

CHAPTER I.

BACKGROUND: THE POST WAR ERA.

To attribute all our American difficulties since 1920 to the first world war would be obviously stretching a point. But there are certain social trends which, if they did not actually begin with or were caused by the war, at least became evident during and immediately after the war period.

It is hardly necessary for one to be a trained psychologist or physiologist to understand what a war such as the last one can do to a whole nation. If the "nation in arms" is only the product of very careful and clever planning on the part of propagandists; if intelligent men suddenly become not only willing but eager to "make the world safe for democracy"; if the "civil state" suddenly becomes the "soldier state",¹ that all this will be quickly forgotten and eradicated from the nervous system of the nation as soon as the immediate pressure has passed is a non sequitur. It is much quicker process to anaesthetize the patient than to bring him out of it.

No great social pressure had forced the American people to feel very deeply on any significant national

¹Morstein Marx, Fritz, Government In the Third Reich, New York, 1937, (2nd. ed.) p. 15ff.

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problem since the days of Reconstruction. The obvious exception to this statement is again, the world war. The tremendous amount of nationalism and patriotism whipped up after 1916 touched off a spark difficult to extinguish when no longer needed. Granted the qualifications of such a thesis, I am personally convinced that much of the internal unrest in the United States during the 1920's may be traced directly to the nation's search for an emotional outlet - a pop-off valve - to allow for a more gradual escape of the super abundance of loyalties created but not nearly consumed by necessities of war.

On the national scene, the end of the war saw also the end of legal liquor and the coming of female franchise. "Normalcy" was ushered in with the return of the Republicans. The peace treaty still had to be signed and something had to be done about war profiteers - now that the war was over. Prices shot upwards and "the high cost of living" became a most important table topic.² America then had her big "red scare". Newspapers pictured the "communist menace", - dirty beards and bombs - lurking in dark places intent upon blowing the land of the free into complete anarchy and an era of black bread.

²Allen, Frederick Lewis, Only Yesterday, New York, 1931, P. 5.

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Then there was always the cartoon of the "real Americans", New England Yankee type, kicking these "Furiners" all the way from the coast of Maine to the river Don. Even Harvard was "investigated" but Dean Pound and Felix Frankfurter were found not "subversive".

Strikes were an every day occurrence especially in the coal and steel industries. The Boston police strike echoed throughout the nation and caused many who had not done so before to ponder. Law and order were no longer taken for granted. Little wonder, then that this situation soon brought about a reaction. The vigilante spirit of the frontier days suddenly gripped many sections of the country; the Ku Klux Klan was becoming a powerful movement.

As the nineteen twenties rolled on tradition and faith were again given a severe test by the Scopes "monkey" trial in Dayton, Tennessee. Clarence Darrow's pointed queries about the Bible shook the beliefs of many more persons than William Jennings Bryan. The nation was wondering as never before about its morals; this was the "jazz age".

But all the while, the great panacea of all national ills - economic prosperity - was ostensibly healing the wounds made by those events. Prosperity gave

if not a real, at least an apparent stability to the social order which allowed it to progress. Prosperity made the nation quickly forget the Teapot Dome scandals and enabled it to recoup its investment nerves shaken by the Florida boom. Prosperity made America oblivious to economic warnings of the dark days of 1929.

Turning from the national to the local scene the picture is hardly changed. Because it is a part of the United States, Muncie, Indiana, was bound to feel the same impacts that affected the nation as a whole. This little city felt the war's aftermath keenly. The nation lost citizens but Muncie families lost husbands and sons. Grain prices rose on the Chicago Board of Trade but Muncie housewives were much more annoyed that bread prices went up a penny or two. Business indices moved up or down but Walnut Street Merchants were much more interested in knowing whether the week's business would be ruined if it rained next Saturday.

Aside from all these national factors, Muncie, like any other American community, had its own particular city joys, hopes, and sorrows. Proximity to local problems magnified their importance.

Muncie's great post-war joy was the advent of the General Motors which came to build a great plant and

a great city. This was in 1919 when labor trouble was something peculiar only to backward European nations. The General Motors was eagerly welcomed by all strata of society. Labor hoped for jobs, and business planned to profit as never before. Rumors were heard that four to five million dollars was to be spend in the city immediately. Muncie was in economic ecstasy. Bellowed a civic minded editor at the time of the announcement, "Are you ready to help Muncie become a city of 100,000?"³ Some time latter the people were solemnly informed that, "...MUNCIE IS BIG OR LITTLE ACCORDING AS SHE GRASPS THE OPPORTUNITY FOR DEVELOPMENT WHICH THE GENERAL MOTORS OFFERS HER."⁴ Certainly officials of the General Motors had been faithfully promised by the "Chamber of Commerce crowd" that Muncie would tolerate no amount of labor activity. They also attempted to convince the mass of citizens - the laborers - of how well off was their state. Editorials insisted that notwithstanding higher costs of living "labor never in its history is so well off as today, never so wellpaid and never so discontented. Organized labor, especially has come into its own, is getting more nearly what is its due, and insofar as its new rates and

³Muncie Evening Press, Sept. 9, 1919 and following numbers.

