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The Only Badge Needed Is Your Patriotic Fervor: Vigilance, Coercion, and the Law in World War I America

Christopher Capozzola

On July 26, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson condemned mob rule. Almost four months had passed since Robert Prager, a German American coal miner, had been lynched. Wilson was angered that the enemy German press had used the killing of Prager in its wartime propaganda, and he felt increasing pressure from civil libertarians at home. In a widely reprinted proclamation, Wilson insisted on the rule of law. He claimed that “no man who loves America, no man who really cares for her fame and honor and character, . . . can justify mob action while the courts of justice are open and the governments of the States and the Nation are ready and able to do their duty.” The mob spirit, Wilson averred, was irreconcilable with American democracy.

I say plainly that every American who takes part in the action of a mob or gives it any sort of countenance is no true son of this great Democracy, but its betrayer, and does more to discredit her by that single disloyalty to her standards of law and of right than the words of her statesmen or the sacrifices of her heroic boys in the trenches can do to make suffering peoples believe her to be their savior.¹

In the early twentieth century, there was far less consensus about the nation’s “standards of law and of right” than Wilson suggested. During and after World War I, Americans debated the place of extralegal violence in American political life. Through words and actions, they negotiated the boundaries of legitimate political

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¹ Woodrow Wilson, “A Statement to the American People,” July 26, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link et al. (69 vols., Princeton, 1966–1994), XLIX, 97, 98. On the killing of Robert Prager, see Donald R. Hickey, “The Prager Affair: A Study in Wartime Hysteria,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 62 (Summer 1969), 117–34; Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (DeKalb, 1974), 3–26; and Carl Weinberg, “The Tug of War: Labor, Loyalty, and Rebellion in the Southwestern Illinois Coalfields, 1914–1920” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1995), 452–521.

coercion. These ongoing debates shed light on the relationship between voluntarism and state authority in twentieth-century American political culture.

Woodrow Wilson's proclamations notwithstanding, violence has been a persistent feature of American political life, especially in the tumult of World War I. Political violence claims a central place in many narratives of the American past. To read them is to learn that violence is as American as apple pie, a point that would not have been lost on the crowd that strung Robert Prager up on the branch of a lone huckleberry tree on the outskirts of Collinsville, Illinois, and then dropped his body three times, in the words of one participant, "one for the red, one for the white, and one for the blue."²

But if violence is integral to American history, why were Wilson's words so compelling to many readers in 1918? Why did the "lawless passion" that Wilson decried strike George Creel, the nation's leading war propagandist, as so un-American that he could explain it only as the work of German spies? Why—or, more important, how—did incidents of violence in 1918 lead so readily to a ritual of denunciation? The years surrounding World War I mark a high point of one kind of political violence in American history as the actions of repressive state institutions, private organizations, and spontaneous crowds left dozens of Americans dead and led to temporary detainment of thousands on war-related charges. Yet those years also witnessed the invigoration of political arguments that questioned all extralegal authority and laid the groundwork for the legal and political dismantling of vigilantism in the twentieth century.³

One key to understanding this debate turns on the distinction between vigilance and vigilantism made during this period. On the World War I American home front, citizens proudly called themselves vigilant and believed that they were doing work needed—and explicitly requested—by the national government. In that assumption, they were not wrong. Leading public figures, drawing on long-standing traditions equating citizenship with obligation, did call on Americans to stand vigilant during the war. Appealing to habits of voluntary association, they supported the organization of vigilance movements nationwide: committees of safety, women's vigilance leagues, home guards. State actors depended on the voluntary work of such groups for the success of the nation's war mobilization effort.

Yet some of those figures also spoke out against vigilantism, few more eloquently than Wilson in his July 1918 statement. When they did so, they did not have the vig-

² Weinberg, "Tug of War," 484. See also Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York, 1970). On the history of citizenship, see Gary Gerstle, "Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans," *Journal of American History*, 84 (Sept. 1997), 524–58; and Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, 1997). On World War I-era repression, see Stephen M. Kohn, *American Political Prisoners: Prosecutions under the Espionage and Sedition Acts* (Westport, 1994); H. C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917–1918* (Seattle, 1968); and William Preston Jr., *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903–1933* (Urbana, 1994). For a heated exchange on the place of violence in African American history, see "What We See and Can't See in the Past: A Round Table," *Journal of American History*, 83 (March 1997), 1217–72.

³ Responses from Wilson's readers include Robert Russa Moton to Woodrow Wilson, July 27, 1918, in *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Link et al., XLIX, 113–14; and George Foster Peabody to Wilson, July 29, 1918, *ibid.*, 125. George Creel, "Unite and Win," *Independent*, April 6, 1918, pp. 5–6. For historians' debate on the significance of Wilson's statement in relation to the issue of lynchings of African Americans, see Henry Blumenthal, "Woodrow Wilson and the Race Question," *Journal of Negro History*, 48 (Jan. 1963), 4, 10–12; Stephen R. Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York, 1971), 221; and Robert L. Allen with Pamela P. Allen, *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States* (Washington, 1974), 98.

ilance societies in mind. What Wilson and those who shared his outlook meant was something more specific and rarer: the mob, conceived as a violent, spontaneous, and extralegal public group. As national leaders denounced the mob in ever more frequent calls for “law and order,” they attempted to separate vigilance and vigilantism. They cast the former as a valuable work of service and voluntarism that embodied American democracy and delegitimated the latter as incompatible with what Wilson had called the nation’s “standards of law and of right.”

The distinction took on great significance. Americans who engaged in extralegal actions to support the war effort insisted that they were exemplars of vigilant citizenship. Their victims denounced them as lawless vigilantes unworthy of the nation’s honor. The sudden preoccupation with the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate political coercion marked a partial revision of the place of law in the system of political obligation. The attack on the mob and vigilantism gave new energies to civil libertarians; the wartime events that made political violence possible and visible also undermined its legitimacy.

The line between vigilance and vigilantism was contested throughout the war and postwar years. Government officials who denounced lawless vigilantism also praised vigilance organizations’ policing. They insisted that only uncontrolled physical violence was politically illegitimate—precisely because it subverted the spirit of a nation of laws. The wartime and postwar concern with mob violence led many to ignore legal and nonviolent forms of state and private coercion that arose alongside, and outlasted, crowd actions. The distinction obscured the way political violence was woven into American political culture during this period.

The Obligation of Vigilance in Peace and War

The concept of vigilance as a form of collective self-defense has long accompanied claims to self-rule; in the early American republic it was intimately tied to concepts of popular sovereignty. But vigilance as an obligation of citizenship has been not just a rhetorical flourish, but a political practice in which collective policing by private citizens contributed to community defense. By the time of the United States’ entry into World War I in April 1917, Americans were accustomed to the idea that citizens had a positive obligation to police one another. Such policing could involve coercion, many believed. “Mob violence,” that is, uncontrolled physical coercion, was largely (although never entirely) denounced. But drawing the line of legitimacy between controlled and uncontrolled physical coercion created political difficulty.⁴

Vigilantism too has played a recurrent role in American history. Vigilantism is often equated with mob violence and thought to consist of political terror and violent coercion. Use of the term conjures up images of night riders and frontier justice. The historian Richard Maxwell Brown has documented more than 5,400 deaths by organized and unorganized groups between 1767 and 1951. But while vigilantism

⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (New York, 1967), 319–28; Richard Maxwell Brown, “The History of Vigilantism in America,” in *Vigilante Politics*, ed. H. Jon Rosenbaum and Peter C. Sederberg (Philadelphia, 1976), 103–4.

could and often did become deadly, neither killing nor physical violence is necessary for vigilantism. Rather, vigilantism is fundamentally about law. Political arguments about vigilantism articulate relationships between the political behavior of citizens and the system of law in which they operate. Vigilante actions are undertaken by citizens who are not public officials, even if they sometimes cooperate with officials or claim to act in the name of the state. Vigilantes operate outside the strictures of law as articulated by the legitimate regime, but they typically aim to establish social order, whether defense of the state, control of crime, or maintenance of racial, class, or gender hierarchies. “What is paradoxical about the vigilante position is, of course, that it seeks to perpetuate the existing order, but without law and without accepting the actions of the society’s political institutions,” according to the political scientist Edward Stettner.⁵

American traditions of citizen vigilance and vigilantism in 1917 fall into four main categories, each of which long predated the war but was transformed by it: citizen policing, antilabor vigilance, moral vigilance, and racial vigilance. The traditions of Anglo-American common law had long demanded that citizens—particularly male citizens—participate in defending the community. Self-defense could be seen in forms of community policing: Individuals could initiate a citizen’s arrest or be deputized by local authorities; those who heard the “hue and cry” of distressed persons were obliged to come to their aid; militias gathered most able-bodied adult men for service; the common-law rule of *posse comitatus* gave sheriffs the power to summon the same men to preserve the public peace. In the years immediately preceding World War I, those practices appeared to be on the decline. The tasks of policing had been partly professionalized, particularly in urban areas, and the newly reorganized National Guard had largely replaced state and local militias. But while the institutions of law enforcement had displaced the posse and the hue and cry in most of the United States by 1917, the process was hardly complete and universal, as extralegal actions in the Jim Crow South demonstrated. Nor were myths and memories of colonial days and the western frontier far from the minds of either the national elite or the general public.⁶

In 1917 labor relations were dominated by private and community methods for the maintenance of order. Corporations regularly employed private policing forces such as

⁵ Here I am borrowing and modifying definitional categories suggested by H. Jon Rosenbaum and Peter C. Sederberg, “Vigilantism: An Analysis of Establishment Violence,” in *Vigilante Politics*, ed. Rosenbaum and Sederberg, 3–29. Richard Maxwell Brown, the leading historian of vigilantism in the United States, never fully defined the term, using as a working definition “taking the law into one’s own hands.” See Brown, “History of Vigilantism in America,” 79; and Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York, 1975), 95–96. For a definition from political anthropology, see Ray Abrahams, *Vigilant Citizens: Vigilantism and the State* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), 4–10. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a vigilance committee as “a self-appointed committee for the maintenance of justice and order in an imperfectly organized community,” highlighting voluntarism, the organized nature of the undertaking, and its relationship to institutions of law. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d. ed., s.v. “vigilance committee.” The term “vigilante” was not widely used in American discourse until the Virginia City movement in the Montana Territory in 1863–1865, according to Brown, “History of Vigilantism in America,” 85. For the figures, see *ibid.*, 80–81. Edward Stettner, “Vigilantism and Political Theory,” in *Vigilante Politics*, ed. Rosenbaum and Sederberg, 70.

