

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

Thank you so much for joining us here again on *Ideas in Progress*, where we'll be picking up with last week's interview on Professor Katy Hull's *The Machine Has A Soul: American Sympathy With Italian Fascism*. This week, we cover an amazing futuristic flight of fascists across the Atlantic, and Mussolini's grisly end hanging from a meat hook outside a Milanese gas station. Fitting, given how much he loved to parade around the countryside in his car, making photo op-style pit stops to help a few folks with whatever problems they might have.

But anyways, you'll hear much more about that when we get to the end of the show, but suffice to say, it's terribly interesting to hear about how these fascist sympathizers backed away from fascism once the movement turned so sour and ugly. But that's enough for me for the moment. Let's get back to Professor Katy Hull and the great supposed machine with a supposed soul.

Now, one thing I found very interesting throughout the book was, as we said before, you do have all these different figures who come from many different backgrounds. But they do filter their way through American political life in pretty important ways, and they play some big roles in party politics. I'm wondering if you can talk us through that a little more. What was their relationship like with the two big parties?

Katy Hull ([01:44](#)):

Right, so probably ... Where should I start? I'll start with the easiest, which is Herbert Schneider, who didn't have a very active relationship with either of the parties, although he did write some fairly complimentary things, actually, for an Italian audience, because he lectured in Rome in the mid 1930s. He wrote some fairly complementary things about The New Deal. I would say he had probably tangential and loose relationships with people like Rexford Tugwell, who were in the New Deal administration.

From the simplest, I would go to the most complex. That's Richard Washburn Child who, as I stated, started at least ... well, his very early political career was in the Progressive Party. So working alongside to Theodore Roosevelt, which was something that he continued to make hay out of for the rest of his life, because I think he loved ... it was his claim to fame, in a sense, that he had been, by his perception, close to Theodore Roosevelt. I'm not sure what Theodore Roosevelt would have said.

But he said he started life in the Progressive Party, but then very early on became a Republican, worked for Warren Harding, was the ambassador to Italy under Harding, for many, many years wrote at least 70 articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* and about as many short stories. That was quite a strongly conservative mouthpiece in a sense. But after Harding died, Child really struggled to get his foot into politics under Calvin Coolidge or Herbert Hoover. He was out in the political wilderness for much of the second half of the 1920s. I think that it's no coincidence that when he changed his political stripes extensively to become a Democrat, and he actually founded or helped to found an organization called the League of Republicans for Roosevelt. So he backed Roosevelt, but still claiming to be a Republican, but then lobbied Roosevelt very, very strongly for a position in the Roosevelt administration, which he didn't really get.

I've lost my train of thought a little bit, but I think I can finish this sentence.

Anthony Comegna ([04:13](#)):

Oh, Pope. Pope is the most interesting one to me because of the, gosh, very, very old thesis by now, of the importance of ethnic and cultural links in American political life. That whole election of FDR depending on Jewish votes in Philadelphia and Italian votes and things like that, very interesting.

Katy Hull ([04:36](#)):

Yeah, and Pope was ... I want to finish my Child comment, but I'm not going to be able to now, but I'll go back to ... Well, I will say-

Anthony Comegna ([04:43](#)):

Sorry.

Katy Hull ([04:45](#)):

No, that's fine. What I was going to say is it's no coincidence that Child changed his allegiance to Franklin Roosevelt, because I think philosophically, he wasn't particularly aligned with the Democratic Party, but Richard Washburn Child was always aligned with whoever was in power. When he saw that Hoover was very likely to lose the election in 1932, he jumped on the Democratic bandwagon. So I think that his attachments to the Democratic Party only ran so deep, right? He was more philosophically a conservative.

Pope, certainly a really fascinating figure. He rose up from very little. He migrated to the States as a nine-year-old. He worked underground, at first, on the New York subway system. Then he worked for different concrete and gravel companies until he was able to rise within those companies. Eventually, over the course of probably only 15 years, became the head of a monopoly of companies in New York. Then he developed a very symbiotic and somewhat corrupt relationship with New York politicians in Tammany Hall. That was Pope's initial layer of attachment to the Democratic Party, was very much through that Tammany machinery.

