

The Day the Democrats Lost the White Working Class in a Hardhat Riot

EXCERPT

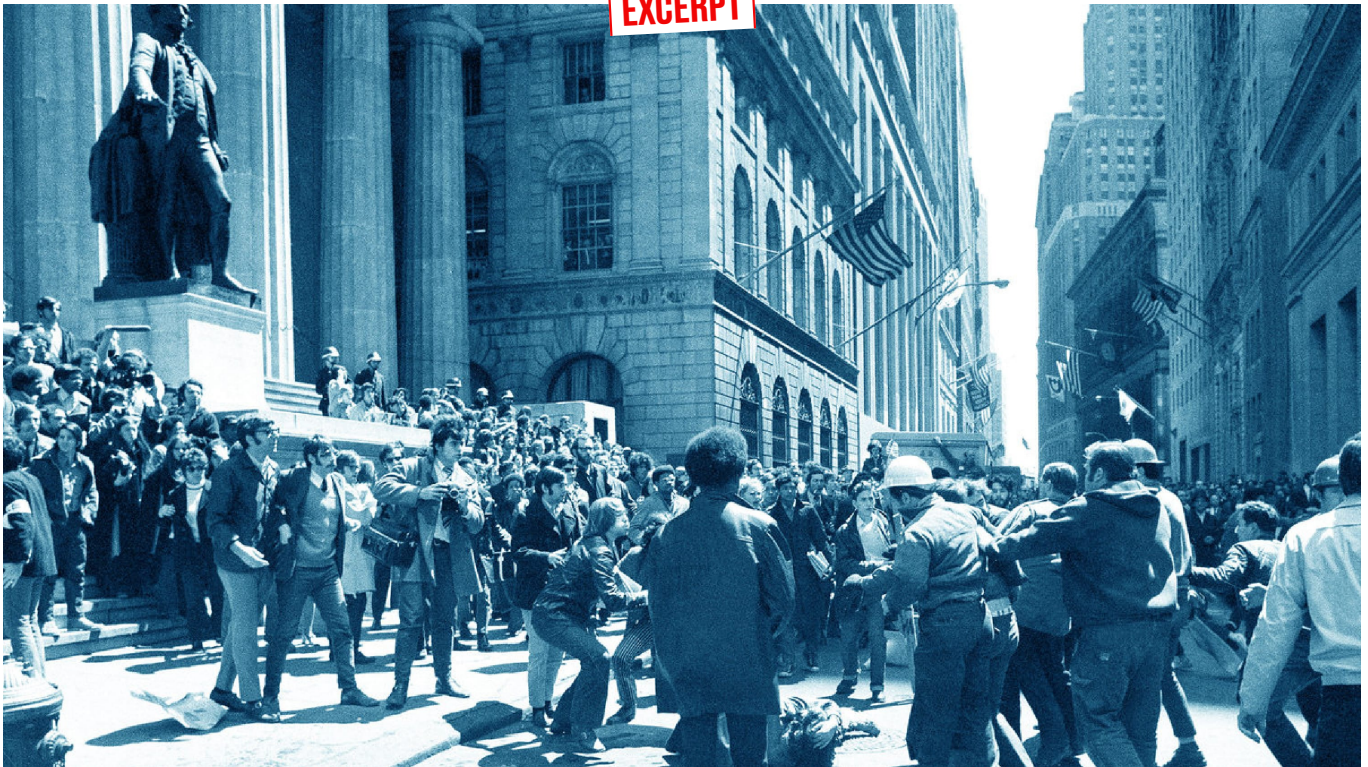


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Leftists and labor had been part of the Democratic Party's coalition since the New Deal. On May 8, 1970, that came unglued in a violent confrontation in lower Manhattan.

David Paul Kuhn

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In 2016, the American electorate polarized to a historic degree, though not by race or sex. The Democratic nominee performed worse with working-class whites than any other nominee, of either party, since World War II. Years later, elites continue to be confounded by how Donald Trump happened, whether he could stun again, and what his presidency has revealed about American life. Sometimes, the contemporary can best be understood by the lessons of history, including one story that shifted history.

