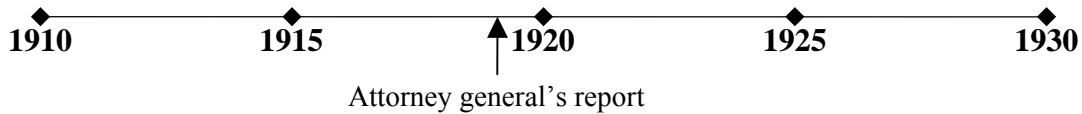


LESSON 6: NATIONAL SECURITY, 1919–1920

Student Handout 4



PROBLEM

You are U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer in November 1919. Your job is to protect the country and enforce the law. Read the report below and decide what kinds of action, if any, you will take to ensure the security of the country.

REPORT TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL ON THE SECURITY OF THE UNITED STATES

Here is the state of the country with regard to security:

- World War I is over and Americans are eager to return to the normal lives they led before the war.
- In 1917 communists (called Bolsheviks) overthrew the Russian government. Now the communists are fighting a civil war against non-communists in Russia, and the outcome is unclear. The United States has troops in Russia fighting against the communists. Communists advocate the overthrow of capitalist countries' governments, including that of the United States.
- The U.S. has experienced 3600 strikes in the country in the past year (a much higher number than normal). These strikes are due mostly to the high rate of inflation: workers are asking that business owners raise their wages to keep up with rising prices.
- In the largest strike, in Seattle, workers in shipyards demanded higher wages and shorter hours. Workers from other industries joined them. The strike basically shut down the city's transportation and industrial production, but it did not affect food, coal, water, heat, or electricity. Garbage trucks, laundry trucks, milk wagons, and other essential vehicles continued making their deliveries. The strike was entirely peaceful. The strikers eventually gave up and lost the strike because they didn't have the support of the public or of the American Federation of Labor, a mainstream labor union.
- Communists in the United States number about 70,000, meaning that membership in the Communist Party has declined since the war. Communists are only a tiny minority compared to the millions of people who belong to the other political parties. During the war, internal disputes and government repression weakened radical groups.

- On occasion, voters have elected socialists to legislatures. Socialists believe in democratic change, whereas Communists believe in the violent overthrow of the system. The New York State Legislature, for example, includes five socialists.
- Last year, radicals bombed the homes of a handful of businessmen, a police officer, and a state judge.
- In April, postal workers intercepted 34 mail bombs addressed to prominent people—including a senator, J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and you. One slipped through, however, and injured the maid who opened it. Radicals were believed to be responsible, but oddly, some of the people targeted were supportive of workers and immigrants.
- In May, communists marched in parades to celebrate communism and the Russian Revolution. Riots broke out in several cities. In each case, the violence began when anti-communist crowds heckled the marchers and threw things at them. Police arrested hundreds of marchers, despite clear evidence that anti-communist crowds started the violence.
- In June, bombs, including one that damaged your home, exploded in eight cities. The targets included a mayor, a state legislator, a jeweler, a silk manufacturer, a local judge, and two federal judges. They were all prominent people, but not all were political leaders.
- In September, police in Boston went on strike when the police commissioner refused to negotiate over low pay and poor working conditions. Meanwhile, steelworkers throughout the country went on strike when owners refused to renew their contract. Then in November, just last week, coal miners also went on strike to protest the continuation of the wartime contract, which is keeping their wages low without compensating for inflation. Newspapers in all three cases tried to label the strikers as Bolsheviks (communists).
- Congress has criticized you and your department for not taking bold action against these various problems.
- On October 2nd, President Wilson had a stroke, leaving the United States without effectively without a president.