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Nixon's Class Struggle: Romancing the New Right Worker, 1969–1973

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During the summer of 1971, in the midst of what H. R. Haldeman called the President's "long philosophical thing," Richard Nixon recast the "labor question" for the 1970s.[1] "When you have to call on the nation to be strong—on such things as drugs, crime, defense, our basic national position—the educated people and the leader class no longer have any character, and you can't count on them," Nixon explained to his closest advisors gathered to discuss the administration's "blue-collar strategy." His search for a constituency with the "character and guts" to meet the many crises of the early 1970s led him to conclude that "when we need support on tough problems, the uneducated are the ones that are with us." Because the President felt that the deepest reservoir of character in the nation was composed of those who "offer their back and their brawn," he rejected the proposals from many of his advisors to come out swinging against organized labor. He explained that it was "vital that we continue to recognize and work with [workers] and that we not attack unions which represent the organized structure of the working man." Nixon believed if he was going to succeed in his plans to build the "New Majority" in 1972 he would have to do it without the help of the Eastern Establishment, for which he had nothing but contempt. When crisis hit, Nixon concluded, business and academic leaders simply "painted their asses white and ran like antelopes." The "so-called managers" were not what the country needed—the historical moment beckoned for what he called the "two-fisted" types. It was in workers and the labor leadership that new political faith could be found for the Republican Party. They may be "shortsighted, partisan, [and] hate Nixon politically" but in the end, the President concluded, "they are men, not softies."[2]

[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the program "Conversations in Working-Class Life" at the Kheel Center for Labor–Management Documentation, Cornell University, 8 November 2001. For support for this project, I am indebted to Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations for a Special Research Grant Award as well as several excellent undergraduate research assistants, including David Klesh, Keith Becker, and Stephen Mak. The staff at the National Archives responsible for processing the Nixon materials have done an astonishingly fine job—the type of work necessary for a democratic society. I am grateful for invaluable criticism on earlier drafts from Melvyn Dubofsky, Leon Fink, Tim Thurber, and the crew at the Chapter House Beer-and-History Workshop. Two anonymous readers for *Labor History* offered incisive and respectful criticism. I present it here having attempted to address at least some of their many concerns about this piece.

[2]Present at the meeting were: H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, George Shultz, John Connally, and Charles Colson. There are extensive notes on it in *Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House,* CD-ROM (Santa Monica: Sony Electronic Publishing, 1995), 21 July 1971; and Colson "Memorandum for the President's File," FF: Nixon and Labor/Political, Colson Files Box 96, Contested Documents, Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives II, Suitland, Maryland (all archival references hereafter will be to the Nixon Materials). "There would be no more rhetoric from the Administration but contained any kind of anti-union implications," Nixon confirmed shortly afterward; see FF: Mtg, Peter Brennan w/President, 26 July 1971, Colson Box 23, Contested Documents.

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In Nixon's thinking about workers, he focused not, as had his presidential hero and model Woodrow Wilson, on routes toward "progressive improvement in the conditions of their labor," ways they could "be made happier" or "served better by the communities and the industries which their labor sustains and advances." Instead he stood the problem on its head—more ideal than material—by making workers' economic interests secondary to an appeal to their allegedly superior moral backbone and patriotic rectitude. He also sought to mobilize their whiteness and their machismo in the face of the inter-related threats of social decay, racial unrest, and faltering national purpose. His cultural formulation of workers' interests meant he was not going to break new legislative ground in the name of the working class, but as it became clear, he was also not going to launch an open offensive against organized labor or the key institutions of collective bargaining in the United States. In formulating such an appeal, Richard Nixon may have been one of the most class aware presidents of the postwar era. That awareness, though, never sought to improve conditions for the American working class or the fortunes of organized labor. He struggled to find ways of bringing the "Southern Strategy" to the urban North and to drive the "silent majority" wedge between organized labor and the Democratic Party. Ultimately, however, Nixon's plans to build his New Majority on the backs of workers and organized labor met with mixed success at best and, in the aftermath of Watergate, appear more grandiose than real.[3]

Nixon's labor strategy stands in contrast to dominant historical memory about this president. The popular view might be captured best by Moe Foner, the recently deceased former secretary-treasurer of Local 1199 National Health and Human Services Employees Union. "I never knew him to be a friend to labor in any way, shape, or form," Foner explained. "If Nixon had tried to cuddle up to the unions he would have created problems with his major base. The big people who were supporting him were fundamentally anti-labor and anti-populist." Nixon's gamble, which was explicitly not based on the left-led and multi-cultural unions like 1199, did, at times, offer a populist bent that threatened his core constituents. Rather than an attempt generally to "zap labor" as is often quoted in the literature or, more specifically, to trump "class" with "race" via the over-emphasized Philadelphia Plan, the more important (if semi-clandestine) theme of the administration was to win labor to Nixon's side. He basically took a page from Eisenhower's playbook, which suggested the power of a "modern

[3]See Steve Fraser, "The Labor Question," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order,* ed. Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 55; for Nixon's use of Wilson as a model, see Gary Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-made Man* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1969), 419–495. Nixon made clear in his first inaugural address that while the nation faced "only" material problems under FDR, Nixon would have to deal with moral and social problems. See Richard Nixon, "Inaugural Address," 20 January 1969, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 1971), 2. Scholars can roughly be divided into two camps on Nixon. One group emphasizes the semi-authoritarian figure with regard to foreign policy and the illegal means he used to achieve his political ends that resulted in Watergate. In contrast, considering "Nixon without Watergate," as historian Joan Hoff has conceptualized the problem in *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), creates a portrait of a president pushing for a revised New Deal liberalism that in reality increased social spending, seeking to reconceptualize (rather than defund) welfare through the Family Assistance Plan, and who signed such benchmark legislation as OSHA and the EPA. His labor strategy links the two and shows Nixon's strategic mind at work. His liberal domestic policies were indeed remarkably liberal by the standards of the early 21st century. His goals, however, were framed less out of any political conviction than out of an attempt to take flight on the political winds of his time in order to build his political majority. As Allen Matusow argues, "The whole point of Nixon's domestic presidency was to create a New Majority by taking the center and recruiting Democrats to his cause." Allen J. Matusow, *Nixon's Economy: Booms, Bust, Dollars, and Votes* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 203.

Republicanism" based on a mutually cooperative relationship between big labor and big business. Rather than an accommodation to the New Deal order as Ike had envisioned, however, Nixon sought to recast coalitional politics on a cultural base and place his own stamp on his times just as Franklin Roosevelt had.[4]

This inquiry, however, is less concerned with the efficacy of Nixon's policy or the unions' reception of his message than it is with an intellectual history of the ways in which the President and his advisors sought to recreate the politics of organized labor and reimagine the meanings of the American working class in the transitional decade of the 1970s. As Jonathan Rieder suggests, "If the Right discovered the people, it did so by fits and starts, and required a good deal of mental labor." The administration's "mental labor" went into planning a new political structure with the working class as a key cornerstone in the foundation. As Nixon's advisor Elliot Richardson once explained, the President's ambition was to be "the Architect of his Times," but in Nixon's attempt to construct the New Majority, he turned out to be more of a visionary draftsman than a skilled craftsman. He wielded his material with ambition but not precision, with a fundamental sense of the historical moment but without the care, devotion, and style that makes for a work of greatness. Richard Nixon was a politician who ironically had a class background closer to his hoped-for constituency than the more popular figures of John F. Kennedy or Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was, in biographer Richard Reeve's words, however, "a strange man of uncomfortable shyness, who functioned best alone with his thoughts and the yellow legal pads he favored, or in set pieces where he literally memorized every word he had to say"—hardly the characteristics of a man of the people. His was a "cramped version of populism," based on who

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[4]Moe Foner, "Nixon and Workers" in "Combating Amnesia: Counter-obituaries for Richard Milhous Nixon," *Radical History Review* 60 (Fall 1994): 178. Historical memory about Nixon and labor is misshapen by a single recycled quotation: that the administration's goal was to "zap labor." Arnold Weber, Assistant Secretary of Labor and director of Nixon's Cost of Living Council, used this phrase specifically about the controversial wage–price freeze. The quotation originates with a member of Nixon's staff who opposed the blue-collar gamble and about a period in which administration–labor relations were at their pre-Watergate low. In contrast, the administration itself saw the labor question as central to its efforts. The "zap labor" quotation is most popularly from Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-turn* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 25, original quotation in *New York Post,* 19 September 1974. Nixon's support for the Philadelphia Plan to integrate the building trades has also received disproportionate attention given its historical significance. The President was always "tenuous" on the plan and it was endorsed more to outflank the liberals and flood the inflation-minded labor market in construction than anything else. Most importantly, it was "short lived." As William Safire explained, the Philadelphia-type plans "lasted for a couple of years, until Charles Colson's appeal to labor as a bloc in the 'new majority' took these matters out of [Attorney General] Mitchell's hands." Colson's blue-collar strategy won out, resulting in Arthur Fletcher, the plan's biggest advocate, being moved from Labor to the United Nations. See William Safire, *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 266; and Dean J. Kotloswki, "Richard Nixon and the Origins of Affirmative Action," *Historian* 60 (Spring 1998): 523–541. For a look at Eisenhower's strategy to "woo" what he regarded less as working class than an organized middle class, see Melyvn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 210–212. In terms of Nixon not attacking labor, his impact on the NLRB is fascinatingly similar to Eisenhower's. The Miller Board essentially served in relatively good faith under classic Taft–Hartley precepts—a vivid contrast to the complete counter-offensive launched by the Reagan-era board. Nixon's appointments must be seen in light of the need to shore up AFL-CIO support for Vietnam and were a disappointment to business conservatives organizing to control the NLRB. See James A. Gross, *Broken Promise: The Subversion of U.S. Labor Relations Policy, 1947–1994* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 218, 223–231, 239–240. For a comparison of Nixon and Roosevelt, see William Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR,* 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 165–169.

he was aligned against not what he was for, and it tapped into his own grinding sense of anxiety rather than his faith in the working class. However flawed, Nixon's vision did allow him to believe that he could surmount fundamental economic disagreements with organized labor and, by presenting his cultural vision at his particular historical moment, recast the politics of the possible and become the workingman's President.[5]

MANIFESTOS OF THE WHITE MALE WORKER

In the administration's plans for building the New Majority, Nixon's strategists did not simply depend upon the bootstrap ruminations of the President for their gamble on the working class, but instead discussed, and later authored, several key documents that provided the intellectual substance for their project. Kevin Phillips's well-known political manifesto *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969) served as a basic point of departure. The book argued that Nixon's narrow victory over Hubert Humphrey in 1968 was not the political fluke that it appeared to be; rather, it represented the beginning of a major ethnic and regional political realignment. To look at simple election returns of the two major parties was to miss the point. By adding the Nixon votes to those cast for George Wallace, one could see a nation "in motion between a Democratic past and Republican future." A less prominent argument in Phillips's book looked beyond the southern white voter, alienated by the Democrats' commitment to racial equality, and made tentative explorations into mobilizing the votes of northern industrial workers. "Successful moderate conservatism is also likely to attract to the Republican side some of the northern blue-collar workers who flirted with George Wallace but ultimately backed Hubert Humphrey," Phillips calculated. The problem was that working-class voters feared that a Republican administration would do away with popular New Deal programs—from social security to collective bargaining. If Nixon could dispel the notion that his party and his presidency were anti-worker, cleverly manipulate the race issue, and peg the label of "elitism" on the liberals, it followed, he could build a post-New Deal coalition that transcended the Southern Strategy. By co-opting the northern blue-collar worker, the Southern Strategy, in essence, would become a national strategy.[6]

While Phillips's thinking laid the philosophical foundation for the administration's ruminations, the document that really sparked the President's imagination was a provocative essay by journalist Pete Hamill titled "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class." Nixon read the 1969 piece in *New York* magazine only a few months after taking office, and by all accounts was deeply moved by it. The article exposed the unrecognized rage coursing through the white working class. It allowed the President to move Phillips's thinking from abstract possibility to a concrete strategy by clearly identifying a set of political resentments in the urban north ready for plucking. While

[5]Jonathan Rieder, "The Rise of the 'Silent Majority,'" in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 264–265; Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 12–14; on the reformulation of populism in this period, see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion,* rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, [1995]1998), 248–255.

