

Nixon's Class Struggle

H.R. Haldeman, Richard Nixon's chief of staff, called it the president's "long philosophical thing." As Washington sweltered in the hot July of 1971, a year before George McGovern would receive the Democratic nomination, Richard Nixon gathered his advisors together to explain the core premise of his domestic political strategy: winning working men to what he liked to call the "New Majority." Few issues in domestic politics stirred his passions more deeply. Although his team would go down in history most famously for the crimes of Watergate (which barely emerged in the 1972 campaign season), in the summer of 1971 they believed they were brewing a permanent realignment in the political cauldrons of the White House—one that would finally bring an end to the Roosevelt coalition.

"When you have to call on the nation to be strong—on such things as drugs, crime, defense, our basic national position," Nixon declared to the assembled political wizards gathered about him, H.R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, George Shultz, John Connally, and Charles Colson, "the educated people and the leader class no longer have any character, and you can't count on them." Nixon always detested the eastern elite, whom he saw as impotent and effete, and envisioned the working class as the only constituency with the "character and guts" to meet the many crises of the day. "When we need support on tough problems," he declared, "the uneducated are the ones that are with us." Because the president felt that the deepest reservoir of character in the nation consisted of those who "offer their back and their brawn," he rejected the proposals from many of his advisors to do what Republicans were supposed to do: attack 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.”¹

In Nixon’s class analysis, workers were the counterpoise to the eastern establishment for which he had nothing but bitter contempt. When the crises hit, Nixon concluded, the 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—the traditional backbone of New Deal politics—that new faith and renewal 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.” As Nixon theorized his plans for the future, he declared, we “need to build our own new coalition based on Silent Majority, blue-collar Catholics, Poles, Italians, Irish. No promise with Jews and Negroes. Appeal not hard right-wing, Bircher, or anti-Communist.” He sensed the moment and devoted his presidency to making the New Majority out of such sentiments. His sole domestic political goal was to disassemble the Roosevelt coalition and to rebuild the pieces into his own modern coalition. All else—the Watergate break-in, the liberal domestic policy initiatives, much of his entire domestic presidency—derived from that central principle.²

By the fall of 1972, Nixon would prove very successful in shifting what FDR called the “forgotten man” away from his bread-and-butter material concerns to the shared terrain of culture, social issues, and patriotism. This was not simply just cynical political manipulation—although there was plenty of that. Rather, it was something he really believed in: that the people’s natural political alliances stemmed from their values (and that they were highly exploitable politically). “The Roosevelt coalition was just that—a coalition,” he intoned to his advisors. FDR “played one against another—big city bosses, intellectuals, South, North. By contrast, our New American Majority appeals across the board—to Italians, Poles, Southerners, to the Midwest and New York—for the *same reasons*, and because of the same basic values. These are people who care about a strong United States, about patriotism, about moral and spiritual values.” There may not even be consensus on what “those moral and spiritual values ought to be,” Nixon confessed, “but they agree that you ought to have some.” They were ironic words for a president who would have to resign in disgrace two years after the election, but

they were terms he believed to be bedrock political truth. While FDR intoned against elites as the “economic royalists” who wanted to form an “industrial dictatorship,” Nixon knew in his very soul that working people would rally against a new kind of elite—a liberal cultural elite “who want to take their money, and give it to people who don’t work.” As he concluded, “These are not just southern or ethnic notions—they’re American to the core.”³

Nixon’s thinking about workers inverted that of Woodrow Wilson, his presidential hero and model. Wilson had sought routes for workers to establish “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.” Nixon, in contrast, stood the problem on its head—ideal rather than material—by making workers’ economic interests secondary to an appeal to their moral backbone, patriotic rectitude, whiteness, and 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 much 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. Indeed, it was not long after his musings that he declared that there would be “no more rhetoric from the Administration [that] contained any kind of anti-union implications.” In formulating such an appeal, Richard Nixon may have been one of the most class aware presidents of the postwar era, even if that awareness never sought to improve conditions for the American working class or the fortunes of organized labor. He would make the Republican Party a bit less receptive to the needs of Wall Street and, at least rhetorically, much more open to the men of the assembly lines.⁴

Richard Nixon’s attempt at working-class populism may have been the loneliest in American history. 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 speechwriter William Safire’s estimation, a “man born with a potmetal spoon in his mouth fighting a Rockefeller for the nomination and a Kennedy for the Presidency.” Humble origin, however, does not a populist make. As biographer Richard Reeves explains, Nixon was “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 he was aligned against not what he was for, and it tapped into his own grinding anxiety rather than his faith in the working class. Lonely, isolated, and smart, the brooding workhorse of post-war America came to believe that groups and interests could be politically manipulated from the inner-sanctum of the White House. As Reeves argues, “he gloried in cultural warfare, dividing the nation geographically, generationally, racially, religiously,” often believing that the genetic code caused voters to act in pre-determined ways.⁵

By the 1972 campaign, he would have strategic appeals laid out to thirty-three separate ethnic voter groups ranging from the Armenians and Bulgarians to the Syrians and the Ukrainians—all united around the need for some vague sense of values. Nixon believed that he could bring those ethnicities together; surmount economic disagreements with organized labor; and, by presenting his cultural vision at his particular historical moment, become the workingman’s president. And he was, to a large extent, correct.⁶

I

The origins of what Nixon’s men called the “blue-collar strategy” were rooted in a more vague but famous appeal to the “Silent Majority.” Barely squeaking past Hubert Humphrey and a Democratic Party in complete disarray after the 1968 Chicago convention, he turned toward sharpening his appeal to what he first called the “Silent Americans.” He launched a secret group called the “Middle America Committee” in the fall of 1969 to help the Republican Party reach the “the large and politically powerful white middle class.” That constituency, they reasoned, was “deeply troubled, primarily over the erosion of what they consider to be their values.”⁷

The National Moratorium to End the War on October 15, 1969, provided a chance for Nixon to take his strategy to the next level. The flavor and hue of protest suggested that criticism of the war was going mainstream. The massive mobilization against the war received favorable press coverage and appeared to be a public relations disaster for the pro-war administration. “Enough educated and affluent Americans turned against [Nixon],” former *New York Times* reporter Max Frankle argues, that “criticism ceased to be ‘radical’ and the president had to vie with critics for attention on the news.” With the anti-war cause clearly no longer a fringe cause, he had to win back

the hearts and minds of the people. So, in the early hours of the morning about two weeks after the moratorium, Nixon toiled to find the right words for his national television address to defend his policies in Vietnam. It was then that he struck upon his famous appeal to “the great silent majority of my fellow Americans.” While it began as a counter-attack on the anti-war movement, it crystallized as a key domestic theme that would run through his presidency all the way through the 1972 campaign.⁸

The Silent Majority rhetoric also meshed neatly with the more venomous posturing of Vice President Spiro Agnew, who had a field day attacking the “small and unelected elite” of the press and the “effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals.” The nation’s newspapers and television stations, argued Agnew, had played up the scourge of dissent in the nation while ignoring the hardworking Americans who did their jobs and paid their taxes. He tarred the media elite, with his trademark alliteration, as the “nattering nabobs of negativism” who had formed “their own Four H club—the hopeless, hysterical, hypochondriacs of history.” Pat Buchanan, a young reporter who had become a sort of political valet to the president, reveled in Agnew’s success. The vice president, he wrote to Nixon, “has become the acknowledged spokesman of the Middle American, the Robespierre of the Great Silent Majority.” The press sheepishly covered Agnew’s rhetorical offensive. The cover of *Time* magazine that November even showed thousands of clean-cut white people at the Washington Monument celebrating Veterans Day with the headline “Counterattack on Dissent.” An influential young billionaire name H. Ross Perot then dumped half a million dollars into an advertising campaign to send letters of support to the White House.⁹

As it was for Robert Kennedy and then George McGovern, the key to Nixon’s political universe between 1968 and 1972 was the Wallace voter. Wallace’s oratory during his 1968 campaign, running under the banner of the American Independent Party, earned him the moniker of “Cicero of the cab driver” from one journalist because of his ability to tap into the anger, disenchantment, and racial resentments of white blue-collar America. As the governor’s biographer argues, Wallace was able to draw together the social and racial problems of the late sixties and early seventies in inextricable ways. “Fears of blackness and fears of disorder—interwoven by the subconscious connection many white Americans made between blackness and criminality, blackness and poverty, blackness and cultural degradation—were the warp and woof of the new social agenda.” Working-class liberals

still constituted a strong bloc, but they were growing suspicious of changes afoot and feeling forgotten in the mix. Better than many Democrats, Nixon, like Wallace, figured out that much of the backlash was a simple search for secure ground in the cultural storms.¹⁰

The Wallace voter offered the key to more specific plans for romancing the working class beyond the Silent Majority. Kevin Phillips, the precocious young Nixon advisor who read his computer printouts with the intensity of a biblical scholar, believed that the secret to American politics was “who hated who.” The Bronx-Irish strategist understood the essential cultural conservatism of the white ethnics and boldly posited that the manipulation of race and culture would provide for what he called the *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969). In that famous manifesto, Phillips 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. The Wallace voters were not a one-time move away from the Democrats but part of a permanent realignment toward the Republicans. To look at simple election returns of the two major parties was to miss the point. The solid Democratic South was crumbling under the Democrats’ commitment to racial equality and cultural values, he believed, and, 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’ famous book looked beyond the Southern Strategy and considered the possibility of 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.¹¹

