Justice Sees Red - The Case of Sacco and Vanzetti, Part 1

By Toni Lee Robinson

Post-World War I America was a riotous jumble of conflicting ideas and emotions. Old quarreled with new, teetotalers (those who abstained from alcohol) clashed with the party crowd, and on a deeper level, fear insinuated itself alongside the lure of pleasure and reckless abandon. The brutal realities of war had made Americans desperate to escape into frivolity. At the same time, a dark distrust of anything foreign brooded in the national consciousness. People were determined never again to be involved in anything as painful as the Great War. The country must focus inward, they said, and shake off the uncertainties of the world outside its borders.

The bloody Bolshevik Revolution in Russia confirmed these suspicions. The situation seemed like a prime example of the craziness of foreign groups and of radicals in general. The fact that radical ideologies were solidifying into groups and even movements within U.S. borders made many people very nervous. Socialists, communists, anarchists, labor organizers -- all were a source of anxiety for citizens and government alike.

Where would all these extremist ideas lead? Socialists wanted an even distribution of wealth, communists wanted to accomplish socialism through a working-class take-over, and anarchists sought socialist goals through disruption of law and order. Labor leaders worked to organize workers so that their collective clout would be felt in the battle for better working conditions to even out the sharp divide between workers and wealthy factory owners.

In the American consciousness, all the groups blended together. The socialists had a flag that symbolized their philosophy, a simple, solid red ensign. Because of this, Americans labeled the radical groups "Reds." The color became a symbol of all that the American people feared from radicals and foreigners. A spate of bombings that hit the U.S. as it passed into the century's second decade added fuel to the fire. The bomb plots seemed to be the work of immigrants who embraced anarchistic beliefs. This same ideology had recently brought the ancient empire of Russia to its knees. It was obvious to many that the radicals desired to achieve the same ends in the U.S. When labor leaders organized strikes that paralyzed whole cities, the American people were certain that, without decisive action, the U.S. would fall prey to the "Reds."

Fear galvanized the nation. Law enforcement agencies hunted down suspected "Reds." Basic civil liberties were forgotten in the rush to protect the nation from the dangers of radical ideas. People were arrested for little reason, in some cases merely because they looked like radicals. The foreign-born were most frequently targeted. Most were detained without trial and without benefit of counsel. Many were deported.

In 1920, Braintree, Massachusetts, was a small town in the shadow of the city of Boston. Most of its inhabitants made a living in the area's shoe factories. A good part of the work force was made up of the immigrants that had been streaming into the U.S. from the nations of Europe. Braintree had a three-man police force that dealt mainly with keeping the peace, resolving disputes, and other relatively simple problems. On April 15, 1920, the town and its police officers were called upon to respond to a much more brutal crime. The events of that day would blast Braintree into the international spotlight.

It was Thursday. Early in the day, the Slater and Morrill Shoe Company prepared to meet its weekly payroll. Cash was delivered to its uptown office by an American Express agent. As he made his delivery, the agent noticed an unfamiliar car parked outside the office building. It was a large vehicle, a dark blue touring car. Several of the town's residents saw the car as well, driving here and there on the city's streets. Meanwhile, in the shoe company's bookkeeping office, each employee's pay was counted out and placed in one of 500 pay envelopes. The envelopes full of cash were put in two metal cashboxes for transport to the factory.

As they did every week, the paymaster and his guard came to take the envelopes to the factory gates. The money would be handed out to workers at quitting time. Carrying the cashboxes, the two men walked down the street toward the factory. Suddenly, they were confronted by two gunmen. With a revolver in his face, the guard began to plead for his life. One of the gunmen, wearing a dark cap, fired several times. The guard went down, blood pouring from a main artery. His .38 revolver fell from his coat. His attacker reached for the revolver and pocketed it. The paymaster was shot by the second gunman.
The killers picked up the money boxes and ran to a dark blue car that had pulled up beside them. The men jumped in. The car pulled away, turned a corner, and was gone. At the scene, the guard died within minutes. Witnesses picked up spent cartridges from the killers' guns, as well as a dark cap dropped by one of the men. Days later, a dark blue Buick with no plates was found abandoned in a nearby wood. Tracks in the wooded area indicated a smaller car had been parked in the same area, awaiting the robbery gang.

Within three weeks, investigators had identified suspects. Two men were led into a police trap and arrested. One of the two was a laborer at a local shoe factory. The other sold fish on the city streets. Both were Italian immigrants who had fled the U.S. to avoid being drafted to fight in the Great War. They had returned to become active in radical causes. When captured, the two were discovered to have handbills for an anarchist rally in their pockets. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were charged with robbery and murder.

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Questions

1. Describe the atmosphere in the U.S. that provided the backdrop for the crime committed in Braintree, Massachusetts, on April 15, 1920.

2. In the chaotic aura of the early 1920s, socialism, communism, anarchism, and early labor organizations were all lumped together under the "Red" flag. Was this justified? Why or why not? Were there similarities? Differences?

3. Where did the term "Reds" come from?
   A. A solid red flag was the symbol for socialist groups and venues.
   B. The activities of radicals made people "see red," or be very angry.
   C. The foreign-born activists tended to have ruddy complexions.
   D. The cost of pursuing radicals put government budgets "in the red."

4. What caused the American public and the government to fear a plot by radicals to overrun the U.S. government?

5. List some of the civil rights violated by the round-up of "Reds" during 1919-20.
6. The events of April 15, 1920, put Braintree, Massachusetts, under the world's scrutiny. What happened?


7. What conclusion did police draw from the juxtaposition of the small car tracks and the blue touring car abandoned in the woods near Braintree?


8. Explain the saying "Justice is blind." How might it apply to the case of the Braintree murder/robbery?


In your opinion, how can the conflict between freedom and security be resolved? How would your solution play out on a national level with the passage of time?
Explain how the freedom of ideas can sometimes clash with the goal of national security. Give examples.