[6]Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1969), 463; on how the Wallace issue plagued Nixon and his attempt to outflank the Alabama Governor, see Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Race: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 371–414. As the blue-collar strategy took shape, Kevin Phillips recognized it as the "Post-Southern Strategy," *Washington Post,* 25 September 1970.

Hamill did not mince words about the racist expressions of white working-class anger in 1969, like Nixon, he concluded that it was less race, *per se*, that drove phenomena like northern blue-collar support for George Wallace than workers' belief that they were not respected and that society had focused its attention and resources on other, noisier, groups. The urgency of the war, civil rights, and the rising women's movement were overshadowing the pressing and real needs of the old New Deal base—the white ethnic working class. "It is imperative for New York politicians to begin to deal with the growing alienation and paranoia of the working class white man," Hamill explained; he "feels trapped and, even worse, in a society that purports to be democratic, ignored." The author wound up his polemic with a programmatic analysis that might have been aimed at the left, but ultimately found voice on the right. "The working-class white man is actually in revolt against taxes, joyless work, the double standards and short memories of professional politicians, hypocrisy and what he considers the debasement of the American dream." In concluding words that must have leapt from the page into Richard Nixon's mind, the author wrote "Any politician who leaves that white man out of the political equation, does so at very large risk."[7]

The new President immediately recognized the political import of Hamill's thesis and ordered the Department of Labor to study the issues it raised in greater empirical detail. The end result was *the* document of reference in the administration's debates over the labor question, a paper titled "The Problem of the Blue-Collar Worker." The brief was commonly referred to within the administration as the "Rosow Report" after its author, Assistant Secretary of Labor Jerome M. Rosow. Delivered to the President in April 1970 and publicly released the following August, the brief confirmed that white lower-class workers were "on a treadmill, chasing the illusion of higher living standards." A worker's "only hope seems to be continued pressure for higher wages," admitted Rosow, and "their only spokesmen seem to be union leaders spearheading the demand for more money wages." The author concluded that these workers "are overripe for a political response to the pressing needs they feel so keenly." In essence, the report concluded, "People in the blue-collar class are less mobile, less organized, and less capable of using legitimate means to either protect the status quo or secure changes in their favor. To a considerable extent, they feel like 'forgotten people'—those for whom the government and the society have limited, if any, direct concern and little visible action." It was a message that Nixon had been working on well before Scammon and Wattenberg published their more famous *The Real Majority* the following fall. The book became the buzz among the Washington elite in late 1970 by arguing, among other things, that the future of either party depended upon capturing the mythical "forty-seven year-old housewife from the outskirts of Dayton, Ohio, whose husband is a machinist."[8]

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[7]Pete Hamill, "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class," *New York Magazine*, 14 April 1969, 28–29; reprinted in Louise Kappe Howe, ed., *The White Majority: Between Poverty and Affluence* (New York: Random House, 1970), 10–22.

[8]"The Problem of the Blue Collar Worker," 16 April 1970, FF: Blue Collar, Colson Box 39. See Rosow's speech on the matter as well: "Rosow Calls on American Business to Help Solve the Problem of Blue-Collar Workers," U.S. Department of Labor Office of Information, press release, 29 October 1970, FF: Blue Collar, Colson Papers Box 39; Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970); as Nixon noted about Scammon and Wattenberg in his diary, "We should set out to capture the vote of the forty-seven-year-old Dayton housewife." Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 491. Nixon learned about *The New Majority* from Pat Buchanan in August 1970, long after he had already acted on Pete Hamill's ideas. For

The administration was, of course, rife with leaks that continually frustrated the President, and the Rosow Report shared a fate with other key administration documents. A little over two months after the White House received the report, one of the 25 copies in circulation made it into the hands of the *Wall Street Journal*. "Secret Report Tells Nixon How to Help White Workingmen and Win Their Votes," proclaimed the title of the *Journal* article revealing the report. The exposé claimed that "President Nixon has before him a confidential blueprint designed to help him capture the hearts and votes of the nation's white working men—the traditionally Democratic 'forgotten Americans' that the Administration believes are ripe for political plucking." While the article covering the strategy was forthright, the paper's editorial on the subject dripped with contempt. Calling the news of the strategy "depressing" and its rationale "a sense of absurdity," the newspaper condemned the proposed new direction for the Republicans suggesting that alienation was too complex an emotion for presidential politics. Workers were simply just the next group to claim the fashionable badge of alienation, the *Journal* claimed, and even if it was a real emotion, the newspaper questioned whether it was at all curable. It preferred to place a chunk of the blame on "the big labor unions," which were once a "fountain of so much security" and now "may also contribute to [workers'] alienation."[9]

On the one hand, Nixon's interpretation of the labor question might be understood as a fashionable indulgence in victimization and identity politics, as the *Wall Street Journal* seemed to argue; on the other hand, the return of workers' issues to the public stage was a widespread movement. Writers like Pete Hamill were only the beginning of a large-scale reconsideration of occupational and employment problems in the early 1970s, as the topic seemed to burst back upon the national scene after slumbering during the postwar decades of "consensus" and the 1960s' years of upheaval. By almost any measure—strike rates, unemployment figures, public policy initiatives, Congressional debates, new efforts in organizing, intellectual life, and commercial popular culture—the issues of social class and occupational life resurfaced with vitality in the first half of the 1970s. In the face of the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, reporters descended on factories in search of an explanation for the "blue-collar blues," while a large and diverse set of intellectuals of the type not heard from since the 1940s set their minds to exploring the problem. Indeed, the resurgence of the labor question became a veritable genre in the early 1970s as radical, liberal, and conservative populists all fought with Richard Nixon for their preferred version of the working-class future.[10]

Footnote 8 continued

a typical disproportionate emphasis on *The New Majority* and the date Nixon read it, see Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 37–38; similarly, see Reeves, *President Nixon*, 261–262.

[9] *Wall Street Journal,* 30 June 1970 and 17 July 1970. The much more modest coverage of the administration's official endorsement of the Rosow Report is covered on 14 August 1970. The story behind the report is covered in Charles Culhane, "White House Report/Nixon Eyes Blue-collar Workers as Potential Source of Votes in '72," *National Journal,* 30 January 1971, 236.

[10] There is a broad sense in the literature that there was both resurgence in the politics of labor and occupational life and a sea change in their meaning. Beyond that, much is debated. Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991) argue that the Democratic Party alienated key parts of its base and thus delivered them to the Republican Party; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling* (New York: Pantheon, 1989) and Peter Levy, *The New Left and Labor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) agree that the blue-collar backlash has been overplayed; others, such as Jonathan Rieder, "Silent Majority," and Thomas

The issue raged throughout commercial popular culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s as well, typically portraying workers in white, male, conservative, often reactionary, ways—terms favorable to the Nixon administration's casting of the issue. To believe that the stage was being set for a populist turn to the right, one only had to witness any of a number of cultural productions during Nixon's first administration. Merle Haggard won an invitation to the White House as a result of his anthem of the silent majority, "Okie from Muskogee." "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee/We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street," sang the blue-collar troubadour, "Cuz we like livin' right and being free." Or consider the popularity of television's anti-hero Archie Bunker. "If your Spics and Spades want their rightful share of the American dream, let 'em go and hustle for it just like I done," declared Archie. In a more sinister vein, the New Majority took cinemagraphic shape in Peter Boyle's crypto-fascist 1970 title character Joe, a machinist, who teamed up with an advertising executive in a violent hunt for hippies. "Forty-two percent of all liberals are queer," Joe explained in a dark, drunken rage. As the forward march of liberalism appeared to take on a distinctly middle-class hue, the American working class seemed to many mobilized in a reactionary effort—"Karl Marx turned upside down," in columnist Mike Royko's phrase.[11]

If this was the counter-revolutionary moment—"To the Nashville Station" quipped Phillips—it was a deeply gendered one. The framing of the concept of "workers" in reactionary terms can be understood, at least partially, as a defensive strategy with regard to the embattled state of manhood. Part of Nixon's plan was to maintain an image as "a tough, courageous, masculine leader," explained Haldeman, but often a masculinity undergirded by homophobia. Nixon, discussing the popular TV show "All in the Family," for instance, explained to his advisors that Mike, a character written to represent some vague sense of the New Left, "apparently goes both ways." The President went on to describe an episode in a private (but of course taped) conversation with Ehrlichman and Haldeman about Archie confronting an old buddy, a former football player, who had come out of the closet—a "fairy" he explained. As the three men sat on the edge of their own crumbling *Pax Americana*, Nixon's analysis of popular culture slipped into an interpretation of history that managed to meld the rise of homosexuality with the fall of empire. "You know what happened to the Greeks! Homosexuality destroyed them. Sure, Aristotle was a homo. We all know that. So was Socrates." In contrast, the "strong societies," like Russia, "Goddamn, they root 'em

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Footnote 10 continued

Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) point to the fundamental instability of the New Deal coalition; others, such as Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: Norton, 1989), argue that anti-elitism and class antipathies were at the root of the early 1970s backlash populism. None of these researchers have squared the backlash impulse of the 1970s with the insurgency that was also happening at the same time around Miners for Democracy, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, the J. P. Stevens campaign, or the struggles among the workers at Lordstown, Farah, the Post Office, and the electrical sector, among others. Hamill's work was complemented by such studies as Patricia Cayo Sexton and Brendan Sexton, *Blue Collars and Hard-Hats* (New York: Random House, 1971), Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage, 1973), Andrew Levison, *The Working Class Majority* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1974), and E. E. LeMasters, *Blue-Collar Aristocrats* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), to name only a few.

