

Wars of Attrition

***Vietnam, the Business Roundtable, and the
Decline of Construction Unions***

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Construction Workers' Counter-Demonstrations Supporting the U.S. Invasion of Cambodia and Neutralizing the Nixon Administration: The End of the '60s

The union craftsman, while not exactly a Wall Street banker or a prosperous physician, does have a large stake in preserving our society with its institutions against the destructive forces of revolutionary change. ... In a way, the craft union is more hateful than Wall Street to the braintrusters of the Left.... If, Brothers, we must beware the Right because we are labor, we must beware the Left because we are very fortunate labor in a very blessed country.¹

[T]he press and television have...attached something demeaning and brutal to the name [hard hat]. Why? Because a few construction workers in New York, goaded beyond endurance by the sight of unwashed, uncombed, unkempt young rebels desecrating a flag so many fought to protect in World War II, reacted in a very human way. They used their fists, fists calloused by honest work, fists used to paying taxes and saluting the flag.²

The building-trades counter-demonstrations in Manhattan in May 1970 in the wake of the open U.S. invasion of Cambodia, the killing of four students at Kent State University by the National Guard on May 4, and the student-led antiwar demonstrations became a crucial symbolic political event in the complex struggle over construction unionism. For *Business Week*, suddenly much more than symbols was at stake: events had consolidated “the academic community against the war, against business, and against government. This is a dangerous situation. It threatens the whole economic and social structure of the nation.”³ The magazine intoned similarly solemn words about the construction workers’ “almost surreal performance”—what it called “Three days that shook the establishment.”⁴

National leaders of the building trades unions, unlike some of their industrial counterparts, had long displayed chauvinist zeal in supporting U.S. war-making in Vietnam.⁵ In 1965, the National Legislative Conference of the BCTD, 4,200 building trades union leaders representing more than 3,500,000 workers, unanimously passed a resolution supporting President Johnson’s conduct of the war,

¹Peter Schoemann, “Enough Is Enough,” 79 (4) *UAJ* n.p. [inside front cover], n.p. [inside back cover] (Apr. 1967).

²M. A. Hutcheson, “If Hard Hats Stand for Hard-Working Old-Fashioned Patriotism, So Be It,” 91 (5) *Carpenter* 40 (May 1971).

³“Handling the Student Protest Movement,” *BW*, May 16, 1970, at 140.

⁴“Three Days that Shook the Establishment,” *BW*, May 16, 1970, at 24.

⁵To be sure, polls indicated that overall a somewhat larger proportion of union members favored more U.S. military action in Vietnam than of the population at large. Derek Bok & John Dunlop, *Labor and the American Community* 61 (1970).

and calling on their 8,000 local unions and 525 state and local councils to “counteract the senseless [antiwar] demonstrations” by promoting a “better understanding” of the war goals.⁶ In 1966 Maurice Hutcheson, who had inherited his general presidency of the Carpenters from his father William, analogized the right to dissent regarding the war in Vietnam to the right to cry “fire” in a crowded theater.⁷ To be sure, that year also witnessed the AFL-CIO convention adopt a resolution pledging the organization’s “unstinting support...of all measures the Administration might deem necessary to halt Communist aggression....”⁸ In 1967, the president of the BCTD told its annual convention that “we should stay until we do win, decisively and totally.”⁹

The year 1970 also marked the high point in labor militance during the Vietnam era. The United States had not experienced such a level of strikes, strikers, and striker-days across a broad spectrum of industries (including and especially construction) since the historically unprecedented postwar wave of 1946.¹⁰ In March mail workers ignited the first strike in the history of the postal service, which originated in New York City, was illegal, nationwide, and, after the federal government had failed to keep mail moving with the National Guard, successful. April witnessed wildcat strikes by Teamsters in various locals in blatant disregard of their national president’s orders. “The truculence of the 1970 wearer of a union button,” according to *The New York Times*, was driven by the “melting away of wage envelopes in a period of high corporate profits....”¹¹

In the wake of these pioneering labor eruptions and the nationwide seismic reaction to the invasion of Cambodia, student demonstrations took place on May 6, 1970 at various locations in New York City including Wall Street. Construction workers made their first appearance by raining down bottles, beer cans, and asphalt on demonstrators from a building on Broadway.¹² Medical students and construction workers, according to the front-page caption of “New York’s Picture Newspaper,” “tangle[d] after medics, gathering for antiwar rally at Battery, reportedly made obscene gestures at workers showing American flag.”¹³ Strikes at and closings of colleges and universities, followed by the decision of the New York City Board of

⁶“Our Firm Stand: Viet Nam Resolution,” 18 (12) *BCTB* (Dec. 1965) [no pagination]. See also “AFL-CIO Building Trades Convention Acts on 30 Resolutions in San Francisco,” 109 (1) *IOE* 11-13 at 13 (Jan. 1966).

⁷M. A. Hutcheson, “When the Right to Dissent Becomes a Disservice,” 85 (1) *Carpenter* 40 (Jan. 1966).

