THE OUTER WORLD AND THE INNER LIGHT: A CASE STUDY

By Robert K. Murray*

The outer world and the inner light. Perhaps no other descriptive phrase better capsulizes both the majesty and the irony of the democratic experience since the moment that William Penn first thought of establishing his Quaker refuge in the American wilderness. In place of the turmoil and violence of daily life in 17th-century England, Penn hoped to substitute peace and tranquility, and create an atmosphere in which the inner light of equal justice, tolerance, and universal freedom could shine more brightly. The dark outer world with its chaos and frustrations would thereby presumably be illuminated so that men everywhere would come to see that liberty and harmony were preferable to repression and strife.

Before his death, William Penn dejectedly realized that the mere geographic transferral of his hopes to the woods and valleys of Pennsylvania did not necessarily cause freedom's light to burn more brightly nor did it transform the dark outer world of conflict into a thing of beauty. Penn's beloved Quakers, no less than the Germans, the Welsh, the Dutch, and the Scotch-Irish, seemed to be fatally infected by the intolerance, the vanity, the avarice, the intrigue, and the ruthlessness which so characterized that outer world from which they sought release. Obviously, the struggle against reaction, repression, and violence was not simply a one-shot affair in which the alteration of environmental circumstances would assure success. Instead, it was a constant, unending, desperate battle against recurrent and endemic human weaknesses.

On the night of June 2, 1919, two hundred and one years after the disillusioned Penn died in misery, another Quaker, A. Mitchell Palmer, was preparing for bed in his Washington home at 2132 R Street, N.W. Across the way, the Assistant Secretary of the

*The author is a Professor of History at Pennsylvania State University. This paper was originally presented to the 1968 meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association at Pottstown, Pennsylvania.
Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and his wife had just arrived home from a dinner party. Suddenly a terrific explosion rent the air, shattering windows and shaking the entire area.

Roosevelt bounded upstairs to find his son James scared but unhurt, staring out from his bedroom window at the wrecked Palmer house across the street. While Mrs. Roosevelt was left to allay the young boy's fears, Mr. Roosevelt rushed over to the Palmer home and struggled through the debris where he found the Attorney General and his wife unscathed although badly frightened. As Roosevelt later told his family, in the intense excitement Palmer lapsed into familiar usage: "He was 'theeing' and 'thouing' me all over the place—'thank thee, Franklin' and all that."

Upon examination it was discovered that the explosion had been premature, the bomb thrower evidently stumbling on the stone steps leading up to Palmer's door and blowing himself to bits with his own missile. Only fragments of his body and clothing were found, but enough to indicate that he was an Italian alien from Philadelphia. Moreover, he was a radical, since near the door to Palmer's house was found a copy of an incendiary pamphlet entitled *Plain Words*:

> There will have to be bloodshed; we will not dodge; there will have to be murder; we will kill . . . there will have to be destruction; we will destroy . . . We are ready to do anything and everything to suppress the capitalist class.

**THE ANARCHIST FIGHTERS²**

This bit of drama may seem far removed from William Penn and his unfulfilled hopes for better men in a better world. Yet the events surrounding the bombing of Palmer's home and Palmer's reaction to them, as well as that of the American public, illustrates in modern form, and in a most poignant way, that the struggle between the outer world of repression and the inner light of freedom still continued on and that the outcome of that

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struggle remained of vital importance to all members of a democratic society.

Alexander Mitchell Palmer was born of Quaker parents in 1872 in Moosehead, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. Named after the president of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, "Mitch" Palmer spent his boyhood being indoctrinated in the twin concepts of Quakerism and the importance of being successful. The Palmer family had for several generations been profitably engaged in the lumber, paint, and construction business. Mitch's father, however, was among the least effective of the Palmer clan and represented something of a failure. Earning barely enough to support his large family, the elder Palmer was both a warning and a stimulus to the young boy. He instilled in Mitch the burning desire to "be somebody" while at the same time unconsciously offering himself as an example of how not to be it. From his mother the lad received his basic training in the Quaker faith and early fixed in his mind the conviction that success in the secular world and adherence to Quaker principles was not only possible but that the two goals could be meshed easily.

Pampered by his mother and precocious by any standards, Mitch was by far the smartest of the family's six children, and considerable sacrifices were made to enable him to develop his mental powers. While his brothers and sisters did daily chores around the house or worked at outside jobs, young Mitch spent his time reading, always pushing his knowledge beyond that required by his grade level in school. Such studious activity caused him to graduate from the Stroudsburg High School at the tender age of 14—an age so young that he could not yet matriculate at a college. After spending a year at the Moravian Parochial School in Bethlehem, he passed the entrance examinations for Lehigh and was accepted. But Mitch was told by his parents that he had to attend a Quaker institution and so Swarthmore was selected. His father borrowed the money so that he could enroll.

In college Palmer appeared to be lazy and not overly given to study. Indeed, in the class prophecy he was noted for his love of

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3 For the most authoritative brief version of Palmer's career see Robert K. Murray, "A. Mitchell Palmer," Dictionary of American Biography. For the only full scholarly treatment of Palmer's life see Coben, Palmer. The material for Palmer's life prior to 1919 is drawn mainly from these two sources and from interviews between myself and Mrs. Palmer in 1958.
a quiet rest. But this was simply a mask behind which lurked an intense desire to excel. His congeniality and lackadaisical attitude were calculated to offset the fact that he was brilliant. He consciously sought not to alienate those who might otherwise have considered him a “greasy-grind.” Acceptance by his peers was as important to Mitch as high marks. By shrewdly juggling his talents he achieved both. He was universally liked—and he graduated first in his class, with a Phi Beta Kappa key to boot.

