

American Renaissance

There is not a truth existing which I fear or would wish unknown to the whole world.

— Thomas Jefferson

Vol. 17 No. 6

June 2006

Blacks and High Steel

What affirmative action did to the trade.

by Tom Dilberger

In the late 1960s, I came back from Vietnam, once again to take up my chosen profession as a “connector” in the high steel trade. I was a member of the ironworkers union, the men who build the steel frames for multi-story buildings. I worked on many Manhattan skyscrapers, on jobs that changed the city’s skyline.

I was born in 1943—I am not a baby boomer—and started my career before the days of affirmation action. I was taught by men who made their mark in the 1930s, and absorbed standards of excellence from them, along with the belief that there was no excuse for sub-par work. I have had a close look at how things have changed. I consider myself an American patriot, and as a white man, I think people should know what lowered standards have done to my profession.

At my first union meeting back from Vietnam, the main question was whether black men should be allowed in the local union. All the older men, including the leadership, were against letting blacks in, while we younger men were for it. As a veteran, I thought it only right for blacks, with whom I served in combat, to get a shot like anyone else. The debates were furious, but on its own, my union would not have admitted blacks. In the early 1970s, a court order ended the debate. Judges ordered all the trades to let blacks take the apprentice tests.

At that time, my union was mainly “father/son,” meaning that if your father or another close relative was a member, you’d get a shot at the work. However, this didn’t guarantee membership in the local. You still had to pass the appren-

that had to find another line of work.

Although there were no blacks in the union, it was not segregated. It was about 60 percent white, and the rest were American Indians. Indians had to take the test and measure up just like everyone else.

When black men first took the apprentice test, they all failed—every one. You can imagine the laughter of the older members of the local. However, soon after, their laughter was silenced, again by court order. A judge ruled that although the test had been overseen by the state, the results were not satisfactory, and there had to be another way to get blacks into the union. Every trade had plans like this, and ours was called the “trainee program.” It was

open only to blacks, but did not have an age limit. Blacks could

still take the union apprentice test, but if they failed, as the overwhelming majority did, they got in through the “trainee program.”

There was a reason the union had an apprentice test: it weeded out people who could not do the work. But the test was not perfect, either, and there were men who could pass it but were still not up to the job. Think for a moment what it means to build a steel frame. As the frame goes up, every time a beam is set onto a column, two pieces of steel meet in thin air. It’s windy up there, and frames tend to sway without walls to stiffen them. A “connector” has to be at the top of that column, ready to pin the beam to it—and he may be 30 floors above the street. The work is simple to understand, but that doesn’t make it easy. It is dirty, difficult and dangerous, and it takes a

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Lunchtime for the ironworkers on the Empire State Building.

tice test and measure up on the job. Nor did it mean that men who didn’t have family in the business never got a chance. They could take the test, and if they were good they could join the union.

At that time, the apprentice tests were hard. There were three parts—physical, mental and psychological—and failure

As an American patriot, I think people should know what lowered standards have done to my profession.

on any part meant disqualification. The test was given every three years, and if a man failed, he was out of luck. He had to wait for the next test. There was also an age limit of 29. Anyone older than



Letters from Readers

Sir — I just received the May AR and read your statement on the recent unpleasantness at the conference. A few thoughts:

1) I do not think it is fair to compare the debates in racist circles on abortion, foreign policy, economic policy and homosexuality to those on Jews or Christianity. The latter two are, according to those who see them as important, directly related to white racial interests.

2) I also do not see the argument that even if the Jews were a cause of the problem, it is a matter of merely historical concern. This would be true only if they are no longer a contributing cause.

3) The key issue is whether Jewish influence is cause or symptom. Whites unquestionably got sick, but did Jews make them sick or merely make an already sick people a bit sicker? This is the crucial question. If the fault lies with the Jews, stopping them is crucial. If whites made themselves sick, then the cure lies within, and when achieved will defeat any negative Jewish influences.

