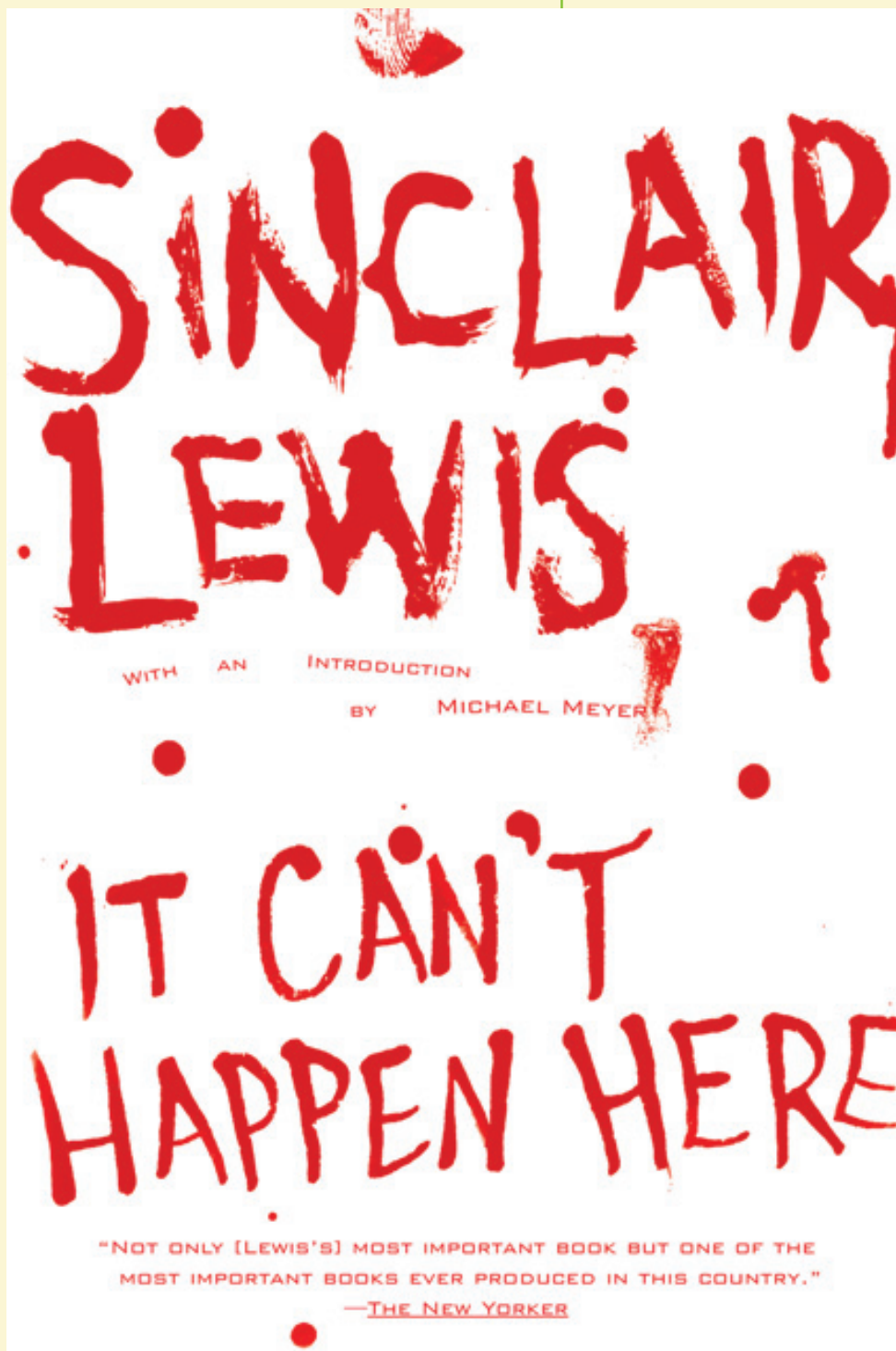




CAL HUMANITIES
Searching for Democracy

california
READS



DISCUSSION GUIDE

it can't happen here

WELCOME!

