

Meet the New Boss: “The Establishment” in 1960s and 70s American Thought

by

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Abstract

Throughout the 1960s and early 70s the phrase “the Establishment” gained salience in American political and popular discourse. Referring to an unseen group of elites that had their hand in decision making, the phrase was wielded by both the political right and left. “The Establishment” permeated society in such a way that by the end of the 1970s the term was a common part of the vernacular. This thesis argues that the term “the Establishment,” gained prominence because of its overall utility during the considerable political and social change that occurred during the period.

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Introduction

In the late 1960s and early 70s, many Americans railed against "the Establishment" as a source of political, military, and economic power that functioned to control them and pursued aims that were not in their interests. As progressives fought for more considerable change with fears of slowing momentum, there was a shift in rhetoric to focus on the significant obstacles to progress. In a climate in which civil rights activists, student and antiwar protestors, hippies, and others actively fought against the perceived "Establishment," the idea of some powerful elite who acted against the wishes of the majority would be marshaled by conservatives as well. Perhaps ironically these parties who would act in opposition to one another would wage war against a similarly perceived enemy. This would come on a major national stage and in his acceptance speech at the 1968 Republican National Convention, Richard Milhous Nixon drew attention to what he called the "'forgotten' majority of Americans, 'good,... decent people,' who worked and saved, paid taxes, weren't racists, and were 'not guilty of the crime that plague[d] the land.'"¹ Reorienting the progressives' rhetoric, Nixon laid claim to a different, but related, sort of anti-Establishmentarianism: the revolt of decent, ordinary Americans against the rule of the Democratic elite.

What fueled this kind of rhetoric? Why did "the Establishment" become such a universal target of derision in this period? This thesis argues that in a time of tectonic political realignment and profound social change, Americans with different ideological bases found utility in the concept of "the Establishment," even when they didn't mean the same thing. This is also not to say that "the Establishment" is a material reality, but it is to say that the concept itself held power

¹ "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida | The American Presidency Project." Accessed November 22, 2022. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-miami>.

in the lives of people. Not only did it mean something to the populace and people in power, but it was wielded as a tool to unite groups, political or otherwise, around a common goal. A term that was popularized in the context of British politics in the 1950s, “the Establishment” took many forms and became a useful concept for a variety of political factions in the US. The New Left in the United States was able to mobilize this term as a way to describe those in power while also uniting the many causes that made up the movement. As a coalition of students, anti-war protesters, racial nationalists, and economic leftists, forged their path, they had to contend with the structures that inspired them to depart from the status quo in the first place.

Surprisingly, however, the New Left was not the only movement to mobilize the term. The concept was used by conservatives during the period as well to attack similar axes of power. While, privately, Richard Nixon was not shy about the groups he detested, he was able to turn the term on its head again during his presidency, using it to describe the intellectual elites and leftist students to unite his supporters against an enemy. With its increased political usage, “the Establishment” was used in popular cultural texts across the different forms of media during the period. By the 1970s, the word became a colloquial and popular term in the American lexicon, even inspiring phrases such as “anti-establishment” and “disestablishment.”

Pinning down the etymology of such a slippery term can like “the Establishment” can be tricky to navigate, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “the Establishment” as “a social group exercising power generally, or within a given field or institution, by virtue of its traditional superiority, and by the use esp. of tacit understandings and often a common mode of speech, and having as a general interest the maintenance of the status quo.”² While different factions adapted the term to their own rhetorical needs, this definition provides a baseline of reference for

² “Establishment, n.” In OED Online. Oxford University Press. Accessed November 8, 2022. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64536>.

understanding the concept. It assumes, however, that there is a singular “Establishment” that dictates and makes decisions. A genealogy of the term in the years between 1955 and 1979 reveals the evolution of a more complex definition.

The phrase “the Establishment” has a very long history. Tracing its roots to the 16th century Anglican Church in England, “the Establishment” was a shorthand to describe one of the most dominant power structures of the time. Though mostly used by religious institutions the phrase emerged in the popular vernacular in the early 20th century, this time being used by journalists, like Henry Fairlie, to describe the powerful members of the aristocracy and government.³ The British origin of the concept is important because it demonstrates how central social hierarchy and class identity were to “the Establishment’s” meaning. The rigid class distinctions of British society were potent obstacles to social mobility, placing limitations on the possibilities for individual achievement and advancement. In the United States, class has worked more abstractly owing to the egalitarian ethos of American democracy. Class is important, yes, but the perception of class in the eyes of Americans is what gives power to “the Establishment.” With the expansion of the middle class in the early 20th century—and again in the post-World War II years—most midcentury Americans came to define themselves as either working or middle-class.⁴ The anti-elite attitudes would be apparent in the grand social upheaval that was occurring throughout society. While the salience of class identity was less powerful in the American context, the British connotations of a more rigid class divide and accompanying

³ Fahlenbrach, K., M. Klimke, J. Scharloth, and L. Wong. *The Establishment Responds: Power, Politics, and Protest Since 1945*. New York, UNITED STATES: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2012, p. 3

⁴ Bird, Robert, and Frank Newport. “What Determines How Americans Perceive Their Social Class?” Gallup.com, February 27, 2017. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/204497/determines-americans-perceive-social-class.aspx>.

wealth disparities would stay with the phrase in the postwar United States, becoming central to its core meaning.

“The Establishment” entered the consciousness of midcentury Americans as the result of a May 1962 *Esquire* article by journalist Richard Rovere entitled “The American Establishment.” Throughout the article, Rovere identifies parts of “the Establishment” and its overall grasp on American society. In the opening paragraph he bluntly wrote, “there is an Establishment in America.” It was, he declared, “a more or less closed and self-sustaining institution that holds a preponderance of power in our more or less open society.” His 1962 article made it clear to Americans that their growing discontent with the institutions in their lives was valid and that perhaps there was a common enemy to point their anger towards. That antagonist to people around the country would finally have a name that would quickly spread over the next decade: “the Establishment.” And with Rovere’s biting descriptions, it became clear to the public that members of “the Establishment” had influence in many important facets of their lives like finance, politics, and even in their religion.

