Security and Liberty

Wartime laws and the First Red Scare

USH.C.3.2.C "Describe the purpose of the Espionage Act and Sedition Act within the context of the First Red Scare and its impact on individual liberties, such as the imprisonment of anti-war critics and activists, the Palmer Raids..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline what the wartime laws were meant to protect, circle examples of restricted liberties, and number the two sentences that explain why the Palmer Raids and the Sacco-Vanzetti trial were not prosecutions under those laws.

When Fear Shaped Justice

(1) In 1917, as the United States entered World War I, officials feared that spies and interference could weaken the war effort. The Espionage Act of 1917 punished spying and actions that obstructed military recruitment. A 1918 amendment, commonly called the Sedition Act, made certain disloyal or abusive statements about the government, Constitution, flag, or armed forces a crime. Leaders said these laws protected national security during wartime. Yet the laws also reached public speech. Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs criticized the war in a speech, was convicted under the Espionage Act, and began serving a prison sentence in 1919.

(2) After the war, strikes, bombings, and the Russian Revolution fed fears of revolution in the United States. This period, known as the First Red Scare, made criticism and radical political beliefs seem threatening to many Americans. In 1919 and 1920, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer directed raids on people suspected of radical activity. Federal agents arrested thousands, including immigrants, and many detainees were held without proper warrants or access to lawyers. Some were deported under immigration laws. The raids were not prosecutions under the Espionage or Sedition Acts, but they reflected a similar willingness to restrict liberties in the name of security.

(3) In 1920, police arrested Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants and anarchists, for a robbery and two murders in Massachusetts. A jury convicted them in 1921, and they were executed in 1927. They were tried for murder, not for violating the wartime speech laws. Still, their case became part of the debate over the First Red Scare because critics argued that fear of anarchists and prejudice against immigrants shaped the trial. Others believed the evidence supported the verdict. Together, these events raise a question: when officials claim to protect public safety, how can people safeguard speech, due process, and fair trials?

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Espionage Act aim to protect the war effort, and what did the Sedition Act add?

2. How does Debs's case show a conflict between wartime security and freedom of speech?

3. Why do the Palmer Raids belong in a discussion of restricted liberties during the First Red Scare, even though they were not prosecutions under the wartime laws?

4. Why did the Sacco-Vanzetti trial raise concerns about fair trials during the First Red Scare, despite the charges against them?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 75 to 100 word memo to a civic committee proposing one rule to protect individual liberties during a security scare. Use two different events from the passage to explain why your rule matters, and acknowledge one security concern.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · USH.C.3.2.C

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline what the wartime laws were meant to protect, circle examples of restricted liberties, and number the two sentences that explain why the Palmer Raids and the Sacco-Vanzetti trial were not prosecutions under those laws. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Espionage Act aim to protect the war effort, and what did the Sedition Act add?	**The Espionage Act punished spying and obstruction of military recruitment. The Sedition Act also made certain disloyal or abusive statements about the government and other national institutions a crime.**
2	How does Debs's case show a conflict between wartime security and freedom of speech?	**Debs criticized the war in a speech and was imprisoned after a conviction under the Espionage Act, showing how a law meant to protect the war effort could punish political speech.**
3	Why do the Palmer Raids belong in a discussion of restricted liberties during the First Red Scare, even though they were not prosecutions under the wartime laws?	**Agents arrested thousands of suspected radicals, and many were held without proper warrants or access to lawyers. The raids restricted liberties in the name of security, though deportations used immigration laws.**
4	Why did the Sacco-Vanzetti trial raise concerns about fair trials during the First Red Scare, despite the charges against them?	**They faced robbery and murder charges, not charges under the wartime speech laws. Critics argued that fear of anarchists and prejudice against immigrants shaped their trial.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

To the civic committee: Require a lawyer and a prompt court hearing for every person detained during a security scare. Officials must be able to investigate bombings and robberies, but fear alone should not justify holding someone. During the Palmer Raids, many suspects lacked proper warrants or access to lawyers. In the Sacco-Vanzetti case, critics argued that prejudice against immigrants influenced a murder trial. My rule would let a judge check the grounds for detention and help defendants challenge biased claims before a case proceeds.

Accept other accurate explanations of the laws' purposes and effects on speech or due process. For the memo, accept a feasible rule supported by two distinct passage events and a stated security concern.