4) AR seems to have implicitly adopted the former view.

5) I sometimes suspect that the root of the matter is that because AR's editor is such a decent fellow, and has come to know and, correctly, respect some of those Jews who honestly see themselves as part of the white race and the movement that seeks to defend it, that he subconsciously shies away from discussing the larger issue.

A Jewish Friend of AR

Sir — In the previous issue you describe a confrontation between David

Duke and a detractor at the AR conference. I was not ten feet away when it happened. Mr. Duke reacted calmly and with impeccable manners despite being called a "f***ing Nazi." You should have apologized to him immediately but you did not. I personally did not hear anyone tell a Jew, or any other conferee that he was not welcome. I would wager that you did not either, and that you are taking someone's word for this. Why are you going out of your way to defend Jews?

Jack Ingram, Lynchburg, Va.

Sir — I was greatly interested by your observations on Jews and *American Renaissance*. The question of Jewish influence on American race relations is interesting and sometimes troubling. One of the most useful studies of the role of Jews is Stuart Svonkin's *Jews Against Prejudice*. Mr. Svonkin describes how, in the years after World War II, Jewish intellectuals and organizations tried to fight anti-Semitism by targeting "prejudice" of all kinds. By allying themselves with Catholics, blacks, immigrants and other possible targets of discrimination, Jewish leaders were able to identify their fight against anti-Semitism with the broader humanitarian sensibilities of the great heyday of American liberalism from the 1940s through the '70s.

Jews played an important role in the civil-rights revolution 1955-65, and one still finds many Jews among the leading advocates of liberal egalitarianism. However, since the mid-1960s, relations between blacks and Jews have become strained. Anti-Semitism is now increasingly common among black radicals, and many Jews now oppose the civil rights establishment and its agenda. This situ-

ation presents an opportunity in the 21st century that would be squandered if prejudice against Jews—or far-fetched conspiracy theories—were to distract us from the larger and more urgent issues whites now face.

Let us not waste our energy in divisive struggles that will do nothing to secure a hopeful future for our posterity, and will only hamper the promising efforts now underway. Let all who perceive the real dangers—and many Jews do—lend their efforts to this struggle.

Name Withheld, Tacoma Park, Maryland

Sir — In my circle there are several theories about what you are up to with Jews. One is that you are taking money from Jews who are paying you not to discuss the Jewish problem. Sorry to sound disrespectful, but there is no reason to think that what AR might say about Jews would be so effective and persuasive that anyone would need to pay you to keep quiet. The second is that you have the low opinion of Jews common among race-realists, but want their support for some reason. This makes no sense either, because the ADL thinks you are a "hate group" and always will. The third theory is that you actually believe what you say. That would probably make you unique in the annals of white nationalism, but once the even less likely possibilities are rejected, it is all that remains.

Steven Hollister, Tacoma, Wash.

Sir — I hesitate to mock the dead, but I must add a sour note to your March book review's treatment of Ernest van den Haag as one of the heroes of early resistance to integration. His later career was not admirable. He went neo-con along with the rest of the Buckley crowd, and spent his later years covering up the useful things he did in the old days. He is almost the perfect symbol of why we go from defeat to defeat. People who know the facts—and once you know them you never stop knowing them—quietly move on to more respectable pursuits when the fight gets too warm. The Spartan mother told her son to come back from battle "with your shield or on it." Ernest did a few good things, and let us not take them from him, but he ditched his rifle in the middle of a fight.

Martin Collet, Ithaca, N. Y.



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American Renaissance is published monthly by the New Century Foundation. NCF is governed by section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code; contributions to it are tax deductible.

Subscriptions to American Renaissance are \$24.00 per year. First-class postage is an additional \$8.00. Subscriptions to Canada (first class) are \$36.00. Subscriptions outside Canada and the U.S. (air mail) are \$40.00. Back issues are \$3.00 each. Foreign subscribers should send U.S. dollars or equivalent in convertible bank notes.

