

Personality and Power in the Ford Motor Company Hierarchy:

The Story of Harry Bennett, 1916-1945

Adam Stefanick

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For My Family

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-- Adam J. Stefanick
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Introduction

*“During the thirty years I worked for Henry Ford, I became his most intimate companion, closer to him even than his only son. This relationship...has been distorted in the public mind. It has been made to appear that Mr. Ford was a simple man who was merely ill advised—and that I was his advisor... I have been called a thug, a gangster, a pro-Nazi, an anti-Semite; it has been said that I was ‘fired.’ All of these accusations are just plain lies. I have no desire to eulogize myself. But for the sake of my family, and for my own peace of mind, I want to set the record straight.”*¹

-- Harry Bennett

Harry Bennett is one of the best-known figures in the labor wars of American industry during the first half of the 20th century—the head of the notorious, anti-union operation of thugs and spies known as the Ford Service Department. He was hired in 1916 after being discovered in a street brawl by Henry Ford’s friend, the prominent journalist Arthur Brisbane, and quickly won Ford’s affinities thereafter by telling him rugged stories from his time spent in the Navy as a boxer.² Bennett then quickly rose up the ranks in the Ford Motor Company (FMC); by 1921, he took over as head of the Ford Service Department.³ Additionally, he also became head of the employment office in the massive River Rouge Assembly Plant, in the process playing a key role in ending the Ford Sociological Department, a benevolent yet paternalistic endeavor that had aimed at helping immigrant workers manage their earnings by visiting them at their homes and teaching them about “civilized” and “responsible” living. In dissolving the Sociological Department, Bennett incorporated its more paternalistic element, worker supervision, into his

¹ Harry Bennett and Paul Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, Gold Medal Books (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1951), 5.

² Richard Bak, *Henry and Edsel: The Creation of the Ford Empire* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2003), 155-156; Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 186; Ford R. Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, Great Lakes Books (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 30.

³ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 156; Steven Watts, *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 447.

labor relations policy at Ford Service.⁴ As such, from the late 1920s onward Bennett became a significant player in the FMC, with the River Rouge Assembly Plant becoming a focal point of its operations.⁵ With Henry Ford's tacit approval, Bennett filled the ranks of the Service Department with ex-convicts, athletes, and pugilists and used them to spy on blue-collar and white-collar Ford workers alike in order to stymie unionization efforts and accumulate information on rivals in the company.⁶ Throughout the 1930s, Bennett's clashes with organized labor picked up steam, occasionally resulting in violence, as was the case in the 1932 Ford Hunger March, which resulted in four marchers killed and twenty-eight wounded, or in the 1937 Battle of the Overpass, in which Ford Servicemen viciously assaulted prominent UAW activists.⁷

But Bennett's career tells us things about the nature of the FMC beyond the virulent anti-union practices that its founder, Henry Ford, endorsed and promoted. It also reveals the unusually personalized mode of management that Henry Ford established during his tenure as head of the company, and Bennett's fall at the end of World War II indicated a shift to a more bureaucratic, organized management, even as the company remained family-controlled. From the FMC's incorporation in 1903, Henry Ford held a deep-seated contempt for financiers and independent directors who held considerable control over the way the company was ultimately managed, preferring that he himself retained control of what he saw as *his* company.⁸ Through continuous effort to usurp these men, Henry Ford finally achieved complete control of the FMC

⁴ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 31; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 447.

⁵ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 176.

⁶ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 447.

⁷ Christopher H. Johnson, *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit, 1912-1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 121; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 453.

⁸ Anne Jardim, *The First Henry Ford: A Study in Personality and Business Leadership*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), 75-115.

in 1919, buying out all other minority shareholders and distributing FMC shares between himself (55%), his son Edsel (42%), and his wife Clara (3%).⁹ Afterwards, he moved to solidify his dominance, preferring to manage the FMC through use of executives whose tenure in the company depended solely on their ability to appease him. Of the most prominent of these executives were Ernest Liebold, Ford's personal secretary; Charles Sorensen, head of production at the River Rouge Assembly Plant; and Harry Bennett, who dealt with Ford employee relations.¹⁰ And while this personalized management structure worked for Ford while he was able-bodied, it turned on him as his mental health deteriorated in the late 1930s and early 1940s. With a figurehead for a boss, Bennett's close relationship with Ford afforded him an opportunity to solidify his position as a possible heir to the company's presidency, pushing out rivals and eventually obtaining for himself a spot on the company's Board of Directors.¹¹ However, after Henry Ford resigned the presidency in 1945, his grandson Henry Ford II and other members of his family both realized the threat that Bennett constituted to the company's future management and grew weary of the unsavory tactics he used against organized labor. In one of Henry II's first actions as president of the FMC, he ousted Bennett from the company—proving to be a bookend to the way the company was managed from 1919 to 1945.¹²

As striking as Bennett's story is, and as substantively it has been documented, historians have usually discussed him within the context of a larger project, relegating him to a supporting role. For example, Allan Nevins discusses Bennett at length in his three-volume work on the FMC, but he is discussed only at certain junctures in the company's larger history. Anne Jardim

⁹ Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933* (New York: Scribner, 1957), 112-3.

¹⁰ Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 229.

¹¹ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 33.

¹² Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 34; Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 191-192.

and Stephen Watts both discuss him in their biographical books on Henry Ford, but again, he plays a minor part in their larger argument. Keith Sward does a better job than both Jardim and Watts in his book *The Legend of Henry Ford*, featuring Bennett prominently in the last half of his book; however, the historiographical problem remains, albeit less so. Stephen Norwood perhaps comes closest to presenting a detailed study on Bennett in particular, dedicating a chapter in his book *Strikebreaking and Intimidation* to him. However, the chapter is not intended as a thorough analysis of his career, but rather aims to situate Bennett and his Service Department within the larger context of corporate-sponsored anti-unionism in the early 20th century.

I think that a significant historiographical problem arises when casting Bennett as a supporting character in a larger historical project, not dissimilar to how Bennett is represented in the public's historical memory. I recall many a conversation with people throughout Southeastern Michigan where have I mentioned my work on Harry Bennett, only to hear the common replies that he was a "thug" or a "gangster." Note that historians *have not* painted him in this way. However, a chief problem with fitting any historical figure within a larger narrative is that the subject's story is simplified for the sake of argument and clarity, and the idiosyncrasies and nuances of their story often (and necessarily) fall by the wayside. I fear that this has happened with Harry Bennett. The more graphic and violent chapters of his career have been highlighted, and his other work in the FMC has been overshadowed as a result. For the sake of brevity, aspects of his career are simply stated rather than explained. And in the end, just as in popular historical memory, Bennett features as a "thug." As such, the chief aim of this thesis is to help formulate a detailed account of Bennett's career at the Ford Motor Company and set the record straight. In short: *Bennett was much more than a thug—he was not only the head*

of the Ford Service Department, but also a key figure in the personalized managerial structure of the FMC while under Henry Ford's control.

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In his essay, “Fordism and The Assembly Line: The British and American Experience, 1895-1930,” Wayne Lewchuk argues that Ford tried to run the company in a highly paternalistic manner even in the company’s formative years, personally giving directives to all his workers.¹³ After the company began expanding, Lewchuk points out that Ford could not sustain this type of management style, and was forced to turn to delegating authority to other lower-level supervisors or other executives.¹⁴ Once doing so, Ford began to fear that other executives might begin to more hold sway with lower-level management than he did himself; as a result, Ford worked to ensure that other high-ranking executives and supervisors in the company were subject to his ultimate authority. However, he could only achieve this goal in full once he obtained total ownership of the company in 1920. Until then, his directives constantly clashed with other shareholders, large financiers, and executives of the company.¹⁵

In my first chapter, I contend that a study of Bennett’s career is immensely useful in understanding the way Henry Ford attempted to manage the FMC after gaining ownership. In doing so, I draw significantly from the work of Anne Jardim. In *The First Henry Ford: A Study in Personality and Business Leadership*, she makes the argument that what drove Henry Ford’s business strategy was an obsessive need for control of his company and its products, and in order

¹³ Nelson Lichtenstein and Stephen Meyer, eds., *On the Line: Essays in the History of Auto Work* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 22.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Charles E. Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford* (New York: Norton, 1956), 74-5; Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 111-2.

to pursue this desire, he fostered personal relationships with high-ranking executives in the company, creating a stringent, hierarchical corporate structure where his direct subordinates were expected to carry out his wishes to the letter.¹⁶ She goes on to argue that this corporate structure had a two-sided nature. On the one hand, Henry Ford maintained a high degree of control over the company through the use of these executive relationships. On the other hand, these executives obtained considerable power by the very virtue of this corporate structure.

Bennett proves to be an exemplary figure in understanding these power dynamics in practice. For one, Bennett used his position as head of both the River Rouge Assembly Plant Employment Office and the Ford Service Department to carry out Ford's wishes in regards to controlling his labor force. Under Bennett's watch, the Service Department expanded to a large espionage force that kept workers fearful for their jobs. Workers' accounts indicate the severity of the spying—men were followed into bathrooms to ensure they were not discussing labor issues and wives of Servicemen were often enlisted to report any gossip between workers' wives back to Bennett. However, as Ford granted Bennett his power on the basis that his actions would allow Ford more direct control of the company's daily affairs, this move had the ironic effect of increasing Bennett's own power in the company—armed with an extensive plant police that commanded the respect (or fear) of workers, he quickly became a dispenser of patronage in his own right.

My second chapter chronicles the central role Bennett played in the conflict that unfolded between the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Ford Motor Company in the 1930s. In it, I argue that Bennett's name is synonymous with the struggle and that the reasons for his actions as

¹⁶ Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 92-3, 205-8.

head of Ford Service stemmed from the highly personalized and autocratic nature of Henry Ford's FMC. To do so, I will detail various violent clashes between the UAW and the Ford Service Department, noting that they flew in the face of the provisions of the 1932 National Industrial Recovery Act and the 1935 Wagner Act, initiatives that offered union organizers the right to collectively bargain unimpeded by their employer. Henry Ford vehemently opposed the legislation until 1941, when the Supreme Court upheld a 1939 National Labor Relations Board decision that called for a halt to Bennett's unfair labor practices.¹⁷ And indeed, because his boss opposed the legislation so much, Bennett willfully played a prominent role in struggle to combat it; in particular, he helped spark the gunfire that resulted in four marchers killed and twenty-eight wounded during the 1932 Ford Hunger March.¹⁸ Similarly, Bennett ordered the violent beatings of UAW leaders during a pamphlet distribution at the Rouge gates in what came to be known as the 1937 Battle of the Overpass.¹⁹ How this violent chapter in Bennett's career ended demonstrated how Bennett's actions in the company stemmed from a personalized managerial structure. It was only when Henry Ford's wife aligned against her husband's much-publicized fight against the UAW that Ford changed his perspective on the union—leading Bennett to immediately give in to UAW demands for sole bargaining rights over FMC workers in 1941.

My third chapter will explore the Bennett-Ford relationship as it played out to its conclusion during World War II. Firstly, I argue that Bennett continued to work against union activities in FMC plants at Henry Ford's behest, shifting his tactics somewhat in order to appear compliant to the law. No longer overtly violent in stymieing union organization, he instead

¹⁷ "In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY and INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS OF AMERICA, 1939." <http://mynlrb.nlr.gov/link/document.aspx/09031d458005dfa4>

¹⁸ Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 121.

¹⁹ Victor G. Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW: A Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 199-213.

avored the use of stall tactics to make bargaining with the company as laborious as possible and the use of a divide and conquer strategy in order to play union leaders and workers alike against each other. Secondly, I argue that the Ford family's difficult times in the 1940s allowed Bennett to utilize his position within the personalized managerial structure of the FMC to his advantage, pushing out rivals in order to situate himself as a possible successor to the presidency. As Ford became advanced in age, the detrimental effects of two strokes left him unable to manage his company, leaving him, as historian Stephen Watts points out, a "figurehead" of the company.²⁰ From this, his son Edsel Ford's untimely death in 1943 left a considerable power vacuum in the company, leaving Bennett an opening to fire executives that had opposed him while Edsel had worked in the company and fill the open positions with his own people. In this vein, Bennett's role at the FMC during this period exemplified the maturation of the highly personal, authoritarian corporate structure that Henry Ford had used to manage his company. With the headstrong personality of Henry Ford waning, the power that Bennett had channeled through his close relationship with the boss became more potent. However, the Ford family proved to be too much for Bennett in the end, and he was shown the door as Henry Ford's grandson, Henry II, assumed the presidency.

²⁰ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 522-524.

I

A Sign of the Times

*“Mr. Ford didn’t want me to have much money. I got peanuts for a salary for twenty-eight of the thirty years I was with him. ... On the other hand, Mr. Ford would give me almost anything I wanted as a gift. Yet that is significant too, because to receive gifts is to be dependent on the giver.”*¹

-- Harry Bennett

While Bennett is no doubt significant for his substantive roles in the Ford Motor Company’s violent clashes with organized labor in the 1930s (roles perhaps more vivid in collective remembrance), his story really starts two decades prior, before he entered the company—when Henry Ford was still a middle-aged engine builder and entrepreneur who had yet to taste sustained success. When the Ford Motor Company was incorporated in 1903, Henry Ford had already taken part in two defunct automobile companies and had grown frustrated with the fact that his prior ventures had been compromised by what he would later term “parasites,” financiers and executives who he perceived as unduly benefiting from his innovation and risk-taking.² As such, in the first two decades of the FMC’s existence, Ford worked diligently to ensure that this time around he would be the man with ultimate say. Executives who had once helped Ford create the company fell victim to his concerted efforts to push them out. First it was Alexander Malcolmson, who had helped finance the company as a start-up, then it was James Couzens, who had managed the business side of the company, and finally it was the rest of the company’s shareholders: John and Horace Dodge, John W. Anderson, David Gray’s estate, H.H.

¹ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 64.

² Watts, *The People’s Tycoon*, 98; Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company* (New York: Scribner, 1954), 278.

Rackham, and Rosetta Haus.³ On July 11, 1919, Ford, his son Edsel, and his wife Clara gained total ownership of the FMC.⁴

With the “parasites” out of the way, Ford began to use Bennett as an instrument to achieve complete control of the company. In the mid 1910s, Ford had established the Ford Sociological Department, a paternalistic yet benevolent project that aspired to help assembly line workers utilize their earnings to the fullest potential and live lives deemed morally upright and socially acceptable.⁵ However, when post-war depression struck in the early 1920s, Ford’s attitude towards his workers became less sympathetic. Now, he hoped to squeeze as much labor out of his workforce as possible in order to keep profits up and oppose union organizing, which he perceived as a threat to his control of the company. With Rev. Samuel Marquis, who ran the Sociological Department from 1915 to 1921, leaving the company in frustration because of this new coercive labor policy, Harry Bennett took up the torch. In order to appease his boss, Bennett gradually built-up the Ford Service Department to a several-thousand-strong labor espionage force, which went as far as following workers to the bathroom to see that they were not trying to organize a strike.

In this chapter, I argue that Bennett provided Henry Ford with the confidence that he had a loyal, but strong-willed employee that could help him wrest control of what he perceived as *his* company from the hands of others—in this sense, Bennett was both an expert “yes-man” and an agent of Ford’s new hard-edged policies directed towards the workforce. Indeed, while others have described Harry Bennett’s job at the FMC as that of a thug, gangster, or strongman, how he

³ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 105-13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 110-13.

⁵ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 199.

himself described his work there is closer to the mark. In his memoir, he wrote that he was “[Henry Ford’s] most intimate companion,” and purportedly, he often told the press that he was “Mr. Ford’s personal man.”⁶ His self-declared title in the company provides us with a better label for Bennett’s job responsibilities at the company because it underscores the more fundamental reasons why Harry Bennett is a historical figure worth study. More than a thug, he was a sign of the times, ushering in an era of the Ford Motor Company characterized by a personalized managerial structure in which Ford was the man holding the ultimate power.

The Need for Control⁷

To see where Bennett fits into the larger narrative of the Ford Motor Company, it is important to first establish the tumultuous nature of the company’s managerial structure in its nascent years. Ford’s ousting of once prominent partners, like Alex Malcolmson, James Couzens, and John and Horace Dodge, occurred once he perceived them as possible threats to his vision. Their stories illuminate Ford’s tendency from the founding of the FMC to use his close relationships with other executives to try to tighten his grip on what he saw as *his* company, often leading to the departure of figures that had once played the same part. Indeed, while Malcolmson, Couzens, and the Dodge brothers proved to be the first of such executives in the FMC, they were not the last. However, their departures, in conjunction with Bennett’s entry into the company, cemented what would be the dominant executive culture of the Ford Motor Company until Henry Ford’s 1945 resignation: That business decisions flowed through Ford, that one should defer to Ford’s ultimate wishes, and that one’s tenure in the company lasted only as long as one could hold favor with the boss.

⁶ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 5; Keith Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford* (New York: Rinehart, 1948), 342.

⁷ Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 75.

The prosperous Detroit coal merchant Alexander T. Malcolmson played a pivotal role in the nascent Ford Motor Company.⁸ Henry Ford's earlier ventures in the automobile manufacturing business, the Detroit Automobile Company (1899-1901) and the Henry Ford Company (1901-1902), both ended abruptly after Ford had a falling out with the companies' financiers; Ford had perceived that these backers did not share the same passion for automobile innovation as he and only wanted to see a quick return on their investment.⁹ Reflecting back on the experience he had just had in the second of the defunct companies, Ford remarked, "From here in, my shop is always going to be my shop and that's the way it's going to be. I'm not going to have a lot of rich people tell me what to do."¹⁰ Ford's relationship with Malcolmson allowed this assertion to become a reality. The two had become friends while Ford was working for the Edison Illuminating Company in the 1890s, and it was this friendship that led the creation of the Ford Motor Company in 1902, with Malcolmson putting up the capital required to start the company.¹¹ Furthermore, Malcolmson not only backed the company financially, but also agreed that Ford and he would be equals as joint majority owners of the company, each having 25.5 % of the total stock in the company.¹²

However, whatever relationship the men might have had was gone by 1907. Even though Malcolmson had freed Ford from the pressures he felt had been put on him by financiers and managers in his prior ventures, Ford now saw Malcolmson playing the same role as his former

⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 225.

⁹ Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 41-44, 46-48; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 71-2.

¹⁰ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 60.

¹¹ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 224-26.

¹² Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 84-6; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 6, "The Company accounts in June and July, 1903", in Chapter 12.

enemies, deeming him a “parasite.”¹³ The pair’s falling-out had stemmed from a row over what type of car should have been the company’s primary product. Ford wanted to dedicate the company’s energies to the production of a cheap, mass-produced, standardized car intended for consumers with modest incomes. Malcolmsen, on the other hand, wished to produce cars intended for a wealthier audience, as was the trend in the automobile industry during the first few years of the 20th Century.¹⁴

Ford looked for a new partner to help pursue his vision, and found him in James Couzens, a business manager and shareholder of the company.¹⁵ Originally one of Malcolmsen’s employees, Couzens quickly developed a rapport with Ford in the early days of the FMC’s incorporation. The two men forged an alliance upon the understanding that they, unlike many of the other executives and financiers of the company, did the *real* work as the inventor and the businessman respectively.¹⁶ They, in contrast to Malcolmsen, were not “parasites.” And as the contention between Ford and Malcolmsen grew over the company’s product strategy, Couzens sided with Ford. They began to cut Malcolmsen out of the company by creating the Ford Manufacturing Company on November 22nd, 1905, a separate entity from the FMC that would be charged with developing its automotive parts, without Malcolmsen’s knowledge.¹⁷ While it was created ostensibly to keep profits from the production of automotive parts within the firm and reduce their reliance on third-party suppliers, it also served a second function—by not offering Malcolmsen stock in the new company, Ford and Couzens could cut him off from a

¹³ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 98; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 278.

¹⁴ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 274-75.

¹⁵ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 68-9.

¹⁶ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 95-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

significant source of company profits.¹⁸ The reassurances of stockholder John Gray to another about the nature of the Manufacturing Company underscored this fact: “I have Mr. Ford’s promise that when things get straightened out with Mr. Malcolmson, the Ford Manufacturing Company is to be taken into the Ford Motor Company, just as if it never existed.”¹⁹

With this move, Ford was in the driver’s seat. Unlike the similar disputes he had had with his former business partners in his prior automobile companies, he was finally in the position to dismiss his rival rather than be dismissed. His exits from the Detroit Automobile Company and the Henry Ford Company had been predicated on the fact that he had little recompense when disagreeing with his backers, who had financial control of the companies.²⁰ This was not the case in the Ford Motor Company—Ford’s large share of the stock gave him an advantage when trying to outmaneuver Malcolmson through the creation of the Ford Manufacturing Company.²¹ John Dodge, Horace Dodge, Horace Rackham, John Anderson, Charles Bennett, who each had 5% of the capital stock, John Gray, who had 10.5%, all eventually sided with Ford and Couzens and became invested with the pair in the Ford Manufacturing Company.²² Malcolmson was in the minority and on the outside looking in.

Infuriated and feeling double-crossed, Malcolmson sabotaged his own position in the company in his attempt to counter the group led by Ford and Couzens. In December 1905, he quickly moved to capitalize his own automotive company, the Aerocar Company, with the money he had made with the FMC in the hopes of building a company that could compete with

¹⁸ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 98-9; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 277-8.

¹⁹ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 98.

²⁰ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 29-30; Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 40-8.

²¹ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 274-83.

²² *Ibid.*, 279; fig. 6, "The Company accounts in June and July, 1903", in Chapter 12.

