

Strange Death of American Revolution

At the heart of the American experiment was always a tension between oligarchy and democracy, with the oligarchs usually holding the upper hand. However, in recent decades, the struggle has taken a curious turn with the oligarchs largely obliterating the people's memory of the true democratic cause, writes Jada Thacker.

By Jada Thacker

Most Americans know Jack London as the author of *The Call of the Wild*. Few have ever read his 1908 novel, *The Iron Heel*, which pits what London calls "the Oligarchy" (aka The Iron Heel) against the American working class, resulting in armed revolution.

The Oligarchy, London explains, is the ruling elite whose immense concentration of capital has empowered it to transcend capitalism itself. *The Iron Heel* is thus an allegorical tale of a fascist state whose hydra-headed business monopolies have seized control of all facets of production, consumption and national security.

London was not the lone American revolutionary author of his generation. *Looking Backwards* by Edward Bellamy, *Caesar's Column* by Ignatius Donnelly, and the less militant *Progress and Poverty* by Henry George all assumed that some version of democratic-socialist Revolution was just around the corner of history or if not, then ought to be.

As late as the 1930s (and briefly during the anti-Vietnam War period), many Americans still thought "The Revolution" was in the offing. But those days have passed, and no one today speaks seriously of any such thing.

Why not?

The Traditional Oligarchy

"Oligarchy" means "rule by the few." It is an ugly word in its pronunciation as well as in its implied meaning.

Moreover, it is a tainted word because it is used often by "dangerous radicals" to describe the people they wish to see blindfolded and stood against a wall. Nonetheless, it is the proper word to describe the current practice of governance in the United States.

This, of course, is not a new development.

The origin of American civil government was not, as certain champions of Locke's social contract would have it, to secure to each citizen his equal share of security and liberty, but rather to secure for the oligarchs their superior position of power and wealth.

It was for precisely this reason the United States Constitution was written not by a democratically-elected body, but by an unelected handful of men who represented only the privileged class.

Accordingly, the Constitution is a document which prescribes, not proscribes, a legal framework within which the economically privileged minority makes the rules for the many.

There is nothing in the Constitution that limits the influence of wealth on government. No better example of this intentional oversight exists than the creation of the first American central bank. It is worth a digression to examine this scheme, as it was the precedent for much yet to follow.

The very first Congress incorporated a constitutionally-unauthorized central banking cartel (the Bank of the U.S.) before it bothered to ratify the Bill of Rights a sequence of events which eloquently reveals the priorities of the new government.

The bank was necessary in order to carry out a broader plan: the debts of the new nation would be paid with money loaned by the wealthy, and the people were to be taxed to pay the money back to the wealthy, with interest.

The 1791 Whiskey Tax which penalized small-scale distillers in favor of commercial-scale distilleries was passed to underwrite this scheme of bottom-up wealth-redistribution. When frontiersmen predictably rebelled against the tax, they were literally shackled and dragged on foot through the snowbound Allegheny Mountains to appear in show-trials at the national capital, where they were condemned to death.

Socialist bureaucrats were not the culprits here: the 16,000 armed militiamen that crushed the rebels were led in person by two principal Founding Fathers, President George Washington and Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, the author of both the central bank and the whiskey tax legislation.

(After the disproportionate tax drove small producers out of competition, Washington went into the whiskey-distilling business, becoming by the time of his death the largest whiskey-entrepreneur in Virginia, if not the nation.)

This should be a "text-book" example of how oligarchy works, but such examples are rarely admitted in textbooks. Instead, the textbooks assure us that the

Founders established the nation upon the principles of “liberty and justice for all,” words that do not appear in any founding document.

Fortunately, for the sake of candor, Hamilton made his support of oligarchy quite clear at the Constitutional Convention when he said, “All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well born, the other the mass of the people. ... The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government.”

Who Were “We the People?”

Despite the “We the People” banner pasted on the Preamble, the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, does not guarantee anyone the right to vote, nor did it prevent the wealthy from making laws denying that right to “the mass of the people.”

Any belief that the Founders countenanced “democracy,” would, at a logical minimum, require that term to appear at least one time within the Constitution or any of its 27 Amendments which it conspicuously does not.

