

## Background to the Red Scare

In April 1917, American President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the United States had to join Great Britain, France, and Russia in their war against the Central Powers (Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire) in order to “make the world safe for democracy.” Wilson wanted to use the power of the United States to change the world into a place that looked and acted more like America. Change is complicated, however, and the same year that the United States entered World War I (which had been going on in Europe since 1914), the people of Russia rose up and revolted against their king (or Czar/Tsar), Nicolas II.

The Russian people had suffered terrible hardships during the war, and many of them were increasingly attracted to a small group of revolutionaries called the *Bolsheviks*, led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The Bolsheviks, better known as the communists or “reds” (after the color of the communist flag), promised to give up the war against Germany. The Bolsheviks kept their promise, and this helped them gain the support of many Russians who were sick of the war. The Bolsheviks eventually gained complete control of Russia and began to transform it into a communist state called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union, or U.S.S.R.). Despite the wishes of leaders like President Wilson, Russia (the U.S.S.R.) was now becoming even less like America than it had been before.



Woodrow Wilson, U.S. President (1913-1921)



Vladimir Lenin, Communist revolutionary leader of the Bolshevik party and first Premier of the Soviet Union

## The Post World War 1 Labor Struggle



Workingmen on strike, Brooklyn, 1918

Although the United States, along with France and Britain, won the First World War in 1918 by defeating the Central Powers (Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire), peace did not come to America immediately. Instead, in 1919 and 1920, the U.S. was shaken by a series of big labor strikes. The vast

majority of American workers who went on strike in 1919 and 1920 did so to try and protect their jobs and the good wages they had earned during the war. Most were *not* on strike to provoke a revolution. Some Americans who opposed the strikes, however, claimed that the workers were **radicals**, communist revo-

lutionaries whose real aim in striking was to destroy the American government and create a communist state like the one in the U.S.S.R. These accusations of communist-inspired labor agitation were accompanied by growing fears of terrorism.



## Bombs Lead to Fears of an Uprising

In the summer of 1919, a number of bombs were sent through the mail (no one really knows by whom) to influential Americans like J. P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller. A wave of fear swept across the country. Many Americans became convinced that both the strikes and the terrorist acts were caused by communists in America, under orders from the Soviet leaders Lenin and Trotsky. Although we can look back now and be certain there was very little chance that a communist revolution would occur in America, many people at that time believed the nation was dangerously on the edge of social and political **disintegration**.



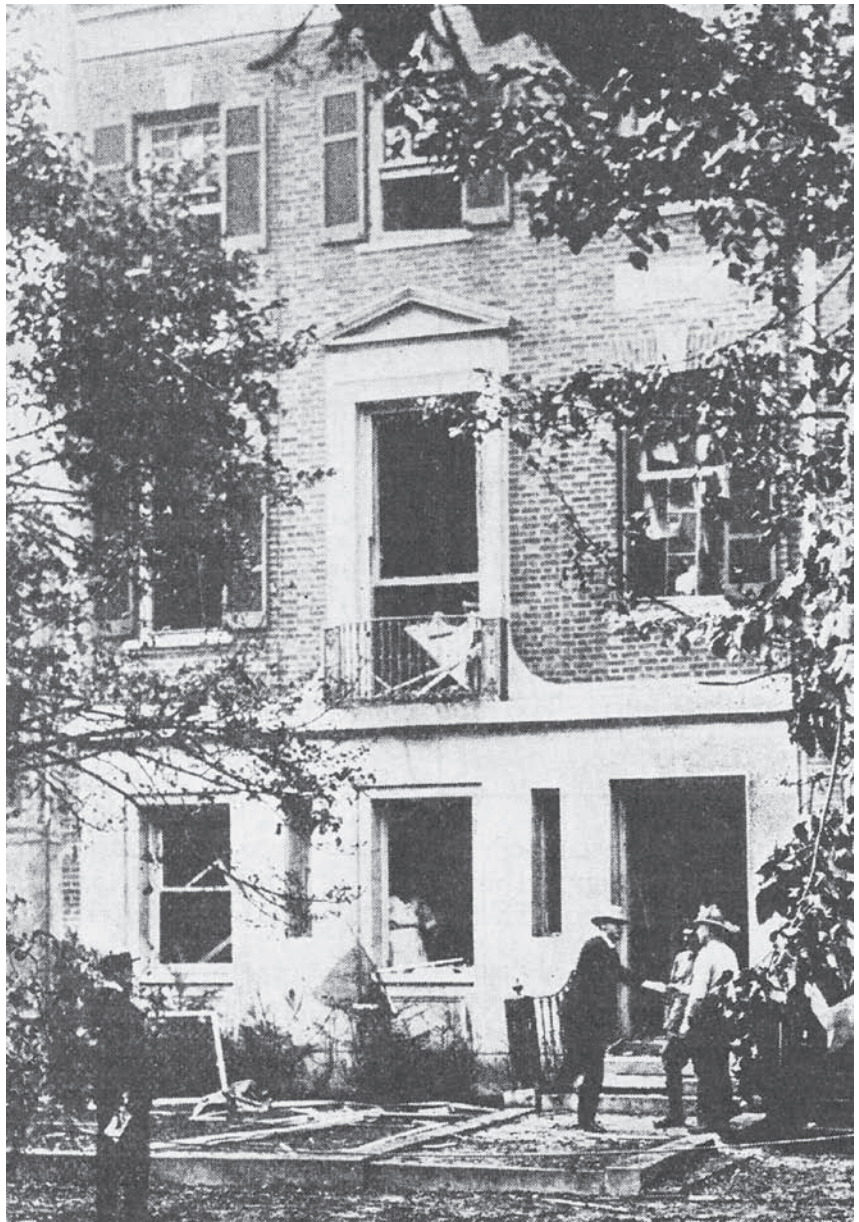
John Pierpont Morgan, was an American banker and one of the richest men in America at the turn of the twentieth century.



