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“HOW ABOUT THE TARIFF AND HOMESTEAD?”

HOMESTEAD, TARIFF RHETORIC, AND WAGE INSECURITY IN 1892

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“How About the Tariff and Homestead?” Homestead, Tariff Rhetoric, and Federal Powerlessness in 1892

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Abstract Content:

Members of Congress appropriated the 1892 labor conflict at Homestead, Pennsylvania as a point of partisan rhetorical debate over the ills or benefits of the 1890 McKinley Tariff. This appropriation demonstrated how congress found the tariff in general useful not only for engaging public concerns over industrial era woes like wage insecurity, but also for deflecting public discussion away from an underlying federal helplessness to mitigate those same detrimental effects of industrial capitalism.

“How About the Tariff and Homestead?”

Homestead, Tariff Rhetoric, and Wage Insecurity in 1892

Introduction

In early July 1892 by the side of the Monongahela River, the workers at one of Andrew Carnegie’s Pennsylvania steel mills gathered firearms and took cover in the sand behind huge piles of metal beams they themselves had forged. There, they repelled two barges of some 300 armed Pinkerton troops that arrived to secure the plant against the massive patrol of striking workers. After a lengthy attempted siege, nearly the entire force of Pinkertons surrendered and gave themselves up to a force of angry townsfolk numbering in the thousands. The townsfolk set the barges ablaze and marched their prisoners to makeshift detention. They formed a gauntlet which included women and children, spitting at the Pinkertons and beating them along the way. The final death toll for both forces showed ten men dead and many more wounded.¹ Bizarrely, much of the congressional debate about the bloody shootout centered around the various effects of tariff taxation.

In 1892 an exaggerated political debate about the effects of tariff rates upon the national labor crisis obscured a general federal refusal to reform worker rights, even as the bloody shootout at Homestead demonstrated that such a measure was sorely needed. Many of the federal legislators who attempted to address the incident twisted its narrative into a debate about its tariff implications. The tariff issue in 1892 had become a political tool for appropriating issues far beyond its practical explanatory scope. It remains for further studies to

¹ Peter Krauss, *The Battle for Homestead: 1880-1892: Politics, Culture and Steel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 3.

reveal how other issues from 1888 to 1892 might also have been obscured by the tariff emphasis. But apropos of labor strife the distracting nature of tariff rhetoric upon the Homestead episode was not an incidental but a useful effect for Congress. Federal legislators were largely unwilling to encroach upon the ownership rights of capitalists, a legislative direction necessary for deflating the underlying tensions behind the raging labor wars. At all levels of government the *de facto* policy on mitigating the labor strife which wracked the country was to support or enact the physical policing of laborers rather than reform the systems which gave rise to their grievances. But and this was not a stance federal legislators were prepared to emphasize in an election year. Recently wage workers had become the largest workforce in the country and were therefore an important electoral demographic. By altering the Homestead narrative to focus on the tariff— an issue which had very little implications for the strike and its ensuing violence— congressmen could avoid admitting their inability or unwillingness to reform the practical forces beneath the incident and focus instead on an unrelated political duel.

The Homestead conflict has been historically emblematic of a national backlash against “Pinkertonism,” the hire of private troops to sabotage unions and break up strikes.² Pinkertonism was indeed a primary feature of the Homestead incident. The Pinkerton Detective Agency hired contract workers from out of state to participate in the Homestead siege, and congressmen responding to the incident discussed the prospect of outlawing the practice based

² For classic studies on the Pinkerton National Detective Agency including its implication for the Homestead incident, see James D. Horan, *The Pinkertons: The Detective Dynasty that Made History* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1968). Frank Morn, *The Eye That Never Sleeps: A History of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982).

on their constitutional jurisdiction over interstate commerce. This proposed legislative prohibition became the basis of two congressional investigations that year. But while Congress shaped most of the jurisdictional justification for its investigations into Homestead around possible Pinkerton lawbreaking, much of the actual congressional debate of the incident centered around its implications for both parties' flagship tariff policies.

Unlike the anti-Pinkertonism angle, tariff rates were a terrible practical explanation for the events at Homestead. But Democrats on the attack in an election year found that tariff culpability made for perfect rhetorical logic. Both parties generally agreed that protectionism in its broad contours benefited the growth of iron and steel industries, whatever their assessment of its impact on American workers and the overall economy. Barely a month after the Republican election committee officially re-committed their party to President Harrison's reelection and a high-protection tariff plank, tariff arch-beneficiary Carnegie Steel Company had deliberately incited a strike at their Homestead steel mill by reducing wages, among other contract demands. The shootout that followed showed the nation exactly how un-beholden Carnegie Steel was to the Republican tariff largess. Republicans, the Democrats asserted, were rewarding the villains of the national industrial-capitalist stage.

It is difficult to convey exactly how heated the tariff debate had become in 1892. The tariff issue was part of a new national emphasis on "Dinner Pail" issues which eclipsed the "Bloody Shirt" of Civil War tensions.³ Since 1887, tariff rates—on the surface a seemingly boring subject for generating political enthusiasm— had in fact become the perfect political rhetorical

³ Charles C. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010).

mechanism for captivating the interest of a country reeling from the impacts of an ascendant industrial capitalism. As a result of this phenomenon, tariff talk interlaced congressional deliberations about Homestead. A special House Judiciary committee was even directed to investigate the possibility that tariff mismanagement had actually caused the Homestead violence.

In the 1888 and 1892 national campaigns both political parties elevated their respective tariff planks above all others because they were counterparts in a useful rhetorical mechanism. In practical terms the tariff was the means for leveraging federal power to foster various economic sectors. But the tariff issue could also be leveraged for rhetorical effect to assign blame for the woes of industrial capitalism and credit for its marvels. Both major parties had their own version of this mechanism. Republicans emphasized a rhetoric of trickle-down economics. They claimed high protection made employment more likely by encouraging domestic growth, and they blamed Democrats for threatening those jobs with what they derogatorily referred to as their “free trade” or “British” (favoring) system. Democrats by contrast emphasized a message which promised better living through cheaper goods. Democrats claimed wages would have more buying power under a reformed, more lax tariff because foreign competition would encourage manufacturers on both sides of the Atlantic to compete for their dollars. They blamed Republicans for inflating trusts on the consumers’ dime, a practice they argued amounted to a hidden tax. Workers were also consumers, and so minor losses in jobs resulting from a competitive tariff rate would be offset by the boon of cheaper goods upon workers’ pocketbooks.

Neither of these political positions were fundamentally incorrect, but they diverted the national dialogue over the new industrial upheavals from the real issue of capital power, and onto the surface issue of spoils. While specific tariff changes had concrete implications for specific industries, the range of politically palpable tariff measures displayed from 1888 to 1894 were relatively slight. Comparisons of the Democrats' defeated 1888 Mills tariff bill, the Republican McKinley bill of 1892, and the 1894 Wilson-Gorman tariff bill reveal variances too small to significantly impact the dramatic large-scale industrial age challenges to working class opportunities during those years. Tariff rhetoric focused national attention on who was being rewarded rather than real economic and legislative solutions to the country's problems. Congressional discussion around the labor riot at Homestead showed how the spoils-emphasis of tariff rhetoric had become legislators' popular framework for national economic analysis, but it also demonstrated how unsuitable it was for that purpose.