By the time that Roosevelt was president, Pope was much more an established figure within the United States and a recognized figure and leader of the Italian-American community. But the Roosevelt presidency also coincides with an increasingly totalitarian, fascist regime that Pope can't let go of. So by the end of the 1930s, Pope's in a very uncomfortable position, because on one hand, he wants to maintain his influence with the Democratic Party and with Franklin Roosevelt. But on the other hand, he's saying things that make him a suspect person from the Roosevelt administration's perspective, because he's a little bit too close to the fascist regime.

Anthony Comegna ([07:03](#)):

Yeah, no, I want to come back to that thread here in a minute, but I can't jump there just yet because we have to talk about probably the best story in the whole book, which is Balbo's flight across the Atlantic. The way that interacted with something we discussed before, which is this whole modernizing aesthetic of fascism, and man working with machines in bold and meaningful new ways. Tell us, what was the story of Balbo's flight across the Atlantic and how did Americans respond to that?

Katy Hull ([07:34](#)):

In 1933, Italo Balbo and his group of airmen achieved a first, which was this first group formation flight in an east-west direction across the Atlantic. After stopping in Ireland and Reykjavik and finally, Newfoundland, they arrived in Chicago. It was to hundreds of thousands strong crowds. I think flying was really particularly appealing at this point. An achievement like Balbo's was particularly appealing because people felt really like they'd lost control, and they felt very powerless in the face of the Great Depression. So this notion of flying as a conquest of nature and of man overcoming the most powerful forces really had strong appeal. You can really see this in the way that some of these observers responded to Balbo's flight. It also fit closely into their conception of fascism more generally, which was fascism as a system that asserted man's control over forces that seem to be out of control in a democratic state.

What I think is noteworthy is that Americans, more broadly, were really enchanted by Balbo's flight. So in this sense, 1933 represents a high point in the alignment of the views of fascist sympathizers on one hand, with the views of the American public more broadly. Whether I was reading the accounts of these fascist sympathizers specifically, or accountants in newspapers at the time written by people who didn't have specific fascist sympathies, I noticed a real fixation on the aesthetics, as you mentioned, and on the appearance of these Italian airmen. Particularly their physical beauty and really strong repetition of the clothes they were wearing and descriptions of these white linen suits, white hats, white kid gloves, white shoes. I think there are layers of explanation here for this interest in their clothing and the aesthetics more generally.

The most obvious explanation was that it was just some light relief. That Americans were oppressed in 1933 by years of economic suffering, and what they really wanted to do was come out onto the streets and celebrate something that was, by all accounts, a really impressive feat. But I think the deeper layer of this fascination with these airmen and their physical appearance keys into this idea of control, in this human capacity to contrive beauty. So I think the psychological purpose that they were potentially serving there for Americans was a sense that humans can carve out a space for themselves and carve out their own identity, even in a period where they may feel that they don't really have control over the many, many forces.

Then the last layer of thinking, I think, about these white suits was the symbolic value of the color white, and how it became a symbol of innocence of purpose and of peace. When Mussolini built up his air force, he was actually building a military machine. Balbo's trip to Chicago and New York was just two years before the Italian military rained bombs down on Ethiopia. I think that there was some degree of wishful thinking and denial, even based on what people knew about Mussolini and his colonial ambitions in 1933, to associate Balbo and his men with peace. But that was really the mental space that many Americans were in, in 1933, which was, they just couldn't countenance another war in Europe or anything that might lead to one.

Anthony Comegna ([11:49](#)):

Yeah, wasn't it Mussolini's son, in the Italian Air Force over Ethiopia, talking about how he loved to look through the viewfinder and just watch the bodies blow apart underneath?

