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*Lessons from a Dark Time*

FROM THE MOMENT HE TOOK OFFICE, American newspapers and TV screens have overflowed with President Donald J. Trump's choleric attacks on the media, immigrants, and anyone who criticized him. It makes you wonder: what would it be like if nothing restrained him from his obvious wish to silence such enemies? For a chilling answer, we need only roll back the clock a century, to a time when the United States endured a three-year period of unparalleled surveillance, censorship, mass imprisonment, and anti-immigrant terror. And, strangely, all this happened under a president usually remembered for his internationalist idealism.

When Woodrow Wilson went before Congress on April 2, 1917, and asked it to declare war on Germany, the country was as riven by divisions as it is today. Even though millions of people, from the perennially bellicose Theodore Roosevelt on down, were eager for war, President Wilson was not sure he could count on the backing of some nine million German Americans or of the 4.5 million Irish Americans who might be reluctant to fight as allies of Britain. Hundreds of elected state and local officials belonged to the Socialist Party, which strongly opposed American participation in this or any other war. And tens of thousands of Americans were "Wobblies," members of the militant Industrial Workers of the World, or IWW, and the only battle they wanted to fight was that of labor against capital.

The moment the United States joined the conflict in Europe, a second, less noticed war began at home. Staffed by federal agents, local police, and civilian vigilantes, it had three targets: anyone who might be a German sympathizer, left-wing newspapers and magazines, and labor activists. The war against the last two groups would continue for a year and a half after the First World War ended.

In strikingly Trumpian fashion, Wilson himself helped sow suspicion of dissenters and hidden enemies. He had run for reelection in 1916 on the slogan “he kept us out of war,” but he was already quietly feeling out congressional leaders about joining the conflict, and he also knew American public opinion was strongly anti-German. Well before the declaration of war, he had ominously warned that “there are citizens of the United States, I blush to admit, born under other flags . . . who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life. . . . Such creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out.”

Once the United States entered the war, shortly after Wilson’s second term began, the crushing swiftly reached a frenzy. The government started arresting and interning native-born Germans who were not naturalized U.S. citizens—but in a highly selective way, rounding up, for example, all those who were IWW members. Millions rushed to spurn anything German. Families named Schmidt quickly became Smith. German-language textbooks were tossed on bonfires. The German-born conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Karl Muck, was locked up, even though he was a citizen of Switzerland; notes he had made on a score of J. S. Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion* were suspected of being coded messages to Germany. Berlin, Iowa, changed its name to Lincoln, and East Germantown, Indiana, became Pershing, named after the general leading American soldiers in their broad-brimmed hats to France. Hamburger was now “Salisbury steak” and German measles “Liberty measles.” The *New York Herald* published the names and addresses of every German or Austro-Hungarian national living in the city.

The government stepped up its spying on civilians. An army intelligence agent in New York became expert at the new art of tapping telephones and loaned his skills around the country as required. With odd clicks on their calls and strangers taking notes at rallies and meetings, it was not long before dissidents realized they were being watched. When a Socialist Party official addressed a crowd on the Boston Common in June 1917, he began “Mr. Chairman, friends, conscripts, and secret agents . . .”

Soon things went far beyond surveillance. In Collinsville, Illinois, the following year, a crowd seized a coal miner, Robert Prager, who had the bad luck to be German-born. They kicked and punched him, stripped off his clothes, wrapped him in an American flag, forced him to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and lynched him from a tree on the outskirts of town. No matter that he had tried to enlist in the U.S. Navy but been turned down because he had a glass eye. After a jury deliberated for only forty-five minutes,

eleven members of the mob were acquitted of all charges, while a military band played outside the courthouse.

The next stage of conflict was an assault on the media unmatched in American history before or—so far—since. Its commander was Wilson's postmaster general, Albert Sidney Burleson. A pompous former prosecutor and congressman whose father had fought for the Confederates, Burleson was the first Texan to serve in a U.S. cabinet. On June 16, 1917, he sent sweeping instructions to local postmasters ordering them to "keep a close watch on unsealed matters, newspapers, etc." for anything "calculated to . . . cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny. . . or otherwise embarrass or hamper the Government in conducting the war." What did "embarrass" mean? A new Burleson edict gave examples, from saying "that the Government is controlled by Wall Street or munition manufacturers" to "attacking improperly our allies."

One after another, Burleson went after newspapers and magazines, many of them affiliated with the Socialist Party, including the popular *Appeal to Reason*, which had a circulation of more than half a million. Virtually all Wobbly literature was banned from the mails. Burleson's most famous target was Max Eastman's vigorously antiwar *The Masses*, a literary journal that had published writers from John Reed to Sherwood Anderson to Edna St. Vincent Millay to the young Walter Lippmann. While *The Masses* never actually reached the masses—its circulation averaged a mere 12,000—it was one of the liveliest magazines this country ever produced. Burleson shut it down; one of the items that drew his ire was a cartoon of the Liberty Bell crumbling. "They give you ninety days for quoting the Declaration of Independence," Eastman declared, "six months for quoting the Bible."