To a significant extent in 1892 economics had become rhetorically synonymous with the tariff, and so the House query about the tariff's role in the Homestead violence was ultimately what passed for a federal economic analysis of the incident. Tariff talk certainly dominated economic discussions of Homestead in the newspapers. But when congressmen on the House Judiciary investigation into Homestead seriously applied the tariff lens to the strike, Democrats found its practical effect upon the incident to be negligible, and so they fell silent. For them, tariff rhetoric had already performed its function and laid the initial election-season blame for the shootout at Republicans' feet. Outraged Republicans on the committee followed the inquiry *past* the election into the next session. In 1893 there were few political points to be won, but nevertheless Republicans on the judiciary convincingly showed how the tariff had no real

bearing on the labor shootout— unless the public wanted to congratulate high protectionism for “creating” the Homestead plant and Carnegie Steel in the first place. Neither party cared to follow the implication that the tariff had no power to alter the issues that led to Homestead, and by extension that tariff alterations could not alleviate the chronic labor strife Homestead represented. They certainly had no interest in the broader implication that the tariff was a poor substitute for serious economic analysis. Tariff rhetoric was simply too popular and too useful to abandon.

Wage insecurity, the real crisis at the heart of the Homestead union struggle, was a manifestation of the industrial-capitalist upheaval and not the result of mismanaged tariff rates. Republicans on the judiciary committee essentially proved this point when they discovered that Homestead workers and their dependents were fairly well off, but they called this a manifestation of Republican protectionism. In fact union power played a significant role in having secured the steady, decent wages Homestead workers enjoyed. Testimony in the House investigation revealed that the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers fought to maintain union influence over the plant more as a means to assert control over future wage negotiations; they fought not primarily against the immediate wage reduction the company proposed, but against the company’s implicit assertion of its own power to regularly reduce its workers’ wages without credible evidence of economic necessity.⁴ Wage insecurity was a broad working class issue, by no means confined to the Homestead riot or even to union struggles. As long as the inability of US workers to guarantee a secure economic future for themselves as

⁴ Committee on the Judiciary, Employment of Pinkerton Detectives, H.R. Rep No. 2447 at XXXIV (1893).

wage laborers went fundamentally unaddressed, this need would continue to spawn similar conflicts. This observation was exactly what Senator Palmer of Illinois pointed out in congress the very next day after the shootout: the labor wars would rage eternal unless federal legislators expanded their jurisdiction to interfere with wage negotiations in some way. In response, many newspapers dismissed this analysis with cries of "Communism!" The legislators in chambers mostly ignored him and returned to the politically safer terrain of tariff talk.

Senator Palmer's assessment was most likely accurate, as continued labor strife in the immediate future would indicate. America had to change, but all reasonably effective solutions were un-American. Palmer's fellow congressmen in 1892 were free to ignore his analysis because tariff rhetoric allowed them to avoid publicly admitting even the strong possibility of the indefinite stalemate he described. Politicians were not free to simply say that the union had lockjaw and there were no electorally or philosophically viable political solutions to the shrinking power of laborers. They might not even have allowed themselves to seriously see Congress as "trapped" in this regard. Avoiding this sentiment either consciously or unconsciously was the real significance and power of tariff rhetoric in discussions of labor strife.

The rhetorical logic of tariff analysis in 1892 encouraged a shallow, surface gloss over the nationally important issue of wage security. This in turn effectively protected the political-economic status quo. The prospect of a serious look at the Homestead episode of the national labor struggle invited congressmen to come face to face with a blind spot in constitutional and common-law legal theory. Their colleague Senator Palmer made this invitation explicit. The legal framework of the nation protected the citizenry from the excesses of monarchical but not capitalist power consolidation. But instead of seizing this opportunity to address the underlying

labor crisis as statesmen, congressmen used the tariff issue to spar as partisan warriors. As a result the Homestead investigation had little political consequence except as ammunition for the Democrats' presidential victory that year. Congressmen saw no clear way to address the labor issues underlying the Homestead violence, but the tariff issue obscured that conundrum for them by giving the public an emotionally satisfying battle.

Historiography

The historiographical purpose of this exploration into the congressional Homestead and tariff coverage is to complicate recent historical works seeking to rehabilitate late nineteenth-century political culture from the popular perception that it was mired by an overall disingenuousness. This purported disingenuousness had many aspects, respectively attacked by recent historians. The first of these aspects and the largest in scope concerns the comparison between the "Gilded Age and its "Progressive Era" successor. Recent works like those of Gilded Age historian Rebecca Edwards and Progressive Era historian Daniel T. Rodgers have capstoned a historiographical campaign to refute an earlier understanding that the Progressive Era was a kind of forward thinking and acting corrective to a "backward" Gilded Age.⁵ But whatever the conclusion a comparison between the two ages does not address the contemporaneous Gilded Age charge that government was slow to respond to systemic changes. The unprecedented success of the People's Party in 1893—a success predicated on the perception of capitalist

⁵ Rebecca Edwards, "Politics, Social Movements, and the Periodization of U.S. History," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Oct, 2009); Daniel T. Rodgers, "Capitalism and Politics in the Progressive Era and in Ours," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 13:3 (Jul 2014), 379.

predations—demonstrates that many people in the late nineteenth-century considered the mainstream government response to the massive shifts in economic infrastructure intolerably slow-paced. The tariff issue was emblematic of this slow-paced response. It was a stalling tactic redolent of a political system ill-adapted to the new capitalist modes of production.

Political impotence to properly counter these shifts on behalf of working people was not the result of an overall philosophical disingenuousness, a charge often levied at the Gilded Age. Academic history of the late nineteenth-century has been saddled with countering an unfortunate broad-strokes literary theme— what might be termed *Gilded Age noire*. Scholars like Charles C. Calhoun have shown that late nineteenth-century politicians for the most part sincerely believed in their respective political positions. A tight electoral stalemate was significantly at fault for the legislative slog in the face of rapid infrastructural change. However, recent historiographical efforts to rehabilitate the Gilded Age against its popular reputation as vacuous and corrupt obscure the realpolitik benefits of stalemate. In the case of labor strife, the tariff distraction bought time for politicians who had no ready solutions. This benefit had nothing to do with corruption or, strictly speaking, political job-seeking. The Homestead investigation revealed how tariff rhetoric had a stalling effect on real political change, and this was a significant impetus for its popularity with politicians on both sides of the aisle.

Gilded Age noire stems originally from sensational literary sources from within the late 19th century itself, featuring tales of gluttonous robber barons bribing self-serving politicians. The classic example is the novel written by Mark Twain coining the phrase “Gilded Age.” The novel featured a national fever for land speculation and its seedy connection to the corrupt politics of

the day.⁶ The charge of bribery was often levied by both parties against the other. It was facilitated in large part by the melodramatic barbs thrown back and forth by journalists in an era in which nearly all major newspapers were political organs in service to the two political parties.⁷ The noire lens was also inspired by the rise of cheap working class literature known as dime novels, which featured proto-pulp stories compounding the corruption themes in the daily news. The dime novels and cheap sheets may have enjoyed better circulation among the working class than even the most popular newspapers of the day.⁸ Some notable historical works in the subsequent Progressive Era even contributed to the sense that their predecessors were money-obsessed, with little differences between political parties.⁹

Present scholarship on the machinations of Gilded Age politicians from the 1970s to the present day refute various aspects of the disingenuousness previously purported to underpin the late nineteenth-century political scene. For instance, in an essay on late 19th century political culture Calhoun shows how the balance in electoral math between the industrial north and the solid south dictated that radical proposals were tantamount to political suicide: “With the outcome of elections in doubt, party leaders and spokesmen saw the need to exercise caution in articulating party positions and were wary of getting too far ahead of public

⁶ Charles Dudley Warner and Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1873).

