

"An Infallible Antidote:" The American Legion and the Legacy of
Progressivism in Interwar America

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For many members of the new veterans' organization the, American Legion, the United States appeared to be a country teetering on the edge of anarchy as they returned home in 1919 from France. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants followed returning doughboys across the Atlantic, flooding America's ports of entry with men and women fresh from the revolutionary upheaval of a decimated Europe. Boston policemen left their precincts in a disturbing strike, anarchists sent bombs through the mail to prominent Americans, gamblers corrupted the national pastime by bribing eight Chicago White Sox to throw the World Series for Cincinnati. A larger proportion of American workers walked out on strike than any other year in the nation's history. To many, it seemed the black flag of anarchy was paving the way for the red flag of revolution. The nation seemed to reject the patriotic unity that had fed the spirited war effort of a year before. Returning amidst the tumult, the fledgling veterans' organization the American Legion vowed to throw itself into the breach, hoping its promise to keep the spirit of the war alive could compel citizens to hold the nation together.

Within five years the American Legion was arguably one of the strongest and most remarkable voluntary organization in the country. It had attracted about one-sixth of the eligible veterans from World War I to its ranks. Its positions on immigration, loyalty oaths, memorializing Armistice Day, school patriotism exercises, and education reform had become state or federal law. It had battled for and won a soldiers' bonus over several

presidential vetoes. Legionnaires held prominent position in Congress and the War Department. It had erected a full-time lobbying machine in Washington, had its conventions attended by presidents and generals and published by the Government Printing Office, had established an alliance with federal law enforcement, and spread its message through an advertisement-filled, glossy monthly magazine. As the country fumbled into the Great Depression, the American Legion had established a presence in over 11,000 communities throughout the nation, while radicalism represented a shell of its former self.

What accounts for the American Legion's potency as an organization during the 1920s? The prominence of the Legion beyond what typically has been seen as the conservative backlash of the early 1920s suggests a more complicated answer than a connection with Red Scare hysteria or a national right turn towards "normalcy." Nor can the Legion's strength necessarily be tied with more culturally chauvinistic organizations. Instead, its success hinged on the Legion's ability to carry the wellspring of nationalist sentiment that developed within progressivism during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century. By that time, the United States had become an empire overseas and a cultural hodgepodge at home. The nation's growing global role, distinct regionalism, immigration explosions, and class strife demanded of Americans a new conception of nationalism to

preserve national unity.¹ Beginning in the second decade of the century, a diverse group of Americans addressed the problem through a number of cultural and political angles.² At the forefront of this effort, progressives were among the first to expound on the belief that the reinvigoration of national political culture could save the nation from divisiveness. Beginning their first champion, Theodore Roosevelt, nationalist progressives embarked on a unique mission to redefine the national community to be more inclusive while pursuing their ultimate goal preserving the United States' political economy. Only such a national perspective, Rooseveltian progressives believed, could save the country's political system from the perils of ethnic, regional, and class factionalism.

This nationalist aspect of progressive thought became what the American Legion carried over from mobilized society into the post-war climate. Nationalist progressives shared many of the same aims as their liberal, brethren: the mediation of industry's effect on the individual, the

¹Both Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm offer compelling arguments that nationalism is not only an invented cultural product, but also one that needs redefinition in times of societal flux. Inventing new nationalist traditions, Hobsbawm argues, is one such method towards reinvigorating the national community. Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1991) Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds. The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²Michael Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), pp. 313, 408. Kammen's work indicates the development of Americans' interest in their own unique cultural heritage intensified around 1913. By the 1920s, that effort had become for many a drive to establish some sort of national culture. Gary Gerstle points out that by 1920s and 30s, this process had only intensified as Americans became occupied in defining exactly what it meant to be American, culturally and politically. Both conservative and radical groups would argue for the merits of how "American" their programs were by the 1920s. Gerstle, Working-class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in an Textile City, 1914-1960 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 8-11.

suppression of radicalism, the establishment of the United States on the world stage. But what distinguished the two was nationalist progressivism's interest in keeping one foot in the realm of cultural adaptation, while liberal progressivism increasingly pinned its hopes for reform on professionalization, social science, and politics, especially after the war. Paradoxically, liberal progressives believed increasingly in the 1920s that the expertise of the elite could yield egalitarian results.³ Nationalist progressives believed that the transmission of the appropriate national values could perform much the same work. The American Legion addressed the issue of national unity by creating politically-disinterested local bodies that worked in their respective communities towards the common nationalistic goals established by its leadership. This organizational structure, a reflection of its progressive roots, made it not only different from liberals' approaches to the challenges of the new century, but also made it unique among other conservative community organizations that thrived around the war years. The American Legion's unique ideological and organizational constructions drove its success where other private citizen groups faltered and allowed the Legion to impact the political culture of its communities and the nation significantly in the 1920s and 30s.

Key to understanding the American Legion's uniqueness in interwar America is an understanding of how it adapted the broad cultural term "Americanism," which Gary Gerstle has defined as "a political language, a

³ Edward A. Purcell, Jr. "Social Thought," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 35, no. 1/2, Special Issue: Contemporary America (spring-Summer 1983) pg. 80.

set of words, phrases, and concepts that individuals used—either by choice or necessity—to articulate their political beliefs and press their political demands.”⁴ Each of the Legion’s conservative cohorts conceived of the role of Americanism in American society differently than the veterans’ organization. Many patriotic and moral reform movements tried to recast American nationalist identity to reflect what they saw as the nation’s vital Anglo-Saxon, Protestant heritage. Groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Society of Colonial Dames, connected nativism with patriotism, using their status as a historicized elite to demand the submissiveness of new immigrants as a display of loyalty.⁵ The Ku Klux Klan also found little compelling in the progressive conception of the melting pot. While they shared many of the Legion’s concerns about the cohesion of modern American society, the Klan reacted to the crisis by looking into the past for a cultural model. It found inspiration in the heroic image of the Reconstruction-era Klansman, the champion of racial and political integrity. Modern Klansmen presented themselves as the agents of more virtuous times, hoping to preserve traditional Protestant values in a diversifying and commercializing culture. Recapturing the Klan and America’s perceived past offered Klansmen, no matter their regional

⁴ Gerstle, pg. 8.

⁵ John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925 (New York: Atheneum, 1977), pp 236-237.

identity, something authentic.⁶ Nativist and moralist groups, therefore, tried not to reinvent tradition as much as resurrect its integrity.

The American Legion, however, focused its tradition-building efforts on the historically mutable nature of the national community, hoping to create a new political culture.⁷ It revered traditions and historical figures, and at times responded to immigration similarly to the Klan. Yet the Legion's leadership hoped to use its brand of Americanism to create a new political culture that could be as inclusive and adaptive as it saw fit. This political culture would constitute reconfigured or new sets of symbols, public rituals, and models for civic behavior that all reflected progressive desires for national community building and could potentially include an entire community. The Klan was not interested in making such statements in its public displays.

In sum, the greatest distinguishing characteristic of the American Legion that separated it from other conservative groups in the inter-war years was its approach to the question of Americanism through progressivism, a political legacy that was decades old by the mid 1920s. In the first decade of the 20th century, the emerging progressive movement embraced "Americanization" as a program to deal with the turn-of-the-century influx of new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. "Americanization" represented urban progressives' efforts to educate and

⁶ Nancy MacClean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 12-13.

