

[Bonus] AFD Ep 353 Links and Notes - The American Protective League feat. housetrotter [Bill/Rachel]

- On past episodes we've talked about Chicago business tycoons sponsoring and supplying police as well as funding labor infiltration by private agencies. On this week's bonus episode we're talking about the Chicago business community's perhaps darkest formation: The American Protective League – an extralegal volunteer private force of hundreds of thousands of narcs and snitches during World War I, funded by private capital. And the big twist [compared to the Pinkertons of the previous era](#) was that the League's unpaid membership wasn't a bunch of low-lives in search of paid work but instead was entirely unpaid and primarily white-collar workers/executives and small businessmen, and directly affiliated to the US Department of Justice under Attorney General Thomas Watt Gregory and working in conjunction with the Bureau of Investigation (which was relatively new and still extremely small in number).
- Two books Bill got from the library
 - **“The League: The True Story of Average Americans on the Hunt for WWI Spies” by Bill Mills (2013, Skyhorse Publishing)** - NOTE: This is a hobbyist history, not necessarily super rigorous, and sort of written in a very dramatized popular history style, but includes a lot of primary source materials.
 - Mills is probably overly generous in assuming good or pure intentions among League members, but he criticizes the government's illegal and unconstitutional use of them to conduct warrantless searches and crush anti-war dissent. He also emphasizes that the German Embassy to the neutral US and the German Navy had spent the first three years of the war organizing and funding sabotage of US military industrial production and bombing US war materiel shipping. (But he also notes repeatedly that the German sabotage campaign evaporated almost instantly when the US actually entered the war, so the ostensible reason for forming the APL should have gone away and instead it pivoted.)
 - Mills also contends that this was merely a patriotic endeavor and that the non-governmental leadership of the APL was uniformly against peacetime domestic volunteer spying and believed most of their members would rapidly lose interest anyway immediately after the Armistice.
 - **The APL was founded by an advertising vice president (and future magnate) Albert M. (A.M.) Briggs, a veteran of the Spanish-American War in Cuba**, who approached the US DOJ Chicago offices to pitch the idea in February 1917, before the US had entered World War I but after the end of diplomatic relations over the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. (Germany was attempting political and materiel sabotage of private US assistance to the Allied powers.) The DOJ office was surprised by the offer but realized this was a potential source not only of extra eyes and manpower, but also off-budget resources for basics like automobiles for special agents. Briggs rapidly organized groups of wealthy businessmen to donate dozens of cars to government offices around the nation. Briggs then traveled to DC to argue that advertising market research techniques could be used for intelligence gathering. Just before war was officially declared in April, he was given full approval to begin his project of “confidentially” organizing divisions all over the country (especially in communities with large German immigrant populations), he began circulating letters, placing long-distance calls, and traveling in person to recruit men of similar social and economic positions to himself to set up local divisions that would work with the DOJ.

