

DARKEST BEFORE DAWN

Sedition and Free Speech in the American West

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ALBUQUERQUE

Frontispiece: Intrigued by freighter Martin Wehinger's story of killing a bear with an axe, pioneer photographer L. A. Huffman took this studio portrait of him in the 1890s. Convicted of sedition for criticizing the United States' participation in World War I, Wehinger spent eighteen months behind bars. He died, toothless, in 1920, four months after his release from prison. L. A. Huffman, Courtesy of Coffrin's Old West Gallery, Bozeman, Montana.

TEN

The Pot Boils Over

War Hysteria Paralyzes the State, 1918

“WAR GIVES THE CONGENITAL LIAR AN EXTRAORDINARY OPPORTUNITY,” the *Saturday Evening Post* advised its readers six months into the war. “Newspapers and newsgathering associations receive grotesque tips of happenings that would be sensational in the superlative degree if they really happened. The newspaper man is able to spot the fake at sight. . . . But a great many credulous people . . . swallow inventions whose falsity would be apparent to their simple horse sense if they would exercise that faculty.”¹

The magazine was half right. Citizens in wartime were indeed susceptible to rumors, half-truths and bald-faced lies, but more often than not their fears were manipulated—by the press, by private “patriotic” organizations, and by public officials.

If Montana editors were able to spot a fake, they also knew how to take something less than accurate and run with it. Newspapers and popular magazines in the state and across the country whipped up the frenzy with sensational stories on German spies and fantastic tales of German plots. Lurid cartoons demonizing the enemy and lionizing the “sammees” drove home the point, along with less-than-subtle advertisements for Liberty Bonds and other war measures. Newspapers blared headlines such as “Huns Plan Bestial Fight on Sammees” and “Hello! Heaven? Vat? Yes? Dis is Vilhe’m, Kaiser of Chermans” and the like.²

In an era when airplanes were exotic, they seemed to blossom in the Big Sky. Two women swore they saw an airplane spin into a Bitterroot valley swamp in early August but it was never found.³ Flathead valley residents told of airships flying south. “Are the Germans about to bomb the capital of Montana?” asked master manipulator Will Campbell, editor of the *Helena Independent*. “Have they spies in the mountain fastnesses equipped with wireless stations and aeroplanes? Do the enemies fly around over our high mountains where formerly only the shadow of the eagle

swept?”⁴ Several weeks later, he announced that Helena citizens “incensed by recent visits” had become the first to fire shots at an enemy aircraft. Gov. Stewart vowed to follow the next airplane and hinted he would take an expert rifleman with him.⁵

Tainted produce, toxic substances and mysterious diseases were blamed on German spies—often accompanied by editorials. Two liters of toxic bee pollen were in the hands of German agents in California, ready to destroy Montana’s wheat crop, the *Daily Missoulian* reported. “We need not picture the disaster that will follow, affecting the most vital welfare of all the population in this great and prosperous territory and acting in the most deadly way to lose the war for us and win it for Germany,” the newspaper warned.⁶ Ground glass in a sack of flour was “apparently unmistakable evidence that enemy agents in the state are poisoning flour,” the same paper declared.⁷ “Poisonous” Burma beans, akin to navy beans, had been shipped into Pacific ports in a “diabolical plot to murder Americans,” the *Independent* reported.⁸ “How would you like it, Mr. Ordinary Citizen, if one of your children or your wife lay dead in your home as the result of using tetanus court plaster or poisoned beans?” the editor asked.⁹

The “pro-German” Wobblies were, of course, often blamed. According to one study, “Federal detectives could supposedly prove that IWW saboteurs had attempted to poison the water supply of Denver; had poisoned fruit shipped from California; and had poisoned horses throughout Idaho by pouring lye and other chemicals into the animals’ food. . . . According to rumors, the IWW even had a widespread plot to murder government officials. Envelope flaps were coated with cyanide of potassium, officials would die of ‘heart failure’ seconds after licking the poisoned flaps.”¹⁰

Whatever “proof” federal agents had of such activities never surfaced. No IWW was ever charged with such crimes and the “evidence” was never used at any trial, including that of the IWW leaders in Chicago in the summer of 1918.

