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Justice and The Law

In all aspects of life, a common question that often pops-up is: “does the ends justify the means?” This is a debate which has many strong opinions from both sides. The actions of vigilantes holds a similar foundation to this question. It is a challenging task to identify the true answer. Some believe that it is solely the authorities job to enforce the law, while others believe that common citizens should act, to do what the law officials could not do. I find myself agreeing with those that believe that it is not vigilantes’ place to take the law into their own hands. In order to provide some evidence to support this claim, it is beneficial to look at a specific case of vigilantism; such as the story of the Reno Gang and The Vigilance Committee.

The 1800’s marked a turning point in American Civilization with the creation of the steam engine. With trains becoming a popular mode of transport, highwaymen had to adapt their approach of thievery. Soon outlaws began to find ways of stopping trains, robbing the passengers, and stealing the cargo. This was a dangerous activity that was given much attention by the media. The first train robbery was accomplished by members of the Reno Gang in 1866. The Reno Gang was started by the Reno brothers and worked around Indiana. Through 1866 and 1868, they robbed several trains and committed similar criminal activities. After a train robbery in 1868, the members were captured by the Pinkerton National Detective Agency.[[1]](#endnote-1) Shortly after their capture, the members were lynched by vigilantes on three separate occasions.

The first instance occurred on July 20th of 1868. Three of the Reno Gang members, Val Elliot, Charles Roseberry, and Phil Clifton were captured by local authorities and were to be transported via train. The authorities went to strenuous lengths to keep the prison transportation secret, because they believed the gang members may attempt to rescue them. It seems that members of the Vigilance Committee spotted the prisoner transfer in progress at an early stage and contacted other members to intercept the train. As the train was traveling, it was stopped in the dark by a man with a light. As soon as the train was stopped, over a hundred armed men surrounded the train. The leaders of the group marched into the train and ceased the prisoners, while meeting little resistance from the guards. The vigilantes swiftly took the criminals into the night.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The following day, the bodies of the three prisoners were found hanging by a tree. This event received much attention from the media and local citizens, one might assume it is because the Reno Gang were popular outlaws. Along with the execution, members of the Vigilance Committee passed out pamphlets to the citizens. The pamphlet served as an official warning towards all criminals that the Vigilance Committee were taking the law into their own hand and would put a violent stop to crime.

The Vigilance Committee had not yet accomplished its task, for there were still seven more members of the gang at large. Moore, Sparks, and Jerrell were all working and hiding on a farm in Illinois. The local Sheriff arrested them, and it was decided that the men should be transferred to prison by wagon. At about midnight they set off without any resistance from vigilantes. At about two in the morning, masked men stopped the carriage, and in a similar manner as the first instance, lynched the three gang members without any trial or due process of the law.

The third instance caught even more attention from the media. Three of the Reno brothers, Simeon, William, and Frank, had recently been captured along with their fellow conspirator Charles Anderson. The authorities realized that vigilantes may attempt to finish their mission and lynch the remainder of the Reno Gang, therefor they took all precautions. They were determined that the criminals would see justice within the scope of the law.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In the final instance, the vigilantes went to the prison cell to commit their social cleansing. Up to 100 of the vigilantes, wearing scarlet masks, overpowered the guard and shot the sheriff in the arm. They threatened to kill the sheriff if he did not reveal the location of the prisoners, but the sheriff bravely refused to give them up. The sheriff’s wife was also at the prison and the vigilantes attempted to pry out the answer from her, but she also refused. When the vigilantes again threatened to kill the sheriff, his wife submitted and gave them the keys to the cell. Mercilessly, the vigilantes took the prisoners one-by-one and hung them outside of the prison. Some members threatened to kill the sheriff and the other prisoners, who were murderers, but the leaders stated that they had gotten what they had come for.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Having explored the details of the story, the question that is presented is whether or not the vigilantes were justified in lynching the Reno Gang and other criminals. In order to answer the question, it is productive to explore the opinions on both sides of the argument. Some believe that only members of law have the authority to enforce the law. The other side believes that the citizens have the right to enforce the law, when the authorities will not.