- **Within two months of launching the project, Briggs had established 400 local divisions with 80,000 members. A few months later, there were 900 divisions with 112,000 members.** It was generally appealing to men who were either too old to serve or draft-exempt under family breadwinner provisions. Recruitment was sort of a pyramid scheme, where senior men recruited more junior men they knew, who in turn recruited more men, which is what allowed it to grow so quickly. There were almost no “walk-in” members who weren’t recruited by someone higher up. 80% of prospective candidates were rejected for recruitment after being vetted or interviewed. (Sometimes just because they couldn’t commit the unpaid time required.) Very few women were admitted, despite their clear potential as spies and investigators, because they would probably need to be recruited on the basis of being the wife of an existing member and this could create drama, especially if other wives were rejected.
- Briggs recruited Captain T.B. Crockett, who as an Army Lieutenant had done field work in **counterinsurgency espionage in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War.** Crockett helped determine a paramilitary “platoon” and commander structure for the organization. A number of other retired military intelligence specialists also held key roles. (This book doesn’t ever really circle back to the implications of this point, but the other book seems to suggest that a lot of the military intelligence guys, active-duty or retired, linked to the APL were veterans of the counterinsurgency in the Philippines and that they pushed to be able to use the APL’s civilian investigators as plain-clothes helpers to the always-uniformed military intelligence personnel. Eventually, the military would opt, somewhat informally, to recruit their own civilians.)
- **Another key figure in the APL was Briggs’ friend Charles Frey, a fellow Chicago advertising executive. The two of them, plus Frey’s attorney (Victor Elting), would serve as basically the three full-time unpaid staffers of the APL.** Frey drafted guidelines for how local divisions should organize themselves after formation. Much of the plan focused on slotting the white-collar volunteers into investigative assignments related to their own occupations, such as real estate, finance, insurance, engineering, accounting, medical records, hotels, restaurants, entertainment, transportation, public utilities, general merchandise, and so on. This was at least true on paper but obviously more chaotic in practice, especially due to the secrecy around the structures and membership, attempting to keep members from knowing too many other members beyond their cell of activity. There were also volunteers assigned to various support functions like legal and administrative advice or motor services. The organization’s books would be externally audited by PWC. Frey was also made a captain in the US Army so he could serve as APL liaison to military intelligence at the War Department. (Frey’s brother was killed in action in Europe near the end of the war.)
- **Intelligence Division Chiefs of the Chicago APL (the unofficial national HQ branch until the leadership relocated to Washington DC) included the President of First National Bank, the President of Chicago & North Western Railway, the President of the Chicago Telephone Company, the President of Montgomery Ward, etc**

- When they needed to raise money to relocate the HQ to DC, the Chicago Division convened a secret meeting of nearly 7,000 Chicago businessmen (who were APL members), at a Masonic temple convention hall, and raised \$82,000 on the spot.
- As a point of contrast, the Detroit division included both manufacturing executives and factory floor workers in order to protect plant operations from sabotage since so much war production was in Detroit. Henry Ford and his company were unsurprisingly enthusiastic about the APL. (This book, unlike the other book, doesn't comment on the obvious usage of the APL within midwestern factories to detect & disrupt unionization drives.) It seems likely that lower-level workers and blue-collar members were typically backed by their employers in APL participation. One reason membership would skew toward white-collar employees, especially executives, was because they had more flexibility than wage workers to set their own hours of availability for APL missions.
- An anecdote demonstrating APL methods: A traveling salesman overheard two children talking, one of whom mentioned a German spy living in his apartment. He reported this to the DOJ, which assigned Chicago APL agents to canvass the building under the pretext of updating the City Directory. A cooperative landlady identified a German tenant and provided access to the apartment while no one was home. The APL agents searched a steamer trunk and found a German pistol, ammunition, and engineering drawings of the Chicago Municipal Pier and a Federal Building. The APL then put back everything allegedly as they had found it (hmm), got more information about his occupation (draftsman at the Federal Building) from the landlady. The next day before sunrise, US Bureau of Investigation agents arrested the tenant, identified him as an employee of the German government, and sent him to Leavenworth.
- Another anecdote involves a 16-year-old shop clerk in New York realizing that a German customer was attempting to bribe him for a cash-only purchase of an unusual wireless transmitter part and calling it in to a secret APL hotline, which had BOI special agents on scene in 10 minutes to search the man's apartment and then arrest him.
- APL agents infiltrated IWW meetings and rallies to write down every speech for possible anti-war content violations and to obtain evidence of IWW promotion of sabotage. Thomas Russel Gowenlock, another young Chicago advertising man, led Chicago Police raids into packed IWW meetings of hundreds of Wobblies to arrest speakers mid-speech if they said anything that could be considered seditious or treasonous. In cases where they felt unable to make a clean arrest, they would call in hundreds of Chicago riot police preemptively to storm the meetings. 165 IWW leaders in Chicago alone were arrested and tried under the Espionage Act, often relying on APL investigations. Volunteer lawyer APL members also directly assisted the prosecution with case work. (The DOJ was also very worried about disruption of raw material supply chains in the mountain west by purported would-be IWW saboteurs.)
 - The famous arrest and charging of Eugene V. Debs for violations of the Espionage and Sedition acts was based on a similar infiltration by APL operatives of the Ohio Socialist state convention in June 16 in Canton Ohio, which had 261 APL members headed by Elton W. Partridge who was ... a newspaper ad executive.

