The flag had barely been claimed by the civil rights movement when another event—the Vietnam War—shifted its meanings yet again. Always an ambiguous symbol, the flag was particularly elastic in the late 1960s. A sizable minority of protesters in the Vietnam antiwar movement carried the Stars and Stripes to early antiwar gatherings. The flag signified their belief that protest was an American tradition, that the strength of democratic opposition would change the course of government policy. “Our way is the American way,” it seemed to say.

On a chilly Saturday in mid-April 1967, an ocean of people gathered in the large grassy field known as Sheep Meadow at the southern end of New York’s Central Park. Major public figures were there: Martin Luther King Jr. had recently broken his silence about the Vietnam War, and Benjamin Spock, the famous pediatrician and author, had been urging young men to resist the draft. Civil rights activist and Black Panther Stokely Carmichael had also come out against the war. Whole families attended, as did students with long hair, students in tweed coats, women in
stockings and pumps, nuns in their habits, and veterans with medals on their uniforms. Between 300,000 and 400,000 Americans turned out in the largest antiwar protest the country had ever seen.

Opposition to the war had first gained momentum when Lyndon Johnson bombed North Vietnam in early 1965, shortly after being reelected on an antiwar platform. That year, hundreds of young men began to refuse induction into the service, and two Americans lit themselves on fire to protest the war. By 1967, roughly 40 percent of the population thought that the war was wrong and that American troops should withdraw.¹

The wide range of opposition to the war was reflected in the forest of signs and flags that people carried. Some set their protest against the backdrop of patriotism with American flags. As one woman told a reporter:

> We want to criticize this war because we think it’s wrong but we want to do it in the framework of loyalty. I hope this demonstration won’t encourage the North Vietnamese. . . . Maybe the President’s right and we don’t know what we’re talking about. Maybe we shouldn’t be protesting. . . . Oh, but this war.²

This deep ambivalence was experienced by many in the crowd. Four out of ten were protesting for the first time, and they found themselves in an unfamiliar bind, wanting to be loyal to the United States yet unable to tolerate U.S. policy.

Other protesters cared little about the appearance of loyalty. They eschewed the American flag, instead waving symbols that rebuked American foreign policy. One protester carried an Amer-
ican flag with a Nazi swastika superimposed. Far more common were flags showing horizontal red and blue fields superimposed by a gold star: the colors of the North Vietnamese. Some protesters carried these as a sign of solidarity with the Vietnamese people; others felt their blood rising at the sight of the enemy flag in American hands. Some hand-lettered signs read simply “Peace” or “Love.” One pointedly read, “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me ‘Nigger.’”

Slightly apart from the main protest, a group of sixty young men huddled on a rocky outcropping. A hand-lettered sign hung against the leafless trees: “Draft Card Burning Here.” While a few war resisters had burned their draft cards as early as 1965, this was to be the first collective action. Journalists crowded in, circling the young men with cameras and heavy television equipment. Spectators stood around as the protesters linked arms to form a protective circle. Then the young men took out cigarette lighters and held the yellow flames to their white cards. They raised the burning rectangles above the crowd. “Resist! Resist!” called the onlookers, as the men dropped the scorched cards into a Maxwell House coffee can.

On the periphery of that protest, several young men staged their own event. Instead of draft cards, they set fire to a large American flag on a long pole. As they held the burning flag high in the air, people clustered around and watched silently.

The next day, residents of major cities opened their Sunday newspapers to an image that many had never even imagined. The Washington Star featured its photo of the flag burning on the front page; the New York Daily News spread its shot over two inner pages. Overnight, congressional representatives and senators were besieged by constituents who wanted to know why it
had been allowed and what could be done to stop it. Veterans of Foreign Wars commander Andy Borg spoke for many when he said that he was “sick and tired of the American flag being burned, stomped upon, torn apart and vilified by communist-inspired peaceniks and others.” New Jersey Congressman Dominick Daniel, who had served four terms, said that he had never heard constituents so unified on an issue. Within days, Congress had begun debating the issue, although only the American Civil Liberties Union and a couple of law professors testified against the bill. Representatives wasted no time aligning themselves with public opinion. “Which is the greater contribution to the security of freedom,” asked Tennessee Congressman Dan Kuykendall in the debate, “the inspiring photo of the Marines at Iwo Jima or the shameful pictures of unshaven beatniks burning that same flag in Central Park?” The measure passed on a voice vote, and President Johnson signed the first federal flag desecration bill into law on July 4, 1968.⁶

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Why was there so much outrage? Only a handful of Americans had ever burned a flag. Mississippians had burned one in 1861, as a response to Lincoln’s decision to fight secession, and on Mark Hanna’s Flag Day in 1896, some William Jennings Bryan followers had seized and burned a McKinley flag. There had been other, nonburning desecrations during World Wars I and II. Since the mid-1960s, there had been several dozen incidents nationwide. Flags had been burned as part of an experimental theater production in the East Village, as a classroom demonstration by a schoolteacher making a point about symbolism, and as a street protest by a black World War II veteran outraged by news

~ 176 ~
reports of James Meredith’s assassination—reports that turned out to be false. These were individual acts of symbolic protest largely hidden away in theaters and classrooms.7

On the other hand, many Americans had participated in the rituals of nationalist culture. Since the 1890s, the flag had been treated as something to revere. Schoolchildren said the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. At baseball games, the entire ballpark rose and held hand over heart for the singing of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” There was a proper way to fold the flag and a proper way to dispose of an old one.