John Davison Rockefeller, was an American industrialist, founder of Standard Oil, and, for a time, the richest man in the world.

## The Sedition Act

After a bomb blew up in front of U.S. **Attorney General** A. Mitchell Palmer's home in Washington D.C., he used laws that had been passed during the war to launch a campaign against those people he suspected of being **subversives**. One of these laws, The **Sedition** Act (1918), made it a federal crime to criticize the government or Constitution of the United States.



Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's house after a bomb blew up in front of it on June 14, 1919.

### Section 3 of the Sedition Act

Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall **willfully** make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States, or to promote the success of its enemies . . . or **incite insubordination**, disloyalty, **mutiny**, or refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully **obstruct** . . . the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States, or . . . shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States, or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States . . . or shall willfully display the flag of any foreign enemy, or shall willfully . . . urge, incite, or advocate any **curtailment** of production . . . or advocate, teach, defend, or suggest the doing of any of the acts or things in this section **enumerated** and whoever shall by word or act support or favor the cause of any country with which the United States is at war or by word or act oppose the cause of the United States therein, shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both.



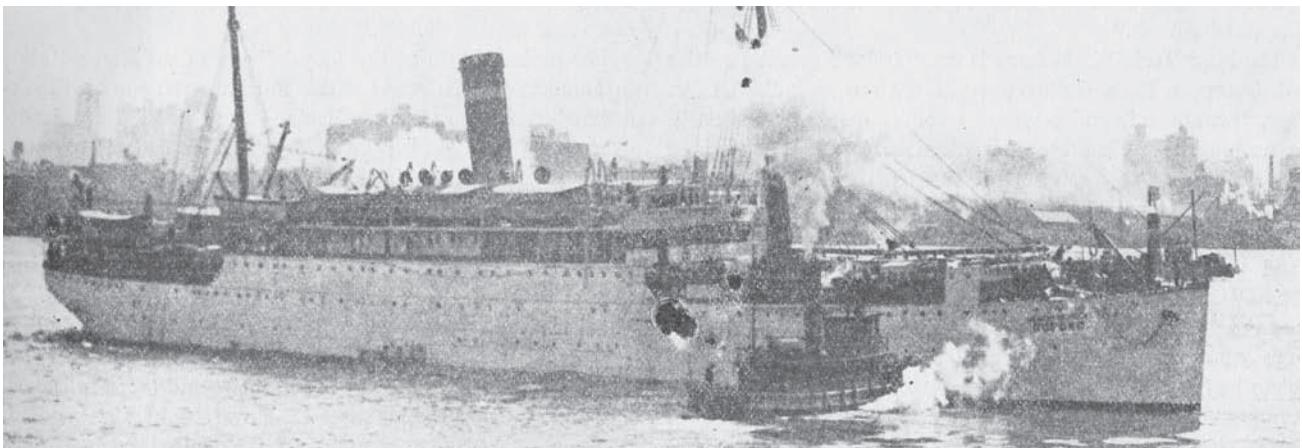