They had even managed to get an APL stenographer onto the stage with Debs to take down his entire speech. He was arrested on June 30 in Cleveland.

- The APL was deeply involved in heavy-handed raids and arrests of alleged “slackers” (the WWI term for draft dodgers) or anyone not carrying their draft cards at all times. (More on that in the notes below.) Even distribution of anti-conscription literature was illegal. There were an estimated 308,000 draft dodgers during WWI and typically they were transient working-age men who simply kept moving from town to town to avoid detection or capture. But this made the lodging houses APL targets for door-to-door surprise raids. APL Slacker Raids ramped up after Bolshevik Russia quit the war and the manpower needs on the Western Front rose sharply. These raids expanded to unannounced card searches of every man at ballparks, movie theaters, beaches, night clubs, train stations, etc. Public sentiment was almost uniformly in favor, until the New York raids of September 1918 (see below) got a bit out of hand and too many men who weren’t carrying cards got caught in dragnets and detained for sometimes days until they could prove their legitimate status and be released. Furious Senators and Congressmen predictably denounced the heavy-handed slacker raids as being like something from Russia or reminiscent of Prussian militarism, rather than acknowledging it as a homegrown problem. Nevertheless, President Wilson did not publicly oppose the raids, even while expressing private concerns, and the media backed down. Later, the state of Washington conducted an entire statewide raid over a three day period. At this point the war was almost over anyway, it would turn out. Nationally over the whole conscription period, 20-25k “slackers” were caught by the APL. (Side note! They also investigated and apprehended deserters from other Allied armed forces!)
- APL investigators typically used low-tech investigative methods, involving studying public and private records, tailing people, or conducting interviews under false pretenses like the example of updating a City Directory or posing as a journalist. But they were also provided with state-of-the-art spy technology for photographing documents or personnel effects during warrantless searches or even for recording conversations. They were officially advised against wiretapping, but instead formed relationships with the telephone companies to feed overheard information from operators to the DOJ. (Similar arrangement for written telegrams.) The Post Office was also instructed to cooperate with APL members to turn over information on suspect mail.
- The APL was also deployed in some cities at night to apprehend bootleggers and other criminal elements, especially if they were linked to military men trying to get booze etc. And working with the War Department, they monitored military personnel for various criminal activity off-base, such as “bribery, theft, embezzlement, and fraudulent requests for furloughs.” They also helped the War Department conduct background checks on men applying to be officers or men applying to serve overseas in non-governmental organizations like the Red Cross. And the APL monitored all manner of fuel, power, and food rationing.
- One of the APL’s more public efforts was soliciting nationwide donations of private photographs or drawings anyone had at home or in newspaper archives of “bridges, buildings, towns, and localities occupied by German

forces in France, Belgium, Luxembourg” & future potential occupation targets in Germany. These were requested for Army Intelligence and resulted in about 50,000 illustrative materials, often from immigrants from those areas or from American tourists who had visited those cities and towns.

