by his close ties to the likes of Kennedy.⁴⁰

Dennis was not in touch with many Negroes but conspicuously among this select group was the embodiment of Negro Conservatism, George Schuyler; "if my memory serves me well," Dennis said, "you wrote an extremely appreciative review of my book *The Dynamics of War and Revolution*"; returning the compliment Dennis added, "I have occasionally read things of yours and always admired your realism and straight thinking; usually I have agreed with you," he said, characterizing himself as a "much misunderstood and misrepresented person."⁴¹ Apparently he never exchanged pleasantries with another prominent "Negro"—W. E. B. Du Bois—though when this NAACP founder was prosecuted during the early Cold War, Dennis remarked that that case "was quite like ours," the "evidence was similar in both cases"—with one being a presumed agent of the Soviet Union and the other, fascist Germany.⁴²

Dennis too was a staunch critic of U.S. foreign policy, being an "isolationist" of sorts—he preferred the term "neutralist"⁴³—particularly during the run-up to World War II when Kennedy as U.S. ambassador at the Court of St. James expressed similar viewpoints. "I think the United States could have avoided fighting in World War II," Dennis said in 1970; "I also think the United States could and should have avoided fighting in World War I."⁴⁴ "Why should we have minded the Japs [*sic*] trying to repeat the acts of the whites in Asia or against the poor Chinese," he asked querulously.⁴⁵

It was in this context that Dennis met with the top leaders of European fascism. “I have a very vivid impression of you,” Dennis was informed later, “striding down the streets of Nuremberg on the 8th of September 1936 during the sessions of the Parteitag.” This colleague, Charles C. Tansill, a future Georgetown professor, “wanted to catch up with you but you were lost in the crowd and my search was in vain,”⁴⁶ as Dennis—symbolically—melted into the Nazi mass.

Later Dennis confessed that he was “less impressed with Mussolini than with Hitler.” Perplexed, he “tried to figure out why and how they had been so successful and had gone so far,” but he “never came to any strong conclusions.” He found Il Duce to be “most cautious and friendly. He didn’t talk much,” apparently taken by Dennis’s notoriously gifted way with words. “Hitler didn’t impress me,” he snuffled, but “one of the Nazis who [did] impress me,” he said brightening “and was very much more communicative was Goering and another was Goebbels. They talked and I appreciated their talking. But Hitler never talked much, at least to me”; he was “always very reserved and cautious”; he was “not as communicative as a man like [Neville] Chamberlain and the British,” though he found the noted appeaser, “rather guarded,” when they “met”; hence, “I never liked him very much.” Of his counterparts, Winston Churchill and Pierre Laval in Paris—both of whom he met—uncharacteristically he had little to say.⁴⁷

Still, Dennis later stressed that he sought to moderate the fascists’ extremism. “The Southerner or South African would never think of fighting a foreign war to impose his racist ideas or practices on other lands,” he declared in 1948. “The Nazis did, which was their great mistake.” Dennis had “an interview” in 1936 with the leading ideologue “Rosenberg” and when Dennis “suggested that the Nazis could only avoid war with America if they could tone down their racism as regards the Jews to some such hypocritical pattern as that followed in America toward the Negro. He was quite shocked that we should consul such hypocrisy. Well,” Dennis said smirking, “he got hanged for his lack of it. The main reason why Britain has prospered and expanded more than Germany from the Reformation to the Russian Revolution,” said Dennis, the ultimate cynical realist, “is that the British have been past masters in hypocrisy.”⁴⁸