In addition to regularly published tales of German brutality, newspapers and magazines indulged in a favorite pseudo-science of the time: phrenology, the analysis of skull shape and facial features to read personality characteristics. Side-by-side photos of Allied and German generals’ eyes, for example, revealed remarkable differences. The “wide-open clear eyes of [British commanding General Douglas] Haig, are the eyes which

picture no hate, no lust, no greed. They are the eyes of a commander who would not countenance wanton slaughter of foe nor inhuman sacrifice of his own soldiers.” The eyes of German commander-in-chief von Hindenburg “see no further than the accomplishment of his own brutal will. They are the eyes which believe in neither man nor God. They are suspicious, searching eyes. . . . They are the eyes who sicken not at need-less bloodshed, ruined homes, and murdered babies.”¹¹

One-Hundred Percent Patriotic

The suspicions and jealousies that pervaded the state and nation were also the lifeblood of the shadowy, quasi-legal organizations that dominated life in Montana in 1918—the state, county, and community councils of defense. They formed the lower and broader tiers of a vast pyramid with the Council of National Defense at the apex. The councils’ original purpose had been to help the war effort. Until 1918, the focus of the state and local councils in Montana had been increased food production.

Their focus changed dramatically—Montana’s in February 1918 after the special legislative session. A reorganized and funded state council, with authority equal to that of the legislature, began to concentrate on boosting patriotism and ferreting out anybody perceived as disloyal. To back up the councils’ power, a new law provided that any person who violated or refused to obey their orders would be guilty of a misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in jail.¹²

Gov. Stewart chaired the state council, while its guiding spirit and most active appointee was his ally, archconservative Will Campbell of the *Helena Independent*. Another newspaperman, Charles D. Greenfield, was the executive secretary. Other appointees represented business, farm, and labor interests.¹³

After the state council gave itself the power to investigate people “in all matters pertaining to the public safety and the protection of life and property,” councils at the grassroots level assumed the same powers. County councils in Montana, composed of prominent men in the community, began squelching “pro-Germanism” and rooting out suspected spies and “slackers.”¹⁴ Mass-membership liberty committees, third-degree committees, loyalty committees, war leagues, and the like, which included almost every adult in the community, had already been harassing Liberty Bond slackers since the previous year. Now, more committees formed and their energies redoubled.

