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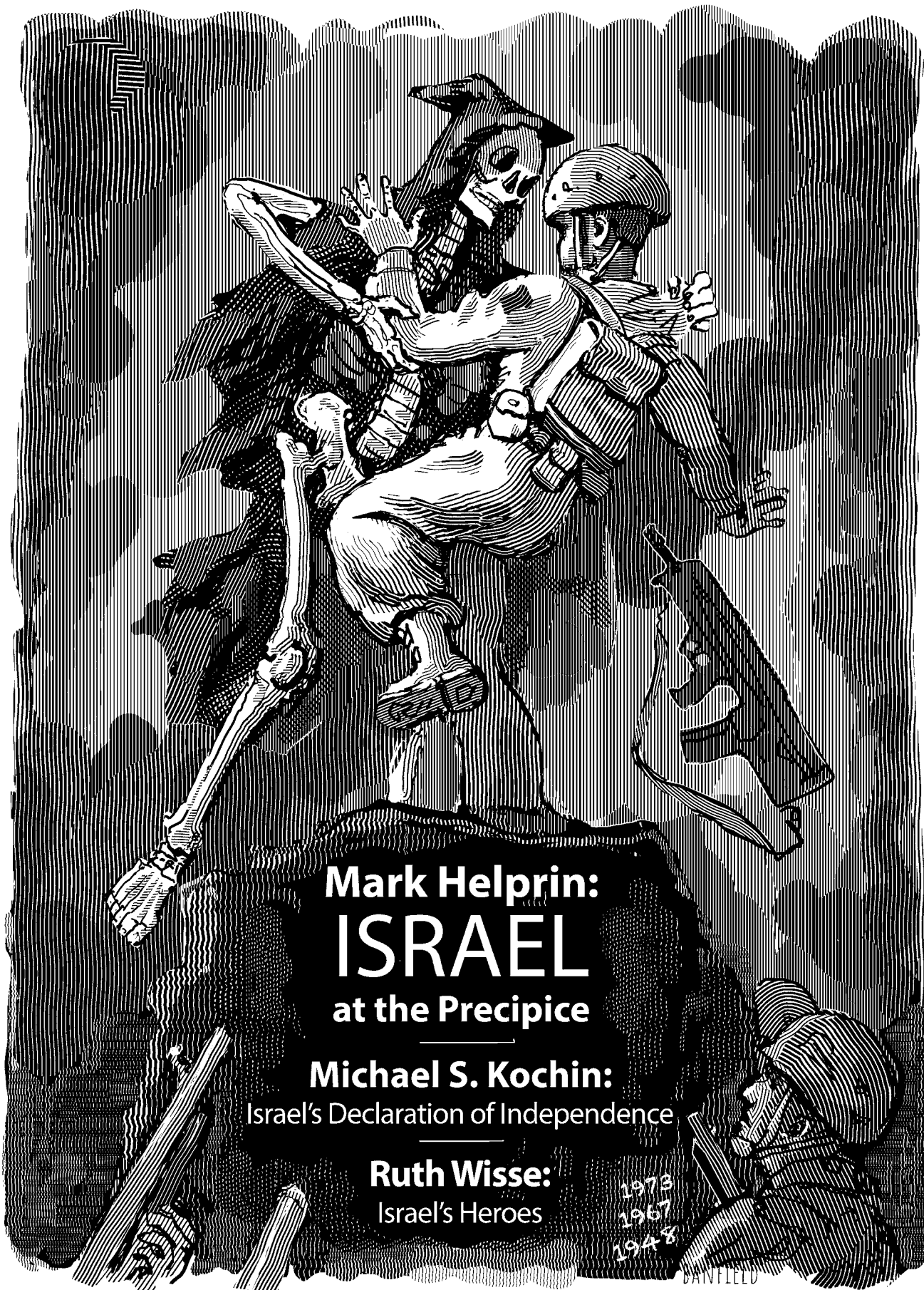
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Book Review by Allen C. Guelzo

WOODROW WILSON'S RED SCARE

American Midnight: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis, by Adam Hochschild.
Mariner Books, 432 pages, \$29.99 (cloth), \$24.99 (paper)



Above: political cartoon by Art Young published in *The Liberator* (magazine) April, 1920.