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. Phillips’ version of conservatism was nothing like what it would soon become; he advocated, for instance, programs ranging from national health insurance to aid for declining industrial regions. 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. As Nixon appeared soft on labor, liberals lost their bearings with (another) new Nixon. As labor insider John Herling reported in the spring of 1969, the new president “certainly is

not behaving according to the pattern both friend and foe set out for him as he advanced to the White House. In the area of labor-management relations, there has been no sizzle and crackle and lopping off of heads, no snarling that 'We've got you now, bub.' The roots of a New Right lay, Phillips contended, in the hope of "a new coalition reaching across to what elite conservatives still consider 'the wrong side of the tracks.'" The Wallace vote of 1968 was merely a "way station" for blue-collar Democrats drifting into the Republican Party—and the future of republicanism rested upon the "the great, ordinary, Lawrence Welkish mass of Americans from Maine to Hawaii."¹²

The Wallace voter was a dangerous and confusing character for any candidate. On the issues of class and economics, the Wallace voter tended to see the Democrats as the party of the center—accepting and depending upon much of the economic gains of the New Deal programs; but on race and law-and-order, that same voter would need the most conservative elements of the Republicans. The question was which element was stronger—culture or economics? As Scammon and Wattenberg explained in *The Real Majority* (1970), from the hypothetical position of the ten million people who voted for Wallace in 1968, "'Law and order' beats 'bread and butter'; social beats economic. Keep your tainted federal dollars if it means putting my kid in school with the colored." For the millions of voters who originally leaned toward Wallace but voted for one of the two-party candidates in 1968, however, in the end the calculus went in the other direction—the politics of economic interest generally trumped the social issue. But, as the pugnacious liberal journalist Pete Hamill described Wallace supporters in 1968, it may have been more basic than the false binary of economics versus culture. As so often in populist movements, the Wallace movement had more than a hint of the promise of a restoration of a lost golden age. As Hamill argued,

There was little mystery to them. They were my own people, lower middle-class people who worked with their backs and their hands, who paid dues to a union that was remote to them, people who drove a cab or tended bar one night a week to make ends meet, people who went hunting with the boys on vacations, people who handed their infant children to their wives while they applauded the candidate. Most of them seemed to make about \$125 a week and were struggling to pay off GI loans on their homes. . . . They want change; the America they thought was theirs has become something else in their own lifetimes, they want to go back. A lot of the people attracted to George Wallace are just

people who think America has passed them by, leaving them confused and screwed-up and unhappy.

The vague populism of the Silent Majority, the sentiments of the Wallace followers, and the outlook of the voters Phillips scrutinized all lacked the class edge that Nixon would soon develop to his political calculations.¹³

The document that moved Nixon's thinking from these broader appeals to a more specific blue-collar strategy was another provocative essay by the liberal 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 he was deeply moved by its street-wise view of the issues. The article exposed the unrecognized rage coursing through the New Deal bulwark. It allowed the president to move Phillips' thinking, and the president's own impulses, from an abstract possibility to a concrete strategy by clearly identifying a set of political resentments in the urban north ready for plucking. While 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, which drove phenomena like northern blue-collar support for George Wallace, than it was 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 threatening the privileged centrality 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 in this strategic Rosetta Stone; he "feels trapped and, even worse, in a society that purports to be democratic, ignored." 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."¹⁴

Hamill's work was complemented by an intellectual resurgence that made the promise and pathologies of white, blue-collar men a veritable genre in the early seventies. Works such as Peter Schrag, "The Forgotten American" in *Harper's Magazine* (1969), Patricia Cayo Sexton and Brendan Sexton, *Blue Collars and Hard-Hats* (1971), Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972), Andrew Levison, *The Working Class Majority* (1974), Studs Terkel, *Working* (1974), Lloyd Zimpel, *Man Against Work* (1974), E.E. LeMasters, *Blue-Collar Aristocrats* (1975), and all too rare entries on

women like Louise Kapp Howe, *Pink Collar Workers* (1977) suggest a small chunk of the blue-collar revival among intellectuals. Yet it is likely that Richard Nixon learned his lessons less from Hamill and the others than he had his preternatural political instincts confirmed by the intellectuals—the exact type of affirmation he relished.

Nixon circulated the Hamill article widely among his strategists. George Shultz's Department of Labor studied the issues in greater empirical detail, and delivered *the* document of reference in the administration's debates over the labor question, a paper titled "The Problem of the Blue-Collar Worker." More commonly known as the "Rosow Report" after its author, Assistant Secretary of Labor Jerome M. Rosow, it was delivered to the president in April 1970. The brief clearly made the case for material concerns, arguing 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." The report admitted, "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." Rosow's solutions to the problems he outlined made up an unimaginative stew of policy ideas to better workers' lives materially: education, childcare, tax policy, and workplace regulations. "Our system of values signal that something is very wrong when conscientious, able, and hard-working people cannot make it." The more conservative members of Nixon's staff were horrified by the whole idea of the report—it was much too redolent of the old New Deal. "The Rosow Report is a blue-print for an expanded welfare state," complained aide Tom Huston; "It envisions a program which we cannot afford politically or budgetarily." The key, he argued, would be to "develop a rhetoric which communicates concern for the legitimate claims of this class, yet avoids any incitement to the baser instincts of man afraid."¹⁵

Nothing remains a secret in Washington for long, and one of the twenty-five 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 exposé. "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 the plan as having “a sense of absurdity,” the newspaper condemned the new direction for the Republicans by suggesting that alienation was too complex an emotion for presidential politics. Workers were simply 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 their alienation.”¹⁶

The question was, despite the obvious need for material betterment contained in the Rosow Report and despite the remarkably objective multi-racial definition of the blue-collar vote it contained, could the administration chuck the material issues it raised and succeed in winning white working-class votes solely through cultural and social appeals? Putting the pieces together, the president and his staff agreed that the political moment 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 legitimacy to Wallaceite 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 the administration 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, in fact placing restraints on workers’ wage demands. The key question remained for the administration: was this to be a strategy to draw out workers only or might even the unions—whose entire identity was largely wrapped up in delivering the material goods to the rank and file—also be brought on board?¹⁷

II

Then came the proof. Just weeks after the internal release of the Rosow Report, Richard Nixon's wildest dreams for the blue-collar strategy found their popular manifestation. Beginning in early May 1970 and lasting much of the month, 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 when brightly helmeted construction workers, many wielding their 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' goal, besides venting their rage, was to raise a flag lowered to half mast to honor the four slain students in Ohio. They then proceeded to storm the steps of City Hall, chasing student protestors through the streets of the financial district, and bloodying around seventy people in the process. While demonstrations continued on lunch hours throughout the month, the culmination of the conflicts came on May 20 when the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York sponsored a rally—the previous actions had no open sponsorship—and delivered around one hundred thousand 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 NIXON AND AGNEW, the protests delivered to the national spotlight both the hard-hat image and the resentment Hamill pinpointed the previous year. *Business Week* called the original hard-hat revolts the "three days that shook the establishment," but it was more like three days that affirmed it.¹⁸

The pro-war worker was an unfair stereotype, which, upon close examination, suggests something of the class divides of the anti-war movement. Certainly there were plenty of blue-collar Americans who agreed with John Nash, a Newark printer interviewed during the protests, who chalked up support for the war as simple duty to country. "I'm backing the President all the way. My boy goes into service Dec. 7. . . . I'm proud of him. It's a chance we all had to take. It's his turn." But polling data belies the myth of a uniquely pro-war working class and consistently shows, in fact, that manual workers were more opposed to the war and more in favor of withdrawal than were the college educated. An amalgam of polls, interviews, and reports suggests that it was less support for the war among pro-Nixon workers than it was

class resentments aimed at the approach, privilege, and lack of duty among the protesters. With college a reasonable class signifier in the sixties, the college draft deferment tore a fairly clear class divide between those who were forced to serve and those who were not—in an era in which many families were barely more than a generation out of poverty. Thus much of the psychology of the backlash trended more toward that of class antagonisms, guilt, and victimization than an actual stand on foreign policy. As historian Christian Appy, reports, “To many veterans, the protest of college students felt like moral and social putdowns, expressions not of principle and commitment but simply of class privilege and arrogance.” As one tradesman confirmed, “Here were these kids, rich kids, who could go to college, who didn’t have to fight, they are telling you your son died in vain. It makes you feel your whole life is shit, just nothing.”¹⁹

What mattered most to the Nixon administration was that the protests suddenly gave their ideas about the working class palpable imagery and potent political symbolism. “This display of emotional activity from the ‘hard hats,’” argued Nixon’s aide 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.”²⁰