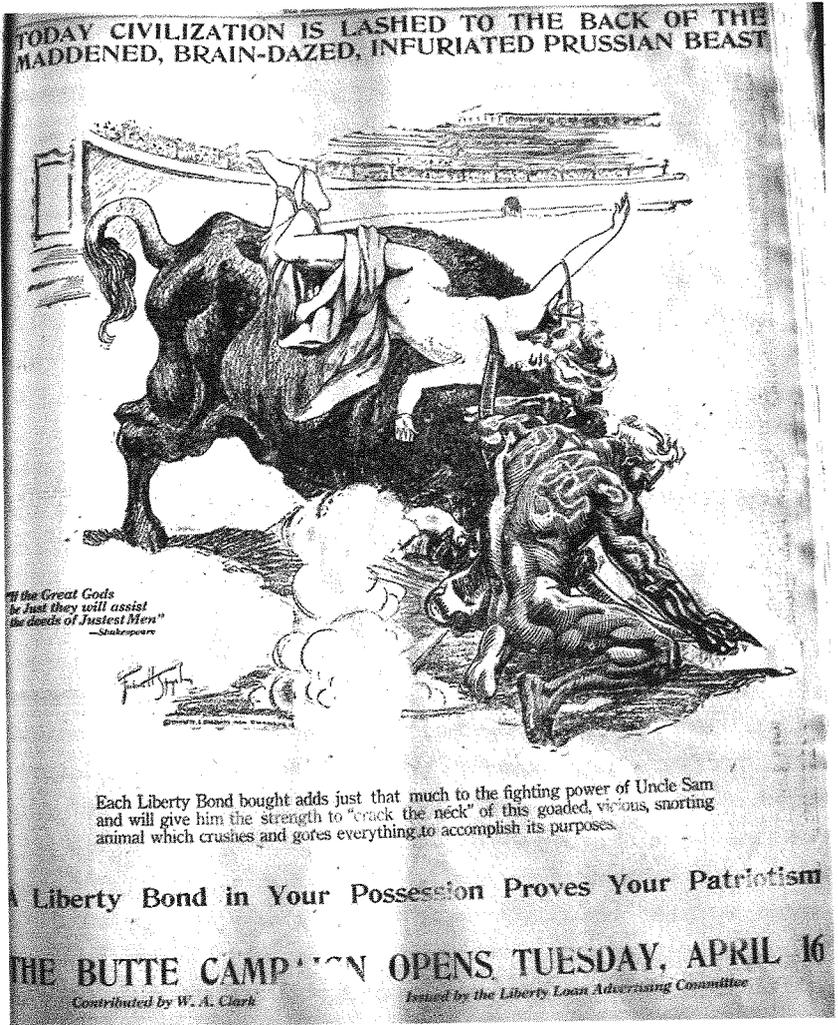


Figure 17. This allegorical cartoon, published in the *Butte Miner* in 1918, typifies the symbolism used in advertisements to promote the sale of Liberty Bonds and other public war financing. Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives.

[facing page] Figure 18. The members of the Montana Council of Defense had wide-ranging powers in World War I. Council orders banned German books and preaching in German. Montana Historical Society.



Pressure to join these grassroots groups, to “make Montana 100 percent patriotic,” was strong.¹⁵ The Jefferson County council of defense organized citizens as War League No. 1, making it clear that “any man who refuses to sign the membership card and pledge of the War League is open to suspicion. The membership certificate is placed in the window, and is an incentive to patriotic endeavor by the neighbors.”¹⁶

In Montana, conditions for repression seemed particularly ripe. With the vast economic and political power of the Anaconda and the copper press influencing public opinion to rally against the demonic forces of labor unrest and radicalism, there was no effective check on hyper-patriotism. Now, with Montana’s sedition law on the books, a national sedition law in the works in the spring of 1918, and loyalty organizations behind every bush, citizens could get to work. Local councils and loyalty groups plunged into the job of investigating cases of “pro-Germanism.”

Lewistown mayor Lewis C. Clark organized a Loyalty Committee composed of himself, the fire and police chiefs, the sheriff and the city

clerk “because . . . there were so many complaints about people making seditious talks” and because “[we] know what is going on.”¹⁷ His committee illustrated the common blurring of lines between the functions of elected city officials and defense and loyalty groups—the latter often gave orders to the former and greatly reduced the chance of any impartiality by law enforcement officers. It also increased the risk that overzealous acts by loyalty groups would not be stopped before harm was done.

Clark also shed light on the pressure put on citizens to conform: “[I]f a man is in business and is found disloyal we suggest that the public stop buying from him. If he has a job, we suggest to the employer, that he lets the man go,” he wrote.¹⁸ The committee asked persons working on war bond and Red Cross drives to report “any person who failed to support these movements without good reason in order that these cases might be investigated.”¹⁹

Whipped up by such exhortations, the citizens of Fergus County threw themselves into a roundup of pro-Germans that exploded on March 27 in Lewistown, the county seat. A real estate man named Edward Foster, an officer in the Montana Regiment in the Spanish-American War, was accused of making a disloyal remark.²⁰ He was found “guilty” of sedition by a “committee of loyal citizens” meeting in a pool hall, then forced to march up and down the street carrying the American flag before he was officially arrested. The crowd that had gathered then swept to the high school and demanded all the German textbooks. They were carried to the street and burned as the mob sang “America” and the “Star Spangled Banner.” The citizens made nine more “disloyal” men kiss the flag and take the Oath of Allegiance, then nearly lynched another man who had refused to buy Liberty Bonds or War Savings Thrift Stamps on conscientious grounds.

