WITH *THE AMERICAN PROSPECT* AND THE NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION PRESENTS:

"UPTON SINCLAIR AND THE OTHER AMERICAN CENTURY."

OPENING REMARKS:

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INTRODUCTION:

MICHAEL KAZIN,
PROFESSOR, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY; AUTHOR OF *A GODLY HERO: THE LIFE OF WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN*

SPEAKER:
KEVIN MATTSON, PROFESSOR, OHIO UNIVERSITY; AUTHOR OF *UPTON SINCLAIR AND THE OTHER AMERICAN CENTURY*

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MR. : Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us here at the Center for American Progress. As a friendly reminder, please turn off your cell phones, pagers or anything else that might make any sound during our presentation this afternoon. Also we're going to have a short question and answer session towards the end of our topic discussion, if you could please remember to wait for the microphone before asking your question and please state your name and where you are from. Again, please turn off your cell phones, pagers, and anything else that might make any sound during our presentation.

MS. NEERA TANDEN: Hi. Welcome to the Center for American Progress. We at the Center are excited to co-sponsor this event with the New America Foundation and *The American Prospect*. We are excited to have professor Kevin Mattson here to discuss his book, *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century*, because Kevin has done a tremendous service in telling the tale of Upton Sinclair, a public intellectual whose work did nothing short to transform our country, which he will talk a lot more about.

Here at CAP we believe strongly in the simple notion that ideas are critical to change and I know that sounds really obvious, but in the public discourse, in Washington particularly, I think that idea gets lost and it's been a relatively foundational point for the Center that it would be a tremendous service to restore the notion that public intellectuals, public activists, intellectuals, thinkers, and muckrakers can transform our country and that is why we are so honored to have Kevin here and why we're also honored to have professor Michael Kazin of Georgetown University, whose recent book, *William Jennings Bryan: A Godly Hero*, does what innovative history should do: reclaims a period in our past, gives us new insights into people and into new ideas, really reshapes the way we think of William Jennings Bryan, whose life was so much more than Scopes Monkey Trial, and so I am very honored to introduce Professor Kazin and then again you all to CAP.

Thank you.

(Applause).

MR. MICHAEL KAZIN: Good afternoon. Thanks for coming. I am really glad to have the opportunity to introduce Kevin. I've been reading him for quite some time now, but until about 20 minutes ago had never actually met him. Kevin is one of these few people in academic life who takes your breath away. He's incredibly prolific, consistently eloquent, and best of all deeply engaged with the task of reinvigorating a democratic left, a force that one hopes can change America and the world.

Deciding where to get his education, Kevin made appropriately intelligent choices. I don't know where he went to high school, but he got his bachelors degree

from the New School in New York City, which those of you who know some history know has always been a fine breeding ground for public intellectuals like Kevin since people like Charles Beard and John Dewey founded it just after World War I. Kevin went on to get his Ph.D. at the University of Rochester, where his advisors were two of my favorite historians of the last half century – insightful, intellectual historians also very deeply engaged, democratic intellectuals, Rob Westbrook, the biographer of John Dewey and the great Christopher Lash.

In a dozen years since receiving his Ph.D., Kevin has compiled a record of publishing and public service that would be the envy of the professor at the end of his career, rather than one who is still in his late thirties. I was going to say that Kevin is the Stephen King of the history profession, but that would be to denigrate his elegance of style and acuity of content. Not all of Stephen King's novels are worth reading, but all of Kevin's books are worth reading.

In the last eight years, I think, he has published five books. All are original and challenging interpretations of the fate of the left – progressive, radical, and liberal – in the twentieth century. For at least a required reading for any political historian or anyone interested in the topic, let me just read you the titles and you can just see from the titles how, you know, exciting his books are. *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* – that was his first book; *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970,* his second. In between, he wrote a book called *Engaging Youth: Combating the Apathy of Young Americans Towards Politics*, a very good cause. Then, *When America Was Great: The Fighting Faith of Liberalism in Postwar America*, and of course most recently the book on Upton Sinclair that will talk about today.

A record like that would be quite impressive by itself, but in his spare time – I don't know where he finds it, but he does somehow – Kevin has edited three anthologies and written scores of articles and reviews both for academic journals and such periodicals as *New York Times Book Review*, *The Nation*, *Common Will* and *Dissent* magazine, where I am fortunate to be on the editorial board along with him.

Somehow, Kevin also found time to help run the Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy at Rutgers University, to consult for the Open Society Institute and the Carnegie Corporation on issues of citizenship and political participation. And, yes, he also teaches at Ohio University in Athens, a location which is quite fitting really because Kevin is a modern exemplar of the older Athenian tradition, writing powerfully about how a knowledge of political philosophy and history can make us better citizens and about why citizens need to be aware of the resources that political thought and history can bring to burning, urgent public issues.

Like Upton Sinclair, whose life he'll tell us today, Kevin – to paraphrase his own words from the end of the Upton Sinclair book – offers hope that a life of ideas can inform political reality. He shows how intellectuals can speak truth to power and sometimes even be heard.

With great pleasure, Kevin.

(Applause.)

MR. KEVIN MATTSON: I really thank Michael Kazin, whose work I also greatly admire, for those very kind words and for the hospitality of the Center for American Progress, the New America Foundation, and the *American Prospect*.

I'm going to open up with just a kind of snapshot about Upton Sinclair's life about 100 years ago – a little bit more. He was in the city of Chicago. He was staying at what it was known as the Stockyards Hotel and he would often get up in the morning. He was about in his early twenties at this point in time. He would get up in the morning, he would put on typical working class garb, he would carry with himself a lunch pail, which didn't typically had any food in it because he couldn't afford it at the moment, and he would just simply walk into the meat-packing plants in Chicago and make observations – take no notes, because if he took notes people would catch on to the fact that he wasn't actually a worker, the way he looked. And then he would go home and write all down into a set of notes. That would be a typical day.