⁷ Anderson distinguishes racism and nationalism in this manner. Anderson, pg. 149.

protect immigrants within cosmopolitan areas in order to awaken an appreciation of their new homeland and unlock their potential as citizens. Through the guidance and shelter of friendly communities and governments, urban progressives believed, new immigrants could be made as “American” as one with roots dating back to Plymouth. Ethnicity and religion, as long as one was European, was largely irrelevant to the process. Thus, Americanism reflected a belief in pluralist democracy and the notion that it was America’s unique socio-political system, not its ethnic composition that had led to its greatness.⁸

Progressives’ interpretation of Americanism represented only one of many such efforts to address the issue of cultural homogeneity during the first few decades of the 20th Century. Historian Michael Kammen has defined this era as one heavily influenced by the oxymoronic force of “nostalgic modernism.” The term “Americanism” was an open city for a variety of rhetorical forces of the era.⁹ But progressivism’s guarded inclusionary consideration of the term attracted a wide swath of Americans from a variety of perspectives into a broad ideological tent before World

⁸Higham, pp. 235-238. Gary Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Divided Character of American Nationalism.” *Journal of American History*, December, 1999. Pg. 1296.

⁹Kammen, pg. 300, Gerstle, Working-Class Americanism, pp. 8-11. Gerstle erects four interrelated dimensions to Americanism—nationalist, democratic, progressive, and traditionalist. Nationalists engaged in hero worship of America’s past leaders and emphasized the unique qualities of the nation. Democratic Americanists focused more on the ideas American heroes espoused rather on their deeds, while progressive Americanists stressed the nation’s role in the endless march of human progress. Traditionalists represented a nostalgic force that looked back on Anglo-Saxon, Protestant values for guidance. These labels are helpful in understanding conservative groups’ use of Americanism, but the American Legion’s particular use of Americanism does not fit neatly into one of these categories. The Legion borrowed aspects of all four conceptions to varying degrees.

War I. Nationalist progressives like Walter Lippmann, Brooks Adams, Herbert Croly, and Theodore Roosevelt, thinkers who hoped to recast civic participation in national terms, joined progressive urban reformers like Jane Addams and Frances Kellor in rejecting ethnic and class requisites for full American citizenship. Americanism held enough in common for nationalist progressives and urban reformers that they found a common cause in Roosevelt's Progressive Party campaign for the presidency in 1912. Kellor and Addams drafted planks for Roosevelt on immigration policy. The nationalist progressives, meanwhile, interpreted Americanization's reforming intent as applicable to all Americans. Croly's writings provided a framework for this broad applicability and became Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" in the campaign of 1912. In a speech representative of this program, Roosevelt told an energized crowd in Madison Square Garden late in the campaign: "We stand shoulder to shoulder in a spirit of real brotherhood. We recognize no differences of class, creed, or birthplace. We firmly believe that the American people ask only justice, justice each for himself and for all others." Americanization, when placed under New Nationalism, held vast progressive potential to smooth social stratification and ameliorate conditions for all. Immigrants simply would be the first to feel the touch of a movement that offered equality for most Americans.¹⁰

¹⁰ Higham, 239, Gerstle, "Theodore Roosevelt..." 1303, Theodore Roosevelt, "The Purpose of the Progressive Party," The Collected Works of Theodore Roosevelt, ed. Herman Haggdorn. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926 vol. 17, pg. 338. Gerstle reminds readers that New Nationalism's reform did not apply to blacks and to some extent, women. "Theodore Roosevelt..." pp. 1300, 1304.

But the outbreak of world war demonstrated Americanization's more ominous applicability to the general population as preparedness and mobilization anxiety extended suspicions of disloyalty beyond the immigrant ranks and onto the nation at large. Recast as "100 percent Americanism," Americanization dropped its prewar concern with social justice and demanded social unanimity for the war effort. As the countries of Europe squared off behind the most intense national mobilization seen since the Napoleonic Wars, nationalist progressives feared that America's own mobilization would be too fractured because of ethnic Americans' divided loyalties to create an effective war effort. Many progressives came to see Americanization as, "a matter of self-defense."¹¹

As Eric Hobsbawm theorized, progressives cast new sets of rituals and traditions to address the crisis of national unity. Behind Kellor's efforts, July 4th, 1915 was rechristened "Americanization Day," in 107 communities throughout the country. Her Americanism Day committee renamed itself the National Americanization Committee and began gathering support from schools, churches, chambers of commerce and even some trade unions, promoting English and reverence for American institutions. Spaces once considered private like factory floors and schoolrooms were inundated with flags and patriotic ceremony. Some progressives combined the best of modern marketing to the war unity effort. When America finally became militarily involved in the war, the federal government passed new sedition

¹¹ Roosevelt, "Americanism," Works, pp. 388, 401.

acts and created the Committee on Public Information (CPI), headed by progressive George Creel to promote the government's line on the war. With a staff of former muckrakers, Creel called his committee's efforts "the world's greatest adventure in advertising" as they launched massive media blitzes of propagandistic material urging patriotic conformity. Simultaneously, conservative business leaders held Americanization classes at factories to ensure the loyalty of their immigrant workforce, while the Klan's promotion of "pure Americanism" attracted thousands of new members.¹² Americanism, regardless of its interpretation or implementation, had burnt itself into the American consciousness.

Wartime Americanism also inspired several preparedness organizations that were direct precursors of the American Legion, one its direct namesake. In March 1915, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. founded the American Legion, Incorporated, receiving a congressional charter "to promote patriotism and to organize citizens, who are not in the military...and who are specially qualified to serve the United States in the event, or imminence of war." Behind the spirited support of General Leonard Wood, the organization attracted about 25,000 to 50,000 members (including Roosevelt Sr. and Ted's brothers) and collected names of Americans particularly skilled or prominent enough to warrant commissions once the United States entered the war. Wood's support of an organization

¹² Higham, pg. 243, George Creel, How We Advertised America (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1920), pg. 4, David Kennedy, Over Here: The First World War and American Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) pg. 61, MacClean, pg. 5, Meyer, pp. 159-160.

contesting the Wilson Administration's neutral stance embarrassed the White House sufficiently enough for the War Department to order Wood cut all military ties with the organization. Within a year, the American Legion withered and turned its files over to the War Department.¹³

Roosevelt Jr. quickly rebounded and reformulated preparedness movement with greater success later that year. After the *Lusitania* incident in May 1915, Roosevelt Jr. and a few Harvard Club friends decided to launch a training camp for potential officers at Plattsburg, New York. Again eliciting the support of Wood, Roosevelt Jr.'s clique invited prominent Americans to participate in camps that summer at their own expense, around \$100. Roosevelt Jr., his supporters, and fellow participants saw such training as their part in patriotic duty as the nation's most able leaders. After all, it was they and their fathers' commercial and managerial initiative that had thrust America into international prominence. Some like General Wood also harbored nationalist progressive hopes that the training camps would encourage a system of universal military training, a dream that would introduce martial spirit into a renegotiated nationalism. About 1,200 men, half from elite coast colleges (468 from Harvard alone) flocked to

¹³ Justin Gray, The Inside Story of the American Legion (New York: Boni and Gaer, 1948) pp. 44-50, Jack C. Lane, Armed Progressive: General Leonard Wood (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978) pp. 190-191. The postwar Legion had no interest in publicizing its prewar predecessor. The immediate cause of this secrecy was probably because the postwar Legion leaders had not received General Pershing's consent to begin a veterans' organization at the Paris conference that began Legion postwar organizing efforts. Premeditation would have drawn more ire. After this issue became less important, Legion leadership probably continued to bury the story to preserve the organizations' founding myth as a spontaneous and egalitarian organization, not one born before the war by America's East Coast elite.