Anna Zellick, who wrote about this incident, interviewed an eyewitness, a high school girl at the time, who recalled:

They nearly hung a man, and he was going to be thrown into the Spring Creek. When my sister and I came upon the scene, they were calling for the ropes. I can still remember how I felt in my bosom. I was just a kid then, but I felt this was so wrong because this was our United States which was supposed to be free, and we could do as we wished as far as buying bonds were concerned.²¹

As a finale, two thousand people marched in a parade that evening and

“cheered lustily” at patriotic speeches. It was, the *Fergus County Argus* crowed, a “Big Day in America and the City of Lewistown.”²²

Somewhat chastened by the mob violence, and perhaps by a mysterious blaze that burned the now-thoroughly-loyal high school to the ground a month later, a re-organized county-wide committee continued to report suspected instances of disloyalty.²³ Eventually, at least ten men would be charged with sedition in Fergus County, giving it one of the highest tallies of sedition cases in the state (a statistic not incongruent with the fact that it surpassed its April bond drive quota of \$241,000 by more than 100 percent).

In district court, Foster was found guilty for having remarked, “Because I don’t buy Liberty Bonds and don’t carry the God-damn flag they call me pro-German.” He received a \$500 fine.²⁴ A sheep rancher, Anton Schaffer, accused of sedition by tenants he had been trying to evict, received a \$12,000 fine.²⁵ Four other men were convicted of sedition.

“Not engaging in . . . rituals of patriotism was tantamount to being a traitor, ‘un-American,’” Bonnie Christensen observed in a recent book about Red Lodge, Montana, where Finnish miners were beaten up in the name of patriotism.²⁶

A leading coal-mining town since the 1880s, Red Lodge was a smaller version of Butte, subject to all the social and economic phenomena of the era, including the emergence of the IWW and the Socialist Party. Finns, the biggest ethnic group among the miners, were never big flag-wavers, and when some of them joined the IWW and publicly denounced the war, they became targets for the town jingoes. In the fall and winter of 1917, the local Liberty Committee, headed by a retired publisher and a former sheriff, brutalized the Finns. One miner who refused to give the names of other IWWs was taken to the basement of the Elks Lodge and strung up by his neck until he did so. The attacks culminated in the accidental death of a Finnish woman. The terrorized Finnish community then publicly embraced loyalty, aiming to show that its members were 110 percent Americans.²⁷

There was practically no limit to the number of patriotic organizations a person could join. The Montana Loyalty League was formed in July 1918, with editor Will Campbell as its executive secretary.²⁸ “Get behind the boys ‘over there’ with every ounce of power, every atom of strength and every dollar to help crush autocracy,” Campbell exhorted citizens. “Thousands of eyes will watch and thousands of ears will listen for the Hun spy or agent or sympathizer within our gates . . .”²⁹ The group claimed sixty thousand

members.³⁰ It spent much of its money and energy exposing the Non-Partisan League, influencing politics, and attempting to “curb the treacherous alien” and “exterminate the Industrial Workers of the World.”³¹

Other large private loyalty organizations included the National Security League and the American Defense Society (with its American Vigilante Patrol, “formed to put an end to seditious street oratory”).³² Largest of all was the American Protective League, with a claimed 1918 national membership of two hundred and fifty thousand, which took spying on one’s neighbors to a new level.³³

