

Cal Poly Activism: The Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant

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By

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Introduction

“They feel there is no great risk involved here. There’s no great metropolis being threatened-it’s just threatening us! We’ve actually been sold out by the agency that’s supposed to protect us.”¹ These were the words of Ralph Vrana, a Cal Poly geology professor, at an anti-nuclear forum at Cal Poly during the construction of the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant in 1973. He was expressing the feeling by San Luis Obispo anti-nuclear activists that the Atomic Energy commission was risking the safety of locals in favor of the energy company’s profits. His words encompassed the fear that was felt across the nation as nuclear power plants expanded, fear held especially at Cal Poly as Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) began construction nearby.² Peaking in 1974 there was a massive expansion in nuclear power as the United States tried to keep up with its eight percent growth in energy demand per year.³

The use of nuclear power is a complicated issue which brings forth concerns for the environment and local populations. The Diablo Canyon Power Plant, which began construction in 1968, was part of this clash between ideas of progress and safety. Environmental concerns arose as locals who cared about the beautiful coastline and archeological area, dating back thousands of years, where the plant was being built wanted to see the site left alone.⁴ Nuclear power at this time was also a relatively new source of energy which the public had little understanding of, bringing a high concern for safety among locals. With the rise of student

¹ Ralph Vrana, “No Protection for SLO,” *Mustang Daily*, 29 November 1973, 1, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1976/>, accessed 15 February 2017.

² Brigid Zuanich, “Diablo Canyon in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster” (Senior Project, California Polytechnic State University, 1990), 3.

³ Sandra J. Leake, “Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant Conflict” (Senior Project, California Polytechnic State University, 1974), 17.

⁴ Steven Marx, *Cal Poly Land: A Field Guide* (San Luis Obispo: Cal Poly Foundation, 2002), 133.

activism throughout the country in this era, how did Cal Poly students and faculty react to the construction of this plant? Cal Poly activism in the 1970s was first initiated by passionate Cal Poly faculty, which led to student activism, despite opposition by the administration. This causation for growth in activism is particularly evident in the activism against the nuclear power plant which will be the focus of this paper.

Historiography

The broad discussion of student activism in the latter half of the twentieth century has a focus on the demographics of students and the types of universities where it most frequently occurred. As part of the journal *Social Problems* is an article written by Nella Van Dyke, titled “Hot Beds of Activism: Locations of Student Protest,” which proposes to explain the factors that contribute to student activism growing in certain locations in the 1960s. Van Dyke looks at factors such as scale of previous involvement and the economic resources of students, showing that large populations of students at highly prestigious schools tend to have a history of activism which perpetuates further involvement.⁵ Richard Flacks’s article on the underlying factors that contribute to student activism explores the social backgrounds of students who are more prone to be involved. He argues that the demographics of students and where they come from is the center of what leads students into activist lifestyles.⁶ David Meyer in “Peace Protest and Policy: Explaining the Rise and Decline of Antinuclear Movements in Postwar America,” an article in *Policy Studies Journal*, looks at the factors that play into activist movements. He focuses primarily on the large-scale effect of movements on public policy when they push past being a

⁵ Nella Van Dyke, “Hotbeds of Activism: Locations of Student Protest,” *Social Problems* 45, no. 2 (1998): 205-220.

⁶ Richard Flacks, “The Liberated Generation: An Exploration of the Roots of Student Protest,” *Journal of Social Issues* 23, no. 3 (July 1967): 52-75.

smaller scale movement, like the anti-Diablo Canyon movement discussed in this paper. In her book, *Protest Diablo: Living and Dying Under the Shadow of a Nuclear Power Plant*, Judith Evered examines the experience of protesters who blockaded the Diablo Canyon site. Her work explains the growth of the movement as a result of the resilience of protestors, which went on to further inspire other activists to become more active in the cause.⁷

In contrast to these works my paper does not look at the backgrounds of the students or the societal factors around them. Instead it points to the relationship between students and faculty at Cal Poly that led to a greater student involvement. My paper shows the effect of faculty involvement in opposition to the power plant on the student body as the essential factor leading to student activism. In this way, a different perspective on what caused so much interest in the anti-nuclear power movement will be shown.