May 1970 was a tumultuous month in a tumultuous era. After Cambodia and Kent State, the antiwar movement radicalized as never before. Even after Watergate, Richard Nixon recalled these days as “among the darkest of my presidency”—until, as his speechwriter William Safire put it, the hardhats helped “turn the tide.”

The Hardhat Riot is a book about a city, a mayor, a president, and a diverging people living different cultures, different wars, different economies, until the American experience became so fragmented that the singular became an anachronism. It was when the “silent majority” first took to the streets. When Gotham, of all places, became a microcosm of the “Middle American Squeeze” and class conflict. When FDR’s “forgotten man” turned against liberalism and the New Left captured popular culture and then the Democratic Party, but lost working-class whites along the way. And that conflict never burned brighter and more brutally than during the

Hardhat Riot, when two archetypes of liberalism clashed, presaging the long Democratic civil war ahead.

Nixon seized on the breach—moving Republicans from blue bloods to blue collars. A half-century later, Trump flails for Nixon’s success, echoing Nixon’s rhetoric of “law and order,” hoping to speak for a new “silent majority.” He is campaigning in a different America and yet his political success has long followed the road Nixon paved.

Back then, circumstance compressed a cultural and class conflict into the narrow landmass of Lower Manhattan. Those demonstrating daily on Wall Street, raging against the war and more, tended to be children of relative affluence, the educated youth who ushered in the counterculture and believed in Gene McCarthy, John Lindsay, and George McGovern. They were a class apart from the blue-collar soldiers over there. Meanwhile, thousands of workers, veterans with kin and kind in Vietnam, were watching the protests from their steel perches above. New York City was experiencing its “Second Skyscraper Age,” including the construction of the tallest towers in the world.

At the time, few people of influence were troubled by class conflict; fewer still expected it to boil over into a melee. Then, where George Washington was inaugurated, in the shadow of the Twin Towers, and on the same day the Knicks won their first championship, the “silent majority” rioted. Construction workers

chased students through the canyons of downtown Manhattan, beating scores bloody. Soon City Hall was under siege. And as hardhats clashed with hippies, it became clear that Democrats were at war with themselves.

Days after, Nixon's Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman noted that "we're turning a corner" because of "the blue-collar group rising up" and Nixon "can mobilize them." "It only encouraged Nixon in the belief that the masses of the American public were on his side," wrote Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser. The riot inspired daily blue-collar protests, culminating with as many as 150,000 workers flooding City Hall with a sea of American flags. Time magazine coined it "Workers' Woodstock." The next day, Pat Buchanan urged Nixon to rally this "Roosevelt New Dealer." "There is a great ferment in American politics," Buchanan advised, "these, quite candidly, are our people now."



Excerpt:

May 8, 1970

A slate-gray mist lingered above the bay and the wind kicked up and came over the rotting docks and blew the thin rain sideward against the half-built skyscrapers rising at the city's southern edge. At the base of one tower, as ironworkers smoked beneath scaffolding and talked, a police car drew up curbside. "Fellows," a cop said, "there's another demonstration at the Subtreasury Building," which was also

called Federal Hall. Ironworker Eugene Schafer, still smarting from confronting peaceniks and getting “mauled,” grabbed one of the American flags on site, and the ironworkers spoke of comeuppance.

At City Hall, a caller reported that workmen planned to “knock heads” with the kids protesting the “Nixon-Kent thing.” Soon after, at a quarter past nine, the NYPD was told that a “disorderly group” would burn down 40 Wall Street. A minute later, someone phoned the police and said that construction workers “might cause trouble” for the demonstrators downtown. Another caller pegged the attack at noontime and warned, “Construction workers at the Twin Towers are going to take care of the protesters on Wall Street.”

The NYPD relocated a crowd control squad from Queens to the Financial District.

On Wall Street, as the rain dissipated, a thousand students shouted beneath the smoky sky, “One-two-three-four. We don’t want your fuckin’ war!” The chanting was loud enough to be heard inside stockbroker Robert Parker’s office on the fifty-third floor of 40 Wall Street. A half-block away, on the seventh floor, executive Walter Hendrickson found the repeated profanity “disgusting.” A woman from the same building phoned the police about the vulgarity.