The hard-hat protests and the stereotype of the hawkish working class was yet another twist in a long line of manipulations of the working-class image—whether it was the Left’s revolutionary agent or the Right’s neo-brown shirts. As two sociologists explained at the time, “the whole idea of the ‘hard hat’—the superpatriot, the racist workingman” served to hollow out the humanity of the wearer and replace the person with a political symbol: “a thing, with an empty head hidden beneath, a part of a mass over which the ‘educated’ or ‘enlightened’ person towers.” The right wing’s new essentialization was as reductionist as the Old Left’s equally simplistic “proletariat”—both mere instruments for others to wield for their own political purposes.²¹

The timing of the protests could not have been more fortuitous. The White House was literally and figuratively under siege in the wake of the bombing of Cambodia. Chuck Colson called the White House a “bunker” as tear gas drifted in from the streets, and the secret service resorted to ringing the

grounds with buses in order to protect the president. 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.²²

Nixon seized upon the moment to uphold traditional values in the face of cultural upheaval: a discussion about manly citizens who work and support their country in opposition to the effete non-citizens who loaf, protest, and undermine the national purpose. As Peter Brennan, head of the New York building trades who helped orchestrate the hard-hat protests, explained to Colson (and Colson to the president), the "hard hats" cheering for the president did not correlate directly to votes. They did not like Nixon's economic policies and feared his push on civil rights. "What is winning their political loyalty," Brennan explained,

is their admiration for your masculinity. The "hard hats," who are a tough breed, have come to respect you as a tough, courageous man's man. Brennan's thesis is that this image of you will win their votes more than the patriotism theme. The image of being strong, forceful and decisive will have a powerful personal appeal with the alienated voter.²³

Many have suggested that the rampaging protests of the tool wielding tradesmen 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. Haldeman, aggravated by the continued presence of Viet Cong flags at the president's appearances, arranged for the illusion of spontaneous blue-collar types to descend upon flag-waving protestors 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 strikebusters-types . . . and then they're gonna beat the [obscenity] out of some of these people." Haldeman's "to

cosmopolitans” whom Williams Jennings Bryan defended against science and the modern world.⁷¹

X

Nixon entered his second term convinced that he could rely on the workingmen's votes. He 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—and rather incompetent—secretary of labor. The appointment of “Mr. Hardhat” 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. As a high-ranking building trades official and Democrat remarked, “It is a very clever move. It shows Nixon's hell-bent on reorganizing the Republican Party to include trade union elements. He's intent on breaking up the monolith of labor support for the Democrats.” Colson reported that Brennan's goal in taking over the position would be to help the Republicans gain labor's “permanent allegiance,” though Brennan later ended up feeling “very frustrated, like a caged lion.”⁷²

The Nixon administration had not counted on the weight of economic reality dragging down their lofty rhetorical appeals in the second term. The wage and price controls largely failed to provide a long-term tool for stabilizing the economy. The expansive economic policies also helped fuel inflation in the economy, which tipped to 8 percent in 1973. The real tragedy for the economic hopes of the administration, however, came from abroad. The developing world bit back in the 1970s from Saigon to Tehran, but no bite was as crippling as the OPEC decision to raise the price of oil.

The economic shocks of 1973 rattled the hopes of the blue-collar strategy, but Watergate destroyed them. The administration quickly 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 its 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. George Meany reported that “This Administration has cast a dark shadow of shame over the spirit of

America. After five years of Richard Nixon, this great and once-proud nation stands before the world with its head bowed—disgraced, not only by its enemies abroad, but by its leaders at home.” Already assembled in Florida, the executive council quickly gathered to ask for Nixon’s resignation.⁷³

The conservative *National Review* could barely hold back its venom at Nixon’s squandering of the New Majority and the conservatives’ political fortunes. In 1972, the journal was suspicious that the Republican Party could become the vehicle of a new governing coalition, but a year later, “Richard Nixon and the circle of political geniuses with whom he has surrounded himself have managed to devastate that possibility.” With polling reaching all-time lows for Republicans in 1974, organized labor back in the Democratic column, and the blue-collar ethnics returning to their traditional party, it appeared that the administration had trashed the natural course of history. With Watergate, “what Nixon and his people have accomplished is to stand athwart history and sidetrack the formation of a new, dynamic non-liberal majority. It has been an astonishing accomplishment, achieved against all odds.” Yet the *National Review* had changed its tune from snubbing the idea of blue-collar conservatism to naturalizing it. The magazine actually failed to give the president enough credit for sensing the prevailing political winds in the first place. As Nixon’s speechwriter, William Safire, recalled, “With brilliance, panache, subtle understanding, and nefarious connivance, the new majority had been fused together, destined to hold sway for one election year; then, after Watergate, Meany would decide he had a good villain in Nixon, and the carefully built coalition would be smashed to smithereens”—yet only, one might add, for the duration of a couple of election cycles.⁷⁴

XI

Richard Nixon was simultaneously the last president to work within the logic of the New Deal political framework of material politics, the first postwar president to try to recast the ways in which workers appeared in American presidential strategy, and the last to court labor seriously. 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. As sociologist 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, meaning, and certainly economic identity, of "workers" in American political discourse.⁷⁵

As 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 inclination to offer material betterment to the whole of the American labor force, Nixon instead tried to offer ideological shelter to those white male workers and union members who felt themselves slipping through the widening cracks 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 they were 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.⁷⁶

Nixon also based his strategic reasoning on political blocs that conflated workers with unions—a hypothetical unity that Ronald Reagan would successfully bifurcate a decade 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, as Jonathan Rieder suggests, “the crafting of a new culture of the Right, one more self-consciously grounded in appeals to the working and lower-middle classes, did not occur full-blown overnight.” As one Democratic strategist explained at the time, “Nixon gnaws around the edges of a worker’s life. He hasn’t touched the central trade union part. But he gnaws a little at the Catholic part, a little at the Polish part, a little at the patriotic part and a little at the anti-hippie part. After a while, he has an awful lot of that worker.”⁷⁷

In December 1972, still basking in the afterglow of the election, Chuck Colson telephoned the president to report that they were receiving the “damnedest fan mail” about the appointment of Peter Brennan as secretary of labor. “You mean,” said Nixon, “they finally think the appointment of a working man makes them think that we’re for the working man? They talk about all the tokenism—we appoint blacks and that but they don’t think you’re for blacks. Mexicans, they don’t think you’re for Mexicans. But a working man, by golly, that’s really something.” Yes, explained Colson, “This kind of locked it up.” As Colson continued, “The fundamental dichotomy here, the fundamental cleavage within the Democratic Party is such that with what you’re doing to build the New Majority, and what I hope to help you do, I think we’re going to keep them split, and I’m awful bullish about what we can do in this country.”

“They may not ever become Republicans,” Colson summarized; “but they’re Nixon.”⁷⁸

I'm Dying Here

Merle Haggard and his band, the Strangers, stumbled toward the stage in matching powder-blue polyester suits. Ready for the gig, Hag pulled his mud-stained Stetson over his bleary eyes, obscuring both his smooth-faced good looks and a fifties-style pompadour grown loose and shaggy with the 1970s. When they arrived at the Nixon White House for the show, the band was on its third day of playing and partying during one of the “wildest tours” of the troubadour’s career. As Haggard recalled, he and the boys showed up at Pat Nixon’s 1973 birthday celebration “hung over, dead on our feet, and walking around in a daze”—hardly the picture of small-town morality that the president hoped to promote by inviting the country singer to perform.

Once on stage, Hag immediately sensed that he was in for a cool reception and silently wished he was anywhere other than in the presence of the president and his entourage. “I felt like I was coming out for hand-to-hand combat with the enemy,” he recalled about the White House audience. As the band banged their way through the first two numbers, Haggard scanned the stiff, black-tie crowd for any signs of awareness of what he and the band were up to, but the audience simply sat there like “a bunch of department store mannequins.” Digging deep into his bag of tricks, he turned to the Jimmy Rodgers classic “California Blues” in hopes that a song about the home state he shared with Nixon might do the trick. No luck there. Clearly the president, he concluded, “hadn’t hung out at the same places I did.” As Hag summed up the appearance, “I didn’t expect the crowd to be as receptive as a Texas honky-tonk’s, but I didn’t expect them to be embalmed either.”¹

Merle Haggard's invitation to the White House was not because Richard Nixon was any kind of fan of country music—quite the opposite—but because it was part of the administration's continuing schemes to bolster the president's blue-collar appeal. Steel guitars may not have made Nixon's heart soar, but building political majorities did. Nixon's lieutenant Bob Halde-
man, however, had to confess defeat to his diary that night. "The 'Evening' was pretty much a flop because the audience had no appreciation for coun-
try/western music and there wasn't much rapport," he wrote, "except when Haggard did his 'Okie from Muskogee' and 'Fighting Side of Me' numbers, which everybody responded to very favorably, of course." Indeed, Nixon's tin ear on the distinctions between country musicians surfaced when Johnny Cash was invited to play the White House earlier in the administration. The president's handlers requested that Cash play the backlash classics (written and performed by others) "Okie" and "Welfare Cadillac," both of which he refused to do, resulting in a minor tempest in the press. As Nixon confessed during Cash's appearance, "I'm no expert on music. I found that out when I told him to sing 'Welfare Cadillac,'" which, Cash's biographer explains, Johnny refused because he did not write it and "the song appeared to mock the poor."²

The path toward linking the Republican elites and the music of the com-
mon man might have been a rough one, but unlike many liberals who dis-
missed the twang, sentimentality, grit, and reactionary tendencies of country
music in the early seventies, the White House overlooked its own musical
tastes, convinced that country music could be marshaled in the fight for
its New Majority. Country music, traditionally a southern working-class
chronicle of lost souls and cheatin' hearts, had become valuable cultural ter-
ritory in the decade's national political wars.

