

PATRIOTS GONE BERSERK
THE MONTANA COUNCIL OF DEFENSE, 1917-1918

Fix it so that no longer may the
enemy spies or the peddlers of
sedition and slander go free in
Montana—to insult the patriotism
and to offend the loyalty of our
citizens at home or to send cheer
to the enemy abroad....

We are today either loyal citizens
of this, our native or adopted land,
or else we are traitors. The neutral
or “half baked” citizen, in time of
war, is an impossible conception.

*Governor Samuel V.
Stewart, 1918*

During World War I, the Montana Council of Defense wrote one of the very darkest chapters in Montana history.

Under the mantle of “wartime emergency” and “protecting the public safety,” the Council played fast and loose with the civil liberties of all Montanans. The Council imposed restrictions that today seem preposterous—clear violations of an American’s Constitutionally-guaranteed rights. And the Council did it all by trading on the war’s rampant emotionalism and by cloaking itself in “patriotism” and “100% Americanism.”

For almost two years, the Montana Council of Defense served as a parallel state government: one that set its own rules; one that

answered to no higher authority; one that seized and practiced all three functions of government—legislative, judicial, and executive. Further, the Council’s “reign of terror” took a serious toll on Montana society for years after the war.

World War I began in Europe in 1914. However, the United States did not enter the conflict until April 6, 1917. During the intervening years, Montanans hotly debated war issues that included:

- Should the U.S. enter this foreign war?
- Should the U.S. bankroll the Allies in the interim?
- Does the Constitution allow the U.S. to send draftees overseas?

On the American home-front, a growing wave of hyper-patriotism evolved into anti-German fanaticism and even “German bashing.” And, with the entry of the United States into the war, that fervor swept across Montana—because Montanans jumped into the war effort with both feet.

About 40,000 of the state’s young men either enlisted or were drafted into service. With booming grain markets and top prices, Montana farmers borrowed to the hilt to expand their acreage. Statewide Liberty Bond drives and Red Cross subscriptions regularly exceeded their quotas. Butte miners (when not on strike) worked three continuous shifts, seven days a week. All of Montana’s newspapers were flooded with war news, both from abroad and from the home-front.

In this context President Woodrow Wilson asked state governors and state legislatures to create “state councils of defense”—some-what along the lines of the National Council of Defense. He directed the state councils to:

- increase food production;
- recruit men for the armed services;
- raise money for war drives;
- promote public support for the war.

But in Montana the 1917 Legislature recently had adjourned. So Governor Samuel V. Stewart created the Montana Council of



Disguised as Uncle Sam, a farmer sows "cowardice" and "treason", while an incongruous group of rats takes food from the fighting troops. Illustrations published by the National Committee of Patriotic Societies, courtesy of Dave Walter

Indicative of the war hysteria that gripped Montana during World War I is this excerpt from the newspaper piece "Billy Bunny: A Bedtime Story for the Kiddies," written by David Cory. This piece ran in the (Helena) Montana Record-Herald on May 31, 1918.

Billy Bunny: A Bedtime Story for the Kiddies

Billy Bunny stepped into the circle of the firelight and said, "I want to sing a song about the war against Germany."

"Go ahead," said Mr. Grizzly Bear.

And Billy did:

Across in France, with sword and gun,
Our boys are going for the Hun.
And so, "On to Berlin" is their cry,
"For liberty we're proud to die!"

And then Billy Bunny took a little red, white, and blue flag out of his knapsack and waved it in the air and chanted:

Hip, hip, hurrah, for every star,
And every bar of red.
Johnny get your gun, hustle for the Hun,
And shoot him 'til he's dead, dead, dead.

Defense by executive proclamation. Thus the Council held no legislated authority; it was really just a "governor's advisory panel."

The state's initial Council of Defense well represented Montana's upper middle class. It contained two bankers, a university president, two mercantile executives, a newspaper editor, and a token woman. Governor Stewart appointed himself the chairman of the Council, and he designated his head of the Department of Agriculture and Publicity—Charles D. Greenfield—the Council's executive secretary.

Since there was neither legislative authorization nor legislative appropriation, none of the Council members was paid. The Governor would cover the Council's expenses out of other state-government funds.

