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Red Scare And Palmer Raids

Published: November 20, 2026 | Index ID: #-

The Red Scare And Palmer Raids: America’s First Great Battle Over Civil Liberties

In the bitter winter of 1919 and early 1920, the United States witnessed one of the most dramatic and controversial episodes in its history: the Red Scare and Palmer Raids. This period, marked by intense fear of radicalism, anarchism, and communism, saw the federal government round up thousands of suspected subversives, often in brutal and unconstitutional ways. To understand modern America’s relationship with civil liberties, immigration, and national security, one must first understand what happened during that pivotal moment, and how the fear of a Red revolution nearly tore apart the fabric of the republic.

The Red Scare and Palmer Raids were not isolated incidents. They emerged from a perfect storm of historical pressures: World War I had ended, but the peace was uncertain; the Russian Revolution had succeeded, and communism seemed to be spreading across Europe; and at home, a wave of labor strikes, race riots, and terrorist bombings convinced many Americans that revolution was imminent. Into this volatile atmosphere stepped a determined and ambitious Attorney General: A. Mitchell Palmer. His actions would define the era and leave a complicated legacy that scholars, activists, and citizens still debate today.

The Seeds of Panic: What Created the First Red Scare?

To appreciate the ferocity of the Palmer Raids, one must first understand the climate of fear that made them possible. The First Red Scare did not begin with Palmer, but rather with a series of real and perceived threats in the years following World War I.

First, there was the triumph of the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917. To many Americans, the success of Vladimir Lenin and his followers represented a direct threat to capitalism, democracy, and private property. The formation of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1919 openly called for world revolution, and American authorities took these calls seriously.

Second, the end of World War I brought economic dislocation. Millions of soldiers returned home to find jobs scarce and prices high. Industrial workers, many of them immigrants, began organizing unions and striking for better wages and conditions. In 1919 alone, over four million workers participated in strikes, including a general strike in Seattle that seemed, to many, to be the opening act of a revolution.

Third, a series of bombings in the spring of 1919 shattered any sense of security. In April, a bomb was mailed to the home of Seattle Mayor Ole Hanson. In June, eight bombs exploded simultaneously in eight different cities, including one that damaged the home of Attorney General Palmer himself. The bombers were never fully identified, but they were believed to be anarchists following the philosophy of Luigi Galleani, a radical Italian immigrant. The press sensationalized these events, stoking public hysteria and creating an atmosphere in which any dissent could be labeled treason.

Who Was A. Mitchell Palmer? The Man Behind the Raids

Alexander Mitchell Palmer was a Quaker from Pennsylvania who had served in Congress and was appointed Attorney General by President Woodrow Wilson. Initially, Palmer was seen as a progressive and a supporter of civil

liberties. He had even spoken out against the Espionage Act during the war. But the bombing of his own home changed him profoundly. He became convinced that the United States faced an existential threat from a vast network of radicals determined to overthrow the government by violence.

Palmer was also ambitious. He had presidential aspirations, and he believed that leading a crusade against radicalism would make him a national hero. With the support of J. Edgar Hoover, then a young and ambitious Justice Department lawyer, Palmer set out to destroy the radical movement. Hoover was placed in charge of the newly created General Intelligence Division, which amassed files on thousands of suspected radicals, labor organizers, and political activists. This database would become the foundation for the Palmer Raids.

Palmer and Hoover did not distinguish between different types of radicalism. Anarchists, communists, socialists, industrial unionists, and even some labor reformers were all lumped together as a single, dangerous threat. This broad and indiscriminate approach would prove to be one of the most troubling aspects of the Red Scare and Palmer Raids.

The Mechanics of Fear: How the Raids Were Conducted

The Palmer Raids took place in two major waves. The first wave occurred in November 1919, targeting the Union of Russian Workers, a left-wing organization that had little connection to actual revolutionary activity. Federal agents, often with the help of local police, conducted simultaneous raids in multiple cities. They entered homes, meeting halls, and offices without search warrants, arrested individuals without explaining the charges, and held them in detention for extended periods without access to legal counsel.

The second and much larger wave came on the night of January 2, 1920. This time, the target was the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party, two newly formed organizations that had split from the Socialist Party. In total, Justice Department agents and local police arrested between 6,000 and 10,000 people in over 30 cities across the country. The raids were coordinated and swift, designed to overwhelm the legal system and the radical movement alike.

The conditions of arrest and detention were appalling. In Boston, hundreds of men were arrested and held in the cold, windowless Deer Island prison, where they were subjected to harsh interrogations. In Detroit, 800 detainees were held for up to six days in a narrow, windowless corridor of a federal building, without food or sanitation. Many were beaten. In several cases, agents used entrapment, sending undercover operatives into radical meetings to encourage membership so that legitimate attendees could be arrested as members of illegal organizations.

The Palmer Raids did not target only citizens. Because many of the radicals were immigrants, the government used immigration law as a weapon. Non-citizens could be deported without a criminal trial simply for being members of an organization that advocated the overthrow of the government. This administrative process was faster and less legally protected than a criminal prosecution, and Palmer exploited it ruthlessly. In December 1919, 249 immigrants, including the famous anarchist Emma Goldman, were deported to Russia aboard a ship nicknamed the *Soviet Ark*.

