Opinion

America was at its Trumpiest 100 years ago. Here's how to prevent the worst.

During WWI, America lurched toward autocracy. Resistance was minimal.

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What was the Trumpiest period of American life before Donald Trump? And what might we learn from it?

It is easy to imagine that constitutional rights are under greater threat today than ever in the past. But history suggests otherwise. Although much of what happened during and after World War I is now long forgotten, Americans in those years saw the federal government act in ways that — so far — Trump can only dream of.

It shut down some 75 newspapers and magazines it found too critical and censored several hundred specific issues of others.

It threw into prison roughly a thousand Americans for a year or more — and a far larger number for shorter periods — solely for things they wrote or said.

And the Justice Department — now the center of so much perversion — chartered a nationwide vigilante group, the American Protective League. Its 250,000 members seized, roughed up and detained suspected draft evaders, violently broke up peace demonstrations, and joined government agents in raiding left-wing and labor organizations.

Just over a century ago, a major war, fear of foreign subversion and an administration with little respect for civil liberties unleashed several years of the worst repression in the United States since the immediate aftermath of slavery. What is unfolding in the country today is different in many ways, but this earlier period holds lessons for us about how swiftly the government can take away basic freedoms — and about our need to be vigilant to be sure it doesn't happen again.

Woodrow Wilson was in his second term as president from 1917 to 1921. We think of him as a progressive idealist, and in his passionate belief in the League of Nations he surely was. But after he persuaded Congress to declare war on Germany in April 1917, he was determined to silence the sizable minority of Americans who opposed the decision. He vigorously and successfully lobbied for the Espionage Act, a sweeping measure that had little to do with espionage and provided prison terms of up to 20 years for anyone who "shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operation of the military or naval forces of the United States." The following year, that legislation was toughened to make it criminal to provide "disloyal advice" about buying war bonds, or to "utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States."

The law's vagueness was a prosecutor's dream. It was the tool that jailed thousands of war opponents, leftists and labor unionists. Big business had long been looking for excuses to imprison the unionists. The most famous political prisoner was Eugene V. Debs, a gentle, peaceful man and perennial Socialist candidate for president, who had won 6 percent of the popular vote in 1912. Six years later, for giving an anti-war speech from an Ohio park bandstand, he was sentenced to 10 years behind bars.

State legislatures rushed to show their patriotism by passing copycat laws. A federal Justice Department official actually drafted New Hampshire's version. As a result, roughly half of those long-term political prisoners were in state prisons. Forty men and one woman served a collective total of 63 years at hard labor in Montana; 73 people were imprisoned by California.

The federal Espionage Act also enabled censorship, without using the word, by giving the postmaster general the power to declare a newspaper or magazine "unmailable." Before the internet, this meant a publication would have no way of reaching a broad national readership.

Not unlike what's happened since Jan. 20 of this year, the changes in 1917 came with amazing speed. Postmaster General Albert Burleson, a right-wing former congressman from Texas, shut down the first newspaper even *before* the Espionage Act passed Congress. (It was the Rebel, of Hallettsville, Texas, which had criticized him for using prison labor on farmland he owned.) The very day the act went into effect, federal agents arrested anarchist leader Emma Goldman for agitating against the draft. By that point, the American Protective League had already injured many people when it broke up a peace rally in Chicago's Grant Park.

Why did all this happen, and so quickly? First, entering World War I provoked mass paranoia. My grandfather was a Jewish immigrant from Germany, and the family spoke German at home. But they were terrified to do so on the street because it could get you beaten up. American schools abruptly stopped teaching German, and around the country people set bonfires of German books — at least 19 times in Ohio alone. Families named Schmidt changed their names to Smith; the frankfurter became the hot dog. Then, in November 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia. Fearful of communist revolution spreading to the United States, Wilson's government and its vigilante allies began hunting down Soviet sympathizers, real and imagined.

Even though the war was the excuse for the Espionage Act, Burleson, who loved being chief censor, continued as postmaster general to ban publications for more than two years after the fighting ended. Vigilante violence continued as well. In November 1919, for instance, former congressman Ernest Lundeen mounted a stage in Ortonville, Minnesota, to give a speech. He got no further than "Ladies and gentlemen …" when he was seized by a mob, angry that he had opposed the war. They marched him to a railway track and locked him in a refrigerator car of a freight train starting to pull out. Dissidents remained in prison by the hundreds, and there were calls for mass deportations of troublemakers. Wilson turned down appeals to release Debs, and in November 1920, the Socialist received more than 900,000 votes for president — while still in his cell at the Atlanta federal penitentiary.

How could the repression last so long? For one thing, all three branches of government moved in lockstep. The president remained convinced of his righteousness and determined to suppress opposition. Some members of Congress spoke out in protest, but they were a small, increasingly frightened minority. And in 1919, the Supreme Court upheld the Espionage Act twice — the first time unanimously, the second with only two dissenting votes.