The demonstration was relatively civil, however, compared with the chaos since Kent State. Speakers firebranded the familiar: “Get

out of Cambodia!” “You brought down one president and you’ll bring down another!” “Close down the movies and the plays.” One speaker railed, “Off the pigs!”

About twenty cops manned Federal Hall’s marble stairs. They were mostly twentysomethings. Baby-blue helmets with chin straps, gloves, narrow ties, long buttoned coats. In the streets below, scattered knots of policemen looked on as well.

Deputy Chief Inspector Valentine Pfaffmann stood at the periphery. “Prevent assaults on demonstrators,” Pfaffmann told a sergeant, and keep the sidewalk “fluid.” Yesterday, he warned, hardhats and hippies had scuffled at lunchtime.

The crowd fattened on Wall Street. The NYPD detoured traffic. A white boy held up a red sign for the Black Panthers: FREE ALL THE POLITICAL PRISONERS. FREE HUEY + BOBBY. Beside him, a placard read: STOP THE KILLING IN CAMBODIA AND KENT. Another handwritten sign: KENT-BODIA.

Students awaited yippie leader Abbie Hoffman. The NYPD radioed an alert, warning Hoffman was coming. But the organizers were unsure he would show. The morning’s cold rain had tapered expectations, if not also relaxed student ire citywide for the first time since Kent State, four days earlier. Only a thousand, of the ten thousand expected, had arrived so far. Activists still intended to shut down Wall Street. As one protester put it, “We have to

close down the financial centers of this country because they help carry on the war.”

With Abbie Hoffman’s arrival uncertain, the headliner was Paul O’Dwyer, a man of the Old Left with rare reach in the New. The son of struggling Irish schoolteachers, and one of eleven children, O’Dwyer arrived in America as a young man. He worked docks. Packed garments. Eventually, he made his name as a champion of the underclass. His elder brother became the mayor of New York City. But the activist wanted inside too. Paul O’Dwyer was one more pol chasing Bobby Kennedy’s Senate seat.

O’Dwyer put on his best political bonhomie and glad-handed bystanders and hopped a puddle. He was a small man with a disheveled white mane and wild gray eyebrows and wore a baggy suit reminiscent of old sack-suited professors. At the outskirts, watching, businessmen with brokerage jackets, tightly knotted neckties, narrow-shouldered blazers, putty raincoats, snapbrim caps and fedoras, holding boxy briefcases, leaning on furled umbrellas.

The inner crowd sat and stood along Wall Street. The students wore bandanas, tartan slacks, frayed bell-bottom jeans, mackinaws, serapes, corduroy blazers, suede buckskin with fringe, thick knitted sweaters, the usual small buttons on big lapels, the usual faded Army field jackets. A half-dozen students made origami hats from newspaper and wore them for the rain.

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working class."***

A young woman read the *Times* with a stack of broadsheets on her head. A cigarette stub burned between her fingers. Beside her sat a bearded boy in a green military coat. With the public schools closed to honor Kent State, some teenagers and teachers came too. Among them, seven staff members from an alternative progressive school uptown, including a future Democratic city leader, young administrative assistant Ruth Messinger. There were black kids here and there. Some with big afros. A few Puerto Ricans too. But it was mostly the usual pale college kids. A lot of glasses and good listeners. Girls with center-parted long locks and tawny lips. Boys with adolescent beards and severe stares.

Paul O'Dwyer, his voice still hinting Irish, brushed his bangs off his creased forehead and spoke of the "children of the working class," of

families “loaded-down with taxes.” He talked of a “message we can give them, which I think will bring that group over to our side.” This was how to “end the war,” he said. “We can end it now. We can end it immediately. And we can end it before these demonstrations cease—”

“End the war on the Panthers!” someone yelled from the crowd. “Power to the Panthers!”