Please make checks payable to: American Renaissance, P.O. Box 527, Oakton, VA 22124. ISSN No. 1086-9905, Telephone: (703) 716-0900, Facsimile: (703) 716-0932, Web Page Address: www.AmRen.com

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very determined man to do it. There are no gray areas. The reality of the work hits a man like a baseball bat each day. He can either do it or he can't. Many men never have to be told to leave; they willingly leave the trade, and this in-



High over Manhattan.

cludes quite a few who are relatives of members. There are other, less demanding jobs in a "raising gang," but capable men will generally spend a good part of their career as connectors.

When black men started filtering on to the job, it was clear from the beginning they had no ability to do the work. For the most part, they were so obviously incapable, many left immediately. The usual practice with a man who clearly wasn't up to the work was to give him two hours pay and fire him, but it was different for blacks even in that respect. They stayed below for the day with the older men in the detail gangs, and were fired only when they came down off the

building at the end of the work day. Before long, it became impossible to fire any but the very worst. Courts mandated that a certain percentage of the workforce, especially on government jobs, be made up of black men.

To understand the effect of forcing inadequate men into a profession, it is important to know something about the work. A raising gang has a foreman or pusher, and men with four different specialties. The hooker-on physically puts the steel wire slings, or chokers, around the beams, girders, columns, etc., that are going to be raised by the crane for the connectors to set. He must know all the different capacities of the chokers he's using, so as not to put a choker on a piece if it is not rated for that weight. He also unofficially runs the gang, because he sets the sequence for the pieces of steel that go up to the connectors. A tagline man then uses ropes with hooks spliced into their ends to guide the beams up to the connectors. If one of the beams he's guiding snags on a beam that's already set, he must signal the crane operator (who is not an ironworker) to slack off the load so the tagline man can clear the piece. Then he directs the crane to continue raising the piece. The tagline man is usually the youngest man in the gang and is being groomed to be a connector. He must be in excellent shape, since he may be asked to go connecting at any time. The signal man communicates with the crane operator. Sometimes he will use hand signals, and at other times there is a "phone system" hooked up to the cab of the crane. The signal man must be alert all the time because the unexpected can always happen. A good signalman can save a man's life, and a bad one who doesn't pay attention

can cause all sorts of trouble. He is usually the oldest man in the gang, and is considered something of a sage.

At the very top of the building are the connectors. I consider connecting to be an art within the trade, and it is widely recognized as the most dangerous and demanding work. The job takes a special combination of mental and physical abilities, along with great strength and agility. The connector must not only anticipate the flow of the work and the motions of a beam swinging at the end of a cable, he may have to climb straight up a 30-foot column with as much as 50 pounds of equipment in a work belt hanging from his waist. These are bolts and pins of various lengths and diameters with which he sets the steel, along with the other tools he has to use. Connecting takes a certain physical type. A man may be a weight lifter, but if he has given up too much mobility with all that bulk, he is no more use than a man who is overweight. There are always two connectors working together, and they must have complete confidence in each other. Men who work well together may stay together for years. Not everyone can do

Most blacks were so obviously incapable they left immediately.

this work, and a man who makes his mark as a connector is due a certain respect not given to others, even after he moves on to less demanding jobs.

There is a limit to how long a man can connect steel. At some point his body won't take the beating anymore, and his abilities slip. He still knows what to do, but his reactions aren't there anymore. Some men connect steel into their sixties, but not many. One I knew was also a walker. He would walk about seven miles from Brooklyn into Manhattan—across the Brooklyn bridge—do a day's work and walk home.

Anyway, these are the men in the raising gang, and they work under the supervision of a pusher. If he's a good pusher, he'll get good men working for him, and he will keep them from job to job. When the gang is working well, the lighter his touch on the gang the better. A good gang will almost function on its own.

