

THE BARONS OF MIDDLETOWN AND THE DECLINE OF THE NORTH- EASTERN ANGLO-PROTESTANT ELITE*

Dean Acheson, the urbane secretary of state who personified America's white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite, was a native of Middletown, Connecticut, a small manufacturing and commercial city in the centre of the state. Son of an English father and Canadian mother, he was born in Middletown in 1893, just as Sicilian and Polish immigrants were beginning to find jobs in the town. Acheson grew up in the rectory of the Church of the Holy Trinity, where his father, the Episcopal bishop of Connecticut, served as pastor. When the future diplomat was a boy, elderly neighbours told stories about the 'clipper ships [that] dropped anchor there, home round the Horn from China'. Middletown's days as a small international seaport ended in the mid nineteenth century. Yet 'the boom left imposing houses on High Street at the top of the hill with its four rows of great elms', Acheson recalled in 1965. 'Now Wesleyan University owns them all; but in the golden age the last of the barons still lived there — the Russells, the Hubbards, the Alsops, Governor Weeks'.¹

Secretary Acheson's recollection was accurate in every respect but one. Although Joseph Alsop IV did leave Middletown at the turn of the century and ultimately settled in Avon, Connecticut, where he and his wife Corinne, a niece of Theodore Roosevelt, raised their sons, the renowned foreign affairs journalists Joseph and Stewart, Middletown's other 'barons' did not depart then. On the contrary, T. Macdonough Russell, Elijah Kent Hubbard and Governor Frank Weeks remained in the city for many more years, as did the other landed proprietors, bankers,

* I would like to thank my friends in Middletown, at Olin Library, Russell Library and Middlesex County Historical Society, and colleagues and friends at Wesleyan and several other universities, for their valuable suggestions and help. Special thanks to my wife, Cynthia Wells.

¹ Dean Acheson, *Morning and Noon* (Boston, 1965), 1; Robert L. Beisner, *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War* (New York, 2006), 1–2; James Chace, *Acheson: The Secretary of State Who Created the American World* (New York, 1998), 1–3.

manufacturers and corporate board members whose families constituted Middletown's gentry class.²

Some of these men and women were descendants of the puritans who had settled in Middletown among the Wangunks in 1650. Others' forebears arrived during the Industrial Revolution. Melded together through business, friendship and marriage, these families held the reins of power in the city until the mid 1930s, when their failure to cope with two crises — one natural and the other social — convinced the majority of voters that the Republican Party, which the gentry controlled, could no longer govern effectively. The local aristocrats soon began to move away. Leadership of the town passed to the descendants of the immigrants who had laboured in the barons' mills.

I

ROOTED IN LOCAL SOIL

In its broad outlines, the tale of the rise and fall of the barons of Middletown resembles that of other industrial towns in the north-eastern industrial region of the United States. White Anglo-Protestant landowners, merchants, sea captains and, as time passed, factory owners, bankers and attorneys governed smaller cities and towns throughout New England and the mid-Atlantic region from the seventeenth century through the Industrial

² Other local gentry in the early twentieth century included William W. Wilcox II, Colonel Clarence Wadsworth, James Bunce, O. Vincent Coffin, Arthur Allin, Joseph Merriam, Robert Merriam, Francis Beach, Harold Guy, James Guy, Ernest Inglis, Charles Davis, Clarence Bacon, John Bacon, Judge Curtiss Bacon, Charles Warner and Howard H. Warner. For further information, see Robert W. Merry, *Taking on the World: Joseph and Stewart Alsop, Guardians of the American Century* (New York, 1996), 3–7; Joseph W. Alsop and Adam Platt, *I've Seen the Best of It: Memoirs* (London, 1992), 27–9; *Who's Who in New England*, ed. Albert Nelson Marquis (Chicago, 1909), 54, 511–12; *Who's Who in New England*, ed. Albert Nelson Marquis (Chicago, 1916), 32, 57, 256, 376, 1111, 1126, 1155; *Who's Who in New England*, ed. Albert Nelson Marquis (Chicago, 1938), 71–2; 569, 665–6, 1362; *Who's Who in Finance, Banking and Insurance: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporaries, 1929–1930*, ed. John William Leonard (Chicago, 1930), 17, 69, 268, 459, 543, 562, 1107, 1139; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1928*, 52, 63, 77, 98, 103, 140, 157, 197, 237, 270, 273, 274, 279; *Men of Mark in Connecticut: Ideals of American Life Told in Biographies and Autobiographies of Eminent Living Americans*, ed. Col. N. G. Osborn, i (Hartford, 1906), 161–3; *ibid.*, ii (Hartford, 1907), 80–1; *ibid.*, v (Hartford, 1910), 9–12, 344–7, 551–2. For discussion of the emergence of industry in Middletown in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, see Peter Dobkin Hall, *Middletown: Streets, Commerce, and People, 1650–1981* (Middletown, 1981), 20–7.

Revolution until the 1930s and 1940s, when public esteem for them dwindled and they lost political control.

The fall of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite, or 'WASPs', as they began to be called during the 1960s, was so dramatic that, during the mid twentieth century, several of the most renowned novelists (John O'Hara, Sinclair Lewis and, above all, John P. Marquand) and foremost social scientists (W. Lloyd Warner, Robert Dahl, E. Digby Baltzell) in America wrote at length on the subject.³ Political scientists and urban historians followed in their footsteps during the 1960s and early 1970s, producing numerous studies exploring the overthrow of that privileged class during the New Deal. Generally they viewed these events as a conflict between the old native-stock Americans and rising immigrants, leading to the creation of a Democratic liberal coalition which, it appeared at the time, might continue in perpetuity.⁴

Relatively little work has been done on this subject since then. As Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle remarked in 2005, 'Historians have by and large ceased writing about the role of ruling elites in the country's evolution'.⁵ The only scholars to have recently discussed the decline of the 'WASP Ascendancy', as Joseph Alsop termed his social class, are Eric P. Kaufmann,⁶ and Alan Dawley, Jackson Lears, Godfrey Hodgson and Michael Lind, in Fraser

³ Alsop and Platt, *I've Seen the Best of It*, 18–20; John P. Marquand, *Wickford Point* (Boston, 1939); John P. Marquand, *Point of No Return* (Chicago, 1949); John P. Marquand, *Sincerely*, Willis Wayde (Boston, 1955); John O'Hara, *Appointment in Samarra* (London, 1934); Sinclair Lewis, *The Prodigal Parents: A Novel* (New York, 1938); W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community* (New Haven, 1941); W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt, *The Status System of a Modern Community* (New Haven, 1942); W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (New Haven, 1945); W. Lloyd Warner and J. O. Low, *The Social System of the Modern Factory. The Strike: A Social Analysis* (New Haven, 1947); W. Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* (New Haven, 1959); E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class* (Piscataway, 1958); E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy & Caste in America* (New Haven, 1964); E. Digby Baltzell, *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia: Two Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Class Authority and Leadership* (Boston, 1982). For the evolution of the term 'WASP', see Kevin M. Schultz, 'The Waspish Hetero-Patriarchy: Locating Power in Recent American History', *Historically Speaking*, xi, 5 (2010), 8.

⁴ The first and finest of those works is Robert A. Dahl's *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, 1961), a history of political power in New Haven, Connecticut.

⁵ Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds.), *Ruling America: A History of Wealth and Power in a Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 2.

⁶ Eric P. Kaufmann, *The Rise and Fall of Anglo-America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

and Gerstle's anthology.⁷ However, unlike Warner, Dahl, Baltzell, O'Hara, Lewis and Marquand, each of whom focused on a single city and thus was able to explore the links between the elite and others in those towns, recent writers have looked at elites only at the national level. They have paid little or no attention to local elites, even though, to a far greater extent than in France, Russia and elsewhere, power in the United States historically has emanated from the local level, especially before the New Deal and the Second World War.⁸ As Thomas Sugrue recently remarked, 'For most historians (and other social scientists), local and state governments remain a *terra incognita*'.⁹

With scholars now studying the history of the bourgeoisie in America, the time has come to reconsider the fall of the WASP Ascendancy. Sven Beckert initiated contemporary studies with *The Monied Metropolis*.¹⁰ Inspired by his example and further motivated by turmoil in the US economy and world markets and the rise of the Chinese economy, scholars in fields ranging from history and sociology to the decorative arts, museum studies and American studies have begun exploring the history of capitalism and the bourgeoisie in the United States. They have produced some very good work, with more certain to come. However, most of the work published during the past decade focuses on the nineteenth century, when the North-Eastern Anglo-Protestant bankers and industrialists consolidated.¹¹

If we move forward to the mid and late twentieth century, we can see that the upheaval in American cities as small as Middletown during the 1930s marked the beginning of a profound transformation in the American bourgeoisie. At first glance that claim

⁷ Alan Dawley, 'The Abortive Rule of Big Money', Jackson Lears, 'The Managerial Revitalization of the Rich', Godfrey Hodgson, 'The Foreign Policy Establishment', and Michael Lind, 'Conservative Elites and the Counterrevolution against the New Deal', all in Fraser and Gerstle (eds.), *Ruling America*.

⁸ The principal exception is Cecelia Bucki's insightful study *Bridgeport's Socialist New Deal, 1915-36* (Champaign, 2001). However, while she is sensitive to the manufacturers, Bucki's primary interest is working-class and socialist politics.

⁹ Thomas J. Sugrue, 'All Politics is Local: The Persistence of Localism in Twentieth-Century America', in Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak and Julian E. Zelizer (eds.), *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton, 2003), 304.

¹⁰ Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the Bourgeoisie* (Cambridge, 2003).

¹¹ For an overview, see Sven Beckert, 'History of American Capitalism', in Eric Foner and Lisa McGrir (eds.), *American History Now* (Philadelphia, 2011).

might appear extravagant. We associate the bourgeoisie with the great metropolises — Paris, Berlin, London and New York, or such other centres of capital, commerce and manufacturing as Manchester, Hamburg, Chicago and Pittsburgh — not small, seemingly insignificant cities such as Middletown, Connecticut.

But the United States differs from other highly industrialized nations. In the US Constitution power not granted to Washington is reserved to the states, and state governments in turn partially apportion power to counties, cities and smaller towns. Until the liberals assumed power in 1933 and began centralizing decision-making in Washington, DC, the bourgeoisie exercised its power as much in the smaller cities as it did in the metropolises, as the older generation of novelists and scholars such as Marquand, O'Hara, Lewis, Warner, Dahl and Baltzell understood. The balance of power began to change during the New Deal and the Second World War and continued afterwards, with the advent of mass media, interstate highways and the boom in air travel. In the process the bourgeoisie changed in ways that would have been inconceivable seventy-five years earlier. The transformation began, quite appropriately, in the smaller cities, where the gentry proved to be most vulnerable.