[11]Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, [1982] 1990), 56–70; for Nixon on Merle Haggard, see Nixon, *Memoirs*, 539; for the issue of working-class masculinity in popular culture in the 1970s, see Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 114–121.

out … Homosexuality, dope, immorality, are the enemies of strong societies … We have to stand up to this," Nixon declared.[12]

The President and his staff agreed that the body of evidence they unearthed and the popular milieu around them supported three basic, interlocking propositions. First, the white working-class vote was politically up for grabs and Nixon could be the leader to knit them into a new political coalition—essentially giving mainstream party legitimacy to Wallace-ite sentiments. Second, while Rosow's report brought up significant bread and butter issues and argued that any concern for workers had to include two million blacks "who share many of the same problems as whites in their income class," it was neither the entire working class nor its material grievances on which the administration would focus; rather, it was the "feeling of being forgotten" among white male workers that Nixon and his advisors would seek to tap. Finally, policy and rhetoric would be formulated that did not require federal expenditures or even wage increases—the politics of recognition and status would be enough. The struggle for the Nixon administration would be to ferret out non-material political responses to the "pressing needs" they knew workers experienced and, as inflation became a priority, actually to place restraints on workers' wage demands. When Nixon finished the report, he demanded action on its fundamental ideas, "even if only symbolic," while the broader issues and feasibility of courting workers and their unions would continue to be debated.[13]

UPRISINGS AND DIRTY TRICKS

Starting just weeks after the internal release of the Rosow Report, and lasting for much of May 1970, New York City construction workers turned out in the streets in a frenzy of "jingoistic joy" aimed against the war protestors and "red" Mayor Lindsay, and in support of Nixon's policies in Southeast Asia. The protests began on 8 May as brightly helmeted construction workers, often wielding heavy tools, pushed through a weak line of police and violently descended on an anti-war demonstration called after the killings at Kent State. The workers then proceeded to storm the steps of City Hall, chasing student protestors through the streets of the financial district, and bloodying around 70 people in the process. The hundreds of "hard hats" mobilized in the action were particularly enraged about the American flag that had been ordered to be flown at half mast in honor of the four slain protestors in Ohio. While demonstrations continued on lunch hours throughout the month, the culmination of the conflicts came on 20 May when the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York sponsored a rally—the previous actions had no open sponsorship—and delivered around 100,000 supporters in a sea of American flags, declaring their support for the war effort. Complete with a concrete mixer draped with the slogan "Lindsay for mayor of Hanoi," and signs declaring "GOD BLESS THE ESTABLISHMENT" and "WE SUPPORT

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[12]Kevin Phillips, *Post-Conservative America: People, Politics, and Ideology in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1982), 31. The need to make Nixon appear "masculine" is in response to a series of articles by David Broder that argued Americans lacked confidence in the President's leadership. See Memo. from Haldeman to Colson, 12 October 1970, FF: Broder Articles, Colson Box 40. For the conversation on homosexuality, see 13 May 1971 Oval Office tape transcript, published in *Harper's Magazine,* February 2000, 22–24.

[13]Burns to President, 26 May 1969, FF: [Welfare Book], Ehrlichman Box 39; "Memorandum for the Director," no date, FF: Blue Collar, Colson Box 39. For another powerful iteration of the administration's thinking on the labor issue, see "The Nixon Administration and the Working Man," 11 June 1971, FF: Blue Collar, Colson Box 39.

NIXON AND AGNEW," the protests delivered to the national spotlight both the hard-hat image and the resentment Hamill pinpointed the previous year.[14]

In these events many of the administration's ideas about the working class were suddenly granted palpable imagery and potent political symbolism. "This display of emotional activity from the 'hard hats,' " argued staff member Steve Bull, provided an opportunity "to forge a new alliance and perhaps result in the emergence of a 'new right.' " Strategically, the idea was to avoid the treacherous waters of workers' inflationary wage interests by addressing a powerful and rising tide of cultural conservatism. "The emphasis," continued Bull, "would be upon some of these supposedly trite mid-America values that the liberal press likes to snicker about: love of country, respect for people as individuals, the Golden Rule, etc." The timing of the protests could not have been more fortuitous, as the White House was literally and figuratively under siege in the wake of the bombing of Cambodia. With protestors and the press attacking the White House, the hard hats came to Nixon's aid, bolstering the sagging *esprit de corps* of the administration. The workers, Nixon exclaimed, "were with us when some of the elitist crowd were running away from us. Thank God for the hard hats!" As Haldeman noted, Nixon "thinks now the college demonstrators have overplayed their hands, evidence is the blue collar group rising up against them, and P can mobilize them," he explained optimistically as Washington lay in a fog of tear gas.[15]

Since each tool-wielding tradesman rampaging through the financial district chanting pro-Nixon slogans seemed to give credence and symbolic weight to the President's "secret plan," many have suggested that these protests somehow emerged from Nixon's kit of dirty tricks. Although this appears not to have directly been the case, the administration was certainly ready and willing to exploit the uprisings and, when necessary, foment more.[16] There were, moreover, covert tricks that the administration did use to help foster the image of an administration buoyed by the defensive uprisings of the common man. Haldeman, aggravated by the continued presence of Viet Cong

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[14] *New York Times*, 9 May 1970, 10 May 1970, 11 May 1970, 12 May 1970, 13 May 1970, 21 May 1970; for an insightful discussion of the issue of masculinity in the hard-hat image, see Joshua B. Freeman, "Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness, and the 1970 Pro-war Demonstrations," *Journal of Social History* 26 (Summer 1993): 726–744; also Freeman, *Working-Class New York* (New York: New Press, 2000), 237–246. It is interesting to note that Hamill condemned the riots as the "work of cowards;" see Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 448–453.

[15] *Haldeman Diaries*, 10 May 1970; Bull to Colson, 22 May 1970, FF: Hard Hats–Building and Construction Trades, Colson Box 69; Safire, *Before the Fall*, 38; Charles W. Colson, *Born Again* (Old Tappan: Chosen Books, 1976), 39–40.

[16] The only "smoking gun" that ties the administration to the revolts uncovered in this research is a small piece of correspondence between the staff member Steve Bull and one of Nixon's most trusted advisors, Charles Colson. "Obviously," Bull wrote to Colson, "more of these [hard-hat protests] will be occurring throughout the Nation, perhaps partially as a result of your clandestine activity." Biographer Anthony Summers, for instance, implies that Nixon did orchestrate the protests, and even Ehrlichman "assumed" that some of the hard-hat attacks were "laid on" by the White House. No concrete evidence has proven the case that the original protests were directed by the White House, but it is not unlikely that the administration helped, in whatever ways necessary, to insure their continuation. Whether the administration actually assisted in the development of the protests, it was easy to see how, in the combination of working-class backlash, police sympathy, apparent employer support (the workers were off the job and still getting paid), and some mysterious gray-suited individuals, they added up to what *The Nation* called a pattern evincing "the classic elements of Hitlerian street tactics." See Anthony Summers, *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon* (New York: Viking, 2000), 358, 590; Fred J. Cook, "Rampaging Patriots," *The Nation*, 15 June 1970, 712; Bull to Colson, 22 May 1970, FF: Hard Hats–Building and Construction Trades, Colson Box 69.

flags at the President's appearances, arranged for the illusion of spontaneous blue-collar types to descend upon protestors waving flags so that they could be quickly removed. "The best way to do this is probably to work out an arrangement with the Teamsters Union so that they will have a crew on hand at all Presidential appearances, ready, willing, and able to remove Viet Cong flags, physically." At other times Nixon approved of having Teamsters "go in and knock [protestors'] heads off." Haldeman suggested hiring "Murderers. Guys that really, you know … the regular strike busters-types … and then they're gonna beat the [obscenity] out of some of these people." Haldeman's "to do" list in his copious yellow note pads even included "Get a goon squad to start roughing up demos" as part of the appearance of a broader revolt of the silent majority against the vocal minority. There seemingly could be many more such ploys that may never come to light, with unresolved hints sprinkled throughout the Nixon papers, such as Charles Colson's cryptic correspondence about a meeting with New York building trades leader Peter Brennan in the fall of 1970 regarding "some political chicanery that we should get going on as fast as possible."[17]

Whatever covert tricks the administration may have engaged in, the Nixon staff certainly made the most of *overt* operations. No sooner had the protests come to their conclusion than Nixon had invited 22 New York union officials, some with questionable backgrounds and connections, led by New York Trades Council President Peter Brennan, to the White House for a chat. The union leaders presented the President with a small metal flag for his lapel and a construction worker's hard hat labeled "Commander in Chief" as well as a similar helmet for the commander in Vietnam, General Creighton W. Abrams. "The hard hat," they explained, "will stand as a symbol, along with our great flag, for freedom and patriotism to our beloved country." Nixon briefed the group on the progress of the war and "was visibly moved" when one delegation member, whose son had been killed in Vietnam, said "if someone would have had the courage to go into Cambodia sooner, they might have captured the bullet that took my son's life."[18]

ROMANCING THE LEADERSHIP

As the building trades revolts faded from the headlines, Nixon reached out to court the AFL-CIO leadership in an unprecedented gesture at the end of the summer of 1970: he invited George Meany and 60 other labor leaders to the White House for dinner on Labor Day. It was a curious event. William Safire once described the two men as "diametrically allied"—a fundamental mutual admiration, agreement on cultural authority, and Cold War mentality undermined by a constant distrust and disagreement on domestic economic policy. Prior to the dinner Meany helped to lay an amicable groundwork for the dinner in a pre-Labor Day interview. Admitting that the administration was making "a very definite pitch" to win over workers, he helped push the

[17]Haldeman to Chapin, 31 July 1971, FF: 14, Chronological Files, Box 197, Contested Documents; Memo. from Colson to O'Hara, 21 September 1970 in Bruce Oudes, ed., *From the President: Richard Nixon's Secret Files* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 161; Haldeman Notes, 24 July 1970, FF: H Notes July—December 1970, Haldeman Box 42; Colson claims that no Teamsters were hired. There are several references to "those eight thugs" in the documents, suggesting some familiarity and use of them. Curiously, Abbie Hoffman (the butt of many anti-Semitic remarks from Nixon and his advisors) did get a broken nose from unknown assailants two days before the "thugs discussion." *New York Times,* 24 September 1981; Summers, *Arrogance,* 356–357.

[18]*New York Times*, 27 May 1970; Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 239.