⁶ Eric H. Monkkenon, *The Police in Urban America, 1860–1920* (New York, 1981); Sidney L. Harring, *Policing a Class Society: The Experience of American Cities, 1865–1915* (New Brunswick, 1983). For Theodore Roosevelt’s engagement with the romance of the Old West, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of*



During and after World War I, African Americans faced organized violence dedicated to maintaining the racial status quo. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, on May 31–June 1, 1921, white rioters destroyed nearly a thousand buildings, including several churches. The Mount Zion Baptist Church, shown here, had been dedicated just seven weeks earlier. *Courtesy Tulsa Race Riot Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.*

the Pinkertons to break up strikes and infiltrate unions. To supplement such mercenary forces, business leaders seeking to maintain surveillance over labor activities recruited volunteer citizen groups. State and federal officials, who saw little active role for the state in economic life, generally supported antilabor vigilance groups. From time to time, state actors disputed the methods of vigilance groups, and labor organizations consistently challenged their extralegality. But in the pre–World War I era, when the courts were no more sympathetic to labor than were other arms of the American government, workers often saw little to gain by appealing to the rule of law.⁷

The obligation of vigilance also made Americans the guardians of the moral welfare of their fellow citizens, as in the national prohibition campaigns that gathered force before World War I. Similarly, efforts to curtail prostitution coalesced in the

Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917 (Chicago, 1995), 170–215. In 1915 Roosevelt claimed that the work of vigilantes in the nineteenth-century West was “in the main wholesome.” Brown, “History of Vigilantism in America,” 105. The philosopher Josiah Royce explored the impact of vigilantism on community in his writings on the American West; see Robert V. Hine, *Josiah Royce: From Grass Valley to Harvard* (Norman, 1992), 151, 169.

⁷ On private policing, see Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Violence and Reform in American History* (New York, 1978), 6. Even the U.S. Department of Justice relied on Pinkertons as its investigators prior to 1893; see Joan M. Jensen, *The Price of Vigilance* (Chicago, 1968), 12. On citizen voluntarism in the maintenance of industrial order, see Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Urbana, 1988), 376–97; Eugene E. Leach, “The Literature of Riot Duty: Managing Class Conflict in the Streets, 1877–1927,” *Radical History Review* (no. 56, Spring 1993), 23–50; and Steven C. Levi, *Committee of Vigilance: The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce Law and Order Committee, 1916–1919: A Case Study in Official Hysteria* (Jefferson, 1983). On the cooperation of the federal government in the suppression of strikes, see Jerry M. Cooper, *The Army and Civil Disorder: Federal Military Intervention in Labor Disputes, 1877–1900* (Westport, 1980). On the relationship between labor and the legal system, see William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 59–127. Many advocates for workers placed their faith in the legal system despite repeated failures. Mother Jones wrote that

1910s into a movement to abolish it. Supporters of the prohibition and purity movements did not restrict their efforts to legislative campaigns but established vigilance societies. Anthony Comstock's New York Society for the Suppression of Vice sought to purify the city's night life for over thirty years. Beginning in 1910, the Progressive reformer Maude Miner recruited working-class young women into the New York Girls' Protective League, a volunteer police force meant to discipline young women. Across the country massive networks of volunteers surveyed and apprehended suspected prostitutes. Anti-vice activists had an ambivalent relationship to the law. Often, frustrated by what they saw as a corrupt policing and legal system, they chose to work outside it. At other times they cooperated with the police and the courts, either using the law to crack down on prostitutes, madams, and pimps or seeking to aid the women they patrolled through special courtroom procedures and the reform of women's prisons. Their actions, both inside and outside the legal system, were rarely challenged, except by accused prostitutes themselves.⁸

A similar tradition of collective policing, active predominately in the South, was dedicated to suppressing African American militancy and controlling African American labor. White vigilance groups enforced white racial supremacy. They enjoyed the support of formal state institutions at every level of American government, which consistently declined to intervene in what they deemed local or wholly private matters. The number of lynchings had peaked in the 1890s, but the war years saw an increase in racial violence and the formation of new white supremacist citizen groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, reorganized in 1915. Although leading black reformers strongly challenged the methods and even the existence of such groups, they had made little headway by 1917.⁹

In many areas of everyday life, therefore, Americans were accustomed to participating in or enduring citizen vigilance, and they were already debating how to rein in extralegal coercion. As part of the war mobilization effort, citizen vigilance movements expanded. The relationship of those movements to the state changed as private

the courts "are the bulwark of our institutions and their integrity must be preserved." Mother Jones to Sara J. Dorr, Dec. 16, 1918, in *The Correspondence of Mother Jones*, ed. Edward M. Steel (Pittsburgh, 1985), 185.

⁸ Anti-vice activity reached its peak in the 1910s, according to Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore, 1982), 12–15. See also John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York, 1988), 208–15. On Anthony Comstock, see Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York, 1992), 185–96; on Maude Miner, see Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (Chicago, 1990), 173. On antiprostitution campaigns, see Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill, 1980); and David J. Langum, *Crossing over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act* (Chicago, 1994). On the experiences of working-class women who ended up in the wartime net, see Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago, 1988); and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986). On Progressives' involvement in moral vigilance and social reform, see Estelle B. Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830–1930* (Ann Arbor, 1981).

⁹ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana, 1993); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Crystal Nicole Feinster, "'Ladies and Lynching': The Gendered Discourse of Mob Violence in the New South, 1880–1930" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2000); Robert P. Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882–1936* (Knoxville, 1988); Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1998). For the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan, see David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Chicago, 1968); Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, 1991); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York, 1994); and Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921–1928* (Chapel Hill, 1991).

policing efforts were enfolded in state agendas: vigilance organizations gained force and authority as they spoke in the name of the wartime state, but their new position also gave new weapons to those who denied their legitimacy. The wartime debate about political violence, while not entirely new, was conducted on an altered terrain.

Mobilization for war against Germany changed the significance of citizen vigilance. Government officials and other leading public figures called on American citizens, male and female, to stand vigilant for the duration. A poster from New York's Conference Committee on National Preparedness urged defense against spies and traitors: "Men of America, be of clear vision! . . . Promptly deliver up these advance agents to public scorn and to the law, so that when you go to your home at night you can look into the innocent eyes of your children and be unafraid." A similar poster printed by the New Hampshire Committee on Public Safety urged "promptness in recognizing and reporting suspicious or disloyal actions to your local authorities or to us" and "helping your local Committee on Public Safety in every way." In his 1917 Flag Day speech, President Wilson warned that "vicious spies and conspirators" had "spread sedition amongst us" and "sought by violence to destroy our industries and arrest our commerce," and throughout the war he consistently encouraged private citizen vigilance. "Woe be to the man or group of men that seeks to stand in our way," Wilson ominously concluded.¹⁰

Americans who wanted to do their part found explicit instruction in a not unusual editorial in New York State's *Albany Journal*:

If you ever, on the street or in a trolley car, should hear some soft-shell pacifist or hard-boiled but poorly camouflaged pro-German, make seditious or unpatriotic remarks about your Uncle Sam you have the right and privilege of taking that person by the collar, hand him over to the nearest policeman or else take him yourself before the magistrate.

You do not require any official authority to do this and the only badge needed is your patriotic fervor. The same thing applies to women. Every American, under provisions of the code of civil procedure, has the authority to arrest any person making a remark or utterance which "outrages public decency."¹¹

Hundreds of thousands of men and women responded to calls for national defense on the home front by forming voluntary vigilance associations. They varied widely in their aims, structures, and membership, from elite societies such as the National

¹⁰ Conference Committee on National Preparedness, *The Advance Agents of the Hun*, broadside, [1917], portfolio 315, no. 2, Broadside Collection (Rare Book Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); New Hampshire Committee on Public Safety, *People of New Hampshire, Wake Up! We Are at War!*, broadside, [1917], portfolio 98, no. 3, *ibid.*; Woodrow Wilson, "A Flag Day Address," June 14, 1917, in *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Link et al., XLII, 499, 504.

¹¹ "Citizens May Arrest Disloyal Persons," *Albany Journal*, April 17, 1918, clipping enclosed with Dudley Paul Babcock to American Union against Militarism, April 17, 1918, *American Civil Liberties Union Archives: The Roger Baldwin Years, 1917-1950* (microfilm, 293 reels, Scholarly Resources, 1996), reel 5, vol. 35. The Albany editorialist's claim is oversimplified: only a felony justified a citizen's arrest. Espionage Act violations were felonies; breaches of peace or outrages of public decency were generally misdemeanors. Few vigilant Americans bothered with such procedural distinctions, and even civil libertarians such as Roger Baldwin did not apparently understand, or insist upon, them until very late in the war.

Security League and American Defense Society to more menacing organizations such as the Sedition Slammers and the Terrible Threateners to the Boy Spies of America. Over 250,000 men, and some women, enrolled in the largest such organization, the American Protective League.¹²

Not a single German spy was uncovered during World War I thanks to the work of these vigilant citizens, and much of what they did was ineffectual or even absurd. Volunteers in New Haven, Connecticut, kept a round-the-clock watch at an anti-aircraft device they had installed to protect the city against an (unlikely) aerial invasion from Germany. The earnest patriots of a vigilance group in Portland, Maine, seized a suitcase abandoned in downtown Longfellow Square. They “gingerly” brought the bag to police headquarters, where it was “carefully examined and was found to contain a quantity of men’s soiled underwear.”¹³

Other stories, however, offer little comic relief. During the war, vigilance societies targeted pacifists, suffragists, ethnic minorities, religious fundamentalists, trade unionists, and socialists. Incidents of violent, spontaneous prowar crowd action abound, but organized groups working with the institutions of government and civil society already in place in local communities conducted most political coercion. Those organizations repeatedly glossed over or ignored issues of legal process and wasted little energy on establishing with precision their authority to make arrests—on what grounds and consistent with, or despite, what specific structures of law. They were not thoughtless mobs who believed the Constitution a meaningless scrap of paper, even as they appeared to treat it as such, but organized men and women deeply concerned about the survival of American democracy as they understood it.

The wartime context mattered. Calls for citizen vigilance raised the demand for volunteer policing, and wartime rhetoric and fear of subversion heightened its significance. The war also altered the relationship between private political coercion and the state. Americans were accustomed to private citizens’ policing their neighbors’ ideas and behaviors, their labor and leisure, before World War I. Yet it was only during the war—as ideas, behaviors, labor, and leisure had to be mobilized, regulated, and governed in order to defeat the enemy—that the practices of citizen policing came to be state projects, even when they were not conducted under state auspices. As the needs of modern war blurred the line between state and society, between mobilization and social control, the war tied private coercions to state interests.

This essay takes up four episodes that demonstrate the vitality of the four traditions of vigilance outlined above. In each case, wartime vigilance societies drew from, and altered, existing patterns of coercion, and each demonstrates the interpenetration of vigilance and vigilantism. Wartime groups both used and ignored legal institutions, as they engaged in practices ranging from persuasion to coercive persecution. Finally, the essay examines how the postwar debate about mob violence and law and

¹² Peterson and Fite, *Opponents of War*, 18. On the American Protective League, see Harold M. Hyman, *To Try Men’s Souls: Loyalty Tests in American History* (Westport, 1981), 267–97; and Jensen, *Price of Vigilance*.

¹³ Rollin G. Osterweis, *Three Centuries of New Haven, 1638–1938* (New Haven, 1953), 404; *Portland Telegram*, quoted in Clark T. Irwin Jr., “From a Gilded Age onto a World War,” in *Greater Portland Celebration 350*, comp. and ed. Albert F. Barnes (Portland, Me., 1984), 124.

order responded to events on the wartime home front and how it attempted to reconcile the conflicts between vigilance, obligation, and the law in national citizenship.