Without some constitutional guarantee of democracy, government maintains the practice of oligarchy by default. Despite pretensions of Republicanism, even among the followers of Jefferson, the new nation was ruled by “the rich and well born” few for a generation before the specter of democracy even began to rear its head.

And so it was that the oligarchic social contract described in Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* remained the actual basis upon which American socioeconomic order was founded not the Lockean version first fantasized by Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence* and then summarily excluded from the Constitution by the Federalists.

Since money, then as now, buys both property and power, it was only logical that democracy would make its first appearance on the 19th century American frontier, where there was very little money, but much property, to be had.

The fact that the property mostly had been stolen was beside the point: possession of it now conferred the right to vote for the first time upon a majority of people who had no money. Thus, but for a limited time only, common Americans began to feel they were in charge of their future.

For a few short decades, America actually became what it now believes it always was: a democratic Republic, largely free from Big Business, Big Government and Big Religion.

True, the majority of the people still could not vote, slavery still existed, and American Indians were being ravaged, but things were looking up for free, white males as the frontier expanded beyond the grasp of the old-money power of the traditional Eastern oligarchy.

Until the middle of the century when the war came, that is.

The Industrial Oligarchy

The coming struggle did not develop, as many had feared, between the Old East and the New West, nor even between haves and the have-nots. Following the tradition of our remarkably un-revolutionary "American Revolution," the contest was again a proxy war fought by the common man, but led by factions of the wealthy.

In essence, it was a colonial war that would determine whether the Southern oligarchy of Property or the Northern oligarchy of Money would dominate the resources of the vast American Empire west of the Mississippi.

In practice, however, it was a war not so much between men as machines. When the Northern oligarchy whose money commanded both more men and more machines won the contest, it emerged as a political monopoly in possession of both the fastest growing industry and the mightiest military on Earth.

Requiring only a four-year period of gestation from Fort Sumter to Appomattox, America's first "military-industrial complex" was born as a result of war, rather than in anticipation of it.

Facing no immediate foreign threat, the military component of the complex soon devolved into an occupation force for the subjugated South and an invasion force for the soon to be subjugated West. Meanwhile, the industrial arm expanded beyond all precedent, exploiting its political monopoly to lavish public subsidies on favored industries, which reciprocated by buying government offices wholesale.

Cloaked in its guise as the Emancipator of Man and the Savior of the Nation, the nationalist-corporate State had arrived. It was to become a super-oligarchy, controlled increasingly by the monopolists of capital, both foreign and domestic; its mission was nothing less than to monopolize what remained of the means of production: the land and labor of the world's richest continent.

It was this London termed "the Iron Heel." It was not free-market capitalism. It was a corporatist monopoly far beyond anything envisioned by the traditional, landed oligarchy. It was not controlled by statesmen in frocked coats, or by generals, or government apparatchiks, but by the denizens of the nation's

boardrooms, untouched and untouchable by democratic vote.

It was, in fact, a domestic version of the British Empire.

It did not take long for those under its heel to realize there was only one power on Earth ultimately capable of opposing it: democratic collectivization.

But when reformers made peaceful attempts to rally American farmers, miners and industrial labor, they were defeated by political chicanery, divisive media propaganda and state-sanctioned violence. When they dared employ violence, they were simply outgunned.

Fantasies of a democratic Revolution became the last refuge for those who held out hope for social and economic justice.

Revolution How?

Yet the violent military destruction of the U.S. government was not seriously entertained by any who had witnessed the burning of the Southern cities and the utter destruction of Dixieland.

Indeed, in the dystopic novels, *The Iron Heel* and *Caesar's Column*, violent revolution proves initially suicidal for the working class. And, though *Looking Backwards* celebrates the emergence of a national-socialist state, the off-stage Revolution that produced utopia is reported as having been miraculously bloodless.

No doubt, American democratic reformers believed in sacrifice for the common good, but even the fringe anarchists among them were not *Kamikazes*.

The problem lay not in government, *per se*, but in the oligarchy that controlled the levers of power to benefit its own interests (a lesson contemporary government-hating reformers would do well to learn.)

Although American utopians before and at the turn of the 20th century seemed to assume the Revolution would soon arrive, its intended purpose would not be to destroy American government wholesale and rebuild it anew.