II

THE NETWORK OF CONNECTIONS

The barons were the chief officers and board chairmen of the largest factories, banks, and insurance companies, and the principal department store in Middletown in the early twentieth century. They owned the town newspapers, founded the Middletown Board of Trade, and presided over the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce.¹² They also founded, financed or directed the local charities and educational institutions, including the Connecticut Hospital for the Insane, the Connecticut Industrial School for Girls, Russell Library, the Wilcox College of Nursing, St Luke's Home for Destitute and Aged Women, and, as time passed, Wesleyan University.¹³ The only institutions they

¹² These factories included Russell Manufacturing, Wilcox, Crittenden & Co., Omo Manufacturing Company, the Arawana Mills, Tuttle Brick Company, W. & B. Douglas Co., W. H. Chapman & Co., and Rockfall Woolen Co.

¹³ *The Middletown Tribune Souvenir Edition* ([Middletown], 1896), 4–9; *Who's Who in New England*, ed. Marquis (1909), 54, 511–12; *Who's Who in Finance, Banking and*

(cont. on p. 6)

could not control were the trade unions (which were weak), the Catholic churches, charities, and parochial schools, the Jewish synagogue, and the Italian, Polish and Irish fraternal lodges.

Middletown's barons were regularly elected to seats on the Common Council, the Middletown Board of Education, the Connecticut General Assembly, and the State Senate; they were frequently elected to the United States House of Representatives and, on occasion, appointed to presidential cabinet posts. Usually, one of the barons was elected mayor of Middletown, although occasionally an Irish-Catholic Democrat or a reform-minded Wesleyan professor or alumnus was elected. While several of the barons were Democrats in the nineteenth century, they abandoned the party when William Jennings Bryan captured its presidential nomination in 1896. After Bryan, virtually all the local elite were Republicans. Middletown gentry sat on the Connecticut State Republican Party Central Committee and were chosen as delegates to Republican national conventions. Four members of Middletown's elite served as governor of Connecticut between 1895 and 1948. They were all Republicans. Indeed, from 1896 until 1930, the Republicans controlled politics in Connecticut as thoroughly as the Democrats did in Mississippi.¹⁴

The majority of Middletown's gentry lived close to each other in mansions built in the nineteenth century near the centre of town, on wide avenues graced by big elms, wide sidewalks,

(n. 13 cont.)

Insurance, ed. Leonard, 17, 1139; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1896–97*, 211–12, 214, 217–18; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1928*, 385–91; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1936*, 15–16, 393; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1938*, 11; 'Samuel Russell', in *Connecticut History Makers*, ed. E. Robert Stevenson (Waterbury, 1929–38), ii, 216–17. This list of their public service is far from complete.

¹⁴ For illustrations, see *Middletown and Portland Directory 1896–97*, pp. vi–viii, x–xi, 23, 27, 29–30, 38, 41, 77–8, 81, 127, 148, 154–5; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1936*, 23–5, 32, 36, 52, 135, 166, 168, 269, 276; *Middletown Tribune Souvenir Edition* (1896), 20, 32, 36, 50, 54–6; *Biographical Directory of the Governors of the United States, 1789–1978*, ed. Robert Sobel and John Raimo, 4 vols. (Westport, 1978), i, 187, 193, 199–202. The governors were Owen Vincent Coffin, Frank Bentley Weeks, Raymond Baldwin and James McConaughy. A fifth Middletownian, Wilbur Snow, served briefly as governor in 1946–7. However, he was a poet, Wesleyan professor and liberal Democrat, and not part of the gentry's circle. When a Wesleyan political science professor asked in 1927 why the Connecticut Democrat Party kept putting up candidates for office despite repeated defeats, the politician replied, 'Well, you see, Professor, you know some folks are just dyed-in-the-wool Methodists; it's just the same way with Connecticut Democrats'. Lane W. Lancaster, 'The Democratic Party in Connecticut', *Nat. Municipal Rev.* (Aug. 1928), 451. See also Duane Lockard, *New England State Politics* (Princeton, 1959), 229.

wrought-iron fences, horse carriages and pleasing flowerbeds. Others owned large estates in the scenic western and southern sections of Middletown, which, in terms of acreage, was the largest city in the state. Colonel and Mrs Clarence S. Wadsworth owned the most impressive property, a 20,000-square-foot Beaux Arts-style 'summer cottage', with Doric columns, a formal *allée*, tennis court, pavilion and pond. The Olmsted brothers of Boston, whose father had designed New York's Central Park, planned the grounds, which moved from the classical and formal landscapes bordering the manor house to nearly five hundred acres of varied, well-managed forests and pastures, including a stunning thirty-foot waterfall. The colonel and his wife also had residences on the East Side of Manhattan, in Bar Harbor, Maine, and in Palm Beach, Florida.¹⁵

Thomas Macdonough Russell led Middletown's aristocracy during the early twentieth century. One of his ancestors, Revd Noadiah Russell, was one of the ministers who had founded Yale University in 1701. Another ancestor, General William Huntington Russell, co-founded Skull & Bones, Yale's famed secret society, in 1832. His grandfather, Samuel Wadsworth Russell, had made a fortune dealing in silk, tea and opium in Canton, China, in the early nineteenth century. In 1834 he and Samuel D. Hubbard founded the Russell Manufacturing Company, a textile firm that became Middletown's largest manufacturer. Modelled on the Parthenon and filled with Chinese porcelain, paintings and figurines, the Russells' High Street mansion signified wealth, power and acumen.¹⁶ T. M. Russell was a descendant and namesake of Captain Thomas Macdonough, whose convoy had routed a British fleet on Lake Champlain in 1814. Born in Middletown in 1873, 'Mac' Russell, as he was known to his friends, studied

¹⁵ 'Hubbard-Wadsworth Wedding This Noon at Church of the Holy Trinity: A Very Pretty Wedding Indeed', *Middletown Press*, 7 Oct. 1897, 1; 'Colonel Wadsworth Dies in Montreal', *Middletown Press*, 7 Apr. 1941, 1-5. For brief descriptions of the Wadsworth estate, see Bill Daley, 'Wadsworth's Legacy', *Hartford Courant*, 23 July 1995, section H, 1, 5.

¹⁶ Peter C. Perdue, 'Rise and Fall of the Canton Trade System', Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009, <http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/rise_fall_canton_01/cw_essay04.html>; Alain Munkittrick, 'Samuel Wadsworth Russell (1789-1862): A Study in Ordered Investment' (Wesleyan Univ. Honors thesis, 1973); *History of Middlesex County, Connecticut, with Biographical Sketches of its Prominent Men* (New York, 1884), 100-1, 169-70; 'Samuel Russell', in *Connecticut History Makers*, ed. Stevenson, ii; Alexandra Robbins, *Secrets of the Tomb: Skulls and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Path to Power* (Boston, 2002), 4.

civil engineering at Yale University and spent his summers in overalls in the family's mills, working alongside mechanics. In 1909 he joined the board of the Central National Bank of Middletown. Appointed president of Russell Manufacturing in 1913, he soon joined the boards of four other local firms. An ardent Republican, Russell frequently spoke at public meetings, particularly regarding budgetary issues, and voiced his views to the entire community in articles in the *Middletown Press*. He was elected mayor of Middletown in 1908 and a year later was elected to the General Assembly in Hartford. For thirty years Russell served on the Middletown Board of Education. He was also a vestryman at the Church of the Holy Trinity, belonged to five Masonic lodges and the local Elks fraternal order, and was an energetic participant in the Middletown Chamber of Commerce.¹⁷

An avid sailor, proud of his heritage as a descendant of Captain Macdonough, Russell moored his fifty-two-foot, two-mast yacht in Middletown's harbour. When not cruising with friends, he lunched at the Middletown Yacht Club, built in 1905 on stilts over the bank of the Connecticut River. Russell was repeatedly elected the club's commodore. Yet he also made an effort to maintain relations with the common people: upon his death the *Middletown Press* reported, 'Mr Russell knew personally many of the employees. He was an easy man to approach and no problem was too trivial to receive his best thoughts'. Such was typical of the bourgeoisie in America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Tocqueville remarked in 1835, 'The more opulent citizens take great care not to stand aloof from the people'.¹⁸

¹⁷ Membership of many local voluntary associations and government boards was common among the American bourgeoisie in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For further discussion, see, *inter alia*, Sven Beckert, 'Bourgeois Institution Builders: New York in the Nineteenth Century', and Peter Dobkin Hall, 'Rediscovering the Bourgeoisie: Higher Education and Governing-Class Formation in the United States, 1870–1914', both in Sven Beckert and Julia B. Rosenbaum (eds.), *The American Bourgeoisie: Distinction and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2010).

¹⁸ 'Middletown Yacht Club', box 5, Societies and Clubs: Middlesex County Historical Society archives, Middletown; 'T. M. Russell, Former Mayor, Dies Suddenly', *Middletown Press*, 31 July 1935, 1, 7; 'Middletown Yachts in Montauk Regatta', *Middletown Press*, 9 Oct. 1936, 13; Description of collection, box 1, file 5, Winthrop L. Warner Papers: Mystic Seaport Museum archives, collection 259; 'Samuel Russell', in *Connecticut History Makers*, ed. Stevenson, ii; Tom M. Russell III to author, 6 Nov. 2006; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley, 2 vols. (New York, 1945), ii, 104.

Faith and family bonded Middletown's gentry. They prayed together at the Church of the Holy Trinity, an impressive Episcopalian sanctuary in the middle of Main Street, or the First Congregational Church of Christ, a tall brownstone edifice around the corner on Court Street. They dined at each other's residences; golfed together at the Edgewood Country Club; discussed world affairs, science, literature and history with Wesleyan faculty at the Middletown Conversation Club's biweekly dinners; and competed in regattas and power-boat races on Long Island Sound. After receiving private tutoring or graduating from selective private schools such as Groton, Choate or St Mark's, their sons usually enrolled at Yale University in New Haven or Trinity College in Hartford. Others matriculated at Harvard, Brown, Williams, MIT or Wesleyan. It was expected that at least one son in the family would return home after graduation to join the family firm, while daughters normally married the sons of other Middletown barons or propertied young men from elsewhere, who subsequently moved to Middletown or built a second residence there, thus perpetuating the city's privileged class. Hence Katherine Fearing Hubbard, daughter of the president of the Russell Manufacturing Company, Elijah Kent Hubbard, married Clarence Wadsworth, whose family had founded Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum, America's first major art museum. In similar fashion, William Walter Wilcox Jr, son of the founder of Wilcox, Crittenden & Co. of Middletown, one of the world's leading marine hardware manufacturers, married Elizabeth Crittenden, the co-founder's daughter.¹⁹

III

THE GENTRY AND THE NEWCOMERS

In the late nineteenth century, when Poles and Sicilians began to settle in Middletown, the local bourgeois women extended their hands to help.²⁰ 'The foreign population is increasing at a very

¹⁹ *Who's Who in New England*, ed. Marquis (1909), 511–12; *Who's Who in New England*, ed. Albert Nelson Marquis (Chicago, 1918), 32; *Connecticut History Makers*, Stevenson, i, 84.