Defending the Connecticut Home Front

The war obliged American citizens to serve in the nation's defense. Those who did not go to the trenches of France would fight the war at home. Against the imagined dangers of German attack and domestic subversion, vigilance against invasion, disloyalty, and sabotage became basic tasks. Members of the Citizens' Protective League in Covington, Kentucky, stockpiled arms while other townspeople volunteered as public speakers. Their patriotic counterparts in New Jersey formed espionage committees and a women's gun club as they knitted socks and scarves. Whether federal or state governments had legally authorized the groups was not always on their minds. Good citizenship for the wartime civilian required voluntary service for the war effort and vigilance in all matters. Events in the industrial state of Connecticut demonstrate the role of volunteer policing in war mobilization.¹⁴

On March 9, 1917, nearly a month before the United States declared war on Germany, the Connecticut legislature authorized the formation of the Connecticut Home Guard, "a body of armed troops for constabulary duty within the state." By the time of the armistice, 19,336 citizens had worn its makeshift secondhand uniforms. All were men, mostly above draft age or otherwise exempt. The guard's leaders were bankers, lawyers, and doctors, but its rank and file included small businessmen, farmers, traveling salesmen, and clerks. Most were experienced members of fraternal organizations; only a few were military veterans. Nearly all were native-born white Protestants in a state deeply divided by ethnic and religious tensions.¹⁵

The Connecticut Home Guard was dedicated to the defense of the state and its industries, especially munitions. Charles Burpee, a local historian and himself a colonel in the Home Guard, later wrote, "Though the mass of the so-called 'foreign' population was devoted to Connecticut principles, Germans included, a very contrary socialistic element . . . had organized, and the Deutschland genius for working mischief behind the lines had been evidenced, as was to be expected." The Home Guard's authorizing legislation limited its power: it had no legal authority for much of its work, and its members were specifically forbidden to make arrests. The guardsmen, however, regularly disregarded legal formalities.¹⁶

¹⁴ Edward F. Alexander to Roger N. Baldwin, Sept. 16, 1918, *American Civil Liberties Union Archives*, reel 12, vol. 72; *A History of the New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs, 1894-1958* (Caldwell, 1958), 54; Kimberly S. Jensen, "Minerva on the Field of Mars: American Women, Citizenship, and Military Service in the First World War" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1992), chap. 1.

¹⁵ "An Act Concerning the Home Guard," in Connecticut Home Guard, *Regulations for the Connecticut Home Guard* (Hartford, 1917), 1; Connecticut Military Emergency Board, *Report to the Governor: November 1, 1918* (Hartford, 1918), 1. On the makeup of the Home Guard, see Bruce Fraser, "Yankees at War: Social Mobilization on the Connecticut Homefront, 1917-1918" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1976), 97-99, 351-60; Connecticut Home Guard, *Register of Officers* ([Hartford], 1917). Hartford and New Haven had some reserve units in which all the officers had Italian surnames. African Americans, who numbered fewer than 20,000 in the state's population in 1917, are mentioned nowhere in the publications of the Home Guard or other records of the home front vigilance organizations, which leads me to the tentative conclusion they were completely excluded from service.

¹⁶ Charles W. Burpee, *Burpee's the Story of Connecticut* (New York, 1939), 958; "An Act Concerning the Mili-

The Home Guard quickly got to work, in close collaboration with other voluntary associations, industrial corporations, and the federal government. The first task was to coordinate the state's military census of May 1917, which aimed to record vital data on every adult man in the state in preparation for military conscription. The guard later stood watch during the registration calls of the Selective Service System and showed its strength in Home Guard parades in towns across the state just before the registration day. As the guard noted in its official report, the parades "gave to certain inhabitants of the State a salutary object lesson and warning which they needed" at a time when many of Connecticut's young men were surely considering draft evasion. The Home Guards also vigilantly protected the state's railroad bridges and power installations from enemies foreign and domestic. In January 1918, acting on a spurious tip that the radical unionists of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were planning to set fire to industrial facilities and to bomb the bridges of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad, four thousand guardsmen stood watch through the cold winter night.¹⁷

In April 1917, after the federal government ruled that enemy aliens could not live near munitions manufacturers, the Home Guard forcibly evacuated New Haven residents from homes near the Winchester Repeating Arms factory. The guard also collaborated with other wartime organizations, particularly the American Protective League. Together, the two groups invaded the weekly meeting of a Hartford socialist group in April 1918 after the U.S. attorney's office had refused to indict the radicals for sedition. Seizing the stage, Charles Burpee demanded that the socialists pledge allegiance to the flag and warned them of the dangers of their disloyalty:

This city must be purified. The law will act according to the law's own course. In this city we have plenty of citizens ready to back up the law and show the law its course. . . . All law depends on public opinion. Public opinion makes law. No law can be supported without public opinion. When the people enter a great war like this, they are the law.¹⁸

Here was the vigilant citizen's attitude: not bald-faced disrespect for the law (although it must have seemed that way to the assembled socialists), but a theory of citizenship

tia," in Connecticut Home Guard, *Regulations*, 3. Home Guards were active in dozens of states during the war. Many were initiated after the federalization of the National Guard made those units unavailable to state governors. In Portland, Maine, the Sons of Veterans collaborated with the Cumberland County Power and Light Commission to guard against German sabotage. Clark T. Irwin Jr., "WWI Galvanizes Region's Activities," in *Greater Portland Celebration*, comp. and ed. Barnes, 136. On similar work in Maryland and Texas, see Maryland War Records Commission, *Maryland in the World War, 1917-1919: Military and Naval Service Records* (Baltimore, 1933), 99-101; Mrs. Ralph E. Randel, ed., *A Time to Purpose: A Chronicle of Carson County* (4 vols., Hereford, Tex., 1966-1972), I, 280, IV, 293; and Roy Eddins, ed., *History of Falls County, Texas* (Marlin, Tex., 1947), 212-13. The Texas Rangers spent most of World War I along the Mexican border. Charles M. Robinson III, *The Men Who Wear the Star: The Story of the Texas Rangers* (New York, 2000), 269-79.

¹⁷ "Connecticut's Military Census," *Review of Reviews*, 55 (May 1917), 534; Marcus H. Holcomb, "Connecticut in the Van," *ibid.*, 57 (May 1918), 520; Connecticut Military Emergency Board, *Report to the Governor*, 3-4. The report notes that the tip was provided by the U.S. Secret Service, but it probably came from the volunteer operatives of the American Protective League.

¹⁸ Osterweis, *Three Centuries of New Haven*, 403-4. Some 6,300 aliens nationwide were arrested in enforcement of enemy alien legislation; see Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 255-56; and Harry N. Scheiber, *The Wilson Administration and Civil Liberties, 1917-1921* (Ithaca, 1960), 14. Charles Burpee, "Connecticut in the Wars," in *History of Connecticut in Monographic Form*, ed. Norris Galpin Osborn (5 vols., New York, 1925), V, 127; "Socialist Meeting Packed by Patriots," *New York Tribune*, April 8, 1918, clipping in *American Civil Liberties Union Archives*, reel 8, vol. 70; "Home Guards Break Up Socialist Rally," *New York Call*, April 8, 1918, *ibid.* For Burpee's statement, see Fraser, "Yankees at War," 307.

that located sovereignty in the people and would not separate the power of the state from that of the citizens who constituted it and had been authorized to act in its name.

The men of the Connecticut Home Guard described themselves as the descendants of the minutemen who had defended the New England countryside more than a century before, and the work they did was unexceptional in Connecticut's long history of industrial strife and ethnic tension, in which the technicalities of law had frequently been ignored in the interests of order. The men of the Home Guard, fearing revolution or subversion and preoccupied with the needs of the nation during war, viewed the law as a tool to manipulate, rather than a set of institutional constraints to obey. Nor, it appears, did they deem violent coercion illegitimate, as their summary evictions and their raid on the Hartford socialists demonstrate. As Burpee later noted, the guardsmen "were comfort and satisfaction especially to the munitions plants and the managers of the railroads." Not only corporate bosses, but the thankful crowds who filled Hartford's streets on Armistice Day cheered them, and Gov. Marcus Holcomb decorated them in front of the state capitol. Their coercions were not unknown in prewar industrial centers such as urban Connecticut, but they were shaped by the war effort and folded into the national war project in ways that highlighted their ambiguous legal status. In Connecticut there was little public opposition to that ambiguity. Elsewhere the actions of vigilance organizations led some critics to try to disentangle the interwoven threads of public and private that these groups represented.¹⁹

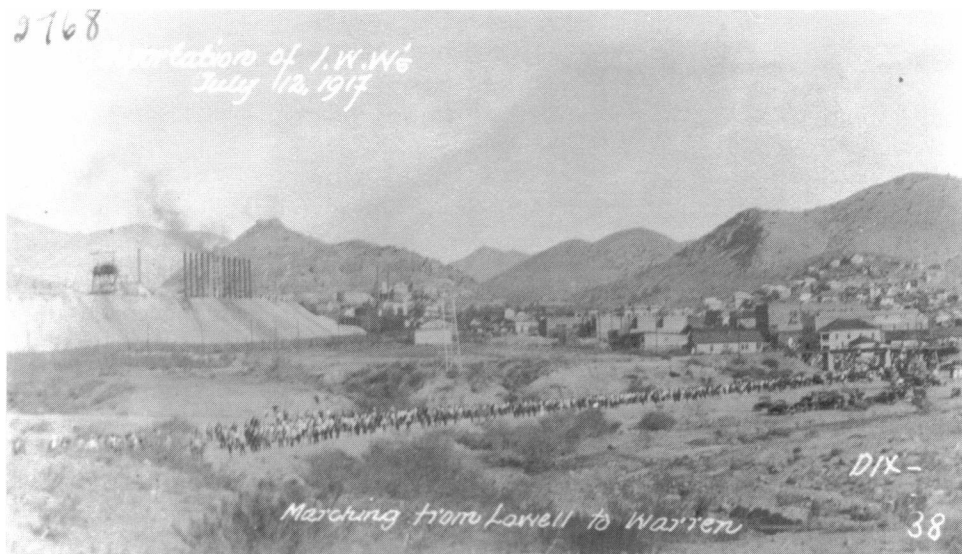
Keeping Vigil over Labor in the Arizona Copper Mines

Connecticut was not the only state in which quasi-military organizations formed and dedicated themselves to citizen policing and the suppression of labor militancy. In Bisbee, Arizona, a small copper-mining city on the Mexican border, the summer of 1917 witnessed a crisis of coercion, authority, and political legitimacy that demonstrates the contested barrier between vigilance and vigilantism in the wartime era. The rule of law did not have a firm hold in Arizona in 1917. Mining companies wielded enormous power at their own mines, and they employed both private police forces and groups formed by citizen volunteers. State and local government officials regularly sided with the corporations against the workers. But in the summer of 1917, the state was in political crisis, as the sitting Democratic governor G. W. P. Hunt had refused to turn over the reins of power to Republican Thomas E. Campbell after a heated and almost certainly corrupt election. The crisis in the statehouse left the day-to-day governance of much of the state almost entirely in the hands of the mining bosses.²⁰

War mobilization changed both the copper industry and the significance of anti-labor vigilance. Every bullet used at the front required almost a quarter ounce of pure

¹⁹ Fraser, "Yankees at War," 107; Burpee, "Connecticut in the Wars," 127.

