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NY

Harvest of Unreason

Violence and physical coercion are never acceptable ingredients of political action. Whether lawless forays against free speech and legitimate dissent are carried out by radical students or by angry construction workers, the appropriate answer is the enforcement of the laws to maintain civic peace, protect civil liberties and prevent physical injuries.

When Mayor Lindsay censured the police for their inexcusable inaction during the construction workers' foray on City Hall last week, police organizations blamed equivocal and politically motivated orders governing the handling of civil disorders for creating confusion on what a proper police response should be. But the police this week have provided a convincing demonstration that adequate deployment of manpower and an impartial application of crowd-control techniques can prevent violent encounters even when emotion-charged antagonists face each other.

Now that the police are doing their job, reflection on the implications of the aroused workers' backlash ought to bring certain truths home to those student extremists who regard violence as a sophisticated form of political strategy. Even if such a choice of weapons were not morally wrong, anyone dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and reason must recognize it as self-defeating.

The confrontations between students and workers are a reminder that intellectual leadership derives its power from rational persuasion, not from a suicidal contest of gutter rhetoric and brawling. The men of muscle can always beat the men of mind in that kind of contest.

The right course is that being followed by the large numbers of students who are pouring their energies into legitimate political activism. While the politics of the mob tear the nation apart, the politics of the ballot box offer the best hope for a new national consensus for peace abroad and at home.