Katy Hull ([11:49](#)):

Yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([11:59](#)):

Yeah, gosh, so let's get to that subject. As it becomes increasingly clear that Italian fascism is the junior partner in European fascist movement overall, and things like the invasion of Ethiopia proceed and get increasingly worse and blatantly imperialist, what happens to American sympathies overall? Especially, maybe lead us out by talking about how your four characters, in particular, responded to all of this.

Katy Hull ([12:35](#)):

Sure. Again, I'll dispense of the easiest first, which in this case is Richard Washburn Child, who died in 1935. He didn't really have to take on, in full depth, this issue of Mussolini's ever closing relationship with Hitler. Herbert Schneider, our academic, also took a fairly easy way out. If death's not an easy way out, another easy way out would be just stop talking or speaking or writing about fascism. Actually, when he was pressed about his fascist sympathies much later in life, he said that he'd never been complimentary about fascism. That his goal had only ever been to show that Italian fascism was different from German national socialism. I can only say that's evidently not true. That wasn't his goal because he was writing about Italian fascism in the late 1920s, and that was long before Nazism was on his radar.

As we already alluded to, Generoso Pope was in a much more difficult and tenuous position as a powerful Italian American. He tried to walk this a very fine line because he felt equally dependent on the US and Italy for his influence and power. So he denied that Italian fascism was becoming increasingly chauvinistic and extremist. That was particularly the case with regard to his posture on Italy's treatment of Jewish people. In late 1937 ... Oh, actually I think it was the summer of 1937, Pope went to Rome and had a meeting with Mussolini. He came back from Rome, waving a piece of paper claiming that he'd extracted an agreement from Mussolini that the Jewish people were safe in Italy. But by the next year, the Italian state had begun introducing very discriminatory laws against Jewish people, banning them from public life, confiscating property, banning inter marriages between Gentiles and Jews and preventing Jewish children from attending public schools.

Still, Pope denied what the fascist state was doing to his readers in his newspaper columns. Behind the scenes, he was actually trying to pull strings. He was making contact with the Italian embassy in Washington to try to get them to organize another meeting with Mussolini. He wanted to convince Mussolini to backtrack on this anti-Jewish legislation and more broadly, to backtrack on his closer relationship with Nazi Germany. But I think it's really important to stress that Pope was never working on this issue and never pulling these strings behind the scene because he was motivated by humanitarian instincts. He never expressed concern for the fate of Jewish people in Italy. Actually, in his newspaper, he frequently denied that they were under any threat.

Actually, what he was attempting to do was get Mussolini to tone down his behavior because Pope knew that this association between fascist Italy and Nazi Germany was making life difficult for Italian Americans, and especially for Generoso Pope. So it was a very self-interested move on his behalf, because it was increasingly difficult for him to be an open fascist sympathizer and an active member of the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Party more broadly.

Anne O'Hare McCormick took a slightly different approach. She was much, much more critical of fascist anti-Jewish policies, and critical to the point where she became a persona non grata in Italy. The Italian government started to refuse to allow her to have audiences with Mussolini, where up until 1938, she'd been considered a friend of the regime, and they were always more than happy to have her write articles about Mussolini. She tried, against the odds because she was no longer welcome, to use her past influence with Mussolini's regime as a way of convincing him to change course. So in this way, she was really actually working alongside President Roosevelt and his foreign policy advisors.

For instance, in January 1940, she went to Italy, most unwelcome by the regime when she arrived there, but she used her usual contacts within the Ministry of Press and Propaganda to try and get a meeting with Mussolini to convince him to remain neutral in the Second World War. This was January 1940, where five months before Italy enters the Second World War, and McCormick, in January, was doing exactly what Roosevelt's official emissary, Sumner Welles, was doing in February when he went to Italy to try to convince Mussolini to stay out of the Second World War. There's actually evidence to suggest that Roosevelt had asked McCormick to work these unofficial channels in Italy, while Welles would work the official ones.