⁸“Sixth AFL-CIO Convention Examines Labor’s Future,” 109 (1) *IOE* 8-10 at 9 (Jan. 1966).

⁹“Haggerty Opens Building Trades Convention,” *CLR*, No. 636, Nov. 29, 1967, at A-6, A-8.

¹⁰BLS, *Analysis of Work Stoppages, 1970* (Bull. 1727, 1972).

¹¹A. H. Raskin, “Strike Fever Speeds Up Wage-Price Spiral,” *NYT*, Apr. 5, 1970.

¹²Sandor Polster, “Protests Are Peaceful,” *NYP*, May 6, 1970, at 2, col. 1; Pete Hamill, “Hard Hats and Cops,” *NYP*, May 12, 1970, at 47, col. 1-2.

¹³*NYDN*, May 7, 1970, at 1.

Education to close all public schools on Friday, May 8, as a memorial to the students killed at Kent State, enhanced protesters' availability and visibility. Construction workers' first major ground-level intervention occurred on May 7 at a rally of 2,000 protestors at Wall and Broad, when about 50 of them from a nearby project "waded into the crowd and began to pummel demonstrators." As the protestors left and marched up Broadway, construction workers "began to pelt the marchers with rocks and cans" from the upper floors of a building.¹⁴ *New York Post* columnist Pete Hamill described them standing "up there, bellies bulging defiantly" after having hit a woman passerby with their beer cans and clumps of asphalt.¹⁵

The first counter-demonstration by construction workers, many of whom were employed building the World Trade Center, was directed against a Wall Street student protest on May 8. With building activity "intense" as a result of work at the Trade Center and other major office buildings, and airport and institutional construction, "[r]ight now there's 120 per cent employment of construction labor in New York in the key trades." The tight labor market and abundant overtime made for prosperous times.¹⁶ Hundreds of such construction workers, whose highest priority, to judge by their actions, was to remedy the tattered prestige of the American flag—their displeasure was triggered, inter alia, by the fact that the headquarters of the *Wall Street Journal* was unflagged, an abuse that they alleviated by hoisting one of their own—"some armed with lead pipes and crowbars, ranged freely through the financial district for almost three hours," beating up many demonstrators without prompting much interest from the police, who reportedly knew and drank with them.¹⁷ While kicking a person they had knocked onto the ground, one of a group of construction workers said: "This Commie kid deserves to be killed." A Sullivan & Cromwell lawyer who tried to intervene wound up in the hospital.¹⁸ The *New York Post*, which for days devoted its front and second and third pages to the demonstrations, editorially denounced the workers as "mobsters" and "hard-hat rightist brutalitarians."¹⁹ Vice President Agnew justified their acts by distinguishing between the motives of violent leftists and those of construction workers: "if at times they lose their tempers and throw a punch or two...theirs is not

¹⁴Sandor Polster, "Order Schools Closed Friday," *NYP*, May 7, 1970, at 1, col. 5, at 2, col. 3.

¹⁵Pete Hamill, "In the Heart of the Beast," *NYP*, May 7, 1970, at 49, col. 1 at 3.

¹⁶Alan Oser, "Building Costs Push Steadily Upward," *NYT*, June 14, 1970, sect. 8, at 1, col. 1 at 4 (quoting Saul Horowitz, Jr., president, HRH Construction Co.).

¹⁷Homer Bigart, "Thousands in City March to Assail Lindsay on War," *NYT*, May 16, 1970, at 11, col. 3; Michael Drosnin, "After 'Bloody Friday,' New York Wonders If Wall Street Is Becoming a Battleground," *WSJ*, May 11, 1970, at 10, col. 3 at 4 (quote); Pete Hamill, "Hard Hats and Cops," *NYP*, May 12, 1970, at 47, col. 1-3; John Brooks, *The Go-Go Years 6-10* (1973).

¹⁸Sandor Polster, "Workmen Smash into Students Here," *NYP*, May 8, 1970, at 1, col. 5, at 2, col. 3-4.

¹⁹"Hard Hats and Broken Heads," *NYP*, May 9, 1970, at 26, col. 1-2.

an aggressive anger...eager to invade the property of others...."²⁰

Agnew's praise of property-loving workers suppressed the fact that a "roving band of 500 construction workers," after "storm[ing]" City Hall and forcing an inferior force of police, "in the interest of safety," to raise the flag from its half-mast position that Lindsay had ordered in memory of the Kent State students, "bulled their way into the [Pace] college lobby, smashing huge glass plate windows and slugging terrified students...gathering signatures for an antiwar petition." At least 12 were hospitalized.²¹