The League “constituted a rambunctious, unruly posse comitatus,” historian David Kennedy observed.³⁴ With offers of well-heeled volunteers and free transportation with fleets of automobiles, the APL worked out a quasi-official relationship with the Justice Department. Members spied on suspected pro-Germans in all sorts of illegal ways—phone taps, burglary, mail and telegram intercepts—which the Justice Department overlooked. The APL “brought to judgment three million cases of disloyalty,” boasted author Emerson Hough.³⁵ Among its chief prizes, Hough claimed, was the arrest of Eugene Debs for sedition, based on a speech in Canton, Ohio, on June 16, 1918. The speech, recorded by APL operatives and stenographers, was the principal evidence at his trial.³⁶

Even young boys were recruited to ferret out disloyalty. The Anti-Yellow Dog Club, founded by writer Henry Irving Dodge, brought to life the fictional plot of Dodge’s story, “The Yellow Dog,” published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in May 1918.³⁷ The club trained Boy Detectives to challenge “yellow dogs”—anyone who “knocked” the government. The boys would hand offenders a “summons” to “the court of your conscience” and report them to the authorities. The club’s motto: “Free speech, yes! Free lies, no!”

By mid-1918, the Department of Justice was receiving fifteen hundred letters a day related to loyalty charges.³⁸ Attorney General Gregory boasted that, “Never in its history has this country been so thoroughly policed.”³⁹ To which CPI director George Creel added, “Not a pin dropped in the home of anyone with a foreign name but that it rang like thunder on the inner ear of some listening sleuth.”⁴⁰

Smoldering Suspicions

Countless other suspicions smoldered. In western Fergus County, a farmer

named Vandenberg complained to Gov. Stewart about a neighboring farmer, Vander Giessen, and his family. "I am sorry thad I have to write this letter, but I tink it to be my duty, when I drove from town Saturday, I seen 3 big boys playing in the yard, two of military age and their father was loafing in town . . . I have not heard of iny of them being drafted. Maybe they have not registered at all. Of course I don't know but one ting I do know that I work 640 acres all alone [whereas all of them together] do not work iny more than 640 in all." The previous summer, he related, "the old fellow said give me a Kaiser and you can have Wilson, one of the boys said if he had to fight for the U.S. he rather be in jail."⁴¹ The Fergus county council investigated and found it to be "a personal feeling" between the families.⁴²

Those who balked at financial contributions to the war were often punished. Alma J. Swift, a store manager in Butte, had bought a Liberty Bond earlier but refused to pitch in during a bond campaign in October 1918. "Nothing doing!" she said. "Let the profiteers pay for that!" After her boss threatened to fire her and to have her sister, principal of a local grade school, investigated, Miss Swift evidently had second thoughts over her lunch hour. She subscribed for a \$50 Liberty Bond, instead of the winter clothing she had planned to buy. When she came back to the store, her time card had been removed.

Miss Swift tried to fight back. "An American citizen has the right of personal security, of personal liberty, of . . . freedom of speech and of the press," she told the county council. "This girl is being black-listed all over this town," a defender from the Good Government Club protested. "If this girl is allowed to be dismissed without protest, you can imagine the rest of them not being able to open their mouths. She has not committed any crime."

The council members were obdurate. A person's duty, she was reminded, is "not to knock publicly in these times. If a person should come out and say, 'I cannot afford to subscribe' . . . that would be all right. If you came out and made a slurring remark as to the reason the Liberty Bonds were sold, I would say you are to the bad."⁴³

Loafers, vagrants, slackers, and IWWs came under special scrutiny. Although the state's vagrancy law already applied to "every person (except an Indian) without visible means of living," the state council in April ordered every able adult "to work and engage in some legitimate occupation for at least five days during each calendar week for the period of the existing war."⁴⁴ A similar "work or fight" order issued by Gen. Crowder, the Provost

Marshal General, required that men be drafted regardless of their draft number if they could not show they were engaged in useful work.

