

OUR TRADITION OF VIOLENCE

BY STEWART H. HOLBROOK

FOR some years we Americans have been reveling in a rather superior smugness. Viewing the various species of savagery in Europe and Asia, we speak complacently about the foreign barbarians slipping back to medievalism; about the Dark Ages again settling down over the world — except, of course, in these United States. What has been going on beyond our borders is enough to make anyone shudder, it is true. But it need scarcely evoke feelings of superiority in a country which has had KKK's, Molly Maguires, Black Legions, Ludlow massacres, Palmer raids, and countless mobs of vigilantes in its history, if not on its conscience. In sober fact, no race of people on earth has gone in so joyfully and efficiently for violence as the residents of these United States of America. Ours is an amazing record.

To begin with, most of our land was got in the manner of Huns, Italians, Japanese, British, and French; that is, we took it forcibly

and with a maximum of bloodshed from a weaker people. Once we had the land, we went into an era of mob-law. The habit stuck: we are still inclined to take the "law" into our own hands. Leaving aside what we did to the Indians in the way of routine massacres of villages, our old frontier was ruled alternately by mobs of gunmen who were called outlaws or posses, depending on the point of view. Both used only the rope and the gun. "There is more law in a Colt Six-Gun," said Westerners, "than in all the law books." Seventy-five years later a police commissioner of our largest city remarked, "There is more law in the end of a nightstick than in all the city ordinances."

When we had a Gold Rush, California was ruled intermittently by mobs of low-class thugs, who had an interest in a state of lawlessness, and by mobs of high-toned thugs — called vigilantes — who had an interest in what was jokingly called Law and Order. Murder and lynching became the

common order of things. Less known, but just as true, is what went on in the later rush to Montana: even more men were summarily hanged there than in San Francisco. And when Skagway became the base of Yukon prospectors that city was immediately "taken over" by a mob of modern gangsters under the lovely Soapy Smith. The American trek into Oklahoma and Indian Territory was likewise made to the accompaniment of enough shooting and other violence to be rated a war in any country but ours.

Our four years of straight homicide, ending at Appomattox, was seriously interrupted by civil disorders far worse than the upheaval in Germany following the World War. In July 1863, for example, 20,000 rioters took over the city of New York and gave an excellent example of mob rule, American style. These opponents of the Army draft tore up railroad tracks, cut down telephone poles, and wrecked telegraph offices. Three thousand of them stormed the Union Steam Works arsenal, drove out the guards, helped themselves to carbines, then fired the building and went on a rampage. Another mob, estimated at 5000, attacked the Colored Orphans Home at Fifth Avenue and Forty-third

Street and burned it to the ground, — but not until they had amused themselves throwing pickaninnies out of the windows.

Negroes swung from lamp posts the length of Clarkson Street, with fires burning beneath them. The Draft Enrollment offices were wrecked and fired. Stores and homes were sacked. The Eleventh Regiment turned out with howitzers and blew cannister and grape-shot into the mobs, but the troopers, outnumbered 20 to 1, were set upon and shot and slugged. Thirteen regiments were hurriedly recalled from the Army of the Potomac and sent to New York, where they arrived in time to prevent destruction of the *Tribune* building. The mob threw up a mile of breastworks along Ninth Avenue and fought to the last ditch. The riots lasted four days in all and resulted in some 1500 deaths.

The Civil War itself acted like a taste of fresh blood to a tiger. Abolitionists shouted that the South was a conquered nation and was to be treated as such. It was. Northern carpetbaggers and Negroes full of gin set up "legislatures" with bayonets. Meeting violence with violence, in typical American fashion, the Klan rose to power and rode savagely in all directions — a new kind of terror.

II

Meanwhile, with the stimulating smell of powder in their nostrils, Labor and Capital began the bloody and continuous war that is still going strong, and is without parallel in the history of any country. In the 'sixties and 'seventies much of the great state of Pennsylvania lived in complete terror of the Molly Maguires, a wild mob that slugged and killed and burned and dynamited and laughed at attempts to put them down. The Mollies, brutal as gorillas, had been brought into being by the savagery of coal-mine operators. They reigned for more than a decade, and when they were finally broken up it was not the law, but a private detective, that did the breaking.

Close on the heels of the Mollies were the railroad riots of 1877, virtually a civil war all over again. Compared with what went on that year in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis, and scores of smaller towns the much-touted Commune of Paris was a picnic. Ours, too, was an unorganized uprising. The dead amounted to more than a thousand, the property damage ran into hundreds of millions of dollars. Few Americans seem to have heard of it.

