

**“A Grand and Glorious Feeling:” The American Legion and American Nationalism  
between the World Wars**

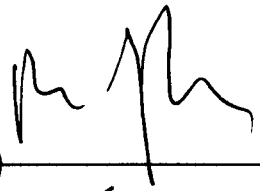
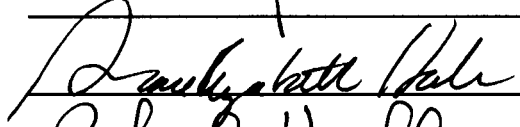
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**Abstract:**

During the period between the world wars the veterans' organization the American Legion became the most significant purveyor of nationalism in American political culture. Legionnaires' grassroots activism during the interwar period knitted together distant American communities into specific conception of nationhood. The Legion devised a variety of civic and educational efforts to encourage citizens to think of their civic and political behaviors as part of a collective effort for Americans to live up to the democratic ideals of their nation. Many of the Legion's efforts, like youth sports, Get-Out-the-Vote drives, and Boys and Girls State, concentrated on teaching Americans to respect the process of American democracy as a way to ensure the survival of the nation's exceptional and defining institutions. It took the lead in patriotic holidays and in commemorating World War I as a nationalistic touchstone, engaged in community service to put its citizenship values on display, and Americanized immigrants and commemorated their naturalization.

The Legion's nationalizing efforts made the organization a unique and important conservative force within American political culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its conservatism sprung from its demand that citizens behave with disinterest in civic and political life, acting for what was the best interest of the nation first rather than of particular class, ethnic, or racial affiliations. As the right-wing Progressives who had inspired the ideological outlook of Legion founders had done as well, Legionnaires denied the legitimacy of class or ethnic consciousness, preferring citizens instead think of themselves as "100-percent" Americans with single, nationally-focused civic identities. The organization's skepticism about immigrants' capacities to understand and appreciate

the need to defer ethnic identity for a new American one and become good democratic citizens led it to advocate restrictive immigration policies during the 1920s and 30s. Its conception of democratic national identity also undercut radical political causes as fundamentally “un-American.” Legion vigilantes chased members of radical leftist groups from the public sphere and broke strikes throughout the interwar period. This conservative activism presaged Cold War antiradicalism and the kind of class and colorblind interpretation of citizenship that would be vital to American conservatism through the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Nationalizing American Political Culture before 1919</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter 2: “A Steam Roller with Heart:” The Origins of the American Legion</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Defining Americanism, Enforcing Americanism</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Chapter 4: “What is a hundred per cent American?:” Defining Good Citizenship through Americanism</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>Chapter 5: “An Infallible Antidote:” Americanism and Race</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>Chapter 6: “A nation without heroes is a nation without a history:” The American Legion and Patriotic Commemorations</b>	<b>224</b>
<b>Chapter 7: “In America there is room for one ‘ism:’” The Legion’s Antiradicalism in the Depression</b>	<b>269</b>
<b>Conclusion: The American Legion’s Legacy in the Interwar Era and Beyond</b>	<b>306</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>316</b>

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Completing this dissertation is unusually bittersweet for me because it marks the end of more than eleven years as a student at the University of Virginia. I've been enrolled at UVa since my first year as an undergraduate in August 1995. Through my time in graduate school my undergrad friends probably found it curious that I hadn't left Charlottesville – or finished yet -- but they supported me all the way. Thank you all.

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Finally, thank you to my wife Christine Tollefson for her love and endurance through my time in graduate school. Excuse me for saying the rest of what I want to tell her in person.

## Introduction

Writing in *Foreign Policy* two summers after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, political scientist Minxin Pei tried to explain the origins of broad anti-American sentiment in the world. Pei argued that the most significant root cause of Anti-Americanism was the nationalism wrapped into American foreign policy. The trouble with this nationalism, however, was the fact most Americans denied its very existence. Nationalism hid in plain sight in American political culture, Pei argued, because “most of the institutions and practices that promote and sustain American nationalism are civic, not political; the rituals are voluntary rather than imposed; and the values inculcated are willingly embraced, not artificially indoctrinated.” Whereas in most other nations of the world the state plays a direct role in promoting nationalism, in the United States the state intervenes to grab hold of nationalistic rhetoric for its own political gain. The nationalism Americans promoted among themselves also did not look much like other nationalisms: It was based on political ideals, was triumphant, and unabashedly forward-looking.<sup>1</sup>

The unique qualities of American nationalism that Pei aptly describes reflect the dominant role that private citizens and groups have played in nationalizing American political culture, particularly since the Civil War. American nationalism can best be understood by examining how citizens argued with each other about the nature of their nation and the requirements of membership in it. Because of the decentralized traditions of American national politics and the specific sectional contexts of post-Civil War political history, private actors demonstrated the most consistent interest in nationalizing American political culture well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During wartime, the state found it

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<sup>1</sup> Minxin Pei, “The Paradoxes of American Nationalism,” *Foreign Policy*, May/June, 2003

necessary to direct private efforts to support its desired notion of national unity rather than supercede them. Given this dominance of the political culture, private groups integrated their particular ideological and racial biases into a broader concept of American national identity. While this process often was contested by other actors, groups' success in promoting their nationalistic vision within the political culture ensured they could stamp their political values and ideals onto the prevailing civic nationalism of the country.

This dissertation focuses on the World War I veterans' organization the American Legion, one of the most important nationalizing voluntary organizations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Legionnaires' grassroots activism during the interwar period knitted together distant American communities into specific conception of nationhood. They undertook this effort because they believed that only a nationalized political culture could ensure the American democratic system would dispense the freedoms and opportunities it promised to all citizens. The war had demonstrated what the nation could accomplish if united. Through a variety of civic, educational, and ceremonial programs, the Legion hoped to make that unity a permanent facet of peacetime American political culture. The Legion developed civic educational programs for children and adults to promote the values of its nationalism. It took the lead in patriotic holidays and in commemorating World War I as a nationalistic touchstone. It engaged in community service to put its citizenship values on display. It Americanized immigrants and commemorated their naturalization. It also monitored communities for subversive ideas and intervened to block "un-American" influences from accessing the public sphere.

Legionnaires believed promoting nationalism was particularly important and legitimate work for veterans to undertake. Those who had served under the flag, the organization argued, had had their civic and political consciousnesses transformed by the experience. Being on the firing line had taught veterans the meaning of unselfish service to the nation-state, the importance of cooperative citizenship in achieving common goals (in their case, victory), and the necessity of loyalty in honoring the sacrifices of the fallen. Legion leaders urged potential members of the organization to think of their experiences in the war in such terms and to consider their own civic participation in Legion programs as continued service to the nation-state. Legionnaires saw their own patriotism as superior within the political culture. Through that sense of superiority, they felt justified in monitoring the civic participation of other citizens for consistency with their vision of loyalty to the nation.<sup>2</sup>

Because the Legion was so committed to the project of nationalizing American political culture, its history in this period provides a vital way to understand the importance grassroots efforts played in shaped American nationalism. This dissertation restores important social and cultural components to the broader intellectual search for

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<sup>2</sup> Much of the historical scholarship on veterans and veterans' organizations has focused on Civil War veterans, especially the Grand Army of the Republic. See Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); O'Leary, *To Die For*, Rodney G. Minott, *Peerless Patriots: Organized Veterans and the Spirit of Americanism* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1962); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Scholarship on the American Legion itself has been paltry as well. For the best, if not the only, major academic account of the organization, see William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1940* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989). For official and friendly accounts of the organization's history, see Thomas A. Rumer, *The American Legion: An Official History, 1919-1989* (New York: M. Evans, 1990); Raymond Moley, *The American Legion Story* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1966); Richard Seeley Jones, *A History of the American Legion* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co, 1946); Marquis James, *A History of the American Legion* (New York: W. Green, 1923)

the political and civic meaning of American national identity.<sup>3</sup> During the past decade historians have re-discovered American nationalism as a field of study, unleashing the interpretive tools of cultural and social history to approach American nationalism with a fresh perspective. Recent work has paid particular attention to race, class, and gender as important factors in shaping modern American nationalism. Yet despite this renewed interest, historical scholarship has not focused adequately enough on the role civic groups have played in defining the nation and its place in the world. It has settled instead on describing nationalistic discourse, often by political elites, rather than on how nationalism became a meaningful part of American political culture on the civic level upon which most Americans would encounter it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars sought to understand how the American nation had developed a unique liberal identity via intellectual history. Hans Kohn, *American Nationalism: An Interpretive Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1957); Merle Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955). For the impact of Hartz' theories on American liberalism and national identity to the study of politics, see James T. Kloppenberg, "In Retrospect: Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*," *Reviews in American History* vol.29:3 (September 2001), pp. 460-76.

<sup>4</sup> For a useful and short account that tries, perhaps too hard, to inject nationalism into the narrative of 20<sup>th</sup> century political history, see Stuart McConnell, "Nationalism," in Stanley I. Kutler, ed. *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996) vol. 1, pp. 251-71. Much of the recent literature on American nationalism focuses either on the state's role in shaping nationalistic discourse or on nationalism's role in politics. See Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Desmond King, *The Liberty of Strangers: Making the American Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1995); John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Andrew Edward Neather, "Popular Republicanism, Ameriactism, and the Roots of Anti-Communism, 1890-1925," (unpublished dissertation, Duke University, 1993). Other recent work has focused on the importance of culture and consumption on creating a common American identity. See: Gail Bederman *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991). More recent works have focused on the role of voluntary associations and other citizen actors have played in crafting American

The Legion's nationalizing mission in the interwar period, however, had greater significance for 20<sup>th</sup> century American political history than simply injecting the political culture with a new way to understand American national identity. The principles and ideas the Legion derived its nationalist vision from were conservative ones, reflective of the organization's overwhelmingly white and affluent membership base. By focusing its activism upon political culture, the Legion emerged during the interwar period as a unique and significant conservative organization. The Legion's conservatism sprung from the narrowly-defined set of civic behaviors it expected from all citizens. It demanded that citizens behave with disinterest in civic and political life, acting for what was the best interest of the nation first rather than of particular class, ethnic, or racial affiliations. In fact, Legionnaires denied the legitimacy of class or ethnic consciousness, preferring citizens instead think of themselves as "100-percent" Americans with single, nationally-focused civic identities. As some conservative Progressives had believed at the turn of the century, such a reorientation of citizenship away from smaller-scale attachments and towards a nationalized conception of citizenship would help propel the further social and political development of the American nation forward. This vision of disinterested citizenship as the basis for national inclusion theoretically offered a place in the nation for anyone who could conform to the behavioral standards Legionnaires laid out. But it effectively dismissed forms of political organization workers and ethnic and racial minorities found essential to have their real grievances within the American socio-

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nationalism, see Cecelia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Richard J. Ellis, *To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005).

economic system be considered part of that common good the Legion was so concerned about.

Legionnaires also believed that a nationalist reorientation of Americans' citizenship would preserve the exceptional democratic institutions and ideals that had led the nation to international prominence. The organization argued that democracy represented the conditions of equality of status among all citizens and the equality of opportunity all shared to access the political system and improve themselves. This definition of citizenship Legion leaders derived from Progressive political thought, particularly from figures like Theodore Roosevelt, whose son Theodore Jr. was a founding member. These twin conditions of equality had enabled the United States to become the most equitable and prosperous nation on earth. Accordingly, it was the function of the democratic state to ensure the equal status and safeguard the equality of opportunity for its citizens, through state action if necessary. Through the course of the nation's history, structures and institutions had developed to further insure these democratic principles, beginning with the Federal Constitution. Citizens, in turn, owed these structures and institutions the obligation of their loyalty. Looking abroad for new ideas to bring to American politics or seeking to transform significantly the American political system, Legionnaires asserted, threatened to destroy American exceptionalism. Such efforts, therefore, were completely illegitimate in the eyes of Legion members. Many of the Legion's nationalizing efforts focused on getting citizens to appreciate the democratic ideals and institutions of their nation and to become active voters and participants in civic life in ways that served national concerns.

The Legion's nationalist civic activism had two conservative consequences for interwar American politics. First, Legion nationalism supplied Americans sympathetic with its political values and perspective a new language with which to describe the political and economic status quo in ways that made conditions appear more inclusive and just than they actually were. Legion nationalism assumed the inherent fairness and equitableness of the American democratic system if citizens lived up to their obligations to it. Americans could be secure in the knowledge, Legionnaires argued, that their system did not favor one class, region, race, or ethnic group but provided equal citizenship rights to all. Threats to the nation's democracy were more likely to come from those who would challenge that assumption of equality through radical leftist doctrine, therefore, than from structural problems. The Legion began a discursive trend in American conservatism that defined the limits of belonging to the American nation very broadly but the requirements of citizenship quite narrowly, allowing for a kind of race and color-blind conception of citizenship that could mask systemic problems and invalidate the political movements of those seeking to solve those problems.

Beyond the realm of discourse, the Legion also worked to shut out challengers to its nationalist vision from the political system and public sphere. Throughout the interwar period Legion members challenged the rights of radicals advocating a variety of leftist causes, sometimes physically, to make their ideas heard in American communities. Legionnaires attacked such radicals as "un-American" and tried through legislation and vigilantism to limit their impact on American public life. These efforts significantly harmed some radical movements' ability to gain acceptance for their political cause and over the long term narrowed the ideological potential of American democracy.

The composition of the Legion as an organization reflected the kinds of Americans its nationalistic ideals were most likely to attract. While the organization trumpeted itself as a cross-section of American society, in reality middle-class and professional veterans were vastly overrepresented against the general veteran population. After modest early success in attracting working-class veterans, a series of well-publicized strikebreaking actions by Legionnaires in the early 1920s led to an exodus of wage-earning veterans that the organization never enticed back. According to a 1938 survey nearly two-thirds of its membership earned more than \$2000 annually. Most Legionnaires were small business owners, white-collar workers, or skilled workers. Only 4 percent reported working as unskilled laborers and 2 percent as farmers. African-American veterans made up a miniscule portion of the Legion's membership.<sup>5</sup> The average Legionnaire, in other words, was the typical white middle-class joiner that populated small city and town life in the 1920s and 30s. This narrow class and social perspective to its membership base helped to shape the organization's ideological perspective that was hostile towards the working class. Homogeneity in membership helped to ensure the same in organizational ideology.

As the Legion's struggle to attract African-American and ethnic veterans would suggest, its language of inclusiveness did not translate into an organizational belief in racial equality. The Legion was internally segregated by race and did nothing to contest segregation within American society. It supported race-based immigration restriction during the 1920s and argued for complete suspension of immigration during the Depression. The racial limitations to Legion nationalism, however, did not represent a

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<sup>5</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 81, Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 157

nativist streak that clashed with its broader civic idealism. In fact, the Legion used the civic ideals it promoted to justify racially restricting membership in the nation. Members believed that racially-inferior potential citizens would not live up to the civic obligations democracy required of them and would behave instead in the best interests of only their race or ethnic group. They would become slavish partisans or fuel for fecund political machines. While individuals could demonstrate capacity for democratic citizenship, Legionnaires argued through their embrace of Americanization, widespread acceptance of ethno-racial minorities was too great a risk for the democracy to assume.

Grounding Legion conservatism in the mainstream of American political and social thought contributes to the growing re-evaluation of conservative groups in 20<sup>th</sup> century American political history. This dissertation joins other recent work on conservative movements that endeavor to take their subjects seriously and not see their politics as legitimate political responses to historical context and not psychological reactions.<sup>6</sup> Legionnaires perpetrated confrontational and violent acts against radicals in the interwar period. Some of their ranks also spoke of radical conspiracies in outlandish ways. The Legion did not, however, represent the anxieties of established men concerned about losing social status nor the irrational reaction to social change. The Legion's

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<sup>6</sup> Until recently, consensus-school vintage work on conservatism held considerable sway over the study of right-wing politics. McCarthyism had a particularly significant impact on this work. See Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1770-1977* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955). For a reaction to this literature, see, Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *American Historical Review* vol. 99:2 (April 1994), pp. 409-429. For contemporary studies of right-wing groups, see Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1912-1928* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long: Father Coughlin and the Great Depression* (New York: Vintage, 1982); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991)

reaction to radicalism and immigration in the interwar period related directly to its concern about the decline of American democratic exceptionalism, not of themselves.

The Legion's unquestioned patriotism and aggressive antiradicalism in the interwar era provided an important precursor to Cold War political culture. The Legion understood Communism to be Americanism's nemesis and believed the Soviet Union posed a long-term threat to the United States because of its ideology and support for revolution. The Legion condemned American recognition of the Soviet government in 1933 and argued consistently for the need for the kinds of internal controls of Communism that the federal government would institute during the early Cold War period. The Legion also engaged in the kind of conspiracy building that would typify the Cold War era, assembling a flawed conception of Communist infiltration into the United States during the 1920s and 30s build on ideological and cooperative linkages between groups. Legionnaires saw links that were not there largely because of the organization's conception of loyalty, which considered any support for any political cause contrary to the interests of Americanism to be a sign of allegiance to the foreign Communist conspiracy. The Legion's efforts to promote its own Americanism and quell Communist influence through direct confrontation were part of a single effort to sustain the dominance of Americanism in the political culture. The Legion's interwar antiradicalism is significant to understanding Cold War political culture not simply because of the similarities of style and ideas between the two, but because as a major nationalizing force within interwar political culture, the Legion transmitted these ideas broadly in the absence of significant state participation in the public sphere. While major political figures like Hamilton Fish, Jr. and Martin Dies made anticommunism a considerable

portion of the political careers, American communities came to understand the threat of Communism first through the efforts of voluntary associations like the American Legion.

Writing about an organization comprised of between 700,000 and 1 million members presents a challenge in capturing a truly representative sense of the larger group. In this dissertation, I use the terms “Legion” and “Legionnaires” to represent the dominant attitudes and ideas of the organization. I try to note explicitly when significant internal controversy existed on particular issues. I have derived what dominant opinions and directives within the Legion were from readings of Legion publications on the national, state, and local levels of the organization, internal memoranda and correspondence, committee meetings of key national officers, the proceedings of national and state (or in Legion terminology, department) conventions, and public utterances of important leaders. This task was made easier by two aspects of the organization. First, the Legion and Legion Auxiliary could not attract new membership beyond a limited and specific cohort—veterans of the Great War and their direct female relatives. Also, the Legion’s ideology flowed generally from the top-down. The organization’s initial leadership quickly formed its nationalist ideas and successfully transmitted them across time, even as they left the Legion to pursue political careers. Subsequent Legion leaders were selected for their administrative skill and internal politicking abilities, not ideological innovation. What the Legion meant by its Americanism remained remarkably consistent across the interwar period, owing to the relative stability of the kinds of people who became its leadership clique. While ideas could flow from the bottom-up, and posts could easily disregard official directives, it was difficult for members to change the

direction of the organization. Those ideas that did percolate up from the ranks were often to the right of existing Legion opinion.

I preserve Legionnaires' widespread usage of the term "Americanism" to represent the organization's understanding of nationalism in its own historical context. To Legionnaires, Americanism represented the way civic nationalism combined concepts of citizenship, patriotism, and national identity. Americanism had emerged at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to capture the interaction of these concepts in American political discourse. "Americanism is nationalism and patriotism," the commission charged with promoting the Legion's nationalist message explained in its report to the 1924 National Convention. "American means another thing – 'The undying devotion and belief in the United States of America.' It has been this spirit that has made our Nation progress, in a very short time, from a few small colonies to the greatest Government in the world to-day. It is that same spirit which has led us to victory in all our wars."<sup>7</sup>

This dissertation is structured to follow particular aspects of the Legion's nationalist agenda as they developed. It is generally thematic, but the history of the organization also lends itself to a loose chronological flow between chapters. In the first chapter I contextualize the Legion's nationalism in Americans' broader search around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for ways to strengthen the cohesive properties of the nation's political culture. The Legion's nationalist agenda owed a heavy organizational and

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<sup>7</sup> *Proceedings of the Sixth National Convention of the American Legion, St. Paul, Minnesota, September 15-19, 1924* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1925), p. 120. I preserve the Legion's usage of the term Americanism in my own analysis of their political thought in this dissertation when discussing the interplay of ideas about national identity and citizen behaviors. In essence, Americanism is a more textured and nuanced term than the contemporary meaning of nationalism. When describing how the Legion tried to imagine the national community in other ways, particularly through more concrete racial or ideological identities that citizens held, I revert to the more contemporary term of nationalism. Here, I am inspired in my own analysis of what makes a nationalism by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; New York: Verso, 1991).

interpretive debt in this period to the Grand Army of the Republic and to more nationalistic-minded Progressives like Herbert Croly, Theodore Roosevelt, and Frances Kellor. I also discuss the impact that World War I had on American nationalism and political culture broadly as the Legion would derive its own nationalism from a good deal of wartime ideology. In chapter 2 I discuss how the Legion's specific ideological and organizational origins. The Legion was founded by men deeply committed to the preparedness movement, who believed military service in war or peace had real civic usefulness. These men built the Legion to represent the lessons of citizenship and national identity they believed the war had revealed. The structure and growth of the organization, therefore, was significant to its future ideological direction. Chapter 3 explains how the Legion defined Americanism in its early years. The theory of citizenship behaviors contained within Americanism did not always square with the realities of postwar political action, particularly the wave of strikes and other radical activism prevalent in the war's aftermath. Legionnaires in this period found it easier in many cases to define Americanism against what it was not, rather than explain what the nebulous concept meant. I return to the pattern of antiradical vigilantism the Legion establishes in the early 1920s again in chapter 7 when I discuss similar efforts during the Depression. Racial difference provided another ambiguity the Legion had to work through in defining the meaning of its Americanism. In chapter 5 I explain how the Legion fit ethnic and racial minorities under the umbrella of its nationalism. The rest of this dissertation examines how the Legion transmitted its nationalist values into American political culture. Chapter 4 details the Legion's efforts to instruct citizens' behaviors through more positive means, trying to bring their conduct up to

Americanism's rigorous standards and inoculate them against radicalism. Chapter 6 relates how the Legion used the commemoration of Armistice Day and other patriotic holidays to reinforce its Americanist message in local communities.

## Chapter 1

### Nationalizing American Political Culture before 1919

The men who founded the American Legion and sustained the ranks of its national leadership were not particularly original nationalist thinkers. They did not have to be. In the decades before World War I Americans from a variety of social and ideological perspectives debated fundamental questions about American nationhood. These debates were necessary because of the apparent collapse of the ways Americans had understood their nation and their place in it. The growing complexities of the American economy, the increasing interconnectivity of American communities, the emerging role of the United States in world affairs, and the diversification of the citizenry through immigration were rendering obsolete the ways republicanism centered Americans civic identity in the local, the familial, the occupational, the partisan.<sup>1</sup> Participants in this debate recognized that the nation's political culture as it existed could no longer guarantee the social cohesion of the nation. Increasing working-class discontent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century suggested as much. Americans needed new ways to understand their relationships with each other and with a distant state. What should define these relationships? How did these relationships define loyalty to the nation and its state?

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<sup>1</sup> For a very good and very succinct summary of this process and the considerable secondary literature touching on it, see, Stuart McConnell, "Reading the Flag: A Reconsideration of the Patriotic Cults of the 1890s," from John Bodnar, ed. *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define their Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 105-6. McConnell notes that Americans understood nation as one level – and the most distant and abstract one at that – of obligations they owed to family or locality. For the origins of this kind of nationalism built on a multiplicity of allegiances, see David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, VA, 1997). For the general weakness of nationalist sentiment in American political culture before the Civil War, see Cecelia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 10-28

Answers to these questions explored how to create a nationalized political culture that provided a critical foundation for the Legion's nationalist perspective in subsequent decades.

The efforts of two sets of actors to reform the political culture of turn-of-the-century America had the greatest impact on the future nationalist thought of the American Legion. Beginning in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and other patriotic and hereditary organizations began the first serious reconsideration of what the American nation represented since the Civil War. These groups sought to stabilize the political culture by thinking of the nation as embodied by its state. Citizens subsequently found their identity as Americans by being loyal to the state. To intensify this feeling of loyalty they devised a variety of ways within the public sphere and education system to generate emotional attachments to the abstract. History, both distant and recent, also became a tool to inspire such personal attachments and foster loyalty. These groups tended to be more politically conservative, considering the racial and socioeconomic status quo to be a reflection of the nation's true nature. Considering economic success to be an expression of definitive American ideals, these patriots looked skeptically upon the working classes' potential for loyalty, especially those lacking Anglo-Saxon racial heritage.

The second approach was favored by those Progressives rethinking the relationships between citizens, the nation, and the state. The reason the nation risked social disintegration, these Progressives argued, was because Americans were not behaving politically in ways that reflected their inherent interconnectedness. A new civic

nationalism offered a solution to this problem.<sup>2</sup> They argued that democracy represented the exceptional characteristic of the nation, one that dispensed equal status to all citizens under its Constitution and offered the equality of opportunity to all Americans. The freedoms and opportunities citizens commonly held generated a shared identity. Because of the interconnectedness of society, citizens could not help but affect the opportunities and rights of others when acting politically. Accordingly, citizens owed their fellows a new kind of obligation that required they work for the common good in their political and civic activities.

World War I raised the stakes for discovering ways to build national unity enormously. Accordingly, Progressives searched for ways to make their abstract ideas more concrete, blurring the line between conservative loyalty and Progressive nationalism. Particularly problematic constituencies within society like ethnic enclaves came under pressure from more conservative Progressives to “drop the hyphen” and conform to a single “American” loyalty. The American state became a significant player in nationalistic programming for the first time, endorsing the Progressive vision of civic nationalism as its own and backing its own calls for citizens’ loyalty with robust new enforcement powers. Americans filled in the gaps of state power through their own considerable private attempts to flesh out the boundaries between loyalty and disloyalty in wartime, policing each other through means a consensus found legitimate. The American people exited the war experience with a much more clear sense of what their nation was, but a muddled sense of how that identity would translate back into peacetime. The Legion would step into that breach in 1919.

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<sup>2</sup> This terminology comes from Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)

### **Turn-of-the century conservative patriotic culture**

The late 1880s and early 1890s witnessed a flurry of activity by elite and middle-class Americans to reinvigorate American political culture by making it more substantively patriotic. Much of this activity involved bringing the symbols of the nation more plainly into public view. National symbols expressed an idea of unity, either politically, socially, or commercially. The American flag became a popular national symbol for the first time since the Civil War, finding its way into public celebrations, onto beer bottles and commercial advertisements. William McKinley's campaign stitched the words "Patriotism, Protection & Prosperity" onto flags next to his name and used them as campaign advertising during his 1896 run for the White House. Eventually, reverence for the more sentimental meanings the flag carried led state legislatures to prevent its misuse and cooption by commercial interests with flag etiquette legislation. Private citizens formed historical preservation societies to save landmarks and restore historic buildings as patriotic shrines. New patriotic and hereditary organizations promoted the historical memory of the nation's founding generation, both amongst their membership and broadly in the general public.<sup>3</sup>

In the midst of this rebirth of patriotic symbolism, the Grand Army of the Republic began to articulate a new way to think of fundamental aspects of American nationalism as a solution to the era's social fissuring. Although it had existed since the

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<sup>3</sup> O'Leary, *To Die For*, pp. 43, 232-3, McConnell, "Reading the Flag," pp. 102-3, Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1991), pp. 260-5, Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 43, 48

late 1860s, it did not invent a prescriptive role for itself in American political culture until the 1890s. When it did enter the political culture it brought with it novel ideas. The GAR posited the nation's identity in the federal state. As Stuart McConnell explains, under this conception "Americans were alike in both their fealty to the national state and their association with the state's assertion of power against other states. By the same token, difference was externalized – 'non-Americans' were those loyal to other nation-states, not gendered or ancestrally defined Others within the United States." The mediating layer of the local was removed from this conception of civic identity. The GAR also modified the traditional republican way of thinking of the nation as a bundle of rights and obligations held by individuals, the aggregate of which formed a nation. The GAR preferred to think of the nation as more tangible and organic than abstract republican principles.<sup>4</sup>

Since the state embodied the nation, then citizens owed their nation the obligation of their loyalty to the state, to accept and respect its laws. "There can be no Americanism which is not based on the highest ideas of loyalty," declared a resolution at the GAR's 1892 national encampment. This conception of loyalty, however, was loaded with the ideological, ethnic, and socioeconomic perspectives of the GAR's members. The organization pulled much of its membership from the petit bourgeoisie – shopkeepers, clerks, skilled workers – and reflected the overwhelmingly Protestant, Northern European cultural and ethno-racial composition of the nation at mid-century. From this potentially

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 207, McConnell, "Reading the Flag," p. 116, O'Leary, *To Die For*, pp. 51-3. Francesca Morgan argues that the Daughters of the American Revolution embraced a similar state-based nationalism to that of the GAR. Stuart McConnell, meanwhile, claims the DAR reconceived of national bonds by extending particularity of family associations outward to a national scope. While Morgan does not make this point herself, it is likely both conceptions of national bonds are at work with the DAR. Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in the Jim Crow Era*, pp. 42, 51, McConnell, "Reading the Flag," p. 113

conservative membership base the GAR argued that the war had validated the timelessness of the values of liberal capitalism and the social relations described by free labor ideology. The nation the GAR described as embodied by its state, therefore, was not an empty vessel, but a reflection of what amounted to the socioeconomic status quo. An undercurrent of millennialism in the GAR's conception of history reinforced this status quo. Union veterans interpreted the northern victory as God's validation of their interpretation of republicanism and a sign of divine providence over the nation.<sup>5</sup>

With a nationalist vision so entrenched in the status quo, the GAR's impact on political culture was inherently conservative. It argued that American politics recognized only individual and contractual rights, while collective rights and the politics of class identification had no place in the American system, and were therefore "un-American." From this narrow conception of the social relations and fixation on citizens' obligations of loyalty to the laws of the state, it indicted the character of the American labor movement. The values of free labor republicanism it saw were best expressed by industrialists, and workers' unionization and strike activities violated their property and contractual rights. To the veterans of the GAR, the industrial struggles being waged by workers represented a betrayal of the nation and its state. Its nationalism gave ideological cover to the use of force by the state and by capital to put down the disloyalty and anarchy of strikers.<sup>6</sup> Personal bias cannot be dismissed here. Coming from a perspective that considered economic success as a function of character, not circumstance or opportunities seized, affluent veterans likely saw little reason to sympathize or care to understand the protests of American workers. Ethnocentrism led many to suspect doubly

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<sup>5</sup> McConnell, *Glorious Contentment*, pp. 210, 219-220, 232, O'Leary, *To Die For*, p. 51, 53, 59 (quoted p. 51)

<sup>6</sup> O'Leary, *To Die For*, pp. 58-63

the character and intentions of foreign-born workers, and some within the GAR began advocating restrictions on immigration in the 1890s. The end result of these biases running amok in the political culture, Stuart McConnell notes, was “the flag lost one set of particularistic associations – those of locality, family, and incident – only to acquire another set – those of ethnicity and class.”<sup>7</sup>

The GAR presented veterans as the living embodiment of greater, timeless nationalist values. It cast veterans as the paradigms of patriotism, representative of the right kinds of civic values and right kinds of people who defined the nation. Veterans also stood as the embodiment of the nation-state during the war, when they physically *were* the state as an extension of its power. Union veterans thus militarized peacetime political culture by asserting the universality of martial values of loyalty and deference to established power in civilian life. The GAR and Women’s Relief Corps auxiliary crafted the new holiday Memorial Day to promote those who had served their nation under arms as model citizens and the embodiment of patriotic principle. Moments of feminine mourning during the holiday were carefully crafted to reflect, rather than challenge, the male-centered patriotism the holiday asserted. GAR members marched in Memorial Day parades that placed martial and manly values of service and loyalty on display once again. National GAR reunions, staged as recreations of life in the field during the Civil War, further represented this connection between good citizenship and martial values. These events drew thousands of participants and attracted the attention spectators and of

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<sup>7</sup> McConnell, “Reading the Flag,” p. 118

the nation's political elite, who lavished praise upon the veterans and their significant public role annually.<sup>8</sup>

The GAR believed veterans could serve as more than mere living symbols of civic virtue. They could bring others up to their standard by promoting patriotism focused on the value of loyalty. These efforts further introduced martial values into American political culture. It and the Women's Relief Corps focused particularly on promoting patriotic spirit in American schools. Beginning in 1888 the GAR launched a campaign to place a flag above every schoolhouse in the country. The purpose of having children raise and salute a flag every morning at school, the GAR argued, was to give young citizens a concrete symbol with which they could learn the lesson of loyalty and, as one veteran put it, "the supremacy of the nation." This ceremony was vaguely martial, recreating similar ceremonies in military camps each morning. This effort was backed by the emerging mass media, as *Youth's Companion*, a weekly magazine with a circulation of more than 400,000, published advertisements and editorials supporting the campaign over the next several years. Both the GAR and the WRC also brought patriotic lessons and literature directly to pupils in public schools. They vetted history textbooks for passages that did not reflect enough upon the glory of the nation's history. These groups saw Americanization as something not simply for foreign-born children to consume, but something vital for all American pupils to develop into good citizens. Progressive educators backed their efforts within the schoolhouse. Advocates of teaching patriotism were not alone in their efforts to shape public school curriculum, however: temperance

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<sup>8</sup> Ellen Litwicky, *America's Public Holidays, 1865-1920* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), pp. 21-5, O'Leary, *To Die For*, pp. 54-9 Part of the purpose of Memorial Day commemorations as political, as veterans needed to keep themselves in the public eye to secure and then justify benefits and pensions from the state. Litwicky, *America's Public Holidays*, pp. 28-9

and religious groups tried to bring anti-alcohol lessons and Bible study to American public schools during the 1890s as well. While it could integrate patriotic lessons into the curriculum, the GAR was largely unsuccessful securing military drill as character-building experiences for boys.<sup>9</sup>

By the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the GAR and other patriotic organizations had developed a patriotic culture based upon martial virtues of discipline, social order, and loyalty. These values defended American democratic exceptionalism from dramatic changes. They also protected the existing socio-economic status quo from significant challenge by tying loyalty to the acceptance of the permanence of the social order at work in the American nation. The GAR believed the Civil War had validated the conservative liberal values upon which American industrial largess had developed and treated Union victory as a kind of signal of divine providence for these socio-economic values. Their nationalistic perspective was therefore static in its political and ideological outlook. The GAR cemented this stasis by becoming a mainstay in partisan politics, allying itself with the Republican Party to ensure the values its members and the party shared would continue to resonate in the American political system. In return, GAR members enjoyed Republican-sponsored welfare benefits as a state-sponsored payment of gratitude for their defense of these values during the war.

### **Progressivism and “nationality”**

While conservatives in the Grand Army of the Republic were forging a new

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<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Ellis, *To The Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005) pp. 4-9, O’Leary, *To Die For*, pp. 179-92 (quotation p. 180), Jonathan Zimmerman, “Storm over the Schoolhouse: Exploring Popular Influences upon the American Curriculum, 1890-1940,” *Teachers College Record*, vol. 100:3 (Spring 1999), p. 622 (n.27)

patriotic culture to match their nationalism, Progressive political thinkers and activists were engaged in a much more fundamental reassessment of the nature of the nation, American society, and the cohesive potential of its political culture. This effort was part of a larger intellectual endeavor to replace the laissez-faire values of classical liberalism with more useful political theories for the modern world that industrial capitalism had produced. It was designed by those who repudiated liberal capitalism's enshrinement of negative freedoms as paramount and the belief it was the function of the state to guarantee those negative freedoms. As the patriotic organizations of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were constructing their nationalist political culture, Progressive intellectuals and political thinkers searched for an alternative set of ideas that could bring order to American politics and society, but that could rest upon a more acceptable vision of reality. What emerged by World War I was a new vision of American nationalism that did not reject the need for citizens' continued loyalty to particular political principles, but that imagined the roots of that loyalty in dramatically different ways.

As American patriots tried to enshrine laissez-faire values into American political culture, a new generation of intellectuals challenged the assumptions that effort was built upon. Social philosophers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly pragmatists like John Dewey and William James, had considerable impact upon the Progressive approach to strengthening the cohesive qualities of American political culture. These thinkers' theories about the social and psychological nature of knowledge, truth, and individual development provided Progressives with the intellectual weapons they needed for the assault on the liberal assumptions of their conservative nation-building rivals. James and Dewey rejected truths that could be discovered, like natural law, in favor of a more

contingent, organic process. History, accordingly, became a vast record of previous experience, not a reflection of the metaphysical unfolding of some plan. Pragmatic thought, and the Progressive political ideas it would inspire, rejected conservatives' claims that classical liberalism reflected true and permanent values of freedom that Americans were accordingly duty-bound to respect. What more, liberalism did not even have the true nature of the relationship between individuals and others correct. A transatlantic movement of intellectuals at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century theorized that individuals were not in isolation from one another, bound together only by the necessity of society, but were in fact inherently interconnected. It was impossible for individuals to exist independently from society. Further, individuals acted not simply as a reflection of personal and discrete interests, but "as beings conscious of their membership in a community, and that community is constantly testing the viability of their ideas and actions," as James Kloppenberg has described this philosophy. As a result, freedom was not defined as classical liberals claimed – as the absence of impediments for self-interested individual choices – but was the condition of being able to develop completely as an individual, which required the removal of internal and external obstacles.<sup>10</sup>

Intellectuals asserting new ways to understand the relationship between individuals and society and the inherently social nature of knowledge, however, faced the same stark reality as American conservative nationalists that older forms of community

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<sup>10</sup> James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 65-72, 107-13, 150-1 (quotation p. 150), Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 141-9, Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), pp. 351-62, Marc Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problem of the State: Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909-1926* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp 28-47. For a comparison of how the pragmatic conception of history related to developments within the American historical profession, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), ch 1.

that held society together were breaking down. The outmoded ideas of liberalism, with their emphasis on competitive individualism that Social Darwinism only intensified, held considerable responsibility for this disintegrative trend. Progressives believed the solution to the problems facing American society lay not just in reorganizing the state but in overhauling of the political culture. They asserted that citizens, because of the social consequences of their seemingly individual choices, had to be converted to new ways of thinking about new forms of social responsibility that could reconcile individual desire with the common good. Reform had to begin at this educative level for reforms to find support within the democracy. Social justice simply could not be imposed from above, as advocates of a truly redistributive state advocated, because citizens had to freely accept reform for it to last. Progressives, therefore, valued education and voluntary action highly and approached politics more practically than dogmatically. These two principles worked in concert as only by participating in democratic life could citizens truly learn about their inherently social nature and, accordingly, how important it was to participate in civic life in support of the common good. Herbert Croly neatly summarized this sentiment in *Progressive Democracy*, writing that only when “personal action is directed by disinterested motives can there be any such harmony between private and public interests.” What Progressives like Croly, Dewey, and Walter Lippmann wanted more than anything was a more actively engaged citizenry. Hence, reforming the political culture was as important as state-building reforms.<sup>11</sup>

Progressives’ interest in improving the participatory quality of the nation’s democratic system stemmed from pragmatists’ celebration of democracy as the most viable and just form of government. John Dewey led this celebration, arguing in 1888

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<sup>11</sup> Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, pp. 348-54, 362, 375-77, 400 (quotation from 400)

that democracy lead to, “the perfection of both individual and the social organism through the harmonious development of the powers and capacities of all the individuals in a society.”<sup>12</sup> Democracy encouraged individuals to develop themselves through the need for their constant participation in collective decision-making. It became a grand and experimental problem-solving system that used the collective experience of its citizens -- not religious or ideological dogma -- to push progress forward. When citizens engaged in the democratic process, Dewey and pragmatists believed, the system would stifle parochial demands and engender a spirit of compromise that would build a sense of community among the electorate without the need for compulsion. These qualities made democracy the perfect alternative to the extremist ideologies of Marxism and classical liberalism that loomed so menacingly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and explains Progressives’ attraction to reforming the democratic system in the variety of ways the movement pursued.<sup>13</sup>

Like their conservative rivals, Progressives believed that focusing individuals on the national level of civic obligation was the first step in creating this disinterested sense of citizenship. But whereas conservatives invested loyalty in the national to protect static political values, Progressives saw the nation-state as a more apt reflection of the complexity and interconnected nature of modern society. This perspective was particularly true of Progressives like Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and Walter Weyl, who looked to new national corporations as models of large-scale organizations that

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<sup>12</sup> Dewey quoted from Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, p. 41. Andrew Feffer further notes that Dewey saw democracy as the extension of true Christian ethics as well, arguing for Dewey’s connection to the Christian social reform tradition that falls beyond the focus of this work. See Feffer, *The Chicago Pragmatists and American Progressivism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 87-8.

<sup>13</sup> Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, pp. 45, 157-9, Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problem of the State*, pp. 46-9.

thrived on the interconnected activity of their members. The talented experts who had organized these corporations understood the power of coordinated action on a national scale in the service of common ends. The same skills could be brought to bear on governance. But we should remember here Progressives' greatest struggle was not simply how to reorganize government but how to re-energize the citizenry to be more effective in their own civic participation. The nation stood as the locus for how Americans should re-imagine their bonds of loyalty to each other.

In his influential book *Promise of American Life*, Herbert Croly laid the groundwork for a Progressive nationalism. He acknowledged in *Promise* that nations have distinctive identities derived from their unique national histories. These identities, as expressed through a cultural and political self-conception of "nationality" – his word for nationalism, which encompassed both state and society -- were essential to the functioning of the Western World. Just as individuals improve within society by finding their own niche and excelling within it, "the maturing nation is in the same way the nation which is capable of limiting itself to the performance of a practicable and useful national work, -- a work which in some specific respect accelerates the march of Christian civilization." Croly embraced the absolute necessity of the nation as the prime focus of social organization, criticizing internationalism as the overwhelming fault of socialism's ideology. He asserted instead that nations were essential. "The modern nation state is at the bottom the most intelligent and successful attempt which has yet been made to create a comparatively stable, efficient, and responsible type of political association." In the United States, citizens owed a particular debt of loyalty to the state because, in Croly's mind, the American state reflected such a Progressive political and social force

when compared to the other nations of the world and because the nation's historical experience had yielded such wonderful material progress for its citizens.<sup>14</sup>

The nation was struggling, Croly believed, because the historical legacy of republicanism discouraged the kind of thinking about social organization that were necessary to move the development of American democracy and hence American nationalism forward. Because it was the distinguishing characteristic of American historical development, Croly made democracy the centerpiece of American nationalism, defining it as an organization of society that brings, "joint benefit of individual distinction and social improvement."<sup>15</sup> Croly read the history of democracy as providing an equality of opportunity for its citizens to improve themselves and create the advanced economy that was the envy of the world. His interpretation of American history was antithetical to that of his conservative peers, who interpreted equality of opportunity as a freedom from complex forces that impinged on individual liberties to enrich oneself in one's own context. In Croly's opinion the democrats of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who embraced the union as an ideal central state but remained staunchly individualistic did not understand democracy fully. They defended the individualist way of life as a defense of the common man, which Croly interpreted as an attempt to create an equality of outcome, not opportunity, in a diversifying and stratifying economy. Croly damned this conception of democracy as "meager, narrow, and self-contradictory." He doubted this Jeffersonian paradise ever existed historically and argued that in his present day individuals and regions were too interconnected for Jeffersonian values to make any sense. Instead new and improved form of social cohesion must emerge from citizens' devotion to a social

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (1909; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), pp. 263, 2-15, 210-1. quoted on p. 263, 216.

<sup>15</sup> Croly, *Promise of American Life*, p. 207.

ideal that reflected the fact that, while they were differentiating as individuals, all were inexorably tied to all.<sup>16</sup>

This problem is the focus of *Promise of American Life*: how to repair American nationalism to be a Progressive cultural and social force rather than a drag on the political system. Croly would not separate politics and culture and like other Progressive thinkers saw revitalizing the loyalties of the American people to the national ideal as the central project of political progress. The central state had its own role to play in this process. A strong executive had to act both to preserve the democratic equality of opportunity and encourage individuals to see themselves as new kinds of citizens. But the Jeffersonian traditions of American political culture, which demanded the state act in a way that gave no special rights to any element of society, stood in the way. He wrote, “there is no reason why a democracy cannot trust its interests absolutely to the care of the national interest, and there is in particular every reason why the American democracy should become in sentiment and conviction frankly, unscrupulously, and loyally nationalist. This, of course, is heresy from the point of view of the American democratic tradition; but it is much less of a heresy from the point of view of American political practice, and, whether heretical or not, it indicates the road whereby alone the American people can obtain political salvation.” To solve its contemporary problems Americans had to accept “constructive discrimination,” or statist solutions to the inequity of modern life. They were wary to do so, however, because so many of them had the history of American democracy flat wrong. Its unique historical contribution to the world was not Jefferson’s “extreme individualism” but the fact that individuals could thrive and develop to their full

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<sup>16</sup> Croly, *Promise of American Life*, pp. 56-7, 43. Edward A. Stettner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), pp. 40-3, Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problem of the State*, p. 63.

potential while at the same time contributing to a greater constructive effort to build an equitable, efficient, productive society. Croly did not see history as an insurmountable obstacle, however: in a way it was an advantage. Unlike Germans or Englishmen who could not find satisfactory ways of “reconciling the national traditions and forms of organizations” of his country, Americans could do so within their national traditions. But they had to understand what those traditions actually were.<sup>17</sup>

When these ideas were put into practical use their ability to serve as a form of civic nationalism becomes more apparent. Croly’s ideas were particularly important to the maturation of Theodore Roosevelt’s political ideology when he returned to public life in 1910. Through Croly, Roosevelt came to understand democracy’s equality of opportunity as needing to provide for the fullest possibility of individuals’ personal development, even if doing so required state action. Roosevelt’s New Nationalism subsequently provided a new common identity for all Americans as individuals all worthy of having the same chances to become who they will in life without undue handicap by forces beyond their personal control. The poor, the rich, the native-born and just-off-the-boat enjoyed equal status as citizens and therefore a shared and redefined identity as “Americans.” In exchange, citizens owed the state an obligation to make the most of the opportunity, even if that meant significant personal changes like “becoming” culturally and civically assimilated to American standards, as in the case of immigrants. Citizens also had the duty not to undermine the democracy’s institutions, as Roosevelt believed revolutionary radicals threatened to do.<sup>18</sup>

Roosevelt’s New Nationalism and the Progressive Party’s enshrinement of a

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<sup>17</sup> Croly, *Promise of American Life*, 267, 43, 271, Smith, *Civic Ideals*, pp. 414-5

<sup>18</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 66-79

Progressive civic nationalist idea in a national political platform distracts from the fact that the movement's civic nationalist principles were just as applicable to small-scale political activism as they were to national electoral politics. Surveying the broad history of Progressive political activism, historian Eldon Eisenach sees a "national patriotism ... in the background of every Progressive critique of the prevailing social and economic system." Social reconstruction could transform the very bonds of affection between citizens, even those separated by geography or social context. Progressives considered small-scale reform, be it municipal ownership, party machine defeat, or local commission regulation, to be national in scope if that effort pointed toward a "social reconstruction" that emphasized broader interrelatedness of citizens. Progressives believed that any such political effort helped to change the political culture of the United States in a way that was vital to the full realization of the Progressive reformist project. Americans had to think of themselves in relation to one another in a novel way than they were used to under the republican tradition for progressivism to work to its fullest extent.<sup>19</sup>

Progressives faced the same challenge of transmission that more conservative nationalists confronted in promoting their version of nationalism. Whereas groups like the GAR enjoyed the advantage of definitive historical events that illustrated the ideals and principles of their nationalist vision, Progressives held the advantage of being able to build from Americans' participation in civic life itself. Since the very point of their efforts within the political culture was to get more robust democratic action from the polity, their approach held by far more inclusive potential than one that relied on ritual and ceremony led by a patriotic elite. Many Progressive activists tried to build particular

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<sup>19</sup> Eldon Eisenach, *Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp. 6, 132-5, 189, Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problem of the State*, pp. 56-65, Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, pp. 349-50.

socializing experiences that could guide citizens towards a more concrete sense of what being an American truly entailed. Immigrants clearly were in greatest need of such lessons. Progressives launched the Americanization movement to ensure that immigrants would integrate into American society according to Progressive democratic principles that called on them to act as disinterested citizens working for the common good. It was a process designed to remove the barriers to full inclusion for immigrants to become fully American, laden with the Anglo-Saxon cultural biases that dominated the whole of American political culture of the era.<sup>20</sup>

Some Progressives' efforts to build a more responsible and responsive democratic public did not stop with the foreign born in this era. Progressive activists tried to build new forums for citizen debate on germane political issues of the day and used community projects like the construction of playgrounds to increase direct participation and decision making by citizens themselves. These efforts reflected how Progressives thought about American citizenship not simply as a bundle of rights or a particular kind of status, but as a shared common identity, loaded with particular rights and responsibilities. These activities also demonstrated some Progressives' belief that active civic engagement was necessary to sustaining this common identity.<sup>21</sup>

Progressives also saw vast potential in transmitting ideas about good citizenship

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<sup>20</sup> Rivka Shpak Lissak, *Pluralism & Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), Ruth Crocker, *Social Work and Social Order: The Settlement Movement in Two Industrial Cities, 1889-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992). Francseca Morgan notes that progressives within the Daughters of the American Revolution pushed their organization to embrace Americanization as well. Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America*, pp. 82-3

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), Sarah Jo Peterson, "Voting For Play: The Democratic Potential of Progressive Era Playgrounds," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 3:2, pp. 145-75. For a sense of where this literature sits within the broader historiography about the Progressive Era, see Robert D. Johnston, "Re-Democratizing the Progressive Era: The Politics of Progressive Era Political Historiography," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 1:1, pp. 68-92

in public schools. Progressive educators believed the right lessons could socialize children to think of their own place within American society with the appropriate sense of interrelatedness to their fellows. School children could also learn necessary deference to the common good and to authority that was necessary for civil society to remain orderly and productive. Part of that sense of collective responsibility Progressives wanted to impart in youth was fealty to their nation-state and obedience to its laws. Progressives brought new holidays like Arbor Day and Bird Day to turn-of-the-century schools, designed to teach children senses of collective responsibility, even to the future generations who would enjoy a future with more trees and birds in it. Such lessons were vital to stemming the crass commercialism sapping the vitality of American political life and preventing social disintegration. Progressives introduced civics into the American curriculum in part to produce more effective democratic participation among future voters, but also to generate respect for authority and rule of law in pupils. Teachers instructed their students to think of the state as they would their parents. Thus, this emphasis upon deference to authority shared some common ground with conservative patriotic groups' conception of citizenship.<sup>22</sup>

Nothing reflected the overlapping potential of conservative and Progressive campaigns for loyalty within the public schools more than the creation of formalized flag rituals for public schoolchildren in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Colonel George Balch, and educator and GAR official, made the first significant contribution to this movement in 1889 when he developed a patriotic flag lesson plan under a commission by the New York City Board of Education. Balch's program made the object of the flag a reward for

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<sup>22</sup> Litwicks, *America's Public Holidays*, pp. 192-207, Julie A. Reuben, "Beyond Politics: Community Civics and the Redefinition of Citizenship in the Progressive Era" *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 37:4 (Winter 1997) pp. 399-420

student conduct that reflected good citizenship, including obeying classroom rules and being respectful of authority. The point of the lesson, however, was to not simply to reward good behavior and shame bad but to impress children emotionally with their responsibilities to the nation, of which the flag was a tangible symbol. Balch devised a flag salute for students, complete with a short oral pledge of loyalty and an outstretched arm. On the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America, the Christian socialist Francis Bellamy added his words to Balch's saluting gesture to create what became known as the Pledge of Allegiance. Bellamy claimed he wrote the pledge to contribute to the "new consciousness" gripping the nation of its "true value and destiny." He hoped promoting the flag pledge in 1892 would encourage students to think of their nation not simply as materially rich, but uniquely principled in its embrace of liberty and equal justice for all. With the support of the GAR, Progressive educators, *Youth Companion*, Bellamy promoted a mass movement that resulted in the first national mass salute of the flag by American schoolchildren on Columbus Day. Bellamy included the GAR in Columbus Day celebrations because veterans could stand for the kind of sacrifice for the greater good youth needed to respect. The Columbus Day flag salute and the Pledge of Allegiance it produced reflected a moment of convergence for dissimilar ideological perspectives on the common ground of loyalty.<sup>23</sup>

Conservatives and Progressives came to another point of convergence in their nationalist visions on the issue of racial diversity within the United States. The socially disintegrative effects of immigration was troublesome to observers across the political spectrum. Both conservative and Progressives approaches to the problem of national unity assumed on some level the cultural and social dominance of Anglo-Saxons in the

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<sup>23</sup> Ellis, *To The Flag*, pp. 29-45, O'Leary, *To Die For*, 150-71.

United States. However, neither the conservatives of this chapter nor Progressives took this dominance to the extent Anglo-Saxon Protestant nationalists did to argue that the nation was exclusively a WASP domain. The crux of the matter for both approaches was how to best reconcile racial difference with the need to build a cohesive national community. Immigrants' capacity for loyalty was the test for both groups. Those whose racial background suggested a capacity to understand the nation's democratic system were acceptable, provided they commit themselves to the process of meeting existing cultural, social, and political standards of conduct as an expression of their newfound loyalty to the United States. Those incapable or unwilling to meet these standards should be refused a place in the nation. Conservatives like GAR members tended to fixate on the potential loyalty of working-class European immigrants within the context of labor unrest. Progressives took a bit more comprehensive an approach, theorizing how immigrants would fit into democracy as they conceived of it. For example, University of Wisconsin Professor John Commons noted that democracy relied on two Progressive ideals: "equal opportunities before the law, and equal ability of classes and races to use those opportunities. If the first is lacking, we have legal oligarchy; if the second is lacking, we have actual oligarchy disguised as democracy." Neither approach to national cohesion accepted the assimilability of Asians nor cared particularly much for African-American citizens' equality, considering both groups too racially inferior to include as members of the national community.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Stuart Anderson, *Race and Rapprochement: Anglo-Saxonism and Anglo-American Relations, 1895-1904* (East Brunswick, NJ: Association of University Presses, Inc., 1981), pp. 17-23, Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 47-65, Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), pp. 37, 43-4, Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 177-83, Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), pp. 145, O'Leary, *To*

### **Nationalist political culture during World War I**

World War I changed the entire calculus of finding ways to promote national cohesion. Life or death, victory or defeat now hung in the balance of how successful the nation could be at organizing itself behind a common vision of togetherness. While Progressives had devised a new vision of how American citizens related to each other through their more expansive and intricate definition of democracy, they still struggled to find the language to articulate that vision and the methods to promote it within the political culture. A survey launched by *American Journal of Sociology* editor Albion Small reflected this fact. In the weeks after the outbreak of war in Europe, Small sent letters to 250 prominent American men and women of a variety of backgrounds asking them to define the American mission for the future in the hope of discovering a common national identity at the time of world crisis. Responses fell all over the map. In trying to summarize the Americanism of the responses for the journal, Small noted the strong “moral meanings of nationality” expressed by respondents. “A cardinal problem for the United States today is how to form and inform and transform our nationality so that it may become more effective in making ourselves first into higher types of persons, and then into better team-workers, both within our national relations and as citizens of the world.” To many Progressives, the war represented an opportunity finally to bring about the kind of national loyalty they had been advocating for decades that could aid the

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*Die For*, pp. 62-3, John R. Commons, *Races and Immigrants in America* (1907; New York: MacMillan Co, 1911), p. 3

reconstruction of American society.<sup>25</sup>

The dangers posed by the war and the eventual American involvement in it forced Progressives to be more concrete in describing what both their vision of national identity and national loyalty were. This was not the moment, as Cecelia O’Leary claims, that a “militaristic tradition” of conservatives’ patriotism triumphed over an “emancipatory and democratic tradition” of the Progressives. We should see the World War I era instead as one when Progressives finally had to define not just a new and more democratic form of citizenship but describe clearly their nationalist vision. They also had to come to terms with what loyalty and the consequences of non-compliance. The war ratcheted up the danger of social disunity considerably, making it not just a social problem but a matter of national security in their eyes. This context forced clarity. Progressives had to define the nation’s foreign and domestic enemies, describe what it was fighting for, and what Americans’ obligations for that fight were. This era, then, witnessed not the triumph of militarism but the militarization and full nationalization of Progressive thought in ways the American Legion would subsequently use to reshape peacetime American political culture.<sup>26</sup>

The war also made apparent the extent to which Americans’ sense of loyalty had not changed over the previous three decades. Americans continued to hold multiple political obligations and felt the tug of competing loyalties, both within American society

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<sup>25</sup> Albion Small, “What is Americanism,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 20 (January 1915) pp. 484-5. Liberal progressive contributions to the process of mobilization have been given overwhelming attention in the historical literature as historians have linked the search for a pluralist alternative to the nationalism of World War I to the greater story of American liberalism. See, David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991); Stuart I Rochester, *American Liberal Disillusionment: In the Wake of World War I* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977); Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Liberalism*.

<sup>26</sup> O’Leary, *To Die For*, p. 220.

and beyond the nation's borders. Bonds between members of local communities remained strong. Regional identifications persisted, particularly in the South that looked upon federal power skeptically. Ethnic's desire to form their own semi-autonomous communities within the United States and retain ties to their homeland remained. Labor and capital each looked upon the project of federal centralization as a potential threat to their own interests. The federal government had to break down some obligations Americans felt towards their fellow citizens to replace them with those they owed the state while using other existing concepts of obligation between citizens in new ways to serve the needs of the state. The war, then, was a nationalizing moment not only for the way it explained what the United States stood for but in the necessity to focus the political culture on a more centralized conception of civic and political obligation. The work of citizens fed directly into the health and well-being of the nation-state.

The nationalization of citizenship that occurred during the war relied on a variety of existing traditions and social institutions to take place. In communities across the nation, Americans explored the meaning of their loyalty to each other and the nation-state on their own through traditions of locally-focused vigilance and coercion. The federal state also relied on volunteerism to make the war effort go. This reliance on volunteers was both a ideological and practical decision. The state had limited capacity to accomplish major tasks of the war effort on its own and enlisted voluntary associations and volunteer efforts of private citizens to supply it with operational know-how and manpower.<sup>27</sup> The Wilson Administration also believed that Americans needed to give

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<sup>27</sup> For the importance of volunteerism to the war effort, see Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); Skocpol, Ziad Munson, Andrew Karch, and Bayless Camp, "Patriotic Partnerships: Why Great Wars Nourished American Civic Volunteerism," Ira Katznelson and Martin Shefter, eds. *Shaped By War and*

their service to the state freely for it to mean anything and if the state were to avoid becoming a leviathan. In places where no existing private capacity existed to do the state's work, the Wilson Administration turned to volunteerism both to get a job done and to give such functions legitimacy. In both the conscription and war propaganda programs of the American government, administrators decided to enlist thousands of volunteers rather than rely on an expanded bureaucracy in the hope that direct citizen participation would lead to a sincere sense of loyalty to the federal state. The search for this loyalty was both top-down and bottom-up, with the state and civil society groping towards methods of instilling that loyalty in the American people that were tolerable to both.<sup>28</sup>

Those Progressives committed to accelerating the nationalization of American political culture after the outbreak of war were particularly concerned with the ties immigrants continued to hold to both their ethnic communities and to their foreign homelands. These attachments represented potentially subversive affiliations as a pro-British neutral nation and potential belligerent. Critics of the persistence of immigrants' ethnic and national affiliations described those professing multiple loyalties as "hyphenated Americans." Such persons should "drop the hyphen" and dedicate their loyalty singularly to the United States. In his famous speech of May 10, 1915, in which he declared that the United States remained "too proud to fight" after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, President Wilson also reminded his audience of thousands of newly-

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*Trade: International Influences on American Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). For specific contributions made by a few voluntary groups, see Nancy K. Bristow, *Making Men Moral: Social Engineering During the Great War* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Christopher Joseph Capozzola, "Uncle Sam Wants You: Political Obligations in World War I" (unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 2002); Christopher J. Kauffman, *Faith and Fraternalism: The History of the Knights of Columbus, 1882-1982* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), ch. 8

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 18, Kennedy, *Over Here*, pp. 150-4, Capozzola, "Uncle Sam Wants You".

naturalized citizens in Philadelphia that they should continue to deny a hyphenated identity. Wilson, however, emphasized the essential racial heterogeneity of America's white citizens as a vital aspect of its nationalism. Inspired by Wilson's endorsement of a pluralist Progressive definition of American nationalism, Progressive activist Frances Kellor, the head of the Americanization organization the Committee for Immigrants in America formed a movement to create a national Americanization Day to replace celebrations of July 4<sup>th</sup>. The idea received official endorsement by the Wilson Administration and in 150 cities and towns across the United States immigrants gathered for citizenship lessons, patriotic singing, and receptions for newly-minted Americans. In the fall of 1915 the Bureau of Education partnered with Kellor's new National Americanization Committee and formed the America First program to teach immigrants English and the values of Americanism.<sup>29</sup>

For Progressive nationalists like Frances Kellor and Theodore Roosevelt, immigrants' loyalty represented a particularly thorny aspect of the broader need for national loyalty during the war. Kellor wrote of the situation in 1916, "we face the fact that America is not first in the hearts of every resident, that not every man works for America, and that not every man trusts her present or believes in her future." As a result, immigrants themselves could not be trusted to come to loyalty to the United States by old

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<sup>29</sup> Edward George Hartmann, *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), pp. 127-33, Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, pp. 234-45, Desmond King, *Making Americans*, pp. 90-2, "Americanization Day in 150 Communities," *Survey* July 31, 1915, p. 390, Litwicky, *America's Public Holidays*, pp. 223-30. For the effect of war mobilization on ethnic communities, see Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974); Christopher M. Sterba, *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants During the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); June Granatir Alexander, *Ethnic Pride, American Patriotism: Slovaks and other New Immigrants in the Interwar Era* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004). For foreign-born presence in the American Military, see Nancy Gentile Ford, *Americans All!: Foreign-Born Soldiers in World War I* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2001)

methods. Compulsion was necessary national security. But even Kellor realized the problem was larger than the disloyalty of the alien:

“In the growing demand for a more united America it is apparent that America needs a national spirit which shall combine reverence and service; a national consciousness which shall be willing to give as well as to receive benefits and to put something into politics as well as take something out; an ideal, which shall make every resident give something of his interest, service, time, and money *voluntarily* to America without waiting for conscription and without quibbling over ‘rights,’ ‘emergencies,’ ‘time of need,’ or ‘obligations of business.’”<sup>30</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt, writing in politically-charged tract for that year’s presidential election, agreed that, “patriotism should be an integral part of our every feeling at all times, for it is merely another name for those qualities of soul which make a man in peace or in war, by day or by night, think of his duty to his fellows, and of his duty to the nation through which their and his loftiest aspirations must find their fitting expression.” While embracing the religious and ethnic pluralism of the nation, Roosevelt argued that, “the man who loves other nations as much as he does his own, stands on par with the man who loves other women as much as he does his own wife.” Furthermore, “the professors of every form of hyphenated Americanism are as truly the foes of this country as if they dwelled outside its borders and made active war against it.”<sup>31</sup> From this sentiment, Americans took it upon themselves to coerce German-Americans and other foreign-born citizens to accept a single loyalty to the American nation.