Few scholars have tried to trace a genealogy of the term itself, instead mobilizing it as a conceptual tool in their own historical analyses. Many scholars have focused solely on the relationship between protest and the “Establishment” powers in play. For example, scholars Fahlenbrach, Klimke, Scharloth, and Wong’s, *The Establishment Responds: Power, Politics, and Protest Since 1945* pits protest movements at odds with governmental and other focused powers. This textbook is an organized collection of text about social movements in postwar America and throughout Europe centered around the concept. They posit, that as a way to exert power, in large part many of the governmental responses around the world during the early Cold War

period were actions based on a crackdown against popular protest movements.⁵ They pose the protestors as diametrically opposed to the elites in government.

This paper approaches the concept of “the Establishment,” by examining its uses in American rhetoric. First, I explore the political conditions that enabled the term’s revival in midcentury America and examine the splintering of the Liberal-Left coalition as well as the backlash against far-reaching liberal programs. Next, I explore the history and ideology of the New Left. The third section of the paper will take a critical look at the political Right and their use of the concept as a way to seize the political high ground from the fractured Democratic Party. Finally, I move away from the realm of high politics to explore the cultural life of “the Establishment” and antithetical terms that emerged before providing some thoughts on the concept’s relationship with the present.

The Political Context for “the Establishment”

For the party that had become so dominant over the thirty-year period since the New Deal, fragmentation amongst the Democrats was more than apparent by 1968. In their 1967 book *The Republican Establishment*, journalists Stephen Hess and David Broder recognized the unique opportunity that the Republican party had going into the 1968 election because of that fragmentation. They expressed this by saying “the ‘Roosevelt Coalition’ that had made the Democrats the majority party for most of four decades were in conflict with each other.”⁶ To Hess and Broder, the Democrats faced a series of conflicts within their own messaging and party members. The South and many in the industrial Midwest became weary with calls for integration and with the emergence of George Wallace as an outsider candidate, they did not feel tied to the

⁵ Fahlenbrach, K., M. Klimke, J. Scharloth, and L. Wong. *The Establishment Responds*. p. 3

⁶ Hess, Stephen. *The Republican Establishment; the Present and Future of the G.O.P.* [1st ed.]. New York: Harper & Row, 1967. p. 10

party. The white ethnic working class also became uncomfortable with the position of Black Americans in the workplace. All of these factors, combined with the war in Vietnam, led to a sense of liberalism that was quite different from a generation prior. Writing in Gerstle and Fraser's *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, sociologist Jonathan Rieder had this to say about the state of liberalism in the 1960s, "(l)iberalism appeared to [white, ethnic middle class] as a force inimical to the working and lower-middle classes, assaulting their communities, their sense of fairness, their livelihood, their children, their physical safety, their values."⁷ While, yes, not all Democrats were liberals, the party leaders like President Lyndon B. Johnson represented liberalism to many Americans. This section will explore some of the ways that this manifested in the realignment of the period. In terms of "the Establishment," this section constitutes the fractures among the Democrats that gave saliency to the concept.

As seen in the quote from Rieder, liberalism by the mid to late 1960s was fracturing in many different places, though at the start of the decade these fractures weren't as defined. The quest for civil rights by Black Americans was anything but easy. Following a critical decade of pressure placed upon liberals in Congress, the Civil Rights Movement achieved two major pieces of legislation in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act and in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act. These major pieces of legislation finally brought to Black Americans some of what was promised to them during Reconstruction. However, they did not come without backlash from white people throughout the country. The backlash came from segregationists, of course, but also as a result of members in the white working class who feared that they would lose jobs to black workers,

⁷ Fraser, Steve, and Gary Gerstle. *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989. p. 257-8

along with some in the North.⁸ This inspired some ire against the liberal agenda, but President Johnson's Great Society programs would further define this cleavage.

At the start, the Great Society policies enacted by the Johnson administration were a genuine attempt to bring Americans - black and white - out of poverty. Along with a Democratic Congress, President Johnson's main domestic spending plan during his first full term in the White House was the creation and expansion of social welfare programs, including food stamps, Medicare, Medicaid, and the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).⁹ While many of these programs were utilized regularly by poor Americans, they also were far-reaching and cost a considerable amount of money. It also increased the size of the governmental bureaucracy. For opponents, these programs drew ire and provided them with targets to attack in their quests for political gain. It was not just political opponents that were displeased with the expansion of the programs. According to historian David Farber, "(m)any poor African-Americans in America's largest cities were becoming angry. They believed the immense successes of the [Civil Rights] Movement in fighting Jim Crow laws and enfranchising black people to be irrelevant to their lives in Northern cities. The War on Poverty, they felt, did nothing to provide them with real opportunities or better lives."¹⁰ As such, these policies isolated many white, working Americans that saw the programs and felt that for the cost, they were overreaching. With the rising costs of the war in Vietnam, this severely damaged the Democrats ability to appeal to the working class.

The bloody conflict in Vietnam was so far reaching that it could not be ignored by Americans. However, in 1964 the conflict in Vietnam was only a minor issue to most Americans, focused more on domestic issues of race. Though in August of that year, two American

⁸ Glickman, Lawrence. "How White Backlash Controls American Progress." *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/white-backlash-nothing-new/611914/>.

