Felix Cuervo, Highrise Hero

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In the months after September 11, if you had turned on your computer, accessed the world wide web, and typed in the address www.seiu32bj.org, you would have been greeted with the following inscription:

> SEIU Local 32BJ is a union of over 70,000 building services workers. This is a union of everyday heroes—doormen, handymen, concierges, porters, cleaning and maintenance workers—who keep New York City humming.

On September 11, 2001, elevator starter Arlene Charles helped her coworker and shop steward Carmen Griffith, who had been severely burned on her face and hands, down seventy-eight flights of stairs. Security worker Gabriel Torres helped evacuate frightened tenants and then led two firefighters through the building in a search for more victims; they were trapped under falling debris and dug out two hours later. Window cleaner Jan Demczur, stuck in an elevator between floors with five other men, burrowed through the wall with his squeegee, and the men made it out of the building minutes before it collapsed. The Service Employees International Union told their stories on its website (www.seiu.org).

These days, heroes are not hard to find: the police officers and firefighters who saved thousands of lives directing civilians from the burning towers, the airline passengers who died wrestling a plane to ground in Pennsylvania, the soldiers serving overseas. Where do we rank the 1200 members of 32BJ who worked in the World Trade Center, the 350 on duty at the moment of attack, the 24 who died, in our list of heroes?[1] The times are extraordinary, but the question is not new. For over one hundred years, the building service workers of New York City have quietly protected the public from calamities large and small, often with little recognition for their efforts. In the 1930s, the founders of Local 32B (precursor to 32BJ) made it a priority to publicize the brave acts of its members. They did this both to improve the public image of workers—giving them leverage in negotiations with management—and to increase the dignity and pride that workers themselves took in their jobs. In the face of contrary cultural assumptions, their efforts succeeded quite well.

The number of jobs related to building service expanded in the last decades of the nineteenth century with the invention of the modern apartment house and office building. The enormous architecture and physical plants of these buildings entailed the creation of a new workforce to run elevators, fire boilers, maintain the physical plant, and attend to the various needs of the tenants. In time, a roster of jobs evolved to meet these needs, each job with its own set of respon-

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sibilities. Many building service occupations also developed a set of cultural connotations, always overgeneralizations and sometimes inaccurate stereotypes: the daring and fool-hardy Latin window washer, the doleful Slavic scrubwoman, the impudent young elevator operator. These fanciful descriptions spun out and took a light hold on the consciousness of New Yorkers, but one adjective that did not often appear before a building service job title was "heroic."

Nevertheless, the dangers of modern office and apartment buildings—particularly fires, elevator accidents, and crime—provided various opportunities for building service workers to show their mettle. For most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the specter of fire loomed large in the minds of New Yorkers. Ironically, as Chicago's great fire of 1871 cleared the ground for experimentation with newer, taller building designs, it also stoked the fear of conflagration. In 1883, a report by a committee of distinguished New Yorkers, alarmed by the rash of "inordinately high apartment houses" (a few as much as 160 feet tall) going up in the city, warned of the danger of fire. The concerned gentlemen quoted a statement by Chief Engineer Bates of the fire department that the department had great difficulty fighting conflagrations in buildings taller than sixty-five feet and could do nothing more than seventy-five feet above the sidewalk. They also warned that elevator shafts served as conduits, spreading fire throughout the building.[2] The capabilities of the department improved in later years, but the growth of buildings higher and higher often outpaced their abilities.

Elevator accidents also plagued the first high-rise buildings. An elevator could malfunction in any number of ways, leading to serious injury or death. Some unwary victims died at the bottom of elevator shafts; others crushed between the car and the doorsill. Most terrifying, though least common, the cable sometimes snapped. If the safety devices failed to engage, the car plummeted to the bottom of the shaft. Though improved safety devices made elevators relatively safe by the turn of the century, the perception of danger remained. By the 1920s, elevator travel became statistically safer than taking the stairs, but many people, influenced by sensational newspaper reports of those accidents that did occur, still worried when they stepped into the car.[3]

The fear of crime, as old as law itself, took on new forms in tall buildings. Anonymity and architectural design combined to create new opportunities for theft. The vast number of people going in and out of apartment and especially office buildings each day made it easy for criminals to claim a legitimate reason for entering the building when doormen stopped them on their way in or others encountered them inside the building. After dark, the ambitious sneak-thief needed only to avoid the scrubwomen and the night watchman as they moved from office to office, searching for unlocked doors and safes left open by careless (or confederate) clerks.[4]

Americans generally believed that improved technology (fireproof building materials, sprinkler systems and elevator safety devices) would solve the first two problems, and that an improved police force might stem the growth of crime.[5] From the extant evidence, it seems that the people who lived and worked