⁷ Richard Kaplan describes a broad shift away from a partisan to an “objective” tone in mainstream journalism. He locates this shift concurrently with the shift from the Third to the Fourth United States Party systems.

Richard L. Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press; The Rise of Objectivity, 1865-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 104-139.

⁸ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987).

⁹ “Worth Robert Miller, “The Lost World of Gilded Age Politics,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan 2002), pp. 49-67.

opinion.”¹⁰ Several of Calhoun’s several works tacitly “rehabilitate” the stereotype of “Gilded Age” corruption by adhering to a strictly political narrative showing earnest politicians engaged in heartfelt struggle.¹¹ In this setting any forward progress was the result of truly herculean lobbying, not the lackluster token gesture of party hacks.

While a limited government ethos and tight electoral math straightjacketed nineteenth-century politicians into centrist issues like tariff duties, it is also important to emphasize the impact of deliberate agreement between the two major parties. The way in which public debates are framed determines the border between outré and acceptable thought; this is a key component of what Antonio Gramsci called the “manufacture of consensus.”¹² A public network of formal and informal opinion-shapers Gramsci calls “organic intellectuals” divert the energies of criticism into informal channels of public action which often times lack the power to make obvious systemic corrections for the greater good. Nineteenth-century “organic intellectual” politicians engaged in a just such an act when they overemphasized the tariff debate. Thus this essay serves as a complication of Calhoun’s implicit argument that earnest politicians were mostly held back from forward progress by an electoral stalemate. Rather than simply acting as receptacles for mainstream public opinion, politicians also shaped that opinion with their choice of platform planks. In this case, both parties used tariff rhetoric to simultaneously acknowledge their constituents’ concerns about job and wage insecurity while

¹⁰ Charles C. Calhoun, “The Political Culture: Public Life and the Conduct of Politics,” *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*, 2nd Edition (Lanham: Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 240-245.

¹¹ Charles C. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010).

¹² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (New York: International Publishers Co., 1971).

tacitly suing for inaction. By setting the major point of debate at minor differences in the tax code, the two major parties shaped consensus around a *de facto* political holding action.

While Calhoun's works elucidate the political parameters surrounding this holding action, the works of Jeanette Rebello and Paul Krauss describe its cultural and intellectual foundations— especially as they relate to the tariff and the Homestead incident respectively. Jeanette Rebello's *The Great Tariff Debate* attempts to rehabilitate late nineteenth-century political culture against an aspect of the popularly imagined "Gilded Age" disingenuousness— that of a root "intellectual bankruptcy." Rebello's book is one of the very few works of non-economic history that focuses upon the tariff issue. Because of its subject *The Great Tariff Debate* is also the closest peer to this paper. Her introduction reveals a blatantly rehabilitative historiographical aim. She begins by conceding that despite its prominence in the 1880s, the tariff, "did not definitively shape America's rate of economic growth." Nevertheless, she argues that Gilded Age politicians and intellectuals who engaged in the tariff controversy comprised a kind of intellectual laboratory— a furious effort to reconcile an identity crisis brought on by the new industrial-era realities. "This was a truly dynamic debate, one in which the ideas of the past were examined against the realities of the future." Real philosophical differences between the two Gilded Age parties reflected debates present from the country's foundation, but the two parties used the tariff issue to transform those positions into vicissitudes relevant to the new industrial age: "The Democrats used the tariff to translate the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian heritage into industrial terms. The Republicans built on the Hamilton-Clay legacy to finally adopt protection for its own sake in 1888." Both of the major political parties used the tariff duel for exploring modifications to the classical-economic ideals articulated by Adam Smith and later

revitalized by John Stuart Mill. By attempting to update the principles of classical economics, they rescued it from the simplified, often dogmatic symbol of laissez faire it had become for many Americans. Politicians and economists of the day were earnest and productive in constructing and articulating these new reforms of classical ideals-- an intellectual project worthy of praise and respect.¹³

Paul Krauss in what is perhaps the definitive modern work on the Homestead incident modifies this idea of a national intellectual laboratory, tracing Rebello's "dynamic debate" to the ground level theater of the Homestead union struggle. He argues that, "the late nineteenth-century conflicts between organized capital and organizing labor . . . embodied, to no insignificant degree, a contest over the meaning of republicanism in modern America. The defenders of capitalism privileged the rights of property and translated the republican emphasis on the development of moral personality into a quantitative process measured by the calculus of the market." On the other hand, adversaries of unfettered capitalism tacitly argued that in the classic republican era of the nation, before capitalism reified labor, labor's value was mitigated by a moral economy. This morality, they argued, should rightly extend into the modern age and provide workers with a minimum "competence" or standard of living in exchange for their efforts.¹⁴

In effect, Rebello and Krause argue that the tariff debate was part of a Gilded Age intellectual and cultural laboratory for hammering out a new industrial-age identity for the country capable of meeting the challenges of modernity, while also respecting the nation's

¹³ Jeanette Rebello, *The Tariff Question: The Great Debate of 1888*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pg. xii-xxiii.

¹⁴ Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, 10.

political-cultural roots. The intellectual laboratory Rebello wrote about helped produce some of the ideological framework which the United States fourth party system later put into practice starting in 1896. Krauss asserts that workers lacked the means to articulate their insistence on what today is sometimes termed “moral capitalism”; Homestead workers suffered for the lack of such intellectual products as would eventually issue from Rebello’s laboratory. But while political and economic intellectuals were “test-marketing” various solutions to the country’s capitalist dilemmas behind and through the tariff issue, and while workers struck for rights they could not yet intellectually defend, federal politicians utilized tariff rhetoric to obscure the fact that those solutions had not yet been formulated. This was its realpolitik utility, whatever cultural values or traditions it reflected.

Anti-Pinkertonism and the Prospect of Congressional Investigations

Prior to Homestead, congressional response to the ongoing national labor struggle was already infused with the tariff and anti-Pinkerton issues. The earliest trace of Congress’ eventual response was prompted by a freshman congressman who would leave the Democrats in the November election and denounce his former party’s tariff position as, “a sham battle... so that capitalists, corporations, national banks, rings, trusts, watered stock, the demonetization of silver and the oppressions of the usurers may all be lost sight of.”¹⁵ However, back in January, Representative Thomas Watson of Georgia limited himself to the tamer battle over reining in Pinkerton excess. By the time the shootout at Homestead lit up the newspapers in

¹⁵ “The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party,” History Matters: the US Survey Course on the Web, accessed September 24, 2018, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5361/>.

early July, the country was already engulfed in a labor war which often featured Pinkerton strike-breakers. Two years earlier a New York Rail strike in Albany shut down the rails and the conflict with employers had purportedly resulted in the deaths of several workers at the hands of Pinkertons.¹⁶ This had been the latest in a host of such complaints from labor about Pinkerton murders, and in January 1892 these aggregated complaints inspired Representative Watson to submit what was essentially an anti-Pinkerton resolution that would later evolve into the Homestead investigation.¹⁷

The campaign against Pinkertonism was probably the most leftist pro-union issue with a chance of passing both houses, and its lukewarm results were a good barometer of both union unpopularity in Congress and the extreme limitations of federal power to protect workers against employer violence. The root accusation against Pinkertons in various state legislatures tended not to center around their violent conduct or even employers' right to utilize them, but rather around the charge that when they called in troops from out of state they violated the democratically-answerable chain of police-command within the given state. A federal version of an anti-Pinkerton law that would apply in all states would have to invoke Congress' constitutional interstate commerce jurisdiction. Anti-Pinkerton laws were already passing fairly easily at the state level because they advocated a relatively minor reform of the process by which strikers were physically disciplined. Concerned politicians merely asserted that police forces assigned to combat striking workers should be justifiably wearing a local law enforcement badge. However, these initiatives were typically Democrat initiatives because they

¹⁶ "The Big Strike: A Tie Up All Along the Central Road" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Aug 9, 1890.

