

“Striking” Similarities Between The West Virginia Mine Wars and George Floyd Protests: How They Pertain to Civil Disobedience and the Civic Duty All Americans Have to Keep Their “American Creed”

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Born out of civil disobedience itself, the United States of America and the standard of life US citizens enjoy today would be nothing but an afterthought without the hundreds of thousands of outlaws and rebels who time and time again throughout history stood up for what they believed in. From the American Revolution itself, all the way up until today, American citizens have always stood up for what they believed was right, even if it was in defiance of the government itself. Many events pertaining to civil disobedience such as the Civil Rights movement and the fight for Women's Suffrage in the United States are well known and well documented, and rightfully so as they were major victories for millions of Americans in their fight for basic rights. But what happens when a movement fails? What happens when "victory" isn't achieved? These fights still hold the same meaning, yet they seem to be forgotten battles left in the past and forgotten to most living today. An example of this can be seen in the early 20th century, located in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains where thousands of West Virginian coal miners began their fight for freedom in what is known as the biggest insurrection since the American Civil War itself, the West Virginia Coal Wars. Although forgotten or unheard of by many, the impacts of the Coal Wars are seen by every working man and woman today. The history of the Coal Wars and the events that occur during this time of civil unrest in West Virginia bear a striking resemblance to the riots and protest movements sweeping across America today in the wake of the brutal death of George Floyd. The similarities and differences between the George Floyd riots and the West Virginia Coal Wars can be used as an important tool to show what went wrong in the past when these brave miners fought for their rights as Americans and how this can be avoided today. It can help to give protests sweeping the nation the victory they deserve, as well as helping us to find the answer to the question of whether or not civic duty sometimes demands civil disobedience.

Understanding the definition of civil disobedience is very important when talking about the West Virginia Coal Wars and the George Floyd protests. Civil disobedience is a broad term that can be left up to interpretation, but many believe that to be classified as only civil disobedience events must include four main features. These features include conscientiousness, communication, publicity, and non-violence (Brownlee, 2017). Both protest movements easily pass the test for conscientiousness, communication, and publicity as the movements and their goals were well known from the start. The issue lies with the fact that violence was and has been used in both protests as they progressed. Are they even acts of civil disobedience? The feature of non-violence for protests to be considered as civil disobedience seems to be a controversial topic as the act of violence itself is disobeying society and the government around it. The two protests certainly do not fall in line with legal protests as they very much go outside the law in an attempt to fight for what is commonly known as the "American Creed" which states " ...all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" (Brownlee, 2017). It is also hard to classify these protests as rule departures or conscientious objections as they were very clearly organized protests and marches that many participated in at once (Brownlee, 2017). Due to the violence involved in the protests, you may believe they would fall in line with what is known as radical protests, but it is much more complex than that. At certain points they could be classified for sure as civil disobedience, however, something changed, and these protest movements got ugly. What exactly caused this? Does this change help or hurt the argument for civil disobedience since that is what both acts of radical protest started as? The fact that both movements were civil disobedience turned wrong only strengthens the reasoning for talking about these two very relevant events. Neither movement started violently in nature, so what caused the protests to shift

towards violence and become so controversial? What caused both protests to be forced into limbo about whether or not they are true forms of civil disobedience? Was the shift to violence necessary and do all acts of civil disobedience follow this trend? These are questions that can only be answered by looking at the full history of events and trying to fully understand what caused these protests and what the outcomes were and possibly will be.