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in tall buildings did not often see building service workers as protectors against these or any dangers. Through the early twentieth century, literature portrayed building service workers as ineffectual, even sinister. In his farce "The Elevator," William Dean Howells uses the character of "The Elevator Boy" as nothing more than a foil for the trapped passengers' growing hysteria. When Mrs. Crashaw asks, "with mingled trepidation and severity," why the elevator has stopped between floors, the Boy replies unhelpfully, "I don't know. It seems to be caught." In Edith Wharton's popular novel *The House of Mirth,* the scrubwoman of a bachelor apartment blackmails the protagonist Lily Bart, acting as the plot device that eventually leads to Bart's undoing. Cartoons ridiculing the laziness and stupidity of janitors became a staple of the popular press. Often, a service occupation was attached as a veneer to crude ethnic and racial stereotypes, and it becomes difficult to tell whether the artist intended to insult janitors, the Irish, or both.[6]

By the 1920s, new management practices, changed popular images of New York, and a popular reconception of heroism (developed largely by the mass media) all pushed popular ideas about service workers in new directions. The changing business strategy of building managers led to a renewed focus on the quality of service provided by their employees. Where real estate agents and managers once touted the technological offerings of the spaces they rented, they increasingly emphasized the good training and ability of their employees and created work rules that would encourage good relations between tenants and employees. Alongside the technological advances of fireproof building materials, fire escapes, sprinkler systems, alarm systems, and a multitude of safety devices for elevators, many buildings began to promise their tenants a well-trained and professional service force

At roughly the same time, a celebration of New York as commercial carnival of delights that crested in the 1920s helped burnish the image of service workers. In the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos, in Fred Astaire and Busby Berkeley movies, and in popular songs, service workers in buildings and especially in hotels became savvy characters of modern urban life, not worrisome interlopers on domestic privacy. In these works, men and women prove their suave urbanity (or lack thereof) through interactions with the service workers around them. The increasing ease and comfort depicted in these popular sources probably reflected a real change in comfort level as time passed and city-dwellers adjusted to life in tall buildings.

The new media of the era (and portions of the old media that adapted to competition by emulating it) pioneered a modern concept of heroism that became available to building service workers. To the biblical, folk, political, and war heroes of past years, new media added new exemplars. The radio, the film reel, and the new profession of Public Relations brought The Shadow, Henry Ford, Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Mary Pickford, and Charles Lindbergh before the American people more vividly than ever before. Old media and new depicted increasingly democratic heroes, like Floyd Collins, who was trapped under a landslide in a Kentucky cave for two weeks in 1925 and made the front page of

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virtually every paper in the country.[7] In tabloids, tales of heroism became an important counterbalance to more lurid fare. In their rabid search for everyday heroes who might morally instruct the readership and fill the space between the advertisements, papers inevitably fell on some stories regarding service workers.

For many years, service workers did little to take advantage of these openings. Some workers may have advanced their careers through individual acts of heroism, but there is little evidence of this one way or the other. After 1934, when a few marginal New York unions merged to become Local 32B, Building Service Employees International Union, it also proved possible to organize and use a claim to heroism collectively. In the short run, Local 32B (which merged with its sister union to become 32BJ in 1977)[8] succeeded for many of the same reasons that workers successfully organized other industries in the 1930s. They won recognition and concessions from management because they proved they could take control of their workplace and stop production (or, in this case, transportation of elevators and provision of services throughout the building). Very quickly, though, they began an ideological campaign that might obviate the need for strikes. They sought to recast the public image of the service worker as a crucial part of the urban infrastructure, a friend of both the tenant and the general public, patriotic, civic-minded, and even heroic. They would then use the sympathy of the public to force management to recognize the union and negotiate with it in good faith. They also hoped this rhetoric of heroism would instill members with a sense of dignity in their work. It might even inspire them to heroism on behalf of tenants, fellow workers, or the union itself.

Early moves toward this policy were made of necessity, as union leaders learned from experience. A veteran union member recalled that Local 32B won its first big battle in 1934 by fighting it out with strikebreakers in the lobbies of the buildings. "I think Mr. Krivitz, he owns the building, he got a rap in the mouth by the name of Kennedy, Frank Kennedy, and it seems that 1400 Broadway signed up with the union and that seemed to settle everything in the Garment Center."[9] The rough tactics of the fledgling union might be acceptable on Seventh Avenue, but not on the boulevards of the bourgeoisie. When 32B staged its second big strike in 1936, it began on Central Park West and West End Avenue, and it lasted two cold weeks in March. In the first few days of the strike, the press eagerly reported on brawls between flying squadrons, strikebreakers, and police, some of them inside the struck buildings. The *New York Times, World-Telegram, Herald-Tribune,* and *Evening Journal* all reported on Frederick Coudert Bellinger, a retired United States Assistant Attorney General, a veteran of the Third Division during the Great War, and a tenant at 925 Park Avenue. Bellinger was also the head of the Tenants' Defense League, an organization he had hastily assembled in one day, inviting all rent payers on the East Side from 59th to 98th streets to join. At 925 Park, members of the Defense League fired the furnaces, ran the elevators, and guarded the lobby door against saboteurs. Bellinger stood in the lobby of his building, a rifle in his hand and his old army-issue helmet on his head. On March 3rd, the third day of the strike, he solemnly told the reporters that "We intend to be a militant organization."