The next gang on a job is the bolt-up gang. These are usually men who used to be in a raising gang or who, for some

reason, could not function on one. They come along after the raising gang and put in the final bolts to hold the steel. Most of the time the bolt-up gangs do not need strong young men, but there can be exceptions. Sometimes a point (where columns and beams join) may require 100 bolts that must be torqued with a heavy impact gun. The gang will have as many apprentices as it needs to keep the gang supplied with bolts and tools. Needless to say, the worst apprentice is

the one who gets the coffee.

Finally, there is the detail gang. These people come along later to weld the larger bolts, clean up mistakes, and take care of any changes that come up dur-

the street, but only at a very slow, measured pace they can control. They don't adjust well to fast-paced work.


Blacks have similar problems with rigging (the work of putting the right

Indians and High Steel

I worked with American Indians the whole time I was an ironworker. They run the gamut, just like everyone else, from excellent men to men who are not very good at all. However, when I broke into the trade in the early 1960s, they were very good indeed. Most of the big companies like Bethlehem Steel and American Bridge always had Indian gangs working next to white gangs. Of course there was competition, since nobody wanted to be outdone by the other gang, but the competition was mostly friendly. No one ever forgot we were doing something very important and serious, and they were men you could respect.

Of course, if we stopped off at a bar after work, there could be fighting. That's what young men do when they get tanked up. I must say that the Indian guys would get very wild when they were drunk. I guess there's something to that idea about Indians and alcohol. For a while, I worked in Minnesota. The town I lived in, Orr, would not let Indians into the town bars because they had had too many bad experiences.

For the most part, the Indian men I worked with were Mohawks from the Kahnawake reservation outside of Montreal, Canada, and the St. Regis reservation in upstate New York. Many of them made the trip up to the reservation every weekend. They left after work on Friday and come back to start work Monday morning. The reservation seemed to be where they were the most comfortable.

Because of the bond established through ironworking, I consider many Indians to be my lifelong friends. 



Working on the Empire State Building.

ing a job. This

work is easier and more slow-paced than raising and bolting up steel.

For those who have never worked in a union, perhaps this description is enough to make it clear that the union really was a brotherhood. When you work together for years with people whose abilities you count on not only to do your job but for your physical safety, you develop close attachments. At the same time, the best ironworkers love what they do. There is immense satisfaction in seeing a building go up, in doing a challenging job most men can't do.

When blacks started coming into the business, I was still young and making a name as a connector. The job requires total focus, so when you're 40 floors above the street, you don't have time to think about what some black guy is doing or not doing in a detail gang down below. Although I was aware of what foremen were saying about the overall inability of black men to do the work, I never saw them. They seemed instinctively to know they could not work in a raising gang. I wasn't fully aware of the overall damage they were doing the industry until I finished my years of connecting, and started pushing.

It's hard to describe exactly what keeps them from being able to do the more difficult raising-gang work. They are not particularly afraid of heights. Blacks will go out on the iron, way above

cables on the steel pieces and sending them up). Rigging is an integral part of getting the steel where it is has to go. Ironworkers must know all the different capacities of steel cable, and how to use a particular size cable in a way that increases its capacity. For some reason, this is something blacks do not seem to pick up. The same is true with knotcraft. All men in the trade must know certain knots and how to splice. I don't know why, but blacks don't seem to get the hang of it. Their abilities to see things before they happen don't seem to be well developed, and don't improve as they gain experience (though as far as the raising gang is concerned, they don't stay around long enough to get much experience anyway).

Finally, blacks do not read blueprints well. That is why there are so few black pushers even after all these years. It's hard to cover for a guy who can't read a blueprint. When I taught blueprint reading in the apprentice school, I was able to get it across to the white and Indian guys but not to blacks. When I was in the service, I tried to teach a black guy to read a map and use a compass. Either I wasn't a good teacher, or he wasn't a good student, because after I was finished, he couldn't do either.

