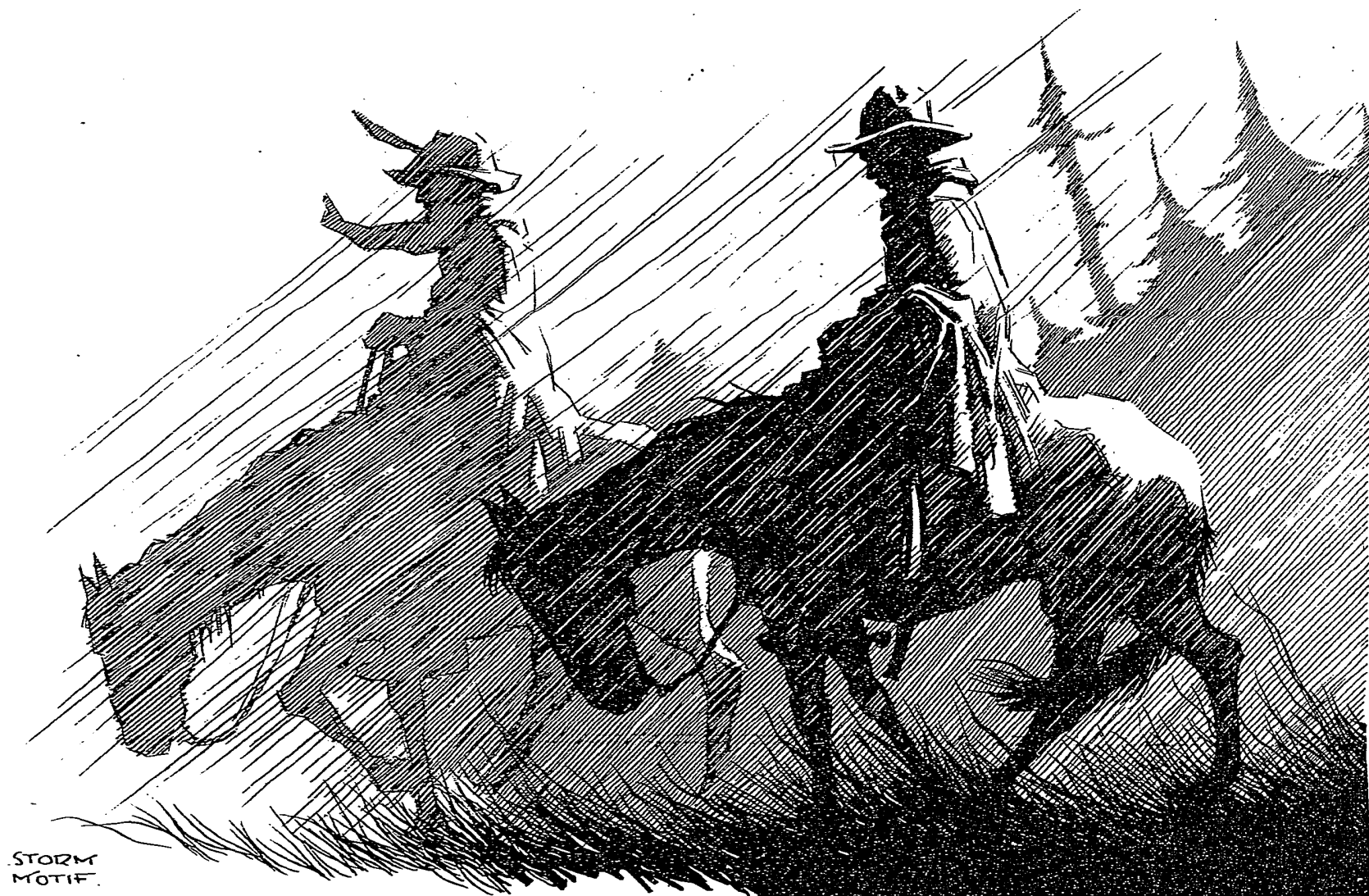


A DRENCHING DAY ON THE YELLOWSTONE TRAIL



STORM MOTIF

Drawn by Wallace Smith to Illustrate His "On the Trail in Yellowstone." New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Norman Thomas Discusses Conscientious Objectors

A Review by  
**CHARLES WILLIS THOMPSON**  
 THE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR  
 IN AMERICA. By Norman  
 Thomas. Introduction by Robert  
 M. La Follette. New York: B. W.  
 Huesch, Inc.