These flag rituals were becoming increasingly meaningful in the working-class communities that bore the brunt of the war. In the 1960s, it was class far more than any other factor that determined whether a young man would go to war. Eighty percent of the soldiers serving in Vietnam had a high school degree or less. Few could afford college, and the military looked like a good option compared with the low-paying jobs available right out of high school. With draft exemptions disappearing at the end of the decade, most of their peers were headed into the service. Many had little exposure to the debates about American policy. As one veteran said, “It never occurred to me that America would go to war without a good reason.”8

For blue-collar communities, the American flag symbolized a collective pride in military service. Whether or not working-class men wanted to go to Vietnam, many expected to do military service of some kind. “My grandfather went in 1917, my father went in 1942,” said one veteran. “It was my turn.” Military service was not simply one option among others. In many families, to serve was to be inducted into manhood, taking one’s proper place in the family and community. Avoiding that service
seemed cowardly and childish. In these families and communities, the flag stood for duty and honor.9

Flags also bore the weight of grief, with increasing frequency. By early 1968, there had been 120,000 American casualties. As the bodies came home from Vietnam, military flags covered caskets and then lay folded in the homes of mourning parents. Tiny flags waved from the fenders of cars in funeral processions. On the day of a military funeral, towns hung out their flags along the main street as a way to honor the dead: Residents knew, when the flags went up, that another boy had been killed in Vietnam. The practice had a ripple effect in blue-collar communities, as homeowners put out their flags as a gesture of respect and solidarity. Flags on the streets marked a town in collective mourning.10

In these communities, flags did not speak to the rightness or wrongness of government policy. In fact, as American casualties mounted, blue-collar workers turned increasingly against the war, more so than white-collar professionals. By 1970, some 61 percent of those who had not been to college advocated for immediate withdrawal, compared with only 47 percent of college graduates. Labor leaders criticized the war for being unethical. They also pointed to the money it diverted away from American domestic policy needs. The United Auto Workers pulled out of the AFL-CIO on the basis of the larger organization’s support for the war.11

Much working-class opposition was based on a desire to stop American boys from being killed. When blue-collar people talked about the war, they were concerned, first and foremost, with the American servicemen over there. Almost always, there was someone they knew, a family member or a neighborhood kid. Every death hit close to home. After watching a military funeral parade through his small town, flags on the car fenders, a
World War II veteran expressed his anger and disbelief: “For Christ’s sake how long are they going to let that slaughter go on over there? The whole goddamn country of South Vietnam is not worth the life of one American boy, no matter what the hell our politicians try to tell us.”

Although blue-collar opposition to the war shared some similarities with middle-class protest, the two groups watched each other with suspicion. Blue-collar workers were changing their political allegiances in the face of the Democratic Party’s turn to the New Left. For decades, these workers had been Democrats. The party had embraced the unions, the unions had embraced the party, and the Democratic platform reflected a set of working-class priorities. But in the late 1960s, the party began to focus on cultural rather than explicitly economic issues: civil rights, women’s liberation, and the Vietnam War. Desegregation through school busing, in particular, polarized poorer white people against blacks. As George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO and a supporter of Nixon’s war policy, said, “The Democratic Party has disintegrated—it is not the so-called liberal party that it was a few years ago. It almost has got to be the party of the extremists.” As working people began to feel that their cultural values were no longer reflected in the party platform, they became swing voters.

Most working-class people felt alienated by the student protesters, who seemed to care more about the Vietnamese than they did about American soldiers. One mother who had lost her son in Vietnam articulated this position with heartbreakingly clarity. Both she and her husband, a firefighter, felt that their boy had died in vain. Both wanted the war ended. At first, the mother had considered antiwar protesters possible allies, but she soon reconsidered:

~ 179 ~
I told [my husband] I thought they want the war to end, so no more Ralphs will die, but he says no, they never stop and think about Ralph and his kind of people, and I’m inclined to agree. They say they do, but I listen to them, I watch them; since Ralph died I listen and I watch as carefully as I can. Their hearts are with other people, not their own American people, the ordinary kind of person in this country. . . .

I’m against this war, too—the way a mother is, whose sons are in the army, who has lost a son fighting in it. The world hears those demonstrators making their noise. The world doesn’t hear me, and it doesn’t hear a single person I know. ¹⁴

The mother’s opposition to the war was an opposition born of grief, not anger. It was the kind that would never burn an American flag.

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The workers were not the only ones to feel a deep passion about the flag and about patriotism. The antiwar activists, too, felt that power. In the early years, flags were often seen at antiwar events. The protests came right on the heels of the civil rights movement, and the flag seemed a more potent symbol of democracy than it had previously in the century. Many activists were involved in both causes.

In the long tradition of humanitarian patriotism, many organizers had faith that the war would be stopped if only their fellow citizens understood what was going on. As children in the 1940s and 1950s, they had pledged allegiance to their classroom flags every morning, invoking “one nation, indivisible” and its goal of “liberty and justice for all.” They had listened on the
street and at Sunday dinner as their parents and neighbors talked about World War II. When they thought of war, it was that war, the Good War. The invasion of Vietnam stood in direct opposition to those values, and they felt hopeful that once the contrast was revealed, the country would right itself.

Initially, few people knew about what was happening in Vietnam. So in the spring of 1965, students organized over a hundred teach-ins at colleges and universities. These were all-day and all-night affairs, attended by thousands, where students and faculty explained the events in Vietnam and the history of American involvement. "I saw that we could really have an impact," said one of the organizers of the Berkeley teach-in. "It seemed as though we could reach a wide range of people. . . . The teach-in definitely was a very hopeful event."  

The protests spread in 1966 and 1967. Twenty thousand marched in New York City on March 26, 1966; less than two months later, on May 15, ten thousand gathered in Washington, D.C. On January 4, 1967, between twenty thousand and thirty thousand protested in San Francisco. During a Stop the Draft Week that October, more than a thousand men returned their draft cards. On October 21, 1967, a massive demonstration at the Lincoln Memorial became a march on the Pentagon, as over thirty thousand protesters surrounded the building. There were protests in London, in Spain, and in other European countries.

But as resistance spread and policies stayed the same, it became apparent that American democracy was either corrupt or broken. A Gallup poll in June 1967 revealed that more than 56 percent of Americans thought that the government was losing the war or at an impasse. The Johnson administration suffered such a credibility problem that CBS anchor Walter Cronkite

~ 181 ~
announced on broadcast television: “We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds.”16

There seemed to be hope in 1968, when Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection and troop levels in Vietnam stabilized, but Nixon’s presidency, beginning in 1969, continued the war. The activists’ dedicated attempts to stop the war by persuasion and democratic means were not working: fatigue-clad soldiers kept being deployed to Vietnam, and flag-draped coffins kept coming home. The flag was carried deep into Vietnam, flown over base camps in the jungle, and painted on the back of the air force planes that bombed the villages. For a long time, the activists had relied on the promise of the American political dream and the tradition of dissent. Now, with years of organizing behind them and no visible change in policy, they felt betrayed by that dream. Humanitarian patriotism seemed an impossible naïveté.