¹⁷ 23 Cong. Rec. 255 (1892).

proposed to cut off large employers from an easy source of force which could act more immediately and powerfully than local police. In environments like Homestead where the employees had the favor of the community, the presence of quick-response “Hessian” strikebreakers un beholden to local sentiment could make the difference between employers’ victory or defeat at the negotiating table.¹⁸ Representative Watson sought to win a somewhat modest political victory for his industrial-worker allies by removing larger, out-of-state troops from their employers’ repertoire. He had no idea that so prominent an example of Pinkerton excess was just six months away.

Continued Pinkerton violence soon provided the necessary specific grievances for further legislative momentum, with the tariff issue looming nearby to appropriate them. Watson failed to elucidate any specific Pinkerton sins in the resolution itself, but perhaps he felt that by this point in their history their controversial reputation was common knowledge. No matter. By mid-May, Chairman William C. Oates of Alabama revived Watson’s resolution. He mentioned reports of violent Pinkerton strikebreaking activities, “from different sources, mainly from the West” utilizing the rails to ship mercenaries across state lines.¹⁹ However, election season had begun and both parties were beating the tariff drum. Pinkerton strikebreaking was a particularly juicy target for Democrat blame-slinging. One month prior to the Homestead strike while debating the relationship between the McKinley tariff and reciprocal trade agreements with US trade partners, Democratic Senator David Turpie of Indiana quipped that he was too hard on the Republican McKinley tariff: “I would not misrepresent the known

¹⁸ Morn, *The Eye That Never Sleeps*, 104.

¹⁹ 23 Cong. Rec. 4222 (1892).

effects of the policy of our political opponents.... Let us be frank, there has been both an increase of wages and work for one class of employees- the Pinkerton detectives.”²⁰ Even prior to Homestead, tariff talk had absorbed the strikebreaking issue. But it remained for Congress to determine what action, if any, it could take against the threat of Pinkertonism— whatever connection may have existed between that threat and the tariff.

In the Gilded Age congressional investigations had become something of a joke, a platform for partisan grandstanding to questionable practical effect.²¹ To the contrary, very much like tariff rhetoric itself congressional investigations were a political tool not only for furthering a partisan agenda but for obscuring federal helplessness to protect wage workers in the new industrial era. The symbolic partisan attacks that congressional investigations had become is a key component of late nineteenth-century political culture that extended beyond even the tariff, and it was the subject of an early spat between three bickering senators early in the process discussing the prospect of a congressional investigation into Pinkertonism.

At the prospect of such an investigation an exasperated Representative William Bynum from Indiana complained of the inefficacy of congressional investigations into the larger issue of strikes throughout the “Gilded Age.” Past congressional investigations into the Southwestern Railroad system strike in 1886 and again earlier into the Reading Railroad strike in 1877 did not convincingly suggest to congress any follow-up legislation: “The result of the [1877] investigation was a report from the committee that Congress had nothing to do with the matter and could not remedy the evil.”²² This was true, he noted, of the 1886 investigation as well. But

²⁰ 23 Cong. Rec. 4936-37 (1892).

²¹ Charles C. Calhoun, “The Political Culture,” 241.

²² 23 Cong. Rec. 4224 (1892).

Representative Jeremiah Simpson of Kansas argued back that if big capital could command congressional investigations, it was only fair that labor complaints might warrant them too. Here Simpson sidestepped the practical inefficacy of congressional investigation, perhaps because Bynum's point was hard to argue. He then proceeded to demand an investigation anyway. Representative Walter H. Butler of Iowa joined in with Simpson's plea, conflating investigations with protection. On the same subject of investigations, he exclaimed, "I say that we have as much right to protect the American citizen, though he be the poorest laborer, in his rights and life, if he be honest, as we have to protect the property of any corporation."²³ Clearly investigations were a political ritual important to politicians and constituents. In many cases, in the late nineteenth-century federal investigations may very well have been the best protection Congress could offer. It was equally clear that in regards to strikes they had done little to help. Calling for congressional investigations on behalf of certain groups was an opportunity for politicians to express sympathy and appear proactive, even when that action would knowingly lead to no legislative solutions to the underlying phenomenon. Both parties fought for the privilege of serving in this manner as symbolic champions.

"Protection Does Not Protect": Investigations into Homestead²⁴

As might be expected, the "riot" at Homestead prompted a flurry of resolutions akin to Representative Watson's January resolution. Now members of both houses targeted the Homestead incident specifically with calls for investigation on the grounds that hiring 300 un-

²³ 23 Cong. Rec. 4224 (1892).

²⁴ "Protection does not Protect," *New York Times*, July 7, 1892, 2.

deputized armed men from out of state to overpower workers at gunpoint surely represented criminal excess of some kind. Both the House and the Senate immediately launched proposals for investigations into Pinkertonism in general, and Homestead in specific. They also littered the congressional record with insinuations of connections between Pinkertonism, Homestead, and the tariff. Watson's early resolution in the House had succeeded in generating momentum on this issue since May, so the House needed only incorporate Homestead specifics to the earlier mandate before the bill could be enacted. This readiness enabled the House to dispatch a sub-committee of the Judiciary to nearby Pittsburgh just six days after the Pinkerton barges rolled in and were captured. A select sub-committee of House Judiciary members immediately commenced to interview the participants. In the face of this alacrity from their sister-chamber, Senate investigation deliberations tried to avoid redundancy and eventually focused on the phenomenon of Pinkertonism in general to the exclusion of any particular incident. Nevertheless the deliberations of both houses over the prospect of congressional action in the wake of the Homestead incident revealed important dimensions to the tariff rhetoric mechanism.

When faced with the inevitability of a congressional investigation into Homestead from one or both houses, three types of response are particularly germane to this study. Two of these were representative of their parties. The third was Senator Palmer's iconoclastic perspective. All of them, in their own ways, pointed to an underlying federal powerlessness to mitigate the underlying suffering which caused labor riots and illustrated the use of tariff rhetoric as a distraction from real discussions of power dynamics in the labor crisis.

The Democrats used tariff rhetoric in conjunction with the Homestead violence to hammer politically vulnerable Republicans with the charge that they were key allies with the country's trust-forming industrial scourges. Democrats' enthusiasm often inspired them to overstate their case, blaming high tariff duties directly for the Homestead carnage in a feat of awkward logic. Missouri Democratic Senator George G. Vest's was heralded as, "acknowledged representative of his party in this Chamber in all matters pertaining to tariff legislation."²⁵ Vest's appropriation of the Homestead incident in the tariff debate was the most forcible and dogmatic of the standard Democratic positions. Admirably, he began by addressing what he saw as the underlying causes of the Homestead conflict: namely, trusts.