(and defeat) Ford.²³ This move proved to be a fatal mistake; the Ford Motor Company's directors proceeded to remove Malcolmson from the company on the grounds that his deep involvement with the Aerocar Company constituted a conflict of interests with his position at the company.²⁴ In the end, Malcolmson and his supporters sold their shares in the company to Ford and Couzens, not knowing that their stakes in the company would soon be worth exponentially more in a few short years, after the Model T's introduction to the market.²⁵ And with Malcolmson ousted, James Couzens would thereafter fill the role of Ford's confidant. The relationship he had fostered with Ford had allowed him to rise to the pinnacle of the company, just as Malcolmson before him. And shortly after Malcolmson's exit, Couzens assumed the vice presidency of the Ford Motor Company, going on to become an instrumental part of the Model T's success and a co-author of the Five-Dollar Day policy, a program which doubled most workers' salaries and made Ford one of the most popular men in the United States.²⁶

However, with the success of the Model T, Ford became increasingly more confident in his own abilities and suspect of those of others. As a result, history would repeat itself, with Couzens resigning the vice presidency in 1915 after clashing with many of Henry Ford's directives. Historian Keith Theodore Sward aptly described the turn of events in his book *The Legend of Henry Ford*, writing, "Now as never before the Yankee mechanic who had 'arrived' by rule-of-thumb became the man of destiny; he began to feel that the 'inner guide' to which he alluded so often could never do him wrong. ... The first to brush against this expanding sense of

²³ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 280; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 99.

²⁴ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 279-80; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 99-100.

²⁵ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 280.

²⁶ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 67-8; Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 64; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 179.

self-sufficiency on Ford's part, ironically enough, was James Couzens."²⁷ As a case in point, Couzens opposed Ford's use of the company paper, *The Ford Times*, as a platform for his pacifist political views during World War I.²⁸ On one occasion, Couzens informed his boss that he had held up the publication because Ford had authored an opinionated article in the paper, only to be lambasted by a seething Ford. Recalled Couzens, "He just flew off the handle, I was shocked, aghast."²⁹ Couzens' opposition to Ford's wish to drastically expand the company's production capacities also brought the men further apart. With the Model T's success, Ford wanted to bolster the company's production capacity by expanding the Highland Park Assembly Plant and building a new assembly plant on the River Rouge capable of producing a million cars a year, quadrupling the company's existing productive capacity.³⁰ While Couzens also favored expansion, he wished to do it more slowly, worrying the company would overstretch itself financially.³¹ Because of this, Ford directed more animosity towards Couzens. Shareholder John Dodge later commented on Couzens' resignation, testifying to the type of uncompromising attitude that Ford had held on this matter:

Mr. Ford then stated very emphatically that it was a very good thing that [Couzens] had left, and that now they would be able to do things that before Mr. Couzens had prevented; that his restraining influence was gone and they were now going to expand. ... He said they were going to double the size of the Highland Park plant and double the output of cars and sell them at half price. ... I told him that if he proposed to carry things to such an extreme, ... he should buy out the other stockholders, then he could run the business as he saw fit. He told me that he did not care to buy any stock. ... He had control and that was all he needed.³²

Indeed, Ford's attitude grew too much for Couzens to tolerate, and eventually, he tendered his

²⁷ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 63-4.

²⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 23.

²⁹ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 226.

³⁰ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 22.

³¹ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 64-5.

³² Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 97.

resignation. “The friendly relations that have existed between us for years,” Couzens wrote, “have been changed of late. Our daily disagreements become more violent. I finally decided that I would not be carried along on that kind of a kite.”³³ In the past, Couzens had helped Ford in realizing his lofty dreams as an inventor, but now Ford saw him as standing in the way. Again a close Ford colleague was pushed out of the company, a casualty of Ford’s quest for ultimate power of what he saw as *his* creation.

The Dodge brothers, both large shareholders of the company, became the next victims of Ford’s zeal for control. In 1916, they opened a shareholders’ lawsuit with Ford because he had suspended shareholders’ special dividends for an indefinite period in order to finance the building of the River Rouge Assembly Plant.³⁴ The Michigan Supreme Court decided in 1917 in favor of the Dodge brothers, requiring Ford to hand out the special dividends he had withheld to attempt his expansionary project and stating definitively, “A business corporation is organized and carried on primarily for the profit of the stockholders.”³⁵ Following this decision, Ford set his sights on the Dodge brothers and their supporters and postponed his plans for expansion in order to first obtain financial control of his company. To do so, he resorted to theatrics, resigning the presidency of his company in favor of his twenty-five year old son Edsel and pledging to start his own company in direct competition to the Ford Motor Company in order to scare minority shareholders into selling their shares to him.³⁶ And in the end, they did: on July 11, 1919, Henry Ford finally gained total ownership of the Ford Motor Company, buying out the

³³ Ibid., 96.

³⁴ Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 103-110; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 98-100.

³⁵ Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 106-7.

³⁶ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 98-111; Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 103-112; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 276-283; Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 115.

company shareholders to the tune of \$105,820,894.57.³⁷ In his parting remarks, shareholder David Gray alluded to the reason he sold his shares—Ford’s difficult attitude towards other executives: “[The company] was practically a one-man management. . . . [I] did not know what the man would plan.”³⁸

Harry Bennett’s difficult early experiences at the FMC underscored how Henry Ford wished to manage his company after pushing out his former friends and associates. With prominent co-founders Malcolmson and Couzens gone, Ford hired Bennett in 1916 as a lowly lackey with no job title or established responsibilities. This left no doubt—Ford was the man with the ultimate authority, and the real business decisions were up to him. As a case in point, Bennett was kept waiting for six months at the company headquarters in Highland Park before being sent out to do any work. This period of uncertainty frustrated Bennett; he wrote in his memoir that, “I guess [I tried to quit] at least five or six times. . . . I quit and went home, and each time Mr. Ford sent for me, and each time he’d say, ‘Well, I just wanted to keep in touch with you,’ and that would be all. He made other appointments to see me and then broke them. I didn’t know what to do.”³⁹ Bennett then guessed at what was going on in Ford’s head: “It’s interesting to speculate now on what was going on in Mr. Ford’s mind. Was he testing me in some way? Was he really too busy to get me set? Was he undecided about the whole thing? I don’t know, to this day.”⁴⁰ Left questioning his role, the entire process had served its purpose magnificently, subjecting Bennett to Ford’s whim. And when Ford finally spelled out Bennett’s responsibilities as plant policeman at his new production behemoth, the River Rouge Assembly

³⁷ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 110-1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁹ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Plant, he made sure to drive the point home. Instructing Bennett on his duties, Ford reminded him that, “There may be a lot of people over there that want to fire you, but don’t pay any attention to them. I’m the only one who can fire you. Remember, you’re working for me.”⁴¹

Indeed, as Ford asserted his primacy by forcing his former peers out, it became abundantly clear that a FMC executive’s staying power would be contingent on his ability to avoid being fingered by the boss as a potential rival or a do-nothing and that anyone could be sacrificed for the sake of the Ford’s vision. As Bennett was being groomed as “Mr. Ford’s aide,” the head of the Ford Sociological Department, Samuel Marquis, would become the next executive to leave the company in protest of the new autocratic environment at the FMC.⁴²

The Birth and Death of the Sociological Department

The early 20th century ushered in the Progressive Era, where a wave of social activist groups and political reformists swept through the United States, advocating for their own particular conceptions of progress.⁴³ The Ford Sociological Department—a benevolent yet paternalistic project charged with determining if an employee was worthy of the company’s high wages by putting them through an evaluative and educational process—fell firmly into the movement. Like the Protestant woman missionaries in New Mexico during the 1910s working to “make true American citizens” out of native Hispanics by “[giving] them a moral and technical education that will enable them to cope with the social temptations and problems of the twentieth century,” so too did the Ford Sociological Department hope to engender in FMC assembly line workers (many first or second-generation immigrants) a sense of civility by

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

⁴² Ibid., 15.

⁴³ John Mack Faragher et al., *Out of Many, Volume 2*, 6th ed. (Prentice Hall, 2008), 592.

teaching them the ways of Anglo-Protestant morality.⁴⁴ Reflecting on the virtues of self-reliance and self-discipline he himself held to dearly, Ford told the media that the Sociological Department was an exercise in “dispensing practical Christianity, interpreted through dollars and cents in the sharing of profits,” which would help the worker “in a friendly way until he is able to walk alone.”⁴⁵ Indeed, with the establishment of the wage-boosting Five-Dollar Day policy, as well as other company-sponsored social programs like English and trade schools, legal services, and medical clinics, Ford had put into place resources that could actively aid the lot of his workers.⁴⁶ On his view, all that was left to do was to infuse these programs with a moral backbone that could make workers civilized, responsible, and self-reliant human beings.⁴⁷ In 1915, he hired his reverend, Samuel S. Marquis, to head the Sociological Department, ordering him to “put Jesus Christ in my factory.”⁴⁸

However, Ford soured on the project as time passed. Hard times during the post-World War I depression put the company into financial peril, and Ford had to let go workers and enforce stricter assembly line discipline in order to cut costs and keep profits up. The benevolent yet paternalistic attitude he had held towards his workers was revamped in light of the circumstances—Ford’s attitude lost its benevolence and gained more paternalism, and Ford no longer thought it necessary to guide the worker to virtues of self-reliance and civility. At this point, he began to feel they simply *should* be self-reliant and respectful. Because of this, Marquis ultimately left the company. In his place, Harry Bennett reformed the company’s labor

⁴⁴ Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 64-5.

⁴⁵ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 206-7.

⁴⁶ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 207; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 178.

⁴⁷ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 207.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

policy to match up to his boss's new attitude. Ending the Sociological Department as it stood, his Ford Service Department carried on the Sociological Department's more unsavory work, moving towards more pervasive supervision of FMC workers to ensure that the boss's need for control was satisfied and that discipline on the assembly line was enforced.

In 1915, Marquis wrote of the rationale of behind the Five-Dollar Day policy and the Ford Sociological Department, showing how the FMC hoped to instill civility in its workers. First, he described the particularities of the new wage program: "A man's pay consists of two parts, given to him in two separate envelopes—his wage and his profits. The wage is conditional on skill and length of service. The profits are shared on the condition that a man measures up to a given moral and economic standard."⁴⁹ The profits then, carried with them a considerable distinction from wages, much like a right contrasts with a privilege. To qualify for the profits, employees needed to demonstrate that they would abstain from drinking and gambling the money away and use their money in appropriate ways.⁵⁰ As Marquis explained, this is where the Sociological Department came in. It would employ inspectors who would travel to a given employee's house to ascertain whether or not his family was being neglected, whether or not his money was being spent frivolously, and whether or not conditions in his home were sanitary and healthy.

On his view, Marquis saw the Sociological Department not as an autocratic or prying administrative body, but a sort of means to achieve a fruitful, fraternal relationship between the

⁴⁹ Samuel S. Marquis, "Ford Profit-Sharing Plan," 1915, 10, Ford Profit-Sharing Plan, Box 1, Accession 293, Samuel Simpson Marquis Papers, Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

⁵⁰ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 207.

company, the worker, and the community at large.⁵¹

When the Ford profit-sharing plan was announced it was generally predicted that it would have a bad effect on Ford employees. This prediction, in my opinion, would have come true but for the educational work which the company undertook as a part of the general plan. Over one hundred men, each furnished with an automobile to expedite his work, spent their entire time visiting out employees and their families and advising them in matters of thrift, honesty, sobriety, and better living generally.⁵²

At its root, Marquis's argument tried to demonstrate his employees' work was not seedy or prodding, but rather worthy and necessary—rather than spies, these men were educators and advisors. Underlying this faith in the Sociological Department's mission was the belief that workers, in some respects, were childlike, unable to be trusted to use their newfound affluence in laudable ways unless guided. While extremely condescending and paternalistic, this notion of workers probably stemmed from the true fact that illiterate immigrant workers sometimes had difficulty avoiding scams that preyed upon their ignorance. “Tony Giovanetti no sooner had his new money to spend than real estate agents, second-hand car dealers, insurance men, and peddlers of iceboxes and over-stuffed chairs raced to the front porch,” writes pro-FMC historian Allan Nevins, “The company had to help Tony separate the sheep from the goats.”⁵³

The company worked diligently to make sure that “Tony” was able to. A 1915 pamphlet distributed to workers, aptly entitled “Helpful Hints and Advice to Employees to Help Them Grasp the Opportunities Which Are Presented to Them by the Ford Profit-Sharing Plan,” demonstrates the paternalism of the project, but also shows the extent to which the company went out of its way to provide services that might not have otherwise been available to its workers. For instance, it highlighted the legal services available to workers through the

⁵¹ Samuel S. Marquis, *Henry Ford: An Interpretation*, Great Lakes Books (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 98.

⁵² Marquis, “Ford Profit-Sharing Plan,” 7.

⁵³ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 335-6.

company, and offered advice on purchasing fire and life insurance and managing savings for retirement.⁵⁴ However, the pamphlet also demonstrated how willing the Sociological Department was to pry into the minutia of the worker's daily life. Cleanliness was one of the main themes; for instance, readers were shown the difference between what constituted an "unhealthy" room and a "healthy" room by comparison of different photographs of workers' homes. Bedrooms depicted as unhealthy were crowded rooms (commonly with five or six unkempt beds and a clothesline running through it) with a dirty floor, bare walls, and low light. In contrast, the healthy rooms were depicted as spacious, often with a patterned rug on the floor, wallpaper adorning each room, a large bed, and big windows with drapes.⁵⁵ The pamphlet noted that, "The premises and back yards should be kept clean, and where conditions permit, a vegetable garden or flower garden be cultivated."⁵⁶ Additionally, the pamphlet made sure to lay the rules out definitively: only he who "leads a clean, sober, and industrious life, who can prove that he has thrifty habits, is eligible to share in the profits."⁵⁷

However, the FMC faced economic and labor difficulties after the conclusion of World War I, which led to Henry Ford's souring on the Sociological Department's mission—showing that his belief in a conciliatory approach towards his workers ran only as deep as his company could afford it. For instance, an increase in cost of living led to 1919 strikes at FMC suppliers Wadsworth Manufacturing Company and Wilson Body Company, hampering the company's

⁵⁴ "Helpful Hints and Advice to Employees to Help Them Grasp the Opportunities Which Are Presented to Them by the Ford Profit-Sharing Plan" (Ford Motor Company, 1915), Hints & Advice for Ford Employees, Box 23, Accession 951, FMC Non-Serial Imprints, Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁷ Marquis, "Ford Profit-Sharing Plan."

ability to produce.⁵⁸ In addition, post-war inflation drove the costs of production up to the point where FMC sales were beginning to falter; to rectify the issue, Henry Ford implemented drastic price-cutting measures, running the company at a severe loss in the hope that inflation would eventually curb.⁵⁹ However, by December 1920, FMC could no longer afford to do so, and on the 26th the company announced a six-week complete factory shutdown in order to cut costs and update outdated assembly-line machinery.⁶⁰ As a result, workers' jobs were lost in the short and long term. In Allan Nevins' words, the work force was "stripped to a skeleton crew of managers and superintendents" that labored for their six-figure salaries by sweeping the floors of inactive assembly plants.⁶¹ During the shutdown, some 55,000 workers were sent home, and as factories reassumed their production, updated facilities rendered many workers obsolete, leading Henry Ford to cut more than \$2,000,000 worth of payroll.⁶²

Shortly after this run-in with austerity, Ford made a statement that exemplified his new attitude towards his workers:

Some organizations use up so much energy and time maintaining a feeling of harmony that they have no force left to work for the object for which the organization was created. The organization is secondary to the object. The only harmonious organization that is worth anything is an organization in which all the members are bent on the one main purpose—not to get along with itself, but to get along toward the objective. A common purpose, honestly believed in, sincerely desired—that is the great harmonizing principle. ... I pity the poor fellow who is so soft and flabby that he must always have 'an atmosphere of good feeling' around him before he can do his work. ... In the end, unless they obtain enough mental and moral hardness to lift them out of their soft reliance on "feeling," they are failures. Not only are they business failures; they are character

⁵⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 149.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 152-3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 156-7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 157-8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 167.

failures also; it is as if their bones never attained a sufficient degree of hardness to enable them to stand on their own feet.⁶³

So went what Marquis would term “the era of fellowship and good feeling” in the Ford Motor Company, resulting in Marquis’ resignation from the company in early 1921.⁶⁴ While before, Ford had hoped to guide his workers towards Anglo-Protestant civility, now workers were simply expected to pick themselves up by their bootstraps and rely on themselves only. They could no longer be “soft and flabby.” They needed to instead “stand on their own feet” and understand that the company’s financial strength took precedence over any “feeling of harmony” that might be fostered within the company’s doors.

When reflecting on the conditions in the Sociological Department that led him to leave the company, Marquis condemned this new change in labor relations, writing, “The old, humane policies were still professed, but the new influence which had gained the ascendancy made impossible, so far as I was concerned, an honest and consistent application of those policies.”⁶⁵ Marquis did not disagree with the paternalistic spirit guiding the Sociological Department as long as it effected positive change in the lives of FMC workers. However, as Marquis points out, Ford’s new harsh outlook on his workers led Marquis to change his perspective on whether or not this could be achieved—for him, paternalism was only justified as long as it was benevolent. But for Ford, helping workers’ lives was second to his company’s strength. As Sward put it in his book *The Legend of Henry Ford*, “While job insecurity was characteristic of the [FMC]—particularly in 1914, in 1921, from 1926 to 1928, and throughout the depression—for the same reasons that employment was precarious at any comparable business institution, it had been

⁶³ Marquis, *Henry Ford*, 156-7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 155-8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

intensified at the Rouge and at Highland Park by a purely personal factor. This additional source of job insecurity...grew out of Ford's familiar idiosyncrasies as an administrator.⁶⁶ Indeed, as Sward goes on to point out, workers' longstanding tenure meant nothing to Henry Ford and cost cutting was a prevailing factor over keeping workers on the line.⁶⁷ The "object" overruled all.

While Marquis himself could not bring himself to adopt a more ruthless attitude towards business management, he pointed out that new hires in the company felt differently. He wrote that men like Malcolmson and Couzens, who gave "years of faithful and efficient service to the company," left in droves in 1920 and 1921, making up the extensive "executive scrap heap" of the company.⁶⁸ He went on to be quoted in a 1923 magazine article, saying that these men were being replaced by a new, coldhearted type of executive willing to do whatever it took to, in Ford's words, "get along to the objective."⁶⁹ He stated, "The old group of executives, who, at times set justice and humanity above profits and production, were gone. With them, so it seemed to me, had gone an era of co-operation and good will in the company. There came to the front men whose theory was that men are more profitable to an industry when driven more than led; that fear is a greater incentive to work than loyalty."⁷⁰

While somewhat self-serving, the reverend's words would become curiously prophetic. In his place, Harry Bennett became the Sociological Department head and seized the opportunity to demonstrate his utility to his boss. Ending the Sociological Department as it stood, Bennett's Service Department took the Sociological Department's supervision of workers to an entirely

⁶⁶ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 351.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁶⁸ Marquis, *Henry Ford*, 122.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 156-7.

⁷⁰ Edward Lyndon Jr., "Ford and Labor," *Pipp's Weekly*, August 25, 1923, 2.

new level. Like the employees of the Sociological Department, Servicemen kept tabs on the personal lives of FMC employees. However, they did so in order to violently repel any type of unionization activities and enforce assembly line discipline, not to help improve the worker's lot. As such, Bennett's conduct as the head of the Service Department highlighted the new personalized, autocratic corporate atmosphere Ford had established.⁷¹ To appease Ford, Bennett needed to stay one step ahead of his boss and keep him happy, being both an expert-yes man and an agent of Ford's hard-edged policies.

Harry Bennett and Ford Service: Paradigm of the New FMC Atmosphere

In his memoir, Bennett alluded to the fact that he needed to be a step ahead of his boss to prove his worth as head of Ford Service:

'Ford Service' was the name used for the [Ford] plant police [when I came to the company]. Their job was to guard the gates, protect the plant, and keep order. But besides these ordinary police duties, Servicemen were used to check on the men constantly, to see that they kept working and broke none of the rules. ... Mr. Ford wanted to prevent theft of tools rather than apprehend people. In short, he wanted to lock the barn *before* the horse was stolen. ... While this system worked moderately well in regard to the workmen, it was not so successful with the foremen and executives. When there was an excess of anything, these people usually helped themselves.⁷²

In describing the situation at the company, he noted that there was still an inadequacy in how the plant police was being run when he took it on. On his view, while keeping tabs on workers was a good thing to enforce Ford's rules for his plant, it was problematic that higher-ranking employees were not held to the same scrutiny. As such, Bennett expanded Ford Service's capacities, hoping to keep tabs on *everyone*. He did this by first dissolving the Sociological Department, with its educational and moralistic aspects obsolete in the new FMC, taking on its more paternalistic aspect, employee supervision, as a guiding principle of the espionage efforts

⁷¹ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 176.

⁷² Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 33-35.

of Ford Service. Indeed, Bennett drastically expanded the Service Department with the purpose of keeping workers in line, working towards appeasing Ford's obsession with controlling and guiding the company in the way he saw fit. As Keith Sward aptly put it, "Ford Service...undercut the security and peace of mind of every employe [sic] on the Ford roster...substituting for a rule of reason at the company's employment office the expediencies of machine politics."⁷³ And by becoming one of Ford's most trusted aides, Bennett began using his position at the Ford Service Department to his advantage, becoming a dispenser of patronage throughout Southeastern Michigan. As a result, Bennett's work at Ford Service showed an idiosyncrasy of the new FMC executive culture—as an expert yes-man for Henry Ford, Bennett turned the intensely personalized company hierarchy to his advantage, embracing his subordinate position to the boss in order to accrue power of his own.