²⁰ The industrialists had done the same when Irish immigrants came to Middletown in the mid nineteenth century: see Hall, *Middletown: Streets, Commerce, and People*, 28–30.

rapid rate and the . . . overcrowding is likely to become a menace to our city, both morally and physically. . . . Certain sections . . . are teeming with children and already the cry is raised of the lawlessness among the growing boys', declared Mrs Samuel Russell Jr the year her son was elected mayor. Consequently, she and her husband helped to found the Social Service League. After bringing up an expert from Yale to lecture on immigration and urban poverty, the League set up a milk station to reduce infant mortality. Within four years the League had several hundred dues-paying members, a thirty-one-member board of directors, officers, a professional social worker, and committees on charity, public health, recreation, entertainment, education and the prevention of poverty. The League also operated a second-hand clothing bureau. Women comprised the majority in each body. By 1917 the women had established a supervised playground, a day nursery, a summer school, a savings plan at the elementary schools, classes on infant health, a Charity Registration Bureau, and annual clean-up campaigns throughout the city — an impressive enterprise for a town with only twenty thousand residents. In 1918 they brought professionals from Yale's new Department of Public Health to town to determine the extent of typhoid fever, malaria and other infectious diseases in the city, and to propose solutions.²¹

Meanwhile, the men worked hard to prevent strikes and other labour protests. The most explosive year in American labour history came in 1919, when more than one-fifth of the labour force went on strike, including nearly fourteen thousand in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and more than twenty-seven thousand in Waterbury. Middletown, by contrast, remained quiet in 1919, for the largest employers in town reduced work hours and increased hourly wages by 10 per cent in June and July before radicals could mobilize the working men and women.²²

²¹ *Fourth Annual Report of the Social Service League, Middletown, Conn., 1911–1912*, unpaginated; *Fifth Annual Report of the Social Service League, Middletown, Conn., 1912–1913*, 10 ff.; *Eighth Annual Report of the Social Service League, Middletown Conn., 1916–1917*, 4–5; David Greenberg and Ira J. Joel, *Health Survey of Middletown, Connecticut* (New Haven, 1918); Beckert, 'Bourgeois Institution Builders', 106.

²² 'Russell Co. Gives Employees Shorter Week and Wage Raise', *Penny Press*, 9 June 1919, 1; 'Noiseless Company Goes on 50 Hour Week Basis', *Penny Press*, 14 July 1919, 8; 'Local Concerns Increase Wages', *Penny Press*, 22 July 1919, 4; 'Cigarmakers Go On Strike Here', *Penny Press*, 6 Sept. 1919, 1.

Middletown also suffered far less than most industrial towns during the Great Depression. According to government data, the employment rate in Middletown and its neighbour Portland fell by only 3 per cent between 1929 and late 1932, in contrast to other Connecticut towns such as New Britain, New London, Torrington, Bridgeport, Danbury, Stamford and Willimantic, which suffered job losses ranging from 25 to 41 per cent.²³ Even if the data is not entirely accurate, there is no doubt that Middletown workers suffered less than those in most industrial towns, and this was for several reasons. A large proportion of its labour force worked in state hospitals and other non-profit institutions, where employment was steadier; several of the major manufacturers in Middletown produced goods such as light bulbs and auto-brake linings that were less vulnerable than most to business fluctuation; and demand remained high for the typewriters manufactured by Remington Rand Company on North Main Street.

To aid those who did lose their jobs, the mayor established a committee chaired by James Bunce, the owner of Middletown's largest department store, with Mrs Katherine Wadsworth, Mrs Mary Wilcox, and the president of Wesleyan University on the executive board. They asked residents to contribute 1 to 2 per cent of their weekly earnings to provide work and assistance to the needy and encouraged those with private incomes to give larger amounts. Within a year the committee had raised \$50,000, funding jobs for four hundred unemployed men to cut wood, which heated the residences of impoverished families, and work for jobless women to repair old clothes and sew new garments which churches gave to needy children. As the mayor declared, the Committee on Unemployment 'not only relieved hunger and distress, but conserved the morale and manhood of our citizens'.²⁴

While Democrats trounced Republicans in mayoral contests in Hartford, New Haven and New Britain in 1934, Middletown voters elected a Republican — an Italian-American named Leo

²³ Connecticut Unemployment Commission, *Measures to Alleviate Unemployment in Connecticut: A Report to Wilbur L. Cross, December 1932* (Orange, 1932), 41.

²⁴ *Annual Message of the Mayor of the City of Middletown and Reports of the Various Departments and Report of the Supt. of School for the Period May 1, 1931 to April 30, 1932* (Middletown, 1932), 7–8: Middletown Room, Russell Library, Middletown.

Santangelo — as mayor that year. His victory demonstrated the gentry's success in incorporating Sicilians into their party, thus ensuring continued Republican dominance. The son of immigrants, who started out as a barber, pool-shop owner and member of the Connecticut Barber Commission, Santangelo established a real-estate agency in the city and was an 'exalted ruler' of the Elks in the state. He owned a handsome Victorian home not far from the barons' quarters and joined a Protestant church, which undoubtedly helped to put the gentry at ease. And the choice thrilled Middletown's Sicilians, who lit firecrackers and danced in the streets when he was elected.²⁵

Three weeks later, on Sunday, 21 October 1934, Colonel Clarence and Mrs Wadsworth's son Julius, who had become United States vice-consul in Shanghai, married Miss Cleome Carroll Miner, daughter of a noted Oregon artist and a deceased army aviator and descendant of Charles Carroll, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Following the ceremony in the Church of the Holy Trinity, one thousand guests attended the reception and dance at the Wadsworths' mansion. The Governor's Foot Guard Band entertained the guests.²⁶

IV

THE FLOOD

As late as January and February 1936, the barons' authority appeared secure. Unemployment rates remained low; the labourers were fairly quiet, and Russell Manufacturing's production and profits were on the rise. As 1936 proceeded, however, the city suffered a series of calamities that undermined the barons' power. The troubles began when the Connecticut River flooded its banks.

The Connecticut descends 2,200 feet from its upper reaches in the mountains near the Canadian border to Long Island Sound.

²⁵ 'Every Republican but One Is Swept into Office in Crushing Victory at the Polls', *Middletown Press*, 2 Oct. 1934, 1, 3; 'Shower Messages on Mayor-Elect', *Middletown Press*, 2 Oct. 1934, 1, 16.

²⁶ 'Couple Engaged in China Plan Bridal at Home', *Washington Post*, 23 Aug. 1934, 11; 'Vice Counsel Will Wed', *New York Times*, 30 Sept. 1934, N4; 'Mrs. Olin Miner Weds Saturday', *Washington Post*, 17 Oct. 1934, 13; 'Wadsworth-Miner', *New York Times*, 21 Oct. 1934; 'News Notes and Social Events: Wadsworth-Miner', *Middletown Press*, 22 Oct. 1934, 2.

A relatively shallow river, it is deepest alongside Middletown. The city's poorest residents lived next to the riverbank: the Sicilians in the northern section of the town, the Poles in the middle section, and East European Jews further south. Population density was far greater there than in the rest of the city.

Snow had piled unusually high in the New Hampshire and Vermont mountains in January and February 1936, only to thaw suddenly in early March, when the weather turned warm. As rain poured down, the river began to rise precipitously. By 19 March the Connecticut had reached thirty feet at Middletown, nearly six feet higher than its previous 1854 record. The result was the worst flood in Middletown's history.²⁷ All the apartment buildings and businesses east of the railroad tracks were at least partially under water. The Coginchaug River, which flows into the Mattabasset River in the northern part of the East Side, swamped factories, shops, and the basements and ground floors of immigrants' living quarters. The deluge was so great that several houses and stretches of railroad track were lifted from their foundations. Four railroad tank cars floated across the river into a quarry in Portland, while stones from the mine, some weighing fifteen tons, were washed away and a huge Sinclair Refinery oil tank toppled over. As mammoth ice blocks floated south, sewers caved in.

Middletown was hit harder by the flood than any other town in the state.²⁸ Like the poorest citizens of New Orleans in the 2005 Katrina flood, Middletown's most destitute residents refused to leave their quarters. Instead they carried their belongings to the rooftops, where they remained until police arrived in canoes and

²⁷ 'Crest of '54 Passed, Water Still Rising', *Middletown Press*, 20 Mar. 1936, 1.

²⁸ A thousand residents were displaced in Hartford by the flood, and seven hundred in Middletown. However, Middletown has a mile-long waterfront; Hartford's is seven times longer. Fully one-third of the residents of Cromwell, which borders Middletown, were displaced. 'River Rises after Night-Long Deluge', *Middletown Press*, 12 Mar. 1936, 1, 4; 'Connecticut Is a Flood Stage, Rising Steadily', *Middletown Press*, 13 Mar. 1936, 1 ff.; 'River Still Rising but Crest of Flood Here Is Expected This Evening', *Middletown Press*, 13 Mar. 1936, 1, 5; 'River Will Exceed 1927 Level in City; Ohio and Other Rivers Wild Torrents', *Middletown Press*, 19 Mar. 1936, 1, 5; 'Detour Comes as Result of Rising Water', *Middletown Press*, 20 Mar. 1936 1; 'Vast Loss Is Sustained by Flooded City', *Middletown Press*, 23 Mar. 1936, 1; Raymond H. Wilcox to Mayor and Members of the Common Council, 6 Apr. 1936: Selectman's Office, Common Council Collection, unprocessed, Russell Lib.; Middletown Fire Department Monthly Report, Mar. 1936: Selectman's Office, Common Council Collection, unprocessed, Russell Lib.; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1936*, 169.

insisted that they climb in. More than seven hundred people were evacuated from the East Side.²⁹ The refugees slept for nearly a month in cots in the State Armory on Main Street or in the Figli d'Italia club on Court Street.

A big flood — the worst in seventy-five years — had inundated Middletown in 1927. Unable to imagine an even worse deluge occurring, unable to co-operate with each other, and unwilling to appeal to Washington, state governments in New England had failed to prepare for the contingency. The politically conservative *Middletown Press* described the 1936 flood as beyond human control. The paper's editor, Elmer Hubbell, seemed excited, almost thrilled, by the event. 'Main Street was in darkness', he reported.