A *New York Times* reporter concluded that the workers' patriotic rhetorical flights might have struck the "more cynical bystander...[as] an easy price to pay for an unexpected day off from work. But to anyone who spent hours in the march constantly hearing of this special devotion to the physical presence of the flag, this fervor seemed composed of deeper strains ranging from the mystical to the primitive."²² (Union construction workers' reverence for the flag is indeed venerable: as early as 1886, the Bricklayers Union passed a resolution both disavowing any affiliation with organizations governed by socialist, communist, or anarchist views and urging that "the flag bearing the stars and stripes is the flag that should be recognized as the standard of all labor organizations.")²³ A "thin, gentle-looking woman," whom three construction workers punched in the ribs—"If you want to be treated like an equal we'll treat you like one"—when she tried to stop one of them from going after a student with a pair of iron clippers, concluded: "They believe passionately that the students are destroying the country. They are very sincere and its [sic] very scarey [sic]."²⁴ So passionately sincere was one 29-year-old structural ironworker, an ex-Marine who was earning \$348 a week on the U.S. Steel building at Liberty Street and Broadway, that he was able to "run after and beat people with long hair" despite having recently broken three toes when a steel beam fell on his foot: "it was probably the only day my foot didn't hurt me a bit. I had other things on my mind."²⁵

In the course of the next two weeks similar patriotic outbursts occurred. On

²⁰Spiro Agnew, "In Defense of Hard Hats," 70 (8) *Ironworker* 2-3 at 2 (Aug. 1970) (reprinted from the St. Louis *Globe Democrat*).

²¹Jean Crafton et al., "500 Storm City Hall to Raise Flag," *NYDN*, May 9, 1970, at 3, col. 1-3. Perversely, the *Daily News* editorialized that Lindsay had "brought much of this trouble on himself" because in the previous four years he had "hampered and hobbled the police...in the matter of curbing disorderly crowds." "We Do Not Condone," *NY DN*, May 12, 1970, at 39, col. 1.

²²Francis Clines, "Workers for Nixon and Flag Come out in Force," *NYT*, May 24, 1970, sect. 4 at 2, col. 4.

²³Harry Bates, *Bricklayers' Century of Craftsmanship: A History of the Bricklayers, Masons and Plasterers' International Union of America 75-76* (1955).

²⁴Leonard Katz, "'They Came at Us Like Animals,'" *NYP*, May 9, 1970, at 8, col. 1 at 3.

²⁵Timothy Lee, "Construction Workers—Who They Are, What They Believe," *NYP*, May 16, 1970, at 21, col. 1-2.

May 11, 1,500 to upwards of 5,000 construction workers and longshoremen “roamed through Lower Manhattan in organized bands,” throwing punches at bystanders.²⁶ A “huge lunchtime crowd lined the streets...cheering the workmen as if they were a conquering army.”²⁷ Even as five police unions responded to charges about their passivity in the face of construction workers’ violence by asserting that “New York City stands today on the brink of anarchy,”²⁸ Hamill accused them of having “collaborated with the construction workers in the same way that Southern sheriffs used to collaborate with the rednecks...beating up freedom riders.”²⁹ The same day a member of Ironworkers Local 455 exclaimed to 3,000 students at City College that the construction workers he had seen were “black shirts and brown shirts of Hitler’s Germany”; his own local, in contrast to others whose members had terrorized students, was fully integrated and the majority opposed the war.³⁰ In its account of the May 11th demonstration, the *Daily World*, the organ of the Communist Party U.S.A., which had initially failed to identify the May 8th attackers as workers, finally reported that 1,000 construction workers had “again rampaged.”³¹ Its editor, apparently incapable of believing that genuine proletarians could have “defiled the honor of every workingman and working woman,” repeatedly had recourse to skeptical quotation marks in mentioning the “goon attacks of ‘construction workers’”; these “‘construction workers’ [sic] forays... smelled like Hitler’s street gangs.”³²

The marching construction workers’ demand on May 12 was the impeachment of “the red Mayor,”³³ while the following day’s watchword was “Down With Lindsay, Up With Nixon.”³⁴ By this time, Hamill reported, “the troops of the New Bullyism” had been joined by “all those white collar workers one always sees lounging at street corners on Broad St. at lunchtime, making sucking sounds

²⁶Sandor Polster, “Cops Nip Violence in Workers March,” *NYP*, May 11, 1970, at 1, col. 6 (quote); Edward Kirkman & Joseph McNamara, “5,000 Demonstrators Rap Mayor,” *NYDN*, May 12, 1970, at 3, col. 1.

²⁷ Michael Drosnin, “Construction Men Stage Another March in Wall Street Area,” *WSJ*, May 12, 1970, at 12, col. 2.

²⁸Anthony Mancini, “Police Unions: Wait for Facts,” *NYP*, May 11, 1970, at 1, col. 4, at 2, col. 1. Mayor Lindsay had called for an investigation into reports that the police had received advance warning of the workers’ plans. Cy Egan, “Mayor Calls Police Brass on the Carpet,” *NYP*, May 9, 1970, at 1, col. 1.

²⁹Hamill, “Hard Hats and Cops.”

³⁰Anthony Burton, “Builds a Bridge to Students,” *NYDN*, May 12, 1970, at 3, col. 3, 5.

³¹Vicki Morris, “Day of Mourning, Day of Marching,” *DW*, May 9, 1970, at 3, col. 4; “1,000 Stage Pro-War Mob Attacks at City Hall,” *DW*, May 12, 1970, at 12, col. 3.