The Revolution would restore the principal virtues of Jefferson's *Declaration* and the Lockean social contract the Natural Right of revolution over that of the extant Constitution foretold by Rousseau, which did not.

The crushing irony of the fantasized democratic Revolution lay not in its intention to replace the American system of governance with a foreign statist ideology, but in its effort to establish for the first time a guarantee of domestic social justice most Americans erroneously believed already existed.

Having no clue that the Constitution had not guaranteed any rights not already exercised by Americans at the time of its ratification, a gullible public majority assumed the purpose of a counterrevolution would be to take their supposed constitutional rights away.

Moreover, the popular majority in the decades after Appomattox was dominated by victorious Union war veterans, who were encouraged to believe they had subjugated the South in the service of human liberty. Thus patriotism, now implicitly defined as allegiance to the Nation State, became the staunchest ally of the victorious industrial oligarchs.

When the Spanish-American War arrived, America first entered into the international sweepstakes of the second great Western colonization.

When the resultant Philippine War erupted in an unapologetic attempt to deprive Filipinos of democratic self-determination, it was this same sense of patriotic self-glorification that allowed American boys to herd thousands of doomed Filipinos into disease-ridden concentration camps.

Meanwhile, President William McKinley – having narrowly defeated the democratic-populist electoral threat two years previously – was so far removed from reality he reportedly had to refer to a map to discover where the Philippine atrocities were committed. Today, of course, nobody seems to know.

But it would be Democrat Woodrow Wilson, despite his cameo appearance as a progressive president, who would possibly do more to undermine world-wide democratic reform than any other American in history, to include Ronald Reagan.

Starting in the 1890s, America middle-class progressives had begun to make some measurable progress not in promoting Revolution against the oligarchy but in using the power of the ballot to at least regulate some of society's undemocratic flaws. Wilson was elected in part to promote the progressive cause.

But Wilson, having nominally stood against American entry into the largest war in human history, suddenly caved to the demands of bankers who feared losing billions in defaulting loans if the Allied cause foundered for lack of American support.

Over the span of a few weeks, Wilson thus reversed two years of principled neutrality, torpedoing more human progress than any number of German U-Boats.

Oddly, Wilson seemed to understand perfectly the result of his betrayal. On the night before he asked Congress to compel the nation into its first world war, he criticized his own decision to a confidant:

“Once lead this people into war,” he said, “and they’ll forget there was ever such a thing as tolerance. To fight, you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of national life, infecting the Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man in the street.”

And so it did.

Patriotic Oligarchy

War propaganda and the “rally ‘round the flag” mentality of wartime America not only distracted Americans from the project of progressive reform, but split them into two antagonistic factions: those who supported the war to “export democracy” worldwide, and those who believed the war, itself, was a betrayal of universal progressive principle.

More important, however, the war inevitably conferred more power and credibility to the oligarchs. Under cover of newly manufactured patriotism, an Espionage Act was passed, rivaling only the founding Federalists’ Sedition Act in totalitarian suppression of free speech.

As a result, prominent socialist labor leaders such as Eugene Debs and Bill Haywood were arrested on the specious charges of speaking their minds and sentenced to 10 and 20 years, respectively.

The engineered Red Scare following the Great War further decimated the ranks of American democratic-socialist reformers.

Soon the socialist IWW labor union was hounded out of existence; Sacco and Vanzetti were executed amid world-wide protest; draconian anti-immigration law was passed; and 9,000 armed miners lost the Battle of Blair Mountain after the intervention of the U.S. Army all serious setbacks to those who hoped for any sort of democratic Revolution.

None of these events was reported by the corporate-dominated press as American workers’ opposition to oligarchy, but rather as foreign-inspired sedition against an All-American democracy.

Then, at long last the Revolution came but it was not American.

For a very short while, Bolshevik Revolution seemed to promise hope. But Lenin was assassinated in 1924, and the rise of Stalin to power within the Bolshevik Party doomed any hope of its fidelity to egalitarian principles.

At home, the dismissal of Wilson’s Fourteen Points by American isolationists helped cement progressive cynicism as their expectations for a “world made safe

for democracy" seemed to have failed domestically as well as abroad.