While at Swarthmore Palmer met or came to know some of the most influential Philadelphia families and through such contacts might have gradually injected himself into the power structure of Pennsylvania life and culture. Instead, he decided to return to Stroudsburg, considered a backwater politically, where he could more directly prove the worth of his father’s investment in his education and where he could more quickly “be somebody.” Admitted to the Pennsylvania bar in 1893, he immediately built a reputation as a shrewd lawyer. Extremely gregarious and a joiner, he belonged to the Elks, the Knights of Malta, the Knights of Pythias, the local country club, and so on. Seeing politics as a handmaiden to the law, he also began to move in Democratic party circles and soon became a political figure of some note. Speaking for the Democratic cause at the drop of a hat, Mitch Palmer was much in demand as a stump speaker. Possessing a strong voice and a marvelous delivery, Palmer’s orations tended toward hyperbole and flowery phrases yet they contained force.

Despite this penchant for politics, his first concern was making money. Palmer frankly enjoyed wealth and the automatic prestige which monetary success brought. He liked to delude himself that a rich Quaker was morally more entitled to the plaudits of the community than his non-Quaker counterpart, but there was never any indication that he allowed his Quaker principles to get in the way of his business dealings. He shrewdly invested in promising local concerns, especially in the bank and the newspaper, and became the solicitor for most of them. By 1908, when he was first elected to Congress, he was already a man of considerable means and was on the board of directors of a half-dozen corporations.

Mitch Palmer’s political career was spawned in an era of tribulation for the Democratic Party in Pennsylvania. These were the
years (1897-1911) of a Democratic drought in state politics and there were constant rumblings of discontent with the Democratic boss, Colonel James Guffey. At least once, such rumblings broke out into a bitter struggle to topple Guffey, liberals in the party maintaining that no progress could be made until he was deposed. In this fracas Palmer walked a tightrope, remaining a “regular of the regulars” but still being acceptable to reformers. More than most local politicians, Palmer had a feel for national political trends and the shape of the future. He regarded the new wave of progressivism as inevitable but believed that it needed a strong old party base. Therefore he urged party unity while at the same time pushing liberal ideas. His goal was to get the party to adopt a stance that would win.

In Congress Palmer soon became identified with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, supporting low tariffs, greater welfare legislation, and a revision of the rules to curb “Cannon-ism.” Yet he was always careful to be a “practical reformer,” never losing touch with political reality. While he antagonized powerful business elements by his tariff stand, he compensated by retaining the active support of organized labor through his advocacy of pro-labor measures such as the creation of the Bureau of the Mines. He also consistently ingratiated himself to the “right” people in his party—men like Champ Clark and Oscar Underwood. To such men, Mitch Palmer proved to be a pleasant companion, a superb raconteur, a loyal party member, and a vicious in-fighter against all Republicans. His ability to confront Republican liberals like Gifford Pinchot eyeball to eyeball made him a darling to conservative and liberal Democrats alike.

By shrewd maneuvering and by relying heavily on his influential friends Palmer emerged in 1911 as the head of the Democratic Party in Pennsylvania, succeeding Guffey. Now as leader of all Pennsylvania Democrats Palmer achieved his first national recognition. The Keystone State was slated to have more delegate votes in the 1912 Democratic convention than any other state except New York, and both Democratic House chieftains, Speaker Clark and Majority Leader Underwood, hoped for the nomination. Although owing much to these men, Palmer surprisingly

Charles Schwab regarded Palmer as one of Bethlehem Steel’s greatest leaders in the Congress. See Cohen, Palmer, 27.
declared for Woodrow Wilson, not only because he was drawn to Wilson intellectually but also because he sensed that Wilson represented a new force in the party. At the 1912 convention Palmer controlled the Pennsylvania delegation ruthlessly and worked unstintingly for Wilson's selection. Not only did he serve as a tireless floor manager for the Wilson forces but once even turned down an offer of the vice-presidency if he would release Pennsylvania's votes.\(^5\) Wilson's subsequent nomination and election filled Palmer with anticipation because he frankly expected to be rewarded with a high appointed post. After all, the long-range future in elective politics was rather dim for a Democrat from a permanently Republican state, and one who was opposed to high protective tariffs at that.

Mitch Palmer had good claims for a top administration position. His help to Wilson had been critical; he had the support of influential presidential advisers such as Joseph Tumulty; and he possessed a liberal congressional record. Wilson at first considered him for Attorney General, a post Palmer very much wanted. But opposition to his appointment developed, initiated mainly by James C. McReynolds, assistant attorney general under Theodore Roosevelt, who objected to Palmer's earlier connection with certain railroad clients. Ironically McReynolds, not Palmer, got the Justice Department job. Understandably Palmer was bitter.\(^6\)

As if to make amends, Wilson offered Palmer the position of Secretary of War. After some delay, the Pennsylvania Congressman finally declined by saying: "I am a Quaker. . . . And the United States requires not a man of peace for a war secretary, but one who can think war. . . ." Up to this moment Wilson had not known that Palmer was a Quaker which indicated how lightly the Pennsylvanian had worn his Quakerism in political circles. It was his wife, more than Palmer, who was shocked by the proffer of the war post. Indeed, in the case of the war position Palmer’s refusal on religious grounds was only partially sincere.

\(^5\) For Palmer’s specific convention role see ibid., 61-63.
\(^7\) Palmer to Wilson, February 24, 1913, in Papers of A. Mitchell Palmer, box 47, Woodrow Wilson Collection, Library of Congress.
He hoped his rejection would prompt Wilson to transfer McAdoo, who had already been appointed to Treasury, to War, and thus open the possibility of his own appointment to the vacated Treasury office. Much to Palmer’s dismay, Wilson did not do so and temporarily Mitch Palmer’s dreams of national political power vanished.  