To begin talking about the history of the West Virginia Coal Wars one must first transport themselves to the early 20th century. Living in the state of West Virginia was not easy, as the Appalachian Mountain ranges created isolation from most other states in the nation. These ranges also housed an abundant supply of a natural resource that was in very high demand during the Industrial Revolution taking place, coal. This isolated, resource-rich land was a gold mine for company owners looking to make a quick buck, but their only problem was finding a workforce. Their solution was to build company towns for their workers to live in. This in itself does not sound like such a bad idea, until you begin to realize that this left workers with no ownership of anything worth value. Working in the mines was very strenuous and unsafe, as many mine workers were injured or died at very young ages due to such poor working conditions. On top of this, owners began to pay their workers in company money called “script”, which was worthless outside of company-owned stores that did not accept American currency and only accepted said “script” (Martin, 2019). This meant that these mine workers lived in homes they did not own, on property they did not own and were getting paid absolutely nothing while the companies made 100% profit (Martin, 2019). Needless to say, many workers began to get fed up with the living conditions they were forced into. Basically slaves, these workers were on the brink of action and

all they needed was a spark to put things into motion. Enter Mary Harris “Mother” Jones (Martin, 2019).

“Mother” Jones was a union agitator for the United Mine Workers Association (UMWA), which was a group put together to fight for the rights of miners across the nation. Some companies were union ran, however, not everyone was so lucky. “Mother” Jones once stated, “The miners made so little they were always in debt to the ‘Pluck Me Store.’ They were docked so heavily that they never had necessities. They had to load 2,240 pounds for a ton instead of 2,000, as the union miners do” (Newhouse, 2012). The company owners also paid local officials large sums of money in order to help harass union organizers such as “Mother” Jones. Arthur Gleason wrote in *The Nation* in 1913, “The operators pay directly to the sheriff \$32,700 a year for this immunity from unionization. In addition, most of them pay the individual armed guard salary. These agents of the company are deputy sheriffs” (Newhouse, 2012). This made fighting for the rights these workers deserved very hard, yet they still fought. All throughout the early 1910s, miners peacefully struck for better working conditions and “Mother” Jones was a very big part of this. In April 1912, miners along Paint Creek and Cabin Creek in Kanawha County left their jobs and decided to peacefully protest (Corbin, 2020). They demanded employer recognition of the union, which meant an end to company housing, company stores, company schools, company guards, and company churches, as well as better pay for the miners and control over their own lives and work (Corbin, 2020).

Soon mine companies hired guards from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency to take care of the striking miners, and these guards had a reputation of being very violent with the protesters.

Gianiana Seville testified against mine companies and in front of a U.S. Senate committee, she explained how 20 of these agents broke into her household and abused her. She stated “They struck me and I fell down, and then they kicked me in the stomach and they hit me with their fists in here (indicating) and then they knocked me down. ... They asked me to give them the keys to the trunk and I refused to do it, and then they hit me and threw me down” (Newhouse 2012). Seville was pregnant at the time, and when her husband arrived back home from his shift in the mines, he rushed her to the hospital where their baby was delivered dead. One night in February 1913, Kanawha County Sheriff Bonner Hill commanded a train equipped with a Gatling gun that shot up a tent city occupied by striking Paint Creek miners and their families (Newhouse, 2012). The Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike lasted a year and a half. Miners were beaten, ambushed, and killed by mine guards. With all the abuse and violence occurring, miners were growing restless, still being treated like slaves with no end in sight they were trying their best to have peaceful civil disobedience, but nothing was working. “Mother” Jones and many others were being arrested for their peaceful protests, and something had to give.

Miners began to take up arms and soon fought back against the corrupt local officials and Baldwin-Felts Detective agents. The Matewan Massacre is a well-known dispute during these “wars” where on May 19, 1920 mine owners were shot at and a bloody battle ensued due to the eviction of striking miners from their company homes. Many more acts of violence occurred leading up to the biggest insurrection since the Civil War, “The Battle of Blair Mountain.” This so-called battle began as the famous Miners’ March on Logan (Corbin, 2020). This march was the largest armed labor uprising in American history. As many as 20,000 miners marched 90 miles and fought a two-week battle with more than 5,000 Logan County deputy sheriffs, mine

guards, and state police for the basic rights they rightfully deserved (Corbin, 2020). Sadly, this story does not have a happy ending, as United States President Warren G. Harding placed the region under martial law and ordered 2,500 federal soldiers and a squadron of bomber aircraft into the state, ending both the strike and the Mine Wars themselves (Corbin, 2020). The workers' strikes, both peaceful and violent, had failed. They were forced to accept their lives in oppression to their company owners. This led to the end of the UMWA in southern West Virginia until the 1930s where Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" would finally answer the cries of the oppressed workers in West Virginia. (Corbin, 2020)