Welcome to *California Reads*, a statewide program that brings Californians together to explore important topics through reading and discussion. This year, our theme is *Searching For Democracy*. What does democracy mean to us? What challenges has American democracy faced in the past? How can we strengthen our democracy in the future? How can we talk and work together despite our differences? What can we learn from the experiences of others who have struggled with these questions?

California Reads offers a choice of five superb books to act as a springboard for community discussion. These works include fiction as well as non-fiction, and were written by men and women of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. There are many ways to experience and explore what democracy means, strives for in its promise, and requires for its success. No singular book can capture all of these complexities, and each selection offers the reader an opportunity to discover new perspectives by inviting us to think about individual responsibility, the importance of a free press, the collective good, and what it is needed from each of us to sustain a healthy democracy.

Cal Humanities and the California Center for the Book are partnering on this project because we feel books—and the conversations they spark—can make a difference in the world. We hope this will be just the first of many statewide conversations under our *California Reads* banner, providing Californians with opportunities to read and discuss stories and ideas that matter. Whether you are joining the discussion through a program at your local library, bookstore, school or elsewhere, we hope you will be inspired by these books and enjoy a new connection with your community and your state.

With gratitude,



Ralph Lewin
President and CEO
Cal Humanities



Mary Menzel
Director
California Center for the Book

california READS OVERVIEW

California Reads is a new program of Cal Humanities developed in partnership with the California Center for the Book and the California State Library. It invites Californians from all walks of life throughout our state to participate in reading and discussion programs and related activities hosted by libraries, schools, colleges, bookstores and other community institutions.

We have selected a slate of books this year to stimulate a thoughtful reflection of, and lively discussion among, friends and neighbors, family and strangers about the past, present, and future of democracy. Five thought-provoking books were chosen from a pool of over 300 titles nominated by members of the public, and based upon the final recommendations of an advisory group of librarians, authors, scholars, publishers and critics.

These five books were selected:

- *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution: A Fully Annotated Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution and Amendments, and Selections from The Federalist Papers*, by Richard Beeman. Annotated by one of the nation's foremost Constitutional scholars, this compact edition of our nation's founding documents provides text and context for readers seeking to understand the framework of our democracy as well as its meaning, past and present.
- *Farewell to Manzanar*, by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston. A heartbreaking and compelling memoir about the Japanese American internment experience as seen through the eyes of young girl, this personal story bears witness to a failure of American democracy.
- *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, by Rebecca Solnit. A masterwork of narrative nonfiction by a contemporary California writer reaches some surprising conclusions about our need for community and common purpose, which she argues are fundamental to democratic forms of social and political life.
- *It Can't Happen Here*, by Sinclair Lewis. This underappreciated classic by one of America's greatest novelists, first published in 1935, imagines a chillingly undemocratic America. It details the rise of a populist politician as he creates a fascist regime, and reminds us of the fragility of our democratic institutions.
- *Lost City Radio*, by Daniel Alarcon. A haunting novel by a young California writer explores the aftermath of a traumatic civil war in a fictitious South American country, and raises questions about the importance of historical knowledge, collective memory, and public access to information in a democratic society.

The discussion guides for each book—like this one—provide an overview of the book and author, a series of discussion questions to begin conversations, a brief author interview, bibliographies and other supplemental resources for interested readers. A K-12 curriculum guide for each book is also available to further support classroom activities. All of these materials, along with additional resources and information about *Searching for Democracy* and *California Reads* public programs and activities at libraries and other community venues, can be found at our web site at www.calhum.org/searchingfordemocracy.

SEARCHING *for* DEMOCRACY OVERVIEW

Leading into the national 2012 elections, *Searching for Democracy* is the culmination of a two year-long initiative that provides Californians with various ways to explore how the humanities can provide insight and opportunities to converse about the nature, state and needs of our vibrant American democracy. Cal Humanities and its partners will explore these complexities—through a series of local, regional, and statewide humanities-inspired activities—to accomplish a greater understanding of what is needed to sustain a healthy democracy in an increasingly interdependent world.

Students, families and people from all walks of life will explore—online and in person—what discoveries and lessons lie in works of fiction and nonfiction, provocative cultural exhibits and public conversations. The Cal Humanities website (www.calhum.org) will be an online hub for all activities, where participants in events, readers of the initiative's books, and people new to our effort can learn more and share what they have discovered.