The poet laureate of fascism and avatar of “modernism,” Ezra Pound, was impressed with Dennis’s way of thinking. He thought Dennis was “not yet a Brook Adams / at least I don’t think so.” He found his fellow extremist a “very irritatin[g] writer” but, he insisted, “you better all the

same read him/not as gospel/read him for what he has got and for what he has NOT got yet or cannot get printed.” Yes, he thought, Dennis “does know more than most of his confreres” but Pound was unsure about his erstwhile comrade’s ideological bona fides. “I think he thinks he is fascist / but I have no idea what he means by a FASCIST / it seems to me that he leaves out a good deal of what they mean here by the word.” The “trouble with Dennis,” said Pound, “is that he uses these general terms like fascism, democracy, liberal / he knows what he means, or he may know but the reader is buffaloes / however Dennis does get some things across / especially where he has had Experience / like he had on Rosyfield’s [*sic*] Brain Rust” (emphasis in original).⁴⁹

Pound’s skepticism about Dennis’s fascist credentials was understandable for some of his ideas did not seem to dovetail with those of the ultraright. Since Dennis continually argued that he was not a fascist but simply asserted vigorously that he thought fascism was inevitable, this gives rise to the belief that even here he was “passing,” or seeking to position himself advantageously for what he viewed as an inexorable rise of fascism, as the “wave of the future” crested—to use Morrow Lindbergh’s phrase that she was reputed to have cadged from Dennis.

Thus, he found the “[Joseph] McCarthy line” to be “bad strategy,” particularly his assault on clergy as being influenced by the left; “much of the case made out against these preachers and teachers on account of the leftist affiliations is like the case made out against me for being linked with the Nazis.”⁵⁰ Thus, Dennis was “surprisingly sympathetic to the deposed Secretary of Commerce”—and 1948 third party presidential standard-bearer—Henry A. Wallace.⁵¹ In 1952, he opted to “prefer Adlai to Ike” since he found the latter “really a hick just like [Truman],” both “contradictory and confused.”⁵² He was an early and adamant opponent of the Cold War—a conflict continuously pointed to by most on the right as one of their greatest accomplishments. But during the height of the war in Vietnam, Dennis asserted that “there was more basis for intervention against Nazism and Fascism before and during World War II than there is today for intervention against communism. Communism poses no counterpart of Hitler’s anti-Semitism,” though he found it “probably more dangerous over the long run than was Nazism.”⁵³ “There is no such world plan of Communist conquest,” he declared in 1954, “as our propaganda extremists have been telling us about.” This was his response to the overthrow of the progressive Arbenz regime in Guatemala on precisely anticommunist grounds.⁵⁴ “I have never liked Nixon,” said the

“brain” behind U.S. fascism in 1968 and “would have liked to see Rockefeller get the nomination.”⁵⁵

His readers, who often were not as esoteric in their viewpoints as Dennis, often took umbrage with his fiercely held notions. “Some of our readers,” he said in the spring of 1942, “have been reproaching the editor with having turned pro-Communist”; this was after—consistent with the newly minted national consensus—he was effusive in his praise of the United States’ wartime ally, the Soviet Union. He cautioned that the war would “make communism master of Europe”—which, like his argument about fascism, was something he viewed as inevitable, not a matter of his advocacy.⁵⁶ Later, as African nations were rising to independence in the postwar era, he noted mournfully that “we lost several subscribers because of our repeated use of the phrase ‘the colored world.’” He sought to reassure these doubters of his bona fides by alleging that he had borrowed the phrase from the notorious white supremacist, Lothrop Stoddard—author of wildly popular volumes warning darkly about the “rising tide of color”—but some careful readers were not assuaged.⁵⁷ He would not relent. “In the United States today,” he announced in 1952 as Jim Crow’s foundations were beginning to show stress, “far too much emphasis is being placed on communism as a menace and too little attention is being paid to the revolt of the colored world against the white man,” though “American publishers and people in control of communication” refused to discuss this latter point. “No useful purpose is being served,” he insisted, “by hush-hushing the war of the colored world against white supremacy.” He went on to cite Du Bois favorably, no mean feat during this tense year of war in Korea, and added presciently that the “Supreme Court must, sooner or later, outlaw segregation” and “this it has to do because of the imperatives of American foreign policy.”⁵⁸

More obdurate readers were not conciliated because like a nervous tic, Dennis had a habit of addressing racial matters in a manner not congruent with those of his comrades on the far right. It is said that an arsonist often returns to the scene of the crime to admire his deed: it seemed that Dennis found it hard to avoid alluding to his controversial racial origins, as if he wanted to be “outed.”