²⁰ "A State with Two Governors," *Independent*, Jan. 15, 1917, p. 96.



On July 12, 1917, over two thousand members of two vigilance groups, the Citizens' Protective League and the Workmen's Loyalty League, used organized force to expel nearly twelve hundred residents (most of them striking members of the Industrial Workers of the World) from the copper-mining town of Bisbee, Arizona. *Courtesy Arizona Historical Society/Tucson, AHS 2768.*

copper, sending the price of the mineral (and corporate profits) skyrocketing, while a wartime inflationary spiral left workers feeling pinched. Labor shortages caused in part by draft call-ups made the workers at the Phelps-Dodge mines in Bisbee more confident about unionizing. Some chose the more moderate International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, a branch of the American Federation of Labor, but most workers in Bisbee chose the radical unionism of the Metal Mine Workers Industrial Union no. 800, affiliated with the IWW.²¹

On June 27, 1917, more than half of the forty-seven hundred workers at the Copper Queen mine in Bisbee walked off the job. A bitter strike dragged on for weeks, and production of copper for the war effort reached a near standstill. Mineowners, town leaders, and the national press interpreted the strikers' actions as disloyal and outrageous. Bisbee residents formed two organizations to oppose the strike: the Citizens' Protective League gathered business leaders and middle-class locals, while the Workmen's Loyalty League organized nonstriking mine workers.

Early in the morning on July 12, 1917, over two thousand members of the two leagues, as well as hundreds of privately hired detectives and the president of the

²¹ Carlos A. Schwantes, "Toil and Trouble: Rhythms of Work Life," in *Bisbee: Urban Outpost on the Frontier*, ed. Carlos A. Schwantes (Tucson, 1992), 121. For the suggestion that both unions were sympathetic to the Industrial Workers of the World by the summer of 1917, see Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 370. The Bisbee work force was a mix of northern, southern, and eastern European immigrant workers, as well as African Americans, Mexicans, and some Chinese, who were excluded from the town of Bisbee itself. See Charles S. Sargent, "Copper Star of the Arizona Urban Firmament," in *Bisbee*, ed. Schwantes, 35–36. On the domination of the town by "northern Europeans and American-born whites," see Tom Vaughan, "Everyday Life in a Copper Camp," *ibid.*, 59–61.



Residents of Bisbee, Arizona, volunteered to aid Sheriff Harry E. Wheeler in the deportation. One of their white armbands, symbols of voluntarism and of an assumed legal authority, can be seen on the right arm of the man in the middle distance. *Courtesy Arizona Historical Society/Tucson, AHS 43171.*

Phelps-Dodge Corporation (who “happened to be in Bisbee on the day of the deportation”), were deputized by Sheriff Harry E. Wheeler of Cochise County, a former Rough Rider. Wheeler told the men that the federal government had authorized them to deport the strikers (although they had not been so authorized), gave his new deputies white armbands, and set them to work rounding up “on the charges of vagrancy, treason, and of being disturbers of the peace of Cochise County all those strange men who have congregated here.” The deportation itself was a political circus that indiscriminately detained men, women, and children, regardless of their opinions on the war or their actions during the strike. By midday, approximately twelve hundred townspeople were held under armed guard in a baseball park in a neighboring town. By late afternoon, they were marched at gunpoint onto trains provided by the El Paso and Southwestern Railroad and deported to New Mexico, where they were unceremoniously dumped in the desert town of Hermanas.²²

²² Walter Douglas, president of Phelps-Dodge, quoted in *Tucson Citizen*, May 29, 1918, in John H. Lindquist and James Fraser, “A Sociological Interpretation of the Bisbee Deportation,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 37 (Nov. 1968), 417. On Sheriff Harry E. Wheeler’s proclamation (printed in the *Bisbee Daily Review*, July 12, 1917, p. 1), see *ibid.*, 408. The Citizens’ Protective League had hoped to deliver the deportees to the U.S. Army camp in Columbus, New Mexico, but angry civilians in the town refused the shipment. The most extensive source on the Bisbee deportations is James W. Byrkit, *Forging the Copper Collar: Arizona’s Labor-Management War of 1901–1921* (Tucson, 1982). See also Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 385–91; Vernon H. Jensen, *Heritage of Conflict: Labor Relations in the Nonferrous Metals Industry up to 1930* (Ithaca, 1950), 381–410; Lindquist and Fraser, “Sociological Interpretation of the Bisbee Deportation,” 401–22; Philip J. Mellinger, *Race and Labor in Western Copper: The Fight for Equality, 1896–1918* (Tucson, 1995), 174–203; and Schwantes, ed., *Bisbee*. On the privately hired detectives, see Robert W. Bruere, “Copper Camp Patriotism,” *Nation*, Feb. 21, 1918, p. 202.

For the next four months, the Citizens' Protective League and the more patrician Chamber of Commerce in nearby Douglas effectively ruled Bisbee from a building owned by the copper companies. The league issued "passports" to town residents after oral examinations that mingled questions about the war with questions about the strike. No one could enter or leave Bisbee without a pass; no one found work—or got a draft exemption—without one either. Men and women who failed the league's loyalty tests were excluded from the city, deported, or imprisoned and sent to work at the copper mines in convict labor gangs. The rule of the Citizens' Protective League continued until late November 1917, despite the pleas of President Wilson and orders from Arizona's attorney general. The competition between the state's two competing governors left a power vacuum in which the corporations and the vigilance organizations held control.²³

The Citizens' Protective League claimed that its work was vital to the war. Its spokesmen argued that they had taken the law into their own hands to defend law, not to violate it. In a telegram to the president, Governor-elect Campbell noted that "citizens in the many mining communities affected, feeling that peace officers cannot afford adequate protection, are acting, . . . meantime praying for federal intervention." Campbell, Wheeler, and the corporations insisted that it was the IWW strikers who were lawless. As Wheeler told the state attorney general, "If we are guilty of taking the law into our own hands, I can only cite to you the Universal Law that necessity makes. . . . I would repeat the operation any time I find my own people endangered by a mob composed of eighty per cent aliens and enemies of my Government." The leaders of the raids sought to claim the mantle of lawful vigilance and to distance themselves from lawless vigilantism. Across the country, many Americans cheered their work. The *Los Angeles Times* congratulated the posse, noting that "the citizens of Cochise County, Arizona, have written a lesson that the whole of America would do well to copy." Former president Theodore Roosevelt insisted that "no human being in his senses doubts that the men deported from Bisbee were bent on destruction and murder."²⁴

Critics of the Bisbee deportations placed the leagues on the other side of the divide between vigilance and vigilantism. They distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate political coercion and insisted on the need for legal process. From Florence, Arizona, J. Sheik claimed that the copper companies "had taken, as it were, the government from out of [the governor's] hands and were running it to suit their needs." Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, also blamed the leagues:

I assume it is not necessary for me to give any assurance of how utterly out of accord I am with the I.W.W. and any such propaganda; but some of the men

²³ Bruere, "Copper Camp Patriotism," 203; Robert Bruere, "Copper Camp Patriotism: An Interpretation," *Nation*, Feb. 28, 1918, p. 235; Lindquist and Fraser, "Sociological Interpretation of the Bisbee Deportations," 405–7. Passes could also be issued by the chief of police and the chambers of commerce in El Paso and Tucson. For an earlier example of the use of privately issued passes, see D. G. Thiessen and Carlos A. Schwantes, "Industrial Violence in the Coeur d'Alene Mining District," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 78 (July 1987), 83–90.

²⁴ Thomas E. Campbell to Wilson, telegram, July 12, 1917, in *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Link et al., XLIII, 157. For Harry Wheeler's statement, see Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 386. For the statements from the *Los Angeles Times* and Roosevelt, see Peterson and Fite, *Opponents of War*, 55–56.

deported are said to be law-abiding men engaged in an earnest effort at improvement of their condition. . . . There is no law of which I am aware that gives authority to private citizens to undertake to deport from the state any man. If there be lawlessness, it is surely such conduct.²⁵

Robert Bruere, an investigative labor journalist, observed events in Bisbee after the deportation. In the midst of World War I, even Bruere could not countenance subversion of the war effort by striking workers, and he echoed the copper corporations in his criticisms of IWW radicalism. But Bruere questioned the entire system of vigilance when he insisted that the wartime need for order did not outweigh the value of legal process. The citizens' leagues, he suggested, were the dangerous and lawless elements in southern Arizona. "When . . . we look more closely at the things which the copper companies did, we are startled to find their policy inspired by the same distrust of the State, of the constituted authorities of Arizona and the Federal Government, for which they themselves condemned the I.W.W. as an 'outlaw' organization."²⁶

The Bisbee raids prompted a conflicted response from officials in Washington. Immediately after the workers walked out, Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson was pleased that the secretary of war had decided not to dispense "troops or secret service men" to deal with the situation in Bisbee. But the federal government encouraged citizen vigilance through its support for Arizona Home Guards. Writing from Camp Sevier in Greenville, South Carolina, the Arizona native Clifford C. Faires noted that:

The Loyalty League of Globe [another Arizona mining town] was organized for the purposes of preserving law and order and of fostering patriotism in a community where it was sadly lacking. The outgrowth of this organization has been the formation of a Home Guard, which has been drilling since August, to preserve order after the troops are withdrawn. Very recently notice was received from Washington that this effort at safeguarding the peace is to be rewarded by Federal recognition and supervision.²⁷

Faires perceptively identified the complicated and contradictory response of a government that depended on citizen vigilance yet actively tried to rein in vigilantism.

As the details of the Bisbee deportation reached the White House, key figures in the administration came to regret their slow response to the raids. Hours after the raid, President Wilson assured Governor-elect Campbell that federal troops were on their way to quiet the town but added, "Meantime may I not respectfully urge the great danger of citizens taking the law in their own hands as you report their having done. I look upon such action with grave apprehension. A very serious responsibility is assumed when such precedents are set."²⁸

²⁵ J. Sheik, "Autocracy in Arizona," *Public*, Feb. 16, 1918, pp. 216–17; Samuel Gompers to Wilson, July 20, 1917, in *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Link et al., XLIII, 231. For two other views from labor, see Jeannette Rankin to Wilson, Aug. 1, 1917, *ibid.*, 339–40; and J. L. Donnelly and Thomas A. French to Wilson, telegram, Aug. 6, 1917, *ibid.*, 373.

²⁶ Bruere, "Copper Camp Patriotism," 202; Bruere, "Copper Camp Patriotism: An Interpretation," 235.

²⁷ William B. Wilson to Newton D. Baker, June 22, 1917, in *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Link et al., XLII, 563; Clifford C. Faires, "I.W.W. Patriotism in Globe," *Nation*, March 21, 1918, p. 320.

²⁸ Wilson to Campbell, telegram, July 12, 1917, in *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Link et al., XLIII, 158.