Our *Searching For Democracy* program partners include: California libraries, California Center for the Book, California History-Social Science Project, Exhibit Envoy, and Zócalo Public Square, in collaboration with California State Library, California Community Colleges, California State University, and University of California Television.

about the book

It Can't Happen Here



It Can't Happen Here, by Sinclair Lewis, was written during The Great Depression and published in 1935. It is a cautionary tale of the meteoric rise to power of a fascist politician who eventually becomes President of the United States. During the presidential election of 1936, Doremus Jes-

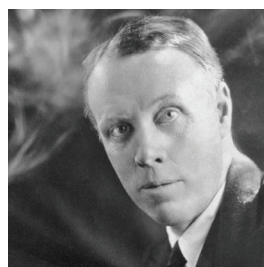
sop, a newspaper editor, is baffled to find that many of the people he knows support the candidacy of a populist demagogue, Berzelius Windrip. When Windrip wins the election, there are dire consequences for the nation. He forcibly gains control of Congress and the Supreme Court, makes dissent a crime, and, with the aid of his paramilitary group known as The Minute Men, turns the United States into a totalitarian state.

Motivated by the totalitarian dictatorships that had recently come to power in Italy and Germany, Lewis felt a sense of urgency and rushed to finish the book. Upon publication *It Can't Happen Here* sold over 300,000 copies in the United States. It sold well in Britain and France but not surprisingly was banned by the Nazi regime in Germany.

This classic work, written more than 75 years ago, remains a timely story about the fragility of democracy. It illustrates the ease with which a president-turned-dictator can justify the suspension of democratic ideals and constitutional law, all in the name of patriotism. In this post 9/11 world, *It Can't Happen Here* proves to be a shockingly relevant story for today's times and democracies. In 2007 the novel won a Prometheus Award celebrating it as a classic work of libertarian science fiction. The *New Yorker* has called it "not only Lewis's most important book, but one of the most important books ever produced in this country."

about the author

Sinclair Lewis



Harry Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, in 1885. He was the son of a small town doctor, and his mother died when he was six. As a child, as throughout his life, he was a voracious reader. In 1906, his friend Upton Sinclair, the successful American writer and

active socialist, established Helicon Home Colony, a socialist community. Lewis briefly suspended his studies from Yale University to work at the Colony, and Upton Sinclair's views on politics and literature had a lasting influence on Lewis and his work. After graduating from Yale University in 1907 Lewis worked for a time as a reporter, then as an editor for several publishers, and wrote articles for popular magazines. He was committed to political and social change throughout his career.

The publication of *Main Street* in 1920 secured Sinclair's literary reputation as one of America's great writers. *Babbitt* (1922), a study of the complacent American whose individuality has been taken away by the general conformity of everyday life, is thought by many to be Lewis' best novel. *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Dodsworth* (1929) were also thought to be some of his best. In 1930, Lewis became the first American to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Upon accepting the prize he warned that writers were "still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification of everything American, a glorification of our faults as well as our virtues." *It Can't Happen Here*, published in 1935, was Lewis's last major work. Toward the end of his life Lewis spent much of his time abroad. He struggled with alcoholism and in 1951 he died in Rome, Italy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

It Can't Happen Here by Sinclair Lewis

1 This novel was written at a time when people were terrified about the future and believed any number of drastic scenarios were possible. As you read the book in the 21st century, did it strike you as broad or cartoonish? Or did it seem to reflect real fears and concerns?

2 Did you identify with the protagonist? His attitude evolves throughout the story: at first scornful of Windrip and his followers, then disbelieving at their rise, then convincing himself to play along, then stymied by fear, and finally inspired to fight back. Did you find this evolution believable?

3 The book reflects the passionate arguments that took place in the 1930's about socialism vs. communism and other utopian visions for bettering society. Doremus eventually resolves that no social system will solve all of mankind's problems and that "men of superior cunning" would always have influence over worthier people. Do you agree or disagree?

4 The author presents Windrip's positions as obviously unrealistic and openly pandering for votes: against the banks but for the bankers, for Labor but against strikes, unspecified plans to make all wages very high and all prices very low. What appeals to voters about politicians like Windrip?