⁴Ibid., Oct. 23, 1919.

privileges are making for happiness and better living, homes and better living conditions, everybody is pleased.

"But there has arisen in its ranks a radical element composed largely of foreigners, of disloyalists that seem bent on wresting control from the conservatives, the latter of whom have made possible all of labor's progress, industrially and socially up to this time. The radicals are the same to a large extent, that fought insidiously against this nation during the great war and they are opposed to American institutions and are the real foes of American labor."⁵

In the same issue of this newspaper was a picture of John L. Lewis under which was the warning caption: "If these men get a 30-hour week and 60 per cent more wages, for which they threaten to strike, coal prices will soar."⁶

Sixteen years later when the General Motors returned to the Muncie it had deserted during the depression, the attitude of "the business class" toward organized labor had hardly changed.⁷ "The plant moved back after, and because of, the bitter Toledo strike,

⁵Ibid., Oct. 20, 1919.

⁶Ibid.

⁷See Middletown in Transition, p. 36ff.

and the central issue in its return was the fact that Middletown is an open-shop town and its controlling business-men were prepared to pledge its continuance as an open-shop town."⁸ Next to its glass jars⁹ its transmissions became Muncie's pride and claim to fame in the world's markets.

The coming of the General Motors also brought with it minor problems with which the city had to cope before it became adjusted to its new economic advantages. There was an acute shortage of housing facilities. Said a local editorial, "We are not now in need of civic movement but a CIVIC MOVEMENT, the housing movement."¹⁰ There were cries set up against "rent profiteers", threats and exhortations but these were soon forgotten in the excitement of Muncie's political problems.

Throughout the first half of 1921 the most important political question facing every city in Indiana was what to do about the recently passed Knapp Act, which permitted certain classified municipalities to institute either a commission or a Commission-Manager form of government. Local opinion in Muncie was

⁸Ibid., p. 35.

⁹Ibid., p. 74ff. on the "X family: A Pattern of Business-class Control."

¹⁰Muncie Evening Press, Oct. 23, 1919.

definitely split on the question. The evening paper rapidly opposed the proposed change which was to be decided by popular referendum while the morning paper mildly supported it. The Muncie Evening Press supported a "Home Rule League" opposed to the strong minority favoring the possible change. City officials were naturally the most violent opponents of the new plan because they stood to lose most by it; therefore, they found many columns devoted to their opinions in the evening paper. The City Attorney accused the National Municipal League, the American Civic Association, the National Short Ballot Association, and the City Manager Association of attempting to seize control of the city. Some of his remarks were actually laughable. Said he, "The plan is.... to get absolute control of municipalities. They¹¹ are engaged in the business of manufacturing city managers and secretaries of commercial clubs and they must find a market for their finished product else their business fail.... But, thank heavens, the multitudes are fast becoming familiar with their deceptive arguments, and on the 7th day of June next, a righteously indignant people of this city will hurl from this municipality the heartless crowd of New York which is

¹¹ Referring to the above named organizations.

attempting to tear our liberties from their shrine and barter them away to the enemies of freedom.

"You voted against the League of Nations on last November, now are you going to vote for a League of Municipalities and place those New York 'birds' in control? Are you going to invite them to enter our gates and take possession of your persons and property?

"I class them as roving bandits of old, who under chiefs or leaders subsisted by sweeping down upon and plundering the people. They would take possession of ourselves and our prosperous city, subdue its people and divide the spoils between themselves. I cannot see any other object they have in mind except to get control."¹²

As the date of the referendum drew near this paper indreased its howls against a form of government that was "autocratic and subversive of American ideals"; against a remedy "worse than the disease" it was intended to cure.¹³ The days of war propaganda were not so distant that the people forgot their late hate against things Teutonic. The Muncie Evening Press stirred up old embers with telling effect saying, for example, "We must heed, too, the warning of the people in the towns that have

¹²Muncie Evening Press, May 20, 1921.