³²“Goon Squads and Cops,” *DW*, May 12, 1970, at 7, col. 1. The next day it continued to use quotation marks in describing the “‘construction workers’ [who] roamed the financial district at will....” “Business Students in Wall St. Peace Rally,” *DW*, May 13, 1970, at 3, col. 2 at 4.

³³Sandor Polster, “Cops Split Protest Groups,” *NYP*, May 12, 1970, at 3, col. 3 at 5.

³⁴Sandor Polster, “Marchers Go Uptown,” *NYP*, May 13, 1970, at 1, col. 1.

with their mouths as girls go by. They were there in their Robert Hall suits and the dandruff on the shoulders, the army of the \$125-a-week clerks inflamed now by the excitement of doing something that...would give them an opportunity to strike out at all the privileged, at all the pampered..."³⁵ On the 15th, as the U.S. Attorney announced that the federal government was investigating the violent attacks as possible violations of antiwar demonstrators' civil rights, 3000 construction workers were marching 15 abreast up Broadway to City Hall Park led by motorcyclists in black leather jackets and accompanied by a 12-piece brass band. With the help of a bull horn, a Brooklyn Republican assemblyman praised the workers for their "pride in America."³⁶

Construction workers' intervention attained its organized high point on May 20. In the words of *The New York Times*:

Marching under a sea of American flags, helmeted construction workers led tens of thousands of noisy but peaceful demonstrators...in a rally and parade supporting the Vietnam policies of President Nixon and assailing Mayor Lindsay and other opponents of the war in Indochina.

Staged by the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York to demonstrate "love of country and love and respect for our country's flag," the noontime rally...drew a crowd estimated to number 60,000 to 150,000.³⁷

Peter Brennan, president of the 200,000-member Council, set the tone by instructing the cheering sea of war and Nixon supporters that "this flag is more than just a piece of cloth."³⁸ Such rhetoric prompted Hamill to express his disbelief that Brennan would ever hold a rally calling for integration of construction unions.³⁹

The timing and genesis of the May 20th demonstration are instructive. According to a statement made the previous day by David Livingston, the president of District 65, Wholesale, Retail, Office and Processing Union and one of the organizers of a labor-student coalition antiwar rally scheduled for May 21, after an erroneous report had appeared in the press the previous week setting the rally for May 20, Brennan announced that the Building and Construction Trades Council demonstration would take place at the same place and time. Livingston denounced Brennan's demonstration as "the closest thing to civil insurrection we've had in this city. Maybe civil insurrection is too strong, but it's damn close. ... It's clearly a call

³⁵Peter Hamill, "USA Alla Way," *NYP*, May 13, 1970, at 51, col. 1.

³⁶Sandor Polster, "U.S. Probing Violence Here," *NYP*, May 15, 1970, at 1, col. 1, at 2, col. 1-2.

³⁷Homer Bigart, "Huge City Hall Rally Backs Nixon's Indochina Policies," *NYT*, May 21, 1970, at 1, col. 6.; Frank Prial, "Antiwar Protests Go On; Nixon Backers March Here," *NYT*, May 14, 1970, at 20, col. 5.

³⁸Sandor Polster, "Pro-War Rally Draws Huge Crowd," *NYP*, May 20, 1970, at 5, col. 5.

³⁹Peter Hamill, "The Flag," *NYP*, May 20, 1970, at 53, col. 1 at 2.

for war, and it's a call for violence...."⁴⁰ The May 21st antiwar rally organized by unions representing automobile, clothing, hospital, and municipal workers included a sizable proportion of blacks, but overall was only one-third as large as the building trades demonstration.⁴¹

Brennan, whom Nixon later rewarded with an appointment as Secretary of Labor, both denied that his organization had had anything to do with the violence during the demonstration on May 8 and proudly announced that letters and calls to the unions ran twenty to one in favor of the workers' spontaneous action against antiwar demonstrators who "spat at the American flag."⁴² The president of the national Painters Union telegraphed brother Brennan: "We support without reservation the patriotic stand you have taken in support of our country and the flag."⁴³

The reality-content of the demonstrators' political orientation can be gauged by their signs, which variously referred to Lindsay as "a Commy rat, a faggot, a leftist, an idiot, a neurotic, an anarchist and a traitor," and fantasized that "Mao Lindsay's Red Guards are SDS Bums."⁴⁴ For some the confrontation seemed to be an ersatz for a lost war: "We've got to beat these Communists somewhere. So we're fighting them."⁴⁵ That the "Commie bastard" they "stomped" was a Sullivan & Cromwell lawyer did not appear to faze them.⁴⁶ The quasi-surrealistic politics were underscored by the fact that the construction workers viewed as their enemies a group of students from elite business schools with short hair and ties who were "expressing views as members of the Establishment" and appreciatively listened to Wall Street bankers sympathetically assure them that business opposed the war because the accompanying inflation was destroying the economy.⁴⁷ Indeed, the construction

⁴⁰Abel Silver & Sandor Polster, "Unions Split on Marches," *NYP*, May 19, 1970, at 1, col. 4, at 2, col. 1, 3.