Senator Vest entered into proceedings on a Deficiency Appropriations Bill a numbered catalogue of the various trusts his party had identified, in an attempt to blame the McKinley tariff for their manifestation. Among them was "No. 77, Steel Trust," in which he outlined the campaign of the Carnegie corporation to simultaneously incorporate a number of disparate steel manufacturers under the new "Carnegie Steel Company, Ltd." The consolidation was part of a renewed campaign against the Amalgamated Association union operating in many of those plants. "In short," he wrote, "this trust, like hundreds of others, is a conspiracy to 'cow' the workingmen and defraud the consumer."²⁶ Democrats like Senator Vest and his constituents saw trusts as dangerous precisely because their size rendered them impervious to the market pressures labor could legally bring to bear to secure their own wages. His charge that trusts

²⁵ 23 Cong. Rec. 6745 (1892).

²⁶ Ibid, S6782.

were able to “cow” laborers, such as through blacklisting or mass firings was an apt assessment of their threat to workers.

But in 1892 this complaint against trusts was nearly always paired with the tariff, and here Senator Vest did not stray off-script. In the same section of the record, Senator Vest excoriated the Republicans for attempting to dodge their tariff-culpability in the strike: “in the face of the bloodshed and the carnage at Homestead, the Senator stands here today and says that the country is tranquil, the workingmen contented, that the most amicable relations are existing between the employer and the employee.”²⁷ Here Senator Vest attacked the core of Republican tariff-reasoning which stated that despite isolated frictions the United States economy was successful in the aggregate. The pathos of this argument was rhetorically weakened by the Homestead spectacle, if not its logos. Senator Vest and his party had already fully overturned the 1888 Republican hegemony in House and Senate. In an era before more complex polling, election results were the best indicator of a public mandate for its agenda. Empowered by their electoral recovery in 1890, the Democrats seized the tariff rhetoric mechanism and hammered the Republicans with the Homestead counterargument to protectionist beneficence.

Eventually the attacks of Vest and other Democrats seemed to have driven one Republican senator to an unorthodox defense of his party; in his desperation, Republican Senator Eugene Hale of Maine attempted to jettison tariff rhetoric altogether. He produced a quote from Terrance Powderly, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor. “The Democratic papers are vehement in their denunciation of the Republican party for enacting a

²⁷ Ibid, 6776.

tariff law under which protection was afforded to manufacturers,” Hale quoted of Powderly. But, “the Mills [1888 tariff] Bill and the McKinley bill differ very little in the duty on steel rails, plates, etc. One was a Democrat bill, the other a Republican.” He read on, “Democratic papers in asserting that the trouble at that point is due to the McKinley bill, are but condemning the very thing they themselves advocate and on which they base their claim to power- a reduction of the tariff.”²⁸ It was a rare thing for a Republican to compare the flagship Republican McKinley bill to the hated Mills bill as “differing very little” in such a prominent industry. But the constant use of the tariff rhetorical mechanism by both parties as a means for addressing nearly all economic issues was backfiring this election for Republicans, in significant part because of Homestead. On the 26th of July in the middle of an appropriation bill, this prompted Senator Hale to enlist a strange ally. The result was a rare but telling admission that tariff rhetoric and tariff specifics were two very different prospects.

House Republicans on the defensive in the Homestead issue shed an interesting light on the tariff rhetoric mechanism; their responses were the best example of how tariff analysis often served as merely a gesture of economic analysis. The House judiciary investigation was the closest to a serious exploration of Homestead the nation received from its federal legislators, and tariff rhetoric was the nearest the investigation came to mining economic causes from beneath the violence. Two Republican members of the judiciary committee, representatives James Buchanan of New Jersey and George W. Ray of New York, better represented of their party’s orthodox position on Homestead than had Senator Hale. In contrast to Hale’s unorthodoxy, they tenaciously adhered to the Republican party line. They

²⁸ Ibid, 6791.

were so committed to its defense that they chased the opportunity to defend it even into the lame duck session in 1893 after Homestead was politically moot.

Even though the House investigation into Homestead was deployed quickly, the timing of the Homestead strike itself ambushed Buchanan and Ray. Because Representative Watson's early Anti-Pinkerton initiative was poised to address what would become a major point of congressional inquiry into the Homestead incident, the House was able to spring into action. This fortuitous momentum enabled them to interview Homestead witnesses as early as July 12th. But in a cunning maneuver, opportunistic House Democrats outside the investigating committee slapped a tariff "brand" on the investigation as it went out the door, attaching an amendment, "that the committee be instructed to inquire whether or not the employment of Pinkerton detectives has any connection with the present system of federal taxation."²⁹ This was a kind of checkmate. Buchanan and Ray could not offer a decent rebuttal to the implication that tariff economics underlay the Homestead violence without delaying the report into the second session, well past the upcoming election.

In August the chairman of the committee, Colonel Oates, reported that his committee could not submit a conclusive report on the entire incident in time for the close of the congressional session because certain senators on the committee were busy compiling minority opinions. Attentive readers would later learn that among these were two exacting analyses of relevant economic statistics intended to conclusively prove that the tariff was nothing but beneficial to the people of Homestead, Pennsylvania. Congressman Ray was mentioned by

²⁹ Committee on the Judiciary, Employment of Pinkerton Detectives, H.R. Rep. No. 2447 at II (1892).

name as one of the straggling authors. Chairman Oates, however, released his own summary, later the majority opinion, to the newspapers ahead of the next congress. While explaining the delay in the release of the committee's full report, he decried the tariff rider as ancillary and partisan. Both parties, he grumbled, would seek to establish a connection to the tariff, and they would do so strictly along party lines.³⁰ It would seem, however, that Democrats had had their fun merely insinuating Republican wrongdoing by attaching the tariff query in the first place; in the final report the next year there were no significant Democratic opinions asserting a role for the tariff at Homestead.

While it may have been too late for Republican House Judiciary Committee members to attach a detailed response to the Homestead investigation in time for the election that year, their allies in the popular press lost no time in formulating a party defense. The Republican-favoring *Penn Yan Express* of Yates County, NY is nicely representative of the party's engagement with the opposition, as its pages were rife with references to allied and enemy newspapers alike. On July 13 it reported that, "At this writing the mob are in complete possession of the Homestead works." It admitted that Republicans in Congress were relegated to the defensive: "Even in Congress Republican leaders are silent or apologetic in behalf of the outlaws, while a few of the more arrogant Democratic demagogues... have taken advantage of the great calamity to make partisan capital, claiming that it is the natural result of a protective tariff that favors the millionaires while it unmercifully oppresses the poor down-trodden workingmen." Republican partisan papers tended to take the rhetorical "high road" in their

³⁰ "Plain Talk on Homestead: Colonel Oates Gives His Views on the Strike to the Public", *Washington Post*, August 7, 1892, 2.

characterization of the Homestead incident, condemning Democrats for their naked partisanship in politicizing the tragedy of Homestead. In comparison to sensationalist Democratic politicians, Republican leaders were the level-headed statesmen doing all they could: “It is believed in Homestead, PA that the Republican leaders will participate in the settlement of the labor troubles.” Finally a single-sentence quote from the New York Press was bordered all by itself: “No tariff, no mills; no mill, no strikes; no strikes, no riots. The man who can’t see that protection is to blame for the Homestead affair must be blind.” Republican statecraft had brought forth prosperous factories from the very ether; it was simply poor sportsmanship to implicate them in this unfortunate but unpreventable incident.³¹