O’Dwyer persisted. “This is the thing—”

“End the racist war in South Vietnam!” The protester stepped forward. He was chubby, college age, a white boy with an afro of curls. He thrust his left fist into the air. “End the racist war in South Vietnam!”

“We will talk to everybody that listens to us,” O’Dwyer said. “The whole world is in shock.” O’Dwyer tolerated these interruptions now. This was no longer his left.

Few activists still believed they could jawbone peace. But the New Left was invested in the Free Speech Movement. Even critics were invited to have their say. One student, bespectacled and bearded, held the silver “fat Elvis mic.” He prepped the audience for outrage. “No matter what he says, no matter how bad it is,” the speaker warned haltingly, “please be quiet and listen to his point of view.”

The new speaker exuded Establishment. The jacket and tie. A Wasp face with a Roman nose. The side-swept hair, straight and trim with delicate bangs, a tidy mustache, pinkish skin. A cigarette cindered in his left hand as he

mellowly said, “It’s fine to demonstrate and everything, but when you start burning down buildings—”

The crowd hollered and brayed. Heads shook dismissively. The organizer raised his palm to mollify them.

The speaker waved his left hand inward, gesturing as if to say, Bring it on. “It’s okay for you to yell but I can’t, right?”

The crowd’s mau-mauing loudened.

It only riled him. “I’m for America! I love America!”

Once more, the organizer lifted his palm. More students hollered and booed.

“I love America!” The mic was soon passed.

“We all love America,” said a boy in a floppy woolen hat. “It’s the people who run it that we can’t stand.”

Scattered applause. A girl yelled, “That’s what I’m sayin’.”

Someone sang “Hey Jude” over the PA system. Hundreds joined in. The Beatles’s final album was officially released today.

At five minutes to eleven, the thin rain returned. Scores opened their newspapers and held them over their heads like pitched rooftops. Few protesters left. Most remained unaware of the warnings.

Just in case, Chief Pfaffmann radioed:
“Construction workers would appear from [the]

Twin Towers site.” The chief also dispatched two patrolmen to the World Trade Center site to “interview foremen, ascertain facts, and dissuade.” He insisted, “Prevail upon the workers.” The chief presumed the workers, and his own men, would heed him.

In a dorm room lounge uptown, beside the dingy East River, one student organizer nervously twirled a coiled phone cord. The lounge was chock full of first-aid kits and bulky ink-based duplicating machines and fliers and crinkled soda cans. Bruce Biller, a small, 23-year-old med student, was coordinating a new corps of volunteer paramedics from Hunter College and NYU’s medical and dental schools. Biller was on the phone with a medic deployed near Wall Street. A workman had warned a nurse that hardhats would “beat up the demonstrators” at noon. The source “apparently” was a construction worker from the Bronx, who worked at the Twin Towers site. Biller hung up and called 911. Fifteen minutes later, he dialed 911 again.

At 11:26, a sergeant sent out an alert over NYPD dispatch: “Two hundred construction workers expected to enter crowd at Wall and Broad to create havoc. Also, rumors of a few thousand students coming to Wall and Broad from Queens.”

Rumors spread within the crowd. A speaker announced that if hardhats “come” at them, “don’t try to fight them.” After all, the speaker added, “The police are here to protect us.”

At the top of the steps, in front of the helmeted police line, a girl with a white motorcycle helmet stood beside another activist. They waved a Vietcong flag.

Some protesters began to trail off. They were asked to stay, to reinforce the ranks, to make a stand. "Nobody's going to move us," a speaker yelled into the microphone. "Let them come! We'll show them! We won't be chased away."

From afar, the cross-cut steel shell looked like a rusty car radiator grille, and while the South Tower remained small and skeletal, the North Tower approached the height of the Chrysler Building. Its red bones were only exposed near its peak, which seemed to fade into the sky on days such as this, when the haze hung low on the city.

Two patrolmen circulated around the muddy gravel below. They spoke with foremen about the rally and radioed back that the Twin Towers "workers are not involved."

Forty-two floors above, Joe Kelly heard talk of getting involved. The steel was slick and the wind harsh, but the smog abated at these heights. The workmen spoke of yesterday's clash, of another demonstration today.