To Palmer’s credit he did not allow this disappointment to diminish his effectiveness as a New Freedom supporter. His innate belief in man’s essential goodness and his instinctive humanitarian tendencies, both of which stemmed from his Quaker training, caused him to lend his support to all progressive causes, including the abolition of child labor and women’s suffrage. He especially endeared himself to Wilson by his activity in securing House passage of the low Underwood-Simmons Tariff. But although such action won him praise in the White House, it lost him votes in Pennsylvania. Indeed, the more Palmer moved in the direction of aiding the New Freedom the more he alienated himself from the voters at home.

By 1914 Mitch Palmer’s dilemma was a real one. He needed his congressional base to continue to demonstrate to Wilson that he was indispensable to the New Freedom program and was still worthy of great reward. Yet his voting record, especially on low tariffs, had brought a powerful coalition of local forces into the field against him and his reelection to Congress was extremely doubtful. As a result he decided on a bold course. Rather than run for his House seat in 1914, he announced for the Senate against Boies Penrose. He calculated that even a defeat at the hands of the powerful Republican boss would enhance his reputation for fidelity to the Wilson cause. Charging Palmer with being “the Benedict Arnold of Pennsylvania” for his tariff views, Penrose did handily defeat him in a three-way race which also included Gifford Pinchot.

Palmer’s poor showing—he ran third behind Pinchot—suddenly confronted him with political oblivion unless he could quickly and successfully cash in on all his outstanding political debts. But before he could do so he was stymied by foreign events. Prior to the sinking of the Lusitania, being a pacifist contained no political disadvantages. Afterwards, however, such

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8 Coben, Palmer, 282, fn. 81.
persons rapidly became suspect. Palmer soon discovered that his earlier Quaker sentiments uttered when he rejected the War post now boomeranged to his detriment. Understandably the Wilson administration studiously avoided him while, for the moment, Palmer failed to make the imperatives of Quaker principles coalesce with the requirements of the political scene.

With American entry into the war in April, 1917, Palmer staged a dramatic about face. He let it be known in the White House that he would serve “in any capacity without compensation” to help the war effort. He claimed that he would even “carry a gun as a private” if necessary. Badly in need of legal talent to handle the many problems spawned by the war, Wilson at last decided to name him head of the Alien Property Custodian’s office which Congress had created to take over and manage all enemy-owned property in the United States. Palmer immediately set out to discover and acquire all such enemy assets and then advocated their immediate “Americanization,” meaning their sale to private American interests. Simultaneously Palmer used his office as a political base by dispensing patronage.

In particular, he gave jobs as directors or attorneys for seized enemy companies to his friends and others in the party power structure who could help him politically. All this brought him some criticism personally, and a few of his appointees committed sufficiently severe indiscretions in handling their assignments that they later went to jail. Opportunities for graft in the Alien Custodian’s office were indeed great and although none was proven against Palmer himself, such chicanery by those who surrounded him did not enhance his own reputation for scrupulous honesty.

For Mitch Palmer the Alien Property Custodian post was merely a stepping stone to bigger things. McReynolds, who had beaten Palmer out for Attorney General in 1913, remained in that office only one year when Thomas W. Gregory succeeded him. At that time Gregory indicated that he did not want the post permanently and from 1916 on spoke of retiring. Wilson managed to convince him to remain until 1918; but with the war

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9 See comments on Palmer in New York Times, May 9, 1915.
11 For the best summary of Palmer’s Alien Property Custodian activities see Cohen, Palmer, 127-150.
Gregory was no longer able to ignore the financial lure of private practice and resigned. Palmer immediately put in his bid, asking friends everywhere to intercede for him. Most influential was Tumulty who cabled Wilson in Paris:

Your attitude toward the future of our Party will be measured by this appointment. Palmer young, militant, progressive and fearless. Stands well with country, Congress, appeals to young voters; effective on stump. . . . Our enemies and some of our friends have the feeling that you do not care to recognize the services of those who stood by us in the dark days. . . . The ignoring of men of high type of Palmer who have been faithful throughout will accentuate this feeling.12

Colonel House was not favorably disposed toward Palmer and convinced Wilson to hold off making an appointment for the time being. But when Wilson returned to the United States in February, 1919, he came directly under Tumulty's influence and, with House not around, finally capitulated to Tumulty's pro-Palmer arguments. On February 26 Wilson wrote Gregory:

I have been thinking and thinking hard and in many directions, about the appointment of your successor, and each time my mind comes back to Mitchell Palmer. I think that on the whole he is my most available man.13

That same day it was announced that the White House would send Palmer's name to the Senate as Attorney General. Mitch Palmer's appointment to this position which he had so long coveted came at a critical moment. Wilson, increasingly embarrased by the League question, was leaving domestic affairs largely in the hands of his cabinet subordinates. After his stroke in September, 1919, the President exercised no effective leadership at all over matters either domestic or foreign. The public, meanwhile, already burdened by the postwar problems of demobilization, reconversion, and the high cost of living, suddenly became hagridden by the spectre of Bolshevism. The nation trembled in February as a general strike in Seattle seemed to

12 Ibid., 153, quoting Tumulty.
13 Ibid., 154, quoting Wilson.
indicate that a radical revolution was sweeping the Pacific Northwest. In late April, eighteen bombs (sixteen of which were intercepted), were sent through the mails to various high government officials and businessmen. On May 1 socialist and red flag riots erupted in numerous American cities, resulting in property damage, many injuries, and a few deaths. On the night of June 2, within an hour of the explosion at the Palmer residence in Washington, public buildings and the homes of prominent citizens were dynamited in eight other cities. Shortly thereafter, American radicals, enthralled by contemporary events in Russia, proclaimed the formation of a Communist Party and a Communist Labor Party in order to spearhead a similar Bolshevik take-over in the United States.4