## The Palmer (and Hoover) Raids

Although it certainly seems to have been unconstitutional, many people supported Attorney General Palmer's use of the Sedition Act in his campaign to arrest suspected subversives. Palmer targeted labor leaders and outspoken radical intellectuals. His officials, under the direction of Palmer's special assistant, J. Edgar Hoover (who would later lead the FBI for many years), conducted raids on **anarchist** organizations, schools, and other gathering places in over thirty cities nationwide. Thousands of people were arrested and jailed. Most were recent immigrants to the United States. Almost 250 were deported back to the Soviet Union, including the outspoken anarchist and feminist activist, Emma Goldman.

The Sedition Act empowered Attorney General Palmer to round up people, not for things they had done, but for expressing their thoughts and beliefs. They were arrested because they spoke or wrote words that the government claimed were dangerous. But doesn't this conflict with the right to free speech protected by the First Amendment?



Anarchist Emma Goldman



"The Soviet Ark"—a United States army transport carrying 249 "undesirables" who were being deported to Russia. Most had been seized in the Palmer raids and belonged to an anarchist or labor organization.

## Resource E

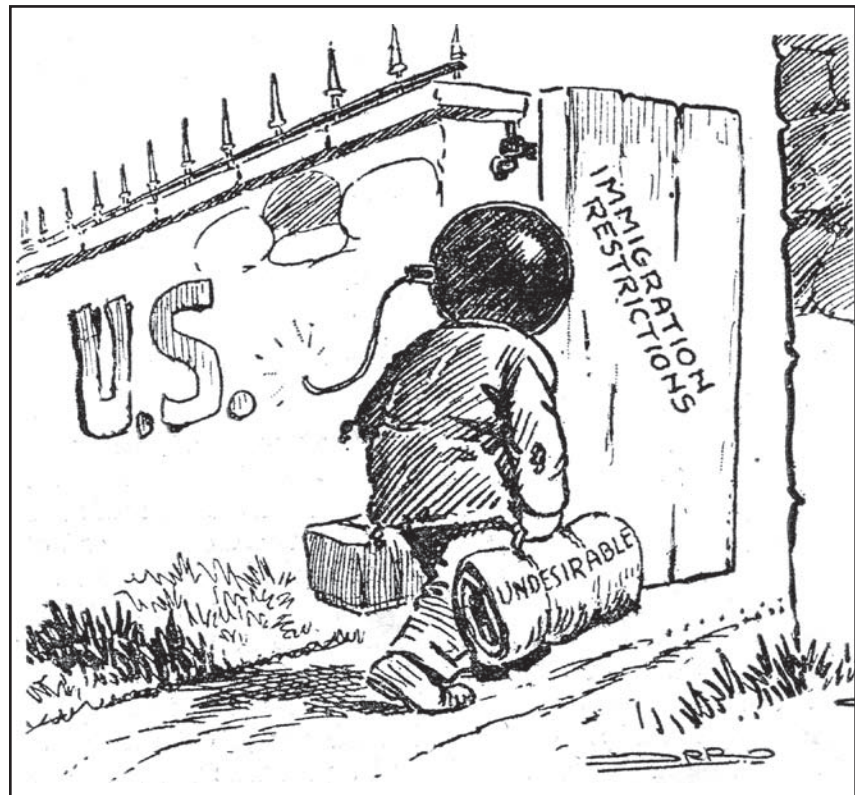
## The End of the Paranoia & Lasting Impact

By the summer of 1920, the public gradually lost interest in Palmer and his campaign against subversives, in part because he predicted a series of terrorist attacks that failed to occur. The **paranoia** that had gripped America for over a year passed and Palmer was increasingly criticized for conducting searches without warrants and for denying detainees legal representation (he didn't let them have lawyers, even though the Constitution promises a lawyer to anyone accused

of a crime). When a bomb went off on Wall Street in New York City in September 1920, most Americans probably considered it the act of a crazy person rather than part of a communist plot against America. Palmer, once considered a possible presidential candidate, was largely forgotten.