First, let us look at the reasons why some believe the Vigilance Committee is justified. The general opinion of those who agree with the vigilantes, is that they are tired of how the law handles criminals. They believe that too often wealthy criminals buy their immunity from corrupt judges. When criminals who should be hanged, are set free, people believe they must act to do what the law authorities will not, bring justice to murderers. There was a strong opinion that the Reno Gang were thieves and murders and that they were making the public unsafe. Traveling by steam engines was now dangerous due to the attacks by the Reno Gang. Members of the Vigilance Committee were acting to restore public safety and the only way to accomplish this was by hanging the people who were a threat to society. The vigilantes believe that the ends justify the means.

On the contrasting side, many members of society believe that it is not vigilantes place to take the law into their own hand. They believe that vigilantes are no better than the criminals, both are acting outside of the law and committing murder. Vigilantism is illegal, it often gets in the way of law officials doing their job. All citizens who are accused of crimes have a right to a trial and due process of the law. Vigilantes punish “suspects” without proof. There are several recorded incidents of vigilantes torturing and murdering suspect that turn out to be innocent. When looking at the final lynching of the reno gang, it was clear that the sheriff of the prison was disgusted by the action of the vigilantes. Vigilantes believe that they are better than sheriffs and often get in their way while trying to perform their own justification. In the end, vigilantes are no better than the criminals they kill; both act outside of the law, both use force to threaten officials, and both commit unjust murder. As one newspaper wrote: “violence will provoke violence; law alone can repress and restrain.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Both views on vigilantes held support from public citizens. It appears, however, that the majority of people at this time believed that the vigilantes were right to act out against criminal activities. There were several newspaper articles at this time that clearly stated their disapproval for vigilantes’ acts. However, the majority of people in Indiana were upset at law officials for letting criminals off without punishment. Citizens believed that the system was corrupt, and it was time for them to step up and take charge. This was obvious in the number of members that joined the Vigilance Committee. The organization was a statement of the citizens’ dissatisfaction with how the justice system operated. This was clearly stated in a letter from a citizen to the newspaper. The citizen expresses how guiltless people are forced to step up and take the law into their own hand to keep society safe.[[6]](#endnote-6)

When objectively looking at the arguments for and against vigilantism, it becomes quite clear to me that the enforcement of the law is best done by the local police and sheriffs. Too often there are incidents of vigilantes torturing and killing innocent people, without any sort of proof. No one is above the law. Vigilantes aren’t very different from the criminals that they lynch. The members of the Vigilance Committee stopped a train, threatened to kill innocent police, shot the sheriff, broke into a prison, and of course committed multiple murders. It makes it hard to sympathize with vigilantes, when they break the laws that they condemn their victims of committing.

Having analyzed documents covering the events of the Reno Gang and the Vigilance Committee, it is clear that there was a different view point between Americans in the 1800’s and present day. In the 1800’s citizens didn’t trust the judicial system like they do now. This is clear when observing over 100 members of society banding together to enforce their own justice. In that time lynching wasn’t considered an abnormality. Often people would be lynched, but it was mainly due to racism. In today’s society it would be unlikely for a large group of normal people to group together to “murder” criminals. In that time, capital punishment was a typical justice for thieves and murderers.

The story of the Reno Gang and the Vigilance Committee is a remarkable tale. A gang of imprisoned criminals are hunted down and murdered by a group of vigilantes in extraordinary fashion. There is no common tale that can rival this story and show such true vigilantism. The media widely covered such events and from this grew many opinions on vigilantes and the law. Some believed that it was necessary for vigilantes to enforce the law, while others believed it was solely the police’s authority to enforce the law. This was a time in the wild west, where the law was enforced by local citizens as much as the authorities.

1. Lynch Law in the West - The Hanging of Three Men” Baltimore Sun, July 23, 1868. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lynch Law in Indiana: The Hanging of Three of the Express Robbers by a Vigilance Committee,” Philadelphia Inquirer, July 25, 1868. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Veiled Death in Indiana,” Daily Memphis Avalanche, December 16, 1868. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Indiana Mob Law” New York Tribune, December 19, 1868 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lynching Criminals” Chicago Tribune, July 25, 1868. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Letter from Indianapolis citizen to The Chicago Republican” New York Tribune, August 1, 1868. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)