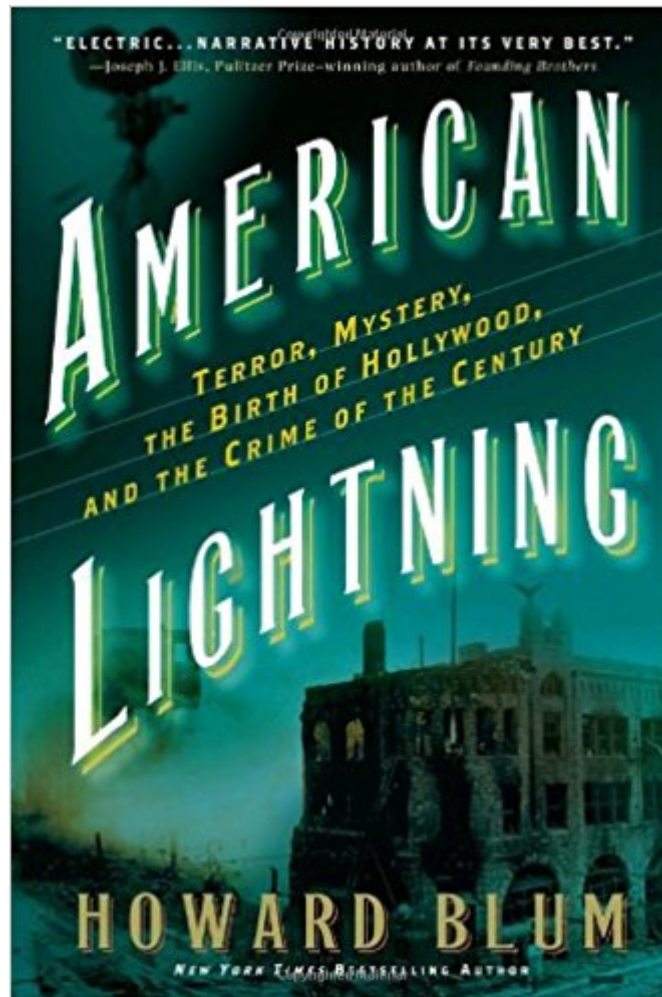


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# American Lightning: Terror, Mystery, The Birth Of Hollywood, And The Crime Of The Century



## Synopsis

It was an explosion that reverberated across the countryâand into the very heart of early-twentieth-century America. On the morning of October 1, 1910, the walls of the Los Angeles Times Building buckled as a thunderous detonation sent men, machinery, and mortar rocketing into the night air. When at last the wreckage had been sifted and the hospital triage units consulted, twenty-one people were declared dead and dozens more injured. But as it turned out, this was just a prelude to the devastation that was to come. In *American Lightning*, acclaimed author Howard Blum masterfully evokes the incredible circumstances that led to the original âcrime of the centuryââand an aftermath more dramatic than even the crime itself. With smoke still wafting up from the charred ruins, the cityâs mayor reacts with undisguised excitement when he learns of the arrival, only that morning, of Americaâs greatest detective, William J. Burns, a former Secret Service man who has been likened to Sherlock Holmes. Surely Burns, already world famous for cracking unsolvable crimes and for his elaborate disguises, can run the perpetrators to ground. Through the work of many months, snowbound stakeouts, and brilliant forensic sleuthing, the great investigator finally identifies the men he believes are responsible for so much destruction. Stunningly, Burns accuses the menâlabor activists with an apparent grudge against the Los Angeles Timesâs fiercely anti-union ownerâof not just one heinous deed but of being part of a terror wave involving hundreds of bombings. While preparation is laid for Americaâs highest profile trial everâand the forces of labor and capital wage hand-to-hand combat in the streetsâtwo other notable figures are swept into the drama: industry-shaping filmmaker D.W. Griffith, who perceives in these events the possibility of great art and who will go on to alchemize his observations into the landmark film *The Birth of a Nation*; and crusading lawyer Clarence Darrow, committed to lend his eloquence to the defendants, though he will be driven to thoughts of suicide before events have fully played out. Simultaneously offering the absorbing reading experience of a canât-put-it-down thriller and the perception-altering resonance of a story whose reverberations continue even today, *American Lightning* is a masterpiece of narrative nonfiction.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"American Lightning" presents one chapter in the fierce cultural war of strikes, propaganda, politics, and violence that raged between labor unions and capitalist businesses in the early part of the 20th century: On October 1, 1910, six explosions destroyed the "Los Angeles Times" building, leaving 21 people dead and 17 injured. The owner of the "Times" newspaper was vehement anti-union propagandist Harrison Gray Otis. The bombing was immediately assumed to be part of a campaign by anarchists to attack the mechanisms of capital in which more than 100 bombs were planted across the nation. The city of Los Angeles hired Billy Burns, former Secret Service agent and founder of the Burns Detective Agency, to find the persons responsible. This is history for the popular fiction market. "American Lightning" tells the story of Billy Burns' investigation and the subsequent campaigns of public relations, witness intimidation, and juror bribery that took place as the three men whom Burns accused awaited trial in Los Angeles. Author Howard Blum relates the story in the style of narrative fiction, like a novel. He attempts to weave together the stories of three prominent men who helped shape this period in American history and were, in turn, shaped by the war between labor and capital: detective Billy Burns, crusading attorney Clarence Darrow, who represented the accused men, and filmmaker D.W. Griffith, who moved his operations from New York to Los Angeles in the midst of all the furor. I appreciate that Howard Blum is trying to bring a forgotten chapter of American history to a broad audience. The 1910s were a time when the nation's security was threatened by very real violent conspiracies but Americans managed, for the most part, to prevail without succumbing to paranoia on a large scale.

Not a lot to add to some of the other critical reviews of this book as I agree that the Burns/Griffith/Otis narrative was scattershot and made for a lot of extraneous material. One point I have not seen in other reviews that I would expound upon is Blum's clear bias, which - for me - made the book less enjoyable from the beginning. The central conflict in Blum's set-up is the labor

versus capital tension that escalated from striking and strike breaking to the bombing that serves as the book's central narrative. As he lays out this conflict, he is unsparing in his criticism of Otis, his trade association and his allies. While they are "uncompromising," the LA Times' writing is "shrill and unyielding," and their actions to break strikes are "brutal." By contrast, the union leaders are possessed of "strident minds," Griffith's work embodies "the workingman's struggle to put a loaf of bread on his dinner table." Where Otis is "intransigent" and "belligerent," union leader Olaf Tveitmoe is "fierce," "formidable," and "intellectual." But, that is just one element. Overall, there are just much better reads out there unless you really want to hone in on this crime, this city, or these historical figures. In fiction or in historical nonfiction, I would look elsewhere for a capsule of this rocky time period at the turn of the century, only forty years removed from the Civil War and in the midst of America's fitful rise to the global power that it would cement in WWII. There is no shortage of good material in what has been a fertile historical period for literature recently. Mike Dash's work is superior on true crime - as is Larson's in both *Devil* and *Thunderstruck*.

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