

importance in the agribusiness economy became apparent as meatpacking plants and grain elevators shut down. In Montana, where half of the state's truckers were owner-operators, deliveries of livestock to packing plants and of boxed beef to supermarkets halted almost completely. Produce began rotting across the country, from Washington State cherries, cucumbers, squash, and potatoes to North Carolina green beans and potatoes, to California strawberries and lettuce—all foods carried primarily by independent truckers. Peach growers in Georgia stopped harvesting; farmers in Pennsylvania dumped milk; and a Minnesota pork plant shut down. Truckers blockaded a Stop & Shop supermarket distribution center in Connecticut, making a direct appeal to consumers in New York City, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. The intent, as Independent Truckers Association spokesman Don Swanson argued, was to show consumers that the cost of diesel fuel translated directly into increased food costs. "We could go ahead and pay \$2 for a gallon of diesel," stated Swanson, "but people are going to have to pay \$6 for a pound of hamburger. We don't want to see that. We have to buy hamburger, too." Despite panic buying in supermarkets, however, the truckers' shutdowns and blockades proved too sporadic and disorganized to achieve a lasting impact on food supplies. Without an effective means of central organization, the 1979 shutdowns ended much like the first, with the Carter administration offering only limited concessions to the truckers. There was one important difference, however, between the results of the 1973–74 shutdowns and those of 1979. Although the 1979 strikes did not produce a "hellacious uproar" in Washington, they did lend support to President Carter's and Massachusetts senator Edward Kennedy's efforts to push deregulation of the trucking industry through Congress.⁵²

DEREGULATORY CAPITALISM

With the passage of the Motor Carrier Act of 1980, Parkhurst saw his desire for a free-market revolution in long-haul trucking come true as Congress formally deregulated the U.S. trucking industry. This legislation could be seen as the culmination of a decade-long effort by economic advisors within the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations to implement a free-market ideology in response to pressure from consumers and business interests. Ralph Nader, for instance, attacked the ICC for gouging consumers by sanctioning freight monopolies, while shippers from grocery stores to auto manufacturers decried trucking regulation for driving up freight rates. These views resonated with economic advisors to Presidents Nixon and Ford—particularly James Miller III and Alan Greenspan—taken with economist Milton Friedman's neoliberal free-market theories. Jimmy Carter, determined to reform trucking policy as

part of his broader efforts to pare back federal power, appointed a proderegulation commissioner to the ICC. In 1978, the newly antimonopolistic ICC defied Congress, the Teamsters, and the American Trucking Associations and began dismantling regulatory structures. That same year, Carter signed a law deregulating the domestic airline industry, capping five years of efforts by Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) to undermine the Civil Aeronautics Board's regulatory power. In the spring of 1979 Kennedy surprised Carter by proposing a sweeping deregulation bill, challenging Carter to deliver on his earlier promise to fully deregulate trucking. Kennedy enrolled a wide-ranging crew of supporters whose politics would, in prior decades, have aligned them with the Republican rather than the Democratic Party—including the National Association of Manufacturers on behalf of free-enterprisers, Mike Parkhurst representing independent truckers, and the American Farm Bureau Federation speaking on behalf of agribusiness. In June 1979, President Carter joined with Kennedy, and the two Democrats successfully pushed trucking deregulation through Congress within the year, despite heavy resistance by the American Trucking Associations and the Teamsters Union. The political climate of the 1970s, with its "mood for free enterprise," stagflationary economic woes, and repudiation of New Deal economic liberalism, made full deregulation of the trucking industry possible. But the roots of trucking deregulation lay in the social and political context of rural America that had bred the fiercely independent "tired ex-farmer" trucker who supported Mike Parkhurst's call to arms during the 1979 shutdowns.⁵³

Violent strikes would not bring down the ICC, Mike Parkhurst realized. The legacy of the agricultural exemption clause of the 1935 Motor Carrier Act, however, could provide an effective lobbying tool before Congress. By the early 1970s, the agricultural exemption discussed in previous chapters had created an entire sector of the long-haul trucking industry that was free from regulatory oversight by the ICC. For promoters of antistatist approaches to national transportation policy, the agricultural exemption offered a model of free markets operating in the public interest. Mike Parkhurst was not the only one to argue along these lines; economists both within and without the USDA had been arguing along much the same lines for decades. For instance, Richard N. Farmer, a professor of business administration at the University of California-Los Angeles, argued in 1964 that the exemption reduced shipping costs, benefiting both producers and consumers of agricultural products. As Farmer put it, "To regulate for the sake of regulation, or to tidy up what seems to be a confusing, chaotic free market seems unsound." But it was Mike Parkhurst who fully realized the political power of the agrarian resonance of independent trucking in the 1970s. If agribusiness-friendly congressmen could be convinced that

deregulated trucking would lower the price of food without lowering farm prices, independent truckers could attack the ICC as an outmoded relic and the Teamsters as selfish brutes who contributed to the inflation of the 1970s. The seeds of deregulation that had been planted by a farm-friendly Congress in 1935 and nurtured by the USDA through the 1960s were ready to bear fruit. Mike Parkhurst was prepared for the harvest.⁵⁴