The Committee on Public Information (CPI), led by their former muckraking boss George Creel, shared Kellor’s hope that wartime nationalism could also serve the purpose of revitalizing the political culture and expunge lingering strands of laissez-faire

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<sup>30</sup> Frances A. Kellor, *Straight America: A Call to National Service* (New York: MacMillan Co, 1916), pp. 4, 9-10

<sup>31</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *Fear God and Take Your Own Part* (New York: George G Doran, 1916), pp. 18, 139-46 (quotations from p. 18)

individualism. The democratic idealism of the CPI's propaganda explained how the war would revolutionize American social bonds and draw citizens closer to a true democracy built in individual deference and sacrifice for the common good. The CPI stressed service, common purpose, and sacrifice to American audiences in a variety of contexts. Its branch that focused on youth education emphasized concepts like community responsibility and social obligation. Its National School Service branch urged students to think of their own freedom in relation to the needs of their community and their nation in much the same way Progressive educators had before the war. The CPI explained the war to workers not simply as a test of their loyalty but in terms of how mobilization could help them achieve industrial democracy and noted how governmental controls had made the war effort more efficient and just. In this same spirit it urged immigrants to drop the hyphen and submerge ethnic affiliations in favor of an explicitly American identity.<sup>32</sup>

The war added victory to the tally of what greater social cohesion and a refocused sense of national obligation by citizens could yield. War also dramatically changed the meaning of the behaviors of those not living up to their obligations as citizens. Actions that shirked responsibilities all shared, like not registering for the draft, hoarding food, or failing to buy war bonds, sent the message that one's own comfort and safety was more important than the needs of a society working together literally to put lives at risk in as short a time as possible. Similarly, speech that gave aid and comfort to the enemy or encouraged disunity and disloyalty among other citizens demonstrated a lack of responsibility that deserved no constitutional protection. On all levels where Americans would encounter the bonds of obligation during the war, from their local communities up

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<sup>32</sup> Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines*, Kennedy, *Over Here*, pp. 60-2, William Graebner, *The Engineering of Consent: Democracy and Authority in the Twentieth Century* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 42-3

to the federal state, mechanisms arose to ensure that Americans were doing their duty for the war effort. The federal government jailed dissenters based on their public utterances, culled disloyal periodicals from the mails, and used the military to round up members of the IWW. States began to pass their own criminal statutes against subversive speech, a legislative trend that continued through the immediate aftermath of the war. These laws were written with the suppression of known subversive groups like the IWW in mind. On the local level, citizens' vigilante actions against their fellows exploded. Americans used the methods they had employed to insure citizens fulfilled their local obligations, ranging from gossip to lynching, in service of the nation. Groups like the American Protective League reflected this overlap between local and national obligations, as deputized citizens combed American cities for "slackers" who had dodged registering for the draft. The APL's highly-publicized "slacker raids" rarely flushed out many slackers at all, but instead dramatized for citizens what the expectations of their obligation to the nation-state were in time of war.<sup>33</sup>

Considering the aggregate of private and governmental efforts to bring national unity during the World War allows a picture of American nationalism that was heavily influenced by Progressive ideas to emerge. The war enshrined a Progressive vision of what democracy meant at the center of that nationalism. The United States was a nation that offered citizens a place in an imagined community based on their shared set of rights and responsibilities democracy offered. While race and gender remained blind spots, democracy theoretically granted all the same social and political status. Citizens enjoyed

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<sup>33</sup> Capozzola, "Uncle Sam Wants You," chs. 4, 6, Kennedy, *Over Here*, pp. 75-88, Eldridge Foster Dowell, *A History of Criminal Syndicalism Legislation in the United States* (1939; New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), Paul L. Murphy, *The Meaning of Free Speech: First Amendment Freedoms from Wilson to FDR* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972) pp. 41-58, William Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (1963; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) pp. 100-16

an equality of opportunity in economic and political life, as well as the freedoms of expression and religion. These rights and opportunities, however, came with responsibilities that citizens also shared. Americans became full members of the democratic national community by accepting the obligation to balance or even defer their own interests, rights, and privileges to the needs of the greater society.

What made the war context different from previous debate about the nature of democracy and political obligation of citizens was that these ideas were now being projected towards understanding the nation's broader mission in the world. In a war between imperial powers, American democracy represented an exceptional light in the world. This exceptional conception of the American nation as a democratic nation provided a clear distinction between the United States and its Prussian enemy. In portraying the enemy, the CPI preferred to compare the German authoritarian government to the American democracy, presenting the war as a choice Americans faced between either supporting the democratic system or accepting Prussianism's dominance of the Western World. Exceptionalism also contributed to the messianic feeling many Americans, including President Wilson, attached to the nation's war effort. Intervention would advance Christian Civilization by spreading the American ideal of democracy to the continent.<sup>34</sup> Americans therefore owed their nation the additional responsibility of seeing their civic actions contributed to that greater international mission.

This international context, the ability to imagine a national community in relation to other similar communities, provided the final missing piece for the development of a Progressive civic nationalism. Much to the chagrin of those Progressives who believed

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<sup>34</sup> Graebner, *The Engineering of Consent*, pp. 42-3, Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 130-40

their democratic vision should yield an international conception of society, the war provided Americans a way to understand the divisions between themselves and outsiders, both within and without national borders. It is particularly important for a civic nationalism to draw such distinctions in the absence of clear racial or ethnic criteria. This tendency to see what was not clearly compatible with an American conception of democracy with being foreign and “un-American” was of vital importance to the political culture of the both the war and postwar eras, as native-born citizens who subscribed to such ideas could be accused of foreign influence. Immigrants who retained foreign allegiances marked themselves as outsiders for failing to live up to the responsibility of dropping the hyphen and converting to “100 percent Americanism.” In more everyday contexts, however, the war also drew clear distinctions between “true” and “un-American” citizens on the basis of civic conduct. Those who uttered antiwar or anti-government statements, shirked responsibilities of common service, or simply seemed to be what was vaguely described as “pro-German” forfeited their status as members of the American nation. Americans who would discipline them saw such conduct as transcending simply the boundaries of what was bad citizenship to see it as something much more ominous and subversive. They grasped for the symbols of the nation – war bonds, the English language, the American flag – to distinguish insiders from outsiders and to assert offending citizens’ need to submit to the common American civic identity and the responsibilities contained therein.

The war turned out to be the beginning, not the end, of debate within American political culture about the nature of the nation and the best methods through which social cohesion could be maintained. The war had intensified Americans’ exploration of the

bonds of obligation they owed each other and the state, but had not closed the process. The American Legion was founded in this context and with these open-ended questions in mind.<sup>35</sup> As subsequent chapters will trace, the Legion's founders were deeply impressed by the nationalistic lessons they gleaned from the war. They believed the Progressive form of nationalism that had matured during wartime represented essential ideals that should organize American political life, not simply rally the public to a finite crisis moment. In a deteriorating international and domestic context, they made it their mission to ensure that wartime nationalism remained embedded in American political culture permanently. The Legion would subsequently explain the rights and responsibilities American citizens held under that nationalist vision in language borrowed from more conservative Progressive thinkers. It would conceive of loyalty to the nation similarly to the way many Americans had thought of it during the war, even though the global and domestic contexts for that idea of loyalty had changed significantly. Legionnaires would also extend the practices of wartime vigilantism to check the nation's enemies and subversive elements in peacetime.

The Legion also drew from conservatives' explorations of how best to foster social cohesion within the political culture. Most obviously, the Legion expanded upon the symbolic meaning veterans carried as particular kinds of citizens in the political culture that Civil War-era veterans had cultivated. The Legion avoided becoming a new GAR in the respect it did not enmesh itself in partisan politics in the same way Union veterans became a voting block for the Republican Party. But the Legion did model its role in civic life on the GAR's activities, particularly its commemorative and educational

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<sup>35</sup> Christopher Capozzola reads "a vision of obligation, articulated through a comradeship and mutual devotion put in the service of the nation-state" in the preamble of the Legion's constitution. "Uncle Sam Wants You," p. 358

functions. The idea that particular people and particular moments in history could embody the concept of national loyalty remained a vital part of American political culture through the Legion's extension of Civil War veterans' efforts in this regard. As was also true in wartime, the Legion's language of Americanism, which it used to represent the nationalist values of the war era, provided more conservative members with a new way to contextualize their own conceptions of national loyalty that ultimately dragged the organization to the right.

## Chapter 2

### “A Steam Roller with Heart:” The Origins of the American Legion

World War I proved to be a watershed moment for Progressive political and social thought. The war came as Progressives were searching for methods to make the political culture more responsive to the problem of social disintegration the nation had faced since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Progressives believed that Americans needed to feel the interconnectedness that inherently bound them to their fellow citizens and defined their political obligations.<sup>1</sup> The war intensified Progressives’ calls for citizens to defer private interests for the good of the greater whole. Since war clarifies what is in the common national interest as no other collective effort can, many Progressives saw the war and an opportunity to clarify citizenship values that were central to the proper function of the nation’s democracy in war or peace. The war witnessed an explosion of efforts, both federal and private, designed to foster disinterested citizenship among Americans and reconnect them with a rejuvenated sense of nationalism that defined the nation through the democratic freedoms and obligations citizens shared.

The American Legion emerged from this wartime reinvigoration of the political culture. Actually, it emerged twice. The first American Legion was created in 1915 as a registry of volunteers who vowed to make their particular skills available for military service when the United States entered the conflict. This first iteration of the Legion was

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<sup>1</sup> For a better sense of the intellectual roots of the progressive search for the sense of what at the time would be described as “nationality,” see: Marc Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State: Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909-1926* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 63-5, 131-4, Eldon J. Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp. 132-5, Edward A. Stettner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), pp. 38-9, John A. Thompson, *Reformers at War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 80, Gary Gerstle, “The Protean Character of American Liberalism,” *The American Historical Review*, 99:4 (October 1994), pp. 1049-50.

part of the preparedness movement of 1915-16, which some Progressives believed offered a way to inculcate the spirit of disinterested service to the nation-state into men while simultaneously boosting the nation's military readiness. Veterans of the preparedness movement who had gone off to war founded the second and permanent version of the American Legion in early 1919. These men saw the millions of American veterans milling around Europe and the training camps of the United States as a potentially vibrant new force in American civic life. They believed veterans had undergone a transformative experience through military service that had made them keenly aware of the kinds of citizenship principles many Progressives hoped the war would instill in all Americans. Just as the Grand Army of the Republic channeled the particular experiences of Civil War veterans for the benefit of the greater political culture, the founders of the Legion directed the experiences of service men of the Great War to peacetime use.

This chapter explores how the American Legion was founded in 1919 to promote specific Progressive values of citizenship after the war through the vehicle of a mass-membership veterans' organization. The postwar Legion represented the culmination of efforts by a clique of young, nationalistic Progressives to use the transformative experience of military service as the basis for a new consciousness of citizenship in civilian life. These efforts had begun in the club rooms of Manhattan and the drill fields of Plattsburg and other military camps in 1915-16.<sup>2</sup> After the war, the Legion's founders

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<sup>2</sup> The Legion's roots in the preparedness movement before the war has not been explored in the historical literature describing its founding. See, John Lax and William Pencak, "Creating the American Legion," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 81:1 (Winter 1982), pp. 43-55, William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1940* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), pp. 49-77, Thomas A. Rumer *The American Legion: An Official History 1919-1989* (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1990), pp. 8-37, Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 155-60

hoped to build a large organization that could direct veterans' interpretations of their own service and put them to good use in reshaping civilian political culture. During its formative years, these founders encouraged veterans to think of themselves as the harbingers of this new civic consciousness that emphasized disinterested political action and loyalty to the state. This encouragement met veterans' expectations of having some public role in civilian life after their military experience was over. The Legion grew rapidly in its first full year of existence by meeting this vague expectation and directing it towards a larger vision of veterans' postwar roles in civic life than competing organizations could offer.

Legion founders organized the new organization skillfully to support their aim of promoting their citizenship values in peacetime political culture. They created a non-partisan, non-political organization that disciplined itself only to comment on issues directly related to veterans' interests, military policy, or citizenship. This discipline reflected its founders' experience in partisan politics and parties' reliance on educational structures to get specific messages out to the public. It also resembled the disinterested spirit of Progressive organizations that had engaged in similar work to reform Americans' political and civic participation. Legion organizers modeled their organization upon the flexible mass-membership voluntary associations that were common in American civic life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, using some of the same techniques veterans would have been familiar with through other associations to attract them to the Legion as well. Voluntary associations also had been fundamental to Americans' contributions to the war effort. They made up for a lack of state capacity and created a place Americans could

connect with a distant federal state in the context of their own communities.<sup>3</sup> The postwar Legion extended the usefulness of such voluntary efforts to the expansion of state function – in this case, promoting a civic nationalism that supported the state’s legitimacy. The flexible national structure the Legion built through the mass-membership model allowed its leaders to transmit ideas about what the organization’s Americanism meant and what kinds of activities newly-minted Legionnaires should plan for their communities accordingly. Understanding the structure of the Legion, therefore, is an important first step to appreciating its role in postwar political culture.

How the Legion determined qualifications for membership also reflected its broader nationalist vision. Organizers were careful to emphasize the democratic nature of the Legion and held no distinction between officers and enlisted men in membership qualifications. The Legion accepted African-American veterans, but white supremacist factions within its leadership clique and within Southern membership pools ensured their second-class status within the organization. The Legion accepted women who had served in the military as members in full, but rejected the membership potential of women who had worked in supporting organizations except for the Red Cross. It also formed an auxiliary for female relatives and spouses of veterans. The women’s auxiliary would reflect, rather than challenge, the particular wartime experience of male veterans and

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<sup>3</sup> For the role of voluntary associations in wartime, see Theda Skocpol, Ziad Munson, Andrew Karch, and Bayless Camp, “Patriotic Partnerships: Why Great Wars Nourished American Civic Volunteerism,” in Ira Katznelson and Martin Shefter, eds., *Shaped By War and Trade: International Influences on American Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 153-64, Nancy K. Bristow, *Making Men Moral: Social Engineering During the Great War* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); William J. Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home: Civilian Mobilization, Wartime Federalism, and the Council on National Defense, 1917-1919* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984); Christopher Joseph Capozzola, “Uncle Sam Wants You: Political Obligations in World War I America” (unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 2002)

suggested the continued dominance of male citizenship over female, despite passage of the Women's Suffrage Amendment.

### **The preparedness movement and the origins of the American Legion**

Many of those veterans who founded the American Legion in 1919 had participated in wartime experiments using private mechanisms to reform the nation's political culture. Several of the Legion's founding figures played leading roles in the preparedness and the Plattsburg training camp movements, efforts designed both to compel the Wilson Administration to adopt more rigorous preparations for war and demonstrate positive examples of loyalty to the nation through the service of their members. The preparedness movement as a political cause drew supporters from nationalist Progressive and conservative ranks. While a great portion of the movement involved shaming the President into building up the American military to prepare for the potential of American entrance into the Great War, some corners of the movement also saw preparedness as a potentially useful tool for promoting specific values of citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

Widespread military training programs had attracted the attention of some elite Americans since the 1890s, when its advocates had urged its introduction in public schools.<sup>5</sup> In the 1910s the idea of using military drill as a citizenship-building experience had morphed into a more comprehensive national plan called universal military training

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter will not discuss preparedness as an issue of defense policy, nor will it focus on its conservative proponents. For more on the politics of the movement and its conservative adherents, see John Carver Edwards, *Patriots In Pinstripe: Men of the National Security League* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 30-6

<sup>5</sup> Stuart McConnell, "Reading the Flag: A Reconsideration of the Patriotic Cults of the 1890s," from John Bodnar, ed. *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define their Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 114-5

(UMT). Its proponents believed UMT could provide social discipline in a highly individualized society. Often this conception of social discipline was in response to the changes to work patterns advanced industrialism had wrought: One of its most prominent proponents, General Leonard Wood of Eastern Command, believed that moral and physical failures in young American men were interrelated from his study at Harvard Medical School. Wood supported UMT for its ability to instill personal responsibility in its participants that would lead them to embrace Americanization and class unity. Most supporters shared Wood's enthusiasm for military training as one method the state could quickly implement to achieve the goal of restoring masculinity to softening elite American men and instilling the lower classes and foreign born with a sense of civic duty. Collective service to the nation would hence encourage the reorientation of civic life towards the Progressive idea of national citizenship when trainees returned to their communities that would prove an added benefit to its reinforcement of personal character. General Wood was instrumental in the creation of a military training camp for college men in Plattsburg, New York in 1913. This camp had the support of the presidents of Princeton, Yale, Columbia, Lehigh, and Cornell in instilling their students with masculine virtue and discipline to steel them against the supposed softening effects of business careers.<sup>6</sup>

Support for UMT picked up some momentum after the outbreak of the European War. In August 1914 a clique of Harvard graduates and other elites formally founded a movement to promote the idea. An array of Progressive-minded professional men openly supported the concept of UMT for American men and developed various plans to

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Pearlman, *To Make Democracy Safe for America: Patricians and Preparedness in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 37-8, 46-7, 82-4.

implement it, including Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Harold Ickes, journalist William Allen White, New York City mayor John P. Mitchell, and New York City police commissioner Arthur Woods. Former (and future) Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson called universal military training the “salvation of our democracy.” Several members of the movement, including the Roosevelts, tried unsuccessfully to use their influence to steer the Boy Scouts of America towards embracing a preparedness stance in 1915.<sup>7</sup>

Younger men in elite circles also embraced the preparedness cause. Their participation in the preparedness movement is an important indication of their intensions of the mission for the postwar American Legion. In early 1915 Theodore Roosevelt’s son Theodore, Jr. joined the leadership of a new preparedness organization formed in New York City named the American Legion. The group, founded by *Adventure Magazine* editor Arthur S. Hoffman, former army officer Dr. J. E. Hausmann, and Captain Gordon Johnson of General Wood’s staff, intended to create a catalog of ex-service men and those with particular skills who would be ready to serve upon a declaration of war. Hausmann envisioned the organization as a register “of men who can handle a high-powered rifle and are seasoned in roughing it in the open,” and those whose job skills could be logistically useful.<sup>8</sup> The American Legion was to be a registry of potential new Rough Riders, willing to dash off to the front at a moment’s notice for renewed glorious service. Hausmann included “cowboys, explorers, guides, scouts, trappers, and hunters” in a list of ideal occupations for the branch of members without military service backgrounds, clearly demonstrating a preference for an idealized set of rugged

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<sup>7</sup> Pearlman, *To Make Democracy Safe for America* pp. 63-4 (quotation from p. 63), 112, 122, Kennedy, *Over Here*, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> John Patrick Finnegan, *Against the Specter of a Dragon: The Campaign for American Military Preparedness, 1914-1917* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), p. 59, *New York Times*, March 1, 1915, p. 4.

individuals as enrollees. Demonstrating a romantically naïve vision of the individual within the realm of modern, big-unit mobile warfare, his list also included yachtsmen, butchers, and balloonists amidst a laundry list of professions and craft skills. Hausmann's organizational methodology, however, represented the application of expertise through volunteerism in service to the state directly in what amounted to a strange mix of military adventurism and corporate personnel management. The Legion hoped to enroll more than 250,000 members who would pay only 25 cents to add their name and address to an index card system the organization would make available to the War Department for recruiting purposes when war was declared. The younger Ted Roosevelt joined the organizations' board of directors and he and Pennsylvanian Bull Mooser and future Legion co-founder Eric Fisher Wood drummed up support for the group in New York City during the spring of 1915.<sup>9</sup>

Immediately the American Legion fell into controversy. Several New York City newspapers trumpeted General Leonard Wood's support for the new organization and the *Times* quoted Hausmann stating that he had met with Wood about the idea for the group and he approved of its purpose.<sup>10</sup> Through Capt. Johnson, the American Legion set up its initial offices on Governor's Island within Wood's headquarters. Upon learning these facts, leaders of the American League to Limit Armaments telegraphed a protest to President Wilson and Secretary of War Lindley Garrison that Wood and Johnson's housing and support of the Legion was "subversive to the interests of democracy and in violation of the policy and tradition of the United States of America."<sup>11</sup> Wood's tacit endorsement ran against two directives from Secretary Garrison in early 1915 ordering

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<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, March 1, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *New York Evening Post*, March 2, 1915, p. 1.

officers to cease public comment on military affairs. Garrison, speculating that Wood conspired with former president Roosevelt to score political points on the administration through backing the American Legion, reeled the general in quickly and the Legion moved its offices off Governor's Island to Manhattan.

Although it fell well short of registering the number of men it projected it would attract, the original American Legion enjoyed moderate success in attracting registrants and attention for itself and the preparedness cause at large. In the week after its announcement the Legion attracted 5,000 applicants in New York City and through the mail. It picked up further endorsement from notables like Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, William Allen White, former attorney general and prominent New York Republican George W. Wickersham, Joseph Choate, and former president William Howard Taft. The Legion enjoyed a surge in membership, even from the South and West, after the German navy sank the *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915.<sup>12</sup> As a private representation of what many prominent Americans thought was a task for the War Department – organizing potential recruits into a centralized data collection – the Legion was part of a significant political movement among the American elite to the right of the Wilson Administration that successfully pushed the president slowly towards accepting preparedness and provided an associationalist bridge for the creation of a more robust military. Upon the creation of the Council of National Defense by Congress in 1916, the American Legion turned its index of more than 24,000 names over to the War Department on January 1, 1917 and ceased operation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, March 6, 1915, April 26, 1915.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, December 26, 1916, p. 5.

The original American Legion was an early demonstration of the connection many privileged Americans made between good citizenship and consensual service to the nation-state. Their voluntary registration to serve in a military not yet ready for their service echoes with the future structure of the Selective Service system established a few years later. As an organization built entirely on gathering index cards, however, the original American Legion did not inflame the passions of some of its youthful founders for long. After the sinking of the *Lusitania* some of the young men within the preparedness movement who would go on to form the second American Legion explored expanding the military camp idea to their own cohort. Greenville Clark, Elihu Root, Jr., Theodore Roosevelt Jr., and a dozen wired the White House on May 10 urging President Wilson to make a strong reaction “both to secure reparation for past violations by Germany of American rights and sure guarantees against future violations.”<sup>14</sup> They also formed the Committee of One Hundred at the Harvard Club, modeled on a pro-war civic club in New York during the Civil War, and invited Wood to speak about the Plattsburg camp. Wood promised to hold a businessman’s camp after the college camp in Plattsburg in August if the group could secure 25 volunteers and instructors.<sup>15</sup>

Through their Harvard alumni, social club, and business connections the Committee of One Hundred encouraged a small social movement of interested military trainees that summer who could afford the \$100 tuition. Regular Army instructors at the camp, supervised personally by General Wood, taught attendees basic infantry fighting skills and marched them with full packs around a gorgeous setting on Lake Champlain.

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<sup>14</sup> Telegram, Roosevelt Jr. et al. to White House, May 10, 1915. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Papers, Box 11 – General Correspondence, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>15</sup> Finnegan, *Against the Specter of a Dragon*, pp. 64-65, John Garry Clifford, *The Citizen Soldiers: The Plattsburg Training Camp Movement, 1913-1920* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press: 1972), pp. 57-9.

With favorable attention provided by Willard Straight in the Progressive press, the idea of staging civilian training camps took off elsewhere in the country. Interested businessmen opened camps in the Presidio in San Francisco, at American Lake in Washington State, and at Fort Sheridan outside Chicago in 1915 along the Plattsburg camp model. By that winter 2,000 men had attended a training camp. About half of Plattsburg's first class of trainees had attended elite Eastern colleges, 468 from Harvard alone. Greenville Clark and Lehigh College President Henry Drinker became leaders of the Military Camp Training Association (MCTA) to organize the burgeoning movement. The success of the Plattsburg model drew the attention of Congress, which authorized federal material support for attendees of Plattsburg-styled training camps upon the approval of the secretary of defense in section 54 of the National Defense Act of 1916. That March, Secretary of Defense Newton Baker offered the MCTA official War Department support for camp courses in the coming summer. Behind large advertising and local organizing campaigns, 17,000 more men attended 12 military training camps in 1916. Franklin Roosevelt used his position in the Department of the Navy to establish a "naval Plattsburg" for 1,600 men who cruised on the U.S.S. *Rhode Island* in the late summer of 1916. Future Legion founding member Hamilton Fish Jr. founded the Junior Patriots of America to solicit funds for teenage boys to attend the Junior Plattsburg camp.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than just a retreat where rich middle-aged men and college students could play war for months at a time, the Plattsburg movement camps were designed to make a lived experience out of the Progressive ideas behind their programs. Participants lauded

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<sup>16</sup> Clifford, *The Citizen Soldiers*, pp. 75, 94-5, 150-3, 182-4, , Pearlman, *To Make Democracy Safe for America*, pp. p 131-2, 104, , Ralph Barton Perry, *The Plattsburg Movement* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1921), pp. 26-7, 38, Finnegan, *Against the Specter of a Dragon*, pp. 65-6. Perry, an officer of MCTA, was a professor at Harvard.

the democratic nature of camps at which classes and ethnicities were intermingled amidst the training units and New York City cops barked orders at Wall Street lawyers as drill instructors. General Wood invited Samuel Gompers to visit Plattsburg in 1915 and some working-class men attended training camps behind the support of the National Defense Act of 1916. Some major businesses offered workers paid leave to attend the camps.<sup>17</sup> Despite these initiatives it is unlikely significant members of the working class attended these camps, and the democracy its participants spoke of more likely represented the diversity of occupations among its upper and middle-class attendees.

Finding democracy through bayonet drills revealed the broader socio-cultural concerns of the elite who created the preparedness movement. Wealth had not shielded the democratic values of the camps' participants but rather had placed these values in peril. Since democracy to Progressives was about personal conduct as much as abstract political concepts, the training camps of 1916 represented a sort of political revival experience. The idea that a social experience could impress political ideals upon participants was also common in Progressive social work. Ideally, the camps removed wealthy and working-class men from their social contexts and placed them in units in which all were equal members of a common effort. Democracy was found in the ranks and reinforced through the experience of service. Praising the Plattsburg camps as "the great civic movement of Americanism" while campaigning for Charles Evans Hughes presidential bid in 1916, Roosevelt proclaimed that "when crystallized along the lines of universal training for universal service [the Plattsburg model] will become the most

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<sup>17</sup> Pearlman, *To Make Democracy Safe for America*, pp. 127, 58, Clifford, *The Citizen Soldiers*, p. 153.

powerful agent for national democratic progress in our land.” The metaphor for democratization in the ranks would be an important trope for veterans after the war.<sup>18</sup>

Plattsburg reflected other concerns about what modern corporate life was doing to elite American males. Wealth through the expansion of the professional class had led to what historian Jackson Lears described as a crisis of cultural authority around the turn of the century. Not only was the cohesiveness of American society at risk against the shearing effect of class conflict but so was the integrity of elites’ own selfhood. As a result, men came to value disciplining experiences that placed them outside of the over-rationalized world. Many graduates of the Plattsburg camps viewed their own participation as something that would steel their own characters against the vices of wealth. The idea that elite masculinity needed restoration also carried with it racist overtones. Some advocates of Plattsburg-style camps hoped they could re-invigorate Anglo-Saxon manhood. Progressives had done much to popularize this racial essentialism and the theory that races could decline through the evolutionary pressures of new blood entering a stable “stock.” Many preparedness advocates, therefore, saw the maintenance of the virility of American men of Anglo-Saxon heritage as a crucial defense of American civilization. Historian Richard Hofstadter wrote that in the period between the Spanish-American War and American entrance into World War I, “warnings of decay were most commonly coupled with exhortations to revivify the national spirit; and this trend in thought gave a back log to preparedness workers.” The Plattsburg

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<sup>18</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “Righteous Peace through National Preparedness,” May 19, 1916 (New York: Allied Print, 1916; Microfiche. Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1983.) p. 19. For further comments by Roosevelt endorsing military training plans, see “National Preparedness: Military -- Industrial--Social,” Kansas City, MO, Memorial Day, 1916 (New York: Allied Print, 1916; Microfiche. Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1983), “Preparedness: Military, Industrial and Spiritual,” Denver CO, October 24, 1916. From Theodore Roosevelt, *Americanism and Preparedness* (New York: The Mail and Express Job Print, 1917), pp. 108-9.

movement, therefore, found analogues in turn-of-the-century youth culture that was saturated with the travails of the frontier huntsmen and medieval knights, new organizations like the Sons of Daniel Boone and the Boy Scouts, and college football.<sup>19</sup>

The interaction between citizens' private and public consciousnesses, so crucial to the spirit of the military training aspect of preparedness, was typical of the broader mobilization of political obligation during the war. The state did not simply ask citizens to do certain necessary tasks like join the military, buy war bonds, or participate in food rationing, but instead asked citizens to think of themselves as finding virtue in the execution of their obligations to the state. In other words, the war required citizens to think of themselves as "Americans," and to express that sense of self through specific actions that served the greater good. Because Americans had found this style of obligation most frequently in the voluntary associations and fraternal groups that dominated civic life, the state relied both on the rhetorical ethos of volunteerism to center citizens' participation in the war effort and the actual associations themselves to compel loyalty to the state.<sup>20</sup>

This sense of service to the state reflecting a connection between personal virtue, political obligation, and greater national identity was reflected in the spirit many American soldiers interpreted their war experience. Soldiers and civilians were

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<sup>19</sup> Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), pp. 50-5, Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), ch. 1 and 5, Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 40-1 Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism and American Thought, 1860-1915* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), ch. 9, quoted pp. 159-60, Daniel Justin Herman, *Hunting and the American Imagination* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), pp. 234-5, Kennedy, *Over Here*, p. 179, Ronald E. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 95-6, Kim Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 108, 111, E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 243-4. For broader commentary on turn of the century manhood, see Rotundo, *American Manhood* ch. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Capozzola, "Uncle Sam Wants You," ch. 1, Kennedy, *Over Here*, pp. 152-4.

indoctrinated by state propaganda to believe that the United States was fighting to preserve and extend democracy against the threat of Prussian militarism. As a result of the attention the military paid to its troops' understanding the war effort, soldiers' private reactions to their unfolding participation in the war closely mirrored the official interpretation of their cause. As David Kennedy explained, "not only did many doughboys accept without reflection the official definition of the war's meaning, but, perhaps more important, they translated that meaning into their understanding of their personal experiences, and described those experiences in language transported directly from the pious and inflated pronouncements of the spokesmen for traditional culture." When they died in battle, their chaplains and comrades memorialized their sacrifice to a glorious national cause in similar ways the Wilson Administration lionized the country's fallen.<sup>21</sup>

### **Organizing American veterans**

With the war abruptly coming to an end in November, 1918, several sets of military officers immediately began to explore ways to organize American veterans into new associations for postwar political causes. While the military had no immediate plans in place to do so, it was instantly clear that the millions of men drafted into the services would be coming home and returning to their civilian lives. The impetus to organize American war veterans even before they returned home from Europe indicates the importance organizers understood voluntary associations would play in postwar political efforts and the inherent value the military experience would have in legitimizing the

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<sup>21</sup> Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, pp. 77-9, Kennedy, *Over Here*, pp. 212-3 (quotation p. 213), Mark Megis, *Optimism At Armageddon: Voices of Participants in the First World War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 175.

causes of such associations. Even within the Army itself some officers believed the professional military itself should form a veterans' organization to link it permanently to conscripted citizen-soldiers, an idea General Pershing rejected.<sup>22</sup>

What became the American Legion was one of three separate approaches to organize veterans for particular political purposes. The first approach was partisan. The GAR had proven the value of a coordinated "soldiers' vote" in 19<sup>th</sup> century politics, and Democrats and Republicans explored the idea of organizing veterans into constitutive organizations for future political mobilization. Finding political balance against the potential of a domestic radical insurgency proved a particularly motivating idea. The chief chaplain of the American Expeditionary Force, Episcopal Bishop Charles Brent, took the lead by forming Comrades in Service in January, 1919. His group nominally intended to carry on the wartime spirit of military men against radicalism. Brent also hoped the group would be a springboard for General Pershing's nomination for President by the Democratic Party. At the same time, Illinois Republicans Milton Foreman and Robert McCormick discussed ways to organize veterans also to combat radicalism. Veterans resisted being dragged into such partisan uses so early into postwar life. Brent also lost significant rank and file support, however, by focusing much of the organization's attention on decrying the unruly, drunken behavior of American servicemen.<sup>23</sup> Brent, Foreman, and McCormick eventually became important organizers for the American Legion.

A second political movement emerged from the Left and appealed to the enlisted man directly. In March, 1919, Marvin Gates Sperry formed the Private Soldiers and

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<sup>22</sup> Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, pp. 154-5

<sup>23</sup> Thomas B. Littlewood, *Soldiers Back Home: The American Legion in Illinois, 1919-1939* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 17, William Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 49-50.

Sailors' Legion, more common referred to as the World War Veterans. Sperry's organization hoped to steer veterans towards postwar affiliation with the labor movement by using veterans' concerns about postwar employment and unionists' anger that the military was directing veterans towards scab work to weld the two together. The World War Veterans forbid members from working as scabs and called on the government to provide work for all veterans, distribute \$500 discharge bonuses, and even redistribute of agricultural land and unused city lots to returning servicemen. Part of the World War Veterans' appeals to veterans involved fostering whatever bitterness enlisted men felt towards their officers and channeling it towards a broader anti-elite, anticapital critique. Its declaration of principles included calls for the prosecution of officers who had abused their men. The no-scab pledge brought organized labor over to the World War Veterans' side and major unions like the Amalgamated Metal Workers of America and American Federation of Labor endorsed the organization. The organization grew to 100,000 by the early 1920s, the overwhelming majority of whom also belonged to a union.<sup>24</sup>

The Legion represented something of a hybrid organization in comparison with these other two options. Organized in Paris in March, 1919 ostensibly around concerns about soldiers' morale, the Legion's founding clique hoped their organization would look after the particular interests of veterans and promote a nationalized political culture in peacetime. While the GAR was a clear precedent in Theodore Roosevelt Jr.'s mind, the general consensus in American public opinion that Union veterans had fleeced the government for pensions made he and his fellow organizers wary of using the Legion to

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<sup>24</sup> Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, p. 169, Pencak, *For God and Country*, p 51.

demand a reward for service.<sup>25</sup> The Legion's position on bonus legislation would change, in large degree because of its popularity among members; but it was not founded solely to be an interest group. Its founders wanted to create an organization that could be a postwar conduit for the citizenship lessons they believed military service contained. As founding member Eric Fisher Wood recalled to *The Forum*, "we all hoped for a civilian organization to replace the military one we were leaving; a civilian organization which would enable us to carry into the new life that effective team-work and mutual support, the value of which we had so thoroughly learned in the army." As veterans returned to their home communities, voluntary association offered the best organization option for connecting veterans to this vaguely defined sense of continuing national service.<sup>26</sup> The key was to begin organizing veterans as quickly as possible. Aside from its early embrace of antiradicalism, the Legion could establish a specific agenda later.

Part of the rush to organize stemmed from Legion founders' desire for veterans not to lose touch with thinking about the war experience in a particular and narrow way. As the World War Veterans' early success in organizing working-class veterans indicated, returning soldiers potentially could interpret their experience through something of a victim mentality, seeing their service as entitling them to special treatment from the state.<sup>27</sup> Theodore Roosevelt Jr. preferred to see veterans as having "bought a

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<sup>25</sup> Theodore Roosevelt Jr. to Eleanor Butler Alexander Roosevelt, January 21, 1919, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Papers, Box 8 – Family Correspondence, Library of Congress, Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, pp. 162-3

<sup>26</sup> Eric Fisher Wood, "The American Legion: Keep Alive the Spirit of the Great War," *Forum*, August 19, 1919, p. 220. For the development and growth of organizations following this particular model, see Skocpol, et al, "Patriotic Partnerships," Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000)

<sup>27</sup> Early Legion founders tried to contain this sentiment within the organization and resisted many members' calls for it to seek soldiers' bonus legislation. By 1922, the Legion was no longer able to contain

share of stock in a company,” through service under arms, as he claimed in his postwar memoirs, *Average Americans*. “He is interested in seeing the country run right and is willing to give more service.” Roosevelt Jr. told the *St. Paul News* in May 1919 that the war had taught veterans that “our brand of democracy is not much a shibboleth, but an operating force in our daily lives.”<sup>28</sup> As broadly aware of the divisive political and economic controversies that had threatened to polarize American society, the men who organized the Legion also felt a sense of urgency in forming a social body that would distill the essence of the war experience before those controversies swamped them again. This sense of urgency translated in continuing the spirit of wartime nationalism. “We must profit by these lessons [of citizenship] and preserve the impulses that have been given to our people,” Roosevelt wrote in *Average Americans*. “If we do this the war will not simply be history, a past issue, a good job well finished; it will be a force that will be felt in this country through the generations to come for righteousness and a truer Americanism.”<sup>29</sup>

To become the dominant veterans’ organization for the soldiers of the Great War, the Legion had to convince veterans to see the political meaning of the war experience at least partly in the way Legion founders described it. The Legion’s ultimate success, therefore, reflects its ability to both shape and meet the expectations veterans held for

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popular support for this initiative and openly sought federal adjusted compensation. It argued this switch on the grounds that soldiers had suffered undue economic disadvantage because their military service had cost them wartime wage increases and had handicapped their advance during the postwar recession. How the Legion reconciled the principles of selfless service to the nation with claims the state and society owed veterans special rights will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. For how the bonus issue shaped early Legion organization, see Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, p. 170-3, Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 70-2

<sup>28</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., “Why I Back the Legion,” *American Legion Weekly*, Aug 15, 1919, p. 14, *St. Paul News*, May 10, 1919, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Papers, Box 64 -- Clippings (1919-1923), Library of Congress

<sup>29</sup> Theodore Roosevelt Jr., *Average Americans* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1919) p. 235, *St. Paul News*, May 10, 1919, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Papers, Box 64 -- Clippings (1919-1923), Library of Congress

their own role in peacetime life. In its first year of existence, Legion leaders developed an organizing strategy that borrowed methods from both voluntary associations and political parties. Out of a leadership group of about 50 men, the most well connected formed the Committee of 34 to take on the bulk of organizing duties.

Many of the Legion's key initial leaders had extensive experience in electoral politics. They used some of the methods learned from that arena to help promote the Legion. In its efforts to build state-level structures and publicize the larger mission of the organization the Legion emulated the educational style of political campaigning that had been the norm since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It tried to attract elite men from both political parties whose personal credibility could be used to lead the masses of veterans towards the kinds of interpretations of military service the Legion hoped they would adopt.<sup>30</sup> Republican Roosevelt and Democrat Bennett Clark, son of the Speaker of the House, wired governors of their parties asking for suggestions for about half a dozen men "of high standing and leadership" to serve as delegates to a domestic caucus in St. Louis that May. These men would subsequently become important state-level organizers. Eric Fisher Wood also sent letters to every governor that urged them to support the Legion's organizing work. As an enormous series of strikes fanned out across the country Wood reminded the governors, "In time of crisis a great body of men actuated by a spirit of profound patriotism and bound together by a patriotism born of mutual service might well prove an effective bulwark against the forces of disintegration and destruction."

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<sup>30</sup> Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 80-100

Wood advertised the new organization would be a cross-section of America and would not base its activities on partisanship or “narrow class prejudice.”<sup>31</sup>

The Legion also created an impressive publicity strategy designed to spread the word about the values of service the new organization would represent. Leadership coordinated what it said in public and what it told organizers on the state and local levels well to ensure that prospective and new members and the general public understood the mission of the organization. Rev. John Inzer and Roosevelt Jr. made up the core of a 15-man speakers bureau that crisscrossed sections of the country drumming up publicity for the Legion’s coming prominence in national affairs. Roosevelt himself spoke in thirty states by the end of the fall. Franklin D’Olier chaired the State Organization division of national headquarters, sending packets of information to state-level leaders containing the resolutions passed by the stateside caucus the organization held in St. Louis in May, the temporary Legion constitution, and suggestions for organizing posts and state offices. D’Olier’s office further issued well-heeded memoranda before state conventions to guide the organization process further. The Public Relations division of national headquarters fed the media positive accounts of Legion work. In June the Committee of 34 hired Ivy Lee, the public relations mastermind behind the Rockefellers’ recovery from the Ludlow Massacre and the wartime advertising campaign for the Red Cross, to oversee a national advertising campaign to encourage new membership. The Legion paid Lee \$7,500 a

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<sup>31</sup> Richard J. Loosbrock, *The History of the Kansas Department of the American Legion* (Topeka, KS: Kansas Department of the American Legion, 1968), pp. 14-7, *New York Times*, April 9, 1919 p. 7, Eric Fisher Wood to US governors, April 10, 1919, Eric Fisher Wood Papers, Box 1 – Correspondence, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, NY.

month for five months. This publicity fund secured the organization 300,000 posters and advertisements in every paper in the country with a circulation over 150,000.<sup>32</sup>

The capstone of the Legion's professional public relations work was the establishment of a mass-circulation magazine, the *American Legion Weekly*. Launched on July 4, 1919, the *Weekly* served as the Legion's primary mouthpiece. The magazine was not simply an organizational newsletter but was distributed to local libraries, newspaper offices, troop ships, and Congressional offices as well as subscribers at an estimated cost of \$100,000. Its initial run of 12,000 copies grew to 175,000 in a few months, and the Legion placed so much importance on developing its circulation that the magazine became a serious financial drag on the organization. Former *Stars and Stripes* editor George White oversaw the publication and filled its pages with works of former staffers.<sup>33</sup> The early months of the magazine tread skillfully between alarmism over "Red" activism in the United States and sunny portrayals of the veteran's new role in redeeming American democracy as a Legionnaire. White and *Weekly* contributors created an early narrative in the pages of the magazine about the "Gr-r-rand and Glor-r-rious Feeling" of being in the Legion, as White called it in a *Weekly* cartoon, overcoming emerging and perilous new challenges in the postwar world.<sup>34</sup>

The Legion's public relations blitz was in part designed to overcome the skepticism in the American public about the true nonpartisan nature of the organization and distinguish itself from the pension-grubbing GAR. Early editorial reviews of the new body could not resist comparing the Legion to its antecedent. The *New York Times*

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<sup>32</sup> Rumer, *The American Legion*, pp. 64-5, Pencak, *For God and Country*, p 64, *New York Times* September 14, 1919.

<sup>33</sup> Rumer, *The American Legion*, pp. 63, 75, Pencak, *For God and Country*, p 64.

<sup>34</sup> Rumer, *The American Legion*, p. 59, Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 63.

declared, "It would be a deplorable result if these men [in the Legion], approved by and dear to the whole community, should become a mere reflection of their own separate objects; if they, who have done so much for all of us, should be turned into a class organization, seeking its own objects and dividing itself from the great body of the public." The *Times* doubted this outcome based on the Legion's superior leadership: "Used in the honorable, straightforward, large, national way advocated by Lieut. Col. Roosevelt and Let. Col. Clark, it will be a help and a strength to the United States." *World's Work* noted the similarities between the Legion's initial published aims and those of the G.A.R. in 1866, but praised the Legion's nonpartisan and national character. The Legion, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* commented, must keep its promise to remain non-partisan. "The young men in question must win their spurs if they are to wear them. They will be welcomed as leaders provided they furnish leadership."<sup>35</sup>

The Legion received valuable press attention from newspaper men already in its ranks. Publishers of newspapers in New Mexico, New York, New Hampshire served as important organizers in their states. *Chicago Tribune* publisher Robert McCormick led organizing efforts in Illinois and included membership application slips on the *Tribune's* editorial page throughout the fall of 1919. The *New York Herald's* George Wheat chaired the caucus' publicity committee along with newspaper men from Louisville and Idaho. Forty three editors, journalists, or newspaper publishers attended the St. Louis caucus.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *New York Evening Post*, May 8, 1919, p. 12, *New York Times*, April 10, 1919, "Politics and the American Legion," *World's Work*, July, 1919, pp. 242-4, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 6, 1919, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 64, *Chicago Tribune* October 1, 1919 p. 8, October 8, 1919, p. 8, October 12, 1919, p. 8. Statistics on employment for St. Louis delegates taken from American Legion, *Proceedings and Committees: Caucus of the American Legion St. Louis, Mo., May 8, 9, 10, 1919* (Publisher unknown, 1919), pp. 3-38, 82.

Even in press it did not directly control the Legion received significant coverage and praise. *Outlook* took particular interest in the Legion, publishing the Legion's press release on its activities in July almost verbatim. It hired New York George Palmer Putnam to cover the caucus as he served as a delegate of the Empire State. Putnam took full advantage of the opportunity to declare the absence of sectionalism, class division, or rank distinction at the caucus. A week later *Outlook* declared that the Legion had "commenced its career irreproachably" in regards to avoiding partisanship and boldly predicted, "If, welded together in this new union, America's soldiers shall find a way of expressing their determination that government of the people, for the people, and by the people shall continue and prosper, and voice their will again to fight in behalf of such determination, should need be, the American Legion well may become one of America's mightiest influences."<sup>37</sup>

### **Remaining non-partisan and non-political**

Having bested early rivals and secured favorable press coverage in its formative months, the Legion's leadership cadre continued to guide the Legion down a track that steered it clear from illusions of partisanship or controversial political issues of the day. They hoped to attract as many veterans as possible, since numbers meant not only power to shape political issues the Legion founders did think the organization should comment upon, but the ability to reach into every corner of the nation with its message of Americanism. Remaining non-partisan and non-political as part of crafting a positive

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<sup>37</sup> George Palmer Putnam, "The Birth of the American Legion," *Outlook* vol.122, May 21, 1919, pp. 104-5, "America's Young Veterans," *Outlook* vol. 122, May 28, 1919, pp. 143-4.

postwar civic role also ensured the Legion could enjoy support from the federal government and capital.

Legion leaders continued to shape the political direction of the organization even as it attracted enough members to generate its own internal democratic capacity. Leaders deterred delegates against debating any controversial political issue at its first large domestic meeting in St. Louis in May, 1919, stating such questions were more appropriate for the first national convention in November when the inchoate Legion had attracted a fuller representation of veterans at large. This excuse covered national leaders' desires to put off debating such issues permanently. Doing so ensured the widest appeal for the organization and allowed it to live up its non-political and non-partisan rhetoric. Delegates, nevertheless, tried to put the Legion on record on issues like the League of Nations and prohibition. The raucous, often drunken delegations bantered about partisan resolutions over the first night second day of the conference. The next day, in what was probably a prearranged speech, Rev. Inzer chastised the body for straying from its mission with politically loaded resolutions. Inzer urged the delegates to postpone consideration of any resolution that would not pass unanimously until the November convention to ensure the survival of the organization. "What the great seers of the past ages have dreamed and what they have planned and longed for, the opportunity that they sought, has suddenly been placed in our laps and in our hands," he told the caucus, asking "Are we going to be great men and big men and loyal, patriotic, unselfish, sacrificing, serving men, with the spirit of the soldier in the American legion as we had on the battlefield and arise to the dignity and be worthy of the occasion?"<sup>38</sup> He claimed, "It is

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<sup>38</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 59-60, *Proceedings and Committees: Caucus of the American Legion*, pp. 114-5.

zero hour for this organization and let's stand together. If we don't carry anything else home, let's go home and say we are for America, that we have caught the spirit and you can't stop us with anything in the world." Inzer then successfully motioned that the offending resolutions be tossed from consideration.<sup>39</sup> With this action Inzer ensured that the Legion would remain sufficiently neutral on extraneous political issues that could hamper its ability to attract the maximum number of members.

The Legion's leadership cadre's success at St. Louis in keeping the organization focused on an agenda that avoided political controversy demonstrated their campaign-styled tactics were working. Rev. Inzer, enthused by the progress made at St. Louis, beamed in a letter to Roosevelt Jr. soon after the caucus, "We will not be a heartless steam roller, but we will be against littleness, un-Americanism, and untruth—a steam roller with heart." Inzer's usage of the "steam roller" metaphor, the political slang for a faction within a political party that used bullying tactics or fraud to achieve a particular political aim, is telling of how the leadership corps of the Legion viewed its control over the political future of returning veterans and the Legion's broader ability to influence American political culture in new directions.<sup>40</sup>

As state-level branches of the American Legion began to hold their own conventions in 1919, national headquarters discovered their control over membership was hardly absolute. Several department conventions passed politically-charged resolutions that challenged or embarrassed the organization's national leadership. Montana's first

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<sup>39</sup> *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 10, 1919, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> John Inzer to Roosevelt Jr., May 13, 1919, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Papers, Box 36 – General Correspondence, Library of Congress. My understanding of the term "steam roller" comes from Theodore Roosevelt's explanation of the outcome of the 1908 Republican National Convention. See, Roosevelt, "The Steam Roller," in Roosevelt, *Social Justice and Popular Rule: Essays, Addresses, and Public Statements Relating to the Progressive Movement (1910-1916)* (1925; New York: Arno Press, 1974), pp. 331-3.

state convention endorsed a bonus while Texas delegates approved a resolution supporting American entrance into the League of Nations. The Tennessee department convention endorsed both.<sup>41</sup> Pennsylvania delegates passes a resolution declaring that Irish leader Eamon DeValera was as “a traitor to the cause of the Allies,” drawing the ire of a Pennsylvania leader in the Legion-friendly National Catholic War Council.<sup>42</sup> Despite the occasional head-shaking state conventions caused them, Legion leaders in the Manhattan headquarters tolerated them to allow members to blow off steam in relative obscurity away from national caucuses and to quell the criticism that the organization was little more than a political trampoline for its hierarchy. Since they controlled the official public utterances of the national body, Legion leaders at national headquarters disavowed the statements and actions of posts or departments as failing to reflect the spirit of the entire organization.

These periodic controversies between state and national-level leadership over political issues reoccurred periodically throughout the interwar period. They reflected national leadership’s reliance on a classic voluntary association model to build membership and organize a large national body. The Legion borrowed terminology directly from the GAR, calling local chapters “posts” and state-level offices “departments.” Posts fell under the administrative oversight of division-level offices, then departments. The Legion followed the strategy of “competitive emulation” for growing the organization.<sup>43</sup> With an overall goal of enrolling a million members by the November

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<sup>41</sup> Geraldine Lowery, *The American Legion in Montana 1919-1963* (Billings, MT: American Legion Department of Montana, 1965), p. 4, Carrie Wilcox. *The American Legion in Texas 1919-1949* (Dallas: Banks Upshaw and CO, 1951) p. 27, Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 71

<sup>42</sup> Michael Slattery to Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. Oct 16, 1919. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Papers, Box 11 – General Correspondence, Library of Congress.

<sup>43</sup> Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, p.92

national convention in mind, national organizers set quotas for every state based on the eligible veterans in each state expected to join. Departments' quotas were published in advance and members in each state competed to exceed its allotted membership goal. The department with the highest membership in relation to its quota received a trophy, a practice that continued throughout the interwar period. Departments also challenged each other to meet particular membership figures in their own side competitions.

Departments enjoyed a degree of organizational autonomy. At most department conventions, post or district representatives selected delegates to the national convention. Establishing rules for selecting representatives for department conventions and organizing posts were left to the state-level officers, who themselves were elected through this tiered convention system. Department conventions adopted resolutions on their own and select those to bring to national conventions for the full body to vote on. The election of a leadership system up through the organizational structure emulated the "status ladders" Theda Skocpol has claimed were crucial to ensuring a degree of egalitarianism within organizations that further encouraged mass membership.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the ideological direction of the organization remained relatively insulated from the desires of the Legion hoi polloi. Department hierarchy made sure that posts were coordinating their local efforts with directives from department and national headquarters. While the Legion's organizational structure allowed individuals in communities to interpret their mission with significant latitude, most direction flowed from the top down. The only true barometer of the organization's "democratic" character remaining the enthusiasm of local members determined the level of activism the Legion

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<sup>44</sup> Skocpol et al, "How Americans Became Civic," pp. 66-7, Lax and Pencak, "Creating the American Legion," p. 52.

achieved. As a result, post activism was often to the right of the official organizational line. Posts could choose to ignore or even exceed directives from headquarters with little consequence, as long as the result was not overly politically embarrassing to the organization as a whole. Ideas for rather creative community-level projects would come from the states in the future, but these fit into the conceptual boxes of legitimate activism set up by the Legion's founders early in its history.

The Legion also owed a good deal of its early success to the fact its leadership could garner official support from the American state. General Headquarters in France, while not officially endorsing the Legion or directly aiding its creation, did provide its organizers with the time and access to military communications to organize its initial Paris caucus. In the states, professional military officers attended Legion conventions and took general interest in its success. As the military planned counter-subversion campaigns in 1919, some officers considered using the Legion as a paramilitary force, although Legion leadership itself had no interest in such plans. All the while, military intelligence worked to actively suppress its competitor the World War Veterans. The Legion also received official state endorsement. It garnered a Congressional charter in 1919, a rarity for public interest corporations and something only the American Red Cross and Boy Scouts of America had secured previously. The attainment of such an honor provided proof that the Legion stood for something greater than simply the preservation of wartime memories or veterans' benefits. It also helped put to rest the idea that the organization was a partisan machine through language that one member suggested reflect that the Legion was for "all things that are best in citizenship and government." Without these

official endorsements, historian Jennifer Keene has argued, it would have been very difficult for the Legion to grow as it did.<sup>45</sup>

The Legion also enjoyed important financial support from American business. The Legion succeeded in raising enough funds to match its ambitious organizational strategy not as some capitalist conspiracy as radical critics would later charge, but because its affluent leaders shared corporate concerns about radicalism in the United States. Corporate interests' investment in the Legion represented a sort of political contribution to an organization dedicated to driving radicalism from the public sphere. Building a nation-wide organization required significant economic resources that even the affluent-led Legion initially scrambled to secure. Dues were designed to be low enough to encourage mass membership and therefore could not be counted on to provide significant monetary support. In fact, dues barely covered the costs of printing the *American Legion Weekly*. In June 1919, the Legion obtained a loan of \$250,000 from 66 banks and individuals in Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, and elsewhere to cover its mounting organizational expenses. The Morgan Guaranty Trust Co. put up the largest share of the loan (\$100,000), leading to charges by the Legion's growing set of left-wing critics that the organization was the tool of Wall Street. Some departments also raised money from corporate interests. The department of Illinois held its hand longest in the corporate trough, securing significant financial support in its first year from department store magnate Marshall Field as well as Chicago's largest wholesale grocer and the city's

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<sup>45</sup> Rumer, *The American Legion*, pp. 66-8, Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, pp. 155-6, 166-7, 170

large meatpacking companies. Most Legion departments and posts also accepted free access to buildings and offices from government or corporate officials.<sup>46</sup>

Official endorsement by the military and the state and the organizational talents of the Legion's founders were not the only explanation for why it grew quickly. The Legion also succeeded in attracting hundreds of thousands of veterans to its ranks because it met many of the expectations those veterans held both for their own postwar needs and for their own future political activism after the war. In the summer of 1919 the Legion established an officer in each state to help veterans navigate the maze of paperwork necessary to collect benefits from the War Risk Insurance Bureau. During the war soldiers could purchase life and disability insurance from the federal government so after the war benefits became a rudimentary disabled veterans' system. Veterans who escaped the war unscathed could also convert their policies into civilian life insurance. In Illinois, Legionnaires went door-to-door to encourage veterans to take advantage of insurance benefits. Tough cases were referred to national headquarters in New York, which were handled with minimal delay given the prominence of the men in charge. By the time of its convention in Minneapolis in November, the Legion's leadership openly advocated reform of the entire War Risk Insurance system and urged the federal government to spend more on hospitals, rehabilitation, and job training for returning veterans.<sup>47</sup>

While remaining wary of demanding simple monetary rewards for their service, the pathetic state of the federal government's support network for returning veterans, particularly those wounded during the war, mobilized the Legion to advocate a more comprehensive veterans' benefit system. Legion headquarters, however, hesitated in

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<sup>46</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 70, 340-1, Littlewood, *Soldiers Back Home*, pp. 20, 26.

<sup>47</sup> Rumer, *The American Legion*, pp 65-6, Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 66, 72.

supplementing the flagging attempts by public and private organizations to find returning wage-earning veterans work in the summer of 1919. While Colonel Arthur Woods of the United States Employment Service hoped to pass the task of coordinating reemployment off on the Legion, the organization resisted taking on the role of welfare bureau itself. Rather, Legion officials in New York instructed state organizations to appoint employment officers who could act as intermediaries between national headquarters and localities. The Minneapolis convention also endorsed hiring preferences for veterans by the federal and state governments.<sup>48</sup> On handouts, however, this was as far as the Legion was willing to go initially: Despite popular agitation within the organization for going on record in favor of a soldiers' bonus, especially from Midwest and Plains states, Legion leaders managed to steer both the St. Louis and Minneapolis meetings clear of the issue.

Many veterans clearly expected to provide some kind of law-and-order function in the apparent explosion of radical activity in 1919. The Legion assimilated smaller veterans groups organized over concerns about radical-spurred unrest. One such group was the Loyal Legion of Minnesota, organized in late February, 1919 after the mayor of Minneapolis asked the local draft board for a list of eight to ten veteran businessmen to create a counter-organization to the World War Veterans who could react quickly if a repeat of the Seattle general strike were to occur in his city. It attracted about 4,000 members, who became the backbone of the American Legion in that state.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Rumer, *The American Legion*, pp 65, Lax and Pencak, "Creating the American Legion," p. 48, *Minneapolis Journal*, November 12, 1919, p. 2

<sup>49</sup> Bernard A. Gimmestad, *Legion 50: The American Legion, The American Legion Auxiliary, and the 40 and 8 in Minnesota 1919-1969* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, Inc, 1970), pp. 30-3. For other smaller groups organized separately from the Legion that became vital to the growth of the Legion itself in their states, see George E. Sweet, *The Wisconsin American Legion: A History 1919-1992* (Milwaukee: Wisconsin American Legion Press, 1992), pp. 5-6, Lowery, *The American Legion in Montana*, pp. 3-4, William H. Reeves to Wood, May 2, 1919, Eric Fisher Wood Papers, Box 1 – Correspondence, Syracuse University Library.