Nixon's attempt to build a cross-class cultural alliance was a paler shade of
its opposite, a fun house mirror incarnation, of the 1930s Popular Front.
During the Great Depression, artists, writers, performers, and intellectuals
joined together in what Michael Denning called, in somewhat exaggerated
terms, the "laboring of American culture." The worker and the CIO were
the cause, and burying the sectarian hatchets of the Left in favor of the New
Deal was the mood. By the early seventies, however, there was less a popular
front than a cultural war as to what the "the worker" might be, as artists did
battle over his (mostly, *his*) allegiance and representation. Nixon's tapping
into performers like Haggard suggested the inverse of the Popular Front—

the emergence of a top-down cultural front for the Right. On the Left, in contrast, overtures from the counterculture to the working class were weaker—and sometimes hostile. Occasionally New Left filmmakers or countercultural performers offered the possibility of a cross-class alliance akin to the college students who entered the labor movement during the insurgencies of the early seventies. The country-rock movement or films like *Five Easy Pieces*, for instance, looked to blue-collar culture as a source of authenticity for a movement lacking roots and grounding. Others, who chose art over partisanship, like Sidney Lumet in his film *Dog Day Afternoon*, suggested that the problem may have been beyond politics—that, truth be told, there was a wholesale meltdown in working-class identity. Parts of the working class did go Right, parts did go Left, but mostly the “working class” in early seventies popular culture failed to congeal in a visible public form.

In the thirties, the Left had Okie troubadour Woody Guthrie; in the seventies, the Right had Merle Haggard and the number one hit on the backlash billboard, “Okie from Muskogee.” “We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee / We don’t burn our draft cards down on Main Street,” Haggard sang, “Cuz we like livin’ right and being free.” The same year that the Woodstock Nation basked in love, pot, and mud, at nearly the same historical moment that the lurking violence of the counterculture revealed itself at the bad trip at Altamont Speedway, and in the year that Black Panther Fred Hampton was gunned down in his bed by the Chicago police, the number one hit on the country charts celebrated a place where “We don’t make a party out of lovin’” and “football’s still the roughest thing on campus.” It not only made Haggard into a hot commodity among Republican strategists for celebrating “a place where even squares can have a ball,” but propelled him into stardom. His booking fees went through the roof, and the tune opened the floodgates to a wave of songs celebrating a defensive, chip-on-the-shoulder belligerency from other artists. It also created a stereotype of what Merle Haggard’s music was about, which he struggled against for the rest of his career. As the *New Yorker* explained, “It is an unfortunate irony that Merle Haggard, probably the most musically diverse singer in country music, should be inextricably linked with a casual ditty—a passably catchy tune—that shifted attention from his musicianship, which is highly articulate, to his politics, which are not.”³

Class consciousness had always been weak in country music, but its new populism meant that the genre in the seventies was typically contemptuous

of those who did not work (on either end of the economic spectrum), suspicious of outsiders and strangers (whether by geography, race, or conviction), and antipathetic toward the uprooting of tradition (which tended to get pinned more on the state than the market). The new country attitude, the “redneck rebellion,” was recasting American political iconography in the early seventies. The tensions between, on the one hand, a longing for roots and tradition, and, on the other, the maelstrom of modernity, gave country music “an appealingly rebellious yet conservative political identity for America’s modern white working class.” This happened at just the moment when key aspects of southern culture were becoming national culture. The easy battles of the early seventies were cultural more than economic, so that rebellious Americanism tended to be aimed at the permissive liberal/radical elite who served all too easily as the enemy of tradition. By emphasizing the cultural dimensions of working-class life over its material base in the early seventies, country offered a lot of rebellious attitude but certainly not much threat to capitalism.⁴

Not long before, country music had mostly been apolitical. Here again Nixon took his populist cues from George Wallace, who reportedly had a country act in every political rally since 1958. Wallace had even invited Hag to join his presidential campaign. Many country music fans were certainly drawn to Wallace’s message, but it was not because the genre was innately reactionary prior to the seventies. The Alabama politician had simply sought out Nashville’s support as no previous candidate had ever done. His rallies bordered on stage revues, with country performers, the bouffant-haired “Wallace girls,” and the knee-slapping lines of the man himself. As Bill C. Malone argues, “Wallace and the country musicians shared a common ground, apart from ideology, in their origins in the southern working class with their common accents, religion, food tastes, and social memories.” The candidate, he notes, “played the role to the hilt.” Subsequently, any major country act that endorsed a candidate came out for either George Wallace or Richard Nixon in 1968 and, by 1972, the entire country music establishment became associated with the semi-mythic “Silent Majority.” By the dawn of the seventies, as Malone argues, “for the first time in its history, country music began to be identified with a specific political position, gaining a reputation for being jingoistic and nativistic music.”⁵

Rednecks and good ol’ boys were suddenly everywhere—not just in country music but in movies like *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), television shows like *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979), and even political iconography in the form of Jimmy Carter’s alter ego, brother Billy Carter. The term had moved suc-

cessfully from pejorative to point of pride, with some exceptions such as the horrors of *Deliverance* (1972), in which the rural poor remained a frightening “other” to four adventurous Atlanta businessmen—not yet their cultural allies in a fight against the hippies as they would be in most seventies productions. The South was no longer a place inhabited by innocents as in the sixties with *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, or *Petticoat Junction*; by the seventies the southern white worker had become variously a defensive militant, a rebellious outlaw, or, most often, the most distinctly American of all groups. The redneck maintains a paradoxical combination of rebellion and patriotic nationalism—the state is his enemy, the nation his mystical identity—forged in honest if “alienated, body-wrecking, and mind-numbing” manual labor.⁶

So it is easy to understand that Nixon's entourage might not have grasped much of the material reality of Haggard's music, but they felt fine trying to tap into its populist resentments. They heard the anti-counterculture traditionalism, but they failed to see how Hag's fingernails still curled and bent because of prolonged exposure to the chemicals he used during his labors in the San Quentin laundry. They smelled political opportunity, but they did not recognize a character who really did seem like part of a Steinbeck novel. They sensed the potential for mobilizing Okies in support of the war and against the protestors, but they probably never noticed the initials PBS tattooed on his wrist, for Preston Boy's School, the juvenile home where he was imprisoned at the age of sixteen. And, while Nixon's men were more than a little familiar with political crimes, they knew little of the world in which stealing cars, breaking and entering, or doing hard time for material reasons were not uncommon. What Nixon's people saw in Hag's song was one thing: a rising star of a new anti-elitism, one pointed at cultural values and away from those responsible for economic conditions.⁷

Nixon was not alone in his calculations. It had only been a year before the White House gig that California's governor Ronald Reagan had granted Haggard a full and unconditional pardon for his long and sordid list of felonies and misdemeanors, which had led to the artist's incarceration in San Quentin. Haggard really had “turned twenty-one in prison” (in solitary confinement next to the condemned Caryl Chessman, in fact) just as he sang in his hit “Momma Tried.” Back when many country singers really were outlaws, not just packaged as such, Haggard longed to escape the chains of his nefarious past rather than wear them as false badges of honor. Returning from prison to his beloved Central Valley, he helped build on Buck Owens'

“Bakersfield Sound” in the 1960s as a roots-based alternative to the slick, corporate-country music of Nashville. Despite his string of country music successes, he did not feel complete until the day that Reagan forgave his crimes. “I was no longer ex-convict Merle Haggard,” the singer declared proudly about Reagan’s pardon. “I was Citizen Haggard. I had outlived my past.” Repaying the favor, Haggard appeared on a televised Republican fund-raiser with Reagan. His appearance on behalf of Reagan was an act of loyalty to those who stood in his corner—one of the more prized characteristics of working-class culture. “A lot of Democrats didn’t think that someone who sang for a workingman’s rights, as I had, should try to help a Republican win office. I don’t judge a man by his politics, any more than I judge him by his color,” Haggard recalled. “Reagan helped me in a way no one else had and no one else could. So when he called on me, his friend, for a favor, I was there—will be again should he need me.”⁸