Wilson assigned the President's Mediation Commission (PMC), a board of lawyers and labor bureaucrats generally liberal and sympathetic to labor, to investigate events in Bisbee. The PMC, under the direction of Felix Frankfurter, worked in southern Arizona throughout fall 1917 and issued a report highly critical of the deportations. The report also condemned the postdeportation reign of law and order by the Citizens' Protective League and the Chamber of Commerce; as a cure for industrial strife, it urged greater cooperation between labor and management, to be facilitated by the federal government. But the PMC's greatest concern was that the leagues had undermined the effectiveness of other wartime loyalty organizations: "Such agencies of the 'public' as the so-called 'loyalty leagues' only serve to intensify bitterness, and, more unfortunately, to the minds of workers in the West serve to associate all loyalty movements with partisan and anti-union aims."²⁹

The wartime mobilization of American industry had changed the context of the tense relations between labor and management. Accustomed to maintaining order through citizens' groups and private police forces, the copper companies and the town leaders who supported them turned to long-standing traditions of antilabor vigilance in Bisbee in summer 1917. In part, the war was a pretext to continue pre-war labor battles on new terms. But it was more. League members tied their work—and the actions of the strikers—to the fortunes of the war effort, claiming to speak with the authority of the state in their ongoing contests over power. Sheriff Wheeler justified the July 12 raid by saying of the strike, "This is no labor trouble. We are sure of that; but it is a direct attempt to embarrass the government of the United States." The wartime need for industrial mobilization made the government dependent on such organizations even as some of its officials questioned their legitimacy. Most of the leagues' actions were supported, even in the United States Supreme Court, which heard a challenge to the deportations on the grounds that it infringed freedom of movement. The Court dismissed the claim as a state issue in which the federal government had no interest.³⁰

By making a labor dispute into a high-stakes matter of war mobilization, the leagues also opened the door for workers to use that formulation as a weapon and to call on state institutions in their own defense. The leagues' more violent forms of coercion were debated in the press and condemned within the Wilson administration. The fundamental idea that citizens had a duty of vigilance—which had prompted the formation of such organizations as the Citizens' Protective League—was never fully discredited. But the court challenges and federal investigations laid the groundwork for new approaches that would come to the fore in later decades.

²⁹ Bruere claims to quote this directly from the President's Mediation Commission (PMC) report; see Bruere, "Copper Camp Patriotism," 202. But it does not appear in U.S. Department of Labor, *Report on the Bisbee Deportations Made by the President's Mediation Commission to the President of the United States* (Washington, 1918). On the PMC, see Jensen, *Heritage of Conflict*, 411–29; and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912–1921* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 77–80.

³⁰ *Bisbee Daily Review*, July 12, 1917, p. 1, quoted in Lindquist and Fraser, "Sociological Interpretation of the Bisbee Deportation," 408; *United States v. Wheeler*, 254 U.S. 281 (1920).

Moral Vigilance around Military Camps

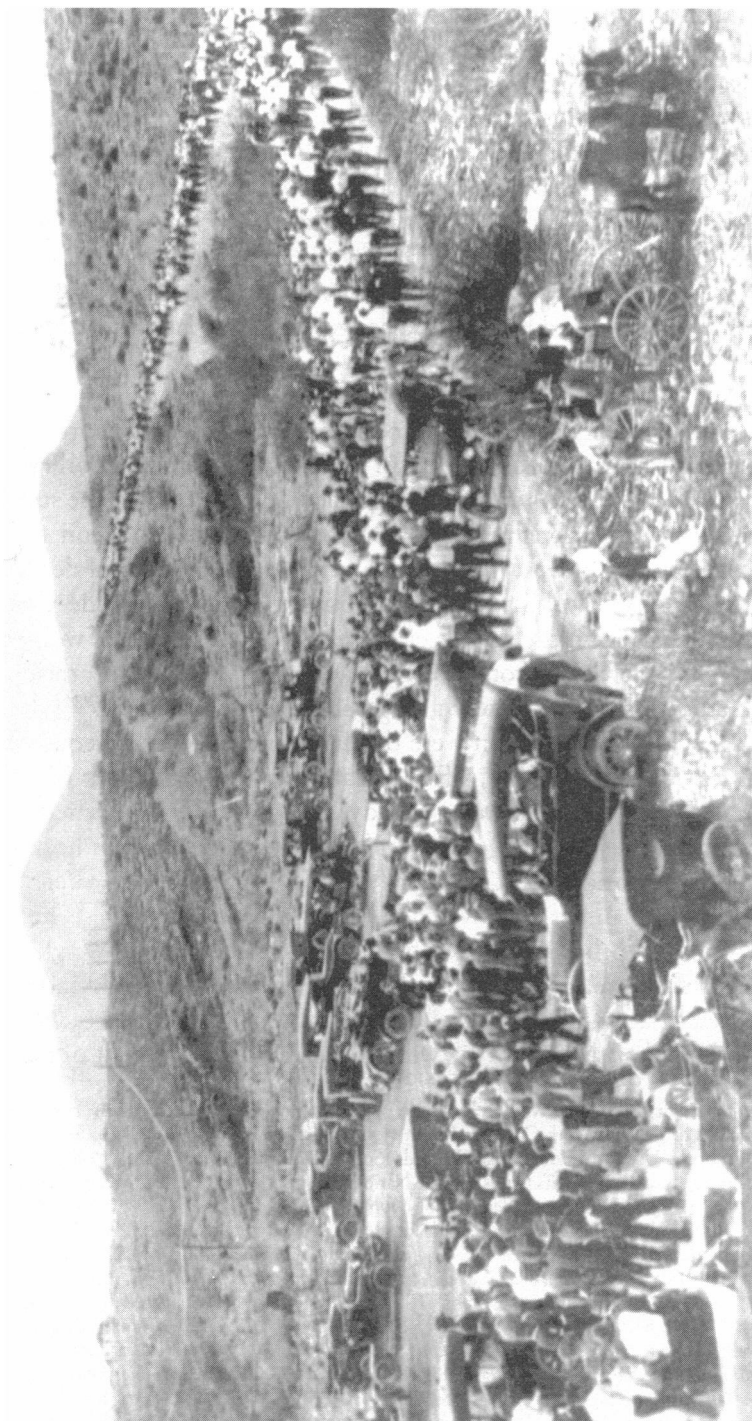
The importance of moral vigilance was also heightened during the war, particularly in communities adjacent to the nation's military camps. There, the large congregations of soldiers gathered in hastily constructed military installations had a sudden impact on local communities. Many residents welcomed their presence and organized recreational and social service opportunities; others worried that the popularity of the camps with young women from town betokened imminent moral collapse. Some of the young women were commercial prostitutes, but most were guilty only of offending middle-class understandings of proper female behavior. Military police operating with the authority of law undertook much of the anti-vice work of the World War I era; the Selective Service Act had made it a federal offense to sell alcohol or operate a house of ill repute within five miles of a camp. But the enforcement of that legislation folded into—and dramatically transformed—patterns of moral vigilance and citizen policing of personal behavior and female sexuality. The war raised the stakes for those who saw women's personal freedom as a subversive assault on the effectiveness of U.S. troops. As D. J. Poynter of Albion, Nebraska, wrote to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker: "Shoot the lewd women as you would the worst German spy; they do more damage than all the spys." The work of moral vigilance societies reveals the outer limits that coercion could reach when legal authorities cooperated closely with private policing and few organized to oppose it.³¹

Soon after the passage of the Selective Service Act, the War Department established, in conjunction with its Commission on Training Camp Activities, a Committee on Protective Work for Girls (CPWG) to patrol the areas around military establishments in order to protect soldiers from the dangers of prostitution. The suppression of vice was a federal policy, and women and men in official positions dominated the bureaucracy that oversaw it, but volunteers conducted the nightly work of surveillance, investigation, and internment in communities nationwide. In every city that had a military training camp, the CPWG established a Protective Bureau. Conceived as official police forces, the bureaus were in practice staffed largely by volunteers, due mostly to the CPWG's insistence that the enforcers be female, for, in the words of one War Department official, "it is a woman's job to work with women."³²

The state endeavors of the CPWG intersected with the private initiatives of middle-class women's clubs in military communities. The convergence of governmental and private policing brought the structures of coercion down hard on allegedly loose women. As Henrietta S. Additon, the program's assistant director, noted, "all the

³¹ D. J. Poynter to Baker, Aug. 6, 1917, quoted in Nancy K. Bristow, *Making Men Moral: Social Engineering during the Great War* (New York, 1996), 135.

³² Henrietta S. Additon, "Work among Delinquent Women and Girls," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 79 (Sept. 1918), 152–60; Martha P. Falconer, "The Segregation of Delinquent Women and Girls as a War Problem," *ibid.*, 165. On the government's wartime attack on prostitution, see Bristow, *Making Men Moral*, 114; D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 211–12; Connelly, *Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era*, 136–50; and David J. Pivar, "Cleansing the Nation: The War on Prostitution, 1917–1921," *Prologue*, 12 (Spring 1980), 29–41. On the similar work of volunteer policewomen in Britain, see Lucy Bland, "In the Name of Protection: The Policing of Women in the First World War," in *Women-in-Law: Explorations in Law, Family, and Sexuality*, ed. Julia Brophy and Carol Smart (London, 1985), 23–49.



The Bisbee deportation was not a spontaneous crowd action, but a carefully coordinated event that required the mobilization of volunteers and their automobiles. The events also drew crowds of onlookers, some of whom can be seen here. *Courtesy Arizona Historical Society/Tucson, AHS 42669.*

resources of occupation, education, health, recreation and religion in the community are brought into play.” During the war Maude Miner transferred her energies from volunteer protective work to government service. In a lecture to the War Work Council of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) National Board, Miner urged the women of the Y to practice vigilance, and she tolerated no slackers: “Every one who has been around can help. At times you are too busy at work and too tired to do anything. Combine a little trolley car ride with some scouting work. You will find you cannot help but follow some of these youngsters home and help them.” When asked after the lecture how women could get authority for the patrols, she told her listeners, “Just by asking for it. . . . All of us have a certain amount of power. We can stop a little girl and find out about her and learn of the danger and start the work, and then go to the Chief of Police and to the different officials of the city.” Miner gave voice to her understanding of women’s obligations, but she also exerted agency and thereby claimed a space for vigilant women in the coercive work of the war effort.³³

Antiprostitution squads already existed in some communities; in others, the war led to their formation. Women’s patriotic leagues could be found on the streets of cities across the country. In Massachusetts, the social worker Helen Pigeon and her colleagues hid in the bushes of Boston Common at night to spy on and detain women who were consorting with soldiers. In Chillicothe, Ohio, just outside Camp Sherman, an army captain found the patrols effective: “The worst kind of women do not parade the streets as the Girls’ Protective League operates under the ‘arrest on suspicion’ rule, and strangers are not in town long before being picked up.”³⁴

Women suspected of prostitution were detained, interned, and frequently forced to submit to medical examination, often without any legal charges being pressed against them. At best, women were quickly released; others, particularly those infected with venereal disease, languished indefinitely in the nation’s hospitals, prisons, or makeshift detention centers—some behind barbed wire—where they performed manual labor under the watchful eye of armed guards. The vigilance societies’ definition of prostitution was frequently vague: Juanita Wright, a young woman originally from Spartanburg, South Carolina, was committed indefinitely to the Sherborn Reformatory for Women in Massachusetts after word reached the Protective Bureau there that she was living with a soldier without benefit of marriage.³⁵

³³ Additon, “Work among Delinquent Women and Girls,” 155–56; Maude Miner, “Probation Work,” [1917], “Lectures under the Auspices of the War Work Council of the YWCA,” typescript, pp. 52, 63–64, box 28a, Young Women’s Christian Association of the U.S.A. National Board Records (Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.). The General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the National Association of Colored Women were active nationwide in anti-vice activities. See California Federation of Women’s Clubs, *Diamond Jubilee History Highlights* (n.p., 1975), 16; Sallie Southall Cotten, *History of the North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1901–1925* (Raleigh, 1925), 110; Mary Jean Houde, *The Clubwoman: A Story of the Illinois Federation of Women’s Clubs* (Chicago, 1970), 92; Martha Lavinia Hunter, *A Quarter of a Century History of the Dallas Woman’s Forum, 1906–1931* (Dallas, 1932), 67; Maude T. Jenkins, “The History of the Black Woman’s Club Movement in America” (Ph.D. diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 1984), 81, 97; Members of the Past Presidents Association of the Dallas Federation of Women’s Clubs, eds., *History of the Dallas Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1898–1936* (Dallas, 1936), 81; Maude G. Palmer, comp., *The History of the Illinois Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1894–1928* (n.p., 1928), 91; Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, 52, 116; and Carrie Niles Whitcomb, *Reminiscences of the Springfield Women’s Club, 1884–1924* (n.p., [1924]), 137.