**T**HERE is a confusion in men's minds. Most men confuse the conscientious objector with the persons convicted under the Espionage act. The former were mainly men who answered the draft but refused to serve because of scruples against aiding the killing of men. The latter were tried under an act aimed at German spies, but so wide in its provisions as to include men who aided Germany in any way during the war. Necessarily the lines crossed, and there were rank pro-Germans among the so-called conscientious objectors and probably conscientious objectors among the so-called pro-Germans. The War Department tried to make a division between the two, but often failed, and the different objectors themselves made the task more difficult, the more so as in many cases there was no difference.

Mr. Norman Thomas, who professes to write only about the C. O.'s, as they were called, writes smoothly but somewhat too obviously in the interest of the social propagandists. He pushes to the front the Mennonites, Quakers, Molokans, and all other really conscientious objectors, and only occasionally admits the existence of the I. W. W. and militant Socialists. Probably he will defend his work by saying that the former were in the majority, as they were among the C. O.'s, but not among the larger class convicted among the violators of the Espionage law. In the public mind they are all of one class, which isn't such an injustice as it seems. In spite of himself he admits enough by im-

plication, the existence of enough enemies of the United States among the conscientious objectors to make it clear that President Wilson and Secretary Baker, and especially the army officer, had a hard job on their hands. The Quakers, as he virtually admits, had only to announce their religion to have an easy time, and so, after a while, did the Mennonites. The Molokans, of whom none of those officials seem to have heard, had a harder time until they could convince the authorities that they were a genuine sect. The social warrior never had an easy time from the first to the last, and it is difficult to blame the officer and soldier for that, when you consider that each of these prisoners was, in the soldier's opinion, firing a bullet into the back of his buddy in France—a point of view which Mr. Thomas steadfastly ignores.

As for Senator La Follette's introduction, it is ably written, but discredited by the fact that it pays little attention to the book and is mostly devoted to a defense of La Follette's own behavior during the war. This is a subject the public has heard enough of.

Toward President Wilson Mr. Thomas is unusually bitter, for his mettle is suavity and sweet reasonableness.

To the tragic record of his failures [is a kindly example], the treatment of conscientious objectors does not contribute as black a page as the treatment of prisoners under the Espionage act. Toward Debs and the others he felt and expressed a positive vindictiveness. It was as if they had sinned against the Holy Ghost in disputing his justification of the war.

Not altogether ingenious, we fear, is Mr. Thomas. One reaches page 230 of his 272-page book before coming upon this admission. "Perchance"—and mark the word, per-

chance—"among the conscientious objectors in jail there were Reds," and even then it is said in a tone of irony, as if it constituted a delusion on the part of the authorities. Yet all through his book there runs, like an underground river, the circumstantial evidence showing that there was no "perchance" about it, unless Mr. Thomas means to deny that his heroic mutineers and many another in his pantheon were Reds. Perhaps he thinks a man must sign the roll of the Bolsheviks in order to be a real Red, and that anarchists and militant Socialists and Communists should be classed with Quakers and Mennonites—in which, so far as the few "philosophical" anarchists are concerned, those who are as much opposed to revolution as to war, he is right, but we do not hear of many such at Fort Leavenworth.

It is a waste of space to prove so often that the conscientious objectors were no cowards. Bad language used in war-time and consisting of everything that had a sting in it fades away with the dawn of peace. It is five or six years since the objectors were charged with being cowards. There was, in fact, a pathetic heroism about the members of those strange German and Russian sects who could not understand what it was all about, who barely knew that there was a war, the chief thing about which was that they were being required to wear uniforms; and the garments making up that uniform were forbidden by their creed. So they resisted, and endured much cruelty and even death; a strange martyrdom, since ignorance of the language forbade them to find out exactly what it was they were dying for. Yet no doubt the better-informed Socialist who had somehow gotten mixed up with the Quakers under a law intended only for their benefit was just as conscientious as they. Once the

whole outfit revolted at Fort Leavenworth, and were conquered only by reason—a most unusual mutiny. The reason was displayed by Colonel Sedgwick Rice, who made a speech in which he showed them two things: first, that he had absolute control of the situation, and, second, that he understood all their grievances and would try to remedy them.