The state's order raised all kinds of questions. The Granite County attorney in Philipsburg inquired whether real estate agents and saloon owners were "engaged in some useful occupation."⁴⁵ The Big Horn County Council of Defense had questions about "merry-go-round men" in Hardin.⁴⁶ Should clerks and moving picture managers do farm work, even if they are unsuited for it, asked the Custer County chairman. "Shall such men just quit what they are doing, and wait till they are called for some productive work?" No, as long as they work five days a week, state council secretary Greenfield advised.⁴⁷

H. A. Simmons, county attorney in Red Lodge, took a tougher stance. He prosecuted eight men arrested after soliciting orders for enlarged portraits. A colorful account appeared in the *Helena Independent*, reporting that the men "started with a loud crashing of cymbals and beating of tomtoms to canvass the town for pictures of departed relatives and photographs of Pa and Ma when they were married years ago, with ears pinched between the forks of a photographer's head steadier."⁴⁸ Seven of the portrait men pled guilty and were fined \$25 each.⁴⁹

Most city officials were eager to cooperate in squelching dissent. The state council asked all municipalities to ban public speaking without permission. A separate order prohibited all parades, processions, or other public demonstrations without a permit.⁵⁰ In Butte, "the talker and the subject matter is first made known to this office and to the chief of police," reported the mayor. "We have absolutely prohibited such for some months past, except for the Salvation Army," the mayor of Missoula noted. Frank Conley, warden of the state penitentiary in Deer Lodge, and the town's mayor as well, said no street speaking had been allowed "since the trouble in Butte in 1914." Banned in Bozeman was "talk in any public place . . . that was not for the betterment, or for the good of the great conflict that is being waged."⁵¹

Ford's Burlesque

In such a climate, unpopular speakers and radical organizers were not likely to get permits, but rather a clear signal they were not welcome, an escort to the next train, or worse. Rep. Jeannette Rankin, who had voted against declaring war with Germany and was frequently charged by the newspapers with being associated with Wobblies, socialists, and Nonpartisans,

was refused permission to speak in Butte, Deer Lodge, and Missoula, even though she was making Liberty Loan addresses.⁵²

But the unwelcome mat was out particularly for organizers for the IWW and the Non-Partisan League. On the same day that Frank Little arrived in Butte, the *Anaconda Standard* related the reception for an IWW organizer named Blomkvist. The man arrived in Anaconda on the two o'clock train. Police had been tipped off to his arrival, but didn't show their hand when they met him at the train. Thinking the men were his Wobbly welcoming committee, the unwitting Blomkvist chatted away as he was escorted—right to the courthouse and jail.

"Noticing bars on the county jail, he was suddenly afflicted with a severe attack of cold feet," the *Standard* reported, "and he suddenly realized he had said a trifle too much." The detectives confiscated socialistic and IWW literature in Blomkvist's bag. "Seeing the authorities had the goods on him, Blomkvist formed the opinion that Anaconda was a mighty poor place to deliver a speech . . . and was more than willing to accept the proposition that he leave the city on the next train. In order that his memory might not fail him, two of the officers accompanied him as far as Silver Bow, where they saw him safely aboard the southbound short line train [to Butte]."⁵³

The policemen's attitude (and the newspaper's as well) was a manifestation of a widespread public attitude that contemporary journalist John Fitch had noticed back in 1915: "Baiting the IWW has become a pastime in nearly every place in the United States where that organization has made its appearance. Members and leaders have had their constitutional rights atrociously invaded by officials and by 'good' citizens."⁵⁴

Similarly targeted were organizers for the Non-Partisan League, whose endorsement of greater state regulation through state-owned elevators, cooperatives, and extended farm credit branded them as socialists, and whose opposition to the state sedition bill had labeled them as pro-German sympathizers. In March, the NPL's two top leaders, A. C. Townley and Joseph Gilbert, were indicted by a Minnesota grand jury for sedition.⁵⁵