Ironically, the origins of the song that propelled Haggard and working-class identity itself to right-wing political fame were more circumstantial than consciously partisan. On tour, Haggard and his band motored past the exit sign to Muskogee, Oklahoma—presumably in a cloud of their own smoke—when one of the band members facetiously called out, “I bet they don’t smoke no marijuana in Muskogee!” This quip led to a series of satirical riffs on what else they did not do in small town America besides dope: protest, burn draft cards, tolerate men with long hair and sandals, or riot on campus. But they did, the song finally declared, “fly old glory down at the court house” because they “like livin’ right and being free.” What started out as a joke among the punchy and road-weary musicians quickly evolved into a novelty song and then, rather unexpectedly, into a political anthem that helped to define the politics of a white, male working class drifting away from the politics of economic empowerment toward those of cultural pride and social resentment. The runaway success of the tune was a little unexpected. The first time Hag performed the number publicly, he had to play it three times in a row to a demanding crowd. Clearly, he had hit a populist nerve as his song shot to the number one position on the country charts. Newly elected president Nixon sent Haggard a note of congratulations, and Reuters proclaimed that “Haggard has tapped, perhaps for the first time in popular music, a vast reservoir of resentment among Americans against the long-haired young and their underground society. Those who condemn the hippies’ refusal to work, their drugs, pacifism and eccentric costume, have

taken the song as an anthem of their unvoiced approval for the traditional values of small-town America.”⁹

As for so much of the seventies working-class revival, hovering in the background of Hag’s thinking was the Great Depression. In the thirties, the issues somehow seemed clearer, the struggle more concrete than the diffuse and complicated issues of the seventies. “There were so many things I loved about the thirties,” Haggard explained, “I could find many reasons for wanting to live back there. . . . America was at the dawn of an industrial age, coming out of a depression into war. . . . Then again, the music was young. So many things were being done in music; it was wide open back then, electronics had not yet been involved, and basically it was *real*.” Haggard was often praised for his Guthriesque odes to the era, such as “Mama’s Hungry Eyes” and “They’re Tearing the Labor Camps Down.” His fascination with trains, his association with the Okie experience, his desire for a simpler time, are all suggestive of the nostalgia for lost tradition that permeates country music. It also hints at the shadow that the Great Depression cast over the present—it was both celebrated as a time of struggle but feared as something that could return. James Talley put that fear at the center of his song, “Are they Gonna Make Us Outlaws Again?” Dolly Parton framed the ambivalence of nostalgia for the Depression best in the title to her oft-covered song, “In the Good Old Days, When Times Were Bad.”¹⁰

I

By the 1970s, “Okie,” like the term “redneck,” had become nationalized. Once it referred specifically to the uprooted peoples of the Southwest who headed to California during the Great Depression—most famously illustrated in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*—but the ideal had grown from a specific group of down-trodden migrants to a conglomerate of American identity. The Okies were less a piece of American history bound in time and place than they were a collage built from fragments of collective memory, history, and current events: the Depression, Dorothea Lange’s photographs, John Steinbeck’s fiction, Woody Guthrie’s music, John Ford’s film, and Merle Haggard himself. By the 1970s, Okies had grown from marginalized and impoverished southwestern migrants to a broader idea, as James Gregory put it, of a “people who have known suffering, who are tough

enough to rise above it, who can be guilty of redneck intolerance, even as they never forget the ‘essentials,’ namely, that ordinary folk are the guts and sinew of American society.” The identity was no longer tied to region or time, but had become the title of an American working-class pastiche, “constructed out of symbols appropriated from the heritage of an entire nation.”¹¹

Like the Nixon-McGovern campaign itself, the canonization of Okies and rednecks in the seventies marked the triumph of the “reddening of America” over the counterculture’s “greening of America.” The old defiant regionalism became a murkier but appealingly defiant nationalism, a populist conservatism that held federal programs, urban life, women’s rights, and “special privileges” for blacks in bitter contempt. Not surprisingly, however, the growth of country-based nostalgia served to cover the tracks of more profound issues that were recasting southern distinctiveness into American homogeneity: urbanization, suburbanization, Republicanization, and the growing dependence on federal dollars of the Sunbelt economy. In the 1974 book *The Americanization of Dixie*, John Egerton writes, “The South and the nation are not exchanging strength as much as they are exchanging sins; more often than not, they are sharing and spreading the worst in each other, while the best languishes and withers.” That was certainly the case in the national discourse over working-class identity. What writer Kirkpatrick Sale called *The Power Shift* from the Northeast to the South rested *not* on a national commitment to the small-town Muskogee ideal, but on the realities of investment in the Sunbelt: corporate agribusiness, federal defense dollars, aerospace, oil, and tourism.¹²

In celebrating the trials and tribulations of the hard life, “redneck chic” functioned as a cultural antidote to the economic and demographic changes of the seventies. The country and western records—and the cowboy boots, Confederate flags, tickets to stock car races, and chances to ride mechanical bulls—sold in much greater numbers than could be sustained by the genuine article. It was really the spread of the “demi-rednecks,” as Bruce Schulman calls them, who adopted the posture of Nixon’s conservative working-class populism as a tamed and sanitized form of rebellion against an increasingly homogenous and effete national world of suburbs, service work, and corporate consolidation.¹³

“The Second War Between the States” for investment, as a *Business Week* headline dubbed it, had its own pop culture variation: a regional battle of the bands. “Southern man, better keep your head,” sang Neil Young in his

indictment of Dixie, “Southern Man” (1970); “Southern change gonna come at last.” His references to the “bull whips crackin’” were a decade late (and implied the South alone had the corner on American racism), and, to white southern ears, certainly sounded pious and contemptuous—a ready formula for raising the hackles of regional defensiveness. The members of Lynyrd Skynyrd responded in kind to “Southern Man” as well as Young’s follow up “Alabama” (1972), telling audiences to “turn it up” as they launched into a defense of the homeland, “Sweet Home Alabama” (1974). Skynyrd, a Florida group playfully named after the lowest form of authority, the band mates’ high school gym teacher, had captured the new southern rock sound better than any other. They fired back,

*Well I heard Mister Young sing about her
Well, I heard ole Neil put her down
Well, I hope Neil Young will remember
A Southern man don't need him around anyhow*

While Skynyrd told Neil to mind his own business, they also admitted there were problems. “In Birmingham they love the governor / Now we all did what we could do,” they sang about George Wallace followed by an ambiguous “boo, boo, boo.” Symbolic of something larger about the early seventies, Young, and almost everyone else, had to admit that Skynyrd had the better song even if the politics were less uplifting. Like the revival of ethnic identities—Kiss Me, I’m Italian or Irish or Greek the t-shirts used to say—the sentiments at the foundation of “Sweet Home” and the Confederate flag hanging behind the band crossed the line between an affirmation of whiteness and a subjugation of blackness. In 1975, the members of Skynyrd stood on stage before thousands of fans in Tuscaloosa and accepted honorary positions as lieutenant colonels in the Alabama state militia. The governor presenting was George Wallace.¹⁴

For all of the backlash impulses in “Sweet Home Alabama” it was, like Haggard’s “Okie,” an outlet for pride more than anything else. “My father came from the [Muskogee] area,” Haggard explained, “worked hard on his farm, was proud of it and got called white trash once he took to the road as an Okie.” Born in a boxcar to migrant parents in Oildale, California, Haggard staked his identity and the meaning of the song most directly to the chorus. “Listen to that line,” Hag explained, “I’m *proud* to be an Okie from Muskogee.’ Nobody had ever said that before in a song.”¹⁵

Richard Nixon understood. He sent speechwriter William Safire into the occupational wilderness to speak to some real workers and return with material on the importance of working class pride. “What’s happening to the willingness for self-sacrifice that enabled us to build a great nation, to a moral code that made self-reliance part of the American character?” Nixon asked in his Labor Day radio address. “We must give more respect to the proud men and women who do work that is all too often considered ‘menial.’” Indeed, at its heart, Haggard’s immensely popular song was in the same “forgotten man” category as Pete Hamill’s expose, Chuck Colson’s strategies, Scammon and Wattenberg’s political analysis, and George Wallace’s campaign. Pride in work often remained directly or indirectly a main theme in all categories. “The lyrical insistence on the heroic qualities of blue-collar jobs,” wrote two critics of the decade, “may be an ideological assertion of working-class worth in the face of urban white-collar ways.” The inability of McGovern, the Left, or the liberals to make more than minor headway with this tension—while the Right basically cleaned up—is the essence of working-class political and cultural history of the seventies.¹⁶

Robert Altman’s 1975 film *Nashville* attacked the faux folksiness and artificial grit of the seventies Southern cult and revealed the Nixonesque manufacturing, commodification, and broadcasting of a Warholian festival of the people. The movie may have been set in Nashville, with rootless characters descending upon the city like moths to a vague light of fame and power, but, like the new country attitude itself, the city only serves as a cultural hub for its real subject, America. *Nashville* moves, agonizingly, toward a vivisection of politics, country music, and the dissolution of the national narrative in what one critic called “an X-ray of the era’s uneasy political soul.” For the viewer, Altman creates a craving for authenticity that is never satiated with anything more than empty cultural calories and political junk food. Social critic Christopher Lasch might well have been watching *Nashville* when he noted in the seventies, “Today Americans are overcome not by the sense of endless possibility but by the banality of the social order they have erected against it.”¹⁷

Throughout the movie, a truck fitted with a loudspeaker makes announcements about the coming of the “Replacement Party,” although, appropriately enough, nobody seems to listen to the obnoxious political drumbeat. While the political campaign might resonate with the candidacy of a George Wallace, there is really no sense of what the candidate of such a party might stand for; yet everyone is expecting some sense of deliverance. Conflict

between generations, the emptiness of death, the vacuity of politics, and the pre-fabrication of social life are all captured in the film's chaotic *cinéma vérité* style, oddly enough, in a society without much *vérité* to offer. In one of the great platitudes of a movie awash in discomforting platitudes, one character sings over all sorts of strife in the studio, "We must be doing somethin' right to last 200 years"—the best that can be mustered on the eve of the nation's bicentennial. In the end, the loose strands of the film come together in a festival of politics that ends with the film's single moment of awful authenticity when an assassination rips through the rally. The tone of the film abruptly changes with this echo of the sixties, as devastation, blank looks, and a song actually sung from the heart overtakes the vacuous culture that had dominated the film. Given the terror of reality, it is no wonder that the characters of *Nashville* choose to live the cultural lie. "You may say that I ain't free," triumphantly twangs the unifying aural backdrop to the film, "but it don't worry me."