Kelly was six foot four, fit, blue-eyed, with a pudgy nose and receding red hair that was cut close. After discharge from the Army, he slogged a few years as a seaman on oil tankers. He returned stateside, enrolled in night school, and put in seven years as an apprentice. Now 31, Kelly worked the largest elevator

constructor job in the world.

Workday mornings—like his neighbors: a bus driver, a policeman, a steamfitter, a TV color processor—Kelly left his wife, Karen, his baby, and two small strawberry-blond daughters at his modest brick-and-shingle house on Staten Island. He mounted his turquoise Triumph 500 cc motorcycle, parked it in the steel belly of the ferry, climbed the metal stairs, and sat on a wood bench and skimmed the *Daily News*. When the ferry screeched against the wood pier and docked, he drove a mile to the Twin Towers. He parked near the rusty elevated West Side Highway and, with thousands of workmen, walked in the shadow of the partially built Twin Towers, entered the gray wooden shanty, and donned his plastic helmet, which was yellow and had flag decals and the phrase for god and country.

Kelly's half-hour lunch break approached. He had never marched over anything before. But he'd reached his "boiling point." Kelly descended and joined about fifty tradesmen, to "see what this peace demonstration was all about."

Along Wall Street, scores of new demonstrators arrived from the east. One leader bullhorned: "Watta we want?"

"Peace!" the marchers responded. "When do we want it?"

"Now!"

In front of Federal Hall, a thousand protesters

rose up and turned to the new arrivals and roared, tossing fists high beneath the cool gray sky.

The leaders of the march were clad in more faded military coats, more armbands. But the two hundred followers were boys with cherubic faces and oversized jackets, girls with headbands and ribbons in their hair—the big collars, the big glasses, the big hair of the era. Near the front, one boy with mop-top hair held a red placard that read, STOP NINETEEN'S WAR. The chanting became frenzied.

“Watta we want? When?”

“Peace now! Peace now! Peace now!”

Twenty minutes to noon. Bruce Biller, the coordinator of the medics, dialed 911 for a third time. He was connected to the temporary police headquarters on Wall Street. Inspector Harold Schryver assured Biller that they “had a sufficient number of patrolmen on the scene.” Besides, they “had learned that the construction workers were not coming.”

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workmen wading into the
mass.***

The hardhats had not showed. The protest concluded gradually. Some students strolled uptown for another rally. A thousand demonstrators remained. Some witnesses estimated twice that. The students chatted casually. One Times man noted that the crowd was in “good humor.”

At first, few noticed the dozen workmen wading into the mass. At the fore, a man grimacing, his yellow helmet backward, his hands in the pockets of his chore coat. Another man with a wide fleshy nose and sideburns and a helmet adorned with flags. A fair-haired older man in brownish coveralls. Behind him, a little man pinched a newly lit cigarette. Near him, a tall hardhat with a lineman’s build. They entered slowly, single file. A senior NYPD officer glanced at the hardhats and turned away.

Another group of hardhats neared Wall Street’s plaza.

“Give ’em hell, boys,” a patrolman shouted.
“Give ’em one for me!”

The lunchtime crowd thickened to thousands and construction workers continued filtering into the plaza, until hundreds of workmen were seen parading up Broad Street’s slim corridor. They were several men abreast, moving in a loose phalanx with heavy footfalls, wearing colored helmets, flannel, tattered trousers over steel-toe boots, shouldering big American flags, bellowing, “U—S—A. All the way! U—S—A. All the way!”

NYPD chiefs counted four hundred hardhats now.

Cops formed a line. They contained the hardhats where Broad Street fed Wall Street. The workmen moved four American flags to the fore of their ranks. A few hardhats held up a lean workman. The workman lifted a flag high above the fray.

The streets were now brimming over. A businessman stood on a lamppost, holding a file folder. The police created a demilitarized zone of sorts, separating the hardhats and the students by twenty to forty feet, each faction volleying chants.

Students swung their arms overhead and hollered louder.

Hardhats responded with their middle fingers and shouted out, “We’re number one! We’re number one!”