With so many recent immigrants, the United States had dozens of foreign-language papers. All were now required to submit English translations of all articles dealing with the government, the war, or American allies to the local postmaster *before* they could be published—a ruinous expense that caused many periodicals to stop printing. Another Burleson technique was to ban a particular issue of a newspaper or magazine and then cancel its second-class mailing permit, claiming that it was no longer publishing regularly. Before the war was over seventy-five different publications would be either censored or completely banned.

Finally, the war gave business and government the perfect excuse to attack the labor movement. The preceding eight years had been ones of great labor strife, with hundreds of thousands of workers going on strike every year, and

now employers could brand all who did so as traitors to the war effort. Virtually every IWW office was raided; at the group's Chicago headquarters, police smashed tables and chairs, left papers strewn all over the floor, and took away five tons of material, including even some of the ashes of the popular Wobbly songwriter Joe Hill, recently convicted of murder on shaky evidence and executed. In Seattle, authorities turned Wobbly prisoners over to the local army commander, who then claimed that because they were in military custody, they had no right of habeas corpus. When 101 Wobblies were put through a four-month trial in Chicago, a jury found all of them guilty on all counts after a discussion so brief it averaged less than thirty seconds per defendant. The judge passed out sentences totaling 807 years of prison time.

Others sent to jail for opposing the war included not only well-known radicals like Emma Goldman and Eugene V. Debs but hundreds of conscientious objectors to the draft. The C.O.'s were dispatched to military prisons, where some were shackled to cell bars so they would have to stand on tiptoe nine hours a day. A haunting charcoal drawing of this ordeal was later made by one of the victims, the *Masses* illustrator and cartoonist Maurice Becker. By the time of the Armistice, there would be nearly 6,300 warranted arrests of leftists of all varieties, but thousands more people, the total number unknown, were seized without warrants.

Much repression never showed up in statistics because it was done by vigilantes. In June 1917, for example, copper miners in Bisbee, Arizona, organized by the IWW, went on strike. A few weeks later, the local sheriff formed a posse of more than two thousand mining company officials, hired gunmen, and armed local businessmen. Wearing white armbands to identify themselves and led by a car mounted with a machine gun, they broke down doors and marched nearly 1,200 strikers and their supporters out of town. The men were held several hours under the hot sun in a baseball park, then forced at bayonet point into a train of two dozen cattle and freight cars and hauled, with armed guards atop each car and more armed men escorting the train in automobiles, 180 miles through the desert and across the state line to New Mexico. There, after two days without food, they were placed in a U.S. Army stockade. A few months later, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a mob wearing hoods seized seventeen Wobblies and whipped, tarred, and feathered them.

People from the highest reaches of society bayed for blood like a lynch mob. Elihu Root, a corporate lawyer and former secretary of war, secretary of state, and senator, was the prototype of the so-called wise men of the twentieth-century foreign policy establishment who moved smoothly back and

forth between Wall Street and Washington, DC. “There are men walking about the streets of this city tonight who ought to be taken out at sunrise tomorrow and shot,” he told an audience at New York’s Union League Club in August 1917. “There are some newspapers published in this city every day the editors of which deserve conviction and execution for treason.”

Although Woodrow Wilson fruitlessly tried to persuade the American people to join the League of Nations, so as to peacefully resolve conflicts abroad, his zeal for reforming the international order included no tolerance for dissent at home. His Justice Department, for example, encouraged the formation of vigilante groups with names like the Knights of Liberty and the Sedition Slammers. The largest was the American Protective League, whose ranks filled with employers who hated unions, nativists who hated immigrants, and men too old for the military who still wanted to do battle. APL members carried badges labeled “Auxiliary of the US Department of Justice” and the Post Office gave them the franking privilege of sending mail for free. The organization rapidly mushroomed into an ill-controlled mass of some 250,000 members, who gathered more than a million pages of wildly unreliable surveillance data spying on Americans they claimed might be aiding the German war effort.

The government offered a \$50 bounty for every proven draft-evader, which brought untold thousands to the hunt, from underpaid rural sheriffs to big-city unemployed. Throughout the country, the APL carried out “slacker raids,” sometimes together with uniformed soldiers and sailors. One September 1918 raid in New York City and its vicinity netted more than 60,000 men. Only 199 actual draft dodgers were found among them, but many of the remainder were held for days while their records were checked. Wilson approvingly told the secretary of the Navy that the raids would “put the fear of God” into draft dodgers.