The Legal and Constitutional Crisis

The Red Scare and Palmer Raids created a serious constitutional crisis. The Fourth Amendment protects citizens against unreasonable searches and seizures, and the Fifth Amendment guarantees due process of law. The Palmer Raids violated both of these protections on a massive scale. Arrests were made without warrants, evidence was obtained illegally, and detainees were denied access to lawyers and family members.

In response, a small but determined group of lawyers and civil libertarians began to fight back. The National Civil

Liberties Bureau, which later became the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), was formed in 1920 specifically to challenge the legality of the raids and to defend the rights of the accused. The legal system slowly began to push back as well. In April 1920, a federal judge in Boston, George W. Anderson, released 20 detainees and condemned the Justice Department's tactics, calling the raids "an orgy of terror and lawlessness."

Meanwhile, the legal framework used to justify many of the arrests—the Immigration Act of 1918 and the Espionage Act of 1917—came under greater scrutiny. The Supreme Court had upheld the Espionage Act in cases like *Schenck v. United States*(1919), but the mass arrests of the Palmer Raids tested the limits of the government's power in ways that many found deeply troubling.

J. Edgar Hoover, who would go on to run the FBI for nearly 50 years, learned valuable lessons from the Palmer Raids. He saw that the raids had initially been popular but had ultimately failed because of legal overreach and public backlash. In later years, Hoover would pursue a more methodical and secretive approach to surveillance and harassment of political dissidents, which he refined during the Cold War.

The Collapse of the Red Scare

By the spring of 1920, the Red Scare was beginning to fade. Several factors contributed to its decline. First, there was no revolution. The strikes that had frightened so many Americans ended without serious violence, and the radical movement was too small and divided to pose any real threat to the government. Second, the legal challenges mounted by the ACLU and others exposed the brutality and lawlessness of the raids, turning public opinion against Palmer.

Perhaps the most important factor was Palmer's own overreach. He predicted a massive radical uprising on May Day (May 1) 1920, warning that the country would be plunged into violence and chaos. When May Day passed without incident, Palmer's credibility was destroyed. The public began to see him as an alarmist and a political opportunist. President Wilson, who was ill and politically weakened, did not support further raids. The Red Scare and Palmer Raids ended not with a bang, but with a whimper—a slow realization that the threat had been vastly exaggerated.

Palmer never became president. His reputation collapsed, and he retired from public life. But the damage had been done. Thousands of people had been arrested, beaten, and deported. The radical labor and political movements in the United States were shattered, their leaders in prison or in exile. The lesson seemed clear: dissent would be tolerated only within very narrow limits.

The Human Cost: Who Was Hurt by the Palmer Raids?

The Red Scare and Palmer Raids devastated immigrant communities across the country. Many of those arrested were Italian, Russian, Polish, or Jewish immigrants who had come to America seeking freedom and opportunity. They were activists, writers, and workers who believed in a better future. The raids tore families apart. Children were separated from parents, who were deported to countries they had not seen in decades. Some of the deportees were sent to the Soviet Union, where they faced suspicion and hardship, having been rejected by both their old and new countries.

Beyond the direct victims, the raids had a chilling effect on American culture. Labor unions became more cautious. Radical newspapers were shut down. Public meetings were monitored. The atmosphere of suspicion made it dangerous to advocate for workers' rights, racial equality, or economic change. Many intellectuals and artists who had been sympathetic to radical ideas either left the country or went silent.

The Legacy of the Red Scare and Palmer Raids in American History

The Red Scare and Palmer Raids were not the last time the United States would give in to fear. Similar patterns appeared during the Second Red Scare in the 1950s when Senator Joseph McCarthy hunted for communists in government and Hollywood. They appeared again after the September 11 attacks, when thousands of Muslims and immigrants were detained and surveilled in the name of national security. In each case, the government acted out of genuine fear, but also out of political calculation, and in each case, civil liberties were the first casualty.

What makes the Palmer Raids particularly important is that they established a framework for political policing that would persist for decades. The FBI's COINTELPRO program of the 1960s and 1970s, which targeted civil rights leaders and anti-war activists, used techniques first developed during the Red Scare: infiltration, blacklisting, disinformation, and mass surveillance. The Red Scare taught the state that it could operate with relative impunity when public fear was high and when the targets were politically powerless.

But the Palmer Raids also taught another lesson: that the public eventually recoils from lawlessness. The backlash against Palmer's tactics showed that Americans, for all their fear of radicalism, also valued their constitutional protections. The ACLU, founded in direct response to the raids, became a permanent institution in American life, defending free speech and civil liberties through every subsequent crisis.

Comparisons to the Second Red Scare and Modern National Security Debates

It is natural to compare the first Red Scare with the second, which dominated American politics from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s. The McCarthy era was also characterized by fear of communist infiltration, blacklisting, loyalty oaths, and the destruction of careers. But there were important differences. The first Red Scare was more violent, with mass arrests and deportations. The second Red Scare was more insidious, relying on blacklisting and public shame rather than physical force. Both were fueled by ambitious politicians and a sensationalist press.

In the wake of 9/11, the USA PATRIOT Act expanded government surveillance powers, and immigrants were again targeted. The parallels to the Palmer Raids are striking. In both cases, the government used the threat of terrorism (whether anarchist or Islamist) to justify sweeping measures that bypassed normal legal procedures. In both cases, the targets were disproportionately immigrants and non-citizens. And in both cases, a robust public debate eventually emerged about the balance between security and liberty.

Lessons for a New Century

The Red Scare and Palmer Ra

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