⁹ Farber. *The Age of Great Dreams*. 1994. p. 108-110

¹⁰ Farber. *The Age of Great Dreams*. 1994. p. 110

destroyers claimed that they were under fire from North Vietnamese torpedoes in the Gulf of Tonkin. In turn, a retaliatory strike was conducted by American air forces in the North.¹¹ What followed was the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that passed almost unanimously in the US Senate. This allowed the President to take any measures to “prevent further aggression,” which meant he controlled the further escalation of the war.¹² It would be in April of 1965 that the first national anti-war protest took place in an attempt to bring public awareness to what was going on and to change the public’s perspective.¹³

By 1967, amidst greater escalation the anti-war sentiment had made its way into the traditional Democratic Party, with a movement to “Dump Johnson” and Senator Eugene McCarthy declaring that he would become an anti-war challenger to the presidency.¹⁴ Only a year later, the Tet Offensive¹⁵ shifted the perspective of the public to one that was not so staunchly defensive of the war. After years of being told that victory was just around the corner, American families saw on television what the battlefield truly looked like and that perhaps this war was not in their best interests. With that, the political assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy brought a sense of violence directly home to Americans.¹⁶

Incumbent President Lyndon B. Johnson decided not to run in 1968 as a result of the ever-escalating war in Vietnam and the social backlash. This forced the Democrats to find a candidate that could re-unite their party amidst the social tumult and the various social cleavages

¹¹ Farber. *The Age of Great Dreams*. 1994. p. 136-7

¹² Ibid. p. 136-7

¹³ Ibid. p. 138

¹⁴ Gosse. *Rethinking the New Left*. p. 94

¹⁵ “Milestones: 1961–1968 - Office of the Historian.” Accessed November 22, 2022.

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/tet>.

The Tet Offensive was launched during the Tet holiday in January and February of 1968. It amassed thousands of casualties on both sides, with the United States and South Vietnamese forces being victorious militarily. However, the largely publicized event left many Americans unsettled and is considered by many to be the turning point in the war.

¹⁶ Gosse. *Rethinking the New Left*. p. 95

that had become apparent in the years prior. The party's best option would come in the form of Robert F. Kennedy in his quest to forge a new coalition of voters that worked across both class and racial divides.¹⁷ The main issue with Kennedy's candidacy was that the well-established partner of the Democrats - organized labor – did not like his support of the student movement and their anti-labor tendencies.¹⁸ With Kennedy's assassination in 1968, the baton ultimately fell to Hubert Humphrey to carry the party to victory in an unfavorable election. Making matters worse for the party, the former Vice President Humphrey gained the nomination at the infamous 1968 Democratic National Convention (DNC), where hundreds of protestors were assaulted by the city's police.¹⁹ The Democratic party was fractured as the long stable liberal consensus was under attack from all directions. In this grand social upheaval and with this considerable political shifting "the Establishment" would blossom as a concept and phrase for the growing movements that sought to gain power for themselves: the New Left and the resurging Right.

"The Establishment" and the New Left

One of the most integral texts in understanding the New Left and its ideological formation is C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite*. Published in 1957, Mills' work was a concerted effort to break down the power structures that seemingly dictated life for Americans. A central concept for Mills was what he called the "power elite". They were those in power in every facet of life - from the government to the military to those with considerable wealth and most importantly power - and they were all connected.²⁰ It is crucial that Mills formed a concept and phrase to dictate to his readers the power structures that pervaded their lives because it awoke a

¹⁷ Cowie, Jefferson R. *Stayin Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. Illustrated edition. New York, NY: The New Press, 2012. p. 75-83

¹⁸ Cowie. *Stayin Alive*. 2012. p. 80-3

¹⁹ Waxman, Olivia B. "Inside 1968's Chicago Democratic National Convention Protest | Time." Accessed November 22, 2022. <https://time.com/5377386/1968-democratic-national-convention-protesters/>.

²⁰ Mills, C. Wright. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 10.

certain consciousness. As Mills describes, the United States was not built upon an established ruling class, but rather over the years with little opposition, a set of elites were cultivated and continuously replanted through their own building of “prestige.”²¹ Over time, the power of those elites’ became a critical force in society and as such, a certain resistance was born. The spirit of resistance would be a crucial pillar that would hold up the New Left and the attraction to their cause.

Mills acknowledged the flexibility of “the Establishment” as a phrase. Writing about the rhetoric of elites in society, Mills observed that “(w)ithin the nation, the use of such rhetoric is rather more complicated: when men speak of the power of their own party or circle, they and their leaders are, of course, impotent; only ‘the people’ are omnipotent. But, when they speak of the power of their opponent’s party or circle, they impute to them omnipotence; ‘the people’ are now powerlessly taken in.”²² For Mills, those in power use a type of ‘us vs. them’ mentality to justify their actions and decisions. The rhetoric they espouse criticizes their opponents without directly colliding with them head on. As such, elites themselves are never a part of “the Establishment” because that term is only reserved for their enemies. It can be simpler and more effective for the cause to attack the unseen “Establishment” than it is to break down the issues with another group.

Building upon the work of Mills and others with its roots in the movement of global consciousness, the New Left emerged as a considerable force for activism in the 1960s. It represented a shedding of the traditional New Deal economic coalition of liberals and the stepping out of a youth movement that would propel many left-wing policies to the forefront of American society. From its inception, the movement was one of a hopeful resistance to the

²¹ Mills. *The Power Elite*. p. 10, 13

²² *Ibid.* p. 17

inequities imposed by the people and groups that held power.²³ When tracing the story of “the Establishment” in American thought, it makes sense to look at the rise of the New Left and the driving factors behind their usage of the concept. To do this, I will examine three critical parts of the New Left and how they contributed to the “anti-establishment” rhetoric of the period. First will be the Civil Rights Movement and its methods for protest, followed by a discussion on the student movement, and finally the overwhelming weight of the war in Vietnam along with the anti-war movement that accompanied it.