5 The new Jeffersonian party formed by the Republican candidate doesn't excite the electorate because "it represented integrity and reason in a year that the electorate hungered for frisky emotions, not monetary systems and taxation rates..." What are the implications for democracy if citizens don't have the will or the patience to focus on complex issues?

6 Doremus repeatedly struggles with feelings that are less than egalitarian, noting that "there must be SOME crooks and swine among the toilers" just as there are among well-off people, and mentioning several neighbors (such as the ungrateful squatter farmer) who turn on him although he has given them charity in the past. What did the author think about human nature? Did the author think people are basically selfish? Do you?

7 After reading this book, do you have a different feeling about the term "class warfare" which is being used so often in today's political discourse?

8 Lewis paints an unflattering portrait of homosexuals such as Lee Sarason and some of his Minute Men followers. Did you feel he engaged in stereotyping? If so, did this undermine your enjoyment of the novel?

9 Doremus muses throughout the book that well-intentioned, ordinary people are the "most facile material for any rabble-rouser," and that the people to blame for Windrip's success are the "conscientious, respectable lazy-minded Doremus Jessups who have let the demagogues wriggle in, without fierce enough protest." Do you agree? Do you think it is important to stand up for what you believe in?

10 The book explores how Windrip's scapegoating of the Jews and blacks proves useful to the regime. The author references Huey Long's famous slogan, "Every man a king," when he notes, "Every man is a king as long as he has someone to look down on." Do you see any contemporary parallels?

11 When Doremus is considering whether to escape to Canada, he muses that "having a wife and family to support" makes us fearful of doing the right thing. What do you think motivates people to act despite these fears?

12 As Doremus and his friends try to help the New Underground in their amateurish way, he asks himself, "What conceivable reason could one have for seeking after righteousness in a world which so hated righteousness?" The author continues, "He never did find any particularly good reason. He simply went on." Is this a disappointing portrayal of someone who's supposed to be a hero?

13 In Michael Myers' introduction to the book he states that Sinclair Lewis "...believed that dissent -- even a cranky, erratic, eccentric, old-fashioned version of it -- was not disloyalty but at the heart of an American democratic identity." What do you think about that sentiment? Have you seen instances where dissent has been taken as disloyalty in our democracy or democracies around the world?

14 In his 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*, Philip Roth agrees with Lewis' premise that it "could happen here." Both the authors were writing fiction. Could the kind of fascist government they portray ever come to power in the United States, or, for that matter, in any other democratic country around the world?

AN INTERVIEW

with scholar Dr. Sally Parry



Sally E. Parry (left) is the Associate Dean for Student and Curricular Affairs in the College of Arts and Sciences at Illinois State University and the Director of General Education. She is the Executive Director of the Sinclair Lewis Society and has been editor of the Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter for the last 14 years. She has published numerous articles in such journals as

Fiction, Connecticut Review, Midwestern Miscellany, and Journal of Florida Literature and is the editor of two collections of short stories: The Minnesota Stories of Sinclair Lewis and Go East, Young Man: Sinclair Lewis on Class in America.

In what ways is *It Can't Happen Here* a book about democracy?

It Can't Happen Here is a novel about what happens to a country when citizens do not participate in a democracy. Unless they are involved in the workings of their country—through attending meetings, reading about issues, writing to their elected representatives, running for office, and voting in elections—terrible things can happen. In this novel, those people who shouted the loudest and exploited the fear and despair of the populace were those who were elected into power. In some ways, the novel is a cautionary tale about what happens when citizens do not take their part in a democracy. In essence, democracy is hard work. It requires citizens to be responsible for paying attention and calling into question those things that they think are wrong, whether it's local, national, or international issues. Connected with this is that democracy is messy. People don't always agree about issues, but they need to be able to talk about them rationally and with evidence, rather than shouting or accusing those who disagree of lack of patriotism.

Do writers have special roles or responsibilities in democratic societies?