¹³Ibid., May 23, 1921

been afflicted by the imposition of the Germanic form of government upon them, and in the listening loss for the moment the clamoring voices of theorists and faddists who would bridle us in likewise."¹⁴ Querried the same paper a few days later in most ominous tones; "Wouldn't it be worse for the voters to find their hands tied by a man foreign to the community who had no interest in the community except his salary check, than to find themselves in the hands of their own citizens who would be fearful of the wrath of the voters if these officers misbehaved....?"

"Wouldn't it be worse to have a foreign burgo-master like the Germans have in charge of their cities - which is all that a manager would be - than to have an American mayor and an American council in charge of our American city as we now have? COULDN'T IT BE WORSE AND WOULDN'T IT BE WORSE?"¹⁵

The morning paper's milder support of the plan hardly compared with the force of the opposition and probably kept the fight from being more important than it actually was. This paper took the very safe position of advocating the hackneyed reformer's plea; that is,

¹⁴Muncie Evening Press, May 27, 1921.

¹⁵Ibid., May 30, 1921.

put the city on a business basis and throw out the political bosses. Suggested its editorials; "If any voter who is opposed to the present system of political government in city affairs fails to vote.... he should forever hold his tongue and say nothing about how the affairs of Muncie are conducted."¹⁶

The most emphatic editorial in support of a City Manager was an admonition to cast off the political yoke; "The proposal to put Muncie's government in the hands of a non-partisan board of commissioners in whose interest will be the interest of the taxpayers and not that of the Republican or Democratic party, should be supported by every man and woman who thinks of the safety of their homes and children."¹⁷

The plan was defeated in the referendum by a margin of 2 to 1. There was a real landslide against it in the poorer sections of the town and very noticeably in the colored districts. The morning paper was resigned to the outcome and weakly suggested that "the average voter requires an occasionally prodding to awaken within him his duties as a citizen.

"We believe that those responsibilities have been

¹⁶Muncie Morning Star, May 22, 1921.

¹⁷Ibid., May 26, 1921.

awakened and that the voters of Muncie will go into the primaries and nominate the men best fitted for the places which they aspire to fill"¹⁸ - just as if the good people had not always had a chance to nominate the "best" men but usually neglected too.

The Press was jubilant. It looked upon this defeat as a personal victory and an index of its own power in the community. Gloating, it wisely remarked that it was evident that the people "are not ready to place themselves and their affairs in the hands of one man as community boss and that they still preserve in their hearts the ideals of freedom and democracy inculcated by the constitution and be the founding fathers.

"The PRESS is glad of the part it played in this victory which it believes is distinctly that of the common people, and if the occasion should again arise when it felt called upon to defend the interests of the community it will have no hesitancy in doing so."¹⁹ And so was ended a short and bitter fight, which, if it did nothing more, proved that all was not complete accord within the community pattern. Fissures deeper

¹⁸ Muncie Morning Star, May 22, 1921.

¹⁹ Muncie Evening Press, June 8, 1921.

than partisan differences became faintly discernable.
The years were to clarify them.

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Muncie's claim to fame, aside from being used as a sociological laboratory, from its Ball family and their glass jars, and from its basket-ball teams may be found in its politics about which few of its citizens like to speak publicly. The fair name of Muncie has been regularly splashed over the front pages of metropolitan newspapers in connection with some political scandal or other ever since 1919. In April of that year came a great political stench. For the first time in its history Muncie was aware of a small army of Federal investigators in its midst. During the next decade and a half similar situations were to become everyday occurrences and very little thought given them other than the usual explanation that something-must-be-wrong-at-city-hall-again.

The local papers announced that the federal officers were investigating a large ring of confidence men who were conducting fake prize fights and making fraudulent land deals. There were rumors of "big money" being taken from out-of-town "suckers". No names were as yet divulged but the evening paper saw a note of

subtle humor in the comical way in which "suckers" bite.²¹

It weakly admitted that vice conditions did exist in Muncie and that the city should be "cleaned up" but suggested that the federal men should cooperate with the local police if there was any investigating to do. Still, it was consoling to know that there was vice in every city and that it was impossible to wipe it out completely. "Surely there is a way to do this and surely public sentiment in time will crystallize to the point where it will demand that Muncie be made a thoroughly decent place in which to live. Enough has been divulged and is to be divulged by federal investigators to warrant the belief that with proper cooperation the local authorities may be able to accomplish a great deal toward ridding the community of its low dives, at least. This task is not a job for professional reformers, half-baked politicians nor men with axes to grind, however, and whenever any of these elements undertakes reformation the movement is foredoomed to failure before it begins, but certainly if the men whom the public has entrusted with the conduct of its affairs are sensible and right minded they should be able to