THE HEADLINES IN *THE WASHINGTON Post* practically screamed: “Red Bombs Palmer’s House; Dies Himself; Family Is Not Injured.” They were describing the explosion that had ripped apart the new Washington townhouse belonging to Attorney General Alexander Mitchell Palmer at 2132 R Street (just off Embassy Row), on the evening of June 2, 1919, a blast which shattered windows all along the block and blew off the front of the townhouse. Mercifully for Palmer, it had gone off prematurely. The bomber, Carlo Valdinoci, was a member of the Galleanist anarchist sect and was in the process of planting the bomb under Palmer’s front steps when it detonated, incontinently blasting bits of the bomber’s anatomy all across the pavement (and levitating his head, as another article reported, “entirely across the street”).

Palmer was not the only one marked for the charms of dynamite that spring. Package bombs arrived on the doorsteps of Seattle mayor Ole Hanson, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, San Francisco District Attorney Charles Fickert, former Georgia Senator Thomas William

Hardwick (whose maid had her hands blown off when she tried to open the box containing the bomb), and North Carolina Senator Lee Overman, whose bomb arrived in company with wedding presents for his daughter but was intercepted. A year later, a bomb concealed in a horse-drawn wagon would detonate on Wall Street, killing 38 people, the worst act of domestic terrorism until the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing in 1995.

ODDLY, PALMER WAS NOT THE MOST likely target for a bomb attack. A Pennsylvania Quaker and graduate of Swarthmore College, he had been elected to the House of Representatives in 1909 as a Progressive Democrat who fought against Republican protective tariffs, opposed the wartime vigilante tactics of the American Protective League, and sponsored legislation to restrict child labor and expand voting rights to American women. When he was appointed by President Woodrow Wilson to succeed Thomas Watt Gregory as attorney general in March 1919, he was hailed by Wilson’s

private secretary, Joseph Tumulty, as “young, militant, progressive and fearless.” No matter. That spring, Palmer was overseeing an indictment in western New York against the Spanish-speaking anarchist society *El Ariete* for distributing a manifesto urging its readers “to attack the State directly and assail it without hesitation or compunction”—and that was enough to pin the explosive tail on Palmer.

It was also enough to convince Palmer that he must strike back with singularly un-Quakerish vehemence by staging raids that netted almost 4,500 arrests. He focused not only on anarchists but any politically dissident organization, from the Federation of the Union of Russian Workers to the Industrial Workers of the World, in what has been ever since known as the “Red Scare” of 1919-20.

The greatest casualty of the raids, however, has turned out to be Palmer, whose reputation as a forward-looking Progressive never recovered. He has become instead a Joe McCarthy *avant le fait*, and the waves of arrests that Palmer sponsored in November 1919, and then again in January 1920, have been



condemned by Progressive-era scholars as an unjustifiable reaction to “a growing civil libertarian consciousness and a commitment to cultural modernism among progressives” or set down as the product of “a spiritual fatigue, involving a lack of moral stamina, of faith in the principles of democracy, of wisdom, and of effective leadership.” In his collection of essays *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress* (2006), Howard Zinn attributes the Palmer raids to “the lingering super-patriotic atmosphere” of World War I and its “hysteria against the foreign born.”

ADAM HOCHSCHILD’S *AMERICAN MIDNIGHT: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy’s Forgotten Crisis* is generally of the Zinn persuasion, and not only about Palmer. This is also no new ground for Hochschild, whose *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914–1918*, a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist in 2011, dealt with the treatment of anti-war dissenters in Europe. *American Midnight* is the American half of that story, recounting how America’s entrance into the First World War led to “mass imprisonments, torture, vigilante violence, censorship, killings of Black Americans, and far more,” from wartime draft

evaders to the postwar Palmer raids. Not that there is, for Hochschild, who teaches at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, anything peculiar about the hysterics: “Currents of racism, nativism, Red-baiting, and contempt for the rule of law have long flowed through American life.” What is peculiar about it, in his reading, is that this “midnight” should have descended under the aegis of a Progressive president, Woodrow Wilson.