House judiciary members seemed to treat the tariff amendment as a political ploy similar to a lawyerly query the counselor knows will be overruled. In the majority opinion Colonel Oates wasted very few words claiming the tariff did not directly cause the Pinkertons to be employed, and left the tariff rider at that.³² For Representative Buchanan this was a great injustice to the victims of Homestead and congressional constituents. According to him Democrat newspapers and their allies, the “politicians of the smaller class,” had already sated a ghoulish gluttony for the political capital that tariff blame-rhetoric reaped from the Homestead tragedy: “While the country stood aghast at the violence and bloodshed coming so suddenly upon a land of law and order [Democrat opportunists] danced with delight upon the new-made graves, howled with demoniac glee at the awful scene, and sought, like a hyena, amid the desolated homes for food for his partisan appetite.” But despite this untoward perversion of a

³¹ “The Homestead Tragedy,” *The Penn Yan Express*, July 13, 1892, 1.

³² Committee on the Judiciary, Employment of Pinkerton Detectives, H.R. Rep. No. 2447 at X (1892).

genuine tragedy, he lamented, most of his colleagues failed to redress it. They willfully ignored, “the popular belief that the instruction include(d) the idea that the committee should find what relation, if any, the troubles, *generally*, at Homestead had to the tariff.” (italics mine)³³ Buchanan, along with his colleague and fellow Republican Representative Ray, were determined to compensate for their colleagues’ reticence.

While systematically proving that Homestead remained protected by a prohibitive tariff both before and after the McKinley bill, Representative Ray joined his colleague in acknowledging the political utility for Democrats of the Homestead and tariff pairing: “In our own country we find a political party, seeking power, attacking the doctrine of protection and attributing to it every evil that stalks abroad and every misfortune that overtakes men or communities, individually or collectively. ‘War, pestilence, and famine, the three greatest calamities that can befall mankind’ are named as the results of protection.” The tariff rhetorical mechanism ran on melodrama; it cast heroes as well as villains. Currently, Ray boasted, the United States rode a wave of prosperity fueled by its aggressive trade postures. “Our prosperity is marvelous, and we have moved to the front of the nations with such rapid strides that their jealousy has been aroused and every effort made to bring our American idea of protection into disrepute.” However, an apocalyptic landscape plagued by hordes of hobos awaited, should Democrat free-traders defeat Republican protectionism. “Thousands of our factories would be closed, tens of thousands of our workingmen would go unemployed and become pauperized... our country would be made the poorer, the condition of the masses of our people most

³³ Ibid, at XXVIII-XXIX.

miserable,” and, “strikes and riots would be increased ten, nay, an hundredfold.”³⁴ The tariff duel invited rhetorical hyperbole from both sides.

In Ray’s defense, hyperbole had ramped up in the 1892 political season when Democrats rhetorically reaffirmed a commitment to “free trade” — that is, tariff duties for federal income only. This was an act of pandering to the Democratic base the party had no intention of honoring. As the leader of the Democratic Party, Cleveland repeatedly denied ambitions to strip *all* non-revenue tariff duties in a new bill, and his earlier championing of the relatively moderate 1888 Mills bill bore him out.³⁵ Moreover the Democrat tariff bill which followed his re-election later that year was so moderate that in disgust Cleveland refused to lend his signature in protest. Serious students of the political landscape would have known that Democrats at the federal level depended too heavily on their own cadre of capitalist supporters, and as such they were tariff *reformers*— and then only reformers when it was politically safe. But in 1892 Democrats decided to play to their base and put genuine free-trade language into their official party platform. “We declare it to be a fundamental principle of the Democratic Party that the Federal Government has no constitutional power to impose and collect tariff duties, except for the purpose of revenue only, and we demand that the collection of such taxes shall be limited to the necessities of the Government when honestly and economically administered.”³⁶ This tariff hyperbole incited rhetorical extremism in return such

³⁴ Ibid, at LIV.

³⁵ Grover Cleveland, the annual State of the Union address, Dec 6, 1887, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/third-annual-message-first-term>.

³⁶ Democratic Party Platform, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/1892-democratic-party-platform> (1892).

as that exhibited by Mr. Ray. All of this helped cultivate the power of tariff rhetoric to distract from the real issues at stake in the Homestead incident.

While it may be argued that the Homestead's investigation's tariff inquiry mandate did not explicitly invite economic analyses beyond tariff causality, both Republican minority-report defenders did offer explanations for the conflict beyond defending the tariff from culpability. Ray's analysis of the real underlying causes of the Homestead dispute denied any systemic responsibility for Homestead or like incidents, except a profligate immigration policy which admitted "agitators and anarchists" into the country and the regrettable presence of unions. While Ray earlier admitted that Amalgamated workers had the right to strike, he later condemned them for exercising this power. "Had the Amalgamated Association not existed, had the 3,400 [respective union members] ... been free to exercise and act on his own judgment... unfettered by the edicts of the officers of that association, no strike would have occurred."³⁷ Thus, while rightly pointing out that tariff economics had very little impact on the Homestead riot itself, Ray tried to ignore the disparity of political-economic power between workers and employers which lay at the heart of the Homestead incident and indeed many others like it.

Avoiding real analysis of underlying power structures was exactly how tariff logic functioned, and Ray's summation was an excellent example. As an analysis, his was the most superficial of the Republican minority summations. Carnegie's proposed wage cuts disproportionately affected the highest paid workers at the plant, workers who were generally

³⁷ Committee on the Judiciary, Employment of Pinkerton Detectives, H.R. Rep. No. 2447 at LVII (1892).

prosperous. As Ray's colleague Buchanan noted, "This was no bread riot, such as the starved elsewhere raised."³⁸ Ray implied that this lack of an immediate practical grievance simply made the strikers greedy trespassers. He made a major point to draw a line between tariff policy and Carnegie workers' homeownership as a litmus of prosperity: "Many of the workmen formerly employed in those mills have so prospered that they have builded (sic) themselves homes and become the owners of other houses, which they rent."³⁹ But Ray failed to explain the seeming contradiction of the well-heeled striker. Here was a rare opportunity to explore the true representative nature of a dispute which caused 400 materially comfortable homeowners to besiege their former workplace at great risk to life and freedom. But it was not ultimately in the nature of tariff-centered analysis to seriously delve into the underlying causes of the national laborer's crisis.

Buchanan for his part offered a deeper analysis than Ray for the cause of the strike, and it echoed more closely Col. Oates' majority opinion. On the subject of Pinkertonism at Homestead, Ray had unapologetically suggested that the Pinkertons were a force which rightly and necessarily accompanied the growth of industry. Buchanan, however, disagreed. For him the tariff had brought nothing but prosperity to the town but, "into this was injected the resolve of a hard, imperious man [Mr. Frick] to disintegrate the Amalgamated Association and to employ a hireling, alien force to garrison his works while he filled them with nonunion men. This led to the bloodshed and the horror."⁴⁰ Buchanan thought that a smooth industrial

³⁸ Ibid, at XXXVIII.

³⁹ Ibid, at LIV.

⁴⁰ Ibid, at XXXVIII.

operation was not only possible, but the natural result of the moral conduct of prosperous employers.