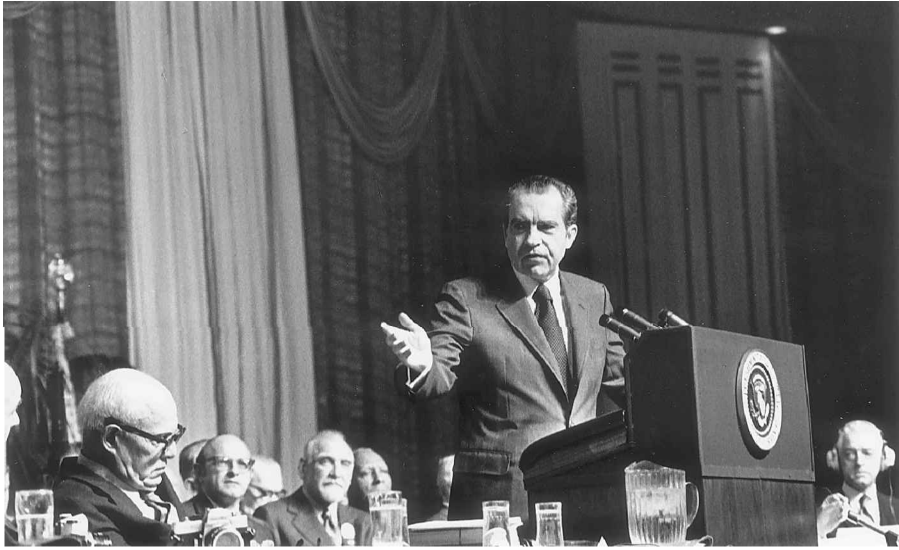

FIG. 1. President Richard Nixon pays homage to a skeptical AFL-CIO President George Meany during an unprecedented White House Labor Day dinner on September 7, 1970. Photo courtesy of the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives.

effort by declaring that "the Democratic Party has disintegrated" and what remained was being taken over by "extremists." Despite the opening, the President did not make any bold initiatives at the gathering—inviting Meany into the White House was certainly risky enough—but instead focused on the fundamental point of agreement between the administration and the AFL-CIO: the Vietnam war.[19]

Following a round of golf between Meany and the President, Nixon had his chance to preach to labor's Cold War choir during dinner. "The message of our time is that a strong, free, independent labor movement is essential to the preservation and the growth of freedom in any country in the world," lectured the President, and "the American labor movement stands firmly with the American President, be he Democrat or Republican." Turning his attention to the AFL-CIO leader, Nixon raised his glass to George Meany and proffered a parallel between the recently deceased Vince Lombardi, whose funeral Nixon had just attended, and his aging guest. Meany, he explained "has stood like a pillar in the storm—strong, full of character, devoted to his church, devoted to his family, devoted to his country, whether the president is a Republican or a Democrat, standing with that President and his country when he felt that that served the interest of freedom, that kind of freedom which is so essential if a strong, free labor movement is to survive." Nixon and company then retired to the South Lawn, where they joined 6000 union families for a performance of the 1812 Overture.[20]

[19]Safire, *Before the Fall,* 584; *Washington Post,* 31 August 1970. Not to be suckered, Haldeman scrawled across the Meany interview, "Don't be totally taken in by this–What he's trying to do is force the Dems back to the right–not to help us." Brown to Colson, 23 September 1970, FF: Labor Campaign (2 of 2), Colson Box 77.

[20]Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Exchange of Toasts between the President and George Meany," 7 September 1970, FF: Blue Collar, Colson Box 39.

If only Nixon could go to China, perhaps only Nixon could have brought labor into the Republican White House on Labor Day as well. Haldeman privately noted that the dinner was a "real coup," and no sooner had the posturing ended and the East Room been cleared of the dirty dishes than the memos began to flow through the White House about hopes and strategies to capitalize on the new labor–Republican linkage. Haldeman dashed off a memo regarding the new "resource to be cultivated" and argued that, given the success of the evening, he and the President felt that the most efficient route to the blue-collar vote would be through sympathetic labor leaders. The administration's plan was to proceed by sifting through the labor leadership to figure out which "are worth cultivating" and "picking them off one by one." As Haldeman summarized, "there is a great deal of gold to be mined." As he passed responsibility for the initiative onto Charles Colson, he noted: "As you can see from all of the above, [the President] is most anxious to move hard, fast and extensively in this whole area, and he is counting on you to see that this is done."[21]

"I will take this one on with real delight," Colson responded to the challenge of wooing labor to Nixon's side after the Labor Day dinner. Labeled the administration's "hatchet man" by the *Wall Street Journal* years before Watergate, Colson went down in history (and to prison) as one of the masterminds of Nixon's dirty tricks and took pride in his self-description as "toughest of the Nixon tough guys." Colson's effectiveness led Nixon to make more use of him as his "political point-man" in 1970, because, explained the President, he was "positive, persuasive, smart, and aggressively partisan" with an "instinct for the jugular." When Nixon complained to Colson, he "felt confident that something would be done," suggesting that the selection of Colson spoke of the importance the President gave to the blue-collar project. The two men also shared a similar class background and a history of aggressive upward mobility. "Nixon and I understood one another," explained Colson, "We were both men of the same lower middle-class origins, men who'd known hard work all our lives, prideful men seeking that most elusive goal of all—acceptance and the respect of those who had spurned us in earlier years." In turning his considerable energies toward the President's request, however, Colson may have underestimated the task before him. "We have succeeded in splitting large parts of the labor movement away from the Democratic Party," Colson wrote. "We have not won them over to the Republican Party; but the reservoir of goodwill and support for the President, both as an individual and as a President, is the basis for a permanent alliance." Conceding that getting labor to advocate for the President in the near future would be difficult, the strategist concluded that "Our immediate objective is to keep Labor split away from the Democrats. Our long range target is to make them part of our 'New Majority.' "[22]

Despite the success of the Labor Day dinner, Colson knew that the leadership was

[21] *Haldeman Diaries*, 7 September 1970; Haldeman to Colson, 8 September 1970, FF: Labor Campaign (2 of 2), Colson Box 77.

[22] Colson also revealed intelligence at this time that Meany was already positioning "himself to be at least neutral in the 1972 election" (well before McGovern had been selected as the presidential candidate), news seemingly confirmed by a confidential Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) memo a few weeks later. For descriptions of Colson, see *Wall Street Journal*, 15 October 1971; Colson, *Born Again*, 31–32, 57; Colson, "Thank God for Watergate," Part II, cassette tape, Life Story Foundation, Sumas, Washington. Transcript available online: http://www.lifestory.org/cols2.html. Nixon, *Memoirs*, 496; *New York Times*, 24 September 1981. For administration's discussions, see Colson to Haldeman, 14 September 1970, FF: Hodgson/Elsrey/Colson mtg with President, Folder 2 of 6, Contested Documents, Colson Box 22; Brown to Colson, 23 September 1970, FF: Labor Campaign (1 of 2), Colson Papers Box 77.

not enough—that the rank and file were the real voters. "As a general policy we must always keep in mind that romancing the union leadership is only one part of the task ... We need to cultivate the leadership by our individual activities and the rank and file by both our policies and our reaching out to the state and local apparatus." He concluded the plan of action should be to continue courting sympathetic union leaders—including maritime unions, the building trades, federal employees, Teamsters, fire and police, the Retail Clerks, and even the staunchly liberal United Auto Workers (UAW). In the UAW case, he tacked differently, given the classic situation in which the "socialist" leadership would never be won to the Republican side, but the rank-and-file autoworkers were "among the most conservative in the union movement." Indeed, it was only labor's last minute large-scale campaign that prevented much of the autoworker vote from going to Wallace in 1968. Combining the major intellectual themes of the administration's strategy, he explained: "our task, therefore, is to cultivate local leaders, who are strongly patriotic, anti-student and keenly aware of the race question."[23]

However optimistic Colson may have been, his specific plans to woo labor did meet with the President's approval. Nixon scrawled "good," "yes," and "do it" to most of Colson's suggestions, and his memo essentially stands as a blueprint for the administration's actions to implement the spirit of the Rosow Report from the 1970 midterm elections through the 1972 national campaign. Colson suggested appointing representatives of organized labor to "every commission we announce," having an administration official at every labor convention, considering the appointment of a trade unionist to a top post in the administration, having regular meetings with top union economists, and canceling prospective indictments of friendly labor leaders. In sum, explained Colson, "If we bring them into the advisory process in this way we then make them a part of our policy formulation rather than natural adversaries." He went so far as to suggest that, in order to find some common ground beyond Vietnam and foreign policy, the administration should consider backing a "pro-labor" bill to prove its mettle.[24]

The most cost-free angle, however, was going to be the most effective: not being silent on the silent majority. One of Nixon's fundamental beliefs had always been that the appearance of action was at least as important as, if not more so than, the reality of it. The administration therefore sought to control the discourse. "Of crucial importance is getting out the right line to the press," Colson continued, advising that administration publicist Herb Klein "should have a regular media briefing for the labor press particularly on key economic issues." The real key would be to build a sense of working-class movement on behalf of the President. "Friendly columnists should keep talking about how Nixon is winning the workingman's vote and how this Administration is pro-workingman, not anti-labor as other Republican administrations have appeared to be," Colson noted. "The more that the rank and file read that we are winning the labor vote, the more they are psychologically adjusted to getting on the band wagon." They went out of their way to make sure the bandwagon was big by ensuring that "working man" and "building America" themes regularly appeared in the speeches of all administration representatives. The Rosow Report was distributed to

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[23]Colson to Haldeman, 14 September 1970, FF: Hodgson/Elsrey/Colson mtg with President, Folder 2 of 6, Contested Documents, Colson Box 22.

[24]ibid.

