
Reviewed by Jared Kazik Asser (University of Georgia)

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Commissioned by Graeme Pente (Independent Scholar)

**The Labor History Origins of Law and Order Politics**

Chad E. Pearson closes his new monograph with a reflection on the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol. News coverage surrounding the insurrection is emblematic of a larger shift in how Americans define terrorism, cementing the white and far-right man as the new face of American terrorism. Indeed, as Pearson notes, the insurrection itself was preceded and followed by many instances of political violence, and these events have set the young white reactionary alongside the caricature of the Islamic extremist, potentially even displacing the latter as the dominant image of a terrorist in recent American memory.

*Capital's Terrorists* shows that white socio-economic elite men have a longer history as the nation’s foremost terrorists. Focusing on the depth and breadth of violent labor suppression in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, Pearson argues that intimidation and violence were central to “management, capitalist development, and stability during the Second Industrial Revolution” (p. 2).

Beyond simply exploring violence perpetrated by business elites, Pearson’s analysis turns on his definition of “terrorism,” which he defines broadly as both physical and emotional violence in the service of a political or economic goal. With this definition, Pearson focuses on three themes: the evolving methods of violence practiced by business elites from the 1860s to about 1910, the coalition of public and private forces that enacted this violence, and the role of journalists and other writers in justifying this violence after the fact. These last two ideas are explored through discussions of men whom Pearson calls the “enablers” and “narrative-creators.”

The narrative-creators are perhaps the most important part of this history. Controlling the interpretation of any particular strike or strikebreaking activity was equally if not more important than the acts of agitation or suppression themselves and on both sides, language was the most powerful weapon. In large part due to these
narrative-creators, business elites were able to cloak their violent organizations under the designation of “law and order” clubs run by a city’s “best men,” phrases that will be eminently familiar to historians studying periods between at least Andrew Johnson and Richard Nixon. In so doing, they were able to attract public support and resources to their cause, with governors and presidents enabling this violence. Pearson contextualizes his historiographical contribution carefully. By using organized violence against working people as the central theme of the work and bringing together Klansmen, Pinkertons, managers, and presidents under the label of terrorists, he presents not a labor history but a new and dramatic business history.

*Capital’s Terrorists* consists of six chapters, each a case study of a particular labor struggle. For this reason, chapters follow a small handful of elite individuals as they crushed worker dissent, drawing inspiration from one another. While a portion of one chapter investigates the Northeast, the South and the West—especially the states of Florida, Missouri, Wyoming, and Idaho—predominate. The first chapter is a study of the Ku Klux Klan as an anti-labor organization. The early portions of the chapter draw on sources familiar to historians of the period, including congressional reports and the writings of newspaperman Randolph Abbott Shotwell. These materials build to an analysis of John L. Hunnicutt’s memoir, where he celebrated his own use of the Klan as a tool of labor suppression in Alabama beginning as early as 1867. As Pearson notes, it is easy for contemporary historians to categorize Klansmen as terrorists but perhaps more difficult to see business leaders in this way. However, this chapter sets the foundation for the rest of the text, establishing the violent means that Reconstruction property owners and businessmen felt free to employ. The use of similar methods, a decentralized organizational structure, and violence in service of psychological as well as physical harm links Gilded Age businessmen to their Reconstruction counterparts.

The second chapter introduces J. West Goodwin who appears as a central or supporting figure in many of the book’s chapters. Goodwin managed a small printing empire in Missouri and used the *Sedalia Bazoo* as an organ for the state’s economic development. Early in his career, Goodwin supported a call to bring back the whipping post as a legal form of corporal punishment, linking him to Klan forms of terror. But he really cut his teeth in 1885 fighting a typographical union. Though he lost this battle, caving to union pressure after an almost one-month-long boycott, the business magnate would use this event to present himself as a martyr for the rest of his life. Likely still fuming from his concessions to the typographical union, Goodwin supported Jay Gould in the rail strikes of 1885 and 1886. In the 1886 strike, he began to organize businessmen into Law and Order Leagues, a covert organization of armed elites that intimidated strikers and supported scabs. In the years after the strike, these organizations continued to operate, circulating blacklists that punished labor activists. As Pearson provocatively shows, Goodwin’s organizational efforts took place after Missouri’s Governor John S. Marmaduke had already committed state resources to a violent suppression of strikers. The success of the Law and Order Leagues in Sedalia led Goodwin to travel the South and West, creating new chapters in cities where labor had established a foothold, as a direct competitor to the Knights of Labor.

While the Klansman Hunnicutt and publisher Goodwin violently supported property rights in their own communities, “absentee capitalists” were less visible, as explored in chapter 3. The chapter is framed by a discussion of John Hays Hammond and his representative A. M. Esler in Idaho’s Shoshone County. Together they represented the interests of the Mine Owners Association (MOA), which was attempting to suppress miner militancy on behalf of the Bunker Hill & Sullivan
Company. With the support of Pinkerton detectives, state and federal troops, and a newly founded Law and Order League, the MOA arrested and imprisoned miners en masse, holding them illegally in hastily converted spaces, warehouses, and private residences, which came to be known as “bull pens.” This happened not just in 1892 but again in 1899. This chapter is perhaps the book’s best, as it illuminates the networks that business leaders had at their disposal. It does so in three ways, with one across space, as Hammond and Esler’s efforts were discursively supported by other business leaders, including Goodwin, and one across time, as Hammond mobilized men who had previously worked for his father. Finally, Hammond could mobilize networks of strikebreakers who, ironically, were paid the high wages that strikers demanded but did less work. Aside from showing the overlapping networks at business elites’ disposal, Pearson explores the emotional impact of coercion, imprisonment, and humiliation on workers’ ability to organize in the future.