²¹Muncie Evening Press, April 17, 1919.

accomplish much."²² This same paper tried to laugh off the whole situation in editorials telling how much worse were crime conditions in Chicago²³ - a city sixty times larger than Muncie - and by admitting that" even if all the stories told about the swindles of the Muncie gang are true, the men did not do much robbing of Muncie people, preferring to work on outsiders. We should be careful to give proper credit in these little matters."²⁴

I do not imply when I quote from one of the local papers that either of them indicate the opinions of more than a very small portion of the community. But it gives an interesting insight into some of the political ideas of the "good people" of an average American community to note how editorials representing their opinions have and still explain the phenomena of local politics. The present example came at the height of the recent federal investigation. As yet everything was still in the secretive stage, no one knew who was going to be exposed although it was becoming evident that some local officials might be connected somewhere in the operations of the "ring". At such a time, the evening paper explained all the city's difficulties in these terms:

²³Muncie Evening Press, April 21, 1919.

²⁴Ibid., April 22, 1919.

²²Ibid., April 18, 1919.

*The principle reasons why viciousness has been so generally triumphant in the long run even when at times seemingly brought to bay, have been about these:

*Too much politics.

*Lack of temperance of speech and act on the part of those who have taken the lead in attacking vicious conditions.

*Unlimited 'nerve' and funds possessed by the lawless element.

*Protection of lawlessness by persons in high places.

*Lack of common sense leadership and lack of adequate organization on the part of the generally decent element....

"While we continue in our present state of disorganization, we can only trust that those outside the city who have been investigating things here will continue and will act upon the results of their investigation. Maybe we shall be together in some organized way, soon, but just now we need help from outside."²⁵

The city was "together in some organized way" in a few years.

The upshot of the investigations was the indictment of the mayor and prosecuting attorney along with others for violation of the United States postal laws.²⁶ Thus was begun the era of mayor troubles which even today Muncie has not been able to leave behind. In the case in

²⁵Muncie Evening Press, May 12, 1919.

²⁶Ibid., June 26, 1919; Muncie Morning Star, June 27, 1919; New York Times, June 27, 1919, p. 7.

point, the Mayor and his confreeres were accused of being members of this swindling syndicate which carried on some of its activities through the mails. The political career of that mayor, Dr. Roblin Bunch, would indeed make a fascinating case study in itself. A real ward boss type of politician, he had built his personal organization on a firm social service foundation. As a "quick" physician, - but none the less a very able one - he has built up a large practice among the poorer classes and was known especially among the Negroes as a man who did not press his debtors too harshly. Elected mayor in 1914 he continued his chartible proclivities and if his methods of disbursing services were not always ethical, they were at least effective politically. Even if care of coal and flour were mysteriously robbed in Muncie freight yards, there were a good many families that were warm and had bread during the winter months. In 1916 he had been charged with accepting "protection" money from various "dives" and gambling houses in Muncie but the jury could not agree and his case was dismissed. He was reelected the next year by the largest majority ever given a candidate before that time.²⁷ Now he was to face a federal, not a county court.

²⁷ Muncie Evening Press, June 26, 1919.

The local papers made an honest effort to be impartial after the indictments had been returned and before the trial began. Editorial opinion admonished the people to "go slowly" in judging the accused men.²⁸ "We shall not prejudge the men who have been indicted and have no wish to do so, but we can judge ourselves and our community as harshly as we please and not be amiss. If Muncie's name has become a byword and a hissing throughout the state among decent persons, it is because we have allowed it to become so - and by 'we' is meant those who consider themselves decent citizens. If this reputation is to continue, we will be to blame."²⁹ This last opinion is very interesting in that it was one of the few occasions when either of the local papers was willing to make a distinction in its editorials between the "nice" people of the community and all others. As the trial drew nearer the papers concentrated upon Muncie's "wide open" vice conditions and the fact that something should be done about them.³⁰ But the community could console itself in the knowledge that Muncie was different from other cities suffering from unhealthy politics. In Muncie, "evil is resisted and

²⁸Muncie Morning Star, June 27, 1919.

²⁹Muncie Evening Press, June 26, 1919.

³⁰Ibid., Nov. 3, 1919 and following numbers.

apprehended and punished, whereas in many other cities it is tolerated, condemned and endured."³¹ In any case the defendents were found guilty,³² and the mayor and prosecuting attorney were sentenced to serve two years in prison.³³ A new mayor and prosecutor took office and announced a "clean-u-the-city" policy. Such a program has become as regular an event in the political life of the city as the annual Community Fund Drive.