Crowds of several hundred persons awaited NPL organizer Robert Martin at the Big Timber and Columbus train stations in March 1918. Although he was accompanied by State Attorney General Sam Ford, he decided not to alight.⁵⁶ Even Gov. Stewart issued a plea for tolerance, saying, "It is highly essential that the right of free assemblage and free speech

should not be denied to anyone in . . . Montana so long as they keep within lawful bounds.”⁵⁷

His plea was ignored. In mid-April, Martin was scheduled to speak at the University of Montana in Missoula, this time escorted by U.S. District Attorney B. K. Wheeler and bearing accreditation as a Liberty Loan speaker. But as they approached the theater where Martin was to speak, a member of the Missoula County Defense Society stepped from the shadows—a prominent lawyer in town, Wheeler recalled—and told Martin that if he went ahead, he’d be tarred and feathered. “If it must travel into the twilight zone to clean the city of disloyalty,” the *Daily Missoulian* said of the local council, “it will be because our citizens, individually, are not in co-operation . . . Missoula is to be cured of the last trace of kaiseritis. Don’t forget that.”⁵⁸

J. A. “Mickey” McGlynn, a young farmer from Sidney who became an organizer with the NPL, paid for his courage against the mob. In early April he survived a close call near Mizpah, where ranchers had planned to drag him down a creek at the end of a rope.⁵⁹ Then, on the night of April 7, a loyalty committee in Miles City hustled McGlynn down to the basement of the Elks Club, beat him up and “persuaded” him to hop the next train west.⁶⁰

Saying the Miles City incident was “setting a flagrant example of the very kaiserism against which the U.S. is warring today,” State Attorney General Ford vowed to prosecute the men who mistreated McGlynn.⁶¹

County Attorney Frank Hunter brought kidnapping charges against not only the men named by McGlynn but also against the county’s leading lights, some of whom weren’t even in Miles City at the time of the McGlynn incident. The action prompted a letter of congratulations to McGlynn from the NPL’s state superintendent, saying, “If we can get a few of these self-styled super-patriots up against a dose of their own medicine, they may hesitate to use their political prejudice under the guise of patriotism.”⁶² But the man had badly misread the county attorney’s true intent: to embarrass Ford by stirring citizens to rally in defense of their “patriotic” leaders.

The *Daily Star* bought into Hunter’s ploy: “Take a good look at . . . the 21 ‘kidnappers.’ . . . Has there been a patriotic movement of any kind at any time in . . . which these gentlemen have not been conspicuous? . . . [Then] turn your eyes in the direction of the witnesses for the prosecution. . . . How many Liberty bonds have [they] purchased? . . . How many patriotic movements have they fathered . . . at this particularly critical time when your son is in the trenches [prepared to give] his life in sacrifice for the flag we love?”⁶³

On Monday, May 13, all twenty-one defendants met Ford at the train station and escorted him to the courthouse.⁶⁴ People flocked from Terry, Forsyth, Roundup, Mizpah, and surrounding communities to attend the proceeding. "Sweet Red Cross nurses" sold tickets to the hearing, which they billed as "Ford's Burlesque, or the Thrilling Adventures of the Kidnapper Kid." They collected more than \$250. The spacious courtroom was packed "almost to suffocation" as the hearing began.⁶⁵

Hunter cross-examined McGlynn about the April 7 incident in Miles City, but also questioned him about his loyalty. McGlynn denied having said that maimed Belgian children being shown around the country to raise money for war relief had actually been injured in Chicago. But Hunter had already prepared a warrant for his arrest on sedition charges based on those remarks.