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That night, at the end of a mass rally in East Harlem, Local 32B president James J. Bambrick urged the audience to take a "stroll" down Park Avenue, which they did. By 96th street, where Harlem gives way to the luxury apartments of the Upper East Side, they began smashing lobby windows. A crowd of five hundred gathered outside 925 Park and yelled various oaths at him, but none rushed the building. Perhaps Bellinger's rifle warned them off. Bellinger later told reporters that the Mayor's lenience was directly responsible for the incident and persuaded District Attorney Dodge to call Bambrick in for questioning. D. A. Dodge kept Bambrick and BSEIU Eastern Representative George Scalise for three hours on the afternoon of the fifth. He later reported, "I questioned Mr. Bambrick about the statement attributed to him that the strikers 'would fight it out in the street and tear things down.' Mr. Bambrick told me that what he meant to convey in his speech was that the strikers would use the streets for picketing, but he insisted he did not mean to encourage any acts of violence."[10]

This kind of publicity may have stirred the membership to greater militancy, but it did the union little good. Fortunately, a few allies of the union acted with greater media savvy, probably without consulting the union first. The Young People's Socialist League (an organization with which 32B had no official ties) found a better way to taunt Bellinger. It sent seven young women with tin hats and toy pop-guns to picket 925 Park Avenue. They carried placards that read "A Barrel of Fun, Bellinger goes Up and Down," "Dillinger Gone, Bellinger Going, Going," and "Office of Tin Hat Bellinger." They sang "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Bellinger" as they walked back and forth. Several pedestrians stopped to chuckle; they laughed louder when twelve policemen tried to convince them to leave and then awkwardly arrested them.

At 112 East 19th Street, the building that housed the offices of the City Affairs Committee, the Consumers League of New York, the Joint Committee on Unemployment, the American League Against War and Fascism, the League for Industrial Democracy, the American Student Union, and the publications *Fight* and *Survey,* tenants joined the picket. When police asked them to leave, they responded by forming a snake dance. Thirty-two were arrested. Tenement House Commissioner Langdon Post, a well-respected, civic-minded New Yorker, publicly announced a rent strike in sympathy with the workers and gave other New York tenants some free and dubious legal advice on their right to withhold rents. These developments were covered by the press, some of them extensively. News articles also reported thefts and beatings committed by strike-breakers against tenants. Three strike-breakers beat up an old sparring partner of Jack Dempsey when he tried to fire them for giving unsatisfactory service in the Bronx building where he was superintendent. A twenty-three year old scab named Samuel Gallo was crushed to death in the rear elevator of 151 Central Park West; news reports insinuated that lack of familiarity with the machinery led to his death. While most editorial pages came out against the strikers, news stories on earlier pages implied that experienced building service workers were vital to the safety of tenants.[11]

Good publicity quickly became very important for Local 32B. Its success

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owed a great debt to many active interventions by Mayor La Guardia, before, during, and after the strike of 1936. La Guardia, a master politician and a media hound himself, was more likely to expend political capital on an issue if it played well with the public. In 1936, the leaders of 32B learned this lesson and began to court the public more assiduously. Over the next year, the union's publicity department released almost 900,000 pieces of literature and propaganda. It began to use smaller tactical strikes to win publicity. It took out advertisements in the local press, including one in 1940 that announced 32B had amassed a defense fund of $250,000 and was reducing its dues from two dollars a month to a dollar fifty.[12] It even urged its rank-and-file members to join in the effort. In a story called "Pop Takes Umbrage," published in 32B's monthly magazine, Pop tells his son, "the public, y'know, is a large body of people entirely surrounded by propaganda. We need 'em on our side, if we can have 'em, me lad."[13]

The union's public relations offensive strongly contested the old view of building service workers as unreliable. In *Building Service,* the monthly glossy magazine published by 32B, articles depicted workers as eager and deserving, much put-upon by building management companies, dedicated to the union, the tenants and the general public, and sometimes capable of heroism. In its pages, workers foiled crimes, took part in blood drives, and reacted calmly when crises hit their buildings.[14] It reprinted letters like one from Paul Silverman, a tenant of 330 West 38th Street, who pronounced it "a thrill watching the boys clean the building of panic stricken workers and tenants during that explosion that happened on Wednesday . . ." Silverman particularly praised the "presence of mind" of elevator operator Thomas Grady.[15]