Republican candidates throughout the country to include them in the new strategic vision.[25]

Nixon was well aware of the right–left tensions within organized labor dating from his time in the Eisenhower administration. He sought to exacerbate that split by simultaneously courting the right-wing unions and attacking the left within the labor movement. Calling the UAW and the ILGWU leadership "not only hopeless Democrats, but also hopeless pacifists," he countered Colson's more blanket approach, suggesting that "we simply are not going to make any points by trying to get along with the congenital left-wingers of the labor movement." The administration did try, however quixotically, to return to old McCarthyite tactics, by asking the Department of Justice to "initiate and sustain a major attack on left wing/Communist infiltration of the labor movement." Nixon's people never made headway on this angle for one simple reason: they could not find many communists. They did have legitimate concerns about New Left activists and splinter group militants moving into the unions, but this hardly constituted the heady issue they needed in order to make a meaningful public show. As an intelligence memo to John Dean explained, "CP [Communist Party] infiltration of, and influence in, the labor movement is minimal ... I do not believe it would be appropriate to launch any 'major attack' upon CP influence in the labor movement." Even J. Edgar Hoover, capable of finding subversive threats where they did not exist, had to admit: "CP influence can't be gauged." The administration still maintained its vigilance against radical influences and appeared to work in concert with the AFL-CIO hierarchy whenever it could. Lacking communists, the administration still kept progressive unionists on its infamous "enemies list" and vented its anger and conspiratorial venom at dismal employment reports by purging Jews and Democrats from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.[26]

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[25]Colson to Haldeman, 14 September 1970, FF: Hodgson/Elsrey/Colson mtg with President, Folder 2 of 6, Contested Documents, Colson Box 22. There were a host of smaller plans. Personal letters were sent out to all of the guests explaining Nixon's unemployment plan, the leaders of all sizeable unions were to be put on the list to be invited to major White House social functions (with published guest lists), lesser leaders would be invited to Sunday worship, photo opportunities, and brief words with the President, and influential figures would get 30-minute discussions with him. "Recognition and reward be made to those who publicly support us; this by means of legislative favors and additional invitations, appointments to boards, commissions, task forces, and honorary delegations," Colson explained. They kept careful track of what local, state, and national leaders needed help or were proving their loyalty to the President or other Republican candidates. They also kept track of where COPE funds were going and how well Meany was able to control them from being used to support liberal candidates. Often through tips from Jay Lovestone, the Nixon image-makers were well aware that "Meany was under intense pressure for his behind-the-scenes relationship with the Nixon Administration while ignoring struggling liberal Democrats," but remained confident that, despite his policy "blasts" against the administration, he would continue to refuse to help Democrats. See Colson to Haldeman, 14 September 1970, FF: Hodgson/Elsrey/Colson mtg with President, Folder 2 of 6, Contested Documents, Colson Box 22; see the memos of implementation of Colson's strategies in Brown to Colson, Brown to Ehrlichman, Brown to Flemming, Brown to Magruder, Brown to Shultz, Brown to Chapin, Brown to Klein, Brown to Dent and Chotiner, Brown to Flanigan and Flemming, Brown to Flemming, all 26 September 1970, FF: Labor Campaign (2 of 2), Colson Box 77; Colson to Haldeman, 9 October 1970, FF: Labor Campaign (2 of 2), Colson Box 77; Colson to Haldeman, 3 November 1970, FF: Nixon and Labor/Political, Colson Box 96.

[26]Safire, *Before the Fall,* 584, 587; Kissinger to Ehrlichman, 15 January 1970, "Confidential Intelligence Analysis," 9 July 1970, FF: SACB (Subversive Activities Control Board) (Folder 4 of 4), Dean Box 70, and see all attached memos, especially Hoover to Huston, 30 September 1970; FBI Surveillance Letter, 1 September 1970; FBI Surveillance Letter, 9 September 1970; Brown to Dean, 26 September 1970, FF: Subversive Activities Board (4 of 4), Dean Papers, Contested Documents from Boxes 46–71; see also Hutson to Dean, 28 September 1970, Dean to the Attorney General, 2 October 1970, Dean to Hoover,

TAKING OFF THE GLOVES

Not everyone was as excited about the blue-collar tactic as the key players in the strategy such as Charles Colson, George Shultz, or Pat Buchanan. Indeed, the administration was layered with old-school Republicans itching to discipline labor economically and politically. After the 1970 midterm elections were over, in fact, a battle of the memos ensued that attempted to come to terms with the bedrock issues a "New Right" faced with regard to labor issues: Was the effort to co-opt labor futile, given the unions' traditional interests or was there a real opportunity to remold American politics? Analysts and advisors spread out in a spectrum of opinion from Colson, who fought militantly to continue efforts to woo labor, to Acting Treasury Secretary Charls Walker, who saw the effort as foolish. The President seemed unclear about his own sense of how to proceed, penning "excellent analysis" in the margins of reports and memos with conflicting advice.

Walker crafted an influential memo to Nixon in November, recommending "for economic and political reasons, the Administration [ought] to take a more antagonistic stance towards organized labor." Walker's logic was fairly tight from a traditional Republican point of view. Economically, wage settlements were outpacing productivity gains in core industries, and thus the sought after combination of price stability and full employment could not be achieved without "reducing the power of some major unions." This meant that it was time to "take off the gloves" and "enter into open battle." This view, continued Walker, is "very widely held by our traditional constituency" and the prudent thing to do on economic grounds. Fundamental conflicts over inflationary wage pressures, a problem Federal Reserve Chairman Arthur Burns had been trying to push to the top of the agenda for months, meant that organized labor was never really going to be part of the New Majority. "There is little to lose—and perhaps much to gain," Walker argued, "by getting 'tougher.' " It was true that the AFL-CIO had not hesitated to embarrass the President, attack the administration, and oppose many of its economic policies. Even Walker wanted to insure the continuation of the "common man" theme, however, assuring that the new attack strategy should "not be aimed at the 'working man' " but at those institutions and leaders damaging to the stability of the economy and that cut across workers' own long-term interests.[27]

Nixon noted "Excellent Analysis" on several points of Walker's memo, and it prompted him to launch a reconsideration of the romancing labor strategy among his chief advisors. The memo hit the nub of the issue when he postulated that the whole concept that "labor would leave the Democrats and join us" was simply "wrong." The unions' goal would not be to support Nixon in 1972 as Colson and others hoped, but rather "to move the Democratic Party in its direction, supporting a centrist candidate such as Muskie." Here Nixon noted "Probably true." There was only one problem with

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Footnote 26 continued

2 October 1970, Dean to Attorney General, 2 October 1970, Dean to Staff Secretary, 2 October 1970, all in FF SACB, Dean Box 70. For a discussion of the enemies list, see Stanley I. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 104; for Nixon on Jews at the BLS, see Matusow, *Nixon's Economy,* 96–98.

[27]Colson to Bell, 26 July 1971, FF: State Labor Leaders (5 of 6), Colson Papers, Contested Documents from Box 114; Walker to President, 30 November 1970, FF: President's Handwriting (16–30 December 1970), President's Office Files, Contested Documents from Boxes 1–13, Folder 1 of 4; Keogh to Haldeman, 25 November 1970, FF: Labor Campaign (1 of 2), Colson Papers, Box 77; Shultz to Brown, 30 December 1970, FF: President's Handwriting (16–30 December 1970), President's Office Files, Contested Documents from Boxes 1–13.

Walker's analysis, noted Nixon in the margins: "But [they are] with us on national Defense." Without Vietnam, one wonders whether the "common man" strategy would have survived the trial stage, yet other documents suggest that the "blue-collar" strategy was as much a domestic political and moral crusade as an international one.[28]

Elder White House intellectual, writer, and former *Time* editor James Keogh took a slightly different tack: the effort to woo the leadership was futile, but there might be more support to be mined by differentiating the rank and file from the leadership. "We had a big Labor Day dinner for [the AFL-CIO leadership] and in other ways sought their favor. In return, they went out and bludgeoned us with rhetoric and money spent for the opposition. I have no doubt that they will continue to oppose the President politically right up to and including 1972." Keogh certainly expected quick results given the short time between Labor Day and the midterm elections, but his basic point had merit: it was a no-win situation given that other, more natural Republican allies would be alienated by Nixon's courting of labor. There was hope, however, in exploiting the anti-establishment mood by taking advantage of tensions between the rank and file and the labor leaders. That, Keogh argued, was where the administration should place its emphasis. "I hold the belief that even the rank and file labor union member tends to look with suspicion on the big labor leaders, having transferred to them a considerable portion of the dislike that goes towards the bosses." Rather than scrapping the whole blue-collar concept, "I wind up concluding that it is politically wise for us to seek the support of the rank and file of organized labor but that it is a risky affair for us to hold hands with the big labor leaders."[29]

Chuck Colson countered all opposition in a passionate defense of the rise of the working-class Right. Under the guise of siding with George Schulz's notion of taking an "even-handed approach" to both labor and business, he sided forcefully with other blue-collar militants who wanted to continue to push fully toward bringing labor on board. "There is no profit in being antagonistic simply for the sake of being antagonistic," he argued, "nor to please those Republican businessmen and bankers who still believe that being anti-labor is part and parcel of Republican orthodoxy." Playing to the President's sympathies on foreign policy, Colson stressed: "Labor has been our strongest ally on the most vital issues which confront this Administration—the fight against neo-isolationism—the ABM, SST, Cambodia, Hatfield–McGovern, and the Defense Budget." Even on fighting inflation, Colson argued for an even-handed approach requiring getting tough on business and government too, tapping into Nixon's own ambivalence about the business community. Most importantly, when it came to the tension between labor moving the Democrats to the center or joining the Republicans, there was no reason not to think the administration could not still win the tug of war: it was, he argued hopefully, "unwise to prejudge this one."[30]

Analysis of the 1970 midterm elections demonstrated both the importance and the volatility of the blue-collar vote. The administration's state-by-state breakdown showed that the blue-collar and middle-income votes varied dramatically depending upon the race, while most of the other categories remained relatively constant. In the races won

[28]Keogh to Haldeman, 25 November 1970, FF: Labor Campaign (1 of 2), Colson Box 77; Shultz to Brown, 30 December 1970, FF: President's Handwriting (16–30 December 1970), President's Office Files, Contested Documents from Boxes 1–13; for a succinct breakdown of all of the key players' positions on the labor question, see Kehrli to Haldeman, 31 December 1970, FF: HRH-Higby/Kehrli memos, Haldeman Box 69.

[29]Keogh to Shultz, 4 December 1970, FF: Labor Campaign (1 of 2), Colson Box 77.