But I mean, it goes without saying that neither Pope nor McCormick's efforts to sway Mussolini had any effect whatsoever. Italy was, of course, hell bent on an alliance with Hitler, and so this idea that Mussolini could be softened or could be used as a way of moderating Nazi Germany was certainly wishful thinking. Finally, when Italy did enter the war in June 1940, both McCormick and Pope have to make the absolute final break with fascist Italy.

Anthony Comegna ([18:46](#)):

Yeah. Then just a few years later, the whole project is down in flames. Italy is a shell of what it once was, which is already a relatively poor and weak country in Europe. I love the way the book ended, which is you telling these people's stories like that, of what they're left with and how they try to, more or less, explain away their past affiliations with this regime, or just ignore it as best they can. But I almost wish, just because I have a sick dark sense of humor like this, I almost wish you'd ended it with Mussolini's death and reactions to the way he actually died.

Because I always think about William the Conqueror, for example, who was just horrible. He killed 10% of Northern England and just a terrible, terrible person. But when he died and they were ... his intestines were so putrefied, they tried to stuff them in the coffin, and his body exploded all over the church. It's just this horrible smelly mess covering everybody in the church, and I just imagine a Monty Python scene where everybody gets sick all at once. Mussolini's death is similar in its over the top level of darkness and justice for a horrible figure. So I wish you'd ended there, but what were their actual reactions to his death, the fact that Italy just hated him at the end of it?

Katy Hull ([20:18](#)):

Yeah. I think if the material had been better on this topic, I might have ended there in terms of their reactions. But I think that probably somewhat predictably, their reactions were really muted, the two that were still writing about Italy at all. Because I think, for them, silence was the best policy because, in a way, they wanted to ... they hoped that American people would forget their past fascist sympathies, and the easiest way to have them forget those past fascist sympathies was writing as little as possible

about Mussolini and Italy at this point. Five months after his death, McCormick wrote that Mussolini had been killed in a brutal manner of the old Romans. She noted that the Italians had at least disposed of their tyrant themselves.

I think that that conception was quite consistent, in a way, with the ways that McCormick was artfully distancing herself from Mussolini by arguing that this once loved dictator, because that's how she had classified him as first, is a sort of extension of the will of the people, no longer embodied the will of the people. With that, she put the issue to bed. Both she and Pope went on to very doggedly and insistently prove their worth as good, old fashioned American cold warriors. She died in 1954 and Pope died in 1950, but they really proved their worth as very strong anti-communist writers.

Pope was instrumental, in 1948, in a letter writing campaign that got Italians to vote for the Christian Democrats in the 1948 election, rather than ... well, against the Communist Party, to prevent the Communist Party from coming into power in Italy. So he was working as part of a broader American effort to interfere in the Italian elections as a way of keeping communists out of Italy in the post-war situations. So as much as they could help people forget that they'd ever sympathized with fascism, both Pope McCormick were happy to do so.

Anthony Comegna ([22:47](#)):

Once again, our very greatest thanks to Professor Hull for joining us on the show, and simply for producing such a fantastic, important and unfortunately, timely study of American fascism. I certainly don't want to belabor the modern applications one could put this book too, but I can, once again, reiterate that even though the 20th century was absolutely awful and should be reviled, my opinion, this book was a rare treat for me. I feel like I really got a true education on subjects which I was genuinely unfamiliar with. I'll never forget these four figures. I won't think about the possibilities of fascism in America in the same way. Despite our totally legitimate fears that we might be trending back in that direction, I'm also now able to clearly recognize that the fascism problem is really something that comes from fear, and hopelessness, and powerlessness, and maybe most important and sad of all is loneliness.

The comforting thing I find in all of this is that a more humane society is probably going to be a less fascist society. I'm comforted in the knowledge that so many of you out there, so many people in the IHS network are working for that very kind of more humane world. In that spirit, happy holidays all around, the very happiest of new years. We really need one, and everybody, keep the progress coming.