Drug stores, lunch rooms, tobacco stores and a few offices were illuminated by candles and presented a Bohemian atmosphere. Crowds roamed the street and flashlights were plentiful, a few had lanterns. Pedestrians stared intently at each other and it was hard to recognize acquaintances in the dark. The Chamber of Commerce and Red Cross headquarters teemed with activity.

While mourning the destruction of property, Hubbell expressed relief that no lives had been lost or stores looted, and he praised the local Red Cross, the American Legion and the Wesleyan fraternities for their help during the emergency.³⁰

Hubbell's homage reflected the gentry's admirable tradition of volunteerism. Yet he appeared oblivious to the suffering of the flood's principal victims, the East Side immigrants. Residing on a tree-lined hillside lane two miles from the river, he failed to understand the plight of the East Siders, who were not only driven from their dwellings and lost clothing, furniture and other possessions, but in many cases were rendered jobless, since immigrant-owned shops and the lower floors of the factories near the river had been flooded.³¹ Editor of the *Middletown Press* since 1919, Hubbell was a director of the Middletown Savings Bank, a member of the Edgewood Country Club and six Masonic lodges, and a past president of the Middletown

²⁹ 'Unprecedented Height of 30 Feet, 2 Inches Brings Disaster Here', *Middletown Press*, 21 Mar. 1936, 1–2.

³⁰ 'Unprecedented Height Reached', *Middletown Press*, 21 Mar. 1936, 12; 'Testing Times', *Middletown Press*, 21 Mar. 1936, 4.

³¹ 'Roads Are Cut Off, Must Leave Homes', *Middletown Press*, 19 Mar. 1936, 5; 'Red Cross on Job Directing Relief Program', *Middletown Press*, 20 Mar. 1936, 1, 5; 'Unprecedented Height of 30 Feet, 2 Inches Brings Disaster Here', *Middletown Press*, 21 Mar. 1936, 1–2; 'Vast Loss Is Sustained by Flooded City', *Middletown Press*, 23 Mar. 1936, 1; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1936*, 169.

Chamber of Commerce and the Community Chest. His inability to appreciate the immigrants' distress did not bode well for the gentry's future in the city.³²

V

THE REMINGTON RAND STRIKE

The spring flood was only the start of Middletown's calamities. No sooner had East Side residents returned to their homes, thrown out spoiled clothes and other possessions, and if possible resumed work than the Remington Rand Corporation, which had replaced Russell Manufacturing as the largest employer in the city, forced its 1,350 Middletown machinists to strike. Workers also struck at Remington Rand's factories in Syracuse, Ilion, Tonawanda and North Tonawanda, New York; in Norwood and Marietta, Ohio; and in Ontario, Canada. American labour historians have produced innumerable studies of the auto, rubber and steel strikes of 1936 and 1937, yet they have virtually ignored the Remington conflagration, which contemporary observers considered to be of equal if not greater significance.³³

³² 'Elmer Hubbell Dies', *Middletown Press*, 25 Sept. 1967, 1, 12.

³³ The sole exception is Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston, 1970), which devotes one page to the conflict. Three factors explain labour historians' failure to investigate the Remington Rand strike. First, nearly all of them concentrate on Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions, while most of the Remington Rand locals were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Second, labour historians have been particularly interested in unions and walkouts led by Communists, Trotskyists or Socialists, which was not the case with any of the Remington Rand strikes except, to some extent, that in the Tonawandas. Finally, the Remington Rand machinists lost. The only published account is Robert R. R. Brooks, *When Labor Organizes* (New Haven, 1937), ch. 5. Brooks was a young Yale professor and a graduate of Wesleyan. I have located three unpublished accounts: Marc Steven Kolopsky, 'Remington Rand Workers in the Tonawandas of Western New York, 1927–1956: A History of the Mohawk Valley Formula' (State Univ. of New York-Buffalo Ph.D. thesis, 1986), ch. 6; John Houston and Alex Kotlowitz, 'Class Conflict in Middletown: The Remington-Rand Strike of 1936' (essay, 1976, available in the Special Collections, Olin Library, Wesleyan University); and Gerald Goodrich, 'A Study of Labor Militancy in Central New York, Three Cases: Syracuse Building Trades, 1913; Rome General Strike, 1919; Syracuse Remington Rand Strike, 1936' (Kheel Archives, Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labor Relations). Although these studies provide valuable information, none used resources at Remington Rand, the AFL, the International Association of Machinists or the state mediation agencies' archives, or unpublished material in the National Labor Relations Board files at the National Archives. The Remington Rand strike deserves further research.

‘During the summer and autumn of 1936 Remington Rand, Inc., conducted one of the most elaborate strikebreaking programs in the history of the American labor movement’, Yale economist Robert R. Brooks wrote in 1937.³⁴ The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* all ran front-page stories about Remington Rand’s use of strike-breakers during the height of the conflict in the summer and autumn of 1936, and again in April 1937, when the National Labor Relations Board issued a ruling damning the management’s behaviour. *Time* magazine ran pieces on the strike, while the major papers in Hartford, Syracuse, Buffalo, Cincinnati and Ontario, the cities closest to Remington Rand factories, reported on the strike nearly every day for months. Many of the accounts concentrated on James H. Rand Jr, the company’s dynamic, photogenic, Harvard-educated president, who had devised new tactics to break strikes and destroy unions.

Formed in the early 1920s, Remington Rand produced adding machines, typewriters, office furniture, and filing and record-handling devices. In 1925 James Rand purchased the Noiseless Typewriter Company in Middletown’s North Main Street, bordering the Sicilian neighbourhood. White-collar work was rapidly expanding in those years, and Rand’s goal was to provide businesses with everything ‘from carbon paper to calculators’.³⁵ He succeeded, and his firm was the world’s largest office equipment manufacturer by the early 1930s. However, with an income of \$1.4 million in the year ending 31 March 1931, Remington Rand was far less profitable than its more specialized competitors, National Cash Register, Underwood Elliot Fisher, and International Business Machines.³⁶

Remington Rand decided that it had to slash labour costs to remain competitive. Yet when it cut piece rates in 1933, the machinists in Syracuse, Iliion, Norwood and Middletown, the company’s largest factories, enrolled in locally led ‘federal’ unions affiliated to the American Federation of Labor. The

³⁴ Brooks, *When Labor Organizes*, 133.

³⁵ Quoted in Kolopsky, ‘Remington Rand Workers in the Tonawandas’, 15. In the 1950s Remington Rand produced the first popular computer, ‘Univac’.

³⁶ ‘Rand in Command’, *Time*, 27 July 1931; Kolopsky, ‘Remington Rand Workers in the Tonawandas’, 22–38; James W. Cortada, *Before the Computer: IBM, NCR, Burroughs, and Remington Rand and the Industry They Created, 1865–1956* (Princeton, 1993), 115–16.

local unions consolidated into the AFL's District Council of Office Equipment Workers in May 1934, and, when James Rand refused to recognize the District Council as the workers' bargaining agent, called a strike. Rand conceded on wage rates, hours and working conditions after six weeks, but refused to sign a bargaining contract. Instead, he devised a plan known as the 'Mohawk Valley formula' to destroy the union.

Rand's strategy, which was subsequently adopted by Bethlehem Steel, Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, and Republic Steel, among other employers, called for plant management to intentionally provoke a strike. Management would then label the union's leaders 'agitators', threaten to shut down operations, and use the local papers, radio stations, politicians, police and courts to turn public opinion against the union, thus demoralizing the strikers. Next, managers would create a 'back-to-work' committee. At that point, Rand himself would arrive in town and dramatically reopen the plants. The plant manager would invite striking workers to return to the open-shop plant and would recruit replacements for those who remained intractable.³⁷

By mid 1935, workers at three additional Remington Rand factories — those in Marietta, Ohio, and Tonawanda and North Tonawanda, New York — had also joined unions.³⁸ In the autumn of 1935 Remington Rand managers began hinting that the company was planning to move some of its operations to a new factory in Elmira, New York, and other operations to Iliion. When the unions demanded a 20 per cent wage increase in the spring of 1936, management rejected the demand out of hand, even though profits had nearly doubled in the preceding nine months. They snubbed the union officers' call for negotiations and refused to confirm or deny that management was planning to relocate the business.³⁹

³⁷ See National Labor Relations Board, 'Original Decision of Remington Rand, Inc.', 13 Mar. 1937, 30–2: National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, RG 25, box 2867; also Benjamin Stolberg, *The Story of the CIO* (New York, 1938), 100–15; Benjamin Stolberg, 'What the NAM Said', *NAM Labor Relations Bull.*, no. 19 (12 Apr. 1937), 10.

³⁸ Unlike the other Remington Rand locals, the locals in Tonawanda were affiliated to United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, which had many communists on its staff and among its officers.

³⁹ Arthur Cottier, 'Office Equipment Earnings Increased Materially Last Year', *Wall Street Jl*, 2 Jan. 1936, 13; 'Remington Rand Reports 9-Month Net Nearly Doubled', *Wall Street Jl*, 20 Jan. 1936, 11; Kolopsky, 'Remington Rand Workers in the Tonawandas', ch. 5; Goodrich, 'Study of Labor Militancy in Central New York'.

The seven union locals responded by polling their members in early May 1936. According to union officers, 90 per cent voted to strike if management refused to negotiate. Management responded by conducting its own poll, which most workers boycotted. The minority who did participate said that they were not satisfied with conditions but did not want to walk out, results that James Rand interpreted as proof that outside agitators were manipulating the employees.

At this point the superintendent in Syracuse announced that Remington Rand was shutting down operations for two weeks and would move the bulk of its operations to Ilion unless the union agreed to the dismissal of sixteen workers, including the local union's officers. Polled by the union, the Syracuse members rejected this ultimatum. The Office Equipment Workers leaders declared that its members would strike on 26 May unless Rand or his empowered representative agreed to discuss the dispute. Rand refused to reply, and the walkout began as scheduled in Syracuse, Middletown and the other five towns.⁴⁰

For several weeks all went well for the union in Middletown. Virtually all blue-collar employees quit work. They picketed every day; large numbers turned out at strike meetings and support rallies; and unions in other parts of the state offered aid. Mayor Santangelo offered to mediate between the union and the company.

However, neither the mayor nor the union had ever faced a boss like James H. Rand, who was far more aggressive than Middletown's local employers. Although Russell Manufacturing, Omo Manufacturing, Rockfall Woolen Mill, and Wilcox, Crittenden & Co. resolutely opposed unions, the owners and officers lived in the city, had personal ties to the community, and, in the case of the Wilcoxes, even sent their sons to the public schools. James Rand, by contrast, had no historical connection with Middletown, nor any commitment to the city. Remington Rand was incorporated in Delaware, was headquartered in Manhattan, sold shares on the New York Stock Exchange, and had nine manufacturing plants spread across four states and Canada, and thus could play their employees off against each other.