Building Service approvingly republished reports of incidents that broke into the mainstream media. When a man shot and killed Officer Ed Maher in midtown in the middle of the day, doorman George Baxter and cabbie Leonard Weisberg combined to catch the murderer. During the scuffle, Weisberg was shot in the neck. Walter Winchell interviewed Baxter on his popular radio show, and Baxter donated his income from the appearance to Weisberg's medical bills. Winchell commented, "A Jew risks his life for an Irishman and in turn receives financial aid from another Irishman . . . What a fine example it is of the bond between Americans . . . It should make the bigoted crawl back into the walls." *Building Service* reprinted this quote with a comment from a member of Council 3, 32B: "Winchell made two minor errors in his column. George is a Scot by birth. He has a remarkable brogue to prove it. George may not make what is called a salary when compared to the high earning power of America's number one columnist but he does make a living wage. He has a 32B card to prove it."[16]

Building Service gave examples of the dangers that occurred when service workers were not present. It reported crimes like the mugging of Abraham Lindner, sixty-five, of $100 in cash and a $6500 (or so Lindner said) diamond ring. Two young men met Mr. Lindner in the automatic elevator of his apartment building on West 151st Street. They stopped the elevator between the second and third floor, where they took his ring and wallet, then brought him up to the roof and beat him with the butt of a revolver. This story ended with a promise

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that 32B would continue fighting in Albany for a bill that would require buildings with automatic elevators to hire hallmen to sit in the lobby (the bill never passed). It also called on tenants and insurance companies to fight the spread of automatic elevators and urge managers who installed them to hire hallmen.[17]

Building Service also reported on elevator accidents, the grislier the better. In March 1940, a four-year-old girl named Renee Alperin was crushed in an automatic elevator on Kings Highway in Brooklyn. Renee was caught between the rising floor of the car and the top of the open doorway to the shaft. As Renee's mother tried to pull her out, the elevator caught her left arm in the same space where Renee was crushed and pulled her off her feet. Mrs. Alperin hung for half an hour while the police tried to free her, her hand crushed and her younger daughter, two-year-old Beryl, trapped inside the elevator. The author of the article reiterated the union's opposition to automatic elevators and requested that members send news of other accidents to union headquarters.[18]

The magazine had a number of intended audiences: union members and unaffiliated service workers, but also managers, other labor leaders, the occasional tenant, and the politicians whose letters of congratulations were printed at the front of commemorative issues. For this latter, external audience, the magazine's tales of heroism fit a larger strategy promoting the public image of the union and its members. Its success on this front is not easily measured, but increased sophistication in the use of publicity coincided neatly with the growing success of the union. Local 32B made extensive use of the radio and press; in 1939, when contracts for 25,000 members expired, the union placed paid advertisements in the local papers for days on end and bought time on two radio stations throughout the period of negotiation with management. A favorable new contract was signed without recourse to strike, an outcome that 32B's Vice President Arthur L. Harckham attributed to the constant publicity the union brought to bear on the negotiations. Harckham insisted that the development of these tactics compared in significance to the invention of the sit-down strike.[19]

For the internal audience, the workers, *Building Service* hoped to stir pride and satisfaction with the union. Some members viewed the earnest exhortation of the magazine cynically. Others found its columns inspiring. For a few, the very existence of the magazine created a forum in which new ideas about heroism and service could be developed and disseminated. More than anyone else, a young elevator operator named Felix Cuervo took advantage of this opportunity.

Cuervo first appeared in the pages of *Building Service* as one more example of the everyday hero. One summer night in 1939, he was walking home from his job in Chelsea when he witnessed a car accident on the corner of Ninth Avenue and 22nd Street. As others stood by in shock, Cuervo leaped to the side of the victim, a neighborhood resident named Thomas Carter. Perhaps the two had seen each other around the neighborhood before. Cuervo placed Carter in a car and drove him to St. Vincent's, where he was diagnosed with a possible fractured skull and a broken leg. According to the account in the union magazine, Cuervo's quick action may have saved Carter's life.[20]

Cuervo soon moved to a new job at 95 Christopher Street. He liked it there

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and appreciated the kindness of his boss, Irving Hartstein, whom he and other employees called "the most humane employer in the Building Service Industry,"[21] but Cuervo needed another outlet for his boundless energy. He found it in *Building Service*. His first articles, entitled "Helpful Hints," gave on-the-job tips and other advice such as dressing correctly for interviews and soaking your legs in water with epsom salts after a long day of work.[22] He also contributed to the general campaign to publicize the dangers of automatic elevators, describing in detail the death of an infant named Beatrice Nitzburgk: "Her mother was forced to stand helplessly listening to her infant's screams as the child's body was dragged up five floors, and crushed against the shaft."[23]

As time passed, Cuervo developed a colorful and comfortable writing style, and he began to publish longer pieces, including some fiction. In "Mom Meets the Senator," Cuervo speaks through the protagonist "Jim O'Hara," an elevator operator who finds a job in a residential building on a side street near Central Park.[24] O'Hara is a confident master of his craft; in a job interview, he playfully outlines his experience:

> Can I run a car? Mr. Jones, in all modesty permit me to say that you are now gazing at the best elevator pilot in town. I've run 'em all from a jeepers-creepers in a six story tenement in Canarsie, to a high speed wizzer in the Empire State Building. I can throw a car into a dead stall on the fifty-first floor, do a nine G power dive, come out of it on the second floor, bank left, and make a three point landing, on the brass main floor saddle plate.