In his memoir, Bennett claimed to have shut down Marquis' Sociological Department *because* it was more paternalistic than it was benevolent:

The [Sociological Department] investigators became collectors of suspicions and rumors, and a card-catalogue record was kept on just how every employee was behaving himself at home. Of course, most workmen in the plant were determined to give up neither their jobs nor their crap games nor their beer, and most of them worked out ruses that enabled them to live as they wanted. I felt the whole setup a stupid waste of time and money for the company and petty tyranny over the employees. If I had been one of those checked on, I certainly wouldn't have taken it. I criticized the whole thing to Mr. Ford, and he said, "Well, go ahead and stop it." So in 1921 I ended the Sociology setup as it existed, and Dean Marquis left the company.⁷⁴

However, his motivations for doing so were not so altruistic. Just like the Sociological Department, the Service Department continued to keep tabs on workers inside and outside the plant. And just like the Sociological Department, the Service Department hoped to make

⁷³ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 352.

⁷⁴ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 32-4.

workers follow the rules and regulations of the company. However, the work of Sociological Department investigators, while overbearing insofar as their job was to visit employees and ascertain they were using the profits in ways Ford felt morally upright, was always qualified with the understanding that the Department's intent was to "provide against sickness or any misfortunes that may befall [Ford employees] or their families."⁷⁵ This sentiment was at odds with the general character of the Serviceman's work. As one of Bennett's Servicemen described in an 1939 interview: "Harry Bennett had under his charge some well known Italian gangsters in charge of so-called well known Italian crews for the purpose of breaking the union heads. ... Everyone [of these men] had their own crew of men driven around in trucks and big cars around the plant with ammunition—guns, rifles and machine guns."⁷⁶ He went on to mention that the Ford Motor Company sponsored target practice for the Servicemen inside the Rouge plant, and that most of the Servicemen who carried guns were not uniformed.⁷⁷ Reflecting on these statements, Bennett's description of the Sociological Department as a form of "petty tyranny" takes on a new, Machiavellian meaning. It is as though the word "petty" is the operative word—tyranny is acceptable as long as its ends justify its means.

Bennett drastically stepped up worker supervision as head of the Service Department, creating an espionage force throughout the 1920s and 1930s that dwarfed Marquis's group of 100-odd Sociological Department inspectors.⁷⁸ Exact figures of the extent of the ranks of the Service Department are hard to pin down due to the absence of information on the Department

⁷⁵ "Helpful Hints and Advice to Employees to Help Them Grasp the Opportunities Which Are Presented to Them by the Ford Profit-Sharing Plan," 9.

⁷⁶ Ralph Rimar, "Ralph Rimar Labor Spy Statement," interview by Jack Beck. 19-20, Maurice Sugar Collection - Box 54, Folder 9, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁸ Marquis, "Ford Profit-Sharing Plan," 7.

before Bennett's tenure, but a rough estimate puts Servicemen's numbers at the FMC's Southeastern Michigan facilities in the hundreds in the early 1920s, growing to about 6,000 to 7,000 men by the early 1930s.⁷⁹ Note that this estimate is on the higher side of the numbers that previous historians have given—3,000 to 6,000.⁸⁰ But perhaps unwittingly so, Bennett himself revealed the higher figure to be more accurate. Trying to distance himself from the actions of the Service Department, he wrote in his memoir, "It seemed to me, by 1921, that about every fifth employee was a Serviceman. Everyone was checking on everyone else. I thought the whole thing had got out of hand and was ridiculous, and I told Mr. Ford so. He said, 'Well, put 'em to work,' and ordered me to cut Service by two thirds. ... I did this."⁸¹ Out of context, it might seem as if Bennett's testimony shows that he limited the prevalence of Servicemen in Ford plants. But *pro-labor* historian Carl Raushenbush gives similar numbers to those of Bennett: "There is probably a serviceman and a spy for every 25 workers, conservatively. ... On that basis, taking the number of employees at the Dearborn plant conservatively at 80,000, the service men and spies together number about 6,500."⁸² In short, both Bennett and Raushenbush agree; there was one Serviceman for every 15 or so employees at the Southeastern Michigan FMC assembly plants.

Whatever the total number, Bennett's Service Department had enough man power to cast a large shadow over Ford plants in Southeastern Michigan (extending to other plants around the United States as Ford expanded its operations). The fact of the matter is that the size of the Service Department fluctuated depending on the moment, with Bennett enlarging it if the current

⁷⁹ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 648.

⁸⁰ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 156; Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 181.

⁸¹ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 34.

⁸² Carl Raushenbush, *Fordism: Ford and the Workers, Ford and the Community* (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1937), 14.

climate between Ford and organized labor merited it. To be sure, during the 1930s, labor began to dedicate its energies fully to unionizing Ford plants, the Service Department ranks swelled.⁸³ *The Detroit Free Press*' coverage of the violent way the 1932 Ford Hunger March, a protest organized in part to denounce Bennett's actions as Service Department head, was broken up by Bennett's Servicemen illustrated that Bennett's name was synonymous with the contention between the company and its workers by the early 1930s; the newspaper adorned its front page with the boldface headline, "4 DIE IN RIOT; BENNETT HURT."⁸⁴ And as the UAW organizing drive picked up in the latter half of the 1930s, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), a federal commission created in 1935 to investigate and resolve instances of unfair labor practices, wrote, "Since the start of 1937, ... [the Ford Service Department] has been vastly enlarged and servicemen now patrol the aisles during all working hours watching for any signs of union activity."⁸⁵ *Detroit Times* reporter Fred Collins's and ex-serviceman Joseph Barnick's testimonies before the NLRB backed up these findings, with the men stating that multiple unmarked cars filled with Servicemen were stationed at each Rouge Plant entrance, monitoring, as Barnick puts it, "anything that didn't look right."⁸⁶ Al Bardelli, a former Ford worker and UAW member, related the presence Servicemen had inside Ford buildings proper in the late 1920s and early 1930s: "They were all rotten, no-good sons of bitches. ... You couldn't take a crap without one of those bastards following you into the restroom. No doors on the stalls. Take

⁸³ Jack Skeels, ed., "Harry E. Ross Interview," 1959, 29-30, UAW Oral History Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

⁸⁴ "4 Die in Riot; Bennett Hurt," *The Detroit Free Press*, March 8, 1932, 1.

⁸⁵ "In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY and INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS OF AMERICA, Case No. C-199" (National Labor Relations Board, December 22, 1937), 25, Accession 47, Box 16, Folder "National Labor Board Decisions and Orders - Ford Motor Company", Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

too long and you were out of a job.”⁸⁷ And while this evidence speaks to the latter half of Bennett’s tenure as head of the Service Department, it must be stressed that Ford Service was still relatively well known, hated, and feared by Ford workers even early in Bennett’s tenure. Bennett himself stated that even as early as 1921, labor espionage at FMC was so pervasive that men were spied on while they took care of their business: “Besides ordinary police duties, Servicemen were used to check on the men constantly, to see that they kept working and broke none of the rules. How thorough a job they did is indicated by the fact that employees were even followed to the toilets. ... This was going on when I came to the Ford Motor Company.”⁸⁸

Not educators, as Marquis thought of his own investigators, the types of people that Bennett hired to work for him at Ford Service offered him a formidable police corps to use against labor organizers. As Bennett wrote in his memoir, “We had many former pugilists, both boxers and wrestlers, on the Ford payroll. We spotted them around in jobs where there was likely to be trouble. It wasn’t necessary for these men to assault anyone. Just the presence of one of them in a trouble spot was enough.”⁸⁹ Bennett also added many ex-convicts to the ranks of the Service Department. Admitting himself in his memoir that he had put “thousands” of former criminals on the Ford payroll, the extensive police record of Serviceman Charles Goodman indicates the sorts of men that had been hired into Ford Service.⁹⁰ Detroit Police officer Bernard Middleton testified in 1937 in front of the National Labor Relations Board in regard to Goodman’s record:

⁸⁷ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 159-60.

⁸⁸ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 33-4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

Our records show on April 27, 1918, that Charles Goodman was picked up for simple larceny... On August 14, 1919, he was arrested for grand larceny... September 15, 1919, he was arrested for disorderly person... December 31, 1919... arrested for simple larceny... February 1920, aiding prisoner to escape... April 14, 1925, he was arrested for robbery armed... October 19, 1925, he was arrested for robbery armed... On February 15, 1928, arrested for robbery armed.⁹¹

And although Bennett stated in his memoir that physical confrontation was unnecessary to intimidate workers, it was certainly a tactic employed by his Servicemen. For example, in the NLRB's 1937 hearings regarding Bennett's efforts to hamper unionization of FMC plants, ex-Serviceman Joseph Patrick Barnick testified that he was ordered to "beat up" organizers working to pass union handbills to plant workers.⁹² Henry Ford also offered Bennett an instrument to coerce workers' peers to work as de-facto Servicemen when Ford named Bennett head of the River Rouge Assembly Plant Employment Office in 1921.⁹³ An NLRB hearing in the 1930s showed that in times where Bennett needed to bolster the Ford Service Department ranks to combat a union drive, he would wield his hiring and firing power by having Ford bosses forcibly recruit tougher workers to become temporary Servicemen by threatening the loss of their job.⁹⁴ For example, the NLRB found that a Ford foreman once "recruited" shear operator Mack Cinzari to join a "vigilante group": "In the event of any trouble that arose he was to pick up a lead pipe or anything else that that might be handy and begin swinging it at the union members present."⁹⁵ As H.S. Abelwhite, a worker in Bennett's employment office, pointed out in his reminiscences,

⁹¹ "In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY and INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS OF AMERICA, Case No. C-199," 19-20.

⁹² "Told to Slug, Ex-Aid Says," *The Detroit News*, July 12, 1937.

⁹³ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 156; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 211.

⁹⁴ "In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY and INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS OF AMERICA, Case No. C-199," 25.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Bennett's control of the Rouge payroll scared workers like Cinzari into acting in accordance with his directives for fear of losing their position at the FMC.⁹⁶

While violence was one deterrent Bennett used against workers who might otherwise act out of line, espionage was the other. The spying ran from top to bottom of the Bennett sub-organization at the FMC; Jo Gomon, who worked as executive secretary of Detroit mayor Frank Murphy as early as 1931, had intimate knowledge of one of the ways Bennett could obtain insider information about dealings with union leaders: "Every conversation was recorded [by a Dictaphone]. Whenever a group asked him for funds or favors, it was customary for him to leave the room on one pretext or another. He then retired to an adjoining office and got the real lowdown on the situation later by listening to the recording of the group discussing [the deal] among themselves."⁹⁷ However, Servicemen conducted the bulk of the spying work by keeping close watch on Ford workers on the assembly line. In 1932, former FMC worker Robert L. Cruden attested to this fact when writing a pamphlet condemning the company's treatment of its employees:

The secret section of the Service Department has spies scattered through the plant, working with regular workers. They "listen in" on conversations, find out what's going on, and locate those who voice "dangerous thoughts." In this way even the mildest criticism of Ford meets with swift dismissal. In fact, so easy is it to get a man fired for "political agitation" that foremen used to have used the pretext to get rid of men they didn't like. ... All those suspected of Communist sympathies [are] fired and spies [are] sent in among the workers to locate those who expressed sympathy with [them]. At the time of writing, all Ford workers are required to open their lunch boxes for inspection when they enter the plant. Ford fears the distribution of leaflets.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth* (New York: Scribner, 1962), 153-4; "H.S. Ablewhite Oral History," 61-5, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

⁹⁷ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 157.

⁹⁸ Robert Cruden, *The End of the Ford Myth* (New York: Union Labor, 1932), 9-10.

The spying continued beyond the gates of the Rouge plant proper, carrying on the Sociological Department's investigations in spirit. But the Servicemen did not stop at following workers to their homes, as did Marquis's investigators. Servicemen followed suspected unionists both to their homes and to union meetings, hoping to record the license plates of cars in the lots outside the meeting place to figure out what other employees were unionizing.⁹⁹

Curiously, Bennett actually introduced a revamped and much more limited Sociological Department to the FMC during the Great Depression years, which functioned as a subsidiary to the Service Department.¹⁰⁰ Ostensibly revitalized to help workers during the Depression, the project lacked Marquis' guiding influence and was used as a further tool of the Service Department's espionage effort, with employee data from investigations going through Bennett's Service Department.¹⁰¹ An anecdote given by Harry E. Ross, demonstrated how Bennett's Sociological Department was only superficial in nature. Stating that he went down to the Rouge Employment Office in 1932 to get attention for a severe cut in a vein in his arm he suffered while working, he was berated by a Ford Serviceman for not keeping a garden:

I went down to the employment office and before I could say anything, I gave the guy my name and he said, "You haven't got a garden." He did not even ask me why I was down there. I said, "What kind of a garden?" He said, "You have got to have a garden." "A garden! Christ, when do I work this garden?" "Well, Henry Ford says, 'You work eight hours, you sleep eight hours and you play eight hours.' So...we want everybody to get back to the good old earth. You have got to take up a garden." I said, "Christ, man, I cannot stand up. I go to bed as soon as I go home, and I stay in bed until I come to work and I cannot work no garden." He said, "You are going to work the garden or you are going to get out." I said, "I am not going to work no garden." That was the end of me in

⁹⁹ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 181.

¹⁰⁰ "Sociological Dept Records, 1930," 1930, William Cameron Records Subgroup, Accession 44, Box 18, Folder "Sociological Dept Records 1930", Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Ford and I went back on the welfare.¹⁰²

The sentiment expressed by the Ford Serviceman that Ross should keep a garden clearly reflected the same sentiment in Marquis' Sociological Department leaflets distributed to workers before Bennett had come into the company—that workers should keep their living spaces clean and vibrant looking as a sign of their upstanding moral character.¹⁰³ However, absent the visible educational component of Marquis' Sociological Department, Bennett's Serviceman was only echoing the sentiments of the boss, in step with the way Ford wanted to run his company. Instead of showing workers why certain virtues were important, the expectation was that workers *should* simply be civil and respectful. In this case, Ross needed to keep a nice garden and make his house's appearance acceptable by Ford's standards—even while Ross was facing much more serious problems in the moment, with copious amounts of blood dripping down his arm. In other cases, employees needed to work hard on the assembly line to show they were abiding by Ford's rules.

In his memoir, Bennett again let on more than he wished to in regards to his Service Department's espionage effort. When trying to deny that the UAW's accusations that he had spied on them, he wrote:

It was a waste of time to send my men into the union to get information. ... There were always a certain number of men who thought the union wouldn't win out and wanted to stay in the good with us. After every meeting, these men would come to us and tell us what had transpired. We were good listeners. When advisable, I would take one of these informants up to lunch with me in the executives' dining room and let him talk all he

¹⁰² Harry E. Ross, "Harry E. Ross Interview," interview by Jack Skeels, 1959, 37, UAW Oral History Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

¹⁰³ "Helpful Hints and Advice to Employees to Help Them Grasp the Opportunities Which Are Presented to Them by the Ford Profit-Sharing Plan," 13.

wanted. With so many men coming to see me that way, I could always cross-check their stories, and would know when they were telling the truth.¹⁰⁴

Bennett drew a fine line between what constituted one of his men. The fact of the matter is that whether or not an employee at Ford was classified as a Serviceman proper mattered little; what mattered most is that Bennett controlled the Rouge Employment Office as well as the Service Department, and could use his position at either to procure information from workers by use of his Servicemen or other workers' forced collaboration with the Service Department. The extent of this power even reached into the family life of the workers. By some reports, Servicemen's wives played a role in the spying, relaying information to their husbands from conversations they had with workers' wives in different public spaces like churches, grocery lines, or restaurants.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, by keeping employees fearful of their jobs' security, Bennett easily goaded the peers of unionists into supplying him with critical information about union activity, a method of procuring intelligence not all unlike that of the Stasi's use of citizen informants in Eastern Germany decades later.¹⁰⁶

In fashioning the Service Department into a company organ of worker coercion, Bennett aligned himself with the new, unsympathetic business disposition of Henry Ford, bolstering his own position in the company.¹⁰⁷ The reminiscences of Mrs. Stanley Ruddiman, a close Ford family friend, help demonstrate this. She noted that Ford thought very highly of Bennett, especially towards the end of his career at the Ford Motor Company, at one time remarking that

¹⁰⁴ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 116-7.

¹⁰⁵ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 181.

¹⁰⁶ Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 213-14, 219-23.

¹⁰⁷ Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 205-7.

Bennett was “one of the smartest men he had ever known.”¹⁰⁸ She went on to state that Ford was “a kind person” who wouldn’t willfully hurt anyone, and that if he had to fire anyone, he would pass the word along and have it done by someone else before doing it himself.¹⁰⁹ And while this conception of Henry Ford may, on the surface, differ considerably from the picture painted thus far of him in this chapter, it is not incongruous with the Henry Ford who wished to have total control of his company. Indeed, Bennett’s own account of Ford’s actions as head of FMC actually add to this point:

I took the rap for many things that were really Mr. Ford’s doings, not by choice, but because you had no choice. You couldn’t pin anything back on Mr. Ford. Mr. Ford might come to me and say of some executive, “Now you get rid of Joe. I don’t want him around here any more.” I’d call Joe in and say, “Joe, Mr. Ford doesn’t want you here any more. He has asked me to fire you.” Naturally, Joe didn’t like being fired, and he didn’t mean to be, if he could avoid it. If he was high enough up in the organization, he would get to Ford and demand to know why he was being let out. Mr. Ford would then throw his hands in that characteristic gesture and say, “I don’t know a thing about it. You go back and see Bennett.” The man would then come back to me and say that Mr. Ford never told me to fire him at all. I then had no choice. I knew that Mr. Ford expected me to discharge the man. So I would say, “I don’t care what Mr. Ford told you, you’re fired.” Once you’ve had a few experiences like that, of course you stopped saying “Mr. Ford told me to do this.” You knew he wouldn’t back you up. So when he gave you an order, you just went ahead and did it and took responsibility for yourself.¹¹⁰

Bennett’s anecdote shows that he willfully acted the part for Ford, in the process demonstrating the fruition of Ford’s restructuring of the corporate hierarchy to firmly seat himself as the company’s sole power broker. Now, Ford could put Bennett to task in taking care of the undesirable processes of firing men perceived as unwilling to go along with the program or

¹⁰⁸ “Mrs. Stanley Ruddiman Oral History.” 81, Oral History Subgroup, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 81-83.

¹¹⁰ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 30.

stamping out worker discontent that bucked against what Ford saw as the ultimate “object” of the FMC.¹¹¹

It is debatable whether or not Ford actually demanded that Bennett use the *specific* measures that he employed while working as head of the Service Department to suppress organized labor and enforce assembly line discipline in Ford plants. Still, it is very unlikely that Ford did not know of Bennett’s activities, or that he was not in a position to stop them. Purportedly, when Ford was once told of Bennett’s deeds in the Ford Service Department, he smiled back and asked innocently, “That wasn’t my Harry was it?”¹¹² In reminiscences of Emil Zoerlein, a head engineer at Ford, Zoerlein also discussed the fact that Ford probably knew what Bennett was up to, and furthermore, that Ford was of the opinion that it didn’t matter so much because if he put someone else in the same position, that new executive would do the same things.¹¹³ Indeed, Ford delighted in the new FMC corporate environment. By keeping a yes-man like Bennett’s staying power in the company contingent on fulfilling his wishes, Ford ensured that all *real* business decisions, in some extent or another, flowed through him. As Bennett recollected in his memoir: “[Ford] expected me to carry out his wishes without probing for his motives. Mr. Ford always had a motive for everything he did; usually two motives—the one he gave, and the real one. He didn’t want me digging into that too far.”¹¹⁴ In other words, Ford wanted Bennett to understand him enough to know what would make him happy, but not enough to enact any substantive plans of his own at the company.

¹¹¹ Marquis, *Henry Ford*, 156.

¹¹² Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 451.

¹¹³ “Emil Zoerlien Oral History,” n.d., 236, Oral History Subgroup, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

¹¹⁴ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 17.

However, by all accounts, Bennett *was* able to utilize his position as one of Ford's close aides in order to serve his own purposes. Writing later in life, UAW attorney Maurice Sugar reminisced that in the early 1930s, one could buy a job at Ford for around \$50 through intermediaries with ties to Bennett. He proceeded to share an anecdote that a prominent real estate broker in Detroit would often use his connections with the Ford Motor Company to his financial advantage, using them to get jobs for his clients on the condition that the worker pay him back for a lot he would sell them with a portion of the monthly earnings from the client's new job.¹¹⁵ L.S. Sheldrick, a senior automotive engineer at FMC during the 1930s, said that Bennett eventually developed a "stranglehold" on control of the company by virtue of his ability to navigate his relationship with Ford:

He had control of hiring and firing. He had control of the payroll department. He had control of transportation and communications. He had to approve all travel vouchers. That meant that one could not hire, fire, raise, or transfer a man. ... You didn't send a message to anybody without him seeing it if he wanted to. And if he chose to misinterpret it he could run to Mr. Ford with a very misleading story, which he did often.¹¹⁶

Another executive's account also describes how Bennett would at times manipulate Ford's ambition for control of the company to serve his own needs: "Bennett's technique was not to make a frontal attack but to drop a remark, an off-hand remark—and a few days later another remark. That's the way he got [one executive]. It was known around the company for more than a year what he was doing."¹¹⁷

Moreover, by virtue of his close ties with Henry Ford, Bennett became a dispenser of patronage throughout Southeastern Michigan, granting jobs and votes to people that could return

¹¹⁵ Maurice Sugar and Ernest Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March* (Berkeley: Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute, 1980), 113.