As American culture embraced the feverish consumerism and urban moral vacuity of the Roaring Twenties, renewed democratic activism languished. Even the progressive constitutional reform amendments (income tax, direct election of senators, Prohibition, and women's suffrage) seemed too little to revive the spirit of social reform dulled first by abandoned neutrality, then again by abandoned war goals.

By the late 1930s, with Stalin's anti-democratic brutality fully exposed, the democratic-socialist cause was a dead letter for all but the most radical reformers in America.

Heroes' Warnings Ignored or Worse

Yet even then, America's most highly decorated soldier, the once popular Marine Major General Smedley Darlington Butler, in 1935, wrote a book entitled *War Is a Racket*. Having earned two Medals of Honor and more in service to the oligarchy, it seems he had learned something about the "honor" of American war making.

"I spent 33 years and four months in active military service," he said, "and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism."

One need not imagine why his is not now a household name even among U.S. Marines.

Then there was another World War and another Red Scare. The Soviets got the Bomb; China went "Red." McCarthyist America, it appeared, went temporarily insane.

Almost immediately came yet another war, now in Korea. With it, came the permanent Cold War, and with it, a permanent Red Scare. America's temporary insanity lapsed into chronic psychosis.

The once-fantasized Revolution, now tarred with the brush of Soviet and Chinese despotism and sidetracked by the incessant paranoia of nuclear holocaust, was never seriously considered again by the American working class.

The more Americans were rallied to defend the corporate nation state, the less able were its citizens to appreciate the structural flaws in its national charter. The collectivism of organized state violence had trumped the collectivism of democratic reform.

Instead of a Revolution that would force the ruling elite to rewrite the social

contract to represent the socially cooperative, "combinative" nature of man, as London and so many others had predicted, it was the people who were forced to sign "loyalty oaths" to a corporatist state bent on perpetual war and perpetual fear of perpetual war.

This dangerous state of affairs was poignantly detailed by an American working-class war hero at the height of the second Red Scare in 1951. Despite the ongoing war in Korea, General Douglas MacArthur found time to blow the whistle on patriotic oligarchy.

He said, "It is part of the general pattern of misguided policy that our country is now geared to an arms economy which was bred in an artificially induced psychosis of war hysteria and nurtured upon an incessant propaganda of fear. [S]uch an economy renders among our political leaders almost a greater fear of peace than is their fear of war."

Ten years later, another working-class war hero, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, reiterated MacArthur's warning of "an artificially induced psychosis of war hysteria" in his 1961 farewell address to the American people.

Eisenhower famously warned that the oligarchy what he originally styled "the military-industrial-congressional complex" was conspiring to lead the nation into needless wars for power and for profit.

Did Americans heed the warnings of its own famed military heroes? Some did.

Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, gave action to these words and refused to be goaded into an invasion of Cuba only weeks after Eisenhower's warning. The next year Kennedy again refused to order the Pentagon's planned invasion of Cuba during the missile crisis.

The year after that, Kennedy resolved to withdraw all American military advisors from the ever-tightening noose of war in Southeast Asia. At the same time, he privately vowed to withdraw all American forces from Vietnam following the next general election.

Weeks later, he was murdered. He would be the last American president to openly defy the military-industrial complex.

Only nine months after Kennedy's assassination, Congress abdicated its constitutional responsibility. Eschewing a declaration of war, it nevertheless authorized open-ended military aggression against the country of North Vietnam all on the strength of carefully crafted, now-acknowledged lies, known as the Gulf of Tonkin affair.

If America failed to defeat the global communist threat in Vietnam, we were told, all would be lost. Americans would become communist slaves. Presumably to forestall their future loss of liberty, over two million Americans were then forced against their will to serve the armed forces during an unprovoked military invasion of Southeast Asia.

Nine years of utterly senseless combat ensued before the United States abandoned the war effort in humiliation, having caused the death of over 58,000 Americans and about two million Vietnamese.

Yet a generation after our inglorious military failure, we had not become communist slaves: on the contrary, Vietnam had been accorded Most Favored Nation trade status as American boys queued up in shopping malls to buy sports shoes, produced in American-subcontracted Vietnamese sweatshops, by girls too young to date.

The war drums and the profits beat on.