On the job, O'Hara quickly ingratiates himself with the tenants (especially Miss June Carstairs, the socialite who lives in the penthouse with her mother) and with other people who work in the neighborhood (especially Mazie Lynch, a waitress at Joe's Luncheonette around the corner). When the building manager fires another elevator operator and replaces him with a friend's son, 32B calls O'Hara and his workmates out on strike. The manager hires strikebreakers for ten dollars a day, men who "don't know an elevator from a dumbwaiter or a steamboiler from a blowtorch." The strikers worry "'cause the tenants in the building are our pals and they're afraid they'll get hurt," so they keep a watch on the scabs.

One night O'Hara is on picket duty with Mike the handyman when a long black car rolls up to the curb. When a man steps from the back seat, O'Hara recognizes him as Senator Murphy and runs to warn him, "Senator, the building is on strike and I want to warn you that there's an incompetent sca- er I mean strike-breaker running the elevators and you may get hurt." The Senator insists that O'Hara personally take him to the apartment of Judge Johnson, and O'Hara agrees to cross the picket line for this important occasion. The Judge is not home, but O'Hara and the Senator get to talking about the old neighborhood, and O'Hara invites the Senator home to dinner with his mother, who is cooking corned beef and cabbage. After a delightful dinner, Mother O'Hara preens "My Jimmy is the best elevator boy in town." O'Hara replies, "Mom, it's

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taken me twenty-one years of hard work to be a man, and I got a draft card to prove it. I am not an elevator boy, I am an elevator man."

Many aspects of "Mom Meets the Senator" are noteworthy—the complicated loyalties to boss, tenants, union, and notable members of the public; the detailed ethnic typing of the protagonist by an author of another ethnicity; the sexual tension in the building and neighborhood where Jim O'Hara works. Most important, though, is the sense of dignity that pervades the story. O'Hara and his fellow workers draw their dignity from a number of sources: hard work, experience, skill, the power of the union, relationships with tenants, and the ability and willingness to play the hero and protect the public from danger. In Felix Cuervo's formulation, heroism is an integral part of the building service worker's occupational identity.

This articulation of heroism reached its apogee during World War II. Members of 32B found many ways to aid the war effort. The executive board of the local allocated $50,000 of the union defense fund, originally meant to tide over striking workers, for the purchase of war bonds. Members organized blood drives and scrap-metal drives in their buildings and bought up cigarettes to send to the boys overseas. Member donations paid for the cost of a bomber that was ceremoniously named The Spirit of 32B. Workers, managers, and the union cooperated to organize fire drills and make plans in the event of civil defense emergencies, in which building service workers would play central roles in leading tenants out of buildings and to safety. As some workers went off to war or new jobs in war production, others volunteered to work overtime serving the needs of apartment buildings and offices. They watched their loose lips and looked out for enemy sabotage. By October 1942, 3,346 members had joined the armed forces; the union waved their dues and promised to find them jobs when they returned.[25]

These contributions to the war efforts were common among many union locals in New York and elsewhere, but according to men and women like Felix Cuervo, the temperament of the service worker lent itself specifically to patriotic sacrifice and especially to tasks that protected civilian lives. Even before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, members of 32B began volunteering as air raid wardens. Cuervo signed on to a post on West 23rd Street across from London Terrace, an enormous residential apartment complex that still stands today. In *Building Service,* Cuervo complained of the cold but commented that "[w]hen you've been on as many 32B picket lines as I have this job seems like a snap."[26] After a year of war, Cuervo quit his job to help the war effort more directly, as a mechanic at the Brooklyn Naval Yard, and then joined the Navy.[27]

Other building service workers continued to look after their tenants and guard against catastrophe. The great opportunity to prove themselves as heroes came at the end of the war, on July 28, 1945, at 9:49 in the morning, when Lieutenant Colonel William F. Smith Jr., the recently decorated deputy commander of the 457th Bomber Group, got lost in the fog above midtown Manhattan. On the seventy-eighth floor of the Empire State Building, office workers heard the

