

Observer: Passions in Search of an Understanding

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, May 16—At some point in the business of the New York construction workers last week a photographer took a picture that makes you wonder what's going on here. The workers are seen waving flags and fists—near City Hall, says the caption—which is routine demonstration stuff, but the odd thing is this sign which is being held up by several of them.

Very professionally lettered, it says, "We support Nixon and Agnew." Nothing surprising there; organized labor has been officially hawkish on Vietnam through three Administrations. The mind-boggler is the declaration that follows. It says: "God Bless the Establishment."

An adjacent picture shows the construction workers in battle. Three or four of them are kicking some long-haired men lying on the sidewalk. Neatly barbered man applying boot to unbarbered man's kidney. And so forth.

In what cause? One wonders, baffled by that "God Bless the Establishment."

Beyond the Joke

"Establishment," to the extent it is anything at all more than a sophisticated joke, is the idea of the kind of people who are responsible for television saying they never look at it themselves but what can you do except give the slobs what they want.

In brief, to the extent it is anything at all more than a sophisticated joke, the Establishment is the mythical embodiment of everything despised by the Molly Maguires, Samuel Gompers, Philip Murray, John L. Lewis, et al.

As a battle cry for the working man, "God Bless the Establishment" makes sense only if we view it as absurdist, as a tacit announcement that the reasons labor is in the street applying workingman's boot to collegiate kidney are so diffuse, so complex, so far beyond rational explanation that the question can only be answered with the Lennonesque put-on. "God Bless Wall Street, Country Club, Grosse Pointe and All."

It may be that when things begin coming apart—in a soci-

ety, or in a family—you can tell things are really bad when it becomes impossible to define what people are tormenting each other about.

Take the students, who are the object of construction-worker street fury. The latest war escalation has made it fairly easy to define student positions just now. Omitting the usual inactive mass, the bulk oppose the war, a probably smaller group opposes the Nixon Administration, a smaller group opposes the existing

system of government and a very small group would like to destroy it by violence.

It isn't usually this easy to characterize student positions; normally between hot crises the campus is a mass of inarticulate passions and perceptions waiting to be seduced by a bullhorn. Such in fact seems now to be the state of groups reacting against the campus people.

It is not clear why the construction workers have been demonstrating and terrorizing

doves. Interviews in the paper have the same baffling conclusions as those interviews with college kids which ask them what they really want. The construction workers say they are tired of seeing the flag mistreated, of hearing the country abused, of there not being one hundred per cent support for the war effort. Everybody should support the President in wartime. And so forth.

Pundits interpret this sociologically. Frustration, rage—these natural human responses must not be overlooked, nor must similar clichés useless for understanding. There are too many potential explanations; so many in fact that the workers end by fighting under "God Bless the Establishment" for lack of a bullhorn that makes sense.

Too Facile for Logic

There are facts. Construction workers, policemen, guardsmen are finally reacting violently to student violence. The same division occurred in France when workingmen stood against students attempting to bring down the de Gaulle Government. The condition is not local, but international; the division is not between generations, but between classes.

Shall we leap at the logical conclusion? If proletarian (American workingman) takes boot and club to revolutionary aristocrat-intelligentsium (hirsute student), the status quo must prevail.

It is too facile. When things become really bad—in a society, or a family—the logical development seldom is.

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