Radicals on the left leveled other pointed attacks at the idea of elites in society. Saul Alinsky, a radical political theorist and influential leftist thinker said, “(t)he establishment in many ways is as suicidal as some of the far left, except that they are infinitely more destructive than the far left can ever be.”²⁴ He understood the unconventional ways of those new leftists and their ideals, but he also recognized the power in “the Establishment.” It held true weight and the members of “the Establishment” had a real ability to make consequential decisions. Alinsky advocated that radicals make their mark through the inside of the system before they could do anything else.²⁵ It would be on this ground that the leftists staked their claims and made their arguments about the established system in front of them. To truly attack “the Establishment,” it would have had to be done from the inside. As such, these new leftists brought with them a sense of protest and a certain willingness to work outside of the bounds and constraints of society.

Central to the rise of the New Left was Black Freedom Struggle and the civil rights campaigns of the late 1950s and early 1960s. On the surface, the Civil Rights Movement inspired

²³ Lynd, Staughton. “The New Left.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 382 (1969): 64–72.

²⁴ Alinsky, Saul D. *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1971. p. xv

²⁵ Alinsky. *Rules for Radicals*. p. xx-xxi

changes to society that would re-shape the United States and shift the public's notion of race. But, to social activists across the country, it also provided a sort of blueprint for how to protest.²⁶ By having to work outside the already established systems, Black Americans knew what it meant to use different avenues for change that would aid the New Left in its goals for enacting social reforms. Under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Black Americans worked to protest in unique ways, by utilizing the non-violent techniques of Ghandi.²⁷ This struggle represented a clear divide between the established axes of power in the United States and the desires of the largest minority group in the country.

This divide would be made clear with the events that transpired at the 1964 DNC. Leading up to the convention and as a part of the Freedom Summer of 1964,²⁸ the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was formed. The MFDP was created in response to the state's Democratic Party sending an all-white delegation to the 1964 DNC and the inability of Black Mississippians to participate in the state's Democratic party meetings.²⁹ After trying unsuccessfully to replace the all-white delegation, the MFDP angled their appeals at President Johnson. However, he was afraid of losing votes in the South if the delegation was replaced, so instead he tried his hand at a compromise which would allow the MFDP to have two seats at the

²⁶ Gosse, Van. *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 20-22

²⁷ Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. "Nonviolent Philosophy and Self Defense | Articles and Essays | Civil Rights History Project | Digital Collections | Library of Congress." Web page. Accessed April 9, 2023. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/nonviolent-philosophy-and-self-defense/>.

²⁸ SNCC Digital Gateway. "Freedom Summer." Accessed February 27, 2023. <https://snccdigital.org/events/freedom-summer/>.

The Freedom Summer of 1964 was a mass mobilization of thousands of people to the Southern United States to register millions of black Americans for the first time. The plan was a success as it not only helped to register new black voters, but it also gained national media recognition that began to put pressure on Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act, which would successfully pass in 1965.

²⁹ Farber, David. *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*. 1st ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1994. p. 94-5

convention, the all-white delegation would support Democrats in the next election, and it would get rid of segregated delegations for the 1968 convention.³⁰ These compromises were far too shallow for the MFDP as they were little more than a consolation prize. The MFDP delegates still attended the convention by borrowing passes from others.³¹

This saga proved the limits that some within the Democratic party had when it came to their commitment to the Civil Rights Movement. President Johnson was put in a difficult position by the MFDP's desire to attend the convention instead of the all-white delegation because of the sweeping Civil Rights legislation that he worked so hard to get through Congress during his shortened first term in office. He could not risk upsetting the Southern base of support and his plans for his next term in office by allowing their idealism to hurt his positions at the convention.³² Johnson's maintenance of the status quo here was a calculated political move, but one that made him appear as an "establishment" man.

The New Left coalition brought other groups along with Black Americans together to try and work as a force for action in the latter half of the 1960s. Perhaps the most visible, was the student movement that began to make its way across college campuses nationwide. The seeds of the student movement were planted in the northern United States as the Civil Rights Movement began to blossom in the South.³³ These liberal students began working in concurrence with the demonstrations in the South all resulting in ideals of a collective consciousness. The students on campus were gaining a newfound autonomy rooted in their rebellion against the authorities that

³⁰ University of Stanford, and California 94305. "Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)." The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, June 2, 2017. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/mississippi-freedom-democratic-party-mfdp>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Farber. *The Age of Great Dreams*. 1994. p. 95

³³ Gosse. *Rethinking the New Left*. p. 64-5

had dictated their lives to that point.³⁴ As the college population ballooned during the postwar decades, the number of students on campuses studying radical thinkers grew too. These isolated academic bastions saw students organize together with their radical cohorts against racism and the ever-looming threat of nuclear war. Growing out of campuses like Berkeley, Madison, or Ann Arbor, these new leftists saw themselves as distinct from liberals in that they were using politics to try and achieve a more moral society, while direct action was the right tactic to “achieve justice.”³⁵ Importantly, they wanted to distance the country from the Cold War that had dictated a good portion of governmental policy in their lives. The group that would lead these young people would be the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

The ideology of these students came through in 1962 in the form of the Port Huron Statement, that was drafted by prominent SDS member, Tom Hayden. The Port Huron Statement called out the elites in society that had taken over the major institutions for isolating the average citizen from their community.³⁶ Instead, they fought for a “participatory democracy” in which individual members of society mattered in their community actions.³⁷ This is critical for understanding the student movement and in concurrence, the New Left’s ideology. Their desire for individual action would, in theory, take power away from elites and instead return it to the people. This type of language lent credence to the concept of an “establishment” in society that made up the bloat of the educational bureaucracy or the government structures. Some of these students connected with the thousands of the Black Americans in the South by aiding in the voter registration drives during the Freedom Summer. An issue for Black students within the

³⁴ Weiner, Rex. *Woodstock Census: The Nationwide Survey of the Sixties Generation*. New York: Viking Press, 1979. p. 34

³⁵ Matusow, Allen J. *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2009. p. 310

³⁶ Students for a Democratic Society. “The Port Huron Statement,” 1962.
<https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/27-the-sixties/the-port-huron-statement-1962/>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

movement was that with the fracturing of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, the focus of protests began to shift away from racial justice towards other issues. With the escalation of the US War in Vietnam, the movement turned away from the liberal “Establishment”, towards the military industrial complex.