³⁴ Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 177; Capt. Paul Popenoe to Major Joy, Feb. 20, 1919, quoted in Bristow, *Making Men Moral*, 130.

³⁵ In wartime raids on prostitution, women were the only targets; during war mobilization, the calls of some

Moral vigilance and state power intersected with the emerging discipline of psychology, as suspected prostitutes were subjected to psychological examinations. Women found to be “feble-minded” were regularly turned over to institutions without their consent and with no public hearing. Further complicating matters, between 1910 and 1917, sixteen states had passed laws authorizing the sterilization of the feble-minded, and some of the presumptive prostitutes were sterilized. It is unclear how many women faced the strong arms of the law, of medicine, and of the nation’s moral vigilance groups during the war. Official documents from the period report as few as 15,000 women arrested as prostitutes, but the historian Allan M. Brandt suggests that 30,000 were held in federal facilities alone, excluding an even greater number who encountered local laws and organizations but were not formally arrested.³⁶

That the policing of women’s sexuality was considered a specifically female obligation demonstrates the distinctly gendered aspects of citizenship in the World War I United States. Men’s service in the military posited a direct equation between manhood and full citizenship, one that the state home guards mimicked through their exclusionary membership patterns. But patriotic women on the home front could choose from options that ranged well beyond women’s moral vigilance societies. Women formed gun clubs for armed self-defense. Within days of the declaration of war, the American Defense Rifle club, under the leadership of June Haughton, “an expert rifle shot,” established a rifle range on the roof of the Hotel Majestic in New York City. The women of the Albany Colony of the National Society of New England Women learned how to use rifles in self-defense under the direction of a staff member from the nearby armory. In Bayonne, New Jersey, nineteen women formed the Women’s Revolver League and, using borrowed weapons and an instructor borrowed from the local police station, trained at the police practice ranges at the Bayswater Yacht Club. Through their actions, these women reworked the gendered structure of obligation and embedded themselves in the institutions and rhetoric of self-defense and citizen vigilance.³⁷

reformers to crack down on males who solicited prostitution were generally ignored. Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 176; Freedman, *Their Sisters’ Keepers*, 147; Bristow, *Making Men Moral*, 118–19; Mary Macey Dietzler, *Detention Houses and Reformatories as Protective Social Agencies in the Campaign of the United States Government against Venereal Diseases* (Washington, 1922), 64. Martha P. Falconer suggested a national internment camp system for women who were “a menace to the men in training.” See Falconer, “Segregation of Delinquent Women and Girls,” 160. For a summary of actions against alleged prostitutes, see Bristow, *Making Men Moral*, 124.

³⁶ Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, 22–23; Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York, 1987), 234n118. No more than one-third of interned women were commercial prostitutes, according to Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 176–77. Psychological testing procedures were borrowed from the U.S. Army, according to Falconer, “Segregation of Delinquent Women and Girls,” 161. On the problematic nature of the tests, see Daniel J. Kevles, “Testing the Army’s Intelligence: Psychologists and the Military in World War I,” *Journal of American History*, 55 (Dec. 1968), 565–81. In one study a whopping 42 of the 88 women examined were found to be feble-minded, according to Additon, “Work among Delinquent Women and Girls,” 156. On the sterilization of the feble-minded, see D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 215; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 191–92; and Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Berkeley, 1985), 96–112. On clubwomen’s advocacy of sterilization laws, see Vernetta Murchison Hogsett, *The Golden Years: A History of the Idaho Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1905–1955* (Caldwell, 1955), 82.

³⁷ *New York Times*, April 8, 1917, sec. 1, p. 5; National Society of New England Women, *Tidings from Far and Near* (Chicago, 1918), 14, pamphlet, folder 3, box 23, National Society of New England Women Records (Sophia Smith Collection); *New York Times*, April 15, 1917, sec. 1, p. 16. For a fascinating and nuanced history of the gendered politics of women’s wartime use of guns, see Jensen, “Minerva on the Field of Mars.”

Women formed patriotic leagues, surveillance societies, and women's auxiliaries to all-male militias and guards. Connecticut women, for example, could not enroll in the Home Guard, but the Minute Women of New Haven and Bridgeport formed a quasi-military uniformed alternative that drilled and paraded just as men did. Some women even joined men's vigilance organizations. A few women were members of the American Protective League, and women were among the perpetrators of the Bisbee deportations, even as Bisbee's morning paper on July 12, 1917, urged, "All Women and Children Keep off Streets Today." The obligations of citizenship were gendered, but the barriers between the gendered variants of citizenship were permeable. Women's wartime vigilance also demonstrates the divisions among women along lines of race and class. In Utica, New York, the elite members of the National Society of New England Women helped guard the Utica Gas and Electric Company, the Savage Arms Corporation, and nearby bridges against sabotage by German spies and striking workers. But the radical socialist Ella Reeve Bloor also spent much of the war in Utica, organizing women workers at Savage Arms, who struck in an effort to obtain equal pay for equal work.³⁸

The work of the moral vigilance societies on the World War I home front represents another aspect of wartime citizen policing. Nothing that occurred, from the formation of vice squads to forced sterilization, was entirely new. But moral vigilance took new forms during the war, as ongoing campaigns for citizen vigilance were incorporated into war mobilization efforts. Moral vigilance work also had new meanings for the citizens who undertook it, as women folded private policing efforts into state institutions. Questions about coercion were answered differently in this instance than in others. Radicals in Connecticut and elsewhere had vigorously protested the Home Guard's breakup of the socialist meetings in Hartford. In the wake of the Bisbee deportations, national labor unions and liberal intellectuals called for defending labor against the leagues. But few organizations or individuals spoke out on behalf of the working-class women who were interned as feeble-minded prostitutes, and a far wider range of state and voluntary activities were deemed legitimate forms of coercion. With governments, laws, voluntary associations, psychologists, and reformers arrayed against them, and the relative political powerlessness of their gender and class and sometimes race as well, these Americans bore a heavy burden of political coercion on the World War I home front.³⁹

Keeping Vigil over the Racial Order

World War I had a profound impact on African American life. Many black veterans, concurring in W. E. B. Du Bois's strident claim "we return from fighting, we return fighting," began to agitate for political rights both in the South and in the urban

³⁸ Osterweis, *Three Centuries of New Haven*, 405; Caroline Ruutz-Rees, "The Mobilization of American Women," *Yale Review*, 7 (July 1918), 810; Fred T. Frazer to American Protective League, Jan. 8, 1918, box 5, American Protective League Correspondence with Field Offices, 1917–1919, Records of the Department of Justice, RG 65 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.); Schwantes, "Toil and Trouble," 127; *Bisbee Daily Review*, July 12, 1917, quoted in Lindquist and Fraser, "Sociological Interpretation of the Bisbee Deportation," 408n43; National Society of New England Women, *Tidings from Far and Near*, 26; Ann Barton, *Mother Bloor* (New York, 1935), 16–17. For a theoretical consideration of vigilantism and gender, see Abrahams, *Vigilant Citizens*, 137–52.

³⁹ Except from a small group of Progressive women reformers, the draconian anti-vice measures of the home front faced no public opposition, although women did voice their own protests from within prisons and intern-

North, where African Americans had migrated in large numbers during the war. But white vigilance organizations in the South had dedicated much effort to enforcing African American participation in the draft and suppressing black militancy. Tensions boiled over in the summer of 1919, with at least twenty-five episodes of racial violence in cities nationwide, from Washington, D.C., and Knoxville, Tennessee, to Birmingham, Alabama, and Longview, Texas. In Chicago, at least 38 people died in two days of rioting that began on July 27, 1919. In Omaha in late September 1919, a crowd of six thousand attempted to lynch the city's mayor when he defended Will Brown, an African American packinghouse worker who was the target of the mob; federal and state troops had to intervene to end the episode. In the year following the armistice, at least 76 African Americans were lynched, 10 of them still in their military uniforms. African Americans found that they could affirm their loyalty and lawfulness and plead for the rule of law, or they could form their own vigilance societies for self-defense. They attempted both approaches.⁴⁰

Some tried to stop the lynchings and race riots of 1919 by convincing white Americans that black people needed state and legal protection from the rule of mob violence. This was an old technique in the antilynching movement, but the message was made clearer and more urgent by pointing to African Americans' loyalty during and after the war. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in its annual report for 1919, called for law and order and affirmed the rights of black Americans by insisting that the fact that "lawabiding colored people are denied the commonest citizenship rights, must be brought home to all Americans who love fair play." Writing in the *Independent*, W. S. Scarborough, president of Wilberforce University, a historically black college in Xenia, Ohio, appealed to the rule of law and concluded by asking, "Will not the American white people come half-way—put aside their prejudices and play fair with this people that has done so much to help win this war?" Such positions were the culmination of over two decades of organized antilynching activity, much of it drawing on the extensive networks of voluntary association among African American clubwomen. Hopes for a vigorous response from the government foundered in the White House, where President Wilson dismissed a petition bearing thirty thousand signatures and protesting the treatment of African Americans in the Washington riots. Wilson insisted that the fight for the League of Nations treaty required all his attention.⁴¹

In the Mississippi River Delta, however, where patient appeals to law and fairness were ignored by white listeners, another version of fair play arose. Citizens of Phillips

ment facilities. Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 168–71.

⁴⁰ The statistics are from John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York, 1994), 346–52. See also William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York, 1970); James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1997), 289–92; and Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 221.