Initial Opposition

The introduction of a power plant to the San Luis Obispo area came with the best intentions because with new power infrastructure comes energy, job opportunities, and economic growth. PG&E went through all the proper channels with the Atomic Energy Commission utilizing studies of the local area to ensure a safe structure would be built. However, these studies were challenged by local geologist and Cal Poly instructor Ralph Vrana, whose focus of research was earthquakes on the central coast.⁸ Vrana claimed that there had not been thorough data collected on offshore fault lines. His concern resided in the possible devastation a large-scale earthquake could cause to the power plant, which he publicly made known by addressing the

⁷ Judith Evered, *Protest Diablo: Living and Dying Under the Shadow of a Nuclear Power Plant* (San Luis Obispo: Judith Evered, 2010), 30.

⁸ Glen Holstein, "Dismissal Quiets Instructors," *Mustang Daily*, 16 November 1970, 2, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1504/>, accessed 15 February 2017.

Atomic Energy Commission. Even after spending hours cross-examining experts the commission still insisted that his claims were not substantial enough to warrant a halt on the construction of the plant.⁹

The continued rejection of evidence led to a claim among conservationists, “that nuclear industry has been promoted as well as licensed by the same agency. It is for this reason that the conservationists think the credibility of the AEC is questionable.”¹⁰ In the early stages of the power plant Ralph Vrana stood out as a knowledgeable and vocal advocate against its construction. Research of the *Mustang Daily*, Cal Poly’s student newspaper, shows little early interest on part of the students in the possible consequences of building a nuclear reactor nearby. Vrana fought PG&E as best he could but his voice was largely drowned out by the opposition. Through these hearings, and what coverage there was in local newspapers, the word had slowly begun to spread but student activism against the plant had yet to grow. Cal Poly students were known for this lack of activism, they were described as “apathetic”¹¹ by more active students from other universities and would need to be inspired to act. It was here in the public stance of a faculty member that the earliest anti-nuclear activism is seen at Cal Poly.

Administration Response

While students initially did not take a large part in the Diablo Canyon controversy, the administration did respond to Ralph Vrana’s involvement with the opposition. At the time,

⁹ “Earthquake Testimony Fails to Delay Coast A-Plant Hearing,” *The Fresno Bee*, 10 August 1970, 8-B.

¹⁰ Leake, 22.

¹¹ Robert E. Kennedy, *Learn By Doing: Memoirs of a University President: A Personal Journey with the Seventh President of California Polytechnic State University* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 298.

Robert E. Kennedy was the president of Cal Poly. Kennedy saw three responses to controversy, ignoring it, suppressing it, or reconciliation. He claimed he saw Cal Poly as a place for reconciliation, but in the instance of a faculty member opposing Diablo Canyon, the choice was seen by many as suppression.¹² Shortly after making his stance against the plant Vrana was denied tenure along with other teachers who had controversial positions on public issues. The reason behind this was attributed by one student reporter to “an overwhelming popular mandate to purge this type of instructor from the state college system,”¹³ referring to the type of instructor who students rally behind on issues. While the fears of the institution may have been justified with riots breaking out at other universities, Ralph Vrana had no intention of rebelling in any way other than to firmly stand up to the power company and insist that a break be mandated on the construction.

In addition to the denial of tenure, a proposal was put forward that would, “prohibit all but tenured faculty members from serving on committees or otherwise participating in formal recommendations from departments, schools and deans on whether tenure should be granted to a colleague.”¹⁴ This policy effectively silenced the opinion of anyone who did not fit the qualification of tenured faculty, excluding much of the Cal Poly community from weighing in on who deserves to receive tenure. These issues of tenure brought Vrana, as well as the other professors, into the light as they spoke out against this unjust process. Originally a concerned citizen with expert advice to offer on an important issue, the administration had now brought Vrana and his activities from his personal life, into the school environment. These professors did

¹² *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* (San Luis Obispo: Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001) [Reserve Desk, Special Collections], 103.

¹³ Glen Holstein, “Dismissal Quiets Instructors,” 2.

¹⁴ “Down the river on tenure issue,” *Mustang Daily*, 26 February 1971, 1, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1504/>, accessed 15 February 2017.

not just give up though, they carried their same propensity for actively speaking out into the tenure issue. They showed the student body and fellow faculty the facts of their tenure denial, arguing that despite their excellent reviews from students, as well as fellow faculty in many cases, they were denied tenure. Vrana felt that the unfavorable review from Dean Clyde P. Fisher was ultimately the reason for his denial, which was not rooted in performance but was due to his activism.¹⁵ This extension of questioning authority and standing up for what one believes in was just what the students needed to witness to become more active themselves.