Plattsburg in the camp's first summer. With the endorsement of the War Department some 17,000 men entered five camps set up across the nation in 1916. Significantly, several prominent future American Legionnaires, including Philadelphia textile heir Franklin D'Olier, New York police commissioner Arthur Woods, and New Yorker William Donovan and George White of Oregon joined Roosevelt Jr. at the camps.¹⁴

The significance of the preparedness movement came not in its military value as much as the way it served to unite affluent, young, like-minded nationalists into a network that would extend beyond the war. Many Plattsburg movement participants represented a new generation of Roosevelt progressives. Others represented eastern, Anglo-American support for the British war effort. Their participation in the preparedness movement mirrored the support of Congressional Republicans like Augustus Gardner and Roosevelt friend Henry Cabot Lodge had demonstrated for a military buildup in 1915 and 1916.¹⁵ Many Plattsburg attendees responded sympathetically with the national security concerns embedded within wartime Americanism. To them, Americanism represented less an ideology than a call to duty for all citizens to find their place in a united American nation. They saw their own place in that national effort as officers in the American Army they were convinced would soon be

¹⁴ Ralph Barton Perry, The Plattsburg Movement (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1921) pp. 26-27, Kennedy, pp. 146, 161, Perry, pp. 38, 109, William Pencak, For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989) pg. 52, Lane, pg. 194.

¹⁵ Herbert F. Margulies, Reconciliation and Revival: James R. Mann and the House Republicans in the Wilson Era (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996) pg. 122.

necessary to hem the German march over Europe. That sense of obligation embedded within wartime Americanism, which provided such a powerful rallying impetus among this eastern cohort during mobilization, would not die with the conclusion of hostilities.

Victory, however, failed to provide much of a sense of security for those enraptured with Americanist spirit, especially those still serving in the European Theater. From the *New York Times*' correspondent in Paris, covering the Versailles Treaty deliberations, came this troubling dispatch in late March, 1919:

All agree that the world's fate hangs on the decisions of the next ten days. As a member of the American peace delegation put it, 'It will now be settled whether we shall have a fairly livable world in the near future or whether we are just finishing the first and least destructive five years of the great war.'¹⁶

As radical rebellions rocked the former German and Austrian Empires and the Bolsheviks in Russia fended off counterrevolutionary armies, two million American soldiers remained en masse in Europe, chafing for their return home. About a million had not seen combat. They were required to keep drilling through the armistice to keep fit and busy while they stewed in the field through the winter and into the spring of 1919. Morale suffered accordingly, and their inactivity and poor attitudes so close to the radical European maelstrom troubled American commanders. By February General Headquarters became concerned enough to ask Roosevelt Jr. to create a 20-

¹⁶ *New York Times*, March 25, 1919.

man task force of civilian officers to study the morale problem of the A.E.F.¹⁷

Roosevelt Jr. used the February 15th meeting to advance an idea he and friends Maj. Eric Fisher Wood and Lt. Cols. William Donovan and George White, Roosevelt Jr.'s old Plattsburg mates, had discussed a month earlier: the possibility of creating a Grand Army of the Republic-type of organization for World War veterans. They agreed to sponsor a caucus on the issue in a month in Paris. Nominally open to all ranks, the sparsely attended meeting resembled a prewar preparedness organization meeting with all but two of the 450 in attendance holding commissions and only 47 ranking below lieutenant. The organizers of the caucus actually benefited from such scant attendance to push through their vision without much debate. They resurrected the name American Legion and drafted a temporary constitution that offered membership in the Legion to any member of the armed services, regardless of rank and even service in the European Theater. The meeting also federalized the organization and explicitly affirmed principles of "Americanism" that lingered from wartime mobilization. While the assembly met, Roosevelt Jr. drummed up support for the Legion in the United States, securing media attention with his name.¹⁸

17 John Lax and William Pencak, "Creating the American Legion," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 81 no. 1 (Winter 1982) pg. 44, Pencak, pp. 41, 46.

¹⁸ Thomas A. Rumer, *The American Legion: An Official History 1919-1989* (New York: M. Evans & Company Inc., 1990) pg. 14, Gray, pp. 49-50, Pencak, pp. 54-55. The provision to make states the locus of Legion organization appears to be a nod to Bennett Clark, who expressed concern to Roosevelt Jr. that Southern states would have to send delegations to national conventions with a percentage of black Legionnaires. In fact,

As with the Plattsburg and preparedness movements before the war, prominent upper-middle class officers made up the American Legion's initial leadership. New York Progressive Hamilton Fish and Franklin D'Olier joined the cadre, as did Roosevelt's Jr. cousin George, future Secretary of the Treasury Ogden Mills and Bennett "Champ" Clark, son of the former Speaker of the House. Most of the original 20-man task force hailed from the seats of the eastern establishment like Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago. Eight came from New York City alone. These men saw a great opportunity at Paris to revive the preparedness organizations for postwar use. Their initial agenda for preserving the "memories" and "spirit" of the war signaled how their experiences leading men from across the nation and from diverse backgrounds with success validated nationalist communal values.¹⁹ It had required enormous effort to create those values in the American public before involvement, and the Legion's founders feared what a rollback against such values would mean for the memories of the fallen and the nation at large.

The fledgling American Legion scheduled a stateside caucus in St. Louis for May 8-10. By the time of that meeting, domestic order was becoming all the more tenuous. Strikers had all but shut down Seattle in the

Legion posts remained segregated in the South into the 1950s. Clark to Roosevelt Jr. July 30, 1919. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Collection, Library of Congress, Michael Kazin, The Populist Persuasion (New York: Basic Books, 1995) pp. 181-182.

¹⁹ Pencak, pg 53. Hamilton Fish, Hamilton Fish: Memoir of an American Patriot (Washington D.C: Regnery Gateway, 1991) pg. 19. Terry G. Radtke, "Americanism and the Politics of Commitment: The Policies and Ideology of the American Legion in the Interwar Period" (Rutgers University: PhD Dissertation, 1993) pg. 15. Pencak, pp. 325, 59.

spring, precipitating federal troop involvement. Radical rallies on May Day in Boston, Cleveland and New York led to riots. Before the summer of 1919 ended, one in five American workers walked off the job, half a million in the steel industry around Pittsburgh and Gary, Indiana alone. The police force of Boston struck. Radicals on the fringes of the movement detonated bombs in Pittsburgh and Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Butte, Montana, Seattle mayor Ole Hanson's office, and at Attorney General Mitchell Palmer's home in Washington. The International Workers of the World's (IWW) increased activity allowed many to place the blame for anarchist activity on its doorstep, as the IWW openly embraced the Bolshevik Revolution and emphasized class issues in America.²⁰

To Americans, anarchism and Bolshevism were synonymous. The cursory information Westerners received about Bolshevik practices indicated that they were the enemies of order. As, Christopher Lasch has noted, Americans interpreted Bolshevik tyranny not in terms of class warfare or any communist policy of the new Soviet Union (although certainly those policies were not approved of) but of mob rule.²¹ Americans only had to look to the chaos raking over Poland, Austria, Bavaria and Berlin for examples of Bolshevik mobs at work. Other radical factions assassinated leaders of revolutionary factions like Kurt Eisner in Munich and Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin. Street fighting raged through long periods

²⁰ Kennedy, pp. 288-289, *New York Times*, July 7, 1919

²¹ Christopher Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972, Columbia University Press, 1962) pp. 129-131.

of 1919 in both cities. Legionnaires worried that Bolshevism could unravel the social order of the United States if allowed free reign in American society as it had been granted in a decimated Germany.