Continuing beyond the Pinkerton presence, Buchannan's analysis of the underlying economic factors at play in the Homestead plant was also more judicious and insightful than Ray's. He compiled statistics demonstrating that under the tariff, production of steel products had dramatically increased, the tariff rates on most of the products had actually dropped as had the cost to consumers, and Buchannan reiterated that wages were healthy enough to make homeowners out of many of the workmen. He also justly admitted key ambiguities in the case. Chief among these were the unknown future effects of automation upon productivity, the resulting effects on the price of steel products, and perhaps most importantly the lack of profit figures from the company. Carnegie representatives refused to supply the committee with proof of their profits. Buchannan decried this refusal on the very congressional power to legislate the tariff in the first place: "It will not do to claim that these are details of private business. The lawmaking power which grants protective legislation has a right as to its actual workings."⁴¹ No one, however, legally pressed Carnegie Steel to prove that a loss to profits motivated the proposed wage decrease which precipitated the Homestead conflict.

Despite his thorough understanding of the economic details specified in the July interviews, and despite his empathy for the workers' passions, Buchannan, too, neglected to speculate about the underlying cause of the strike before the Pinkerton barges arrived. While Buchannan faulted the majority for failing to extrapolate the larger implication of the tariff inquiry-mandate, he himself only went one step further and halted at clearing the tariff of any

⁴¹ Ibid, at XXXIV.

role in the strike. But there was a larger implication to the tariff inquiry: what were the economic and political causes of this strike, and how might or how should the federal government intervene to prevent such occurrences in the future? This line of inquiry would have led to the fundamental dilemma outlined by Rebello and Krause; it would have revealed the schizophrenia of a nation trying to honor the conflicting values of a fidelity to absolute ownership rights and a dogmatic faith in free labor ideology.⁴² It would have revealed how this dilemma led inevitably to violent conflicts between workers and employers. But like Representative Ray, Buchanan was present primarily to clear the Republicans and their legislative agenda of specific wrong-doing. As it had done for Ray, tariff analysis spared Buchanan from dwelling on this conclusion. As such he confined himself to answering the immediate mandate about the ubiquitous tariff culpability question with a lengthy, “no.”

In the Homestead investigation tariff rhetoric functioned as a feint toward deep economic analysis of the labor question. It successfully extracted many of the strictly economic details out of the Homestead strike, but it appropriated them for a rhetorical duel incapable of leading to real legislative solutions to the underlying crisis which befell laborers. The House Judiciary inquiry resulted mainly in a bland condemnation of Carnegie “excess” in hiring the Pinkertons, and a spirited defense of protectionism from two committee members. The immediate issue underlying the incident was wage security, and workers often struck to achieve this with or without union leadership. After the defeat of Amalgamated at Homestead a flurry

⁴² Krause illustrates free labor ideology by quoting Abraham Lincoln: “There is no permanent class of hired laborers among us.” Krause explains that Lincoln believed that this was because, “the free labor system provided unending opportunities for everyone.” Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, 82.

of wildcat strikes occurred later in Cleveland's second administration. Here Representatives Ray and Buchanan were able to use the tariff mechanism to counter the political-economic gestures of their opponents, perform a gesture of economic analysis gesture of their own, and sidestep real analysis of the underlying power dynamic detrimental to the economic security of workers. Free labor ideology failed because it was not conceived with capitalists modes of production in mind. Congress had absolutely no plan to mitigate this failure except minor gestures of aggregate wealth creation and a permissive attitude toward the violent discipline of wage workers.

Not all senators used the tariff mechanism to avoid the larger implications of Homestead. Senator John McCaulay Palmer of Illinois was acutely aware of the underlying economic-political tensions that Representatives Oates, Buchanan, and Ray so deftly ignored. Almost the second an investigation into Homestead was suggested, he entered into the congressional record an impromptu speech about the real contours of persistent labor tensions. By pointing to the real problem of federal neglect in its current form, he provided the nation with a small measure of antidote for the distracting effects of the tariff rhetoric. A Civil War general for the Union and political iconoclast who switched political parties on a number of occasions, Senator Palmer seized the Senate floor on July 7 just a day after the shootout began. He then spoke at length about the prospect of unending labor wars in America and the duty of federal legislators to avert it regardless of the cost to current political theory and American traditions. As such, Senator Palmer was to the tariff mechanism the exception that proves the rule. Refreshingly, he found the tariff question mostly beside the point.

Senator Palmer decried the lack of congressional power to avert the current labor crisis. Just like Representative Bynum earlier, he lamented the paltry token gesture that investigations had become: “It is a reproach to our civilization that this Senate and country- that the Senate has no control over [national labor strife] beyond investigation.”⁴³ This was particularly disturbing to Palmer because the shootout at Homestead, while it seemed to shock the nation with the scale of its violence, was for him not an isolated friction but symptomatic of labor relations throughout the industrial era. “It might have happened at any one of a hundred places in the United States where large numbers of men are employed in the service of these enormous manufacturing establishments,” he declared. This sentiment of Homestead’s representative nature was echoed later that same day in the House when Representative John C. Tarsney of Missouri noted, “the employment of the Pinkertons on yesterday was a mere incident. The groundwork of that difficulty... was something entirely different, and something that relates solely to the labor problem that is troubling the people of this country today.”⁴⁴ All effective solutions to such troubles, however, were to significant extent politically unthinkable at the time.

The problem, as Senator Palmer saw it, was that workers had a natural right to continued employment except in times of their employers’ genuine misfortune, or else for genuine misdeeds. “These [Homestead] laborers having been in that service, having . . . spent their lives in this peculiar line of service, have the right to insist upon the permanency of their employment.” This right, furthermore, was vital to the existence of democracy itself, because in

⁴³ 23 Cong. Rec. 5824, (1892).

⁴⁴ Ibid, 5859.

order for a democratic system to function properly, “You must give the voter, if you mean that he shall be independent, a fixity of employment, so that he may defy the employer and say to him, ‘My tenure depends not on my vote.’”⁴⁵ If in a system where employers hire thousands those employers are empowered to send workers into the street for economic-political reasons— especially in a *buyer’s* labor market— corporations would marshal votes like a bloated grotesquery of Tammany-organized neighborhood voting blocs.

What the nation needed in order to maintain wage security was the means to assure workers “ownership” of their own employment. But as Jeanette Rebello observed, the nation needed to achieve this while also maintaining a reasonable fidelity to employers’ rights to conduct their businesses as they otherwise pleased. By this assessment, union power was in fact the centrist solution, as it attempted to compensate for the absolute property rights of capitalist owners not by subtracting from employers’ power but by adding to that of the workers through collective bargaining. But as Homestead historian Paul Krause writes, Amalgamated at Homestead was the last bastion of union power in the steel industry for four decades.⁴⁶ After Homestead even the “moderate” union labor solution had been destroyed for the foreseeable future.

To be clear, the idea that workers had a natural right to their own jobs was radical to most Americans; ensuring this idea would remain radical was a key function of tariff rhetoric as applied to the labor crisis. Paul Krause in a chapter called “Legacies of Homestead” noted that this conception of natural workers’ rights in the context of property law, “certainly seemed

⁴⁵ Ibid, 5824.