Student Interest

Despite the administration's efforts to pacify the community, the passion Vrana had would continue to build momentum as students started to become involved. A letter to the *Mustang Daily* editor on February 5, 1971 revealed this new involvement of students into the controversy surrounding Vrana and the plant: "any possible element of not rehiring because of extra-curricular involvement must stop...NOW!"¹⁶ Students were outraged that a teacher's stance on such a vital issue would be suppressed by the university administration and became emboldened after seeing how Vrana stood up to the Atomic Energy Commission and administration. Students began to attend forums and "rap sessions,"¹⁷ addressing the issue of tenure which allowed Vrana to better plead his case and get more attention on his concerns about Diablo Canyon. A previously uninterested student body was now actively involved in the controversy surrounding their instructor. This was the true hope of those already involved in

¹⁵Ian McCabe, "Political Personnel Practices Attacked," *Mustang Daily*, 26 February 1971, 1, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1555/>, accessed 15 February 2017.

¹⁶ John Mason, "Meet On Vrana Monday," *Mustang Daily*, 5 February 1971, 2, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1540/>, accessed 15 February 2017.

¹⁷ "Students Speak," *Mustang Daily*, 26 February 1971, 5, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1555/>, accessed 15 February 2017.

activism at Cal Poly, that the forums would lead students away from their unquestioning, conservative mindsets.¹⁸

The issue of Ralph Vrana's firing was the spark that lit the questioning attitudes of Cal Poly students, which led them to the Diablo Canyon controversy. No longer did students sit idly by as decisions were made but they began to ask questions that Vrana had been putting forth. Students demanded answers on the topic of nuclear power in their area, and the administration was helpless to stop their inquiries. A year following the Vrana controversy a student made his voice known, along with many other students, by passionately standing up for his beliefs in the May 19, 1972 issue of the *Mustang Daily*. The student referred to the argument that the nuclear power plant was needed to bring jobs, and put forth the idea that the community would be better off with less jobs. He added that the community would be better off with criminals and stated, "We may find their capacity to wreck misery on a thousand generations of yet unborn children small by comparison to the work being done in all best-intentional innocence by the men at Diablo Canyon."¹⁹ This is put forth to show just how fearful the community was of having nuclear power in their area with so many questions unanswered about the possible effects an incident could have on the local population. This new attitude of questioning authority and raising their voices against those in control was the result of the earlier voices raised in conjunction with faculty.

One student, Sandra Leake, who attended Cal Poly during the construction of the plant did her senior project on the controversy of local nuclear power, which revealed a great deal

¹⁸ "Non-retained Instructors to rap at SNAP Forum," *Mustang Daily*, 25 February 1971, 1, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1554/>, accessed 15 February 2017.

¹⁹ Glen Holstein, "Nuclear Power Impact," *Mustang Daily*, 19 May 1972, 2, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1761/>, accessed 15 February 2017.

about the mindset of the newly activist students. In her writing, she emphasized that the big question on everyone's mind was, "What if there were an accident?"²⁰ As students became more aware of Vrana's research and began to look deeper into the issue there was a sense of fear in the community. Government safety studies were released to try and answer questions and remove the fear in the public's mind as they asked questions like "Can a nuclear power plant explode like an atom bomb?"²¹ While the answer appears to be unequivocally, no, the fact that these questions were being addressed shows the growth in concern that occurred between the time that Vrana began questioning PG&E, and students like Leake were looking deeper into the matter. As more students joined in on the anti-nuclear movement the next step in the progression was fully organized activism.

Student Activism

The final product of the progression shown thus far was an organized and active student body which took part in local issues. Due to the extensive proceedings that Vrana and the now active Cal Poly community were taking part in, more research was done on the Diablo Canyon project and the surrounding environmental concerns. A U.S. Geological Survey team came to the central coast in order to remap offshore fault lines in the vicinity of the power plant. Upon arrival at the dock after their data collection, they were greeted by a group of Cal Poly students eagerly awaiting the results. The team had confirmed the presence of the offshore fault lines that Vrana

²⁰ Leake, 7.