Those delegates who attended the St. Louis caucus remained sensitive to the radical issue. Many of its attendees had served stateside and were therefore quite familiar with the events of the spring. On an organizational level, the American Legion immediately began the work of reinterpreting Americanism to address the threat of radicalism, which they perceived as a new foreign enemy. Essentially, Legionnaires replaced the Red replaced with the Hun in the Americanism lexicon. Members took their first swipe at the IWW directly at the St. Louis caucus by supporting a resolution for the Credentials Committee to refuse voting privileges for any independent group of soldiers and sailors who had been involved in the Seattle strikes. On its final day, the caucus passed a resolution that called for the federal government to deport "every one of those Bolsheviks or IWWs."²²

The caucus also stood to define the progressive direction of the organization. It adopted declaration of mission written by a committee headed by Fish that became the preamble to the American Legion constitution: This document rung with Bull Moose rhetoric, emphasizing that the Legion was formed "to maintain law and order; to foster and perpetuate a one hundred percent Americanism...to inculcate a sense of

²² Pencak, pp. 59-60.

individual obligation to the community, state, and nation” and, significantly, “to combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses.” In progressive spirit, American Legion members began referring to each other as “comrade” or “buddy” instead of by rank to emphasize the progressive disdain for unnecessary hierarchy. The caucus also launched the American Legion’s public relations campaign with a strong send off from the national press and the establishment of the Legion’s own magazine, a weekly that began publication in July.²³ The magazine served as the Legion leadership’s pulpit and would become an effective organizing tool for its national headquarters. Initially, it was filled with antiradical commentary.

The message the Legion brass offered veterans was becoming clear by the summer of 1919. The war had been a heroic crusade that Americans had undertaken to rid Europe and Western Civilization of autocracy. By war’s end, the United States involvement was assuming something of a mythic quality for veterans. The American Legion offered a place to prolong such glory.²⁴ Part of the “camaraderie” that the Legion hoped to preserve from wartime experience was common sacrifice of personal interest in the name of the larger national good. Camaraderie also meant more than military buddy-making. It referred back to the spirit of wartime Americanism that strove to create a feeling of national community. The heterogeneous social environment many soldiers encountered in the military

²³ Pencak, pg. 63.

²⁴ Kennedy, pp. 217-218.

provided a perfect example of just that feeling, a the “GR-R-AND and GLOR-R-RIOUS feelin,’” the *American Legion Weekly* proclaimed.²⁵ Legionnaires returned home to find a nation seemingly disinterested in preserving national cohesion but more engaged in splitting itself by class, race, or ethnicity. Little evidence indicates that the American Legion’s leaders actually feared a radical revolution in the United States, but they did recognize how local radical action threatened to disrupt civic life and economic activity in communities throughout the country. Thus, antiradicalism did serve as a recruitment tool for Legionnaires encountering radical and union activity in their cities and towns.

Camaderie also offered veterans an alternative to what the Ku Klux Klan called “brotherhood” in many of the same communities that soon supported Legion posts. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the version of the Klan reborn in 1915 attracted large numbers of middle class, urban men and women who were not the marginalized members of communities as previously thought. The modern Klan spread throughout the Midwest and Pacific Northwest, in many of the same areas that the Legion enjoyed success.²⁶ The Klan pursued members from churches and established secret societies like the Masons, Elks, and Odd Fellows, hoping to attract respectable families to a “mass movement” of Protestants united in defense

²⁵ *American Legion Weekly*, July 4, 1919, pg. 11

²⁶ Recent revisionist studies of the Ku Klux Klan include: Shawn Lay, Hooded Knights of the Niagara: the Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, New York (New York: New York University Press, 1995), MacClean, Leonard J. Moore, Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928 Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), Robert Allen Goldberg, Flooded Empire: the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

of traditional racial, gender, and class conventions of American culture.²⁷

Therefore, brotherhood to the Klan, especially in the South, reflected participation in an evangelizing mission of cultural cleansing.

That grand and glorious feeling caught on quickly, with help from a barrage of sophisticated publicity. Behind a campaign employing a leading corporate publicist in New York, speaking tours, federal incorporation, the support of the governors of New Jersey, Colorado, Kansas, Ohio and even the initially cool General John Pershing, Legion membership swelled to 843,000 by 1920. Unlike the Veterans of Foreign Wars, which extended invitation of membership only to those veterans who had served overseas (about 2/5 of those mobilized for World War I), the Legion's decision to open its membership to anyone in uniform during the war proved wise. While holding similar interpretations of postwar Americanism, the VFW never exceeded 300,000 members before World War II. The Legion did best in attracting new membership in states that had voted strongly for Theodore Roosevelt in 1912. Most of the Legion's new membership came from belts of Roosevelt strength in the Midwest and Middle Atlantic states. Of the states in the top 10 of Legion membership (California, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) only Wisconsin returned less than a quarter of its ballots for Roosevelt. He won four of the 10 states (California, Michigan, North

²⁷ MacClean, pp. 7, 11.

Dakota and Minnesota).²⁸ This shift westward in Legion membership away from the leadership's largely eastern locus added an interesting touch of contestation between the delegates and the upper cadre of Legion organizers, who less and less reflected the typical Legionnaire.

At the American Legion's first national convention in Minneapolis in November 10-12, 1919 this rift between leadership and membership first developed. The Legion brass entered the convention intent on ramming through its specific agenda of creating a politically sensitive, progressive organizational able to affect all levels of government. This agenda rubbed against the democratic spirit of the Saint Louis caucus, at which the Legion leadership had endorsed the power of local posts and the equality of all Legionnaires. The Legion's upper echelon wanted it both ways: to be progressively democratic yet hold the reins over the potentially unpredictable whims of its membership. These contradictory aims created problems for Roosevelt Jr. and his peers immediately at Minneapolis. The leadership first struggled to maintain control of the convention when news arrived from Centralia, Washington that four Legionnaires had been shot and killed in street fighting with the IWW on Armistice Day. After wrangling with a number of stridently anti-labor resolutions from the floor,

²⁸ Pencak, pg. 83, 50. While it shared much of the American Legion's consideration of Americanism and patriotism, the VFW was more populist in its approach to issues of government spending. Roger Daniels, The Bonus March: An Episode of the Great Depression (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971) pg. 52, Statistics from Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. *United States Election Data: 1788-1990*. <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/elections/us.elections/> Membership data from Proceedings of the Fifth National Convention of the American Legion, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1925.

the convention's heads pushed through a statement that only authorized posts' cooperation in law enforcement when "anarchistic and un-American groups" were involved at the last moments of the convention. Delegates did manage to approve resolutions concerning lowered dues, reform of the War Risk Insurance Board, and adjusted compensation legislation, all of which the membership supported over Legion leaders' cautious objections. The body also transferred the Legion's national headquarters from New York City to Indianapolis in a move symbolic of the organization's strong presence in the Midwest. Roosevelt Jr. managed to create a precedent of political impartiality by rejecting nominations for commander because he feared his own aspirations would taint what he saw in progressive terms as a nonpartisan organization. The convention voted behind Roosevelt Jr.'s insistence to approve a resolution that required all office holders in the Legion to forswear aspirations for political office as well.²⁹

The battles between leadership and the rank-and-file that the Legion experienced at its first convention would continue throughout the 1920s in a variety of ways, as membership either got ahead of the wishes of Indianapolis with their actions or through convention resolutions. But the challenges posed by the Legion's membership usually tried to push its politically-sensitive leadership into more aggressively progressive and nationalist stances on issues like adjusted compensation and antiradicalism. The Legion's national committee would have to reel in overly aggressive

²⁹ Pencak, pp. 49, 65, Rumer, pp. 94-94, Pencak, pp. 73-74.

posts to salvage its national reputation during the last half of 1919 and into 1920 as the Red Scare began to grip America. Above all, the Legion's elite wanted to keep their new organization in the political mainstream to keep it effectual in its lobbying and publicity efforts. Despite these struggles the Legion's leadership succeeded in the organization's first year to establish the principles of nationalism, nonpartisan community action, and equality of opportunity. Furthermore, it had succeeded in carrying over the nationalist progressive conception of Americanism into the postwar environment by challenging its posts to apply Americanism in their local communities.