The State Council quickly created supporting councils in every one of Montana's 43 counties. Each county council was comprised of three men appointed by the Governor and the State Council. The county councils held the same powers as did the State Council.

In addition, the county councils could certify subordinate town and district groups—"community councils." These local committees were open to anyone who wished to join—and thus drew the most extreme "patriots." The committees did not, however, hold the powers of their superior councils. It would be these community councils that became the "third-degree committees": the best of the self-styled watchdogs of a community's standards of "Americanism" and the harassers of those neighbors whom they found "un-American." During the early months of the Montana Council of Defense's existence, wartime hysteria raged in the state.

One of the most visible purveyors of anti-German hatred was William A. Campbell—a key member of the State Council and the editor of the *Helena Daily Independent*. Because the Council meetings were closed to the public (by decree of Governor Stewart), Campbell became the conduit for Council of Defense news to reach *all* Montanans. And Campbell bordered on the maniacal in his "pro-Americanism."

Campbell excelled in the dissemination of fear. A sample headline from the *Independent*—in inch-high, bold capitals—read: "YOUR NEIGHBOR, YOUR MAID, YOUR LAWYER, YOUR WAITER MAY BE A GERMAN SPY!"

On September 8, 1917, Campbell reported that Helena residents had seen an airplane "of curious design hovering over the city under the cover of darkness." A month later, the editor revealed to his readers what he figured was a massive espionage operation: Butte

spies were sending precious information to a wireless station hidden in the forests somewhere west of Missoula; from here the information was relayed to Germans in Mexico.

On the next day, the *Independent*—in a boldfaced box on the front page—offered a reward of \$100 to anyone who could locate the mysterious airplane, which had flown south and east of Helena, and identify its owner. Campbell's statement concluded with an editorial inquiry (*Independent*, September 9, 1917):

Are the Germans about to bomb the capital of Montana? Have they spies in the mountain fastnesses, equipped with wireless stations and airplanes? Do our enemies fly around over our high mountains, where formerly only the shadow of the eagle swept?

In the throes of extreme anti-German emotionalism, citizens learned quickly how to use the Council to their personal advantage. One could settle any old grudge simply by reporting his personal enemy to the county council! Then he just sat back and watched his fanatical neighbors go after one of their own!

For example, a teacher in Rexford (Lincoln County) had offended the parents of several of his students. The adults reported him to the Lincoln County Council of Defense. J. M. Kennedy of the county council wrote to State Council Secretary Greenfield about the teacher (Record Series 19: Records of the Montana Council of Defense, Box 2, folder 3, letter of February 4, 1918, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena):

He is not a good citizen. He is disloyal to this country. He is a rabid, arrogant rebel. He persistently refuses to do his duty as a citizen. As a teacher of the public school at Rexford, he is a public menace. Always he preaches and teaches dangerous doctrines.

Dragged before the county council in Libby, the teacher would

admit only to refusing to aid in a campaign to sell thrift stamps and war stamps in the Rexford school. He maintained that children should not be taught that war was worthy of their financial support.

Within two weeks, minutes of the Libby inquiry were delivered to the State Council in Helena. The instructor's teaching certificate then was revoked by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and he was fired by the local school board.

To combat Montana's growing wartime problems (both real and imagined), Governor Stewart finally called a special session of the Montana legislature for February 14, 1918. In a frenzy of fanatical patriotism, legislators passed a statewide gun-registration law and an exceptionally tough espionage law.

They also approved an incredible sedition law, with penalties running to a fine of \$20,000 and/or 20 years in jail. Because of its severity, this legislation became the core of the federal sedition law later in the year—another dubious honor for Montana.

Special-session legislators also passed a bill that officially created the Council of Defense and made it a legitimate state agency. The legislation appropriated \$25,000 for operating expenses and directed the Council to dispense \$500,000 in seed loans to farmers. In light of gaining official sanction, the Council reorganized its membership.

The new (second) Council really had gained incredible power, because its enabling legislation permitted it to do "anything not contradicted by the U.S. Constitution or the Montana Constitution." An extra-legal body that already had operated for ten months thus became a legal entity with vast, frightening authority.