²¹ United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission, "Reactor Safety Study: An Assessment of Accident Risks in U.S. Commercial Nuclear Power Plants" (Springfield: National Technical Information Service, October 1975), 5.

had been concerned with for several years. Moreover, several other experts suggest PG&E knew about the fault but did not report it in order to get a business license.²²

The spirit of activism is exemplified by John Forster, a senior at Cal Poly in the Natural Resources Management program. A *Mustang Daily* article on Forster published on April 10, 1974 showed that through the nuclear power plant controversy the student body had become more involved in organized protest as well as the democratic process as a means for change.²³ In response to the construction of the nuclear power plant Forster and the Ecology Action Club, which he chaired, attended hearings and fought the Atomic Energy Commission on issues of waste disposal and possible nuclear contamination, even though they continued to be largely ignored. Even with the construction of the power plant going strong, this new activist movement at Cal Poly would bring about change in other ways. The Ecology Action Club became more involved in city hall as noted by the *Mustang Daily*, “So far Forster and Ecology Action have been instrumental in electing such conservation minded candidates as supervisors Richard Kreaja...who played an important role in the adoption of Prop. 30, the Shoreline Initiative.”²⁴ No longer were students just voicing their opinions in the letter to the editor section, but active change was occurring because of the Cal Poly student body. This new activist Cal Poly which was sparked by faculty involvement had become a concerned political force within the San Luis Obispo area.

²² Jason Schmitt, “Concerns of the Opposition to the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant” (Senior Project, California Polytechnic State University, 1993), 16.

²³ Michael Ruskovich, “John Forster: A Man Fighting Diablo Canyon,” *Mustang Daily*, 10 April 1974, 1, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/2036/>, accessed 15 February 2017.

²⁴ Ruskovich, 1.

Despite the continued construction of the plant, going forward the anti-nuclear movement at Cal Poly only grew. More professors and students joined the movement alongside a growing public concern as the attention of people outside of the area was drawn to the controversy. The activism peaked with the Diablo Canyon blockades of 1981. Organized by the Abalone Alliance, a civil disobedience group against the Diablo Canyon Power plant, thousands of people headed to the plant to protest and block traffic and workers from entering the plant. Over a two-week period nearly two-thousand protesters were arrested, the largest number arrested for an anti-nuclear protest in the United States.²⁵ Cal Poly students and faculty were active participants and got on buses to “[go] out to the blue line,” as retired Cal Poly history professor Lloyd Beecher put it.²⁶ In addition to camping out near the entrance of the plant, protesters also boated in on the beach side of the plant. After a decade away from Cal Poly teaching, but still very active in the Diablo Canyon Controversy, Ralph Vrana was once again at the center of the action. *The Santa Cruz Sentinel* interviewed him at the blockade and he laughed as he said, “We put 50 people right in under their noses, the coast guard is basically on the run.”²⁷

Conclusion

The concerns over the construction of the Diablo Canyon Power Plant started off as a research inquiry within the Cal Poly faculty by Ralph Vrana. He actively fought for a stall on the plant construction and made his stance publicly known. This brought him into a controversy between faculty and administration that would shed further light on his ideas. The escalating climate of tension between administration and faculty led to student involvement as the students

²⁵ Evered, 187.

²⁶ Lloyd Beecher, interview by Author, 21 February 2017.

²⁷ “Protesters Say They’ll Carry On,” *The Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 18 September 1981, 4.

began to actively ask questions like their faculty had modeled. This then brought forth a passionate student activism at the university which was turned toward the Diablo Canyon Nuclear power plant and surrounding environment. Going forward Cal Poly students were active in the affairs of San Luis Obispo County, and the activism against the plant gained attention as it drew in scores of people climaxing in the Diablo Canyon blockades. In academia, the causes of student activism, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, are analyzed heavily. Most research looks at the quantitative factors in movements such as economic resources of students but this paper has shown a less obvious source for student activism. The relationship between faculty and students is key to the growth of activism in the case of the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant controversy. The movement grew out of inspiration as the younger generation followed the example of those older than them. It was movements like this that have built the academic institution of today where students are encouraged to develop their intellect by questioning what has been presented to them.

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