Mr. Thomas seeks to conciliate, and is nowhere violent. But he makes his points clearly enough; for instance, "President Wilson's policy toward conscientious objectors was better than his treatment of Debs, by so much as Newton D. Baker was a better man than A. Mitchell Palmer." He could run into an argument over that question without much trouble. He slams the late President as hard as he deems fit, but with an air of doing him no more than justice, which somehow is not convincing.

The people of the victorious North had the proud memory that after the Civil War no one had been sentenced to death, or even imprisoned for treason. Why, then, was such a people content to maintain a small army of political prisoners?

A frivolous respondent might answer that this time the noble North was demoralized by association with the wicked South. The real answer, however, is that the boy lied. After the Civil War the North did imprison large numbers of Southerners, one of whom, the ex-Vice President of the Southern Confederacy, Alexander H. Stephens, has left a most beautiful and endearing account of that mad incarceration with its brutalities, not one of which should have been inflicted on so frail and old a man. As for sentence to death for treason, technically that is true; Wirz was hanged for violation of the laws of war. Still it

is what Gilbert called "such precious nonsense" to say, as Mr. Thomas does, that there was any difference between the two wars or that we jailed political prisoners because the war was unpopular. What was President Davis flying from at the time of the alleged hoop-skirt incident? From an indictment for treason and murder; and the story of his foul treatment in jail has never been forgotten and is the one thing that has barred General Nelson A. Miles's way to the Democratic nomination for President. On the other hand, Horace Greeley's act in freeing him went far toward inducing many an ex-rebel to vote for the otherwise impossible nomination of Greeley by the Democrats in 1872. But read Stephens, Mr. Thomas; read Stephens.

There is not much use talking about the conscientious objectors now. The real purpose of such writing is to bolster up the case of the men convicted under the Espionage act, most of whom deserve what they got, if there is any virtue at all in the Government's defending itself against treason and rebellion. In fact, Mr. Thomas's book will do the memory of President Wilson a distinct service, showing by inference and even by incident, that the President was much more inclined to take the short way with treason and rebellion than was generally believed. But he had a great task, of which this was a small part, and generally ended by leaving the matter to Secretary Baker or some other official whom Mr. Thomas has a dangerous air of almost calling "old boy."

The chief trouble was one for which there was no remedy, and is thus stated by Mr. Thomas: "Variations in the temper of the officers themselves were also reflected in the

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# The Conscientious Objectors

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treatment of objectors." If he were to go a little further and add that variations in the temper of the objectors themselves were responsible for both the brutality and the kind of treatment the victims received he would have a perfect case. The C. O.'s suffered about as much probably as soldiers arrested in camp for infractions of the rules. Mr. Thomas might reply that the soldier knew what he was being punished for, while the Molokan didn't. Sometimes the soldier was a badly scared moron and sometimes his lieutenant was. Those who appeared before Senator Tom Watson's committee may have known as much as a Molokan, but certainly hadn't as much intelligence. Among these objectors were some brilliant young college men who had picked up odd opinions from their reading and who combined heroism with high intelligence and sensitive nerves. One of these, W. A. Dunham, who was put on trial by a court-martial for being a conscientious objector, replied when arraigned that

as a trial, I consider this whole proceeding of constituting a tribunal of military officers to try me (by archaic forms) for my religious convictions, as a side-splitting farce.

If any of the officers on the force had enough sense of humor to comprehend this delicate play of wit he must have wished himself well out of the place. But, after all, there is seldom a war in which there appears no incident that is gruesome or grotesque, though of course in each war the victim thinks his case is unique. This being the case with Mr. Norman Thomas and his fellow-objectors in this particular war, as it probably was with the Great Kings of Nineveh, we cannot blame him and can only compliment him on the ease and courtesy of his style and manner. If some of his friends think we are tools of Wall Street, he at least has the grace not to mention it in our presence.