“White and colored, like beautiful and ugly, are semantic booby traps,” he asserted. Like a precursor of post-modernism, he proclaimed, “what is a white person or a white nation or people? You might as well ask what is a beautiful woman”; the “upper classes of the Moslem world in North Africa and the Near East . . . always accepted a certain amount of inbreed-

ing of Africans or Negroes. As one often hears the top people say, in these circles, they regard bringing in a little Negro or African blood,” like “English breeders of thorough-bred horses.”⁵⁹ No doubt a few more readers were lost after this assault on the bedrock ultraconservative notion of “racial purity” by a man who considered himself to be a “thorough-bred” among intellectuals. Yet ultimately modern conservatism jettisoned extreme racism and moved toward Dennis’s viewpoints. Thus, as Dennis “passed,” his opinions entered the conservative mainstream.

Now I am not one to view Dennis as some sort of “prophet on the right” or even as Sidney Hook—the profoundly anticommunist though “Marxist” philosopher—put it as some kind of Social Democrat.⁶⁰ When he received a letter in 1936 from the “Societa Delle Nazioni Delegazione Italiana” in Rome, inviting him for an official visit on behalf of the “Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” he knew full well what fascism was about and protestations that he was not an advocate but simply curious about the “wave of the future” are hard to swallow.⁶¹ In 1968, writing from the nation then known as West Germany, Professor Klaus Kipphan instructed him brusquely, “my study of German propaganda in the United States has indicated that [Dennis’s] ‘Weekly Foreign Letter’ . . . was subsidized since the beginning of 1941 by Germany. The files of the German Foreign Ministry reveal a monthly subsidy of 1200 dollars.”⁶² Dennis replied weakly that, yes, he “did receive some contributions from the German Embassy”—a fact he had denied adamantly previously—“but they were never anything like \$1200 a month.” It was more like a still handsome “\$500 a month.”⁶³ Herr Professor was “pleased . . . enormously” by his interlocutor’s “frankness” since his “German oral sources try to reveal as little as possible; they even don’t hesitate to tell outright lies.”⁶⁴

Such an explosive detail was denied by Dennis when in 1944 a grand jury brought forth an indictment, placing him at the center of a “three year plot to incite mutiny in the armed forces, unseat the government and set up a Nazi regime.”⁶⁵ Dennis, said *PM*, was one of a number of “full-fledged partners in a world-wide fascist plot.”⁶⁶ This “plot,” it was thought, was the culmination of a rising arc of hate. At the time of the disbandment of Henry Ford’s meretricious and fanatically anti-Semitic *Dearborn Independent* in 1927, “there were only five hate organizations in the entire country”; but the bigotry soaked years of 1933 to 1940 “witnessed the emergence of an estimated 121 groups preaching fascist, pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic propaganda, an astonishing increase,” fueled by

developments in Rome and Berlin.⁶⁷ In January 1940, the U.S. authorities arrested eighteen members of a Christian Front splinter group and charged them with trying to overthrow the government. Their alleged aim was to rally thousands of Irish Catholic members in the police and National Guard to seize the White House and place one of their ideological own in the Oval Office as a dictator. Supposedly, they had accumulated arms, explosives, and ammunition from an officer of the New York National Guard—and allegedly had army support.⁶⁸

Though these were Dennis's ideological confreres, it would be a mistake to impute their weird and less than wonderful plans to him, even though characters of this ilk were to share the dock with him. Likewise, it would be an error to assume that he shared the same degree of anti-Semitism as his codefendants. William Dudley Pelley, leader of the Silver Shirt storm troopers in the United States, headed an organization whose explicit aim was “‘a wholesale and drastic ousting of every radical-minded Jew from the United States.’”⁶⁹