⁴¹ "Tenth Annual Report of the NAACP for the Year 1919," 1920, in *Civil Rights and African Americans: A Documentary History*, ed. Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando (Evanston, 1991), 339; W. S. Scarborough, "Race Riots and Their Remedy," *Independent*, Aug. 16, 1919, p. 223; Jeffrey-Jones, *Violence and Reform in American History*, 151. On the opposition to lynching, see Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 45–76; Feimster, "Ladies and Lynching," 164–234; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York, 1993); Jenkins, "History of the Black Woman's Club Movement in America," 89–95;

County, Arkansas, formed an organization to keep watch over their fellow citizens and maintain peace and order in their community. They met in secret, swore oaths of allegiance to “defend this Government and her Constitution at all times,” and perhaps stockpiled arms for self-defense. These were not the night riders of the Klan. These vigilant Americans were the black sharecroppers of the Progressive Farmers and Household-ers’ Union of America. Their story demonstrates the multiple uses of citizen vigilance in the early-twentieth-century United States and the contest about its significance.⁴²

On October 1, 1919, black sharecroppers filled the pews of a small church in Hoop Spur, Arkansas, near the town of Elaine, to hear about the work of the Progressive Farmers. Although accounts of the earliest incidents are conflicting, the sharecroppers ended up in a gun battle with a group of white men outside the church, triggering three days of violence across Phillips County. Crowds of local whites roamed the countryside, and African Americans returned fire; 200 people may have died. U.S. Army forces restored order, but they turned over control of the county to the Committee of Seven, a privately organized white vigilance organization composed of local business and political elites. The Committee of Seven quickly established its own rule of law in Elaine, launched an investigation of the riots, and arrested 79 African American men. In the wake of the committee’s investigations, the trial that followed can hardly be dignified with the name: deprived of counsel and forbidden to call witnesses on their own behalf, every one of the black defendants was convicted by the all-white jury, some after just seven minutes of deliberation. Twelve men were sentenced to death and 67 others to lengthy prison terms in what Mary White Ovington, chairman of the board of the NAACP, called a “lynching by law.” The Progressive Farmers and Household-ers’ Union was seen no more in Phillips County.⁴³

Coming at the end of a months-long wave of racial violence in the “red summer” of 1919, the riots in Elaine contributed to a movement by African American activists to put a stop to lynching and mob violence. The NAACP called a Conference on Lynching and Mob Violence in 1919, while Ida B. Wells-Barnett publicized the violence in Phillips County through a fund-raising campaign, articles in the *Chicago Defender*, and a

Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “African-American Women’s Networks in the Anti-Lynching Crusade,” in *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, ed. Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye (Lexington, Ky., 1991), 148–61; and Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia, 1980).

⁴² For the oath, see Walter F. White, “‘Massacring Whites’ in Arkansas,” *Nation*, Dec. 6, 1919, p. 715. On events in Elaine in 1919, see Richard C. Cortner, *A Mob Intent on Death: The NAACP and the Arkansas Riot Cases* (Middle-town, 1988); O. A. Rogers, “The Elaine Race Riots of 1919,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 19 (Summer 1960), 142–50; Kieran Taylor, “‘We Have Just Begun’: Black Organizing and White Response in the Arkansas Delta, 1919,” *ibid.*, 58 (Autumn 1999), 265–84; Arthur I. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960s: A Study in the Connections between Conflict and Violence* (Garden City, 1966); and Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, “African-American Struggles for Citizenship in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas in the Age of Jim Crow,” *Radical History Review* (no. 55, Winter 1993), 33–51. For an account that erroneously reports that the twelve men convicted in the wake of the riots were executed, see Lee E. Williams and Lee E. Williams II, *Anatomy of Four Race Riots: Racial Conflict in Knoxville, Elaine (Arkansas), Tulsa and Chicago, 1919–1921* (Jackson, 1972), 38–55. Also unreliable is J. W. Butts and Dorothy James, “The Underlying Causes of the Elaine Riot of 1919,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 20 (Spring 1961), 95–104. For a comprehensive historiographic overview, see Jeannie M. Wayne, “Low Villains and Wickedness in High Places: Race and Class in the Elaine Riots,” *ibid.*, 58 (Autumn 1999), 285–313.

⁴³ The official death toll of the Committee of Seven was 30 people, but few scholars believe that number. See White, “‘Massacring Whites’ in Arkansas,” 715; William B. Hixson Jr., *Moorfield Storey and the Abolitionist Tradition* (New York, 1972), 183; and Carolyn Wedin, *Inheritors of the Spirit: Mary White Ovington and the Founding of the NAACP* (New York, 1998), 190.

pamphlet that she circulated in Arkansas. Public criticism of the violence in Arkansas was supplemented by courtroom challenges. Speaking in Columbia, South Carolina, in the summer of 1919, Moorfield Storey, a distinguished former president of the American Bar Association, told his audience that “there never was a time in the history of the world when it was more important to teach the knowledge of and respect for the law.” Like other critics of mob violence, Storey insisted, “that all men must obey the law is the doctrine on which free governments rest”; he argued that “there is no more dangerous tyranny” than “mobocracy.” Storey would later collaborate with the NAACP on court cases resulting from the 1919 Arkansas riots that eventually brought questions of legal authority and mob violence before the nation’s highest court.⁴⁴

In his brief to the Supreme Court, Storey argued that the formal mechanisms of law were insufficient protections when the entire atmosphere of social life was pervaded by coercion: “If any juror had had the courage to investigate said charge, with any spirit of fairness, and vote for acquittal he himself would have been the victim of the mob.” The legal system, claimed Storey, might be an insufficient safeguard against the mob, even when it operated according to its rules. In a dramatic departure from earlier decisions, the Court agreed, ruling in 1923 to overturn the verdicts. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the majority opinion in *Moore v. Dempsey*:

If the case is that the whole proceeding [of a trial] is a mask—that counsel, jury, and judge were swept to the fatal end by an irresistible wave of public passion . . . neither perfection in the machinery for correction nor the possibility that the trial court and counsel saw no other way of avoiding an immediate outbreak of the mob can prevent this Court from securing to the petitioners their constitutional rights.⁴⁵

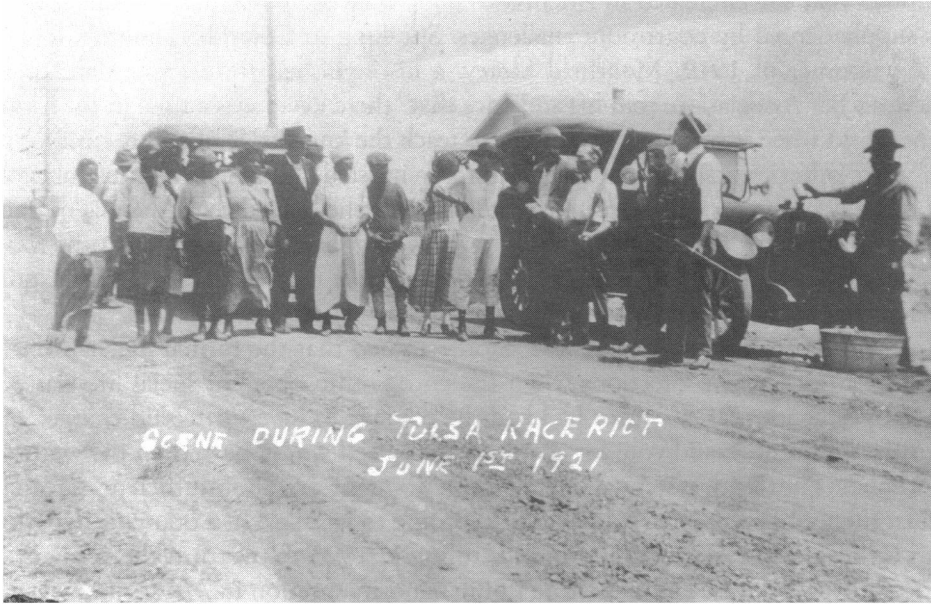
The law, in other words, could itself be a form of mob violence. In such a situation, said Holmes, the Court could intervene to guarantee a fair trial. The ruling in *Moore v. Dempsey* demonstrates how widespread postwar concerns about mob violence and legitimate authority found one resolution in the judicial process. It held out the possibility, eagerly hoped for by civil libertarians and African American activists, that the law might act as the arbiter of the boundaries of political coercion.

The Postwar Debate over Law and Order

Even as they marched in Armistice Day parades in November 1918, few of the nation’s vigilance societies felt that their work was done. The Connecticut Home Guard, for example, petitioned Governor Holcomb to forestall his attempt to disband the organization. Members noted that “the State should have at its command

⁴⁴ Jenkins, “History of the Black Woman’s Club Movement in America,” 93; Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade against Lynching*, 23–50; Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago, 1970), 397–404. Wells-Barnett’s work was not always welcomed by the NAACP. See *ibid.*, 400–401. Moorfield Storey, *Obedience to the Law: An Address at the Opening of Petigru College in Columbia, South Carolina* (Boston, 1919), 3–5, 7. On the NAACP’s legal campaign, see Cortner, *Mob Intent on Death*, 106–84; and Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In*, 143–74.

⁴⁵ Hixson, *Moorfield Storey and the Abolitionist Tradition*, 184; *Moore v. Dempsey*, 261 U.S. 86, 91 (1923). But see Justice James C. McReynolds’s dissent: “The delays incident to enforcement of our criminal laws have become a national scandal and give serious alarm to those who observe.” *Ibid.*, 93.



African Americans defended themselves against organized violence in personal confrontations, including the one pictured here in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921, and through legal channels: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People succeeded in persuading the Supreme Court to overturn the convictions of twelve black men condemned to death after riots in Elaine, Arkansas, in 1919 (*Moore v. Dempsey*, 1923). *Courtesy Tulsa Race Riot Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.*

during the time of reconstruction and readjustment of public and private affairs, a well-disciplined and reliable military force of sufficient strength to protect life and property within its borders in any emergency.” The governor granted their request, and guard members probably helped quell the town-gown battle of New Haven of May 28, 1919, when three hundred soldiers and five thousand townspeople, outraged by student catcalls at a military band concert, stormed the Yale University campus and beat students until they were forcibly disbanded.⁴⁶

The largest postwar vigilance organization was the American Legion. Founded soon after the war as a veterans’ organization, the legion jumped wholeheartedly into the tumultuous conflicts of the postwar period, and legionnaires frequently attempted to impose their vision of Americanism and social order through extralegal means. The legion worked closely with public and private espionage and surveillance organizations, as in Cleveland, Ohio, on May 1, 1919, when legionnaires and former members of the American Protective League broke up the city’s May Day parade and tore red flags from the hands of socialist veterans who dared march in their own uniforms. Later in the year, Armistice Day brought violence to Centralia, Washington,

⁴⁶ Connecticut Military Emergency Board, *Report to the Governor*, 7; “Two Men Shot as 5,000 Mob Yale Students,” *New York Tribune*, May 28, 1919, clipping in *American Civil Liberties Union Archives*, reel 8, vol. 70. Rollin G. Osterweis claims that the Connecticut National Guard broke up the riot, but it was probably the Home Guard. Osterweis, *Three Centuries of New Haven*, 408.

where legionnaires stormed the local IWW hall and exchanged gunfire with the men inside. They then captured local IWW leader Wesley Everest, castrated and killed him, and dragged his body through the city streets wrapped in an American flag.⁴⁷

Despite calls from across the political spectrum to rein in the postwar violence, the continuing power of the American Legion and similar groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, which made over two hundred appearances in twenty-seven states and added one hundred thousand names to its membership rolls in the year after the armistice, demonstrates that extralegal political coercion persisted after the war. Throughout the 1920s, the legion and the Klan continued to exercise forms of political coercion, ranging between the legitimate and the illegitimate, that reflected wartime precedents.⁴⁸