Obviously, by the Fall of 1919 conditions were ripe for a strong man to exercise tremendous influence. There was a power vacuum in the administration which needed to be filled. There was an hysterical public which had replaced the hated Hun with the dreaded Bolshevik and was seeking a protector. The domestic problems that needed the most immediate attention (the high cost of living, labor relations, and subversion) were under Justice Department jurisdiction. In this connection, wartime powers affecting both the economy and civil liberties were still in existence and a compliant and confused Congress was willing to grant more. At the same time, the Democratic National Convention was only fifteen months away and there was a sick lame-duck president in the White House.

At first Palmer was reticent to take advantage of this unique situation. There were good reasons. His Quaker background made him shy away from authoritarian action, especially in the area of civil rights. The legitimacy of dissent was after all, a cardinal principle of his Quaker heritage. Moreover, Palmer realized that in view of the current state of public opinion, any exercise of government power would be more popularly directed against labor than against any other element in society. But labor had given Palmer strong support throughout his career and he winced at the prospect of alienating old friends. Risking public censure,

\footnote{For a detailed description and analysis of these various events see Robert K. Murray, \textit{Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920} (Minneapolis, 1955), 57-81.}
he therefore did little during the first several months of his tenure and even condemned the "gossip, hearsay information, and inferences" which daily deluged the Justice Department.

The bombing of his own home in June, 1919, however, acted as a catalytic agent which finally fused together Palmer's own fears and his intense ambition, and caused him to abandon both his prudence and his caution. There is evidence that beginning in June Palmer began to envision himself as the nation's savior. Also, there is no doubt that he saw in the mounting red scare an unparalleled opportunity for personal political advancement. Indeed, he began to regard himself as Woodrow Wilson's heir and fastened his eye on the White House. This curious mixture of super-patriotism, public service, conceit, opportunism, and aggressiveness contrasted oddly with his religious background and caused even his friends thereafter to refer to him as the "Fighting Quaker."¹⁶

Palmer's first move was to change the complexion of the Justice Department. On August 1 he created a General Intelligence Division under the direction of twenty-four-year-old J. Edgar Hoover. This agency began to collect information on all subversive activities and by October had an index file of over 200,000 cards, containing details on radical organizations, societies, associations, and publications. According to Palmer this index also contained the complete case histories of over 60,000 dangerous radicals and housed "a greater mass of data upon this subject than is anywhere else available."¹⁶

As far as the public was concerned, Palmer had not begun such activity any too soon. Indeed, he was soundly condemned for his tardiness in confronting the radical menace and more than one newspaper had already charged him with being a "faking fighter" and a "quaking quitter."¹⁷ Churches, businessmen, patriotic societies, and others urged him to drop his caution and act aggressively to save the nation. Fellow cabinet members, demoralized by Wilson's illness, frankly looked to Palmer to preserve order and protect society. Secretary of State Lansing,

¹⁶ For Palmer's Red Scare motives see ibid., 192-193.
especially, considered the crisis to be “very great.” The Senate, meanwhile, indicated that it believed Palmer was far too timid in the face of the red peril and on October 14, without a single dissenting vote, called on him to report specifically what he was doing to curb radicalism. As Palmer himself later said:

... I was shouted at from every editorial sanctum in America from sea to sea; I was preached upon from every pulpit; I was urged—I could feel it dinned into my ears—throughout the country to do something and do it now, and do it quick, and do it in a way that would bring results. ...

Sensitive to such criticism, especially the implication that a Quaker could not also be a patriot, and becoming convinced himself that there was “a Bolshevist plot in every item of the day’s news,” Palmer reacted to the events of the Fall of 1919 with mounting apprehension. He saw in the Boston Police Strike of September an attempt by radicals to reduce the city to helplessness and loudly applauded Governor Calvin Coolidge’s adamant stand against the strikers. He believed that the great Steel Strike of October was the first step toward a socialized America and that organized labor had merely become a catspaw for Bolshevism. Following the steel strike, he dropped his concern for labor, sensing that the public no longer sympathized with its aims anyway, and thereafter braved organized labor’s antagonism by openly supporting its enemies. When a nationwide coal strike threatened in November, Palmer preemptorily assumed control and slapped an injunction on John L. Lewis and his miners in order to prevent “the paralysis of government.” The public and the press greeted this last action with effusive praise and, much to Palmer’s satisfaction, began to speak of him as a presidential possibility. He was, they said, a “lion-hearted man” who was bringing “order out of chaos.” Palmer’s injunction, agreed most newspapers, was simply an example of what could be done if government officials were willing. But more such action was

*29 Coben, Palmer, 210, quoting Lansing.
*31 For the three great Fall strikes, see Murray, Red Scare, 122-165.
The test soon came. Already Palmer, Hoover, and other Justice Department agents had laid elaborate plans for the mass roundup and deportation of all alien radicals. Drawing upon information supplied by the GID, they selected the Union of Russian Workers as their first victim. A nationwide organization of approximately 4,600 Russian immigrants, the URW, according to its own statements, was dedicated to the overthrow of all institutions of government and the confiscation of wealth and property through revolution.22