The flag’s increasing volatility became clear at the stormy 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. It was late August, and thousands of protesters sat on the ground, radiating out from the band shell in Grant Park, listening to speeches against the draft. American flags, if there were any, were far outnumbered by the Vietnamese flag and protest signs. To the left of the stage stood a flagpole bearing the American flag. An eighteen-year-old wearing an army helmet climbed up the pole’s base to seize the flag’s halyards, lowering it to half-staff because, he later explained, the authorities had “killed democracy.” Many felt it was an appropriate gesture of mourning. “People started to yell to lower it to half-mast,” a witness said. Others urged him to

~ 182 ~
lower it all the way to the ground, shouting, “Tear down the flag!” The boy tied the flag at half-mast and was grabbed by police officers, who took him away to a squad car.\textsuperscript{17}

The incident enraged the crowd. A group of young men approached the pole, untied the halyards, and lowered the flag to the ground. A few women started crying. A witness described the crowd’s response as “non-approval”: “Most people felt lowering the flag to half-mast was symbolic, a form of protesting the actions in and outside of the convention. But to take the flag down was not acceptable.” The young men quickly tied a red cloth to the ropes and raised it to the top of the pole, a gesture interpreted as raising the red flag of revolution. The police moved in, and there followed two days of terrible rioting and brutality.\textsuperscript{18}

By 1969, it was clear that the government was pursuing its Vietnam policy in the face of every humanitarian and democratic instinct. News of war atrocities were everywhere. On the front pages, the words “My Lai Massacre” evoked the mass murder of unarmed citizens by American troops. Blue-collar workers turned increasingly against the war, openly questioning whether it could be won and criticizing it for injustice and for the money it diverted from domestic issues. On October 15, 1969, more than two million people turned out across the country for Vietnam Moratorium Day.

Deliberate gestures against the flag became increasingly popular and increasingly public. The early flag burners had been drifters and anarchists, people on the radical fringes outside the antiwar movement. But increasingly, and especially after the publicized burning in Central Park, flag desecration became part of the symbolic rhetoric. A University of Wisconsin student cut
the ropes on an American flag during a protest against Dow Chemical in October 1967. A year later, Yippie leader Abbie Hoffman wore a flag shirt to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. At Nixon’s inaugural in January 1969, demonstrators burned dozens of small American flags. Protesters burned flags in San Francisco and Chicago, and at the University of Virginia, and a young man set fire to a small flag that he waved at the president’s motorcade.¹⁹

Some activists continued to carry the flag to marches, but, recognizing its military connotations, modified its design. They superimposed symbols on it, painting a black peace sign across the banner or replacing the field of stars with hearts. Some inscribed a slogan: “To Want Peace Is American.” “Make Love Not War—The New American Revolutionaries.” Such additions were a visually dramatic articulation of the conflict between the two strands of American patriotism. They did not always convince—the peace sign, like the flag, had become a polarizing symbol—but they made their meaning clear.²⁰

Most peace demonstrators found themselves unwilling to carry the American flag. Activist Todd Gitlin described his sense of betrayal as the American government continued its course, despite the protests: “I was implicated because the terrible war was wrapped in my flag—or what had been my flag. The American flag did not feel like my flag, even though I could recognize—in the abstract—that it made sense for others to wave it in the anti-war cause.” Painfully aware of the gap between their hopes and their realities, many activists began to see the flag as a visual reminder of that chasm. The flag, which had been a symbol of democracy, now seemed more of a symbol of empire and even of genocide. As Gitlin wrote:

~ 184 ~
I did argue against waving the North Vietnamese flag or burning the Stars and Stripes. But the hatred of a bad war, in what was evidently a pattern of bad wars—though none so bad as Vietnam—turned us inside out. It inflamed our hearts. You can hate your country in such a way that the hatred becomes fundamental. A hatred so clear and intense comes to feel like a cleansing flame.²¹

All the long-held assumptions on which Americans had been raised now appeared false. The U.S. Army was acting like an imperial power, greedy for land and natural resources. Large-scale protests were having no impact on foreign policy. The government seemed to belong to the U.S. military, not American citizens.²²

Yet the antiwar activists did not relinquish the flag lightly. Like the segregationists a decade earlier, they were alienated by a seemingly irreversible pattern of federal action that took them by surprise. In each case, the American vision they thought they shared was destroyed; in each case, they watched as the rift between their vision and government policy widened and deepened. In each case, they felt a profound sense of betrayal that caused them to reach for other flags and other symbols and to push away the American flag.

The image of the burning flag cleaved down the middle of the American population, estranging groups that might have been allied. The large population of those troubled by the war were severed into two camps: those who saw the flag primarily as a symbol of sacrifice and honor, and those who saw it as a symbol of a government that had betrayed its people and American ideals. The stage was set for the event that would come to be known as the Hard Hat Riot.
CAPTURE THE FLAG

In the spring of 1970, New York was in the midst of a building boom. All over Lower Manhattan, cranes lifted reddish spires of steel onto the skeletons of new buildings. The Twin Towers were creeping upward to the sky, hives of activity as nearly five thousand workers laid steel, built elevators, ran wires, and connected plumbing. Signs of construction activity were everywhere: massive foundation holes, yellow hard hats, huge steel beams.\textsuperscript{23}

The steady hum of building activity belied the stress and strain of a nation in shock. In late April, President Nixon had invaded Cambodia without consulting Congress. It was an extremely unpopular move, and it had briefly united the country in opposition to Nixon. More than half of all Americans polled thought the invasion was unconstitutional; nearly half believed that Nixon had lied. Hundreds of thousands turned out for a march at the nation’s capital on May 8. Students held a national strike, many of them closing campuses for the rest of the semester. At Kent State College, where students set fire to an ROTC building, the National Guard shot into a crowd sixty-one times on May 4, killing four students and wounding nine others.\textsuperscript{24}