[30]Colson to President, 7 December 1970, FF: President's Handwriting December 1970, Contested Documents, President's Office Files, Documents from Boxes 1–13.

by Republicans, the blue-collar vote was often responsible. The opposite was also true: in the races they lost, the party did poorly with the working-class vote. As Colson concluded to Haldeman, "The blue collar, middle income vote is volatile, and will swing to us if we play the issues correctly ... There is an emerging conservative, middle class/labor vote." Given that the party in power usually has a tough time in midterm elections, the general winds were not unfavorable as the Republicans gained two seats in the Senate and only lost nine in the House. Appealing to the President's ambitions, Colson extrapolated some wishful thinking from the data. "You have made an historic breakthrough in the old Roosevelt coalition of the 'have nots,' labor, the poor, the minorities ... you are winning the respect—and I believe the votes—of working men."[31]

It was not until the following summer, 1971, however, that the President finally put the matter to rest by siding decisively in favor of the hard-hat strategy as revealed in Nixon's philosophical musings that open this article. And decisive it was. Incredibly, even when polling data showed that the moment was right to attack labor, the administration bit its tongue. "The public in general and union families in particular are now ripe for a major uprising against the leadership of organized labor," claimed pollsters commissioned by the administration. All of the issues and sentiments were in place for a large-scale public revolt against crippling strikes, inflationary wage demands, and the undemocratic structure of some key unions. All measures demonstrated significant anti-labor gains since the 1969 poll, even, and most dramatically, in union families. "Surprisingly enough," concluded the poll results, "those closest to unions appear to share, often to an even greater degree, the feelings of the general population." But the pro-labor strategy was set—there would be no attack. As Colson concluded in a private memo after Nixon's decision, "This President, regardless of what the business community urges, what the polls show, or what Republican orthodoxy would dictate, is not going to do anything that undermines the working man's economic status."[32]

CONFLICT AND CONSTRAINTS

Despite the flow of optimistic rhetoric and symbolic concessions, real-life labor issues plagued the administration, often putting the President in the difficult position of being economically at odds with the interests of the labor movement while still allied with the AFL-CIO leadership on questions of culture, authority, and foreign policy. Quickening inflation, rising unemployment, a drawn-out General Motors strike, the postal strike, the suspension of the Davis–Bacon Act, the controversial wage/price freeze, and a snubbing of the President by George Meany at the AFL-CIO convention all suggest that the administration had every reason to reverse course. Contrary to both evidence and traditional Republican policy, however, Nixon's advisors struggled to maintain the blue-collar strategy even when it appeared to be failing before their eyes. The administration remained fairly committed to good-faith collective bargaining in most disputes, and the major problem with the "wooing labor" strategy was not necessarily convincing the leadership and the rank and file that the Democratic platform, at least by 1972, was wrong. Rather, it was finding ways to continue the hard-hat rhetoric while simultaneously

[31]On voting analysis, see Colson to Haldeman, 22 December 1970, FF: "Nixon and Labor/Political," Colson Box 96; Colson to Haldeman, 16 February 1971, FF: Labor Campaign (1 of 2), Colson Box 7; Colson, *Born Again,* 63; Colson to Haldeman, 22 December 1970, FF: Nixon and Labor/Political, Colson Box 96.

[32]Colson to Howard and "Public Thinking on Unions and Labor Legislation," 26 July 1971, FF: Unions and Labor Legislation, Barker Box 3; Colson to Bell, 26 July 1971, FF: Unions and Labor Legislation, Contested Documents from Box 3, Barker Papers.

seeking to discipline what was just beginning to compete with the administration's concerns about unemployment: inflation. And the staff had already identified a chief cause of inflation—the economic demands of its hoped-for new ally, organized labor.

The Davis–Bacon Act, for instance, which requires contractors working on federal construction projects to pay the highest prevailing [i.e. union] wage to its workers, had been regarded as an inflationary pressure in the construction industry for many years. Wage increases in the industry were far outpacing those in manufacturing, and the powerful but fragmented craft unions prevented any easy top-down response to what was beginning to be an inflationary crisis in the industry. In February 1971, Nixon suspended the Act after failing to get the unions to agree to a voluntary solution. Even though the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the suspension "seemed to have undone all the administration's careful cultivation of the blue collar vote," the President was not plunging into the political darkness. The suspension had been secretly vetted ahead of time with all of the major building trades leaders, as well as various figures including Lane Kirkland, George Meany, and Frank Fitzsimmons, among over a dozen others. Although Peter Brennan felt that there were other options that could have been pursued, he was kept tightly in the loop of the administration's decisions and still promised to "deliver 90% to our side in 1972." In ending the wage guarantee in the industry, the President had the agreement that leadership would grouse but not fight, and so his crafting of his official statement on the suspension in pro-worker terms would not seem completely absurd. "While some might wish to blame management or labor unions for this inflationary syndrome, we must recognize that, in fact, they are its victims," argued the President in his official statement. "The person who is hurt most by this pattern of inflation," he explained, "is the construction worker himself. For as the cost of building increases, the rate of building is slowed—and the result is fewer jobs for the working-man."[33]

Not surprisingly, many saw the suspension as a victory for labor. The *New York Times* editorialized that the suspension meant that "the construction unions win" because the administration's solution was really a tepid response to a situation that demanded more draconian moves. Nixon may have pulled his punches somewhat in order to avoid alienating his new allies. The administration put the Act back in place barely over a month after rescinding it, obtaining the voluntary controls it had originally hoped as the suspension got the attention of the unions "the way a two-by-four gets the attention of a mule" explained Labor Secretary Hodgson. The new "voluntary" controls by labor–management boards included heavy governmental pressure to control wages but gave the administration room to wiggle in order to placate friends in need. It did work, modestly, as first-year contract negotiation wage and benefits increases fell from 19% to 11%.[34]

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[33]His advisors hotly debated the suspension as Arthur Burns recommended Nixon "wave a big stick at the building trades unions," while Shultz, then at the Bureau of the Budget, "argued that antagonizing the hard-hat unions would be bad politics." See Roland Evans, Jr and Robert Novak, *Nixon in the White House: The Frustration of Power* (New York: Random House, 1971), 370–371; "Statement by the President" (suspension of Davis—Bacon Act), 23 February 1971, FF: Building and Construction Trades, Colson Box 39; Colson to President, 23 February 1971, FF: Building and Construction Trades, Colson Box 40; Colson to Chapin, 25 February 1971, FF: Hard-Hats–Building and Construction Trades, Colson Box 69; *New York Times*, 24 February 1971 and 25 February 1971; *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 1970.

[34]*New York Times*, 30 March 1971; Matusow, *Nixon's Economy*, 95–96, Safire, *Before the Fall*, 587–588; for a complete discussion of the wage controversy in the construction industry, see Marc Linder, *Wars of Attrition: Vietnam, the Business Roundtable, and the Decline of the Construction Unions* (Iowa City: Fanpihua Press, 1999), 304–327.

Nixon had been openly opposed to a very popular idea for curbing inflation, broad wage–price controls, and Meany knew it. It was an immensely popular idea, however, and the AFL-CIO president made the mistake of publicly, if tepidly, endorsing a freeze on the presumption that Nixon would never actually implement one. When the President did what the polls had been telling him was popular, and what appeared to assist his reelection hopes—declare a wage–price freeze under the guise of his New Economic Policy—what little common ground there had been between labor and the administration quickly evaporated. Labor opposed freezes in general largely because it was much easier to control wages than prices, and, of course, it violated one of the basic prerogatives of unions, the freedom to negotiate contracts. When the administration ruled that 1.3 million workers scheduled to receive wage increases negotiated before the freeze would not get their pay, labor's position hardened. Leonard Woodcock, president of the liberal UAW, declared that if the administration "wants war, it can have war."[35]

The wage–price freeze controversy forced the administration to tack away from the leadership strategy and back to the rank-and-file approach. Meany's open hostility to the freeze as a rich man's plan showed his overreach, they believed, and the rank and file—and certainly the public at large—were with the President on the freeze. As the *Washington Post* reported, "The gamble was buttressed by supporting evidence in private White House contacts with other leaders of big labor and public opinion polls that Meany's defiance was by no means fully shared by American wage earners." The labor leadership's anger, however, was deep. When Shultz and Hodgson went to the AFL-CIO headquarters to explain the program, one labor official told Shultz: "When you take your ass out of here, get measured for a pair of tin pants because you are going to need them," implying that they would need extra protection where the unions were going to kick them. But labor had clearly fumbled the popularity of the freeze. As Herbert Stein recalled, the freeze "had instantly become the most popular economic action of government that anyone could remember."[36]

Given the popularity of the freeze, the AFL-CIO had to cave in. Nixon knew that "Meany's overplayed his hand, and that's why he came back." Still, he admitted, "no program can work without labor cooperation" and the President welcomed union leaders in to shape Phase II of the controls. With Meany's reluctant buy-in on Phase II, Nixon launched a Price Commission and a Pay Board, with five members each from labor, business, and the public on the Pay Board. Meany was able to shape the board to his plans, including autonomy from the federal government, simply by threatening to walk out, after which the Nixon people had to appease the feisty plumber's demands. In fact, at the first meeting, Meany kept his overcoat on, claiming that it was chilly in the room but giving the appearance that he was ready to walk out at any moment. The Pay Board remained deeply divided and when the majority voted to deny retroactive payment of a wage increase negotiated to take place during the freeze, Meany stopped in his tracks. The sanctity of the contract had been violated. Nixon refused to meet with Meany on the issue to cut a deal. Nixon's advisors had already concluded that Meany would "spring lots of his opposition when he thinks it will do the most damage."[37]

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[35]*New York Times,* 19 August 1971; Matusow, *Nixon's Economy,* 158.

[36]Quotations from Matusow, *Nixon's Economy,* 158–159; see also *Washington Post,* 27 August 1971.

[37]*Haldeman Diaries,* 12 October 1971; Matusow, *Nixon's Economy,* 157, 160; Chotiner to Mitchell, 2 September 1971, FF: Press Reports, Haldeman Box 303; Colson to President, 4 November 1971, FF: Charles Colson, November 1971, Haldeman Box 86.

All of the real issues at stake devolved into a nasty symbolic showdown at the AFL-CIO convention in Florida. At the last minute, Nixon decided to accept a *pro forma* invitation to address the convention, creating the forum for an ugly clash between two monumental egos and viscerally political animals around one issue: Who was the voice of the American worker, Nixon or Meany? The administration decided the day before the convention to make a macho play on what they called the " 'Daniel into the Lions' Den' thesis"—a gutsy President strutting into the fortress of his enemies to boldly set the opposition straight. He planned on having a boilerplate speech to release—covering all the "dull routine standard stuff" that the administration had done for labor. The plan was for Nixon to get up to the podium, claim he stood behind everything in the official speech, then toss it aside and speak to the workers from his heart. In reserve, he had all of the "good stuff" about the dignity of the working class that had been building up in the blue-collar strategy that would be unleashed in a staged spontaneous outreach to the common man—"straight from the shoulder, the way they like to hear it."[38]

Meany had other plans for the President—the lion's den was actually a bear trap. Even though George Shultz had been assured that Nixon would be extended all of the "courtesies," Meany was ready to humiliate the President on labor's turf. Nixon walked into the convention with only a terse, one-sentence announcement, the band did not play "Hail to the Chief," the television cameras had been banned, and the President of the United States was seated in the second row on the platform. He looked exhausted, having stayed up much of the night memorizing his allegedly extemporaneous speech. Meany had instructed the crowd not to respond to what Nixon said and even tried to get the Executive Council not to sit on stage with him, which the members rejected. It was a master snub. The audience occasionally applauded but also snickered and groaned at the idea that the freeze was a success. When the pseudo-words-from-the-heart were over, the President moved to begin shaking hands with the conventioneers, when Meany gaveled the convention to order and all but pushed Nixon out. Suggesting that the President was faking his way amid the representatives of labor, Meany announced: "We will now proceed with Act II."[39]

After events in Florida, Nixon's advisors became obsessed with the public spin on the humiliating appearance. The *New York Times* reported that the audience "reacted with polite hostility, punctuated occasionally by derisive laughter." Haldeman noted that there was "more emphasis on the rebuff by the labor people than on the P's courage" so the strategy became to change the news story to "labor is rude to a courageous President." Despite the bruised feelings, a host of plans suggested to savage Meany publicly, and Nixon's immediate reaction that "we can't make peace with the labor unions," the President and his advisors agreed "not to martyr Meany or drive the union members to support him." They would continue the effort to woo the rank and file and hopefully let Meany hang himself, thus allowing Nixon to fill the leadership void. Editorial opinion, telegrams, and the polls after the convention showed little improve-

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[38]*Haldeman Diaries,* 17 November 1971 and 19 November 1971.