At St. Louis the Legion confronted the World War Veterans directly. Its support of the International Workers of the World and its limitation of membership only to enlisted men drew the ire of the Legionnaires in St. Louis, even as its representative, Sergeant Sherman Curtain of Seattle, claimed that his faction of the World War Veterans was intent on “doing everything in our power to make that a one hundred per cent. American organization.” Sherman was chased from the hall as the caucus body unanimously endorsed the credentials committee report to deny membership to any active member of the World War Veterans because of the organization’s ties to radical labor.<sup>50</sup>

### **Building a membership base**

In communities and states where labor unrest had been significant in 1919 the Legion often drew larger-than-usual support from veterans. The outbreak of the great steel strike of 1919 and the Legion’s strong stance for “law and order” attracted middle-class veterans in Illinois and Bull-Moose stronghold Pennsylvania. Illinois had formed 460 posts and Pennsylvania had chartered 521 posts and attracted over 60,000 members by early 1920. In Massachusetts Legion membership exploded in September when the Boston police force walked off the job and the city fell into near-anarchy. On September 13 the Legion declared itself ready to assist Governor Calvin Coolidge in the restoration of law and order and “against sympathetic strikes under the existing circumstances as a radical injury to and the abrogation of civil rights and liberty.” That week, over a thousand veterans signed up and paid their dues to join the organization while men

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<sup>50</sup> *Proceedings and Committees: Caucus of the American Legion*, pp. 90-2

queued up for the 2,000 Legion buttons the Massachusetts headquarters received weekly. By the end of the year the Massachusetts Department exceeded 60,000 members.<sup>51</sup>

The Legion succeeded in attracting members particularly in Midwestern states with rapidly-developing small towns. Its success in these kinds of communities reflected the overlapping conceptions of obligation veterans held and that Americans had demonstrated in their locally-focused volunteerism and vigilance activities during the war. Local activism was the first stage in building a national conception of citizenship obligation, and the post-centered structure of the Legion worked particularly well in the scattered small cities and towns of the middle of the country. The men who joined in these locales, most often professional men, merchants, or craftsmen, imagined themselves the rightful centers of civic life. Voluntary associations stocked with men like these stepped into the void left by the absence of partisan activism in the public sphere. Even if men were not Progressives themselves, progressivism had succeeded in expanding the legitimacy of political power anywhere that citizens worked to build efficient structures that made society more ordered, unified, and just, opening further room for the emergence of organizations like the American Legion to entrench themselves in civic life.<sup>52</sup> The civic landscape as the Legion came into existence left room for organizations that could fill the public sphere with meaningful activity and that could organize new

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<sup>51</sup> Terry Radtke, *The History of the Pennsylvania American Legion* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1993) p. 18, *Boston Globe*, September 13, 1919, p. 2, September 17, 1919, p. 5, September 18, 1919, p. 12. By late-September, New Jersey, Vermont, and Rhode Island had exceeded their quotas and Delaware, Minnesota, New Mexico and Oregon had come within 1,000 of theirs. The Legion grew rapidly in the New York City tri-state area, attracting 7,000 in Connecticut 35,000 in New Jersey, and 85,000 in New York state, most of whom joined in the New York City. Nearly 40,000 veterans joined in Pennsylvania in the Summer of 1919. By October over 1,300 posts had been organized and more than 600,000 men had signed up. *New York Times*, September 22, 1919, p. 28.

<sup>52</sup> Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in US History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 412-5. For the decline of partisanship and partisan ritual, see Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*

forms of political participation that were nonpartisan but nevertheless targeted towards particular political aims. As voting participation continued to decline these new forms of participation in fact became increasingly important to civic life. Men who joined the American Legion in smaller American communities, therefore, signed on to play a prominent role in crafting the political boundaries of the civic societies of their communities. The Legion succeeded in drawing members from the professional class that had the resources of time and money to dedicate to this mission.

With no major cities to suck up hundreds of members per post, the bulk of Mid and Far-Western departments were made up of small-town posts, and the Legion made a concerted effort to spread the organization to every county of the nation. Legion leaders offered such men handbooks on meeting procedure, based on a parliamentary model, which separated the organization from fraternal organizations that had previously populated small-town America. Largely removed from the labor and immigration controversies of their far Western and Eastern brethren, Midwestern Legionnaires enjoyed the latitude accorded them in interpreting the directives of National Headquarters to form their own innovative citizenship-building projects that attracted more members.<sup>53</sup> The Legion grew to 20,000 members in Kansas in 1919 (201 posts) and to over 37,000 members in Iowa (402 posts) by the end of 1920. By early 1920 there were more posts in South Dakota (155) and North Dakota (152) as there were in Texas (144). Montana gathered 8,400 members by July 1920.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Loosbrock, *The History of the Kansas Department of the American Legion*, pp. 36, 77-9, 45-8, 43-4, Jacob Armstrong Swisher, *The American Legion in Iowa 1919- 1929*, (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1929), p. 71, Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 81-2, *New York Times*, November 27, 1919, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> "Progress Report of Organization Division, American Legion," National Recreation Association, Howard Braucher Collection, Series 5, Box 16 -- American Legion -- Folder 1, National Recreation and Park

With a leadership cadre that was primarily Republican and a nationalist vision of the American state, it is not surprising that the Legion did its worst in drawing new members from the South. Despite its commitment to form a nonpartisan organization with national reach, Southerners could not overcome the Legion's early comparisons with the GAR. By limiting membership to white veterans, a decision discussed further below, Southern departments intentionally cut themselves off from a substantial membership pool. While the Legion did gather members among the middle class in growing Southern towns, the organization's overall philosophy of focusing the local towards the national did not mesh readily with Southern political culture, still awash with the Lost Cause. A Progressive vision of politics built on the New Nationalist idea of a robust central government was incompatible with the localist values of the more paternalistic Southern strains of progressivism.<sup>55</sup> Southern leaders' suspicion that the National Executive Committee would trample their "local customs" in national convention delegation selection indicated the extent to which white supremacy would limit the Legion in the South. Legion leadership was silent on all major racial issues to arise from demobilization, from segregation to race riots to lynching. It remained silent to welcome Southerners. With its Northern cadre of early leaders and Bull-Moose heritage, even making the Legion lily white probably would have done little more to attract southerners to the organization. Still, the organization tried to strike a balance between regions. Every year leadership ensured that the five vice commanders it named at national conventions

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Association, Joseph Lee Memorial Library and Archives, Ashburn, VA, Lowery, *The American Legion in Montana*, p. 8, Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 83.

<sup>55</sup> For accounts of each of these topics see, David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), ch. 8, William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism 1883-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

were from all regions of the country, including the South. However, only four national commanders of the Legion hailed from below the Mason-Dixon Line before 1941.<sup>56</sup>

While its goal of building a civic society focused on a nationalist conception of citizenship clashed with the South's own political culture, the Legion remained determined to build an organization with a national scope and therefore remained sensitive to southern members' concerns. Southern segregationist leaders in the Legion argued against granting African-Americans full membership rights and any access to the decision-making bodies of the organization. The issue of African-American membership came up before the St. Louis caucus when black veterans in southern states showed enthusiasm for the organization. On April 14, 1919 a large number of African-Americans attended an organizational Legion meeting in a segregated theater in New Orleans. The interest such men showed in joining the Legion alarmed local leader John Parker, who wrote Theodore Roosevelt Jr. urging that the Legion be organized into two separate branches: "the paramount and recognized leading one to be represented by the intelligent white men, and then a separate organization, kept just as distinct as is the Army and Navy, of the negro legion."<sup>57</sup> While the Legion's leadership committee rejected such a plan, the race issue remained a sticking point even within the leadership clique. Bennett Clark wrote Roosevelt Jr. in July 1919 that allowing states to select their own delegates to the national convention remained crucial to maintaining the principle of white supremacy in the southern departments of the organization. Clark recoiled at the idea of African-American members of southern departments representing their state at national conventions. He believed the Legion should not endeavor to change any aspect of

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<sup>56</sup> Rumer, *The American Legion*, pp. 548-51.

<sup>57</sup> John M. Parker to Theodore Roosevelt Jr., April 15, 1919, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Box 36 – General Correspondence, Library of Congress

southern racial custom. “So long as the Negroes are given membership in the organization and are allowed to participate in the election of delegates to the state and national conventions, it seems to me that that is all they have the right to demand,” Clark noted, arguing that any efforts to hold southern department delegations to some semblance of racial representation of its posts would be as unfair as holding northeastern states to quotas for Catholics, Jews, or Italians. The Minneapolis national convention endorsed Clark’s general plan officially and returned all questions of delegate selection and membership eligibility to the states.<sup>58</sup>

The Legion made little official effort to include blacks in the organization not only because doing so would alienate Southerners but because most in positions of power doubted the usefulness of African Americans as members at all in an organization dedicated to reinventing American citizenship. The Legion was uninterested in acknowledging the role African Americans played during the war beyond that of clownish fish out of water, as minstrel-styled cartoons in early editions of the *American Legion Weekly* depicted them. Even in the North most African Americans formed their own posts that mirrored the racially segregated residency patterns of urban centers. The state constitutions of South Carolina and Georgia explicitly restricted membership to “Caucasians,” while Louisiana’s constitution banned African-American membership. In Alabama and Mississippi no former constitutional barrier barred blacks from joining, but state headquarters refused African-American applications for membership as policy. Virginia allowed African-American membership but refused them the right to vote for members of the state executive committee, hold state office, or serve as national

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<sup>58</sup> Bennett Clark to Theodore Roosevelt Jr., July 30, 1919, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Box 36 – General Correspondence, Library of Congress

delegates from the Commonwealth. In this kind of environment, African Americans unsurprisingly took little interest in the Legion. The organization had only 1,862 black members (out of a potential pool of 380,000) in 100 posts by 1925.<sup>59</sup>

The status of potential female members also represented a weighty question the Legion had to answer in its early period. Like the GAR had in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Legion intended to make male wartime service its central touchstone for its citizenship message. Inviting women to join in some capacity was desirable, but not if it detracted from this defining characteristic of an organization built around a masculine conception of service and even nationhood. The first national convention also endorsed the idea of a Legion Women's Auxiliary, granting a year of organization work before officially organizing the branch of the organization at second national convention in Cleveland. The Committee of 34 had first considered forming a women's auxiliary for women who worked in war relief or support organizations during the conflict. After debating how to determine which war relief agencies to admit the committee decided to forward the idea along to the Minneapolis convention as an organization built from scratch. At Minneapolis the committee on the women's auxiliary agreed with the Committee of 34's recommendation and suggested an entirely new organization be formed that could cooperate with the Legion.<sup>60</sup>

Ultimately, the Legion followed the G.A.R.'s model for incorporating an auxiliary within the greater organization. Membership was open only to women whose husbands, sons, brothers, or fathers were either in the American Legion or who had died in the line

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<sup>59</sup> Justin Gray, *The Inside Story of the Legion*, (New York: Boni & Gaer, 1948), Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, p. 157

<sup>60</sup> Vye Smeigh Thompson, *History, National American Legion Auxiliary* vol. 1 (Pittsburgh: Jackson-Remlinger Printing Co., 1926), pp. 37-8, "Handbook for Use of Units of the American Legion Auxiliary," (Indianapolis, IN: American Legion Press, 1923), p. 5.

of duty. Women who served in the military could join the regular American Legion, but women workers in organizations like the Y.M.C.A. or Red Cross were shut out of the Legion entirely. The Legion outlined a suggested course of community activism for Auxiliary units in an official pamphlet, distributed through departments, as it had with posts. While Auxiliary “units” were organized and run in similar fashions to Legion posts, welfare and hospital relief efforts were designed as the Auxiliary’s main area of focus. The Legion also suggested that Auxiliary units ensure that flag etiquette and Americanism were well understood by community children. Units were encouraged to visit hospitals, help Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls organize, and lead community sings. In its first year of operation, the Auxiliary attracted 131,000 members, mostly in Midwestern and Eastern states with strong Legion membership.<sup>61</sup>

The role the larger organization defined for the American Legion Auxiliary reflected the ambiguities of what historian Paula Baker called the domestication of politics in the Progressive era. While in the 19<sup>th</sup> century women’s participation in politics still contained elements of separate spheres between the public and private, the Progressives effectively denied the existence of spheres at all. As a result the Legion Auxiliary engaged in activities in the public sphere that reflected both traditional gender roles and the negation of such divisions.<sup>62</sup> Most Auxiliary units performed public service that reinforced the nurturing and protective role women had played in the public sphere since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women’s Auxiliary units presided over the Legion’s famous poppy sales in the early 1920s as their major activity of the year, selling mementoes of

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<sup>61</sup> “Handbook for Use of Units of the American Legion Auxiliary,” pp. 6, 13-17, Thompson, *History, National American Legion Auxiliary*, p. 104.

<sup>62</sup> Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 89:3 (June 1984), pp. 620-47

the men buried in Flanders (symbolically—Americans never fought there). They also visited veterans' hospitals and continued to provide comfort to the wounded and families of the dead. In this way, the organization perpetuated the female role in patriotic life as one directly involved with commemoration and rehabilitation.<sup>63</sup> But the Legion did not completely dismiss women as democratic citizens. While the Women's Suffrage Amendment represented the kind of lightning rod issue it avoided commenting upon, the organization tacitly endorsed it. Legion leadership encouraged the Auxiliary to form "citizenship clubs" at which young people between the ages of 18 and 21 could learn the Constitution and the requirements of citizenship.<sup>64</sup> Auxiliary members also participated in Get-Out-The-Vote campaigns in the mid and late-1920s.

Few observers of the Legion in its first few years doubted its capacity not only to make an impact on American politics but its ability to help solidify the bonds of political obligations in peacetime. As the American Legion struggled internally to define exactly what its vision of American nationalism would be, the decisions it made and members it attracted in its first year in the United States indicated the direction it would take initially. One of the statements that Legion leaders often repeated about their new organization was how well it represented a cross-section of the United States. Its self-celebrated diversity, however, came within a group already severely winnowed out from society as a whole, or even the veteran population of the Great War. Legion leaders were not being purely deceitful in their praise for the organization's democracy: the organization simply contained all those they thought were sufficiently "American" to extend the principles of

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<sup>63</sup> "Handbook for Use of Units of the American Legion Auxiliary," p. 16. For the most complete treatment of women's roles in patriotic societies in this era, see Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005)

<sup>64</sup> American Legion Auxiliary, "Handbook for Use of Units of the American Legion Auxiliary," p. 16.

Americanism to the rest of the body politic. By severely limiting membership to African-American veterans, the Legion reinforced an idea of nation built from white supremacy. By rejecting membership for female volunteers of wartime support organizations in its auxiliary, the Legion ensured the continued dominance of a male-centered nationalism. Further, the Legion represented an alternative to ethnic or class-based veterans associations that could conceive of service through alternative political constructions. While the Legion remained open to all (white) “races and creeds,” and welcomed working-class veterans, it maintained the central civic identification of its members should be “Americans.”

The Legion’s success in attracting hundreds of thousands of veterans to the organization in its first year of existence represents the strength the voluntary association model of political participation held in the early twentieth century when members could be mobilized behind particularly compelling causes. The organization’s founders recognized, through their experiences in the preparedness movement, the power of the association model to address problems within American society the state was either unwilling or unable to address. They constructed a mass-membership organization to address the problem of social cohesion that had concerned Progressives for decades. Subsequent chapters will explore how the Legion used nationalism as its central tool to promote social cohesion in a manner true to the nation’s democratic identity. A mass-membership organization allowed nationalism to ingrain itself within American civic society, penetrating community life in a way that could be reasonably coordinated across disparate regional circumstances. While this kind of organization was hardly new in American civic life, the Legion’s unique founding mission and particular constituency

extended the political potential for voluntary associations in the interwar period and predicted future mass political mobilizations along ideological, not simple self-interested, grounds.

### Chapter 3

#### Defining Americanism, enforcing Americanism

Writing for *Collier's* in May 1919, American Legion member William Slavens McNutt described the transformation in civic consciousness the war had produced in his fellow citizen-soldiers. McNutt wrote that, “prior to the war the average American was very much inclined to think of the Government as a thing apart from himself...He had no vital, actuating sense of himself as an integral part of the Government, personally responsible for its action and personally affected thereby.” McNutt noted that the war had awakened the formerly negligent veteran, “of the fact that he *was* an integral part of the Government,” while the personal experiences on the battlefield transformed this new civic consciousness in ways civilian life could not. The fact that his relationship with his government was now a matter of life and death:

was ground into him on K.P. and sentry go, on raw mornings with the bugle sounding in his ears and desirable evenings with taps blowing; on overcrowded transports, on long night marches, in muddy trench and fox hole; by shrieking steel and foul gas; by the filth beneath him and the destruction that rained down out of the dangerous sky above. He learned that his Government was not a thing apart from that could go blundering along any old way and let him alone, except for a mild holiday and semi-celebration at election time.

The veteran looked upon his previous civic behavior with scorn and believed that the lessons learned on the battlefield could redeem his “careless prewar civilian self.” The veteran of McNutt’s article made “a solemn promise to use the knowledge he had gained in making himself a better civilian” to make his government one “that should be honestly

representative of the high ideals and stern efficiencies” the government had made him exhibit as a soldier.<sup>1</sup>

Descriptions of what the war had done to the political consciousness of veterans like the one McNutt wrote for *Colliers*’ echoed through the American Legion during its first year. Legion organizers made the idea that the men who had served in the American military had been fundamentally changed by the experience for the better one of their central appeals to potential recruits. It also became the main validating reason Legion founders provided for why they were organizing such a body in the first place. The men who had served in the wartime military returned to civilian life intent on using that experience to change American civil society for the better.

By its very nature, however, war is an atypical event. Service under arms adds a further layer of exclusivity to the experience. As the Legion argued for a new civic role for veterans, it needed to explain exactly how the lessons of the war would translate into peacetime American civil society and reach those not privileged to have experienced the war in the ways Legionnaires had. The Legion argued that the war represented an analogy for a nationalizing experience that was relevant for all Americans. It had taken men from their communities, posited them with others from all regions and walks of life, given them a common identity and set them upon a common task. Their abilities to devote life and limb to greater service for the nation and struggle together against an enemy had secured victory. As McNutt argued in his commentary, the war represented a more dangerous but direct parallel to civilian life. The military had compelled men to think and do things they were not otherwise inclined to, like come together across

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<sup>1</sup> William Slavens McNutt, “The American Legion: How the Veterans of the Great War are Getting Together,” *Colliers*, May 10, 1919. Reprint, publisher unknown, Eric Fisher Wood papers, series II, box I, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, NY.

ethnicity, class, and social standing, push aside personal concerns and desires for the common cause, and devote their own conduct to service to the nation. These particular experience had mattered greatly, so the Legion would always address the general public from a particular distance. But it fully expected these martially-derived virtues discovered on the battlefield would have direct application to the civic lives of Americans in all walks of life and permanently in peacetime.

The Legion adopted the term “Americanism,” which had developed in the political discourse of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to represent a vaguely nationalistic sentiment based on political ideals, to represent its version of civic nationalism.<sup>2</sup> During World War I, Americanism became both a description of the exceptionalness of the American democratic tradition as Americans understood it and an call for absolute loyalty to it, transforming into “100-percent Americanism.” The Legion adopted this language of 100-percent Americanism, writing it into the DNA of the organization by placing the phrase in the preamble to its constitution. Americanism became the primary way the Legion explained the applicability of the war experience to everyday civilian life in the postwar period.

This chapter examines how the Legion first defined its version of Americanism in its early years. The Legion did not come to a clear definition of Americanism easily.

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Gerstle describes four “overlapping dimensions” of Americanist discourse allowed a variety of political actors to pursue their agenda in the public sphere: nationalist, democratic, progressive, and traditionalist. To these dimensions Gerstle added two long-term political principles—“suspicion of government” and “a commitment to proprietary ... notions of independence” – as limits to the left’s success in appropriating Americanism for its own. The Legion’s role in successfully limiting what kinds of political actors could participate in the democracy as sufficiently “American,” however, determined who first had access to such discursive tools. Moreover, the Legion neither was suspicious of governmental power or entrenched in the defense of proprietary ideas of independence, lobbying hard for significant state intervention in the well-being of veterans’ lives and others. Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (1989; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. xvii-xix.

Even its leaders struggled to define the concept in precise language. This difficulty stemmed from the fact that Americanism described a civic nationalism that was closely tied to citizens' political behaviors. The Legion followed wartime nationalism that placed the nation's exceptional democratic government at the center of its national identity. As many Progressives had argued, Legionnaires believed democracy created a common status and identity for all citizens based on the equality of opportunity and freedoms they all shared. That common identity made all citizens responsible for protecting the nation's democratic system by behaving politically in ways that sustained its institutions and respected the rights and freedoms of others. Americanism, therefore, contained within it an obligation for citizens to respect the process of democracy and to act in political and civic life with the greater good in mind. Americanism was difficult for Legionnaires to define because it offered both an answer to what America was and described an entire set of responsibilities and obligations citizens all shared by virtue of being American. How the Legion described what citizens owed each other and the nation-state was vital to its own understanding of the limits of its civic nationalism.

Legionnaires believed that through Americanism all citizens held the responsibility to contribute to the common good and sustain the principles and structures of its democratic nation-state. These responsibilities in turn created rules for political conduct. Through their unique experience of service, Legionnaires took it upon themselves to police the public sphere of their communities for political behaviors inconsistent with Americanist principles. During the early and mid 1920s, Legionnaires engaged in a variety of antiradical activities, ranging from breaking strikes to raiding radical party offices to interrupting socialists' and pacifists' speeches. Legionnaires felt

such actions were legitimate because they followed in the tradition of citizen vigilance that blossomed during the war that empowered citizens to police the loyalty of their fellows as a service to the state. These moments connected local senses of obligation to a broader national one. Local actions provided opportunities for Legion members to contribute to a broader struggle to protect the nation's exceptional democratic institutions and ensure the security of the state.<sup>3</sup> Legionnaires saw such confrontations as opportunities to mark clearly for their communities the boundaries of "un-American" conduct in political life and to make abstract ideas concrete. They became a kind of nationalist theater in which enlightened citizens within communities challenged those who violated the principles and ideals that defined the nation. These moments also became opportunities to clarify what an abstract concept like Americanism was by demonstrating what it was clearly not. At times, members' actions exceeded national leadership's own ideas of where the boundaries of Americanism lie, forcing officers in Indianapolis to clarify the organization's positions on particular political behaviors. Vigilantism, therefore, was part of the conversation the Legion had both within its own bounds and with society at large about the nature of American nationalism and good citizenship.

While the Legion may have adopted Progressive-inspired conception of civic nationalism, the antiradical behavior of its members from the organization's earliest days made it an important conservative force in American political life. The Legion's role in first Red Scare and in its subsequent longer history of antiradical activism was not

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Joseph Capozzola, "Uncle Sam Wants You: Political Obligations in World War I America" (unpublished dissertation., Columbia University, 2002)

reflective of a psychological reaction to the potential for social revolution.<sup>4</sup> Nor was it a betrayal of the Progressive principles the Legion claimed to represent. Rather, the Legion promoted Americanism with a rigid conception of loyalty in tow. Though wartime Americanization campaigns and counter-subversive legislation, the war had demonstrated the compatibility of a Progressive conception of citizenship and loyalty. The Legion tried to extend the wartime conception of the loyalty citizens owed the principles of American democracy and to its state permanently in the nation's political culture. It considered this effort a service to the state and a necessary defense of the nation's exceptional democratic institutions and ideas. Beginning in the immediate aftermath of the war, the Legion's insistence that citizens demonstrate their loyalty to the nation through their political behavior led its members to define democracy more as a process rather than a set of civil rights or the free debate of political ideas. Such a perspective was inherently conservative.

### **What is Americanism?**

The first step for the Legion in describing what its version of Americanism meant was defining the common identity citizens held as Americans. The Legion relied on the Progressive understanding of American democracy that defined citizenship as the equal

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<sup>4</sup> This explanation that antiradicalism in the immediate aftermath of World War I represented a psychological reaction by middle-class Americans afraid of the loss of their own social status dominated earlier generations of scholarship about the first Red Scare. See Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study of National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955); Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1977* (1970; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). This tendency to see the nativism and antiradicalism of the Red Scare era as a bubbling over of emotional or irrational tendencies in American society was challenged by William Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (1963; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) and more robustly by a new generation of scholarship. See, Regan Schmidt, *Red Scare: FBI and the Origins of Anticommunism in the United States, 1919-1943* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2000) and Capozzola, "Uncle Sam Wants You," William H. Siener, "The Red Scare Revisited: Radicals and the Anti-Radical Movement in Buffalo, 1919-1920," *New York History* vol.79:1 (January 1998), pp. 23-54

status and shared rights held by individuals. The democratic system leveled distinctions between individuals within society, granted them equal rights, and obliged them with the same obligations to work for the common good. It also provided them with an equality of opportunity for success so as long as the nation lived up to its democratic ideals. The National Americanism Commission, the body charged with promoting Americanism within the Legion, described Americanism as standing for in this way “the principle of justice, fair play, the square deal, equality before the law for rich and poor, labor and capitalist, the educated man and the illiterate.”<sup>5</sup> This conception of citizenship that, at least theoretically, transcended class, rank, or ethno-racial distinction was represented in the Legion in how members addressed each other. Legionnaires insisted that their organization represented the true nature of American citizenship on a small scale just as the military had. Members were not distinguished by rank or class and referred to each other simply as “comrades” or “buddies.” While officers generally served more often than enlisted men as department and national officers, officers were granted no membership privileges within the organization.

Legionnaires recognized that citizens would still be attracted to other, smaller-scale civic identities like local community, region, class, occupation, or race. These identifications, after all, had been central to American politics for generations. As entrenched as these identities were, they were something to be transcended. As one North Dakota Legionnaire complained in 1921, “the actions of individuals are governed too much by considerations affection the particular group to which they belong, whether it be that of wealth, aristocracy, labor, or business...the American Legion is opposing this, and

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<sup>5</sup> Minutes, National Americanism Commission, January 19, 1920. National Americanism Commission – minutes. American Legion National Headquarters (hereafter ALHQ), Indianapolis, IN.

is striving to have all public questions and controversies judged according to the spirit of a broad Americanism.”<sup>6</sup> This sentiment did not mean that class identity was illusory, but that citizens needed to think of being “American” first and concern themselves for what was good for the entire nation in their political and civic activities. For the Legion, the national level of citizenship always took precedence. Attachment to community, to trade or class affiliation, or to ethno-racial identity had to serve the greater good. Legionnaires hardly dismissed local-level conceptions of citizenship – indeed, the entire organization was built from the backbone of local activism. Concern about the peripheral, however, had to fit within an idea of serving a larger national whole.

Americanism, therefore, required citizens to make the imaginative leap of thinking of themselves first and foremost as Americans. This outlook fundamentally denied the legitimacy of race, ethnicity, and particularly class as the primary reference point for one’s political obligation. Since democracy had leveled status distinctions between citizens and provided all with the same rights and opportunities, acting politically in ways that asserted the rights of some over other sets of citizens was inherently undemocratic and thus in conflict with the nation’s fundamental nature. The rejection of class-based politics therefore became the first rule of American politics under the Legion’s Americanism.

The Legion’s denial of class as a legitimate principle in American politics reflected its members’ faith in the ability of the democratic system to produce social justice on its own if Americans dedicate themselves to serving the common good in their political activities. Part of this faith arose from the class bias of an organization mainly comprised of those of middle class status or higher. Distanced from the struggles of

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<sup>6</sup> *The Legionaire* (North Dakota), March, 1921, p. 14

working people in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was easy for many Legionnaires to dismiss class-based politics as illegitimate and believe personal success was largely contingent on individual motivation and not external forces. The increasing fluidity of American society beginning in the 1920s broadened the potential appeal of this idea.

The Legion's assertion of classlessness in politics was not a simple defense of the status quo, however. Indeed, denial of class was a bedrock Progressive principle. Many of its members believed the state could and should intervene in social and economic life to rectify problems that were interfering with citizens' attainment of their full chance at success. The organization would make this exact argument in lobbying for veterans' bonus legislation. This idea was not the same as radically redistributing power or wealth within the political economy. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. expressed this sentiment when he wrote a left-wing critic of the Legion in 1919, "what we must strive for is an absolutely equal opportunity for every man to make of himself the best possible. The place where all of you [radicals] are apt to make your mistake is that you do not want this: You want a leveling downward." There is an echo of Ted's father's embrace of the equality of opportunity as the centerpiece of the New Nationalism in this comment.<sup>7</sup> Legionnaires could invest so much confidence in the equality of opportunity yielding equitable results for American society because of their profound belief in the exceptionalness of the American democratic system. They took almost as an article of faith that the nation's exceptional political equality would yield social equality as well. The Arizona Department encapsulated this idea by urging citizens to recite from a pamphlet on

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<sup>7</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. to W.I. Fruit, November 17, 1920. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. Papers, Box 11 – General Correspondence. Library of Congress, Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 67-8

citizenship, “I believe that we Americans have the best government that has ever been created – the freest and the most just for all people.”<sup>8</sup>

The idea that Americans needed to practice “fair play” closely followed this faith in the equality of opportunity American democracy contained. Early Legion leaders used this language held over from progressivism to describe political behaviors that did not seek to gain advantage for one particular cause or class within the political system.<sup>9</sup> Fair play became another rule of Americanism based on the kinds of obligations citizens owed to each other while operating the nation’s democratic system. Legionnaires understood democratic politics were inherently competitive and self-interested; Americanism’s requirement that Americans engage in fair play while participating in the political game gave politics a conscience. At an Armistice Day speech in Texas in 1920 future national commander Alvin Owsley claimed that in the spirit of fair play:

we can preserve the harmony of all classes and of the masses and the equilibrium of the Union by obeying and defending the Constitution and enforcing our Laws; by giving equal and exact justice to all men – all classes alike – by wiping out from the statute books every law that oppresses one for the benefit of another, and by frowning down the efforts of politicians to kindle the fires of class hatred. Let all men help each other to solve their problems and let each believe that the others are honest in their efforts to suppress the wrong and give the greatest good to the greatest number, honest in their efforts for the upbuilding and happiness of all our people.<sup>10</sup>

Americans owed it to each other to be dispassionate, rational operators within the democratic system, particularly in electoral politics. While the Legion did not reject partisanship outright, it did believe democracy’s full function required citizens to choose

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<sup>8</sup> Department of Arizona, American Legion, “The Essentials of Citizenship,” (no date, ca. 1920) Pamphlet collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

<sup>9</sup> What is Americanism,” *American Legion Weekly*, February 12, 1920, p. 18, Arthur Woods, “Practical Americanism,” *American Legion Weekly*, June 11, 1920, p. 6

<sup>10</sup> Alvin M. Owsley, “The Spirit of America’s Warriors” *Texas Legionnaire*, November, 1920, p. 28-9. Owsley’s last name is erroneously spelled “Ousley” and his middle initial is noted as “N” in this article’s byline.

between candidates based on qualifications to govern and not pre-existing affiliation.<sup>11</sup>

Fair play rejected machine politics. As Owsley's speech indicated, it also rejected efforts to rally Americans to political action based on their class status. The Legion considered such an approach to partisan politics to be demagoguery contrary to a true representation of American democracy rather than an effort to empower a downtrodden segment of society. Hence, the Legion's commission on Americanism declared it was committed to "showing to every person contaminated by un-American prejudice that the welfare of all people is really the best interest of any class, and that government must be conceived in terms of all the people and not for the benefit of relatively small classes."<sup>12</sup>

By focusing on the need for fair play, the Legion elevated fealty to process over any other concern in democratic politics. As a nonpartisan organization, the Legion limited its direct participation in policy formation to a discrete set of interests. It cared most about issues of defense, veterans' affairs, and issues related to Americanism like child welfare, public education, control of radicalism, and immigration policy. The Legion was not particularly concerned about the policy outcomes that resulted from political activity in general and did not comment on issues related to the political economy that did not affect the concerns described above. The Legion, for instance, commented on New Deal legislation only insofar as to remind the government of its standing spending commitments for veterans. It was more worried that those advancing political agendas would respect democratic process. Violators of Americanism's requirement to be loyal to process came in many varieties, from open revolutionaries to

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<sup>11</sup> See in particular, David Lawrence, "At the Point of the Ballot," *American Legion Weekly*, January 9, 1920, pp. 5-6, Everett Kimball, "The Machine and the Boss," *American Legion Weekly*, November 5, 1920, pp. 7-9. Chapter 4 will discuss the Legion's perspective on proper voting in further detail.

<sup>12</sup> Marquis James, "The Voice of the New Day," *American Legion Weekly*, November. 28, 1919, p. 8.

those who used the trappings of democratic elections to advance the interests of only one class. Exactly when political activity crossed the line from being in the national common good to being too narrowly focused was unclear, as the Legion's record of intervention below will indicate.

The final and most elemental rule of politics the Legion believed Americanism bound citizens to follow was to respect "law and order." This principle had been part of the obligations contained within American nationalism since the Gilded Age. Given the context in which the Legion was founded, when the radical cause had spread beyond labor agitation to building a parallel revolutionary political culture, the organization took a more expansive perspective on exactly what maintaining law and order meant. Legionnaires defined this principle as containing both acts that subverted the government's ability to maintain control and activities that created the environment for such subversive acts to happen. As Americans invested in the nation's power structures had done for decades, the Legion connected the nation's economic and political orders inexorably.<sup>13</sup> Legionnaires therefore saw work stoppages, regardless of their precipitating cause, as a potential violation of its law and order mandate, especially when such action interrupted an industry or service vital to the well being of the community.

The Legion's concern about Americans' continued deference to authority and loyalty to their nation-state was palpable in its first few years of existence. The variety and intensity of left-wing radical activism, particularly in the strike wave of 1919, was alarming not so much as an immediate revolutionary threat as evidence that social cohesion was rapidly deteriorating. The outcome of the first meeting of the National

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<sup>13</sup> For example, anarchists and members of the International Workers of the World were denied citizenship and were subject to deportation even for crimes solely against private property. Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters*, pp. 70-81.

Americanism Commission (NAC) demonstrated the depth of this concern within the Legion's hierarchy. The NAC was created at the Legion's first national convention in November, 1919 to coordinate how the organization would disseminate its Americanist principles in the political culture. When commissioners met in January, 1920, one of their first tasks was to define what Americanism actually meant. Instead of coming up with a concrete definition they cobbled together lists of principles contained within Americanism. Of the six principles on the list, five related directly to law-and-order issues:

- 1) The Maintenance of Law and order
- 2) That the democracy for which we fought recognizes the right of majority rule, and respects the right of minority to full expression (In other words, we believe in the minority having free speech but in the necessity of their yielding to the will of the majority)
- 3) The right of free speech but not to include the license to preach lawlessness and violence
- 4) that social happiness is dependent upon the maintenance of law and order and therefore the pursuit of happiness guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence and by the Constitution of the United States are dependent upon our upholding law and order
- 6) Self-government and liberty under law<sup>14</sup>

This list revealed the interaction in Legion leaders' minds between their suspicion of the radical left and their knowledge that the democratic structures of the nation were fundamentally fragile and open to corruption by determined foes. Their concern was not simply that radicals would openly oppose the existing social and political order through large actions like strikes or riots, but would use the democratic system against itself by taking advantage of civil liberties and electoral politics for their own nefarious purposes.

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<sup>14</sup> Minutes, National Americanism Commission, January 19, 1920, National Americanism Commission – minutes, ALHQ

**“Bolshevism can only be killed by true Americanism”**

The Legion’s take on law and order reflected its understanding of the context of radical politics in which it was founded. From Legionnaires’ perspective, there were many bears in the woods in the aftermath of the Great War. The most serious threat to democracy globally was Bolshevism, which had dedicated itself to the cause of world Communist revolution upon seizing control of the Russian Empire. The Legion found the closest analog to Bolshevism in the International Workers of the World (IWW), commonly known as the Wobblies. Legionnaires found the Wobblies particularly troubling because their struggles as a traditional labor union led the organization to turn to using political culture as a revolutionary tool. It set out to create a new political culture that could overcome the fractious dogmatic disputes that had handicapped the American Left for decades and could wash away all identifications workers held beyond their own class consciousness to reveal their place in the broader working-class struggle. The IWW claimed that class, not race or nationality, was the fundamental civic identity individuals had. The only loyalty workers owed in political life was to their class.<sup>15</sup>

The Legion became fixated on the threat posed by the IWW, in part because of its role in postwar unrest and a bloody encounter Legionnaires had with Wobblies in Centralia, Washington that will be described below. Wobbly syndicalism also captured Legionnaires’ imaginations because it was such a striking antipode to the Legion’s

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<sup>15</sup> Charles H. McCormick, *Seeing Reds: Federal Surveillance of Radicals in the Pittsburgh Mill District, 1917-1921* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), p. 35, Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the American West, 1905-1930* (Corvallis, OR : Oregon State University Press, 2001), pp. 178-9, Salvatore Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 41, 115, 120.

Americanism. The Legion believed American political culture needed a strong nationalist element to function. The IWW rejected nationalism, nations, even the idea of states outright. Legion nationalism believed class distinctions were illusory, while syndicalism claimed that class consciousness was the only true political idea. Legionnaires claimed that citizens owed the democratic system and their fellow Americans the obligation to behave disinterestedly and work for the common good. Wobblies argued that workers owed their loyalty only to each other and should act accordingly in a political world thought to extend wherever worker and capitalist power came into conflict.

The IWW's syndicalism became a metonymic device for Legionnaires unschooled in the precise nuances between leftist radical movements. They surveyed the broad swath of radical activism in the immediate postwar era and saw parts of the broader syndicalist challenge to their nationalism represented by various movements. Members assembled these assorted challengers into a complete picture of left-wing radicalism that menaced Americanism and the democracy it represented. For example, at its first convention the Department of Kansas resolved that it stood "squarely against all violation, or threat of violation, of law and order, whether by individuals or aggregation of individuals and more particularly by the IWW, the Communist Party, the red flag wavers and all kindred organizations."<sup>16</sup> The Legion was inclined to combine dissimilar radical movements because these groups, in some or another, challenged the nationalistic aspects of American political culture the Legion believed were vital to the health of the nation and its democracy. These groups contradicted the Legion's desire to create a sense of a national community in which citizens clearly thought of themselves as bound by

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<sup>16</sup> *First Annual Convention of the Kansas Department, the American Legion* (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1919), p. 6.

obligations to their fellow citizens and their nation-state. Radicals undermined Americans' conceptions of civic obligations for their own political gain, resorting to such tactics because their ideas were losers and they were shut out of the political process accordingly. Legion founding member Eric Fisher Wood described the enemy as "irresponsible, shiftless, and cowardly groups of men, who seek by direct anarchistic action to overthrow the government based upon that Constitution, in order to seize by violent methods what they have been too lazy, too stupid, or too incompetent to obtain by fair means."<sup>17</sup> Legionnaires understood the threat from radicalism, therefore, to be much more than their ability to physically disrupt or challenge the social order through mass action.

The Legion's role in the Red Scare and its subsequent antiradical activities must be understood in this context of what the Legion believed to be a struggle for the future direction of American political culture. The Legion interrupted the speeches and assembly of radicals, broke strikes, and harassed organizers in the name of defending Americanism. While these efforts had clear and direct political consequences for the people who suffered from them, they were part of the same process of defining and promoting Americanism that the Legion would pursue through other, more peaceful methods. Organizationally, the Legion reflected this intent by making the National Americanism Commission responsible both for guiding antiradical activism and promoting Americanism amongst a lethargic citizenry through education and community service projects.

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<sup>17</sup> Eric Fisher Wood, "The American Legion: Keep Alive the Spirit of the Great War," *Forum*, August 19, 1919, p. 220

While the success of some radical groups enjoyed in organizing workers and winning local and state elections in the war's aftermath did concern some Legionnaires, few in the organization considered radical revolution likely. What most concerned the Legion was radicals' ability to lay the groundwork for such a revolution by reshaping the nation's political culture around their competing ideas of political obligation. Legionnaires understood their struggle as a battle of ideas. An editorialist in the *California Legion Monthly* claimed Red "propaganda, if allowed to continue in the United States will work incalculable harm. One degenerate thrown into close contact with several decent people will not contaminate all those people, but he will to a certain degree make his influence felt on all of them." The chaplain of a post in Smithville, Texas wrote "Bolshevism can only be killed by true Americanism, guns cannot kill it: guns, legislation, prisons, these cannot kill ideas, plant stronger and higher and nobler ideas."<sup>18</sup>

Legionnaires' belief in American exceptionalism made this battle of ideas particularly intense. They followed mainstream opinion that American development into a democratic nation reflected its unique historical, geographic, and racial contexts. European authoritarian governments, like that of the Soviet Union, conversely reflected the racial makeup and historical development of the nations of the continent. The exceptional development of the American nation had made it the light of the world, something its victory in the Great War had proven. Legionnaires also believed the United States represented the best hope for human progress in the future, adding a forward-looking component to its exceptionalist take on the American past.<sup>19</sup> They emphasized

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<sup>18</sup> Article reprinted in *Pacific Legion*, June, 1920, p. 42; Matthew H. Arnold, "Aims and Ideals of the American Legion," *Texas Legionnaire*, April, 1921, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> This sentiment reflected that of progressive intellectuals. Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), ch.5

this sentiment and rebutted radicals' claims of representing the future by pointing to the failures of the Soviet state. The task ahead of Americans was to ensure their nation remained exceptionally free and democratic as a service to civilization. Turning to radical Marxism for new ideas that came out of a completely different historical context and served drastically different political ends potentially was disastrous. Accordingly, Legionnaires struggled to find any way that leftist radicalism was compatible with the American democratic system and assumed that the proponents of such ideas were either native to or under the influence of foreign lands. Radicals wanted to rip the United States out of its exceptionalist historical track and make it more like Europe. The Legion's founders, therefore, believed one of the most fundamental missions of their new organization was to evict such disloyalty from the public sphere.

As the Legion was coalescing organizationally in 1919, national headquarters gave new posts little actual guidance on exactly what members' responsibilities for combating radicalism were. In December, 1919, Freeman Allen, a member of the Monroe County, New York Committee of the Legion wrote to Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. seeking guidance for how to engage members of the IWW in Rochester. He had attended a meeting at the Wobblies' hall on their invitation to discuss the Legion's purpose. He informed Roosevelt:

“When I was asked to our objections to radicals, I told them that we had no quarrel with their advocating changes in the form of our government by peaceful means, but that we did expect to combat, by proper peaceful means, any agitation for a change in the form of government, and any attempt at change by revolution or violence, we would be prepared to meet on the same footing; by force, if necessary, but in any case, our efforts would be directed through the properly constituted authorities, and by backing up the proper authorities. I also said we saw no excuse for any criticism of our government, or agitation for a change in government, by aliens.”

Roosevelt praised his initial moderation, replying, “the only expression that covers my opinion of what you have done is ‘At a boy!’ I think you have handled yourself splendidly and I am in hearty sympathy with your remarks.”<sup>20</sup>

Other posts were more willing to react with force to potential revolutionary threats. Early in Legion history a bloody incident between the IWW and members of a Centralia, Washington post dramatically raised the stakes of the Legion’s struggle against the Wobblies. At the conclusion of an Armistice Day parade in 1919, Legion members rushed the IWW meeting hall in Centralia in a premeditated action planned by the post commander and other members of the town’s business class. To the unarmed Legionnaires surprise, the Wobblies inside had anticipated the raid, armed themselves, and assembled a unknown number of shooters on a nearby hill and across the street on the roof of a hotel to defend the hall. When the Legionnaires suddenly broke off the parade route and tried to force open the meeting hall door, the snipers opened fire and three veterans were killed. A fourth Legionnaire was killed pursuing Wesley Everetts, whom a lynch mob hanged from a bridge and shot later that evening. Many of these details were hidden from the public as the Legion and sympathetic national press portrayed the event not as an event provoked by the marchers, but as a massacre of unarmed and heroic veterans marching in a patriotic celebration by a radical conspiracy.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Freeman C. Allen to Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., December 31, 1919, Roosevelt Jr. to Allen, January 12, 1920, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. Papers, Box 11—General Correspondence, Library of Congress

<sup>21</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 151-2, Robert L. Tyler, *Rebels in the Woods: The I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Press, 1967) pp. 155-64. For the Legion’s internal coverage of the event see, Jerold Owen, “Centralia” *American Legion Weekly*, December 12, 1919, p. 9, “Centralia Murders Shock the World,” *Pacific Legion*, December 1, 1919, p. 8.

The Legion used its victim status coming out of Centralia to generate credibility for its narrow reading of Americanism as exclusionary of movements with even a tinge of revolutionary zeal. Already in a privileged position through wartime sacrifice, the Legion proclaimed Centralia was “an act of war” that gave the organization added authority in its own mind to pursue antiradicalism activities in communities. “That little post of the American Legion at Centralia has shown the way in a quick, decisive campaign against the would-be destroyers of American government and institutions. And posts all over the country are following the trail thus blazed,” the *Pacific Legion* claimed. Throughout the Far West Legionnaires helped local officials round up those “suspected of IWW tendencies.” The Centralia “massacre” also proved the Legion had known what it was talking about when describing the Wobbly threat before November, 1919 and the *American Legion Weekly* characterized the incident in Centralia as “the inevitable clash between Americanism and Anti-Americanism.” Visiting the graves of the fallen Legionnaires a year later, National Commander Franklin D’Olier compared the event’s significance to Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, and Chateau Thierry.<sup>22</sup>

While Centralia gave credibility to the Legion’s warnings about the violent potential of radicals like the IWW, it was also something Legionnaires could take personally even if they were well removed from the Pacific Northwest or even contact with radical organizations. The incident localized the abstract threat of revolution and allowed Legionnaires to imagine radicalism threatening the institutions of government in their own communities. “Government is our greatest worldly possession, because without it the things that enrich and ennoble life could not be,” claimed one North Dakota Legion

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<sup>22</sup> Pekcak, *For God and Country*, p. 152, *North Dakota Legionnaire*, December 15, 1919, p. 11, *Pacific Legion* Dec 1, 1919, p. 23, *American Legion Weekly*, December 12, 1919, p. 7, *Pacific Legion*, October, 1920, p. 10.

editorialist. “The sanctity of the home, the security of life, liberty and property, the school houses dotting all our land, the church spires pointing heavenward, could not exist for a moment unless a worth government threw its protecting aegis over them.” This editorialist exemplified how the Legion’s nationalism could be inverted to view the community as the first line of defense for that broader aegis of the national state. The Legion’s first national convention, meeting as the Centralia drama unfolded, endorsed local-level responses to radicalism by passing a resolution that authorized local posts to act in “the suppression of riot in mob violence” perpetrated by “anarchistic and un-American groups” in cooperation with local law enforcement.<sup>23</sup>

Local posts frequently interpreted this directive in the winter of 1919-1920 to mean they could act to pre-empt radical violence by busting up radical organizations. In Tacoma, Seattle, and Spokane, Legionnaires helped local officials round up those “suspected of IWW tendencies” for incarceration or eviction from town shortly after the Centralia incident. Oakland, California Legionnaires ran Wobblies out of town and ransacked the offices of a radical newspaper. After declaring a “war of extermination” against radicals, Legionnaires beat another group of Wobblies gathered in Los Angeles two weeks after the Centralia incident as Bureau of Investigation agents looked on. In Stockton and San Diego, Legionnaires joined with commercial bosses to round up suspected radicals and drove them from town. Cities with strong radical party presences experienced similar Legion vigilante activity. Posts in Columbus, Ohio, and St. Louis cleared radical party halls while in Cincinnati Legionnaires demolished socialist and

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<sup>23</sup> *The Legionaire* (North Dakota), March 1, 1920, p 8, Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 10.

communist party offices and burned their literature in bonfires in the street.<sup>24</sup> These incidents were valuable not only in disrupting radical operations but in the very public example they set for localities. Guilt or innocence of plotting revolution was irrelevant: what mattered was such radicals did not deserve to live among good Americans.

Legion leadership was aware that some posts were responding overzealously to radical disloyalty. In a bulletin to all posts National Commander Franklin D'Olier reminded members that:

we must always clearly bear in mind that any disposition on the part of individual members of the Legion or of local posts to take law into their own hands, to regulate by force or demonstration of forceful intent what is contrary to our interpretation of one hundred percent Americanism, or to act as self-constituted vigilance committees in disregard of lawful and properly constituted authority, is not only subversive of the principles and ideals of The American Legion but will weaken and tend to destroy our influence for good in this country.<sup>25</sup>

The Legion formed the National Americanism Commission in early 1920 to better coordinate the organization's response to radicalism and to promote Americanist ideas more broadly within the political culture through less confrontational routes. It was modeled on the Wilson Administration's Committee on Public Information. The NAC coordinated activities and disseminated information nationwide that could give Legionnaires information they needed to spread Americanism in their communities. It developed a speakers' bureau that distributed short patriotic speeches to post commanders. With the federal government unwilling to erect such a structure itself, the Legion's efforts represented the most prominent propaganda agenda of its kind in the

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<sup>24</sup> *Pacific Legion*, June, 1920, pp. 5-6, 32, Sept., 1920, pp. 41, Schmidt, *Red Scare*, p. 105, Arthur Warner, "The Truth About the American Legion," *Nation*, July 6, 1921, pp. 7-10, Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 74, 150-2, 155.

<sup>25</sup> Franklin D'Olier, "Bulletin Special no. 2," December 23, 1919, p. 2, American Civil Liberties Union Papers 1917-1950, reel 18, volume 132, p 141, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, (hereafter ACLU)

1920s, forming an important associationalist link between public and private within the political culture.<sup>26</sup>

D'Olier's rather tepid response to Legion vigilantism did little to quell members' overzealous pursuit of radicalism in any perceived form. Nor did it clarify whether or not work stoppages by organized labor constituted a threat to "law and order." Although the organization declared its neutrality in disputes between labor and capital and insisted it supported the principle of trade unionism, members nevertheless were allowed to intervene as individual citizens, not Legionnaires, "to continue the production of the necessities of life temporarily, in order to prevent suffering and alleviate distress," as National Adjutant Lemuel Bolles instructed a department official in 1920. Legionnaires intervened during strikes in 1919 and 1920 either to break them or to maintain order. Sometimes, the Legion performed these duties at the bequest of government officials. Legionnaires patrolled the streets of Denver to maintain order during a streetcar workers' strike at the request of Colorado Governor Oliver Shoup. During the winter of 1919 Legionnaires in Kansas mined coal at the request of Governor Arthur Capper when a strike by the United Mine Workers threatened to create shortages in the state. Legionnaires broke strikes on their own as well, operating Maplewood, New Jersey streetcars and replacing striking dockworkers in New York Harbor.<sup>27</sup> In these interventions Legionnaires claimed to be acting as a neutral party. Their actions,

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<sup>26</sup> For more on private voluntary organizations' augmentation of state capacity in this period, see Theda Skocpol, et al, "How Americans Became Civic," in Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, eds, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 1999); Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003)

<sup>27</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 210-13, Richard J. Loosbrock, *The History of the Kansas Department of the American Legion* (Topeka: Kansas Department of the American Legion, 1968), pp. 42-4, Walter Wilson, "Labor Fights the American Legion," *American Mercury*, January 1935, pp. 4-5

particularly for two Republican governors, nevertheless harmed the political standing of the unions in these disputes.

Legion antiunion activities occurred as unions were working feverishly to secure the advances they had made during the war and counteract capital's efforts at rollback. Unions, accordingly, took note of Legion strikebreaking and ordered veteran members to quit or avoid the organization. A Detroit local in the Automobile, Aircraft, and Vehicle Workers Union fined one member \$100 when it discovered he was a member of the American Legion. After the New York County Council of the American Legion organized a list of members capable of operating city infrastructure during a strike in the spring of 1920, the Central Federated Union ordered its members to resign from the Legion. Larger unions followed suit. The United Mine Workers, Detroit and Montana State Federations of Labor, and New York Central Trades and Labor Council all ordered their members quit the Legion in 1920. Unions' reactions to Legion strikebreaking pushed working-class veterans out of the organization in droves. By the end of 1922, the Legion had hemorrhaged more than 120,000 members, dipping below the 700,000 mark of membership for the first time in since its first few months of existence.<sup>28</sup>

To stem the exodus of working-class veterans and restore its ability to claim credibly that it represented a cross-section of American society, the Legion worked to salve relations with mainstream and conservative unions. National Commanders D'Olier and Frederic Galbraith, D'Olier's successor, both reiterated the neutrality of the Legion in labor politics and urged posts not to intervene in strikes. The Legion developed friendly

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<sup>28</sup> *New York Times*, May 2, 1920, p. RE2, Wilson, "Labor Fights the American Legion," pp. 5-6, "Fourth Annual Report of National Officers of The American Legion and Legion Publishing Corporation, 1922," pp. 5, 7. 1920 membership figure from American Legion, "Third Annual Report of National Officers of The American Legion and Legion Publishing Corporation, 1921," p. 5

relations with the American Federation of Labor. These organizations formed a natural political alliance against the backsliding fiscal conservatism of the Harding and Coolidge Administrations, as corporate interests attempted to hamstring the AFL's drive for industrial democracy and the Legion's push for the veterans' bonus. But more than a marriage of convenience, the Legion's embrace of the AFL reflected its ideological similarities as well. The AFL curtailed its use of strikes, particularly to win wage gains in boom times, and sought collective bargaining as a method to rationalize shop politics. It claimed not to be after undue benefits but what AFL officer and Legion Vice President George L. Berry claimed was "a square deal" that would allow workers the material comforts they needed to become better citizens and throw off the shackles of paternalism. As Samuel Gompers' successor as AFL president, William Green, wrote Legionnaires in the *American Legion Monthly* in September, 1926, "organized labor is coming to believe that its best interests are promoted through concord rather than conflict. It prefers the conference table to the strike field." The average Legionnaire probably admired the AFL's staunch antiradicalism more than its philosophy of industrial democracy. Legionnaires in Oregon praised the AFL's ultimatum to the Seattle Central Labor Council to rescind its endorsement of the Soviet government in Russia and praised Gompers' antiradicalism. Berry told the Kansas Department's 1925 convention "if I had the authority any man that preached communism or sovietism or revolution in America I would hang him to a sour apple tree before you could say Jack Robinson," a statement which drew heavy applause from the audience.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 214-6, *The Legionnaire* (North Dakota), January 1922, pp. 13, 27, 29, William Green, "The Why of Trade Unionism," *American Legion Monthly*, September 1926, p. 6, *Pacific Legion*, June, 1923, *Seventh Annual Convention of the Kansas Department, the American Legion*, 7-9<sup>th</sup> September, 1925, *Chanute* (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1925), pp. 69, 72.

### **Legion suppression of radical political parties**

The Legion's principles of Americanism and the realities of leftist politics in the immediate postwar period came into conflict again on the question of whether political parties that advocated the redistribution of wealth but not a Marxist-styled state were un-American. Legionnaires took particular interest in the Non-Partisan League (NPL), an agrarian socialist organization that held considerable sway in the electoral politics of the Upper Plains states, and the Socialist Party of federal prisoner Eugene Debs. Both parties appealed to particular constituencies and promised them greater power within the political economy if elected. Both had achieved some modest electoral successes. The politics of these two groups received almost no support from within the Legion, particularly from its department or national-level leadership. Neither had supported the war, and their class-based outlook towards politics violated the Legion's classless Americanist vision for American political culture. Nevertheless, both parties were committed, at least as far as Legionnaires could tell, to the democratic process. Legionnaires split on whether that commitment was enough for the organization to consider these groups to be consistent with American political values, or whether their participation in electoral politics was simply a ruse to gain power they would then wield for the benefit of one class over the interest of all others. As a delegate in the New York Legislature, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. supported the rights of minority radical parties to be

seated, voting against a bipartisan motion to expel five Socialist Party assemblymen elected in 1920.<sup>30</sup>

Many Legionnaires took a less tolerant view of radical electoral politics than did Roosevelt Jr., particularly in states with significant NPL strength. More conservative Legion membership in Western states made little distinction between the populist tendencies of the NPL and the revolutionary vision of worker control proposed by the IWW agrarian unions and other leftist parties. A Legion magazine for Pacific Northwest members claimed that a collaborative relationship existed between the NPL and the “communist leaders of the IWW” in North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, and Washington. The first Kansas department convention resolved that Congress should bar members of all leftist parties from holding political office.<sup>31</sup> In North Dakota, where the Non-Partisan League held control of state government, Legionnaires took particular interest in uncovering the organization’s revolutionary intent. Conflating “socialism” with “bolshevism” the editor of the Legion magazine for North Dakota claimed that Centralia forced Americans to realize they could no longer tolerate socialism’s argument for an alternative vision of Americanism. The two were in fact, “direct opposites and the time had come when the people of North Dakota must either affirm their loyalty to our country or to repudiate any belief in a democratic form of government.” Part of that affirmation involved a reconsideration of the NPL. While its rank and file claimed not to be revolutionary -- or as the editorial writer put it, “socialist” -- its leadership’s relationship with Eugene Debs and the organization’s sympathy with radicals jailed for sedition in the editor’s opinion placed the NPL in league with “the Bolshevist program.” The editorial

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<sup>30</sup> *Washington Post*, April 2, 1920, p. 1

<sup>31</sup> *The Pacific Legion* November, 1920, p. 117-8, *First Annual Convention of the Kansas Department, the American Legion, September 29-30, 1919, Wichita* (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1919), p. 6.

failed to address whether or not Legionnaires should support NPL candidates but the stark choice it presented members to support either government or revolution certainly argued as much.<sup>32</sup>

Richard Gibson, adjutant for the Wisconsin Department, pushed Legion commentary on the fitness of radical parties to stand for office to the limit in 1920 when he sent Legion members in the Badger State several pamphlets attacking Socialist and NPL-backed candidates. Gibson claimed in a letter to the adjutant of Kansas the Socialists' "idea is to get control of the government through the working people by deception and fraud," arguing that all radicals advocated a Soviet style of government and "the destruction of all organized government by force and violence." His attacks on the Non-Partisan League violated the Legion's standing policy on not commenting directly on political campaigns and drew the ire of the department commander. In his own defense, Gibson wrote his commander:

"I do not know whether or not that the Non-Partisan League is a Socialist institution and that the Socialist doctrine is propagated for the purposes of wrecking and running all established government and erecting upon these ruins what is called the Dictatorship of the proletariat, or in other words, a government similar to that one operated in Russia by Lenine and Trozky [sic]. I will say to you that these Non-Partisan candidates, who are of an international character and who are not of the American political parties, cannot be considered at all in the light of partisan politics or the dissemination of partisan principles, for they are world wide and international and I will take issue with you or any other man or set of men before the convention on this principle."<sup>33</sup>

Although the NPL could hardly be considered outright revolutionary even by Gibson's own admission, he and Legionnaires who followed similar logic believed the

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<sup>32</sup> *The Legionaire* (North Dakota), March 1, 1920, p.8

<sup>33</sup> Richard Gibson to Frank Samuel, March 20, 1920, Gibson to Claudius Pendill, Sept 15, 1920. American Legion Department of Wisconsin. Box 20, Post Department Files, Wisconsin Historical Society Special Collections, Madison, WI. Adjutants were the communication secretaries for Legion departments.

international context American radicals operated within automatically made trusting them out of the question. Nevertheless, Gibson was removed from his office in Wisconsin for his explicitly partisan attacks against NPL-supported candidates and Republican senatorial candidate Irvine Lenroot.<sup>34</sup> Here was the irony of the Legion's position in full: members could contest the American-ness of groups like the NPL to hold office, but they could not openly campaign against them.

Other Legionnaires believed it was their duty to use much more aggressive tactics against radical political parties. They began a trend that would continue through the entire interwar period of using vigilantism against radical groups' organizers and speakers. Legionnaires considered such tactics a continuation of citizen policing of their fellows' loyalty that had occurred throughout the nation during the war. Physical and even violent confrontation against disloyal citizens continued to be acceptable to many Americans as long as such action was taken in support of the law and the state. The war context made clearer the types of acts and comments that were in violation of the law or a challenge to the state. But in the postwar context, the line between legitimate action in support of "law and order," and illegitimate mob reprisal was muddled.<sup>35</sup> Legionnaires who engaged in postwar vigilantism insisted radicals' political ideas were enough of a challenge to the principles of Americanism that bound the nation together to warrant their removal from the public sphere. In most instances the Legion and local government were in concert in this opinion and members' actions took place with the active or passive support of local police.

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<sup>34</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 109

<sup>35</sup> Capozzola, "Uncle Sam Wants You," pp. 215-23

The most dramatic vigilante action perpetrated by Legionnaires against the NPL occurred in Kansas. On June 1, 1920 in the central Kansas county of Barton a group of over 300 men who claimed to represent the American Legion interrupted a picnic of farmers in Ellinwood attended by NPL writer and lecturer Walter Thomas Mills and five other NPL organizers. The mob drove the NPL organizers to the county seat of Great Bend. Mills and his fellows were held in a stockyard while the county sheriff deputized ten Legionnaires. The newly-deputized veterans then paraded their captives the town's main street to a Topeka-bound train along with the town minister as onlookers pelted the NPL men with eggs. In the aftermath of the Barton County incident, a post commander in Wichita announced his men would attend a speech by Mills on the ninth of June. Denouncing the NPL as contrary to "the principles and purposes of the Constitution," the commander claimed "if anything was said derogatory to the state, community, or nation, it was our plan to adjourn the meeting." The meeting was cancelled. In March, 1921, Legionnaires from Barton County again assaulted NPL organizers in Great Bend. In this incident, 200 Legionnaires interrupted an NPL meeting and abducted state officers J.O. Stevic and A.A. Parsons. Driving them into the countryside, the mob forced both men to smear tar on their bodies and roll in mowed grass and told them not to return to Great Bend. The same day Legionnaires in Salina in southern Kansas escorted former Senator J. Ralph Burton and another NPL officer out of town before a public meeting. No Legionnaire was disciplined by the organization or legally prosecuted for these events.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Wichita Plaindealer*, June 4, 1920, reel 19, volume 136, ACLU, *Topeka Courier Journal*, March 14, 1921, reel 22, volume 175, p. 111, ACLU. The victims of these vigilante attacks were individuals either from out of state or distant Kansas cities and several held ties to radical labor unions in addition to the NPL. Mills had worked and written about labor issues in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand while Stevic had campaigned for the labor-NPL ticket that unsuccessfully tried to unseat Kansas governor Henry Allen.