After 45 years, the \$13 trillion Cold War stumbled to a close with the political and economic implosion of the Soviet Union. But it was an event predicted not to result in peace:

“Were the Soviet Union to sink tomorrow under the waters of the ocean,” said George F. Kennan in 1987, “the American military-industrial establishment would have to go on, substantially unchanged, until some other adversary could be invented.”

Kennan, the Cold War author of our “containment strategy,” knew whereof he spoke.

Kennan’s predicted “invention” arrived on cue. Simultaneously with the fall of the Soviet Union arrived the First Gulf War. Then, after the 9/11 terrorist attack, the Cold War was reinvented, permanently it seems, as the Afghanistan War.

It soon was augmented concurrently by the Iraq War founded, like the Vietnam War, upon yet more carefully crafted, now-acknowledged, lies. These seemingly endless conflicts have been joined by an openly secret war waged on the lawless frontiers of Pakistan, and more recently by aerial wars in Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere.

“No nation,” James Madison had said, “could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.” Ironically, this 1795 nugget of wisdom came from one of our founding oligarchs, who, in 1812, led the United States of America into the first senseless war it did not win.

He ended up proving his own point. Two years after the British burned the White House, Madison renewed Hamilton's central banking cartel brainchild in order to pay the war debt loaned at interest by the rich.

The Conscripted Revolution

So what of the glorious Revolution, foretold as inevitable by some of our forefathers, many of whom witnessed the 20th century arrive with the eyes of hyphenated slaves: squalid immigrant-laborers, peasant-sharecroppers, or the imprisoned peonage-patrons of the "company store?"

Despite the violence (and it was legion) deployed against those who preached faith in a rejuvenated social contract, the long-awaited democratic Revolution was not crushed by force. It was simply drafted into the service of the corporate-state.

Instead of rebelling against the oligarchy during the second decade of the 20th century, as Jack London foretold fictionally, Americans instead allowed their rulers to register a fourth of the nation's population for the draft.

Over two and one half million men eventually were pressed into service to fight a war "to make the world" though not their own homeland "safe for democracy."

But when the nation failed to win the peace on its stated terms, the people failed also to perceive the oligarchy had won it on theirs. Flush with war profits, the moneyed class then indulged itself in a decade-long binge of market-driven hysteria which ended, predictably, in the global Great Depression.

This, as is happened, was a blessing in disguise for American democracy.

The governmental and economic reforms made under the New Deal constituted, perhaps for the first time in human history, a re-conceptualization of national government as a guarantor of social justice.

No longer was the principal purpose of American government to be the perpetuation of an oligarchy. Democracy would provide the protection of the "mass of the people" from the depredations of "the rich and the well born" the corporations, and the privileged few who control them.

Jefferson's nebulous "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" were redefined concretely by Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. Much more important, Madison's Bill of Rights despised as it was by many of the Federalist aristocrats that penned our inadequate Constitution would at last encompass economic, instead of merely political, guarantees of right.

President Franklin Roosevelt told us:

"We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. 'Necessitous men are not free men.' People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.

"In our day these economic truths have become accepted as self-evident. We have accepted, so to speak, a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all, regardless of station, race, or creed.

"Among these are:

"The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or shops or farms or mines of the nation

"All of these rights spell security. And after this war is won we must be prepared to move forward, in the implementation of these rights, to new goals of human happiness and well-being."

This, then, was perhaps the pivotal moment in American democracy. This was no manifesto posted by foreign anarchists. It was no dormitory pipe dream of campus intellectuals. It was a gauntlet thrown down at the feet of the American oligarchy by the most popular and most victorious American leader of the century.

It was a promise never before made to the American people.

That was in 1944. The war, and Roosevelt's life, ended in 1945.

The next year saw 4,985 labor strikes, involving 4.6 million workers. In no year before, nor since, have so many Americans called themselves to action in an attempt to force corporations to extend a living wage to labor. But the oligarchy, fearing guarantees of security that threatened both its power and its profits, immediately counterattacked.

The very next year, 1947, saw the roll-back of workers' rights and the establishment of a new and more consolidated "National Military Establishment," replete with a novel organization called the CIA, the U.S. Air Force, and NATO, America's first permanent international military alliance since 1778. And for the first time in history, Americans continued to be conscripted into military service with no impending war on the national horizon.