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roar of engines approaching and ran to the windows just in time to see Colonel Smith's bomber loom out of the mist. The impact tore an eighteen-by-twenty-foot hole into the north wall, set fire to the building and disabled the elevators above the sixtieth floor. For a moment, thousands of people on the sidewalk saw the top of the building engulfed in flames that leapt as high as the observatory, almost ten stories above the site of impact; then the view disappeared in a cloud of smoke and debris. Burning fuel ran down the stairwells into hallways as far down as the seventy-fifth floor. A motor hurtled across the seventy-eighth floor, smashed through the south wall of the building, and fell through the roof of an office building across the street. The offices of the War Relief Services of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, located on the seventy-ninth floor, were destroyed, and at least one person in the office jumped from the window to his death. Thirteen people in all, including the three occupants of the plane and ten at work in the building, were killed. Twenty-six were injured, including several members of 32B.[28]

The most highly regarded heroes of the day were the firemen who lugged their equipment up from the sixtieth floor and extinguished the fire in forty minutes. Fire Commissioner Patrick Walsh said the blaze was the highest in history, but comparatively easy to put out. Mayor La Guardia also walked up from the sixtieth floor, soaked by the torrents of water from the firemen's hoses above, and arrived in time to see the end of the "fiery furnace." Members of 32B, which had a closed-shop contract with the building's management, reacted calmly and heroically, putting themselves in the way of danger to rescue and render first-aid to tenants of the upper floors. In the observatory, three guards smashed open some windows so the fifty visitors, covered in a cloud of dust and metal fragments that shot up the elevator shafts, might breath. An elevator operator named Abe Gluck, bleeding from both legs, pulled a burned and injured colleague through thick smoke and down many flights of stairs to safety. The elevator operators calmly evacuated the building.[29] Lieutenant General Hugh A. Drum, president of the Empire State, Inc., Corporation, later sent an open letter to the building's service workers that was republished in *Building Service,* expressing his "very keen appreciation of your willing and untiring assistance." He wrote that the workers' "calm sane approach to the situation aided immeasurably in preventing possible panic. Many of our tenants have expressed their complete satisfaction with the fine service rendered by our employees."[30]

Mercifully, the crash at the Empire State Building took place on a Saturday morning, when few people were at work. On September 11, 2001, the people in the World Trade Center were not so lucky, but police officers, fire fighters, tenants, and service workers helped thousands of people out of the buildings to safety. These people are heroes, and not just because the media and politicians have told us so. Nevertheless, we ought not celebrate heroism uncritically, without reflecting on the benefits it provides to those groups who harness its rhetorical power, the detriment to those who are denied its mantle and the subtle ways that specific definitions of heroism lead to specific results. It is still too early to see all the effects that will follow from the rhetoric of recent months. This does

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not absolve us from the responsibility to judge various claims to heroism, support those that fall in line with our personal and political beliefs and agendas, deny those that do not, and add our own voices to the debate.

Perhaps a look backward can help to illuminate the present. In the 1940s, Local 32B used the concept of heroism to burnish the public image of building service workers, leading in turn to greater popularity with the general public, greater leverage against management, and concrete concessions for its members. The local also used it to build a sense of dignity and a will to activism among the membership, qualities that the membership could use on the job or in their efforts to build a stronger union. Even when they left building service, they could bring those qualities with them and apply them to future endeavors.

After World War II, Felix Cuervo never went back to running an elevator—he became a civil service employee, working in the Coast Guard, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Veterans Administration—but he remained true to the values he set forth in the pages of *Building Service.* In 1960 or 1961, he founded the Native New Yorkers Historical Association. He began giving walking tours, issuing press releases on various historical topics and putting up historical plaques on the homes of such notable New Yorkers as Chester A. Arthur, Jacob Riis, and Betty Smith, the author of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.* He also played a key role in the restoration of the Remsen Cemetary on Metropolitan Avenue, the resting place of many veterans of the Revolutionary War, providing them with new VA tombstones.[31] With each of these acts, Cuervo continued his life-long mission to create a thoughtful and inclusive definition of heroism.

If you happen to be in New York City on a sunny afternoon with nothing to do, take the J train to the 111th Street station, get out on the north side of Jamaica Avenue and walk one block north to the intersection of 86th Avenue and 111th. There, on the same corner as the Holy Child Jesus School, you will find a street sign commemorating Felix Cuervo and his work as a public historian. It is a good place to stand and think about heroes.

NOTES

1. "The Missing and the Dead: For Whom the Bell Tolls," [New York] *Village Voice,* September 19, 2001; Austin Fenner, "Union Pays Homage to its Dead," [New York] *Daily News,* October 20, 2001.

2. *Report on Elevated Dwellings in New York City* (New York: Evening Post Job Printing Office, 1883), 3–7.

3. A modern comparison would be the fear of flying in airplanes, which, the threat of future terrorist attacks to the contrary, will probably remain the safest form of transportation. Fred C. Floyd, *Elevator Accidents and How to Prevent Them* (Boston: 1905); "Elevator Accidents," *Buildings and Building Management* (November 3, 1919), 42; *Buildings and Building Management* (November 17, 1919), 31–2; "Report on Elevator Interlocks," *Buildings and Building Management* (January 26, 1920), 26–7; "Safeguarding Vertical Traffic," *Buildings and Building Management* (April 11, 1927), 38; "Statistics Prove Elevators Are Safest Transportation," *Buildings and Building Management* (November 1, 1934), 34; David L. Lindquist, "Inherent Safety of Elevators," *Real Estate and Building Management Digest* (May 1939), 10–11.