Or he might spend a day with a social worker, who would take him over to the local dump where kids would be kind of fishing around in the dump with sticks trying to get food to eat, or a social worker would take him into one of the neighborhoods and show him the unpaved streets that were kind of pooling up with water and point out where a child had died downing in the streets of Chicago. He wrote all this down, took copious notes, went back to New Jersey where he lived in a one-room shack with his wife and child with very few resources, and wrote the notes up into the novel that we know today as *The Jungle*.

His intention was to make the plight of poor immigrants accessible to middle-class readers, but instead his readers were drawn to passages like the one that I will read and probably some of you have heard if you've read the novel yourself or have heard quoted in typical history textbooks. And I apologize for doing this so close to the time that you're eating, but I think you're mostly eating veggie burritos, so you don't have too much to worry about. This is a description of the meat-packing plants:

> There would be meat stored up in great piles in rooms and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it and thousands of rats would race about it on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hands over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances and the packers would put poison bread out for them, they would die and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. The meat would be shoveled into carts and the man who did the shoveling would trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one. There were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit.

> There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage. There were butt ends, the smoke meat, and the scraps of corned beef and all the odds and ends of the waste of the plants that would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there.
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> Under the system of rigid economy, which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that it would only pay to do once in a long time and among these was the cleaning out of the waste barrels. Every spring they did it and in the barrels would be dirt and rust and old nails and stale water and cartload after cartload of it would be taken and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat and sent out to the public's breakfast.

As you can imagine, reading a passage like that caused a sensation. The president at the time, Teddy Roosevelt, invited Upton Sinclair to the White House. He had himself eaten tainted meat during the Spanish-American War and he brought Sinclair into the White House and in his typical style would slam its fist against the desks and talk about the corrupt senators that were going to stand in his way, but that, in fact, he would do something to address the problem of *The Jungle*, and the result is the Meat Inspection Act in 1906, which Senator Albert Beverage, key spokesperson for the bill, called it the most pronounced extension of federal power in every direction ever enacted, and it's true.

Sinclair had become essentially a celebrity. He had used his celebrity status to acquire a political victory. It's the hundredth anniversary of *The Jungle* that's gotten a lot of attention recently, as is often the case with a book like that, but actually Sinclair's also been in the news more recently at the beginning of this year for another reason and this issue centers on Sinclair's novel *Boston*, which came out about 20 years after *The Jungle*. It was a historical novel about the famous Sacco and Vanzetti case and told the story about the two Italian immigrants who pledged themselves to anarchism, supposedly shot and killed a guard during a hold-up.

They were, of course, sentenced to death in a very famous trial that some, including Sinclair, thought symbolized a growing fear of immigrants, especially those associated with radical causes and was most famously seen in the case in which the judge overseeing the case referred to Sacco and Vanzetti in public as "the anarchist bastards."

Last year a man in Los Angeles was going through a kind of sale of items and he came across a set of letters and he bought them and they wound up being Upton Sinclair's letters. And one of the letters was postmarked September 12th, 1929, and in it Sinclair confessed knowing that Sacco and Vanzetti were in fact guilty, because the defense lawyer had let him in on this bit of information. And Sinclair poured his guts out, admitting anguish over the ethical quandary of writing a book that could serve, as he called it, the cause of making Sacco and Vanzetti into martyrs. This seemed like a smoking gun to many observers – that Sinclair was essentially willing to lie for his

politics and for the cause, and in fact, the *Los Angeles Times* running the story put the term "exposé" in the title of the story.

As you can imagine, right-wing pundits jumped all over this and very quickly. In a nationally syndicated column, Jonah Goldberg of *The National Review* grandstanded about what he called the clay feet of liberal saints. There was no mention of the Red Scare. There was no mention of Boston's elites' attitudes towards immigrants or any comment upon Judge Thayer's public remarks about "anarchist bastards." *The Weekly Standard* quickly followed Goldberg's lead and worked itself into a froth about what they called, quote, "Upton Sinclair's ethics." They quoted the newly discovered letter in which Sinclair admits that his story would be – and I quote the letter that they quoted – would be, quote, "much better copy as a naïve defense to Sacco and Vanzetti, because this is what all my foreign readers expect, and they are 90 percent of my public."

Now, if you listen to the sentence, it does not suggest that he was in fact going to write the novel that way, but that doesn't matter of course, if you're the editors at *The Weekly Standard*. It just simply suggests that Sinclair might have been suggesting that the book could actually cover up for a lie. *The Weekly Standard* argued that essentially Sinclair was concerned with his bottom line – that's the market of foreign readers that he refers to in the letter – and that Sinclair decided – and I quote *The Weekly Standard*, "decided to lie so his fans would keep buying his books."

Now, it's necessary to move beyond the one single, individual letter that was discovered and to go into the realm that *The Weekly Standard* and Jonah Goldberg refused to go into, which is the realm of reality. Sinclair admitted openly that he thought that the case on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti was very grey and he consistently angered his communist friends when he pointed this out. And in fact, I have gone through, as you have to do in writing a biography – Michael knows this very well – you have to go through the correspondence of the individual that you're dealing with. And you could see throughout a lot of letters that Sinclair was admitting to many people that in fact the case was very, very grey. It was not black or white.

And if you actually went and read the novel *Boston* itself, you would notice that the fictionalized lawyer in the novel, Lee Swenson, openly talked about perjured evidence. He admitted to using perjured evidence in defending Sacco and Vanzetti, and this was much to the frustration of the story's central idealist, Cornelia Thornwell. Now, while admitting grayness in the novel, that the guilt or the innocence of Sacco and Vanzetti was very difficult to prove one way or the other, most of the time in the novel was spent contextualizing the case, talking about the prejudiced Boston aristocracy that exploits and hates immigrant labor, the "anarchist bastards" remark is made use of, and especially the Red Scare of 1919 and 1920, which really framed the Sacco and Vanzetti case and suggested that even if Sacco and Vanzetti were fully innocent, which Sinclair didn't really think they were, that they would have a hard time receiving a fair trial.