¹¹⁶ Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 229-30.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 231.

the favor and bolster his position at the company.¹¹⁸ In his book *The People's Tycoon*, Ford historian Steven Watts writes of this power Bennett wielded: "Bennett reinforced his position in the company by cultivating powerful connections in the surrounding community, in Dearborn and elsewhere in the State of Michigan. He dispensed patronage by handing out jobs, favors, and automobiles. He built a political organization in Dearborn by donating money to public officials."¹¹⁹ Watts goes on to quote a Ford manager on Bennett's political power, who tellingly stated, "I don't think there is any doubt that Harry Bennett made and unmade the mayors and chiefs of police in Dearborn."¹²⁰ Indeed, the fear that had spread among the workers due to the coercive efforts of Servicemen allowed Bennett the ability to influence local elections. In 1938, *Forum* magazine wrote that, "Because he has so many jobs at his disposal, Bennett is afar the greater dispense of patronage than is, for instance, the governor of Michigan. If a public official is asked by a supporter for a job, he hands the job seeker a letter to Harry Bennett and another favor is done. Because of his potent political influence, influence based primarily on Ford's millions. Candidates for public offices are frequent visitors of the Ford Service Department."¹²¹ A book published by a labor group, entitled *Fordism*, also detailed this political clout that Bennett carried, writing, "Fear of discharge may swing some workers' votes to Ford, but the company relies rather on a direct method of getting votes which amounts to buying them. The candidate favored by Ford is permitted to send a certain number of men to Ford's factories for

¹¹⁸ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 450-1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ John O'Brien, "Henry Ford's Commander in Chief -- Harry Bennett and his Private Army," *Forum*, February 1938, 8.

jobs. He can barter jobs for electioneering services, or, if he has to, for votes. ... Ford has assigned service men to do electioneering work for its candidates.”¹²²

Maurice Sugar, a prominent union activist and Detroit attorney, also shared his thoughts on Bennett’s political power in his reminiscences, stating, “Ford’s system was comprehensive. It included public functionaries. The mayor of the city of Dearborn—where the Ford plant was situated—was a distant cousin of Henry Ford. His name was Clyde M. Ford, and he ran a Ford automobile agency.”¹²³ Sugar goes on to discuss Bennett’s links to the corrupt Dearborn police chief Carl Brooks, which may explain how Bennett was able to easily hire many parolees as Servicemen:

Workers who lived in the city of Dearborn were hired to work for the Ford Motor Company through Carl A. Brooks, the chief of police of the city of Dearborn. Brooks had appeared on the Ford payroll as early as 1927. By 1929 he was a full-fledged Ford detective, directing the plant police at Highland Park. He later left this post in order to become Dearborn’s chief of police. Years later, in May 1941, while still in office, he was indicted on a charge of selling police protection to gamblers and brothel brothers.

Dearborn Judge Leo Schaefer also had ties with Bennett, as evidenced by his testimony before the NLRB where he stated that he had furnished over 100 jobs through Bennett’s Rouge Employment office for his campaign workers.¹²⁴ Evidence also suggests that Bennett might have even influenced part of what was published about him and his Service Department. In his memoir, he wrote that he held at least one *Detroit Times* reporter in his confidence.¹²⁵ In addition, a 1935 memo written to the *Detroit News*’s staff suggested that Bennett held some sway at the newspaper. Helping to sanitize Bennett’s public image, it read, “In any stories on

¹²² Raushenbush, *Fordism: Ford and the Workers, Ford and the Community*, 41.

¹²³ Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 112-3.

¹²⁴ National Labor Relations Board, “Testimony of Leo R. Schaefer.” 5728-30, Accession 232, Box 54, Folder 23-4, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

¹²⁵ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 114.

Harry Bennett, personel [sic] director of the Ford Motor Co., NO reference is to be made to his first two marriages without the permission of the City Editor. The present Mrs. Ester Bennett is to be considered the only Mrs. Bennett.”¹²⁶ Similarly, Bennett’s reach extended into the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, as implied by testimony gathered by Sugar from a Ford worker shot during the 1932 Ford Hunger March, where Service Department and Dearborn Policemen fired shots into a crowd of workers demanding fair-treatment in plants.¹²⁷ Upon admittance to the hospital, the worker had his damaged clothes (which could have been used as evidence in a trial) confiscated by authorities and found it impossible to get them back upon release.¹²⁸

Indeed, Bennett relished in the power and authority that he gained by working close with Ford. As historian Stephen Watts recounts, Bennett “indulged in a continual round of parties, drinking and carousing with cronies such as Harry Kripke, the former football coach at the University of Michigan. He loved to host rowdy events on his boat, where his favorite prank involved tripping up a guest so that he fell overboard. The inebriated crowd would fish him out amid much merriment.”¹²⁹ Strikingly, Bennett’s means of maintaining this lavish lifestyle also elucidated his willing subordination under Ford. Bennett’s low salary at the FMC could not alone sustain his party life; he gained much of his monetary worth through the sale of valuable properties given by Ford as gifts.¹³⁰ Among these gifts were his house in Ann Arbor, nicknamed the “Castle” for its design and use of secret passages

¹²⁶ Arthur Hathaway, “Memo to Detroit News Staff,” Accession 232, Box 5, The Harry Ross Collection Series I, Folder 53:3 - Harry Bennett, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

¹²⁷ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 180.

¹²⁸ “Ford Massacre 1932 Evidence,” n.d., Accession 232, Box 5, The Harry Ross Collection Series I, Folder 53:6, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

¹²⁹ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 448.

¹³⁰ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 448; Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 31.

throughout the house, and his 2,800-acre estate in Clare County, Michigan, now used today by the Boy Scouts of America as a summer camp.¹³¹ On the matter of gifts, Bennett himself wrote that, “Mr. Ford didn’t want me to have much money. I got peanuts for a salary for twenty-eight of the thirty years I was with him. ... On the other hand, Mr. Ford would give me almost anything I wanted as a gift. ... That is significant, ... because to receive gifts is to be dependent on the giver.”¹³² Bennett knew that to gain status within the Ford Motor Company, he would have to act first and foremost in the ways that Ford wanted him to. With a higher salary, Bennett could have perhaps pursued a different course more opposed to that of his boss, but with most of his salary tied up in gifts, he was left considerably less leeway. Nothing was guaranteed with gifts—no guaranteed flow of income as detailed on paper, no large severance package set in stone.

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Bennett’s position as Ford’s right hand man did not go untested. As alluded to in this chapter, as the company entered the 1930s, Harry Bennett faced real challenges from organized labor, strengthened by the passage of pro-labor legislation. As historian Stephen Watts remarks, “Enjoying the full confidence of his boss, and the loyalty of hundreds of thugs in his service department, he was confident of success. But events did not cooperate. Bennett’s blustering, bragging persona and heavy-handed methods helped launch a bloody labor struggle that crippled the Ford operation throughout much of the Depression decade.”¹³³ My second chapter delves into Bennett’s tactics used to combat this potential threat.

¹³¹ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 31.

¹³² Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 64.

¹³³ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 453.

II

Ford's Strong Arm

*"The UAW got into the automobile industry for some very good reasons. If I had been one of the men in the shop, ... I'd have been in sympathy with the union myself."*¹

-- Harry Bennett

*"Our Father Who art in Dearborn, Henry be thy Name.
Let pay-day come. Thy will be done in Fordson as it is in Highland Park.
Give us this day our 6 bucks (plus 40¢).
And forgive us our laziness, as we forgive Thee for speeding us up.
Lead us not into intelligent thot [sic] or action
But deliver us from all Freedom. For Thine is true slavery.
Thy power over us forever and ever. Amen."*²

-- "A Ford Worker's Prayer," from *The Ford Worker*, Aug. 1926

The Great Depression hit automotive workers in Detroit hard. In his reminiscences, UAW activist John W. Anderson painted a stark picture about the conditions they faced: "When there were reports of hiring, the lines in front of the employment offices would sometimes be two or three blocks long. ... The unorganized worker during the Depression had no bargaining power at the employment office. He accepted the hours, wages and working conditions without question. ... At the end of a day he had no energy for his family. ... A man was just a machine that worked, brought home the paycheck and lived a bare existence."³ The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal measures, sought to remedy the situation. Passed on June 16th, 1933, it charged industry leaders to draw up industrial "codes of fair practice" with the input of labor by which all corporations in their

¹ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 108-9.

² Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 112.

³ Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 51-2.

industry had to adhere (once approved by the President).⁴ Most importantly for labor, Section 7A of the act granted workers the right to “organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing” and stated that their right should not be violated by coercive activities of employers.⁵

However, the passage of the act only marked the beginning of a decade-long struggle between Ford and organized labor—not the resolution of the difficulties of the Detroit working class. Indeed, Ford plants were not fully unionized until 1941, when the United Auto Workers (UAW) achieved recognition as Ford’s sole company labor bargaining agent.⁶ Until then, Ford workers would clash (sometimes violently) with Harry Bennett’s Service Department. The Ford Motor Company largely ignored the provisions of the NIRA, and applauded the Supreme Court’s July 1935 ruling that it was unconstitutional.⁷ And while similar pro-labor legislation soon followed with the passage of the Wagner Act, which sought to maintain the measures of the NIRA’s Section 7A, the conflict continued, culminating in the much-publicized 1937 Battle of the Overpass, where Ford Servicemen bloodied UAW organizers Walter Reuther and Richard Frankensteen.⁸

In this chapter, I argue that Bennett played a critical role in how the contention between organized labor and the Ford Motor Company played out. Henry Ford perceived the automotive unions as a threat to his ultimate control of the company and was insulted by the fact that they

⁴ Sidney Fine, “The Ford Motor Company and the N.R.A.,” *The Business History Review* 32, no. 4 (December 1, 1958): 353-4; Landon R. Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (UNC Press Books, 2000), 93.

⁵ John Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983), 30.

⁶ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 164-7.

⁷ Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers*, 34.

⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 141.

saw him as an unjust employer. Ford maintained throughout the 1930s that he had bargained on behalf of his workers more than enough and needed his workers to tow the company line in return. And as the conflict between workers and the company grew, Bennett seized upon the opportunity to elevate his role in the FMC, given its highly personalized and autocratic hierarchy. As already alluded to in the previous chapter, Bennett vastly expanded his Ford Service Department during the 1930s, fashioning a formidable police and espionage force that kept workers in line throughout the country, appeasing the boss. Underscoring the fact that the FMC's coercive labor policy stemmed from Bennett's want to satisfy Henry Ford's wishes and navigate the personalized hierarchy of the company, the UAW only achieved recognition in 1941 as company bargaining agent once Ford's wife, Clara, stepped in and forced her husband to change course. Shocked by the negative publicity her husband's company was receiving in the national media, she told him to make a deal and halt the bloodshed or else face divorce.⁹ Once Ford acquiesced to his wife's wishes, Bennett was in lockstep with the boss, on board to cooperate with the UAW and get a union contract signed.¹⁰ Indeed, by considering Bennett's diligent work during the 1930s to appease the boss and bolster his position in the company, we can see the chief reason why it took nearly a decade after the passage of the NIRA for an automotive union to assume the role of official bargaining agent for Ford workers.

The Ford Hunger March: Effect and Cause of Worker Discontent

The first major clash between Bennett's expansive Service Department and organized labor came during the 1932 Ford Hunger March. With the Great Depression exacerbating the worker's lot, the protest was organized in order to voice discontent with the abysmal conditions

⁹ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 462.

¹⁰ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 419.

workers faced both inside and outside Ford plants. However, Bennett's Servicemen, aided by Dearborn police, quickly put a stop to the protest as it drew close to the Rouge plant, shooting into the crowd and killing four marchers and injuring dozens more. In the end, the march proved to be an illustrative chapter of the FMC's history. It showed the lengths that Bennett would go to in order to appease his boss and bolster his position in the company, ushering in the most violent years of the FMC's conflict with its workers.

In general, American assembly line workers labored in a difficult job environment by the depression years. As satirized in Charlie Chaplin's seminal 1936 movie *Modern Times*, workers on the line faced constant production "speed-ups," where the pace of the machinery on the assembly line was increased several fold, resulting in each worker being forced to exponentially increase his output. Unlike in the Depression of 1920-1, where replacing outdated machinery allowed the FMC to cut production costs, the assembly line had been perfected to the point where it was difficult to pursue this course of action a second time, leaving the speed-up as the only alternative. "[The speed-up]," writes historian Keith Sward, "came after all the major efficiencies of line production and all the revolutionary mechanical arts of the trade had been worked out to perfection, and after the machine as such had lost its cost cutting magic of the 20's. By 1930, therefore, the only way to run this remarkable and almost perfect apparatus cheaper was to run it faster, just as it stood."¹¹

Across all of American industry, discipline on the lines was strictly enforced in order to keep up profit margins. One electrical worker's characterization of the speed-up demonstrated the negative effect it had on workers: "You could drop over dead, and they wouldn't stop the

¹¹ Ibid., 353-4.

line.”¹² These conditions were particularly severe in the Ford plants; with Ford’s profits suffering a catastrophic drop after the 1929 crash (dropping by a nearly a third from 1929 to 1930 alone), workers were let go and the remaining called upon to pick up the pace on the assembly line to reach production quotas, just as was the case in Ford’s first run in with austerity in the Depression of 1920-1.¹³ UAW lawyer Maurice Sugar detailed the circumstances surrounding the speed-ups, stating that, “Ford sped up production in many ways. ... Speeding up conveyors, so the men on the line had to perform their work at a faster pace. ... Making men operate more machines. ... Cutting the time unit required to perform a given operation. ... [In the depression years], many welders, lathe operators, and machinists had their machine production doubled. Many punch press operators had their work tripled.”¹⁴ The words of former Ford worker and UAW activist Harry Ross further elucidated just how bad the conditions were: “While I was there [during the Depression] I was able to look around. There was one guy working next to me and all day long that guy’s nose would bleed from emery dust. I have seen grown-men in the plant just break down and cry from their nerves.”¹⁵

However the conditions on the line were not the only problems that working-class Detroit faced in the Depression years. With Marquis and the Sociological Department long gone, the outset of the Depression meant that on the whole, workers worked longer hours, received lesser pay and fewer benefits, and suffered from poorer working conditions. Furthermore, while Ford had increased his worker’s wages to a seven-dollar-a-day base pay in 1929, the policy was criticized as deceptive, considering that Ford had recently contracted much of its manufacturing

¹² Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 8.

¹³ Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 104; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 570-4.

¹⁴ Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 108-10.

¹⁵ Ross, “Harry E. Ross Interview,” 37-8.

work out to other companies who paid their workers poorly.¹⁶ And while the Seven-Dollar Day had been extended to some Ford workers, many others had recently been let go; thousands of unemployed workers filed at Bennett's Rouge Employment Office daily in the hopes of gaining work, even if it was excruciating and dehumanizing. Government statistics show that by April 1930, 92,000 people in the city were unemployed.¹⁷ By 1932, this number doubled, growing to over 225,000 people.¹⁸ However, these figures do not do justice to the extent of poverty in Detroit during this period; the *Detroit Times* wrote on May 12th, 1932 that, "Nearly 700,000 persons in all [of Detroit] (almost 44% of the population) [are] directly affected by unemployment when the dependents of the jobless are taken into consideration."¹⁹ Bank failures in Detroit resulting from the Depression also destroyed workers' savings. As Maurice Sugar wrote in his book *The Ford Hunger March*, "In 1930-31, a number of these banks, including every one of the fifteen 'private' banks that held nearly all the deposits of some 30,000 workers, closed down—never to open again."²⁰

The 1932 Ford Hunger March, aptly named to demonstrate the difficulties that workers faced, was the culmination of workers' discontent with the state of affairs. It began on March 7th, 1932, consisting of about 3000 to 5000 unemployed Ford workers led by the Detroit Unemployed Council and the Auto Workers Union, two unions with Communist ties. *The Detroit News* described the group as a mismatch of "known radicals, habitual demonstrators, former Ford workers, professional paraders, and jobless men hoping to somehow get a job from

¹⁶ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 578-9, 588-9.

¹⁷ Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

marching.”²¹ They began their march at the Dearborn-Detroit border, close to a mile from the Ford Employment Office at the River Rouge Assembly Plant, intending to advance there to voice their discontent with the inhumane conditions they faced while working at the FMC.²² They carried fourteen separate demands that they intended to present to the company; the major ones were as follows: jobs for all laid off workers, immediate payment of 50 percent of full wages, a seven-hour day, two fifteen-minute breaks for each worker per day, a discrimination-free workplace for blacks, the abolition of Bennett’s Service Department, the abolition of Bennett’s graft system in hiring workers, and the right to organize.²³

From the workers’ demands alone, we can see how the policies carried out by Bennett as head of the Service Department and the Rouge Employment Office had boiled to the surface, acting as impetuses to the marchers’ discontent. Indeed, Bennett’s work to insure that FMC workers’ hard pace was kept up on the line and that they refrained from organizing had only increased in the early 1930s.²⁴ In Maurice Sugar’s detailed account of the Ford Hunger March, he wrote that it had gotten so bad that to shake the hand of a union leader like himself during a funeral was cause for discharge by Bennett’s Service Department:

When Bud Reynolds’s [a worker at FMC] father died, Bud and his mother requested me to speak at the funeral services at the Reynolds’s home. My remarks were brief and dealt quite unprovocatively with the unsung heroism involved in the daily struggles of a worker’s existence. On the conclusion of the talk...Bud’s brother Ira, whom I had never met, extended his hand, and expressed his thanks. ... A few days after the funeral, he was discharged [at FMC]. Totally ignorant of the reason, he made persistent efforts to

²¹ Christopher H. Johnson, *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit, 1912-1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 116-7; Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 30-2; Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 201.

²² Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 30-2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁴ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 179-80; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 449.

ascertain what it was. He was finally informed by a superior that he had been discharged because of that handshake at the funeral.²⁵

The account elucidated just how pervasive the Service Department's espionage efforts had become, with spying going on even in a private ceremony at a worker's home. In addition, Bennett's graft system and political corruption also influenced the workers' discontent. Wrote Sugar, "The Ford workers who marched to the plant knew of the corruption involved in procuring jobs."²⁶ Indeed, the problem of corruption had gotten so severe that even those at the top of government knew what was going on. Referring to the sway Bennett had over the Dearborn authorities, Detroit Mayor Frank Murphy asked rhetorically during the time of the March, "What is the difference between the official Dearborn police and Ford's guards?" He answered: "A legalistic one!"²⁷

If Bennett's conduct at the Service Department helped to provoke the Hunger March, the way in which the Ford Hunger March devolved into what some termed the "Ford Hunger March Massacre" or "Bloody Monday" exemplified how Bennett's policies exacerbated the FMC's conflict with its workers.²⁸ While the marchers advanced unimpeded through Detroit, when they drew close to the Rouge gates about fifty Dearborn policemen and Ford Servicemen met them, stating that they had no right to proceed through Dearborn because they had not obtained a permit.²⁹ Things quickly fell apart from there, with the Dearborn police deploying tear gas on the marchers.³⁰ The marchers' pace turned to a run, charging the Ford plant and throwing rocks

²⁵ Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 112.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Cruden, *The End of the Ford Myth*, 11.

²⁹ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 201; "4 Die in Riot; Bennett Hurt," 1.

³⁰ "4 Die in Riot; Bennett Hurt."

at the police and Ford Servicemen.³¹ Upon drawing closer to the gates, the marchers met reinforcements consisting of Detroit and Dearborn police, Dearborn firefighters, and Ford Servicemen, and were repelled by freezing water shot from fire hoses.

At this point, Bennett came outside the plant to confront the marchers, though his specific actions in the story differ depending on the source. In his memoir, Bennett argued that he left the Rouge in the hopes that he could reason with the marchers, driving out in a company car and indentifying himself to a marcher named Joe York, who was yelling that they had come for Bennett.³² Immediately thereafter, Bennett was met with a hail of rocks, with one glancing him on the forehead:

I grabbed hold of York, thinking I would protect myself that way. A chunk of slag seared across the skin of my forehead and furrowed my scalp. Blood rushed over my face. I fell to the pavement, York on top of me. I tried to get up, but the weight of York's body held me down. My whole body was by now bruised by the slag rained toward me. . . . York got to his feet. Just as he did so, Dearborn police opened fire on the mob from in front of the gate, and Detroit police, who had come out to see the show, began firing from the overpass. York and four others were killed, and many were injured. . . . I was determined to get out of that rain of bullets. I got to my feet. Someone hit me on the back of my neck with a chunk of slag. That was the last I knew for some time.³³

However, others would paint a different picture of the event from the one Bennett conveyed. A police officer later told a Detroit prosecuting attorney that Bennett had joined in the gunfire, stating, "When he emptied his gun he turned to me and demanded mine. Before I could hand him the pistol he fell unconscious and was lifted back into his car and driven to the emergency hospital."³⁴ In his narration of the events, Maurice Sugar accused Bennett of actually starting the gunfire, writing that, "No one paid much attention to [Bennett's car] until a window opened and

³¹ *Henry and Edsel*, 201; Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 120-1.

³² Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 93.

³³ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

³⁴ Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 36-7.