Yet the weightlessness of *Nashville* may not have been so surreal, as it only matched Richard Nixon's performances of reality. In the spring of 1974, when Nixon's presidency was in the throes of the Watergate crisis, he went on the road to save his faltering reputation by turning to the real city of Nashville to shore up his support with the common horde. With the House Judiciary Committee about to launch its impeachment inquiry, Nixon attempted to soften up his congressional critics by appealing directly to the people. Part of his strategy consisted of appearing on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry and performing yo-yo tricks with country legend Roy Acuff. (As one critique quipped, the silliest image of a president, that of Calvin Coolidge in a war bonnet, could now be laid to rest with the new image of the leader of the free world twirling a yo-yo.) With George Wallace seated prominently in the front row, Nixon told the audience, "Country music radiates a love of this nation—patriotism." "The Peace of the world for generations," he continued, "maybe centuries, may depend not just on our military might or wealth but on our character, our love of country, our willingness to stand up for the flag, and country music does just that." Although not enough to save his presidency, for reasons stretching deep into the American psyche, such paeans to the *herrenvolk* republic resonated more effectively than George McGovern's quoting of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" at the Democratic Convention.¹⁸

The ever-shrewd Nixon intuitively grasped the nationalization of the southern working-class identity, as his infamous "Southern Strategy" to

complete the conversion of the region from Democratic to Republican showed. “The South,” he argued in a private session with advisors, “is finally teaching the Democrats a lesson—not because they think I’m a racist, they know I’m not, but because they’re proud, because they care about a strong national defense, about patriotism, about life-styles, about morality. I don’t satisfy ’em on race. But southerners have basically the same sort of characteristics as a lot of union leaders—a belief in abiding by the law, and respect for the presidency.”¹⁹

II

In the public imagination, semi-mythical places of country attitude like Muskogee, Oklahoma, evolved into a political and geographic counterpoint to Woodstock, New York, site of the famous 1969 music festival. One was southern, western, gritty, masculine, working class, white, and soaked in the reality of putting food on the table; the other was northern, eastern, radical, effete, leisurely, affluent, multi-cultural, and full of pipe dreams. One was real, the other surreal; one worked, the other played; one did the labor, the other did the criticism; one drank whisky, the other smoked dope; one built, the other destroyed; one was for survival, the other was for the revolution; one died in wars, the other protested wars; and one was for Richard Nixon, the other was for George McGovern. It was that sense of reality, a grounding in life’s lived circumstances, that gave the productions of the cultural Right their authority—even when they were being manipulated, and drained of content, from the top.

The press referred to two separate events in the early seventies, with dramatically different contents, as the “Workers’ Woodstock.” One was Lordstown, where auto workers attempted to recast the meaning of work and their relationship to the assembly line in a youthful and inter-racial rebellion against GM. The other was the construction workers’ counter-demonstration in New York against the anti-war protesters after Kent State. That both of these incidents, with nearly diametrically opposed political implications, were labeled as the “Workers’ Woodstock” by different commentators is suggestive of the complex tensions running through northern, industrial working-class identity. While the reactionary “Woodstock” of the hard hats received more media play than did the Lordstown-type insurgencies, there were some promising spaces of compromise and reconciliation in the cultural

fragmentation. If the hard hats were on the right and Lordstown workers on the left, if Muskogee was country and Woodstock was rock 'n' roll, then the new thing called "country rock" might have been the dialectical synthesis of the age for the labor Left. It was, perhaps, the musical equivalent of the New Left colonizers who went to the plant gates to organize workers or akin to rank and filers like Eddie Sadlowski or Arnold Miller who united the thirties and the sixties in their insurgencies against the official families of the establishments.

When facing cultural exhaustion, rock innovators typically refresh the genre by dipping into either of its two main tributary streams: African-American blues or white country ballads. In the early seventies, it was country music's turn. Rock 'n' roll had lost much of what had given it authenticity by the early seventies, having largely drained the current of black blues reinvented and redelivered to American shores by the British invasion. As an antidote to the narcissistic culture of bloated guitar solos, stadium audiences, hard drugs, and private tour jets that would go on to dominate corporate rock of the decade, the innovators of the era turned to white country music for inspiration and to rekindle the lost sense of authenticity.

The creation of country rock that dominated the early seventies was, symbolically and culturally, the type of cross-class alliance on which working-class success had always depended. According to *Rolling Stone* editor Jann Wenner, it was "the music of reconciliation," an attempt to fill the gap between the rock 'n' roll Left and the country Right, between the grand designs of the youth movement and the grit of people who worked for a living. At worst, explains Peter Doggett, rock's tendency to incorporate "a banjo or a blare of bluegrass harmonies became a self-conscious totem of American identity, a statement that the artist was speaking for a nation, not a youth movement or cultural elite." The synthesis of country, rock, and pop was at least as old as Hank Williams, however, and the genealogical thread ran through Sun Records to Dylan's *Nashville Skyline*, and it stumbled toward maturity when Bob Dylan appeared on stage at the Grand Ole Opry with Johnny Cash in 1969. It arguably peaked with Gram Parsons' solo albums of the early seventies and the growth of "Redneck Rock" in Austin, Texas, before quickly fading into the "peaceful easy feeling," the campfire mellowness, the enlightened apathy, of bands like The Eagles. For all of the liberal criticism of redneck culture for the debasing of the urbanity of American civilization—what one writer called the takeover of "Red Necks, White

Socks, and Blue Ribbon Fear”—few have adequately explored the failure of the Left to create an alternative cultural synthesis that could appeal to the white working class.²⁰

Arguably, there may have been more space for a cross-class cultural alignment than a quick survey of the era might at first suggest. Haggard, like much of the backlash, was more complex and ambivalent than the belligerence and resentment suggested in the lyrics of “Okie.” As Haggard later explained, the song made “me appear to be a person who was a lot more narrow-minded, possibly, than I really am.” Even the Grateful Dead loved his stuff and had once embraced him as the new Woody Guthrie. As Jerry Garcia explained, “We’re kind of on the far fringe of it, but we’re part of that California Bakersfield school of country-and-western rock ‘n’ roll—Buck Owens, Merle Haggard. We used to see those bands and think, ‘Gee, those guys are great.’” Haggard even expressed some sympathy for the counterculture and, like many working-class Americans, uncertainty on the war, while never wavering in his belief that the protestors’ methods were wrong. “I don’t mean if they could have changed the whole world situation that it might not have been better,” Haggard explained, “[but] it irritated me a little bit to see ‘em roaming the streets and bitching and burning and not really coming up with any answers to anything. So some of the frustrations came out in different songs.” He even attempted to temper the message of “Okie” in his follow-up recording, “Irma Jackson,” a tale of inter-racial love—“there’s no way the world will understand love is color-blind,” he sang—but the record machinery refused and demanded more redneck anthems. They got them in the militant singles “The Fightin’ Side of Me” and “Workin’ Man Blues.”²¹

Meanwhile, the search for a politics of authenticity that informed, and ultimately failed, the Port Huron generation had collapsed in the face of formal politics by the 1970s. Out of that rubble emerged a more achievable but limited individual, cultural liberation. The turn in rock ‘n’ roll toward what Mark Marqusee calls “the release of inhibitions, in self-expression and communal joy” in the late sixties also meant a turn away from art grounded in tradition, in community, and hard work celebrated by artists like Cash and Haggard. Working people largely believed that a good time could certainly be had, but communal joy—and certainly the release of inhibitions—were misguided goals. Bob Dylan’s 1967 experiments that became known as the “Basement Tapes” reflected the advance party of a generation’s voyage that

had given up on people's politics. The artist who began in the guise of working-class hero Woody Guthrie and who debuted for many at the March on Washington ended in the individual cultural release but with "no popular-front optimism" and "no faith in progress, democracy or the people." Dylan's path in the sixties was largely a retreat from what he saw as stale and deadening political realities, and toward the pursuit of the "politics" of innocence, spontaneity, and personal authenticity. As Marqusee boldly argues, such a "retreat may be a palliative, but it is not a cure."²²