To this end, the legislature granted the State Council the power to create "by-laws" or "orders" to regulate Montana's wartime situation (please see the sidebar). Breaking one of these "orders" drew a fine of \$1,000, or one year in jail, or both! Violators of these "laws" were prosecuted by county attorneys and processed through the state courts.

Rapidly the new Council set to work creating "orders": 17 in

seven months! Most of these “laws” limited or prohibited an activity or a right that the Council deemed “anti-patriotic” or “detrimental to the war effort.” They ran from banning parades, to prohibiting fires, to forbidding use of the German language in Montana schools and churches.

Two of the most important of the “orders” were #7 and #8. By these “laws,” the Council gave itself the powers to investigate, to subpoena, and to punish violators. It could hold hearings and compel witnesses to attend. It could fine violators and even imprison them. And it did just that in the cases of suspected German operatives Eberhardt von Waldru and Oscar Rohn. Likewise the Council publicly and repeatedly investigated William Dunne, the editor of the radical *Butte Bulletin*.

Just as frightening, the powers invested in the State Council extended to the county councils. So rabid county-level “patriots” also could drag their neighbors before an intimidating county panel and grill them on any subject they wanted!

The second Montana Council of Defense continued its original tasks of increasing farm production, filling draft quotas, and promoting fund drives. But, more and more, it moved into the realm of “creating and maintaining emotional support for the war effort.” That is, it whipped Montanans into a pro-American, anti-German frenzy.

Simultaneously the State Council spread fear through Montana society by wielding its self-appointed investigative and punitive powers. The Council’s favorite targets were Socialists (especially members of the radical Industrial Workers of the World and the liberal Nonpartisan League), pacifists, Montana’s German-Russian population, Mennonites (who, unfortunately, were both pacifists and German!), and suspected German sympathizers of any ethnic background.

The Council kept secret dossiers on “suspicious citizens.” It tried, unsuccessfully, to create a 400-man state police force and to attach

it to the Council. Either with the enthusiastic support of Montanans or with their acquiescence (often based in fear), the Council controlled everyday life in Montana. And its victims had no recourse—for the Council answered to no one. Mass hysteria and ethnic intolerance fueled Montana’s “hyper-patriotism.”

Some of the greatest violations of civil liberties occurred during “investigations” run by the county councils. Executive Secretary Greenfield described such an instance involving men who had “under-subscribed” to a Red Cross fund drive in Broadwater County (*RS 19*, Box 1, folder 3, Charles D. Greenfield to Franklin D. Tanner, Hardin, May 18, 1918, MHSA):

In two cases, these men were brought before the Broadwater County Council of Defense and, while they first persisted in their original decision [not to contribute], nevertheless public sentiment was so stirred up against them that they finally concluded that it was the best part of wisdom to subscribe to the fund drive.

In one case, a genteel boycott was put on a man, in that he was not spoken to by any of his old friends. When he went into a store, the proprietor refused to allow him to be waited on. It took only about 24 hours of this sort of treatment to bring this gentleman to his senses.

“Bond shirkers” were citizens suspected by the county councils of failing to purchase enough Liberty Bonds or savings bonds. “Bond shirkers” received particularly harsh treatment at the hands of the “super-patriots.”

In Stevensville, for example, the Stevensville War Service League brought five residents before the Ravalli Council County of Defense. After the extensive grilling of each—designed more to harass than to reveal—the council determined that they all were “money slackers and, as such, deserving of public censure.”

The State Council ordered a copy of the county-council findings printed in every newspaper in Ravalli County, to berate the five men.

LEWISTOWN CITIZENS DISPLAY PATRIOTISM

Lewistown. March 27—The pent-up feeling against pro-Germans here found expression this afternoon when an impromptu crowd called Edward Foster in and told him to kiss the flag and take an oath of allegiance. Foster, a prominent real-estate man and an officer in the Montana Regiment during the Spanish-American War, was arrested later upon a charge of having uttered seditious statements a couple of days ago. He gave a bond of \$5,000 required by Justice Fred Skalicky.