Rand dismissed Mayor Santangelo's offer to mediate, dubbing the local machinists' union officers 'criminals'. Although he did

⁴⁰ Goodrich, 'Study of Labor Militancy in Central New York'.

agree to meet the mayor, Wesleyan University's president James McConaughy, and a group of local business leaders at his Manhattan headquarters, the session proved fruitless. Afterwards the company hired four infamous 'detective' firms — the Interstate Detective Agency, the William J. Burns International Detective Agency, the Railroad Audit & Inspection Company, and the Bergoff Service — to break the strike. Lodged in hotels in nearby Meriden, the brawlers began work on Memorial Day 1936, twelve months before the massacre at Republic Steel in South Chicago. Pretending to be millwrights, some of these men elbowed their way through the picket lines; others called strikers' parents and spouses, warning of dire consequences if the strikers did not return; several infiltrated the union's ranks; others stood in front of the plant, handguns strapped to their belts or rifles over their shoulders.⁴¹

The union nonetheless held fast. Consequently, Rand informed the mayor that his company intended to permanently close its Middletown factory. 'Because you have failed to give protection to honest workers . . . and have allowed radicals to coerce and intimidate them, the company has decided that Middletown is not a suitable community in which to carry on operations', he told Santangelo, who angrily replied that 'there are more policemen outside than there are men wanting to come in'.⁴² Seemingly unperturbed, Rand ordered the strike-breakers to drive trucks to the back doors of the factory, apparently to remove machinery.

On 26 June, four weeks after the strike began, James Rand came to Middletown. The plant's superintendent sent telegrams to the employees' residences announcing a mass meeting that afternoon. Foremen personally urged strikers to attend and radio stations advertised the meeting. After conferring with the mayor, Rand addressed the crowd — which consisted mainly of his purported 'millwrights', plus company salesmen and office

⁴¹ 'Labor Espionage and Strikebreaking', hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate, 74th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, DC, 1936), 163. For further testimony by labour spies employed by Remington Rand in Middletown, see *ibid.*, 142–66.

⁴² 'Rand Reshuffle', *Time*, 22 June 1936, 72; 'Middletown Strike Topic at Hearing', *Hartford Courant*, 25 Nov. 1936, 8; '\$55,000 Paid for Strike at Rand Plant', *Hartford Courant*, 26 Nov. 1936, 1, 27; "'Crying Nat" Testifies in Rand Hearing', *Hartford Courant*, 2 Dec. 1936, 1, 5; 'Former Rand Guard Tells of Shotguns', *Hartford Courant*, 4 Dec. 1936, 14.

employees, none of whom had gone on strike. Rand announced that the company had changed its plans: the Middletown factory would reopen. The black tarpaulin covering the building's windows and the 'For Sale' signs on North Main Street would be removed. Rand urged strikers to return to work. When he finished, the plant manager stepped to the microphone, offering bonuses to strikers willing to return.⁴³

The factory reopened on 29 June 1936. Since almost no machinists showed up, the general superintendent placed a full-page ad in the *Middletown Press* the next day. 'Where does your loyalty belong? — to Mr. Anderson [president of the local union]? Or to your family?' he asked the employees in print. 'I appeal to you on behalf of 1000 Middletown families — your wives, your sweethearts, your children. Put an end to this nonsense and come back to work if you ever intend to work again'. Remington Rand not only paid the highest wages in the area and provided the finest working conditions in New England, he declared, but it also had provided employment throughout the worst years of the depression, even though the company was losing money

Your company has maintained an 'open shop' where anyone can work . . . You will never again have to pay tribute to any union or other organization in order to be allowed to work here. This is an all-American plant . . . It is not now and never will be dominated by Russian communists or by Mr. Crofut [Syracuse union president] . . . You may not care what befalls the City of Middletown. You may not care what befalls Remington Rand. But I believe that you care a lot about what the Syracuse strike has done to you and yours.⁴⁴

On the opposite page an ad from the company's personnel manager announced: 'REMINGTON RAND IS BUILDING A NEW FACTORY ORGANIZATION around a nucleus of foremen and experienced hands'. He promised to give preference to residents of Middletown and the vicinity and not to discriminate between union and non-union applications.⁴⁵

James Rand's decision to keep the operations going in Middletown relieved the gentry, who justifiably feared that a shutdown would devastate the city. Although the *Middletown Press* did not try to stigmatize the union, as company-controlled papers had

⁴³ National Labor Relations Board, 'Original Decision of Remington Rand, Inc.', 63–6.

⁴⁴ 'A Final Message to the Middletown Employees of Remington Rand', *Middletown Press*, 30 June 1936, 6.

⁴⁵ 'Middletown Men and Girls', *Middletown Press*, 30 June 1936, 5.

done in western Pennsylvania steel towns in 1919, Hubbell did suggest — at first gently, later more firmly — that the strike had failed and the strikers should resume work. This appeal also failed, as the strikers remained stalwart. Management responded by obtaining a court injunction against large picket lines, while supervisors drove pickup trucks through the East Side, playing the ‘Star-Spangled Banner’ anthem and calling on immigrant workers to return to work.

Over the following two weeks, some weary strikers did indeed return, as did other residents anxious for jobs. As solidarity waned, violence began. By mid July strikers or provocateurs were slugging strike-breakers on Middletown streets almost every day. They overturned or set aflame scabs’ cars, and stoned the strike-breakers’ residences. One striker or saboteur threw a bottle filled with ammonia through the windshield of a blackleg’s car, seriously injuring the man. Another firebombed the shop of a Polish butcher whose daughter had taken a job at Remington Rand. If firemen hadn’t promptly arrived, the family sleeping upstairs might have burned to death. Meanwhile, strikers picketed Mayor Santangelo’s home, jeering whenever he opened his door. The Connecticut State Police twice used tear gas to disperse the crowds outside his house.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ ‘Remington Laborers’ Homes Stoned’, *Middletown Press*, 1 July 1936, 1, 5; ‘Violence Here Stirs Officials’, *Middletown Press*, 3 July 1936, 1, 5; ‘Mayor and Prosecutor Determined to Preserve Law and Order in City’, *Middletown Press*, 7 July 1936, 1; ‘Russo Found Guilty of Stone Throwing’, *Middletown Press*, 8 July 1936, 1; ‘Mayor to Enforce Law’, *Middletown Press*, 8 July 1936, 1; ‘Central Body Would Organize All City’, *Middletown Press*, 8 July 1936, 1; ‘Strike Zone Quiet Broken by Disorder’, *Middletown Press*, 22 July 1936, 1, 12; ‘Finds 2 Guilty of Violence in Strike Scuffle’, *Middletown Press*, 23 July 1936, 1, 9; ‘Stores and Home Are Stoned During Night’, *Middletown Press*, 24 July, 1936, 1; ‘Strikebreakers Demand Special Deputies, Hold City Lacking in “Guts”’, *Middletown Press*, 25 July 1936, 1, 5; ‘City Outraged by a Demonstration in Front of Mayor Santangelo’s Residence’, *Middletown Press*, 4 Aug. 1936, 1; ‘Remrand Worker Stoned’, *Middletown Press*, 5 Aug. 1936, 1, 12; ‘Suspicious Fire Being Probed’, *Middletown Press*, 8 Aug. 1936, 1; ‘Disturbance Cases Here Are Continued’, *Middletown Press*, 13 Aug. 1936, 1, 15; ‘Strike Disturbers Convicted in Court’, *Middletown Press*, 13 Aug. 1936, 1, 5; ‘Sokolowski’s Jail Term Is Suspended’, *Middletown Press*, 19 Aug. 1936, 1; ‘Remrand Worker Alleges Assault’, *Middletown Press*, 25 Aug. 1936, 1; ‘Arrest Rem Rand Co. Striker and Worker’, *Middletown Press*, 31 Aug. 1936, 1; ‘North End Now Quiet; 5 Arrested; Police Forced to Use Tear Gas to Rout Excited Crowd’, *Middletown Press*, 10 Sept. 1936, 1, 7; ‘Fortin Case Jury Speedily Selected’, *Middletown Press*, 11 Sept. 1936, 1; ‘Crowded Court Hears Simpson Read Decisions’, *Middletown Press*, 18 Sept. 1936, 11; ‘Remrand Workers’ Cars Are Damaged’, *Middletown Press*, 21 Sept. 1936, 1; ‘Two Strikers Are Held for Jeering’, *Middletown Press*, 23 Sept. 1936, 1.

The strike attracted national attention. Senator Robert La Follette brought the president of the Middletown machinists' local to Washington to testify about Remington Rand's tactics before his Subcommittee on Education and Labor. Sinclair Lewis, whose most recent novel⁴⁷ had warned about fascism in America, came to Middletown to scout out a story on Jimmy Rand. On 13 March 1937 the National Labor Relations Board ordered Remington Rand to re-hire four thousand employees, accusing the company of 'medieval ruthlessness', charging that it had put the lives of strikers and strike-breakers at risk in 'framed riots'.⁴⁸ Rand ignored the edict, opting instead to appeal through the federal courts. When the appeals failed, he closed the Middletown factory.

The Remington Rand strike revealed the limits of the Middletown bourgeoisie's power. Although those families had led the city for decades, they were unable to mediate between the corporate interloper and the union or to re-establish peace on the city's streets once Remington Rand resumed operations. At the peak of violence in September, a committee of gentry appealed to Governor Wilbur Cross to declare martial law and send the National Guard to Middletown. Yet the governor declined, for he was a Democrat pressured by the Connecticut Federation of Labor to remain neutral. And if these setbacks were not humiliating enough, the caddies went on strike three hours before the state golf tournament at the Edgewood Country Club, demanding higher pay.⁴⁹

VI

A CHANGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Battered and distressed, Middletown's citizens turned to politics in the autumn of 1936 to restore calm and reconsider who should

⁴⁷ Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here* (New York, 1935).

⁴⁸ 'It Happens Here under WPA Aegis', *Hartford Courant*, 1 Dec. 1936, 6; National Labor Relations Board, 'Original Decision of Remington Rand, Inc.', 98-100; Louis Stark, 'US Board Orders Remington Rand to Re-Employ 4,000', *New York Times*, 15 Mar. 1937, 1, 6; 'Remington Rand Defies US Board', *New York Times*, 16 Mar. 1937, 1, 6; *Middletown Press*, 1 July 1936, 5.