- Another public APL effort included putting up large posters advertising a tipline for suspected disloyalty after the passage of the Sedition Act. This was relatively unusual for mentioning the American Protective League by name in a public-facing campaign. These ads were sort of like the forerunners to the post-9/11 “See Something Say Something” posters. At this point, the APL was turning the entire population into full-time snitches, who were supposed to report on everyone around them for casual conversational criticisms of the president or praise for Germany. People could be sentenced to a chain gang for toasting the Kaiser. Writing a letter to the editor in German opposing Liberty Bonds on the basis that they could fund munitions deployed against German civilians if the tide of the war turned led to a 10 year prison sentence. A German objector urging his friends not to take up arms against their homeland committed suicide after being reprimanded by the APL. A baker was sentenced to 10 years in prison for saying the US shouldn’t have entered the war if it needed to raise money to do so and that US troops would run away from battle anyway.
- After the war, there was a raucous debate among members of the Chicago Division of the APL on whether or not to dissolve as instructed or to keep going and pivot explicitly toward anti-socialist activities in Chicago. They ultimately voted to disband but also voted to destroy all their investigation records, rather than turn them over to the federal government as expected, because they feared retribution from trade-unionists if they ever got their hands on the documents through public records requests.
- There were ~250,000-300,000 members nationally at the war’s end. The APL conducted over 99,000 investigations on behalf of the DOJ, spending about \$7k/month donated by members & business community supporters. In Chicago alone, the DOJ estimated that 75% of government investigations during the war were conducted by the APL. In the New York City region, it was about half, although they had a much smaller membership count.
- **“The Price of Vigilance” by Joan M. Jensen (1968, Rand McNally & Co) –** This book was written in the context of the upheavals of 1968 and mounting dissent about the Vietnam War. She presents a much more critical view of the APL than Mills and provides far more examples of unseemly behavior and internal scandals, even above and beyond the obvious immoral and unconstitutional suppressions of civil liberties. There’s a whole chapter we won’t get into about their clashes with actual federal and local law enforcement professionals who weren’t just doing amateur vigilante things in their free time.
 - Jensen argues that one legacy of the American Protective League’s promotion of paranoia and censorship was a huge public backlash after the war ended, when it was finally safe again to criticize the government, the administration, and the war – that it was undertaken under false pretenses to benefit bankers and industrialists, etc. This backlash in turn led to the very deep isolationist sentiments that would later prove so

controversial as World War II arrived. Without understanding the level of totalizing illiberalism by the government and its APL henchmen, where it was literally illegal to criticize the purpose or even conduct of the war, under severe penalty and with spies everywhere, it is difficult to understand why so many voters and politicians were so adamantly opposed to US entry into war again.

- On the other hand, Jensen notes that very little was actually known about the APL during or shortly after the war because the government refused to declassify files on domestic wartime activities until the 1950s, by which point there was less interest and it had faded from memory somewhat.
- J. Edgar Hoover made a huge effort for years to totally distance the Bureau of Investigation and the Dept of Justice from the American Protective League, even though that was a complete lie.
- Jensen also makes a critical observation about the genesis of the American Protective League, which isn't noted in the other book: The Bureau of Investigation Superintendent in Chicago who heard the proposal from A.M. Briggs and obtained the necessary local and federal permissions to approve the League's formation was Hinton D. Claubaugh of Alabama ... and Jensen argues that he almost certainly endorsed the proposal based on his familiarity with local citizen groups "cooperating" closely with law enforcement in the American South, if you know what we mean
- There was also already some pre-war work in Chicago around the Bureau of Investigation's federal mandate to stop sex trafficking, where they had relied on informants in the hotel industry
- The APL would go on to serve a role in many communities, especially outside of the big cities, that was somewhere between Pinkertons and the Klan. Perhaps also true even in the industrial cities as well, once Black workers began flocking to the new defense industry jobs and racial tensions mounted. Not to mention APL involvement in unrest between Black soldiers and white civilians.
- The Wilson Administration's Democratic bills with serious prison time for its critics and opponents of the war prompted a Republican response ... which was to call for widespread civilian use of military tribunals and executions. The general mass hysteria being whipped up and the silencing of dissent left very little domestic political support by the 1918 midterms for a moderate peace or any of the future Versailles efforts Wilson had hoped to promote, contributing greatly to those failures.
- Whenever presented with an opportunity publicly to distance himself from the APL or curb its activities, Wilson seemed to tacitly endorse their actions, although privately he and some cabinet members kept expressing concerns or at least raising questions
- For the sake of time we will skip past the chapters in the Jensen book on what happened after the League's official dissolution in early 1919. Suffice it to say that many members went back to their lives and businesses and were happy to do so, while others remained eager to partner with law enforcement or military intelligence for anti-radicalism after the war, and others unsurprisingly filtered over to the resurgent Klan.
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Protective_League