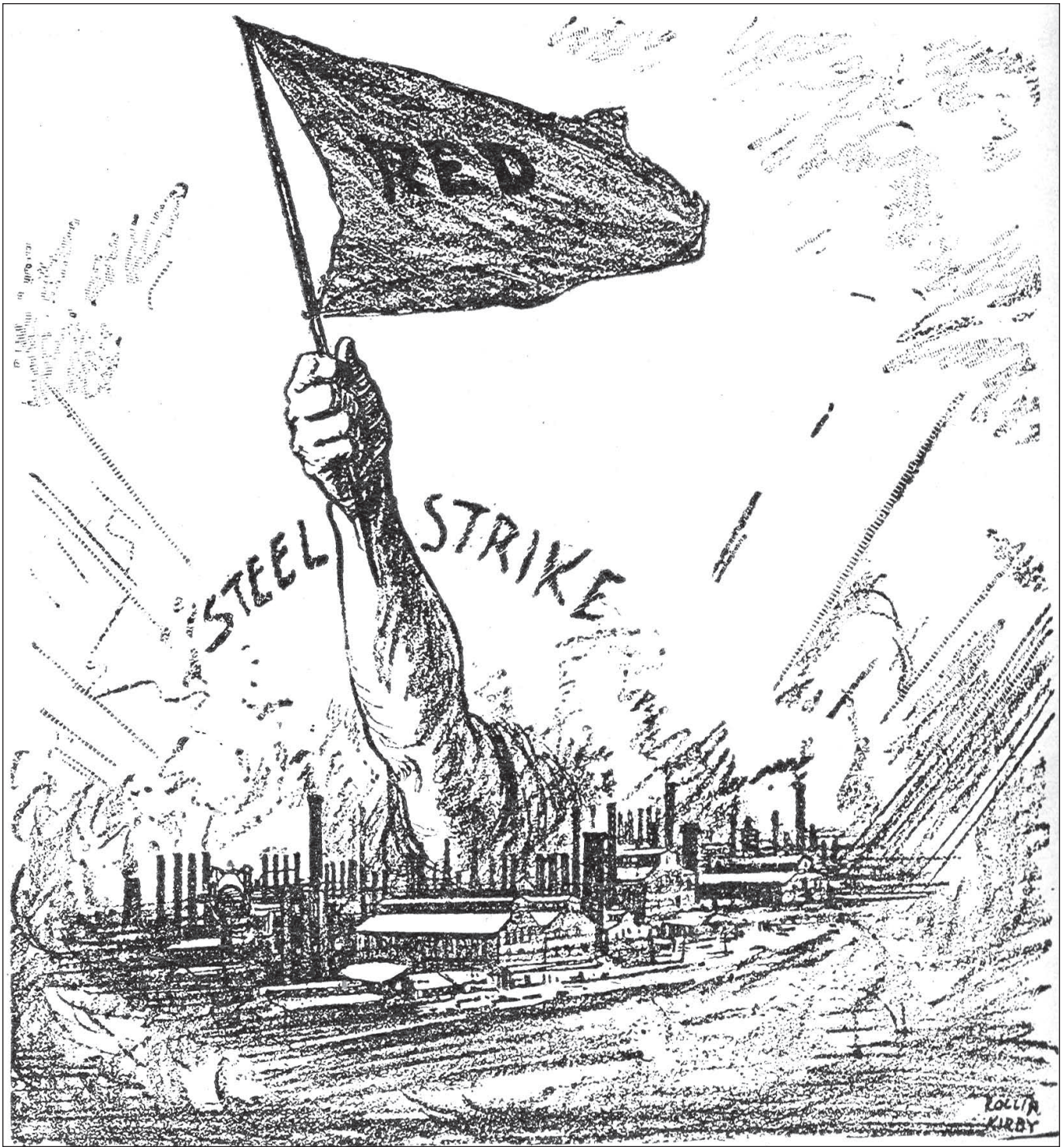
The Palmer Raids and the Red Scare paranoia did, however, frustrate the labor movement's attempt to increase its influence in the United States. The Red Scare also helped convince

many Americans to support a dramatic change in the nation's immigration policy. Until the early 1920s, the United States had very few laws that stopped immigrants from coming here (racist regulations that restricted the entry of Asians, especially Chinese, were the great exception). In 1924, however, America became a "gatekeeping" nation for the first time, closing its doors to most Central and Eastern European immigration.