⁴⁹ 'Governor Watching Situation', *Middletown Press*, 29 July 1936, 1; 'State Mediation Board Failed in Effort to End Local Strike Amicably', *Middletown Press*, 21 Aug. 1936, 1, 13; 'Edgewood Caddies Reach an Agreement', *Middletown Press*, 12 Aug. 1936, 1; 'Golf Bag Carriers Go on Strike Again', *Middletown Press*, 14 Aug. 1936, 1. See also Wilbur L. Cross, *Connecticut Yankee: An Autobiography* (New Haven, 1943), 353.

govern. Although Connecticut's larger cities held elections for both national and municipal offices on the first Tuesday of November, it was different in Middletown and most of the other smaller towns, which held their municipal elections in early October, followed by elections for state and national offices four weeks later. The municipal election in Middletown on 5 October 1936 proved to be significant, not only for that city but for the state, the region — even the nation.

Middletown's bankers and manufacturers adamantly opposed Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. From the beginning, the administration had directed a disproportionate share of the new federal spending to Southern, Appalachian and Western states, the regions then most supportive of the Democratic Party. The reallocation of federal funds hurt Connecticut, where labour costs were highest and support for the Republicans was most firm.⁵⁰ In May 1934, while the president of the US Chamber of Commerce was still describing Roosevelt's economic programmes as 'mostly sound', E. Kent Hubbard Jr of Middletown led a coterie of Connecticut industrialists to Washington to protest against proposed new labour and economic legislation. Scion of one of Middletown's founding families, Hubbard not only sat on the boards of Russell Manufacturing and five other Middletown firms, he was president of the Manufacturers' Association of Connecticut and vice-president of the National Industrial Conference Board, a committee of America's top corporate executives. Led by Hubbard, Middletown's principal manufacturers and two hundred other Connecticut industrialists chartered a train to Washington to lobby against Senator Wagner's proposed labour relations act, federal unemployment insurance, stock market regulation, tariff reduction, and Senator Hugo Black's thirty-hour working week plan.⁵¹

Yet, while they despised Roosevelt's New Deal, Middletown's bankers and manufacturers were well disposed towards the Southern and Eastern European immigrants, who by 1930

⁵⁰ William Edward Leuchtenburg, *Flood Control Politics: The Connecticut River Problem, 1927–1950* (New York, 1953), 11, 14–15, 71.

⁵¹ *Middletown and Portland Directory 1934*, 23, 157; 'Business Leaders Approve New Deal', *Middletown Press*, 2 May 1934, 1; *Middletown Press*, 5 Apr. 1934, 1, 5; Conversation Club Records, 1000–20, box 20, Minutes of 1937–47, p. 53; Wesleyan University, Middletown, Olin Library, Special Collections and Archives; *Who's Who in New England*, ed. Marquis (1938), 665–6.

comprised the majority of the town's residents. They had established an Italian-American Republican Club before the Great War, a decade before the Democrats formed a similar committee. Kept out of jobs and viewed with contempt by the Irish, who controlled the police and fire departments and the Democratic Party in Middletown and the Roman Catholic Diocese in Hartford, the new immigrants flocked to the Republican Party.⁵² In 1918 two Sicilian businessmen were elected to Middletown's Common Council on the Republican ticket.⁵³ The Republicans' nomination of Leo Santangelo for mayor in autumn 1934 marked a turning point in the town's history. After the disastrous strike, violence in the streets, and harassment outside his house, Santangelo quite understandably decided not to run again in 1936. The Republicans consequently chose a local Polish-American attorney and assistant state attorney-general, Bernard Kosicki, as their candidate for mayor. To retain the votes of Italian-Americans, the Republicans nominated an Italian-American state highway inspector for a seat on the City Council and formed an Italian-American Republican Women's Club. They also put Henry Bacon and C. Marsden Bacon, whose forebears were among the founders of the town, on their slate.

Despite the balanced ticket, the Republicans' prospects in Middletown in the October 1936 municipal elections were dismal. Although half the delegates at Middletown's Central Labor Union were registered Republicans, after the flood and the strike, none of the union men was willing publicly to endorse the party's candidates for office. 'I hardly could believe my eyes. But it is really a fact: The Republicans are catering to the Rem-Rand strikers', one resident wrote to the *Middletown Press*. 'What a job it must be. I mean to swallow one's pride and principles and a few other things. Truly, many and strange are the ways of politicians'. Several representatives on the Central Labor Union proposed nominating a Labor Party candidate for mayor.

⁵² The annual reports issued by of the mayor of Middletown listed the name of every employee in those departments. The Protestant-led Republican Party also recruited Southern Italian candidates in New Haven and Bridgeport. See Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, 2nd edn (New Haven, 2005), 38–9, 46–7, 110; Bucki, *Bridgeport's Socialist New Deal*, 86.

⁵³ 'Rev. J. P. Donovan Marshal, Issues Order of Parade', *Middletown Press*, 9 Oct. 1920, 1.

After a heated debate, the delegates initially decided not to endorse any candidates for mayor or the Common Council.⁵⁴

Roosevelt's campaign manager, Postmaster-General James A. Farley, followed the turmoil in Middletown. Although Roosevelt had received more votes than the incumbent president Herbert Hoover in Middletown in 1932, Hoover captured the state of Connecticut's electoral votes, just as the Republican presidential candidates had done in every election except one since 1896.⁵⁵ However, the margin was closer in 1932 than before, and Farley thought that Roosevelt might be able to capture the state in November 1936. To check his hunch, he surveyed informed Connecticut Democrats during the summer and early autumn. Reports were mixed. The state's economy was improving, Farley was informed, with textile mills running overtime. Factory foremen and department heads who in the past had pressured workers to vote Republican, 'this year . . . are going along with the President', attorney Thomas J. Dodd of New Haven, the future US senator, told Farley, 'and while they are not in a position to make their attitude publicly known, the workers under them have been quietly informed'. Moreover, the Republicans in the state were bickering amongst themselves over whom to nominate for governor.

However, not all augured well for Connecticut Democrats. Works Projects Administration jobs were distributed by local governments, and Republicans controlled patronage in most Connecticut towns. Even more disturbing, 'Connecticut is a hot-bed of the Coughlin campaign', the chairman of the Meriden Town

⁵⁴ Kurt Schwarzkopf, 'Go Voting', *Middletown Press*, 2 Oct. 1936, 12; 'Unions Will Vote GOP Repudiation', *Middletown Press*, 30 Sept. 1936, 1; letters to the editor from Charles R. Anderson and John W. Nyman, *Middletown Press*, 2 Nov. 1936; telegram from J. M. Hagel, Secretary, Middletown Central Labor Union, to Daniel Tobin, US Secretary of Labor, 20 Oct. 1936: folder 'CT', box 27, Office File 200, Trip of the President, 1936, Presidential Campaign, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. Calls for a Labor Party were fairly widespread in unionized, militant industrial towns in 1935–6. For examples, see Eric Leif Davin and Staughton Lynd, 'Picket Line and Ballot Box: The Forgotten Legacy of the Local Labor Party Movement, 1932–1936', *Radical Hist. Rev.*, xxii (1979–80), 433; Eric Leif Davin, 'Blue Collar Democracy: Class War and Political Revolution in Western Pennsylvania, 1932–1937', *Pennsylvania Hist.*, lxxvii (2000), 240.

⁵⁵ *American Presidential Campaigns and Elections*, ed. William G. Shade and Ballard C. Campbell, 3 vols. (Armonk, 2003), ii, 568, 585, 602, 619, 639, 656, 675, 694, 713, 731. The exception was 1912, when the Republican majority split, thus allowing the Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, to capture a plurality of the votes. Middletown's business leaders backed William Howard Taft.

Committee told Farley. 'If the election were to be held at this time, . . . [we] would be beaten by about 20,000'. Former New Haven mayor David Fitzgerald dubbed the Coughlinites' National Union for Social Justice a 'militant force'. Tom Dodd was even more anxious. 'The Union for Social Justice is . . . our greatest concern because . . . it is made up almost one hundred percent of persons who would ordinarily vote for the Democratic ticket', he told Farley. 'State Democrats who are unhappy or dissatisfied . . . are turning to the Union for Social Justice as a place to go without voting the Republican ticket'.⁵⁶

The danger posed by the Coughlinites led Farley to pay special attention to Middletown. At that time, 140 of Connecticut's 169 cities, towns and villages held their municipal elections in October. These were nearly all small boroughs. However, as mentioned above, Stamford and Middletown, which were somewhat larger, also held municipal elections in early October, a month before the national and state elections. Stamford ordinarily went Democratic; Middletown to the Republicans. Hence Farley's eyebrows rose when he saw the Democrats capture every single office in the city from the mayor all the way down to town constables on Monday, 5 October 1936. The *Middletown Press*, a paper friendly to the Republicans, described the local results as 'a tidal wave . . . which surprised even those who had been most optimistic of success at the polls'.⁵⁷

In truth the Democrats had not prevailed throughout the city. At that time Middletown was divided into four electoral and assessment districts. The Republican candidates won in three of the four: Westfield, a semi-rural section where the Ku Klux Klan had held konklaves in 1919–22 and the Russell family owned large

⁵⁶ John M. Bailey to Farley, 15 Sept. 1936; David E. Fitzgerald to Farley, 22 July 1936; Edward J. Daley to Farley, 9 Sept. 1936; Paul R. Connery to Farley, 11 Sept. 1936: all in box 519, Democratic National Committee Papers, Correspondence of James A. Farley 1936, folder 'Al-Ind', Franklin D. Roosevelt Lib. Farley to Paul R. Connery, 19 Sept. 1936; Frank W. Kraemer to Farley, 18 Sept. 1936; William M. Citron to Farley, 3 Sept. 1936; Matthew A. Daly to Farley, 15 Sept. 1936; Thomas J. Dodd Jr to Farley, 14 Sept. 1936; Frank W. Kraemer to Farley, 16 Sept. 1936: all in box 36, Official File 300, Democratic National Committee Papers, Correspondence of James A. Farley, Chairman, 1936, folder 'Conn. and Del.', Franklin D. Roosevelt Lib. 'Coughlin League Is Organized in City', *Middletown Press*, 6 Feb. 1936, 1; 'Middletown Man Is Lemke Ticket Elector', *Middletown Press*, 1 Sept. 1936, 1; 'Union of Social Justice Rally Announced', *Middletown Press*, 17 Oct. 1936, 12.

⁵⁷ 'Brown Leads Democrats to Smashing Victory, Defeating Opponents by 487', *Middletown Press*, 6 Oct. 1936, 1, 12.

swathes of land; South Farms, where the Hubbards were major landowners; and the Wesleyan University neighbourhood, home to professors, other professionals, storeowners, office clerks and skilled workers. Democratic strength was concentrated in the district between Main Street and the river, where the large majority of Sicilians, Poles and Eastern European Jews lived, and this was the most densely inhabited district.