While movements of early feminism and gay rights emerged alongside the student and Civil Rights movements, it was the rise of an anti-war consciousness that truly showed Americans what the New Left looked like. In what was a largely polarizing movement, the anti-war movement was centered around bucking the traditional military establishment and directly challenging the government’s will. While the movement would spread beyond college campuses throughout the 1960s, it remained an extremely unpopular endeavor as a vast majority of Americans were committed to a sense of patriotism for the armed forces.³⁸ With Johnson’s escalation of the war in 1964, student radicals throughout the country began to protest, yet there was no central agenda to follow, and their actions proved to be unpopular.

The crux of the issue as the anti-war movement spread throughout campuses around the country was how radical should the solutions be? Leaders on the New Left debated and pondered this question heavily. The SDS took the radical stance of demanding a unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam and centered much of their language around the morality of the war.³⁹ On the other hand, the Committee to End the War in Vietnam (CEWV) also showed commitment to removing forces from Vietnam, but they took a less radical stance. They were willing to accept a stopping of the escalation of troops and attacks.⁴⁰ Interestingly enough, the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP), took a less radical approach to their anti-war positions essentially taking

³⁸ Gosse. *Rethinking the New Left*. p. 90-2

³⁹ Rossinow, Douglas C. *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America*. Columbia Studies in Contemporary American History. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. p. 214-6

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 216

the same position as the CEWV in an attempt to create a broader coalition of supporters. To many New Leftists, this was a betrayal of sorts as it meant to them that there was at the very least tacit support for the war as it was in 1965.⁴¹ The SDS was also concerned with the role that defense research contracts played in supporting the war in Vietnam. During this period, the Department of Defense (DoD) gave universities contracts in which they conducted research and development for weapon systems.⁴² Their universities were upholding the military industrial complex, rooting another wedge between student radicals and the institutions in their lives. The issue for the New Left was that by entering the anti-war movement, they had staked their survival on the war. This aided in their growth as a political movement, but it also grew out of control to have a central set of messaging.⁴³

“The Establishment” and the Right’s Resurgence

August 8th, 1968 was a typical muggy day in the Florida sunshine and there was a buzz on the streets of Miami, louder than usual. Delegates from across the country were gathering to cast their ballots for the Presidential nominee at the Republican National Convention (RNC). The tensions in the country were high following three years of escalation in Vietnam and the assassinations of political leaders at home. This tumult caused incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson to step aside after one term. The fervor threatened to incite a country that was all but bursting at the seams with revolutionary energy. Unlike their Democratic counterparts whose convention the next month would descend into mayhem, the Republican convention was smooth sailing. Republicans chose a Presidential candidate who was a familiar face to most Americans, Richard Nixon. United with Spiro Agnew, Nixon had redesigned himself as a new candidate, one

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 217

⁴² Ibid. p. 219

⁴³ Ibid. p. 246

removed from the failures of his first presidential bid in 1960 and his run for California governor in 1962. By capitalizing on the social cleavages that had become more defined amongst Americans during the Civil Rights Movement and with the war in Vietnam, Nixon was ready to accept the nomination as the candidate who could speak for “average Americans.” In his acceptance speech, Nixon began his assault on the established powers within the United States government and he accelerated the transformation of the Republican party into a viable option against the Democratic successes of years past. An option not for New Leftists, of course, but rather an option for the Americans that were uncomfortable with the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-poverty policies of the Johnson administration. The speech painted America in ruins and turmoil, transferring the energy of the war in Vietnam to the home front, with a finger pointed directly at the Democratic Party that had held power for the past 8 years. Nixon identified every day, working-class Americans the heroes who struggled against the destruction of the country. By aligning the Republican agenda with the masses of the public, Nixon set up an ideological battle between the Democratic Party and the average American. No longer could white, working-class voters be so sure that they were Democrats.

To understand Nixon’s relationship to “the Establishment” during his presidency, we must look at some of the key events in his intellectual development. Nixon was born to parents that were grocers in Yorba Linda, California and soon moved with them to a Quaker community in Whittier. Even as a young man, Nixon’s sense of exclusion was being cultivated. At Whittier College, he formed a group known as the Orthogonians as a response to being left out of the student body’s traditional fraternal group that held ‘power’, the Franklins.⁴⁴ A key point can be drawn from this part of Nixon’s life, one that is noted by Rick Perlstein in his book *Nixonland*. It

⁴⁴ Perlstein, Rick. *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*. 1st Scribner hardcover ed. New York: Scribner, 2008. p. 22-3

is that the Franklins were never necessarily that powerful, but rather their perceived power was drawn from the victimization of the Orthogonians.⁴⁵ With that, it can be difficult to not see the parallels to his rhetorical strategy during his presidency. For law school, Nixon would attend the non-prestigious Duke, which led to his rejections at many Wall Street law firms.⁴⁶ Another crucial aspect of Nixon's career before public service was his entrance into the Navy in 1943. Unlike the military elites, he did not attend the Naval Academy or go to West Point.