Bennett shot into the workers assembled near [a public speaker]. Almost instantly a shower of stones was hurled at the Bennett car, smashing the windows and injuring Bennett.”³⁵ After the smoke settled and the marchers had broken up, four marchers had been killed and about two-dozen marchers and Dearborn police had been hurt, with injuries varying from gunshot wounds to minor scrapes and bruises.³⁶

The response to the Ford Hunger March by Bennett and the local authorities also demonstrated the how far Bennett’s power in Southeastern Michigan had extended by the early 1930s. There were real questions as to why Dearborn and Detroit police had participated in the shooting and failed to investigate the event properly, especially since Dearborn mayor Clyde Ford had familial relations to Ford and the Dearborn police chief was purportedly on the Service Department payroll, listed as a “special investigator.”³⁷ Indeed, while the police chief came under some fire for the Dearborn police’s involvement in the Ford Massacre, the company itself was found without blame.³⁸ In Maurice Sugar’s reminiscences of the investigation and trial, he recalled that there were numerous instances where he felt procedure was lacking or being influenced some way by FMC. For one, he protested that the bullets in the bodies of marchers were given from the coroner back to the Dearborn police for evidence, when the trustworthiness of the police itself was in question.³⁹ Similarly, he also protested that the prosecutor, Harry Toy, did not immediately impound the Dearborn policeman’s guns following the shootings, stating that it was now impossible to determine whether or not the guns used to shoot the marchers had

³⁵ Ibid., 37.

³⁶ “4 Die in Riot; Bennett Hurt.”

³⁷ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 202.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Maurice Sugar, “An Open Letter to the Prosecuting Attorney from the Attorney for the International Labor Defense,” *New Force*, April 1932, 11-2; Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 58-62.

been swapped out before being taken as evidence.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he cited the one grand juror's testimony, which was printed by the *Detroit News* after the trial, to demonstrate that Bennett had held sway over the prosecutor Harry Toy, as well as the verdict, which had handed out no indictments. The juror stated:

I feel sure that the people of this country should know what transpired there, and I am confident that their righteous indignation would find some way to prevent a repetition of such a travesty on the dignity of the law. . . . That upon occasions agents of the prosecuting attorney's office and that of the attorney-general acted as defense counsel for certain individuals and institutions; that, upon other occasions, certain of these agents showed extreme prejudice against witnesses accused of no crime; that these agents, throughout the entire proceedings, exerted undue influence on the jury, contrary to the intents and purposes stated in the letter of the law. . . . Under the law, the agents of the prosecutor's office are required to render assistance to the jury on request only. Because of the Judge's [instructions to the jury], the impression was left that they owed allegiance to the prosecuting attorney rather than to the letter of the law.⁴¹

Sugar would go on to interpret the juror's words as he saw them, writing, "It was clear to me [who] the 'agents' who acted as defense counsel for 'certain individuals and institutions' and who 'exerted undue influence on the jury' were. The 'agents' had to have been the assistant prosecuting attorneys; the 'certain individuals' had to have been Harry Bennett and the Dearborn Police Department."⁴² Yet however many questions still surrounded the Wayne County grand jury investigation, its conclusions stood, showing that Bennett could even get around the law when combating labor if need be. Ford historian Richard Bak put it best in his assessment of the incident: "In the eyes of many, the lack of criminal culpability in what became known as the 'Ford Hunger March Massacre' meant that the [Ford Motor Company] could literally get away with murder."⁴³

⁴⁰ Sugar, "An Open Letter to the Prosecuting Attorney from the Attorney for the International Labor Defense," 12.

⁴¹ Sugar and Goodman, *The Ford Hunger March*, 134-5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴³ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 202.

Federal Legal Challenges to the Service Department

The following year saw the passage of legislation that changed the rules of engagement for industrial unions hoping to organize the Ford Motor Company plants. The 1933 NIRA and the 1935 Wagner Act both included provisions that protected workers' right to bargain with employers and join unions unimpeded. However, Ford hated the legislation, thinking it a challenge to his ultimate authority at the FMC. As such, Bennett used the opportunity to appease his boss, continuing to coercively stymie the unionization of Ford plants and ignoring the legislation.

On June 16, 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) into law, stating that "History probably will record the...Act as the most important and far-reaching legislation ever enacted by the American Congress."⁴⁴ The President aptly described the new legislation. Created in the hopes that establishing new codes of fair competition for U.S. industries would jumpstart the stagnant economy by eliminating "destructive" competition, the bill charged industry leaders to set-up industry-wide codes through discussions with labor that would increase both wages and payrolls in order to curtail unemployment and give American workers higher purchasing power.⁴⁵ Most significantly, the labor clause of the NIRA, Section 7A, was included in the hopes of protecting the workers' right to organize and bargain collectively with their employers through representatives of their own choosing.⁴⁶ It stipulated that workers should be allowed to do so free from employer "interference, restraint or coercion" and that no worker should be required to refrain from joining

⁴⁴ Fine, "The Ford Motor Company and the N.R.A.," 353-4.

⁴⁵ Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, 28-9; Fine, "The Ford Motor Company and the N.R.A.," 353-4; Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 91-4.

⁴⁶ Fine, "The Ford Motor Company and the N.R.A.," 354.

a union in order to obtain or keep a job.⁴⁷ However, as foreshadowed by the authority the Bennett exercised during and after the Ford Hunger March, a law prohibiting the actions his Servicemen took did not necessarily mean that they would stop. Henry Ford himself thought very little of the contents of the bill, stating authoritatively in 1933 that, “I have never bargained with my men, I have always bargained for them. I think we have made better bargains for them than any stranger could, or than they could make for themselves.”⁴⁸ The paternalistic, authoritarian stance Ford had taken on towards his workers since the Depression of 1920-1 thus continued. Workers were supposed to understand that their place was to work for the boss and respect him. All indications were that Bennett and his Service Department would put the new legislation to the test at the behest of Henry Ford.

Following up on worker complaints about supposed violations of Section 7A of the NIRA, the National Labor Board, a committee that presided over labor disputes arising from the law, began hearings on the labor conditions at Ford on December 15th, 1934.⁴⁹ Maurice Sugar featured as the key witness in the hearings. Amid cheers from workers at the hearings, Sugar addressed the chairman and condemned Bennett’s practices at Ford, stating, “Look at what has happened at this hearing. Almost every witness who has appeared here, and who has a job, has indicated in some manner or another that he expects to lose that job because he testified here. ... [The men who do not testify] are not cowards; quite the contrary. ... These men have families, they have wives, they have children, and they cannot bring themselves to testify. And who is to

⁴⁷ Sidney Fine, *The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 33-4.

⁴⁸ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 221.

⁴⁹ Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 148.

blame them?”⁵⁰ However, the hearings ended without further action against FMC, with the Department of Justice scared to act against the corporate giant without a complete assurance of a victory.⁵¹ In March, Assistant Attorney General Harold Stephens discussed the rationale behind the decision not to pursue further legal action, stating, “A suit against [Ford Motor Company] would be of such national importance and would be so ably and vigorously defended that it should be based only upon the clearest and highest proof of violations of [Section 7A]. The proof referred to must necessarily be of such evidentiary value as to render the Government’s position on the facts impregnable.”⁵² With these closing words, Bennett’s Service Department had again bucked legal threats to its operations.

The Supreme Court declared the NIRA unconstitutional the following year on March 27th. However, new, stronger legislation quickly followed to maintain the force of the NIRA’s Section 7A, further challenging Bennett’s stranglehold on unionization efforts in Ford plants. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act, nicknamed the Wagner Act after its sponsor New York Senator Robert Wagner, kept intact Section 7A of the NIRA while implementing more severe penalties for violations.⁵³ While before the National Labor Board investigations on Ford had run aground because the Department of Justice had failed to pursue a case against Ford, handing out punishment would now be much easier, with a revamped three-member National Labor Relations Board being granted significant leeway in how to administer it.⁵⁴ Additionally, the

⁵⁰ Maurice Sugar, “Auto Workers Tell the President -- Plenty,” December 16, 1934, Henry Kraus Collection, Accession 112, Box 2, Folder 2-26 - Statement by Maurice Sugar to Committee Investigating Auto Industry, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

⁵¹ Fine, “The Ford Motor Company and the N.R.A.,” 383.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 383-4.

⁵³ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 50; Fine, “The Ford Motor Company and the N.R.A.,” 383-5.

⁵⁴ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 50.

Wagner Act also implemented stronger measures to encourage collective bargaining between an employer and its employees: “[The law], writes labor historian Robert Zinger, “mandated representation elections upon workers’ request, laid down ground rules for the conduct of those elections, and required that employers engage in collective bargaining exclusively with the party victorious in the election.”⁵⁵ This measure of the Wagner Act would prove to provide much needed help for the autoworkers in Detroit, with the governmental backing giving them leverage as they fought against Harry Bennett and the FMC.⁵⁶

The Wagner Act was not the only thing that positively affected the ethos of the autoworker labor movement in the mid-1930s. For the first time, autoworkers became unified under the banner of the United Auto Workers and made significant gains in strikes against their employers. Indeed, before 1935, auto unionism had been marred by competition between a variety of different craft and industrial unions and inter-union factionalism. To exemplify the divisions apparent in these unions even by 1933, differing opinions on the efficacy of the NIRA and on the industry-wide auto code that was eventually adopted under the law fueled union rivalries and divided the labor movement. While the American Federation of Labor (AFL) supported the passage of the NIRA, the Communist-affiliated Auto Workers Union (AWU) condemned the law and drew up a utopian automobile industry labor code in response, hoping to situate itself as an alternative union to the AFL for autoworkers.⁵⁷ The final auto code approved under the NIRA further increased divisions among the auto industry. By 1934, it became apparent that the code was largely ineffectual, given Bennett’s activities; as a result, the membership of the AFL’s 100,000-strong auto locals dropped to a membership of 20,000, and

⁵⁵ Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, 39.

⁵⁶ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 258-9.

⁵⁷ Fine, *The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle*, 40-1.

the vast majority of workers of automotive plants in Michigan (88.7%) voted for unaffiliated representatives in elections that determined their representatives in collective bargaining negotiations with employers.⁵⁸

However, automotive unions slowly became unified under the umbrella of the UAW. An affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a federation of industrial unions, the UAW burst on the scene once the CIO left the AFL in 1935.⁵⁹ In the spring of 1936, the UAW was 30,000 strong, and quickly gained momentum soon thereafter, completing successful sit-down strikes in the South Bend assembly plant of automotive supplier Bendix and in critical General Motors (GM) plants throughout Flint, Michigan in late 1936 to early 1937.⁶⁰ During the same year, the UAW absorbed other rival unions, with Mechanics' Educational Society, the Automotive Industrial Workers' Association, and other various assembly plant unions joining the union in the summer and fall.⁶¹ The UAW's organizing efforts in Flint ultimately led to a significant concession to the union—GM recognized the UAW as the sole bargaining agent for the workers in the plants struck, and promised that it would not discriminate against union members in its plants nor attempt to prevent its employees from organizing.⁶² The workers quickly realized the far-reaching implications of their win; historian Robert Zieger aptly describes its importance in American history:

Thousands of autoworkers filled the streets in a celebration that lasted through the freezing night. Despite the grudging and partial character of the contract wrung from GM, unionists regarded the very fact of bringing the world's most powerful corporation

⁵⁸ Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step; Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974), 34-5.

⁵⁹ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 50-2.

⁶⁰ Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, 46-7; Nelson. Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 62-4.

⁶¹ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 52.

⁶² Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW*, 170-1.

to the bargaining table as a breathtaking victory. “The GM sit-down strike of 1936-37,” declares historian Sidney Fine, “was, all in all, the most significant American labor conflict in the twentieth century.”⁶³

Indeed, the victory had given the UAW an unprecedented victory against a major automotive maker. It would soon turn to fight what was perceived as an even greater adversary: the Ford Motor Company.

Henry Ford made it no secret that he detested both the UAW activity in his plants and the new Wagner Act that threatened to dictate the terms of the FMC’s operations. In a conversation with a Ford executive, he shared his belief the Wagner Act was a gross violation of American individualism, stating, “[The Wagner Act] will fail because our workers won’t stand for it, I won’t stand for it, and the public won’t stand for it.”⁶⁴ On other occasions, he displayed harsher, more irrational opinions. For example, in an 1937 interview at his winter home in Georgia, Ford inexplicably linked labor unions to wealthy financiers not unlike the ones he had battled in his formative years at the Detroit Automobile Company and the Henry Ford Company: “Labor union organizations are the worst thing that ever struck the earth, because they take away a man’s independence. Financiers are behind the unions and their object is to kill competition so as to reduce the income of workers, and eventually bring on war.”⁶⁵ However nonsensical the relation he drew between “parasites” and labor unions, it seemed that he was opposed to both on the grounds that they threatened his ultimate control of the FMC. And in an interview with another reporter in 1937, he expanded on this belief: “[Unions] want control. I have always

⁶³ Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, 47-8.

⁶⁴ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 259-60.

⁶⁵ “In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY and INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS OF AMERICA, Case No. C-199,” 23.

made a better bargain for our men than an outsider could. We have never had to bargain against our men, and we don't expect to begin now.”⁶⁶

When the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Wagner Act as constitutional in 1937, Ford shared his opinions with his workers, distributing a company pamphlet around the FMC's Dearborn facilities entitled “Ford Gives Viewpoint on Labor.” In it, he condemned the new legislation, opining again on the nonsensical notion that somehow wealthy financiers were trying to control unions so as to bring down the FMC. “Labor,” wrote Ford, “thinks the Wagner Act helps it. All you have to see is wait and see how it works. It fits perfectly into the plans to get control of labor. ... A little group of those who control both capitol and labor will sit down in New York, and they will settle prices, and they will settle dividends, and they will settle wages. The mechanic, this skilled factory man, will take what is left. Those are his new bosses—not the bosses that pay him his wages, but the bosses who make him pay.” Ford was resolved not to let anyone else have control over his workers other than himself.

Ford felt that he needed someone trustworthy yet ruthless to combat the newly constitutional legislation and deal directly with the UAW, and he continued to support Bennett's endeavors as head of the Service Department as a result. The memoir of Charles Sorensen, a chief engineer at Ford during the 1930s, provides the details of Ford's thought process on the matter:

“If things get too warm for any of us,” [Ford stated], “we should take a trip and get away from the plant. I've picked someone to talk to the unions. I want a strong, aggressive man who can take care of himself in an argument, and I've got him. He has my full confidence and I want to be sure that Edsel and you, Charlie, will support him. He's waiting...at the Rouge now, so let's go down there and see him.” I drove father and son to my office, and whom should we find there but Harry Bennett! ... Bennett bubbled over

⁶⁶ Ibid.

with enthusiasm ... [He] assured Mr. Ford that he could handle the unions—if necessary take them over.⁶⁷

Sorensen's anecdote provides a good way of understanding Bennett's position in the company by the 1930s. The impromptu ceremony of Ford reannointing Bennett as his labor representative demonstrated how Bennett's relationship with Ford conferred a certain amount of legitimacy on Bennett in the FMC. Bennett understood that this legitimacy was conditional on his work to appease the boss. As such, he acquiesced to Ford's harsh stance towards labor. As Bennett described the FMC's contention with the UAW in his memoir, we can see how this was the case: "Unions were necessary in the automobile industry in order to stop all the politics, the favoritism, and the discrimination that went on in the plants. However, having said this much, I will say frankly that we didn't want the CIO in the [River Rouge Assembly Plant]. ... Our feelings were not any different from those of the rest of the industry as a whole."⁶⁸ Bennett undoubtedly had trouble in his memoir in framing his work as union buster in a way that could be used paint himself in a good light. He readily admitted that unions were "necessary," but conceded that this was a moot point. As head of Service Department, he needed to, as Sorensen put it, "fit Ford's mood."⁶⁹ And in 1937, Henry Ford was determined to resist the UAW's attempts to organize his plants.

UAW organizers realized how hard it would be to take on Bennett's Service Department. Harry Ross reminisced that UAW lawyers wanted to avoid the Ford organizing drive like the plague: "When it came to talking about organizing Ford, that was too tough for these lawyers. They wanted a chair [at a peaceful office] instead of the work that would be involved in

⁶⁷ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 260-1.

⁶⁸ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 109.

⁶⁹ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 257.

organizing Ford.”⁷⁰ And indeed, Bennett and his Service Department initially won major victories against the UAW in 1937. His victories in FMC plants in Dallas and Memphis showed the extent of Bennett’s reach as the company expanded its operations during the 1930s; city administrators allowed Servicemen free reign in their communities due to their fear that if Ford grew displeased with the arrangement, he would move the company’s assembly plants elsewhere.⁷¹ In Dallas, Bennett sponsored an especially violent campaign against organized labor. He transferred loyal Servicemen from Ford’s Dearborn headquarters that then organized what the NLRB would later term “strong arm squads” that spied on, threatened, and beat CIO organizers throughout the year of 1937.⁷² Noteworthy acts of violence included the tarring and feathering of one CIO organizer, the kidnapping and whipping of UAW organizer Charles Elliot, and the beating of CIO-UAW lawyer W.J Houston in the streets of Dallas.⁷³ Servicemen also went to great lengths in spying on the union men. They wiretapped Houston’s household, listening in on the family’s private conversations for up to two weeks.⁷⁴ To underscore the power the Servicemen held over the local authorities, it is important to point out that none of the men involved in the beatings were ever brought to justice.⁷⁵ The situation in Dallas mirrored the situation in Memphis. Historian Stephen Norwood writes that:

In September 1937, UAW organizer Norman Smith opened an office in Memphis and announced his intention to organize its Ford plant. ... A month after his arrival, six or seven Ford thugs dragged Smith from his car and beat him over the head with hammers

⁷⁰ Ross, “Harry E. Ross Interview,” 29.

⁷¹ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 186.

⁷² “In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY vs ... Case No. XVI-C-509, XVI-C-542, XVI-C-544, XVI-C-545, XVI-550” (National Labor Relations Board, April 18, 1940), 10-15, Accession 31, Box 12, Folder 13: “Ford Motor Co. Hearings before the NLRB”, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

⁷³ “In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY vs ... Case No. XVI-C-509, XVI-C-542, XVI-C-544, XVI-C-545, XVI-550,” 36-9, 46-7; Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 186.

⁷⁴ “In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY vs ... Case No. XVI-C-509, XVI-C-542, XVI-C-544, XVI-C-545, XVI-550,” 39-40.

⁷⁵ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 186.

and pistol butts, fracturing his skull and nearly killing him. Memphis police made no arrests, despite have eyewitness reports and the assailants' car license number. When Smith recovered from the beating, the UAW withdrew him from Memphis.⁷⁶

And if things were bad for CIO-UAW organizers in the South, they were equally bad, if not more so, at the FMC headquarters in Dearborn. While the Wagner Act was supposed to protect workers' right to organize and bargain collectively, in practice, a worker joining a union in Southeastern Michigan put his livelihood in serious risk. Indeed, initially it seems as though the provisions of the Wagner Act actually hurt more than helped workers. As pro-labor historian Carl Raushenbush points out:

When the [Wagner Act] was held constitutional...on April 12, 1937, and when Henry Ford said in an interview on April 14 that Ford workers were free to join a union, a number of employees believed what they saw in the papers. ... Joseph V. Bailey was one of these [men]. He joined the UAW on April 14. He was fired from the Highland Park plant May 7. John Schipper joined in March; he felt free to talk about the union after April 12, and on April 15, he brought a newspaper to work with him, with the Ford interview in it, and gave it to his foreman to read. "He just looked at me and gave me a silly grin," testified Schipper. "That was all until about 9:15 a.m." Then Schipper was fired and could get from the company no reason for the discharge.⁷⁷

While ostensibly there to help workers join a union without fear, Bailey's and Schipper's experiences showed that the Wagner Act actually made the Service Department's work easier. Blatantly ignoring the legislation, Servicemen used the opportunity to fire workers who thought it was safe to openly admit they were part of the UAW.

The violent activities that occurred in Memphis and Dallas also occurred in Dearborn. The most vivid example of this came on May 26th, 1937, where a UAW leaflet distribution on the pedestrian overpass on Miller Road leading from the River Rouge plant devolved into a one-

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Raushenbush, *Fordism: Ford and the Workers, Ford and the Community*, 18-9.

sided battle between UAW organizers and Servicemen.⁷⁸ Walter Reuther, then president of the 174 UAW local and senior-organizer, was one of the men who were viciously beaten. His recollection of the incident, later termed the Battle of the Overpass, was included in his brother Victor Reuther's memoir. Walter stated, "I was there a couple minutes and then all of the sudden 35 or 40 men surrounded us and started to beat us up. I didn't fight back. I merely tried to guard my face. The men...picked me up about eight different times and threw me down on my back on the concrete and while I was on the ground, they kicked me in the face, head and other parts of the body."⁷⁹ The men who distributed the beatings exemplified the type of people employed by Bennett's Service Department: Bennett's friend from the navy, Sam Taylor; Angelo Caruso, a boss of a Detroit gang; and a handful of professional wrestlers and boxers.⁸⁰ And as occurred during the Ford Hunger March, the authorities, while present, did nothing to prevent the beatings.⁸¹ In fact, the actions of the city of Dearborn after the incident demonstrate the extent of Bennett's control of the local authorities during this period, as shortly thereafter, the city passed an ordinance *banning* leafleting around the Rouge.⁸² If the UAW were to organize Ford, it was going to prove to be much more difficult than doing so at GM.

Luckily for the union, significant negative press following the Battle of the Overpass made it much more difficult for Henry Ford to justify the tactics being employed by Bennett on his behalf. Indeed, one key difference from the 1932 Ford Hunger March and the Battle of the

⁷⁸ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 185; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 461-2; Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW*, 201-2.

⁷⁹ Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW*, 201.