A surprisingly diverse array of Americans opposed the war. Fifty representatives and six senators voted against it; one of the latter, Robert La Follette, who had listened to Wilson’s speech to Congress asking for war with conspicuous defiance, crossing his arms and chewing gum, then began receiving nooses in his office mail. Men who failed to register for the draft, didn’t show up when called, or deserted after being drafted totaled well over three million. “A higher percentage of American men successfully resisted conscription during World War I,” the historian Michael Kazin writes, “than during the Vietnam War.” Several men and women, among them Norman Thomas, A. Philip Randolph, and Jeannette Rankin, lived long enough to vocally oppose both wars.

Although brave and outspoken, such war opponents were only a minority of the population. The Wilson administration's harsh treatment of them, sadly, had considerable popular support. The targeting of so many leftists and labor leaders who were immigrants, Jewish, or both drew on powerful undercurrents of nativism and anti-Semitism. And the United States was inflamed with war fever that left millions of young American men, still ignorant of trench warfare's horrors, eager to fight and hostile to anyone who seemed to stand in their way of doing so.

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By the time the war ended the government had a new excuse for continuing the crackdown: the Russian Revolution. It was blamed for any unrest, such as a wave of large postwar strikes in 1919, which were ruthlessly suppressed. Gary, Indiana, was put under martial law, and army tanks were called out in Cleveland.

That year also saw anarchist bombings make headlines across the country. An alert New York postal worker intercepted suspicious-looking packages addressed to sixteen prominent political and business figures, but a number of other mail bombs reached their destinations. One killed a night watchman guarding a judge's home in New York, and another severely damaged the house of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer in Washington, DC. Government officials had evidence that the bombs were all the work of several dozen Italian-American anarchists—one of whom managed to blow himself up while planting the explosives at Palmer's home. But it did not suit them to solve the case by prosecuting such a small group when what they really wanted was to wage a far more sweeping war on communism and organized labor. The director of the Bureau of Investigation, predecessor of the FBI, claimed that the bombers were "connected with Russian bolshevism." With the bombings providing the perfect excuse, the crackdown on radicals intensified. Two hundred and forty-nine foreign-born leftists were placed under heavy guard on a decrepit former troopship and deported to Russia. One of them, Emma Goldman, reportedly thumbed her nose at the rising young Justice Department official J. Edgar Hoover, who was seeing off the ship from a tugboat in New York Harbor.

The tumultuous year 1919 also brought an outburst of protest by black Americans and violence against them. Nearly 400,000 blacks had served in the military and then come home to a country where they were denied good

jobs, schooling, and housing. As they competed with millions of returning white soldiers for scarce work, race riots broke out, and in the summer of 1919 more than 120 people were killed. Lynchings—a steady, terrifying feature of black life for many years—reached the highest point in more than a decade; seventy-eight African Americans were lynched that year, more than one per week. But all racial tension was also blamed on the Russians. Woodrow Wilson, himself a Southerner and ardent segregationist, predicted that “the American negro returning from abroad would be our greatest medium in conveying Bolshevism to America.”

This three-year period of repression reached a peak in late 1919 and early 1920 with the “Palmer Raids” under the direction of Attorney General Palmer. He had been understandably jarred by the anarchist bombing of his house, but his raids, with the help of Hoover, cast a net that scooped up every imaginable variety of radical or dissenter. On a single day of the raids—January 2, 1920—5,483 people were arrested; one scholar calls it “the largest single-day police roundup in American history.” The raiders were notoriously rough, beating people and throwing them down staircases. After one raid, a *New York World* reporter found smashed doors, overturned furniture, wrecked typewriters, and bloodstains on the floor. Eight hundred people were seized in Boston and some of them marched through the city’s streets in chains on their way to a temporary prison on an island in the harbor. Another eight hundred were held for six days in a windowless corridor in a federal building in Detroit, with no bedding and the use of just one toilet and sink.

Palmer was startlingly open about the fact that his raids were driven by politics. Attacking “the fanatical doctrinaires of communism in Russia,” he vowed “to keep up an unflinching, persistent, aggressive warfare against any movement, no matter how cloaked or dissembled, having for its purpose either the promulgation of these ideas or the excitation of sympathy for those who spread them.” Campaigning for the Democratic nomination for president, he hysterically predicted a widespread Bolshevik uprising on May Day, 1920, giving authorities in Chicago the excuse to put 360 radicals into preventive detention for the day. When the date passed and absolutely nothing happened, it became clear that the United States never had been on the verge of revolution; membership in the country’s two feuding communist parties, after all, was miniscule. Citizens—most notably a committee of a dozen prominent lawyers, law professors, and law school deans—were finally emboldened to speak out against the repression, and the worst of it came to

an end. But it had accomplished its purpose. The IWW was crushed, the Socialist Party reduced to a shadow of its former self, and unions forced into sharp retreat: even the determinedly moderate work-within-the-system American Federation of Labor would lose more than a million members between 1920 and 1923.