After gaining national attention in the 1973–74 shutdowns, Parkhurst regularly appeared as a witness before Senate and House committees considering trucking deregulation. Parkhurst repeatedly pointed to the exempt rural trucker as the backbone of the nation's food economy. In 1977 Parkhurst informed the sympathetic Senate Committee on Agriculture that "a lot of farmers around this country would like to be able to put their goods which are now being shipped by regulated carriers right on the backs of independent truckers." Speaking "from the standpoint of consumers" before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in March 1979, Parkhurst declared that with deregulation, "food costs could be brought down inasmuch as over 90 percent of all fresh fruits and vegetables are hauled by the small operator." As evidence for his claim, Parkhurst pointed to what he called an "invisible regulatory agency in the basement of the Department of Agriculture" that had driven down food prices by expanding the agricultural exemption for farm truckers since 1935. While the Teamsters and regulated trucking firms represented by the American Trucking Associations testified that deregulation would bring only chaos to the trucking industry, Parkhurst noted that farm trucking had long been deregulated, making it possible for independent truckers to provide consumers with fresh produce at low prices at any time of year. Calling upon independent truckers to "launch [a] much-needed letter-writing campaign" to Congress, Parkhurst urged truckers to "appeal to the consumer interests" in trucking deregulation as well as think about how deregulation would "put more dollars in your wallet [and] more steaks on your table." By easing ICC restrictions on market entry, deregulation would make it possible for thousands of small trucking firms, especially independent owner-operator truckers, to begin freely competing for general freight much as they had always been able to compete for farm and food hauls. A free market for truck transportation, Parkhurst declared, would benefit farmers, consumers, and independent truckers alike.⁵⁵

Senator Edward M. Kennedy, unlike Mike Parkhurst, was no libertarian. Kennedy nonetheless understood the political resonance of the agricultural exemption as a model for trucking deregulation. As an early front-runner in the race to replace Jimmy Carter as the Democrat's presidential candidate in the 1980 elections, Kennedy saw trucking deregulation as an ideal issue that would

allow him to reach out to the hard-working independent rural truck driver while still satisfying his urban and suburban working- and middle-class constituency. Carter had come into office proposing to deregulate trucking but had not fully delivered on his promise, so Kennedy pounced on the issue. In a craftily staged press conference in January 1979, Kennedy put trucking deregulation on the congressional agenda flanked by consumer crusader Ralph Nader, Carter's "chief inflation fighter" and point man on airline deregulation Alfred E. Kahn, along with representatives of the National Association of Manufacturers, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, and the Consumer Federation of America. All agreed that with inflation threatening the nation's consumer-driven economy, Congress could no longer bow to the special-interest demands of the Teamsters and the American Trucking Associations, who continued to fight any efforts to deregulate the industry. Introducing free enterprise to the trucking system, Kennedy believed, would simultaneously boost independent truckers' incomes while lowering consumer prices. Trucking deregulation thus appealed to libertarian and liberal interests simultaneously in an age of stagnating wages and inflationary prices. Kennedy's framing of the politics of trucking deregulation in this manner was part of a broader effort among Democrats in the period to distance themselves from the perception that liberal politics necessarily implied big bureaucracy, cozy relations with labor unions, and interventionist economic regulations. Just as his brother Robert Kennedy had done in formulating the McClellan Committee's anti-Teamsters attacks in the late 1950s, and as his other brother John F. Kennedy had done when proposing a dramatic tax cut in 1963, Edward Kennedy's pro-deregulation stance marked the culmination of a long-term shift within the postwar Democratic Party. By the 1970s, party leaders had defected from New Deal-style, class-based, equity-oriented economic liberalism enforced through regulatory governance. Both Kennedy and Carter represented the Democrats' new focus on rights-based social liberalism combined with growth-oriented economic policies that primarily benefited business interests and relatively affluent consumers. Carter soon offered his full support to Kennedy's efforts, and in June 1979, just as Parkhurst and his followers were gearing up for a violent blockade of the nation's farm and food transportation network, the two Democratic leaders proposed sweeping trucking deregulation legislation.⁵⁶