⁴¹Sandor Polster, "Students and Unions Rally Against War," *NYP*, May 21, 1970, at 3, col. 5-6.

⁴²Damon Stetson, "Unions Differ on Indochina War," *NYT*, May 13, 1970, at 18, col. 6, 7; Emanuel Perlmutter, "Head of Building Trades Unions Here Says Response Favors Friday's Action," *NYT*, May 12, 1970, at 18, col. 1 (quote).

⁴³84 (6) *PATJ* 5 (June 1970). See also S. Frank Raftery, "Construction Workers Help prove that Real Patriotism Still Lives," 84 (7) *PATJ* n.p. [inside front page] (July 1970).

⁴⁴Bigart, "Thousands in City March," at 11, col. 4. On May 20, demonstrators also carried placards declaiming that "We Hate Our Commie Mayor." Pete Hamill, "Lion in the Streets," *NYP*, May 21, 1970, at 43, col. 1 at 2.

⁴⁵Francis Clines, "For the Flag and for Country, They March," *NYT*, May 21, 1970, at 22, col. 3 (quoting a printer).

⁴⁶Michael Drosnin, "After 'Bloody Friday,' New York Wonders If Wall Street Is Becoming a Battleground," *WSJ*, May 11, 1970, at 10, col. 3 at 4.

⁴⁷Homer Bigart, "2 Protest Groups Meet on Wall St.," *NYT*, May 13, 1970, at 1, col. 1 (short hair and ties), at 18, col. 5-6 (bankers); Homer Bigart, "Thousands Assail Lindsay in 2d Protest by Workers," *NYT*, May 12, 1970, at 1, col. 5, 6 ("Establishment").

workers may have understood more about capitalism than Brown Brothers Harriman & Co. partner and ex-Treasury Undersecretary Robert Roosa, who declared to the students that “when we are relieved of the cost of this war, there will be full employment for everyone.”⁴⁸ The workers' enmity becomes even more bizarre in light of the signs some carried reading, “God Bless the Establishment.”

The street theater prompted this interpretation from *Times* columnist Russell Baker: “As a battle cry for the working man, ‘God Bless the Establishment’ makes sense only if we view it as absurdist, as a tacit announcement that the reasons labor is in the street applying workingman’s boot to collegiate kidney are so diffuse, so complex, so far beyond rational explanation that the question can only be answered with the Lenonesque put on, ‘God Bless Wall Street, Country Club, Grosse Pointe and All.’”⁴⁹ In the crowd, whose “swagger” was “built of a kind of joy at being what participants saw as the first counter-response from a long-suffering middle America,” was a black construction worker who opined that “Communism must be fought every place.”⁵⁰ However, a sample of the 300 to 400 black construction workers in lower Manhattan “revealed sentiment against the ‘make-believe patriotism’” of their white counterparts.⁵¹ Moreover, the New York chapter of the National Afro-American Labor Council, likening the beatings administered by construction workers to “repressive violence against blacks,” warned that it would “not tolerate the beatings of any heads at any construction site in...any...black communities hereabouts.”⁵²

The newspaper of historical record drove home the larger political-economic point by quoting a student: “I’m scared. If this is what the class struggle is all about,” he added, surveying the flag-waving workers, “there’s something wrong somewhere.”⁵³ This insight was perhaps designed to sober dreamy left-wing students, who had missed the cue that “the evidence is inescapable that in the United States—for reasons known only to some Higher Being—labor and management despite their disagreements, have learned to work better with each other than anywhere else in the world.”⁵⁴ Editorially, too, *The New York Times* delighted in

⁴⁸Michael Drosnin, “Police Keep Workers and Business Students Apart at Peace Rally,” *WSJ*, May 13, 1970, at 14, col. 3. Epistemologically much more modest was David Rockefeller, chairman and CEO of Chase Manhattan Bank, who told visiting students that with 100,000 shareholders, 25,000 employees and untold customers, he felt that he lacked “the authority to express political sentiment on behalf of this bank.”

⁴⁹Russell Baker, “Observer: Passions in Search of an Understanding,” *NYT*, May 17, 1970, § 4 at 18, col. 3. For further examples of the demonstrators’ irrational slogans, see Francis Clines, “Hard Hats on the March—Fists Swinging,” *NYT*, May 17, 1970, § 4 at 9, col. 3.

⁵⁰Francis Clines, “Workers Find Protest a 2-Way Street,” *NYT*, May 13, 1970, at 18, col. 3.

⁵¹“The Blacks in the Hardhats,” *NYP*, May 14, 1970, at 4, col. 1.

⁵²“Blacks Unionists Blast Beatings of War Foes,” *NYP*, May 19, 1970, at 36, col. 3 (quotes); Hugh Wyatt, “Black Leaders Give Warning to Hard Hats,” *NYDN*, May 20, 1970, at 30, col. 1.