A bit later the bomb went off in

Chicago's Haymarket, to terrible effect. It has been a lasting effect, too, for pineapples have been detonating in sickening numbers ever since. At Homestead, Pennsylvania, a battle between private guards and striking workmen showed real imagination and gave an inkling of what an American mob really could do when it spat on its hands and let go. In this fight not only rifles were used, but armored scows, heavy artillery, homemade flame throwers, and a ton or so of dynamite. When the losers had been disarmed, they were set upon in good old Yankee style. Some were castrated, others had eyes gouged out, and the rest got off merely by being beaten into insensibility. Few Americans under fifty seem to have heard of Homestead.

Then a strike of Pullman-car workers grew into a railroad strike, which grew into the Debs Rebellion, and the flat lands between Chicago and the Rockies were lighted nightly by the burning of thousands of freight and passenger cars. Bloody riots exploded all along the line from Oregon to the Great Lakes. As usual, a greater part of the United States Army had to be called in to restore order.

Later still, "General" Jacob Coxey, a Man with a Message, sent

out a clarion call and thousands of bums, hoboes, and honestly unemployed started a march on Washington from the four corners of the Republic. They captured trains and ran them, rocking and bounding across mountains and prairies; they terrorized farms and towns, raided barns and homes, and helped themselves to whatever they wanted. Americans forget the implications of that march, and Coxey's name survives only as a joke. Coxey lost; hence he is funny. But he was a potential Man on Horseback. Years later, Huey Long, too, began as a joke. By the time Huey died — by violence — he was anything but a joke. Since Coxey's time, Relievers and others have used the same technique and have been put down by violence.

Since the turn of the century, Labor-Capital wars have been worse and more numerous. A bomb blew all hell out of the Los Angeles *Times* building, another went off at Steuart and Market Streets in San Francisco, still another made little pieces out of an ex-governor of Idaho. And what must have been the daddy of bombs exploded in front of Mr. Morgan's place in Wall Street. Staid Lawrence, Massachusetts, had its revolution. So did Paterson, New Jersey. Two thousand miners were driven out

of Bisbee, Arizona, by a mob and forced into the desert. Tar-and-feather parties and lynchings fill the history of the IWW, a 100 per cent American movement if ever there was one. Twenty men were killed and 200 sent to hospitals by the steel strike of 1919, and since then steel, rubber, and motor wars have taken a continuous toll.

When the World War reached America, every country town in the United States had its behind-the-lines patriots who staged pogroms against inoffensive people of German birth or parentage. During the same period troops were called out to shoot down miners in Colorado and to burn their pitiful homes. In Everett, Washington, a mob of dubious deputies shot down and killed seven lumber union men who were merely testing their constitutional right to speak from a soapbox on street corners.

Following close on the Armistice, the Government's mob, under the direction of Mitchell Palmer, rode roughshod over such civil liberties as were left. Two persons talking was a crowd; three, a menace to the Republic. Palmer alone ruled. No group not wholly orthodox in his eyes could meet without danger of a raid and clubbing. Unpopular newspapers were suppressed in all parts of the country,

and often they were mobbed. One hundred and thirteen members of the IWW were arrested and charged with criminal thoughts. Ninety-three of them were sentenced to a total of 1160 years in prison and subjected to fines that totaled \$2,570,000. Mass deportations went on daily, many of the victims with American wives and children. Foreigners of unorthodox political views lived in a state of terror. The Rand School in New York was raided by a pseudo-legal mob. Members of the International Bible Students, a pacifist sect commonly known as Russellites, were hounded everywhere. Nine of them spent years in jail without trial. In short, the Palmer regime gave us a mild taste of what an American dictatorship would be like.

In the realm of divinity America's record of violence is something to shoot at. The mob killed Mormon Joe Smith in cold blood, and destroyed Mormon settlements, putting them to the torch. American divines have often been ungodly violent. Lyman Beecher attacked the Irish. Theodore Parker shouted again and again for the blood of slaveholders. Hardly one of them but did not howl for the head of Altgeld, a most kindly man. In turn they raised mobs against witches, Quakers, Shakers, Mora-

vians, Catholics, Unitarians, Mormons, and Christian Scientists, and always the mobs resorted to violence, often to murder. Billy Sunday always used the words "fight," "exterminate," "drive out," and "battle" in his "war" on sin. Sunday could whip his simple clods into a frenzy — another potential Man on Horseback.

For half a century a dangerous fanatic named Anthony Comstock was granted virtual police powers over the "morals" of any citizen he did not approve. Comstock and his agents committed every indecency and broke every law short of murder in their efforts to suppress everything from dirty postcards to legitimate works of art. In more recent years, Comstock's heirs, aided by powerful religious groups, made life a hell for a courageous woman who felt that women should have something to say about the birthrate.

III

Prohibition brought the American's love of mobbery into its fullest flower. The grimy town of Cicero became the mid-west capital of the biggest industry in the land. The wars between bootleggers and thugs wearing city, state, and federal badges are still too fresh to need

recounting. It should be remembered, though, that kindly Uncle Sam forced manufacturers to add a deadly poison to their alcohols and that reverend gentlemen stood up in their pulpits to say that blindness, even death, was good enough for a person who touched spirits. Citizens with a pint on their hips were shot down like mad dogs. Many of them, maimed for life, are still in hospitals.