Although Kennedy's support for deregulation reflected his efforts to pitch the Democratic Party as the party of economic growth, most of the hard work of making deregulatory ideology into material reality had already been done by agribusiness over the previous four decades. Kennedy's specific proposals for deregulation drew on the fact that rural trucking had remained unregulated

since 1935. Appearing before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in late June, Kennedy explicitly drew legislators' attention to the agricultural exemption as a template for deregulation. "The best proof that trucking deregulation works," Kennedy intoned, "is the fact that more than half of the trucking industry has never been regulated." The success of the agricultural exemption in keeping rural trucking free from the heavy hand of government regulation, Kennedy announced, had been proven in 1956, when "fresh and frozen dressed poultry and frozen fruits and vegetables were declared exempt from I.C.C. regulation." Citing the USDA's study of the rapid drop in freight rates that came with the Supreme Court's 1956 decisions to allow transportation of frozen poultry and frozen produce without ICC regulation, Kennedy asserted that he could not "think of a single action that could deal more effectively with the problem of inflation than deregulation of the trucking industry." The "absurdities" of ICC regulation of trucking, according to Kennedy, "have an impact . . . from a consumer's point of view in terms of prices at the supermarket." Kennedy, like Mike Parkhurst, tied the pocket-book politics of rural anarchopopulist independent truckers to the inflationary fears of middle-class suburban consumers, proposing trucking deregulation as a simple solution to the era's complex economic difficulties.⁵⁷

Farm lobbyists joined Parkhurst and Kennedy in this fight for deregulation. C. H. Fields, testifying before the Senate on behalf of the Farm Bureau, declared that the benefits of trucking deregulation had been proven since 1935 by the "tremendous success story" of the agricultural exemption clause of the original Motor Carrier Act. According to Fields, "55 percent of the motor carrier business is already free from ICC regulation," allowing independent truckers to haul farm products at lower prices and with greater flexibility than either regulated trucking firms or the railroads. B. H. Jones, representing the National Cattlemen's Association, agreed. "When nonregulated truckers can haul live cattle, hogs, and sheep to slaughter more expeditiously and at lower rates than the regulated trucks and rails can haul away the approximately 60 percent of that cargo which is meat, the need for a serious and thorough review of the intervention of government in the system is obviously overdue." Jones, echoing the sentiments of Mike Parkhurst, declared that "the Nation can no longer afford the luxury of overregulation on the part of Government." Ray Mackey, representing the Kentucky Farm Bureau, told the Senate that "overwhelming evidence points to the fact that less Government regulation and red tape in the trucking business and more freedom and competition will produce better service to all Americans." As if he had taken part in the trucker insurrection of the summer of 1979 himself, Mackey stated that "we believe that 45 years of restrictive regulation is enough for our Nation's trucking industry." Farm Bureau

and other agricultural representatives, unlike Mike Parkhurst, were not revolting against government intervention in the economy per se; the Farm Bureau continued to support New Deal-era farm subsidies that benefited large-scale farmers at taxpayers' expense. Trucking deregulation, however, promised to unite the interests of commercial farmers with those of urban consumers, simultaneously raising farmers' incomes while reducing the price of food at the supermarket—much as Charles Brannan had unsuccessfully attempted to do back in 1949. In contrast to Brannan's proposal for a U.S. version of a Swedish social-democratic consensus among farmers, workers, and consumers on farm policy, however, the deregulation of trucking would ensure that private enterprises rather than public political coalitions would hold the reins in the food economy.⁵⁸

The agricultural politics of trucking deregulation helped secure the passage of the Motor Carrier Act of 1980, which formally deregulated the entire trucking industry. The House committee that reported the final trucking deregulation bill to President Carter announced it had received “thousands of letters from consumers—from beef processors to independent owner-operators.” With an oddly placed dash the House declared that beefpackers and truckers were “consumers,” implying that all agreed with Senator Kennedy and President Carter on the need to deregulate transportation to keep consumer prices low. The House Committee on Public Works and Transportation summed up the aims of the Motor Carrier Act of 1980: “reduced regulation of the industry will indeed reduce prices and inflation.” Allowing independent owner-operator truckers to transport processed food products as well as farm commodities would “result in cost savings to the consumer through increased service and price competition.” The “ultimate beneficiary” of deregulation would be “the American consumer.” The House report repeatedly referenced the USDA's study on the impacts of the 1956 deregulation of frozen food trucking as proof positive of deregulation's anti-inflationary potential. Thus, while the Motor Carrier Act of 1980 was crafted in direct response to the economic stagflation and political conservatism of the 1970s, the deregulatory impulse in trucking also had much deeper historical roots. Long before the word “deregulation” came into widespread use, rural trucking had always been unregulated, providing a model for the version of “free enterprise” pushed by Carter and Kennedy in 1979.⁵⁹

