Palmer’s Case Against “Red” 1920

Primary Source Analysis
Image Analysis
Point of View Writing Prompt
In 1919 and 1920, Attorney General Palmer led a crusade against Americans believed to be “leftist,” “anarchists,” and threats to the general safety of democratic America. His plan was to arrest and deport those threats to America. The Department of Labor thwarted many of Palmer’s deportations attempt because deportation was under its jurisdiction and the Department objected to Palmer’s methods. These Palmer Raids were one aspect of the Red Scare, the fear of, and reaction to, political radicals in America. With the Russian Revolution making news, for many people this Red Scare became more of a reality.

A fear was that the Russian Revolution would bleed into America via Russian immigrants and other immigrants sympathetic to the Russian cause. People were targeted by Palmer both fairly and unfairly. A person could denounce his or her neighbor and proof of radical activities was not necessary for the arrest to happen. Below is a speech given by Palmer regarding his crusade against “Red.” In two years hundreds of individuals were deported, multiple thousands were arrested, and more than a few were unfortunately innocent of being anarchists, communists, or leftists.

**Attorney General Palmer’s Case Against the “Reds,” 1920**

In this brief review of the work which the Department of Justice has undertaken, to tear out the radical seeds that have entangled American ideas in their poisonous theories, I desire not merely to explain what the real menace of communism is, but also to tell how we have been compelled to clean up the country almost unaided by any virile legislation.

Like a prairie-fire, the blaze of revolution was sweeping over every American institution of law and order a year ago. It was eating its way into the homes of American workman, its sharp tongues of revolutionary heat were licking the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace marriage vows with libertine laws, burning up the foundations of society.

Upon these two basic certainties, first that the “Reds” were criminal aliens, and secondly that the American government must prevent crime, it was decided that there could be no nice distinctions drawn between the theoretical ideals of the radicals and their actual violations of our national laws.

An assassin may have brilliant intellectuality, he may be able to excuse his murder or robbery with fine oratory, but any theory which excuses crime is not wanted in America. There is no place for the criminal to flourish, nor will he do so long as the rights of common citizenship can be exerted to prevent him.

It has always been plain to me that when American citizens unite upon any national issue, they are generally right, but it is sometimes difficult to make the issue clear to them. If the Department of Justice could succeed in attracting the attention of our optimistic citizens to the issue of internal revolution in this country, we felt sure there would be no revolution. The government was in jeopardy.

My information showed that communism in this country was an organization of thousands of aliens, who were direct allies of Trotzky. Aliens of the same misshapen caste of mind and indecencies of character, and it showed that they were making the same glittering promises of lawlessness, of criminal autocracy to Americans, that they had made to the Russian peasants.

How the Department of Justice discovered upwards of 60,000 of these organized agitators of the Trotzky doctrine in the United States, is the confidential information upon which the government is now sweeping the nation clean of such alien filth.

Behind, and underneath, my own determination to drive from our midst the agents of Bolshevism with increasing vigor and with greater speed, until there are no more of them left among us, so long as I have the
responsible duty of that task, I have discovered the historical methods of these revolutionary humans with increasing amazement and suspicion.

In the confused information that sometimes reaches the people, they are compelled to ask questions which involve the reasons for my acts against the “Reds.” I have been asked, for instance, to what extent deportation will check radicalism in this country. Why not ask what will become of the United States Government if these alien radicals are permitted to carry out the principles of the Communist party as embodied in tis so-called laws, aims, and regulations?

There wouldn’t be any such thing left. In place of the United States Government we should have the horror and terrorism of Bolshevik tyranny such as is destroying Russia now. Every scrap of radical literature demands the overthrow of our existing government. All of it demands obedience to the instincts of criminal minds, that is, to the lower appetites, material, and moral.

The whole purpose of communism appears to be a mass formation of the criminals of the world to overthrow the decencies of private life, to usurp property that they have not earned, to disrupt the present order of life regardless of health, sex, or religious rights. By a literature that promises the wildest dreams of such low aspirations, that can occur to only the criminal minds, communism distorts our social law.
Questions

1. What 2 world events had just happened, instigating these raids and this crusade by Palmer?
   a. 
   b. 

2. What did Palmer mean by saying, “the menace of communism?”

3. Define “virile legislation.”

4. List 3 societal foundations being burnt by revolutionary fervor.
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 

5. Why did Palmer decide “that there could be no nice distinctions drawn between the theoretical ideals of the radicals and their actual violations of our national laws?”

6. Rewrite the 4th paragraph in your own words. The paragraph starting with, “an assassin may have…”
7. Explain what Palmer’s information told him about American communism.

8. How does Palmer respond to those who question his actions against “Reds” and the deportations of merely suspected radicals?

9. What two things are demanded by radical literature according to Palmer?
   
a.

b.

10. Re-write the last paragraph in your own words to show that you understand Palmer’s message.

Point of View Writing Prompt

Virtually all situations have more than one point of view. Write a solid 2 paragraph reacting to Palmer’s speech from the point of view of an actual Russian Communist/anarchist/leftist/threat to America. Then, write another 2 paragraph reaction to this speech from an American citizen who does not believe America has reason to fear the Russian Revolution spilling onto its shores or that anarchists will dismantle the US Government.
Pick 3 of the following images. Describe a) what is happening in the image, b) the message of the political cartoon, c) the meaning of any symbols/figures, and d) explain how they relate to Palmer’s speech.

For the other 3 images, write a 1920s appropriate caption for it (in other words, make sure your caption reflects the thinking of the times and for fun, utilizing 1920s terms).
**Answers should be along the lines of**

1. World War 1 and the Russian Revolution

2. communism was a threat, problematic, would injure America

3. robust/powerful laws/government action

4. workingmen, religion/churches, marriage, education

5. because he was absolutely sure that “Reds” were criminal aliens and that the government must prevent crime

6. answers will vary

7. that Trotzky had allies in the form of thousands of aliens in America

8. he turns the question back to the person and asks what would happen to the American government if the radicals were NOT removed by any means necessary and if they put their Communist principles into place.

9. overthrow the American government and obedience to criminal minds

10. answers will vary
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