Concurrently with Prohibition we had a revival of the Klan, this time more violent than ever and supplanting the government in many states. In this incarnation it was directed against Negroes, Catholics, Jews, simple aliens, and "scofflaws." The Klan faded, for a while, but it seems to be reviving in 1939, along with various groups — all political mobs — known as Black Legions, Bunds, and Crusaders-for-this-and-that.

Until quite recently the larger cities of the west coast lived under the rule of mobs of goons — labor racketeers fighting each other for the right to plunder the public. Time after time Seattle, Tacoma, Portland, and San Francisco have been on the verge of local near-revolution, while bombs wrecked breweries, set fire to sawmills, warehouses, homes, and loosed stenches in restaurants and the-

atres. Only a capable Man on Horseback was lacking to start something really big, either Left or Right.

Throughout the past twenty years seemingly isolated incidents have continued to show what sort of people we are when aroused and the mob takes over. When the police of Boston went on strike that seat of culture and light tasted twenty-four hours of the stuff Carlyle wrote about: hoi-polloi broke into stores and lugged off everything in sight; women and children were insulted and abused by the hundreds; gangs ran yelling through the Common, throwing park benches into the duckponds and heaving rocks at street lamps; young toughs came out of the stews and gutters to shoot crap on the State House steps; South Boston and the North End were bedlam. Until the troops turned out the Hub knew chaos. At about the same period Chicago had a race riot during which more Negroes were killed than ever were done to death by Southern planters. Out in Seattle, a simple shipyard strike grew into a general strike of such proportions that martial law was declared and armored cars with machine guns patrolled the streets. Off and on, during the years, mobs have taken a Negro and done vari-

ous things to him — hanged him, shot him full of holes, burned him at the stake, or simply clubbed him to death. Only recently was any improvement shown in the technique: some genius at lynching brought along a blow-torch.

America's record of domestic "peace" would stagger the warlike Arabs. Our prisons are the biggest ever built, and they overflow at all times. Our people's heroes are — after Washington and Lincoln — Jesse James, the Daltons, John L. Sullivan, and Dillingers, Barkers, and Capones without end. Our American Legion is composed almost entirely of heroes, and it has many times lived up to the American tradition of taking the law into its own hands — at Centralia, Washington, and San Diego, to name two typical occasions. Even our genteel Daughters of the American Revolution often get out of hand and pass resolutions

which, though futile, give an idea of what they would do if they had the power and weren't quite so well bred. Abroad we are considered the most quarrelsome of people, and our record of six major wars in one hundred and fifty years gives substance to that opinion.

In short, Americans have no reason to be smug about the foreign barbarians. God help Uncle Sam and those cool, calm whiskers of his if a sizeable American mob ever finds its Man on Horseback! We have a long and lusty tradition of violence. The paranoiac supermen in our midst, those who would inflame hatreds and shatter the structure of civilized legality, are the more dangerous for that reason. If the dreaded moment comes, the doings of the sissy French in '89, the Russians in 1917, and the Nazi Germans in 1933 will look like kindergarten brawls by comparison. We Americans have got what it takes.



CAPSULE WISDOM

The AMERICAN MERCURY's monthly Stuffed Shirt Awards are herewith bestowed on the authors of the following prize pontifications:

Earl Browder, leader of the American Communist Party: "If we were ever to have a war with Russia it would be because of the Trotskyists."

Joannes Kiev, Estonian Consul General in New York: "Estonians don't want to impose their will on anybody."

June Hamilton Rhodes, fashion commentator for the National Retail Jewelers Association: "Any girl without earrings this season will feel naked."

William Feather, journalist: "Cigar smokers are inclined to be substantial citizens, able to think things through."

Mrs. D. Leigh Colvin, president of the New York State WCTU: "A person who never touches alcohol never dies a drunkard."

Robert Minor, outstanding American communist: "You can trust the USSR."

Mrs. James Bogert, centenarian of Creskill, N. J.: "Don't ever wish to live to be a hundred — eighty is enough."

Gov. Luren D. Dickenson of Michigan: "How many golf games, baseball games, bridge parties, and wine parties are started with prayer?"

Bernard M. Baruch: "If anybody thinks they can make a profit out of war, they are crazy."

Eugene Goossens, conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony: "We are a happy, wonderful country with nothing to worry about."

George U. Harvey, Borough President of Queens: "If Hitler wins, the United States will find him in Bermuda and Stalin in Canada."

Dr. Sidney H. Coleman, president of the American Humane Association: "As long as millions of animals go to their death without benefit of humane stunning, there remains a task that challenges the imagination of the best humane thinking."