After deregulation became political reality in 1980, independent truckers gained the freedoms they had so long demanded, but at a significant cost. Deregulation transformed the trucking industry in the 1980s, bringing chaotic and cut-throat competition reminiscent of the 1920s. By mid-1982, the American Trucking Associations reported that 188 formerly regulated motor carriers

had gone bankrupt, while 40 percent of large trucking firms saw net losses. The easing of market entry restrictions encouraged the proliferation of small trucking firms located in rural areas, following the pattern set over the previous decades by the unregulated agricultural trucking industry. Larger firms, particularly J. B. Hunt, also joined in the competition. But whether the new trucking companies were small or large, nearly all were nonunion. Three years after the 1980 Motor Carrier Act became law, the number of nonunion motor carriers tripled. The Teamsters hemorrhaged members, so that by 1985 only 160,000 long-haul truckers belonged to the union—a 43 percent decline since 1976. With competition driving down freight rates, wage-cutting became a business imperative for both union and nonunion firms. By 1996, the nation's freight bill reached an all-time low, but at the cost of transforming big rigs into "sweatshops on wheels," as firms slashed wages while Teamster power collapsed in long-haul trucking. Some individual truckers benefited from the deregulatory regime, of course, considering that the easing of barriers to market entry allowed individuals previously unable to work as self-employed truckers to join in the competitive fray. For African American truckers in particular, the decline of Teamster power and the removal of regulatory barriers to black self-employment opened up new opportunities; black truckers were three times more likely to be owner-operators by 1988 than they had been in 1978. But because white drivers entered the ranks of owner-operators even more rapidly than African Americans after deregulation, blacks represented only 6 percent of owner-operators by 1988. In any case, declining incomes for both employees and owner-operators meant that new opportunities did not necessarily translate into economic security. Deregulation proved to work exactly as it had been intended—to place on "independent" truckers the brunt of the burden of satisfying both producers and consumers by driving down the cost of the transportation that connected them. Truckers who had all along sought to be independent men—free of government bureaucracy, corporate control, and dues-demanding unions—seemed to have achieved exactly what they wanted.⁶⁰

Why would independent truckers fight so hard for a policy change that would prove so contradictory to their economic interests? William Hill, the head of the Fraternal Association of Steel Haulers, lamented the "farm background" of most of the truckers who participated in the shutdowns of the 1970s, implying that rural truckers fell prey to a form of false consciousness when they demanded independence at any cost. "All these guys have that American dream, man, that they're gonna work hard and they're gonna be millionaires," scoffed Hill. "And they'll own their own trucking company some day. Bullshit."⁶¹ But while that "farm background" certainly drove owner-operators to attach great importance to unregulated long-haul trucking as a

path to manly independence, they were not unthinking dupes of free-market ideologues. With few options for satisfying work in an era of industrial agribusiness, rural men who chose to enter the relatively unrestricted world of agricultural trucking at mid-century did so in an economic world not entirely of their own making. Under the deregulatory umbrella established by a farm-friendly Congress in 1935 and expanded by the Department of Agriculture through the 1960s, farm and food trucking remained chaotic and hypercompetitive even as the Teamsters Union and larger trucking firms cornered the market for more lucrative freight. The ideal figure of rural manhood within this agribusiness context became the “bandit” trucker, who proved willing to embrace *laissez-faire* ideology even if that meant a return to the economic chaos that had characterized trucking in the 1920s. By the 1960s and 1970s, the fierce independence of owner-operator truckers—intensified by country music, Hollywood films, Mike Parkhurst’s libertarian screeds, and a sense that the Teamsters and the federal government had betrayed the working man’s economic interests—created the conditions for a violent protest. When fuel prices rose in the 1970s, independent truckers demanded an injection of free enterprise into the entire transportation economy. In doing so, truckers and congressional deregulators paved the way for the low-wage, low-price capitalism that would define the final decades of the twentieth-century U.S. political economy. Independent truckers helped to shift the machinations of deregulatory capitalism into high gear in the late twentieth century, not out of ignorance of their own economic interests, but because they had few other economic choices.