4. "Building Employees Should Wear Uniforms," *Buildings and Building Management* (August 23, 1920), 35; "Curbing Thief and Peddler Nuisance in Buildings," *Buildings and Building Management* (July 29, 1929), 32–3.

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5. Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871–1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Sara Eve Wermiel, "Nothing Suceeds Like Failure: The Development of the Fireproof Building in the United States, 1790–1911" (Ph.D, MIT, 1996); Robert M. Fogelson, *Big City Police* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Eric Monkonnen, *Police in Urban America, 1860–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

6. I do not want to suggest that all portrayals of building service workers before the 1910s and '20s were negative. See, for example, "The Night Elevator Man's Story," Edward W. Townsend, *Near a Whole City Full* (New York: G. W. Dillingham Co., 1897); Jesse K. Krueger, "Maggie O'Conner—Scrub Woman," *Buildings and Building Management* (December 1, 1914), 19. For negative portrayals of elevator operators, see William Dean Howell, "The Elevator," *The Sleeping-Car and Other Farces* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1876); Gerrit Smith Stanton, *Renting a Furnished Apartment: A Narrative* (New York: J. S. Ogilvie, 1916); Charles Battell Loomis, "Poe's 'Raven' in an Elevator," *Poe's "Raven" in an Elevator, and Other Tales* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1907); Frances Aymar Mathews, *The Apartment* (New York: Edgar S. Werner & Company, 1907). For cartoons about janitors, see *Harper's Weekly,* December 29, 1888, 1011; May 4, 1890, 411.

7. Of course, popular celebrity was not new in the 1920s. In earlier decades, Edwin Booth, Jenny Lind, P. T. Barnum, John L. Sullivan and Sam Patch (who went over Niagara Falls in a barrel) were common names in some households. Nevertheless, the growth of mass media during this period introduced a greater proportion of Americans to media-manufactured celebrities and heroes. Simon Michael Bessie, *Jazz Journalism: The Story of the Tabloid Newspapers* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1938), 232, 235; Betty Houchin Winfield and Janice Hume, "The American Hero and the Evolution of the Human Interest Story," *American Journalism* 15:2 (Spring 1998), 79–99.

8. Tom Beadling, Pat Cooper and Grace Palladino, *A Need for Valor: The Roots of the Service Employees International Union, 1902–1980* (Washington, D.C.: Service Employees International Union, 1984), 63–4.

9. Grand Jury Statement of Peter Wagner, *People v. James J. Bambrick,* Records of the District Attorney, Municipal Archives, New York City.

10. *New York World-Telegram, March 6, 1936; New York World-Telegram,* March 3, 1936; *New York Herald Tribune,* March 4, 1936; *New York Evening Journal,* March 4, 1936; *New York American,* March 4, 1936; *New York Times,* March 5, 1936; *New York Times,* March 7, 1936; all found in *Realty Advisory Board on Labor Relations, Inc., Publicity Clippings, Volume 2, 1935 to March 9, 1939,* Realty Advisory Board on Labor Relations, New York, New York.

11. "Girls in Tin Hats Deride Bellinger," *New York Times,* March 7, 1936; "Tenants Band to Aid Strike; 32 Are Nabbed," *New York Daily News,* March 7, 1936; "Rents Go On During Strike," *New York Evening Journal,* March 6, 1936; "Post Leads Tenants in Rent Strike War," *New York Daily News,* March 6, 1936; "Strike Job Agency Loses Its License," *New York Times,* March 13, 1936; "ERB Shuns Strike," *New York American,* March 14, 1936; "New Board Brings Strike Truce Near; Night Parleys On," *New York Times,* March 15, 1936; "Elevator Guard Killed in Mishap," *New York Times,* March 5, 1936;

12. *Building Service* (January 1938), 7; "Letter from Thomas J. Lyon," *Building Service* (August 1, 1940), 3.

13. Pop's son replies, "You mean, Pop, that if every Union man was to go about his work like that, rememberin' that he was out to do a little job of publicity every day, the public wouldn't pay much attention to the propaganda that tries to make him out to be a cross between an idler an' a thief?" Simon Yenrac, "Pop Takes Umbrage," *Building Service* (October, 1938), 10.