⁸⁰ "Ford Riot Warrant Testimony Begins," *Detroit News*, July 6, 1937; Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 184.

⁸¹ Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW*, 201.

⁸² Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 186.

Overpass was the press-reaction. While the press coverage of the Hunger March was overtly anti-labor, the violent reaction that the unionists had received in the Battle of the Overpass led the media to paint a much different picture about labor relations at Ford. Many reporters and photographers had been on the scene to cover the leaflet distribution (In his account of Battle of the Overpass, the Walter Reuther actually attributes his escape from the violence to the actions of newspaper photographers).⁸³ As a result, they were right in the middle of the skirmish and able to take a number of graphic photos that showed the world exactly what the FMC's labor policy meant for workers.⁸⁴ *Time* magazine published a photo of a bloodied Richard Frankensteen, another prominent UAW organizer, and wrote: "It looked very much as if that brutal beating might hurt Henry Ford as much as it Richard Frankensteen."⁸⁵

To make matters worse for the company, it received more negative press after the NLRB began hearings on FMC's unfair business practices in violation of Section 7A of the Wagner Act. Throughout 1937, the *Detroit News* simultaneously ran stories on both the NLRB hearings and the grand jury investigations on the beatings at the Battle of the Overpass, having to clarify for its readers at the end of one of its articles that, "No direct connection exists between the grand jury investigation and the Federal investigation under way as a result of the complaint against the Ford Company by the National Labor Relations Board."⁸⁶ In December 1937, the NLRB found the Ford Motor Company guilty of violating the provisions of the Wagner Act, ordering the company to desist from discouraging membership in the UAW and to reinstate men who had lost

⁸³ Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW*, 201.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ "Ford Riot Warrant Testimony Begins."

their jobs as a result of their union affiliation.⁸⁷ Similarly, on April 1940, the NLRB finished its detailed investigation of the unfair practices occurring in Dallas since 1937, coming to the conclusion that the Ford Motor Company “has engaged and is engaging in unfair labor practices” and recommending that the company “cease and desist from discouraging membership...in any and all...labor organizations.”⁸⁸ And while the company tried to appeal the 1937 NLRB decision to the Supreme Court, in March 1941, the Supreme Court upheld the decision.⁸⁹ The Government was now firmly backing the UAW in their quest to organize Ford.

After it became apparent that Harry Bennett and Henry Ford were still resistant to meeting with UAW representatives and cooperating with the rulings of the NLRB and the Supreme Court, the UAW called for a massive strike on the River Rouge plant in 1941.⁹⁰ The strike was, in Victor Reuther’s words, “massively successful;” however, it was not without difficulty.⁹¹ Bennett tried to break the strike by attempting exploit racial antagonisms within the UAW, hiring black scabs in the River Rouge plant. “I know I am doing the wrong thing,” stated one scab, “but I haven’t had a job for a long time. I’m getting \$15 a day and something to eat.”⁹² Additionally, Bennett hired black pugilists to use as Servicemen. In a 1967 interview, black UAW organizers Mr. and Mrs. Robert Battle corroborated this fact, with Mrs. Battle asking her husband, “Do you remember, we had detectives in the house asking you to become a service

⁸⁷ “In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY and INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS OF AMERICA, 1939,” 1-3; 43-5.

⁸⁸ “In the Matter of FORD MOTOR COMPANY vs ... Case No. XVI-C-509, XVI-C-542, XVI-C-544, XVI-C-545, XVI-550,” 82-3.

⁸⁹ Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW*, 211.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 211-2.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁹² August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 88.

man? They said he was tall, and he was very well developed, and he was well at that time, and he doesn't have to work hard. And they came to see me."⁹³ While Battle did not join, others did. Armed with iron clubs, knives and razorblades, they assaulted the mostly white picket lines, resulting in about fifty strikers injured.⁹⁴ However, union solidarity ultimately prevailed. The UAW held a rally outside of the plant, distributed leaflets, and issued press releases that told the African Americans that they had "nothing to be afraid of;" that "the interests of the Negro workers are the same as the interests of the white workers;" and that their animosity was directed towards Bennett and the FMC, not the African American scabs.⁹⁵ With the help of prominent Black UAW activists like Louis Martin, Horace White, Malcolm Dade, and Charles White, the African American scabs were eventually persuaded to exit the plant.⁹⁶

But Bennett and Henry Ford were both ready to continue fighting the strikers. The conflict only halted once Ford's wife became involved, exemplifying again how personalized the company's hierarchy was. Indeed, while Henry's son Edsel and Charles Sorensen both had been opposed to Henry Ford's and Bennett's labor policy, it was only when Henry's wife Clara became vehemently opposed to the labor practices at the FMC that things changed. In other words, the advice of his close associates and other executives fell on deaf ears when it came to Henry Ford pursuing the policy he felt best. As the ultimate decision maker at the company, the only person that ultimately held sway over Henry Ford was, humorously, his wife. In a conversation with Sorensen, Henry Ford detailed the final straw for the reversal in labor practices at the company: "[She told me that] there would be riots and bloodshed, and she had

⁹³ Robert Battle, "Robert Battle Oral History," March 19, 1967, 7, Blacks in the Labor Movement Oral History Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

⁹⁴ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 190.

⁹⁵ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 90.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 102-3.

seen enough of that. ... She did not want to be around here and see me responsible for such trouble. What could I do? The whole thing was not worth the trouble it would make. I felt her vision and judgment were better than mine.”⁹⁷ Whatever the pressures coming from his associates and the media, it was only when the internal familial pressures were too great that Ford changed his opinion. As a result, Bennett was left to cut a deal with the UAW, agreeing to striker’s demands that an election be held on the unionization of Ford plants. On May 21, 1941, the UAW won bargaining rights for Ford workers, gaining 70% of the total vote.⁹⁸

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However, Ford was not particularly pleased with the settlement, as it meant that he would have to relinquish some control of his company to others. In a discussion with Michigan Governor Murray Van Wagoner at his residence, who had supported the UAW organizing drive, Ford bitterly told him, “Well, you’ve got a plant – what are you going to do with it?”⁹⁹ While no longer able to resort to overt tactics to thwart the union, Ford still hoped to control the union through different means. Understanding that his boss still wanted to fight the union, Bennett persuaded Henry to offer the UAW the “check-off,” the automatic deduction of UAW dues from FMC worker paychecks.¹⁰⁰ In an interview with a reporter, Bennett explained that he and Ford remained optimistic that the FMC could hold the check-off as a bargaining chip in bargaining with the UAW:

Mr. Ford was mad over the UAW-CIO strike in 1941. He told me, “I’ve never done anything against labor.” He was so mad he wanted to shut the plant down. He asked me, “What is this check-off system the UAW wants? I explained to him that we’d take union

⁹⁷ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 462.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 137.

¹⁰⁰ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 420.

dues out of the employees' paychecks and that we'd be the UAW's banker. He liked that idea. "What's wrong with that?" he said. "We'll go along with it."¹⁰¹

Ford also hoped that by giving the union more than it asked, it might foster internal fighting within the union. "Mr. Ford told me," Bennett wrote in his memoir, "'Give em' everything—it won't work.' He then explained that he felt if we gave the union just a little, then they'd be right back at us for more. But if we gave them 'everything,' he thought, then they could fall to fighting and bickering among themselves. The way he saw it, it was a case of 'enough rope.'"¹⁰²

Indeed, while the FMC had capitulated to the union in some respects, it was far from clear that the UAW was going to have an easy time bargaining moving forward. As Bennett tellingly told *Time* in 1941, "If the NLRB orders an election, of course we will hold one, because Mr. Ford will observe the law. The C.I.O. will win it, of course, because it always wins these farcical elections, and we will bargain with it because the law says so. We will bargain until Hell freezes over, but they won't get anything."¹⁰³ It was clear—even after the UAW settlement, Bennett still had a job to do, working on behalf of Henry Ford's wishes.

¹⁰¹ Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW*, 212.

¹⁰² Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 139.

¹⁰³ Ross, "Harry E. Ross Interview," 40; "Model T Tycoon," *Time*, March 17, 1941, 17.

III

Tumult and Change

Bennett always carried a gun and had a pistol range in his office. Here he and Henry Ford used to have target practice. I mentioned this one day to Mrs. Ford, who demanded indignantly, "Who is this man Bennett who has so much control over my husband and is ruining my son's health?" The question startled me. ... I left her in tears. I couldn't answer the question. I couldn't tell her that Bennett did not control Henry Ford but that the reverse is true.¹

-- Charles Sorensen, on the Bennett-Ford relationship in the early 1930s

The 1940s brought an air of uncertainty and challenge to Ford Motor Company. Firstly, the company's production shifted almost entirely towards the production of war materials for the Allied effort. Edsel Ford and Charles Sorensen, who had worked his way up through the company's highly personalized hierarchy to become Ford's much relied upon Chief Production Engineer by the mid-1920s, set in motion an ambitious project for building a massive assembly plant in Ypsilanti, MI capable of producing a B-24 bomber every hour.² Secondly, as the UAW achieved recognition as the sole bargaining agent for FMC employees, there was a question of how labor relations should be handled moving forward. As was evident from negative publicity, government investigations, and opposition within the Ford family, Bennett would no longer be able to rely on the heavy-handed tactics he had employed in the 1930s. Thirdly, the 1943 death of Edsel Ford, who had acted as the nominal president of the company ever since the Ford family had purchased it in 1919, led to questions about the present and future management of the company.³ After his son's departure, a physically and mentally declining Henry Ford, who

¹ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 256.

² Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 269.

³ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 261.

suffered two strokes in 1938 and 1940, took up the presidency of the company. As such, FDR's government, the FMC's business partners, and the general American public all wondered who was really running the show at the company and whether or not Henry Ford could still carry the responsibility of managing one of America's most important corporations.

Indeed, as Henry Ford became increasingly irrational and absentminded due to his health problems, some also wondered whether or not Bennett was using his position as "Mr. Ford's personal aide" in ways to bolster his own power in the company. For one, some questioned whether or not Bennett was manipulating the declining Ford in order to guide company policy in his favor and oust would-be rivals. As early as 1938, *Forum* magazine brought up this possibility, telling its readers that, "In many minds [Bennett] occupies the position that Rasputin did in Russia."⁴ In his book *Henry and Edsel*, historian Richard Bak also questions whether or not this was the case, writing, "Bennett accompanied [an aging] Ford on his daily rounds. The two men were almost inseparable—and it quickly became a question of whether the orders coming from the boss reflected Henry's views or those of a certain bow-tied Svengali."⁵ However, some wondered whether or not Bennett simply acted unilaterally in firing rivals, and simply used his relationship with the company founder to boost the credibility of his own demands. For example, Josephine Goman, a Ford manager at the Rouge in the 1940s who helped deal with labor grievances, noted that Bennett was using Ford as a rubber stamp in company business dealings:

By the time I knew Mr. Ford all contacts with him were made through Harry Bennett's whim or discretion. I sat in on some of these conferences and watched Mr. Ford, who seemed to be enjoying every minute. ... He would show a lively interest in what was

⁴ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 447; O'Brien, "Henry Ford's Commander in Chief -- Harry Bennett and his Private Army," 2.

⁵ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 262.

going on without taking part in any of the conversation. Many a visitor came away with the impression that he had talked with Mr. Ford and was confused later when he tried to recall what Mr. Ford had said. If he said anything, he had told an amusing story which probably had nothing to do with the business at hand.⁶

Indeed, after Edsel Ford's death in 1943, Bennett used his position in the company to fire many prominent executives who had once been close to Edsel and had been Bennett's rivals as possible candidates for the next FMC president. All indications were that Bennett would try to make a power grab after Henry Ford's resignation.

In the course of this chapter, I will make sense of the last few tumultuous years of Bennett's career in the Ford Motor Company. Firstly, I argue that Bennett adopted a new labor relations approach in light of the NLRB rulings against FMC and the 1941 UAW unionization. As always in his career, Bennett took the cue from Henry Ford, who hated challenges to his authority, to impede the union's power through any means necessary. However, due to the infeasibility of the violent tactics he had once employed, Bennett adopted a more passive, covert resistance to the letter of the law and union activities. He moved to frustrate the UAW in two ways. Firstly, he foiled union representatives' work by employing stall tactics in order to make the company as difficult to deal with as possible in getting labor grievances heard. Secondly, he played UAW leaders and workers alike against each other through a strategy of divide and conquer. In this chapter, I also argue that as Ford declined, Bennett took advantage of the relationship that he had fostered with the boss, wielding it to oust executives that he had personal spats with or that had rivaled his own power in the company. And while it is debatable whether or not he could have actually become the head of the FMC after Henry Ford's resignation, he certainly tried to. When Henry II was released from the navy to go work at the FMC after his

⁶ Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 263; Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 159-60.

father Edsel had died in 1943, he came into a company that looked to be controlled by Bennett. Indeed, Bennett's conduct during his final few years at the company were threatening enough to make Bennett's firing a top priority for Henry Ford II when he assumed the presidency of the FMC in 1945, following his elderly grandfather's resignation.

Charles Sorensen's remarks about Bennett's conduct at the Ford Motor Company, shared in the beginning of this chapter, elucidates my second argument more fully. In referring to the early 1930s, a time where Henry was still mentally sharp, Sorensen was probably more right than wrong. At that point, Henry Ford dictated the terms of their relationship, delighting in the fact that Bennett knew him well enough to do the things that he wanted done without asking. However, by the late 1930s and 1940s, contrary to what Sorensen writes, Bennett was no longer an inferior to Henry Ford. The fact of the matter is that Bennett's close relationship with a declining Ford put him in a good position to make a power grab. He channeled the power he had at the FMC, obtained through the close relationship he had built with the boss for over two decades, to suit his own desires.

The Personalities of the Arsenal of Democracy

The FMC's World War II production strategy showed how the highly personalized structure of the company became an unwieldy detriment to the company as Ford declined. While Charles Sorensen and Edsel Ford both were enthused to help the Allied effort by producing war materials, seeing it as an opportunity to make guaranteed profits for the company and do their patriotic duty, they found it difficult to get the stamp of approval from the boss, who harbored deeply pacifistic sentiments. Indeed, Henry Ford constantly proved to be a stumbling block to beginning war production, only acquiescing to Sorensen and Edsel's plans once the men were

able to sell it to Henry in a way that pleased and flattered him—by building a gargantuan assembly plant to produce B-24 Liberator bombers for the military, the FMC would be the crown jewel of the nation’s production effort. Even so, Henry continued to make Edsel’s and Sorensen’s efforts difficult, which is where Bennett came in. While Sorensen was content with keeping contention with labor to a minimum, seeing strikes as a threat to their production strategy, an elderly Henry Ford continued to charge Bennett with thwarting the UAW’s efforts in Ford plants, still viewing the UAW as a threat to his control of the company. As such, Bennett persisted in his efforts to battle the union, albeit in a method less overtly violent and illegal. Instead of relying on espionage and coercion, Bennett resorted to foot-dragging and a strategy of divide and conquer, hoping to make the union’s work as difficult as possible.

Under the direction of Edsel Ford and Charles Sorensen, the Ford Motor Company dedicated itself to contributing to the war effort by flexing its muscle as a production juggernaut. The two men saw it as a noble and patriotic undertaking, even before the United States’ formal declaration of war against the Axis. In his memoir, Sorensen termed his work during the war as the biggest and most important challenge of his life and of his 40-year long career at the FMC. He wrote, “Orators, columnists, professors, preachers, and propagandists performed magnificently with the theme that World War II was a war between two ideologies. But whatever inflamed people’s minds in warring countries, victory was on the side of the heaviest-armed battalions. The conflict became one of two systems of production.”⁷ And indeed, the Ford Motor Company took upon many tasks: the production of army jeeps (both amphibious and non), army staff cars, gliders, and different components for aircraft and tank engines.⁸ In 1940, Sorensen also

⁷ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 273.

⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 198-9, 205.

persuaded Henry Ford to commence the production of around 4,000 Pratt & Whitney engines even before securing a government contract later in October; taking into account costs of materials and the conversion of assembly lines, it amounted to putting the entire company on the hook for around \$30 million.⁹ Mustering all the resources that they could, Edsel and Sorensen helped the company reach their monthly production quotas.¹⁰ However, as Ford historian Allan Nevins points out, the armed forces wanted further contributions from the company: “Despite Ford’s protests that it had many other war contracts to meet, the Air Force pressed the company for a larger output, and set a goal of 3400 [Pratt & Whitney engines] a month to be attained by the spring of 1941.”¹¹ Similarly, around the end of 1941, government officials approached Sorensen and asked him if the company would be able and willing to produce around 1,200 B-24 Liberator bombers for the Air Force.¹² Despite the company’s impressive efforts toward helping the Allied war effort, Washington wanted more.

To do so, Sorensen needed to implement sweeping changes on a company-wide basis. Assembly plants in Highland Park, Kansas City, St. Paul, and other cities across the country were all fitted to produce aircraft engines.¹³ Additionally, after visiting the Consolidated Aircraft B-24 production plant in California, whose production was advancing at a snail’s pace due to poor factory design, Sorensen realized that a new, massive assembly plant needed to be built in order to give the Air Force the thousands of planes that it needed quickly. “[Production in California] was pretty discouraging,” wrote Sorensen in his memoir, “and I said so. Naturally,

⁹ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 276; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 202.

¹⁰ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 278-9.

¹³ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 202.

and quite properly, the reply was ‘How would you do it?’ I had to put up or shut up. ... I really did have something in mind.”¹⁴ Calculating the time needed to produce parts along an assembly line that would ultimately yield a bomber a day until the early hours of the morning, Sorensen produced the sketches of what would become the gargantuan Willow Run plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan the next day.¹⁵ And while Edsel immediately signed on to the Willow Run project that Sorensen had penned, Henry Ford was still a difficult sell for any war project, or for that matter, any project that he himself had not conceived of.¹⁶

The problem was that both men still needed Henry Ford’s approval for any major undertaking. As the majority shareholder of the FMC since the company’s purchase in 1920, Henry could veto any policy he disagreed with.¹⁷ While nominally the president of the FMC ever since the Ford family had obtained ownership, Edsel Ford was still very much the inferior of his father and was treated as the number two of the company.¹⁸ As such, Sorensen could not lean on Edsel to set any policy decisions in motion.¹⁹ And as an experienced member of the personalized corporate hierarchy of the FMC, Sorensen knew both that his pacifistic boss hated the notion that his company would be aiding the war effort and that it would take a lot to convince Henry otherwise.²⁰ In fact, Henry had already shot down a proposal from Sorensen in 1940 that would have seen the Ford Motor Company making 6,000 Rolls-Royce engines for the

¹⁴ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 281.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 281-3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹⁷ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 115.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 268-69.

²⁰ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 142.

British after hearing that it pleased Roosevelt.²¹ Sorensen had never seen Ford so livid: “He was wild about Franklin Roosevelt and people in Washington. ‘They want war,’ he repeated over and over again.”²² However, Sorensen knew that Henry’s aversion to any project related to the war did not chiefly stem from his pacifism; otherwise, it might have been much more difficult for Sorensen to sell Ford on Willow Run.²³ The primary motivation for Ford when making management decisions, even during his waning hour, was still based on a need for control and perfection. “He admired [the British] engineering excellence,” wrote Sorensen in his memoir, “but to manufacture [Rolls-Royce engines] he would be making something to somebody else’s design, and that thought hurt. When a man’s work is merely mediocre, he is let severely alone. But when it sets a standard for all to see—and copy—he becomes an object of admiration and envy.”²⁴ Sorensen understood that Ford took immense pride in his own original work and simply wanted to compete with other companies and be the *best*.

So while producing Rolls-Royce Engines seemed terribly unattractive to Ford, Sorensen thought that a massive project like the Willow Run plant might be an easier sell. Sorensen picked up on this fact when trying to persuade Ford to take on a contract to build Pratt and Whitney Airplane Engines earlier during the war: “It was not until I pointed out that we might set the standards in building them that I secured Henry Ford’s consent to make 4,000 Pratt & Whitney engines.”²⁵ Knowing this, Sorensen used a similar tactic in selling Henry on the Willow Run plant and the B-24 project: “I anticipated that [persuading Henry Ford to build the

²¹ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 275-6.

²² *Ibid.*, 162.

²³ *Ibid.*, 276.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Willow Run plant] might be harder to accomplish than getting Washington's approval. I showed him my penciled sketch [of the plant] to explain what a properly laid-out plant could do. ... In return I got the usual long lecture about war. ... This time however, the lecture ended differently. 'Make a complete plane only.'²⁶ While Ford had been opposed to earlier projects, Ford saw that building entire planes as fast as Sorensen wanted to was an impressive feat. He signed onto the project after being reassured that the FMC would set the standard for wartime production. With that, Sorensen went to the Army, echoing his boss's sentiment. "We are not interested in assemblies [of components]," said Sorensen, "We'll build the complete plane or nothing. ... We believe we can do a good production job. If the Air Force will give the Ford Motor Company a contract and will spend up to two million dollars, we will build and equip a plant capable of turning out one Liberator bomber an hour."²⁷ With that, Sorensen began work on the Willow Run Plant, having successfully navigated the intensely personalized corporate hierarchy of the company.

But Sorensen faced a similar problem in trying to foster amicable relations with the FMC's employees. Having drawn up plans for an ambitious production project to support the war effort, Sorensen needed the support of the workers in order to bring them to fruition—something he knew his boss would not be overly enthusiastic about. Generally speaking, it *should* have been an easier task to create good relations with labor than in the decades prior. After winning the struggle to unionize in 1941, workers' quality of life improved dramatically, leaving them less likely to strike. Real earnings jumped to unprecedented levels as a result of labor shortages caused by the draft and the ever-increasing demand for more industrial

²⁶ Ibid., 286.