The trap was sprung on November 7, 1919, barely a week after the coal strike injunction. Palmer’s agents swooped down on Russian Workers’ meeting halls in twelve cities, but the main blow fell on the New York Headquarters, the Russian People’s House, at 133 East 15th Street. There the raid was conducted with mathematical precision, operatives surrounding the building and charging inside at a prearranged signal. Several truckloads of radical propaganda were confiscated and, although only 27 arrest warrants had been issued, 200 men and women were driven out of the building and taken by vans to Justice Department headquarters at 13 Park Row for questioning. Some prisoners later claimed that they were beaten without provocation and were forced to run a gauntlet of blackjacks and clubs on their way to the waiting vehicles. The New York Times reported that some of the occupants had indeed been “badly beaten by the police . . . their heads wrapped in bandages testifying to the rough manner in which they had been handled.”23

After close questioning, only 39 of the 200 were ultimately held. Of the remainder, some were found to be citizens while others were neither members of the URW nor radicals. Most were simple workingmen of Russian nationality who spoke little or no English and who belonged to the organization for almost every conceivable reason except to promote revolution. However, despite their obvious ignorance of the stated aims of the URW,

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21 Portland Oregonian, October 31, 1919.
22 Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer on Charges, 166-168.
they were held for excessively long periods of time before being released.

The same pattern was generally repeated in the other raids. Homes were invaded without search warrants; men were taken into custody simply because they spoke the Russian language. Often held for unconscionably long periods of time, all but a handful were finally released. For example, in Hartford, Connecticut, one small band of prisoners was kept in jail five months before receiving a hearing.24

Despite the injustices involved and the meager catch of true revolutionaries, the nation was delighted with the November raids. Attorney General Palmer drew unstinting praise for having acted "in the nick of time." His prestige soared, while the press excitedly described him as "a tower of strength" and claimed his actions brought "thrills of joy to every American."25

But greater thrills were in store. No sooner were the November raids over than new forays were planned. This time the chief targets were the Communist and Communist Labor parties. Claiming that membership in these parties was itself a deportable offense, Justice Department officials now sought to bring within their net all aliens belonging to these groups and expel them from the country. Accordingly, on December 27 instructions were sent to all United States District Attorneys ordering them to search meeting places and homes of Communist and Communist Labor party members and hold the occupants in detention. They were told to arrange with undercover agents, some of whom had quietly slipped into radical ranks, to have meetings of the two organizations called for the night set because such action would facilitate the making of arrests. Field agents were instructed to "obtain all documentary evidence possible," to secure "charters, meeting minutes, membership books, due books, membership correspondence, etc.," and to allow no arrested person to communicate with any outside person until permission was specifically granted by either Hoover or Palmer. As far as the necessity for search

25 Sample newspaper opinion taken from Boston Evening Transcript, November 10, 1919; Columbus Ohio State Journal, November 12, 1919; Atlanta Constitution, November 10, 1919.
warrants was concerned, the instructions left this matter "entirely to your discretion." 26

On the night of January 2, 1920, exactly six months to the day after the bombing of his own home, Palmer unleashed his forces. The results could not have been more spectacular. Over 4,000 suspected radicals were seized in 33 major cities in 23 states. Palmer's agents entered bowling alleys, pool halls, cafes, club rooms, and even homes, seizing everyone in sight. Prisoners were held incommunicado and deprived of their right to legal counsel. All suspected radicals who were American citizens were turned over to state officials for prosecution under state criminal anarchy or syndicalist laws. All aliens were jailed by the federal authorities and held for deportation hearings.

In the Northeast, approximately 800 persons were seized, half of whom were taken to the immigrant station in Boston and then shipped to Deer Island in Boston Harbor. Forced to walk in chains from the immigrant station to the dock, these prisoners provided the press an opportunity through sensational pictures to emphasize their "dangerous, violent character." At Deer Island the prisoners found conditions deplorable; heat was lacking, sanitation was terrible, and incommunicado restrictions were strictly enforced. During the period of detention one captive went insane, another plunged five stories to his death, and two others died of pneumonia. 27 Of course, in this whole process mistakes were made and finally over one-half of the 800 who were apprehended were given their freedom after three to six days when it was discovered that they were in no way connected with the radical movement. In Lynn, Massachusetts, for example, 39 bakers, arrested for holding a "revolutionary caucus," were released when it was discovered that they had met on the night of January 2 to discuss the creation of a cooperative bakery. 28

In the Middle Atlantic area circumstances were much the same. About 1,000 persons were seized, although the majority were later released for "insufficient evidence." One man was arrested

27 Charges of Illegal Practices, 381, 494. See also Murray, Red Scare, 213-214.
28 Ibid., 214; Charges of Illegal Practices, 353, 499; Report Upon the Illegal Practices of the United States Department of Justice, 55.
while strolling along Newark's Charlton Street because he "looked like a radical." An innocent bystander, much to his amazement, was likewise seized when he inquired what all the commotion was about. Not only unjust arrests but sometimes ridiculous assumptions were made. In New Brunswick, while a Socialist Club was being raided, the drawings of a phonograph invention were found and were immediately sent to demolition experts because they were thought to represent "the internal mechanism of various types of bombs." In New York City itself, over 400 persons were arrested and taken to 13 Park Row where GID agents questioned them before releasing them or shipping them off to Ellis Island. Here brutality was practiced to a greater degree than elsewhere. Prisoners later testified under oath that they were viciously beaten by Justice Department agents without provocation. One claimed that he was blackjacked repeatedly by a sadistic operative who obviously relished his work.