[39]*New York Times,* 20 November 1971. When the press later fired back at Meany that he had been at best discourteous to Nixon, the Bronx plumber claimed to the convention: "I have the impression the President did not come here to make a speech. He came here to contrive a situation under which he could claim that he had been unfairly treated," he explained. See the discussion of a leaked memo to Meany that suggested that Nixon was trying to set Meany up in Robinson, *Meany,* 318–319. In Meany's backpedaling, he claimed that they did not have the sheet music for "Hail to the Chief" but the Teamsters later gave Colson a photograph of the sheet music sitting on the piano at the convention.

ment for the President's actual ratings but clearly showed that the public had strong support for Nixon over Meany in the affair. In the aftermath, George Shultz, arguing against launching vengeful anti-labor legislation, explained: "we may be on the verge of a spectacular breakthrough, because our strategy, which was to neutralize the headquarters and woo the locals, is working and now that the headquarters are falling apart at the seams and Meany's power is waning." They had to be very careful, Shultz was convinced, "not to send anti-labor signals from the White House and give Meany the leverage to get back on top." The *Los Angeles Times* summed it up best with a cartoon of Nixon and Meany arm wrestling—with Nixon winning.[40]

After Nixon's Florida speech, he noted to Haldeman that "it'll be hard to make the Hoffa move right now," but move he did. Barely a month after the debacle in Florida, he cemented his relationship with the most trusted of his blue-collar backlash supporters, Frank Fitzsimmons of the Teamsters, when the President released Jimmy Hoffa from prison just before Christmas 1971. The President's commutation of his sentence included a proviso that Hoffa could not return to his lifeblood, union business, until 1980—the end of his original sentence. Hoffa claimed not to know about this stipulation in the terms of his release, learning about it only when reporters peppered him with questions once he was outside the penitentiary gates. He quickly concluded what many of his biographers believe, that a deal had been struck between Teamster President Frank Fitzsimmons and the Nixon administration (probably engineered by John Dean and Charles Colson) to prevent Hoffa from returning to office. Hoffa showed no resentment toward Nixon but did vent considerable anger at Fitzsimmons, the person who was supposed to sit passively in Hoffa's place while he was in jail. In essence, "Fitz," as he was known, had gone from Hoffa's hand-selected puppet and place-keeper to, in Hoffa's words, a "liar" and a "double-crosser." But the Nixon administration loved Fitzsimmons: he was more New Majority than Meany, less volatile and skittish than other labor leaders with the exception of Brennan, far less independent than Hoffa, and believed to be capable of delivering an enormous bloc of votes to Nixon. He was simultaneously powerful, but sycophantic and highly seducible—the perfect and certainly the favorite lieutenant in Nixon's battle plans for the New Majority.[41]

Despite Nixon's machiavellian success with the Teamsters, labor leaders seemed to be snubbing the President's overtures by early 1972—especially when an exasperated Meany finally walked off the Pay Board in March (for which Nixon privately promised him a "kick in the ass"). As Colson aide George Bell saw it, "As I analyze our campaign in terms of support for the President from organized labor, it seems to me that on a national basis, we are in rather poor shape." The national leadership situation seemed in disarray, and the best hope was for a few endorsements of small independents and maybe some neutrality from a couple of large unions. The blue-collar strategy limped

[40]*Haldeman Diaries*, 20 November 1971, 22 November 1971, 30 November 1971; *New York Times,* 20 November 1971; the *Miami Herald*'s headline proclaimed "Big Labor Blows the Game with an Intentional Foul." Meany wanted to patch things up afterward; see analyses on 11 January 1972 and 28 January 1972 in FF: Political Miscellaneous 1971, Haldeman Box 303; *Los Angeles Times*, 25 November 1971.

[41]*Haldeman Diaries*, 20 November 1971. When Nixon met with Fitzsimmons after the Teamsters' endorsement of the President in 1972, Colson told Nixon to take Fitzsimmons aside and "tell him that we are with him all the way and that there will be no concessions with Hoffa. Obviously no one else should hear this." See Colson to President, 17 July 1972, FF: Meeting with Pres of Teamsters, San Clemente, Colson Box 24. See Arthur A. Sloane, *Hoffa* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 362. Fitzsimmons was responsible for a period of drift and dramatic reduction in the Teamsters' organizational power.

along into the 1972 election, vacillating between romancing and attacking the leadership, or drumming up the rank and file. By the summer campaign season, the administration's strategic plans to win the hard hats looked good only if compared to the disarray of the Democratic Party's relationship to its blue-collar base.[42]

1972 ELECTIONS AND BEYOND

The Democratic Party was at a vulnerable juncture in 1972, still reeling from the 1968 convention in Chicago that had taken the many fissures in the New Deal coalition and turned them into seemingly irreparable cracks. For the 1972 nominations, the party instituted much-needed changes in the selection of delegates that favored women and minorities over entrenched machine interests that tended to favor white ethnics and organized labor. As a crusty, bitter, and immobilized George Meany explained at the 1972 Democratic Convention, "We listened for three days to the speakers who were approved to speak by the powers-that-be at that convention. We listened to the gay lib people—you know, the people who want to legalize marriages between boys and boys and legalize marriages between girls and girls ... We heard from the abortionists, and we heard from the people who look like Jacks, acted like Jills, and had the odors of johns about them." Having lost the struggle to get a Henry "Scoop" Jackson or even Edmund Muskie to head the Democratic ticket, labor was faced with what it regarded as its worst-case scenario. Stuck between the courtship of Richard Nixon and the social issue liberalism of George McGovern, for the first time the AFL-CIO simply refused to endorse a candidate. "I will not endorse, I will not support, and I will not vote for Richard Nixon," announced a dyspeptic George Meany; "I will not endorse, I will not support, and I will not vote for George McGovern." Hinting at the need for a structural solution to the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, he added with his tongue obviously in cheek, "If Norman Thomas was only alive—." Of course, Meany never did and never would have endorsed Socialist Party candidate Norman Thomas, but even his teasing about such a move speaks to the volatile nature of the labor issue in the 1970s.[43]

The AFL-CIO's 1972 non-endorsement strategy has been subjected to two interpretations. Most commentators, taking their cue from Meany's snide rhetoric, point to the politics of culture in the early 1970s. Many believe that the federation refused to endorse McGovern because of the importance of "differences on foreign policy, and ... such cultural issues as permissiveness, the work ethic, and social and sexual deviance." Taylor Dark, in contrast, suggests that McGovern's remarkable pro-labor voting record meant that there had to have been something more at stake than simple cultural politics or even the war. He points to the AFL-CIO's loss of a "power broker role" in the Democratic Party after the post-1968 reforms took place. Meany feared labor's loss of its traditional position as king-maker in the Democratic Party, hated the idea of a candidate not beholden to them, and, most importantly, feared a candidate accountable to the "new" interests of minorities and women's groups. Rather than accommodate themselves to the new developments in the party, Dark suggests, they

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[42]Chotiner to Mitchell, 29 November 1971, FF: Press Reports, Haldeman Box 303; *Haldeman Diaries*, 22 March 1972; Strachan to Bell (and attachments), 14 March 1972, FF: George Bell, March 1972, Haldeman Box 93.

[43]Robinson, *Meany*, 322–323.

were misguided enough to believe that withholding their support would help roll back the reform process and restore the old, closed, hierarchical system. Obviously, there is significant overlap between these two theses, but overlooked in both is the way Nixon had already laid the foundation for a potential and believable non-endorsement. Without the cover laid by the administration's blue-collar strategy since 1970, however uneven it may have been, it is difficult to envision the neutrality strategy having much legitimacy for organized labor in 1972.[44]

Once the nomination was secure, George McGovern's candidacy gave the President the latitude necessary to portray himself as the candidate of the workingman and the Democrats as captured by the most effete and decadent elements of the new liberalism. As the administration's "Assault Book" for the fall presidential contest argued:

> As the campaign progresses, we should increasingly portray McGovern as the pet radical of Eastern Liberalism, the darling of the New York Times, the hero of the Berkeley Hill Jet Set; Mr Radical Chic. The liberal elitists are his—we have to get back the working people; and the better we portray McGovern as an elitist radical, the smaller his political base. By November, he should be postured as the Establishment's fair-haired boy, and RN [Richard Nixon] postured as the Candidate of the Common Man, the working man.

Half jokingly, Buchanan and the other strategists suggested pushing even further into the lion's den: "How about RN going to [UAW Detroit rally site] Cadillac Square on Labor Day this year!!" McGovern helped by being unwise enough to tease that he would renounce his 1965 vote against the repeal of section 14b of Taft Hartley (the "Right-to-work" provision), a relatively minor flaw in a pro-labor voting record that the AFL-CIO had bludgeoned him with, if Meany would proclaim that he was incorrect about Vietnam and the Cold War. This, of course, was a gold mine for the Nixon administration, as all the staff had to do was wait for reporters to ask whether Meany, probably the second most prominent cold warrior in the country after Nixon, would renounce a lifetime of militant anti-communism.[45]

As the election approached, Secretary of Labor James Hodgson tried to summarize Nixon's working-class appeal in an appearance at New York's Dutch Treat Club by arguing that "the worker's liberalism had been tied to bread-and-butter economic issues [and] when those issues were crowded from the center stage by more extraneous sociological concepts, the workers began to question sharply just where his [*sic*] self-interest lay." But even for white male workers, the Republican Party offered little of "bread-and-butter" value—comfort and solace but precious little bread. In many ways, the blue-collar strategy offered the worst type of identity politics—place of pride but place without economic substance. Emblematic of the entire strategy, in the final push to get out the blue-collar vote for Nixon, the administration had 100,000 little stickers delivered to New York City that declared simply "Nixon" above a hard hat emblazoned with an American flag. The campaign decals were designed to be just the right size to be placed on a worker's hard hat. There was, however, a problem: "*NO*

[44]Taylor Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 87–92; J. David Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), xxv; see also Jerry Wurf, "What Labor Has against McGovern," *The New Republic,* 5 & 112 August 1972, 21–23.