This is not to say that *no blacks* can do the work. As in so many other situations, there is the rare exception that proves the rule. I have seen only one black man who could do the work the

way it's supposed to be done. He was a good man in every way. Unfortunately, he got killed in 1980 when he fell to his death. Nobody knew what made him fall. It was just one of those things.



High steel.

When I started pushing, the very first gang I took was a bolt-up gang with two blacks. It was apparent very quickly that they were not up to the job. This was early in the work on a 50-story building in Manhattan, and I could not afford to be stuck with men who could not pull their weight. I got hold of the steward and told him to do something or I was going to fire them. He told me they were going to start a detail gang (easier, less demanding work) in a couple of days, and would take the blacks off my hands. In their place, I got two decent guys.

Some people will tell you blacks are lazy, but I think a better word for it is childlike. If a pusher gives them a task and leaves, they will sit down because they're not being watched. It doesn't seem to register with them that when the pusher comes back he will see that the work has not been done—until they see him coming. Then they will invent some silly excuse for why the work is not done. Obviously, it's risky for a pusher to pair two blacks to work together. The usual thing is to put a black guy with a white or an Indian, but the Indians absolutely hate to work with blacks, and if you insist, they may walk

off the job. With a mixed pair, the white or Indian guy has to do all the thinking and most of the work.

I know it runs counter to the common view, but generally speaking, I'm not impressed with the strength or stamina of blacks. I'm sure many people will find this hard to understand, but blacks just give out sooner.

Late in my career, I was pushing a detail gang that was setting some small beams. A black guy said we should take a rest every time we set a piece, but it was light work and I kept the men going. During coffee break he told me I was a slave driver. I told him that if he were the slave and I were the master, I'd have to go out and get a job to support us both because he wasn't doing enough to make owning him pay. I suppose you could get fired for saying that today.

There are other problems with blacks. They tend to come to work late, and without the proper tools or clothing. When I was a walking boss on a job, I'd be down in the street sometimes watching the connectors unload steel off a truck shortly after seven o'clock in the morning (the start time for work in the trades), and I'd see black guys coming late from all directions. That includes all the trades, not just ironworkers.

Some of the excuses I have heard are incredible: "I lent my alarm clock to a friend and he forgot to call me and wake me up and that's why I'm late." Or this



Low steel.

one: "I was on time but a cop gave me a ticket on the train for smoking, and he wouldn't let me off at my stop and I had to wait for a train going back the other

way and was finally able to get off." Then there are the guys who claim to have had deaths in the family, but who forget, and claim multiple deaths for the same person.

Blacks are also likely to have a different kind of baggage. I had a black guy on a job who wasn't bad. He could do a fair job of bolting up, and seemed to be good at being on time for work and doing what he was supposed to do when he was there. Then, all of a sudden, he sticks up a fast food joint and that's the end of him. He got five years. What good was he to the brotherhood?

Certain contracts (usually city, state and federal) now stipulate that the work crew has to have certain percentages of minorities. Also, on many public projects, a certain amount of the contract is set aside for minority contractors. This means large outfits have created dummy minority companies so they can get the minority contract, too. I've seen only one genuinely black outfit get one of these contracts, and they made a mess of things and were thrown off the job.

The fact that blacks would or could not do the hardest work had an effect no one outside the trade would have anticipated. It meant that instead of starting in a raising gang, they started in detail work or bolting up—work that older men traditionally did. If it was a government job that required a certain number of blacks, you had to put those men to work

somewhere. Many times, it meant older men who had been in the trade for years—some nearing retirement age—had to go back and do the work of younger men. You can imagine the snow-ball effect. By their very presence, blacks upset the rhythm and flow of work.

The courts pushed women into the trade, too, just as they had blacks. Of course, they don't have the upper body strength to do the work, but in our unfortunate country, that makes no difference. They're in now, and that's that. They've caused untold problems on the jobs.

The curious thing is that 90 percent of the women who have come into the trade are black, so you have all the other problems I have mentioned plus the fact that they are not strong enough. Once again, we had a group without any abil-

ity to do anything but the easiest work.