Orr, "Close the Gate"

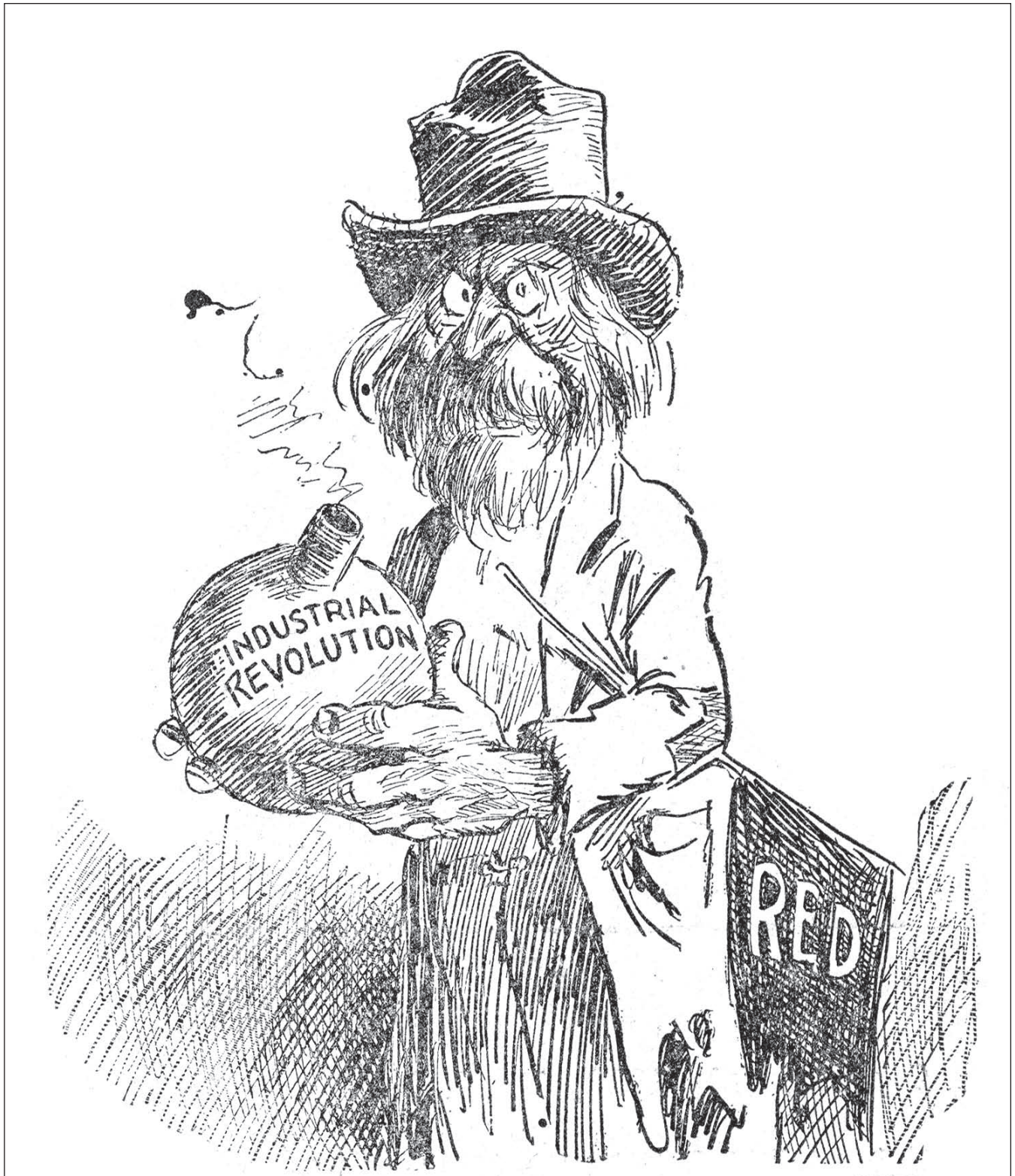




Kirby, "Coming Out Of the Smoke" (*New York World*). Reproduced from *The Literary Digest* (10 October 1919), p. 13.