“Love” and “affection” are not words Woodrow Wilson tends to bring to mind. C-SPAN’s 2021 presidential ratings survey placed him at 13th, ahead of William McKinley but behind James Monroe (and he had dropped from sixth place the year before). Coming after the walrus-like good humor of William Howard Taft and the brash virility of Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson appears neurasthenic, self-preoccupied, and unbearably professorial. H.L. Mencken sneered at him as “the Archangel Woodrow...a typical Puritan,” and hooted that “[m]agnanimity was simply beyond him.” He barely won re-election in 1916 on the boast, “He kept us out of war,” and then within six months called on Congress to join the Allies in defeating Imperial Germany. He baffles even Hochschild, who can only describe

him as “one of the most enigmatic of American presidents,” a “visionary internationalist” who nevertheless “presided over the greatest assault on American civil liberties in the last century and a half.”

BUT PERHAPS HOCHSCHILD SHOULD find in Wilson less bafflement than he does. Wilsonian Progressives imagined a new America emerging out of the simple Lincolnian republic of the 19th century, an America of vast industrial corporate power which required vast governmental regulation, overseen by experts who could turn the corrupt tide of selfishness into the productive path of efficiency. “The aggrandizement of corporate and individual wealth,” warned Herbert Croly in the Progressives’ textbook, *The Promise of American Life* (1909), requires “the regulation of commerce, the organization of labor, and the increasing control over property in the public interest.” Lofty as this sounded in Progressive ears, it could not conceal an element of condescension on the part of the expert class, tinged with an urge to compulsion. “The average American individual,” Croly declared, in words which must have had Lincoln struggling to rise from the dead, “is morally and intellectually inadequate to a serious and consistent conception of his responsibilities as a democrat.”

This passion for top-down control, excusing itself in the name of its good intentions, fostered an attitude of we-know-best that was hostile to any criticism. In 1906, Wilson had denounced industrialists “who sink their consciences in the corporations of which they form a part, and act as instruments rather than as men.” With equal energy, he got into a shouting match over segregation in the White House in 1914 with William Monroe Trotter, who had helped found the NAACP. You simply did not question Woodrow Wilson, any more than you would question Savonarola or Oliver Cromwell.

Hochschild begins *American Midnight* on April 2, 1917, the day Wilson appeared before Congress to ask for a declaration of war against Germany and the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the doddering Ottoman Empire). Despite the anger over the *Lusitania* sinking in 1915 and the outrageous German folly of the 1917 Zimmermann Telegram (in which German diplomats invited Mexico to join the Central Powers in exchange for U.S. territory), America’s entrance into World War I was not quite the popular crusade that the Second World War in 1941 would become. Six U.S. senators and 50 members of the House voted against the declaration, and Wilson’s

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Democrats actually lost their majorities in both houses of Congress in the next election in 1918.

Enthusiasm for the war had to be helped along by the sprightly pro-war propaganda of George M. Cohan (composer of “Over There”) and James Montgomery Flagg (the artist who created the famous “I Want You” recruiting poster), or prodded by the Espionage Act of 1917 (and its kin, the Sedition Act of 1918, which forbade “any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States”). And if they were not enough, a new Committee on Public Information, created by executive order to combat the Wilsonian version of misinformation, terrified Americans with the unlikely thought that “You are in contact with the enemy *today* just as truly as if you faced him across No Man’s Land.”

PROGRESSIVE IMPATIENCE WITH DISSENT took odd forms. The playwright Eugene O’Neill was arrested at gunpoint for using a “black box” (actually his typewriter) to send secret messages to German agents off Cape Cod. In rural Illinois German farmers were warned, “Southern Illinois doesn’t laugh when one says German spy. Instead Southern Illinois gets out tar and feathers, and her vigilance societies begin parading the town.” But the Wilson Administration was even harder on dissidents to the left of Progressivism: the International Workers of the World labor union was destroyed; anarchist Emma Goldman was deported to Russia; four-time Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene Debs went to jail for questioning the draft, and stayed there until he was pardoned by Republican President Warren G. Harding in 1921, who added, “Debs was right. We shouldn’t have been in that war.” It remained for Calvin Coolidge, an even more conservative Republican, to pardon the last of Wilson’s dissenters in June 1924, four months after Wilson’s death.