Writers, like other artists, should bring an awareness of the variety of humankind to their readers. Writers are able to cause others to think about what it would be like to be a people different from themselves—of another race, or class, or ethnicity, or gender or sexual orientation. When we read about people other than ourselves, we tend to empathize with them more because we have been able to imaginatively step into their shoes. Too often we talk of “those people,” often lumping together a group for which we may have little sympathy, whether it's an ethnic group, a labor

union, or citizens of another country. However, when one reads about others, and sees individuals instead of a group, it is easier to have empathy and an awareness of those who may be different from us. In *It Can't Happen Here*, Buzz Windrip is able to use his power as president to separate people into different groups, and then play them off against each other, exploiting their fears. By creating an us vs. them mentality, he was able to cement his power.

What relationship do the literary arts and humanities have to democracy?

The literary arts, and the humanities more broadly, have a responsibility to present as broad a canvas as possible of what it means to be human. The arts need to challenge the status quo, and in doing so make people think more deeply about the world in which they live. They must go beyond the standards and mores of the day rather than just replicate what currently exists. In a speech that Sinclair Lewis gave in 1944, when the United States was still at war, he said, “The scientist, the artist, can ultimately contribute to making a world fit to live in, only in a world that is fit to live in—not a city or a state or a nation, but a world that is fit to live in.” I'd like to think of Mr. Lewis in that way, as America's eternal conscience, asking its citizens to move toward true democratic values, rather than just honor them with lip service.

Do you think American democracy is fragile or robust?

It is both at the same time. It is robust in that we can still voice our opinions, in letters to the editor, in communicating to our elected officials, and in the plurality of voices that exist in our country. It is fragile in that the media often control what we hear and see. This control can smooth out knotty problems, ignore issues that are not connected to the greater narrative being promoted by a particular party or media outlet, and basically not let the full extent of issues be communicated to the public. When this happens it is difficult to realize the complexities of issues that may exist. The more that the population is educated, the better chance we have of keeping our democracy robust.

What concerns you about the current state and the future of our democracy? What makes you hopeful?

In our current society we are often very divided or seem to be; the shorthand reference to this is referring to the red and the blue states. Much of the media would like to pigeonhole voters into one category or another, based on their geographic location, their income level, and the amount of education that they've received among other things. This simplification of citizens into one of two

AN INTERVIEW

with scholar Dr. Sally Parry (continued)

groups sets up the political parties and what they represent as opposite positions from which one must choose. The reality is much more complicated than that. And that's what gives me hope. Regardless of their political affiliation, most people would like our children to have good educations, our environment to be less polluted, our poor, sick, and elderly cared for, and jobs and housing available. How we get to this is something that we may differ about, and that is the point of a democracy. In order for the things that we want and care about to take place, we must educate ourselves and encourage our elected representatives to do likewise, so that wise decisions can be made that will help all our citizens.

What questions would you like readers to keep in mind as they read your book?

- If you were Doremus Jessup, what might you have done differently before the election?
- If you were unemployed and desperate for a job, might you have joined the Corpsos?
- Several characters used the phrase: "you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs." Do you think this is a good rationale for condoning violence in order to help the good of the state?
- What does the free, inquiring, critical spirit mean to you?
- What sort of courage would it take to join an underground movement against the government in order to bring back democracy?
- What sort of threat would have to happen to this country before you would feel compelled to do something about it?
- Do you believe that it could happen here?

Do you see any parallels between the events/situation/world described in Lewis's book, and what's happening in America today?

Sadly yes. The time period in which Lewis wrote was during the Great Depression with millions of people out of work and no social safety net. Although there are now programs in place to help those who are unemployed, when benefits run out, there are not a lot of options, outside of relying on friends and relatives and taking help from food kitchens. Today, as back then, millions had lost their homes due to foreclosure, and were trying to make do, not knowing what the future would bring. In today's society there is a lot of concern about unemployment, loss of housing, and the future of our country. In 1936 Lewis and J.C. Moffitt wrote a play version of *It Can't Happen Here* for the Federal Theatre Project. It was done in over 20 theaters across the country on the same night in order to highlight the pressures that our country was under at the time. The last week of October 2011, readings of this same play were done again across the country. It was sad to see that many of the same issues were still around. Fear about the future, muzzling dissent, accusing those who disagree of being unpatriotic are still with us.

How did Sinclair Lewis view the balance between loyalty and dissent in a democracy?