After grueling his way to a Senate seat, Nixon joined Eisenhower's ticket and became Vice President in 1953. He narrowly avoided disaster during the campaign with his "Checkers Speech," which drew the ire of liberals throughout the country but endeared him to the average American.⁴⁷ The speech was in response to an article that was written about campaign funds he received for travel. While not illegal, the secret fund created a public outcry which led Nixon to give the speech. What made the speech special, was that he endeared many members of the public to him as a politician and the Republican party overall.⁴⁸ Nixon positioned himself in the speech as a regular American - with bills to pay and a family to support - that came under attack from the liberal media. Each of these events in Nixon's early life and career, helped to forge his outsider perspective against a powerful liberal "Establishment."

Nixon's rhetorical strategy shift would prove to be crucial to Republican party successes in the years that would follow. Nixon's perception of himself as an outsider would be the major driver in his actions throughout his political career.⁴⁹ He waged political wars with the liberal elites in the Northeast and even lost his first presidential bid to perhaps the most famous of all,

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 23

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 23

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 40-3

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 38-43

⁴⁹ Schulman, Bruce. "Down to the Nut-Cutting." In *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, 23-52. De Capo, 2001. p. 23-25

John F. Kennedy. To Nixon, the Kennedy's epitomized "the Establishment," yet outside of the family's wealth, they were Catholics, which placed them outside of the WASPs that typified the liberal elite. It was in Nixon's presidency, however, that his words and actions pointed to a direct distaste for the liberal Establishment and Great Society Democrats. In a December 1972 tape from his secret recordings, Nixon said to advisors, "(n)ever forget, the press is the enemy. The establishment is the enemy, the professors are the enemy."⁵⁰ This quote is indicative of Nixon's convictions and perspective as he had just won the 1972 election in a landslide at the time this was recorded, yet there was still a fire in which he still felt the need to rail against an "establishment."

In what is perhaps a bit of historical irony, both Nixon and his New Left counterparts centered their ideals upon taking down the dominant, old Democratic party. Whereas the New Left was aiming to transform it, Nixon was seeking to condemn the radicals publicly while maneuvering politically to take down the old guard of Democrats electorally. This line would, of course, be crossed with the Watergate break-in and subsequent attempt to cover it up. However, those close to Nixon, like political strategist Pat Buchanan, would use the concept of the Establishment when referring to the era. Buchanan went so far as to say that following Nixon's "Silent Majority Speech" the "liberal establishment had sustained a historic defeat."⁵¹ In Buchanan's eyes, this was such a blow to what was considered the "Establishment" because it was an ultimate declaration by Nixon that there was a greater coalition of everyday Americans than those members of the liberal elites he opposed.

⁵⁰ Glaister, Dan. "Tricky Dicky: Nixon Recordings Confirm Popular View." *The Guardian*, December 4, 2008, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/dec/04/richard-nixon-recordings>.

⁵¹ Buchanan, Pat. "50 Years Ago: The Day Nixon Routed the Establishment." *Minotdailynews.Com* (blog), November 7, 2019. <https://www.minotdailynews.com/opinion/national-columnists/2019/11/50-years-ago-the-day-nixon-routed-the-establishment/>.

A considerable portion of Nixon's shift in rhetorical strategy was an attempt to forge a new relationship with organized labor, the long-time partners of the Democratic party. Though labor seemed like an unlikely supporter of a Republican president, Nixon and those in his circle wanted to capitalize on the struggles of the Democrats to find a candidate that would adequately appease the labor bosses in the 1972 election.⁵² There was however a strategic problem for the president and his men in that they had to decide if it was best to court the bosses or the rank-and-file workers. As the administration worked out their next plan of action, Nixon made a crucial step in appealing to the working class, by emphasizing the social divisions between labor and the educated. He wooed labor leaders with extravagant dinners and public shows of support, while he spent his public appearances ratcheting up the pressure on the cultural aspects of the white working class.⁵³ Even after he was publicly snubbed at the AFL-CIO convention in 1971, he still made massive inroads in the white industrial sections of the Midwest and cultivated a strong base of non-union Southern support that ultimately propelled him to a landslide victory in 1972. Charles Colson, an advisor and Special Counsel to the president said after the election that "Christmas time at the White House, 1972, signified the changing of power from the citadels of the Ivy League, the Wall Street law firms and the mass media complex, to Main Street USA."⁵⁴ Those within the administration felt that this signified to the public that their administration was truly about the working people, even though labor support for Republicans would largely diminish with the scandals that racked Nixon's second term.

Beyond the Nixon Administration, there were radical conservatives who would champion the "Establishment" as a major enemy of their cause as well. These groups only built on the

⁵² Cowie. *Stayin Alive*. 2012. p. 75-124

⁵³ *Ibid*. p. 125-167

⁵⁴ *Ibid*. p. 162

socially conservative ideals of the national and mainstream Republican party but put an increased importance on commitment to those notions. For example, in an August 1969 pamphlet from a now defunct publication called *Defenders of the USA Republic*, a guest writer calls out members of the touchstone conservative publication, *Human Events*, for being members of the “establishment.”⁵⁵ The writer was so concerned about the “powers” of the Establishment that they believed another conservative publication was working for their very enemy. This fear is what stoked the flame of such a concept.

To conclude this section on conservatism and “the Establishment,” it feels important to look at journalist, Godfrey Hodgson’s 1973 article entitled, “The Establishment.” In the article, he deciphered what the American foreign policy “establishment” looked like. Perhaps more importantly, Hodgson pointed out key parts for what made “the establishment” what it was. Members of “the establishment” were not necessarily wealthy but came from good and old families. They had connections to either Wall Street, the international banking system, or Washington D.C. Crucially, he recognized the real implications these people had over policymaking.⁵⁶ Much of what Hodgson describes in the article provides credence to Nixon’s outsider status. He was not from an old WASP family, and he had no connections to insiders or higher ups in Washington or New York. He had to work differently than others and make critical strategic choices to win the Presidency. Perhaps, it was that drive and outsider mentality that drove his downfall as well.