## Resource G

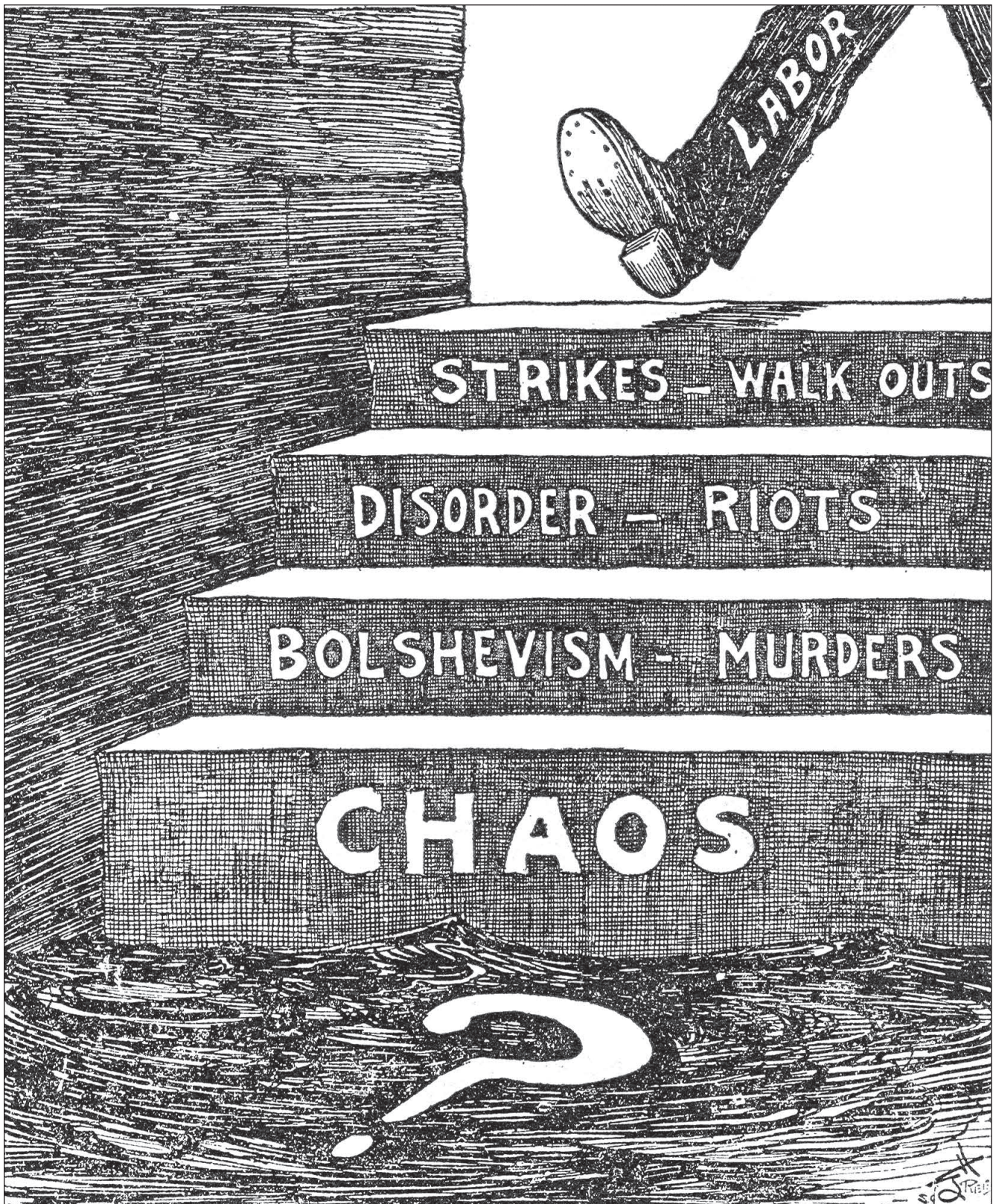




Morris, "Curses, It Won't Explode In America" (George Matthew Adams Service). Reproduced from *The Literary Digest* (18 October 1919), p.13.

## Resource H





Greene, "Step by Step" (*New York Evening Telegram*). Reproduced from *The Literary Digest* (1 November 1919), p.12.

## Resource I





Orr, "Close the Gate" (*Chicago Tribune*). Reproduced from *The Literary Digest* (5 July 1919), p. 29.

## Resource J