⁵³Bigart, “Huge City Hall Rally,” at 22, col. 2.

⁵⁴“The Building Trades,” *AL*, Oct. 1968, at 18-22, 53-55, 57 at 57. For the European leftist

confirming that the extremes had met: "The building-tradesmen, of course, are in the forefront of those who deplore...the decay of law and order. They have now joined the revolutionaries and bombthrowers on the left in demonstrating that anarchy is fast becoming a mode of political expression."⁵⁵ Perversely, these demonstrations by what some New York "Establishment" lawyers called "'labor fascists' in the Wall Street area" finally prompted members of major law firms to protest the war.⁵⁶ Even the *Wall Street Journal* editors eschewed "the irrational shouting of a mob."⁵⁷

Despite this considerable journalistic attention, the key question remained unasked: why was this apparently slumbering patriotism suddenly transmogrified into manifest political action only after five years of large-scale U.S. warfare in Indochina?⁵⁸ The construction industry's leading trade journal reported that the demonstrations were "spontaneous," but hints also surfaced casting doubt such claims.⁵⁹ The first report in *The New York Times* quoted a Wall Street broker who had observed with binoculars two men in gray suits and hats directing the construction workers with hand motions.⁶⁰ A reporter for the then liberal *New York Post*, which covered the demonstrations in much greater detail than the *Times*, discovered that Ralph L. Clifford, a radical right-winger who published the *New York Graphic*, had been guiding the workers. Clifford, who stated that he greatly admired Joseph McCarthy and the John Birch Society, distributed a leaflet calling Lindsay a "'One World socialist Mayor.'" Moreover, these demonstrators, many of whom were drunk, received twice their daily wages from their employers just to demonstrate.⁶¹ The *Wall Street Journal* reported that one construction worker, "who said his life would be in danger if he was identified, claimed the attack was organized by shop stewards with the support of some contractors. He said one contractor offered his men cash bonuses to join the fray."⁶²

view of U.S. construction unions as "communist eaters," see Gerhard Armanski, Peter Schulze, & Peter Tergeist, "Ökonomische und soziale Krise in den USA: 2. Teil," *Links*, No. 68, July-Aug. 1975, at 19-21 at 20.

⁵⁵"Violence on the Right," *NYT*, May 9, 1970, at 24, col. 1-2.

⁵⁶Thomas Brady, "1,000 'Establishment' Lawyers Join War Protest," *NYT*, May 15, 1970, at 21, col. 5.

⁵⁷"Toward Peace and Quiet," *WSJ*, May 12, 1970, at 22, col. 1 (editorial).

⁵⁸See Philip Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Vietnam War* 103-108 (1989).

⁵⁹"Construction Workers Back Nixon's Cambodia Policy," *ENR*, May 28, 1970, at 57.

⁶⁰Homer Bigart, "War Foes Here Attacked by Construction Workers," *NYT*, May 9, 1970, at 1, col. 5, at 10, col. 5.

⁶¹Richard Schwartz, "Man in Gray & the Violence," *NYP*, May 12, 1970, at 3, col. 1-2, at 90, col. 1-4; telephone interview with Richard Schwartz, New York City (1970). See also Tom Draper, "Pay for Hard-Hats," *NYT*, May 21, 1970, at 34, col. 5 (letter questioning who was paying workers whose contracts strictly provided wages only for hours worked).

⁶²Michael Drosnin, "After 'Bloody Friday,' New York Wonders If Wall Street Is Becoming a Battleground," *WSJ*, May 11, 1970, at 10, col. 3 at 4. See also "The Sudden Rising of the Hardhats," *Time*, May 25, 1970, at 20-21.

If construction firms were financing these days of controlled proletarian rage, they refused to acknowledge their complicity. Workers at the major building sites admitted having taken time off to demonstrate or “battle with students” without loss of any wages. Yet when asked by the *New York Post*, all of the general contractors and subcontractors at the large construction sites in downtown Manhattan—including the World Trade Center, where 2,200 workers were employed, and the U.S. Steel building, one of the whose subcontractors was American Bridge, a wholly owned subsidiary of U.S. Steel, whose former president, Roger Blough, was directing big business’s campaign against high construction wages—denied any knowledge of what their employees “do as citizens of the United States, because of their own conscience” on their lunch hour.⁶³

A prominent sociologist found “some similarity to the plot of the motion picture ‘Z,’”⁶⁴ but an explanation was still lacking as to why construction firms should have been especially interested in giving away some of their profits in order to provide public support for Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia and to gain publicity for their employees’ claims that the Mayor of New York City was a communist and homosexual.⁶⁵ Further mystery emanated from Fred Cook’s article in *The Nation*, which confirmed that construction firms had co-organized the demonstrations, but also pointed out that immediately before the Cambodia invasion the Nixon administration had developed plans to undermine the building trades unions—a step that might have been expected to please employers. Pressure on the unions seemed to come from a second side inasmuch as 30 to 40 percent of their members working in lower Manhattan had traveled to New York from other states; they supposedly feared that Mayor Lindsay’s “open union” campaign would disemploy them by transferring their jobs to black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers. The most enlightening aspect of Cook’s article was his reference to the offer of support that George Meany, the AFL-CIO president, had made to Nixon immediately after the

⁶³“The Great Hardhat Mystery,” *NYP*, May 19, 1970, at 3, col. 2, at 93, col. 1 (quoting Carl Eckhardt, assistant project manager for Otis Elevator at the World Trade Center). At the peak, more than 5,000 workers were on site at the World Trade Center. “World Trade Center,” 25 (7) *Laborer* 8-11 (July 1971).