Campuses exploded in response to the Kent State news. More than a hundred major demonstrations were held on campuses per day, and five hundred schools canceled classes for periods ranging from days to the rest of the school year. Students burned or bombed ROTC buildings at thirty campuses. At more than twenty schools, there were armed standoffs between students and police or national guard forces. Many Americans found that their dismay at the Kent State shootings was quickly superseded by a greater shock over the students’ violent response. Night after night on American television, viewers saw the burned shells

~ 186 ~
of ROTC buildings and the mayhem of student rioting. College students took over administrative buildings, shut down their schools, and burned down banks. The world felt out of control.25

On Whitehall Street at the southern tip of Manhattan, construction workers had erected an American flag on their job site, as was common practice. But in those volatile early days of May, the flag served as a flashpoint for all kinds of emotions. When seven hundred medical students gathered on May 6 to protest Kent State in nearby Battery Park, one of them ripped down the Whitehall flag.26

The workers were irate. “The steelworkers piled out of the building and pitched into them,” said a fellow worker. “Several [students] were beaten up, though nothing much about it got into the papers.” After returning to the building site, the steelworkers kept talking about the incident. As one worker reported later, “A lot of them feel strongly about the situation, no doubt about that. Their attitude was that not enough was being done about these goddamn kids.”27

The next day, a group of workers went to an antiwar protest on Wall Street during their lunch hour. There was a shoving match, but no one was hurt, and the workers got back to the job right after their lunch hour ended. But the conflict left the men unsatisfied. “After they came back,” their coworker reported, “they kept talking, kept psyching themselves up. They weren’t satisfied they’d done enough, and the word began to go around that the next day they would really do it up right. The word circulated on all the jobs in the area. It was a planned thing.”28

There was a strong class element to the antagonism. Construction workers, even young men, always used the term “kids” to describe students, the word illustrating their sense that the
students were merely playing around. Even those who hadn’t served in the military knew the realities of a difficult, dirty, dangerous life. In many ways, blue-collar work paralleled the dangers of war because manual labor held out a very real chance of being killed or injured. In 1968, more than fourteen thousand workers died in industrial accidents in the United States, nearly the same number as American soldiers killed in Vietnam. Construction work was especially dangerous: One out of fifteen iron-workers would be killed within ten years. Thus, even when the workers were not much older than the students, the laborers were men who had watched friends die on the job, falling twenty stories from iron scaffolding to the street.29

As word spread of the workers’ plans to attack more protesters, New York’s powerful Building and Construction Trades Council got involved. On one job site, the contractor offered the men cash bonuses to participate. On others, union bosses told the men they must participate. “[The bosses] came back,” said one worker, “and said that everyone had to go out Friday—all the workers from the World Trade Center, the U.S. Steel building, and 2 Manhattan Plaza—and break some heads.” These directives were unusual, but not entirely unprecedented. Peter Brennan, the head of the union, had a history of using his men to rough up war protesters. He also had a history of using workers with American flags to push for political advantage.30

Friday, May 8, would have been a volatile day under any circumstances. The day had been set aside by New York’s mayor and city council to commemorate the Kent State massacre. As a tribute to the four dead students, the city hall flag hung at half-staff in the cool, rainy morning. The gesture inflamed many veterans, who felt that the students didn’t deserve it. No flag at city
Flag of Class: The Hard Hat Riot and the Vietnam War

hall had been lowered for their buddies killed in the line of duty. Adding insult to injury, antiwar demonstrations were planned all over the city. It was a good day to go “break some heads.”

Around noon, just as the construction workers were punching out for lunch, the sky began to brighten and the air became humid. On Wall Street, Federal Hall sat like a misplaced Greek temple amid the tall buildings. A scheduled protest was under way, and a speaker stood on the steps addressing a crowd of about a thousand people. “You brought down one president,” he told them, “and you’ll bring down another.” The crowd, mostly students, was peaceful. Some stood in the street; others sat on the stone steps eating sandwiches.

Soon the regular noontime crowd of Wall Street appeared alongside the students. Men in suits emerged from the New York Stock Exchange for their lunch break. Some listened to the speaker; some ignored him since protests were common on Wall Street. Sidewalk vendors did a brisk business from under their striped umbrellas.

Then the construction workers arrived: a wave of steelworkers, elevator mechanics, carpenters, and crane operators. They wore brown bib overalls and plaid shirts, yellow hard hats, and tool belts. Wire-snippers, pliers, and hammers clanked as the men surged forward. They emerged out of the narrow streets, flooded around the corners of Federal Hall, converged on the stone steps from all directions. At the police barricade on the west side of the building, they slowed to a halt, forming a milling pool of about two hundred men.

Two incongruously dressed men appeared among the workers. Both wore gray suits and gray hats; both wore matching patches on their lapels. They moved busily through the gathering throng,
handing something out. In their wake, as if by magic, dozens of American flags appeared. The workers pushed forward against the police barricade. A line of a dozen officers in dark helmets separated them from the rally. The workers shook their flags. “U.S.A., all the way!” they shouted. “Love it or leave it!”

The students were sprawled along the east side of the building’s steps, which reached to the giant bronze statue of George Washington in the center. “Peace now!” they shouted back. “Motherfucking fascists!” One of them waved a Vietcong flag.

A partner in a brokerage firm, watching with binoculars from the thirty-second floor of 63 Wall Street, saw the men in gray suits directing the crowd with hand signals. All of a sudden, the workers pushed forward and the police line dissolved. Construction workers swelled across the western part of the steps, reaching the Washington statue and pushing the students away from it. Workers swarmed up onto the statue and placed flags on it, then raced to the top of the steps and mounted their flags there. The men in gray suits shouted orders. The workers pushed the students back to the eastern margin of the steps, away from the statue. Said one witness, “it was just like John Wayne taking Iwo Jima.”