In response to the violence of the war and postwar years, many called for the rule of law. In Oklahoma City, where an aggressive state council of defense and groups such as the Knights of Liberty acted with the support of the state government, *Harlow's Weekly* editorialized on the dangers of suspending the rule of law:

Armed with the great authority of public opinion, the Councils rapidly assumed judiciary and almost legislative rights. In some instances, the same men acted as accuser, prosecutor, judge and jury. . . . No autocratic government in the past century ever suspended the great fundamental principle, that a person charged with an offense against the law must have the right of trial, to face his accusers or to have the counsel of one versed in the law.⁴⁹

Or, as the *Omaha World-Herald* editorialized in October 1919 in the wake of the riot there:

We have learned how frail is the barrier which divides civilization from the primal jungle, and we have been given to see clearly what that barrier is. It is the law. It is the might of the law wisely and fearlessly administered. It is the respect for and obedience to the law on the part of the members of society. When these fail us, all things fail. When these are lost, all will be lost.⁵⁰

Such a vision—that legal process, not violence, divides legitimate from illegitimate political coercion—rested on a different characterization of mob violence and vigilantism and different views of the place of law in political life from those held by members of vigilance societies.⁵¹

⁴⁷ William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919–1941* (Boston, 1989); Marcus Duffield, *King Legion* (New York, 1931); Thomas A. Rumer, *The American Legion: An Official History, 1919–1989* (New York, 1990). On events in Cleveland, see “The May Day Rioting,” *Nation*, May 10, 1919, p. 726. On a similar event in Gary, Indiana, see “Red Chief Beats It As Mob Threatens,” *New York World*, May 4, 1919, clipping in *American Civil Liberties Union Archives*, reel 8, vol. 70. On Centralia, see Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 455–56; Tom Copeland, *The Centralia Tragedy of 1919: Elmer Smith and the Wobblies* (Seattle, 1993); and the lightly fictionalized account in John Dos Passos, *1919* (New York, 1932). For an example of battles between the American Legion and the NAACP, see Wedin, *Inheritors of the Spirit*, 193.

⁴⁸ Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 348.

⁴⁹ *Harlow's Weekly*, Dec. 11, 1918, p. 4, quoted in Edda Bilger, “The ‘Oklahoma Vorwärts’: The Voice of German-Americans in Oklahoma during World War I,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 54 (Summer 1976), 252. Bilger suggests that there was widespread support for mob violence in newspapers in Oklahoma City and Tulsa in 1917 and early 1918, but that opposition to it became more common by late 1918. *Ibid.*, 256.

⁵⁰ *Omaha World-Herald*, quoted in “Omaha,” *Literary Digest*, Oct. 11, 1919, p. 16.

⁵¹ On this distinction, see Brown, “History of Vigilantism in America,” 108–9. For an overview of key words in discussions of lynching and mob violence, see Feimster, “‘Ladies and Lynching,’” 18–44; and Christopher Waldrep, “War of Words: The Controversy over the Definition of Lynching, 1899–1940,” *Journal of Southern History*, 66 (Feb. 2000), 75–100.

For most Americans, the call was for “law and order,” for a strengthening of constituted legal authorities’ control of political coercion. The 1918 “slacker raids”—in which American Protective League members circulated on streets, in ballparks, and in other public places demanding that men show their draft cards and detaining those who did not comply—prompted a flareup of dissent that brought the league’s ambiguous legal status into focus. The APL was quickly shut down, but the Justice Department was simultaneously hiring a dozen new federal agents a week. Postwar legislation similarly took power to regulate prostitution away from women’s volunteer vigilance societies while it dramatically expanded the reach of state power by authorizing the intervention of boards of health and local police. *Harlow’s Weekly*, which had spoken out passionately for the rule of law, hoped that it would be used to rein in lawless German Americans “because they failed to use the caution so necessary in this time of stress.” In the wake of the Washington, D.C., riots, some sought to use law to control, not white rioters, but African American citizens. “Already a bill before the Senate seeks to separate the races on street cars,” noted the *Independent*. In the wake of the events of 1919, Congress considered a bill making lynching a federal crime but did not adopt it. The nationwide May Day violence of 1919 led one senator to state that he would “at once introduce a bill in Congress making it unlawful to advocate, among other things, by a ‘general cessation of industry,’ the ‘overthrowing of the Government of the United States, or any other Government.’ In California the wholesale arresting of ‘undesirable aliens’ is already under way.”⁵²

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the political situation was presented as a choice between law and order and social chaos. Among the growing community of civil libertarians, a stark picture of American politics also prevailed, but viewed from a different angle. The activists of the National Civil Liberties Bureau—like their opponents, the law-and-order conservatives who clamored for stricter loyalty laws—wanted more laws, and they wanted them more consistently enforced.⁵³

Another area in which civil libertarians and conservatives concurred was in their denunciation of “mob violence.” Where one side saw jingoistic superpatriots, another feared subversive anarchist strikers, but both understood the mob to be made up of the same social types, and both thought mob rule posed similar dangers to American democracy. As one commentator wrote of the July 1919 race riot in Washington, D.C.:

The mobs that broke the long record of good order in the National capital . . . were made up almost wholly of boys between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. In

⁵² *Harlow’s Weekly* quoted in Richard C. Rohrs, *The Germans in Oklahoma* (Norman, 1980), 45; E. H. Rushmore to Capt. Charles D. Frey, Oct. 4, 1918, box 7, American Protective League Correspondence with Field Offices, 1917–1919, Records of the Department of Justice; “The Washington Riots,” *Independent*, Aug. 2, 1919, p. 147; “May Day Rioting,” 726. See also Eldridge F. Dowell, *A History of Criminal Syndicalism Legislation in the United States* (1939; New York, 1969). “Law and order” was a prominent issue in the 1920 presidential campaigns. Candidates considered for the Republican and Democratic nominations included many who had made their names as defenders of law and order—Gov. Calvin Coolidge of Massachusetts, Gov. James Cox of Ohio, Mayor Ole Hanson of Seattle, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, and Gen. Leonard Wood—while the Socialist party made mob violence a centerpiece of its campaign on behalf of Eugene V. Debs, then in federal prison in Atlanta. See Donald R. McCoy, “Election of 1920,” in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789–1968*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Fred L. Israel (9 vols., New York, 1985), VI, 2349–85.

⁵³ For an example of publications issuing from the National Civil Liberties Bureau (later renamed the American Civil Liberties Union), see Everett Dean Martin, *The Mob Mind vs. Civil Liberty* (New York, 1920).

part these were composed of young roughs of the city. The rest were soldiers and sailors, either discharged or from near-by camps, and from their appearance doubtless of the hoodlum element of their home towns.⁵⁴

Such statements attributing social disorder to spontaneous, disorganized gatherings of lower-class men were common throughout 1919.

Some leading postwar intellectuals contributed to this vision of the mob as they reformulated their thoughts on crowd psychology and mass politics. European sociologists at the turn of the century considered the significance of mob psychology in an extended debate that gave voice to their concerns about mass democracy. Prewar American thinkers often challenged the antidemocratic assumptions of this literature. Writing before the war, the historian Allan Nevins chastised a European theorist of crowd psychology for ignoring “the immense hopefulness in the gradual rationalization of the crowd which is going on all around us” and suggested a progressive interpretation of the crowd. “Not even in the backward parts of the world is the crowd, in any sense of the term, so excitable and blind as it once was.” That view would not prevail in the postwar years. By then, intellectuals had come to fear the mob instinct and its power over the American mind; Walter Lippmann worried that “at the present time a nation too easily acts like a crowd.”⁵⁵

In their sociological and intellectual assumptions, the critics of mob violence—who had witnessed the violence of the American home front firsthand—were not entirely wrong. But such a viewpoint acted to make the workings of American political coercion invisible, in two ways. First, it obscured the central role played by organized groups and local elites in the narrow category of events called “mob violence.” Second, by focusing on violent passion and ignoring the ways that vigilance groups had exercised their powers with the consent of the government, this literature helped sweep the more systematic, organized, and passionless coercions under the rug of political legitimacy.⁵⁶

In fall 1917 Bisbee witnessed what the city’s *Daily Review* called “a splendid gathering of high-class, patriotic business men and workers and professional men of the district.” Sheriff Harry Wheeler, who had led the deportations that July and who was viciously rebuked in the President’s Mediation Commission report, was the guest of honor. Accepting the accolades of his fellow community leaders, Wheeler said, “My friends, you pay me too much honor in this matter. There were scores of men in that drive the

⁵⁴ “Racial Tension and Race Riots,” *Outlook*, Aug. 6, 1919, p. 533.

⁵⁵ Allan Nevins, “Crowds and Crowd-Psychology,” *Dial*, May 11, 1916, pp. 465–66. Nevins’s essay is a review of Martin Conway, *The Crowd in Peace and War* (New York, 1916). Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (New York, 1920), 56. See also Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York, 1925); and, for a contrasting view, John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York, 1927). For an extended consideration of Lippmann and Dewey on “the public,” see Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, 1991), 275–318.

⁵⁶ On the relationship between class, gender, race, and crowd violence, see Feimster, “Ladies and Lynching”; Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington, 1996); and Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolitionist Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970). The long-standing tradition of excusing the crowd actions of “gentlemen of property and standing” helped elites distinguish their own political coercions from ones that threatened their social privileges.

morning of July 12 who are entitled to more honor than I, who did more than I that day for the district and our home fires. I merely did my duty. I couldn't shirk."⁵⁷

On the World War I American home front, there were many men and women who, like Sheriff Wheeler, felt they could not shirk the duty of vigilance in service of the war effort. And so they responded, drawing on social practices they knew and creating others as they went along. During the war Americans policed their fellow citizens as part of a mobilization effort that pervaded nearly every facet of national life. At the factory and at school, in churches and in dance halls, on the streets and on the telephone, ordinary Americans were watched and governed by their fellow citizens. The apparatus of surveillance would not have been constructed had not many Americans viewed vigilance as basic to good citizenship and had not officials at all levels of government tolerated and even encouraged that vision of political obligation.

In May 1919 the *Public*, a reform-minded magazine, editorialized on the role of law in American life:

This is a country of law. If it is not that it is nothing at all. And being a country of law those who assume to set up private judgment are undermining its foundation. Every word spoken and every act committed is subject to law, and men have been appointed to see to its enforcement. . . . If this system is not self-sustaining then democracy itself is at fault.⁵⁸

Events on the World War I home front demonstrate that the system was not self-sustaining as the editorialist had suggested. Those who called for the rule of law while they oversaw a system of coercion that continued to operate outside the law were neither devious, duplicitous, nor hypocritical. They were obedient citizens trapped in a paradox of their own making, dedicated to a nation of laws that asked them to ignore laws. In the postwar push for law and order, the worst manifestation of citizen vigilance—mob violence—had been denounced, and even as it persisted into the postwar years, the intellectual, legal, and institutional weapons wielded against it would grow more powerful. But the vast structures of citizen vigilance remained in place; vigilance societies that had done the work of the state outside its boundaries now saw those actions folded within it. The mob, narrowly defined, had been publicly renounced. But the coercion had not.

⁵⁷ Bruere, "Copper Camp Patriotism," 203.

⁵⁸ "Mob Violence," *Public*, May 10, 1919, p. 481.