Thereafter, Franklin Roosevelt's Revolutionary vision of an Economic Bill of Rights, proudly proclaimed to a long-suffering people, was relegated to the garage sale of Great Ideas. Not so, however, for America's glorious wars,

without which another generation of Americans might have recalled the rationale for London's now-forgotten Revolution.

The Revolution Disremembered

America reveled in its superstar status in the years immediately following the Second World War, its working-class children of the Great Depression desiring nothing so much as to put the ordeal behind them.

Having "fought the good fight," Americans wanted only "what was coming to them." As it happened, they allowed someone else to tell them what that would be.

American workers had produced the war machines and manned them, but they had not profited personally in the process; indeed, half a million had surrendered their lives, and millions of others their liberties, their wages, and their savings to the war effort.

For them, the war was something never to be repeated. They did not perceive, in the relief of peace, that the owners of the war industries had learned a far different lesson.

The corporate giants had become fabulously wealthy because of the war. It was not a lesson they would forget. Thereafter, for every subsequent war the American people were glad to put behind them, the "military-industrial complex" had already laid the foundation for yet another.

Americans tended to interpret victory in WWII as a validation of their own wartime propaganda: that America was land of the free and land home of the brave. Having defeated despotism overseas, Americans fantasized the home front to be an example of egalitarian virtue, the envy of a world we had helped to bomb flat.

In the mind of Americans, we had become the permanent Good Guys on planet Earth no matter whom we were told to bomb, invade or overthrow next, or whatever pretext was given for doing so. Being by definition always right, Americans imagined we could do no wrong.

But something crucial was lost amid the triumphalism, the battle-fatigue, and the self-flattery of postwar America culture.

As mostly white American veteran-workers escaped to suburbia from hardscrabble farms and claustrophobic city neighborhoods, they forgot the final battle had yet to be won. They lost sight of the fact that the Four Freedoms, the Economic Bill of Rights, and the New Deal in general stood only as notes scribbled hastily in the margins of the Constitution, but never finalized in a new social

contract.

For all of the democratic justice the New Deal reforms had produced, the structural relationship of “the mass of the people” to the “rich and well born” remained precisely as it had when Hamilton first argued successfully to retain oligarchy in the federal Constitution.

Once isolated in sterile suburbia, America repressed its collective memory. We somehow forgot that the democratic Revolutionary banner had not first been raised by Marxists, but by American farmers in rebellions against oligarchs led in turn by Bacon, Shays, and Whiskey Tax rebels.

The same banner had been taken up in turn by American agrarian populists, urban progressives and democratic reformers of every stripe.

We as a people seemed to forget how, in the generations before Pearl Harbor, thousands of American militiamen and deputized goons had machine-gunned and bayoneted striking workers from Massachusetts to Seattle; how corporate interests had conspired to overthrow the White House with an armed coup d’État; how differences in race, class, ethnicity, gender, and national origin had all been and still are exploited by the ruling elite to divide and conquer democratic challenges to its power.

The rebellious, democratic spirit that had survived centuries of suppression, violence and poverty would not survive the American retreat to suburbia, where Americans traded Revolution for revolving credit. For in this diaspora to the temporary economic Fantasyland that Americans now call home for those who still have a home we left our history behind us.

How the oligarchy now the corporate-security state finally triumphed over the last shred of hope in a democratic Revolution is a story whose last chapter has recently been sent to the printshop of history.

Let it suffice to say that it transpired while a majority of Americans sat, conveniently stupefied, watching corporate-sponsored war news on a television manufactured by an outsourced American job.

It would not have surprised Jack London if the democratic Revolution he envisioned had failed in its first attempt, as he himself had imagined in *The Iron Heel*. What he did not imagine is that state-sponsored violence would co-opt a peoples’ revolution.

Amongst all the wars and the rumors of war, after the manufactured patriotism, the decades of incessant fear and profitable lies, it is no wonder that London’s Revolution had not been defeated at the barricades. For in the end, it had

simply been forgotten.

But let us remember the Revolution was forgotten by a nation continually at war. If a vast multitude of us are today unemployed, debt-ridden, homeless and desperate, it is past time we recall the major reason why.

Having never heard of Jack London's novel of rebellion against oligarchy, today's children if they are lucky read his tale, *The Call of the Wild*, instead. It is a poignant story about an abused dog that ultimately, despairingly, turns its back on a cruel and vicious civilization.