An unidentified man in a suit, neither worker nor student, climbed up onto the pedestal of Washington’s statue. Standing between the president’s huge bronze legs, he cursed out the construction workers and spit on the flag. The crowd roared in anger: “He spit on the flag! He spit on the flag!” A construction worker leaped up after him and punched him, sending the man flying into the crowd. A man in a bow tie cowered on the other side of the pedestal, clutching the statue’s enormous thigh for support. Students started chanting, “Hell no, we won’t go! Hell no, we won’t go!” infuriating the workers.
Then there was mayhem. Workers took off their yellow helmets and lashed out with them, beating indiscriminately at the protesters. Others smashed students with wire clippers and lead pipe, gashing foreheads. Office clerks and the backroom help from the financial district began to egg the workers on. And quite a few of the white-collar workers—nearly as many as the blue-collar ones—began to beat the students as well.\textsuperscript{37}

Long-haired men were special targets. One was thrown to the ground and kicked by four pairs of steel-toed boots. Others were chased through the canyon-like streets of the financial district. A partner at Lehman Brothers tried to stop a worker from beating a youth and was himself pushed up against a telephone pole; a man who came to his aid, in turn, was bashed in the head with a pair of pliers. Stunned observers couldn’t believe what they were seeing. The event seemed suspiciously choreographed. Police officers had been warned of a possible attack, but they seemed to melt away, leaving the protesters to the mercy of the beatings.\textsuperscript{38}

Spectators dragged as many of the wounded as they could into nearby Trinity Church. Bloody noses and black eyes were common; more than seventy students were beaten so badly they had to be taken to the hospital. Then the mob turned north on Broadway, marching straight for City Hall.\textsuperscript{39}

President Nixon’s chief domestic affairs adviser, John Erlichman, later said that he had always “assumed” that the hard hat demonstrations were “laid on” by the White House. By 1970, the Nixon White House already had an established track record of infiltrating civilian groups. Since the inauguration in 1969, the FBI and CIA had focused heavily on domestic intelligence and set
up surveillance on activists. Agents had infiltrated Students for a Democratic Society, the largest student group, posing as members of the antiwar movement. Some even went further and became agents provocateurs, pushing the limits of protest to generate backlash.\(^{40}\)

There was strong circumstantial evidence that the Hard Hat Riot was one of these instances. In early March 1970, two months before the incident, Nixon’s vice president, Spiro Agnew, had written a memo suggesting that CIA operatives might organize counterprotests to the student demonstrations in various American cities. These protests, the memo stated, could feature construction workers. When confronted with the memo by a tiny muckraking magazine *Scanlan’s Monthly*, the White House denied everything. It then spent the following six months putting the magazine out of business, investigating its IRS records and arranging for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to shut down further printing.\(^ {41}\)

Most of the evidence emerged only much later. A Nixon aide admitted to pushing the Veterans of Foreign Wars to create “counter demonstrations,” activities that may well have included the Hard Hat Riot. Nixon himself was caught on tape, plotting with his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, to use “thugs” to break up demonstrations. Their conversation described how they had previously used steelworkers—construction workers—to do the same thing.\(^ {42}\)

During the riot, there had been hints of backroom organization. The heavy pressure from the Building and Construction Trades Council suggested some vested interest. Later developments confirmed a deal between Peter Brennan, the powerful union boss, and President Nixon. The American flags, generously provided by the
two men in gray hats and suits, gave a focal point to the protest: one that made the outrageous beatings more acceptable by clothing them as a defense of the flag. The middle-aged man who spat on the flag might well have been a secret agent: As he was neither student nor construction worker, his action was senseless unless he was trying to incite further anger and violence.

Bearing their American flags proudly before them, the rioters strode up lower Broadway. This half mile, where the avenue forms a deep and narrow gorge between the tall buildings, is known as the Canyon of Heroes. It is the city's traditional parade ground; the Apollo mission astronauts had marched there the summer before. In 1970, hundreds of construction workers and several thousand office workers made their own parade: American flags, brown overalls, yellow hard hats, white dress shirts, swinging ties. "U.S.A., all the way," the men chanted, and then began to sing. The words of "The Marines' Hymn" echoed from the tall buildings and resonated through the marching crowd. A half dozen mounted police on glossy horses trailed alongside. Office workers along the route threw open their windows and flung out handfuls of ticker tape—the traditional parade response—which twirled through the air.

From Broadway, the crowd marched under the budding trees in City Hall Park and brought their flags directly up to the stately structure of City Hall. High on the roof, just below the domed cupola, rose the city's official flagpole. The flag hung at half-staff, the mayor's tribute to the Kent State victims. The men surged around the building's pink granite base and up the front steps. They stopped in front of the central doors, while one man
slipped inside and found his way to the roof. The people in the crowd craned their necks to watch, as the man appeared above and then untied the halyards and pulled the ropes. Foot by foot, the flag rose to its full height. Within minutes, one of the mayor’s aides appeared on the roof and stalked over to the flagpole. He hauled the flag back to half-staff.43

From the steps and portico, the construction workers and clerks howled in anger. Some leaped onto parked cars and ran over the hoods; other men scrambled over the police barricades and stormed toward the building. They reached the tall doors and heaved themselves against the heavy wood, using their bodies as battering rams. It looked for a moment as though the men would splinter through and take over City Hall.

Frightened, the deputy mayor announced that the flag would be raised to its full height. The crowd quieted and watched as two plainclothes officers and the building custodian walked out onto the roof. The trio grasped the halyards and slowly raised the flag. As it ran up the pole, the crowd began to sing:

*Oh say can you see*
*By the dawn’s early light*

Hands moved to hearts. Construction workers pulled their yellow helmets off.

*What so proudly we hailed*
*By the twilight’s last gleaming*

A dozen police officers lined the stairs, their black helmets glinting in the sun. “Get your helmets off!” one of the workers
shouted at them. The cops looked at one another. Grinning a little foolishly, about half of them pulled off their helmets and laid them over their hearts.