14. The following description is typical: "Without the slightest hesitance or thought of fear Clark went to the tenant's assistance, only to be felled by terrific blows to the face. Bleeding and in a dazed condition, he gave chase, capturing the prowler at 89th Street on Columbus Avenue, and turned the culprit over to the police." "Member Captures Prowler," *Building Service* (May 1940), 8. On fighting crime, see also "A Slight Case of Burglary," *Building Service* (October 1939), 11; *Building Service* (January 1940), 4; "City Honors Two Members of Local 32B," *Building Service* (October 1940); "Member Aids Police," *Building Service* (January 1941), 13; "News from Council 4," *Building Service* (March 1941), 8; and many others. On blood drives, see *Building Service* (July 1938), 4.

15. The explosion of an air compressor tank blew off the front of this garment-center building. The lights went out in the building and thirty "girl workers" were thrown from their benches. "Letters," *Building Service* (December 1939), 6.

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16. "News From Council 3," *Building Service* (February 1941), 6

17. Robert E. Conroy, "Alleged Labor Saving Device Installed by Landlords Unprofitable to Tenants," *Building Service* (February 1938), 15; *Building Service* (April 1938), 5. On 32B's ultimately unsuccessful crusade against automatic elevators and the effects of that defeat on the strength of the union, see Grace Palladino, "When Militancy Isn't Enough: The Impact of Automation on New York City Building Service Workers, 1934–1970," *Labor History* 28:2 (1987), 196–220.

18. "Local 32B Fights Menace of Automatic Elevators," *Building Service* (March 1940), 2. See also *Building Service* (December 1940), 3, 7;

19. A. L. Harckham, "Vice-President's Page," *Building Service* (May 1939), 2.

20. According to the union magazine, of course. "Shafts About Town," *Building Service* (June 1939), 4.

21. Cuervo and his fellow workers also praised his wife and their lovely daughter Elaine, "who makes Hedy Lamar look like Miss America 1898." *Building Service* (May 1, 1940), 6.

22. Felix Cuervo, "Helpful Hints," *Building Service* (February, 1940), 14; Felix Cuervo, "Helpful Summer Hints," *Building Service* (July 1940), 14; Felix Cuervo, "Helpful Hints," *Building Service* (September 1940), 15;

23. Felix Cuervo, "Letter," *Building Service* (December 1940), 7.

24. The story appeared in two pieces, in February and March of 1941. Felix Cuervo, "Mom Meets the Senator: A Short Story about Building Service," *Building Service* (February 1941), 10, (March 1941), 13.

25. "Our Duty in the War," *Building Service* (December 1941), 1; "Members Collect Tons of Metal in City-Wide Drive," *Building Service* (October 1942), 9–10; *Building Service* (May 1943), 14; *"Going Up!": The Story of 32B* (New York: Local 32B, 1955), 62; George Keiller, "Civil Defense Precautions," *Buildings and Building Management* (August 1, 1941), 25; Alan Purling, "What Have We Learned From Wartime Operation?" *Buildings and Building Management* (December 1, 1945), 27–9; Arthur L. Harckham, "Treasurer's Page," *Building Service* (May 1942), 6; Charles F. Merritt, "Suggestions for the Defense of Properties Against Sabotage," *Real Estate and Building Management Digest* (January 1942), 7; *Building Service* (October 1942), 1; *Building Service* (October 1940), 6.

26. "Council 3," *Building Service* (November 1941), 12.

27. *Building Service* (December 1942), 12; conversation with Bob Cuervo, February 28, 2002.

28. Two elevator operators narrowly escaped death, thanks to safety devices embedded in the elevator shafts. Betty Lou Oliver was blown out of her car by the impact of the plane and burned by flaming gasoline. Two young employees of the Air Cargo Transport Corporation, also women, found her on the floor, brought her back to their office, and administered first aid. Then they took her to an elevator in shaft six and put her in with the elevator operator. They almost got in also, but their boss advised against it. Just as the elevator doors closed, the cables snapped with a sound like a rifle shot, and the car dropped to the basement. The two woman, though badly injured, survived. A front-page article in the New York Times called Oliver "the heroine of the most fantastic escape of the entire catastrophe." "Mayor Lays Crash to Bomber Pilot," *New York Times,* July 30, 1945; "Empire State Crash Stirs British Public," *New York Times,* July 29, 1945; Frank Adams, "Bomber Hits Empire State Building," *New York Times,* July 29, 1945, 1; Larry Resner, "Catholic War Relief Office Is Chief Victim of Tragedy," *New York Times,* July 29, 1945, 1; Alexander Feinberg, "Survivor Likens Crash to a Quake," *New York Times,* July 29, 1945; "32B Members Hurt in Crash at Empire State Building," *Building Service* (August 1945), 15.

29. Frank Adams, "Bomber Hits Empire State Building," *New York Times,* July 29, 1945, 1; "Lift Operator Hurt, Rescues Injured Man," *New York Times,* July 28, 1945, 31; "32B Members Hurt in Crash at Empire State Building," *Building Service* (August 1945), 15.

30. Hugh A. Drum, "Letter," *Building Service* (October 1945), 20.

31. Conversation with Bob Cuervo, February 28, 2002.

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