The attractiveness of these principles in the immediate aftermath of the Great War connected with a broader national debate over the relationship between nationalism and culture. The emergence of a more robust nationalist movement in the first few decades of the 20th Century, especially after the failure of Woodrow Wilson's internationalist vision, touched off literary and artistic movements that aspired to rediscover a national consciousness or unique identity. American patriotism after the war, meanwhile, flourished under the new mission of defining American distinctiveness from the smoldering ruins of Europe. Historian Michael Kammen has contended that the reinvigoration of patriotism was not strictly limited to private clubs like the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Society of Colonial Dames, or the American Legion, but extended across the cultural spectrum to include professionals. Writers, journalists, even professional historians engaged in illuminating the American character

throughout the 1920s, against the emerging “debunking” work of liberal progressives writers and scholars. While many observing this nationalist shift in culture resented the change and resisted the process, support for the “strictly American” style of cultural expression certainly provided a fertile bed for the American Legion’s own Americanizing efforts to take root as they developed in the 1920s.³⁰

The American Legion launched its postwar Americanism program by targeting radicals. For those patriotic Americans searching for the antithesis of postwar-American cultural values, few examples were as fruitful—radicalism was subversive to nationalism and some of its supporters were foreign-born. The actions of foreign radicals were over-represented in Legion public discourse. “Bolshevism, the word, christened in the blood of a wayward and hopeless Russia, came and took its place in the speaking vocabulary of American,” the *American Legion Weekly* declared in November 1919. One editorial used the metaphor of infection to describe how “America will not be poisoned by the virus of Bolshevism,” or “virulent Slav radicalism,” to which the American Legion would prove “an infallible antidote.” An article in the last *American Legion Weekly* in 1919, describing the deportation of Emma Goldman and other Communists, equated “Reds” with foreign-born radicals and emphasized how they had turned their attention away from supporting Germany and towards destroying America. Sounding a reoccurring theme, the article declared

³⁰ Kammen, pp. 302-304, 332-337.

"The Red does not figure in all strikes, of course, but he does in every reign of terror." The caption of a picture of a riot in Cleveland indicated that "of 134 persons taken in this raid 130 were aliens." The same article claimed that 50,000 "alien terrorists" were at work in America. Another article published in early 1920 described how even non-radicalized immigrants turned left by claiming "the foreigners, believing, or pretending to believe, that our form of government is as repressive and oppressive as any of the old systems in central Europe, urge these crazy Bolshevist schemes of class war, class robbery, and class slavery."³¹ As Bolshevik sympathizers, foreign radicals represented a real threat to societal order. They threatened to unleash the mob. The Red Scare, therefore, was continuing the necessary work of Americanization, pruning such potentially dangerous elements from an increasingly tenuous national condition. In a letter that declared its willingness to cooperate with the police if the IWW ever struck, Oakland, California Legionnaires declared themselves "determined to see that no lawless element gets control of this city. We feel it just as much our obligation to perform this duty at home as it was for us to defend the flag in the trenches in France."³²

The IWW drew the particular ire of the Legion. Despite its domestic origins at century's turn, the IWW represented little more than a Bolshevik syndicate, and its leaders little more than the hired guns of a foreign

³¹ *American Legion Weekly*, November 28, 1919, pg. 8, December 26, 1919, pg. 11, Jan 30, 1920, pg. 33.

³² *American Legion Weekly*, August 1, 1919, pg. 19.

government bent on destroying democracy in the eyes of Legionnaires. Seattle's Mayor Hanson informed Legionnaires that "the international Reds saw the necessity of procuring a force already organized in this land of ours, and chose the I.W.W. to do their work and carry out their policies in America," claiming that "under consultation with and under the direction of the Bolsheviks" the Wobblies decided to embark on a strike campaign to bring American capitalism down.³³ After the Centralia, Washington incident marred the Legion's first convention, the events of that Armistice Day became an antiradical rallying point for the organization. Resolutions at Minneapolis used "IWW-ism" and Bolshevism in the same sentence, apparently seeing the two terms as interchangeable. *American Legion Weekly* editors tacitly endorsed post vigilantism through a sensational article in December 1919 chronicling the Centralia incident. The article hailed the enforcement capabilities of the local Legion post which "within a few minutes...had affairs completely under control and most of the murderers in jail." The Legion claimed that the attack was premeditated by IWW members, who shot from rooftops at parading Legionnaires. In fact, Legion members had stormed the IWW meeting hall as they had previously planned when reaching it along their route. Word had leaked to the Wobblies that the assault would take place during the parade, and they had armed themselves accordingly and responded to Legion action with force. But the Legion version of events won the day, both in the media and in the

³³ *American Legion Weekly*, July 11, 1919, pp. 10, 14.

rigged jury trials for six IWW members convicted of second-degree murder. When one IWW member, veteran Wesley Everetts was lynched before the trial, which the *American Legion Weekly* dismissively commented that “there is no doubt that in this case a real murderer was saved the ceremony of a trial.”³⁴

The Centralia incident touched off a flurry of vigilante activity perpetrated by energetically antiradical Legion members eager to join in the action. Posts throughout the so-called “Red Belt,” a swath from Oklahoma north and across the upper Plains to Montana and Washington, began to engage in attacks not only against the IWW but the pacifist Non-Partisan League. In Oakland, Tacoma, Seattle, Spokane and elsewhere, Legion posts assisted local and federal law enforcement agents in rooting out IWW organizers. Local posts in Kansas, Cincinnati, and St. Louis broke up leftist meetings while Legionnaires prevented Socialist Congressman Victor Berger from addressing crowds in Milwaukee, the Bronx, and Providence.³⁵

Soon, moderate posts began to complain to National Headquarters about their more reactionary buddies’ activities. Even by December 1919, the national leadership had to distance itself from the actions of local posts to maintain its credibility as a nonpartisan action group. As the *American Legion Weekly*’s editorial board reminded its readers, “if there have been incidents where veterans, impatient over official disinterest, have in the name of Americanism taken the law into their own hands, it must be

³⁴ Ibid, December 12, 1919. Pencak, pp. 151-152.

³⁵ Pencak, pp. 152-153.

recalled that these were the isolated actions of individuals.” Nevertheless, by 1921 vigilantism had become a very serious problem for the image-conscious Legion. Mob incidents perpetrated by Legionnaires against radicals the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) cried were too numerous to count. In a report it sent to American Legion National Headquarters, the ACLU singled out 50 posts that had committed violations of the constitutional rights the Legion claimed to defend. National Commander Franklin D’Olier decided to reel in wayward posts and wrote each accused post a letter that rejected their use of violence.³⁶

Since headquarters had loosed each local post to do what their individual communities needed to maintain law and order, the American Legion’s organizational structure created much of the problem during the Red Scare. But it is important to distinguish the Legion from a vigilante group like the American Protective League. Formed during the war to defend American industry from potential German sabotage efforts, the APL had attracted as many as 250,000 men, many from the same middle-class cohort as Legionnaires, to its ranks. In the fall of 1919, the APL reorganized unofficially as the Justice Department and Military Intelligence recruited former members to perform Red raids. APL members participated in federal police action until 1921. Municipalities also recruited both APL veterans and Legionnaires to serve as an auxiliary police force.³⁷ But since APL

³⁶ *American Legion Weekly*, December 19, 1919, pg. 12, Pencak, pp. 153-157.

³⁷ Joan M. Jensen, *The Price of Vigilance* (New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1968), pp. 25, 283-287, Higham, pg. 211.

participation in the Red Scare was *sub rosa*, it was very difficult for the organization's leadership or the government to control individual agents at the risk of exposing the government's complicity in using them in the first place. As a result, the APL abused the civil liberties of many Americans during the Scare. The American Legion, however, suffered publicly when its members stepped out of line in repressing radical activity. As a new and politically sensitive organization, the Legion could stand only so much egg on its face.