_And the rockets’ red glare_
_The bombs bursting in air_
_Were proof through the night_
_That our flag was still there_

The flag on top of City Hall moved gently in the breeze. Just above the men’s heads, the workers’ flags fluttered in response. The reverence was palpable: a striking contrast to the violence of an hour before.

_Oh say does that star-spangled banner yet wave_
_O’er the land of the free_
_And the home of the brave?_

The Hard Hat Riot, also known as Bloody Friday, marked the beginning of the flag’s intense repoliticization as a prowar symbol. Before that day, many construction workers and longshoremen had had a personal relationship with the flag, because of their military service. Now, the flag was something that belonged to the construction workers, as workers. Many of the men began to embrace the flag, especially as part of their workplace identity. Some decorated their hard hats with flag decals; others inscribed slogans like “For God and Country.” This aggressive celebration of the flag was a form of class consciousness, a response to student protesters’ perceived disrespect for the flag and working-class culture.
The Hard Hat Riot was antiprotester, but after the event, it was not immediately clear that the construction workers had a political agenda beyond that. Did the workers support Nixon’s war policy? There was no evidence to suggest that they did. Within days, however, a political program became apparent as the unions pushed their workers to more flag demonstrations. For more than a year, the Nixon administration had been advocating for what it called the Philadelphia Plan, which required specific quotas of minority workers on jobs involving the federal government. The overwhelmingly white unions, especially New York’s Building and Construction Trades Council, opposed the plan fiercely. Immediately after the Hard Hat Riot, President Nixon met with union leaders in a secret session. Afterward, he quietly dropped his Philadelphia Plan, and Peter Brennan’s union, representing 250,000 workers, brought the flag to the streets as a symbol of support for Richard Nixon.46

Ordinarily, a construction worker got half an hour for lunch, enough time to eat a sandwich, possibly drink a beer, and listen to Paul Harvey’s News and Comment on the radio. If a man was late returning to work, justice was swift and severe. His pay was docked and his job was on the line: The foreman could easily send out to the union hall for another man to take his place. But for two weeks after Bloody Friday, the rules were different. Construction workers and longshoremen were paid for marching at lunchtime nearly every day, often for as long as two or three hours.47

These marches were spectacular affairs. Between two thousand and three thousand workers hit the street, generating enormous publicity and snarling traffic throughout Lower Manhattan. Construction workers marched from City Hall to Bowling Green, car-
rying foot-long American flags. Brooklyn longshoremen marched over the Brooklyn Bridge carrying flags to City Hall in a parade that featured pretty young women, a motorcycle escort, and a twelve-piece brass band. Workers even threatened the offices of the *Wall Street Journal* with violence, demanding that they fly their flag; despite objections from reporters and editors, management duly hung one out.⁴⁸

The flag appeared in the Manhattan marches as a symbol of support for Nixon’s prowar policies. “We Support Nixon and Agnew: God Bless the Establishment” proclaimed a large, printed sign. A young man who waved a peace sign to marchers was surrounded by men in business suits. “Go back to Germany and take your chances, you commie Jew!” one of the suits shouted at him. Another bystander, who formed a peace sign with his index and middle fingers, was attacked and punched out by marchers.⁴⁹

Analogies to Nazi Germany were common among observers, especially those who opposed the war. “We won’t be intimidated,” said an antiwar speaker in the wake of the riots. “This is not the Weimar Republic.” One woman, after seeing the workers punch a bystander, announced: “The new Nazis: They’re here.” Some of the construction workers made the same connection. “These are people I know well,” said one worker. “They were nice, quiet guys until Friday. But I had to drag one fellow away from attacking several women. They became storm troopers.”⁵⁰

The culminating event two weeks later was a huge rally on Broadway in Lower Manhattan, encompassing all the members of the Building and Construction Trades Council. The May 20 rally was ostensibly an apolitical demonstration for “love of country and love and respect of our country’s flag.” The union
told all the men in the building trades to drop their tools and go. As one union member experienced it:

The word was passed around to all the men on the jobs the day before. It was not voluntary. You had to go. You understand these are all jobs where the union controls your employment absolutely. . . . We were told that if we got back to the job a half-hour after the parade ended, we'd be paid for a full day's work. Of course, the parade lasted until 3:30 and by the time the guys got back, the day was done. But everybody got paid.51

Nearly one hundred thousand people, many of them construction workers and longshoremen, most of them white, gathered on Broadway. Many carried flags; others wore red, yellow, and blue hard hats with flag decals. Signs bobbed across the crowd: “We Love Our Police, Flag and Country; We Hate Our Commie Mayor.” A band played World War II fighting songs and “God Bless America”; then, as everyone stood and doffed their hard hats, it played “The Star-Spangled Banner.” No patriotic detail was left out: music, the Pledge of Allegiance, the flag—it was all there.52

Peter Brennan, the handsome, ruddy head of the Building and Construction Trades Council, stood on the podium and addressed the crowd. “This symbol, this flag,” his voice rang out, “is more than just a piece of cloth!” The crowd cheered and cheered. Throughout the noon hour and into the afternoon, ticker tape and computer punch cards were tossed out of the office buildings of lower Broadway in celebration. One man was hit on the head by a falling cardboard box of confetti and taken to the hospital.53

Amid this manufactured demonstration, it was hard to tell what the workers really felt. There was plenty of support for
Nixon, although it was the kind of support that came from having a common enemy. Given the alternatives—Nixon and the antiwar protesters—many construction workers chose Nixon. A union official summed up the feelings of his electrical workers: “Sure, a lot of workers feel Nixon should have gone to Congress before the Cambodia thing. But they go right back to supporting the President when they see what’s happening on campus.”

Reporters who interviewed the workers after the events realized that they were in the presence of something they did not fully understand. Many of the workers felt a connection to the troops in Vietnam and had long personal histories with the flag, imbuing it with all the complex emotions of American pride and working-class grief. The journalists were struck by the particular reverence with which these men spoke of the flag. One worker said of the flag, “Outside of God, it’s the most important thing I know.” He elaborated, “I know a lot of good friends died under this. It stands for the greatest: America.”