The new letter that was discovered and made much of by right-wing pundits is just not as sensational and is not as important as some might have thought or hoped it

was, but I will concede one thing: the right-wing pundits were right to say and to suggest that there was a weakness in Sinclair's life and the weakness is that Sinclair did have a penchant for self-publicity and the desire to sell his books and to become a full-fledged celebrity. That was the weakness that the right had picked up on I think successfully in looking at his life.

I open with these two cases – the hundredth anniversary of *The Jungle* and the recent controversy over this newly discovered letter – because I think they both go to the heart of Sinclair's life. They tell us about Sinclair's life and they tell us also about what Sinclair's life means in terms of the American past. Upton Sinclair was not, as Jonah Goldberg intoned, a liberal saint; nor, though, was he a pathological liar. He was in fact a bundle of contradictions. He was a public-minded reformer with a great deal of self-interest. He was the man who spoke of the common good while speaking about himself consistently in an attempt to work at self-promotion. He was a critic of capitalism who found himself implicated in the dynamics of consumer capitalism, especially the perpetual sales job of consumer capitalism.

He was one part self-proclaimed Messiah, one part man of the people, and another and equal part celebrity, and like most celebrities in America was a self-infatuated narcissist in many cases. He was a purist who clung to his ideals and yet wound up changing society in pragmatic ways. That's the essence as I see it, of Sinclair's life.

I think what I'll do to talk about it is just give you a few snapshots. Obviously, the book explores these in further detail, but I want to give you a few snapshots that go to the heart of this kind of contradiction between the kind of self-infatuated celebrity plus the man who actually changed America in some ways. And I'm going to go before *The Jungle*. *The Jungle* was not, in fact, Sinclair's first novel, because the novels that he's writing prior to *The Jungle* are where you see that he is really comprehending the dynamics of the consumer culture that he would deal with throughout his life.

In fact, Sinclair began as a hack writer. He wrote a lot of essentially stories for young men, especially about military heroes. That's how he got his beginning as a hack writer. But he was also always a kind of a romantic and had this kind of romantic-poetic bug and he wanted to write romantic novels. And he started of writing a book called *Springtime and Harvest*. Just for those who know, I suffered to read Sinclair's stuff, you do not. I don't recommend any – too many of his writings in terms of what they offer us today, especially not *Springtime and Harvest*, which is really – just to put it bluntly – a very bad book. It was sappy, the plot was unbelievable, and it's something that marked all of Sinclair's writing as a whole.

It sold abysmally. He sold less than 200 copies and he almost went broke trying to get a publisher to take it. This source of frustration for him – the frustration of the lonely, rejected writer – of course, all of you know this type of person and you know that you probably – they're not always the best person to trust and it really marked Sinclair's life from that point onwards. He wrote another two books and then he hit upon a book

that he authored called *The Journal of Arthur Sterling*. This came out in 1903. This is still three years before *The Jungle*.

The book, if you read it, took very little time to write. It was written in a few weeks and in many ways it was simply nothing more than (a hoax?). The book is written from the perspective of a diary telling the story of a young writer who is spurned by publishers. Is it autobiographical? Most definitely. And it's full of these kinds of shrill ejaculations at the horrors of the publishing industry at one point in time, just simply breaking into statements like "Oh, what a horrible thing is business," after being rejected by a book publisher. The book was as bad as his previous ones, but there was a hitch here and this is the important – this is an important point. His publisher had sent out a notice to all New York City newspapers that a young poet had actually committed suicide recently, a mysterious suicide that nobody knew about, and suggested that Sinclair's journal of the suicidal poet, which did not carry his author's name on it in the first renditions, was the answer to this mysterious death of a young writer. And of course this created a buzz and in fact the book sold better than any of Sinclair's books had sold before.

And I think what it taught Sinclair was a very primary lesson: publicity works often much better than does the actual quality of the product that you are producing, and he took that to heart throughout the rest of his life. He would consistently oversell his books, making big promises for them. My favorite example is a book that he edited called *The Cry for Justice*, which is an anthology of small, little writings of progressive, liberal, left-wing thinkers that came out around the time of World War I. And instead of calling it an anthology, what he called it was a bible of the future, a gospel of the new hope of the race. And it was this kind of tone that crept into a lot of Sinclair's writings – this kind of over-promising, big sell job.

And what's funny to note about Sinclair is that this penchant that he had for publicity always bit him back. It always wound up doing him in some ways more harm than necessarily good. He became a celebrity, obviously, with *The Jungle* and in the process he tried to make himself into a celebrity, hiring a photographer, a publicist and all these sorts of things to try to get a word out about him as much as about *The Jungle*. It made the newspapers very hungry to treat him like a celebrity, as someone who would be, in the remarks of Richard Schickel, an intimate stranger: people who we don't really know but want to know very, very well, in detail.

Sinclair was one of the first twentieth-century American writers to suffer, for instance, from an awful divorce case that was splashed all over the newspapers. I'm not going to go into details about his marriage. I don't – it's not really all that interesting of a story. Much more interesting is to know how his marriage played out in the newspapers. Sinclair had an awful marriage. I'll leave it at that. And it was three years after *The Jungle* came out and people were trying to treat them as a typical celebrity. He will move to an alternative community in Delaware named Arden, and it's here that his marriage completely falls apart in the year of 1910, just four years after *The Jungle* was out.

Sinclair had been making stupid statements to the press when he went out to the West Coast in 1909. For instance, front page news that his wife picks up the paper and reads "Sinclair says his marriage is a disaster." She'd read these sorts of things and think "Well, that's probably going to do a lot of good for improving the relationship." You're in San Francisco, your wife is on the East Coast and she is reading how much you think your marriage is a disaster on the front page of the newspapers. And he would do that: he would blab about himself. He would, you know, kind of spill the truth about what was going on in his private life. He had very little boundary between his private life and the public life.