Forty-eight hours after the Democratic triumph in Middletown's municipal election, Farley announced that the President would campaign in Boston, Hartford, Middletown, New Haven, Bridgeport and Stamford.⁵⁸ Roosevelt arrived on 22 October, accompanied by his wife Eleanor, who ordinarily shunned such trips. They rode through Middletown's Sicilian neighbourhood; passed St John's Church, historic sanctuary of the Irish; slowed momentarily at St Aloysius' Hall, a temperance hall temporarily turned headquarters for the Remington Rand strikers; and continued down a flag-draped Main Street, accompanied by the blaring trumpets and saxophones of high-school marching bands and the beat of an American Legion post's drum corps. Twenty thousand men, women and children lined the street, cheering, yelling, whistling and ringing bells. As the presidential car neared the speaking platform, the sun broke through heavy clouds. In gracious brief remarks, FDR expressed great sympathy for the victims of the flood and promised, 'We're going to take care of this little creek'. This trip across Connecticut twelve days before the election was 'one of the most frenzied episodes of the campaign', *Time* magazine reported in reference to the ecstatic crowds that greeted FDR.⁵⁹

The sole mishap — if in fact it was an accident and not an intentional snub — occurred near Wesleyan University. According to the Secret Service, not only had some Wesleyan students hung Alf Landon posters on trees and poles on High Street, but one fraternity boy had put a Communist flag in his window,

⁵⁸ 'Roosevelt Plans to Visit Here Soon', *Middletown Press*, 9 Oct. 1936, 1.

⁵⁹ 'Roosevelt Here Today for Campaign Talk . . . Opens Tours of State', *Hartford Courant*, 22 Oct. 1936, 1–2; 'Roosevelt Talks Here as Thousands Cheer, Motors across State', *Hartford Courant*, 23 Oct. 1936, 1, 8; Alvin Von Auw to the author, 17 Dec. 2006; Tom M. Russell III to the author, 3 Jan. 2007; James A. Farley, *Behind the Ballots: The Personal History of a Politician* (San Diego, 1938), 317. Roosevelt did not deliver on his promise, as renewed depression, war and wrangling in the Congress and in state legislatures prevented action: Leuchtenburg, *Flood Control Politics*, ch. 13.

another had a Nazi swastika in his windowpane, and fights broke out when other students tried to tear down the Landon posters. Some students were reported to be lying in wait with firecrackers. Forewarned, the Secret Service commander decided that the President and First Lady should avoid the campus on their way to and from the rally. Although quite liberal today, Wesleyan University was not friendly territory for liberal politicians back then. A chemistry professor chaired Middletown's Republican Party Committee, the university's president James McConaughy sat on the Connecticut State Republican Party's central committee, and the bulk of the students favoured the Grand Old Party.⁶⁰ According to a straw poll taken by the college paper three days before Roosevelt's visit, Wesleyan students favoured Landon over FDR by nearly three to one.

When questioned about the brouhaha by reporters the following day, McConaughy scoffed at the idea that anyone from the university would have insulted President Roosevelt. 'No one, I am sure, ever dreamed of discourtesy on High Street. We are amazed — and amused — that the secret service men should have refused to have Mr Roosevelt drive beside our campus for fear of possible "booming"', McConaughy told reporters, adding, 'I feel certain [the President] would have received from all of us the courtesy due him'.⁶¹

The mockery implicit in McConaughy's final words suggests his actual opinion: the university's president loathed Roosevelt. Five days after the President's trip, he participated in a debate on the question 'Does the Underlying Philosophy Warrant the Continuation of the New Deal?' before an audience of three hundred in the ballroom of Hartford's Hotel Bond. The opposing speaker was the Right Reverend John A. Ryan of Catholic

⁶⁰ McConaughy was subsequently elected lieutenant-governor and governor of the state.

⁶¹ 'Governor Alf M. Landon Victorious in College Body Presidential Poll by Decisive Three-to-One Majority', *Argus*, 22 Oct. 1936, 1, 3; 'Route Shift Disappoints Big Crowd: Roosevelt Line of March May Have Been Due to Pro-Landon Wesleyan Students', *Hartford Courant*, 23 Oct. 1936, 25; J. Russell Ward *et al.*, 'Regrettable Incident', *Argus*, 30 Oct. 1936, 4; 'Thousands Crowd Main Street to See President', *Middletown Press*, 22 Oct. 1936, 1, 17; '4,000 School Children Miss Seeing President', *Middletown Press*, 22 Oct. 1936, 1, 7; 'Fix Blame for Change in Presidential Route', *Middletown Press*, 23 Oct. 1936, 1, 15; 'Frenzy in New England', *Time*, 2 Nov. 1936, 7–8.

University, an ardent liberal. In his remarks McConaughy denounced the New Deal for

the glorification of waste, its lack of planning . . . the concentration of power in one place and largely in one man's hands, its efforts to change conditions by revolution rather than by evolution, its tendency to make people think of the federal government as a Santa Claus and its development of class antagonism, its tremendous costs and the resultant huge increases in national debt, its deception and breaking of contracts, as instanced in the gold devaluation, its philosophy and practice of meeting obligations by borrowing, and its failure to work.⁶²

McConaughy's remarks were typical of the gentry in Middletown and similar towns throughout New England and the mid-Atlantic region at that time. They believed that society was divided into distinct classes, only one of which had the knowledge and judgement required to govern, and that conditions should be improved slowly, at the local level, by the personal efforts of men and women of good will, not by 'communistic social planners', 'corrupt labor unions' and 'intrusive' federal agencies. Through years of conscientious effort, they maintained, the local bourgeoisie had kept Middletown healthier, cleaner and calmer than most industrial American towns. They were its legitimate leaders.

Yet following the March flood, the Remington Rand strike and the violence in the streets, Middletown's barons lost authority. On Tuesday, 3 November 1936, Franklin Roosevelt captured 5,789 votes in Middletown — nearly 62 per cent of the total vote. The Republican candidate, Governor Alfred Landon, received 3,596 votes, only 37 per cent. Roosevelt's margin of victory in the city in November 1936 was more than four times greater than it had been in 1932. The bulk of Roosevelt's votes came from the East Side, the new immigrants' home turf. Despite Tom Dodd's apprehension, the National Union for Social Justice's presidential candidate, Rep. William Lemke, received only 109 votes in Middletown, barely 1 per cent of the total cast.⁶³

Elmer Hubbell, editor-in-chief of the *Middletown Press*, acknowledged the magnitude of the Republicans' rout. The performance of the Democrats in Middletown and throughout Connecticut, he wrote, 'breaks all records for party majorities',

⁶² 'Fix Blame for Change in Presidential Route', *Middletown Press*, 23 Oct. 1936, 1; 'New Deal is Debated by Noted Educators', *Middletown Press*, 27 Oct. 1936, 1, 12.

⁶³ 'President's Margin of 2,200', *Middletown Press*, 4 Nov. 1936, 1, 6; 'City Casts its Ballots for the Roosevelt Slate', *Middletown Press*, 9 Nov. 1932, 1, 6; *American Presidential Campaigns and Elections*, ed. Shade and Campbell, ii, 750.

including 1896, when the Republican William McKinley thumped William Jennings Bryan by fifty thousand votes in Connecticut. Back in '96, Hubbell declared, Connecticut's voters had rejected the populist Democrat. 'Today, it surrenders to the influence of advanced ideas, vast expenditures and heavy debt makings', he conceded, adding, 'we now know the meaning of the enormous [increased] registration [in Middletown and other cities with many immigrants]. The nation had an enormous desire to approve the Roosevelt way'.⁶⁴

VII

THE FALL OF THE BARONS OF MIDDLETOWN

Demoralized and defeated politically, Middletown's barons gave up, abandoning first their leadership posts and, soon after, the city itself. Several of the older prominent figures — Bishop Acheson, T. M. Russell, Walter William Wilcox Sr and Colonel Wadsworth — passed away between 1935 and 1941. When 'Mac' Russell died, his son Thomas M. Russell Jr was appointed vice-president of Russell Manufacturing, assumed his father's place on the boards of Middletown's banks, and was elected to the Connecticut General Assembly during the Republican revival of November 1938. However, he never became engaged in public affairs to the same extent as his father. The family donated their High Street mansion to Wesleyan University in 1936, relocating to the city's outskirts. In the early 1950s they departed altogether, moving to Old Lyme, a posh town on the Long Island shore.

Other gentry followed suit, reducing their newly increased federal tax liability by donating their residences to the university or selling them to upwardly mobile Jewish and Italian families. Thus William W. Wilcox Sr, president of Wilcox, Crittenden & Co., gave his High Street residence to a Wesleyan fraternity, and his son, the vice-president of the firm, sold his to the Jewish owner of a chain of luggage stores before fleeing the city. The next generation of Wilcox men quit their world-renowned ship equipment business entirely. One went into banking in Hartford; another into investment management in Old Lyme; a third became a physician; the youngest became a minister. The Wilcox men

⁶⁴ 'State Results', and 'Roosevelt', both in *Middletown Press*, 4 Nov. 1936, 4.

were not unique. Thomas M. Russell Jr and E. Kent Hubbard Jr's sons also abandoned Middletown and manufacturing. Although several of the barons' widows — most notably Eleanor Acheson — remained in the city after their husbands died, others left — including Katherine F. Wadsworth, who moved to the family's brownstone on Manhattan's East Side.⁶⁵

The degree to which the city had changed became clear when Middletown celebrated its three hundredth anniversary in September 1950. The city organized a week-long fête, featuring parades, dances, a fife and drum corps march, sports contests, fireworks, a race down the Connecticut River, and a costume ball. The celebration came to a climax on Friday, 15 September, with the dedication of a new highway that separated the downtown and East Side areas from the river, thus protecting the city from floods. The road was christened Acheson Drive, in honour of the late Revd Edward Campion Acheson and his son Dean, the city's most famous citizen.

Dean Acheson had hoped to attend the dedication. However, the second week of September proved to be a dreadful time for the secretary of state. Not only was China threatening to cross the Yalu River and attack General MacArthur's forces, but France and Britain were resisting US plans to re-arm West Germany, and prominent Republicans were calling on the President to fire Acheson, whom they blamed for the Communist invasion of South Korea. Fortunately, the secretary's mother, Eleanor G. Acheson, was on hand to receive the homage, as were his brother and nephew, who came up from Washington. 'This is an unexpected honor', Mrs Acheson declared. 'We are all honored over this wonderful tribute to my husband and to all my family'.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ 'Wesleyan Is Given Mansion, Old Samuel Russell Estate, Local Landmark', *Middletown Press*, 29 June 1936, 1, 7; 'City Briefs', *Middletown Press*, 1 Oct. 1936, 22; 'Wesleyan Acquires Ex-Governor's House', 2 Mar. 1936, 1; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1929*, 290; *Middletown and Portland Directory 1940*, 471, 511–12, 518; 'Acheson to Visit City Today if Time Permits', *Hartford Courant*, 15 Sept. 1950, 24; 'Middletown Celebrates: City Begins Observance of its 300th Anniversary', *New York Times*, 10 Sept. 1950, 96. For the decline of the Protestant elite in Bridgeport, see Bucki, *Bridgeport's Socialist New Deal*, 188 ff. For discussion of this general phenomenon, see E. Digby Baltzell, 'The WASP's Last Gasp', in his *The Protestant Establishment Revisited*, ed. Howard G. Schneiderman (Piscataway, 2000).

