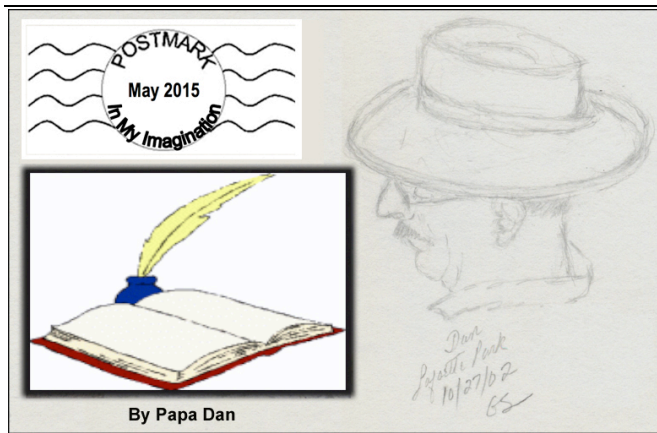


Naw, Can't Happen, Not Here . . .

By Dan Sapone



**"Those who cannot remember the past
are doomed to repeat it."**

— George Santayana

**"I've got news for Mr. Santayana: we're
doomed to repeat the past no matter
what. That's what it is to be alive."**

— Kurt Vonnegut

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Now that we are in the last month of the 2016 election, I couldn't resist the impulse to renew a "warning" that was written back in 1935. The temptation to write about the election has been strong. So, back in January, I wrote a [column about the future of the Democratic Party](#). At the end of it, I cited a column by [David Brooks about the future of the Republican Party](#). You probably noticed that neither of these were actually about the candidates; they are about a larger question. After posting that piece, I sat down to watch a series of interviews in which people who had attended the last Republican debate were asked what attracted them to the various candidates. As I listened to what they liked about Donald Trump, it occurred to me that I had heard some of those messages before. Some wore hats that repeated his theme, "Let's make American great again." They liked the fact that he wanted American to *win* more often – "We don't *win* anymore. When I am president, we are going to *win*!" They cited his desire to restore what he considered "traditional American values" like order and corporate prosperity ("If we strengthen American corporations to they will bring profits back home"). They resonated with his interest in building a wall to keep *them* out but because *they* are coming here to do us harm. He blamed an incompetent and weak government in Washington, especially the Congress, for most of our troubles. They liked is plan to destroy our enemies. How? "We'll carpet bomb them all." That all sounded familiar I recalled hearing that somewhere before. But where?

And then I remembered.

For a high school book report, I read a novel recommended to me by my English teacher in 1966. *It Can't Happen Here* is a 1935 novel by [Sinclair Lewis](#), published during the rise of fascism in Europe. Let's travel back to the world of that novel and see what happens when a fearful America elects an extreme charismatic corporate leader in a time of crisis.

An update → Just this past week, four of us attended the stage adaptation of that novel at the Berkeley Repertory Theater. Although this play only slightly modified the details from the way the story was written in 1935, it was frightening in its similarity to the issues, characters, and divisions among Americans that we know so well in this 2016 election campaign. The story is a reminder — OK a warning — of what is at stake in this election. **The play runs through November 6 (yes, two days before our own election day); so if you are interested, there is still time to see it.** Here is my synopsis:

Back in time to the world of the novel

The novel describes the rise of Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip, a charismatic and power-hungry politician (patterned after an extreme corporate leader of the time). In the novel, Windrip runs for president of the United States and easily defeats Senator Walt Trowbridge and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, promising to restore the country to its former greatness and prosperity. He portrays himself as a champion of traditional American values. Foreshadowing some authoritarian measures that were emerging in the fascist nations of Europe, Windrip reorganizes the US government — he rapidly outlaws dissent, arrests political enemies, and trains and arms a paramilitary force called the Minute Men, who terrorize citizens and enforce the policies of his "corporatist" regime. One of his first acts as president is to eliminate the influence of an ineffective Congress, which draws the ire of many citizens as well as the legislators themselves. The Minute Men respond to protests against Windrip's decisions harshly, attacking demonstrators with bayonets to keep order, as he had promised. In addition to these actions, Windrip's administration, known as the "Corpo" government, curtails the rights of women and minorities, and eliminates individual states by subdividing the country into administrative sectors managed by "Corpo" authorities. Those accused of crimes against the government are convicted in kangaroo courts presided over by Windrip's hand-picked judges. Despite these dictatorial measures — and this was not credible to my adolescent mind in 1966 — a majority of Americans in the novel approve of these policies, seeing them as necessary but painful steps to restore American power. Crowds cheered. Others, those less enthusiastic about the prospect of "corporatism," calling themselves conservatives, reassure each other that fascism "cannot happen here."