“The Establishment” in Popular Culture

⁵⁵ McLaughlin, Mrs. John J. “Human Events Hoax.” *Defenders of the USA Republic*, September 1969. Box 45 Folder 11. Laird Wilcox Collection.

⁵⁶ Hodgson, Godfrey. “The Establishment.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 10 (1973): 3–40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1147778>.

Ideas of the Establishment would spring up in the popular culture of the period as well. The music of folk singers like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Phil Ochs amongst others had a clear disdain for those in power dictating the lives of everyday people. Like the student movement, folk artists did not always begin with radical messaging in their music. In describing the early sensibilities of Joan Baez and the movement as a whole, Margot Hentoff said this, “(in) the early Sixties the young were not asking for much. While it was becoming clear to them that the foundations of our establishments were not built on granite, it had not yet been widely accepted that the constructions were actually on slime.”⁵⁷ While there was a growth in consciousness to the fragility of the system, here she is using “Establishments” as a way to describe the institutions themselves. The tradition of folk music was that it directly came from the people and during the 60s and early 70s this meant a great deal to the seemingly radical young people throughout the country. With songs like “Masters of War” in 1963 from Bob Dylan, he called out the leaders and decision makers that dictated military conflicts. As seen in the lyrics of the verse:

You fasten the triggers
For the others to fire
Then you sit back and watch
When the death count gets higher
You hide in your mansion
As young people’s blood
Flows out of their bodies
And is buried in the mud⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Hentoff, Margot. “Notes from a Plague Year | Margot Hentoff,” November 7, 1968. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1968/11/07/notes-from-a-plague-year/>.

⁵⁸ Dylan, Bob. *Masters of War*, 1963. <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/masters-war-mono/>.

Dylan directly pointed his finger at the military Establishment that dictated the bloody war in Vietnam. Even more than that, he alluded to the unseen nature of the elites that he saw as dictating the parameters of war, they merely hid away in their mansions while the everyday person was sent away and killed. It is not just that average people are those going to war, but it is young people. The same types that were leading the major student protest movements throughout the country and those that were forging the New Left. Other artists like folk radical Barbara Dane frankly declared her hatred for the capitalist system in 1973 with an attack on the established economic system in the face of major American financial crisis.⁵⁹ As with Dylan, Dane directly juxtaposes the established elites with the average American merely trying to make ends meet. That strikes pointedly at the heart of a perceived Establishment. By arguing against the entirety of the system, she inherently is attacking what it means to be successful within that system.

The clear divide between the bubblegum pop of the 1950s and the revolutionary nature of rock and roll in the late 1960s did not go unnoticed. Artists were no longer expected to sing songs that were written for them, but rather they brought with them a lyrical sense of independence and rebellious vigor that directly was expressed in their music. Political Scientist James Harmon conducted a study that was published in 1972, analyzing the different music of period and he found that a considerable portion of the new music being produced contained “numerous references, direct and indirect, to an Establishment.”⁶⁰ He acknowledged the power that this messaging brought with it in terms of youth culture. Perhaps more importantly though, Harmon gave credence to “the Establishment’s” place in early 1970s America by saying,

⁵⁹ Dane, Barbara. *I Hate the Capitalist System*. <https://genius.com/Barbara-dane-i-hate-the-capitalist-system-lyrics>.

⁶⁰ Harmon, James E. “The New Music and Counter-Culture Values.” *Youth & Society* 4, no. 1 (September 1972): 61–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X7200400106>.

“(w)hen a regime is labelled fictive by a minority, or, as in youth lexicon, the Establishment is asserted to be the true source of social decision-making, then the question of legitimacy of power begins its inexorable erosion of the bonds of society.”⁶¹ He recognized that it mattered little if “the Establishment” existed as a physical entity, but rather if the people believed that it existed, then those in power had already lost. These findings are rooted in the popular music of the period which further lends to “the Establishment’s” role in youth culture because music is such a critical tool in conveying ideas to the public.

Movies of the era carried with them a certain “anti-establishment” attitude as well. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) not only gave new life to the old tales of the titular characters, but it also romanticized the rebellious and anti-authoritarian lifestyle of the infamous gangsters.⁶² In the film, the gang cheated, murdered, and robbed their way across the country with the backdrop of the Depression behind them, yet the story that was being told felt necessary for time or as the paramount reviewer, Roger Ebert put it, “(t)he fact that the story is set 35 years ago doesn't mean a thing. It had to be set sometime. But it was made now and it's about us.”⁶³ The setting and time were important, but it meant less to the overall rebellious impact of the film. Similarly, *M*A*S*H* (1970), railed against the perceived military elite too with its main characters using unorthodox methods to achieve successes. For example, Hawkeye and Duke, the outlandish surgeons, arrive in a stolen army Jeep, but prove throughout the film that they are quite capable as surgeons.⁶⁴ By posing the main characters as successful outsiders, the film bucks the traditional and makes heroes of the rebels, not the established systems in place. Thus, the idea of

⁶¹ Harmon. “The New Music and Counter-Culture Values.” p. 77

⁶² *Bonnie and Clyde*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1967.

⁶³ Ebert, Roger. “Bonnie and Clyde Movie Review (1967).” <https://www.rogerebert.com/>. Accessed February 13, 2023. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bonnie-and-clyde-1967>.

⁶⁴ *M*A*S*H*. 20th Century Fox, 1970.

the Establishment was consistently fluttering around the cultural and social conscious of the period as such.

The movies of the period were not just thematically aligned against “the Establishment,” but there was also a trend that sprouted up amongst filmmakers of the period. Young writers and directors throughout the country began to make films that pushed the boundaries of the long-established Hays Code.⁶⁵ This era of “New Hollywood” signified a true challenge to the many studios and executives that had long held the decision-making power. For the filmmakers of the period, it meant that they were able to wrestle creative control away from the Hollywood elites by pushing graphic and sexual boundaries. It also meant that cultural productions would no longer be grounded by limitations imposed by the Hollywood elite. Instead, young filmmakers could produce radical expressions that provided commentary on society. Directors like Arthur Penn or Mike Nichols, who came from outside Hollywood, produced some of the most significant pieces of cinema in film history.