⁶⁴Richard Hamilton, *Class and Politics in the United States* 498 n.103 (1972). See also Jay Borland, “‘Hard-Hats’ Scored,” *NYT*, May 14, 1970, at 36, col. 5 (letter): “Is it possible...that trade unionism’s just and single-minded pursuit of a living wage created among its members a pig-headed insularity that borders on fascism?” A confidential memorandum, dated March 11, 1970, allegedly from the office of Vice President Spiro Agnew, included an implication that the Nixon administration would promote demonstrations by construction workers in New York and other cities to support its Indochina war policies. Agnew denied the genuineness of the memo, which also dealt with cancelling the 1972 national election and repealing the Bill of Rights. *Scanlan’s Monthly*, Aug. 1970, at 1; James Naughton, “Agnew Attacks Memo as Fraud,” *NYT*, July 22, 1970, at 22, col. 1.

⁶⁵*ENR* reported: “No one in the New York Building Trades Employers Association or in the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York...would comment on rumors that the demonstrators had contractor or union support.” “Hard Hat Workers Take Hard Line on War,” *ENR*, May 14, 1970, at 11.

Cambodia invasion; Brennan then implemented this offer. From this perspective the demonstrations represented a kind of horse trade by means of which the unions sought to ward off the federal government's campaign against them. Cook, who regarded the demonstrations as characterized by "the classic elements of Hitlerian street tactics," was unable to provide a plausible answer to the question as to why the companies would have financed such a counter-move.⁶⁶

By May 26 Nixon had already received Brennan and other union leaders at the White House.⁶⁷ Indeed, "Brennan's leadership of the New York City hardhats' 1970 march to support the decision to invade Cambodia" earned eternal gratitude from Nixon, who nurtured "'fantastic and deep psychological and emotional attachment for Brennan because of Cambodia,' says a Republican on Capitol Hill. 'I remember then that it seemed I was virtually alone,' Mr. Nixon recalled..., 'and one day a very exciting thing happened: The hardhats marched in New York City. And for the first time the press began to realize that...the people supported doing what is right.'"⁶⁸ Nixon's embrace of the rampaging hardhats offended the *Wall Street Journal*. Immediately after the White House meeting, the newspaper opined editorially that since neither Nixon nor anyone in his administration publicly condemned the "enraged mobs...it is possible to imagine that the Administration considers kicking bystanders in the head...less reprehensible than, say, throwing stones at armed, helmeted National Guardsmen."⁶⁹ And George Meany later used the incident against Brennan. When President Ford asked Brennan to stay on as Secretary of Labor after Nixon's resignation, Meany not only called him "completely unacceptable" to labor, but demeaned him personally: "He was not a national labor leader. He was a local building trades fellow, who had very, very little experience. I don't even think he knew where the White House was until Chuck Colson brought him down here for that hard-hat publicity stunt."⁷⁰

The May 1970 demonstrations can be understood in the context of the joint

⁶⁶Fred Cook, "Hard-hats: The Rampaging Patriots," *Nation*, June 15, 1970, at 712-19 at 712, 717-18. Cook's mention of the companies' reliance on government contracts was too unspecified to bear any explanatory weight. For background on the possibility that white construction workers' animus against Mayor Lindsay may have been sparked by his having held up city construction contracts in a dispute over building trades unions' exclusion of black workers, see William Gould, *Black Workers in White Unions: Job Discrimination in the United States* 310-15 (1977). The General Secretary of the Communist Party, U.S.A., Gus Hall, suggested that "those secret operators" who "secretly organized the march, for their purposes" were "big real-estate interests." Hall failed to name them, but later singled out the Chase Manhattan Bank and the Rockefeller interests and others who profited from the war. Gus Hall, *Hard Hats and Hard Facts* 4-5, 13 (1970).

⁶⁷Michael Hanrahan, "Hard Hats to Be Nixon's Guests," *NYDN*, May 26, 1970, at 2, col. 1; Robert Semple, Jr., "Nixon Meets Heads of 2 City Unions; Hails War Support," *NYT*, May 27, 1970, at 1, col. 6.

⁶⁸Byron Calame, "'Pistol Pete' vs. Labor's Bureaucracy," *WSJ*, June 22, 1973, at 8, col. 4.

⁶⁹"No Time for Ambiguity," *WSJ*, May 28, 1970, at 12, col. 1-2.