²⁷ Ibid., 284.

production to fuel the country's war effort.²⁸ During the war years, infant mortality also sharply declined, access to health care and education improved, and life expectancy increased substantially.²⁹ Also going for Sorensen was the fact that UAW leadership, led by Walter Reuther, had diminished the influence of its radical communist wing and pledged support for FDR's war effort.³⁰ Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein writes on Reuther's *modus operandi* for managing the union during wartime:

Reuther saw that the use of the strike weapon would become immensely more difficult and that the government's direct role in shaping production, wages, and investment would necessarily expand. ... To the non-Communist left, Reuther became a sensationally attractive figure in the 1940s because of his overall strategic approach: an assault on management's traditional power in the name of social and economic efficiency, an appeal for public support in the larger liberal interest, and an effort to shift power relations within the political economy. ... An imaginative planner, he would link union power with government authority in what we might label today a "corporatist" framework designed to recognize American capitalism within a more stable and humane framework.³¹

While the corporatist mission that Reuther espoused, where labor would play an integral role in management, was no doubt different from Sorensen's vision of managing the company, the point was that both men were willing to work with the government to coordinate wartime production; to have the automobile industry lead the charge as the nation's "Arsenal of Democracy;" and most importantly, to compromise on the more contentious issues. Indeed, like Reuther, Sorensen delighted in collaborating with Washington during the war-time period: "[It was]...the most fantastic of my career, which up to then had not been devoid of the unusual, the unexpected, and even in those days, the fantastic. I was in complete charge of production of the Ford Company now geared for war. We were no longer in the motor car business but were

²⁸ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 176.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers*, 70-81.

³¹ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 154-5.

virtually a government subsidiary.”³² And like Sorensen, Reuther hoped that the automobile industry could solve the nation’s war material shortage. During 1940, Reuther proposed a solution to the war material shortage that Sorensen also quested to solve, calling his plan “500 Planes a Day.”³³ While perhaps more ambitious than Sorensen’s promise that the Ford Motor Company would produce a B-24 an hour at Willow Run, the idealistic sentiment behind the plan was almost identical to that of the Ford chief’s, albeit different in that Reuther saw Detroit’s massive labor force as the engine of wartime production, not the new Willow Run plant. As Reuther viewed it, the problem was that the auto industry as a whole did not operate at 100% capacity year-round in the years leading up to the war. The majority of factories operated only with single day shifts, employees often worked only half the year, and many plants had 2/3 of their operating capacity lay idle.³⁴ “To each firm individually,” writes labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein, “such idleness represented a rational use of its resources, but given the needs of the national defense program, Detroit’s haphazard deployment of its vast productive machine was a social and economic debacle.”³⁵ Reuther hoped that by adopting new practices that utilized the auto industry’s unused labor capital, wartime production might be increased.³⁶

Sorensen was more than willing to cooperate with Reuther and the UAW to a limited extent, providing more jobs and better working conditions for workers if it meant that the use of large strikes was off the table. As such, the UAW, along with other labor unions throughout the country, promised Washington not to pursue any strikes, on the condition that prices would be

³² Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 287.

³³ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 161-2; Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers*, 78.

³⁴ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 161-2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

controlled.³⁷ As Sorensen described it in his memoir, the decision for them was easy to make: “I took [Philip Murray] (head of the CIO) down to Willow Run, which was then under construction. When I told him we expected to employ 60,000 workers there, his eyes glistened. ‘Of course,’ he remarked, ‘we will take advantage of all our prerogatives.’ He foresaw new members and increased dues from that plant. And so did I.”³⁸ Both Walter Reuther’s and Philip Murray’s visits to Willow Run were cordial, with Murray and Sorensen joking around about Sorensen once being in the Patternmaker’s Union in his younger years before working at Ford, with Murray playfully stating, “Charlie, I understand you still carry a union card.”³⁹ Sorensen went on in his memoir to share an interesting discussion he had that with Murray that demonstrated his attitude about Bennett’s conduct as chief FMC labor negotiator:

Murray spoke in a not too kindly way about Harry Bennett and he said he wanted to see more of me. I put him straight on Bennett, that he was handling all union discussions and that I had all I could do with the manufacturing side of our war production. However, at a big union meeting that night Murray mentioned meeting me and assured his audience that I was a good friend of labor. Both with and without a union card, I am willing to agree with that.⁴⁰

While it seemed on first glance that FMC and the UAW were to finally have amicable relations throughout the wartime years with Sorensen on good terms with the UAW, Sorensen rightly pointed out that dealing with the union on a day-to-day basis was outside his job description. He knew that as long as Bennett was in charge of labor relations, and as long as Henry Ford was to have an ultimate say in company business dealings, there was still to be friction between the company and its workers.

³⁷ Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers*, 81.

³⁸ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 291.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

And indeed, with the UAW and the FMC poised to pursue a common course that would make the company a large profit, Henry still, somewhat paradoxically, sabotaged any hope that the two would have easy and amicable relations. Even though working together might help the company's wartime effort go smoother, Henry still felt the union a threat to his control. Part of this irrational decision no doubt stemmed the fact that during the 1940s, Ford was into his late-seventies and not as mentally sharp as he once was after suffering two strokes. The nuances of his personality that had once allowed him to be the country's famed inventor and businessman began to turn on him—making him into a more jealous, moody, and irrational individual. When Ford was younger, he had showed a propensity to try to take total control of the company's endeavors and pursue his vision energetically and aggressively; successfully gambling the company's future on mass-producing the cheap Model-T being a good example. But now, his aggressive and confident business sense had withered into something less admirable. In his memoir, Sorensen accurately described Henry's mental health during this period:

Throughout 1940, Henry Ford was in bad health and worse morale. His memory was failing as rapidly as his obsessions and antipathies increased. His pet peeve was Franklin Roosevelt, but any mention of the war in Europe. ... Upset him almost to incoherence. Edsel, who was suffering from stomach trouble, came in for unmerciful criticism. The elder Ford was not the decisive man he had been. ... His emotional streaks wore one down.⁴¹

Bennett's accounts of the state of Henry Ford's health during this period are similar. In his memoir, shared a curious anecdote that demonstrated Henry Ford's state of mind during this time:

He took on eating habits that could hardly fail to break his health. ... Mr. Ford became convinced that sugar was not a food, but a danger to the human body. He wanted to "prove" this to everyone. He was like that; he couldn't tolerate disagreement. If you

⁴¹ Ibid., 273-4.

believed differently than he did, he'd keep nagging at you and nagging at you until you either changed your mind or said you did.⁴²

At this point in his career, Henry Ford was not able to fully see the irrationality of his business decisions, making it clearer why Bennett still was to prove to be a thorn in the UAW's side. To Ford, what mattered was that his vision was being carried out, and paradoxically, in the 1940s it meant both working *with* the UAW to produce war materials and working *against* the UAW's efforts in unionizing his plants.

And indeed, Bennett did work to impede the UAW at FMC plants through the early 1940s. During this time, Walter Reuther stated that Bennett represented “the chief stumbling block to honest collective bargaining.”⁴³ In his reminiscences, UAW activist Harry Ross lamented the fact that even while the NLRB had ruled that Ford needed to stop the unfair labor practices implemented by Bennett, things did not get better overnight. He remarked in vague terms that there were still problems at Ford after unionization, alluding to the fact that there was still some anti-union violence occurring: “After the [River Rouge] was organized, of course, we were continually called in by the company. They said, ‘Okay, we have given you the contract, you make it work.’ But it is just unfair to believe that a waving of the wand could accomplish [this]. ... We were constantly confronted with incidents occurring in the plant after the contract. Foremen were beaten up [by Servicemen]. Our men were being irritated into actions that we termed as ‘growing pains.’”⁴⁴ Similarly, the reminiscences of UAW organizer Paul Boatin show that UAW workers saw the post-organization period of Ford plants as just as important, if not more so, to their cause in combating the threat that Bennett presented. He states, “But I would

⁴² Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 163-4.

⁴³ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 191.

⁴⁴ Ross, “Harry E. Ross Interview,” 49-50.

have to repeat that up until 1950, ... there [was] a growing and deeper understanding of the conniving of corporations as exemplified by what has happened in the Rouge plant. ... [It] sticks out as an example number one of the need for militancy. When you talk to some of the old-timers they refer...to the period prior to the organizing and the 10 years following [it] at Ford's as glorious days that should make every worker in the Ford plant proud.⁴⁵

However, Bennett was no longer able to rely chiefly on his strong-arm tactics after Clara had forced her husband to deal with the union in 1941. Bennett instead resorted to less overt tactics in fighting the union. For one, Bennett used his Servicemen to simply make the unionized worker's life on the line less comfortable. Renamed "Plant Protection," Servicemen were no longer permitted to resort to egregious acts of intimidation, espionage, and violence towards workers. However, they were still used to enforce trivial regulations that stemmed from Ford's Anglo-Protestant morality: no smoking, no gambling during lunch, no failing to "look busy" when production was slow.⁴⁶ And when someone was caught violating these rules, union men suffered much stiffer penalties from Bennett than did other Servicemen or company foremen.⁴⁷

Similarly, Bennett worked to stymie the UAW in a post-Wagner Act era by encouraging rivalry among union leaders and workers through a strategy of divide and conquer. In his book, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, Historian Keith Sward points out that Bennett tried to flatter UAW up-and-comers in an attempt to foster division among union ranks and hopefully get people in power that would be more in Bennett's favor: "Bennett catered to the top leaders of the UAW by playing first on their vanity, and then on their fears. ... On such a tack, Bennett once confided to

⁴⁵ Ann Boatin and Paul Boatin, "Ann and Paul Boatin Oral History," interview by Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, 1983, 3-10, Talking Union Oral Histories, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

⁴⁶ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 426.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

one of the union's highest-ranking officials that he had never met a young man with such promise."⁴⁸ Furthermore, the 1984 recollections of UAW organizer Paul Boatín showed how Bennett utilized his position as the fielder of all labor grievances to his advantage in playing union workers against each other. He stated that Bennett used the bargaining process to keep tabs on divisive issues so that he could drive a wedge between different subsections of the workforce.⁴⁹ To elucidate his point, he described an episode where Bennett and the FMC acted illegally in giving premium pay to workers at the Rouge's rolling mill during wartime while keeping other steel workers on a different pay scale in order to nurture division and resentment among union ranks:⁵⁰

Bennett gave the Rolling Mill overtime. Even in violation of the law. ... In addition to their pay, they were getting [illegal] bonuses, of some four-five hundred dollars. They were making more on a steel bonus than they were making in regular wages. ... [As a result], the Rolling Mill [had] more wildcat strikes than anybody else did. Those strikes were never, never, never related to a justifiable, acceptable union cause. It was strictly on the basis [of the illegal overtime bonus Bennett gave to workers]. And that's how the company played one section of the workers against another. That's why, incidentally, about a year and a half ago the company came along and said we are going to close down the steel mill unless the steel mill workers take a wage cut. Not one single worker in the rest of the Rouge plant was willing to move one finger to help the Rolling Mill. Because they said, you sons of a bitches, you know.⁵¹

While illegal like his more violent actions during the 1930s, the political maneuvers of Bennett symbolized a shift in the way Ford handled labor relations after 1941. Recall the Ford Hunger March and the Battle of the Overpass—both harsh examples of the measures that Bennett enacted in order to not give the union any access to the plant. These methods of open disdain towards the law were modified in response to the current favor the unions held in the public and

⁴⁸ Ibid., 422-3.

⁴⁹ Boatín and Boatín, "Ann and Paul Boatín Oral History," 1984-2.

⁵⁰ Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers*, 81.

⁵¹ Boatín and Boatín, "Ann and Paul Boatín Oral History," 1984-3.

with Washington. Bennett had moved to a more passive, covert resistance to the letter of the law.

Bennett also utilized the “check-off” to his full advantage in playing hardball with the UAW. When the UAW achieved recognition as FMC’s sole-bargaining agent, Ford had given them this additional concession, with the company promising to deduct union dues from its worker’s paychecks and give it directly to the UAW.⁵² In negotiations with the UAW, Bennett used this as an ace, telling the union leaders that this concession could be taken away as fast as it had been given.⁵³ Thus Henry Ford was proven correct—by giving the UAW “everything” in their 1941 settlement, the company had obtained a powerful bargaining chip.

Additionally, Bennett resorted to simple stall tactics to make the UAW’s job as hard as possible. For one, Bennett made the Service Department’s method of fielding UAW grievances at Ford plants as inefficient as possible, so as to technically allow the UAW a way to bargain, but give them next to nothing in terms of an effective way of seeing out disputes to an amicable resolution.⁵⁴ “He left no stone unturned,” writes historian Keith Sward, “in an effort to keep the grievance machinery at one of another Ford plant from functioning at par. ... He refused for more than a year [during the war] to allow the company of the union to be represented for bargaining purposes by anything more than the barest skeleton.”⁵⁵ Percy Llewellyn, a UAW organizer and former Ford worker, similarly described in his reminiscences how Bennett passively resisted the UAW. He stated that at one point, he wished to reach Bennett’s office in

⁵² Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 420-3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 424.

⁵⁴ Ross, “Harry E. Ross Interview,” 40.

⁵⁵ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 424.

order to get back payments for UAW workers sent out before Christmas, which were “continually being held-up.” It was impossible for Llewellyn to ever do so, at least through Bennett’s Service Department.⁵⁶ He finally got through to Edsel’s office, and Edsel’s reaction to the whole incident elucidated how Bennett was foot-dragging in order to minimize the union’s effectiveness in Ford plants. “[We made an appointment with Edsel Ford. We met Mr. Ford and he said, ‘Did you contact Mr. Bennett’s office?’ We said, ‘We tried to contact Mr. Bennett’s office.’ It left the impression with us that we were successful in getting a meeting with Mr. Ford only because somehow it got around Mr. Bennett’s office to Mr. Ford. Edsel Ford was very fair, ... and he said that he would do anything he could to see that our grievance was acted upon.”⁵⁷ Sward’s account of Bennett’s conduct during this period similarly showed how Bennett would give the UAW the run-around: “As late as May 1943, [Bennett’s] labor relations men were scheduling appointments with union officials, only to appear several hours late or the next day or not at all. So received, more than one shop committee won a hearing by trooping into an office and informing a clerk they meant to sit it out indefinitely until the missing company executives put in an appearance.”⁵⁸ With these stall tactics working to full effect, Bennett had held to his word, having told *Time* in 1941 that, “We will bargain until Hell freezes over, but they won’t get anything.”⁵⁹

Bennett’s foot-dragging tactics became apparent when the UAW began to call for an end to racial discrimination in Ford plants. Indeed, after the UAW had achieved recognition as the company workforce’s sole bargaining agent, and after blacks realized that the company had tried

⁵⁶ Percy Llewellyn, “Percy Llewellyn Oral History,” interview by George Heliker, 1954, 50-1, Individual Oral History Interviews, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit MI.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 425.

⁵⁹ Ross, “Harry E. Ross Interview,” 40; “Model T Tycoon,” 17.

to use them to break the 1941 UAW unionizing strike, blacks united with the union in hoping to get themselves better job opportunities.⁶⁰ In a public meeting organized in 1942 by the UAW to air complaints about discriminative hiring practices against black women within the Ford plants throughout the war years, Bennett demonstrated his unwillingness to bargain with the UAW on the issue. “No reason, [Bennett] said,” related UAW leader Victor Reuther, “why this committee or any other should come to the Ford Company and tell them what to do. ... Mr. Ford had been very generous to the colored people. ... The unions were a bunch of cutthroats and liars, and now they had the payroll locked up and he couldn’t get into it. [Bennett] was going to cancel all their agreements and not believe anything they said.”⁶¹ In this way, the violence once espoused by Bennett was replaced by passive resistance. Instead of threatening to retaliate against UAW activities, now Bennett simply chose to make working with the company as laborious as possible.

A Modern Rasputin?

Shocking and amusing anecdotes about Bennett’s difficult personality abound in both historical scholarship and in primary sources, which help show the free rein that Bennett exercised on a day-to-day basis in the company after unionization. Stephen Norwood writes that, “One UAW-CIO official described him as a ‘psychopath.’ Union Representatives entering his office for a meeting might find him hiding behind the door, waiting to scare them with an incendiary device, or leaning back in his chair blasting away at a target with a pistol.”⁶² Other oral accounts of Bennett’s conduct share similar stories. Harry Ross recalled that Bennett would

⁶⁰ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 108-9.

⁶¹ Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW*, 238-9.

⁶² Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 191.

suffer from severe stomach cramps and alleviate them by dumping ice water on himself—even during a business meeting.⁶³ In later pages, Ross shared another story: “We were notified to come and see Bennett [to discuss a grievance]. ... The first thing that Bennett did was pull up his pants and show us that his legs had varicose veins in them and how he was suffering.”⁶⁴

And indeed, when resorting to stall tactics while acting as Ford’s chief Labor agent, Bennett was left with little real job responsibilities that related to the actual design and engineering of automobiles; for all intents and purposes, his official work in the 1940s *did* boil down to giving Union executives the run-around. As Sorensen pointed out in his memoir, “Bennett had nothing to do with making automobiles. He knew nothing about production methods. And when he or his supporting cast got to behaving as though they were the Ford Motor Company they soon discovered they weren’t.”⁶⁵ However, Sorensen went on to make an interesting point, writing, “His ballyhoo fooled a lot of people.”⁶⁶ As Henry Ford II quickly learned when he came to the FMC in 1943 to learn how the company ran, Bennett was utilizing his close relationship with Ford to enact policies of his own, pushing out other rival executives:

In a way, not having a job [when I first came to the company] was a good thing for me. ... It gave me time to find out a lot of things about Bennett. When an important policy matter came up, Bennett would get into his car and disappear for a few hours. Then he’d come back and say, “I’ve been to see Mr. Ford and he wants us to do it this way.” I checked with my grandmother and found out that Bennett hadn’t seen my grandfather on these occasions.⁶⁷

⁶³ Ross, “Harry E. Ross Interview,” 64.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 70-1.

⁶⁵ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 256-7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁶⁷ Victor Lasky, *Never Complain, Never Explain: The Story of Henry Ford II* (New York: R. Marek Publishers, 1981), 62.

By the 1940s, Bennett was intent on using his position in the highly personalized hierarchy of the FMC to his own advantage, challenging for the Presidency by exploiting his relationship with the declining boss.

The tragic demise of Ford's son, Edsel, showed how Bennett began to situate himself in a good position to assume the presidency. The father-son relationship between Henry and Edsel had always been tumultuous, even before Edsel had come to work for his father. However, once he did, Henry grew obsessed with micromanaging Edsel in order to ensure that he was becoming the type of businessman that he wanted his son to be. "Whenever Mr. Ford," wrote Bennett in his memoir, "thought someone was selling Edsel ideas contrary to his, he came down on the offender like a ton of bricks. If Edsel began carrying out an idea that Mr. Ford didn't like, Mr. Ford never said a word to him; he let Edsel go ahead, and meanwhile worked against the project itself."⁶⁸ Henry used Bennett readily and often in order to keep tabs on Edsel and to stop Edsel's projects. Bennett shared one occasion of stopping Edsel's endeavors in his memoir, writing, "During the early part of the war, Edsel was president of a German American shipping line. ... Mr. Ford asked me to go up and ask Edsel to resign. It was an unpleasant task, and no concern of mine, but I couldn't refuse. Edsel...showed me his letter of resignation, saying, 'Well, there goes a million bucks.' The implication was plain: I personally was depriving him of a million dollars."⁶⁹ In his memoir, Sorensen similarly suggested that Bennett enthusiastically played the role of disciplinarian for his boss:

As late as October 1942, Edsel and I had a hot session with Harry Bennett. Bennett had been telling Henry Ford how his grandsons Henry II and Benson were in danger of being kidnapped. He wanted to surround them and Edsel's house with servicemen. Edsel blew up. He told Bennett to stop such talk and let his boys alone. He didn't want protection

⁶⁸ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 23-4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

for either himself or his sons. ... Whereupon Bennett put on his act. He jumped from his chair, tore off his coat, and threatened Edsel. ... It is difficult to imagine such a scene, but it shows what Edsel was up against. Mr. Ford could have put an end to it. Instead, he encouraged Bennett to keep at Edsel. Constant turmoil was Henry Ford's idea of harmony. By keeping things stirred up, no one else could swell with importance.

Perhaps most notably, Edsel differed from his father and Bennett in his thinking on how the unions should have been handled in the 1930s. While Ford had supported Bennett in his work to thwart the UAW from organizing plants, Edsel had always sympathized with the workers' plight in the Depression years and advocated a more friendly and humanistic approach to dealing with their demands; UAW Organizer Harry Ross remarked in an interview that, "If there was anyone who was concerned about the injustices to workers that were then prominent in the Ford organization, Edsel was."⁷⁰ The contention grew over the issue even as Edsel's health had begun to fail in 1942, owing to severe stomach pain that eventually revealed itself as stomach cancer.⁷¹ "In the middle of this health crisis," writes historian Stephen Norwood, "Henry indulged in a shameful display that threatened to open a total breach with his only son. In a phone call on April 15, 1943, he ordered Sorensen to confront Edsel and demand a change in his attitude and behavior. He reiterated his faith in Bennett...and demanded Edsel fully acquiesce in Bennett's authority over labor issues."⁷² Sorensen recollected the incident in his memoir, sharing his notes that enumerated the demands that Ford made. They all suited Bennett's interests. For one, Henry demanded that A.M Wibel, Vice President of Sales and Purchasing at the FMC, be fired.⁷³ A close friend of Sorensen and Edsel, Wibel had been one of

⁷⁰ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 117-8; Bak, *Henry and Edsel*, 229.