- *"I have today several hundred thousand private citizens... assisting the heavily overworked Federal authorities in keeping an eye on disloyal individuals and making reports of disloyal utterances."*
- *In the most extraordinary cooperative action, thousands of APL members joined authorities in **New York City** for three days of checking registration cards. This resulted in more than 75,000 arrests, though fewer than 400 of those arrested were shown to be guilty of anything more than failing to carry their cards.*^[13]
- Woodrow Wilson, seeming not to grasp the Attorney General's involvement, wrote to him, *"It would be dangerous to have such an organization operating in the United States, and I wonder if there is any way in which we could stop it?"*
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Watt_Gregory
- A. Mitchell Palmer, while certainly no friend to the left (see: Palmer Raids), shut down the APL organization (for the most part) almost as soon as he replaced Gregory as AG [NOTE: The Mills book quotes a document saying that it was ordered shut down in December 1918 effective February 1919, before Palmer became AG. Mills also notes that Palmer made use of the APL's clerical investigators in his previous position tracking down false sales of companies in the US owned by entities or people in the Central Powers who were disguising their ownership during the war. Jensen says much the same.]
- <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-american-protective-league-and-white-house-security-during-world-war-one>
 - The APL wasn't just focused on socialists, anarchists, labor, draft-dodgers, and pacifists, but also on German-Americans
 - *While the Department of Justice approved of the investigative efforts of the APL, members of the force were not authorized by the federal government to carry weapons or make arrests. However, local police departments also lacked manpower, and so tacitly encouraged the APL to identify and even arrest suspicious individuals. **By the fall of 1917, the League had enlisted an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 members in over 600 cities in the United States, including major cities like Chicago, New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C.***
 - It was also hoped that the private APL force could replace a bunch of work that the US Secret Service had been performing, thereby freeing it up to protect President Wilson and his family as the US entered World War I
 - *Leaguers kept watch on hotels, restaurants, railroad stations, industrial plants, telegraph and telephone lines, steel mills, and the chemical trade.*
 - Media reports tended to blur the extra-governmental nature of the organization and even some federal government officials found themselves a bit confused as to what authority the organization had or whether the government was supposed to work with it (as local governments clearly quickly did)
- <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/10/07/spies-among-us-wwi-apl>
 - Unlike numerous private vigilante wartime groups, the APL was at least backed by the US Attorney General, even if it was also private
 - APL "agents" wore badges the organization had issued that said "Secret Service" further confusing the public (The Jensen book has a whole section on the badges dispute and alleges that there were widespread abuses of the badges.)
 - In yet another example of how reactionary and wrong the New York Times has always been, here is a quote from their book review of a 1919 propaganda book called "The Web: A Revelation of Patriotism" about the American Protective League, "There are many reasons why every man and woman in the whole

country ought to know the full story of the A.P.L.'s work. For if they are good Americans already it will make them still better ones, will stimulate their pride and loyalty. If they are not good Americans it will put the fear of God in their hearts.” [Note from Mills: The book was largely intended to raise money quickly to pay down outstanding APL debts before it closed out its operations.] Also ironic is that the NY Times had condemned the Sept 1918 slacker raids.

- Related previous episode: Our recent guest episode with Everett from Age of Napoleon on Attorney General Charles Joseph Bonaparte and the creation of the Bureau of Investigation - <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2021/01/13/unlocked-jan-13-2021-charles-joseph-bonaparte-feat-age-of-napoleon-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-341/>
- Also over a year ago we talked about the Green Corn Rebellion in Oklahoma, which was another anti-draft movement during WWI, which is mentioned in the Jensen book. <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2019/12/09/lend-lease-15-oklahoma-and-oregon-resist-the-great-war-dec-8-2019/>
- Our 2020 episode on the failure of the Treaty of Versailles in the US Senate: <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2020/08/10/aug-9-2020-1920-look-back-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-320/>