In an attempt to gain a better organizational handle on its Americanizing efforts, the American Legion created the Americanism Commission in 1920. Reflecting the increasing fluidity of the term, the Legion struggled to define exactly what Americanism meant in a postwar environment. For its own organizational purposes, it determined Americanism to mean a notion of citizenship that encouraged local community participation with an appreciation for national political institutions and history.³⁸ Americanism, like the Legion's posts, should focus on the local while addressing larger issues of the national culture. This definition of Americanism had significant political ramifications for communities across the nation as the Legion unified both the debate on the presence of a national culture and wartime notions of loyalty into one expression of citizenship. These aspects reinforced of the other, as the

³⁸ Radtke, pg. 360.

Legion the cultural power of nationalism to bolster its explicitly politicized conception of citizenship.

The Americanism Commission preferred education, both civic and institutional, as its main course of action against radicalism. "The greatest weapon with which to successfully combat communism and its kindred diseases is education," the chair of the Commission declared at the ninth national Legionnaire convention. This approach not only reflected what Legion leadership's progressive faith in the power of education but also guided posts away from vigilante activity. Even in communities free from radical activity, the Legion's promotion of patriotic symbol and ritual served to reinforce American "civil religion." As William Pencak noted, "The Legion was practicing semiotics a half century before the academics discovered it." By 1931, an internal poll of discovered that well over half of Legion posts nationwide performed some sort of community-reinforcing service.³⁹

The Americanism Committee itself pushed for variety of patriotic educational reforms that promoted civic nationalism. It lobbied for loyalty oaths for teachers and pushed through bills requiring patriotic exercises in public schools in 13 states in 1921. It also called for new classes in Civics and American History to be taught in public schools. The Committee created its own textbook in 1924 entitled "The Story of the American

³⁹ Proceedings of the Ninth National Convention of the American Legion (Omaha: Government Printing Office, 1928) pp. 45, Robert Bellah, The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial (New York: Sebury Press, 1975), Pencak, pp. 279, 281.

People” to provide an appropriately patriotic telling of American History in light of the field’s debunking trend. By 1925, the Committee had joined with 150 other organizations to create and promote Education Week in American public schools. The program included lessons for Constitution Day, Patriotism Day, School and Teacher Day, Conservation and Thrift Day, Know Your School Day, Community and Health Day, and, finally, For God and Country Day, unabashedly titled after the first line of the American Legion constitution’s preamble. It urged awards for “honor, courage, service, leadership, and scholarship” to schoolboys, subtracted honor and leadership and added “companionship” as accompanying awards for girls. No quotidian detail was too small for Americanism Committee attention: it published a pamphlet in 1924 described how to display the flag appropriately during parades and civic ceremonies and suggested dimensions for community playgrounds.⁴⁰

Concern about playground design and recreation opportunities connected with an older progressive desire, as Paul Boyer noted, to control community behavior through manipulating the environment. Legionnaires also tapped into the Rooseveltian emphasis of a strenuous life by encouraging athletics in their communities. Baseball held particular currency for the Legion, as it represented the national culture and could supplement the patriotic education of the school day by teaching the values

⁴⁰ *American Legion Weekly*, October 7, 1921, pg. 24, Proceedings of the Seventh National Convention, pg. 140, Garland W. Powell. “Service” For God and Country (New York: American Legion, 1924),

of fair play and healthy competition. The organization started its own youth league, complete with a Junior World Series, in 1926. The Legion formed another committee to promote posts' adoption of Boy Scout troops in 1926 as well. "Both these programs had the goal of helping boys to know the Legion and to teach Americanism," Legion historian Thomas Rumer wrote. Beyond the sandlot and the scout hall, posts provided communities a variety of charitable services designed to serve as examples of positive community participation. Legionnaires aided in disaster and unemployment relief, cared for orphans, ran traffic safety programs, and volunteered at local charities. Taken in sum, all of these programs (while certainly benefiting the needy) acted to reinforce the American political economy. In viewing the larger picture of this mosaic of community service, the Americanism Commission summarized its own program as "political education" in 1928, missing the Bolshevistic irony of its statement.⁴¹

The Legion did not ignore its own membership in its Americanizing efforts. It explored the nation's political system in a series of articles in the *American Legion Weekly* that acted as a kind of progressive civics lesson for its membership in the early 1920s. All of these articles focused on the federal government and the electoral process as the *Weekly's* editors strove to inculcate the membership with respect for the federal government and a positive sense for participatory democracy. "The returned soldier should

⁴¹ Paul Boyer, The Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) pg. 221, Rumer, pg. 182, Pencak, pp. 279-285, Proceedings of the Eighth National Convention, pg. 47.

join with other bodies of disinterested citizens in every community, city, state and nation to weed out the politician and to nominate on both tickets men who shall look after the common good," one article declared. Smith College Government Professor Everett Kimball wrote a series of articles for the *American Legion Magazine* that examined the party system, the presidency, and the Senate, concluding that progressive reform had improved all. He urged Legionnaires: "Go into politics. Be a politician...if you do, you will control the party organization. Then there will be no machines."⁴²

These articles also urged Legionnaires to support moderate unions like the American Federation of Labor (AFL). National Vice Commander George L. Berry, president of the International Printing Pressmen and Assistants' Union, assured readers in 1922 that "by and analysis of the legislative program of The American Legion and The American Federation of Labor it will be observed that there is little, if any, difference in the aspirations of these two organizations from that point of view." The Legion insisted it would remain neutral in strikes between labor and capital, as long as law and order was preserved. Both moderate labor and the Legion were "wholly opposed to a dictatorship of any class and [were] determined that the American Government shall be responsive to the will of the majority of all the American people," one writer asserted in defending the Legion from criticism that the organization was anti-labor in 1921. In fact, a Legion

⁴² *American Legion Weekly*, January 9, 1920, pp. 5-6, November 5, 1920, pp. 7, 20-21, June 15, 1923, pp. 6, 19-22.

official spoke at the 1921 AFL convention of the organization's shared purpose. After AFL chairman Samuel Gompers spoke at the Legion's 1922 national convention, the Legion actually had to defend itself from accusations of being in bed with the union. The Legion's relationship with moderate labor remained strong throughout the inter-war period, despite periodic strikebreaking actions by Legion posts.⁴³

The most obvious target for the Americanization efforts of the Americanism Commission remained alien nationals. In its first year the Legion offered a hostile face towards aliens by urging Congress to deport those who had not served the war effort. But once the Americanism Commission got off the ground, the American Legion's focus on immigrants' issues began to shift away from wartime grievances with so-called "alien slackers," or immigrants who refused military service. Instead, Legion programs centered upon broader considerations of nationalism and assimilation. The Commission's first chairman, former New York City Police Commissioner Arthur Woods rejected a "knock-his-block-off" approach to Americanizing immigrants. Woods insisted "the foreigner has no desire—and none of us would have in his place—to be a machine-made American. He wants to feel a friendly welcome, he wants to believe that he is wanted here, that he will have a fair chance." Woods felt the Legion could offer such a warm welcome by assisting new immigrants acclimate to

⁴³ Ibid, March 24, 1922, pp. 8, 22, September 2, 1921, pp. 5, Dec 1, 1922, pg 10, Report of Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor (Washington D.C.: The Law Reporter Printing Company, 1921) pp. 277-279.

their new country and even provide help in their native language. Under Woods, the Americanism Commission tried to gather information about immigrants' specific destinations within the United States from the Port of New York so they could alert the appropriate post to prepare a welcome. Nationalist identity as an American could be coddled out of immigrants, Woods believed, with the appropriately sensitive approach that retreated from harsher wartime demands for instant immigrant assimilation.⁴⁴