The novel foretells the results of electing a charismatic leader who offers these kinds of simple solutions to difficult problems. In time, Windrip's hold on power weakens as the economic prosperity he promised does not materialize and many Americans, including many of the supporters who helped him gain power, flee to both Canada and [Mexico](#). Chaos ensues as former supporters return to overthrow him, replacing him with weak government, creating a power vacuum, and a violent coup. New leaders try to restore popular support and patriotism by launching an unjustified invasion of Mexico, using mass conscription. Riots and rebellions break out across the country, with many realizing that they had been . . . misled. The novel ends with the outbreak of civil war and an underground movement emerging from occupied portions of southern Minnesota.

Minnesota?!

Back in the “Real World”

In 1936, in the “real world,” a stage version, also titled *It Can't Happen Here*, premiered simultaneously on October 27, 1936 in 21 U.S. theatres in 17 states^[6], in productions sponsored by the Federal Theater Project, a New Deal agency of WPA. A film version was in preparation at [MGM](#), but studio head [Louis B. Mayer](#) canceled the production anticipating potential problems in the German market.



In 1982, an adaptation titled *Storm Warnings* was presented to NBC as a TV miniseries, but NBC executives rejected the initial version, claiming it was too cerebral for American audiences. To make the script more marketable, the American fascists of Windrip's “Corpo” government were re-cast as man-eating extraterrestrials. The revised story became the miniseries [V](#), which premiered in 1983. Other versions have appeared, with limited success and little of the intended influence.

Poster for the stage adaptation of
It Can't Happen Here, October 27,
1936 at the Lafayette Theater

Then, I went to the record store early in 1967 and bought a new album by a group called Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention. An obnoxious little song called “It Can't Happen Here” got my attention. The lyrics are below.

Frank Zappa, Mothers of Invention	
Album: “Freak Out!” released June 27, 1966 on Verve Records [I still have it in vinyl]	
It can't happen here; It can't happen here I'm telling you, my dear That it can't happen here Because I been checkin' it out, baby I checked it out a couple a times, hmmmmmmmm And I'm telling you, It can't happen here Oh darling, it's important that you believe me (bop bop bop bop) That it can't happen here	It can't happen here, It can't happen here Everybody's safe and it can't happen here No freaks for us, It can't happen here Everybody's clean and it can't happen here No, no, it won't happen here I'm telling you it can't, It won't happen here (bop bop didi bop didi bop bop bop) Plastic folks, you know it won't happen here You're safe, mama; You're safe, baby
Who could imagine that they would freak out somewhere in Kansas... Kansas Kansas totototodo, Kansas Kansas Who could imagine that they would freak out in Minnesota... Mmmmmmmmmmm Minnesota Who could imagine... That they would freak out in Washington, D.C. D.c. d.c. d.c. d.c. d.c.	Oh, and it won't happen here (no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no) Man you guys are really safe, Everything's cool). Who could imagine That they would freak out in the suburbs I remember (tu-tu), I remember (tu-tu), They had a swimming pool I remember (tu-tu), I remember (tu-tu), They had a swimming pool
And they thought it couldn't happen here (duh duh duh duh duh) They knew it couldn't happen here, They were so sure... But... Hmmmmmmmmmm (it can't happen here)	

Epilogue: As I finished writing this piece, Gretta asked a pointed question that deserves an answer, “Aren’t we tired of all that yet? Isn’t there something more positive you can contribute?” I will attempt to address that question in my next post – wait for it.