Of course, anti-Semitism was not necessarily on the fringes of society during Dennis's heyday. It was on 21 July 1947 that President Harry S. Truman had a conversation with former secretary of the treasury, Henry Morgenthau, who happened to be Jewish, and wanted to talk with the occupant of the White House about a ship carrying Jewish refugees to Palestine, who faced the prospect of being turned away by the British colonial occupiers. “He'd no business, whatever to call me,” the irked chief executive confided to his diary. “The Jews,” he added sweepingly, “have no sense of proportion nor do they have any judgement on world affairs. Henry brought a thousand Jews to New York on a supposedly temporary basis and they stayed.” Working himself into a lather, the man who was to receive millions of votes from his compatriots about a year later, added, “The Jews, I find, are very, very selfish. They care not how many Estonians, Latvians, Finns, Poles, Yugoslavs or Greeks get murdered or mistreated as D[isplaced] P[ersons] as long as the Jews get special treatment. Yet when they have power, physical, financial or political neither Hitler nor Stalin has anything on them for cruelty or mistreatment to the underdog. Put an underdog on top and it makes no difference whether his name is Russian, Jewish, Negro, Management, Labor, Mormon, Baptist, he goes haywire. I've found very, very few who remember their past condition when prosperity comes.”

“Truman was often critical, sometimes hypercritical, of Jews in his diary entries and in his correspondence but this doesn't make him an anti-

Semite,” says Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis, pointing to his role in recognizing the state of Israel.⁷⁰ I’m not so sure. I will say, however, that there are degrees of anti-Semitism and Dennis falls closer to the Truman, rather than the Pelley, pole.

Moreover—and this is a painfully sensitive matter—even a system as demonic as fascism has to be placed in context. For it is apparent that in retrospect one reason—perhaps—why German fascism particularly is viewed so negatively is precisely because it occurred in Europe with the victims being overwhelmingly European. Thus, according to one analyst, “‘between 1880 and 1920, according to the best demographic estimates today, the population of the Congo was slashed in half: from roughly 20 million to 10 million people. . . . Some writers cite even higher numbers. . . . Hannah Arendt used a figure of 12 million deaths’”—but such genocidal slaughter hardly registered a blip on the world’s consciousness, perhaps because of the color of the victims. These astonishing figures do not encompass the even more atrocious depopulation that accompanied the African Slave Trade, an atrocity that was not widely recognized as such for much of Dennis’s lifetime.⁷¹ On the one hand, such anti-African atrocities may have convinced Dennis that wisdom compelled those who were able to escape with all deliberate speed the straitjacketed and asphyxiating U.S. definition of “Negro.” On the other hand, such atrocities may have induced in Dennis a kind of moral coarsening and jaded inability to rationalize the horrors that were unfolding in Europe.

Still, though the powerful Republican Right shed Dennis-style isolationism after 1945, leaving him further isolated, as it rushed to embrace the forward-leaning momentum of the Cold War, it also—at least rhetorically—embraced Dennis’s premature anti-racism: this may be his ultimate intellectual legacy.⁷²

For Dennis, who was no Negrophobe—unlike some of his more stubborn comrades—was exquisitely sensitive to racial matters. On the other hand, some of his bedrock ideas were not entirely inconsistent with fascism as defined by the scholar, Robert O. Paxton. The latter has asserted that fascism is grounded on the articulation of historic grievances, involving a cult of leadership spearheading a mass-based movement of militants bent on repressing democracy. The popular view on the left is that fascism has involved the open and naked terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary segment of the ruling elite. If there was a “historic grievance” driving Dennis it was persecution of Negroes—hardly a motive force for his presumed fascist comrades. On the other hand, Paxton also

points to “humiliation or victimhood” as a motive force of fascism globally, though it is doubtful that this eminent scholar had in mind the kind of humiliation endured by Dennis as a result of his ancestry. Yet, it is easy to see how this humiliation could drive Dennis to extreme remedies. Paxton also points to the “failure of democracy” as an “essential precondition for the fascist achievement of power”; again, he did not have the plight of Dennis in mind but it is hard to imagine a larger “failure of democracy” besides the plight of the Negro.⁷³