Gram Parsons, one of the creative forces behind country-rock, consciously avoided protest songs in favor of what he liked to think of as "Cosmic American music." Parsons was a Southerner from old money who could readily afford to drop out of Harvard to explore drugs and rock 'n' roll. Willie Nelson described him as the "real link between country, rock 'n' roll, blues, that whole thing." Having lived in the eye of the psychedelic storm of California rock in the sixties, Parsons searched for a rock 'n' roll identity that could fuse the history of music from Elvis to Merle. With his own mournful rural themes, steel guitars, and wistful lyrics, as his biographer explains, Parsons "tried building bridges, by way of music, between rock and traditional country—two worlds separated by age, politics, life-style, and musical tastes." Troubled by the rootlessness of his generation, Parsons attempted to reconstitute the dissolving sense of self he witnessed around him by infusing his music with the richness of traditional country forms. In his 1973 "A Song for You," he envisions saving his aimless generation by seeking refuge among the rural people. He asks for guidance to the dance floor—even if people will not tolerate his looks or his habits:

*Some of my friends don't know who they belong to
Some can't get a single thing to work inside
So take me down to your dance floor
And I won't mind the people when they stare
Paint a different color on your front door
And tomorrow we will still be there²³*

The Confederate flag hanging behind the band during his performances was a reminder of his geographic background, but his life's material circumstances were the opposite of those that informed Haggard's sensibilities.

But Parsons loved Hag. “Merle Haggard is a great artist and a great person, a great human being. Great everything,” proclaimed Gram Parsons about his hero. Having survived the kind of life that Johnny Cash only wrote about, Haggard was the real deal for Parsons. Gram Parsons blew his chance, however, like he blew his life. When Parsons showed up at Hag’s place in Bakersfield hoping to convince him to produce his next album, the Bakersfield legend would not have anything to do with him. Although the details of the story are highly contested, journeyman player Chris Hillman put it this way: “Gram was drunk. So Merle quit.” It’s not like Hag knew his alcohol—“Tonight the Bottle Let Me Down” rings personal—but what remained of craft pride among country music meant being able to crank out saleable music in a reasonable time—not by showing up in the studio either drunk or on smack, and Parsons liked to do both. As Richard Doggett asked rhetorically, “Why should the poet of the American working man waste time on a hippie who wanted to be a country star?” The working class was not the cultural Left’s playground. Parsons died of an overdose not too long afterward, with alcohol and chemicals numbing him to death in a cement motel room in Joshua Tree, California, when he was twenty-six years old.²⁴

As the quick answers to the questions of the sixties never came, the political Left looked to organize workers during the insurgencies of the early seventies, but much of the counterculture began to make plans for an exodus—be it to colonize farms in Vermont, build utopias in Mendocino County, or make a more metaphorical retreat into their own communal consciousness. The national consciousness proved less responsive to the baby boomers’ demands than they had been raised to believe, which resulted in fantasies of leaving and starting anew. This was fueled by the impending sense of a possible nuclear—and certainly social—apocalypse that haunted the Cold War political imagination.

David Crosby’s “Wooden Ships,” written along with an ensemble of sixties rockers on his boat off the coast of Florida, best captures the sentiments of searching out a higher plain on which to rebuild civilization afresh—far from the common man who drags him down. The song begins with the muffled dialogue of two post-apocalypse survivors meeting and then moves quickly, and brightly, to the narrators’ collective and harmonious search for a land on which to launch a new society far from the wreckage and the madness of that which they must leave behind. There are “Wooden ships on the water, very free, and easy / Easy, you know the way it’s supposed to be.” To

find that paradise, however, the old corrupt world that refuses to follow the enlightened path must be abandoned:

*Go take a sister, then, by the hand
Lead her away from this foreign land
Far away, where we might laugh again
We are leaving, you don't need us*

Yet not everyone with similar sentiments agreed. Like a Bobby Kennedy delegate who did not know the campaign was over, Jackson Browne penned his brilliant 1973 song of vigil “For Everyman” as the seventies’ direct response to the exodus of “Wooden Ships.” Browne, keenly aware that the many ways in which the idealism of the sixties was hardening into the cynicism of the seventies merely increased the impulse to flee, took an anti-sixties position: he would remain to play out political fate with those whom FDR called “the forgotten man.” Browne knew both the emptiness of retreat as well as the improbability of success without building some sort of democratic majority—despite the cultural differences.²⁵ He was so convinced that his song was the statement of the decade, in fact, that the typically cautious Browne blurted out to an interviewer that he was working on the “motherfuckin’ hit of the seventies.”

Perhaps Browne was not completely convinced of his own stated convictions, but he knew that he had chosen the only viable option: a lifelong alliance with people he neither understood nor with whom he could always agree. His voice has a reedy equivocation to it and the lyrics honor the desire to run, both of which add ambivalent dimensions to his determination to work it out with the Silent Majority:

*Everybody I talk to is ready to leave
With the light of the morning
They've seen the end coming down long enough to believe
That they've heard their last warning
Standing alone
Each has his own ticket in his hand
And as the evening descends
I sit thinking 'bout Everyman*

Anyone who thinks they can make it without those whom the Old Left liked to call “The Masses” are free to make a go of it, but, reminds Browne,

*Somewhere later on you'll have to take a stand
Then you're going to need a hand*

We rise and fall together, he notes, as he reminds his listeners of the futility of a holier-than-thou politics of marginal groups. As one critic put it, Browne “internalized the remains” of Bob Dylan’s search for answers “and still dares to hope for solution” in the lingering twilight of post-sixties hope. He notes that his commitment to the people is antiquated—it was “Long ago,” he admits, that “I heard someone say something ’bout Everyman.”²⁶

The album by the same name, *For Everyman*, is thematically wound around the problem of confronting what to do about the counterculture’s inability to bend the regular folks to their will. He has the problem right, but the futile ache in much of the album reveals his despair about linking common man and counterculture. In a track that comes earlier in the album, “Our Lady of the Well,” he actually does leave and has fled to some form of indigenous community or commune (referred to simply as “people in the sun”). He admires the way they live there and craves it for himself, lamenting, America is in the shadow of “a cruel and senseless hand,” but he takes faith that there are “some hearts” in which “love and truth remain.” His exile cannot last since he remains wedded to the people of his country to whom he must return. Jackson Browne’s courage to remain with “everyman,” even though he is neither comfortable nor even convinced it will lead to a brighter day, is unique in seventies popular culture. It might be an old-fashioned concept to build some semblance of solidarity with the common horde, but he has no other option if he is to live a socially and politically fulfilling life other than to stand together with the Wallaceites, the hard hats, and the people who returned Nixon to a landslide second term.²⁷

As rock ’n’ roll emerged from the fads of the psychedelic scene in the late 1960s, Robbie Robertson, the great guitar virtuoso for The Band, was another of the era’s leaders in both the white roots revival and a more progressive cross-class alliance. Critic Greil Marcus effectively describes The Band’s momentum: “against a cult of youth they felt for a continuity of generations; against the instant America of the sixties they looked for the traditions that made new things not only possible, but valuable; against a flight from roots they set a sense of place.” While vocal young Americans spent the decade displaying badges of alienation, decrying Amerika, and worshiping in the cult of cultural innovation, as Canadians The Band could embrace the “land

that had kicked up the blues, jazz, church music, country and western, and a score of authentic rock 'n' roll heroes." Displaying an almost mystical connection to the rich Gothic complexities and midnight energy of all things American, Robertson wrote "King Harvest (Has Surely Come)" from a hideaway in Woodstock, New York—at about the same time Hag wrote "Okie" and after Robertson had finished reading the Okie epic, *Grapes of Wrath*.²⁸

Robertson, whose credentials might suggest another, more contemptuous, path, holds out for a very different concept of the working-class community than others of his generation. In "King Harvest," the indignities of working-class life are overcome not in Haggardesque cultural pride, but in affirmation of the land and the power of the labor union. The song, optimistic, full of desire, and grounded in its setting, declares its labor commitment through an idealized historical community with the shared understandings necessary for social life. Here, the culture that country music celebrated requires economic defense:

*I work for the union 'cause she's so good to me;
And I'm bound to come out on top, that's where I should be.
I will hear ev'ry word the boss may say,
For he's the one who hands me down my pay.
Looks like this time I'm gonna get to stay,
I'm a union man, now, all the way.*

The setting is the rich time of harvest, the real time of life's fulfillment, in which it is the land itself that offers the worker a future, if only the boss can be controlled: "And then, if they don't give us what we like / He said, 'Men, that's when you gotta go on strike.'"