⁶⁶ 'Policy on China', *New York Times*, 3 Sept. 1950, 67; 'Stevenson Hits Rumors', *New York Times*, 10 Sept. 1950, 55; 'Three, Twelve, Fifty-Nine', *New York Times*, 10 Sept. 1950, 135; 'Middletown Celebrates', *New York Times*, 10 Sept. 1950, 96; 'Secretary [Louis Johnson] Resigns', 13 Sept. 1950, 1; 'G.O.P. Also Wants Acheson

(cont. on p. 32)

However, the barons' children did not show up for the 1950 tercentennial, neither participating in the planning nor appearing at the events. Consequently, the mayor, a Wesleyan University professor, asked other residents to take their place. He appointed the Jewish owner of a local oil burner firm to chair the Tercentenary Celebration Committee. The other executive committee members were a local magistrate, also Jewish, the pastor of an African-American church, the manager of a local galoshes factory, the Polish Republican attorney who had unsuccessfully run for mayor back in 1936, an Irish-Catholic baker active in local Democratic politics, an accountant, a physician, the executive secretary of the local Red Cross chapter, and Victor Butterfield, a liberal philosophy professor who had succeeded McConaughy as Wesleyan's president. The 225 citizens who served on the various tercentenary committees were from even more modest backgrounds and, aside from Wesleyan faculty and administrators, were mainly Irish, Polish, Sicilian or Jewish.⁶⁷ Except for Thomas M. Russell Jr and his wife, who sat on the Water and Receptions Committees but soon moved away, and Winthrop Warner, the naval architect who had designed Russell's yacht, none of the barons or their children participated in any way.

Thus the mid twentieth century marked a juncture in Middletown history. Before the mid 1930s, relations in the town had been 'slightly feudal', as John P. Marquand termed a similar southern New England town in his 1955 novel *Sincerely, Willis Wayde*.⁶⁸ Following the 1936 cataclysm, new leaders came to the fore: the children and, later, grandchildren of the Irish, Italian, Polish and Jewish immigrants who had worked in the barons' mills or whose local businesses had catered to the gentry's needs. Socially speaking, the city's new leaders were middle class and professional — local attorneys, storekeepers, high-

(n. 66 cont.)

Dismissed', *New York Times*, 14 Sept. 1950, 13; 'Connecticut Drives Opened Honoring Acheson Family', *New York Times*, 16 Sept. 1950, 7; 'Acheson Work Kept Him in Hotel 75 Hours', *New York Times*, 16 Sept. 1950, 8.

⁶⁷ Hall, *Middletown: Streets, Commerce, and People*, 5–7; 'Middletown Tercentenary, 1659–1950', 41–5, pamphlet from the Modern Ephemeral collection: folder 'Centennials-Middletown-Tercentenary',? Middletown Room, Russell Lib.; *Middletown, Portland and Cromwell Directory 1950*, 228, 246, 306, 361, 402, 459, 507, 515, 634, 652.

⁶⁸ Marquand, *Sincerely, Willis Wayde*, 147.

school teachers and real-estate agents, a class that the Yale political scientist Robert Dahl termed 'ex-plebes'.⁶⁹

The new leaders' approach to politics and governance differed utterly from the barons' *noblesse oblige*. To finance their political campaigns, they relied on donations from affluent (and sometimes corrupt) building contractors and local labour unions (at first the building trades, after the 1960s the municipal employees' unions). To rouse support on election days, they depended on the labour unions, the Sicilian, Polish and Irish fraternal organizations and family networks, and the Black churches. To balance city budgets, they relied on state and federal grants, regardless of the impact on government deficits, as Wesleyan's president James McConaughy had feared.

VIII

THE END OF THE WASP ASCENDANCY

The upheaval in Middletown would be of no more than local significance had it been confined to that city. However, this was not the case. With the benefit of hindsight we can see that the violent change in that small city was an early, dramatic instance of forces that would transform the leadership of government and private institutions throughout the United States in the mid to late twentieth century.

The change began in 1933, when the new president of Harvard University, James Conant, a chemist of modest background, persuaded the Board of Overseers to accept the principle of meritocracy for hiring of faculty. Other exclusive universities and colleges followed suit. The Second World War and the protracted conflict with the Soviet Union that followed put a premium on recruitment of talented young professionals regardless of their ethnicity or religion. The anti-Semitic prejudices common among the white 'Anglo-Saxon' Protestant elite for decades waned after the US Third Army liberated Buchenwald and Dachau in April 1945, and the American public viewed photographs and newsreels of gaunt survivors and piles of corpses in movie theatres and magazines. *Gentleman's Agreement*, Elia Kazan's film about the ban on Jews in a rich Connecticut town, won the Oscar for best film of the year in 1947, and New York and

⁶⁹ Dahl, *Who Governs?* (1st edn), 11 ff.

several other states enacted laws prohibiting religious and racial discrimination in employment. In this milieu Jews began to be appointed to the faculties of selective universities, permitted to purchase homes in upscale neighbourhoods, and admitted to membership of exclusive social clubs, first one at a time, and later in larger numbers. When Senator Joseph McCarthy held hearings to expose subversion in the US State Department and other federal bureaus, he attacked not Jews, but Anglo-Protestant graduates of Harvard and Yale, most particularly Dean Acheson.

The decline of anti-Semitism was only the beginning. As late as the 1960s, elite white Anglo-Protestant men held the principal positions of power throughout the United States — the key cabinet posts (State, Defense, Justice, Treasury) in every presidential administration; board positions and chief executive offices at the largest banks, railroad firms, insurance companies and manufacturing firms; and president and provost positions at the Ivy League colleges. However, in the aftermath of the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and the subsequent introduction of affirmative action programmes, children of the Anglo-Protestant elite often felt ashamed of their background and family status, and fewer sons assumed their fathers' posts as business and community leaders. 'Whereas most members of the second WASP generation had been able to keep up their ancestral lands and their large houses, the third generation — without servants for the first time in countless decades — was no longer interested in or able to do so', E. Digby Baltzell remarked in 1976.⁷⁰

With old-style anti-Semitism and racism discredited, the composition of student bodies at America's prestigious colleges and universities became much more heterogeneous, and their alumni sought positions and influence. Not only Jews but also Irish, Italians, Blacks and other previously excluded groups were selected for high positions in business, government, universities and other non-profit institutions, as were thousands of highly talented Anglo-Protestant women whose mothers had been confined to charitable work, home-making, teaching and nursing.

In the process the bourgeoisie was transformed. By the early twenty-first century a fair number of women and Jews, in

⁷⁰ E. Digby Baltzell, 'The Protestant Establishment Revisited', *American Scholar*, xlv, (1976), repr. in his *Protestant Establishment Revisited*, ed. Schneiderman, 84.

addition to two African-Americans, an Armenian-American and a Korean-American, had been appointed to the presidencies of elite schools including Yale University, Harvard University, Dartmouth College, Brown University, Princeton University, and the University of Pennsylvania. Similar developments occurred in the upper reaches of the older corporations, with DuPont's board of directors appointing a Jew as its president, Chrysler's selecting an Italian-American man as their CEO, IBM's appointing a white woman, and Xerox's board an African-American woman. The current US secretary of state is a white Protestant woman. Her immediate predecessors were a Black woman, a Black man, and a Jewish woman. In 2008 the majority of American voters pulled their levers for an African-American senator as president of the United States. Barack Obama, in turn, nominated an African-American as attorney-general, an Italian-American as secretary of defense, and Puerto Rican and Jewish women to the US Supreme Court. When the court reconvened in October 2010, three of the nine justices were women; six of the justices were Roman Catholics; the remaining three were Jewish — the last representative of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite, Justice John Paul Stevens, the son of a Chicago hotel and insurance magnate, having retired. Equally significant has been the migration of capital and people from the North to the South and West, where evangelical Protestants became increasingly assertive in business and politics. In the early twenty-first century the Walmart Corporation of Bentonville, Arkansas, the gigantic retailer which promotes an evangelical ethos amongst its managers and employees, displaced General Motors as the largest corporation in the United States.

This hardly means that economic equality has arrived in America. On the contrary, wealth has become more inequitable in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. What it does signify is that the WASP Ascendancy was dethroned as the bourgeoisie diversified. Like the abolition of slavery, the enfranchisement of women, the prohibition of liquor, the right of workers to join unions, the desegregation of commerce in Southern states, the campaigns to permit (and then to outlaw) abortion, and the current campaign to allow gay men and women to marry, this transformation began at the local level, in many places, and, given the federal system, inevitably required decades to complete.

If we look at Middletown, Connecticut, it is possible to see how this transformation began. In 1936 a huge flood forced immigrant families from their homes, a bellicose corporate interloper tore asunder the ties that had held the city's wealthy Anglo-Protestant employers and their immigrant employees together for a century, and the Irish, Poles, Sicilians and Jews overcame their differences to vote the Republicans out of office. In the following decade the barons' children and grandchildren abandoned the town. Although the Republicans regained political power in the city after 1936, at least temporarily, the party's new local leaders were Italian, Irish, Polish and Jewish, as were the Democratic leaders. In 1940 a Roman Catholic candidate was elected governor of Connecticut for the first time in the colony and state's three-hundred-year history. In 1954 a Jewish candidate was elected governor of the state for the first time. In 1960 a Roman Catholic candidate was elected president of the United States, again for the first time. In each of these elections, the large majorities of Middletown voters went for the Democratic newcomer, in the first instance ousting a Middletownian, Governor Raymond Baldwin. Russell Manufacturing closed its last mills in the 1960s and Wilcox, Crittenden & Co. of Middletown was taken over by outside corporations, and then also shut down. Although corporations continued to invest in the city, they were national firms — Pratt & Whitney Aircraft, Aetna Insurance, and retailers such as Stop & Shop Supermarkets, Walgreens, and Walmart, not local capitalists. To understand how America's Anglo-Protestant elite lost its self-confidence and power, we should look at cities such as Middletown, where that class was first deposed.

Wesleyan University

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