



# Thunder In the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War, 1920–21

*Lon Savage*

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The West Virginia mine war of 1920-21, a major civil insurrection of unusual brutality on both sides, even by the standards of the coal fields, involved thousands of union and nonunion miners, state and private police, militia, and federal troops. Before it was over, three West Virginia counties were in open rebellion, much of the state was under military rule, and bombers of the U.S. Army Air Corps had been dispatched against striking miners.

The origins of this civil war were in the Draconian rule of the coal companies over the fiercely proud miners of Appalachia. It began in the small railroad town of Matewan when Mayor C. C. Testerman and Police Chief Sid Hatfield sided with striking miners against agents of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, who attempted to evict the miners from company-owned housing. During a street battle, Mayor Testerman, seven Baldwin-Felts agents, and two miners were shot to death.

Hatfield became a folk hero to Appalachia. But he, like Testerman, was to be a martyr. The next summer, Baldwin-Felts agents assassinated him and his best friend, Ed Chambers, as their wives watched, on the steps of the courthouse in Welch, accelerating the miners' rebellion into open warfare.

Much neglected in historical accounts, *Thunder in the Mountains* is the only available book-length account of the crisis in American industrial relations and governance that occurred during the West Virginia mine war of 1920-21.

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