The later career of the mayor is very interesting in view of the fact that after he was pardoned by President Coolidge in 1923, his name cleared and franchise restored,³⁴ he slipped back quietly into his practice and began repairing his broken organization. That his rehabilitation was successful is evidenced in the fact that he is the present mayor of Muncie.

The next political stir that came to the city was the announcement that federal indictments had been served upon a number of local liquor law violators.³⁵ Stories of graft and unholy political connections flew thick and fast.

³¹Muncie Evening Press, Nov. 6, 1919.

³²Ibid., Nov. 11, 1919; New York Times, Nov. 12, 1919, p. 14.

³³Muncie Evening Press, Nov. 25, 1919.

³⁴Ibid., Sept. 15, 1923; Muncie Morning Star, Sept. 16, 1923.

³⁵Ibid., Dec. 7, 1921 and following numbers in both local papers.

The evening paper bemoaned the fact that federal authorities always had to come into the city to clean out vice and corruption which local officials seemed unwilling to touch. The city would get a bad name if something were not done about this state of affairs. But there was a ray of hope. Said the Press, "Muncie is about to have a change in her city administration. We expect conditions here to be helped materially by this change because it is the understanding that there is to be a general cleaning-up of the police department, among other things."³⁶

Surely enough, as the first duly elected mayor since Bunch went to prison took office, there came the expected "shake-up" in the police department.³⁷ For a time Muncie politics ran smoothly.

Because of its greater editorial freedom and interest in local affairs, some editorial opinions of the evening paper are very interesting especially when written during periods of comparative political calm. There is, for example, a great deal of practical

³⁶Muncie Evening Press, Dec. 9, 1921.

³⁷In both local papers, Jan 3, 1922. It is unimportant but interesting to note in this connection that the new mayor was also a physician.

philosophy of government applicable to much of our American experience in the following excerpt from an editorial: "The American people are great 'kickers' about the way their government is run and about the kind of men that sometimes get into office, and yet when they make these objections they would be better made against themselves.

"We have about the kind of government we wish and have in office the kind of men that we ourselves are, in the mass, or rather better. The greatest difficulty is that we do our objecting after election instead of our investigating before election."³⁸

But even with the occasional outburst of a "common-sense" editorial, the local papers in Muncie could hardly be said to hold a consistent position in political attitudes. When, for instance, Muncie was faced with the city manager problem the Press screamed for "Constitutionalism" and the "good old American way" of running a government. It insisted that "the federal system with the primary election plan is the fairest method ever devised by man. It gives to each voter the right of individual expression, and for this very reason

³⁸Muncie Evening Press, April 12, 1922.

it is freer from abuses than any other plan.... that a public servant violates faith is no just criticism of the political system."³⁹ And yet, not a year later, came the following editorial on the direct primary where the same paper championed "change" and "progress" in government; "It was the idea of the nation's founding fathers that we should have a representative government. A pure democracy was found impossible after the nation had outgrown its swaddling clothes and attained a large population and it then became more than ever necessary that the people should select their officers through men delegated for that purpose. The system worked well and it produced the nation's great statesmen for a hundred years or more. It had come to be realized that the country had passed the town-meeting stage of its existence. Now there are those who would go back a century and a half and attempt to place us within the old shell that we have outgrown and cast aside."⁴⁰ This editorial went on to discuss the processes of government and has an interesting thought on civil service which might be of great significance if it represented the opinion of the entire community on this subject. This

³⁹Muncie Evening Press, May 28, 1921.

⁴⁰Ibid., April 18, 1922.

paper looked upon the creation of a civil service in American government as a "beautiful theory". In practice, it went on to explain, men appointed under civil service provisions tend to become lazy and inefficient because they know they will not lose their jobs. And by the same reasoning it concluded that appointive, political officials always will be best because the alertness needed for them to keep their jobs will mean that they will perform their duties better. This is not necessarily a naive sort of argument. It merely demonstrates how thinly developed among the people was any idea of having trained administrators to run their government as well as how deep-rooted were traditional faiths in the inherent goodness of their institutions regardless of how badly they worked. Editorials are not quite the same today; Muncie has begun to question this old symbols.

I have stressed these editorial opinions to suggest lines of division in Middletown's community pattern that were apparent in the early 1920's. The local papers were an inadequate but non the less important index to these divisions and therefore cannot be taken as irrelevant. But if the above-mentioned disturbances of the status quo were only embryonic at this early date, there would be little question of the tremendous strain put upon

the community by a new organization which suddenly engulfed Middletown - the Ku Klux Klan. Most important was the part played by this new group alignment in local politics for the next five years.