One after another, the workers connected the flag with their military service, their dead buddies, their purple hearts, their sons in East Asia. One man, a veteran who had lost a son in Vietnam, spoke of an almost corporeal connection: “It’s me. It’s part of me.” Seeing the flag violated was like seeing all that service, all that sacrifice, disrespected. And the anger that welled up in them was particularly intense because the flag burners were upper-middle-class young men and women who would never know what it was like to find themselves in a jungle being shot at by an unknown enemy.

But there were also fault lines among the construction workers. One of the Twin Towers men, a construction worker in his twenties, had marched on Washington, protesting the U.S. move
into Cambodia. “I don’t think you honor America by beating someone over the head with a flag,” he said. Another agreed. “I hate to even dignify these men by calling them construction workers. I’m a construction worker and proud of it. These guys are cowards who feel threatened, so they hit people. It makes them feel good and gets them time off of work.”

Black construction workers opposed the riots and the marches by a margin of fifteen to one. “These men are make-believe patriots and cowards,” said one older carpenter, who wore both an American flag pin and a black nationalist button. “I fought in World War II also, but I don’t go around beating up young kids and girls.” A younger man, an electrician’s apprentice at the World Trade Center, also kept his distance from the marchers. “None of the black workers want anything to do with them. How many blacks did you see in the march the other day? We counted five. And some of them weren’t even Americans.”

The evening after the big rally, President Nixon phoned Brennan and spoke to him for over an hour. The next week, Brennan was invited to a reception at the White House. In front of other labor leaders, he stepped forward to present the president with two gifts. He handed Nixon a hard hat reading “Commander in Chief.” Then he pinned an American flag pin on the president’s lapel.

Not surprisingly, the biggest winner from the Hard Hat Riot was Richard Nixon. Before the riots, he had been the president of a rapidly disintegrating country, having lost the confidence of most of his citizens. The national guard was shooting at students, and there were major protests against his policies nearly every day. As a result of the riots, Nixon found himself with unexpected sources of support. The press seized on the riots in New
York and similar riots in St. Louis, Missouri, and Tempe, Arizona, as a way to give popular face to the “silent majority” that Nixon claimed. By August, Newsweek, Business Week, Time, and a number of major newspapers had all published articles pitting blue-collar workers against student protesters.

Polls showed that 53 percent of the public disapproved of the hard hat violence, but they sympathized more strongly with the hard hats than they did with the students, by 40 percent to 24 percent. To most Americans, the flag was not just a symbol. Reflecting back, Nixon pinpointed the Wall Street events as a turning point in marshaling popular support. “I remember then that it seemed I was virtually alone,” he said, “and then one day a very exciting thing happened: the hard hats marched in New York City.”

The Hard Hat marches epitomized a deepening split between the left and the right in American political culture, a split that centered around the flag. It was a split that would dominate American political culture for nearly the next four decades, as the right took hold of the flag and the left grew increasingly alienated from the symbol. When Peter Brennan pinned a gift of the flag on Nixon’s lapel, the action proved deeply symbolic: The Hard Hat Riot gave the American flag to Nixon and the Republican Party, establishing its cultural politics through the end of the millennium.

Of all the presidents during this period, Ronald Reagan was the most gifted in his political use of the flag. In his 1980 and 1984 campaigns, he invoked the symbol frequently, though its political uses were often unspoken. With hundred-foot-long flags hanging behind them, the president and his wife Nancy appeared at rallies, waving smaller flags in hand. His television
commercials, in particular, made heavy use of flag imagery, and publicity firms still view the “Morning in America” series—with its images of going to work, getting married, and Boy Scouts raising the flag—as one of the best advertising campaigns in history. It communicated, in visual shorthand, a rich and promising sense of a nation on the rise. There were a handful of negative ads, as well, ones that evoked the specter of Middle Eastern instability by showing a crowd of angry Iranians gathered around a flaming flag. These proved an effective foil to the optimistic patriotism that infused most of the campaign; together, both approaches pulled “Reagan Democrats” in large numbers from opponent Walter Mondale.\footnote{61}

One particular event during Reagan’s presidency reestablished the political import of the flag, redrawing the lines that had been set during the Hard Hat demonstrations. On a sweltering day in late August 1984, a group of about a hundred protesters marched through the streets of Dallas. Most were members of the Revolutionary Communist Party, and they were on what they called the Republican War Chest Tour. They barged into department stores, kicking over trash cans and falling to the floor in a “die-in” protest against nuclear weapons. In a bank, they threw deposit slips in the air, overturned potted plants, and splattered red paint on the floor to symbolize blood.\footnote{62}

At one of the buildings, the demonstrators pulled an American flag off a flagpole. They carried it through the streets as they marched, chanting:

\begin{quote}
\textit{America, the red, white and blue}
\textit{We spit on you.}\footnote{63}
\end{quote}
One of the protesters was a young man named Gregory Lee Johnson. When the group reached Dallas City Hall, someone handed him the flag. He poured kerosene on it and then set it ablaze.

Johnson was convicted under Texas law for vandalizing respected objects. He appealed the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The *Texas v. Johnson* decision, released in June 1989, reflected the division in American life over the flag: The justices split, five to four. The majority opinion held that flag burning was protected speech. “We do not consecrate the flag by punishing its desecration, for in doing so we dilute the freedom that this cherished emblem represents,” wrote Justice Anthony Kennedy. “It is poignant but fundamental that the flag protects those who hold it in contempt.”

The dissent, written by Justice William Rehnquist, held that the flag was not simply an idea but rather a powerful collective symbol, viewed by millions of Americans with “an almost mystical reverence.” It argued that burning the flag was not so much free speech as “the equivalent of an inarticulate grunt or roar that, it seems fair to say, is most likely to be indulged in not to express any particular idea, but to antagonize others.”