As McGlynn left the witness chair, slouch hat in hand, the county sheriff served him with the warrant. At the courtroom door, a supporter of McGlynn accosted the sheriff, who punched him. The man ran back into the courtroom. McGlynn made a run for it (officials later claimed an escape plot); the sheriff drew his gun, shouting at his prisoner to stop. McGlynn skidded to a halt. The courtroom erupted in pandemonium. "Bailiffs pounded for order, women screamed, and for a moment a tragedy threatened, for hundreds were struggling to get to the man who had attempted interference," according to one report. "Then officers charged the crowd and after a short struggle succeeded in getting [the supporter] away."⁶⁶

With McGlynn and the other man in jail cells, Ford did his best to press his kidnapping case against the men who had actually confronted McGlynn in the Elks Club basement. Defense attorney Sharpless Walker delivered an impassioned patriotic oration in support of his twenty-one clients and moved for dismissal of the charges. The judge agreed, declaring, "This is certainly not a case of kidnapping, Miles City has been able to handle its own problems, and handle them to a queen's taste and has never needed any help from the western end of the state . . ."⁶⁷

"The thunderous applause that followed . . . shook the walls of the courtroom and the demonstration continued for nearly five minutes," the *Daily Star* reported. "The 21 defendants were surrounded by a veritable mob of men and women, each trying to shake the hands of one of the 'kidnapers.'"⁶⁸

“More dramatic and patriotic scenes were never witnessed in a Montana courtroom,” the newspaper exulted. The defendants had been acquitted and the witness for the prosecution was in jail for sedition along with “his IWW bodyguard.” Ford had “made a serious blunder,” the newspaper editorialized.⁶⁹ “The swollen head of our little attorney general hit a solid, concrete wall of American patriotism at Miles City,” said the *Daily Missoulian*.⁷⁰ The *Terry Tribune* was blunter: “Ford is dead, damned, delivered politically, so why waste valuable space for an obituary?”⁷¹

Ford (who later achieved his ambitions for higher office when he served as governor from 1941 to 1949) did not back down. Three weeks after his humiliation in Miles City, he sent a letter to the Montana Council of Defense warning that in “numerous” cases involving county councils of defense and other patriotic bodies, “the right of free speech and the right to make public addresses have been denied individuals . . . by violence . . . intimidation and forcible coercion.”⁷²

Ford continued: “A cloud has arisen upon Montana’s horizon that threatens dire consequences to the people of the state. Class is being arrayed against class and bitterness is being engendered; and if the lawlessness cited is not put down, and the right of free speech is not rescued from the disrepute thrown upon it, in my opinion, conditions may follow that will do the people and the fair name of the state incalculable injury . . . precedents in lawlessness and violence extremely dangerous to the conservative and law-abiding people of this state are being established, and a civil and social evil is rearing its head that may bring down upon them appalling penalties . . .”⁷³

Few newspapers in the state even took note of Ford’s letter. The *Daily Missoulian* called it “a rather wearisome communication . . . much of which is pointless.”⁷⁴ Nor did the newspapers give any play to similar cautions issued by the national Committee on National Defense. “In the past few months there has been a tendency toward lawless treatment of those suspected of disloyalty,” the Committee’s bulletin said. “However patriotic may have been the motives which prompted these outbursts, their effect is deplorable. They are blots upon the war record of a nation which has declared itself to be fighting for a universal reign of law; they furnish ammunition to those makers of enemy propaganda who are trying to make the world believe that the enemies of Germany, too, are capable of atrocities . . .”⁷⁵

President Wilson weighed in on “the mob spirit,” taking his characteristic high road: “No man who loves America, no man who really cares for her fame and honor and character, or who is truly loyal to her institutions, can justify mob action while the courts of justice are open . . .”⁷⁶

Despite his high-minded language, Wilson could only blame himself. He had set the tone with his policy choices. The launching of Creel’s Committee on Public Information had done an extraordinary job of shaping public opinion about the war and energizing the hyper-patriotism that followed. His appointment of reactionaries like Attorney General Gregory and Postmaster General Burleson and his hands-off attitude toward their excesses had added to the strength and velocity of the hatred. “Without meaning to,” noted Meirion and Susie Harries in *The Last Days of Innocence*, “by working on the fears and prejudices already latent in society, Wilson and Creel had helped to shape a divided, fearful, intolerant nation.”⁷⁷ ❖