⁴⁶ Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, 4.

queer indeed to the vast majority of Americans.” But the concept was not actually alien to the American legal tradition, merely problematic. A lawyer later representing some of the strikers echoed Palmer’s very line of reasoning, pointing out that “Common law... holds that ‘private right shall be subject and subservient to the public good.’”⁴⁷ For Krause, this is perhaps the key significance of the Homestead battle itself: workers demanded what some of them referred to as a “competence,” the right to a fair standard of living in exchange for their continued service and the investment it represented for them. But even workers could not find justification for this “right” that would satisfy the American fidelity to traditional property rights, and neither could their representatives. This unspoken paradox of Krauss’ competing “conceptions of republicanism” was the primary impetus for the application of tariff rhetoric to labor analysis. It diverted public attention from the real difficulties in solving industrial-capitalism problems like wage security and substituted blame rhetoric packaged with the promise of slightly more jobs or pocket money to go around.

Just after the Palmer speech, readers of the congressional record can almost read a pin-drop silence. This was followed immediately by an obstinate redoubling of tariff rhetoric. Democrat Senator Daniel T. Vorhees of Indiana rose immediately following Senator Palmer’s insightful description of the actual paradox at the heart of the original strike at Homestead, only to divert attention back to the tariff with a bit of word play: “[Republican tariff] doctrine has been misleading; it has been delusive. You have made the poor people who laid down their lives yesterday on the banks of the Monongahela believe that you were protecting them.” Senator Vorhees thereby demonstrated the genius of the tariff rhetorical mechanism by the

⁴⁷ Ibid, 340-341.

very act of immediately reintroducing it into the proceedings and his use was typical of its rhetorical strength— to ignore rather than refute. Republican tariff protectionism indeed failed to “protect” strikers from Pinkerton violence, but as Senator Palmer had just outlined this had nothing to do with its rates. Yet perhaps relieved by his opponent’s return to familiar ground, Republican Senator Hale stood up to contradict his own quote of Terrance Powderly, waging familiar war and claiming tariff credit for “building up this great industry in that little village which like a great hive of bees has hummed its peaceful note in years past...” The rest of the whole affair was more of the same right into the November elections.⁴⁸

Democrats won the immediate election in 1892, and some commentators argued that the public perception of Carnegie excess and indifference to the company’s workers’ plight contributed to that victory.⁴⁹ But in the press Senator Palmer’s suggestions were dismissed even by the Democrat papers for his assertion of workers’ rights to continued employment.⁵⁰ The Republican papers dismissed him as a Communist.⁵¹ More importantly his underlying analysis that a lack of those rights would continue to plague the nation with labor strife was mostly ignored. The minor “Pinkertonism” issue would slowly vanish as the Pinkerton company

⁴⁸ 23 Cong. Rec. 5825, (1892).

⁴⁹ Republican Secretary Rusk on the Republican defeat later that year: “It was due...to the McKinley tariff law and a feeling of unrest among the laboring men under its operations, which feeling was, I have no doubt, intensified by the Homestead strike.”

“How It Was Lost And Won,” *Washington Post*, November 12, 1892, 2.

⁵⁰ Partisan pro-Democrat New York Times editorial on Senator Palmer’s June 6 observations: “I think we may well hesitate to believe that this is a matured conviction of the Senator, and attribute his expressions to a not unnatural excitement over the introduction of the large Pinkerton force.”

C. of Ann Arbor, Michigan, “Is the Bounty Abused,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1892, 10.

⁵¹ “Palmer, of Illinois, surprised many of his closest friends last week by his speech in the Senate on the Homestead tragedy, for he advocated the extreme doctrines of Communism.”

Penn Yan Express, July 13, 1892, 1.

itself helped advocate for both stronger intra-state police power and a federal bureau of investigation. It had already pioneered the primary functions of this new agency and trained some of what would become its initial personnel. When the time came it even donated key pieces of equipment to the new justice department bureau. Immediately after Cleveland's second presidential election the country was wracked by the Panic of 1893, which effectively broke the Third Party System of electoral stalemate and commenced its Fourth Party System successor under a Republican hegemony. Despite the passage of the seldom-invoked Sherman Anti-Trust laws, the Fourth Party system effectively sealed into US politics an overall aversion to seriously interfering with corporate power. This continued largely unopposed until serious objections were entertained in Congress in the wake of the Great Depression in the 1930s. But even in the stalemated Third Party system of the "Gilded Age," both major parties seemed to have mostly agreed that protection of the pro-capitalist interpretation of traditional private property conceptions should trump the depletion of working class opportunities under the impact of capitalism. Tariff policy was a reflection of the popularity of these priorities to the extent that the people shared it. But it was also a clever means to discourage dissent where they did not.

Conclusion

The issues central to the Homestead incident were echoed elsewhere in the 1892 *Congressional Record*. That year Congress wrestled with the logistical preparations for the upcoming Columbian Exposition, the massive impending mega-fair undoubtedly an exaltation of modernity. Pinkerton guards and their ilk, now in temporary public disgrace and the subject

of a new law limiting their employ in federal service, were forbidden from the contractor list. More amusingly tariff mania prompted one congressman to propose that plaques be affixed to certain exhibits announcing the showcased item's debt— or lack thereof— to tariff duties. Here in this celebration of modernism, the tariff continued to encapsulate perfectly underlying anxieties as to who benefited and would continue to benefit from the breakneck speed of national technological, bureaucratic, and economic development.

Fears of national labor tumult reigned elsewhere in the 1892 *Congressional Record* as well. Inside another tariff squabble a senator described the dystopian novel *Caesar's Column* as becoming frightfully prescient.⁵² The book like its more famous dystopian contemporary *The Time Machine* depicted a horrendous future in which the world became transformed into a Dantean landscape of perpetual class warfare.⁵³ Paul Krause suggests that Amalgamated's resistance at Homestead represented an episodic swan song for contemporaneous union power, and that its heyday had already passed prior to the strike.⁵⁴ Either way Homestead signaled to citizens, workers, and their representatives that the nation was now largely bereft of strong labor defenders. National concerns persisted that the Wild West of an unfettered capitalist economy would threaten the egalitarian nature of the American dream... even as that same nation celebrated its fruits.

To a slightly lesser extent, this paradox— this confusion about capitalism's utility— is a burden the US citizenry still struggles with in 2019. Like our political forefathers we try to

⁵² Senator Call mentions, *Caesar's Column* in 24 Cong. Rec. S6556, (1892); Ignatius Donnelly writing as Edmund Boisgilbert, M.D., *Caesar's Column* (Chicago: F.J. Shulte & Co, 1890).

⁵³ H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1895).

⁵⁴ Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*.

balance the priorities of wealth and international political-economic dominance against the danger posed by aspects of capitalism— this time those which threaten humanity’s existence by destroying its food and air supplies. But our “Gilded Age” predecessors had the burden of pioneers facing this dilemma. They were the first members of a fiercely proud national culture confronting systems impossibly larger and more complex than their own political control at the municipal or even the state level. The first people to confront this leviathan were so dazzled by the problem itself that rhetorically exploring its contours became the national pastime. This process was known as tariff debate.

The Homestead incident with its sensational violence did not, in the end, prompt strong legislation to address its underlying causes. Tariff rhetoric appropriated the riot along with many other practical concerns and fed the people on their own grievances. The events at Homestead were not a significant force for change. But they do represent an opportunity for historians to see how change was avoided. Besides that, Homestead’s absorption into tariff politics was historically significant in its own right: it provided the nation with a new benchmark of acceptable losses in its relationship with capitalist development.