Members of the Socialist Party enjoyed similar treatment in the early twenties from Legionnaires. In Milwaukee, the Bronx, and Providence Legionnaires rallied against speaking engagements by Socialist Congressman Victor Berger. Five thousand Legionnaires attempted unsuccessfully to prevent Socialist leader James Maurer from addressing a working-class audience in Reading, Pennsylvania. Legionnaires heckled and threw eggs at socialist Henry Jager when he called for the release of Eugene Debs from federal prison in New York City in July, 1921, forcing his friends to whisk him away from danger in a taxi.<sup>37</sup>

When socialist Kate Richards O'Hare toured the nation in 1921 after President Harding commuted her sentence under the Espionage Act, posts across the country mobilized to try to have her events cancelled. Members of the William Carroll post in Minot, Montana resolved they would "take whatever action is necessary to prevent" O'Hare's appearance in town, forcing officials to cancel the event. Legionnaires in Twin Falls, Idaho tried throughout the early summer of 1921 to have her event cancelled and publicly announcing they would take action to preserve "Americanism." When O'Hare arrived on schedule in Twin Falls on June 2, Legion members abducted her from her host's house, tossed her in a waiting car, and drove her 120 miles out of town to Nevada. In Weston, West Virginia the Legion succeeded in persuading the town government to pass a city ordinance forbidding public speeches on the day of her scheduled event. Members of the post on the campus of the University of Wisconsin tried unsuccessfully to have O'Hare's address at the invitation of Prof. John R. Commons' Social Science Club cancelled. The effort backfired when the publicity the Legionnaires' protests packed

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<sup>37</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 155, *New York Call*, July 31, 1921, reel 25, volume 177, ACLU

the state capitol with an overflow crowd, interrupted only by a few jeers from student protestors in the crowd.<sup>38</sup>

No other Socialist, however, could match the experience that Ida Crouch-Hazlett endured at the hands of Iowa Legionnaires in 1921. Crouch-Hazlett had long been a speaker for the Socialist Party and had been the first woman to run for Congress in 1902.<sup>39</sup> She participated in the same speaking tour as Kate Richards O'Hare in 1921 as the Socialist Party campaigned for the release of Eugene Debs and other remaining Socialist political prisoners. When her leg of the tour took her through Iowa in July and August, Legionnaires began a sustained campaign of confrontations along the way. In Newton, Iowa, a crowd led by Legion members interrupted her speech with noisy instruments and according to one report forced her to kiss an American flag. One day after local police had arrested and released her and local Socialist speakers for disturbing the peace, Legionnaires in Des Moines dragged her from the steps of the central library and drove her under police escort to the police station, where they claimed she would be safe from a plot to violently interrupt the speech. Evidence of the plot never materialized. She ducked a barrage of doughnuts and pastries lobbed by members of the crowd in Boone during another speech. Legionnaires in Mason City dragged Crouch-Hazlett from the stage after the singing of members of the Salvation Army had interrupted her. The Legionnaires forced Hazlett into a car and drove her ten miles out of town before dumping her on the side of the road. She suffered the same ordeal at the hands of Legion

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<sup>38</sup> Minot *Daily News*, June 2, 1921, New York *Call*, July 17, 1921, *Spokesman's Review*, July 21, 1921, reel 24, volume 175, ACLU, Sally M. Miller, *From Prairie to Prison: The Life of Social Activist Kate Richards O'Hare* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 195-6, untitled memorandum, reel 26, volume 186, ACLU, John C. Fritschlet to Edward A. Birge, January, 19, 1922, University Post #246, Madison, WI papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Special Collections, Madison, WI *Capital Times*, March 31, 1922, p. 16

<sup>39</sup> Solon DeLeon, ed. *The American Labor Who's Who* (New York: Hanford Press, 1925), pp. 51-2

members in Shenandoah later in August. Physically threatened by eight men on that wild ride out of town, she sued the post commander of nearby Red Oak for \$20,000 in damages.<sup>40</sup>

Crouch-Hazlett's rough treatment at the hands of the Legion was met with criticism, even from within the Iowa Department itself. One self-professed "life long democrat," argued in a letter to the *Des Moines Register* that the Legion's actions would chill political discourse. "Previous to the war there were thousands of men who did not know a socialist from a Hottentot. Why this sudden pretense of patriotism just because they had a chance to wear a uniform a few months? If this work is allowed to go on, then no man dare open his mouth where a legion holds headquarters." He concluded "Socialism is a political creed, and has as much right to be heard as republicanism. The time for arresting a speaker is when he becomes an anarchist and talks treason: then we have a police force we expect will do its duty."<sup>41</sup> Members of the Becker-Chapman post in Waterloo asked the city for police protection for Crouch-Hazlett to ensure her safety from mob action and pledged themselves not to interfere with her speech if it remained "within the boundaries of law and order and in no way [was] deprecatory to sound government." The post took out ads in local newspapers to inform the community of their intention not to interfere with her talk. Her appearance in Waterloo occurred without incident.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>*New Day* 6 August, 1921, *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* July 28, 1921, *Des Moines Register*, July 25, 1921, *Newton Record*, July 29, 1921, *Des Moines News*, July 26, 1921, *Des Moines Register*, July 26, 1921, *Des Moines Register*, 29 July, 1921, *Waterloo Evening Courier* 29 July, 1921, Ben Gibson to H. C. Shultz, 23 January, 1922, reel 25, vol. 182, ACLU, *New Majority*, June 12, 1920, Federated Press release, October 27, 1920, *New York Call*, August 15, 1921, August 25, 1921, reel 24, volume 175, ACLU papers, W.G. Daniel to ACLU, August 27, 1921, reel 25, volume 182, ACLU

<sup>41</sup>*Des Moines Register*, August 3, 1921

<sup>42</sup>*Waterloo Evening Courier*, August 23, 1921, *Waterloo Times-Tribune*, August 24, 1921

Despite the criticism his organization received from some in Iowa, *Iowa Legionaire* editor Frank Miles defended the members' actions as legitimate. "Treason is treason, whether in war or peace," Frank Miles concluded in the aftermath of the Des Moines incidents.<sup>43</sup> "The American Legion is ever on the alert to prevent un-Americanism," Miles claimed. "We have that right, and once we believe we are right, we shall strike with all our strength." Miles admitted, though, that Legionnaires faced the difficult prospect of determining in the kinds of situations Crouch-Hazlett's speeches presented "what constitutes treasonable statements in peace?" They are not hard to single out in war for then the lines are clear. Who is qualified to judge what should be permitted said and what should not be? Most of us, we must admit, are not." The solution for Legionnaires, Miles argued, was to wait until someone they expected to make disloyal comments about the government to actually make them. "A socialist speaker has to get pretty 'raw' before we have a right to try to close him or her up."<sup>44</sup>

Part of the reason Crouch-Hazlett and Kate Richards O'Hare received such rough treatment from the Legion in 1921 was because they were not simply promoting the Socialist Party but calling for the pardon of wartime disloyalty of their compatriots. Their argument that all should be forgiven from the war and that the nation should return to some state of normalcy by releasing its political prisoners to Legion ears was intolerable to their conception of loyalty to the nation, a critical aspect of their Americanism. Anti-war Socialists had objected to American entrance on the grounds its suffering would fall disproportionately on the working class. In time of considerable national peril, then, Socialists of Crouch-Hazlett's ilk placed the interests of a class over that of the nation. S.

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<sup>43</sup> *Iowa Legionaire*, July 29, 1921

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, August 5, 1921

W. James, the Legionnaire who had instigated the doughnut throwing in Boone by standing on Ida Crouch-Hazlett's car during her speech, bitterly recalled that one of the Socialist critics of his actions in town had gone to jail for expressing this sentiment with the button "not a man or dollar for war."<sup>45</sup> For veterans, whose lives they believed had been imperiled further on the front by this disloyalty, such sentiments were personally infuriating. Crouch-Hazlett and other Socialists' calls for the release of Debs and other political prisoners for the simple fact the war was over in Legionnaires' minds validated their wartime attitude that loyalty to the state was optional and that one's extraneous interests could be put ahead of serving the nation. As the nation tried to reconstruct its political culture for the postwar era, the Legion believed the lessons of obligation learned on the battlefield, not in federal jail cells, should be the basis of a new sense of national belonging among citizens. The Socialist alternative threatened the very fabric of national unity.

The Legion condemned pacifism for very similar reasons. Members considered pacifism not a moral argument but an expression of disloyalty designed to "break down the ideas and ideals of American citizenship," as stated in a resolution condemning pacifist organizations at its 1924 National Convention. Legionnaires bristled at pacifists' claim that their work had a moral imperative, seeing the movement as advocating instead the shirking of the duty citizens owed each other in defending the democratic nation.<sup>46</sup> Pacifism violated the Legion's conception of Americanism specifically for two reasons. It undermined the vision of manliness Legionnaires derived from their more Rooseveltian-inspired thoughts about what made nations exceptional. These veterans shared the belief

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<sup>45</sup> *Iowa Legionaire*, August 5, 1921

<sup>46</sup> *Badger Legionnaire*, October. 1, 1924, p. 1, October 15, 1924, p. 2.

that nations were only so strong as the manhood of their male citizens, particularly as it was tested as they had been in battle. Pacifism, therefore, dangerously effeminized the American male. Secondly, the internationalism of leading pacifist organizations let the Legion to conclude that American peace activists were part of a Soviet-inspired conspiracy. In this respect the Legion took the language of the Third Internationale literally, assuming that the announcement of a global effort to spread socialism truly tied all “internationalist” organizations to the Bolshevik conspiracy. This small sect of Americans became wolves in sheep’s clothing, attracting unwitting supporters like “parlor Bolsheviks” to causes that encouraged them to abandon loyalty to the American nation and embrace the deleterious aims of international socialism. The logical triangulation of American pacifist opposition to the World War also paired the movement with the Bolshevik withdraw from the war to prove the presence of an international conspiracy designed to weaken the West for socialist conquest.

The Legion did not distinguish between left-leaning pacifists and those who embraced pacifist ideas on religious grounds. In the mid-1920s the Legion took particular aim at the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which it concluded represented a communist front organization. The commander of the Illinois Department claimed Jane Addams’ Hull House was a hotbed of communism and that Addams’ internationalism was designed to sell out America to radicals. Sioux City, Iowa Legionnaires organized with the Daughters of the American Revolution and other voluntary associations in 1926 to oppose the founding of a chapter of a WILPF chapter in their town precisely because Addams was its founding president.<sup>47</sup> Legionnaires in

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<sup>47</sup> Will Irwin, “How Red is America?,” *American Legion Monthly*, October, 1926, p. 17, *Washington Post*, July 26, 1924, p. 2, *New York Times*, November 11, 1926, p. 16, Kim E. Nielsen, *Un-American*

Atlanta in December 1926 mobilized to have a lecture by National Council for the Prevention of War vice president Lucia Ames Mead cancelled at Agnes Scott College because of her left-leaning politics. In 1928 National Commander Edward Spafford intervened personally to encourage North Carolina Legionnaires to cancel speaking engagements by Sherwood Eddy. Legion members joined with the DAR in Greensboro to compile reports on prominent pacifist speakers who had appeared in the state.<sup>48</sup>

Whether it was a violent confrontation with radical organizers, formal requests to organizers to cancel speaking engagements of controversial figures, or petitions to local government to deny permits for radical assemblies, the antiradical activism Legion members pursued in their communities reflected the desire of the organization to ensure its version of Americanism remained dominant within the political culture. Local confrontations with radicals followed a general pattern designed to portray both radicals and the Legion in particular light. The Legion typically opposed the activities of radicals from out of town, creating a scenario in which patriots defended the community from the incursion of outside ideas. Such action symbolized the nation's struggle against radicalism on a small scale, as the nation battled the introduction of ideals from foreign lands that were antithetical for what it stood for. Legionnaires' defensive actions also gave local citizens a sense of their communities' place in that larger national narrative. These moments were examples of local people doing their part for the national common cause. Such moments reminded locals why they should care about living up to Americanism's standards for citizenship as part of a real struggle for the future of the

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*Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2001) pp. 74-83.

<sup>48</sup> *Christian Century*, December 30, 1926, reel 52, volume 331, ACLU, *Winston Salem Journal*, January 31, 1928, *Raleigh News and Observer*, February 2, 1928, *Greensboro Daily News* February 7, 1928, reel 55, volume 339, ACLU

country. Radical counterexamples, furthermore, helped clarify exactly what these standards were in ways abstract language of citizenship often failed. This ability to draw distinctions between insiders and outsiders on a variety of imaginative levels – community, region, nation – reminded locals sympathetic with the radical agenda that someone was watching them, too.

Radicals developed no effective response to the Legion's efforts to destroy their standing as legitimate contributors to American political culture. The most common response radicals mounted to Legion vigilantism was to evoke the First Amendment rights of the target of such attacks. The new American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) began to keep close tabs on the organization. By 1921 the Legion's abuse of radicals had become so widespread that the ACLU wrote national headquarters to document the fifty most egregious cases of vigilante action by local posts that interfered with radicals' civil liberties. In response National Commander Franklin D'Olier wrote letters to the offending posts informing them to desist from further violence. The Legion's internal reaction to liberals and radicals' critiques of the organization's conduct, however, never repudiated the right of members to intervene when they heard disloyal or inflammatory speech. What D'Olier and subsequent Legion leaders were attempting to avoid was the public perception that the Legion was becoming an intolerant mob, not an instrument of law and order. No post suffered a revocation of their charter nor any member ejected from the organization for vigilantism gone awry.

Legion leaders rebutted civil libertarians' criticisms of their members' conduct by skillfully questioning on what grounds un-American persons could claim constitutional protections. They denied that those the Legion had confronted had a right to freedom of

speech in the first place. The Legion defended free speech, it reminded its critics, as long as that speech was responsible speech, a position indicative of mainstream judicial and political opinion of the era.<sup>49</sup> The fact that radicals and their allies would cite their First Amendment rights, moreover, epitomized the ways Legionnaires claimed their adversaries would use democracy against itself to achieve their political goals. As the Wobblies had used “free speech fights” to try and advance their own cause, so too the Legion believed were postwar civil libertarians trying to gain access to the public sphere by using the First Amendment as a Trojan horse. The attempt by delegates at the 1921 National Convention to clarify the Legion’s official position on civil liberties elucidated this position. It passed a resolution that recognized two methods of political change were at work in the United States: “First, through free speech, and a free press leading to changes by the ballot and evolution. Second, through the prostitution of free speech and free press, inciting the people to class consciousness and strife and leading to changes by revolution. The persons and agencies using the latter method are termed radicals.” The convention endorsed the first method, “of changing the institutions to be keeping with the American spirit and constitution,” and condemned the second as, “unlawful and un-American.”<sup>50</sup> Speaking to a press association at the University of Wisconsin in 1925, National Americanism Director Frank Cross claimed that communists held all the political rights of any American to elect representatives of their party to Congress, but they had no right to glorify revolution in speech. As for the defense of communist

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<sup>49</sup> Mark A. Graber, *Transforming Free Speech: The Ambiguous Legacy of Civil Libertarianism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 75-121, Paul L. Murphy, *The Meaning of Freedom of Speech: First Amendment Freedoms from Wilson to FDR* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972)

<sup>50</sup> *Legionaire* (North Dakota), March, 1921, p. 11, Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 154, *Summary of Proceedings, Third National Convention of the American Legion, Kansas City, MO, Oct 31-Nov 2, 1921* (Kansas City: Smith Greives, 1921), p. 39.

expression in the public sphere, Cross claimed, “let the American Civil Liberties Union take up the gauge for the slanderer, the blackmailer and the instructor in vice and crime, if it wishes to be consistent.”<sup>51</sup> Subsequent Legion leaders would point to the ACLU’s defense of Communist freedoms as evidence the organization was a Communist front.

Leftists’ efforts to defend themselves and their ideas from Legionnaires’ charges of being “un-American” suffered from the drastic disparity in the legitimacy to speak for what political ideals were truly “American.” The Legion could ground its arguments for what Americanism represented in mainstream Progressive political culture Americans were well familiar with by the 1920s, particularly the concept of the equality of opportunity, even if Americans were dubious on the details on how to bring it about. The Legion could also evoke the kind of exceptionalist and nationalist conceptions of the American political system that made it supremely difficult for competing ideas that did have an international emphasis or history to counteract. What made the Legion such a formidable opponent for American radicals, however, was the extra legitimacy Legionnaires garnered as veterans to interpret and define Americanism within the political culture. The public was hardly universally behind the Legion’s rougher vigilante tactics, a fact Legion effort to reign in wayward members gently indicated. But the Legion faced little sustained challenge in the 1920s of its ability to speak for what represented American ideals via the experience of their military service. To succeed, radicals did not have to explain simply the compatibility of their ideals with American democracy, but demolish the notion that any group of citizens had the right in a democracy to deny anyone access the political arena based on their own ideological interpretation of civic nationalism. As a result, radicals found themselves constantly

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<sup>51</sup> *New York Times*, November. 29, 1925, p. E9.

playing defense against Legion condemnations of their fitness to participate in the democracy. Routed in the battle to define postwar political culture, leftist radicals found promoting their political agendas exceedingly difficult in the 1920s.

The Legion's victory in the struggle to define postwar Americanism was significant for the organization as well. Members' aggressive responses to a wide variety of reform agendas made it very difficult for liberal Legionnaires to feel a place in the organization. Attending a Legion post dinner in New York City in early 1920, liberal James Rorty already felt out of place among his fellow Legionnaires, despite the organization's self-professed openness to all partisan perspectives. When a speaker declared to the assemblage, "It's up to you fellows that will have to stand for the old order of things. Not entirely the old order, of course, but—evolution moves slowly. It's you fellows, I hope, that will run this country during the next twenty-five years," Rorty concluded "you fellows" did not include him. As the next speaker of the evening, arms flailing, proclaimed the near-infallibility of the Constitution and "my country, right or wrong!" Rorty abandoned any hope that his fellow Legionnaires would move beyond its reactionary nationalism. "It does not seem to me," Rorty concluded:

that the Legion needs to go into moral bankruptcy. But I do feel that it is very distinctly 'Standing in the need of prayer.' It must loosen the hold of reactionaries upon it, live up to its 'non-political' pretensions, and stop regarding itself as the sole repository of national virtue. Is it too much to hope that the Legion will ever stop shouting long enough to indulge in a little wholesome self-questioning? Is it possible for anything to make a breach in its complacency? Will the Legion ever come to the point of saying to itself 'It's me, Lord, it's *me*,' and, ceasing its efforts to serve as its brother's keeper—or jailer, begin to examine, honestly and realistically, the quality of its own idealism?<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> James Rorty, "Standing in the Need of Prayer," *Nation*, April 17, 1920, pp. 515-6.

Rorty doubted the Legion's own capacity for self-examination but hoped, ultimately, the organization would live up to its Progressive potential.

The self-righteousness that Legionnaires carried themselves with that Rorty described was demonstrated whenever and wherever members asserted themselves to defend the principles of Americanism. Again and again, Legionnaires asserted that citizens did not have rights to respect but obligations to meet as Americans. Failing to live up to those expectations of Americanism denied one a place in the nation. The fact that the Legion's conception of political obligation came from the Progressive intellectual tradition is a hidden historical legacy of that movement. To the detriment of the intellectual diversity of American democracy, however, Legionnaires dragged Progressive ideas in a profoundly conservative direction, interpreting ideas of obligation to defend a static conception of democratic process. Loyalty to the nation meant respecting concrete rules of that process, relegating leftist reform agendas to outsider, "un-American" status. While radicals claimed the Legion was simply another tool of capital, in truth it erected these barriers to national inclusion on its own, using the experience of a particular kind of service to the state as all the legitimacy it needed to do so.

## Chapter 4

### **“What is a hundred per cent American?:” Defining Good Citizenship through Americanism**

In September of 1926 the *Iowa Legionaire* printed an anonymous answer to the question, “what is a hundred per cent American?”

He is a man who puts the interests of his  
country before his own interests.  
When he comes of age he votes.  
When he owns property he pays his taxes  
honestly.  
He keeps informed on public questions.  
His hair tingles when he sees the Stars and  
Stripes.  
He has a thorough knowledge of the lives of  
Washington and Lincoln.  
He respects women, every woman.  
He is tolerant of anything except intolerance.  
He does not care to know your religious  
belief so long as you are decent.  
He is a good loser.  
He plays hard and fights hard.  
The chances are that his ancestors did not  
come over on the Mayflower: they may have been  
French, Italian, Czech, Polish, or German, but he  
is American.  
He is not a rabid reformer or revolutionist.  
He hates class.  
When laws do not suit him he does not break  
them, he changes them.  
He is loyal—to his family, to his friends, and to his  
country.  
His loyalty does not imply lying, spying, cruelty  
and inhumanity.  
He hates militarism, but is prepared and ready to serve  
when his country is at war.<sup>1</sup>

These civic virtues broadly captured the Legion’s rather abstract connection between the citizenship of individuals and their relationship to the American nation. This editorialist

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<sup>1</sup> *Iowa Legionaire*, September 3, 1926, p. 5

argued that being American was not simply part of what someone was, but what they did as citizens. Civic behavior was the true measure of one's belonging in the nation.

Legionnaires knew that most American citizens did not come to the behaviors the *Iowa Legionnaire* described naturally. The Legion's mission in the postwar period was to bring citizens up to this standard, to make them fully "American" in a way that reflected the true democratic potential of the political system. Part of that process was ensuring Americans understood what ideas and behaviors were unacceptable to the nation's democracy. In that regard, the Legion was always more clear on what was "un-American" than ideally "American." But the Legion understood that it needed positive reinforcement of its Americanist principles for it to have the fullest impact on the political culture. As its members engaged in vigilante actions against radicals, they also performed educative and community service projects. These activities were part of the same mission to demonstrate concretely what political behaviors were consistent with the civic values at the heart of its nationalism. Through this pragmatic ethic the Legion found common ground with other groups not otherwise aligned with its political perspective. The organization partnered with other Progressive organizations on specific projects, including playground construction and support for public education. It also worked with a wide variety of groups on other civic education and civic betterment programs. For the Legion, the sum of these works produced a citizenry more aware of their obligations to the nation-state and more eager to serve the common good. This form of community service, even when it was focused on the local level, was part of a larger project of nationalizing the nation's political culture.

While the Legion employed Progressive ideas and worked with Progressive organizations in promoting a positive Americanizing agenda, the net effect of its efforts remained conservative. Like its antiradical activism, the Legion's positive promotion of Americanism focused on citizens' obligations to the nation-state and on their need to respect democratic process above all else. The Legion's efforts did not support the kind of diversity of perspective some of its Progressive partners hoped would result from promoting more civic engagement among the public. Legionnaires believed loyalty to the nation and its democratic system was the most important product of its efforts, particularly among children. The Legion's positive efforts were also fundamentally conservative because of their ability to apply seemingly universal language to ideas about citizenship that inherently were biased by race, class, and gender. Like many other citizenship activists of their era, Legionnaires assumed the superiority of Anglo-Saxon political minds and the political behaviors of middle class and elite citizens over working-class ones. The Legion's focus on boys' citizenship, on the positive lessons young men could derive from simulated military service, and on the masculine virtues of the ideal voter, while not repudiating female citizenship, demoted it below that of men. These often unspoken assumptions while describing an Americanism that theoretically offered a place for everyone further de-legitimized the politics of outsider groups seeking their own voice in American politics.

The Legion was hardly alone in its concern about the civic behaviors of American citizens in the aftermath of World War I. The way it directed that concern towards a greater nationalization of the political culture distinguished it from other citizenship reformers of the era. The Legion emphasized action within the citizenry not only to

produce better political results in government, but also to generate a feeling of national belonging it believed participation within the democracy should yield. It asserted that increased rationality alone within the political system would not produce more efficient and intelligent governance. Instead it argued that added rationality would lead Americans to think of their citizenship from a nationalist perspective, which would then generate the kind of disinterested and deliberate behaviors necessary to improving government performance. The Legion did not, therefore, become enamored with expertise for its own sake and remained committed to a greater level of democratic participation than other Progressive-inspired thinkers of the era.<sup>2</sup>

The Legion's conception of citizenship resembled that of John Dewey in the late 1920s. Dewey argued that the nation had evolved into a "Great Society" of interdependent groups that needed further transformation into a "Great Community" that fully understood the ramifications of its inherent interdependence. Dewey, like the Legion, believed educating citizens about their place in this Great Community began on developing better citizenship at the local level, with an emphasis on restoring face-to-face relationships between citizens. Only by learning about the needs and concerns of their neighbors could citizens fully appreciate the complexity of modern society and the proper direction in which democratic governance needed to go to support the full personal development of all individuals within society. Legionnaires shared Dewey's attraction to local activism as the foundation of good Americanism, but not his concern about individual development. The Legion believed such face-to-face relations were vital to demonstrating the kinds of political obligations citizens owed each other in the

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<sup>2</sup> For a survey of ideas about expertise in American electoral politics in this period, see Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), ch. 5

democracy. Such an understanding would produce the kind of loyalty to the nation and the greater good it required to create something loosely analogous to Dewey's Great Community. The Legion's focus on loyalty as the end of community involvement indicated the conservative direction it was interested in taking remnants of Progressive social thought. Its interest in using community-level action to build a greater national community, however, did make the Legion amenable to working with similarly-inclined Progressive groups to the left of its political perspective.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, politics involves not simply collective effort towards common goals, but having the needs of one's particular constituency met in the competition for scarce resources. The Legion was intimately involved in this conception of politics, too. For itself and for other political actors the Legion preferred the nonpartisan, educational style of lobbying that had developed by its founding for the necessary nitty-gritty work of interest group politics.<sup>4</sup> For the Legion, the legacy of the Grand Army of the Republic's relationship with the Republican Party was a precedent to avoid at all cost as politics shifted away from such explicit partisanship. Instead of becoming a block "soldiers' vote," capable of electing its own candidates, the Legion focused on persuading members of both parties to support its positions on narrowly-defined issues. The Legion became a disciplined lobbying force behind the work of chief lobbyist Jonathan Thomas Taylor. Taylor's office followed the nonpolitical and nonpartisan language that the Legion had wrapped itself in since its founding, focusing only on issues pertinent to veterans' affairs, military policy, and Americanism – like federal memorials, immigration policy, and

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<sup>3</sup> Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 300-14, John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1927), pp. 213-6

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth S. Clemens, *The People's Lobby: Organizational Innovation and the Rise of Interest Group Politics in the United States, 1890-1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)

control of radicalism. Taylor used a variety of lobbying tools to secure votes. He kept meticulous record of Congressional members' votes on issues important to the Legion, and presented detailed testimony to Congressional committees on particular issues important to veterans. He could also summon the power of the Legion's grassroots. His office published a weekly newsletter chronicling action on Capitol Hill and could use it and other Legion publications to summon thousands of telegrams in a well-timed "barrage" of Congress. On the state level, Legion departments formed their own lobbying efforts to push favorable legislation through what were often more friendly legislatures.<sup>5</sup>

The Legion justified its lobbying efforts for millions of dollars in veterans' benefits while urging citizens to act disinterestedly in a fairly circular way. Legionnaires pointed to their unselfish service to the nation as moral justification for compensation for postwar economic hard times and federal hospitalization. Iowa Legion leader Hanford MacNider, in a letter to an Eastern banker republished in the *American Legion Weekly*, shared a woeful tale of a man from his unit who had gone "over the top a dozen times" and had sent all his wartime military pay home to his wife, but continued to struggle as an agricultural laborer after the war. The war, MacNider argued, had set this man back financially in ways Americans owed a debt of thanks to rectify. MacNider's letter alluded to the broader justification Legionnaires made for a soldiers' bonus, or what they preferred to call "adjusted compensation." The state had removed men from their communities and sent them overseas, depriving them of earning capacity in the process.

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<sup>5</sup> William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1940* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), pp. 116-9. For a measure of the Legion's success in attaining favorable legislation from statehouses, see a chart in the *American Legion Weekly*, July 21, 1921, p. 16

Because state power had been the responsible culprit for their financial suffering Legionnaires felt justified in having the state compensate their losses.<sup>6</sup>

The way Legionnaires argued for veterans' benefits revealed how they believed Americans should behave politically in the pursuit of their own interests. In the case of veterans, a large power had interfered with their enjoyment of the equality of opportunity. As a result the state had the responsibility to rectify the situation. The Legion believed much of politics involved checking the undue influence of narrow and powerful constituencies. As it advocated a soldiers' bonus it railed against war profiteers, calling for Congressional investigation of industry activities during the war. Similarly, it called for a universal draft of labor, capital, and military manpower in the event of the next war to ensure profits and wages were balanced between these constituencies.<sup>7</sup> The Legion's approach to Americanism, therefore, accepted enormous state intervention to redistribute wealth or regulate the marketplace if such action balanced the fundamentals of American democracy – equality of opportunity and equal justice under law. The Legion's bar for such state action was high. But in its vision of politics as a balancing action between interests, the state played the role of the referee who could award dispensation to aggrieved players.<sup>8</sup> Disinterested political activities that balanced interests against the common good, however, were preferable to such state action.

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<sup>6</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, August 27, 1920, pp. 18-9, Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 172-3

<sup>7</sup> Marquis James, "The Profiteer Hunt," *American Legion Weekly*, March 23, 1923, pp. 5-8, 29-30, Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 211

<sup>8</sup> The Legion did not, therefore, does not fit neatly with Gary Gerstle's argument that Americanism represented two conservative long-term political principles — "suspicion of government" and "a commitment to proprietary ... notions of independence." Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (1989; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) pp. xvii-xix.

## **The Legion and Community Betterment**

Early in its history the Legion took organizational steps to ensure it could produce the kind of broad, community-level political education efforts necessary to attract Americans to its conception of Americanism. Its first national convention in November, 1919 authorized the creation of the National Americanism Commission (NAC) and charged the body with the duty to, “realize in the United States the basic idea of this Legion of 100% Americanism through the planning, establishment, and conduct of a continuous, constructive educational system,” designed not only to combat radicalism and Americanize the foreign born, but to “inculcate the ideals of Americanism in the citizen population, particularly the basic American principle that the interests of all the people are above those of any special interest or any so-called class or section of people...spread throughout the people of the nation information as to the real nature and principles of American government...[and] foster the teaching of Americanism in schools.”<sup>9</sup> The NAC coordinated with department-level Americanism offices and communicated directly with posts about how to promote Americanism in their communities

With the creation of the NAC the Legion took on an ambitious program of civic education and community service that would rely on the abilities of members to execute successfully. Most veterans had no prior experience in this kind of work. To organize the necessary structures within the Legion hierarchy and give members guidance the NAC sought the support of the Playground and Recreation Association of America (PRAA),

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<sup>9</sup> John W. Inzer and Mark T. McKee, memorandum to Community Service, Inc, “Excerpts from Committee Reports of the American Legion of Special Interest to Community Service,” no date. National Recreation Association, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 16, American Legion folder 1. National Recreation and Park Association, Joseph Lee Memorial Library and Archives, Ashburn, VA. (hereafter NRPA)

which had a long track record of the kind of work the Legion wanted to get into after the war. As veterans began to return home, the Legion reached out to War Camps Community Service, the branch of the PRAA that had managed recreation activities for soldiers around domestic military installations during the war. As it sought to reinvent itself, WCCS spun off a new organization, named simply Community Service, in March, 1919 designed to build upon war work that had fostered greater community cooperation in recreation and civic betterment projects. Over the next few years Community Service and the American Legion would formulate plans for such projects jointly.

Community Service and WCCS were both direct descendents of the Playground and Recreation Association of America, a Progressive organization led by long-time recreation reformer Joseph Lee. In the postwar period, Lee and his protégé, Harold Braucher, intended their new organization to do more than encourage municipal playground and recreation efforts: Community Service was designed to unlock the democratic potential of American communities, or as Lee put it, “liberate the power of expression of people and communities.” Community Service’s activism model involved sending professional organizers into communities for a period of months, free of charge to municipalities. That organizer would forge relationships with community organizations and existing civic groups and plan social programs that would foster a feeling of community cohesion and shared civic responsibility in peacetime. Such programs ranged widely in scale and focus, from patriotic pageants, community sings, and meetings to lectures, Americanization classes, and chautauquas. It also sponsored more social occasions like parties, dances, and organized sports. Lee’s vision for the organization resounded with a Progressive faith in participatory democracy found in some of the era’s

community reform movements. “The aim of Community Service,” he wrote to members of its executive board in March, 1919, “in all its work will be not to impose a cut-and-dried program from without, but to draw out the strength that is in the people and to make them conscious and efficient directors of their own affairs.”<sup>10</sup>

On the ideological continuum of the Progressive movement, Community Service and the PRAA were well to the left of the American Legion’s more nationalistic perspective. Nevertheless, the two organizations could find common ground in parts of the Progressive agenda. Both were attracted to the idea of activists creating social experiences that could broaden the perspectives of citizens and encourage them to see themselves in relation to the needs and concerns of other community members. From such experiences citizens would be more eager to participate in civic life and in disinterested ways. Both organizations believed creating these kinds of experiences required a particular kind of expert leadership. From the Legion’s perspective, enlightened patriotic citizens could provide other such guidance. The PRAA believed such work should be done by expertly-trained professional social workers, who could serve as dispassionate referees to ensure the full and equal participation of all constituent groups of communities. While the PRAA was more in line with Dewey’s conception of local activism building a Great Community, both organizations saw local activism as yielding a higher form of social cohesion on the national level.

For the Progressives at Community Service, the American Legion represented an exciting ally in their broader mission of revitalizing American civic society to be more

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<sup>10</sup> Richard F. Knapp and Charles E. Hartsoe, *Play for America: The National Recreation Association, 1906-1965* (Arlington, VA: National Recreation and Park Association, 1979), p. 73, Sarah Jo Peterson, “Voting for Play: The Democratic Potential of Progressive Era Playgrounds,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol.3:2 (April 2004) pp. 23-6, Minutes of the Board of Directors, Community Service, April 23, 1919, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 14 – Community Service, folder 1, NRPA.

egalitarian and socially conscious after the war. In the Legion, Lee and Braucher saw the potential of millions of citizens already dedicated to serving the needs of their communities and the nation who could partner with Community Service organizers and give their movement much needed foot soldiers for community organizing. Moreover, the Legion could give Community Service better access to small towns and rural communities in which a lack of organizational success had frustrated playground, recreation, and community development workers.<sup>11</sup> Lee and the leaders of WCCS directed their service workers and local committees to assist the Legion's recruitment efforts upon its arrival in the United States, dispatching 10 advisors to Legion national headquarters in New York to coordinate these efforts and aiding Legion executive Arthur Woods in re-employment efforts. These seeds of good will soon flowered for Lee's organization as in November 1919 Legion National Adjutant Lemuel Bolles asked WCCS for assistance in developing the organization's Americanism program under the auspices of its new Americanism Commission. Lee and Braucher responded by directing community organizers in roughly 200 cities and towns to cooperate with Legion posts in developing local-level Americanism programs.<sup>12</sup>

While pursuing this close relationship with the American Legion the leaders of WCCS/Community Service remained somewhat wary of the politics of their new friends. Soon after the new relationship began Lee wrote to Braucher that he was "a little scared" about it. Lee was worried that Legionnaires would not embrace the consensus-building and authority-sharing approach Community Services took towards civic activism. "When

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<sup>11</sup> M. Randall to Braucher, January 29, 1920, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 16, American Legion folder 1, NRPA.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Braucher to Lemuel Bolles, May 11, 1923, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 17, War Camp Community Service, Reports folder, NRPA.

a community organizer goes into a new place to work with the Legion,” Lee continued to Braucher, “he ought somehow to be in a position to start with a representative committee and not have to run to the leaders of the Legion, who may be very crude in their ideas, on every decision of personnel and policy.” Lee realized Community Service was in a delicate balancing act: it had to empower valued members of the community found within the Legion’s ranks but guide them to a proper civic consciousness that may be different from the veterans had already, all the while giving the impression that Community Service’s work with the Legion was not simply a scam to extend its own influence. Nevertheless, the Legion had to learn that, “you can do good social work only on a straight democratic and citizenship basis with a representative committee at the head.”<sup>13</sup> Community Service officers tried to control the nature of the relationship as best they could to ensure it was they who led the collaboration. Braucher instructed community organizers not to bring their work with the Legion until they had created “a more general community committee the work of which shall not be different from the usual work of Community Service when it is not established through American Legion invitation.” Community Service also would only accept the invitation of Legion posts to work in their community if a full three months of organization work were to be possible for the organizer.<sup>14</sup> Field officers found their work most effective in approaching department Americanism chairmen or committees, efforts that made Community Service employees essentially the field representatives of the National American Commission.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Lee to Braucher, November. 29, 1919, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 16, American Legion folder 1, NRPA. Underline in original

<sup>14</sup> Memorandum, Braucher, February 9, 1920, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 16, American Legion folder 1, NRPA

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Woods to Braucher, May 29, 1920, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 16, American Legion folder 2, NRPA David Finley to Braucher, March 21, 1921, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 16, American Legion folder 1, NRPA.

From its end of the relationship, the Legion believed Community Service was helping it develop a robust service program which could serve to make Legionnaires greater leaders within their communities. Collaboration remained important to the Legion, but it was not an end in its own right as it was from Community Service's perspective. In 1920, the NAC formed its own Community Service committee under Col. Augustus Gansser. "Peace time patriotism will call on each Post to do all it can to promote the public welfare, stimulate good citizenship by example and precept, and to strengthen the power of other individuals and organizations that are working to the same end," Gansser advised posts in a bulletin in September, 1920. "The American Legion must be an organization composed of willing workers interested in all phases of community life, carrying out with their neighbors a peace time program of activities that will assure a high degree of community welfare." He believed departments, sections, and posts could tackle planning such activities in their own committees, without the kind of community planning process that Community Service preferred to do first. In terms of the kinds of projects Legionnaires should undertake, Gansser's suggestions matched many of Community Service's ideas, including public health and recreation campaigns, community music programs, nonpartisan educational programs on specific political topics, and instruction for children through clubs or scout troops sponsored by the Legion. Gansser also urged Auxiliary units to sponsor social events like dinners, picnics, and plays for the community.<sup>16</sup> For its part, Community Service prepared a handbook for Legionaries on ideas community-level programs entitled "The America Legion – A Community Asset." Published in early 1921, the pamphlet still held out hope that posts

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<sup>16</sup> Augustus H. Gansser, "Report and recommendations of the committee on Community Service of the Americanism Commission," September 7, 1920, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 16, American Legion folder 1, NRPA, *The Legionnaire* (North Dakota), May, 1921, p. 7.

would follow Community Service's preferred cooperative and collaborative styles of community activism, urging posts to study carefully the social environment of their town, what kinds of community resources were available, and what other agencies and organizations could be brought in to help particular projects. Community Service urged posts to defer to the expertise of other organizations if needed and involve as many community groups as possible in the execution of civic betterment campaigns.<sup>17</sup>

In 1921 the close coordinative relationship between Community Service and the American Legion fell in to decline. Facing a precipitous drop in donations through 1920, Community Service could fund operations in only 65 cities on a permanent basis by the end of the year. Competition with other private civic organizations, each searching for a postwar mission, further diverted thinning revenue streams. Rumors that the organization had Catholic ties, its unequivocally pluralist stance towards Americanization, and its race liberalism towards African Americans further deprived the organization of support in the midst of early 1920s intolerance. In December, 1922, Community Service ceased independent operation and folded back into the PRAA as a department of its parent organization.<sup>18</sup> The Legion maintained a relationship with PRAA but their coordinated

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<sup>17</sup> "The American Legion – A Community Asset," (second edition, New York: Community Service, Incorporated, June 1922), pp. 32-56. Twenty thousand copies of this pamphlet were printed in its first run and the organizations issued a reprint in June, 1922. Howard Braucher to Lemuel Bolles, May 11, 1923, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 17, War Camp Community Service, Reports folder, NRPA. Legionnaires found staging the kinds of civic entertainment Community Service suggested not only served the purpose of greater community togetherness but aided in their more immediate needs of publicity and recruitment. In Patchogue, New York Legionnaires staged with the aid of a Community Service organizer two singing concerts of patriotic and popular songs that raised money for the post's treasury for future use. Community Service and the Legion re-opened soldiers' clubs or hospitality clubs for former soldiers' recreational use. Posts organized by African-American members in Baltimore and Kansas City used Community Service clubs to show movies of black soldiers in action on the Western Front to build interest in the organization. "The American Legion with Community Service," undated memorandum, "American Legion & Community Service," May 15, 1920, Howard Braucher Collection series 5, box 16, American Legion folder 2, NRPA.

<sup>18</sup> PRAA, meanwhile, with a more focused agenda concentrating on recreation reform, enjoyed boom times in the early 1920s. Knapp and Hartsoe, *Play For America*, pp. 76-83.

efforts focused on recreation reform, not the more expansive idea of civic betterment that Community Service had been founded to pursue.

Even if outside factors had not doomed Community Service's independence, its direct coordinative relationship with the Legion likely would not have lasted long. The different approaches to civic betterment work both organizations assumed started to strain their relationship by early 1921. David Finley, one of the Community Service field officers assigned to work with Arthur Woods and the National Americanism Commission, reported to Braucher in March that the centralized model of disseminating civic programs to state and local-level Legion officers failed because Legion officers at the state level, who were volunteers instead of professional social workers, were overwhelmed by the work. Finley also reported, "in many of the states also the conception of Americanism was confined to combating disloyal activities. Where no such activities existed, Americanism work was looked upon as unnecessary."<sup>19</sup>

Finley's criticism of Legion mid-level officers indicated Community Service's broader failure to understand exactly what kind of organization the American Legion was and how it was developing its own sense of civic authority to stimulate Americans towards a fuller spirit of citizenship. Through the privileged perspective service under arms had granted veterans the American Legion believed it was uniquely qualified to perform essentially the same function Community Service and Joseph Lee's recreation reform organizations had defined for themselves: compel citizens to join with their neighbors and work, through civically-engaged activism, towards bettering the nation by bettering their municipality first. This idea of citizenship, directed by privileged citizens but encouraging of wider civic and political participation, was quintessentially

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<sup>19</sup> Finley to Braucher, Howard Braucher Collection, series 5, box 16, American Legion folder 1, NRPA.

Progressive.<sup>20</sup> It was not that the Legion and Community Service disagreed on what the fundamentals of good citizenship were, or even the assumption that being inclusive towards other groups was the best way to generate reform agendas that stimulated such citizenship. Legionnaires simply believed veterans should be out front in defining and promoting postwar Americanism. Its defensive posture towards an Americanism in need of protection from alien and radical influences only further encouraged Legionnaires to assert their own civic dominance.

Despite the waning of their coordinative efforts, Community Service helped to shape the Legion's programmatic agenda in two lasting and important ways. The relationship it fostered with Community Service gave the Legion concrete methods to promote the broadly-defined idea of citizenship both organizations favored. Like the leaders of Community Service and the PRAA, Legion leaders in the early 1920s asserted that good citizenship involved much more than a mere legal identity or executing one's rights to suffrage but required participation in civic life that contributed the greater good. Ultimately, such a conception of citizenship would strengthen individuals' bonds with the state and, by extension, the nation.<sup>21</sup> But people did not participate in civic life in such ways spontaneously: both Community Service and the American Legion prefaced their own civic activism with the idea that individuals needed direction from more expert citizens to understand and appreciate this Progressive definition of citizenship.

By the mid-1920s, the Legion had developed its own sense of civic betterment that both served its organizational needs and broadly promoted its own civic nationalist

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<sup>20</sup> Peterson, "Voting for Play," pp. 53-7.

<sup>21</sup> Such ideas were at the heart of "community civics" as promoted by progressive educators in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Julie A. Reuben, "Beyond Politics: Community Civics and the Redefinition of Citizenship in the Progressive Era" *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 37:4 (Winter 1997), pp. 399-420

agenda. This institutionalization reflected a broader shift in Legion attention from veterans' issues like rehabilitation, reform of the veterans' hospitals system, and establishment of soldiers' bonuses that occupied much of the organization's attention as a political actor early in its history. At the fifth American Legion National Convention in 1923, the Americanism Commission voted to create a new branch called the Community and Civic Betterment Bureau which would be responsible for coordinating the work its title suggested throughout the organization.<sup>22</sup> To get a sense of what kind of civic betterment work posts were already doing in their communities the NAC sent out questionnaires to 22 departments, mainly in the Midwest, in 1923 for posts to fill out. Of the 640 posts that responded, 501 were generally following Community Service's model of building up community coalitions for civic betterment work, albeit with more conservative or business-oriented groups like Rotary, Kiwanis, and the Chamber of Commerce. Posts' scattered responses demonstrated the need for more coordinated efforts, but respondents reported building playgrounds, parks, athletics fields or other recreational facilities (59 posts), building memorials (37), performing aid work for disabled veterans (47), and adopting Boy Scout troops (15). Nevertheless, the most common response (68) was performing unemployment work.<sup>23</sup> The NAC published bulletins on civic betterment topics, ranging in focus from playground construction, promoting hygiene and child health, traffic safety campaigns, and staging fairs and

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<sup>22</sup> "What is Community Betterment," undated memorandum (1923?) Americanism -- Post Activities, Community, American Legion National Headquarters Library and Archives, Indianapolis, IN (Henceforth, ALHQ) *Summary of the Proceedings of the Fifth National Convention of the American Legion, San Francisco, CA, Oct 15-19, 1923* (publisher unknown, 1923), p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> American Legion News Service report, undated, Americanism, Post Activities, Community Betterment, ALHQ

bazaars, and stage music and dramatic performances.<sup>24</sup> Legion magazines frequently printed reports from posts and auxiliary units performing civic betterment work.

Inter-organizational cooperation remained a hallmark of the Legion approach to promoting Americanism through civic betterment work, but its preference for working with fraternal, patriotic, commercial or civic organizations dimmed some of the broad participatory potential this approach had harbored when advocated by the more inclusive Community Service. While the Legion narrowed the ideological potential of Community Service's community council model, Legion leaders urged posts to keep such efforts true to their central ethic of collective and locally-contingent decision making. In a bulletin sent to posts in late 1924, NAC Chairman Garland Powell insisted Legionnaires keep community councils non-sectarian and non-political and urged posts to keep the goals of their civic betterment campaigns flexible and responsive to the real needs of their communities. Powell also reminded posts of key "don'ts" in their efforts: "Don't enter any movement that is undertaken for private gain...Don't hold personal animosity, sectarian feeling, nor class jealousy...Don't forget that service is first due to the community, not to your post!...Don't refuse women a place on the council, their advice is as valuable as a man's!"<sup>25</sup> Wisconsin's Americanism chairman in 1927, O.C. Hulett, echoed Powell's suggestions to members of the Badger State. "It is imperative that no impression be given that the Legion is trying to 'run' a town," when promoting civic betterment work. He recommended including members from city government, the school board, Chamber of Commerce, legal and medical professionals, the Knights of

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<sup>24</sup> Garland Powell, Bulletin, "Community Program," November 3, 1924, Americanism, Post Activities, Community Betterment, ALHQ

<sup>25</sup> Garland W. Powell, Bulletin, "Community Councils as Civic Builders," Dec. 13, 1924, Americanism, Post Activities, Community Councils, ALHQ

Columbus, Masonic lodge, and a women's organization as appropriate partners for a Legion-sponsored community council.<sup>26</sup>

In Iowa, state leaders gathered to form a "Friendly Relations committee" in January, 1924 and hatched the idea for a state-wide Community Service Week, held between Lincoln and Washington's birthdays. The idea was the brainchild of former National Commander Hanford MacNider, who also suggested posts form community commissions formed from leaders of other civic organizations. Iowa Legion leaders urged posts to pose the question, "what is the most constructive, helpful, worth while, concrete project that the American Legion can undertake for this community this year," to their members and to the community at large through community commissions.<sup>27</sup> The organizers of this plan for greater community involvement in Legion community work dubbed it the "Iowa Idea," and promoted the week energetically in the state's newspapers. Communities received a wide variety of suggestions, ranging from greater recreational facilities, marking streets with new signs, beginning city beautiful and patriotic decoration drives, adopting Boy Scout troops, to starting a campaign against cigarettes. The positive publicity the week garnered the Legion proved as valuable as any ideas it provided to posts. According to *Iowa Legionnaire* editor Frank Miles, "Thousands upon thousands of Iowans who had the mistaken idea that the Legion was a get rather than a give organization now see it in a new and favorable light."<sup>28</sup> Speaking in Minnesota about the Iowa Idea, Iowa Department Commander Bert Halligan claimed such work at civic betterment could work hand-in-hand with Americanism's other focus of defeating communism in the United States. Halligan urged Minnesotans: "foster better

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<sup>26</sup> *Badger Legionnaire*, March 2, 1927, p. 4

<sup>27</sup> *Iowa Legionnaire*, January 18, 1924, p. 1

<sup>28</sup> *Iowa Legionnaire*, March 7, 1924, pp. 1, 11 (quotation p. 1)

schools, and make your community a more worth-while place in which to live – then you needn't be afraid the communists are going to undermine our government.”<sup>29</sup>

By the mid-1920s the Legion had made community service a major focus of the organization. Legion magazines were replete with notes on a dizzying array of projects from visiting orphanages to the building of municipal airfields. Service projects and charitable efforts complemented the Legion's promotion of Americanism, even when they had no overt didactic purpose. These efforts established the middle class as the font of civic virtue. The Legion's civic betterment and charity work mirrored that of voluntary associations oriented towards professional men like the Kiwanis and Rotary clubs. Such work added an air of respectability among the members of the middle class who were coming to dominate civic society after the war.<sup>30</sup> By engaging in work that asserted the centrality of middle-class Americans in civic life, the Legion nullified working-class efforts to grab the moral high ground in politics. Such work also suggested that solutions to problems, both in communities and nation-wide, could be found first through the collective action of united citizens rather than through state intervention.

### **“How can you teach Americanism with a pencil and paper?” Americanism, youth work, and citizenship training**

Legionnaires also spent considerable time participating in programs designed to teach children about the principles of Americanism by exposing them to particular kinds of experiences that would mold their civic characters. The Legion began some of these programs from scratch, like its popular youth baseball league that continues to the present

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, April 18, 1924, p. 8

<sup>30</sup> David I. Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), p. 173

day. Others it encouraged members to get involved in. The Legion developed a strong relationship with the Boy Scouts of America during the 1920s and promoted members' involvement in scouting through the interwar period. It promoted playground construction projects by members with the support of the PRAA. The organization also encouraged young men to sign up for Civilian Military Training Camps, where they could experience the citizenship-molding power of military drill while supporting American preparedness.

Legion support for baseball, scouting, and drill was designed to provide socializing experiences for boys and young men that would yield the kind of civic consciousness that would ensure the survival of Americanist ideals in peacetime. For all their talk of virtue, even manly virtue, Legionnaires were not Victorian throwbacks. They did not judge character as an expression of one's innate nature. Walter W. Head, a national officer for the Boy Scouts of America and Rotary International, echoed this sentiment in the *American Legion Monthly* in November, 1932, claiming, "many of us err, in working with our sons of our pupils or our employes [sic] or Boy Scouts under our supervision, in assuming that character is inherent. It is not born in one boy and left out of another."<sup>31</sup> Thinking of citizenship as the execution of particular behaviors, Legionnaires focused on providing experiences that would encourage individual children to see their own conduct as bound by the needs of their peers and the expectations of the larger national community. In this regard, the Legion understood itself to be in competition with radicals, whose own efforts to convert American young people to an entirely different conception of social obligation (to class, to worldwide revolution) the

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<sup>31</sup> Walter W. Head, "Boys Will be Men," *American Legion Monthly*, November 1932, p. 40.

Legion feared would gain significant converts if not counteracted.<sup>32</sup> Sports, scouting, and military camp experiences were the Legion's answer to how to generate the sense of loyalty to the group and subversion of individual for the needs of the whole Progressive thinkers had sought for a generation. In this way, such activities were the Legion's moral equivalent of war, particularly for the impressionable young.<sup>33</sup>

Legionnaires' nearly-exclusive focus on boys' citizenship training represented their belief that boys were the future of the American nation as both its future leaders and citizen-soldiers. While not dismissing the idea of women's citizenship out of hand, the way the Legion constructed Americanism's hierarchy of civic actions and gave clear preference to what they saw as masculine contributions to American society. By frequently referencing their own military service as the essence of good citizenship and attacking the women and ministers in the pacifist movement, Legionnaires clearly placed service under arms to the state as the highest form of civic contribution to the nation. The Legion cited other definitively masculine values of good citizenship, including work ethic, personal ambition, and the ability to be a rational, deliberative voter.<sup>34</sup> For

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<sup>32</sup> For more on how American communists were building competing socializing experiences for young people in the interwar period, see, Paul C. Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999)

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the head of the Pittsburg branch of the Playground Association of America, George Johnson, believed play could become the moral equivalent of war as well. Echoing the famous essay by William James, Johnson published his own essay in *Playground* in 1912 entitled, "Play as a Moral Equivalent of War," arguing that American children needed play to harness the 'spunk' or feistiness inherent in children. Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Moral Reform* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 82-3.

<sup>34</sup> Lucy Salyer has described this conception of citizenship as "the warrior ideal of citizenship," or "martial citizenship." Francesca Morgan argues that a "male-centered" nationalism existed in American political culture since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, reinforced by the actions of patriotic women. Liette Gidlow has argued that the emphasis Get-Out-The-Vote drives of the 1920s placed on encouraging seemingly more rational and deliberative elite whites to vote harbored similar gender biases. Lucy E. Salyer, "Baptism by Fire: Race, Military Service, and U.S. Citizenship Policy, 1918-1935," *Journal of American History*, vol. 91:3 (December 2004) pp. 847-76; Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Liette Gidlow, "Delegitimizing Democracy: 'Civic

Legionnaires it was of utmost importance to reach the future political and business leaders of the nation with programs that would help shape their character and senses of civic obligation consistent with Americanism.

The Legion's particular attention to boys' citizenship training also reflected the unique interaction of the organization's acceptance of the Progressive model of learning-while-doing and its belief that veterans themselves had experienced similar educative moments through the course of their military service. Legionnaires preferred to give boys similar experiences to those they believed had helped to transform their own civic consciousness. Boy Scouts and CMTC programs most clearly demonstrated this tendency of the Legion's to encourage citizenship training programs that most closely mirrored military service. CMTC in particular echoed with the memory of the Plattsburg Movement that was so important to many early Legion leaders. Sports, too, carried the same kind of mental and physical disciplining capacity. By directly participating in recreational activities with boys that reinforced particular citizenship lessons, Legionnaires could also provide youngsters with role models for becoming good Americans.<sup>35</sup>

Beginning in the mid 1920s the Legion was attracted to the potential of playgrounds to provide socializing experiences that could build children's citizenship values. The reasons Legion leadership gave to members for why they should support the complicated task of getting a playground built in their community echoed the importance recreation reformers had given for playgrounds' social usefulness since the 1890s.

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Slackers,' the Cultural Turn, and the Possibilities of Politics," *Journal of American History*, vol. 89:3 (December 2002) pp. 922-57.

<sup>35</sup> This argument was essentially the one Walter W. Head used to encourage Legionnaires' participation in scouting. Head, "Boys Will be Men," p. 40.

Recreation advocates stressed the importance of creating alternatives for children to the street for their leisure hours beyond the watchful eyes of teachers and parents. While affinity for ideas like recapitulation theory, promoted by turn-of-the-century psychologists to explain how children's social development mirrored instinctual remainders from different epochs of human evolution, had waned, the belief in a connection between physical exercise and moral development remained.<sup>36</sup> Emerging from their own experience of the social value of military drill, Legionnaires embraced the connection between moral rectitude, personal loyalty, and physical activities that were carefully crafted and monitored by the proper adult authorities. Legionnaires echoed in the interwar period playground reformers' arguments that playgrounds would both reduce juvenile delinquency and ameliorate the development of children's physical and moral qualities. While the Legion engineered no comprehensive study of how many playgrounds and parks were constructed by posts during the interwar period, in a 1927 survey of community betterment projects 72 out of 1706 posts that replied reported promoting the creation of parks and 66 reported promoting playground construction.<sup>37</sup>

Legion efforts to build playgrounds reunited it with PRAA. During the 1920s and 30s the Legion became one of several voluntary and civic organizations the PRAA partnered with to further recreation reform at the grassroots level, with playground construction the heart of that effort.<sup>38</sup> In 1924 the Legion announced it had joined with the PRAA to promote the creation of a "recreation system" in communities nationwide.