I had a problem myself with a woman, soon after they started showing up. I was working as a bolt-up pusher and asked for another apprentice. We were adding



journeymen, so I needed another hand to service them. The union hall sent me a woman. She proceeded to tell me she was going to get the coffee. I told her I was the one who made those decisions, and she wasn't going to get the coffee. I had the original apprentice getting coffee, and that was the way it was going to be. I told her to do ordinary apprentice work, and she just left the floor and told the job super I had harassed her. I told him it was a bunch of baloney, and he put her on a detail gang. I wanted her fired, but that wasn't going to happen. She went on to cause more problems. Last I heard of her, I think she got killed, but not on the job.

I once asked an old timer who had worked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard during the war about the work the women did there. He told me they were good welders (welding is easy work). However, men had to put up the scaffolds for them, so they could get to where the welding had to be done. The situation was much the same as what we're experiencing with women today.

Ours has always been dangerous work. I've been hurt, myself. In 1980, a floor I was on collapsed out from under me, and I fell 35 feet onto Houston Street in Manhattan. I broke my arm. I rehabbed myself and was back at work about three and a half months later, much to the chagrin of my lawyer, who wanted me to stay out of work for as long as my case lasted, which was four years. I got some money, but nothing compared to what I could have gotten if I had stayed out all that time. I wasn't going to sit around for four years.

For the most part, women and blacks don't get hurt. Mainly, it's because they won't do the dangerous work, nor will anyone put them in a critical position where a man's life could depend on them. There has been a blizzard of new safety regulations that are supposed to remove a lot of the dangers, but there are as many injuries as before, and mostly it is whites who get hurt. Why? Because the ironworkers test has been completely watered down to create the illusion that blacks and women are "passing." That means inferior white men are passing the test and entering the trade—and doing the critical work—and inferior men always find a way to get hurt.

Breaking Up the Brotherhood

Structural ironworking is wonderful work for a man who can throw himself into it. The challenges and rewards of the job bring out incredible emotions. The bonds you build with men you can trust last a lifetime. This is why union men call each other brothers, and back in the father-to-son days, men were often related to each other, too.



Ironworkers apprentice class, 1978.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of blacks on high steel is that they have never become part of the brotherhood. They have maintained a *de facto* segregation that has kept them from fully taking part in the trade, and have established themselves as a separate entity within the local. They have refused every overture of brotherhood from members such as myself, who were their friends from the beginning. They have refused friendship from the Indian brothers, too. Mainly this happened because they were artificially inserted into work for which they were completely unqualified. Now, even after all these years, they are just as outside the flow of the

work as the day they started. All this time, no black has ever won elected office in the local.

Many of the blacks have a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude about the job and about whites. In my opinion, they strike a pose to hide the fact that they don't have what it takes as a group to do the work. I can't imagine what their day must be like, always walking around wondering if someone doesn't like them, never able to lose themselves in the work. This work has so much to offer, but it's up to each man to get out of it what he can.

I mentioned the incredible emotions of high steel, but the key to feeling those emotions is the work. If a man won't throw himself completely into the work, he'll always be on the outside looking in. He will end caring about the money rather than the work. For him it's about the money, and only the money. Blacks were thrown into a job they couldn't handle, but they made choices, too. They chose to stay on the outside, and the loss is theirs.

When affirmative action started, nobody thought it would move beyond the blue-collar jobs. Many white-collar workers thought it was fine for people

who work outside to integrate. After all, they thought, what does it take to do that kind of work? Just brawn and no brains. They didn't understand that their turn would come.

Now, everybody sees what has happened. We as white people, must act together and do what has to be done to end this plague of affirmative action. I don't know how it will happen, but I believe there has already been a change in thinking in America. People are fed up with all this nonsense and slowly they will first take back the workplace and then their society. **Ω**

Mr. Dilberger is semi-retired and living on the Jersey Shore.