When he moves to Arden, his wife moves in with him – Meta – and Meta winds up having an affair with Harry Kemp, who is a vagabond poet. And it's at this point in time that Sinclair files for divorce and the newspapers just go bananas over the whole thing. It's just perfect – bohemian radicals, you know, marriages falling apart. We can go and interview the wife, we can interview Sinclair. The wife is saying "Oh, my husband's a hypocrite. He talks about free love, but look at the way he actually treats the situation when it comes up in his own life." The whole thing just went berserk and got completely out of control.

Obviously, it was not just a mess in terms of the headlines that were splashed about, it also undoubtedly probably made Upton Sinclair's young boy even more neurotic than he already was to see the press treatment and to be treated the way he was. But the reason that I raise this is because it gets into the heart of the matter of Sinclair's life as a celebrity. He liked to play the game of publicity, but what often happened was that publicity bit him back and destroyed his ability to be taken credibly.

The desire for publicity and celebrity continued throughout Sinclair's life. Sinclair moved to Hollywood around the time of World War I and was consistently trying to break into Hollywood movies. That was one of his biggest life ambitions. He made a film version of *The Jungle* in 1913 and then he befriended Charlie Chaplin. They were close – they were fairly close friends. Charlie Chaplin claimed that Sinclair taught him about socialism. And you can go through his correspondence – Sinclair's correspondence to see these notes that he sends to Charlie Chaplin on almost like a weekly basis of a suggestion for a film that Chaplin should make, which of course is silly because Chaplin made all of his films completely by himself. He would never have taken anybody's advice, but Sinclair thought he was a smart filmmaker that deserved to get that sort of treatment.

After *The Jungle* is made, another movie comes out that is based upon a novel of his that is completely and absolutely mistreated in terms of the film version of it. His biggest success is that his novel *The Wet Parade* is made into a movie by MGM in 1932. *The Wet Parade* is Sinclair's essential work arguing for prohibition – in favor of prohibition. He was in favor of prohibition as many socialists, in fact, were during that period of time. Michael Kazin's own work points out this kind of cultural conservatism and socialism being intertwined. The movie is made in 1932. It's his biggest success and then soon thereafter he writes a biography about William Fox, the key movie mogul, that

was told from Fox's standpoint. The whole issue became a complete and absolute mess and then Sinclair got his real big chance, which was to work with Sergey Eisenstein to make a film. Eisenstein was the famous Russian director that most of you know, who was famous for the movie *The Battleship Potemkin* and new practices in Russian cinema history.

Eisenstein had come to America in the early thirties to learn more about American movie-making technique and he had a contract to make a movie version of Theodore Dreiser's novel *The American Tragedy*. It fell through and Eisenstein was just about to return to Russia when Charlie Chaplin happened to contact Upton Sinclair and said "You know, if you don't help this guy out, he's going to go back to Russia and he's never going to be able to make the movie he really wanted to make, which is about Mexico." Now, if you consider this approach, what you're getting is, you're getting like a close to a millionaire telling a poor struggling author that he should invest all of his money with a Russian director, and of course most of you would probably say, well, wouldn't he have thought of asking Charlie Chaplin, "Maybe you should make the investment? Maybe that will be a good idea?" But, of course, Sinclair didn't think that way. He was very impulsive and he rushed into the whole thing. He rushed into helping Eisenstein make this movie and the whole thing was an absolute fiasco. He wound up investing about $100,000 and made back about $30,000 in the end. And he also was vociferously attacked by the Communist Party for selling out the great cause of Eisenstein.

Now, the reason I raise these points is just to give you a sense of how Sinclair consistently chased fame and often made very bad decisions in the process of chasing fame. And of course that's the side of it that I think some of the right-wing pundits were right about in terms of the discovery of the letter. But there's another side to Sinclair and I think we need to pay attention to both sides at once in trying to understand the man and understand his relationship to the American past and this is the part of it that obviously the editors of *The Weekly Standard* and *National Review* simply do not pay attention to. And that is that Sinclair was very devoted to changing America for the better and I think that the best place that you see this is in his run for governor of California in 1934, when he learned to truly try to reach out to people in ways that were very impressive indeed.

It's a very impressive candidacy and it's a very impressive governor's race. Sinclair had run for political office on numerous times on the Socialist Party ticket, and in 1934 he observed that the Great Depression was such a serious crisis that he could no longer run to try to win a minimal amount of votes and that it demanded realistic reform. He was also very deeply impressed by FDR's leadership. He decided to ditch the Socialist Party, join the Democratic Party, and then ran for governor in 1934 for the state of California.

This incident in history is often kind of footnoted in a lot of histories. It's not put in front and center where I think it actually deserves to go. There is a whole book written about it, but the book itself is not about the wider context where I think this obviously matters. And I think it shows that Sinclair was a very serious reformer. He came up with the idea and some of you probably know, known as EPIC, which stood for End Poverty

in California, and his plan was fairly simple: he would have the state government buy out idle farms and idle factories and then put them to work in the public interest by allowing citizens to find employment through kind of essentially subsidized farms and factories – a real serious public works program you could essentially call it. And, again, it was a purchase; it was not that government was supposed to expropriate these things from private owners.

To justify what he was calling for, he was in some ways a political genius. He crossed the language of Thomas Jefferson with the language of socialism and came up with the term production for use rather than production for profit. The goods would be brought to cooperatives, as he kind of formulated the EPIC plan, that would be aided by the state, but then also locally and democratically managed. It was big government essentially with local self-governance based upon principles of democracy. It was kind of populism in the form of the 1930s, and a much more serious populism than some of the language that historians like Alan Brinkley see in other reforms at this period of time.