In the Midwest, the chief raids occurred at Chicago and Detroit. In Detroit about 800 persons were arrested and incarcerated for six days in a windowless, narrow corridor in the city's antiquated Federal Building. The prisoners were forced to sleep on the bare floor and wait in long lines for access to the solitary toilet. Some found it necessary to urinate in the corridor itself, and, as a custodian later testified, "before many days . . . the stench was quite unbearable." They were denied food during the first twenty-four hours and thereafter were fed mainly on what their families brought to them. In the end over 300 of the 800 were released after the sixth day when it was obvious that they had no knowledge of or interest in the radical movement.

In Chicago, meanwhile, federal officials nabbed some 225 suspected radicals. The catch was smaller than in other major cities because state officials had jumped the gun and had conducted a raid of their own just the day before. Of the 225 about 80 were ultimately sent to the city jail for safe-keeping. Interestingly enough, when these captives arrived at the jail a riot broke out

among the “patriotic” prisoners because they objected to Reds being thrown in the same cells with them. With tongue-in-cheek the far-off Seattle Times remarked, “There are some things at which even a Chicago crook draws the line.”

In the West and Far West the raids were somewhat anti-climactic. There most radicals of any importance had already been apprehended in a spate of state raids which had followed the famous Centralia Massacre of November 11, 1919, when four American Legionnaires were killed in an Armistice Day brawl with a band of Wobblies. Yet the few federal raids that were conducted in the West possessed a strong vigilante flavor since sentiment still ran extremely high against all suspected radicals in that area of the country.

The American public was dazzled by these actions and the majority cheered the hunters from the sidelines. The Attorney General was againlavishly praised. Even the New York Times, a frequent critic of Palmer, now seemed satisfied: “If some or any of us, impatient for the swift confusion of the Reds have ever questioned the alacrity, resolute will, and fruitful intelligent vigor of the Department of Justice in hunting down these enemies of the United States, the questioners and the doubters have now cause to approve and applaud.”

In view of the shocking abridgment of proper arrest procedures and of civil liberties in general, this reaction can only be explained on the basis of a collective psychosis—the public mind was temporarily deranged by a colossal fear, a fear which would condone almost any kind of repressive action. Palmer, also conditioned by this same fear, willingly catered to the public lust for radical scalps even though it meant abridging constitutional rights. Obviously civil freedoms were not of concern at the moment. As the Washington Post phrased it: “There is no time to waste on hairsplitting over infringement of liberty.” Simultaneously other newspapers called for more action and a rapid follow through on the raids. The immediate deportation of all

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28 Seattle Times, January 9, 1920.
prisoners was widely recommended in order to rid the country of "the kind of cranks that murder Presidents" or "send bombs through the mails to statesmen."36

A precedent had already been set. On December 21, 1919, 249 deportees—some of whom had been captured in the November raids—had set sail from New York aboard the Army transport, the Buford, for an unknown destination (later found to be Hango, Finland, from whence they entrained for the Soviet Union). Christened by the press the "Soviet Ark," the ship actually contained a few dangerous radicals (such as the notorious Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman), but the vast majority had never participated in any terroristic action nor did they have criminal records. Now, as a fitting conclusion to the January raids, newspaper headlines read, "ALL ABOARD FOR THE NEXT SOVIET ARK," and editorials urged that "ships be made ready quickly and the passengers put aboard."37

But there was some uneasiness and a few scattered protests appeared. A few papers such as the New York World, the Richmond Times-Union and the St. Louis Globe-Democrat wondered whether wholesale roundups and deportations afforded the best weapons against radical ideas. Liberal magazines such as the Nation and the New Republic charged that Palmer was "improving on the Czar" and that justification of the raids and deportations on the basis of imminent revolution was utterly ridiculous.38 Quipped the Liberator:

Who is it worries all the Feds,
And fills the Times with scary heads,
And murders people in their beds?
The Reds.39

More substantial criticism came from within Palmer's own Justice Department. Francis Fisher Kane, United States Attorney in Philadelphia and a wealthy progressive, deplored the November and January raids and on January 12 submitted his resignation to

37 Ibid. Also Chicago Tribune, January 3, 1920; Philadelphia Inquirer, January 5, 1920.
38 Quoted in Murray, Red Scare, 218-219.
39 Ibid., 219.
President Wilson because he felt "out of sympathy with the anti-radical policies of Mr. Palmer." At the same time, there was a handful of Labor Department officials, mainly Assistant Secretary Louis F. Post, who criticized Palmer severely for his disregard of proper procedures and who, through a tangled mess of deportation hearings (which by law the Labor Department had to supervise), attempted to stem the tide of injudicious actions. Post, serving at the moment as head of the Labor Department because Secretary William B. Wilson lay ill, was final arbiter in all deportation cases and, being a firm believer in freedom of speech and assemblage, closely reviewed the circumstances surrounding the arrests and the Justice Department interrogation of alien prisoners. Shocked by the obvious infringement of civil liberties which his investigations disclosed and unable in most instances to discover any demonstrable basis for deportation, Post by April, 1920 released almost half of those detained by Palmer in the raids. Post claimed that most of these aliens had been drawn into the membership of the various radical organizations for a variety of reasons other than fomenting revolution and that most of them were "wage workers, useful in industry, good natured in their dispositions, unconscious of having given offense." Public and congressional opinion was at first outraged by the Assistant Secretary's action. Seventy-one years old, Post in his earlier days had espoused some unpopular beliefs himself, such as easy divorce, Henry George's single tax, and severe antitrust legislation. Now, of course, he was charged with "coddling the Reds" and with being a "moon-struck parlor radical." In Congress there was talk of impeaching him and on April 15 Representative Homer Hoch of Kansas introduced a resolution calling for an investigation by the House Rules Committee of Post's handling of the Labor Department. Extending into May, this investigation was less revealing in its review of Post's activities than in the discoveries made about Palmer and the Justice Department. As

7 Charges of Illegal Practices, 346, quoting Francis Kane.
a result the Committee on Rules soon suspended all further consideration of the charges against Post and even the press agreed that the committee ought to make a "graceful withdrawal." By June, 1920, the *Christian Science Monitor* was able calmly to say, "In the light of what is now known, it seems clear that what appeared to be an excess of radicalism on the one hand was certainly met with something like an excess of suppression." Indeed, of the 5,000 arrests that had been made during November and January only a little over 500 were finally upheld as legitimate. And not all of these were ultimately judged to be deportable. This was certainly a far cry from the "thousands upon thousands" of deportations which the Attorney General had once prophesied or even the "second, third, and fourth" Soviet Arks which had been anticipated.