⁷⁰"Brennan to Stay on as Secretary of Labor," *CLR*, No. 986, Sept. 4, 1974, at A-16.

state-employer efforts to control construction wages. Local unions, which were most negatively affected by these proposals, had begun to discuss this connection even before the demonstrations. For example, in early 1970 an official of the Bricklayers and Masons Union in Detroit wrote that the construction unions “are being boxed in by the strongly united Contractors’ Association, bolstered by sharpened attacks by the Nixon administration.”⁷¹ Shortly after the May demonstrations, references appeared to the reticence suddenly characterizing the Nixon offensive, which had just begun.⁷² In connection with the newest revelations about construction wages (“Be a construction worker and—make \$26,000 a year”), *ENR* voiced the suspicion that Nixon would not intercede “because of the administration’s apparent political interest in middle-income blue collar workers.”⁷³

Employers’ soon suspected that construction unions’ Cambodian strategy of restricting Nixon’s initiatives against them had proved successful. Already on the morning of Brennan’s audience with Nixon in May, Arthur J. Fox, Jr., the editor of *ENR* sent Nixon a telegram stating that Nixon was about to commend Brennan for peacefully demonstrating “with some of the same construction workers who terrorized citizens of new York just a week before.” Fox conceded that the construction workers might be with Nixon on Cambodia, but requested that Nixon ask Brennan what they were contributing to Nixon’s fight against inflation.⁷⁴

Big business harbored similar suspicions. At a small meeting of Roundtable members in early October 1970 “[t]here was a general consensus that the Administration is having a love affair with labor and the ‘hard hats.’”⁷⁵ Later that month at the fall meeting of the Business Council, its chairman, Fred Borch, who was also GE chairman, conceded that he partly had in mind Nixon’s “recent praise of the ‘hard-hat’ construction workers for supporting the Administration’s Vietnam policy” when the Council criticized the president for failing to control inflation in general and to eliminate construction unions’ restrictions on productivity and access to employment.⁷⁶

Fortune, too, was unable to conceal its disappointment that the building unions’ clever tactics had for the time being enabled them to block possible adverse action by the Nixon administration. The president, in the magazine’s view, could have made political capital out of the unjustified wage increases, but “his hard-hat supporters may have boxed him in. As one prominent Administration official puts

⁷¹Eugene Tolot, “Building Trade in Crisis,” 9 (1) *LT* 30 (Jan.-Feb. 1970).

⁷²Calame, “‘Pistol Pete’ vs. Labor’s Bureaucracy.”

⁷³“Be a Construction Worker and—Make \$26,000 a Year,” *ENR*, Sept. 17, 1970, at 55.

⁷⁴“He Didn’t Get the Message,” *ENR*, June 4, 1970, at 60.

⁷⁵[], “File Memorandum: Roger’s Round Table” (Oct. 5, 1970), in SP, Box 5, File-CUAIR 1969-1970.

⁷⁶Albert Hunt, “Business Council’s Inflation Gripes May Renew Nixon Leadership Issue,” *WSJ*, Oct. 19, 1970, at 4, col. 1.

it, ‘the hard-hats’ well staged and organized support of Nixon foreign policy, obviously planned at high levels, has made it impossible to get through to the President. The hard-hats knew exactly what they were doing, and the gains they could exact.”⁷⁷ These arguments are consistent with the hypothesis that the May demonstrations were a calculated arrangement.

For public consumption, the Manhattan demonstrations helped establish an image of union construction workers as the violent right wing of the labor movement.⁷⁸ Even weeks after the demonstrations, national construction union leaders continued to praise the “‘hard hats’” as mirroring “the feeling of the great percentage of Americans” who were relieved that someone had finally stood up and shown that “‘we have put up with about all we are going to take’ from the radical left; the peaceniks; the revolutionaries; the anti-establishment nuts....”⁷⁹ However, in the realm of semi-occluded Washington in-fighting, the ostensibly pro-Nixon street militance succeeded in temporarily diverting state attention from implementing the strategy of preventing construction unions—and especially locals—from taking full advantage of tight labor markets.

⁷⁷Gilbert Burck, “The Building Trades versus the People,” 82 (4) *Fortune* 95-97, 159-60, at 96-97 (Oct. 1970).

⁷⁸Joshua Freeman, “Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness, and 1970 Pro-War Demonstrations,” 26 (4) *JSH* 725-44 (Summer 1993). Manhattan was by far the main but not the only site of such violent prowar demonstrations. “Fights at Arizona Peace Rally,” *NYT*, June 1, 1970, at 48, col. 5.

⁷⁹John Lyons, “The President’s Page,” 70 (8) *Ironworker*, n.p. (inside front cover, inside back cover) (Aug. 1970). See also “Campus, Radical Troubles U.S., Canada in Anniversary Period,” 90 (7) *Carpenter* 8-9, 12 (July 1970), which included fotos titled, “‘Hard Hats’ Show Patriotic Support,” discoursed at length about the “mobs of the new left,” but said nothing about the demonstrations.