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<sup>36</sup> Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 242-7, Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>37</sup> *Report of the Director of the National Americanism Commission*, (Indianapolis: American Legion, 1922) quoted from Kent M. Krause, "From Americanism to Athleticism: A History of the American Legion Junior Baseball Program" (unpublished dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1998), p. 53, *The Huddle*, May, 1930, p. 2, *Minnesota Legionnaire*, February 24, 1937, p. 3, Dan Sowers, "Activity Report of the Community Service Division," *Americanism, Community Betterment, ALHQ*

<sup>38</sup> Knapp and Hartsoe, *Play for America*, pp. 84-9

The idea of a recreation system included the construction of playgrounds and the staffing of municipal recreation offices with either professional recreation managers or volunteers. It also involved the municipal support of community drama and music in a variety of forms and the inclusion of physical education in school curriculum. That year PRAA also offered five scholarships for interested Legionnaires to attend its recreation worker school in Chicago for a month that summer.<sup>39</sup> The Legion and PRAA further coordinated recreation efforts when the PRAA encouraged the Legion to urge its posts to apply for grants for playground construction made available by the William E. Harmon Foundation, a fund the PRAA had helped the wealthy New York real estate developer create in 1922. In 1924, 99 of the roughly 750 applications the Harmon Foundation received for grants worth \$10,000 or ten percent of the cost of land needed for playground construction were from Legion posts.<sup>40</sup>

Armed with guides from PRAA on how to accomplish the considerable task of constructing a playground, the American Legion remained interested in playground construction throughout the interwar era. Posts in small towns and larger cities were encouraged to form committees of interested civic groups, organize campaigns to secure land through bonds, taxes, or private donations, and construct new playgrounds in highly organized ways. Posts received advice on what kinds of sports playgrounds should

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<sup>39</sup> "Tentative Outline of Program for Cooperation Between the National Americanism of the American Legion and the Playground and Recreation Association of America Including its Community Service Department and National Physical Education Service, no date (1924), Garland Powell, Bulletin, June 19, 1924, Americanism, Cooperation, Playgrounds, ALHQ

<sup>40</sup> Knapp and Hartsoe, *Play for America*, pp. 95-6, Mary Bettie Brady to Garland Powell, July 8, 1924, Cooperation, Playgrounds, ALHQ

support, what kinds of equipment to buy, even how to landscape such spaces properly to provide children with enough shade.<sup>41</sup>

The Legion also turned to youth sports to provide socializing experiences for boys that would produce good citizens. In 1926 it launched its own youth baseball league from scratch, the most ambitious of its youth activities programs. Youth baseball not only served the kind of educative function but provided communities a venue at which it could gather and collectively cheer the best of their youth. Teams played through a series of local, state and regional tournament rounds before four teams played in a final round, the Junior World Series, held in conjunction with the American Legion National Convention. The tournament at the center of Junior Baseball, therefore, provided a nationalizing effect within the program as well, as competition could make tangible communities' places in the greater nation. The focus of the entire league on reaching the Junior World Series and its ability to rally communities around locally-raised teams made Legion-sponsored squads a source of community pride. The Legion worked with Rotary Clubs, business associations and civic groups to raise money to equip teams for the season.<sup>42</sup>

Legionnaires who were instrumental in establishing the program argued that organized baseball could grab youngsters at a particularly vulnerable age (between 14 and 16, as league rules established eligibility for players) and give them practical lessons

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<sup>41</sup> *Minnesota Legionnaire*, February 25, 1931, pp. 1, 3, March 3, 1931, p. 1, May 13, 1931, pp. 1, 4, February 24, 1937, pp. 2-3, *The Huddle*, May 1930, p. 2

<sup>42</sup> Support from professional baseball and corporations further ensured the viability of the Junior Baseball program. To cover the expenses of travel for teams as they advanced up the tournament ladder the Legion secured \$50,000 from Major League Baseball. Legion friend and Major League Baseball Commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis was instrumental in securing this support. Organized Baseball contributed money to support the baseball league in every year during the interwar era except 1933 and 1934, when several newspapers picked up the slack. In Minnesota, Minneapolis-based General Mills offered free bats and balls to 250 Junior Baseball teams in the state through its Wheaties brand of cereal. In exchange, posts receiving equipment for their teams had to publicize the gift to local newspapers. Kent M. Krause, "From Americanism to Athleticism," pp. 86-93, 96-104, *Minnesota Legionnaire*, April 28, 1937, pp. 1-2

in the kinds of civic values that they would need to be good citizens later in life. One of the program's earliest and most enthusiastic supporters, L.B. "Stub" Allison, the Athletics Director at the University of South Dakota, asked the National Americanism Commission as it met to organize the baseball league in 1926, "how can you teach Americanism with a pencil and paper?" He continued, "you have got to teach these kids Americanism by teaching them to meet competition, by teaching them to play the game, and that is the only way you can teach them."<sup>43</sup> The NAC made an even more explicit connection between the rules of citizenship and the rules of sport in its endorsement of a baseball league plan to the 1925 National Convention, a year before the league became operational: "A fundamental of good citizenship is fair play. If fair play in athletes can be drilled into a boy so that it becomes a part of him, the spirit of fairness is virtually certain to carry over into the business and political relations of manhood."<sup>44</sup>

That idea that in an organized league boys would learn to follow mandatory rules of conduct that ensured the best team won represented how Legionnaires believed political participation by properly-enlightened citizens should be done. Like the honest ballplayer, the citizen participated in the democratic system with the spirit of "fair play" in mind, neither yielding in his own cause nor stepping outside the bounds of good civic conduct to attain victory for his position – through inciting ethnic or class identities among fellows or by attacking the rules themselves through radical ideology. Winning came through the integrity of one's own effort and playing fair demonstrated respect for the sanctity of the democratic system that required unselfish participation from everyone. In its 1927 the NAC further elaborated on the connection between good sportsmanship

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<sup>43</sup> "Minutes of the National Americanism Commission," May 11-12, 1926," p. 25, ALHQ

<sup>44</sup> *Proceedings of the Seventh National Convention of the American Legion Omaha, Nebraska October 5 to 9, 1925* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925), p. 169

and good citizenship as taught by Junior Baseball, listing six major shared principles

between the two ideals in its report to that year's national convention:

1. The good sportsman has learned respect for the rules. The good citizen has also learned respect for the rules, though the rules he respects are more properly known as laws.
2. The good sportsman has learned fair play. The good citizen has also learned fair play in that he is always tolerant of the political, economic, and religious views of others.
3. The good sportsman has learned loyalty. The good citizen has also learned loyalty, the basis of all sound organizations.
4. The good sportsman has learned teamwork. The good citizen has also learned teamwork, which is merely another name for cooperation. A nation of individualists would pass swiftly into anarchy.
5. The good sportsman has learned gameness. A good citizen has also learned gameness in that he does not capitulate or whine when the tide sets in against him. The grumbler lacks sportsmanship.
6. The good sportsman has learned democracy. The good citizen has also learned democracy in that he recognizes no standard of human excellence save merit.<sup>45</sup>

Some of the unique contours of baseball strategy exemplified the conception of loyalty as the subsidence of personal will to the needs of the group.<sup>46</sup> Writing to endorse the Junior Baseball program, former star Washington Senators pitcher Walter Johnson noted in the *American Legion Monthly* in 1928, "the man at bat is sure he can whale the ball out of the lot, but there's a man on base and the other side is one run ahead, an the manager has told him he must sacrifice. So he lays down the ball along the baseline and gives up the

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<sup>45</sup> *Proceedings of the Ninth National Convention of the American Legion, Paris, France September 19-22, 1927, New York City, N.Y., October 18, 1927* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925) p. 97

<sup>46</sup> This conception of loyalty, developed by Josiah Royce in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was present in the thought of Joseph Lee and other play reformers. Lee had studied with Royce at Harvard. Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals*, pp. 95-6.

chance to fatten his average...that's cooperation, that's team work. A man who has learned the lesson of team work in baseball is going to work better with other men when his baseball days are over, and I think I can safely say that he will be a useful citizen."<sup>47</sup>

Small ball made good Americans.

To promote these civic lessons beyond simply playing the games, the Legion implemented a few reminders of good citizenship in the course of running the league. Coaches and organizers were instructed to make sure their players understood good sportsmanship. Games began with a patriotic presentation of colors and players were required to recite from memory the following Code of Sportsmanship:

Keep the rules  
Keep faith with your comrades  
Keep your temper  
Keep yourself fit  
Keep a stout heart in defeat  
Keep your pride under victory  
Keep a sound soul, a clean mind and a healthy  
body.<sup>48</sup>

Players would be ejected for using profanity, throwing equipment and taunting or gesturing to their opponents. To encapsulate the ideal Junior Baseball experience, the Legion sponsored a juvenile novel by Harold M. Sherman, which followed the exploits of a fictional team from Michigan through the Junior Baseball season and the national tournament. The squad overcame class divisions that had gripped their town and cut their best player who was one day too old for the rules and marched on to the World Series.<sup>49</sup>

In an outcome that would hardly surprise contemporary observers of organized youth sports, the Legion found it very difficult to balance the desire to teach good

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<sup>47</sup> Walter Johnson, "A Quarter Million Strong," *American Legion Monthly*, July 1928, p. 20

<sup>48</sup> Krause, "From Americanism to Athleticism," pp. 130-1

<sup>49</sup> Harold M. Sherman, *Batter Up! A Story of American Legion Junior Baseball* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1930)

citizenship through its baseball league with players, coaches, and communities' desire to win. Cheating was rampant in Junior Baseball as teams fielded players older than the league's 16-year-old limit. By 1929 one out of every three regional championship teams in department tournaments were disqualified for having ineligible players. Towns complained bitterly that their rivals had assembled what amounted to all-start teams drawn from entire cities or over several counties. Coaches, who were not required to be Legionnaires, ran star pitchers out for game after game in tournaments, risking injury to teenage arms. Players romped un-chaperoned through hotels and tournament host cities. The success of Junior Baseball in garnering strong community following placed the Legion in the unenviable position of wanting reform without disrupting the golden goose. Organizers decided only to tinker with rules that made fielding teams more fair and decided against re-asserting the league's citizenship mission over its competitive structure. The national tournament was simply too popular and brought the Legion too much positive publicity and gate revenue to give up.<sup>50</sup>

During the 1920s the American Legion also supported previously-established programs for guiding boys and young men towards a full conception of citizenship that respected the principles of Americanism. Very early in its history the Legion endorsed the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) as a viable option for posts engaging in boys work. Legion founder Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. was already an advocate of American scouting, as had been his father, and pushed the Legion to adopt a close relationship with the BSA. Roosevelt, Jr. joined the BSA executive committee in 1921. During the early 1920s Legion national convention repeatedly resolved that posts should sponsor troops. Since troops operated under the leadership and organization of local citizens and the BSA

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<sup>50</sup> Krause, "From Americanism to Athleticism," pp. 133-49

emphasized the citizenship-building and Americanism-supporting aspects of its program after the war, cooperation between the two organizations was a happy marriage.

Ideologically, the two organizations occupied the same territory on the right fringe of the Progressive movement.<sup>51</sup>

Legionnaires were attracted to the BSA because of its claims to be inculcating boys with a sense of citizenship thoroughly compatible with the Legion's own. Scouting made more explicit the learning-by-doing spirit organized play offered in developing citizenship in boys. Like Legion members themselves, Boy Scouts engaged in service projects vaguely designed to perform some function of civic betterment.<sup>52</sup> This activism, combined with the code of conduct scouts were required to abide by, led Legionnaires to embrace scouting as teaching boys the kind of disinterested, community-minded idea of citizenship that would serve them well as adults. In selecting their patrol leaders, scouts also received training in how to make good decisions in a democracy. Further, scouting was a nationalizing experience. "Scouting knows no race or creed or class," the *Minnesota Legionnaire* noted. "It is available to farm or city boy alike...it serves rich and poor. Its aim is to help each of these boys to become the best citizen that he can make of himself."<sup>53</sup> Legionnaires believed they were aptly suited to work with boys towards this aim.

Because scouting offered a similar conception of citizenship to that of the Legion and promised boys outdoorsy adventure, Legion support for the scouting movement was strikingly self-reflective. Supporting an organization that promoted a similar idea of

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<sup>51</sup> Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy*, p. 151, 178-85, Atwood H. Townsend, "Hitting the Scout Trail," *American Legion Weekly*, June 23, 1922, p. 18

<sup>52</sup> Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy*, p. 175

<sup>53</sup> Townsend, "Hitting the Scout Trail," p. 6, *Minnesota Legionnaire*, July 4, 1934, p. 4

citizenship in practice as its own helped to validate the Legion's Americanism. Further, the way scouting placed boys in a disciplining and physically strenuous environment out on the hiking trail was reminiscent of veterans' own experiences on the march, which they believed instilled in them particular, masculine, civic virtues that formed the basis of the Legion's approach to citizenship generally. Support for scouting cemented participating boys' elevated place, therefore, within the civic hierarchy the Legion was constructing for the American democracy, with itself and other masculine citizens at the top.<sup>54</sup> While the Legion did not make the connection explicitly between scouting and military preparedness, scouts clearly made good prospective soldiers, or at least come to reflect the civic values military service imparted on those who experienced it. By helping boys in their pursuit "the lure of outdoor life and adventure," was the BSA's greatest appeal, "an almost universal desire and dream of the normal American boy," Legionnaires believed they provided more than role models. "The boys see heroes in the persons of the World War veterans," the NAC noted in its report to the 1924 National Convention.<sup>55</sup> Support for scouting, then, was as much about Legionnaires' attitude about their own civic status as supporting the overall aims of the BSA as boy savers. Scouts provided ready-made little protégés for Legionnaires, who became something of surrogate fathers to scouts. To cement their privileged civic status, Legionnaires included Boy Scouts in patriotic holiday celebrations. This honor was reserved for very few

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<sup>54</sup>Liette Gidlow, *The Big Vote: Gender, Consumer Culture, and the Politics of Exclusion, 1890s-1920s* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 149

<sup>55</sup>*American Legion Monthly*, Feb. 1940, p. 30, *Proceedings of the Sixth National Convention of the American Legion, St. Paul, Minnesota, September 15-19, 1924* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1925), p. 138

patriotic and civic organizations. Boy Scouts even tagged along at Legion conventions, serving as ushers, pages, buglers, and escorts for distinguished guests.<sup>56</sup>

Legionnaires' enthusiasm for this work, which far trumped any other civic betterment work they pursued in terms of sheer participation, suggests that a ready-made venue in which members could shape future American men in their own image held considerable appeal. In the 1927 survey by Americanism Community Service Division Director Dan Sowers, sponsoring Boy Scout troops ranked first among the scores of civic betterment programs Legion posts reported engaging in. The survey revealed about 17 percent of posts (292 out of 1706 respondents) had done such work in the past year.<sup>57</sup> Figures from studies of the BSA indicate that the participation rate was likely much higher. During the 1920s, as BSA executives sought out more service club support for troop sponsorship, Legion-affiliated troops increased dramatically. By 1925 741 troops found help from Legion members, up from about 530 in 1921. In 1940, NAC Director Homer Chaillaux reported about 12,000 Legionnaires were sponsoring 2,700 scout troops and 200 Cub Scout packs. In all, about 30 percent of posts reported doing Boy Scout-related work by 1941.<sup>58</sup> Support was not limited to more populous states or larger communities. For instance, a survey of community projects in the Iowa Department in 1928 revealed 42 out of 179 responding posts had engaged in Boy Scout work (23 percent). Of those posts, the largest (Cedar Rapids) had 952 members while the smallest

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<sup>56</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, Dec. 1, 1922, p. 9, *Minnesota Legionnaire*, July 26, 1939, p. 7

<sup>57</sup> Sowers, "Activity Report of the Community Service Division," p. 5 *Americanism*, Civic Betterment, ALHQ

<sup>58</sup> Macleod, , *Building Character in the American Boy*, p. 191, 203, *American Legion Monthly*, Feb., 1940, p. 31, William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), p. 281

(Maynard) had a membership of only eleven. The median size for posts supporting Boy Scout work in Iowa was 51 members.<sup>59</sup>

While the Boy Scouts only hinted at a military-styled training regiment for boys, the Civilian Military Training Camp program provided a more direct way for the Legion to support the kinds of experiences for young men it thought would foster particular civic values. During the 1920s and 30s the Legion encouraged young men to attend these camps in the summer months. The camps were a creation of the National Defense Act of 1920 and were under the direction of the War Department to give young men aged 17 to 24 rudimentary military training that may be of use in a national emergency. These month-long camps also served a civic function, instructing attendees on American governmental institutions and the duties and privileges of citizenship. Camps were established in throughout the nine Army corps areas of the United States, including at some of the same Plattsburg, New York campgrounds several Legion founders had traveled to in 1915 for similar training. While the Army ran the camps and federal money covered all expenses, Legionnaires provided encouragement to young men and their parents for them to attend the camps, even inviting them to special evening meetings with veterans of other wars to entice them to enroll.<sup>60</sup>

Legionnaires were careful to note that CMTC did not recreate the military experience in full for young men but merely gave them very rudimentary training in drill and Army life. They promoted CMTC because the civic values the experience imparted on attendees mirrored closely those that veterans had acquired through their own service

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<sup>59</sup> American Legion Iowa Department Records, box 7, folders 5-6, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City Branch.

<sup>60</sup> Gidlow, *The Big Vote*, p. 148, Amico Barone, "C.M.T.C.," *American Legion Monthly*, May 1933, p. 5, *The Huddle*, April 1929, p. 3

experiences. CMTC, in fact, had been built on the Plattsburg Movement model which several Legion founders had found so attractive in nationalizing and Americanizing American men. Training camps provided environments that benefited the character and social consciousness of the men who attended. In terms of personal development, the camp experience instilled young men with the masculine values of discipline, decisiveness, and loyalty to the group while enhancing their physical abilities through drill and a wide variety of sports and games.<sup>61</sup> “Prompt response to orders, habits of obedience, teamwork on the drill field, in athletic sports, and in the give-and-take of recreation, all mold character,” the *Badger Legionnaire* claimed in 1926. “Many a shy lad first tastes the joy of comradeship; many an arrogant youth learns mutual consideration and respect for others’ rights.”<sup>62</sup> Such values, along with the civics lessons young men received in camp, made for good citizens and further privileged particular male values and experiences with the civic culture.

Camps also instilled particular nationalistic values in attendees. Contact with the Army and service under the Flag, even if for a month, inculcated a greater love of country the Legion argued. Further, as Plattsburg Movement advocates had argued, camp life helped to mesh together men from various class, environmental, and ethnic backgrounds into common stock. “Freckle-faced Irish lads, olive-skinned Italians, brown-eyed Yankees, black-haired French boys, tow-headed Poles – Americans all and within twenty-four hours after the first roll call they are calling each other by their first names, discovering a keen zest for new companionships and enjoying a completely changed

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<sup>61</sup> Barone, “C.M.T.C.,” p. 51, *Badger Legionnaire*, March 17, 1926, p. 6, April 28, 1926, p. 5

<sup>62</sup> *Badger Legionnaire*, March 17, 1926, p. 6

mode of life,” claimed a Legion author in 1932.<sup>63</sup> This simulation of service under arms, even if held under the guise of summer camp, encouraged the kind of classless, ethnic-free conception of what it meant to be American. Legionnaires claimed their own military service had inculcated in them.

While the Legion tried to create and support experiences that would produce better citizens in the interwar period, it saw the public school system as the most viable venue for these kinds of lessons. Public education ensured the vitality of American democracy by ensuring all citizens were qualified intellectually to participate in civic affairs and equipped with the skills to succeed economically. Public school, therefore, represented both a social and civic good while providing the kind of developmental environment children needed to become good citizens. Legionnaires argued for the importance of free and high-quality public education first and then pushed for greater patriotic education. The Legion encouraged members to support improving their local public schools, particularly through better funding, higher teachers salaries, and facilities improvements.<sup>64</sup>

The Legion took this message to the community and nation through American Education Week, an annual campaign the NAC created in 1921 in partnership with the National Education Association (NEA). American Education Week encouraged broader popular support for public education improvements and demonstrated how schools could serve particular patriotic and civic education ends. Through its partnership with the NEA the Legion demonstrated sympathy with major aspects of the Progressive school reform agenda. For the Legion, public schools were quintessential nationalizing centers, capable

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<sup>63</sup> Barone, “C.M.T.C.,” p. 51

<sup>64</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, Nov. 7, 1924, p. 8

of reaching every community with a similar conception of Americanism. The NEA and Legion's NAC agreed on a variety of goals for education reform, including mandatory attendance laws, higher qualifications for teachers, English-only instruction in public schools and citizenship requirements for teachers, the mandatory study of the Constitution and American history, better physical education facilities and programs, and the stamping out of adult illiteracy. This agenda attracted a variety of supporters. In 1922, United States Commissioner of Education John J. Tigert directed his bureau to support American Education Week. The Legion also sought out the aid of a wide variety of civic, charitable, and professional organizations for help in organizing and publicizing local efforts during the week's observation. By 1924 the program drew the support of more than 140 other organizations. The Legion and NEA invited the American Bar Association and Daughters of the American Revolution to join the effort as sponsors in 1926.<sup>65</sup>

The Legion and NEA devised thematic focuses for each day of American Education Weeks. While the exact titles of these thematic programs changed almost every year, American Education Week honed in annually on three central messages during the interwar era. Most plainly, the effort was designed to encourage community political and financial support for public schools generally. To that end, the NEA and Legion emphasized what well-funded schools with modern curricula could accomplish for students socially and economically and how spending on new lines of study, like vocational education, was necessary to keep communities competitive. Particular days

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<sup>65</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, October 20, 1922, p. 14, J.W. Crabtree, "The Kind of Schools We Want," *American Legion Monthly*, February 1933, p. 17, *Proceedings of the Sixth National Convention of the American Legion*, pp. 126-7, *Proceedings of the Eighth National Convention of the American Legion, Philadelphia, PA, October 11-15, 1926* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1927) p. 77. Through most of the history of the program the Legion, NEA, and Bureau or Office of Education were its principle sponsors.

focused on the need to give students in all American communities an equal opportunity to receive a quality education. Organizers emphasized how schools enriched civic life by providing entertainment, public health, athletic, and adult education opportunities to the community as a whole. During the Depression, schools were cast as engines for economic recovery by producing more qualified workers. American Education Week also assured community members that public schools fit neatly into existing social institutions rather than competing against them. The Legion encouraged ministers to preach about public schools on Sundays of American Education Week, and thematic days argued for a connection between the moral lessons of school, church, and home. Finally, American Education week demonstrated the patriotic and civically educative potential of public schools. Students learned of their constitutional rights and responsibilities during American Education Week activities, particularly need for the disinterested execution of political rights. During the Depression, the Legion and NEA framed school's ability to train youngsters in their civic and patriotic duties as inherently conservative, preserving the institutions of democracy and the American Constitution from the forces of radicalism.

### **Political Education**

Besides promoting particular experiences that could lead citizens towards a better understanding of Americanism, the Legion also participated in what it called "political education," or the direct education of citizens in the tasks of governance. These efforts also focused on the importance of citizens' performance, in this case of specific tasks within political life. In a democracy, the most elementary responsibility to perform is to

vote. Like many civic-minded groups in the 1920s, the Legion was concerned by the steady decline in voting participation rates and joined Get-Out-The-Vote campaigns. While these campaigns set targets for participation rates, the Get-Out-The-Vote effort was as much about transforming how Americans thought about how they should approach the civic act of voting as agitating for the most people possible vote. The Legion and its partners were concerned about the quality, not simply the quantity, of participants in American elections. Observers complained that white, native-born, affluent citizens in particular were particularly guilty of not voting. Such citizens were compared to draft dodgers with the epithet “civic slackers,” and Get-Out-The-Vote efforts that the Legion was involved in sought the participation of these Americans particularly, not working-class or ethnic voters. By reasserting the dominance of middle-class, native-born, male voters, Get-Out-The-Vote campaigns ensured the civic values that such persons promoted received heightened power within the political culture.<sup>66</sup>

The Legion marked this desire not simply by endorsing the Get-Out-The-Vote movement but in how it distinguished good and bad voting. Good voters, the Legion claimed, made decisions not simply for what was good for them individually but according to what was good for their community, their state, and the nation, for “the interests of the individual and the interests of the nation are the same in the long run.” Good voting, based on “an informed intelligence,” moreover, was the same as when, “by hard work and study, [a man] swings a shrewd business deal and makes an extra thousand dollars.” The class perspective of this comparison created a clear dichotomy between the good, affluent voter and the implied foil to the metaphor – the bad, working-class voter,

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<sup>66</sup> Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 189-92, Gidlow, *The Big Vote*, pp. 10, 30-42

who voted not according to “informed intelligence” but how an elected official could best represent his own individual needs.<sup>67</sup> The real danger in the lack of qualified participation in electoral politics to the Legion was the ability of determined minorities with little regard for the common good to command undue power. The Legion worried about the exaggerated power non-voting citizens would yield to radicals. It warned, “if the non-voting citizen of the United States does not re-assert his rights, he is going to find his Government some day nothing more than a soviet of organized selfishness.”<sup>68</sup>

The Legion saw nothing hypocritical in urging veterans to vote to ensure the organization’s legislative aims of veterans’ benefits and hospitalization were met and the broader issue of voter turnout. As a result, the Legion’s first audience for its Get-Out-The-Vote efforts were its own members. In 1920, the *American Legion Weekly* warned that the federal government’s unresponsiveness on veterans’ issues was a direct result of their lack of electoral clout. While the Legion did not endorse political candidates, the article made clear that veterans should support their own who were running for office.<sup>69</sup>

In 1923 the Legion began outward-focused Get-Out-The-Vote efforts. Its first major grassroots campaign, however, came for the national election in the following year. For the Congressional elections of 1926 the Legion partnered with the Republican-organized National Civic Federation (NCF), an off-shoot of the evolving educative style of electoral campaign strategies. The Legion provided the grassroots manpower for the NCF, organizing local meetings with local business, labor, civic and women’s groups to plan publicity and voter education drives. Legion posts distributed cards reminding citizens to vote, making sure such cards bore the Legion insignia. It also handed out tags

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<sup>67</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, October 17, 1924, p. 8

<sup>68</sup> *American Legion Monthly*, November 1926, p. 34

<sup>69</sup> J.W. Rixey Smith, “Your Voice and Your Vote,” *American Legion Weekly*, July 16, 1920, pp. 3-4

that school children collected from those who had voted; classes that collected the most won prizes. Despite these efforts, voter turnout did not budge. The Legion mounted a smaller Get-Out-The-Vote effort in 1928 but could not muster nearly the grassroots energy (or funds from the NCF) for the cause. Symbolic of this failure, Get-Out-The-Vote activists failed to get golf courses to close on Election Day. While internally it continued to spur members to vote, broad-based Get-Out-The-Vote efforts by the organization collapsed.<sup>70</sup>

The Legion devised a more hands-on approach to teaching civics to high school boys in the late 1930s with the advent of the Boys' State program. The brainchild of several officers in the Illinois Department, Boys' State was a model government program that allowed high schoolers to play the roles of state elected officials and bureaucrats at camps in the summer. At the first Boys' State program in 1935, 600 high school boys gathered at the state fairgrounds in Springfield, where they were divided into fictitious districts and became members of two arbitrarily-assigned dummy political parties. Boys followed procedures for nominating candidates for all elected state offices, from governor to auditor, and for county-level offices down to the level of coroner. Boys not nominated or elected to office became members of the state police or health and safety board. The Legion endorsed the Illinois model for citizenship-training camps at its 1936 national convention. Chambers of Commerce, Rotary, Kiwanis, and other service clubs helped defray the cost of transporting and housing students at Boys' State. Boys were chosen for camps through nominations by their high schools or by describing their interest in civics to Legion officers. Legion leaders took particular pride in pointing to a boy from Portland, Oregon, who won his Boys' State election for governor in 1937. The 15-year-

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<sup>70</sup> Gidlow, *The Big Vote*, pp. 104-7, McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, pp. 199-204

old, whose father was working on a W.P.A. project and whose mother was dead, was chosen based on an outstanding essay he wrote that “compared the purchasing power of the people of the United States with that of the peoples of other nations, and pointed out the doors of opportunity which swing open in a land of democracy.” By 1939, 24 departments had begun Boys’ State programs on the Illinois model.<sup>71</sup>

Advocates of the Boys’ State program in the Legion hailed the programs’ practical and ideological usefulness for training future citizens. It stood in the tradition of other Legion-endorsed civic education efforts like Junior Baseball, Boy Scouts, and CMTC in that particular, guided experience could yield specific results in the civic behaviors of young citizens. In the case of Boys’ State, the behaviors Legionnaires wanted to promote simply were more narrowly tailored. The program essentially fast-forwarded the civic lives of high schoolers to the time when they could vote and hold office in the hopes that experiencing such activities would encourage them to take keener interest in executing their citizenship duties as adults later in life. More importantly, however, Boys’ State counterbalanced radical criticism of the American system young people may have encountered either in communist-established rival summer camps or in the classrooms of leftist teachers in college. One of the founders of the Boys’ State program in Illinois argued his plan filled a dangerous gap in the civic education of young men in their late education careers, when their high school curriculum may fail to impress upon them important lessons of American civics and history and their college professors may teach them that “our form of government has outlived its usefulness, that it is just a relic of a generation that is dead,” and must be replaced through revolution by a socialist

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen F. Chadwick, “These Constitute a State,” *American Legion Monthly*, September 1936, pp. 10-1, 50-1, Sam H. Cobb, “Statesmen of Tomorrow,” *American Legion Monthly*, September 1937, p. 66, *National Legionnaire*, February 1939, p. 5

system. Commander of the Ohio Department, Sam Cobb, argued that Boys' State helped make abstract governing concepts more easy to understand through practical experience and that the lessons boys' garnered from drafting bills, trying court cases, and enacting laws taught participants, "that a Constitution and a Bill of Rights is something vital and indispensable to the preservation of democracy; that in the orderly processes of law are our only safeguards of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and that dictatorships—communism, fascism and other theories of absolutism – are incompatible with true Americanism."<sup>72</sup> Boys' State fit, therefore, into the Legion's broader strategic vision of giving young people practical experiences through which they could combat the forces of radical propaganda the Legion believed would tempt them, particularly during the Depression.

That a week of playing the part of a county supervisor or state senator would dissuade a young man from accepting radical ideology revealed how much faith the Legion placed in the institutions of the American democratic system rather than any particular outcome that system had regularly yielded. Boys' State focused entirely on the process of democratic governance, not its results. What boys actually did with their model governments was irrelevant: the larger lessons to be learned were the balances of power in state constitutions and how theoretically anyone could access the halls of power if they were interested enough to do so and could gain the confidence of their peers. Boys' State implicit argument about the American political system, then, was it was entirely fair and that the radical critique of it as otherwise was groundless. Boys' State, like Get-Out-The-Vote drives in the 1920s, argued that bad government, then, came a lack of interest on the part of those who could and should be more regularly engaged in

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<sup>72</sup> Chadwick, "These Constitute a State," p. 51, Cobb, "Statesmen of Tomorrow," p. 23

democratic life. Graft, injustice, waste, and the other sins of bad government resulted from a lazy citizenry, not inherent problems or inequities within the system itself. While the alternative educative programs devised in this period by the radical left tried to imbibe young people with a sense of being citizens on a mission for a particular end (class revolution), the Legion's Boys' State asked boys to do nothing but remain loyal to American democratic institutions and to participate in those institutions later in life. By linking the individual student to inherently just democratic institutions and to the broader identity of the nation itself, Boys' State became inherently conservative without needing an overt political agenda.

Boys' State further revealed the Legion's investment in a masculine-centered conception of American citizenship. Only in Arizona, which formed their own derivative programs to the Illinois model, did boys and girls share in the learn-by-doing experience of mock state government together. The American Legion Auxiliary began its own Girls' State program in 1938, but during the rest of the interwar period it remained the junior to Boys' State. By 1940, only nine Departments had Girls' State programs up and running.<sup>73</sup> While not exactly an afterthought, the slow development of Girls' State indicated that the Legion believed training future male citizens was of more vital importance than it was for females. By segregating the experience of mock government by sex and leaving Girls' State as the responsibility of the Auxiliary, inferior in status and numbers to the Legion itself, Legionnaires marked that there were differences in both expectation and responsibility between male and female citizens. Further, by focusing the

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<sup>73</sup> *American Legion Monthly*, June 1936, pp. 22-3, *Proceedings of the 20th National Convention of the American Legion Los Angeles, Calif. Sept. 19-22, 1938* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1939), p. 326, *Proceedings of the 22d National Convention of the American Legion, Boston, Mass., Sept. 23-26, 1940* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941), p. 307

program not simply on political participation but on office seeking and the execution of government authority, Legionnaires groomed Boys' State attendees for leadership positions in American government. By deciding to focus these civics programs on the simulation of elections and office holding, not on alternative political activities like lobbying or the formation of interest groups like the Legion itself, the Legion privileged aspects of the American political system that remained overwhelmingly the domain of men in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the presence of an analog Girls' State program, then, the Legion's approach to these civic lessons further elevated male civic status over that of females.

The gendering of citizenship programs like Boys and Girls' State demonstrated point to the full significance of the American Legion's promotion of Americanism through civic education in the interwar era. Whether or not those directly reached by Legion campaigns dedicated themselves to the kind of citizenship the Legion was promoting was not nearly as important as the boundaries between citizens such campaigns drew and the broader ideological implications they carried. The Legion promoted a conception of citizenship that emphasized knowledge, mastery, and rationality, values that were privileged in the emerging emphasis the political system placed on middle-class participation. These values worked to the detriment of more popular, working-class conceptions of citizenship and political participation, in which having one's interests and political affiliations count for something mattered most. This emphasis on deliberative, rational participation in civic life by native-born citizens mirrored Legion Americanization efforts. By holding all Americans to the same standards of civic behavior, the racial arguments the Legion was making about American

nationalism were only strengthened and those lacking demonstrable abilities to conform to the standards of good civic behavior could be excluded more easily. Finally, the Legion's affinity for a mind-body connection to good citizenship, from CMTC to Boy Scouts to Junior Baseball to even military service itself, further privileged male citizenship over female.

Because Legionnaires believed that Americans more or less like them embodied the true nature of American citizenship, their version of civic nationalism in the interwar period inherently elevated a civic elite over other groups of citizens. With that privilege came augmented power to invalidate the participation of groups with rival interpretations of what American citizenship should mean.<sup>74</sup> The Legion quite self-consciously wielded such power, promoting its civic nationalism as a potent set of ideas that could demolish the radical critique of the American system. Avenues towards greater social justice likely closed as a result. A full interpretation of the conservatism of the Legion's civic nationalism, however, cannot stop there. Legionnaires wanted to do more than cynically secure more power for people in American society like themselves: they wanted American democracy to work better and the American nation to reach its fullest potential. Their own tendency towards self-empowerment in the attainment of those goals gave it plenty of company in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As this chapter has demonstrated, the Legion pulled ideas about the nature of citizenship and the relationship between citizens, the state, and the nation from a surprisingly wide variety of sources within progressivism. Some of these sources evolved in postwar society to become liberal. Accordingly, how the Legion used its elite status to push for more elite privilege becomes a less interesting

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<sup>74</sup> Such an argument is central to Gidlow's treatment of Get-Out-The-Vote drives, which she argues were designed to bolster further white, male elites' status in American civic society. Gidlow, *The Big Vote*

historical question than this alternative: why did the Legion's civic nationalism not turn into a liberal idea, too?

Returning to the anonymous editorial list of civic virtues in the *Iowa Legionaire* that defined what it meant to be a "hundred percent American" offers one route to understanding the Legion's evolving conservative role in political culture. Like that editorialist, Legionnaires believed good citizenship was grounded in personal conduct. Its efforts, accordingly, focused on reforming the civic performance of individuals to better operate within the democracy and serve the nation. This focus on the need for greater individual consciousness that one existed in a web of social and economic relationships that well transcended one's local and parochial contexts had been part of Progressive thought since the turn of the century. Herbert Croly believed it the first step towards achieving the promise of American life. The Legion focused on this aspect of the Progressive vision of good citizenship, displaying considerably less enthusiasm for describing what the state owed the citizen. Part of this lack of enthusiasm reflected strategic choices Legion leaders made since the organization's inception not to comment on political issues outside the immediate purview of veterans' benefits, national defense, or the maintenance of law and order. More significantly, Legionnaires simply believed the state did not have a equal role to play to that of citizens in maintaining the fundamentals of democracy, which it considered an equality of opportunity and equal justice under law. While the Legion did support state action like conservation of natural resources, robust public education, preparedness, even a universal draft of manpower and industry and investigation of war profiteers, it believed the balance of responsibilities in the service of democracy lay with citizens instead of the state.

The Legion shied away from the state playing the role of equal partner in securing a full equality of opportunity as liberals would come to describe it because its members believed fundamentally in the fairness of the American socioeconomic system. Legion enthusiasm for the language of more conservative progressivism, through terms like a fair deal and descriptions of citizens playing by the rules, revealed a faith that many of the problems of American society could be remedied not through significant state intervention or revision of the democratic system, but by citizens behaving in the proper ways to make democracy work correctly. In other words, if citizens did as they should and balanced their needs with those of the greater whole and respected the institutions of democracy, more equitable results would come out of government. This faith in the ultimate fairness of the American political and economic system pushed the Legion to consider any reform agenda that claimed to the contrary a threat to the democratic order. Because that democratic order was at the heart of how the Legion defined the American nation such threats were magnified. The reactionary and educative roles the Legion played in interwar politics must be considered as part of the same effort to get Americans to be true to the ideas of their democracy to the greater glory of their nation.

## Chapter 5

### “An Infallible Antidote:” Americanism and Race

As the American Legion struggled to transform the civic ideals of its Americanism into peacetime political culture, the organization could not ignore how racial difference would weigh upon those ideals. The resumption of high levels of immigration after the war intensified the need for it to explain how aliens would fit into its conception of the nation. In this regard, the Legion was hardly alone in the aftermath of World War I. The Legion's ideas about how racial heterogeneity fit within a conception of the American nation was consistent with the mainstream racism of this era.<sup>1</sup> Legionnaires considered racial difference to be real and significant, capable of explaining the cultural and political differences between societies. In this spirit, the *American Legion Weekly* declared in July, 1919 that “the American Legion and the 100 per cent. Americanism it represents are an infallible antidote for Bolshevism,” which represented the “autocracy of imported ignorance and alien viciousness ... the unbalanced temperament of virulent Slav radicalism.”<sup>2</sup> The Legion accepted the premise of Anglo-Saxon racial supremacy, both globally and within the American context of a multiracial society. It believed immigrants from other ethno-racial backgrounds needed to

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<sup>1</sup> For works that reflect the racial component of national identity in this period, see, John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), pp. 271-299; Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of a Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), and *The Liberty of Strangers: Making the American Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Barbarian Virtues: the United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917*, (New York : Hill and Wang, 2000) and *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Mae M. Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924,” *Journal of American History* vol. 86:1 (June 1999), pp. 67-92; Jonathan M. Hansen *The Lost Promise of Patriotism: Debating American identity, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Robert F. Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics: The Dillingham Commission, 1900—1927* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 2004)

<sup>2</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, July 11, 1919, p. 10

acculturate to Anglo-American cultural and political norms and eschew attachments to ethnic enclaves and former homelands. As a result, historians have considered the Legion to be part of the nativist counter-reaction to postwar diversity.<sup>3</sup>

The Legion's approach towards racial difference was more complicated than simple nativism. Immigrants and other racial minorities had to fit into the Legion's broader nationalizing agenda. Racial difference posed two challenges to its vision of civic nationalism. Since political sophistication of societies was a reflection of inherent racial capabilities, American society had to contend with ethno-racial others whose own genetic backgrounds left their capacity to be good democratic citizens in doubt. Secondly, ethnicity represented a competing identity and level of social obligation to the Legion's nationalist vision. Ethnic identity, Legionnaires believed encouraged members of immigrant communities to retain their loyalty to foreign states over loyalty to their adopted homeland. Such situations violated the Legion's sense that loyalty had to be singular to matter for anything, a concept reflected in its affinity for adding "100 percent" to the concept of Americanism.

Despite the considerable challenges racial heterogeneity posed to its nationalizing mission and to American society more broadly, the Legion remained committed to the fundamentally Progressive idea that outsiders could become American. It offered a seat at the national table to anyone capable of understanding and executing the responsibilities and obligations the American democratic system required of all citizens, although its

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<sup>3</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, pp. 224, 256, 313, Gerstle, *American Crucible*, p. 93, Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *American Historical Review* vol. 99:4 (October 1994) p. 1053.

evaluation of exactly who could meet such a standard was racially biased.<sup>4</sup> Further, particular experiences and environmental adjustments could socialize immigrants and help them to become capable democrats and to identify themselves exclusively as Americans – to “drop the hyphen” as some wartime advocates of Americanization described it. Military service had provided exactly such an experience for the foreign born, and many Legion leaders who had served as officers in the war held up the Americanizing experience of the war as something civil society needed to recreate. The Legion promoted Americanization in its membership and urged the nation to adopt a more robust civic educational system for the foreign born. Legionnaires understood the process of bringing ethno-racial minorities in line with Americanist citizenship principles was difficult, especially for groups in which racial difference was quite considerable in their minds, as in the case for the Japanese and African Americans. But even in those tough cases, and when the pace of immigration outstripped the nation’s capacity to Americanize newcomers and the Legion urged a moratorium on further immigration, the Legion did not abandon the belief that minorities needed to be and could be assimilated into the nation.

The way the Legion reconciled race and nationalism through Progressive political ideals reveals the depth to which the Legion used Progressive ideology for inherently conservative purposes. The Legion’s primary concern about race in the interwar period was its potential to sustain a level of disloyalty and disunity within the national body public. Minority groups’ predilection towards crime and left-wing radicalism, their dubious abilities to be disinterested civic participants, their insistence on retaining

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<sup>4</sup> This sentiment was consistent with the nationalist ideology of progressives like Theodore Roosevelt. Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 47-57

connections to the Old World and even to their old foreign governments concerned the Legion much more than any affect they would have on the dominant Anglo-American Protestant culture of the nation. This deep concern with minorities' loyalty and adherence to the citizenship principles of Americanism led the Legion to adopt what seem like on a casual glance to be contradictory positions in the interwar period. It continued to Americanize immigrants throughout the interwar period and called for more meaningful naturalization ceremonies, but advocated more draconian immigration policies than Congress passed in 1921 and 1924. It praised the advanced level of Japanese civilization but joined with avowed racists in Western states to oppose further Japanese immigration. Members honored the service of African-American soldiers during the war, but the national organization remained silent on segregation. The Legion lobbied Congress to allow the family members of foreign-born men who had served in the American military in World War I to immigrate to the United States outside of the quota system and also against a bill that would have welcomed tens of thousands of Jewish children into the nation as refugees from Hitler. In all of these cases, the Legion recognized the potential for individuals to transcend their race and become American in full, but remained skeptical of the potential for loyalty of the larger groups they represented. Whenever the potential loyalty of minorities, particularly aliens entering the United States, was in question, the Legion erred on the side of exclusion.

The Legion's fixation with the political loyalty of aliens and other minorities stands in contrast with the Ku Klux Klan, the dominant nativist organization of this period. Comparing the way these two important organizations connected race and nation clarifies the full scope of the conservative turn the political culture of the postwar era

took and distinguishes the Legion an organization that in truth represented a competitor, not an ally.<sup>5</sup> The Klan organized its conception of nationalism around the belief that a particular set of people – Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, petit bourgeois -- represented the nation's true identity. Its nationalism intended to unite all those who fit those criteria into a grand national community reflective of the nation's true and divinely-bestowed essence. The Klan therefore used race to divide insiders from outsiders within the nation through the cultural and social meaning race carried for the organization. It also attacked the citizenship status of those within the fold of its chosen people who were not living up to culturally-defined standards of conduct. This construction of a racially and culturally-defined nationalism left the Klan little way to contend with the persistence of racial difference within the nation and the increasing tolerance of religious and cultural diversity within American political culture later in the interwar period. The Legion's racially-charged conservatism could survive, in contrast, by providing outsiders a vehicle to become insiders and focusing on political conceptions of loyalty it applied to all citizens regardless of their race.

### **The Legion's approach to immigrant assimilation**

From its beginning the Legion shared nationalistic Progressives' vision of how to integrate newly-arrived aliens into American society. The organization embraced the concept of Americanization at its first national convention in 1919, linking it with other private actors and remnants of the wartime state in this project.<sup>6</sup> Americanization as the

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<sup>5</sup> I am inspired in this respect by Michael Kazin's call for nuanced and serious study of the right in his review essay "The Grassroots Right: New Histories of U.S. Conservatism in the Twentieth Century," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 97:1 (February 1992), pp. 136-55.

<sup>6</sup> *Outlook*, November 29, 1919, p. 348

Legion conceived of it mirrored what it had been during the war: citizenship and English-language classes for adult immigrants designed to integrate them politically into the nation as quickly as possible.<sup>7</sup> Americanizers sought to create an civic environment through which immigrants would learn to appreciate the values of Americanism on their own terms, but took as a given racial difference and the inferiority of immigrants' native social and political structures. Americanization as practiced by the American Legion and others was a one-way street of accommodation designed to impress newcomers with the values of Americanism as a way to ensure those values' further survival.<sup>8</sup> Although they hoped members would avoid embarrassing or harassing immigrants in this process, Legion leaders showed very little enthusiasm for any kind of cultural exchange with new arrivals.

Legionnaires considered political consciousness the major barrier for aliens' inclusion, one that could be overcome through the collective effort of the native and foreign born to transform that consciousness. The key to the process was to provide the right kinds of experiences for immigrants to appreciate their new obligations as members of the American nation. Legionnaires pointed to the war as one such experience for immigrants who had mustered into the American military during World War I. Service to the nation under arms had transformed their consciousness and assured their growth into full American citizens. "Some of us had but recently arrived in this country and did not even speak English," Legion founding member Eric Fisher Wood wrote in *Forum* in 1919, "and valued America simply as a place in which to grub money. These, during their

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<sup>7</sup> King, *Making Americans*, p. 95-7, Stephen Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), pp. 49-50, 101, 104.

<sup>8</sup> King, *Making Americans*, p. 100.

term of service, learned to speak English, and became inoculated with the spirit of Americanism and grew to realize that the United States is today the greatest, freest and most generous nation in all the world.”<sup>9</sup>

Speaking at commencement for Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut in June 1920, the Legion’s National Americanism Commission chairman and former New York City police commissioner Arthur Woods echoed Wood’s assessment of what immigrants had gained from the war experience. He told his audience that while most immigrants had come to the United States before the war as labor for the American industrial machine, during the war “the new arrivals stood the test. Many of them could not speak English. Many of them knew nothing of our Declaration of Independence or our Constitution. But they knew American men. They had met them man to man and the quality of our manhood won them. They trained together, they endured together, they fought and helped each other together, and they died together. The newcomer, though understanding little, was ready to fight and die for a country that such comrades hold dear.” The Legion urged members to seek out alien veterans and urge them to file the necessary paperwork to secure the automatic citizenship the government had offered all foreign-born military personnel during the war.<sup>10</sup>

The idea that interpersonal interaction in structured environments could produce new social consciousnesses in immigrants was a quintessentially Progressive idea central to the Legion’s Americanization project during the interwar period. Legion members could replace what the kind of educative relationships common service during war had generated for immigrants through community-level activism that connected neighbors to

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Fisher Wood, “The American Legion: Keep Alive the Spirit of the Great War” *Forum*, August 19, 1919, p. 219

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, June 21, 1920, p. 14

a shared sense of identity. Hence, the Legion's philosophy on assimilating immigrants began on a face-to-face level, as it had in the ranks during the war when immigrants removed from their ethnic enclaves got to know native-born Americans perhaps for the first time. Arthur Woods reminded members the immigrant "wants to feel a friendly welcome, he wants to believe that he is wanted here, that he will have a fair chance" and that they should welcome "the newly arrived American without patronizing him."<sup>11</sup> Once immigrants felt the touch of common bond between themselves and their native-born neighbors, Legion leaders advocated a program of formal Americanization education that focused on civics and the English language. The Legion was concerned predominantly about immigrants' assimilation into the American political system for fear of a radicalized foreign-born underclass upsetting the democratic institutions of the nation. In the absence of the Americanizing force of the military, peacetime efforts needed to concentrate their efforts on these two areas to ensure immigrants' civic assimilation and appreciation of Americanism.

The Legion's formal support for Americanization would wane over time as the enormity of the project sank in. This spirit of one-to-one contact, of building a sense of an American nation from that first handshake remained. Legionnaires imagined the entire process of assimilating immigrant populations, whether through formal Americanization or not, as one of breaking down existing conceptions of community centered around ethnicity and replacing them with one in which the native and foreign-born came more closely in contact with one another. This imagination owed a heavy debt to Progressive ideology in the way it emphasized community-based and voluntary action by citizens that contributed to a greater sense of national cohesion. To this end the National Americanism

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<sup>11</sup> Arthur Woods, "Practical Americanism," *American Legion Weekly*, June 11, 1920, p. 6

Commission developed a plan that could coordinate better local responses to the arrival of new alien residents. In 1920 it requested permission from the Department of Labor, the federal agency in charge of administering immigration, to open an office on Ellis Island. This office would gather the names and destinations of all immigrants entering the Port of New York and would alert department and post officers of the impending arrival of these immigrants in their communities so they could prepare to greet them and prepare Americanization efforts. The project failed when Assistant Secretary of Labor Louis Post denied the request.<sup>12</sup>

The government, through the public school system, could augment the capabilities of local people to bring immigrants into the national fold. As Americanizers had for decades, Legionnaires considered the public school system as the ideal existing venue for Americanization work.<sup>13</sup> The Legion lobbied state legislatures to initiate history and civics classes for immigrants in the state public school systems of 12 states – Arizona, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Utah. On the national level, it supported failed bills in Congress in 1920 and 1921 that would have empowered the Bureau of Naturalization to set up English language night schools in the public school system. The Legion's Americanism Commission also endorsed Americanizing curriculum for children in public school. At the 1921 National Convention it called for nation-wide English only

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<sup>12</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, Sept 24, 1920, p. 22

<sup>13</sup> Cecelia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 172-93

instruction in American public schools and the teaching of civics and history as a way to reach immigrant children.<sup>14</sup>

In many communities Legionnaires established and supervised their own night classes. National Headquarters guided posts towards publications by the Bureau of Education they could order from the Government Printing Office for guidance in establishing their own adult education programs. While organization-wide interest in Americanization was spotty, Legion posts' participation in this project could be found in many different local contexts. The Massachusetts Department recorded at its 1924 convention that 30,000 adult foreigners were enrolled in Americanization classes sponsored or run by its posts. In Minneapolis the Legion worked with other patriotic organizations and the city school board to create night schools with a heavy emphasis on American patriotism and the federal Constitution. In Brooklyn in 1921 Legionnaires obtained the names of immigrants who had filed papers to have their final citizenship hearing from authorities and invited them to a series of lectures on American history and government to prepare them for the court examination. Americanization was not limited to cities: in Golden Valley, North Dakota, Legionnaires solicited three public school teachers to set up a night school in the farming community in which Russians, Germans, and Scandinavians had recently settled. These courses focused not only on remedial education but also involved lectures on civics and "constitutional government by, for and of the people," comparisons between the United States and other countries – almost certainly the Soviet Union included – and the meaning of the American Legion preamble.

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<sup>14</sup> King, *Making Americans*, p. 100-20, John F. McClymer, "The Americanization Movement and the Education of the Foreign-Born Adult, 1914-1925, in Benard J. Weiss, ed., *American Education and the European Immigrant: 1840-1940* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), *Proceedings of the Third National Convention of the American Legion, Oct 31-Nov 2, 1921, Kansas City, MO* (Kansas City: Smith-Greives Co. 1921), p. 36.

While these programs required considerable time and pedagogical skill many Legion posts could not muster, direct education methods continued well after the immigration restriction regime of 1924 was established. For example, more than a hundred posts in Iowa reported they had engaged in adult education efforts among the foreign born in the late 1930s.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the difficulty in organizing and teaching night classes, direct participation in Americanization classes by Legionnaires remained a small part of the organization's broader activism.<sup>16</sup> Legionnaires and Auxiliary members, however, found a suitable replacement activity in the form of staging patriotic ceremonies either at immigrants' naturalization ceremonies in local courthouses or for recently-sworn citizens. These ceremonies became another opportunity to forge one-on-one relationships with new immigrants to both welcome immigrants into the nation and remind them of their new civic responsibilities. Naturalization ceremonies were also a moment in which the community and national level of civic obligation could come together most tangibly, as an officer of the federal government (the judge) swore in new citizens within a local context and with community members looking on.

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Samuel to L. G. Cross, May 22, 1929. Americanism, Correspondence, American Legion National Headquarters Library and Archives, Indianapolis, IN, *Annual Proceedings, American Legion, Department of Massachusetts, Aug 20-23, 1924* (Boston: Wright and Potter Printing Company, 1924), p. 50, *Minnesota Legionnaire*, March 15, 1923, p. 4, *American Legion Weekly*, March 21, 1921, p. 16, *The Legionaire* (North Dakota) May, 1920, p. 15. *Minutes, 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conventions of the Iowa Department, the American Legion*, American Legion Iowa Department Records, Box 2. State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City Branch.

<sup>16</sup> The entire Americanization movement waned by the mid-1920s. The federal government abandoned support for Americanization in 1921 because of increasingly successful state-level programs, immigration restriction legislation, and the beginning of economic depression. Most state-level Americanization efforts dried up by 1923. Without government support and suffering from a shortage of private funders, voluntary groups abandoned the project. Edward George Harmann, *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), p. 265, Frank Van Nuys, *Americanizing the West: Race, Immigrants and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 179

Legion naturalization ceremonies focused on the duties of new citizens to live up to its idea of Americanism, particularly to vote and appreciate the American constitutional system. National and department-level officials urged posts to distribute symbols of the American nation in the form of copies of the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and an American flag to newly-sworn citizens. “Some well qualified person should impress upon the new citizen that a good American will adopt to our customs and ideals,” the adjutant of Montana reminded posts in 1922. A reception held by patriotic and civic groups should follow, “in order that the new American may be drawn closer in touch with the citizens of the community and his adopted country.”<sup>17</sup> Legion members embellished upon these guidelines. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1921 a post in Erie, Pennsylvania offered speeches and patriotic music for an assembly of 150 new citizens and their families. Legionnaires in Berkeley, California spoke to immigrants about voting and handed out copies of the U.S. Constitution. In Albany, New York, the American Legion Auxiliary organized a community sing one evening in the fall of 1923 at which new citizens received their naturalization papers. Posts also joined with other patriotic organizations for such ceremonies: in Minneapolis, Legion members assembled in early 1923 with Grand Army of the Republic and Women’s Relief Corps members to instruct new citizens on citizenship duties and hand out copies of patriotic literature. Legionnaires believed these activities were of such vital importance that they continued them even after the initiation of the 1924 quota system. Legion-sponsored naturalization ceremonies continued in Minnesota well into the 1930s.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> O.C. Lamport, Special Bulletin # 33, Montana Department, American Legion, November 21, 1922. Miscellaneous Pamphlets, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

<sup>18</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, Oct. 21, 1921, pp. 11, 21, Oct 19, 1923, *American Legionnaire* (Hennepin County, Minnesota), January 11, 1923, p. 4

Despite the friendly hand Americanization classes and naturalization ceremonies supposedly represented, the Legion's efforts to accelerate the assimilation of immigrants were highly coercive. Assimilation remained a one-way street not only for cultural or social norms but political ideology as well. The American Legion could not imagine those racially-different immigrants streaming into the United States in the early 1920s as contributing any novel political ideals of any use to American democracy. Instead of a breath of fresh air, Legion members saw immigrants' existing political awareness as a potential threat. They believed the much of the early 1920s labor unrest and the continued percolation of radical ideals into American politics represented the wholesale failure of the melting pot to assimilate immigrants. For the Legion, the melting pot metaphor represented ideological homogeneity, the removal of the ignorance racially-different immigrants brought with them from the Old World that Bolshevik propagandists could exploit for their own anarchistic devices. The heat of the melting pot was that of compulsion to conform to the ideological standards of Americanism. The slag that did not melt, the radicals that remained among immigrants, the Legion argued should be discarded from the nation through deportation.

Just as individuals could successfully overcome ethno-racial difference and become American, so could they fail at the task by shirking the obligations of Americanism. The Legion believed such immigrants deserved no place in the nation. In the immediate aftermath of the war the Legion focused particularly on the "alien slacker," a worker who took advantage of a bureaucratic loophole in the Selective Service system by withdrawing their naturalization papers but failing to leave the United States. Legionnaires furiously accused such immigrants of abusing the system to work for high

wages without worry of being drafted or deported. Condemning this selfishness, *American Legion Weekly* described the alien slacker as “worse than a parasite; he is a menace within,” for refusing to assimilate and for failing to “yield to the environment of unhampered democracy and freedom.” The Legion demanded employers fire such men, with some posts mailing “slacker lists” to employers or publishing them in local papers. Some Legion departments published their own lists of slackers. These lists were greatly exaggerated: the federal government acknowledged only 818 men had dodged American military service in this way. Nevertheless, the Legion pressed Congress to deport alien slackers, claiming that such action was not only just but would have a “salutary effect on the citizens of this country.”<sup>19</sup> The Legion made no such aggressive calls for the prosecution or sanction of the thousands of native-born Americans who had dodged the draft during the war.

As the Legion’s interest in generating one-to-one contact with immigrants indicated, it felt most comfortable thinking about the assimilation process succeeding when its organizational imagination remained focused on individuals or small groups of immigrants. When imagining large ethnic blocks, the Legion became profoundly skeptical about the collective assimilative power available to American political culture. In calling for the kind of energy Americans put into the wartime mobilization effort be applied to Americanization, the *American Legion Weekly* claimed in 1920 where the foreign born, “are isolate in groups, left entirely to their own devices and not brought into contact with the life of the country, there is little opportunity for the melting pot to reach

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<sup>19</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, August 8, 1919, p. 10, *Pacific Legion*, September 1, 1919, p. 9, 22, *American Legionnaire* (Minnesota) November 9, 1922, p. 8, *Washington Post*, October 25, 1919, p. 6, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Proposed Deportation of Aliens Who Surrendered Their First Papers in order to Escape Military Service*, 66<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess, October 10, 1919, p. 19.

them.” Part of the responsibility for this situation lay with native-born Americans. “In so far as the country has not reached them with educational cooperation and assistance, it would appear to be responsible for their unyielding state of mind.”<sup>20</sup> Legionnaires in New York, expressed more skepticism about the nature of ethnic ghettos at their 1923 annual convention. The New York Standing Committee on Americanism reported to the delegates at Saratoga Springs that “the great danger in the foreign colony is that it may become so large and so self-dependent, and that it may develop its own foreign agencies to such a degree as to cause the immigrants not to feel the need or desire to learn English or to become citizens of the United States. It is the tendency of the foreign colony to keep its people forever alien that constitutes the real menace to our Nation.”<sup>21</sup>

This concern about the opaqueness of foreign-born communities preventing the surveillance of members’ loyalty manifested itself in more general and successful ways as well. The Legion promoted the idea of an English-only civic society, urging a variety of reforms and education initiatives designed to teach immigrants the “American” language as quickly as possible to both foster their more rapid assimilation and ensure better surveillance of immigrant-generated political discourse. In an interview with Legion-friendly *Outlook* in 1923, National Commander Alvin Owsley connected understanding the language of Americans and the political structures of America, calling mastering “the language of Lincoln ... the first step in Americanization.” For Owsley:

a foreign language is inseparable from a foreign psychology. Both must be discarded if the stranger in our land would become an American ... Take a newcomer from the Near East. When he speaks in his own tongue of the word ‘government,’ the chances are that his mind pictures a dreaded, autocratic, merciless power

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<sup>20</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, January 30, 1920, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Convention of the American, Department of New York, Sept 13-15, 1923* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co), p. 58

which has touched him only to exact taxes or massacre him. Now do you believe a journey over water in steerage will blot out the picture? Before the newcomer can appreciate the significance of our word 'government' he must read our Constitution, not disjointedly and laboriously word by word, but as a whole, with a sympathetic historical background to heighten his appreciation of what government is to an American.<sup>22</sup>

In this spirit the National Americanism Commission endorsed English-only education in American public and private schools at the American Legion's 1920 national convention. The following year the commission urged that English literacy be made a requirement for naturalization.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Legion and immigration restriction**

In the early 1920s the same concern for the opaqueness of immigrant enclaves the Legion used to push for more vigorous Americanization efforts the organization also led the organization to endorse immigration restriction. At its 1921 national convention in Kansas City the American Legion endorsed a resolution calling for a five-year moratorium on all immigration into the United States.<sup>24</sup> For the Legion the five-year ban was not a capitulation on its position that the foreign born could be Americanized. It was instead a realization that the collapse of the Americanization movement, the difficulty of the process, and the heightened rates of postwar immigration were overflowing the melting pot.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert M Field, "The Nation's Disabled Sons: An Interview with the Commander of the American Legion," *Outlook* August 29, 1923, p. 673

<sup>23</sup> *Summary of the Proceedings of the Second National Convention, American Legion, Cleveland, Ohio, Sept 27-29, 1920* (Indianapolis: American Legion, 1920), p. 54, *Summary of the Proceedings of the Third National Convention, American Legion*, p. 38.

<sup>24</sup> *Summary of the Proceedings of the Third National Convention, American Legion*, p. 38

While the Legion did not abandon the idea that immigrants who Americanized attained full membership in the nation after 1921, the way the organization began to argue its case for restriction revealed how race had shaped its opinion on a multiethnic America all along. As the new 3-percent quota system was being implemented in 1922, the *American Legion Weekly* editorialized that the nation had already been compromised by “millions of men whose minds and hearts were molded under forms of government wholly inconsistent with our own, whose lives were cramped and warped by social systems which did nothing to inculcate in them the sense of individual responsibility in government...Meanwhile, we continue to Balkanize our large cities – blocks of voting districts take on the political atmosphere of areas in Europe in which humanity had gone to seed.”<sup>25</sup> The handshake approach to Americanization depicted by Arthur Woods was replaced by articles written in the *American Legion Weekly* by scientific racists arguing that immigrants’ racial difference had contributed to the growing crime wave and labor unrest. Princeton Professor Edwin Grant Conklin reminded Legionnaires in 1923, “when we realize that there is a strong tendency for criminality, insanity, feeble-mindedness and low mentality to ‘run in families’ we are in a position to realize how very serious is this matter of indiscriminate immigration. We can never have a great nation founded on poor intellects, and education can never supply brains to those who lack them.”<sup>26</sup> Legionnaires started calling for the federal government to test the “degree of mentality” of immigrants and reject the visas of those who do not meet intelligence standards. Calling for literacy tests for new immigrants essentially accomplished the same. Under director Garland

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<sup>25</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, July 28, 1922, p. 10

<sup>26</sup> C.E. Kilbourne, “The Logic of the Barred Gate,” *American Legion Weekly*, October 20, 1923, p. 20. See also Charles Phelps Cushing, “When the Melting Pot Runs Over,” *American Legion Weekly*, November 2, 1923, pp. 11, 22.

Powell the National Americanism Commission developed an alien crime census in 1924 to determine what percentage of the nation's incarcerated population was foreign-born, particularly those convicted on narcotics-related charges.<sup>27</sup>

Even as it provided members with eugenicist arguments for restriction and lobbied Congress for a new immigration policy that would slam the Golden Door, the Legion did not abandon the idea that the racially-different immigrant could become American. Indeed, it was the absolute necessity in the Legion's opinion to make loyal, obedient American citizens out of foreign stock that pushed its nativist opinion of immigration policy forward. Restriction was a method not simply to preserve the existing ethno-racial composition of the nation but allow for the nation to catch up in the enormously difficult task of getting those foreigners already in the nation up to speed on Americanism. "America should assimilate the aliens already within her borders before she permits more to enter. That is the Legion's position in arguing for total exclusion of immigrants for a five year period," the *American Legion Weekly* stated succinctly in an editorial in September 1922.<sup>28</sup> What made this process difficult in Legionnaires' opinion, it should be remembered, was their belief in the racial inferiority of immigrants which, while varying by degree between groups, made the process of assimilation difficult and slow.