The heart of the movement – the heart of the EPIC movement was the local EPIC club. It was a Democratic campaign that he ran and he was very serious about nurturing what historians call movement culture. If you go through the Sinclair correspondence, you can find all the songs that were written by EPIC clubs to begin meetings and some of them are just, you know, too good to pass up with quotation. They were typically set to other songs. This one set to *Glory Hallelujah* and I'll just sing it to you. I won't sing it, I'll just state it, but you'll get the sense of how that works. "Our eyes shall see the dawning of a great triumphant day / Want and hunger shall be swept from us as hosts people pray / Farm and homestead shall be sacred and one's home one's own shall stay / When Sinclair is marching on / Glory, glory, hallelujah / Sinclair is marching on / We'll make Sinclair a governor and joyous bells will chime / End poverty, end poverty, and now is the happy time / Free Americans are destitute and hungry that's the crime, but Sinclair is marching on."

This one was sung to *Over There* and this is my favorite of all. "EPIC plan, EPIC plan / On the air, everywhere / EPIC plan / Vote for Upton Sinclair / He's always been there / With plans to help the fellow man / We'll colonize and factorize / That's work for all, food for all / If we're wise / We'll elect him / May God protect him / Sinclair for Governor / California's EPIC plan."

The campaign, based upon the local EPIC Club, based upon songs like this, based upon democratic governance of these local EPIC clubs that grew proportionately in pretty amazing numbers throughout the course of the campaign, in some ways is a model for a campaign trying to control its message knowing fairly well that in fact there's another messenger out there and that is the message of the mass media. And you can see a real concerted attempt to try to speak to ordinary citizens directly rather than go through the media, which was avidly anti-Sinclair.

But the culture of celebrity and publicity would always wind up doing Sinclair in. There was the *Los Angeles Times*, at this point in time a conservative newspaper, that

hated Sinclair. It would do this daily thing where they would pull quotes out of his books, put them into what they called the black box, and kind of slap them up on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* – quotes taken out of context about how he believed in free love and things like that. He hated religion blah, blah, blah, blah. It was a pretty strong-handed attack. The people, though, who really did him in were Hollywood. And again, it's ironic to note this before, you know, Hollywood is known as a liberal institution. The key thing that Hollywood did was put together a set of news reels that attacked Sinclair and of course, some of you who might have read the book about Sinclair's governor's race, Sinclair had a talent for running a democratic race. He also had a tendency to shoot his mouth off and to say things in public that were just inappropriate – just the same way that he spoke about his painful marriage.

At one point in time, Sinclair came back from a trip and the press is there and they ask him a question, you know, "How did your meeting go in Washington, D.C.?" Sinclair went to meet with FDR and a few of the other leaders in the New Deal regime. And Sinclair was very happy and excited to talk about this and he says at one point in time, being very tired, "I told Harry Hopkins in Washington that if I am elected, half the unemployed of the United States will come to California and he will have to make plans to take care of them." And he said a lot of other – if you read the actual press conference, you'd notice that there's a lot of other remarks that are actually even worse than that one, but that's the one that the *LA Times* reporter says, "I've got it. I've got it." Not only is there a *Times* story done that just simply says that half of the unemployed of the United States are planning to come to California under the future Sinclair regime, billboards go out throughout the city of Los Angeles and there's most famous of all – and this is where you see the kind of notion of a noise machine as it's sometimes been called on the right. You've got the billboards, you've got the *LA Times* story, and then you've got the famous of all: the bums rush news reel where Hollywood went out and filmed a bunch of men coming off trains dressed up as bums, saying, "Here is the future if Sinclair gets elected."

And it was perfectly timed. It worked perfectly. It worked in synergy. And of course, in the end, Sinclair lost the election. It was close, but he in fact lost. Nonetheless I think that the governor's race showed something important to keep in mind, that in some ways though not always successful, grassroots organizing can sometimes get around the power of the media and also that it's very important, in fact, for candidates to think about how they can creatively, as the sometimes called, speak American: use Jeffersonian language in the case of Sinclair to get people on his side.

So I tell you these little – a few anecdotes because I think that they add up to something. In writing the biography, I found myself emphasizing this theme that Sinclair is a contradictory figure. His life tells us, I think, very much about how change has occurred in the American past. And to end here, what I'll talk about are two truths that I see coming out of writing about Sinclair and thinking about Sinclair's relationship to the American past. The first is a very sad and cynical truth. The second is the more idealistic one. I'll end on the idealistic one.

I begin with the sad and cynical truth. Sinclair's life in terms of this sad and cynical truth, speaks through a dynamic that I think plagues us today, and it's the present day culture of celebrity and publicity. It's routine for people to complain and bemoan that politics is essentially a situation where candidates are sold like any other commodity et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And obviously people make the consistent observation that more people – I know this statistic is slightly bogus, but, you know, that more people vote in *American Idol* than vote in presidential elections. Of course, you can vote as many times as you want in *American Idol*, so that's always a questionable assertion.

I think, though, that Sinclair's life leaves behind a legacy on the issue of celebrity and publicity – that sad cynical truth – and I think you can see it in the work of someone like a Michael Moore, someone who uses entertainment as a way, he hopes, to cause political change, but is often implicated in the darker side of America's culture of entertainment. I think that some of the failures of Moore's own use of publicity in order to convey political position, the fact that he consistently makes this kind of slippery – you know, points out the slippery line between entertainment and politics. Well, I don't have to – I'm not beholden to the truth because I'm just an entertainer – very similar in some ways to Sinclair's attitude.

A tendency also in Moore's case where he doesn't even in fact – if you look at the statistics on who is going to see Moore's films, it's typically the pre-selected people who already agree with his viewpoint who are actually going to see his films. He's not really reaching as many people as I think he thinks he is. Again, if you look at Sinclair's life, he was very much into what I would call kind of a niche marketing. I write for the left, I write in the small – I write the kind of books that I target market to my audience and you can kind of see the tendency that you already see, or you see later in some of Moore's work. And obviously overall a kind of general degrading of our public discourse and a difficulty in keeping in mind the difference between entertainment and truth claims in politics. So I think that that's one of the legacies of Sinclair's life that I point out in the book that I think it's very damaging to a contemporary political culture.