More workmen wandered into the mass and assembled at the rear, including about thirty ironworkers from the west. “I carried the flag up Broadway and Wall Street and I could see three or four blocks of faces—a complete sea of faces of chanting people against the war in Vietnam,” said ironworker Eugene Schafer.

Another contingent of hardhats cheered: “Hey, hey, whaddya say? We support the U.S.A.!”

Patrolmen Michael Stokes, a 26-year-old who lived near the withering industry of Queens’s western shoreline, saw a separate contingent of workmen, about two dozen, walking northward on Broad Street. They shouted, “Love it or leave it! Love it or leave it!”

As midday neared, the sun burned through the clouds and the day warmed and the air became heavy with humidity. Thousands heard the clamor in their offices. Typewriters stopped and phone receivers were set on cradles and chairs swiveled. Legions of office workers descended to the streets. It was now tough to enter the plaza. Spectators stood up on their toes and craned their necks. Strangers asked the person ahead of them, What's going on? Inside adjacent office buildings, plenty of clerks and bankers and secretaries and lawyers worked on. Still, on floor after floor, tower by tower, thousands collected at large windows, cranked them open or lifted wooden frames, and stared downward. The throng consumed the cavernous streetscape, leaving it difficult to discern where the sidewalk ended and the road began.

“Peace now! Peace now!” “Love it or leave it!”

Hardhats gestured with their hands, challenging the peaceniks to come at them.

Some workmen now held white leaflets with American flags and the words RALLY FOR AMERICA.

For a few minutes, it was no more than each tribe shouting anthems and insults,

Deep within the pack, a group of workmen pushed “anyone who happened to get in their way,” said Arlene Gross, a computer programmer in her early twenties, who watched from the sixth floor of 20 Broad Street, which was located beside the Stock Exchange. On the floor above her, elderly executive Walter Hendrickson watched hardhats assemble as “spectators in the street and the employees in the various buildings cheered them on.”

For a few minutes, it was no more than that, each tribe shouting anthems and insults, seemingly delimited. Some cops now stood at ease and chatted with the hardhats.

There were workmen well north of six feet and intimidating from browridge to boot. Yet plenty of the hardhats were no taller than the students. But the shorter guys were often broad-backed. The skinny workmen had veiny forearms, hands thick and cracked and callused from day after day after . . . years of manhandling steel or brick or blasting a riveting gun. At the vanguard, a few dozen men, including a big man, black Irish with a spotted yellow helmet, his checkered-flannel sleeves rolled up, as he hollered at the students, his hands cupped around his mouth, trying to be heard. Beside him, a young man, nostalgically cool, like a handsome Buddy Holly, with a modest pompadour and black horn-rimmed glasses and a pencil behind his ear. To his left, a squirrely little man with a blue helmet and a sinewy face and protruding

ears. Over his shoulder, another big man with pale skin and black hair and a fixed stare. His mustard-yellow hard hat was adorned with an iron cross. Many were tanned from working the high open steel. They had boots and white cotton socks and baggy slacks and some wore shirts with their name on their breast. These were clean-shaven men, ranging from their twenties to their fifties. Some of the older guys were fleshy, shirts protruding at the paunch. Most of the men, though, were trim enough to give chase.

Students abruptly pressed forward, juiced by these gritty men who were now proxies for the warmongers. The youthful ranks were, in this instant, emboldened. It was mere days after the breakdown of civil order at Kent State. Yet these revolutionaries remained confident enough in the system to believe that the police would maintain order, that there were rules of engagement, that the hardhats would be held behind enemy lines, that the means of combat were words.

“Fuck you and Nixon too!” “Take a bath!”

“Commies!”

Hardhats tossed aluminum cans. Men nudged frontward. More shouted. More swollen hands cupped mouths.

The crowd tightened around

***the students. The building was
at their back. The students
were surrounded.***

The cops linked arms and formed a human chain that spanned the width of Broad Street. It was difficult to hear the person beside you. Police loosely assembled a second line parallel with the first.