Hochschild declares a vivid distaste for the Wilson Administration’s cavalier brush-away of civil liberties, and rightly so. To anyone living a hundred years after the Great War, which would make the world safe for democracy, nothing can seem more utterly paranoid than saving democracy by raiding the offices of anarchists or torturing conscientious objectors, since neither anarchists nor conscientious objectors rose up in any way we can notice today to change the world or democracy. But there are two caveats that need to be entered.

The first is about contingency. To anyone living *then*, without the use of a crystal ball, Debs, Goldman, and the anarchists really did look ominous, and Hochschild fails to take this context with enough seriousness. In 1919, not only had Tsarist Russia fallen into the bleeding nightmare of the Bolsheviks, but Bavaria and Saxony in the old German Empire lapsed into the hands of Marxist revolutionaries, Béla Kun set up a Communist regime in Hungary, and even tiny Luxembourg was convulsed in a Communist uprising. In the United States, the general economic dislocation that attended the close of the war triggered a massive wave of strikes and other labor actions that saw as many as 4 million American workers—one out of every five—on strike, and not unwilling to use the dreaded word “soviet” to describe their organization. And after waves of bomb attacks like the Palmer attempt, anyone who was *not* alarmed was probably not awake.

NOR IS IT THE CASE THAT THE VICTIMS of Wilson’s hostility were as innocent as an April morn. Hochschild is scandalized by the arrest of Boston Symphony Orchestra conductor Karl Muck during a rehearsal of (without any trace of humor) the *St. Matthew Passion*. Muck spent the rest of the war “in an internment camp at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, surrounded by searchlights and barbed wire.” But Hochschild’s only source on Muck is a 1970 article in the popular magazine *High Fidelity*, when in fact Muck referred to his American audiences as “crowds of dogs and swine” and hoped eagerly that “[o]ur gracious Kaiser will smile on my request and re-call me to Berlin.” That did nothing to excuse the folly of fever-browed Bostonians who bayed for Muck’s lynching or demanded that the fabled Austrian violinist Fritz Kreisler be banned from performing at Symphony Hall. But in Muck’s case, they were not acting without provocation, either. The mercy is that the American people do not stay paranoid for long: when Kreisler resumed recitals in October 1919, as *The Boston Globe* recounted, “he received an ovation from an audience which jammed every foot of space in the theatre.”

It is one of the abiding frustrations of democratic life that democracies worry too much *and* too little. They are forever wailing about crisis, and then failing to recognize genuine crisis when it arrives. “Democracies are not good at recognizing crisis situations,” David Runciman observes in *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from*

World War I to the Present (2014), because “all the surface noise of democratic politics makes them insensitive to genuine turning points.” Democracies tend to wait until a situation gets completely out of hand, and only then gather their full strength for a solution. They then proceed to overdo the reaction, after which they repent in sackcloth and ashes, fingering not themselves, but their political opponents as the guilty party.

WHICH IS WHAT BRINGS US TO THE second, more ironic, caveat. Hochschild believes that the forces of Wilson-like repression can only be met today by “a more equitable distribution of wealth,” by “a mass media far less craven toward those in power,” and “a vigilant respect for civil rights and constitutional safeguards.” What *American Midnight* does not explain, however, is why those were precisely the values violated by Wilson and the Progressives in every practical detail, even while they promised to promote them.

Wilson imagined that “a more equitable distribution” would come from taxing incomes, which it has not; that the “mass media” needed to develop independence, when it was the Wilson Administration that used postal regulations to ban dissident periodicals and newspapers; and that his Justice Department was being “vigilant” for “civil rights” while employing civilian snoops who could have provided spring training for the Stasi. And it would be an interesting exercise for Hochschild to reflect, first, on whether Wilson’s civil liberties violations were not actually a deviation from Progressivism but in reality its endgame, and second, on why recent Progressive campaigns to Make the World Safe seem to be doing much the same thing as Wilson did, all over again.

The largest lessons of *American Midnight*, however, are for us all: that the totalitarian temptation knows no party boundaries, that emergency swiftly becomes the excuse for surveillance and conformity, and that—as Wilson’s sharpest critic, Randolph Bourne, warned in 1918—“war is the health of the state.” From that iron rule, there is no such thing as political immunity.

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