Here's the more optimistic lesson and this is the theme, as I try to make it, that points out where Sinclair's life fits within the broader contours of American history and gets to what I mean by this title *The Other American Century*. I think that we should remember Sinclair's tendency to expose the realities that he exposed in *The Jungle* and his other writings and his campaign for governor as someone who is trying to force America to confront some very difficult issues. I think Sinclair recognized this was the most important legacy of his work towards the end of his life. In fact, the man lived to be 90. He died in 1968 and as I was writing the biography, my editor pointed out "Don't you wish you had chosen Jimmy Hendrix to write about?" Because, you know, you get to like where he is entering into the 60s and the 70s. Oh, Lord, when is this going to end? And, you know, I mean, he really lead a kind of interesting, reflective life during especially the 1950s.

By the 1950s, Sinclair was what we would call a Cold War liberal and he, in fact, embraced the term. He became a staunch anticommunist who defended the legacy and

the hoped extension of the New Deal. And he found himself plagued, as you can probably imagine, by the novel *The Jungle* during the 1950s, because it was being used consistently by communists abroad to suggest that America was really a bad country that exploited its immigrant workers and that forced people to eat bad food. The communists had a field day with remarketing *The Jungle* during the 1950s, as they did pictures of lynchings of African-Americans in the South and so forth and so on.

And Sinclair had a real tough time. He would consistently say "I am so upset that *The Jungle* is the only book I'm known for, especially now in 1950s." And he was interviewed by a number of people about what he thought about this issue and he said, and I'll quote an interview he did during the 1950s. He said "America has changed a lot since *The Jungle* and I think that the critical authors," including himself, "had something to do with that change." He believed at this point in time that unions and federal regulations had worked to improve America. He had in fact fully abandoned his socialism. And as he put it, America, if it was to lead the battle against communism abroad needed to make its own institutions worthy of respect and needed to listen to its critics as they did in the past and as they needed to in the future. Only then, Sinclair kept intoning, would America actually be able to win the world's admiration.

Remembering the sores from the past, talking honestly about *The Jungle*, but also consistently pointing out how America had improved its situation, would be, as he saw it, part and parcel of the campaign to fight the Cold War. That was how you were going to win the Cold War as he saw it. And I think in some ways this is the most important lesson of his life. America's vision abroad, as I think we are learning very clearly now, is about only as good as its ability to confront its problems at home. We're best, in my mind when we allow the other American century, our tale or our history of exploitation of immigrants, our exploitative labor past, our repression of public opinion during the war – you can name it – to speak to the American century.

America has many sources of pride, but in my mind its best source to pride is its willingness to admit its errors and to deal realistically with them. And this is where I come full circle to the opening that I read to you in terms of the passages from *The Jungle* itself and I'm not going to re-read that passage, obviously. But I think that Sinclair thought that America, as he looked upon it in the 1950s, as he knew he was nearing the end of his life, that America would project its greatness abroad only if it recognized its problems at home and in both the past and the present. And as I see it, though, there's the cynical side of publicity and celebrity that Sinclair's life intersected with. There's also this legacy from his life and I think it's an important one that we would do well to remember today.

Thanks.

(Applause.)

Q: Hi. I'm Bob Bothwell with Visions Realized. You have given us two different ways of looking at Sinclair; probably more, but I focused on two. And one of

them is that he was writing for his niche audience, the left, but at the same time you said he speaks American. In those two songs you read there was very much an appeal to broad American and religious values. What I'm trying to understand a little bit more is was he doing all of that or which did he focus on more?

MR. MATTSON: Yeah. Well, that's a good question. I mean, his life really – I mean, you can see pretty clearly – I think, I see it as kind of more of a tension throughout his life. I think in 1934, as he explained, as he looked at the Depression and he looked at how serious of a crisis America faced, that he could no longer run, for instance, on the Socialist Party ticket. He had done it on numerous occasions. He had won, you know – I mean, if you look at his numbers in California, he was winning sometimes 1 to 2 percent of the vote. I mean, it's kind of a Nader figure if want to think about it that way. And he just said "Look, if I'm going to be serious about this, I need to reach out to people and they don't listen to me when I use the term socialism" and in fact his son was very – who was a socialist, was very upset with him when he abandoned socialism and said "I'm a member of the Democratic Party. I believe in democracy. I believe in the language of Thomas Jefferson, et cetera, et cetera. And I think it's at those moments that Sinclair was at its best: when he simply stopped kind of clinging to his more purest ideals and threw himself into reform. Whether or not he had really truly learned the lesson of the need to kind of break out from the left-wing ghetto and speak to the wider public, I don't know. He kind of goes back and forth. It's always a tension, but in my mind, he's at his best when he recognizes the need to reach a wider audience and in part because of the severity of the problems that he thought he was facing up to and that his governor's race would.

Now, the songs of course are what people are doing. He didn't write the songs and the EPIC club actions and what was going on within the EPIC clubs was all very indigenous and democratic and, in fact, at many times I think that's what made him – it was that movement that made him so powerful and strong at that, not him. And at his best, he was not a man known for humility at all, and that was a real problem for him. But at that moment I think he recognized that in some ways the movement and what people were doing with EPIC was more important than what he in fact was doing. And I think he knew that if anybody was going to mess it up and not be able to reach the wider audience, it was going to be him and not the people on the ground doing the organizing.

Q: Dan Marcus. I am now teaching at American University Law School. I am an old Washington lawyer and Clinton administration official. A couple of questions about the impact of the – of this race for governor in 1934 on Democratic politics in California. I can't remember the dates as to when Olson became governor of California, but was there a direct line between the Sinclair campaign and the Democratic – the (liberal?) Democratic regime in California later in the 30s?