In the case of Asians the American Legion recognized that racial difference made assimilation exceedingly difficult. Since Chinese immigration had been suspended for more than a generation the Legion focused specifically on the trickle of Japanese immigrants still arriving in the United States and Hawaii. Japanese ethnic enclaves were

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<sup>27</sup> *Summary of the Proceedings of the Third National Convention, American Legion*, p. 38, *American Legion Weekly*, January 18, 1924

<sup>28</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, September 15, 1922, p. 14.

too opaque to monitor and their likelihood of successfully assimilating too remote to trust. As a result, the Legion believed total restriction and the marginalization of those Japanese already in the U.S. were the best option. This opinion was formed by observing existing Japanese immigrants' communities in Western American states. In the continental West and in Hawaii Japanese immigrants had arrived to perform low-wage agricultural work. In Hawaii, where independent land ownership was less likely, Japanese workers emphasized their indigenous culture in camps and formed labor unions that were ethnically exclusive and designed to secure favorable wage and working conditions for workers who were determined to stay in American territory permanently. Successful immigrants on the continental west coast saved the money earned from such efforts to purchase their own land and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century rural Japanese succeeded in breaking into lucrative vegetable farming markets. Many formed ethnic communities whites felt were impenetrable to their understanding or surveillance. While Japanese immigration had been limited by the 1907 "Gentlemen's Agreement" between the Japanese government and the Roosevelt Administration, thousands of Japanese women continued to arrive under the agreement as brides for marriages arranged back in Japan. These women were derided as "picture brides" by nativists because all they knew of their husbands in America was their image in a photograph.<sup>29</sup>

A brew of racism, social factors, and international politics formed the Legion's negative opinion of Japanese potential to become Americans. Anti-Japanese racial sentiment had existed before World War I, especially in the Western United States. Whereas racial degeneracy was the prevailing concern of scientific racists in relation to

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<sup>29</sup> Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Little, Brown, 1993), pp. 258-74

Southern and Eastern European immigrants, high Japanese birthrates created fears that immigrants would outnumber whites and dominate the agricultural sector in the West. While Japanese communities' loyal participation in the war effort and Japan's entry into the war against Germany quelled anti-Japanese reaction during the war, the respite proved temporary.<sup>30</sup> Legionnaires became part of a wider movement that claimed that the Japanese in America were too insular within their communities and refused to either assimilate or intermarry (Legionnaires split on whether this last item was desirable or not). The Legion complained that the Japanese enjoyed dual citizenship rights between the United States and Japan and that even American-born Japanese owed allegiance to the Imperial throne, an issue particularly concerning given Japan's increasing aggressiveness as an imperial power in Asia. The purported prodigious birthrate of the Japanese in the United States combined with the Japanese Empire's expansionist aims to lead Legionnaires to conclude that Japanese presence was more than simple immigration but represented the "colonization" of Hawaii and the West Coast. Aggressive tactics by Japanese farmers in the West and in the labor markets of the sugar cane plantations of Hawaii further indicated that the situation between whites and the Japanese was steadily becoming untenable because of the racial differences between the two.<sup>31</sup>

To solve the "Japanese Question," the Legion pursued a variety of political action that aimed ultimately at reversing the Japanese population growth in western states. Its

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<sup>30</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 109-10, Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, p. 265, Daniel P. Johnson, "Anti-Japanese Legislation in Oregon, 1917-1923," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* vol. 97:2 (1996), pp. 176-210

<sup>31</sup> V.S. McClatchy, "What About Japanese Immigration?," *American Legion Weekly*, November 5, 1920, pp. 3-4, November 12, 1920, pp. 7-8, *Pacific Legion*, January, 1921, p. 4, Nathaniel Peffer, "Will the Hyphen Win in Hawaii?," *American Legion Weekly*, October 27, 1922, pp. 6-7, November 3, 1922, pp. 6-8, Peffer, "What is the Japanese Problem," February 2, 1923, pp. 5-6, 23-24, Parkhurst Whitney, "The Facts of the Japanese Question," *American Legion Weekly* April 13, 1923, pp. 13-4, 24, April 20, 1923, pp. 11, 22-3.

first national convention in 1919 called on Congress to abrogate the Gentlemen's Agreement and amend the Constitution to forbid the naturalization of children born in the United States to parents ineligible for American citizenship under a 1870 law restricting citizenship to whites. The Supreme Court would use this law in the 1922 to defeat the citizenship bid of Japanese immigrant Takao Ozawa. Similar resolutions were carried at the following three national conventions.<sup>32</sup> In 1921 the Legion formed a National Oriental Committee to study the Japanese problem. Its report urged the organization to support not only immigration restriction legislation but state and additional federal laws that would restrict further establishment of a Japanese population in the West. The committee tried to soften the blow of these recommendations given the sensitivity of the immigration issue in Japanese-American diplomatic relations by suggesting these proposals be pursued with the Japanese government's cooperation. "The Japanese are a first-class people, but they must not be allowed to absorb the Pacific Coast," the chairman of the committee, Parkhurst Whitney, concluded.<sup>33</sup> Dissatisfied with the national organization doing little but passing resolutions on the issue, Legionnaires in California joined with the American Federation of Labor, the Grange, and the Native Sons of the Golden West to form the California Joint Immigration Committee, which, with the help of anti-Japanese activist and *Sacramento Bee* editor V. S. McClatchy spread propaganda about Japanese restriction in the state. McClatchy credited Joint Committee members for

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<sup>32</sup> *Outlook*, November 29, 1919, p. 348, Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, p. 273, Salyer, "Baptism by Fire," *Summary of the Proceedings of the Second National Convention, American Legion*, p. 54, *Summary of Proceedings of the Third National Convention, American Legion*, p. 38, *Summary of Proceedings of the Fourth National Convention, American Legion, New Orleans, Louisiana, Oct 16-20, 1922* (Indianapolis: American Legion, 1922), p. 30. The Japanese actually were struggling in many places in the West to secure a permanent foothold in the agricultural economy. The 1920 census revealed that nine-tenths of the tenant farmers in California were Japanese, about 5,000 in all. Robert Higgs, "Landless by Law: Japanese Immigrants in California Agriculture to 1941," *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 38:1 (March 1978), p. 207

<sup>33</sup> Whitney, "The Facts of the Japanese Question," *American Legion Weekly*, April 20, 1923, p. 22.

restoring language in the 1924 Immigration Act that completely excluded Japanese immigration after meeting with members of the Senate Immigration Committee.<sup>34</sup>

Depriving Japanese further access to western lands became a crucial strategy for Legionnaires in western states to restrict Japanese presence in their communities and by extension the nation. Forbidding Japanese agricultural settlement defused the ticking population bomb such communities represented. In Washington, Idaho, California and Texas the Legion constituted the major lobbying pressure in the passage of alien land bills.<sup>35</sup> Legion efforts to deprive Japanese of land were strongest in Oregon during the early 1920s. Legionnaires joined with the Anti-Asiatic Association of Oregon and the state's American Federation of Labor office to support a bill before the Oregon legislature in January, 1921 that proposed to prohibit any aliens ineligible under the 1790 Naturalization Act from owning or leasing any land in the state or forming any corporation that would be comprised of a majority of such aliens. While the bill passed the Oregon House of Representatives, pressure from state business and banking interests killed it in the Senate. Legionnaires tried unsuccessfully to have similar language added to the state's 1922 ballot through in initiative posts actively promoted. In 1923, as the Ku Klux Klan made its entrance into Oregon politics, property eligibility legislation found a more hospitable environment in Salem. The bill was re-introduced by two representatives who belonged to the Legion that January and passed with one dissenting vote in the legislature that February. The Oregon alien land law, however, contained a three-month grace period before it went into effect, giving Japanese until May 25 to acquire more

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<sup>34</sup> V.S. McClatchy, "Guarding the Immigrant Gates: What has Been Done – What is Still to be Done" (San Francisco: California Joint Immigration Committee, 1925), pp. 13-4. This pamphlet was a reprint of a speech McClatchy gave to the California Department annual convention on September 15, 1925.

<sup>35</sup> *Pacific Legion*, Oct, 1921, p. 3-4

land. Legionnaires in Oregon vowed “to the utmost in all honorable and lawful means to enforce the spirit of said law as the supreme will of the people of the State of Oregon” and resist any private sale of land to Japanese within the three-month window. Legion posts in the Rogue and Hood River valleys pressed real estate agents unsuccessfully not to sell tracts of land to Japanese according to the spirit of the new law about to go into effect, visiting W.G. Parmalee personally at his Hood River home about the issue.<sup>36</sup>

### **The racial boundaries of Legion nationalism**

On this issue of Asians, more specifically Japanese, meeting the racial standard for inclusion in the American nation the Legion and Klan were in agreement: Asian racial difference was too significant to permit them to join the nation. Both feared, in one Legionnaire’s words, that a “horde of brown men” would overwhelm the West and took active steps not only to limit further immigration of Japanese but to make life uncomfortable enough for those already living in the western United States to leave.<sup>37</sup> Alien land laws were in effect legislative efforts at ethnic cleansing, designed to make impossible the kind of agrarian enclave lifestyle Japanese had embraced in the West. Considering the full spectrum of racial difference in the minds of early-20<sup>th</sup> century racist thought, when the subject shifted from white to non-white races, Legionnaires found common ground with the Klan that an immutable barrier did exist between Americans and some ethno-racial others. For the Klan, Asians were simply one more group that

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<sup>36</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 196-214, Johnson, “Anti-Japanese Legislation in Oregon,” pp. 167-75 David A. Horowitz, “The Klan as Outsider: Ethnocultural Solidarity and Antielitism in the Oregon Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, vol. 80:1 (January 1989), pp. 12-20, *Pacific Legionnaire*, May, 1923, p. 7-8, 26 (quoted p. 7) Johnson notes that the alien land law in Oregon did not stop Japanese from owning land in the state as those farmers with children born in the United States simply purchased land in their children’s names while others used white contacts and friends to buy land for them.

<sup>37</sup> *Pacific Legion*, March, 1922, p. 5

failed to match the racial fitness and cultural superiority of Anglo-Saxon Protestants. But for Legionnaires the exact reason why racial difference for Japanese immigrants could represent a clear standard for the race-based nature of the American nation was more complicated. While for the Japanese farmer, forced to maneuver around racist land ownership laws despite the fact he may have felt as American as his white neighbors, this distinction was irrelevant, it matters to the historical understanding of how ideas about race contained within the Legion's civic nationalism worked. Legionnaires believed Japanese could not become Americans not only for their racial difference, which their higher than average birthrates supposedly attested to, but because they could not imagine, given their observation of Japanese communities near their own, that Japanese would be willing participants in the assimilation process. Japanese, for as far as they could detect, wanted to stay loyal to Japan. Further, the cultural distance Japanese willing to Americanize would have to traverse was enormous. Demonstrating little enthusiasm for assimilating to an Anglo-Saxon ethno-cultural standard not much more advanced than their own and representing a culture beyond native-born Americans' ability to monitor, Legionnaires concluded the Japanese were best dealt with by remaining on their side of the Pacific.

Even in this rather absolute view of Asian citizenship the Legion was nevertheless willing to concede to exceptions. An episode from an unlikely source – the American Legion's first national essay contest for schoolchildren – demonstrated that even within cases in which the Legion was confident that racial difference between Anglo-Americans and another race was significant enough to make their inclusion into the nation undesirable, individuals from such races could nevertheless prove themselves worthy of

being American. In 1922 the Legion sponsored its first nation-wide essay contest for high school students on the topic “How can The American Legion best serve the nation?”

Thirteen-year-old Ah Sing Ching from Ewa, Oahu, an American citizen born in Honolulu to Chinese parents, won the contest and the \$750 first-prize from thousands of entries.

His essay focused on the Legion’s support of education, both for children in public schools and for immigrants in Americanization classes, and on its efforts on behalf of world peace and disabled veterans.<sup>38</sup> In April, 1923 a writer profiled Ah Sing in the *American Legion Weekly*, visiting his family’s modest Hawaii home. The profile writer focused almost entirely on the lifestyle of the family, as to portray Ah Sing himself as a mark of foreignness in some stage of slow transition from Chinese to American. The family lived in a neat but roughly-built shack and kept chickens and geese in the front yard. While Ah Sing spoke in “clipped” English, he knew little of his parents’ native tongue. When pressed on the rituals of ancestor worship evidenced in their house and yard, neither Ah Sing nor his sister Florence could explain their meaning. Ah Sing claimed he has not yet chosen a religion for himself. Projecting families like Ah Sing’s into the future, the profile concluded that the Chinese and Japanese on Hawaii, “will remain, they and their remote descendants, all native-born American citizens. To Americanize them is a tremendous task. But not a hopeless one – not when Ah Sing of Honouliuli can win in a national contest with the Marys and Williams of the States.” Through his understanding of the principles of citizenship the Legion stood for, which were models for the broader nation to follow, the profile’s headline described Ah Sing Ching with one word: “American.” But the foreignness of his home life contrasted starkly

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<sup>38</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, February 9, 1923, p. 24

with his personal exceptionalness, indicating a broader pessimism about those Asians not as uniquely gifted as the essay contest winner.<sup>39</sup>

Just as Ah Sing Ching offered hope that exemplary individuals could Americanize against the odds facing their racial group, so too did the Legion believe members of excluded groups could demonstrate civic virtues that should allow them to get around the immigration quota system. Here, military service for the American nation again stood as the supreme measure of citizenship. Twice in the interwar period the Legion lobbied Congress to allow foreign-born veterans of World War I to immigrate to the United States separately from the national origins quota system. In 1926 Legion founding member Hamilton Fish Jr. introduced a bill in Congress that would allow foreign-born veterans of the American military who had returned to their home countries but were still eligible for naturalization to return to the United States with their wives and children without counting in their nation's allotted quota. Italy Department adjutant Frank Gigliotti, a native-born Italian himself, testified to a Congressional committee of the patriotic sacrifices he personally saw foreign-born men make on the battlefields of France. He also told the committee of his meeting with veteran Vito Milani, who was eligible to receive the soldiers' bonus as a veteran of the American army. In the broken English with which he insisted on speaking to Gigliotti in his office in Rome, he claimed no interest in receiving a bonus. What he really wanted was a passport to return "home" to America.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Farrell, "Ah Sing Ching – American," *American Legion Weekly*, April 20, 1923, p. 13-4 (quoted p. 14).

<sup>40</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Admission of Alien World War Veterans*, 69<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., April 7, 1926, pp. 6-16

In 1934 the Legion joined with a Japanese-American interest group, the Japanese American Citizens League, to urge Congress to grant full citizenship status to those Asians who had served in the American military during World War I but the federal government had denied citizenship to because of their race. Legion pressure was instrumental in the passage of the Nye-Lea Act in 1935, which granted non-white veterans the same privileges the Wilson Administration had allowed white aliens in 1918.<sup>41</sup> In both cases, the racial minorities in question had demonstrated their fitness to become Americans through military service, which Legionnaires clearly weighted higher than any other form of service to the American nation. Having stood on the firing line with other citizens, Legionnaires argued, these men had earned the honor of becoming American.

The citizenship status of African Americans posed another racial complication of the Legion's Americanism. Legionnaires' broad acceptance of segregation within American society and within their organization endorsed a nationalism that was white supremacist. But the Legion did not argue, as the Klan did, that African-Americans had no place in the nation. It acknowledged that the service and loyalty to the American nation that African-Americans demonstrated, particularly during the war, secured their place in the nation and accorded them some equal protection rights. In 1919 the Pennsylvania Department condemned lynching and requested Congressional investigation of the race riots of that year, resolving that "if these United States are to be the factor in democratizing the world and seeing to it that other peoples are to receive justice, that the loyal colored people of this country should be accorded such just treatment as shall accord with the Constitution of this country." Military service itself

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<sup>41</sup> Lucy E. Salyer, "Baptism by Fire," pp. 860-76

became a touchstone for the citizenship status of African Americans. Legionnaires from Washington, DC, Boston, Cleveland, and St. Louis protested the erection of two plaques in the lobby of a Treasury Department building in 1924 that listed the names of deceased veterans of the World War who had worked in the building separately by race, arguing that ‘drawing the color line in death,’ dishonored the service of the 400,000 African Americans who served in the war.<sup>42</sup>

Because it thought of itself as the embodiment of the nation the Legion’s organization struggle over the status of its African-American members was particularly elucidating to its broader opinion of their status within the nation. The Legion remained nominally open to any veteran of any race, creed or color, but southern members of the Legion’s founding clique fought to ensure departments would retain the power to determine their own racial composition and structure. After its first national convention departments were free, therefore, to segregate posts and refuse membership of African-American members. The Legion further divided membership by race in 1921 when it created an honor society named the 40 Hommes et 8 Chevaux, a name taken from the troop transport trains American soldiers had been crammed into during the war. Membership was restricted to whites only, which angered some Legionnaires. The delegation from Iowa at the 1922 national convention unsuccessfully proposed an amendment to the charter of the 40 Hommes et 8 Chevaux that would have opened the society up to black members. J. Q. Lindsey, an African-American member and another Iowan, led an effort at the same convention to amend the Legion constitution to allow black veterans to join the national organization through the national adjutant’s office if

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<sup>42</sup> *Proceedings of the First Cantonment, American Legion of the State of Pennsylvania, Oct 2-4, 1919* (Philadelphia ? : American Legion Department of Pennsylvania, 1919), p. 42, *Washington Post*, Nov 17, 1924, p. 2

their department denied their membership application. Behind the efforts of southern delegates his amendment was soundly defeated.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Legion, the Klan, and the idea of tolerance in Americanism**

The struggles of these Iowans and their supporters within the Legion to hold the organization to a more liberal standard on the issue of African-American membership spoke to its fundamental sense of itself that the American Legion was a racially tolerant organization. This is not to say the Legion was not racist, either as an organization, its politics, or in its conception of nationalism. This racism did not prevent the Legion from thinking about citizenship in egalitarian terms.<sup>44</sup> Rather, race was a way to understand what seemed to Legionnaires to be natural limits to the inclusiveness of American democracy. The Legion began with the premise that it was most desirable to link individuals within American society, regardless of their personal backgrounds, into a single national community. In this effort, it was much more concerned that Americans think of themselves as part of a coherent and single political tradition rather than a racially-defined cultural or social one. Fixating too much upon the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the nation and its cultural, religious, and social traditions was too distracting to this mission of building a politically coherent sense of American national identity. Intolerance on these grounds alienated minorities who needed to be offered a place in the national community so that their political and civic behaviors could be brought in line with Americanism. Legionnaires understood, however, that not every member of a racially

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<sup>43</sup> *Iowa Legionnaire*, April 6, 1923, p. 4, November 3, 1922, p. 5

<sup>44</sup> For a grand exploration of the compatibility of racially ascriptive and civically egalitarian visions of American citizenship see Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in US History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997)

inferior group would be able to comprehend or conform to the requirements of the nation's democratic tradition. Restriction of membership to such individuals, or even to whole racial groups, was still acceptable to the Legion's convoluted version of tolerance because doing so protected the nation's democratic institutions that provided the liberties and freedoms all could enjoy.

This sense of tolerance was hardly as inclusive as that of the cultural pluralists of this era. Legionnaires expressed little interest in how immigrants would enrich American cultural life.<sup>45</sup> But all the same, the Legion's idea of tolerance was in stark contrast to the Americanism of the Ku Klux Klan. Klansmen and women believed the Protestant God had blessed the American nation and the Anglo-Saxon race. Because the nation's history reflected divine providence, those who Klansmen and women believed had been most responsible for its full historical development represented the quintessential Americans: yeomen and their modern iteration, self-made men. Such men embodied the Protestant values of thrift, self-denial, sobriety, and strong work ethic. As spiritually and economically self-reliant individuals, Klansmen and women believed self-made Anglo-Saxon Protestants best reflected the nation's heritage of liberty. White Protestant males who owned their own labor were the most free people on earth as they owed no allegiance to a religious hierarchy from a foreign seat, sat perched between the despotic controls of capital and hopelessness of the working class, and maintained a family life

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<sup>45</sup> Gary Gerstle identifies the issue of cultural pluralism, a term coined by progressive Horace Kallen, as a point of schism between the left and right wings of the progressive movement. Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," pp. 1051-2

that ensured their wives and children would not fall prey to those who would corrupt or exploit them.<sup>46</sup>

The Klan's nationalism asserted the dominance of a particular set of Americans who represented the essence of the nation through their cultural and social identities.<sup>47</sup> Like the Legion, the Klan had to make distinctions in the political culture between insiders and outsiders within the nation. But with a much more narrow definition of what constituted an insider, and one designated by birthright, the Klan essentially imagined a national community of WASPs. As recent scholarship on the Invisible Empire in the North and West has demonstrated, the Klan's methods of imagining such a community were more than mere racial terrorism. The Klan tried to encourage WASP communities to think of themselves as linked together through common heritage and religion to form the true United States. This sense of being part of a larger national ethno-racial whole could be produced through Klan barbeques and picnics, patriotic holidays and charities. These events were the most popular way ordinary members became connected to the organization and provided, as Leonard Moore has claimed, average Protestant citizens a

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<sup>46</sup> Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); Robert Allen Goldberg, *Hooded Empire: The Ku Klux Klan in Colorado* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Shawn Lay, *War, Revolution, and the Ku Klux Klan: A Study of Intolerance in a Border City* (El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, 1985). This literature represents a broader historiographic turn in the study of the Ku Klux Klan that began in the late 1960s to interpret the organization not as a hysterical reaction of members of a declining class to social change but as a populist response to social change that proved flexible and something more than a terrorist ideology. For an overview of this shift towards seeing the Klan as a form of populism, see: Leonard J. Moore, "Historical Interpretations of the 1920s Klan: The Traditional View and the Populist Revision," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 24:2 (Winter 1990); Shawn Lay, *Hooded Knights on the Niagara: the Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, New York* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 177-89.

<sup>47</sup> Only Leonard J. Moore refers to the Klan's collective ideas about race, ethnicity, religion, and nation as a "nationalism" through his descriptive term "white Protestant nationalism." He claims this idea was "defined not by bigotry alone, but by a broader, more complex set of concerns about the place of the white Protestant majority in American society... White Protestant nationalism defiantly asserted that the nation's chosen people had lost their place at the center of American life and, therefore, that the power of the 'average citizen' had been diminished." Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, p. 23.

place to express “pent-up desires of the white Protestant majority,” and “to assert the primacy of its traditional beliefs and its presumed rightful place as the dominant force in community life.”<sup>48</sup> They also revealed common strategies for injecting particular ideas into the political culture of American communities the Klan and Legion shared.

Konklaves also formed in places where the white Protestant middle class felt it had to hold town leadership or elite to account for straying from “American” values. Klansmen tried to clean up corruption in local politics, particularly failures of officials to enforce prohibition, and reacted to perceived abuses of power by town elites that benefited their class over the middle class. Members of the Klan also enforced their own moral code across the nation’s regions, whipping wife-beaters and intimidating members of the community falling short of Protestant behavioral expectations.<sup>49</sup> The Klan’s use of Americanism, therefore, functioned not only to segregate insiders from outsiders within the American nation, but to compel the insiders to behave in ways consistent with the nation’s “true” identity.

In cleaning up both the political and private spheres of their communities, the Klan described their actions as supporting “law and order,” a phrase that was equally attractive to many Legionnaires. Indeed, the two organizations shared thousands of members.<sup>50</sup> Nothing precluded individuals from believing that the American nation was

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<sup>48</sup> Blee, *Women of the Klan*; Glen Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama 1915-1945* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1999); Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, pp. 76-9, 92-101 (quoted 101)

<sup>49</sup> Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*; Robert A. Goldberg, “The Ku Klux Klan in Madison [Wisconsin], 1922-1927,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* vol. 58:1 (Autumn, 1974), pp. 31-44; Christopher N. Cocoltchos, “The Invisible Empire and the Search for the Orderly Community: the Ku Klux Klan in Anaheim, California,” in Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West*; Chris Rhomberg, *No There There: Race, Class and Political Community in Oakland* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), ch. 3; Lay, *Hooded Knights on the Niagara*, pp. 70-1, 76-77, 146; MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 99, 106-13.

<sup>50</sup> See, Shawn Lay, “Imperial Outpost on the Border: El Paso’s Frontier Klan No. 100,” and Eckard V. Tov, “Rob and Gown: the Ku Klux Klan in Eugene, Oregon,” in Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West*:

defined through democratic ideals and through the greatness of its Anglo-Saxon, Protestant members. Some men likely joined both organizations because of the similar rhetorical defenses of Americanism and law-and-order that each made, deciding between one or the other in the process. Such a scenario played out in the case of John Quinn, a prominent rancher in Tulare County, California, Department Commander, and National Commander of the American Legion in 1924. Quinn's name appeared on a Ku Klux Klan membership list seized in a raid of state Klan offices in Los Angeles in the spring of 1922. Quinn claimed to the local press in Tulare County that he had joined the Klan because he had been impressed with its claim to stand for "the highest ideals of Americanism...the preservation of law and order, protection of the Constitution and the fostering of patriotic Americanism." After finding out "what it really stood for," Quinn claimed he quit the Klan.<sup>51</sup>

What the Klan really stood for was the use of a fixed idea of what it meant to be American to marginalize permanently non-WASPs. Again, the Klan's methods in this endeavor were diverse. Klan violence against African Americans in the South in 1919 intended to reinforce their social marginalization in the wake of gains during the war. Klansmen in Detroit, Denver, and Indianapolis pursued segregating city neighborhoods more definitively by race, while the Klan partnered with police in Madison, Wisconsin in the early 1920s to raid the city's Italian neighborhood for prohibition violations.<sup>52</sup>

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*Towards a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992). To date, no scholarly work has cross-checked or compared membership between organizations. Difficulty in acquiring membership lists for the Legion, not only the Klan, on the local level certainly complicates such work.

<sup>51</sup> Newell G. Bringhurst, "The Ku Klux Klan in a Central California Community: Tulare County During the 1920s and 1930s," *Southern California Quarterly*, vol. 82:2 (2000), pp. 370-2. Quinn quoted p. 372.

<sup>52</sup> MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, pp. 132-5, Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, p. 290, Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*, pp. 140-1, Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, pp. 144, Robert A. Goldberg, "Denver: Queen City of the Colorado Realm," in Lay, ed, *Invisible Empire in the West*, pp. 45-6, Goldberg, "The Ku

Catholics suffered the greatest attention from Klan marginalizing efforts. Klan lecturers and pamphleteers claimed that Catholics were representatives of the lowest, most criminally-inclined races of Europe and owed their allegiance fundamentally to a foreigner in Rome, not the American government. Klansmen claimed that Catholics were plotting to take over the United States for the foreign power of the Vatican and that Catholics, because of their reliance on hierarchy in Church organization and doctrine, were poor democratic citizens. They attacked parochial schools as undermining public education and perpetuated the alien allegiances of Catholics. Further, Catholic Church officials represented a threat to the sanctity of white Protestant womanhood. The Klan promoted speakers, the most popular of whom were women, whom claimed inside knowledge of the sexual depravity that took place within Catholic convents and monasteries. These tales of sexual depravity drew large and repeat crowds in the Midwest and echo the beastlike sexuality ascribed to African-American men to mark their racial distance from white Southerners.<sup>53</sup>

It was this kind of behavior that concerned the Legion enough to take up the issue of the Klan directly in 1921. The greatest evil the Klan represented for Legion leaders was not simply its racist existence within American political culture but its enthusiasm for promoting intolerance that divided Americans into racial, religious, and ethnic groups. The Klan had to be judged by what it was doing to the cohesiveness of American society, as groups of ethnic and religious minorities formed their own organizations designed to

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Klux Klan in Madison,” pp. 34-7, For a moment of robust immigrant resistance to Klan marginalization tactics, see Jenkins, *Steel Valley Klan*, pp. 117-39

<sup>53</sup> Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (1987; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 179-80, John Moffat Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1924), pp. 157-9, Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, pp. 36-7, Blee, *Women of the Klan*, pp. 86-93

attack the Klan, not by its opinions. “The vast majority of Americans are tolerant and insistent that no man shall suffer because of his race or religion. But public statements expressive of religious and racial unconsciousness have a disagreeable reaction among those who like to think of this as a country as inhabited not by Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Elks, Masons, and Ku-Klux Klansmen, but only by Americans,” the *American Legion Weekly* explained in carefully-worded editorial in December, 1922 that explicitly claimed not to be a condemnation of the Klan itself.<sup>54</sup> The Klan’s actions and those by its critics threatened to blow the entire melting pot apart by shifting citizens’ fundamental civic identities from being American back to more parochial ethnic or religious ones.

What exactly to do about the Klan as this potentially catastrophic force in American political culture proved a daunting challenge for Legion leadership. Besides the soldiers’ bonus issue no other issue distanced the Legion’s leadership from its common members like the Klan did. Given the wide appeal of anti-Catholicism, calls “law and order, and concern for the nation’s apparent slide towards amorality in the 1920s many Legionnaires likely found common cause enough between the two organizations to join both the Legion and Klan. Overlap in membership was particularly likely in the Midwest, where one Legion report estimated that between 20 and 50 percent of Indiana Legionnaires were also members of the Klan. Caught between the desire to support tolerance, particularly religious tolerance, to foster a broader sense of social cohesion within the nation and the need not to alienate a sizeable minority of its membership base that did not share such a perspective, Legion leaders generally erred on the side of promoting a tolerant image for the organization. The national organization enjoyed good relations with the Knights of Columbus and the National Catholic Welfare Council

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<sup>54</sup> *American Legion Weekly*, December 22, 1922, p. 10

(NCWC), and any anti-Catholic sentiment among Legion members was quickly quashed. For example, National Headquarters revoked the membership of a member of the Kansas Department believed to be a Klansmen after he made a speech against parochial schools in June, 1923 that caught the attention of the Knights of Columbus. At that year's national convention, where the Klan issue threatened to unravel the entire proceedings, Legion leaders still invited secretary William J. McKinley of the Knights of Columbus to speak of the work his organization performed for out-of-work veterans. Mississippi removed its first adjutant for splitting his time between organizing for the Legion and Klan, while Kansans were careful to replace its adjutant promoted to national office with a Catholic "to demonstrate that the American Legion was not connected to with the Ku Klux Klan" in the state.<sup>55</sup>

In attempts to condemn the Klan by name in official resolutions, however, the Legion's internal divisions proved formidable. Even those with no warm feelings for the Klan questioned the efficacy of condemning the Klan by name, fearing such action would either further encourage the Klan's growth, splinter the Legion, or distract the organization at critical times for its broader legislative agenda of veterans benefits. Among the national leadership southerners pushed hardest for official condemnation of the Klan by the Legion, hoping such action would lead poor whites back under their more direct control. Mississippian William Percy tried unsuccessfully to have the National Americanism Commission make a strong Anti-Klan statement in 1921. In 1923, Texan Henry Lindsley led the fight within the National Executive Committee for the Legion to explicitly condemn the Klan for its religious and racial intolerance and unbridled

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<sup>55</sup> Lemeul Bolles to S.N. Dancy, June 21, 1923, Americanism, Correspondence, American Legion National Headquarters Archives, Indianapolis, IN, Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 140-2 (quoted 142)

vigilantism. Lindsley was a former mayor of Dallas, where Klansmen under the direction of Hiram Evans had been particularly violent.<sup>56</sup> Lindsley was only successful in securing a mild rebuke of any group that “creates or fosters racial, religious, or class strife among our people.” During that year’s National Convention in San Francisco the Resolutions Committee and members on the floor engaged in intense debate over resolutions that explicitly and implicitly rapped the Klan’s intolerance. San Francisco businessman and delegate Charles Kendrick urged the convention to condemn the Klan by name and the delegation from Oklahoma drafted a resolution in support of his call. After a debate that nearly spiraled into a donnybrook, Kendrick’s resolution was defeated soundly. Delegates carried, instead, a more general resolution similar to the language contained in the Executive Committee’s own resolution.<sup>57</sup>

State and local-level action by Legionnaires to condemn the Klan explicitly enjoyed more success. Legionnaires in Dallas, New York City, Los Angeles, and Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and on Long Island led anti-Klan opposition in their localities. The adjutant for the Washington Department told a Klan organizer who visited his office that the Legion would deal with Klan vigilantism as it did that of the IWW Legionnaires in Iowa and South Dakota supported bills in their state legislatures that outlawed the wearing of masks at public rallies.<sup>58</sup> Delegates to the Ohio Department Convention in 1921 resolved to “condemn and protest any action, organization, and particularly the Ku Klux Klan, organized for the purposes of discriminating against individuals or classes by

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<sup>56</sup> In Dallas the Klan branded with acid the head of an African-American bellhop with the letters KKK and perpetuated other racially-motivated violence. Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 41

<sup>57</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 140-3, *New York Times*, October 19, 1923, p. 7

<sup>58</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 140, *The American Legionnaire* (Minnesota) February. 1, 1923, p. 2, *Iowa Legionnaire*, February 2, 1923, p. 4

reason of their race, religion, or color, under the guise of 100 percent Americanism or any other guise.” That same year the New Jersey Department adopted a resolution that claimed “that this body, composed as it is of men of all races, colors and creeds, deprecates the spirit so utterly un-American which preaches class hatred of any kind. We served America in the war not as Jew or Gentile, not as Catholic or Protestant, not as Caucasian or Negro, but as Americans. As such we will continue to serve our country and though we are not as full of threats as the Ku Klux Klan we warn all others to serve in that same spirit.”<sup>59</sup>

The assimilative method through which aliens could become Americans that the Legion supported offered ethnic minorities refuge from the likes of the Klan after World War I. Members of minority communities used the evidence of their patriotism and service to the American nation as their ammunition to beat back the Klan’s essentialist arguments for American citizenship and secure for themselves a place in the nation. Such communities had employed similar tactics to overcome racial bias during World War I, trumpeting the service they offered the American state and willingness of their young men to fight and die for their adopted nation.<sup>60</sup> Faced with renewed nativist sniping, particularly from the Klan, after the war, ethnic and religious communities re-asserted their wartime service and portrayed their commitment to being loyal and patriotic citizens as evidence of their Americanness. Immigrant communities insulated themselves from Klan attack through the incorporation of patriotic themes in their ethnic celebrations. Catholic organizations like the Knights of Columbus and NCWC argued that Catholics,

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<sup>59</sup> Bulletin, Dec. 16, 1922, American Legion Department of Ohio, Miscellaneous Pamphlets, Wisconsin Historical Society, *Iowa Legionnaire*, September 23, 1923, p. 4,

<sup>60</sup> Nancy Gentile Ford, *Americans All! Foreign-Born Soldiers in World War I* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001); Christopher M. Sterba, *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants During the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)

through their commitment to social works and championing of the poor, were thoroughly committed to democracy. These organizations adopted the language of Americanism, denying, as the Legion did, that it had anything to do with religious or ethnic identity but instead reflected the civic values of the nation Catholics were committed to uphold. The NCWC engaged in its own Americanization efforts focused on American history and civics education. It published a “Civics Catechism” in as many as 10 foreign languages and distributed them through Catholic dioceses.<sup>61</sup>

The Legion’s ability to attract to its civic nationalism the very people its racial vision of nationalism was busy excluding explains its ultimate triumph over the nationalist ideology of the Ku Klux Klan. While the Klan could provide a sense of collective identity that united WASPs into a loose sense of racial nationalism, the Klan’s 100 percent Americanism failed to provide any real long-term solution to the persistence of racial and cultural heterogeneity in the United States. As “new” immigrant populations became integrated into American political structures the Klan’s project ultimately was doomed. As Catholics’ embrace of Americanism and Americanization suggests, minorities could become the Legion’s staunchest allies in chasing disloyalty, radicalism, and ethnic or class parochialism -- political persuasions that threatened to fracture the American national community -- from the field. Aliens found full citizenship by accepting Legion Americanism. In the process they validated a nationalism that denied the United States had anything to learn from foreigners.

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<sup>61</sup> June Granatir Alexander, *Ethnic Pride, American Patriotism: Slovaks and Other New Immigrants in the Interwar Era* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), pp. 81-8, Lynn Dumenil, “The Tribal Twenties: ‘Assimilated’ Catholics’ Response to Anti-Catholicism in the 1920s,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* vol. 11:1 (Fall 1991) pp. 21-49, National Catholic Welfare Council, Office of the General Secretary, General Administration Files, Social Action: Civic Catechism-Citizenship folder #3, Catholic University Life Cycle Institute, Washington, D.C.

The rise of the Nazi regime in Germany forced the Legion to consider once again its value of tolerance. In the 1930s the organization asserted its support, rhetorically at least, for the principle of religious tolerance. Legionnaires in 22 posts in Baltimore commemorated Maryland's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a religious tolerance program. Prominent Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish figures spoke to a crowd of a thousand and to a radio audience. Presbyterian minister Everett Clinchy of New York City reminded the audience "we need a society that can utilize all groups, mobilize all forces for the welfare of all," while the Legion's National Chaplain, Reverend Father Robert J. White noted "the virtue of tolerance demands that men of every race, creed, and class receive the respect due them as sons of God. Some people say that tolerance rests on charity. I say it rests on justice."<sup>62</sup> On the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ratification of the American Constitution, the *American Legion Magazine* invited the organization's Catholic national chaplain and past national chaplains of Protestant and Jewish denominations to write on religious freedom as a bedrock principle of the nation's constitutional order. All three authors contrasted American reverence for religious freedom to that of the atheist Soviet Union and bigoted Nazi Germany. At the 1939 and 1940 National Conventions the American Legion condemned any group that stirred racial or religious antagonism, resolutions that were aimed at the German-American Bund and similar anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi groups.<sup>63</sup>

In practice, however, Legion tolerance had limits. The Legion opposed the Wagner-Rogers Bill in Congress in 1938 that would have allowed for an exception in the

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<sup>62</sup> *American Legion Monthly*, August, 1934, p. 32

<sup>63</sup> *American Legion Magazine*, April, 1938, p. 10, 51, *Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> National Convention of the American Legion, Chicago, Illinois, Sept. 25-28, 1939* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), p. 73, *Proceedings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> National Convention of the American Legion, Boston, Mass. Sept 23-26, 1940* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941), p. 64

quota system for 20,000 Jewish children under the age of 14 to escape Nazi Germany. In a meeting of the Americanism Commission one member supported the Legion's position on the bill because it did not prohibit children "from Communistic families" from entering the country. Another commissioner argued the Americanism Commission should publicly reject the Wagner-Rogers Bill based on the Legion's principle of Americanism. "We as Americans," he stated, "must have that way of thinking, rather thinking for religious class, or a particular racial group of people. This is but an entering wedge to break down the entire principle of restricted immigration." Passing such a law would encourage the opening of similar immigration windows whenever similar humanitarian crises strike another minority group. "It is a good thing to bring people from Spain, and to bring people from all over the world into our institutions of freedom, but we can't do that."<sup>64</sup> In other words, the specificity of racial difference should be used to continue to exclude refugees in order to preserve a political culture that denied race's importance to an individual's civic identity in the first place.

It would be easy to dismiss the Legion as a nativist organization like the Ku Klux Klan if its principles did not offer the possibility for non-Anglo Saxons to become part of the nation. The Legion's criteria for how ethnic and racial minorities could fit into the nation were awash with the racism of its era. Nevertheless, it remained committed to building a national community that included as many minorities as possible. The intersection of racism and political ideology in the Legion's nationalism required immigrants to conform not only to implied cultural and social standards but overt political ones as well. Through an ability to argue that it was requiring immigrants to

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<sup>64</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People In Depression and War, 1929-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 416-7, Minutes of the National Americanism Commission, American Legion, May 4, 1938, pp. 9, 130, 48-64 (quoted p. 53, 60) ALHQ

meet the same standards it held for native-born citizens, the Legion could de-emphasize the racist component of its nationalism. This ability made that nationalism more flexible and durable within the political culture, as Americans could accept the idea of immigrants needing to conform to the political values and traditions of the nation without considering how those very ideals were racially defined. The burden for minorities to live up to the ideals of American democracy as a condition for their inclusion remains a powerful idea in the conservative approach to assimilation. It is a perspective that allows its adherents to elide their racism for a creedal vision of national identity and deny that the United States has anything to gain from the political or social perspectives of newcomers.

## Chapter 6

### **“A nation without heroes is a nation without a history:” The American Legion and Patriotic Commemorations**

As the American Legion searched in the interwar period for ways to promote its Americanism, public commemorations and patriotic holidays provide ready-made vehicles for this task. Since the earliest days of the American republic citizens had used public gatherings of all sorts to shape the political culture in ways that benefited particular causes. The Legion came into existence at the close of an era that witnessed an explosion of commemorative civic activity by veterans' organizations, patriotic women's societies, business leaders, civic betterment groups, and Progressive reformers.<sup>1</sup> Because veterans of the last major American war, both the South and especially in the North, had taken a long-standing and active role in interpreting the historical legacy of their own military service in the Civil War for the larger citizenry to digest, an unspoken expectation that the Legion would take charge of commemorating World War I existed beginning with the first anniversary of the armistice. The Legion seized the opportunity to use Armistice Day to promote its nationalist values. It also used the holiday to reflect on its own upon the meaning veterans carried in the political culture and the values military service held for civilians in peacetime. With twilight for the Civil War

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<sup>1</sup> David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Ellen M. Litwack, *America's Public Holidays, 1865-1920* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Cecelia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)

generation fast approaching, Legionnaires also assumed responsibilities for older patriotic holidays and commemorations beginning in the 1920s. These holidays offered the Legion more opportunities to spread its Americanist message and reflect on the legacy of veterans like themselves across the nation's history.

Holidays like Armistice Day, July Fourth, and Memorial Day offered Legionnaires moments to reinforce their nationalist ideas through the symbolism of community togetherness and the particular meaning their leadership as veterans gave to the proceedings. The Legion was attracted to taking charge of holiday commemorations and celebrations because such days re-connected community members to a sense of being a part of something greater than their own lives. Armistice Day and Memorial Day in particular could place those community members who had lived through the experience of the Great War back in a time when national unity was of prime importance and restore the sense of belonging to a national community. The sacrifice and service of veterans provided tangible examples of the civic ideals of Legion Americanism. Veterans, the Legion argued, were the quintessential Americans because they had served their nation selflessly and had emerged from the experience imbued with the spirit of disinterested citizenship and service to the national good. Commemorating their military service, either in the Great War or in war's past, could inspire greater patriotic energy in the service of the nation in others. Legionnaires also used holidays to build an arching historical narrative around the nation's military history. Each war in the nation's history represented a milestone in its ultimate development into a powerful and democratic nation. This sweeping history helped citizens understand the defining forces that shaped the nation's past, present, and future identity.

Holidays and commemorations also provided the Legion with moments to bolster its own legitimacy as a civic actor by refining and strengthening the symbolic power veterans carried within the political culture. This legitimacy was critical to its vigilance against radical influence in American politics, its efforts as an interest group, and to its more positive promotion of Americanism, all of which relied on other Americans' recognition of World War veterans as quintessential patriots to continue without widespread challenge by other citizens. Legionnaires emphasized the masculine qualities of veterans as men who had put their lives in peril to defend the freedoms and principles of democracy. While its idea Americanism was forged in the flames of war, the Legion carefully emphasized the ways that particular and exclusive experience translated directly into lessons for peacetime civil society. By focusing on how the experiences of fighting men in war translated into peacetime civil society, the Legion emptied Armistice Day of connections to specific experiences of the war itself. It avoided overly meditating on loss and on the private meaning the war may have had for its members and the citizens of post communities. Instead, war became something of a trope that represented where veterans hoped to lead the peacetime political culture.

How Legionnaires included community members in celebrating patriotic holidays also revealed how veterans erected boundaries of proper civic behavior and imagined what the American nation should be. Legion-sponsored celebrations reflected the political and class perspectives of its members, the majority of whom were at least middle class. Legionnaires selectively included other organizations in holiday celebrations, arguing implicitly that understanding what it means to be a good American required expertise derived only from a middle-class perspective of disinterested political

behavior and respect for social order. While this chapter will note how other veterans' organizations, fraternal clubs, service organizations, and other prominent voluntary associations that attracted throngs of middle-class members during the interwar period were included by the American Legion in patriotic celebrations, the absences of those not included is just as striking to those trying to understand how such holidays represented an idealized American nation. The Legion rarely invited labor unions or ethnic organizations to participate in patriotic holiday programs. Nor did the Legion include community members who had served in nonmilitary capacities during World War I in organizations aside from the Red Cross. It bristled at the prospect of pacifist organizations providing an alternative interpretation of the war on the holiday. While participating in holidays that celebrated the importance of all citizens in creating a sense of national cohesion the Legion argued that some citizens were better equipped than others to determine what proper patriotism was. This tension between wanting a holiday that was popular with the public and yet directed by an elite few led the Legion down an frustrating path of only tepid public reception to its efforts. Their failure to generate the kind of enthusiasm for their patriotic commemorations, Armistice Day particularly, indicated the limits of using such fetes to instill patriotic fervor and attract adherents to a narrow vision of nationalism.

Commemorative programs were hardly uniform in large American cities during the first anniversary of the armistice. While only a handful of states declared the day an official holiday most state governments prepared official ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> With President Wilson still recovering from his stroke official ceremonies in the nation's capitol were

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<sup>2</sup> The *New York Times* claimed that six states had declared Armistice Day an official holiday while the *Los Angeles Times* claimed that ten states had done so. *New York Times*, November 11, 1919, p. 17, *Los Angeles Times*, November. 11, 1919, p. 1

limited to a modest ceremony in Lafayette Park. Poor weather cancelled the plan to have the “flying parson,” Lieutenant Belvim Maynard, say a prayer as he flew over the capital at exactly 11am, his blessing broadcast by wireless to the assemblage below. The pinnacle of the event instead was an 11-minute long community sing by employees of the Treasury Department at 11am led by War Camp Community Service volunteers. Officials in New York City followed the suggestion Britain’s King George V had for his nation’s armistice commemoration by observing a moment of silence at 11am, symbolic of the moment the armistice went into effect in France. The mood in Los Angeles that day was more festive, as the city combined an Armistice Day program with Women’s Tribute Day to stage one massive pageant at Exposition Park that 50,000 attended. As a thousand community singers performed, the four young women dressed as “America, Patriotism, Service, and Loyalty” mounted the altar of victory along with 1,200 high school girls bearing laurel wreaths. Later that night the American Legion staged a victory dance that attracted a crowd of 7,000 at the Shrine Auditorium.<sup>3</sup>

With Legion posts still forming across the nation in November, 1919 and its leadership busy at its first national convention, the organization provided little coordination or guidance for observance of the anniversary in smaller communities. Many posts celebrated the first anniversary of the armistice with minimal public pomp, opting instead for invitation-only dinners or dances. Ceremonies in Racine, Wisconsin on the first anniversary of the armistice typified how many communities coordinated celebrations between the Legion and the remnants of military mobilization in 1919. Racine celebrated its first Armistice Day under the blessing of an official declaration of a

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<sup>3</sup> *Washington Post*, November. 11, 1919, p. 1, *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1919, p. 17  
*Los Angeles Times*, November. 12, 1919, part II, p. 1.

patriotic holiday by the city's mayor. At 11 am local time residents observed two minutes of silence as all commercial activity and city traffic halted and townspeople bowed their heads in silent prayer. That afternoon the Legion sponsored a football game between a local team and a squad from the 32<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. The major program of the day began at seven in the evening and involved little direct participation by the Legion itself. A larger than expected crowd enjoyed a band concert in the town's central square in fair weather. Townspeople then joined a woman likely from War Camp Community Service in a half-hour long community sing, similar to ones staged by the organization during the war. Later in the evening more than 1,500 people attended a patriotic assembly in Eagles Hall that was emceed and sponsored by a 32<sup>nd</sup> division veterans group. The War Mothers Auxiliary gave gifts of silken banners to women who had lost sons in the war. The mayor of Racine spoke of the need to retain the spirit of Americanism that had motivated the war fight against the new challenge of Bolshevism. Racine's residents enjoyed a military ball to conclude the day's festivities.<sup>4</sup>

### **Inventing Armistice Day celebrations in the United States**

As the American Legion grew in its first full year of existence members developed a strong expectation to lead Armistice Day celebrations. Growing up in a political culture dominated by the patriotic activism of veterans from the Civil War, Legionnaires strikingly accepted without much reflection the commemoration of their own war as one of their most urgent responsibilities. Although national headquarters offered some guidance on how to celebrate the holiday, the tone and style with which the

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<sup>4</sup> Post history, 1919-1923, p. 10. American Legion no. 76 (Racine, WI) records, Wisconsin Historical Society Special Collections, Madison, WI.

anniversary should be marked remained up to posts. A New Jersey Department bulletin noted in 1920, “in practically every City and Town in New Jersey, where there is a Legion post, there will be a celebration, and A BIG ONE, and in almost every case the celebration is engineered by the Legion.”<sup>5</sup> Over the next few years Legion posts developed widely varied methods for observing the holiday, ranging from formal memorial services to cookouts and block parties. These celebrations shared an awareness that Armistice Day offered the Legion an opportunity to promote its reading of the legacy of the war without significant challenge. Armistice Day also gave the Legion center state to promote itself as the paramount arbiter of patriotism in the postwar era, building a sense of credibility Legionnaires intended to use for year-long efforts to foster nationalism within the political culture. The forms the Legion chose to promote this agenda were culled from Americans’ expectations for the performance of patriotic organizations and voluntary civic groups on other patriotic holidays. In this way the Legion did not as much invent a brand new tradition as much as build upon expectations previous groups’ efforts had built for such an American holiday.

In many communities Armistice Day parades became the central tableaux Legionnaires used to depict the symbolic meanings of the holiday. Most of these set the tone of Armistice Day as one of pomp, not solemn remembrance, drawing upon the recent memory of victory parades many American cities held for locally-raised divisions as they returned from Europe and of the parades in Northern cities the Grand Army of the Republic staged on Memorial Day. These parades and similar ones the GAR mounted during its encampments celebrated the virtues of veterans by putting their ranks literally

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<sup>5</sup> New Jersey Department bulletin no. 4, November, 1920. Pamphlets Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.

on display.<sup>6</sup> The Legion intended similar messages for Armistice Day parades and benefited from the ability to relegate reflections upon the war's human toll to the existing Memorial Day holiday. As the Legionnaire chairman of the Houston Armistice Day celebration committee asserted, "flowers are all right for Memorial Day, but this is to be a holiday. Get all the flags and buntings and banners in the city. This is to be a celebration." Even when solemn remembrance was part of early Armistice Day celebrations such moments did not overwhelm the general triumphant spirit of the day. In 1920 churches in Des Moines, Iowa rang their bells for five minutes before the city observed a minute of silence at 11 am to commemorate the war dead, but the city was festooned with flags at the city's Argonne Post's request.<sup>7</sup>

While the Legion encouraged veterans to march in their military uniforms, Legion parades balanced martial symbolism with clear gestures to the civic messages of the parade as well. Many parades included not only members of the American Legion but all a community's World War veterans in uniform, emphasizing community solidarity among veterans. Parading veterans did not organize by rank to emphasize the democratic character of the Legion as an organization, in which members referred to each other not by their military rank but by "comrade" or "buddy." Seattle veterans in 1920 marched through downtown with bearing torches in a nighttime parade in a style reminiscent of political clubs' evening Election Day parades in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

The Legion further distanced Armistice Day from serious reflections upon the war's human toll by including veterans of other American wars. Such inclusion conveyed

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<sup>6</sup> Litwicks, *America's Public Holidays*, p. 24, O'Leary, *To Die For*, pp. 53-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Texas Legionnaire*, November 1920 p. 21, *Argonne Post Weekly*, November 25, 1921, p. 5

<sup>8</sup> *Texas Legionnaire*, November 1920 p. 21, *Pacific Legion*, December 1920, p. 9, Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 26-30

a righteous continuity in American military history. Legionnaires' refusal to use Armistice Day to reflect upon the horrors of the war matched a similar choice GAR members had made in commemorating the redemptive rather than destructive legacy of the Civil War. The presence of veterans of other wars with Legionnaires in Armistice Day parades asserted not a sense of common loss or shared horror in combat but a faith in the power of patriotic commemoration to unify the nation into a patriotic, loyal whole and reflect upon the productive aspects of war. Veterans of the Great War simply added their own chapter to the story Union veterans had been telling about themselves for decades.<sup>9</sup> The editor of the magazine for a large post in Des Moines placed the World War in exactly such a context, claiming that as the nation declared its independence and "showed the world that America would brook no inhumanity under our flag," through the Emancipation Proclamation, "now we have had our Armistice day, which marked the liberation of twenty-one nations and hundreds of millions of people from the scourge of the most colossal of wars and the Prussian menace."<sup>10</sup>

Physically placing veterans of these struggles in line with each other made this historical march of freedom all the more salient. Parades allowed men from the local community to represent the nationalizing power of American military adventures and tangibly connected their communities to a broader national historical narrative. Parades were generally held to either conclude or begin around the 11am (local time) anniversary

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<sup>9</sup> O'Leary, *To Die For*, pp. 54-5. The Legion and GAR's approach to the commemoration of their military experiences contrasted that of French and British veterans of the Great War. French veterans overwhelmingly embraced pacifism, while in Britain ceremonies to mark the Armistice focused on acknowledging the experience of the loss of loved ones civilians endured. British veterans either celebrated the anniversary privately through regimental clubs or publicly in commemoration of their comradeship and survival. Antoine Proust, Helen McPhail trans., *In the Wake of War: 'Les Anciens Combattants' and French Society* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1992), Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1994)

<sup>10</sup> *Argonne Post Weekly*, November 11, 1920, p. 4.

hour to give a grand beginning or end to other public commemorative programs and members were encouraged to march in their old military uniforms. The post commander in Gloucester, Massachusetts served as the marshal of the town's parade as he and his fellow Legion officers led a large procession that included member of the GAR, Women's Relief Corps, Spanish-American veterans and their auxiliary, civic clubs, a boat used to cross the Seine River during the war and a seaplane. At a parade in Mansfield, Ohio in 1922 GAR members joined disabled World War veterans at the head of the parade in a place of honor. The Legion began New York City's 1924 observance of Armistice Day with remarks at the Eternal Light memorial and then paraded behind members of the GAR, Spanish War Veterans, and Veterans of Foreign Wars from Madison Square Garden up 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. to Central Park.<sup>11</sup>

Including the graying heroes of past wars also lent legitimacy to the connections Legionnaires made between the masculine virtues of doughboys and the glory of the American nation. The Legion understood the symbolic power the veteran held in American political culture as a representation of social order, manly virtue, and a spirit of loyalty to the state. It latched onto previous generations of veterans to bolster its claims to represent the same values. While many Civil War veterans themselves shied away from emphasizing the physical bravery of their fellows in battle, younger men in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century reinterpreted the experience of combat as the quintessential test of one's self-mastery and masculine vigor. Growing up in a political culture that imagined the Civil War battlefield as the crucible of American manly virtue, Legionnaires included older veterans in Armistice Day commemorations to display their own place in the heroic

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<sup>11</sup> *Boston Globe*, November 11, 1920, p. 9, *Ohio Legionnaire*, December 23, 1922, p. 16, *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1924, p. 3.

lineage of American manhood. By extension, the personal heroism displayed by veterans reflected the kind of personal commitment the nation required to ensure its glorious future.<sup>12</sup> As Alvin Owsley, future American Legion National Commander, told an Armistice Day crowd in Greenville, Texas in 1920, “a nation without heroes is a nation without a history and a nation without a history is a nation without patriotism, and must fall. The heroes of the world have opened the way for the triumphant march of civilization, and the nation whose people are proud of their heroic ancestry will always produce heroes.”<sup>13</sup> Armistice Day became a moment for Legionnaires to hold laurels over their own heads. Reflecting upon the heroism of older generations of veterans in the interpretation of their own gave the experience of the World War a historical vector and continued the belief elite American men had shared since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that their own masculinity would be the engine of national development. Lengthening the historical narrative of the significance of their own combat experience, therefore, did not drag Legionnaires towards a nostalgia for the soldierly life: instead it tried to give even more legitimacy and authority to the idea of veterans as Progressive forces for the further development of the American nation, particularly the reading of the warriors of tomorrow for their own glorious destinies if the nation so required.

Legion posts also frequently included other patriotic organizations, civic groups, fraternal organizations, and youth organizations like the Boy Scouts in holiday planning. The addition of such participants revived the spirit of unity the war had generated on the home front. Including groups that had nothing to do with victory into Armistice Day

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<sup>12</sup> Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) pp. 166-71.

<sup>13</sup> Alvin M. Owsley, “The Spirit of America’s Warriors,” *Texas Legionnaire*, November 1920, p. 9. Owsley’s name and middle initial are erroneous in this article’s byline.

programs also reinforced the holiday's Americanist message. The Legion most commonly included organizations that promoted a conception of citizenship endorsed a middle-class and elite vision of disinterested, enlightened civic participation as the baseline of political activism. Legionnaires likely belonged to these organizations themselves as the Legion drew members from a similar middle-class and professional base. Linking the civic lessons of war to civilian organizations already performing work in line with those lessons allowed the Legion to strengthen its claim that the experience of military service had real and useful application in civil society. Including these groups on *their* day also veterans to imply their own status within society ranked above other service organizations. On the morning of Armistice Day, 1921, Racine Legionnaires attended the dedication of a memorial tree the local Kiwanis Club planted in a city park, and then paraded through the city with members of the Kiwanis, Rotary Club, Red Cross, Boy Scouts, Salvation Army, and fraternal organizations. The Legion post in Bluefield, West Virginia encouraged participation in the town's Armistice Day parade by outside groups by sponsoring a float competition in 1923. The town's Kiwanis and Lions clubs and Improved Order of Red Men were joined in the parade by a float from the Appalachian Power Company, Morton Motor Company, and a local service station. Legion members in Clarksdale, Mississippi, marched with schoolchildren, the boy scouts, and the city's fire department on Armistice Day, 1925.<sup>14</sup>

Legionnaires chose not to include former members of such voluntary support organizations like the YMCA, War Camp Community Service, or the Knights of Columbus, which had provided material and moral support to soldiers during the war.

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<sup>14</sup> Post history, Racine Post no. 76, p. 70, Wisconsin Historical Society Special Collections, *Bluefield Legionnaire*, December 15, 1923, p. 1, *Mississippi Veteran*, December 1925, p. 1. See also *Hoosier Legionnaire*, November 10, 1922, p. 7

Their omission was striking because the service that members of these organizations provided during the war represented the selfless and disinterested service the Legion espoused as critical to Americanism and their efforts greatly overshadowed any similar capacity the federal government could muster on its own. The Legion's omission of such groups said less about its opinion of their service or citizenship and more about the strategic calculus the organization believed Armistice Day required. Including other service organizations would have more accurately reflected the sum of all service Americans offered their nation during the war, but would have detracted from the primacy of military service the Legion placed at the center of the commemoration and thereby insisted represented a higher plane of service. Further, wartime service organizations were developing peacetime agenda that differed significantly from the Legion's and did not insist as the Legion's did that the legacy of wartime loyalty continue in postwar political culture. The YMCA was also pacifist. Thus, sharing the stage with other wartime service organizations proved too threatening to the Legion's central messages for Armistice Day.

Similarly, the Legion excluded ethnic organizations and labor unions from Armistice Day parades, despite the loyalty members of such groups demonstrated to the nation during the war as well. This practice mirrored the long-standing belief by civic celebration organizers that such events should reflect an American society free from class and ethnic divisions. The Legion's Americanist message contained similar sentiments as the organization worked to unite citizens under a single "American" identity. The reluctance of ethnics and workers to conform to Americanizing messages, however, also informed Legion options on including or excluding such groups from the parade line.

Armistice Day offered the opportunity for Legionnaires, particularly in large cities, to resurrect the pageantry of social cohesion and national loyalty among all groups from the war era, when July Fourth alternatively served as Americanization Day (1915) and Loyalty Day (1918). But during the war ethnic communities found ways to assert both their loyalty to the American nation and their own internal identity within that nation, demonstrating the unanimity of their communities' participation in aspects of the war effort but still describing that community as a smaller social unit within the larger nation.<sup>15</sup> Labor unions were similarly well versed enough in the importance of public commemorations in spreading particular ideological messages that their inclusion posed the potential for the Legion to lose control of some aspect of the holiday's message, too. Inclusion of ethnic or worker's groups, then, held too much potential for ideological slippage to risk.