“The Establishment’s” Antithesis

Not only was the presence of “the Establishment” noted during this tumultuous period, but terms associated with the phrase took commonplace in the vernacular. “Anti-establishmentarianism” began to describe the ideology expressed by people who disliked or distrusted what they saw as “the Establishment.” To those young people who saw themselves as leftists, this way of thinking was expressed by protesting in student movements on campuses or by simply railing against the ideas of their parents’ generation. Within the right, “anti-establishmentarianism” became a calling card for those in Nixon’s “silent majority,” the average

⁶⁵ The Hays Code was a self-imposed set of standards for what was acceptable to show on screen in film. The code was used from 1934-1968.

Americans not driven to radical changes, but rather those who believed themselves to be unseen promoters of change.

By the late 1970s, this term was used throughout the country and in different disciplines. In a February 1978 edition of *The English Journal*, Don Nilsen wrote “Doublespeak: Graffiti vs Doublespeak: The Anti-Establishment Strikes Back.” This brief article is a rhetorical analysis of the ever-evolving phraseology that was used in protests, propaganda, and official writings. Nilsen is distinctly critical of the misleading usages of rhetoric which he deems “doublespeak.” He looks at phrases that are directed at exposing “mushy establishment thinking” and “misleading language in general.”⁶⁶ Also, in a different journal article from 1978, Professor James P. Johnson wrote an essay entitled “Turn Your Anti-Establishment Students into Thoughtful Critics.” The piece is brief and to the point, but it centers around how teachers could use the anger in which young people had towards the established systems of their lives and hone that into effective teaching lessons.⁶⁷ The content of these articles matters little, but rather, their acknowledgement of this line of thinking alludes to the fact that the concept of an “Establishment” was real in the lives of young people by the late 70s. The “anti-Establishment” way of thinking did not dissipate with time as the phrase did, but rather became an understood term within the lexicon. Also used by Colonel Raymond Shreckengost in an article from 1972 about technology and its relation to “the Establishment.”⁶⁸ He discusses that in moving forward “the Establishment,” would have a difficult time pushing back against evolving ideas and new ways of thinking. His argument stems from the fact that technological changes force

⁶⁶ Nilsen, Don L. F. “Doublespeak: Graffiti vs Doublespeak: The Anti-Establishment Strikes Back.” *The English Journal* 67, no. 2 (1978): 20–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/814990>.

⁶⁷ Johnson, James P. “Turn Your Anti-Establishment Students into Thoughtful Critics.” *The Social Studies* 69, no. 4 (August 1, 1978): 156–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.1978.9957403>.

⁶⁸ Shreckengost, Raymond C. “Technology and the Establishment.” *Naval War College Review* 24, no. 7 (1972): 16–32.

organizational change, which in turn, grant new voices an opportunity to be heard.⁶⁹ The dominance of “the Establishment” is predicated on the successes of the status quo and its ultimate continuation, so if people can expose noticeable change, then those at the top eventually have to listen or their power will cease to continue.

Conclusion

In 1978, Rovere claimed that there was no real “Establishment,” and that his 1962 article was more of an exaggeration of the truth. While this claim that it never existed came too little too late, the meaning of the phrase evolved drastically from its introduction almost 20 years prior. It is not that the prevalence of “the Establishment” as a concept during this period was a stagnant blip in its historical rhetoric, but rather that its power seemed to pervade a considerable deal of society for this time. Though it became popular in 1962, the phrase “the Establishment” itself became so prominent in the American language that it had little to no novelty by the late 1970s. Not only had it been used by those on the New Left, but then by those on the right causing it to pervade society in a major way for almost two decades. While it spawned quite a few antithetical terms, these too quickly faded into the background of the American vernacular. This also does not assume that other ways of describing “the Establishment” were not used during the period, but rather it was a recognizable term for a universal concept to the public. The tensions of the 60s did not cause these anti-elite feelings to dissipate into the 70s, or even 80s, but perhaps the revolutionary fervor made it less visible to the average observer. The concept would continue beyond the tumult of the late 60s and early 70s even outlasting the Cold War. The idea that was once called “the Establishment,” has taken up many new names in the last 50 years from the “deep state” to “the System” to what President Donald Trump simply referred to as “the swamp.”

⁶⁹ Shreckengost. “Technology and the Establishment.” 1972. p. 16

The parallels of President Trump’s rhetorical strategy to that of the Nixon Administration cannot be overlooked when delineating the ubiquity of the concept of “the Establishment.” When considering the launch of his first presidential campaign in 2016, Trump was influenced by the Nixon administration’s ability to cultivate a base of support using populist tactics. By consistently repeating messages of returning the country to law and order or by promising to “drain the swamp,” Trump echoed Nixon’s hope for law and order in 1968 amid anti-war protests.⁷⁰ Both of their uses of the phrase “silent majority,” made it easier for the public to feel they were not alone in their anger. However, their shared perception of themselves as outsiders is what lent their attacks against the liberal elites so much success. The ubiquity of the concept can only be classified as a confirmation of the American distrust of elites and the perceived egalitarianism by the public. When hard times hit, economic or otherwise, it can be easier to point towards the perceived power than it is for a political group to cede ground by admitting failures.

⁷⁰ McArdle, Terence. “The ‘law and Order’ Campaign That Won Richard Nixon the White House 50 Years Ago.” Washington Post, November 5, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2018/11/05/law-order-campaign-that-won-richard-nixon-white-house-years-ago/>.

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