And the second question is, what relationship, if any, was there between Sinclair's effort in 1934 and this crazy Frances Townsend campaign for governor. I don't remember when that was. I think I wrote a paper on it in college 45 years ago.

MR. MATTSON: In response to your first question, yeah, most historians believe that the EPIC campaign was what shifted the Democrats into a kind of liberal direction from that point onwards. And Olson is – Olson was – Sinclair did not like Olson. I mean, he had conflicts with him, but Olson and (also Voorhees?) was obviously the people who came out of the EPIC movement, stayed in Democratic politics.

Sinclair – again, this goes back to this question of what Sinclair's attitude – Sinclair would pull off consistently. He would throw himself into EPIC, really got engaged, and then when it didn't go his way, he just kind of pulled out and kind of condemned everybody for not, you know, living up to the real truth of EPIC and so forth and so on. So there is – at the end of the campaign, you see that tendency in his personality coming back. But, yes, it was very – it was very important in terms of a long lasting impact within the Democratic Party within the state of California. It was really the beginnings when – the Democratic Party by the time he ran was a shell. That's why he could win the primary, because nobody took it seriously. They hadn't won for quite some time and so I think it really revived the Democratic Party.

With Townsend, yeah, there's a lot of – during the 1930s, there's a lot of different what the historian Alan Brinkley would call these kinds of voices of protest – these sorts of – I don't know if you want to say to the left of the Democratic Party and the New Deal, but certainly a more kind of indigenous protest style that includes Townsend, that includes, you know, obviously, most famously Huey Long – figures along these lines.

Sinclair clearly fits there within that wider tendency. He thought Townsend was actually – he worried about Townsend and he didn't – he thought that the plan that Townsend had, which eventually really essentially becomes Social Security, was not radical enough for his own likings, but he kind of though that, as he would put it, that if his own candidacy could work in tandem with people like Long, who we didn't really trust and thought of as a demagogue, but Townsend as well, and Father Coughlin (ph) and people like that, that you could pull the New Deal to the left. And he thought that that was going to be the longest lasting impact of his work. So there is a relationship, but he was very critical of Townsend.

Q: My name is Jo Freeman. I grew up in California and two years ago I published a book called *At Berkeley in the Sixties*. And I can trace what happened at Berkeley in the '60s back to the San Francisco general strike of 1934. You didn't mention that, and I would think that that would have played a great role in Upton Sinclair's campaign either one way or the other. Could you comment on the strike and what its impact was?

MR. MATTSON: Yeah. No, that's good. I do deal with it in the book. Sinclair had been a big supporter of that segment of the labor movement and had been a big supporter earlier on and in fact had been arrested. One of his three arrests during the course of his life was being arrested in support of a strike similar to one that was in 1934. And he was most involved in defending the freedom of speech of the strikers, not as much their cause. That occurred in the 1920s.

The strike that happens in 1934, then – the person who would successfully beat Sinclair, who was then governor, Merriam, squashed that strike and squashed it pretty – in a very nasty way. And it's funny to watch what Sinclair does. You would have thought that he would immediately have rushed to the defense of the strikers. He does not, because he's really worried by that point in time about how it would play out for him politically. Merriam used that to say, "I am restoring America to order – to law and order. I had to squash the strike. It was necessary," et cetera, et cetera. He used that and he really boosted his impression in a lot of public opinion, at least for people who – you know, especially obviously for people who were in the Republican Party, but also a kind of a, you know a group of people who were worried about things getting out of control.

Sinclair really passed on it, essentially, and it's a part of his being, you know, increasingly in his own mind – whether or not this was an accurate calculation on his part – being more realistic; that if he had associated with labor radicalism that he would be done in, and so he really stayed out of it. He was condemned very quickly by people that said, "You're not supporting the strikers. You're not supporting the strikers." And he said, "I'm not against the strikers, but I'm not – I'm certainly not going to come out in favor of the strikers," because he thought that that would be doing kind of – that would be kind of an act of political suicide. But it was very important for Merriam to boost his own credibility.

Q: Hi, I'm Edward Rotor (ph) with Sunshine Press. You mentioned that Sinclair felt that 90 percent of his market was foreign. The rest of it was primarily American book buyers and people who bought publications where his books were serialized, which publications were largely not supported by advertising, and that was true that the rest of the muckrakers. Do you think that today, when most of the media is controlled by big business and very dependant upon advertising and not so dependant upon sales or subscription sales directly to the public, that it makes it less likely that we'll get muckrakers who make a difference as happened 100 years ago?

MR. MATTSON: Yeah. This was a thing that Sinclair struggled with his entire life and in fact he went into self-publication for a while. He published his own magazine during World War II that refused to take advertising dollars and it was a single person publication. He also published a lot of his own books because he thought that he wouldn't be able to get published by commercial trade press at that point in time.

You know, I think that he – and he really kind of had the sort of almost like a small craftsperson outlook on self-publication and took it to heart, but if you look at his ability to really sell and generate his books, it was pretty minimal when he was doing that sort of stuff. I mean, he really – his numbers kind of shrunk when he tried to move into self-publication. Do I think that the kind of current commercial practices are going to do damage to the possibilities of a muckraker occurring? Maybe, although I think it can cut in all sorts of different ways because, I mean, *The Jungle* was such a sensation and in fact, if you look at the way – why the novel became so popular and widely read, at least claimed to be widely read during that period of time, most of it was the sensational

stories that people knew were within and there was a real hunger for that that I don't think had any – and it was published by a mainstream, popular press, so I think that there's always the possibility that the kind of sensational will get treatment and that can include, I think, muckraking and exposé, but I think there is always the detrimental possibility of that, which is our people fixate on things that probably aren't really necessarily all that important.