The Legion also excluded grieving family members of the war dead from Armistice Day ceremonies and processions, choosing to allow veterans to eulogize their own fallen comrades instead. Parades in particular drained cathartic meaning for those survivors who had lost loved ones in the World War, pushing any moments of bereavement or solace to the sidelines of the private. Dedicated to building from the sense of national unity the war experience had yielded, the American Legion unquestioningly asserted that the war had been a good and glorious thing for the nation that was worth its sacrifices. Allowing the anniversary's central social function to become the national recognition of suffering of those left behind or the national repudiation of the righteousness of military action, as Armistice Day evolved to comment in

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<sup>15</sup> Litwicks, *America's Public Holidays*, pp. 151-2, 192-3, 223-38, June Cranatir Alexander, *Ethnic Pride, American Patriotism: Slovaks and Other New Immigrants in the Interwar Era* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), pp. 19-20, 29-33, 42

Britain and France, would have defeated such purpose. Even the establishment of a more European-styled central ritual in Washington DC at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier beginning in 1921 did not upset the holiday's local focus and grand message. The tomb's major sponsor in Congress, Representative Hamilton Fish of New York, was a founding Legion leader. Fish, however, proposed the cenotaph as a measure to further soothe sectional divisions for the benefit of his Republican Party and urged the tomb's dedication take place on Memorial Day rather than Armistice Day to better suit this purpose.<sup>16</sup> The establishment of a ritual of wreath laying by the president or cabinet officials popularized further the American adoption of a moment of silence at 11am, a pause that allowed individuals to reflect upon any personal significance the war held in quiet isolation.

When challengers to the Legion's interpretation of the war experience attempted to inject their perspective into Armistice Day proceedings Legionnaires reacted swiftly. A particularly dramatic example came on Armistice Day in Boston in 1925, when Legionnaires felt compelled to defend the very meaning of the holiday against participants in a peace parade. The march was sponsored by the Greater Boston Federation of Churches and included members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Fellowship of Youth for Peace, and the League for Democratic Control. The Legion had refused an invitation to participate, but members did sit in the reviewing stand with Massachusetts Governor Alvan Fuller in front of the Massachusetts State House. At the conclusion of the parade its organizer, Rev. George Lyman Paine, introduced a Harvard graduate student and

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony C. Troncone, "Hamilton Fish, Sr. and the Politics of American Nationalism, 1912-1945" (unpublished dissertation, Rutgers the State University of New Jersey, 1993), pp. 78-9.

German native Francis von Oy to speak to the crowd. A group of about 500 Legionnaires loudly jeered von Oy's address. Failing to interrupt the speech, the Legionnaires circumvented a police line and staged their own rally at a captured German howitzer on Boston Common and denounced the parade as an "unforgettable insult" to their own cause.<sup>17</sup>

While parades offered one popular option for Legion posts, they were by no means the only way Legionnaires chose to commemorate Armistice Day. Some posts favored a more didactic approach, staging patriotic assemblies in civic or school auditoriums or brief memorial ceremonies outdoors. Such ceremonies offered Legion officers the most direct way to relate the war's significance to national development and promote a peacetime nationalist agenda. Other posts preferred to stage events like carnivals or Fourth of July celebrations, programs that placed faith in the idea that simply bringing the community together through something more actively entertaining would expose the audience to an implicit patriotic message. Because of some concern within the organization about whether purely entertainment-focused programs were enough to convey the messages of Armistice Day effectively such programs often augmented a more traditional parade. On Armistice Day, 1921, citizens of Davenport, Iowa enjoyed a "Mardi Gras" styled celebration sponsored by the Legion with the help of other civic and fraternal organizations. The mayor ordered a main city street closed to motor traffic and participating organizations sold noisemakers and confetti from booths with the proceeds going to local charities for a general Christmas fund. Davenport residents then celebrated the holiday in a festival-like atmosphere. Posts in Colorado staged indoor fairs, including

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<sup>17</sup> *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1925, p. 6.

a recreation of “la vie Parisienne” in Pueblo that offered attractions guests paid for with fake money.<sup>18</sup>

Some posts chose to recreate the war experience itself with something more than a cardboard tank float in a parade. Legionnaires in Valatie, New York staged reenactments or “sham battles” from the war designed to titillate the audience with special effects. The post enlisted the aid of regular army and National Guard units for these recreations, dressing “Huns” in German uniforms and placing soldiers in scenery to represent French villages. Fireworks and machine gun blanks simulated the racket of the battlefield while smoke was used to recreate chemical weapon attacks.<sup>19</sup>

The most popular compliment to Legion parades on Armistice Day was football. Games between Legion members and other teams, between squads of active military personnel, or between local high schools were incorporated into plans in communities across the United States, often in the afternoon following a parade.<sup>20</sup> Sponsoring or playing in football games on Armistice Day transcended simple entertainment for Legionnaires. Praised by college presidents and rugged individuals like Theodore Roosevelt for its stern test of players’ manhood, well-to-do Americans since the turn of the century had considered football to be a game that simulated the productive aspects of warfare like toughness and cooperation and counteracted the weakening aspects of modern corporate life. Legion founding members Theodore Roosevelt Jr, Hamilton Fish,

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<sup>18</sup> *Iowa Legionaire*, October 21, 1921, p. 1, American Legion National Americanism Commission, “The Observance of Armistice Day,” (Indianapolis, IN: American Legion Headquarters, 1925) p. 31-2. Stafford King Papers, Minnesota Historical Society

<sup>19</sup> “The Observance of Armistice Day,” p. 31-2

<sup>20</sup> Football dominated Armistice Day observances in Oregon in particular in the early 1920s. *Pacific Legion*, December 1921, p. 8, December, 1922, p. 22, December 1923, p. 24

and William Donovan had all played on Ivy League teams.<sup>21</sup> As a spectacle to mark the armistice holiday, football games brought communities together to watch a recreation of warfare on a more peaceful setting, further reinforcing the day's masculine values of action, discipline, and unity of purpose. Football provided a perfect bridge between the celebratory mood many posts wanted to carry during Armistice Day and their desire to inculcate the values of their organization in the minds of the citizens of their town.

Perhaps no post took the Armistice Day football game more seriously than post no. 76 in Racine, Wisconsin. The post formed a team soon after receiving its charter in 1919 and played regular army and other Legion post teams on the first few Armistice anniversaries. In 1922 the Racine Legion team's coach George "Babe" Ruetz successfully secured a spot for his squad in the fledgling National Football League, which in the early 1920s was comprised mostly of squads from the upper-Midwest, including the Chicago Bears and Green Bay Packers. Ruetz recruited veterans who had played football in college to join the squad, with townspeople finding work for the players to support the team.<sup>22</sup> While Legionnaires themselves soon fell out of the physical condition needed for their own participation in football games, gridiron contests remained a staple of Armistice Day celebrations in Racine and many communities through the interwar period.

As posts developed more and more diverse ways to observe Armistice Day a sense of human loss became all the more abstract. Even for Legionnaires reflection on

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<sup>21</sup> For the connection between manliness, football, and elite American men during the formative years of men who would found and join the American Legion, see Ronald E. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 95-6, Kim Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 108, 111, E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 243-4

<sup>22</sup> Post history, Racine Post no. 76, pp.68-70, 108, Wisconsin Historical Society

buddies lost was relegated frequently to private moments. Frank Miles, the editor of the *Iowa Legionaire*, accepted a celebratory tone for the holiday in 1921, but noted “to the soldier the day of the Armistice will always be one filled with a few hours of memory. It was too might an hour – too solemn a moment – to ever allow him to forget in quiet grandeur. Perhaps there will always be two Armistice Days so long as there lives a man who heard the coming of peacefulness to the twisted line that ran from Belfort to the North Sea. At least there will be one for him – a day of quiet thankfulness as he remembers.”<sup>23</sup> The bifurcated style of observance in many towns, with memorial services taking place in the morning and more jovial celebrations scheduled later in the day, reflected this sense of two Armistice Days. Mass media helped bring a bit of coherence to American communities through the broadcast of ceremonies at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington. The national broadcast, including two minutes of radio silence at 11 am, added some level of coordinated remembrance beginning in 1925.<sup>24</sup> Rituals of remembrance of the Great War’s dead, however, remained the symbolic territory of Memorial Day.

By the mid-1920s the sense that Armistice Day had evolved into something of a muddled holiday, combined with declining enthusiasm for Legion-sponsored events in many communities led Legionnaires to reflect on the fact Armistice Day was not becoming the kind of “national” holiday they had hoped it would be. Legionnaires refused to implicate themselves in what they perceived as a decline in popular interest in the holiday’s observance. Instead, they concluded they had not been forceful enough in conveying their message about the importance of the anniversary to national

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<sup>23</sup> *Iowa Legionaire*, November 18, 1921, p. 4

<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, November 8, 1925, p. xx 16

development. Frank Miles complained in 1926 that although Armistice Day was a state holiday and public buildings and banks closed in observance most businesses remained open. With a clear expectation that civic life should pause on November 11<sup>th</sup> to reflect on the war's legacy, Miles claimed, "once Iowans learn the true significance of Armistice day, what it really means to World war veterans, Iowa will undoubtedly observe it considerably more like it should be, and it is up to the Legion to see that the true Armistice spirit is engendered in the hearts of all patriotic citizens of our state."<sup>25</sup> Legionnaires had built without significant challenge the kind of holiday they wanted for the commemoration of their own victory. Their reaction to the public's flagging interest in their program was to redouble commemorative efforts rather than significantly reconsider the message or inclusion patterns of the holiday through its first half-decade of observance.

Trying to inject new life into Armistice Day celebrations, the American Legion's Americanism Commission in 1925 published a guide for the holiday to augment suggestions found in the Legion's "Service" manual. This new guide reinforced the importance of commemorating Armistice Day and the idea that the Legion had to take the lead in planning community observances. But it remained somewhat contradictory on how exactly posts should boost the observance of the holiday. Its authors also noted the split between celebratory and memorializing tendencies in local Legion-sponsored observances, concluding elements of both were probably necessary for Armistice Day to take full root as a national holiday. The key to popularize the event was mass-participation. "The most desirable type of observance," the guide's introduction stated, "is that which may be led by the veterans themselves, yet include the entire community.

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<sup>25</sup> *Iowa Legionnaire*, November 19, 1926, p. 1.

This celebration should primarily mark the sacrifices of those who served in the Great war, include some recognition of the accomplishments of the war, a time for the whole community to meet on a common basis, and thus potentially organize the thought of the entire citizenry as favorably as possible towards the veterans and their activities.”<sup>26</sup>

Legion officials hoped citizens would be eager to participate in Armistice Day events directly but would emerge from the experience confident in what the Legion had organized was valid. Legionnaires almost paradoxically wanted the participation of their communities in commemorative efforts but also their acquiescence to the Legion’s message.

In this guide the Americanism Commission offered a template for coordinating the programs of posts with a sample program for an entire day’s worth of events that, if fully implemented, would have been thoroughly exhausting. The program began at seven in the morning with the firing of a “sunrise gun” and suggested staging a morning parade. A memorial service should follow, featuring music and addresses by the Legion post commander and another keynote speaker on the meaning of the holiday. Townspeople should then be treated to a football game and either dancing or a veterans’ banquet in the evening. This suggested program essentially represented an aggregation of the activities Legion posts had developed over the first five years of observing the holiday. The Americanism Commission further suggested a program for use in schools, including an address entitled “What the World War Accomplished for America,” a historical pageant and singing by the student body. The Community and Civic Betterment Bureau of the Americanism Commission prepared a script for a larger pageant for the entire community, complete with stage directions and set designs. The pageant dramatized the

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<sup>26</sup> “Observance of Armistice Day,” p. 1.

arrival of American forces in France as the saviors of the other Allied nations, with actors portraying the “youth of America” parading through a recreation of the Arc de Triomphe at center stage.<sup>27</sup>

Since it suggested essentially what posts were doing anyway the 1925 guide had little overall impact on Legion observance of the holiday. It reflected, however, the broad refusal by the organization to widen the thematic scope of the holiday or invite more participants to the process of actually interpreting the war’s lasting significance for the nation. By the tenth anniversary of the armistice the Legion remained firmly in control of the planning and thematic content of commemorative efforts and posts had settled into their own routines for the holiday’s observance. Local and state often governments did little more than pass resolutions recognizing the holiday and authorizing groups like the American Legion to take charge of commemorative efforts in the public sphere or in public schools. Left largely to its own devices in many communities, the Legion made Armistice Day as much about itself as the war, promoting the organization as the torchbearer for the values of Americanism soldiers had fought and died for. In this respect the Legion succeeded brilliantly in its goal to become the main interpreter of the historical memory of the war effort, able to plug its nationalist values into memorialization with little challenge from contesting groups. What the Legion really wanted was for the need to celebrate the armistice to become self-evident among citizens, a collective desire to observe the day that the Legion could guide from the firing of a “sunrise gun” to the final dance at the victory ball in the local armory. Legionnaires wanted their fellow citizens to recognize how such observance, like the enthusiasm most held for July 4<sup>th</sup>, could intensify the bonds of affection Americans felt for one another as

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-20

members of the nation. This mission was less successful than the desire to maintain control of the holiday because too many Legionnaires reacted to the failure of Armistice Day to achieve that goal by injecting more of the Legion into the holiday. Such a reaction made the event more self-referential, haughty, and alienating to those without direct experience with war or even wartime in the case of the young.

The temptation to use the open podium of Armistice Day to make overt political statements held further alienating potential. The organization looked upon the holiday as an opportunity to shape public opinion not only about the war's legitimacy but what the Legion believed should be its legacy for domestic politics and American foreign policy. The typical Legion Armistice Day speech used the horrors of war as a prologue before describing how the organization has lived up to its promise to carry on the work of promoting American democracy those who fell in France had died for. In its 1925 Armistice Day pamphlet the Americanism Commission offered a suggested address for post officers to use at public gatherings which mainly listed the civic and legislative accomplishments of the Legion, ranging from the promotion of a flag code to soldiers' bonus legislation.<sup>28</sup> American Legion national commanders issued public statements on Armistice Day annually and frequently spoke either at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier wreath-laying ceremony or other events on the holiday. These statements often advocated particular political positions the Legion had taken on issues of national defense or international relations, like support for universal draft legislation or American entrance into the World Court.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 17-20.

<sup>29</sup> *New York Times*, November 12, 1925, p. 7, *Washington Post*, November 12, 1928, p. 1, *New York Times*, November 12, 1934, p. 2

As the vivid memories of the end of the war began to fade, Legionnaires developed new methods to commemorate the war, particularly for those with little or no recollection of it personally. On the tenth anniversary of the armistice the Americanism Commission suggested in its newsletter the *Huddle* posts read a roll call of all men who served in the military during the war at a large community assembly, allowing men present to respond and noting those killed in action. “This muster of men who fought after ten years, if properly conducted, should be an impressive part of the Armistice Day ceremonies and a striking way of emphasizing the service of men in the community in the war,” the *Huddle* noted.<sup>30</sup>

Lessons brought directly to public schools offered another possibility for reinvigorating Armistice Day efforts. Patriotic organizations and Progressive reformers had recognized the potential of public schools in promoting particular civic messages to a malleability and captive audience. Legionnaires concentrated their efforts on students’ recitation of patriotic poems and musical performances so that children had direct roles in commemorative efforts.<sup>31</sup> Whenever Armistice Day fell during National Education Week, a joint project between the Legion, other voluntary associations, the National Education Association, and the federal Bureau of Education, Legionnaires nation-wide entered schools to give addresses on the meaning of the holiday. Maryland and Wisconsin passed laws in 1929 mandating schools instruct students on an Armistice Day lesson. Legionnaires in both states participated in such lessons, gathering trench paraphernalia, war posters, and weapons for show-and-tell lessons. The Wisconsin

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<sup>30</sup> *Huddle*, October 1928, p. 2

<sup>31</sup> Litwicki, *America’s Public Holidays*, pp. 180-90, 193-207, O’Leary, *To Die For*, pp. 172-93, *Huddle*, October 1928, p. 2

department adjutant also suggested posts plan musical performances by school bands or glee clubs that could conclude for the blowing of “taps” at 11 am.<sup>32</sup>

Even if Legionnaires complained about how the holiday had not become a single national tradition, the local traditions posts had developed for their own community celebrations remained remarkably stable throughout the interwar period. Enthusiasm for parades did not flag in the 1930s. After a parade by 15,000 members of Southern Californian active duty divisions, about 100,000 gathered in Los Angeles Coliseum on Armistice Day, 1932 to witness former American Legion National Commander John Quinn preside over the re-dedication of the stadium as the Memorial Coliseum. Kings County Legionnaires held annual parades through Brooklyn through the 1930s through Grand Army Plaza. Legionnaires even invited German and Austro-Hungarian veterans to join them in processions in Passaic, New Jersey in 1931. Parades invited new participants to recognize the new civic realities of the Depression: in Eureka, California Legionnaires paraded on Armistice Day in a joint celebration of the National Recovery Act with members of “every industry, every line of business, every trade and all professions” as well as men enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps.<sup>33</sup>

Legionnaires’ complaints that Armistice Day was falling short of becoming a full-fledged patriotic holiday also remained consistent. Noting that citizens widely considered Armistice Day a lesser holiday despite widespread, annual public observances, the editor of the California Department magazine criticized the fact that most big-city businesses

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<sup>32</sup> *Badger Legionnaire*, October 1929, p. 1, *Racine Journal News*, November 11, 1929 (np), American Legion Post 76 (Racine, WI) records, microfilm collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, *Washington Post*, November 11, 1929, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> *California Legionnaire*, November 1932, p. 1, 4, *New York Times*, November 12, 1936, p. 22, November 12, 1931, p. 14, *California Legionnaire*, December, 1933, p. 3. Posts also continued to sponsor football games and hold evening banquets or dances through the interwar period.

remained open for the holiday, despite being closed on Washington's Birthday and Admission Day. The editorialist concluded Legionnaires had failed to gain universal observance of the holiday from the business community because they had not been forceful enough to demand it. In Clairsville, Ohio, Legionnaires took such matters into their own hands when the local grocery store ignored a resolution by the town mayor and refused to close. Retrieving tear gas canisters from the sheriff's office on the guise that they would be used for a military demonstration, Legion members clad in steel helmets tossed the canisters into the offending store. The gas forced patrons and employees to rush out gasping for air. The men then overturned a fruit stand in front of the store. No charges were filed against the Legionnaires.<sup>34</sup>

As the pacifist movement became more popular and aggressive in the 1930s the Legion found its message of peace through preparedness openly challenged on Armistice Day. In Tulsa, Oklahoma members of the Christian Youth Council announced that for Armistice Day, 1935 they would stage a counter-parade "without flag-waving, drum-beating, and demonstrations inclined to emphasize the romantic side of war." This announcement drew the ire of Tulsa veterans. The local American Legion post, however, decided not to march that year to focus the attention of the holiday on the cause of peace. A parade of veterans not affiliated with the Legion followed the peace parade a half-hour behind the student group. In 1937 the Raleigh Ministerial Association refused to participate in Armistice Day ceremonies sponsored by the American Legion in city elementary schools. The ministers offered to speak on the topic of peace but stated that

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<sup>34</sup> *California Legionnaire*, December 1931, p. 6, *New York Times*, November 12, 1930, p. 4

they did not want to participate in programs “which were designed solely for informing students of the glory and honor of war.”<sup>35</sup>

The Legion’s clashes with pacifists over Armistice Day celebrations stemmed from the incompatibility of pacifism to the Legion’s nationalism. What the Legion celebrated on Armistice Day was not war, but a kind of service to the nation that war made most tangible. The Legion believed this sense of service, even of one’s life if necessary, was the very wellspring of citizenship. It refused, therefore, to see war as a waste of lives and glorified it insofar as war expanded national greatness. Armistice Day presented the nation with patriotic heroes to follow, both living and dead. The problem the Legion experienced in generating what it thought was the proper enthusiasm for Armistice Day came not from the fact that Americans were unwilling to think of war as generating heroes worthy of honor. The Civil War generation had established that sentiment well before the Legion added to it with a separate commemoration of its generation’s victory. Rather, Americans grew weary of Legionnaires’ self-promotion and its preparedness platform.

A writer for the pacifist-leaning *Christian Century* captured this sentiment well in a droll account of a “peace” celebration in a sleepy North Carolina town in 1935. After an uninspiring parade of national guardsmen and Legionnaires, during which even the participants looked bored, about 140 citizens gathered for a community sing and to hear speeches by the local Congressmen and Legion post commander. The post chaplain tried in vain to illicit enthusiasm from the crowd in singing a series of patriotic songs. “On and on droned the moth-eaten rhetoric and empty phrases,” the commander spoke, his platitude-riddled speech marked by the author with ellipses, before townspeople left the

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<sup>35</sup> *New York Times*, November 10, 1935, p. 37, November 3, 1937, p. 27.

assembly at a loss at what the ceremony had to do with peace or what the point of it all had been.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Legion's Great War memorials**

For all its efforts to encourage a glorified vision of the American soldier on Armistice Day, the American Legion found no consensus on how to convey the sacrifices of the fallen in public memorials. Many Legion posts supported the creation of abstract or strikingly practical memorials to fallen comrades. The decision to honor those who had made the ultimate sacrifice for their nation with something the entire community could use and enjoy symbolized how applicable the Legion believed the lessons of military service were to civic life. Taking inspiration from the planting of memorial trees many communities sponsored immediately after the armistice the Legion encouraged posts to stage their own memorial tree plantings on Memorial Day, 1920 to honor fallen comrades. Trees “have always symbolized the principle of everlasting life in nature...whose promise robs death of despair,” a Legion campaign organizer wrote in the *American Legion Weekly*. For veterans rows of trees along roads would bring back memories of marching along the poplar-lined roads of France. Tree memorials were also reminiscent of the poetry of Sergeant Joyce Kilmer, who was killed in the war. National Headquarters went so far as to suggest what species of trees to plant according to regional climate differences.<sup>37</sup> The idea of planting memorial trees took hold in the early 1920s. Trees were dedicated with a marker indicating in whose memory they were planted. Posts

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<sup>36</sup> Renwick C. Kennedy, “The Great Peace Celebration,” *Christian Century*, December 4, 1935, pp. 1553-4 (quotation from page 1554).

<sup>37</sup> Walter J. Wood, “Keeping Memories Green,” *American Legion Weekly*, May 7, 1920, p. 10, 29 (quotation from page 10).

also dedicated existing forests in local communities as memorial parks rather than plating new trees in graveyards or parks. On Memorial Day, 1921 Legion members dedicated 4,000 acres of forest in Washington Parrish, Louisiana, marking the site with a plaque inscribed with the following message: “hundreds of thousands of young growing evergreen little pine trees here dedicated to the memory of every soldier, living and dead, who enlisted in the World War from Washington parish. What [sic] more fitting than a growing, evergreen pine tree? Always lifting its leafy arms to pray.”<sup>38</sup>

The Legion also embraced the idea of practical memorials by encouraging posts to erect memorial buildings in their towns that could serve as meeting places for civic clubs and host community events. This idea was presented to the Legion by Community Service, Incorporated in the early 1920s but the cost of undertaking such a project prevented its widespread adoption. Most posts preferred to spend such resources on buildings for their own clubhouses. Nevertheless, in a survey of post community service activities conducted in the winter of 1927-1928 76 posts reported establishing a memorial building for community use. In Iowa local posts encouraged municipalities to sell bonds to pay at least part of the cost of erecting new buildings. In Dubuque Legionnaires argued that such a building could serve as a daily reminder of the sacrifices veterans gave for their community and nation for generations with no knowledge of the war. The Hosford Post in Cedar Rapids convinced voters to approve the most impressive of these memorial buildings in 1925, a million-dollar Egyptian Revival memorial building and city hall built on an island in the middle of the Red Cedar River.<sup>39</sup> While community buildings as

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<sup>38</sup> *Iowa Legionaire*, May 5, 1922, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> Dan Sowers, “Activity Report of Community Service Division,” Americanism, Civic Betterment, American Legion National Headquarters Library and Archives, Indianapolis, Indiana, *Iowa Legionaire*, June 21, 1929, p. 3, *American Legion Monthly*, April 1928

memorials proved too costly an alternative to traditional monuments to catch on widely in American communities, they reflected the desire by Legionnaires to have their service in wartime remain a model for service to the nation through good citizenship.

Encouraging voluntary associations to prosper in Legion-dedicated municipal club rooms underscored the Legion's belief that such groups best typified the kind of disinterested, class-neutral, middle-class led civic behavior at the heart of American democracy.

Legionnaires also joined committees in hundreds of towns to erect more traditional war memorials. These committees often went out of their way to avoid the aesthetic choices made for Civil War memorials, which one *American Legion Weekly* observer described as "funny figures at parade-rest...stolid and wooden and expressionless." Many towns erected garish contrasts, statues of men going "over the top" in poses the same writer dubbed "petrified violence." One of the most dramatic example of this style of memorial was created to honor the Seventh Regiment in New York City, a bronze statue of soldiers with bayonets fixed who appear to charge over the wall on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue bordering Central Park to attack passers-by. Statues of doughboys in action could be purchased directly from monument forging companies which advertised in the pages of Legion publications. Towns looking for more stately options could purchase small monumental arches directly by mail-order or hire their own artists. Legion-approved designs included monumental columns and triumph arches that resembled some Civil War memorials. While plenty of committees with enough funds to commission original sculptures selected designs featuring charging doughboys, others chose monuments that conveyed a sense of sacrifice and victorious service more stylistically. While these works tended to be more open to interpretation than those of

men charging far-off pillboxes, they generally avoided sentimentalizing loss in the way the single soldier monuments of the Civil War era had done by allowing the figure to stand for the war's everyman. The town of Orange Massachusetts, for instance, erected a monument that featured a seated veteran in a conversation with a young boy. While the content of their conversation was open to interpretation depending on the perspective of the viewer, this style of memorial held a common theme across memorial efforts by Legionnaires to keep the lessons of the war close to the surface.<sup>40</sup>

### **Passing the flag: the Legion, Memorial Day, and the Grand Army of the Republic**

American Legion members gained another chance to assert themselves in the patriotic traditions of their communities by taking over Memorial Day from the fading Civil War generation. The assumption of Memorial Day duties represented the realities that those killed in World War I deserved memorialization, too, and the fact that Civil War veterans were getting too old to continue the work of leading commemorations themselves. The Legion approached the issue of control for Memorial Day gingerly, hoping not to offend the revered and elderly members of Civil War veterans' organizations. "Tact and good taste should be employed in order to avoid any possibility of injury to [Civil War veterans'] feelings, or the appearance of attempting to overshadow them," warned a Montana pamphlet on cooperating with the GAR on Memorial Day.

"Every effort should be made to promote cooperation with all societies, and to develop

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<sup>40</sup> Lorado Taft, "That All Men May Know," *American Legion Monthly*, June 1928, pp. 10-3 (quotation p. 10), *American Legion Monthly*, September 1926, p. 61, *Iowa Legionaire*, July 18, 1924, p. 10, David Glassberg and J. Michael More, "Patriotism in Orange: The Memory of World War I in a Massachusetts Town," John Bodnar, ed., *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 160-90. For more on monuments to the Civil War, see Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

the observance of Memorial Day into a real expression of community reverence for the dead of all wars.”<sup>41</sup> For Legionnaires, taking over for elderly veterans was a logical extension of their patriotic service, a “grave and honorable trust” that bound them to veterans of past generations through shared sacrifice and service for the nation.<sup>42</sup>

Rather than invent new traditions for the holiday, the Legion perpetuated those developed by the Civil War generation to honor their own dead for use to honor the remaining veterans of all wars and their fallen comrades. Legionnaires took over conducting annual Memorial Day parades, with GAR members at the front of these parades in positions of honor. Northern posts also assumed responsibilities for ceremonies in cemeteries, decorating the graves of those killed Civil War, Spanish-American War, and World War and creating their own special firing squads for the holiday<sup>43</sup> Southern Legion posts, while far fewer in number, also assumed Memorial Day ritual duties. Posts in North Carolina joined with members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in decorating graves while veterans of three wars paraded through Carolina towns. In Mississippi the Legion Women’s Auxiliary continued the Decoration Day tradition by strewing flowers on the graves of all veterans.<sup>44</sup>

Legionnaires also did their part to bridge the bloody chasm of sectional division. When a post in Reedsville, Wisconsin discovered that two Confederate veterans had recently died in near-by Maple Grove members wrote a post in Vicksburg, Mississippi asking if it were appropriate to place flags on the men’s graves on Memorial Day. The

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<sup>41</sup> O. C. Lamport, Special Bulletin no. 111, Montana Department American Legion, May 18, 1923. Pamphlet Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

<sup>42</sup> *Ohio Legionnaire*, May 27, 1922, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> *Iowa Legionnaire*, June 3, 1921, p. 2, *American Legionnaire* (Minnesota), May 29, 1924, p. 1, 4, *Mankato Legionnaire*, May 25, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Oteen Echo*, June 6, 1922, pp. 1, 11, 13, *Mississippi Veteran*, June 1928, p. 8

southerners had moved to Maple Grove after the war. The post in Vicksburg replied by sending them small Confederate battle flags for the occasion to be crossed with “Old Glory” and praised the Wisconsin men warmly for their efforts. The Legionnaires decorated the graves of two Confederate veterans along with the town marching band, Boy Scouts, and school children on Memorial Day, 1926.<sup>45</sup>

Whereas Legionnaires shaped Armistice Day commemorations to reflect a spirit of victory rather than loss members remained adamant that Memorial Day retain the more somber tone it had held since the aftermath of the Civil War. Despite the reverence the Legion approached Memorial Day with it tailored the holiday to suit its own purposes. Rather than using the holiday to sentimentalize loss during the Great War as it refused to do on Armistice day, the Legion tried to connect veterans’ sacrifices across generations to construct a timeless sense of patriotic service to the state. By this the Legion tried to make the Union cause in the Civil War its own cause, linking the generations in a fight to preserve democracy. Legion speakers linked the boys of ’61 and the boys of ’17 as part of the same struggle that pointed towards future national greatness through the patriotic service their deaths embodied. To link these generations the Legion found it vital to retain the tenor of the holiday. The organization and GAR condemned Indiana Legion members for allowing Indianapolis to stage its famous auto race on Memorial Day for profit.<sup>46</sup> “Memorial Day is not a time for the glorification of victories won,” an Iowa Legionnaire wrote in 1928:

It is not a time for celebration and hilarity – ball games, automobile races – it is rather a time for sober and reverent retrospection...a time for the expression of our everlasting debt of reverent affection, of unchanging gratitude to those

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<sup>45</sup> *Mississippi Veteran*, June, 1928, p. 8, *Badger Legionnaire*, June 9, 1926, p.1.

<sup>46</sup> *Iowa Legionnaire*, June 6, 1922, p. 4.

whose heroic deeds have painted the brightest pages in our national history with unselfish sacrifice and heroic achievements that can never be surpassed from Bunker Hill and Yorktown down to Chateau Thierry and the Argonne Forest. To the fast thinning ranks of the G.A.R., to the men of '98 and to us as Legionnaires, Memorial Day should have a little deeper meaning – should be a little more sacred – than to those who have not had the high privilege of following the flag in defense of this land of ours; and to us it should be a time for rekindling in ourselves that spirit of 'Americans All' – a time for reconsecrating ourselves to those lofty principles that have made this America stand out as the brightest star in the galaxy of nations.<sup>47</sup>

Thus while the Legion continued to honor the memories of particular men who died in wars they maintained the broader function of Memorial Day to assert the unique and privileged position combat had elevated veterans to in determining standards for American patriotism. The ability to point backwards over 150 years of American history to the string of wars that had propelled the United States to its position as that brightest star allowed Legionnaires to distance themselves within the political culture from those without the experiences of service they had. That distancing effect made it difficult for competing political actors to challenge the Legion over issues of national identity because of the enormous credibility events like Memorial Day gave veterans as the arbiters of patriotic citizenship.

The Legion also preserved Memorial Day's use of female mourning to glorify the sacrifices of male servicemen, thereby elevating male citizenship above female. Thus, even though the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the federal constitution had leveled male and female civic participation on the issue of suffrage, the Legion's Memorial Day commemorations continued the distinctions 19<sup>th</sup>-century political culture drew between roles for each gender. Ladies' Auxiliary members celebrated the masculine values of veterans'

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<sup>47</sup> *Iowa Legionaire*, May 25, 1928, p. 4.

citizenship while retaining the more emotional and sentimental roles Victorian political culture had ascribed to their mothers and grandmothers. Auxiliary members, who were eligible to join only by being the wives and close relatives of veterans or men killed in the war, led grave decoration duties or shared them with Legionnaires on Memorial Day. Women in the Auxiliary also dedicated memorial trees planted by the Legion to honor the fallen and sold poppies on Memorial Day, the proceeds of which benefited veterans' hospitals and rehabilitation clinics. The voices commemorating the sacrifices of the fallen at Memorial Day ceremonies, however, remained male, as they had been at GAR-led commemorations.<sup>48</sup> The Legion's continuation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century gender distinctions did not represent the organization's broader rejection of women's suffrage, the equal citizenship status of women, or a belief that women need not be held to the same standards of civic participation as men. Nothing required Legionnaires to consider women's newly-won right of suffrage as the refutation of their sex's supposed emotional capacities. And if, as the Legion claimed, veterans carried the same symbolic currency across generations, than sentimental reflections on that fact were certainly useful, even if they were a bit anachronistic.

Legionnaires forged direct relationships with remaining GAR members through their assumption of commemorative duties on Memorial Day. Posts found a variety of ways to honor men in their eighties and nineties who once fought to preserve the political ideals Legionnaires believed they had saved from Prussianism. Posts invited members of the GAR to their clubhouses for special banquets in their honor or simply to recount their

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<sup>48</sup> "Handbook for use of Units of the American Legion Auxiliary" (Indianapolis, IN: American Legion Auxiliary, 1923), p. 16, William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), pp. 297-8, O'Leary, *To Die For*, pp. 97, 101, Litwicky, *America's Public Holidays*, pp. 14-23, Morgan, *Women and Patriotism In Jim Crow America*

experiences in the Civil War. Such ceremonies continued even for GAR members who were quite elderly. In the summer of 1932 members of the Black Diamond Post in Kingston, Pennsylvania invited 17 remaining GAR members in their nineties from the community to the post for an appreciation ceremony. Iowa posts led the way in honoring GAR veterans remaining in their communities. In Shenandoah, Iowa the local Legion post initiated a week of honors for remaining GAR members in May, 1922. Church services honoring the Civil War veterans opened the week on Sunday while the Legion hosted meals and arranged for schoolchildren to serenade the elderly men over the next three days. As the week became an annual occurrence many more Iowan posts picked up the idea by the late 1920s, when it became an official program of the department.<sup>49</sup> Some GAR posts took such ceremonies as opportunities literally to pass the standard to Legionnaires. In Garner, Iowa a member of the town's GAR post mounted the podium at a Memorial Day service along with his post's flag and told the local Legion post commander in front crowd of 1000, "we of the Grand Army of the Republic have carried this beloved flag for more than fifty years. We are too old to carry it longer, so we turn it over to you, confident that you will always love this flag as we love it."<sup>50</sup> When GAR members died the Legion honored them at their funerals. In Aneta, North Dakota Legionnaires provided a full military-style funeral for the town's last remaining GAR member in the winter of 1927, crafting a cassion out of a farm wagon and draping his coffin with an American flag. Cedar Rapids, Iowa Legionnaires furnished pall bearers

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<sup>49</sup> *Iowa Legionnaire*, May 12, 1922, p. 9, May 23, 1924, p. 5, June 10, 1927, p. 1, May 3, 1929, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> *American Legion Monthly*, Nov, 1932, p. 30, *Iowa Legionnaire*, June 6, 1924, p. 1, *American Legionnaire* (Minnesota) June 5, 1929, p. 3.

and bugler for an African-American Civil War veteran's funeral in January, 1929 as the weather proved too difficult for his GAR post to perform the honors themselves.<sup>51</sup>

### **July 4<sup>th</sup> and historical pageantry**

The aging of previous wars' veterans also allowed Legion posts to assume the duties of planning fetes for the Fourth of July in many communities across the nation. Many of the programs Legionnaires created, often in committees with other voluntary organizations and civic governments, inserted a martial spirit prominently in the day's events. In 1921 the mayor of Seattle asked the commander of the Rainer-Noble post to help plan the city's July Fourth celebration. The commander secured the cooperation of the army and navy and Seattle's harbor was filled with American warships for the event. Legionnaires joined a parade of thousands and assisted a re-enactment of the Battle of Chateau Thierry later in the afternoon on the campus of the University of Washington. In Des Moines, Iowa the Argonne Post staged a similar re-enactment of the Battle of the Argonne Forest with the help of four regiments of the Iowa National Guard for July Fourth, 1926. Proclaiming "no detail will be spared to make the Argonne battle reproduction the nearest thing to tactual warfare that has been or will be seen by the public here," the post strung a local woods with barbed wire and dug gun pits for artillery batteries. National guardsmen fired blanks from machine guns and artillery pieces and launched rockets and flares in the recreation.<sup>52</sup> This dedication to reproducing accurately the experience of battle provided those who attended these demonstrations an example of what combat was really like so they could better understand the perspectives of the

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<sup>51</sup> *American Legion Monthly*, January 1928, p. 41, *Iowa Legionaire*, January 25, 1929, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Don C. Stewart, "Seattle to Celebrate 4<sup>th</sup>," *Pacific Legion*, July 1921, p. 29, Clarence O. Pinkerton, "Argonne Post to Stage Battle for Argonne Fourth," *Iowa Legionaire*, June 25, 1926, p. 13.

Legionaries among them. Such exercises in turn validated war as a foundation of experience for patriotic citizenship and reminded citizens on the nation's birthday of the links between nationalism and the nation's military history.

Posts without the resources or inclination to simulate the war in their corner of the United States managed to return July Fourth to something of its past glory of spectacle-rich parades and large community fireworks displays. Legionnaires put to rest the "safe and sane" campaigns for a more education and less pyrotechnic July Fourth that some Progressive social workers and civic groups had launched in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>53</sup> Post in larger cities and small towns planned events that focused on bringing the community together in shared celebration. The Americanism Commission encouraged posts to take up organizing July Fourth celebrations, noting they are, "the recognized leaders in patriotic activities" in their communities. Celebrations frequently included organized sporting events, picnics, complete with three-legged races, and fireworks displays. In 1925 the Legion joined with the American Farm Bureau Federation with the endorsement of President Coolidge to encourage "old-fashioned get-together picnics as a means tending towards the development of the community life of the rural districts in the nation." Posts also organized parades, particularly featuring marching bands or Legion drill teams and drum corps that became an integral part of internal organizational culture and a point of pride for posts. More ambitious posts, like one in Mantako, Minnesota, incorporated events like aerial stunt acts into July Fourth programs. The Americanism Commission suggested in 1929 that posts organize a day's worth of activities designed to unify their community in celebration. As on Armistice Day, the Americanism

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<sup>53</sup> For more on progressives' "safe and sane" campaigns, see Litwicky, *America's Public Holidays*, pp. 207-17, David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 55

Commission urged posts to wake their town up early with a sounding of reveille or dramatic firing of an artillery battery and proceed with a parade of patriotic societies and an afternoon outdoor entertainment later.<sup>54</sup>

Posts also used July Fourth as an opportunity to stage historical pageants, although Legionnaires undertook such projects during other times of the year as well. Historical pageants had enjoyed a heyday in the mid-1910s, and while its popularity was waning the American Legion was one of a handful of groups that kept this dramatic form alive in popular culture. Pageants had depicted through drama the unfolding of local histories before World War I as a form of civic boosterism and as a way Progressives believed citizens could be brought together both as participants and viewers to view a manageable and hopeful common history that pointed towards a more unified and glorious future. During the War pageants dropped their localism and emphasized nationalism and loyalty to the central state. In the 1920s Legionnaires's usage of pageantry contained both aspects of their earlier functions. Pageants became another tool to depict the nation's heroic past in ways that spurred loyalty to a common American identity and dedication to a national sense of citizenship, even as reflected in the development of a particular town's history. The pageants the Legion sponsored explained in idealized terms how Americans in the past had lived in ways that propelled the nation towards the path of greatness. They offered formulas of "idealized behavior of past generations for present generations to emulate," as historian David Glassberg has written.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *American Legionnaire* (Minnesota), June 28, 1923, p. 1, June 21, 1923, p. 3 *Iowa Legionnaire*, July 3, 1925, p. 4, July 15, 1922, p. 10, June 21, 1929, p. 3, *Mankato Legionnaire*, June 24, 1935, p. 1, *Huddle*, June, 1929, p. 4

<sup>55</sup> Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, p. 249.

Some Legion-sponsored pageants focused on the lives of particular patriotic heroes. Abraham Lincoln was a particularly popular subject for Legionnaires and posts interested in dramatizing his life for community audiences purchased a ready-made script. Willard Dillman's "Pageant of Abraham Lincoln" proclaimed to follow no sense of historical accuracy. Intended to have as large a cast as possible in order let children in particular experience the pageant as a form of social play, the script included broke from history for fanciful scenes of a young Lincoln watching flowers and small animals frolicking in the meadow with fairies.<sup>56</sup> The broad purpose of the pageant, however, was to use the Railsplitter's life as a lens to portray the flow of the last century of American history. Lincoln the young man witnesses a slave auction in New Orleans and erupts with rage when a young slave woman is bought by an ugly character and separated from her mother, the drama leading him to vow on the spot he would spend the rest of his life abolishing slavery. This theme of Lincoln the emancipator is carried through the production; President Lincoln in one scene is joined on stage by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Julia Ward Howe, Mrs. U.S. Grant and his own wife to sing "John Brown's Body." The pageant dealt with the Civil War only as an episode that confirmed national greatness, the narrator summarizing the war after Lee's surrender grotesquely, "it had been a chivalrous war and nobody had done anything that he needed to be ashamed of. No foul means had been employed; no women, children, or non-combatants had been harmed." After Lincoln's martyrdom the full impact of the war on the nation is revealed as he joins Uncle Sam and Columbia to review the largess of American agriculture represented by

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<sup>56</sup> Glassberg, *American Historical Pageanty*, p. 52-63.

the figure of Ceres and other harvest maidens.<sup>57</sup> This conclusion reflected the republican values of an organization like the Grand Army of the Republic and reflected the belief that northern victory had at last unified the nation behind its political values. The pageant suggested with the passage of time since Lincoln's death those values had proved their worth through the nation's prosperity and now enjoyed unanimous acceptance as "American" values. It also presented another hero through which communities could understand their own success and that of the nation as the result of the will of great individuals. This pageant's treatment of the Civil War as a chivalric, humane, and ultimately redemptive conflict also drew a clear analogy to the World War's supposed defense of the democracy fully realized with the demise of slavery and suggested that war was a necessary and righteous historical force for the nation.

Other Legion-sponsored pageants focused on connecting local histories to the larger narrative of national development. Some of these pageants followed the narrative formulas of prewar pageants, following the town's history from its Native American prehistory through settlement by whites through the nationalizing experience of either the Civil or World Wars.<sup>58</sup> As the program for such a pageant the Edgar Eubanks Post of Rice Lake, Wisconsin stated, history pageants were by definition "a drama in which the town is the hero and the history of the town is the plot." Nevertheless, members of the town were more heroic than others through the unfolding of the community's history. The Rice Lake pageant opens with the arrival of French trappers in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century who encounter the Ojibwa tribe on the shores of the lake and secure the land for

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<sup>57</sup> Willard Dillman, "Pageant of Abraham Lincoln," Stafford King Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. This script was prepared for Clarence Clofer Post #259, Lake Minnetonka, MN and was performed in a town commons on Aug 3-6, 1921. For other uses of what was almost certainly the same script, see *Badger Legionnaire*, Aug 5, 1924, p. 11, *Iowa Legionnaire*, July 15, 1922, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Glassberg, *American Historical Pageants*, p. 122.

settlement, bringing the Indians Christianity in the process. Skipping through the next two centuries, the pageant depicts through pantomime the establishment of an American logging camp on the site of Rice Lake, which loggers heroically defend from Indian attack, the settlement of the town by families in 1872. The pageant ends with the men of Rice Lake answering Columbia's call to defend the free nations of Europe from Prussian aggression, going "over the top" in a successful assault and then returning home in glory.<sup>59</sup> Other pageants, even if not as comprehensive as Rice Lake's in depicting the community's history, included moments when military engagements secured the future of communities. A similar pageant depicting the history of Kenosha, Wisconsin included a cavalry battle between whites and natives. In a 1924 pageant in Walla Walla, Washington, Legionnaires played the role of Col. George Wright's dragoons, who defeated American Indian challengers to whites' settlement in 1898. Legionnaires in Spokane, Washington blended the two most common styles of pageantry for their production celebration the town's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A cast of 5,000 depicted the city's "spirit of progress," while individuals played great historical figures. The post's curious selections for historical figures included John Rockefeller, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, and P.T. Barnum.<sup>60</sup>

While the ambitious recreations of local history through pageantry the Legion sponsored reflected the end of the road for this dramatic form, the pageant's approach to American history fit neatly into Legionnaires' broader assessment of how to use the nation's past to explain its identity. Through commemorations of military experiences

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<sup>59</sup> Souvenir Program, Rice Lake Pageant, July 22-3, 1920, Wisconsin Historical Society Pamphlet Collection, pp. 1, 9, 19, 23, 25, 29, 37-45.

<sup>60</sup> *Badger Legionnaire*, July 21, 1926, p. 6, Americanism, Post Activities, Community folder, American Legion National Headquarters Library and Archives

that literally put history on the march with the inclusion of several generations of American warriors, Legionnaires presented communities with an idea of the nation forged through the struggles of men on the battlefield. The qualities that propelled those warriors to victory, therefore, represented the essence of greatness for the American nation. A large part of Legion-sponsored patriotic commemoration involved the projection of such values into the future. Legionnaires understood that the globe remained a dangerous place for the United States during the interwar period. Its emphasis on the historical development of American national power, therefore, reflected the concern that the United States would almost certainly need to defend itself again through war. History as portrayed by these commemorations served to perpetuate a virile nationalism appropriate for the context of the times. This is not to say Armistice Day or other holidays became moments for bellicosity. Indeed, Legionnaires shared with many Americans the same popular isolationist view of American foreign policy even while lobbying consistently for a strong national defense system. Reflecting on the desire for peace, however, was framed through the knowledge that Americans have had to fight to secure the political values of freedom and democracy for the nation.

Patriotic commemorations, however, did not simply project a vision of nationalism out upon a dangerous international scene: they built useful lessons for citizenship in the domestic context as well. First and foremost, patriotic holidays promoted unity among the American people as essential for health of the nation's political system. That unity, however, was derived from the deference of citizens to a particular and constructed "American" identity determined by other, sufficiently enlightened and privileged citizens. Legionnaires' inclusion of other middle-class,

conservative-minded organizations and refusal of other class or ethnic-based groups delineated its vision of proper loyalty to the nation through proper civic behaviors. These holidays implicitly endorsed the political and socio-economic status quo by putting seemingly timeless and abstract values like liberty, sacrifice, and devotion to the greater good on display. Those who would pose counter-narratives to those of patriotic holidays or those who would assert competing definitions of what those abstract concepts should mean were shut out of the commemorative discourse. While the actual historical memory of an event like World War I could remain contested in American culture, as witnessed by the reaction against the very spirit with which the American Legion presented the war in the literature of the “lost generation,” or even in the private consciousnesses of those whose experiences of war were painful, the success the Legion experienced in sealing off competing voices from the public commemoration of the war limited severely the political meanings of these events for peacetime political culture.<sup>61</sup>

The American Legion’s role in leading commemorations of patriotic holidays also ensured that the figure of the veteran would retain weighty symbolic importance in twentieth century political culture. By accepting the standard passed from the Civil War generation, sometimes literally, Legionnaires ensured that the way Civil War veterans had reinvented the importance of veterans in political culture would survive their generations’ demise. By doing so, veterans remained a symbol useful “to stimulate loyalty to existing institutions and, therefore, institutional leaders who tended to reside in the professional classes,” as John Bodnar explained in his work *Remaking America*. In

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<sup>61</sup> David M. Kennedy asserts that disillusionment literature actually failed to tarnish the much more heroic and upbeat view of the war elsewhere in popular culture, indicating that the Legion’s interpretive gloss on the war met the expectations of many Americans. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 225-30.

his analysis, however, Bodnar neglects how veterans within the Legion conceived of their own symbolic power in the public sphere and employed their own status to achieve their own political ends, which did frequently match those of community elites.<sup>62</sup> In Legionnaires hands' the symbolic meaning of being a veteran drifted further towards a reflection of conservative political values and farther from the representation of an actual historical event. By seizing the commemoration of their own war for their own purposes in postwar politics, Legionnaires ensured the symbolic meaning of the veteran would become less ambiguous and, paradoxically, less specific to particular war experience. The transition of Armistice Day to Veterans Day and the effacement of any connection to World War I the holiday of November 11<sup>th</sup> represents the culmination of this process as the nation celebrates the values "veterans" of all wars are understood without reflection to stand for.

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<sup>62</sup> Bodnar, *Remaking America*, p. 84-5, quotation from p. 85.

## Chapter 7

### **“In America there is room for one ‘ism:’” The Legion’s Antiradicalism during the Depression**

Writing in the July, 1931 issue of *The Forum*, Republican Congressman Hamilton Fish, Jr. took a curious route to defend the American Legion, an organization he helped to found, from its critics that claimed it had too much influence in American politics. Rather than doing too much, Fish argued that the Legion was doing too little to make itself heard in politics. “It is the manifest duty of the Legion,” Fish claimed, “to take the leadership on most of the non-political and non-partisan issues affecting the interests of the American people, and help in shaping the destinies of our country and making it a better place to live in for oncoming generations.” Fresh from his Congressional investigation of communism in the United States, Fish believed the most pressing political issue facing the nation was destroying communist influence. In the absence of broad federal interest in combating communism, the task fell to organizations like the Legion. “Communism is the most important, vital, and far-reaching issue affecting the civilization of the world and the happiness and liberties of our own people,” Fish concluded. “No veterans’ organization can pussyfoot on the issue and expect to retain public confidence,”<sup>1</sup>

For the rest of the decade of the 1930s the Legion would more than redeem its antiradical reputation. The Legion’s anticommunist zeal became great enough that its critics compared the organization to the fascists. It became one of the most important antiradical force in American politics in the pre-McCarthy era. It pursued the antiradical agenda contained within its conception of Americanism with renewed vigor, abandoning some of the caution the organization exhibited in the 1920s in the new context of

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton Fish, Jr., “In Defense of the Legion,” *Forum*, July, 1931, pp. 29-30

economic depression. As American political culture began to tilt more to the left than ever before, Legionnaires held their ideological ground. They defined the political obligations citizens owed to each other and the state in this new moment of crisis as they had in the first Red Scare and in the prosperity of the Jazz Age. They pointed to Americans' loyalty towards democratic process, becoming increasingly worried that Americans would look outside the traditions of the nation's democratic heritage for solutions to their immediate problems. Legion antiradicalism during this period, therefore, was not simply an expression of the desire to stay the economic and political course from which the New Deal threatened to deviate. Nor was it the snuffing out of the last flicker of Progressive ideas within the organization. It was a real concern that the United States would be heading towards much greater disaster if it used the context of the Depression to reinvent its political culture wholesale.

As the Legion engaged the communist menace many of the lingering questions about the connection between good citizenship and nationalism raised by its definition of Americanism remained. With the resurgence of unionism in the mid and late-1930s, Legionnaires revisited the issue of how class politics could fit within the classless vision of American democracy Americanism presented. As pacifists and antifascists promoted an internationally-focused citizenship, the Legion had to rectify their vision with its nationalism. Legionnaires' vigilante actions and support for new antiradical legislation revisited the question of whether radicals who supposedly represented revolutionary ideas deserved constitutional protection of their civil liberties and right to operate as political parties. The Legion reached the same answers to these questions implicit in its Americanism as it had during the first Red Scare period. This second time around the

Legion cared even less about public opinion towards its aggressive antiradical efforts. In the midst of the Depression and what it considered aggressive infiltration of American society by Moscow, it believed it had to preserve Americanism within the political culture.

Throughout this maturation process, the fundamentals of the Legion's Progressive ideological foundation remained. As previous chapters of this dissertation have demonstrated, the Legion remained committed to a more conservative but Progressive conception of civic nationalism and remained active in promoting its tenets in the political culture. Its aggressive antiradicalism was compatible with those efforts and not separate from them. But by the eve of American entrance into World War II, the Legion demonstrated how Progressive ideas about citizenship and national identity could serve drastically conservative ends, particularly in contrast to the ways liberals were transforming those same ideas into new conceptions of citizenship and nationhood.<sup>2</sup> As this chapter demonstrates, the best way to track the Legion's conservatism is to focus not on policy issues but on how it dealt with the potential for ideological diversity within the democracy. The Legion did not comment on most issues concerning the political economy or challenge the principles of the New Deal or pose alternative political agenda to liberals of the Depression era like other right-wing demagogues.<sup>3</sup> To grasp the Legion's particular variant of conservatism we must pay attention to its defense of its principles of citizenship within the political culture. The Legion was dedicated fundamentally to preserving a particular conception of democratic process, a single way

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<sup>2</sup> For the most concise example of this last historical development, see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 128-55

<sup>3</sup> My thoughts here turn to Father Charles Coughlin and Huey Long. Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Knopf, 1982), The Legion did become involved in fiscal policy debates concerning veterans interests.

to “do” politics wrapped up in conservative Progressive ideas about the relationship between citizenship and loyalty. The Legion spent much of its time in the Depression era arguing against the American-ness of other political actors based on that narrow conception of democratic process, as it had during the early 1920s. Such a conservative approach to the political culture itself condemned categories of political thought while keeping itself largely free from potentially isolating policy debates.

### **The Legion’s sense of mission during the Depression**

Because of the experiences its members had accrued both in the military and in service to the nation-state as Legionnaires in civilian life, the Legion thought of itself as particularly well-suited to understanding the challenges facing American political culture in the Depression. Immediately, the Legion began to argue that the Depression represented a crisis much larger than its economic dimensions, wary that citizens’ reactions to the situation would magnify the financial crisis’s harmful effects. Nearly a year after the stock market crash, the National Americanism Commission reported to the delegates of the 1930 national convention, “Our nation stands on trial. We are confronted with a great struggle – a most serious encounter – which will require the exertion of every energy by true Americans.” Legionnaires had particular responsibilities in this crisis. “It is our duty, we who know what sacrifice means, to uphold the high standard, the traditions and the ideals that were our actuators during the years of war,” the NAC claimed. “We have it within our power to not only preserve, but also to perpetuate our Nation and to give the next generation the greatest America of all times ... With these changing conditions we face the task of perpetuating our American traditions and ideals.

No quicker way to our country's downfall could be found than to permit the national character to weaken and its ideals to disintegrate.”<sup>4</sup> To ensure such a catastrophe did not happen, the Legion urged Americans to remain loyal to the process of their nation's democracy and use its traditions, structures, and institutions to solve the crisis of depression.

The first step to being loyal to democratic process, the Legion asserted, was to try and remedy the economic impact of the Depression through community-level voluntary action. Before massive government intervention was mobilized, Legionnaires believed Americanism required the collective efforts of neighbors to help each other. Such acts were still imagined, however, to be taking place on a national scale. “No organization realizes better that the employment problem is in its essence a local problem – that it becomes a national problem only by adding together hundreds of thousands of local problems,” the *American Legion Monthly* claimed in December, 1931. In early 1932 the Legion used its corporate and political connections to form its National Employment Commission. It tried to put Americans (veterans and non-veterans) back to work in temporary and frequently part-time capacities, often performing home repairs or public works job. It encouraged posts to be imaginative and experimental in their efforts but mounted no political campaign for large state-supported unemployment programs. The commission also approached businesses to encourage larger employers to take on new workers whenever possible. By the summer of 1932 the Legion claimed it had placed more than a million Americans back to work at least temporarily through the efforts of

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<sup>4</sup> *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the American Legion, Boston, Massachusetts, October 6-9, 1930* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), p. 139

the Commission and posts and that it had raised nearly 52 million dollars to support the improvement and repair of private and public property.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their purported successes, private and community-oriented efforts could not make a dent in the long-term problem of Depression-related unemployment. In the failure of community-level solutions to the Depression, the Legion recognized that larger-scale political solutions were legitimate. Before such reform took place, however, Americans needed to collectively consider the greatest needs among the collective suffering of the citizenry and act first to remedy the problems of those individuals. The Legion believed disabled veterans, funding for whose medical care President Roosevelt slashed in the Economy Act of 1933, were among such deserving citizens. The Economy Act essentially wiped the slate clean for veterans' benefits. Roosevelt restored funding for some veterans benefits programs through a series of executive orders. While the Legion pledged to fight these cuts, National Commander Louis Johnson asserted that his organization would remain "loyal" to President Roosevelt in a national radio address that March. The Legion succeeded in restoring previous pension rates for disabled veterans and returned about 30,000 veterans to hospitalization rolls over the next year, but was unable to restore health care rights for veterans and pensions for enlisted men's widows and orphans. The showdown with FDR did not make the Legion a political opponent of the New Deal broadly, as the Veterans of Foreign Wars became after Roosevelt's gutting of veterans programs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *American Legion Monthly*, December 1931, p. 15, Mark T. McKee, "To Every Town and City," *American Legion Monthly*, May 1932, p. 24-5, 53, McKee, "More Jobs and More Dollars," *ibid*, August 1932, p. 15

<sup>6</sup> <sup>6</sup> Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 199-200, Louis Johnson, "There is No Question of Legion Loyalty," *American Legion Monthly*, May 1933, pp. 14-5, Stephen R. Ortiz, "The 'New Deal' for Veterans: The Economy Act, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Origins of New Dissent," *Journal of Military History* 70 (April 2006), pp. 415-38

In the years before Roosevelt's election, however, the Legion was unwilling to categorize the unemployed veteran as a needy case worthy of political action. Although the Veterans Administration discovered that veterans had an unemployment rate 50 percent higher than other men their age, the Legion's leadership resisted calls from within the organization to call for immediate cash payment of adjusted compensation bonus scheduled to come due in 1945. Legion brass favored proposals that would loosen rules to allow veterans to borrow against their bonus certificates, fearing anything more would endanger disabled veterans' benefits and threaten to submarine President Herbert Hoover's political future in the midst of his tepid federal response to the crisis. Hoping to prop up Hoover, Legion leaders tabled a resolution at the 1930 and 1931 National Conventions that called for an immediate cash payment of the bonus.<sup>7</sup>

The Bonus March and subsequent occupation of portions of Washington by unemployed veterans changed the tenor of Legion debate about whether veterans were a class worthy of governmental redress of their particular problems. As the march was unfolding the Legion took no official position on it, although local posts offered aid to marchers as they passed through. It refused requests by Washington Police Chief Pelham Glassford for aid to provide marchers food and shelter once they reached the District. The violence with which unemployed veterans were driven from their camps and vacant buildings in the Capitol shocked the public and veterans. Posts condemned the actions of the Army and D.C. police and Hoover. Eight departments called on the Legion to censure Hoover. At the 1932 convention, ironically held where the Bonus March had begun in

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<sup>7</sup> Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, pp. 184-6, William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1940* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), pp. 201-2, Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen, *The Bonus Army: An American Epic* (New York: Walker and Company, 2004), p. 59

Portland, Oregon, Legion leaders could no longer hold back the surge of support for immediate cash payment of the bonus and a resolution putting the organization on record supporting it won by an overwhelming margin. With the grassroots of the organization in support of political action, the Legion supported immediate payment measures in Congress until a bill authored by Legionnaire Wright Patman cleared a presidential veto in 1936. By then, public opinion had shifted once again to see veterans as a class deserving special privileges.<sup>8</sup>

Other instances of Americans taking the political cause of the unemployed outside the traditional mechanisms of the democratic system worried the Legion more than the Bonus Army. To gain traction within the American working class, Communists began to organize the unemployed into new grassroots political groups called Unemployment Councils. Workers joined such groups in response to inadequate federal and municipal relief of their suffering.<sup>9</sup> Legionnaires, in turn, repressed these displays of disloyalty to democratic process. In March, 1932 in Bloomington, Illinois, a march of unemployed workers was met by Legion vigilantes and the city fire department, who dispatched them with a fire hose. After some of their fellow activists were arrested in Danville, Communists who gathered to secure their release were greeted by 200 armed, deputized Legionnaires. Upon the release of their fellows, the Communists were forced to run a gauntlet of Legionnaires armed with billiard cues, bats, blackjacks, and 2"-x-2"s. One of the organizers involved lamented that these incidents of vigilantism against civil liberties proved "that we have already gone into a Fascist rule, with the Legion as the operating

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<sup>8</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 202-5, Dickson and Allen, *The Bonus Army*, p. 76, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, p. 203

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 262-7

instrument thereof.”<sup>10</sup> Legion leaders were actually encouraged such confrontations did not happen more frequently. In his report to the National Americanism Commission (NAC) in May, 1932, subcommittee for Subversive Groups chairman Dan Sowers noted “that the Reds have been unable so far to pull the great army of unemployed into their ranks for the purpose of violent disorders is high tribute to the fortitude of the average American and the faith he has in his country, but a few more months of unemployment, pinched bellies, and other discomfitures may overcome that spirit of fortitude, faith, and courage.” Sowers worried in 1932 that class-based politics would lead Americans, rich and poor, to assert their own interests within American politics to the detriment of the common good.<sup>11</sup>

The Legion believed it had two important roles to play within political culture to ensure Americans followed the democratic process as they sought governmental solutions to their suffering. The first role was educative. Under Sowers, the NAC focused on this approach, renewing its commitment to boys work and political education through school programs. In the early 1930s the NAC believed such an approach avoided giving communist ideas added exposure through direct confrontation.<sup>12</sup> But as it had since its earliest days, the Legion also believed veterans had a unique duty to police the political culture for disloyalty as well. In late 1930 the NAC encouraged posts to monitor radical activities and speeches in their communities, but not to break them up themselves. “The local Legion post should keep its eyes open, and the minute the communist or the

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<sup>10</sup> Charles A. Severance to *Nation*, March 11, 1932, *ibid*, reel 91, volume 542, p. 110-11, American Civil Liberties Papers (hereafter ACLU), Severance to Forest Bailey, reel 191, volume 542, p. 117, ACLU

<sup>11</sup> Report of the National Americanism Committee of the American Legion, May 3-4, 1932, pp. 112, 117, American Legion National Headquarters Library and Archives, Indianapolis, Indiana (hereafter ALHQ)

<sup>12</sup> *Proceedings of the Twelfth National Convention of the American Legion*, pp. 141-7, *Proceedings of the Thirteenth National Convention of the American Legion, Detroit, Michigan, September 21-24, 1931* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), p. 318. Many of these programs are examined in more detail in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

radicalist makes his appearance in your town and begins to scatter his literature, be ready to act,” the *Huddle* advised members in November, 1930. “But whatever the Post does must be done sanely and wisely ... We cannot lower the dignity of our organization by giving him a lot of free publicity.” The *Huddle* suggested posts contact local district attorneys or the Department of Justice about impending communist meetings or speeches and urge a police presence be made available at the event so “if the speaker goes beyond the limitations of free speech and makes utterances against this government of ours, arrest can be made and prosecution can follow.”<sup>13</sup>

While the Legion still sought to limit the damage vigilantism could do to its public reputation, National Headquarters backed antiradical actions by posts to a much more in the Depression than it had in the Legion’s fledgling years. In the resolutions emanating from national conventions and in directives from the NAC, Legionnaires were reminded of their local duty to control the spread of radical doctrines. Legion hierarchy praised those posts that did. As in the first Red Scare period, posts frequently decided to act upon antiradical directives when their community faced infiltration by radical outside agitators. The Legion did not discipline wayward posts or members for antiradical excesses. More liberal national commanders of this era like Kansas Republican Harry Colmery and Iowa Democrat Ray Murphy did remind posts of their obligations to respect civil liberties of all Americans; but these men accepted the broad organizational diagnosis of the radical threat to Americanism and did little if anything to change the vigilante culture of the organization through disciplining actions.<sup>14</sup> By remaining on guard and participating in the Legion’s anticommunist crusade, either as active agents of vigilance

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<sup>13</sup> *Huddle*, November 1930, p. 2

<sup>14</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 221, 237-8, 253-6

when the time required, or simply in promoting the kinds of civic values the Legion believed were true to Americanism through community work, posts helped maintain the nationalizing spirit of local activism. Meditating on this connection between the national and the local for his local post newsletter, a Legionnaire in Binghamton, New York wrote to his fellows, “Pernicious propaganda hurled at Justice, Freedom, Democracy and Loyalty is going unchallenged in many communities ... Why not agree to make of our nation of weaklings and slackers which is part of a great international scheme to allow anarchy and communism to dominate the world? You are helping to do these very same things unless you take an active interest in your community.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The maturation of Legion anticommunism**

The Legion’s exceptionalist view of American political development remained a vital factor in its interpretation of the communist threat. The nation’s democratic traditions and structures reflected its particular historical development, far away from despotic tendencies of European nations. Since American history had not lacked for its own struggles against inequality and tyranny, accepting the products of foreigners’ struggles in their own societies was a betrayal of that history. “It has taken centuries of time and millions of lives to achieve and secure the freedom embodied in our Bill of Rights, and should they be lost, the whole agonizing path might have to be trod once more before happier generations would know again such liberty of person and freedom of spirit,” the Americanism Chairman of the Wisconsin Department Auxiliary wrote in February, 1939.<sup>16</sup> The Legion created a clear dichotomy throughout the interwar period

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<sup>15</sup> *Huddle*, February 1934, p. 2

<sup>16</sup> *Badger Legionnaire*, February 1939, p. 8

but particularly in its campaign against radicalism in the 1930s between Americanism and the other “isms” of foreign nations. “If other nations prefer Communism, or Socialism, or any other ‘ism,’” Belgrano continued in his *Huddle* editorial, “that is there privilege. But we of the Legion hold that in America there is room for one ‘ism.’ *That is Americanism*. That is an ideal to which every true American can affirm unflinching allegiance without interfering with his individual political views or religious creed.”<sup>17</sup>

Americanism’s conception of loyalty also led Legionnaires to conflate leftist groups into a single movement of alien origin. The Legion defined loyalty through citizens’ fealty to the nation’s established constitutional and socioeconomic order. Being a loyal American, therefore, represented subscribing to a single and narrowly-defined political identity consistent with the nation’s unique historical development. Accepting political ideas that came from an entirely different national political tradition, which was what Legionnaires believed Marxism represented, was in essence a declaration of allegiance to foreign ideas and foreign governments. In this way, the Legion approached Americans who subscribed to radical leftist ideas in much the same way they did aliens who retained divided loyalties. Like the immigrant who wanted a place in the American nation but still felt the pull of their old homeland, radicals could not have it both ways. Becoming radical represented the trading of one civic identity for another, a rejection of American nationalism and a declaration of allegiance to a revolutionary movement. The change was irrevocable. “Once a man becomes a professing communist, he is practically lost to Americanism,” a Legionnaire claimed it in a letter to the *American Legion*

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<sup>17</sup> Belgrano, Jr., “We Must Have but One ‘Ism – That is Americanism,” *The Huddle*, December 1934, p. 1  
Italics in original

*Monthly*.<sup>18</sup> Legionnaires could not accept the applicability of radical ideology to the American democratic system in any way, particularly in the economic crisis facing the nation. To do so was to jump a ship in no danger of sinking. Thus, the exploration of non-Communists of radical ideas that could rectify what they saw as serious problems with American capitalism, even if such explorations rejected the need for social and political revolution against the nation's democratic system, still represented disloyalty.