Was it really as anomalous as it appears that one who could be defined as a “Negro” would become the intellectual leader of fascism? After all, were not those of African descent—more precisely, brutality toward them—essential to the rise of fascism, notably in Italy?⁷⁴ Who would resist seeking to escape the sad role of being the focus of a death machine? But Dennis did not necessarily define himself as a “Negro” in the first place and, in any case, anomalies abound in the history of fascism. The infamous Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, had a clubfoot, and given the Nazi bent toward eugenics, may have been done away with but for his high position.⁷⁵ Hitler was homosexual—according to some⁷⁶—which might have qualified him for one of his concentration camps but for his high position. Mussolini had a corps of Jewish backers⁷⁷ and so on.

Were Dennis—and his presumed anomalous cohorts—all overcompensating madly because of their purported liabilities and flaws? Was fascism ideologically so powerfully seductive that it could even entice those who could easily become its initial victims? Was the malevolent targeting of specific groups, in any case, essential to fascism’s mission or was it driven predominantly by a perceived crisis in capitalism—and challenge from socialism—that transcended the boundaries of identity? Many of the early fascists were outsiders of one sort or another and in the U.S. context there are few more entitled to that description than those who could be defined as “Negro.” Certainly the kind of restrictions on finance capital and state intervention that Dennis advocated was consistent with a good deal of thinking during the 1930s, thinking that was inspired by capitalism’s crisis and that animated the New Deal.⁷⁸

In any case, there was no U.S. fascist leader Dennis followed, save himself, but within this motley movement, he was viewed less as a mass leader than as a man of ideas who could articulate a rationale wonderfully. To be fair, Dennis repeatedly denied that he was a fascist. “I was not ‘a fascist’ or even an advocate of fascism,” said the man viewed widely as the “brains” behind this phenomenon. No, he insisted in 1954, “I said it was

the ‘wave of the future,’ a phrase I coined in that connection.” Dennis persisted in claiming that he was an isolationist or “neutralist”: “I opposed the anti-Nazis just as today I oppose the anticommunists,” but his critics dismissed these qualifications as misleading at best.⁷⁹

For Dennis repeatedly expressed reservations about democracy—though even here his lack of enthusiasm seemed to be influenced by the fact that the voting masses in the United States seemed to have few qualms about Jim Crow and other repressive policies, which apparently pushed him toward advocating rule by elites; this idea, quite frankly, was not incongruent with the historic position of Negroes, who from their first being granted the ballot tended to rely not on the party of the “workingman,” the Democrats, but on the party dominated by the highest ranks of Northern capital, the elite, that is, the Republicans. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Dennis was not the only prominent personality in the United States who felt that fascism was inevitable.⁸⁰

In other words, though I think it not unfair to term Dennis a fascist, a term I consider freighted with the opprobrium it so richly deserves and more, saying such should be the beginning of this inquiry—not the end. My overriding point is that the fascist-like policies of the United States, for example, winking at the proliferation of lynching, inevitably—to use a favorite word of Dennis’s—impelled madness in policies and men alike. As I see it, this is the beginning kernel in an inquiry into the mystery that was Lawrence Dennis. It is this kernel that leads me to suggest that a fascist-like Jim Crow compelled him to cross the color line, just as it convinced him that fascism itself was inevitable.

As Dennis’s life was varied, readers may want to dip into various chapters of particular interest, rather than proceeding in this book from beginning to end.

The Introduction provides an overview of the matter of “passing” as a historical phenomenon and notes how a form of “passing” has involved, for example, gender, class, etc.

Chapter 1 concerns Dennis’s early life. He began life as a famed, globe-trotting Negro child preacher, based in Atlanta. His mother was a Negro—but it is unclear who his father was, though the various possibilities are raised here. However, by the time he entered Exeter in 1913, he had decided to “pass,” perhaps because he recognized even then the circumscribed life chances faced by those defined as African-American. Still, there, at Harvard where he matriculated, and following there in the U.S.

military he faced problems of various sorts, some of which could easily be described as “racial.”