I think that's what you see in *The Jungle* is that, you know, he says that "I aim for the hearts of Americans to talk about the plight of the working class and I hit them in their stomach," because they read these passages that I read out. And so I think it's the danger – I mean, I think it had something to do with the commercialization of publishing that makes it more difficult, but I think there's always the kind of hunger for sensation that still exists. I'm just not always convinced that does a lot of good in the end.

Q: My name is Bill Neil (sp). I write about the future of the Democratic Party and progressives. You were introduced by a gentleman who has traced the life of William Jennings Bryan and the deep resources he reached into, especially the biblical ones, to speak to Southern agrarians and Western populists. What about Sinclair's language? What was he reaching into? Was there a curve of increasing secular appeals and I'm also reading a biography of John Kenneth Galbraith at the same time, where the religious references – you know, a deeply ethical individual in where he was trying to focus economics, but we're moving further and further away from that ability to speak to a good portion of the population, and of course that's a burning issue today for the left. How do you speak to America given that religious division?

MR. MATTSON: Yeah. Really, I mean, if you look at any factor in the 1934 governor's race, in my mind – there's people who debate this, but my impression is that religion and Sinclair's previous writings on religion killed him more than anything else in terms of the popular perception of this guy not being – you know, back to the question of the mainstream and being able to speak American and things like that. It was the writings that he had done on religion. And the writings he did on religion were what you would have to call classically Marxist. You know, religion is the opiate of the masses, religion misleads people. That was pretty much his take on religion in his writings up to 1934, although he also had a very kind of odd sort of universalist, almost Unitarian tendency. He was a spiritualist at the same time that he was very deeply a critical of organized religion, so he was all over the map on this issue.

I think, though, for him when he – when in 1934 and other times when he was at a strength, he did not bash religion. He kind of said – when his campaign workers would say, "Well, what if we get the religion question?" which he always (asking?) – we're here to protect Christians, we're here to protect the Jews, we're here to protect whoever, you know, wants to vote for us. We're for these kinds of things that we hold in common. He always spoke that kind of common language – inclusive language during the campaign. I think it was fairly successful. But I think that what he tapped into was the kind of Jeffersonian tradition, a sort of small-D democratic, egalitarian tendency in the American political tradition that I think was successful. Whether or not we still have that and

whether or not you can actually tap into that, I have some doubts as to whether or not that's actually workable under the – in our current political culture, but that was certainly what he aimed at. He did not speak the religious language. He just – he felt uncomfortable in that terrain, but he was successful at speaking – you know, I think in some way speaking American, speaking the kind of Jeffersonian language, and making a pretty deep appeal based upon that.

MR. : Last question.

Q: My name is Martin Gensler. I used to work with Senator Wellstone. I'm now retired. Basically, I have two quick questions. One is, how did Upton Sinclair get away with supporting World War I. Eugene Debs was doing a term in jail for opposing it. And the second question – I think unrelated, but there may be some links – is how did the FBI's best file clerk – the Justice Departments best file clerk, J. Edgar Hoover, deal with Upton Sinclair as a menace to society and an inveterate socialist and atheist?

MR. MATTSON: Yeah. For those who don't know, Upton Sinclair was one of a handful of socialists who broke with the Socialist Party and supported the war, supported America's entry into the war, supported the war – you know, supported England and then America's entry. The way he justified it was that – his claim to justify it was that he had spoken to numerous German socialists in the past when he was abroad and that they had convinced him that they needed to defend the authoritarian regime that presently existed in Germany and only then would they be able to fully institute socialism and that made him decide to support the war.

He was also, I think, very hopeful, as a lot of progressives were – not socialists, but a lot of progressives were that you could use the war in order to carry out political and social reform within the country, because if you strengthen the government obviously you will be able to strengthen the social and political reform at home. I know that that sounds completely kooky today. You know, that that hopefulness – I mean, when you look at the way the present war has been carried out with precisely the reverse tactic at home, it's hard to wrap your mind around the fact that people were hopeful about that, but those were the things that made him decide to support the war.

He supported the war, but he was also very critical of the Wilson administration when it did things like censor the press, when it tried to silence dissident voices. He always spoke up for those people. He kind of always said, "You know, I support the war and now I'm uncomfortable with the company that I'm keeping. I'm not in support of all their policies." So he kind of played both things at once: he supported the war, but also was a critic of the administration and how it was carried out. Very critical of the postwar settlement. I mean, he thought it was a abysmal what happened in the postwar settlement and was a vociferous critic of how France and England had control over the situation after the war.

As far as J. Edgar Hoover, there is correspondence between Sinclair and J. Edgar Hoover in Sinclair's correspondence and Sinclair was very worried, at least in the 1920s

when Hoover is really at the beginning of his career, that there were going to be repercussions for him being a radical. He was consistently worried that his mail was being opened, that he was going to be attacked by the government. He is very worried about – especially as the Red Scare set in, that he would see the backlash himself. I don't see much evidence that – I mean, I think they paid attention to him, but I don't think that they did anything really actively.

And then the funny part of it is that in the late 50s – and I used this in the book because I think it's kind of an evocative thing – he writes a letter in about 1958 or '59 in which he says to J. Edgar Hoover, "I know that you're trying to crack down on juvenile delinquency," which was a, you know, obviously a big concern in the FBI during the late 1950s. "I know you're worried about juvenile delinquency and I, too, worry about juvenile delinquency, but the only way to attack juvenile delinquency of course is to attack the underlying causes, which is poverty." And it's an interesting letter, because it comes out in '58 or '59 and it's one of these places where you can see Sinclair essentially almost reading the future, because of course it is Kennedy who will use juvenile delinquency to lay the groundwork for the great society. And so in some ways, Sinclair always had this – I mean, he's – again, he's all over the map. He's concerned about being associated with radicalism by that point in time, but he is also making, I think, some pretty interesting kind of political predictions about where American politics would go on that issue. But as far as I can see it, there wasn't a lie in terms of his being actually hassled directly by the FBI.

MS. : Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

(END)