Lewis felt that the truest way to be a patriot was to speak up, especially against injustice. He believed that the United States was built on wonderful ideas—of justice, tolerance, and care for those less fortunate. However, his wife, Dorothy Thompson, called him a "disappointed democrat" because his admiration for his country and what it stood for in terms of democratic values was tempered by the realization that the citizens of the United States more often than not did not live up to these values. To allow demagogues to control the political agenda and keep others from speaking out was something that he believed Americans should be on guard against. A quote that has become attributed to him and which is paraphrased from his work is that "When fascism comes to America it will come wrapped in a flag and carrying a Bible." He was very afraid of politicians who would use symbols that Americans hold dear in order to carry out nefarious activities. In his mind, those true patriots were the ones that asked questions, and did not accept everything that was told to them by others. "The free, inquiring, critical spirit" that Doremus Jessup talks about it is what Lewis thought that everyone ought to have in order to participate thoughtfully in a democracy.

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTS *for further reading & viewing*

for adults

The Plot Against America by Philip Roth (2004): Fable about an alternate universe in which the U.S. has become a fascist state, Hitler's allies rule, and anti-Semitic mobs roam the streets.

The Milagro Beanfield War by John Nichols (1974): A community is mobilized by one man's struggle to defend his bean field against big business and political interests.

A Gathering of Old Men by Ernest J. Gaines (1983): After the death of a Cajun farmer, a group of elderly black men gather to shelter the perpetrator, Spartacus-style.

A Conspiracy So Immense by David M. Oshinsky (1985): A noted historian depicts the rise of Joe McCarthy from Wisconsin farm boy to the architect of America's Cold War crusade against domestic subversion.

for teens & tweens

Little Brother by Cory Doctorow (2008): After a terrorist attack, a 17-year-old and his friends are arrested as enemy combatants and must outwit the Department of Homeland Security.

The Day They Came to Arrest the Book by Nat Hentoff (1983): A student battles peers and parents who have deemed Huckleberry Finn to be immoral and thus worthy of banning.

A People's History of the American Empire by Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacke, and Paul Buhle (2008): The history of the "American Empire" from 1890 to present day is told in comics form.

for children

The Araboolies of Liberty Street by Sam Swope (1989): A family of nonconformists battles the strict rules that govern a neighborhood in order to make it "normal."

We Are All Born Free: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures by Amnesty International (2008): Illustrated version of the declaration adopted by the United Nations in the wake of World War II. Translated into more than 30 languages.

for viewing

V — *The Original Miniseries* (1983): Inspired by *It Can't Happen Here*, this miniseries recasts the 30's-era Fascists as extraterrestrials seeking to pillage earth of its natural resources.

Taxi to the Dark Side (2007): Documentary examination of U.S. torture practices that resulted in an innocent taxi driver in Afghanistan being killed during interrogation.

Good Night, and Good Luck (2005): Evocative feature, shot in black and white, about the showdown between legendary newsman Edward R. Murrow and Senator Joseph McCarthy, architect of the Red Scare.

All the King's Men (1949): Fictionalized retelling of the story of Louisiana Governor Huey Long, who supported his "man of the people" platform with lies and shady deals.

online resources

english.illinoisstate.edu/sinclairlewis/

The Sinclair Lewis Society was formed to encourage the study of, critical attention to, and general interest in the work, career, and legacy of Sinclair Lewis. The Society works to facilitate a broader discussion of his writing among scholars, critics, teachers, students, book collectors, and readers everywhere.

www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/topsecretamerica/

In the years since 9/11, PBS's Frontline has produced more than 45 hours of award-winning films documenting America's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th. The site allows you to take a closer look at some of the films that closely examine secretive and clandestine activities of the U.S. government.



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HAPPEN HERE

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about cal humanities

Cal Humanities is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting a greater understanding of the human condition. We produce, fund, and support cultural experiences in media, literature, discussion programs and more. Through engaging and inspiring work, we encourage our audiences to learn more, dig deeper, and start conversations that matter to create a State of Open Mind.

To learn more about us, please visit www.calhum.org

about the california center for the book

As part of a network of Centers for the Book in every state of the Union, all affiliated with the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, the California Center for the Book develops statewide programs that celebrate California's rich literary heritage, encourage reading and discussion, and promote libraries as centers for community engagement and lifelong learning. It is supported by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian.

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