Our children are told it is London's most important work.

Perhaps, by now, it is.

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Should Christians Defend the Rich?

Republican presidential contenders Texas Gov. Rick Perry and Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann profess their Christian fundamentalist faith, but denounce efforts by the government to restrain the power of the rich. The Rev. Howard Bess looks at this enduring contradiction between Christianity's principles and its alliance with the wealthy.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

Today in America, we have an unholy concentration of wealth in the bank accounts of the few. This concentration of wealth is not earned wealth, but wealth acquired by manipulation of the economic system, the abuse of labor and the evil of inheritance.

What has taken place also is not merely the result of a benign economic system; it is the evil of greed at work. Parallel to this corrupt system is a view among too many confessing Christians that the Book of James with its emphasis on good works, not just faith doesn't belong in the New Testament of the Bible.

Recently, I reread the Book of James and reviewed the history of this five-chapter epistle, as I pondered the controversies that have surrounded it in

Christian church history. I found James's words challenging and exhilarating in their insistence that Christians do good in the world.

Yet, over the centuries, many church leaders have doubted that the Book of James was worthy of inclusion in the New Testament. It was clearly not written by one of the disciples of Jesus, nor by the James who was thought to be a younger brother of Jesus. The best scholars today simply say we don't know who wrote this collection of sayings.

Because of its emphasis on good works, the Book of James is criticized as "too Jewish" in its perspective and divergent from Paul's writings about salvation by faith and faith alone. In the 16th Century, Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, concluded that James was not worthy of inclusion in the New Testament collection.

Contradicting Paul's teachings on faith and faith alone, James states very plainly that faith without good works lacks value.

"What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has no works? Can his faith save him?" James asks. "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Often moving from issue to issue without clear connections much like the Old Testament book of Proverbs the Book of James takes on a variety of questions relating to what is necessary for a true Christian faith. If there is a central theme, it could be characterized as "what does a Godly life look like?"

The writer leaves us with snapshot after snapshot of that life. What is never in doubt is that a confessed faith must be matched by behavior patterns that are consistent with that faith.

In James's writings, jealousy, bitterness and selfish ambition all come under criticism. They are delegated to the unspiritual and devilish.

War and greed are treated in some length tied together by the author who leaves no doubt that a true Christian faith is completely incompatible with war and greed. There is also no place for gossip among the people of God.

The Book of James can best be understood in its moment of early Christian history. The audiences for whom James wrote were third and fourth generation Christians.

Understandably, the first generations of Christians were absorbed in trying to figure out who Jesus truly was and the significance of his death. They were aggressively evangelistic and spread the new religion with amazing rapidity.

In addition, early Christian believers were apocalyptic, convinced they would be translated into the next life without suffering death. By the time of James, reality had set in. Christians were going to live out their years and pass away just as people had before Jesus.

Recognizing that fact, James had the courage to ask the crucial question for Christians: How are we to live our lives?

Rereading the book of James was a reminder of the writings and work of Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister who taught at Rochester Divinity School in upstate New York in the early 20th Century. His most famous book was entitled *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, published in 1907. It set in motion the Christian social gospel movement in America.

Observing that dominant Christian churches were allied with the powerful and the wealthy, Rauschenbusch called for a new social order that addressed the evils of concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. He noted how child labor and other abuses made the wealthy even wealthier.

As I reread the Book of James, I realized that James was challenging the social evils of his own day, evils that were being commonly embraced by confessing Christians. In his messages to his fellow Christians, he railed against confessing believers who gave deference to the rich.

Walter Rauschenbusch was merely restating the message of James for the 20th Century. Like James, he was speaking primarily to his own fellowship of believers, knowing full well that John D. Rockefeller was a prominent member of his own denomination.

It is worthy of note that great American civil rights leader, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., credited Walter Rauschenbusch as being one of his mentors in the Christian faith. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, King pointed his finger not at racists but at fellow clergy who counseled patience toward racial bigots.

James, Rauschenbusch and King all spoke as deeply religious people and used the language of faith. They called sin sin and evil evil.

However, in today's America, we do not have someone like a James, a Walter Rauschenbusch or a Martin Luther King Jr. to speak the Truth to power.

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