Chapter 4 follows newspaper owner and amateur historian D. B. McKay. Through a series of kidnappings in 1901, McKay and his supporters forcibly relocated the leadership of La Resistencia, an interracial union that produced its own newspaper—this organ itself a threat to business elites—and organized across multiple jobs and industries. Business leaders used strategically timed kidnapping and deportation to destabilize labor organizations and empower employers. Outnumbering their victims eight to one, McKay and his supporters organized the kidnapping of thirteen key organizers in La Resistencia. Timed immediately prior to a strike among cigar factory workers, this violence encouraged employers to continue refusing to negotiate with the union. Pearson identifies the roots of this violence in the kidnappings of Black and Indigenous people in Florida’s Second Seminole War (1835-42), which he also categorizes as a labor issue. As an amateur historian, McKay likely found inspiration in this chapter of Florida’s history.

Goodwin appears for the fourth time in the next chapter, this time as a central rather than supporting figure. After the decline of his Law and Order Leagues, Goodwin formed a similar “Citizens Alliance” movement in the first years of the twentieth century. This chapter follows his travels across the Northeast, Midwest, and West where he helped to organize or inspire Citizens Alliances in other cities where business leaders faced challenges from below. Citizens Alliances did the discursive work of presenting anti-labor violence as good for the nation as well as the common people, garnering the support of public authorities at all levels. But they also served as a reservoir of anti-union violence, as when the Citizens Alliance in Scranton, Pennsylvania, was deputized—legitimizing what would otherwise be considered vigilante violence against strikers.

The final chapter reappraises the writing of the novelist Owen Wister. Wister closely based his first novel on the Wyoming Stock Growers Association’s persecution of homesteaders and cowboys in 1892’s Johnson County War. The managerial class dealt with wrangling by supplying Pinkertons and straight-out thugs with a “seventy-person kill list” (p. 191). The following siege of ranches across Johnson County resulted in several murders. A decade later, this violence was fictionalized in Wister’s The Virginian, which became the archetype of the western genre of literature. The Virginian advocated for a popular law, where the “best men” of a community could enact extralegal violence if the normal wheels of justice were perceived to be moving too slowly. Wister was soon hired by the Citizens’ Industrial Association of America with the explicit instruction to create pro-business propaganda. Here, Pearson finds that The Virginian justified Stock Growers Association violence as “popular justice” in Wyoming, setting an interpretive precedent elsewhere.
Finally, Pearson’s epilogue returns to three former Klansmen, Nathan Bedford Forrest, John B. Gordon, and N. F. Thompson, to show how they conformed to the patterns of other Gilded Age businessmen. Forrest and Gordon remained labor managers and maintained their positions with the same violence that they practiced during Reconstruction. Thompson, on the other hand, championed managerial authority into the twentieth century, by advocating for anti-Black vagrancy laws that would bolster the convict-lease system. While Klansmen themselves joined the ranks of the business elite, other anti-labor leaders mimicked their methods.

Pearson’s study focuses on a close reading of a handful of men and events, and some scholars may balk at the narrowness of this approach. But in each case Pearson illustrates the deep roots of each business leader’s willingness to commit violence, often following the example of business leaders in the preceding decades. Further, the diversity of the case studies themselves produce a national portrait spanning half a century. Across the six chapters, what emerges is a vision of pistol-laden elite men who seemed not only comfortable with but also eager to enact violence to maintain their racial and class position. And one of the work’s great strengths is showcasing the evolving but ever-present forms of violence employed by the managerial class. The work is at its best in places where Pearson mobilizes his definition of “terrorism”—emotional and physical violence in service of a political or economic end—as in chapter 3 where he shows the multiple networks of actors that capitalists like Hammond could employ, as well as the psychological impact of incarceration on strikers. Furthermore, the recurrence of Goodwin, of course, produces an image of managerial cells springing up across the United States to provide a unified front against labor agitation.

Pearson concludes with a call for historians to turn away from “the different ways nerdy and wimpish notebook- and stopwatch-carrying supervisors sought to improve shop floor efficiencies” and toward the “intersections of management and vigilantism” (p. 210). Such a shift pulls the business historian’s focus away from histories of scientific management and welfare capitalism (though still important sites of struggle in their own right) and toward their similarities to the cruder methods of nineteenth-century terrorists. This is an excellent work and one that deserves to be read widely. The focus on a single figure in each chapter makes for an approachable read that could be appreciated by undergraduate students. The depth of Pearson’s longer chapters merits them for assignment in courses on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, while some of the work’s shorter chapters are better suited to the American history survey. Of course, scholars of business and labor history will enjoy this work, given the broad sweep of material that the author brings together. But it will also interest political historians of the mid to late twentieth century who are interested in the origins of “Law and Order” politics, as well as cultural historians interested in the relationship between language and violence in the creation of a hegemonic bloc.
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