Because it identified leftist radicalism with the Soviet Union so strongly, the behavior of the Soviet government strongly shaped the Legion's opinion of all leftist political action. Legionnaires paid keen attention both to reports of what life was like within the Soviet Union itself and to the international revolutionary movement it led from Moscow.<sup>19</sup> Organizational leaders displayed at least a working knowledge of Marxist doctrine and of international Communist organization. It condemned the Third International and its incitement of all world Communist parties to foment revolution at its 1923 national convention and pointed to the activity of the Comintern as evidence that the Communist movement in the United States represented the designs of Stalin himself. The Legion vociferously attacked the Roosevelt Administration's diplomatic recognition of the USSR in 1933, claiming that doing represented "the failure to recognize ... that the present Russian Communal system is, in effect, an enemy country, that it is not merely a people exercising the right of self-government, but a vast missionary movement to oppose and upset what is known as Western Civilization," as NAC Chairman Hugh

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<sup>18</sup> *American Legion Monthly*, October 1936, p. 34

<sup>19</sup> The *American Legion Weekly* ran a series of articles by World War and Siberian expedition veteran Edmund J. McGuire detailing his journey through the Soviet Union in 1922. He detailed the suffering of the Russians he witnessed in the aftermath of the civil war. McGuire, "Eight Thousand Miles Through Red Russia," *American Legion Weekly*, February 2, 1923, pp. 3-4, 24-8, *ibid*, February 9, 1923, pp. 5-6, 28-30, *ibid*, February 16, 1923, pp. 9-10, 28-9, *ibid*, February 23, 1923, pp. 9-10, 28, *ibid*, March 2, 1923, pp. 8, 26-30

Williams wrote in the *Huddle*. The revolutionary, repressive, and clandestine nature of Soviet actions, then, the Legion transposed onto American Communists, whose loyalty to Moscow Legionnaires interpreted as evidence the movement was a foreign-bred insurgency. As historian Ellen Schrecker has noted, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) did little through its own behavior to challenge this subversive image in the 1930s.<sup>20</sup>

The Legion's embrace of American exceptionalism, defense of democratic process, ideas about loyalty, and conception of the Soviet enemy the nation faced all served to multiply the threat its members believed the nation faced from the communist conspiracy. Far from focusing on the revolutionary potential posed by the CPUSA alone, Legionnaires expanded their web of suspicion to include any group that posed a major challenge to the principles of Americanism, had cozy relations with known Communists, or threatened the political or socioeconomic status quo by arguing the Depression called for a re-evaluation of the American capitalist system. Where the boundary between appropriate and "un-American" activity lay was only cursorily defined. As a result, the Legion lumped together a variety of political agenda into a single but amorphous Communist enemy and thrived on making connections between shadowy parts of the conspiracy. The Legion had done this before in the 1920s, connecting a variety of causes to Bolshevism. It was not the same rhetorical trick pulled with updated labels, however: as in the twenties, Legionnaires assumed radicals' common disloyalty to Americanism

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<sup>20</sup> *Summary of Proceedings of the Fifth National Convention of the American Legion, San Francisco, CA, October 15-19, 1923* (Indianapolis: American Legion, 1923), p. 26, Frederick Palmer, "How Strong are the Reds?," *American Legion Monthly*, Feb. 1936, p. 9, *The Huddle*, May, 1933, p. 1, U.S. House of Representatives, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*, 75<sup>th</sup> Cong., 3<sup>rd</sup> sess., Aug. 17, 1938, p. 431 (Hereafter Dies Committee, part 1), *Idaho Legionnaire*, November 1, 1935, p. 4

and sympathetic ideological connections with each other made them part of the same revolutionary cause.<sup>21</sup> For Legionnaires, accuracy about who was Communist was irrelevant since the groups under attack had betrayed a loyalty to Americanism in their minds. To Homer Chaillaux, the Legion's most notable anticommunist firebrand and NAC director from 1934 to 1945, "Reds," "pinks," and "yellows" were all on the same team based in Moscow. Chaillaux distinguished them only in function: reds inciting violence, pinks writing sympathetically about communist causes or raising money, and yellows hiding their true affiliations pacifism while undermining the loyalty of youth and the nation's ability to defend itself.<sup>22</sup>

To further expose the radical threat to the nation Legion offices became clearing houses of information gathered by local members about radical activities. After a series of agricultural strikes in the state the California Department established a bureau dedicated to gathering information on radicals across the state. Homer Chaillaux brought that model with him to the National Americanism Commission when he became director in 1934, gathering thousands of reports from Legionnaires over the next decade. Chaillaux found inspiration for such work through his career as a postmaster, a job that exposed him to what he believed was a disturbing volume of radical literature flowing through the mail.<sup>23</sup> Other departments followed suit and established their own similar programs.

In 1936 Chaillaux gathered the NAC's findings and published a comprehensive guide to the Communist conspiracy entitled *ISMS*. The NAC distributed copies by the

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<sup>21</sup> For example, an officer in the Minnesota Department Auxiliary defined Socialism as "a dictatorship of the proletariat." *Minnesota Legionnaire*, February 16, 1938, p. 3

<sup>22</sup> *Badger Legionnaire*, December 10, 1935, p. 3

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, pp. 237-8, Homer Chaillaux, Biographical File, ALHQ

thousands to posts and public libraries, even providing it to a Mexican veterans' group for translation into Spanish for their members.<sup>24</sup> The book was comprised mainly of writings, cartoons, and pamphlets taken directly from Communist sources that Chaillaux hoped would expose the interconnections between front organizations and the true revolutionary intentions of the Communist Party in the United States. *ISMS* starkly contrasted the values that the Legion and Communist Party stood for in to text boxes in the book's first chapter, with the Legion standing for "God and Country," "The Principles of Justice, Freedom and Democracy," and "A Sense of Individual Obligation to Community, State and Nation," While Communism represented the "Promotion of Class Hatred," "Hatred of God and All Forms of Religion," "Revolutionary Propaganda...in Order to Cause Strikes, Riots, Sabotage, Bloodshed and Civil War," and "World Revolution to Establish the Dictatorship of the So-Called Proletariat into One World Union...With the Capitol at Moscow." Chaillaux paid particular attention to exposing the "hundreds of affiliated and sympathetic groups giving aid to a program having at its objective, the overthrow of the United States form of government," in full awareness that they are aiding the objectives of Communism. He included the American Civil Liberties Union in this section.<sup>25</sup> Chaillaux's enthusiasm for assembling the large puzzle of the Communist conspiracy got the best of him at times in *ISMS*, leading him to conclude the broadest possible conclusions with the most tangential of evidence. For example, he argued in *ISMS* that Communist front organizations' advertisements in one issue of the publication of the American Student Union demonstrated the Communist affiliation of

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<sup>24</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 243-4

<sup>25</sup> National Americanism Commission of the American Legion, *ISMS: A Review of Alien Isms, Revolutionary Communism and their Active Sympathizers in the United States*, second ed. (Indianapolis, IN: American Legion, 1937), pp. 12-13, 77, 90-104

theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Brown University professor Alexander Meiklejohn and author Waldo Frank.<sup>26</sup>

### **Legion vigilantism during the Depression**

As the Legion defined the Communist threat its members needed to engage in the political culture, some of the lingering questions concerning the relationship between aspects of citizenship and its Americanism that were raised in the first Red Scare re-emerged. During that period, the Legion's national leadership had given members general guidance on these questions but left it up to individual members and posts to interpret when civic behavior crossed the line and became "un-American." With the resurgence of American labor in the Depression, particularly during the Roosevelt Administration, the question of unionism's compatibility with Americanism's standard of classless political participation took on renewed importance. The Legion insisted its members remain neutral in clashes between capital and labor, but with the caveat that they should intervene in the breakdown of community law-and-order or in the clear presence of Communist infiltration of unions. Members resumed the pattern common in the first Red Scare of testing the limits of this qualified policy of neutrality, intervening frequently in the Depression period in strikes and other union activities on the side of capital.

With the upsurge of labor activism and strike activity after 1933, Legionnaires repeated their performance from the early 1920s, providing vigilante support for law enforcement and corporations hoping to maintain "law and order" during bitter strikes. Unlike its earlier days, however, the Legion did not have to worry about alienating unionists of all stripes by appearing to be anti-labor since the Legion had forged warm

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<sup>26</sup> National Americanism Commission, *ISMS*, pp. 167, 7, 136

relations with the American Federation of Labor. Philosophically, the Legion still approached labor from its conservative Progressive outlook, seeing working people as an important but single constituency within the greater American polity. Unionism was not a problem so long as it avoided revolutionizing social or political relations within the nation. “Our is a free representative government under which both the individual and his group are entitled to pursue their own happiness, protected in so doing by the hand of government, but subject always to whatever restraint it is necessary to impose under the law and the Constitution to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number,” National Commander Colmery explained to the 1936 AFL National Convention. Each group, because it competed for scarce economic and governmental resources and protections, must “call its own plays, and carry its own ball towards the goal of achievement sought for its own group,” because, “unless it plays the game hard and fast and to win, it won’t even make a first down, let alone score.” Colmery claimed government played the role of referee in this game, laying down rules that ensure consideration of the needs of all players and that the game’s results will produce the “greatest good in the common interest.” By extension, “we have the right to be concerned about any minority group which oversteps the bounds of liberty and uses it as a license to violate the rights of others, disturb the peace, or defy constituted authority.”<sup>27</sup> While Colmery personally urged Legionnaires to use restraint in engaging such radical minorities, more aggressive forces within the organization used this conventional approach to trade unionism to validate intellectually their vigilantism.

Legion leaders who supported members’ intervention as law-and-order vigilantes argued that the organization acted not to reject the rights of labor to organize or even to

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<sup>27</sup> *Minnesota Legionnaire*, December. 9, 1936, p. 3, December 26, 1936, p. 3

oppose collective bargaining, but to oppose destructive and communistic forces that threatened to turn American labor into a Marxist revolutionary vehicle. Most Legion vigilante actions during labor disputes came during Communist or CIO-led strikes, during which readily-identifiable Communist organizers had appeared at a jobsite and instigated workers to some new militant action.<sup>28</sup> In Legionnaires' minds, workers in their communities represented vulnerable constituencies which could be incited to violence by Communist provocateurs whose ultimate aim was not to represent the interest of workers on the job but to bring forth a proletarian revolution.<sup>29</sup>

As they had in the first Red Scare, Legionnaires intervened in many major strikes of the Depression as private vigilantes, invited to keep law-and-order either by corporate officers or the local police. The presence or perceived presence of Communist organizers in major strike actions convinced both the Legion and the sponsors of their vigilantism that such situations were dangerous enough to warrant Legion intervention. In another repeat of the Red Scare era, Legionnaires justified their intervention as a defense of their community against outside Communist agitators. In 1934, California Governor Frank Merriam met directly with then-Department Commander Homer Chaillaux during the San Francisco longshoremen's strike. Chaillaux promised the governor Legion vigilante support because the strike was led by supposed communist Harry Bridges. Incited by Hearst papers' claims of pervasive radical dominance in the general strike in the city that ensued, Legionnaires formed the backbone of the "citizen vigilante" force that brutalized

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<sup>28</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 223, Dies Committee part 2, p. 1354

<sup>29</sup> In this regard, the Legion shared the opinion of the AFL. See *California Legionnaire*, September 1935, p. 6

and intimidated picketers in San Francisco.<sup>30</sup> Department Commanders in Rhode Island and South Carolina authorized their posts to serve as peace officers during the great textile strike of 1934, noting that strikes in their states were caused by outside Communist influences. During the CIO organizing drives in the automobile and steel industries in 1937, Legionnaires protected the interests of corporations. The Ford Motor Company recruited Legion men to form a private vigilante force if needed, while in Flint, Michigan, Legionnaires clamored to form strikebreaking units during the CIO's sit-down strike at General Motors. When governor of Michigan and Legionnaire Frank Murphy refused to deputized Legion men en masse, the Michigan Department demanded unsuccessfully he be expelled from the organization.<sup>31</sup>

In some labor disputes, the presence of outsider agitation intersected with the broader issue of race and class. In the Imperial Valley agricultural strike of 1934, labor organizers' efforts threatened to upset not only the social but racial order of the region. Mexican and Filipino immigrants dominated the lower rungs of the labor pool used by lettuce growers in the valley. In October, 1933, Mexican field workers, some in the United States illegally, organized and secured a wage increase. When farm owners failed to adhere to the wage increase consistently, workers accepted the help of the Communist-allied Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, which led the workers out on strike in January, 1934. Immediately, local police and Legion vigilantes organized to break the strike violently, interdicting a caravan of workers traveling between union communities on the highway. After the ACLU dispatched attorney A. L. Wirin to El

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<sup>30</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 222-3, Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 147-9

<sup>31</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 224-9. For a history of strikebreaking at auto plants perpetrated by others, see, Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking & Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002)

Centro to ensure workers' freedom of assembly rights were respected, Legionnaires and other vigilantes abducted him from his hotel. After roughing him up, they drove him into the desert, ditched his car in a riverbed, and left him to find his way back to the nearest town of Calipatria without his shoes. Deputized Legionnaires helped arrest most of the union's organizers in January on trumped up charges of disturbing the peace. After investigating the violent response to the three-month-long Imperial Valley strike, special conciliator of labor Pelham Glassford – Chief of District of Columbia Police during the Bonus Army incidents -- concluded in his report to the Imperial Valley Board of Supervisors that antistrike forces “have exploited a ‘communist’ hysteria for the advancement of their own interests; that they have welcomed labor agitation, which they could brand as ‘Red,’ as a means of sustaining supremacy by mob rule, thereby preserving what is so essential to their profits – *Cheap labor*.”<sup>32</sup> The report on the Legion's role prepared by then-Department Commander Homer Chaillaux acknowledged that Legionnaires had been deputized to maintain law and order in the Imperial Valley but denied they had taken any action in that capacity. It also denied there had even been a strike by workers since much of the organizing work had been done by outside Communist unionists. In its editorial response to the entire episode, the *California Legionnaire* noted “95 per cent of those involved in the troubles were citizens of a country other than the United States.”<sup>33</sup>

The Legion gained its greatest exposure for its strikebreaking vigilantism in Monroe, Michigan during the CIO's drive to organize “Little Steel” in the spring of 1937.

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<sup>32</sup> Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 157-9, United States Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, “Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor,” 74<sup>th</sup> Cong., 3<sup>rd</sup> sess., part 55, January 16, 1940, pp. 20140-2, quoted 20148

<sup>33</sup> *California Legionnaire*, March 1934, p. 1, 4-5 (quoted p. 4)

On June 10, Legionnaires armed with clubs and tear gas canister rifles prepared to meet a planned United Auto Workers march that was called off at the last moment. Photographs of uniformed Legion members armed with riot gear supporting the Monroe police were published in newspapers nationwide. As a result, National Headquarters received considerable criticism, including from at least 26 Legion posts. Monroe members defended their actions by claiming they were not against collective bargaining but that the CIO had in essence invaded their community, provoking their response. National Commander Colmery responded by forbidding Legionnaires to participate in any more strike vigilantism wearing Legion uniforms or insignia and forbid Chaillaux from making grandstanding appearances at strikes.<sup>34</sup> He did not, however, challenge the fundamental legitimacy of the Legion's role in policing the loyalty of workers in Legionnaires' communities.

Legion vigilante action against suspected Communist organizers was not limited to strikes. South Dakota Legionnaires perpetrated one of the most violent responses to organizing efforts by outside leftist groups in August 1934. That summer, a traveling educative initiative designed by the labor-friendly Commonwealth College of Mena, Arkansas called the "Farm School on Wheels" arrived in Marshall County, South Dakota. On the road since 1932, the Farm School on Wheels traveled across the country, stopping to stage four-week long course on "class struggle," farm economics, labor and farm organizing history, publicity techniques, and discussions of current events. Its curriculum was designed to politicize, but not revolutionize, workers and farmers in the depressed agricultural sector. Backed by the local sheriff, Legionnaires broke up a demonstration organized by the local United Workers' League and the Farm School in Britton on

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<sup>34</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 228-9

August 25. Legionnaires in half a dozen cars then pursued one of the rally's trucks in a rambling 40-mile chase over roads and wheat fields into North Dakota. That evening, Legionnaires attacked a dance held by the Farm School in a barn, firing tear gas into the building to disperse the crowd inside. The mob beat six students of the school, including disabled World War veteran Maynard Sharp. Sharp narrowly missed being shot, took tear gas in his eyes, and suffered several broken ribs. The six students were then taken into the post's Auxiliary's rooms and beaten, as newspapers reported, with belt buckles and clubs to "demonstrate the power of the U.S. Government." The *Nation* complained that South Dakota Governor Tom Berry had given the Britton Legionnaires permission to drive off the school in any way they saw fit.<sup>35</sup>

The Legion expanded its repertoire of private actions in support of the political status quo in the 1930s by taking on surveillance work. In Michigan, Legionnaires tailed suspected Communists during the sit-down strikes at General Motors plants. In his testimony before the Dies Committee in October, 1938, the chairman of the Michigan Department Americanization Committee's subcommittee on subversive activities, Mark Reynolds, provided the government with the names and addresses of suspected Communists and the locations of known meeting places of Communist groups, ranging from ethnic fraternal halls to barbershops and private homes. His Legion spies also monitored the speaking engagements of Communist speakers.<sup>36</sup> Reynolds was particularly interested in the interracial aspects of Communist organization in Detroit. He told the Dies Committee that young black men will "readily admit that their interest in communism lies in white women," and that the ideas of racial equality preached by the

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<sup>35</sup> Carl Parker, memorandum to American Civil Liberties Union, reel 114, volume 764, ACLU; *Nation*, September 19, 1934, reel 111, volume 730, p. 49, ACLU

<sup>36</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 238-9, Dies Committee, part 2, pp. 1339-53

Communist Party “serves as a potent factor in mustering Communist strength for the planned seizure of the American form of government.” He proceeded to name several African-American Communist men in the Detroit area who had married white Communist women.<sup>37</sup>

The Legion’s intervention in labor disputes on the side of “law-and-order” and capital did not garner unanimous support within the organization. Most dissent emanated from posts of union men or from affluent and liberal urban members, particularly from New York City. Some posts marched contrary to the Legion’s general tendency to side with capital in industrial disputes. Members of two posts in Manhattan were suspended in April, 1936 for wearing Legion helmets, caps, and uniforms on the picket line at Brooklyn burlesque theater during a city-wide theater workers’ strike. During the longshoremen’s strike of 1934 posts in San Francisco and Portland, Oregon refused to participate in strikebreaking activities. One entire San Francisco post marched in the funeral procession for a striker, a World War veteran, who was killed during strike violence. The Legion’s Milwaukee County Council unanimously rejected Department Commander George Plant’s plan to publicly support the Law and Order League in labor disputes in Wisconsin in 1935. Legion railway workers in Texas protested violence perpetrated with the help of deputized Legionnaires that killed 10 workers in the great textile strike of 1934 as a “bloodcurdling outrage” to National Headquarters. In 1933, a Vermont post that witnessed National Guard troops violently scatter a crowd supporting a

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<sup>37</sup> Dies Committee, part 2, pp. 1334-5

local strike that included women and children with tear gas condemned the action in a resolution calling for the troopers to be court martialed.<sup>38</sup>

As with the resurgent labor movement, the Legion believed the growing pacifist movement of the 1930s secretly harbored communists. The Legion had a clear-cut political rivalry with pacifists given the organization's support for military preparedness and universal military training for American men. Nevertheless, the Legion's opinion about pacifism transcended mere disagreement over an issue of policy to become another moment of Legion red-baiting. Legionnaires remained convinced that pacifism represented not a moral position or a legitimate political cause but craven disloyalty by its adherents. They connected pacifists to the Communist revolutionary conspiracy through their internationally-focused conceptions of citizenship. Particularly concerning were the ideas of men like Rev. Kirby Page, who rejected nationalism outright. He and his allies within the pacifist cause hoped the next generation could be weaned off the kind of patriotic political culture they believed enabled wars to begin. Of course, that was exactly the kind of political culture the Legion had invested more than a decade in promoting. By 1933, the Legion National Convention announced it "vigorously opposes the actions and teaching of all radical pacifist societies, clergymen, college and school professors who advise and urge the youth of our country to refuse to serve our country in time of war." Once pacifists began more substantive (and often tumultuous) cooperation with Popular

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<sup>38</sup> *New York Times*, May 1, 1936, reel 133, volume 906, p. 36, ACLU; *New York Post*, May 23, 1936, *ibid*, p. 124, *Daily Worker*, Dec. 4, 1935, reel 119, volume 801, p. 42, ACLU; Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 223-4, Walter Wilson, *The American Legion and Civil Liberty*, (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 1936), pp. 24-5

Front organizations the Legion pointed to figures like Page as the missing link that proved the pacifist-Communist connection.<sup>39</sup>

Rhetoric from pacifists about what youth should do in the event of the next war further convinced the Legion the movement had Bolshevik roots. The organization took particular umbrage at the comments of Winifred Chappell, secretary of the Methodist Federation of Social Service, who wrote in a March, 1934 article published in the *Epworth Herald* that youth could choose between being cannon fodder in the next war or sabotaging war mobilization efforts. The *American Legion Monthly* cited Chappell's commentary while National Commander Edward Hayes referenced it in a speech to the Chicago Century of Progress Exhibition, asking the crowd, "now, does that not have the ring of communism?" This kind of pacifist rhetoric, combined with the connections the small numbers of key pacifist organizers had with Communist organizations, represented damning evidence that the pacifist movement was a Soviet plot designed to destroy nationalistic sentiment and loyalty to the state in American youth and disarm the nation for the benefit of the USSR.<sup>40</sup>

The problem Legionnaires had with pacifist commentators pointed to the more common way the organization would confront communist sympathizers. Most radicals preferred discourse to open revolution. The Legion remained consistent in its position that political activities and speech that supported revolutionary causes, even if they were not overtly revolutionary themselves, deserved no protection under the Constitution.

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<sup>39</sup> Hughes, "Youth Must Choose," pp. 15, *Proceedings of the Fifteenth National Convention of the American Legion, Chicago, Illinois, October 2-5, 1933* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1934), p. 53, Charles Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1914-1941* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), pp. 152-64

<sup>40</sup> Hughes, "Youth Must Choose," p. 52, *New York Times*, July 1, 1934, p. 1, *Proceedings of the Fourteenth National Convention of the American Legion, Portland, Oregon, September 12-15, 1932* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), p. 130

Once again, Legionnaires believed they acted legitimately to interrupt the speech and assembly of radical parties on their own. By American entrance into World War II, the Legion enjoyed new alliances with conservatives in American government who supported the curtailment of radical Americans' civil liberties with new legislation. After being disappointed for years by the lack of governmental action to contain radicalism, the Legion began to develop a relationship within some portions of the federal state that presaged its own and the federal role in the second Red Scare.

During the Depression Legionnaires continued their sport of interrupting radicals' speeches in mid-sentence. In November, 1931, 20 members of the Glendale, California Legion broke up a speech by State Socialist Party Chairman William Busick at Glendale Junior College on unemployment. The Glendale Board of Education had approved the speech according to state law, but Legionnaires interpreted Busick's declaration that the present form of government was ineffectual as revolutionary and stormed the stage when he refused to quit speaking. They fell into the orchestra pit with him in an ensuing tussle. Despite Busick's protests, the Glendale chief of police refused to arrest the Legionnaires for assault.<sup>41</sup> In May, 1937 Legionnaires in Providence, Rhode Island joined with the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus to successfully block the showing of the film "Spain in Flames" by a pro-Republican group as a fundraiser for their cause. After public protest against the censor by Providence's mayor, the group was allowed a license only for holding a meeting, not to show the film.<sup>42</sup> In July 1939, Legion posts in the Wyoming Valley of Pennsylvania convinced the local burgess to halt a speech by Communist

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<sup>41</sup> *Open Forum*, October 17, 1931, reel 81, volume 464, p. 230, ACLU; *New Leader*, Oct. 24, 1931, reel 82, volume 471, p. 47, ACLU

<sup>42</sup> Joseph M. Coldwell, "Report on the Banning of the 'Spain in Flames' Film in Providence, R.I.," nd, Evelyn S. Fichter to Roger Baldwin, May 27, 1937, reel 154, volume 1059, ACLU

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn at a meeting of a Wilkes Barre branch of the Workers Alliance, despite the fact Flynn's speech was to be on the maldistribution of wealth in the United States and not on the Communist Party itself. "Mrs. Flynn's husband, Carlo Tresco, is an Anarchist and she is a Communist, also being a member of the Friends of Soviet Russia, and we don't want such people speaking in this valley," explained a member of one post protesting the speech. Ultimately, Flynn was allowed to speak in Wilkes Barre, but Legionnaires in Des Moines and Davenport, Iowa disrupted her speaking engagements there in September.<sup>43</sup>

Legionnaires paid particular attention to how communists undermined the loyalty of children. It investigated Communist summer camps, which were designed to radicalize the children of party members. In August, 1929 Legionnaires in Redlands, California joined with the local district attorney and police to raid a Communist youth camp at Yucaipa which was teaching children about the Soviet system and requiring them to pledge allegiance to a red flag every morning. Six adults were arrested in the raid. In Elmira, New York during the summer of 1931 Legion members presented two women running the camp with an American flag. Legionnaires claimed that children at the camp yelled "we have no banner except that of Soviet Russia" and that the two women had booed the flag and encouraged the kids to throw rocks at it, charges the camp councilors denied. The women were arrested and charged with flag desecration. Michigan Legionnaires staged a similar raid in Munising in the summer of 1933, ordering children at a Pioneer Youth camp to take down a Soviet flag. When they refused, state troopers and deputy sheriffs chopped the camp's flagpole down and arrested two of the camp's

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<sup>43</sup> *Wilkes Barre Record*, July 15, 1939, reel 177, volume 2138, p. 233, ACLU; *Wilkes Barre Record*, August 3, 1939, reel 177, volume 2138, p. 248, ACLU; *Des Moines Tribune*, September 1939, *Daily Worker*, September 1939, reel 176, volume 2127, p. 178, ACLU

staff for violating Michigan's red flag law, despite the fact the Supreme Court had struck down a similar California statute in 1931. The two men were later released.<sup>44</sup>

Since a major flashpoint between Legionnaires and pacifists had been the extension of ROTC programs on college campuses in the 1930s, the Legion also took some interest in what teachers at the secondary and college level were teaching their students. To quell both the presence of Communists and pacifists in schools and colleges, the Legion supported loyalty oaths for teachers in several states. New York Legionnaires helped secure the passage of a loyalty oath for teachers in 1935 and presented a similar bill requiring college students at state-supported institutions to give an annual loyalty oath to the American government as well. The Illinois Department presented a bill to the state legislature in 1933 that forbid any public funding and revoked the tax exempt status of universities and colleges with "pink" tendencies." Some posts took headquarters' council to monitor the ideological content of school lessons literally. A post in the Bronx in 1935 urged teachers at a local high school who were Legion members and students whose parents were Legionnaires to report any lesson containing "revolutionary" content, including pacifism, which the school's principal claimed "advocated another kind of war, civil war, class war, the bloodiest of all." Such work by posts received the endorsement of the NAC the year before. Unlike the McCarthy era, however, outside agitation by antiradical groups like the Legion did not result in large-scale teachers' dismissals, in part

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<sup>44</sup> *California Legionnaire*, February 1, 1930, p. 6, House of Representatives, Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States, *Investigation of Communist Propaganda*, 71<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., Sept. 26-27, 1930, part 3, vol. 4, pp. 234-5, *New York Times*, August 17, 1930, p. 10, August 24, 1933 press release, reel 103, volume 661, p. 131, ACLU. For a full account of how Communists tried to create an alternative set of allegiances for children in summer camps, see Paul C. Mishler, *Raising Reds: the Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), ch. 5

because more liberal national commanders Ray Murphy and Harry Colmery eased the pressure the Legion placed on academic freedom.<sup>45</sup>

Outside of the academic context the Legion also supported the renewed use of criminal syndicalism laws still on the books in several states to prosecute radical expression and the erection of new legislative limits on political speech. In one particularly pitiable instance, Legionnaires in Angola, Indiana entrapped a traveling magazine subscription salesman and naturalized Hungarian-American into making benign political comments they interpreted to be subversive, then had him arrested under Indiana's criminal syndicalism law. He was sentenced to five years in prison.<sup>46</sup> The Legion looked particularly to the federal government for new legislation. In 1935 the Legion lobbied for the Tydings-McCormack Military Disobedience Bill, which would have set criminal penalties for any speech or public writing that could be construed as urging American military personnel to disobey orders and regulations. Such a bill was necessary, the Legion believed, because of Communist infiltration into the armed forces in order to subvert military discipline and radicalize members. Its 1940 national convention called for a resumption of a federal ban on "un-American" literature as had existed under the wartime Espionage Act.<sup>47</sup>

The Legion also called on states and the federal government to outlaw the Communist Party outright. It endorsed the Fish and Dies Committee's conclusions that the Communist Party did not represent a legitimate political party in the American sense

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<sup>45</sup> *The Huddle*, June, 1933, p. 4; *New York Post*, October 23, 1935, October 24, 1935, reel, 118, volume 791, p. 100-101, ACLU; Minutes of the National Americanism Committee, May 2-3, 1934, p. 32, Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, p. 68, Pencak, *For God and Country*, pp. 253-4

<sup>46</sup> *Christian Century*, Aug. 19, 1936, pp. 1103-4

<sup>47</sup> Wilson, *The American Legion and Civil Liberty*, p. 8, *Badger Legionnaire*, Feb. 5, 1936, p. 2, Frederick Palmer, "The Reds, The Army, The Navy," *American Legion Monthly*, March 1936, pp. 10-11, 40-3, *Summary of Proceedings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> National Convention of the American Legion, Boston, Mass. Sept 23-26, 1940* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941) p. 63

and thus deserved no Constitutional protection. In justifying his organization's stance, National Commander Raymond Kelly wrote in 1940, "there is nothing to indicate that communist affiliations produce any political principle not based on the rule of the dictator; there are none among them who have earned the right to represent the peoples of the United States." Legionnaires cheered the passage of the Smith Act in 1940, which prohibited membership in any organization that would "teach and advocate the overthrow of the United States by force or violence," and allowed the Justice Department to deport any alien who had ever belonged to such an organization.<sup>48</sup>

Like its continuing intervention in strikes, the Legion's conservative approach towards radicals' civil liberties drew criticism from its liberal membership. In 1936 the ACLU's Walter Wilson prepared a short pamphlet chronicling Legion abuses of civil liberties throughout its history entitled *The American Legion and Civil Liberty*. Signed by prominent liberal Legionnaires in its two printings, including W.W. Norton, Bennett Champ Clark, and Merle Curti, the pamphlet was intended "to counteract what are essentially un-American attitudes" within the Legion, "totally unworthy of men who fought for democracy." For Wilson and the Legion's internal critics who signed off on his report, fault for Legion abuses fell with the organization's leaders, noting that the average member "receives no benefits from strikebreaking and red-baiting. If he joins in such activities it is because he is fooled by his Post or state or national leadership. Not until this rank and file Legionnaire makes his officers feel his own faith in democracy, in the Bill of Rights, in tolerance and fair play, will the American Legion be able to fulfill

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<sup>48</sup> Raymond J. Kelly, "Let's Outlaw It," *American Legion Magazine*, March, 1940, pp. 16-7, 44 (quoted 16), Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 240, Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 160, Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, pp. 97-8

its avowed purpose of transmitting ‘to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy.’”<sup>49</sup>

Also in 1936 the Willard Strait Post of Manhattan, a long-time liberal nonconformist, sponsored a pamphlet rebutting the organization’s prevailing notion of Americanism.<sup>50</sup> Written by former *Stars and Stripes* editor Cyrus L. Baldridge, *Americanism: What Is It?* was published by the New York County Committee as a proposed speech for ceremonies honoring Junior High students receiving Americanism awards from the Legion. The pamphlet set out to distinguish “real” Americanism from the “counterfeit” one selfish Americans were promoting, a slap at the corporate forces Legion action was helping to support. Real Americanism, Baldridge claimed, “is expressed in a determined and magnificent human struggle to achieve Democracy, Justice & Liberty,” which would ensure an equality of opportunity for all Americans. Such rhetoric was not a significant departure from the usual Legion definition of Americanism, but Baldridge’s pamphlet pushed Americanism’s ideological possibilities in the opposite direction of its traditional organizational usage. “Americans practice Tolerance,” Baldridge insisted, and were willing to test ideas before outright rejecting them, searching for the possibility of truth within them that could yield greater human progress. Freedom of speech and what he called “Freedom of Education,” or academic freedom were vital to this process. While “many people, recently converted to new and un-Democratic forms of government, are eager to bring about similar changes here in America ... believing in

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<sup>49</sup> Wilson, *The American Legion and Civil Liberty*, pp. 2, 32

<sup>50</sup> The Legion had ejected the Willard Strait post for publicly renouncing the immediate cash payment of soldiers’ bonuses in the winter of 1932-3. Ernest Angell, “The Legion’s Betrayal,” *Nation*, May 24, 1933, p. 584-5

Freedom of Speech for others as well as for ourselves, we must not attempt to abuse or silence them.”<sup>51</sup>

Like the ACLU-sponsored pamphlet, *Americanism: What is it?* directly challenged Legion leadership’s conservative interpretation of the organization’s bedrock ideological principles. Chaillaux immediately recognized the pamphlet as such, criticizing it for neglecting the Legion’s Americanism programming and complaining “there is not in the remotest mention of the obligation of the young American to good citizenship.”<sup>52</sup> Baldridge’s pamphlet instead challenged Legionnaires *not* to act on that sense of obligation to the nation in conservative ways but instead to invest faith that in the free-flowing exchange of ideas within a liberal democracy, Americans would always reject dictatorship. For men like Chaillaux, such ideas allowed a freedom Communists exploited to promote their revolutionary ways. This small pamphlet, which posts around the country soon thought enough of to order for themselves, became a physical symbol of an internal battle liberals within the organization would lose. Chaillaux ordered it withdrawn from publication, citing the fact the pamphlet was printed on Japanese paper, a representation of the Statue of Liberty’s torch that resembled a Socialist logo, and the red-colored Legion emblems and eagles that appeared in it as indications the pamphlet was subversive. In a compromise, the pamphlet was reprinted without the Legion emblem, and Chaillaux received abuse from those amused by his nearly-pathological overreaction.<sup>53</sup> But it represented nothing more than a minority opinion, which the ideological center of the organization in Indianapolis rejected absolutely, beginning with the very paper and ink used to print it. Chaillaux’s objections could be laughed off by

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<sup>51</sup> Cyrus LeRoy Baldridge, *Americanism: What is it?* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1936), np.

<sup>52</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 252

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 252

liberal observers, but all those seeking intellectual and political tolerance from the Legion could secure was an occasional national commander whose lack of stridency would bring a bit of balance to the NAC's blistering antiradical campaigns.

The Legion received considerable criticism from outside the organization as well for its aggressive antiradicalism. Incidences of members' vigilante excesses could expect coverage and debate within the national press. Magazines close to leftist movements like *Christian Century* and the *Nation* kept close tabs on Legion rhetoric and activities for their audiences. The ACLU doggedly kept up with Legion abuses from both field reports and clippings in the national media, filing periodic reports warning of the Legion's threats to civil liberties. The Legion's status as a veteran's organization led many of the critics of its approach towards civil liberties to compare the organization to fascism and Nazism. In critiquing a speech in the District by National Commander Hayes in which he typically dismissed the legitimacy of any radical thought, the *Washington Post* argued "by intimating that those whose views differ from his are by that fact 'unpatriotic,' the commander reveals an attitude that heads toward approval of the tenets of the Silver Shirts and equally un-American organizations. He is suggesting a philosophy that smacks of Hitlerism as a substitute for that upon which this country was founded." The ACLU and even oddball conservative *New York World-Telegram* columnist Westbrook Pegler complained that the Legion paid dearly little attention to the threat of Nazism and fascism in the United States in the course of their campaign against foreign "isms."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Pencak, *For God and Country*, p. 270-1, Wilson, *The American Legion and Civil Liberty*, p. 22-3, *Washington Post*, August 10, 1934, p. 10, *New York World-Telegram*, September 25, 1936, reel 133, volume 906, p. 76, ACLU. The FBI would later feed Pegler and other writers sensitive information from its investigations of suspected Communists in the 1950s. Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, p. 216

While the Legion was pursuing its antiradical agenda in the Depression decade, it is important to remember that it still thought of the threat the nation was facing as inherently foreign. Despite the fact that immigration restriction legislation had dramatically reduced the flow of foreign people and, accordingly, foreign ideas into the nation, the Legion remained deeply concerned about the nation's ability to control its foreign-born population that Legionnaires blamed for much of the Communist infiltration of American political culture. Beginning in 1933 the Legion called on Congress to begin a system of registering all aliens living in the United States to make assessing which were a security risk easier and to speed any future deportation process. A San Francisco attorney pushed through a resolution at the California Department convention of 1934 that called on the federal government to establish a penal colony for "undesirable aliens, communists, agitators and trouble makers" in frigid Point Barrow, Alaska to hold such incorrigibles pending their deportation. The national convention endorsed the establishment of such camps a few months later. In May of that year the NAC endorsed a bill proposed by Rep. Martin Dies in Congress that empowered the federal government to expel radicals that advocating overthrowing the American system of government. The Justice Department would inherit such power and more in the 1940 Smith Act, which also required all alien residents to be fingerprinted and entered into a national registry. Similar registration procedures would be extended to native-born Americans as well in the 1950 McCarran Act. Flushing Communists out into the open, beginning with the foreign born, became a major strategy of the anticommunist right beginning in the Depression era.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Proceedings of the Fifteenth National Convention of the American Legion*, p. 52, *California Legionnaire*, Aug., 1934, p. 17, *Proceedings of the Sixteenth National Convention of the American Legion*, Miami,

As it sought greater governmental control over the foreign-born population living in the United States, the Legion also urged the federal government to alter its immigration policy to further stem Communist infiltration. From 1931 to 1933, Legion delegates to national conventions resolved that Congress pass legislation requiring immigrants seeking naturalization to pledge that they would bear arms for the United States in time of war.<sup>56</sup> Such resolutions were reminiscent of Legionnaires' attacks on so-called "alien slackers" in the years proceeding World War I, men whose manipulation of naturalization laws to avoid military service the Legion believed disqualified them from membership in the nation. Later in the decade it joined Martin Dies and called for suspending immigration completely. In 1938 the Legion national convention called for a ten-year suspension of immigration from all points of origin.<sup>57</sup>

The organization that Red hunter Hamilton Fish, Jr. had called out in 1931 and that had offered his original Congressional investigation of the communist threat facing the United States the year before had by the eve of Pearl Harbor become one of the premier anticommunist forces in American political culture. Its nationalism was synonymous with anticommunism. Its witnesses provided Martin Dies' House Un-American Affairs Committee with reams of evidence on communist activities and sympathetic testimony. In 1940 it began an official relationship with the Federal Bureau of Investigation to use Legionnaires to monitor and report subversive or un-American activity in their communities to FBI agents. The Legion entrenched itself into the part of

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*Florida, October 22-25, 1934* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), p. 79, Minutes of the National Americanism Commission, May 2-3, 1934, Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, pp. 79, 130, 141

<sup>56</sup> *Proceedings of the Thirteenth National Convention of the American Legion*, p. 58, *Proceedings of the Fourteenth National Convention of the American Legion*, p. 53, , *Proceedings of the Fifteenth National Convention of the American Legion*, p. 52

<sup>57</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, p. 160, *Summary of Proceedings of the 20<sup>th</sup> National Convention of the American Legion, Los Angeles, Calif., Sept. 19-22, 1938* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), p. 63

the right wing of American politics intent on exposing communist conspiracy, even if it meant accusing Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins or the YMCA of communist sympathies.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, we cannot simply dismiss the Legion's antiradical excesses in the Depression decade as an organization abandoning reason in pursuit of Red phantoms. The Legion confronted communism from the organization's earliest moments through a particular understanding of the political ideals and principles at the heart of American national identity. Its leaders understood Marxist-based ideologies as a fundamental challenge to their own Americanism and to the nation's very essence. They understood these ideas as the antithesis of their Progressive conceptions of order, process, loyalty and civic obligation. It is striking how many Legionnaires during the 1920s and 30s understood the Soviet Union to be threat to the United States, and an intractable ideological enemy well before the beginning of the Cold War. Legionnaires believed they were in a long-term battle of ideas with a foreign ideology. They would only be satisfied with the complete destruction of their adversary, and behaved in American political culture accordingly.

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<sup>58</sup> Athan Theoharis, "The FBI and the American Legion Contact Program, 1940-1966" *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 100:2 (Summer 1985), pp. 271-86, Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, p. 64

### **Conclusion: The American Legion's Legacy in the Interwar Era and Beyond**

Liberals have not known what to make of the American Legion for most of its history. Opinion ranged in the interwar period from seeing the organization as “harmless boys ... inflamed by agitators,” as Ida Crouch-Hazlett described them in Iowa in 1921 to the tools of Wall Street. The fact Legion leaders expressed warm feelings for the Italian Fascist movement, including inviting *El Duce* to the 1930 National Convention, did little to dissuade Legion critics from seeing their organization as a latent fascist presence in American politics. In the 1930s, liberals openly worried about this aspect of the Legion. Sinclair Lewis included Legionnaires in his paramilitary movement, the Minute Men, that helped install Senator Buzz Windrip into his fictional American fascist-styled dictatorship in his 1935 political novel *It Can't Happen Here*. Tempted by the promise of greater veterans' benefits, Legion members provided muscle for Wildrip's ascension to power. In his novel *In Dubious Battle*, set during the agricultural strikes of 1930s California, John Steinbeck gave a bit more of a prosaic spin on the Legion's reactionary potential. “You don't know what night a bunch of American Legioners [sic] all full of whisky and drum corps music may come down and beat hell out of you,” one farm hand tells another. Northwestern University Professor William Gellermann openly compared the Legion to Fascism and Nazism in his dissertation at Columbia University Teachers' College, published as *The American Legion as Educator*. Based on that evaluation, he called for the National Education Association to cease cooperation with the Legion on American Education Week in 1938. Much more recently, historian of McCarthyism Ellen Schrecker described the Legion's anticommunism in the interwar period as representative

of “a broader group of right-wing and even near-fascist organizations,” as well as Communist witch-hunters like Walter Steele and Elizabeth Dilling.<sup>1</sup>

Observers of the American Legion to the left of its political perspective have tended to believe there was more than met the eye about the organization. The Legion was always up to something, whether it be operating as a tool of the Chamber of Commerce or Wall Street, standing as a potential American *freikorps*, or reflecting conservatives’ fear of the “other.” Dismissing the Legion as Fascist or reactionary is not useful to understanding the ideological perspective of the Legion nor its legacy in American politics.<sup>2</sup> This uncertainty of what to make of the Legion reflects historians and other liberal scholars’ broader struggle to understand the nature and motivation of conservative political movements. The long history of American antiradicalism had been particularly daunting for historians to explain. In the shadow of McCarthyism, historians of the 1950s evaluated antiradical movements as the product of psychological reactions to fears of social and economic change.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Michael Rogin argued for the presence of a “countersubversive tradition” in American political history that reflected both material and psychological concerns of antiradical conservatives. Ellen Schrecker

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<sup>1</sup> *Des Moines Register*, July 25, 1921, William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1940* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989) p. 21-3, Philip Jenkins, “‘It Can’t Happen Here:’ Fascism and Right-Wing Extremism in Pennsylvania, 1933-1942,” *Pennsylvania History*, vol. 62:1 (Winter 1995), p. 37, John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* (New York: Covici Friede, 1936), p. 32, *National Legionnaire*, July, 1938, p. 10, William Gellermann, *The American Legion as Educator* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1938), p. 47, Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 63

<sup>2</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, p. 47. On this point I am in agreement with William Pencak.

<sup>3</sup> for an overview of this literature, see Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review* vol. 99:2 (April 1994), pp. 409-29, Leo P. Ribuffo, “Why Is there So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything about It?” *American Historical Review* vol. 99:2 (April 1994), pp. 439-41

endorsed this scheme in trying to place McCarthyism in historical context in her study of the second Red Scare.<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation has argued that the Legion's antiradicalism was intertwined with its broader vision of American nationalism. Only by taking the way the Legion constructed its nationalistic vision seriously and understanding its unique historical context can the full depth of the Legion's conservative impact on American political culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century come more clearly into view.<sup>5</sup> This is not to dismiss the Legion's place in the longer tradition of antiradicalism in American politics. Nor does it deny the possibility of irrationality or personal psychology in particular Legionnaires' enthusiasm for antiradical conspiracy-building – Homer Challiaux's name comes to mind. The Legion's nationalism gave even the most fantastic of its antiradical conspiracy ideas a frame of reference and a purpose to serve in defending essential aspects of the American nation from its enemies.

As this dissertation has argued, the Legion defined its nationalism through a set of narrow political ideals and principles, encapsulated in its vision of American democracy. The Legion's understanding of what democracy was owed a heavy intellectual debt to more nationalistic Progressives, who understood it to be a system that offered an equality of status and opportunity to all citizens and the liberties necessary to develop oneself under that condition of equality. What had made the nation unique and continued to define it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Legionnaires argued, was the fact that anyone, regardless of

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Paul Rogin, "Ronald Reagan," *The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 272-300, Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, pp. 46-85

<sup>5</sup> Lisa McGirr makes a similar criticism of Cold War-era liberals' writings about conservative activists, which tended to focus on their irrationality. McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 147-9

their social background, could advance socially and have their voice heard in politics. Being a full citizen – being “American” – was not restricted to one class, ethnicity, or race. Instead, the requirements of citizenship were performative.<sup>6</sup> Citizens could not interfere with the equality of opportunity of others or restrict their equal access to material or political success. Citizens instead had to consider the common good and the preservation of the democratic system that was the light of the world.

Legionnaires were idealists. They believed in the capacity of these democratic values to yield equitable and just results for American society, that Americans could become more prosperous and personally fulfilled in the socioeconomic and political system at hand. If gross inequality or injustice existed, they believed the democratic system was capable of remedying it. They had faith that Americans could master democratic process and create a government that was representative and pragmatic, a reflection of common dedication to solve common problems. The American nation, they were confident, could avoid the perils that had befallen nations that had distributed power and status in their societies less equitably. Their nationalism was forward-looking, expectant of greater and greater social development in American society and greater national prestige for the United States in the world as its most free and most successful nation. Certainly, some of this idealism was derived from the fact that most Legionnaires were the winners in the American status quo. But the particular experience of military service as contributing to their idealism as well. The Legion attracted veterans who likely looked back favorably on their military experience as one that demonstrated citizens

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, this racially universalism was theoretical. The Legion was enmeshed in the mainstream racist thought of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

working together with a unity of purpose. They had survived an event in which men struggled and sacrificed for the preservation of American ideals.

It is easy to forget how attractive many Americans found this kind of idealism. The Legion flourished when other nationalistic organizations like the Ku Klux Klan or antiradical organizations like the Black Legion and Silver Shirts collapsed because it offered much more than mere reactionism. The idealism of Americanism could give form to what Americans liked about their democratic system. It carried the potential to unify swaths of the citizenry around a common identity. It helped Americans make sense of what distinguished their nation from others, particularly in an era when the nation seemed so alone in its rejection of ideological extremism. In other words, it was the very mainstreamness of the Legion's nationalism that made its antiradical efforts possible.

To fully understand the Legion's antiradical efforts its narrow definition of loyalty also requires explanation. It argued that because American democracy provided equal status and opportunity to all, citizens owed the nation-state a debt of obligation participate in civic and political life in ways that did no harm to that democracy. The Legion was worried that those who did not share its idealism about the virtues of American democracy would work to destroy it for their own selfish ends or would undermine it through their own ignorant and self-serving participation. Heavily invested in the idealistic potential of American democracy and the exceptionalism of the American nation, Legionnaires could not tolerate any social or political behavior that appeared to undermine the principles of democracy or the American state. In this regard, they extended the principles of loyalty that had smothered American political culture during World War I.

In the interwar era, this ethic of defending Americanism through the vehicle of antiradicalism had real political consequences for various radical movements. Legion vigilante action and aggressive discursive pursuit of radicals in a variety of political movements were disruptive to radicals' efforts to organize and promote their ideas. While across the organization such interventions by posts were fairly rare in an organization with 11,000 posts, they were designed to have maximum strategic impact, robbing national leaders moments to rally local supporters and supporting capital during major labor disputes. In some states and localities the Legion partnered with other sources of authority to challenge the presence of radicalism comprehensively. In West Virginia, the Legion joined forces with corporate interests, state government, and other civic groups to control radical speech, monitor the ideological content of the public education system, institute Americanization, and promoted open shop unionization.<sup>7</sup> Legionnaires' abilities to act as an auxiliary police force, to physically monitor the public sphere, to agitate for antiradical legislation, and to reach communities with their conservative nationalist agenda made them a daunting foe to any radical group attempting to gain a foothold in American civic and political life. The Legion also placed radicals on the discursive defensive, forcing them to prove their compatibility with American ideals. Even when groups like the American Civil Liberties Union tried to assert their consistency with American democratic principles and accuse the Legion of transgressing them, Legion leaders skillfully deflected their efforts by claiming radicals had no claims to free speech at all.

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<sup>7</sup> John C. Hennen, *The Americanization of West Virginia: Creating a Modern Industrial State, 1916-1925* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pp. 96-116

The Legion's nationalism had longer-term impact on American political culture as well. During the Cold War era the Legion reprised the strategy of marginalization it had used against radicals in previous decades. It supported new loyalty tests for teachers and public employees, particularly on the state level. Legion picketing, letter-writing campaigns, and other forms of publicity led to the firing of teachers, performers, and union members. It continued its cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Investigation in monitoring subversives in American communities. Legionnaires threw stones at the stage to break up a concert by Paul Robeson in Peekskill, New York in the summer of 1949. A post in Monisee, Wisconsin drew more positive national attention in May, 1950 when it staged a simulation of a Communist takeover of the town for a day.<sup>8</sup>

More importantly, the Legion's nationalism provided important conceptual contributions to Cold War political culture.<sup>9</sup> First, the Legion popularized a conception of civic nationalism that was at once relatively inclusive and focused on a definition of democracy that was well within the mainstream of American political thought and the everyday life experiences of many Americans. The Legion defined democracy through the equality of opportunity and social status and did not reject the state's role in bringing these values to full fruition. The Legion described a nation that found its exceptional nature through the kind of economic and civic life greater and greater numbers of Americans had come to enjoy by the middle of the Cold War. In the

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<sup>8</sup> M.J. Heale, *McCarthy's Americans: Red Scare Politics in State and Nation, 1935-1965* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 79, Athan Theoharis, "The FBI and the American Legion Contact Program, 1940-1966" *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 100:2 (Summer 1985) pp. 271-86, Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) pp. 181-3, Richard M. Fried, *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming! Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold-War America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) ch.4

<sup>9</sup> Major works on Cold War political culture have not done a particularly good job in connecting it to earlier periods. See John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Fried, *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming!*

boom times of postwar prosperity, the Legion's civic nationalism sounded a lot like the American Dream.

The way Legionnaires had interpreted the Communist threat publicly since the early 1920s provided Americans a means with which they could understand the shifting international context they found their nation in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Since the inception of the Soviet Union the Legion recognized it as an enemy of Americanism, condemning its support for international revolutionary movements through the Cominform/Comintern and urging the American government not to recognize the Soviet government. In the interwar period the Legion considered the Soviet regime to be evil and intent on dominating the world. The Legion thus contributed to and participated in a conservative perspective in the Cold War that believed any engagement with or accommodation of the Soviet government as unacceptable. The Legion helped pave the way for a Manichean view of the Cold War that cast the conflict in terms of the forces of light and darkness, good and evil, civilization and tyranny, the kind of attitude that would culminate in the rise of Barry Goldwater.<sup>10</sup>

The Legion's narrow conception of loyalty in the interwar era also shaped post-World War II political culture. Here, the Legion was more in step with groups to their right like the John Birch Society in considering the greatest threat from Communism to be internal subversion.<sup>11</sup> Legion nationalism strongly connected dissent with disloyalty through its ideas about the political obligations Americans owed to the nation-state. Political activities that undermined the state's ability to maintain law-and-order or preserve its own sovereignty, a conception of loyalty reaching back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>10</sup> Conservatives in Lisa McGirr's study of Orange County, California reflected this understanding of the Cold War. McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, pp. 168-76

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 175-6

were part of this conception of obligation. The Legion had expanded this concept in the interwar period to include activities that undermined the democratic values of its Americanism in any way. Expressions of class-based critiques of the American system or support of organizations that had even a whiff of revolutionary intent placed political actors in serious risk of being labeled “un-American.” The Legion’s commitment to American exceptionalism also led it to fundamentally accept as legitimate any foreign or defense policy the American state deemed necessary. This attitude that the American nation was always justified in defending its interests and that Americans had no right to challenge the state on such matters had powerful consequences for American politics through the Vietnam War era. Critics of military spending, nuclear arms, and American foreign policy faced charges of disloyalty based on this connection between citizens’ obligation to remain loyal to the state and the exceptionalist faith in the moral goodness of American foreign policy.

This sentiment remains alive and well within the Legion itself. At its 2005 National Convention, the Legion adopted a resolution urging “all Americans and freedom-loving peoples everywhere to stand *united* in their support of the global war on terrorism, and *united* in their support of the troops who are engaged in protecting our values and way of life.” The resolution empowered the Legion’s national commander “to use whatever means at his disposal to disseminate accurate information about this war on terrorism, and to engage whatever means necessary to ensure the *united* support of the American people.” This resolution was saturated with the legacy of the Vietnam War. “For many of us, the visions of Jane Fonda glibly spouting anti-American messages with the North Vietnamese and protestors denouncing our own forces four decades ago is

forever etched in our memories," National Commander Thomas P. Cadmus said. "We must never let that happen again. I assure you, The American Legion will stand against anyone and any group that would demoralize our troops, or worse, endanger their lives by encouraging terrorists to continue their cowardly attacks against freedom loving peoples."<sup>12</sup> That this principle of loyalty could resonate from World War I through 20<sup>th</sup> century political culture and into the present day is a stunning testament to the persistence of the Legion's founding nationalistic ideals.

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<sup>12</sup> American Legion, "Resolution no. 169, The War On Terrorism, A Guide to Building Public Awareness" (Indianapolis: American Legion National Headquarters, 2005), "Legionnaires Condemn War Protests, Pledge Support for President, Troops," *U.S. Newswire* August 23, 2005

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