The crowd went to the high school, secured all the German text books, carried them to the business center, and burned them amid cheers and the singing of patriotic songs. Following this, ten more suspected pro-Germans were required to kiss the flag and take an oath of allegiance. Tonight there was an immense, but very orderly, parade of citizens, headed by the Elks trumpet corps, extending over several blocks.

Roundup Record, *March 29, 1918*

When the editor of the *Stevensville Tribune* questioned this action, he was called to Helena by the State Council for his own hearing!

“Community councils” also ran rampant. These groups of self-appointed patriots created “standards of Americanism” and used them to monitor local actions. Neighbors suspected of pro-German sympathies frequently were brought to the steps of the county courthouse or the city hall. Here—publicly to demonstrate their patriotism—they were forced to kiss the flag, or to sing all the verses of “God Bless America,” or to recite the Pledge of Allegiance ten times. The phrase “public censure” became commonplace in Montana’s small-town weekly newspapers during 1918.

Both county and community councils also practiced “the delimiting of civil liberties in the name of patriotism” with visiting speakers from suspect organizations. In Miles City, Nonpartisan League organizer J. A. “Mickey” McGlynn was surrounded by members of the local “Third Degree Committee” as he stepped off the train one afternoon.

The patriots hustled him to the basement of a nearby hotel, where they beat him severely. Committee members then dumped McGlynn on the next express to Billings, with the admonition that “Nonpartisan League talk has no place in Miles City.” When State Attorney General Sam C. Ford attempted to bring these thugs to task, he was thwarted by the Custer County Attorney, who refused to pursue the case.

Once the anti-German hysteria took root in Montana, it proved hard to control. In the name of “Americanism,” community and county councils pursued any citizens whom they considered non-conformists “to make them part of the community’s war effort.” In Burton K. Wheeler’s autobiography, *Yankee from the West*, the U.S. Senator remarks (pp. 147-148):

In the fall of 1917, so-called “Liberty Committees” were organized in most of the small towns of the state to deal directly with anyone accused of being pro-German or who refused to buy the number of Liberty Bonds that these committees would assess against an individual as his “quota.”

The owner of a Billings meat market, who had torn up his Liberty Loan subscription blank, was forced to kiss the flag.

According to the Anaconda Standard, a so-called “Third Degree Committee” in Billings rounded up “pro-Germans and financial slackers” there in November, 1917. A Billings City Council member also was forced to resign his job and to carry an American flag through the streets [to prove his patriotism].

Some of the most vexing violations of rights guaranteed to Americans by their Constitution resulted from Order #3, forbidding the use of the German language. In fact, even before the enactment of Order #3, anti-German fanatics had run Montana’s last German-language newspaper, the (Helena) *Montana Staats-Zeitung*, out of business. The weekly folded in September, 1916, after these “patriots” had harassed its advertisers into submission.

Order #3 immediately halted the teaching of the German language in Montana schools, both public and private. The order listed a series of “pro-German” books to be removed from the shelves of all school libraries and public libraries. In Lewistown, Brockway, and at the State University of Montana in Missoula, “suspect” books were burned in public bonfires. The librarian at Hilger, a community northeast of Lewistown, wrote to the State Council (*RS 19*, Box 4, folder 19, Mrs. Emil Peterson to Council, May 14, 1918, MHSA):

Last month we weeded out all german [sic] texts that were in our school library, clipped out all german songs in our books of national songs, blotted out the coat of arms and the german flags in the dictionaries, and urged that every home should destroy the german-text and [banned] library books that they possess. We also spell “germany” without a capital letter.

A few days ago, we burned all of our *West's Ancient Worlds* [one of the texts on the Council's banned list], and I have the permission of our school trustees to destroy any texts found to contain german propaganda.

Order #3 also banned the use of German from the pulpit. This decision—from which the State Council never wavered—devastated a number of German-language congregations in eastern Montana, particularly Lutheran, Congregational, Mennonite, and Hutterite groups.