Curbside, a group of Wall Street men—slim twentysomethings, sideparted hair, ties, shirtsleeves—smiled and waved their arms and joined the hardhat anthems. At least a thousand local workers now cheered the hardhats. The students sensed a tidal shift. Hundreds of them retreated into a solid mass at the base of the steps and the Washington statue. The statue was massive and bronze and someone had scratched free bobby into its stone pedestal.

The crowd tightened around the students. The building was at their back.

The students were surrounded.

About twenty thousand people crammed several blocks now, Assistant Chief Inspector Arthur Morgan estimated. Morgan was a veteran of tumult, including the '67 Harlem riot. Although by 1970, every NYPD leader had experience with upheaval.

Bystanders stepped on toes. A man in a blazer

climbed a stop sign. A hardhat scrambled up a lamppost. Police radioed for assistance. More squads were deployed. In the street, hardhats pushed against the police line.

“Take it easy,” cops yelled. “Keep back.”

The police pulled some workmen aside. The hardhats said that Federal Hall belonged to all the people but was missing its American flag. The flag had not been hoisted due to the rain, but none there knew this. The hardhats blamed Mayor Lindsay’s order to lower flags for Kent State.

“All we want to do is put our flag up on those steps,” one workman said. “If you try, there’ll be blood to pay,” Inspector Schryver reportedly replied.

Chief Morgan, also in the parley, told the workmen that they must apply for a permit to protest here, like everyone else.

“The construction workers at this time gave every indication that they were unorganized and had no specific plan of action, and that the sudden interest and support shown by local Wall Street workers appeared to surprise them,” Chief Pfaffmann later reported to Internal Affairs.

The hardhats returned to their ranks. Workmen chanted on and the crowd with them. Each side had instigators hurling insults across the police line. The cacophony drowned out sirens.

“There was yelling, pushing, and shoving going

on between the construction workers and the peace groups,” said one young patrolman in the plaza, Wilton Sekzer. “The construction workers wanted one-half of the Treasury Building.”

Their pushing got “stronger.”

More flag-waving hardhats arrived.

“Love it or leave it!” “Peace now!”

Inspector Schryver saw the police line “waver and bend.” It now “appeared to be a matter of minutes before the police would be overrun.”

Bottles sailed through the air. Chief Morgan was nearly hit. Chief Pfaffmann reported that the “missiles were thrown from the ranks of the demonstrators.” A camera captured one hurled from those ranks.

At the fore of the students, kids angrily flashed peace signs and cursed the war, the president, the workmen.

“Fuck you and Nixon too!” students chanted on, fists and middle fingers aloft. Some screamed, “Fascist pigs!”

Hardhats replied with their middle fingers and fuck-yous and a barrage of slurs—“Bums!... Faggot!.... Commie!”

Electrical supply salesman Bob Barber was on his way to worship at old Trinity Church. But he saw the flags, heard the chants. It felt patriotic to him. He impulsively joined in.

A few rabble-rousing businessmen filed into

the front of the hardhats. More white collars collected at the rear and boomed along. NYPD commanders estimated that eight hundred office workers now bolstered the hardhats' ranks. Chief Pfaffmann reported more "pressure" on police.

Still more construction workers arrived. Men with red helmets and checkered shirts came from the west, cutting through the crowd along Wall Street.

Inspector Schryver encouraged students to leave the area. Hardhats unfurled a massive flag. Bystanders cheered.

Peaceniks continued to aggressively chant.

The students had the loudspeaker. They tried to outcheer the hardhats as though it was an all-American pep rally. It only aggravated the workmen more. More hardhats pushed against cops. More fuck-yous. More middle fingers. Other men had their hands at their sides, curling their fingers into fists. The workmen blasted forward. The first police line broke. "You can't go!" shouted one police supervisor. The second cordon stopped the men. Some patrolmen shoved hardhats back. The hardhats heaved forward. In the hardhat ranks, a few men had lead pipes wrapped with burlap and held them low. Cops backstepped.

A student waved a Vietcong flag from the steps.

The hardhats hollered and booed and the girl with the white motorcycle helmet did not relent.

The last police line broke.