When immigration levels exploded to around 700,000 persons in 1920 from wartime lows of around 100,000 Woods's position became untenable. With about 600,000 servicemen out of work, the Legion lost patience with the open door. But its reconsideration of immigration policy was hardly unique. "When the disillusion that followed the war choked off any large international or progressive outlet for moral idealism," John Higham has noted, "about all that remained of it in small-town America turned inward, in a final effort to preserve the values of the community against change and every external influence." The Klan reacted to the immigration boom by retreating into race theory and emphasizing the inequality of Southern and Eastern Europeans to Anglo-Saxons. The Legion, however, distinguished itself from nativist groups of the period by reorienting community values towards the nation-state, not towards old folkways, nostalgic visions of the past, or ethnic purity. The Legion did not urge posts to circle their cultural wagons around their communities or don

⁴⁴ *American Legion Weekly*, April 23, 1920, pg. 7, June 11, 1920, pg. 6.

hoods. Even while it openly doubted the possibilities for nation-wide assimilation success and lobbied Congress for a five-year immigration hiatus, Legion posts from such unlikely states as Minnesota and North Carolina still received national praise for local immigrant educational efforts. The organization explored the limitations of the nationalist progressive values of education and assimilation, sacrificing progressive tactics only when they seemed hopelessly outmatched by another immigration boom.⁴⁵

Immigration presented the Legion with two challenges. First, it diffused any attempts the Legion made to support the formation of a national culture, especially a national political culture with foreigners arriving from abroad with a variety of political perspectives. The Legion responded to this challenge with a healthy dose of cultural chauvinism. As with during the war, Legionnaires expected aliens to recognize the greatness of American democratic institutions and make their own efforts to join the American community. Those who would not meet Americanizing efforts half-way were open to scorn. "Prior to the war we were a happy-go-lucky people, so far as our concern about citizenship went" the *American Legion Weekly* claimed in 1921. But the Red Scare had made "the evils of an unassimilated population" evident. The Americanism Commission,

⁴⁵ Immigration and Naturalization Services. "An Immigrant Nation: United States Regulation of Immigration." June 18, 1991, MacLean, pg. 131, Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and naturalization, House of Representatives 67th Congress. Serial 1-B. December 13-20, 1921, pg. 149, Higham, pg. 295. *American Legion Weekly*, November 3, 1922, pg. 27.

expanded to a full-fledged division in 1921 under the leadership of Texan Alvin Owsley, complained that immigrants isolated themselves within ethnic communities that became impregnable to Americanizing efforts. One observer warned:

A government in which each citizen takes a personal interest seems never to have existed among Asiatic peoples, of whom there is a considerable strain in eastern Europe and even well in to central Europe, while those democracies established in south-eastern Europe when ethnologists state that portion of the world was "nordicised" have not endured.

A Legion editorial in March, 1923 quoted the words of Roosevelt to make the case for an immigration hiatus: "America must decide once and for all whether she is bringing these people to her shores to make industrial slaves out of them, or whether she proposes to make American citizens out of them."⁴⁶

The second challenge immigration posed to the viability of the Legion's Americanism efforts came at the local level, as posts struggled to deal with explosions of foreign-born populations on both shores. Japanese immigration to Hawaii and the West Coast of the continental United States became a particularly sticky subject for the Legion, as the organization came its closest to expressing a nativist view on this issue. The Japanese apparently intractable cultural identity and supposedly prodigious birthrates alarmed veterans in many Western communities. One writer fretted "what use the Japanese will make of their dominating political position when they get it" in localities through land ownership, envisioning the progressive fear

⁴⁶ *American Legion Weekly*, March 9, 1923, pg. 12, April 29, 1921, pg. 5, Rumer, pg. 560

of the obstinate and selfish political interest. Eastern Legionnaires, meanwhile, called on foreign newspapers to incorporate anglicized phraseologies to aid immigrants' understanding of English and to publish English versions of their papers so authorities could monitor their content. Local immigration issues, therefore, hinged on more than just anxiety over the loss of cultural norms: immigrants represented a real threat to the political culture of localities as well. This development ruffled the Legion's feathers.⁴⁷

With increasing evidence that immigrants were not doing their part to embrace American political culture, the Legion urged for a slamming of America's door before Americanizing efforts became hopelessly swamped. But unlike the Klan, the Legion experienced scant vigilante activity against immigrants. Instead, the Legion employed something the Klan sorely lacked-- a lobbying wing— to address immigration on the national political stage. Legionnaires testified in front of Congress in support the National Origins Act of 1924, which erected severely limiting quotas on Southern and Eastern European immigration and that banned Japanese immigration outright. The organization, however, did support exemption from quotas for foreign nationals who had served in the American armed forces in the World War and their immediate families. These immigrants, the Legion argued, provided positive Americanizing examples and should have received citizenship as a reward. These calculated political actions stood in

⁴⁷ *American Legion Weekly*, October 20, 1922, pg. 6, Nov 3, 1922, pg. 6.

contrast to its reaction to radicalism earlier in the decade, when Legionnaires acted freely as politicized citizens to repress objectionable political discourse. Under stronger dictates from a more organized national leadership, the Legion in the mid-1920s avoided vigilante ugliness and stood as the politically disinterested organization its founders had hoped it would become.

The Legion as a lobbying body reached the apex of its inter-war power in 1924 by scoring another coup with the passage of the long-sought, fiercely-debated Soldiers' Adjusted Compensation Act, which passes over President Coolidge's veto in the summer of that year. First proposed by Legion lobbyists in 1920 and vetoed twice by President Harding, the so-called "Bonus Bill" (a title the Legion itself rejected) offered the estimated 3 million eligible veterans several options for the compensation of their service during the war. The Legion had framed the terms of the debate about adjusted compensation carefully in progressive language. They insisted that the bill did not reward veterans' patriotism, as critics claimed, but instead corrected an "inequality of opportunity" between those who served and those who benefited from wartime wage gains. The organization vilified Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon, a chief critic of the Bonus Bill, as a tool of the Wall Street elite, more interested in promoting unnecessary tax cuts than protecting returning veterans from financial trouble. The Legion also succeeded in lobbying on the state level for adjusted compensation as 20 states at the end of 1923-- most in the

Midwest, Upper Plains, and Northeast—passed bonus bills of their own.

The Legion was on its way to becoming an “interest” in American politics as well as a force in domestic political culture.⁴⁸

But the start of the Great Depression threatened to unhinge the Legion’s tenuous internal cohesion and dampen its potency on Capitol Hill. As unions began to take a more active interest in organizing workers at the onset of the Depression, once again Legionnaires began to engage in vigilante and quasi-official police activities. During a 1929 strike in Gastonia, North Carolina in 1929 Legionnaires trucked in strikebreakers to the textile mills. At a coal mine outside Columbus, Ohio armed Legionnaires served with deputies to push back striking workers from a local jail in 1931. That same year New Jersey Legionnaires participated at state behest in a strikebreaking effort at the construction site of the Pulaski Skyway. Legion National Headquarters once again asserted the organization’s official neutrality in union-management conflict, which tamed some potentially wayward posts. But the Legion’s leadership failed to put its foot down hard enough to prevent future and violent participation of Legionnaires in strikes.⁴⁹

As economic times worsened in America, internal conflict within the Legion itself gave national leadership more to worry about. With the American economy unraveling, the Legion became caught up in veterans’

⁴⁸ House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee, Hearing on Soldiers’ Adjusted Compensation, March 2-5, 1920, *American Legion Weekly*, December 28, 1923, pg. 8, August 31, 1923, pg. 14.