The longing at the center of the self-titled album, *The Band*, is a product of its unresolved tension between the experiences of different eras—the confusion of the present and the search for roots in the mystics of working-class history. The album was "made to bring to life the fragments of experience, legend, and artifact that every American has inherited as the legacy of a mythical past," writes Greil Marcus. "The songs have little to do with chronology; most describe events that could be taking place right now, but most of those events had taken on their color before any of us was born." The mood and the feel of the song make the same bridge between the thirties

and the dawn of the seventies as did Merle's "Okie." As Robertson explained in less abstract terms, the song attempts to recapture the original vision of what organized labor was supposed to be about—before Tony Boyle's thugs made the cover of the papers for murdering dissident mine workers' leader Jock Yablonski and family and before the stale bureaucratic unionism of George Meany. "It's just a kind of character study in a time period," explained Robertson. "At the beginning, when the unions came in, they were a saving grace, a way of fighting the big money people, and they affected everybody from the people that worked in the big cities all the way around to the farm people," he continued. "It's ironic now, because now so much of it is like gangsters, assassinations, power, greed, insanity. I just thought it was incredible how it started and how it ended up."²⁹

The Band's uncanny ability to tap into American culture—and to play with the past in such a way as to make it feel like the present, that is, to blur the Depression and the early seventies—is based, as John Street argues, on a paradox. The Band and other more class conscious artists' "success in creating a sense of community and in evoking past images to forge contemporary links also led to their failure in the mass market." Robertson's working class is captured through the same hazy lens as George McGovern's. Labor is fine when it is idealized, when it is pure in the struggle, but much less attractive in compromise, relative affluence, and in its institutionalized form. It was the problem of the New Left encapsulated; the same issue that concerned Jackson Browne. "The community they helped to forge identified itself *against* the rest of the people," continues Street, "not as part of them." Robbie Robertson attempted to recapture the power of workers' collective action for the seventies but did so for a rather limited and elite audience. Haggard, in contrast, played to a mass audience mobilized by images of cultural pride and individualism. White working-class America wanted more Muskogee and less Woodstock—even when Woodstock attempted to speak in their terms.³⁰

While some popular music sketched out the possibility of a greater connection between Muskogee and Woodstock, the country-rock reality fell to less compelling or interesting products. The music's final commercial form, as the wonderfully acerbic critic Robert Christgau argues, is based largely on a "reactionary individualism" that followed on the heels of the failed collectivism of the sixties. That collectivism, we might add, purported to thrive without the white working class in the first place. The commercial apex of seventies country rock, the music of The Eagles, explains Christgau, "be-

speaks not roots but a lack of them, so that in the end the product is suave and synthetic—brilliant, but false.”³¹

Rather than bridging the cultural and racial upheavals of the sixties and the economic dilemmas of the seventies, the bulk of the country-rock synthesis of the seventies “excises precisely what is deepest and most gripping about country music—its adult working-class pain, its paradoxically rigid ethics—and leaves bluegrass-sounding good feelin’.” John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival—a Californian who adopted his own very effective southern voice—understood the bad faith that underlay much of rock’s colonization expeditions into roots music. Unlike the “love and theft” that went into white appropriation of the blues, much of the country influence came from love, theft, and a certain contempt. “We’re all so ethnic now, with our long hair and shit,” declared Fogerty with a refreshing dose of reality; “But when it comes to doing the real crap that civilization needs to keep going, who’s going to be the garbage collector? None of *us* will.”³²

The condescension of the seventies bourgeois dream of escaping the grit of daily life was best expressed in Richard Bach’s *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. The pop-schlock classic of the new individualism of the seventies—number one on the bestseller list for 1972 and 1973—examines the spiritual awakening of a seagull, who must become an outcast in society in order to learn to fly and soar in absolute freedom. Like the generation that made the book popular, Jonathan cannot understand the grinding struggle for subsistence and longs for something more. “We can lift ourselves out of ignorance, we can find ourselves as creatures of excellence and intelligence and skill. We can be free! *We can learn to fly!*” he exclaims. To do so, he must abandon his fellow gulls sentenced to “screeching and fighting with the flock around the piers and fighting boats, diving on scraps of fish and bread.” He chooses to reject the ceaseless material struggle within the community as well as the idea, as his father tells him, that “we are put into this world to eat, to stay alive as long as we possibly can.” By abandoning the life of work in favor of his own spiritual emancipation, he echoes Reich’s *Greening of America*: “I am a perfect, unlimited gull!” Jonathan obtained his freedom from the daily scramble for fish just as almost every indicator of the nation’s material well-being—wages, prices, unemployment—was getting worse. His individual freedom is not far from that of The Eagles. As they sing on “Earlybird,” “high up on his own, the eagle flies alone / and he is free.” “But,” as Peter Doggett quips, “as Merle Haggard could have told them the working man still had rent to pay.”³³

cosmopolitans” whom Williams Jennings Bryan defended against science and the modern world.⁷¹

X

Nixon entered his second term convinced that he could rely on the workingmen's votes. He 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—and rather incompetent—secretary of labor. The appointment of “Mr. Hardhat” 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. As a high-ranking building trades official and Democrat remarked, “It is a very clever move. It shows Nixon's hell-bent on reorganizing the Republican Party to include trade union elements. He's intent on breaking up the monolith of labor support for the Democrats.” Colson reported that Brennan's goal in taking over the position would be to help the Republicans gain labor's “permanent allegiance,” though Brennan later ended up feeling “very frustrated, like a caged lion.”⁷²

The Nixon administration had not counted on the weight of economic reality dragging down their lofty rhetorical appeals in the second term. The wage and price controls largely failed to provide a long-term tool for stabilizing the economy. The expansive economic policies also helped fuel inflation in the economy, which tipped to 8 percent in 1973. The real tragedy for the economic hopes of the administration, however, came from abroad. The developing world bit back in the 1970s from Saigon to Tehran, but no bite was as crippling as the OPEC decision to raise the price of oil.

The economic shocks of 1973 rattled the hopes of the blue-collar strategy, but Watergate destroyed them. The administration quickly 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 its 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. George Meany reported that “This Administration has cast a dark shadow of shame over the spirit of

America. After five years of Richard Nixon, this great and once-proud nation stands before the world with its head bowed—disgraced, not only by its enemies abroad, but by its leaders at home.” Already assembled in Florida, the executive council quickly gathered to ask for Nixon’s resignation.⁷³

The conservative *National Review* could barely hold back its venom at Nixon’s squandering of the New Majority and the conservatives’ political fortunes. In 1972, the journal was suspicious that the Republican Party could become the vehicle of a new governing coalition, but a year later, “Richard Nixon and the circle of political geniuses with whom he has surrounded himself have managed to devastate that possibility.” With polling reaching all-time lows for Republicans in 1974, organized labor back in the Democratic column, and the blue-collar ethnics returning to their traditional party, it appeared that the administration had trashed the natural course of history. With Watergate, “what Nixon and his people have accomplished is to stand athwart history and sidetrack the formation of a new, dynamic non-liberal majority. It has been an astonishing accomplishment, achieved against all odds.” Yet the *National Review* had changed its tune from snubbing the idea of blue-collar conservatism to naturalizing it. The magazine actually failed to give the president enough credit for sensing the prevailing political winds in the first place. As Nixon’s speechwriter, William Safire, recalled, “With brilliance, panache, subtle understanding, and nefarious connivance, the new majority had been fused together, destined to hold sway for one election year; then, after Watergate, Meany would decide he had a good villain in Nixon, and the carefully built coalition would be smashed to smithereens”—yet only, one might add, for the duration of a couple of election cycles.⁷⁴

XI

Richard Nixon was simultaneously the last president to work within the logic of the New Deal political framework of material politics, the first postwar president to try to recast the ways in which workers appeared in American presidential strategy, and the last to court labor seriously. 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. As sociologist 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, meaning, and certainly economic identity, of "workers" in American political discourse.⁷⁵

As 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 inclination to offer material betterment to the whole of the American labor force, Nixon instead tried to offer ideological shelter to those white male workers and union members who felt themselves slipping through the widening cracks 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 they were 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.⁷⁶

Nixon also based his strategic reasoning on political blocs that conflated workers with unions—a hypothetical unity that Ronald Reagan would successfully bifurcate a decade 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, as Jonathan Rieder suggests, “the crafting of a new culture of the Right, one more self-consciously grounded in appeals to the working and lower-middle classes, did not occur full-blown overnight.” As one Democratic strategist explained at the time, “Nixon gnaws around the edges of a worker’s life. He hasn’t touched the central trade union part. But he gnaws a little at the Catholic part, a little at the Polish part, a little at the patriotic part and a little at the anti-hippie part. After a while, he has an awful lot of that worker.”⁷⁷

In December 1972, still basking in the afterglow of the election, Chuck Colson telephoned the president to report that they were receiving the “damnedest fan mail” about the appointment of Peter Brennan as secretary of labor. “You mean,” said Nixon, “they finally think the appointment of a working man makes them think that we’re for the working man? They talk about all the tokenism—we appoint blacks and that but they don’t think you’re for blacks. Mexicans, they don’t think you’re for Mexicans. But a working man, by golly, that’s really something.” Yes, explained Colson, “This kind of locked it up.” As Colson continued, “The fundamental dichotomy here, the fundamental cleavage within the Democratic Party is such that with what you’re doing to build the New Majority, and what I hope to help you do, I think we’re going to keep them split, and I’m awful bullish about what we can do in this country.”

“They may not ever become Republicans,” Colson summarized; “but they’re Nixon.”⁷⁸