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Once the war was over, all the surveillance and repression were carried out in the name of anticommunism. We think of that set of beliefs as a reaction to the Russian Revolution, but Nick Fischer points out in his provocative *Spider Web: The Birth of American Anticommunism* that anticommunism in the United States never has had much to do with Russia. For one thing, it had already been sparked by the Paris Commune, decades before the Revolution. “Today there is not in our language . . . a more hateful word than communism,” thundered a professor at Union Theological Seminary in 1878. For another thing, after the Revolution, anticommunists knew as little as American communists about what was actually happening in Russia. The starry-eyed communists were convinced it was paradise. The anticommunists found they could shock people if they portrayed the country as ruled by “commissariats of free love,” where women had been nationalized along with private property and were passed out to men. Neither group had much incentive to investigate what life in that distant country was actually like.

All along, the real target of American anticommunism was organized labor. Employers were the core of the anticommunist movement and early on began building alliances. One was with the press, whose owners had their own fear of unions: as early as 1874 the *New York Tribune* was talking of how “Communists” had smuggled into New York jewels stolen from Paris churches to finance the purchase of arms. That same year the *New York Times* spoke of a “Communist reign of terror” wreaked by striking carpet weavers in Philadelphia. In 1887, *Bradstreet’s* decried the idea of the eight-hour work-day as “communist.”

The anticommunist alliance was also joined by private detective agencies, which earned millions by infiltrating and suppressing unions. These rose to prominence in the late nineteenth century, and by the time of the Palmer Raids, the three largest employed 135,000 men. Meanwhile, the nation’s police forces began developing “red squads,” whose officers’ jobs and promotions depended on finding communist conspiracies.



Another ally was the military. “Fully half of the National Guard’s activity in the latter nineteenth century,” Fischer writes, “comprised strikebreaking and industrial policing.” Many of the handsome redbrick armories in American cities were built during that period, some with help from industry. Chicago businessmen even purchased a grand home for one general.

By the time the United States had entered the First World War, the Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. Army’s new Military Intelligence branch were also part of the mix. An important gathering place for the most influential anticommunists after 1917, incidentally, was New York’s Union League Club, where Elihu Root had given his hair-raising speech about executing newspaper editors for treason. And anticommunism seamlessly fitted together with another ideology in the air, restricting immigration. John Bond Trevor, for example, an upper-crust WASP (Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt attended his wedding) got his start as director of the New York City branch of Military Intelligence in 1919. He moved on the following year to help direct a New York State investigation of subversives, which staged its own sweeping raids, and soon became active in the eugenics movement. He was influential in crafting and lobbying for the Immigration Act of 1924, which sharply restricted arrivals from almost everywhere except northwestern Europe. In a pattern still familiar today, his life combined hostility to dissidents at home and to immigrants from overseas.

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What lessons can we draw from this era when the United States, despite sharing victory in the European war, truly lost its soul at home?

A modestly encouraging one is that sometimes a decent person with respect for law can throw a wrench in the works. Somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 aliens were arrested during the Palmer Raids, and Palmer and Hoover were eager to deport them. But deportations were controlled by the Immigration Bureau, which was under the Department of Labor. And there Assistant Secretary of Labor Louis F. Post, a progressive former newspaperman with rimless glasses and a Vandyke beard, was able to stop most deportations.

A true hero of this grim era, Post canceled search warrants, restored habeas corpus rights for those detained, and drastically reduced or eliminated bail for many. This earned him the hatred of Palmer and of Hoover, who assembled a 350-page file on him. Hoover also unsuccessfully orchestrated a campaign by the American Legion for Post’s dismissal and an

attempt by Congress to impeach him. All told, Post was able to prevent some three thousand people from being deported.

A more somber lesson offered by the events of 1917–20 is that when powerful social tensions roil the country and hysteria fills the air, rights and values we take for granted can easily erode: the freedom to publish and speak, protection from vigilante justice, even confidence that election results will be honored. When, for instance, in 1918 and again in a special election the next year, Wisconsin voters sent a socialist to Congress, and a fairly moderate one at that, the House of Representatives, by a vote of 330 to 6, simply refused to seat him. The same thing happened to five members of the party elected to the New York state legislature.

Furthermore, we can't comfort ourselves by saying of these three years of jingoist thuggery, "if only people had known." People *did* know. All of these shameful events were widely reported in print, sometimes photographed, and in a few cases even caught on film. But the press generally nodded its approval. After the sheriff of Bisbee, Arizona, and his posse packed the local Wobblies off into the desert, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that they "have written a lesson that the whole of America would do well to copy." Knowing the facts is not enough. The public, the press, and the courts also have to believe that no one is above the law.

The final lesson from this dark time is that when a president has no tolerance for opposition, the greatest godsend he can have is a war. Then dissent becomes not just "fake news" but treason. We should be wary.

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