⁴⁹ Pencak, pg. 220.

strengthening calls for an immediate payment of the Bonus. In a Congressional compromise at the bill's passage, veterans opting to receive their bonus benefits in cash were issued certificates payable in 1945 so that the Treasury could cope with the financial burden of the program. Veterans could receive a maximum of \$625 based on the number of days served. In 1929 Congressman and Legionnaire Wright Patman of Texas became one of the first to call for an immediate cash payment of the bonus to veterans as a "reflationary" tactic to address the economic crisis of the country. At the 1930 American Legion National Convention Patman introduced a resolution that called for an immediate payment of the bonus. His speech directly assaulted one delivered by President Hoover, who had urged the body not to demand such a plan and to remain confident in American recovery. Patman's resolution was tabled overwhelmingly on a vote he considered unfair. Despite his defeat at the convention, the Legion's Executive Committee found itself under increasing pressure by the New Year to make some statement on the bonus issue. Prodded by a Veterans of Foreign Wars' presentation of a four-million-signature petition for immediate payment to Washington on January 21, 1931 and further pushed by increasing grass-roots support for payment measures within the Legion membership, the Executive Committee overturned the Convention's action. Patman staged a fife and drum parade down Pennsylvania Avenue in celebration.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Pencak, 202-203, Daniels, pg. 71.

Patman's victory would be only the first battle in a protracted internal struggle the Legion waged to protect itself from outside criticism, maintain its unselfish self-image, and balance the demands of suffering members. This struggle heated up in the summer of 1932 as about 20,000 veterans from across the nation marched on Washington in the Bonus March. The national press followed the marchers on their trek across the country with significant fanfare. As the so-called "Bonus Expeditionary Army" (BEF) progressed towards the capital, the Legion refused to take a stand on the march. Legionnaires in many communities, however, did arrange transportation and food for the marching veterans. It is not clear how many legionnaires participated in the march. When the BEF arrived in the nation's capitol in May it set up camp on the flats of Anacostia, demanding the payment of the bonus before they left. On July 28, federal troops under the command of General Douglas MacArthur cleared the BEF's shantytown with tear gas and bayonets, reinforced with machine gun and tank units.⁵¹

As outrageous as the government's action against unarmed protesters was, the Legion leadership insisted that its members stand by the Hoover Administration. It noted the administration was working to find World War veterans jobs by the thousands, and work locally to find community solutions to unemployment. "If we know what is good for us, if we know what is good for America," the *American Legion Magazine*

⁵¹ Pencak, 201-203,

reminded its readers in August 1932, "we will kindly check our whips at the door when we seek beneficial legislation and then forget that we brought them with us." Despite leadership's efforts to quell the controversy, the Bonus issue dominated the 1932 National Convention in Boston, threatening to burst open fissures within the organization present since its founding. Washington police chief Pelham Glassford, whom had supported the Bonus marchers despite White House criticism, drew cheers from conventioners when he tore up newspaper articles that quoted Secretary of War Patrick Hurley commenting on the criminal elements present among the marchers. One reporter garnered cheers by praising the "Americanism and patriotism" of the BEF marchers whose peaceful dispersal had met an unnecessarily violent reaction. Despite efforts to place a pro-Hoover spin on the convention by its leadership, the Legion voted 107-1,274 for the immediate payment of the Bonus to veterans. Eight states voted to censure Hoover himself in an election year. It would take until 1935 for the Legion's leadership to begin lobbying for Bonus payments, which passed in Congress over President Roosevelt's veto in January of 1936.⁵²

While the Legion's tacit support for antiunion vigilante activity by its members and rejection of public protest by Bonus marchers at first seems inconsistent and contradictory, both reactions to the Depression can be understood through the Legion's conception of Americanism. The economic crisis of the 1930s presented the nation with its greatest challenge

⁵² *American Legion Monthly*, Aug. 1932, pg. 11, Pencak, pp. 203-204.

since the Panic of 1893, perhaps since the Civil War. The Legion viewed self-sacrifice and continued faith in the American system of government as the only potential remedy to the nation's deepening crisis. It emphasized local solutions to the problems of the Depression where the federal government failed to provide relief, and deferred its lobbying efforts for veterans' issues in consideration of the needs of the nation at large. Unlike the recession of 1921, which hit returning veterans particularly hard and led to the creation of adjusted compensation legislation in the first place, the Depression was affecting Americans of most walks of life equally. Thus, the progressive-minded Legion rejected grassroots support for bonus payment because veterans were not being unfairly taxed by the economic difficulties of the 1930s. Legion leadership chaffed under the criticism that the organization had become an "interest." Similarly, it rejected union activity during the Depression on the grounds that strikes were the selfish acts of a minority that inflicted harm on the American people at large. It did little, therefore, to discipline posts that engaged in strikebreaking. Americanism called on each citizen to defer his or her personal stake for the good of the whole, to act locally for the good of the nation. In times of trouble, this translated into patience and support for governmental action. It was not the citizens' place, however, to demand more than fair attention for inequality. In an environment of equal suffering, the Legion's leadership was willing to wait for both the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations to act on their own before presenting their own alternative.

The Legion would survive the Bonus controversy and the drains of the Depression upon its membership rolls to flourish after World War II. It sponsored the G.I. Bill, a massive and immediate help to returning veterans. A former charter member of the Tirey J. Ford Post the American Legion, Harry S. Truman, became president in 1945. Its membership swelled to 3.5 million in 1946.⁵³ The onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s gave new relevance to the Legion's Americanism program, which needed little adjustment from its commencement in the early 1920s. America's growing conflict with the Soviet Union demanded exactly the kind of national unity that the Legion had been working to establish since the 1919. The Cold War and America's emerging nationalist consensus against Communism in the 1940s and 50s served to validate the Legion's interwar Americanism efforts and endorse its vision for the future. Communities developed loyalty and patriotic civic programs, while the myths and symbols of America's civic religion, tarnished by Depression, shone again with new importance. Congress established committees to investigate "Un-American" political activities within the branches of the federal government, opening the door for the repressive force of McCarthyism in the early 1950s. The threat of nuclear annihilation served to unify the nation's political culture like never before.

⁵³ Michael J. Hogan, A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945-1954 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pg. 37, Pencak, pg. 319. Hogan provides a thorough and thoughtful examination of the political culture surrounding the Truman and early Eisenhower Administrations, emphasizing how the anticommunist discourse of the day limited and shaped political possibilities for Congress and the presidency.

While it seems the initiation of the Cold War provided the perfect opportunity for the American Legion to popularize its long-held views on Americanism, in reality those views had already affected American political culture significantly by the end of the 1930s. In fact, the efficacy of the Legion's political culture represents one explanation for the organization's staying power in American life, while groups not benefiting from such unifying ideas like the Ku Klux Klan fell by the wayside in the mid-1920s. Legionnaires took the power of Americanism, driven by national progressive ideology from before the war, as a major lesson of the Great War. Like Klansmen, they hoped to create for themselves a heroic role in society. But they insisted that role would be constructive, not reactionary (although this was an aspiration Legionnaires themselves sometimes failed to live up to). The Legion hoped to create new cultural tropes and rituals that would make Americanism a permanent factor in domestic life. This cultural output entered into an existing debate about the existence and nature of American identity prominent in the 1920s. The struggle of Americans to define a national character around World War I provided fertile ground for the Legion to plant its own seeds of political culture. By connecting the identity of that national character to the socio-political views of nationalist progressivism, the Legion and its allies introduced the notion of political ideology being "un-American" long before Senator McCarthy's hearings. The success of this adaptation of culture changed the course of debate in American political life, despite the passage of progressivism from

the national political scene in the 1930s. As Gary Gerstle has pointed out, “a preoccupation with ‘being American’ did not in itself procure political or cultural conformity, but it did force virtually every group seriously interested in political power...to couch their programs in the language of Americanism.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴Gerstle, Working-Class Americanism, pg. 8.

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