[45]Buchanan/Kachigian, "Assault Strategy," 8 June 1972, in Oudes, *From the President,* 466. On tensions between Meany and McGovern on 14b and communism, see *Washington Post,* 28 April 1972.

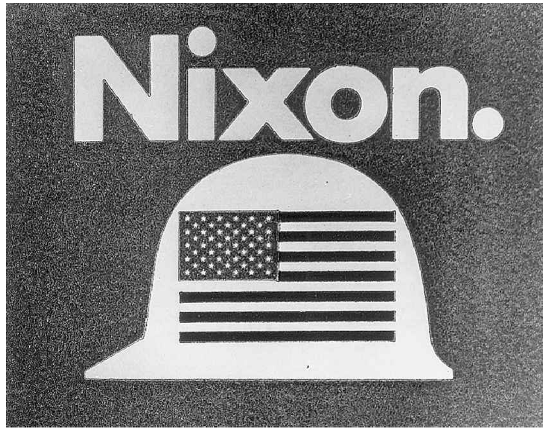

FIG. 2. Tying together three key themes in the administration's blue collar strategy—Nixon, workers, and patriotism—this 1972 campaign sticker had to be pulped for lack of a union "bug" that showed they were printed by a union shop. Image courtesy of the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives.

UNION BUG" (the symbol that shows they were printed by a union firm), proclaimed an advisory memo, "*They're useless.*" The stickers never saw the light of day. While the Nixon people were able to marshal all of the symbols and pageantry of the blue-collar strategy, the underlying bedrock principle of unionism—protection of jobs and wages through solidarity—still remained an alien concept.[46]

When Richard Nixon won the largest electoral victory in American political history in 1972, he sat hidden away in his favorite office in the Executive Office Building alone with his devoted advisors, Haldeman and Colson. Bob Haldeman intently thumbed through reams of election returns to tally the exact size of the President's landslide, calculations that would eventually lead to 62% of the popular vote, 49 states in the Electoral College, 57% of the manual worker vote (a 22 point increase for Nixon since 1968), and 54% of the union vote (a 25 point gain since 1968). He was even the first Republican to receive a majority of Catholic votes. The increases in union and manual votes were some of the largest jumps in any category in that four-year interval, suggesting something particularly remarkable about the voting behavior of workers that year—whether due to the success of Nixon's strategy, the announcement that "Peace was at hand," the many failings of McGovern's campaign or all three. The President himself certainly believed it was a strategic breakthrough. Basking in the private moment of a public victory, Nixon raised his scotch and soda to Charles Colson. "Here's to you Chuck," exclaimed the victorious President, "Those are your votes that are pouring in, the Catholics, the union members, the blue collars, your votes, boy. It was your strategy and it's a landslide!"[47]

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[46]Address by Secretary of Labor James D. Hodgson, 3 October 1972, FF: Labor (1 of 2), Barker Box 2; *Haldeman Diaries*, 10 October 1972; Rodgers to Colson, 5 September 1972, FF: Nixon and Labor/Political, Colson Box 96.

[47]Colson, *Born Again*, 15. Calculations made from Gallup Poll, "Vote by Groups, 1968–1972," archived at http://www.gallup.com/poll/trends/ptgrp6872.asp. The southern vote for Nixon had the most dramatic increase of any category for Nixon—35 points—but this can be attributed largely to the absence of George Wallace, who garnered 33% in 1968. The only other category approaching this type of increase was the high-school-educated vote, with a 23% increase, but this category is not an unreasonable proxy for "manual worker." The only other substantial jump that matches these categories is in the age category 30–49 years old, which saw a disproportionate 26-point increase.

Writing in the halcyon days between Nixon's victory and the public imbroglio of Watergate, pamphleteer Patrick Buchanan claimed in a book titled *The New Majority* that "the ideological fault that runs beneath the surface and down the center of the Democratic Party is as deep as any political division in America." The blue-collar, lower-middle-class ethnics and white southerners "who gave FDR [Roosevelt] those great landslides" were, he argued, in rebellion against the "intellectual aristocracy and liberal elite who now set the course of their party." The 1972 election was for Nixon and the Republicans much like the 1936 election was for Roosevelt and the Democrats: the delivery of the common man to the party of Nixon. The election was, Buchanan claimed, a fundamental, semi-permanent realignment: "a victory of 'the New American Majority' over the 'New Politics,' a victory of traditional American values and beliefs over the claims of the 'counter-culture,' a victory of the 'Middle America' over the celebrants of Woodstock Nation." Although his triumphant rhetoric came as the administration was about to crumble under the Watergate scandal, Buchanan claimed that 1972 "makes the long-predicted 'realignment of parties' a possibility, and could make Mr Nixon the Republican FDR" and the New Right "the successor to the Roosevelt coalition."[48]

After the election the strategy still continued apace before it disappeared in the all-consuming wake of Watergate. Nixon followed Eisenhower's move to bring a building tradesman into the cabinet by quickly tapping Peter Brennan, promoter of the hard-hat protests, to be his new Secretary of Labor. This appointment not only fulfilled the long-standing idea of placing a labor leader in the administration, but also Brennan, the loud, tough talking Bronx Democrat, in many ways symbolized the movement of a key constituent from the party of Roosevelt to an awkward position in the New Right. Colson reported that Brennan's goal in taking over the position—however distasteful some of the tasks would be when it came to drawing the line with the unions—would be to help the Republicans gain labor's "permanent allegiance," though he ended up feeling "very frustrated, like a caged lion." Meanwhile, after the President's landslide, the administration came up with the idea of labeling the powers in the media, academia, and, most of all, Congress, as "the New Minority" to emphasize the New Majority behind the President's mandate. The paper trail on the blue-collar strategy almost completely evaporates as the administration became obsessed with covering up what John Dean reported to Nixon in March 1973 as the "geometrically" compounding "cancer" on the Presidency. The AFL-CIO grew increasingly critical of the President with each new revelation about the abuse of power surrounding the Watergate scandal. Then, in an odd coincidence, the Federation's convention took place on the same weekend as Nixon's "Saturday Night Massacre" in October 1973. Already assembled in Florida, the Executive Council quickly gathered to ask for Nixon's resignation.[49]

RICHARD NIXON AND THE PAGEANTRY OF CLASS

As the last of the presidents working within the logic of the New Deal political framework, Nixon was the final president to court labor seriously, while also one of the first to recast the ways in which workers appeared in American presidential strategy.

[48]Patrick J. Buchanan, *The New Majority: President Nixon at Mid-Passage* (Philadelphia: Girard Bank, 1973), 63–64.

[49]Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate*, 245; *Haldeman Diaries,* 20 November 1972, 13 February 1973; Robinson, *Meany,* 329–330; for the infamous "cancer" on the presidency discussion, see "Transcript of a Recording of a Meeting among the President, John Dean, and H. R. Haldeman in the Oval Office, on March 21, 1973," p. 5, Nixon Presidential Materials.

While "struggling to change the political fortunes of the presidential Republican party by dressing it up as the congeries of the silent rather than the rich or propertied," in David Farber's formulation, Nixon helped to push the concept of "worker" out of the realm of production and helped drive a long process of deconstructing the postwar worker as a liberal, materially based concept. Knowing as he did that there was not a single working-class identity or a pure working-class consciousness, he sought to build political power out of new forms of discontent. Indeed, as David Halle and others have argued, class-consciousness, nationalism, and populism all have very blurry and overlapping edges; they bleed into one another and shape the presentation and representation of different sources of social identity. At any of the sources of workers' thinking about themselves, explains Halle, "there is an identity that contains the seeds of both a progressive and a reactionary response, and which one is dominant will depend on the possibilities people are presented with." Nixon grasped this basic sociology and sought to recast the definition of "working class" from economics to culture, from workplace and community to national pride. *En route* to his hoped-for New Majority, he paved the way for a reconsideration of labor that, in its long-term effects, helped to erode the political force and political meaning of "workers" in American political discourse.[50]

As insidious and graceless as Nixon's ideas and plans might have been, he did attempt to fill a void in the nation's discussion of working people by drafting a powerful emotional pageantry around blue-collar resentments. In contrast, as the Democratic Party chased after affluent suburban voters and social liberals, historian Judith Stein argues, its leaders failed to "devise a modernization project compatible with the interests of their working-class base." Indeed, Nixon may have been the last president to take working-class interests seriously, but his was less a "modernizing project" than a postmodernizing one. Lacking both resources and the inclination to offer material betterment to the whole of the American labor force, Nixon instead tried to offer ideological and discursive shelter to those white male workers and union members who felt themselves slipping through the open fissures of the New Deal coalition. In the end, Nixon's efforts were based too much on undercutting the opposition than building his own vision, and too subterranean for a time that cried out for explicit leadership. He sniffed out the anger and resentment of a constituency in drift only to try to win them with his own definitions of their problems. As biographer Richard Reeves explains, Nixon's followers assembled in a "resentful populist center of working and middle-class Christians" who "loved him not for himself but for his enemies."[51]

Nixon also based his strategic reasoning on political blocs that conflated workers with unions—a hypothetical unity that Ronald Reagan would successfully bifurcate 10 years later. Nixon seemed to feel that all he had to do was command his aides to do the right things, get his representatives to say what people wanted to hear, woo the right leader, and pull the right political levers to draw the right blocs into his realignment. If the project to build the New Right worker was incomplete, the construction of a new

[50]David Farber, "The Silent Majority and Talk about Revolution," in *The Sixties from Memory to History,* ed. Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 295; Farber applies Jean Baudrillard's post-marxist conceptualization that controlling the means of production is less important than the means of "controlling the code;" David Halle, *America's Working Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 301, 292. See a very useful similar theoretical formulation that helps situate the politics of class with the new social movements, J. Craig Jenkins and Kevin Leicht, "Class Analysis and Social Movements: A Critique and Reformulation," in *Reworking Class,* ed. John R. Hall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 369–392, especially 382–384.

[51]Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 6; Reeves, *President Nixon,* 14.

political culture, however uneven, would take much more than a single truncated presidency. By delinking northern industrial workers from organized labor, Reagan later mobilized much the same rhetorical strategy as Nixon while simultaneously seeking to crush labor's organizations and institutions. In the process, Reagan helped to disconnect even further Nixon's brand of white, blue-collar identity politics from organized labor's economic demands. The impact of this separation echoed on into the 2000 campaign cycle, when Al Gore invoked "working families" and George W. Bush recast his patrician upbringing as west Texas common man. By then, however, their posturing seemed to be based on little more than hollow references to a time when "worker" had at least some, if troubled, political content.[52]

[52]Rieder, "Silent Majority," 265; Schulman, *The Seventies*, 24–32.