In heart-wrenching letters to the State Council, ministers pleaded for some modification of Order #3. For example, Lutheran pastor H. E. Vomhof of Laurel in 1918 wrote to Council Secretary Greenfield (*RS 19*, Box 3, folder 11, letter of September 8, 1918, MHSA):

I am coming to you in the interest of my congregation. It consists of Russians of the Volga district. Many of them, especially the old people, are not able to speak a word of English, and they understand very little. Of a sermon preached in English, the majority understand nothing but the words “God,” “Jesus,” and “amen,” or the names of the Apostles when mentioned....

Now my desire is that you ask the Council to allow us to have our communion services—also the funeral services—in German. To partake of the Lord's Supper without understanding what is said would be sinful. Hence we cannot celebrate the Lord's Supper—although that celebration is allowed and guaranteed us by the Constitution of the United States....

Remember, I do not desire to have all services in German. I do not ask for more than the above mentioned, although I believe that the worshiping of the people in any language should be left free—war or no war.

When some congregations began to meet in private homes, rather than in churches, to worship in German, the State Council specifically banned that practice. Even after the war was over (November 11, 1918), the Council punitively held fast to its ban forbidding German in Montana churches.

Order #3 also produced some unexpected results. For instance, there were about 700 families of Mennonites whom the Great Northern Railway had settled, early in the 1910s, on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation and near Chinook. Because of the State Council's hard-line enforcement of Order #3, more than 500 of these families relocated to British Columbia in 1918.

Perhaps most frightening about the actions of the high-handed state, county, and community councils is that they practiced their peculiar brand of "100% Americanism" on their own neighbors! Friend turned on friend; family turned on family; communities were shredded by suspicion, and threats, and bizarre actions—all in the name of "patriotism."

Because it was so strongly emotional, there simply was no way to stop this white-hot hysteria on Armistice Day (November 11, 1918). So the ethnic hatred and divisiveness continued, well into the early 1920s. For most Montanans, the hysteria finally played out then. But some of the hard-core purveyors of intolerance moved into the Montana Realm of the Ku Klux Klan, officially founded in 1923.

Interestingly the 1918 enabling legislation for the Montana Council of Defense required it to dissolve three months after the signing of a treaty. But problems developed among State Council members in interpreting what constituted a “treaty signing.” So the Council existed, at least on paper, until Governor Joseph M. Dixon finally killed it on August 24, 1921.

But by then the damage to Montana society had been done. World War I’s patriotic madness had poisoned an entire generation of Montanans. It certainly affected the state’s German-descent victims. But it also changed the anti-German fanatics, who either attacked their neighbors or said nothing when those attacks were made.

All of this home-front violence and “delimitation of Constitutional liberties” falls at the feet of the Montana Council of Defense. This agency acted as a parallel state government in Montana for almost two years—some of this time in a completely extra-legal capacity.

The State Council organized the hatred and the hysteria, and it fed the hatred and the hysteria. It set the pattern for county councils and community councils. And it generally condoned—even justified—the extreme actions of those subordinates. In an attempt to support the war effort to bring liberty and democracy to Europe, the Montana Council of Defense destroyed the liberty and democracy of Montanans at home.

Is the story of the Montana Council of Defense anything more than a case study—a distant piece of the past? Does it have anything to teach us today? The response obviously is “yes.” That is one of the reasons that we study history!

Given the right circumstances, similar violations of our civil rights could occur again. We need to be watchful, and we need to be vocal. The actions of the Montana Council of Defense constitute one of the very darkest chapters in the Montana story. That this travesty happened here once is more than enough.

The vigilance of Montanans is required to prevent its recurrence.

This rabid editorial excerpt appeared in the Helena Daily Independent, written by editor William A. Campbell—also a key member of the Montana Council of Defense. Campbell is commenting on the hanging of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizer Frank Little in Butte on the previous day, August 1, 1917.

“3-7-77”

Good work! Let them continue to hang every IWW in the state....

The *Independent* is convinced that unless the courts and the military authorities take a hand now and end the IWW in the West, there will be more night visits, more tugs at the rope, and more IWW tongues will wag for the last time when the noose tightens about the traitors’ throats....

The time has come. The *Independent* cannot comprehend why the United States government has not, long ago, established prison camps and interned there the enemies of the American government. It is beyond the comprehension of the average citizen why the War Department has not ordered certain leaders arrested and shot....