⁷¹ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 519-20.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 519.

⁷³ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 320.

the most outspoken critics of Bennett's activities at the company.⁷⁴ Another of Henry's demands was that Edsel should change his attitude towards Bennett and his work as head of labor relations. Over the phone, Henry told Sorensen that no matter what, he would, "support Bennett against every obstacle."⁷⁵ Henry went so far as to say Edsel would "regain his health by cooperating" with him and Bennett.⁷⁶ Sorensen concluded that Bennett had persuaded Henry to make the call: "My first reaction after leaving the telephone was: What a brutal thing to do to one's son! To send me to him to tell him this! It was plain who was the inspiration for all this. Bennett was having his day."⁷⁷

Edsel's health turned for the worse shortly after the row, and on May 26, 1942, he passed away. The death took a visible toll on Henry Ford, who moved to disparage his family doctors for their inability to save him.⁷⁸ Ironically, he also directed his anger towards Edsel's coworkers, who he saw as causing Edsel undeserved mental stress that contributed to his decline. He stated at a Rouge visit shortly after Edsel's death, "I'm going to fire everybody around here who worried Edsel!"⁷⁹ Indeed, the situation proved to be advantageous for Bennett in so far as in the mind of Ford, Bennett was not singled out as a malefactor in the ordeal—perhaps, as historian Stephen Watts suggests, because Ford wondered whether or not he himself had been too hard on Edsel by using Bennett to discipline him.⁸⁰ Bennett's reminiscences alluded to this fact, recollecting a conversation he had with a distraught Ford:

⁷⁴ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 246-47.

⁷⁵ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 320.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 166; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 520-1.

⁷⁹ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 520.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

“Harry, do you honestly think I was ever cruel to Edsel?” It wasn’t easy to answer that one directly, and I temporized: “Well, if that had been me you’d treated that way, it wouldn’t have been cruelty.” But Mr. Ford wasn’t satisfied. “Why don’t you give me an honest answer?” So I said, “Well cruel, no; but unfair, yes.” And then I added, if that had been me, I’d have gotten mad.” Mr. Ford seized on that. “That’s what I wanted him to do—get mad.”⁸¹

With Ford rationalizing his actions towards Edsel as both his parent and as his boss, saying that he simply wanted to light a fire under Edsel and get him “mad,” Bennett got off scot-free.

As Ford second-guessed his treatment of his son, Ford’s mental decline deepened.⁸² The problem with this was that Edsel’s death had left the presidency of the company vacant, and Henry, who was going on 79, decided to retake the title he had abdicated two decades prior. “By the fall [of 1943],” wrote Bennett in his memoir, “Mr. Ford was not himself at intervals. He was losing his memory, and on occasions his mind was confused.”⁸³ Sorensen’s reaction to Ford’s decision to reassume the presidency is even more telling: “The night before Edsel was buried, Mr. Ford telephoned that he had decided to take Edsel’s place as president of Ford Motor Company. My immediate reaction was ‘impossible.’ Mentally and physically he was unable to handle the job.”⁸⁴ And indeed, by all accounts he was, leading all involved with the FMC to worry about its future leadership. Edsel’s son, Henry Ford II, who had come to work for the company shortly after his father’s death, labored diligently to insure that his grandfather’s decline would not scare off business partners. Going on record in 1944, Henry II stated, “I believe the outstanding results accomplished at Willow Run reflect his personal supervision. ...

⁸¹ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 167.

⁸² Watts, *The People’s Tycoon*, 521.

⁸³ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 170.

⁸⁴ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 324.

He is going along toward our common objective, Leadership. All our programs have his complete endorsement.”⁸⁵ As Ford historian Allan Nevins points out, such lofty praises were helpful in two respects: to assure partners of Ford’s age-defying ability to act as head of a multinational firm, and to emphasize that an elderly Ford was not in total control.⁸⁶ In other words, “our” was the operative word for Henry Ford II and his audience. However, one question was left unanswered for many: who constituted this group?

It was during the final years of Henry Ford’s career that the importance of Bennett’s position in the company became evident. After Edsel’s death, Ford granted Bennett the official title of “Director of Administrative Affairs,” a position which Bennett used to play an active role in the firing of many executives who had been in Edsel’s favor.⁸⁷ By doing so, he benefitted himself in two ways. Firstly, he removed many executives who, like Edsel, had been critical of Bennett’s role in the company. Secondly, by doing so he created a power vacuum that he attempted to fill himself, in the hopes of situating himself as a strong candidate to fill the impending presidency vacancy.

Indeed, it is from this final episode that undoubtedly led some to compare Bennett to Rasputin in Czarist Russia. “[Sorensen] saw with a sense of outrage,” writes Allan Nevins, “the renewed purge immediately after the death of Edsel; a purge in which Bennett’s adroit manipulation of Henry Ford’s senile resentments played a main part and which led toward Bennett’s establishment of undisputed sway.”⁸⁸ Executives dropped from the company like flies,

⁸⁵ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 256.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 445.

⁸⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 257.

and those who had supported Edsel while Bennett and Henry Ford had assailed him were the first to go. John Crawford and Fred Black, respectively Edsel's office assistant and Chief Ford Manager of International Exhibition Displays, were both fired after they had repeatedly divulged their dislike of Bennett.⁸⁹ Lawrence Shelldrick, a prominent engineer in the company, was also let go, as was influential designer E.T. Gregory.⁹⁰ And as mentioned already, A.M. Wibel, who had put in three decades of service at Ford as the vice-president of sales and purchasing, was also let go; his counterpart, the General Sales Manager H.C. Voss, soon followed.⁹¹

The situation in the company prompted Sorensen's exit from the company as well, which was extremely convenient for Bennett because Sorensen had been seen as a possible candidate for interim president in order to ease the transition from Henry Ford to his grandson. Sorensen recalled the time he decided to resign in his memoir: "By now I'd had enough. The picture was clear: the team was breaking up. The captain was a sick man, unable to call the plays. The line coaches were gone. Anyone who made a brilliant play was called out. ... Whatever plans there were for resumption of civilian production after the war were being kicked to pieces by Mr. Ford."⁹² Indeed, it was clear that these men were not being let go because they were lacking in their abilities. "All these men," points out Keith Sward, "incidentally, were immediately taken on by Ford's competitors. Sorensen was snapped-up by Willys-Overland; Shelldrick went to General Motors; Wibel, Voss, and Black, to Nash-Kelvinator."⁹³

⁸⁹ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 257; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 523.

⁹⁰ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 329; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 523; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 257-9.

⁹¹ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 446.

⁹² Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 328.

⁹³ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 446.

Bennett himself shared in his memoir that he delighted in firing Ernest Liebold, another executive who had thrived in the FMC's personalized corporate hierarchy while working as Ford's personal secretary:

There were a few bright spots [in my last years in the company]. For instance, I finally got a chance to fire Liebold—the only executive I ever did fire. In the spring of 1944, ... I learned that Liebold held power of attorney for both Mr. and Mrs. Ford. Armed with this information, I took the matter up with Mr. Ford. I told him that with Liebold's power of attorney he could give away just about anything Mr. Ford had. "Oh, it isn't that bad," he said. "Yes, it is," I insisted. ... At first Mr. Ford wouldn't believe me. A couple of telephone calls, however, convinced him. He then spoke the words I had been waiting to hear for so long: "Well, you just get him out of here."⁹⁴

Again, it seems like Bennett let on too much in his memoir, writing it in the hopes of setting "the record straight."⁹⁵ It might have been the case that it *was* very bad that Liebold had held the power of attorney for Ford, but Liebold had worked with Henry Ford for nearly 30 years, managing all of his personal business affairs—it was much more likely that his job duties really did necessitate him having power of attorney for Ford.⁹⁶ It also was the case that most of Liebold's power in the company had come as a result of his close relationship with Ford; one FMC executive stated in his reminiscences that, "All Mr. Ford had to say to Liebold was, 'Do this, do that' and he'd carry out the most ambitious projects. He had a great deal of ability and was very thorough."⁹⁷ In short, Liebold was a direct rival to Bennett as Ford's personal man (which Bennett made no attempt to conceal), and it was convenient for Bennett that there was a reason to fire him. And indeed, one can read Bennett's reasoning as an attempt to find *some* reason to fire Liebold; the language is suggestive of the fact that the dangers of granting anyone powers of attorney was made out to appear worse than they really were. Allan Nevins came to a

⁹⁴ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 173.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁶ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 169-74.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

similar conclusion on the episode: “The circumstances of [Liebold’s] dismissal were unnecessarily humiliating. He showed keen resentment, refusing to consent to the customary press notice of a ‘resignation,’ and making his own statement that he had been discharged without cause.”⁹⁸

And with Sorensen, Liebold, and the rest gone, Bennett made moves to ensure that the power vacuum left by the chief architect of the company’s wartime strategy was filled by himself. For one, after Bennett fired H.C. Voss and made vacant the General Sales Manager position, he insisted that it be replaced with the position of “General Coordinator Between all Regional Managers,” which he would assume. It was a convenient change that would bestow Bennett all the power of Voss’s position but no real responsibility.⁹⁹ Secondly, and most strikingly, Bennett drafted a codicil with Henry Ford to attach to Ford’s will that would have, if valid, put his 58.5% of the company stock in the hands of a board of trustees made up of Bennett and his associates for 10 years.¹⁰⁰ The company lawyer who had worked with Bennett and Ford in drafting the document, I.A. Capizzi, later shared Henry’s rationale for the document: he was afraid that by becoming president too early, his grandson would be dominated by men that Henry disliked in the company. As such, Henry thought it best to leave the company in the control of men he trusted.¹⁰¹ A testament to Bennett’s successful navigation of the FMC’s personalized corporate hierarchy, these men who Ford most trusted were Bennett and his subordinates.

Luckily for Henry II and unfortunately for Bennett, nothing came of the document due to the fact that the mentally ill Ford had scribbled on it to the point that it was inadmissible in court

⁹⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 258.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁰¹ Lasky, *Never Complain, Never Explain*, 61.

and had failed to sign it. Still, the episode played out dramatically. When Henry Ford II first learned of the codicil, he grew frightened and quickly moved to have one of his associates, John Bugas, confront Bennett on the nature of the document. When he arrived at Bennett's office, Bennett told Bugas to come back the next day to have the whole business straightened out.¹⁰² And when Bugas arrived the following day, Bennett presented the original copy and the carbon copy of the codicil and proceeded to burn it on the ground, and then swept up the ashes and handed them to Bugas, stating, "Take this back to Henry."¹⁰³ When asked later by Capizzi why he had destroyed the document so willingly, Bennett stated Ford had written gibberish all over it and had misspelled the name of Capizzi on the will.¹⁰⁴ From what Bennett had told him, Capizzi extrapolated that the confused and elderly Henry Ford had never actually signed the document.¹⁰⁵ While the codicil ended up as a failed threat to Henry Ford II's eventual assumption of the presidency, it signaled that Bennett meant business.

The Ford family was to take no more chances, seeing that Bennett's power had grown to the point where he was in a position to take the reins of the company. Clara Ford argued with her husband that he needed to hand the presidency of the company over to his grandson, threatening that she would sell her stock if it were not done.¹⁰⁶ Again, as was the case when the UAW had finally achieved recognition as the sole bargaining agent in Ford plants in 1941, Ford's significant other proved the final straw that brought about radical change in the company,

¹⁰² Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 266.

¹⁰³ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 266; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 526.

¹⁰⁴ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 266.

¹⁰⁵ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 466.

¹⁰⁶ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 268.

leading to Ford's resignation on September 21st, 1945. Bennett shared his reaction to the ordeal in his memoir:

When we were assembled, they began solemnly to read Ford's "resignation." Knowing what was coming, and unable to sit silently through a farce, I got up from my chair after the first few sentences had been read and congratulated Henry II. I wanted to walk out right then, but the others prevailed on me to stay. The reading of the letter was completed, and then the directors proceeded, still with straight faces, to elect Henry II president of the Ford Motor Company. . . . As anyone else might have, I felt bitter. I told Henry II, "You're taking over a billion-dollar organization that you haven't contributed a thing to."¹⁰⁷

So ended the career of Bennett at the Ford Motor Company. In his memoir, he suggested that his leaving the company was of his own free will, but most other versions of the story cast Bennett as the flabbergasted recipient of Henry Ford II's first official action as the head of the company: the firing of Harry Bennett.¹⁰⁸ As Bennett went to his office to collect his belongings, his anger grew, purportedly drawing a .45 automatic on John Bugas, Henry II's appointed heir to Bennett's seat at the helm of the Service Department. Bennett exclaimed, "You dirty son of a bitch, you did this to me!"¹⁰⁹ Bugas, a former FBI agent, calmly defused the situation by drawing his own firearm and offering choice words of advice to Bennett before turning and exiting the office.¹¹⁰ According to historian Stephen Watts, Bennett then spent the rest of the afternoon burning his records in his wastepaper basket.¹¹¹

Bennett's final chapter at the company proved that he was more than a thug. While unmistakably violent and aggressive, the man had risen to the pinnacle of the company; one

¹⁰⁷ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 177.

¹⁰⁸ Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 192; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 527; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 269.

¹⁰⁹ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 527.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

journalist wrote aptly on his end at the Ford Motor Company, stating, “Bennett was no longer the boss of Ford.”¹¹² And in the end, it seems that Bennett was at least *partially* right in his memoir. He wrote, “I have been called a thug, a gangster, a pro-Nazi, an anti-Semite; it has been said that I was ‘fired.’ All of these accusations are just plain lies.”¹¹³ “Lies” is perhaps too strong a word, judging from his colorful record at the company. But to reduce him to a thug, gangster, or bigot would be to conceal the story of a truly remarkable historical figure who masterfully utilized the highly personal corporate structure of Henry Ford’s company to situate himself a stone’s throw away from the presidency.

¹¹² Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 269.

¹¹³ Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 5.

Conclusion

Bennett never had any real power other than that delegated to him by Henry Ford. He was a yes-man who did as he was told, and promptly. ... [After being discharged from the company], Bennett wrote a book; and what he said about himself revealed him as no knight in shining armor. It also indicates that if fearless personal courage was one of his outstanding qualities, shameless ingratitude may have been another. ... And that's the story of Harry Bennett. It is a story repeated over and over again with men hired and men fired by Ford ever since early days in the little plant on Mack Avenue. Some were great, some were good. And they lasted as long as they fitted Henry Ford's mood.¹

-- Charles Sorensen

After assuming the presidency of the FMC, Henry Ford II commissioned Elmo Roper, a public-opinion analyst, to ask the rank and file how they felt about the company. Reporting back, Roper shared with his boss what he no doubt expected, considering the labor policies that his grandfather and Harry Bennett had espoused: that workers felt no “belonging” to the company and that they saw it too “dangerous” to speak out.² In response, Ernie Breech, one of Henry II’s close aides, called supervisors and foremen in for a meeting to let them know that things were going to be different, that the “drive system” was no more and that the harsh punishments against union organizers inside plants were a thing of the past.³ Henry Ford II then went on record to let the public know that “change” was the buzzword of his presidency: “Certainly we of the Ford Motor Company have no desire to ‘break the unions.’ ... [Rather,] we want to strengthen their leadership by urging and helping them to assume the responsibilities they must assume if the public interest is to be served.”⁴

¹ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 257.

² Lasky, *Never Complain, Never Explain*, 76.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 77.

With that ushered in a new era in the Ford Motor Company. With Bennett and his grandfather gone, Henry II shifted the managerial style of the company to one that was not intensely personalized and autocratic, but rather bureaucratic and cooperative. The managerial model that Henry Ford employed had been one of personal fealty, where men like Bennett worked to implement policies that were appropriate according to Ford's wishes. Unlike his grandfather, Henry II understood that he could not possibly know best for every major decision, and from the start of his presidency brought in smart executives that could help him move the company into the 21st century.⁵ Ironically, Ernest Kanzler, an executive who Henry had pushed out of the company in 1926 after a disagreement, came back to the company.⁶ As early as 1919, he had tried in vain to tell Henry Ford that there was a better way to organize the corporate hierarchy of the company.⁷ With Henry's grandson now in charge, his plans no longer fell on deaf ears, showing that the highly personalized, autocratic nature of the FMC's management structure was no more. Together, they invited other men from GM, Montgomery Ward, and Borg-Warner into the company to help *lead* its restructuring.⁸ Additionally, Henry Ford II also brought in a group of newly retired military officers to change over the executive hierarchy of the company, hoping they could apply more bureaucratic military management techniques to the company.⁹ Among them were Robert S. McNamara and Arjay Miller, who went on to be Secretary of Defense and the Dean of Stanford's Graduate School of Business respectively.¹⁰

⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁶ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933*, 274-5; Lasky, *Never Complain, Never Explain*, 70-1.

⁷ Lasky, *Never Complain, Never Explain*, 71.

⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

With his grandson now running the company, an ailing Henry Ford spent his last few years way from the public eye, with his wife Clara taking care of him.¹¹ While only a shadow of his former self, he sometimes made attempts to call Bennett, who had retired to his northern Michigan ranch after being fired from the company.¹² One conversation aptly illustrated the closeness of the two men. As Bennett recollected in his memoir, “Once Mr. Ford reached me by telephone. Somehow he had got to a phone outside his home. Mr. Ford told me that he wanted me to go into the [Rouge] plant and shut it down. Then he began weeping and became incoherent.”¹³ Even in his waning hours, Ford held on to the notion that all he had to do was call up Bennett to have something done for him. And in true yes-man fashion, Bennett had to double-check to make sure this was not a command to take seriously: “I checked my impression of Mr. Ford’s health with a physician who had attended him, and as a result of his opinion I paid no attention to what Mr. Ford had told me what to do. After that, Mr. Ford called me again many times. But I refused to talk to him on the phone.”¹⁴

However, it must be stressed again that Bennett was not a simple yes-man for Henry Ford, though Charles Sorensen described him as such in his memoir. Bennett knew that his position in the company depended on Henry Ford’s opinion of his work, and used this knowledge to his great advantage. This point is underscored by the fact that, as Sorensen admits himself in his memoir, Bennett essentially forced Sorensen’s hand when he decided to resign from the company.¹⁵ Indeed, as historian Keith Sward points out, Bennett perfected the art of

¹¹ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 527-8.

¹² Bennett and Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, 179-80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 179-80.

¹⁵ Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford*, 320-4.

navigating the FMC's corporate structure by the mid 1940s, having fired many of his predecessors, such as Ernest Liebold:

Ernest Liebold was discharged outright in May 1944, after having served Ford in various capacities for thirty-four years. ... With his abrupt departure from Dearborn went Harry Bennett's prototype—Ford's earlier man-of-all-work...and court flatterer whom all the Ford personnel had once held in dread. In being dropped without notice or explanation. Liebold fell victim to a formula he helped perfect.¹⁶

Interestingly, Liebold had helped publish Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent*, through which Ford fielded many of his divisive (and often anti-Semitic) opinions. In the publication's first issue, Ford wrote an article explaining the paper's mission that was classic Ford: idealistic, definitive, uncompromising, and opinionated. "One of the chief objects of this paper," wrote Ford, "will be to point out to its readers the opportunities that lie everywhere about them and how to use them. ... [Public corruption is caused by] speculative capitalists [who] are always trying to get hold of what another has built up. It is not human. It does not produce anything. ... The *Dearborn Independent* is an organ of unbiased opinion. We are first making our own character."¹⁷

In insisting that his company not be run by "speculative capitalists," and be run by himself only, Ford opened the door for men like Bennett and Liebold to take advantage of him. As Anne Jardim aptly put it in her book on the business psychology on Ford, "[Bennett's, Liebold's, and Sorensen's] face-to-face relationships with Henry Ford maintained the fiction of the primal leader and the dependent sons. ... In Bennett's case, the charade was played out to the end of Ford's career in March 1945."¹⁸ Indeed, Bennett worked in the Ford Motor Company for

¹⁶ Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 446-7.

¹⁷ Neil Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 77-8.

¹⁸ Jardim, *The First Henry Ford*, 208.

nearly 30 years, happily accepting the status quo, knowing that he could utilize his relationship with Ford for his own benefit. In his reminiscences, one Ford executive stated that, “No one carried out Mr. Ford orders quite as literally as Harry Bennett.”¹⁹ Another stated that, “Bennett was one of those fellows who in the presence of Mr. Ford was more or less like a lamb. He would jump in the Detroit River I think, if Mr. Ford told him.”²⁰ In his evaluation of Bennett’s career, historian Ford Bryan painted Bennett in a more conciliatory light: “Friends insist his reputation was the result of Henry Ford’s demand that Bennett play the role of villain in the Ford-directed super drama. . . . Bennett’s...bad reputation can be blamed on Henry Ford to a substantial extent. Ford gave the orders; Bennett took the blame when they were carried out.”²¹

Bennett, like Liebold, carried through Ford’s bigoted desires, no matter how unpalatable. Ford detested unions, and Bennett played the role as union buster perfectly up to the point where Ford could no longer effectively control his former “aide.” In this way, Bennett stands alone in comparison to his peers, showing the logical conclusion of the personalized corporate hierarchy that Henry Ford had set up in his early years at the company. Bennett was with Henry through his prime years and his waning ones. And in being close to the boss through thick and thin, Bennett accrued great power of his own.

¹⁹ Ibid., 230.

²⁰ Ibid., 230-31.

²¹ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 29, 33-4.

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