Palmer was furious. By the Spring of 1920 he had not only convinced himself that the nation was in dire peril but that he was the only one who could lead it to safety. Besides, the various presidential primaries had just begun and Palmer secretly hoped that the spectacle of thousands of radical deportees, leaving the United States would strengthen his claim on the White House. Greedy for publicity and increasingly righteous in his cause, Palmer now urged Congress to pass more repressive sedition legislation and encouraged Hoover and the GID to continue their work. Simultaneously he told the public that he had proof the Bolshevik revolution in Russia had been started by "a small clique of outcasts from the East Side of New York," and, in contrast to Post's observations, allowed his imagination to run rampant in describing the prisoners whom he and his agents had caught in the various raids: "Out of the sly and crafty eyes of many of them leap cupidity, cruelty, insanity, and crime; from their lopsided faces, sloping brows, and misshapen features may be recognized the unmistakable criminal type."

As public hysteria began to decline in the Spring of 1920, Palmer suddenly became his own worst enemy. Foolishly, he attempted to create scares where none existed. He and young Hoover released hair-raising warnings to the public about new

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menaces, especially an impending radical revolution set for May 1, 1920. They predicted that as a result of information gleaned in the November and January raids, the nation could expect wholesale dynamings and killings on May Day. The press immediately broke out in a rash of sensational headlines and for the moment the Red Scare was again in full flower. Local police officials alerted their forces; public buildings and the homes of the wealthy and well-known were put under heavy guard; state militias were called up. In New York City the entire police force of 11,000 men was put on twenty-four hour duty; in Boston trucks with mounted machine guns were parked in various strategic spots; in Chicago 360 suspected radicals were placed under lock and key for the day "just in case." 45

On May 1 not a single disturbance occurred in the entire nation —no assassinations, no riots, no bombs. What few radical gatherings were held were even devoid of the usual inflammatory speeches. Of course, Palmer and Hoover immediately claimed that their timely warnings had prevented an impending revolution and the nation had thus been spared. But this time the public was not fooled. Torn between rage and laughter, the press heaped coals of scorn on the Attorney General's head. Most journals agreed that the scare had been a "mare's nest hatched in the Attorney General's brain" and denounced him as "a national menace" and "Little Red Riding Hood with a cry of 'Wolf.'" 46

The Post hearings and the May Day fiasco marked the beginning of Palmer's downfall. Newspapers now begged the Attorney General, despite his presidential ambitions, to leave the Red issue alone. "We can never get to work," exclaimed the Rocky Mountain News, "if we keep jumping sideways in fear of the bewhiskered Bolshevik." 47 Even Congress was sufficiently exasperated with Palmer that in late May it "invited" him to appear before the House Rules Committee and "explain" his recent actions. Inevitably, the discussion not only covered the May Day scare but also touched on the earlier November and January raids. Although Palmer's explanations left much to be desired, the

45 New York Times, May 1, 1920; Boston Evening Transcript, May 1, 1920; Pittsburgh Post, May 1, 1920.
46 Newspaper comment is from New York Times, May 2, 1920.
House Rules Committee finally decided to let the whole matter drop.48

A parallel situation occurred in the Senate some six months later. Under the prodding of Senator Thomas J. Walsh of Montana, the Senate Judiciary Committee in January, 1921 began an investigation of Palmer's various scare activities. Again he was called upon to testify. On this occasion he defended himself with considerable candor, reminding the Senators that at the height of the Red Scare he was shouted at from every angle "to do something," and now, after having done something, he was being crucified. Concluded Palmer: "I apologize for nothing that the Department of Justice has done in this matter. I glory in it . . . and if, as I said before, some of my agents out in the field . . . were a little rough and unkind, or short and curt . . . I think it might be well overlooked in the general good to the country which has come from it."49 After six weeks of such testimony the Judiciary Committee issued a neutral report and the Senate took no action.

By their indecision both the House and the Senate clearly reflected the changing national mood. Beginning with the Spring of 1920 the nation did rapidly tire of hunting Reds and turned its attention to other matters. Nowhere was this shift in interest more evident than in Palmer's waning political fortunes. Ever since 1912 Palmer had flirted with the notion of becoming president. His king-maker role in the 1912 convention had whetted his political appetite and had given him reason to believe that if he could engineer the nomination for others, he could someday bring about his own. As Josephus Daniels later wrote of Palmer's post-1912 ambitions: "They say a man who gets the Presidential bee in his bonnet never gets rid of it. . . . Certainly the bee buzzed in Palmer's bonnet thereafter."50

In 1920 Palmer was a hot contender for the nomination and with good reason. Despite his current red-baiting, he had a liberal political record and, when the occasion demanded, could conjure up memories of his progressive past. Moreover, many veteran politicians supported him—he was owed many political

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49 Charges of Illegal Practices, 582, quoting Palmer.
He had always been loyal, had used the Alien Custodian and Justice Department patronage where it would do him the most good, and had a lock grip on the Pennsylvania delegation's seventy-six votes. But, especially, he projected an image of one hundred percent Americanism. It was this latter which became the hallmark of his pre-convention campaign. As he announced to Georgia voters just before the Spring primary there:

I am myself an American and I love to preach my doctrine before undiluted one hundred percent Americans, because my platform is, in a word, undiluted Americanism and undying loyalty to the republic.\(^6\)

The collapse of the Red Scare in the Spring of 1920 was a mortal blow to Palmer's chances. Also damaging was the determined opposition of organized labor which, to a man, worked against his nomination. Labor could not forget both his treachery and his "government by injunction," referring to him as "Pontius Palmer." In one primary contest, Michigan, where the labor vote was crucial, Palmer was swamped. He immediately claimed that his defeat was due to the "pro-German vote" and to the "radicals and revolutionists" in Detroit, but everyone knew better. In the Georgia primary, which he lost to Tom Watson, his poor showing was even more revealing. The old Populist dismissed him as one of those "one hundred percent idiots," concluding: "The Attorney General would have me clawed out of bed at midnight; and I would have been aboard a steamer, off Brunswick, before my wife would have known that I was a Red bound for Russia."\(^2\)

Indeed, so far had Palmer's popular stock fallen by convention time that the *Literary Digest* poll placed him at the tail end of a list of potential candidates, only slightly ahead of the imprisoned socialist, Eugene Debs.\(^5\)

Still, delegates to the Democratic San Francisco convention in late June were greeted by huge posters showing a confident dignified Palmer holding a book in one hand and admonishing the viewer with the index finger of the other. Under the leonine

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\(^1\) The best description of Palmer's drive for the presidency is found in iben, *Palmer*, 246-267. This quote is found on 250-251.


\(^3\) *Literary Digest*, LXV (June 12, 1920), 21.
head and handsome features the legend read: “The Fighting Quaker laying down the law.” But laying down the law, Palmer style, was not what most delegates wanted in June, 1920, and he lost the nomination, along with other contenders, to Governor James M. Cox of Ohio. This defeat summarily ended the political career of A. Mitchell Palmer. During the succeeding presidential campaign Governor Cox ignored him completely and even found it expedient to specifically repudiate his antiradical policies. With Harding’s election, Palmer retired to a lucrative private law practice in Stroudsburg and Washington, thereafter leading a quiet and luxurious existence until his death in 1936.54

To the end of his days, Attorney General Palmer maintained that he had been right in his 1919-20 antiradical crusade. He claimed that in the long run history would vindicate him. But immediately upon leaving office, he removed most of his correspondence from the Alien Property Custodian’s office and from the Justice Department files. In addition he destroyed his personal papers. Little remains therefore except the public record. Palmer’s claims to the contrary, that record tells us that A. Mitchell Palmer was both a chief instigator and a major victim of that unfortunate post-World War I phenomenon known as the great Red Scare. It also soberingly tells us that Palmer’s “reign of terror” produced unfavorable side effects which extended beyond his own political misfortunes. The subsequent restrictive immigration legislation of the “Roaring Twenties” stemmed to some extent from the disdain for aliens which the Palmer raids encouraged. Through Palmer’s actions a drive for loyalty oaths and for textbook purgings was given additional impetus. The entire labor movement was left temporarily tarnished as doubts concerning its fidelity continued. And Soviet-American relations were poisoned by the scare experience for a decade to come. Indeed, a thin red line of irrational American responses extends from this first traumatic encounter with communism to the McCarthyism of a later time and to the domestic red-baiting of the present day.

But above all, one fact is clear. In 1919-20 the struggle to preserve American civil freedoms—the nation’s inner light—was almost lost as “government by hysteria” took over. In this battle A. Mitchell Palmer, a latter day product of Penn’s original ex-

54 For Palmer’s later life see Coben, Palmer, 262-265.
periment, a Quaker of native stock, a liberal and a progressive, became a perfect example of what can go awry with democracy's best hopes. Certainly nowhere could one have found a better potential custodian of the nation's liberties. Yet under Palmer's assaults the inner light of freedom was made dimmer for everyone; not just his intended radical victims, but American society as a whole was the loser. Palmer disturbingly reminds us that not all enemies of freedom are mossback reactionaries or avowed tyrants but may also be well-meaning democrats whose desire for freedom is outstripped by their zeal to protect it. Palmer's sin was not the illiberal one of opposing popular will but of offering a nervous public precisely what it demanded. In the process Palmer forgot that there is a higher duty in times of crisis than slavishly following public opinion. He should have known that only in such times does liberty become controversial and, hence, especially precious. Then must its protectors fight hardest to preserve it, not by restricting it but by permitting it, even in the face of popular outcry.

Unfortunately the long record of human history shows that more often than not democracy's inner light of equal justice, universal freedom, and tolerance—the light which Penn had hoped to kindle in the New World—quickly flickers out in the high winds of violent prejudice, imaginary perils, and repressive actions like those displayed by Palmer individually and his contemporaries collectively in 1919-20. Unfortunately, too, history seemingly discloses that the dark outer world of conflict and human weakness with its passions and compromising demands makes the struggle to preserve that inner light futile and encourages the same despondent conclusion about man's future which William Penn reached over two hundred years ago. Yet somehow, even after two centuries, and despite many reverses—despite scares, riots, insurrections, bloodshed, religious and class strife, and repression—that struggle continues on. Somehow, in the American experience, the light of freedom has never been extinguished completely and total darkness has never wholly descended. Often kept alive only by the flint of man's hopes, that inner light still burns. To that extent, and the Palmers and pessimists of this world notwithstanding, William Penn's noble experiment has not yet proved a failure.