The American plan should be to arrest all of the disloyal, strip them of their Constitutional rights, confiscate their property, place them in internment camps, and deport them to Germany once we win the war....

It sort of quickens the blood in the veins of some of the pioneers of Helena to see once again, hanging from Frank Little’s body, the fatal figures “3-7-77.”

The words of German Lutheran theologian Martin Niemoller—in the context of World War II and Adolf Hitler’s Nazis—speak to that need for vigilance:

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.

SOME ORDERS OF THE
MONTANA COUNCIL OF DEFENSE, 1918

1. No parade or public demonstration will be held without the written permission of the Governor (March 15, 1918).
2. All persons not working in useful and legitimate jobs for at least 5 days per week will be considered “vagrants” and must register with local authorities (April 22, 1918).
3. The German language will not be permitted in any Montana schools or churches; specified books (and other books deemed pro German) will be removed from libraries (April 22, 1918)
5. No intoxicating liquors will be served to any member of the United States armed forces (May 27, 1918).
6. County Councils of Defense are empowered to create and enforce herd districts (May 27, 1918).
7. The State Council will investigate and hear all matters involving “public safety,” exercising subpoena power and the power to enforce its decisions (May 28, 1918).
8. The State Council, in its hearings, will conform to accepted rules of subpoena, examination, and transcription; a witness is entitled to counsel (May 28, 1918).
9. All burning will be prohibited during the months of June, July, August, and September (June 24, 1918).
10. During August and September, businessmen will make only one delivery each day, thereby freeing their employees for harvest work on local farms (June 24, 1918).
12. No new newspaper will be created in the state; weekly newspapers are prohibited from becoming dailies (August 12, 1918).
17. No dance or benefit will be held without the permission of the County Council of Defense (October 7, 1918).

SOURCES

The core source for this chapter is the extensive collection of papers: Record Series 19: Montana Council of Defense, 1916-1921, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena. This material can be supplemented with the pertinent state *Laws and Resolutions* passed by the 1917 legislature in regular and extraordinary sessions, and by the state document: *Proceedings of the Court for the Trial of Impeachment: the People of the State of Montana...v. Charles L. Crum...* (Helena: State Publishing, 1919).

Periodical pieces that apply include: O. A. Hilton, "Public Opinion and Civil Liberties in Wartime, 1917-1919," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, 28 (1955), 32-48; Benjamin Rader, "The Montana Lumber Strike of 1917," *Pacific Historical Review*, 36 (May, 1967), 189-207; Hugh T. Lovin, "World War Vigilantes in Idaho, 1917-1918," *Idaho Yesterdays*, 18, #3 (Fall, 1974), 2-11; and Anna Zellick, "Patriots on the Rampage: Mob Action in Lewistown, 1917-1918," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 31, #1 (Winter, 1981), 30-43. See especially: Arnon Gutfeld, *Montana's Agony: Years of War and Hysteria, 1917-1921* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1973).

Much work in this field remains buried in honors papers and theses. See particularly: Charles S. Johnson, "Two Montana Newspapers—the *Butte Bulletin* and the *Helena Independent*—and the Montana Council of Defense, 1917-1921," B.A. Honors Paper, University of Montana, 1970; Johnson, "An Editor and a War: Will A. Campbell and the *Helena Independent*, 1914-1921," M.A. thesis, University of Montana, 1977; Kurt Wetzel, "The Making of an American Radical: Bill Dunne in Butte," M.A. thesis, University of Montana, 1970; Timothy C. McDonald, "The Montana Press and American Neutrality in the First World War," M.A. seminar paper, University of Montana, 1975; Mark Mackin, "The Council for Defense: Autocracy in Montana, 1917-1918," B.A. Honors Paper, Carroll College, 1976; Arnon Gutfeld, "The Butte Labor Strikes and Company Retaliation during World War I," M.A. thesis, University of Montana, 1967. See especially: Nancy Rice Fritz, "The Montana Council of Defense," M.A. thesis, University of Montana, 1966.

The other rich source of color for this chapter is Montana's statewide array of newspapers—but particularly the *Butte Daily Bulletin* and the *Helena Independent*.