The protests occurring in the Mine War spanned almost an entire decade and only ended in violence due to not only having their complaints fall on deaf ears but violence being directed toward them for their civil disobedience. Strikingly, this can be seen in America today when looking into the rioting caused by the death of George Floyd. George Floyd's death under a Minneapolis police officer's knee on May 25 caused a ripple effect leading to peaceful and nonpeaceful protests alike (Heaney, 2020). His death is not the cause of the entirety of protests going on; however, it was that catalyst that changed many acts of civil disobedience into a radical protest. Mirroring the violence of government officials seen during the peaceful protests in the Mine Wars, police officer Derek Chauvin brutally killed George Floyd as Floyd cried for help stating, "I can't breathe" (Taylor, 2020).

For decades now, African Americans have fought to bring light to the fact that police officers in America have been racially profiling them (Sugrue, 2020). George Floyd was not the first African American whose death sparked protests, time and time again Americans have

protested for change. Look no further than the protests following the deaths of Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner who were all killed by police (Cheung, 2020). These protests were all mostly peaceful, and all met with deaf ears and even more violent acts coming from the government. This situation is eerily similar to that of the Mine Wars: what was once peaceful cries for help finally exploded into violence after decades of neglect and disregard.

Due to the rioting and violence, many Americans have changed their mind on the cause as certain media outlets have been able to paint these protesters as “thugs” much in the same way that during the 1920’s the media was able to paint the striking miners as “dumb rednecks”. The use of civil disobedience failed the oppressed mineworkers and is currently failing the rioting Americans outraged by the death of African Americans at the hands of police officers. The Mine Wars ended in failure, but history does not have to repeat itself. Many acts of civil disobedience turn violent; however, it does not always have to be this way. There is still time for George Floyd’s death to be avenged. A victory for these protestors would mean changes in current laws that would stop police officers from being protected in the brutal murder of innocent African Americans, and rules set in place to help to stop the racial profiling and discrimination that occurs from police officers daily. This could be achieved with more peaceful civil disobedience because as seen with the Mine Wars when civil disobedience turns into radical protests, it allows the government to step in and destroy any work and momentum that these movements may have built. Hopefully, this is not the case with the George Floyd protests, but the beginning of this effect can be seen in the actions taken by President Trump and the National Guard. However, it may not be too late to fix this issue.

Civil disobedience is necessary for change in many situations, but sometimes it does not get the change it rightfully deserves. This causes anger and at times violence as seen by the protests and riots scattered across America today, as well as the Mine Wars that took place in West Virginia in the 20th century. This violence does not make civil disobedience any less important, nor does it give any reason to be concerned when it occurs; civic duty does sometimes demand civil disobedience. These people fought and are fighting for valid claims they believe in, and it is due to the neglect of the government they turned violent. They tried to do their civic duty by being peaceful and civically disobedient. The mine workers looked to the past with happened with the American Revolution, and today protesters are looking to what happened with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and '70s. In both cases, civil disobedience was rewarded with much-needed change, making it clear that it is sometimes demanded as it lets the voices of the public known to those in power. Civil disobedience is a cry for change, and right now millions of African Americans are crying and have been for years. The violence is and has been caused by the deafness of those in power to the cries of the people. The strikes returned peacefully in the 1930s once America was under new leadership and eventually the miners found the victory they so desperately sought after. The "New Deal" brought forth minimum wage, rights for workers, and the right to unions among other things. This may be the path the current riots follow, as the violence occurring now and lack of government action to help with the situation makes it seem unlikely that change is coming soon. Maybe, like the miners, the strikes must return peacefully once new leadership is in place. Hopefully, this will lead to the victory of those striking for African Americans today, and further, strengthen the claim that civil disobedience is truly a civic duty that all Americans are entitled to.

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