Another reason is that, even beyond censorship, the nation's daily press was shamefully timid. When Wilson's special envoy Elihu Root, a former secretary of state, told a New York audience in 1917 that "there are men walking about the streets of this city tonight who ought to be taken out at sunrise tomorrow and shot for treason. … There are some newspapers published in this city … the editors of which deserve conviction and execution for treason," the New York Times gave him a three-column front-page headline and its editorial page praised his "great crystalline intellect."

Furthermore, a startling number of well-known journalists who should have known better jumped on the war bandwagon, which meant implicitly supporting the crackdown. Consider the muckrakers, that famous generation of reporters who in the 20th century's first dozen years had crusaded against many areas of corruption and injustice. They included Will Irwin (anti-Japanese racism), Samuel Hopkins Adams (patent medicines, public health, consumer protection), Charles Edward Russell (Chicago stockyards), Ida Tarbell (Standard Oil) and Ray Stannard Baker (racial discrimination, coal mines). The first three all went to work for Wilson's wartime propaganda agency. Tarbell served on the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense. Baker became Wilson's press secretary. Might things have been different if journalists of such renown had instead investigated the proliferating vigilante groups, protested censorship or reported on the many people jailed solely for their opinions?

The madness of this period began to diminish by the mid-1920s, after warnings that the Russian Revolution would spread to the United States proved completely false. And there was one unexpected hero. Warren G. Harding, who succeeded Wilson, was not one of our great presidents, but he stopped censorship and began releasing political prisoners, even inviting Debs to stop in at the White House on his way home. Harding said he enjoyed the Socialist leader's company, and, privately, he told a friend that Debs was right: The United States should never have entered the war. The frenzy gradually died away, but it left behind a scarred country, tens of thousands of wrecked lives and police forces at every level accustomed to regarding dissent as treason. In 1923, when author Upton Sinclair began giving a speech in San Pedro, California, he was arrested while reading aloud the First Amendment.

The crisis Americans are in today is at least as severe as the one back then, but in different ways. Although ominous conflicts exist abroad, the United States is not itself at war, and we are spared the hysteria that can come with that. And we do have a vocal, outspoken opposition, armed with means of instant communication unimaginable during World War I. But we also have a president who has let convicted vigilantes out of jail, who shutters agencies established in law by Congress, who defies judges' rulings and who sounds fiercely determined to humiliate, jail or deport his enemies. What are the lessons for us today of that sorry time a hundred years ago?

First, speak out in every way possible. Unlike 1917 or 1918, there are not — so far — federal agents and vigilante mobs breaking up peaceful demonstrations. Turn out for them. There is no way they can silence all the people around the country who are profoundly upset about the betrayal of Ukraine, the looming threat to Medicaid, the medical quacks running health policy and the gutting of the EPA, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and other agencies.

It's especially crucial that prominent people sound off. Fearful of prosecution, too few did so during Wilson's presidency. There were some brave exceptions, from Sen. Robert La Follette (R-Wisconsin) to writer Randolph Bourne to Francis Fisher Kane, who resigned as U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania in 1920 to protest the mass arrests. Today, anyone whose stature gives them a megaphone needs to use it — loudly. President Barack Obama, where are you?

Second, celebrate that we're a nation of states, and make use of it. States have considerable power and can often outflank Washington's madness. Trump ignores climate change and lauds fossil fuels, but California generates more than 60 percent of its electricity from renewables and is pushing that figure steadily higher. New York has passed a law strengthening protections for doctors who prescribe abortion medications for people in other states. In Illinois, outspoken Gov. JB Pritzker (D) has explicitly compared Trump's actions to the Nazi takeover in Germany in 1933. One of Adolf Hitler's early moves, incidentally, was to shut down all German state legislatures. Trump can't do that. Let's do all we can to press state governments to champion the principles he has chosen to abandon.

Third, despite the fire hose of distortions from right-wing TV and radio, despite Facebook abandoning fact-checking, we still have independent news media. We need more of it. Facts matter. Much of our mass media is far bolder, more investigative, less willing to take for granted what the government says, than the media of a century ago. If there was ever a time when accurate, fearless, probing news coverage in all its forms — newspapers, radio, TV, websites, podcasts and more — is needed, it is now. News media depend on us: as subscribers to sustain them, or as readers, viewers or listeners whose attention they can sell to advertisers. We need to hold every news medium to a high standard, demanding facts and not empty claims. Do not patronize media that don't meet that standard, and support those that do.

Finally, look for every possible way to fight back against the destruction of institutions that have served us well. Both inside and outside government, for instance, computer-savvy professionals are quietly making copies of the tens of thousands of government webpages and precious research data that has fallen, or risks falling, under Elon Musk's chainsaw. Many Canadians and Europeans are joining some of us in boycotting Tesla. New nonviolent resistance efforts will emerge in the weeks ahead. Watch for them. Join them.