Chapter 2 concerns his entering the diplomatic service, where he toiled in Haiti, Romania, Honduras, and Nicaragua (where he crossed swords with the famed Sandino). However, in a pattern that was to become typical, he broke publicly with the State Department and, as so often happened, there were thinly veiled references to “race” in some of his pronouncements, as if he wanted to be unveiled as a “Negro.” He then joined a prominent Wall Street firm, where he predicted the 1929 crash.

In Chapter 3, Dennis is ousted from Wall Street after a spat—a recurrent pattern signaling his prickliness, which may have been an outgrowth of his unease with the “racial” order. He gains a reputation as a loose cannon and he is increasingly alienated from left and right alike. Celebrated architect, Philip Johnson, argues that it was yet another rebuff—his being turned down by the New Deal for a top post—that affected him deeply. It is then that he latches on to what appears to be a rising movement—fascism.

Chapter 4 tracks Dennis’s growing notoriety as the public face of fascism. He argues that fascism is inevitable, not necessarily that he is an advocate, though others fail to discern the meaning of this distinction. He fails to detect a distinction between fascism and bourgeois democracy, arguing that the racism of the latter is akin to the mass deprivations of the former. The FBI begins to investigate him and a former girlfriend tells them that he is a frequent attendee at Nazi gatherings.

Chapter 5 deals with, *inter alia*, his growing celebrity; when he visits Rome, he meets with Mussolini one-on-one; in Germany he consorts with Hess, Goebbels, and Goering. However, when he is photographed standing next to a uniformed Nazi and this picture makes it to *Life* magazine, controversy erupts in the United States.

Chapter 6 concerns Dennis as courtier to the rich and powerful, including Lindbergh. Dennis argues that the United States and United Kingdom want to treat the Axis like they treat Negroes. Thus, “race” is central to his analysis of fascism though, for whatever reason, his many critics choose to ignore this. Meanwhile, the FBI zeroes in on him as they conclude that what is most dangerous about him is his “anti-British” rhetoric and his invocation of the “race question.”

Dennis was a big name-dropper, perhaps yet another defensive reaction induced by his insecurity about “passing.” Chapter 7 discusses his growing infamy, termed by *Life* as “America’s No. 1 Intellectual Fascist.”

Dennis develops ties to Tokyo, which is busily seeking to fan the flames of “race” in the run-up to the Pacific War. Dennis argues that if the United States and United Kingdom can engage in “racial supremacy,” why can’t Germany and Japan?

In chapter 8 Dennis is charged with sedition for supposedly seeking to incite mutiny among the armed forces and establish a Nazi regime in the United States. Friends begin to desert him.

The trial generates enormous publicity, as chapter 9 notes. Dennis defends himself in a trial that is marked by strangeness; his codefendants are crackpots and extremists of various sorts.

After a mistrial is declared, as chapter 10 details, Dennis emerges as a stern critic of the emerging Cold War; he bashes Dixie as resistance to desegregation emerges and takes pleasure in the squirming of the White South.

However, Dennis becomes heavily dependent upon the charity of millionaires—for example, Sterling Morton of the salt fortune—to make ends meet. His spouse, who had stood by him—more or less—during his travails, dumps him, as chapter 11 observes. He becomes increasingly idiosyncratic, backing Stevenson over Eisenhower in 1952 and expressing viewpoints on foreign policy that are well beyond the mainstream. However, he remains close to a raft of prominent conservatives, including William F. Buckley, and remains influential on the right.

Chapter 12 takes Dennis to his life’s conclusion. In his final years, he allows his hair to grow and develops an “Afro,” returning at least symbolically to his origins as a Negro. He passes away in 1977, with none of the many obituaries noting the close tie in his life between his “passing” and his articulation of fascism.