The *Texas v. Johnson* decision shocked many Americans. It also tapped into a political debate about patriotism that had sharpened with the 1988 campaign, when Republican George H. W. Bush hammered on Democrat Michael Dukakis’s veto of an obscure bill that would have required all Massachusetts students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. “What is it about the American flag which upsets this man so much?” Bush had gibed. It was a revisiting of the Hard Hat dynamics.
CAPTURE THE FLAG

Television anchors and newspaper reporters covered the case prominently. Thousands of Americans wrote letters to their representatives in Washington, demanding action. Senator Strom Thurmond said the ruling had “opened an emotional hydrant across our country demanding immediate action to overturn it.” Polls showed that 65 percent of the public disagreed with the ruling. One and a half million people signed petitions in favor of a constitutional amendment to overturn it. Opponents of the measure also jumped into action. Over five hundred law professors signed a public letter opposing a constitutional amendment. In September, Congress passed the Flag Protection Act, which made it a federal crime to desecrate the flag.\(^6\)

When the law went into effect in late October 1989, opponents protested by setting fire to the flag in Seattle; New York; Berkeley, California; and Fort Collins, Colorado. It was the greatest profusion of flag burnings in American history. In Seattle, protesters set fire to one thousand small paper flags and a large cloth banner that had flown over a post office. In Fort Collins, on the campus of Colorado State University, a counter-protester blew out the flames of a burning flag and then grasped it in his hands, exclaiming, “My father fought in World War Two. I’m not going to let what he did go by the wayside.” One of the protest organizers responded, “That’s what your father fought for, the Constitution and freedom of the United States.” The exchange encapsulated the emotions and arguments of the whole national debate.\(^7\)

From 1989 to 2006, Congress debated the question of flag burning seven times, each time polarizing the American people with a largely theoretical discussion about what it meant to be a true patriot. On the one side stood those who considered flag
burning a paradox. "Which is more important: the flag, or the free speech it symbolizes?" they asked. Nearly all were happy to sacrifice the symbol for the substance. On the other side were those who approached the flag not merely as a symbol, interchangeable with others, but also as an icon. Many veterans groups were in this number. For them, flag burning was an outrage, a desecration of an emblem as sacred as the cross. The flag had become a relatively static symbol of American conservatism, flown by certain groups and watched suspiciously by others. Its political meanings were more stable than at any other time in our history.

That is where things stood on September 10, 2001.

35. Medgar Evers, quoted in Langguth, “Jackson Police,” 1; Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 150.


38. Edwin King, quoted in Moss, “Yes, There’s a Reason,” 28.


40. Salter, quoted in Moss, “Yes, There’s a Reason,” 28.

**CHAPTER 7**


6. Previous flag desecration bills had all been on the state level. Even the flag protection movement of the 1890s had been unable to pass a federal law, because the movement included commercial uses of the flag as “desecration.” Quotes from Goldstein, *Saving Old Glory*, 119–131.


9. Dan Shaw, quoted in ibid.
12. Quoted in LeMasters, Blue Collar Aristocrats, 173.
15. Wells, The War Within, 24; Marilyn Milligan, quoted in ibid., 36.
18. Ibid., 180–181.
26. Flags were hung on construction elevators (“Muscles and a Flag,” New York Post, May 9, 1970, 2). Flags were also the centerpiece of the “topping out” ritual of steelworkers (Angus Kress Gillespie, Twin Towers: The Life of


30. Homer Bigart, “War Foes Here Attacked by Construction Workers,” New York Times, May 9, 1970. In the mid-1960s, when he testified before the city council in favor of the World Trade Center project, Brennan brought along several hundred of his union men. They stood outside in City Hall Park, waving flags and shouting their support of the project (Darton, Divided We Stand, 105).


32. Ibid.


35. “Those guys were directing the construction workers with hand motions,” the man who was observing from the thirty-second floor told a reporter (New York Times, May 9, 1970; also quoted in Cook, “Hard-Hats,” 104). “John Wayne” comment quoted in Wall Street Journal, May 11, 1970. One construction worker, an observer rather than a participant, told a reporter that these men “were shouting orders to the workers” (Bigart, “War Foes,” 10).

36. The man who supposedly spat on the flag was in his forties and was wearing a coat and tie. Reports vary on what he did: spitting on the flag, blowing his nose, tearing it with his teeth, eating it. In any event, it was intended to be—and perceived as—an act of desecration (“Joe Kelly Has Reached His Boiling Point,” New York Times Magazine, June 28, 1970).

37. “There [were] as many of these antiwar demonstrators whacked by Wall Street and Broadway office workers as there were by construction workers. The feeling seemed to be that the white-collar-and-tie-man, he was actually getting in there and taking as much play on this thing as the construction worker was” (ibid.).

39. Ibid.


43. Cook, “Hard-Hats.”

44. Ibid.


46. The assistant secretary of labor in the Nixon administration, Arthur Fletcher, suspected this immediately upon hearing of the demonstrations. He detected what he called an “ulterior motive.” “I believe they feel that if they can support the President on this one issue, they can get inside the White House and be a formidable opponent of the Philadelphia Plan” (quoted in Joshua B. Freeman, “Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness, and the
1970 Pro-War Demonstrations,” *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 4 [summer 1993]).

47. “Workers ... have freely admitted taking time from their jobs to join demonstrations or battle with students, and they say they have not lost pay” (*New York Post*, quoted in Cook, “Hard-Hats,” 114).


52. “Pro-War Rally.”

53. Ibid.


56. Ibid.


58. “Blacks in the Hardhats.”


64. Quoted in Goldstein, *Burning the Flag*, 109–110. Flag desecration legislation had originated in the 1890s with the Flag Protection Movement. Many states passed laws banning defacement and contempt, laws that originated as a symptom of disgust at the way that the American flag had become commercialized, but quickly became used against immigrants with radical politics. Defacements and prosecutions spiked during World War I, with the repeal of civil liberties, but largely disappeared from the 1920s onward. It was only with the Vietnam era that the flag had again become a target for desecration. After the flag burning in Sheep’s Meadow, Congress and state legislators passed anti-desecration laws: By 1984, fully forty-eight states had anti-desecration laws on the books. See especially Goldstein, *Saving Old Glory*. On the history of flag desecration, see also Prosser, “Desecration of the American Flag.”

65. Quoted in ibid., 110–111.


CHAPTER 8

