

The Minds of the Dissidents: Cal Poly Student Unrest during Robert E. Kennedy's Presidency
1967-1979

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Introduction

The 1960s and 1970s were a tumultuous time for the United States. Students were disappointed by the state of the country and were not shy to voice their opinion about it. For some universities, this meant sit-ins and marches and for others they started with the best intentions but ended in tragedy. California Polytechnic State University, like other California universities, was affected by this “student unrest.” In 1967, during Robert E. Kennedy’s presidency at Cal Poly the Central Intelligence Agency was scheduled to come to campus to interview twenty-two students, but cancelled because of a protest by Students for New Action Politics (SNAP), the major political club at Cal Poly that existed for only a few short years and were the leaders of almost all major protests at Cal Poly during Robert E. Kennedy’s presidency. SNAP coordinator Dave Markowitz claimed in an interview with *Mustang Daily* reporters Suzanne Lewis and Steve Riddell that they had initially intended to protest inside the administration building but that the protest would interfere with administrative work so they moved it to the outside of the building. He also stated that one of SNAP’s key ideals was “that violence is bad in all forms.”¹ Cal Poly students were not interested in causing harm or damage, only to be heard and provoke change through persistent recognition of the problem. Cal Poly students were not apathetic, they were just passionate about their causes and making sure that situations did not get out of hand.

Students were not the only ones at Cal Poly, however, that were interested in keeping the peace on campus. President Kennedy also wanted to ensure that things would not get out of hand and made sure to assure students that they were not ignored and that their right of free speech

¹ Suzanne Lewis and Steve Riddell, “Possible SNAP Demonstration causes Capitol to halt Interviews,” *Mustang Daily* (California State Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA), November 17, 1967.

would not be infringed upon. Kennedy would sometimes even provide a time and place for the demonstrations to take place to prevent animosity towards the “system,” of which he was a symbol for the students. During the Dow Chemical Company protest in 1968, President Kennedy had faculty stand among the students as a sort of accountability action.² This showed the students, and even faculty, that the administration did care about the well-being of Cal Poly students and that they were willing to acknowledge students’ endeavors for peace.

Cal Poly was not the only university in the country that struggled with these protests, however, and in some cases the result was disastrous. This was the case at Kent State in 1970 when four students were killed and eight more were injured. In protest of the bombing in Cambodia during the Vietnam War students at Kent State gathered and smashed windows downtown, burned the ROTC building, and finally at the apex of the chaos during only thirteen seconds police fired on the riled up students and created an event that will remain forever in infamy.³ In a 1968 article titled “Hypotheses of Student Unrest,” S. L. Halleck analyzed why during this time there was so much student unrest. His argument was that although most students remained apathetic or conservative, there were a few student activists who refused to accept the values of their society. He found that most came from middle class families, had a contempt for adults, and lacked the ability to sustain organized activities.⁴ This disorganization and contempt could be the cause of violent outbursts on college campuses. This is a valid point that could act as a contrast, showing the uniqueness of Cal Poly as a college campus because there were

² Robert Kennedy, President’s Reaction to Thursday, Feb. 1, Student Demonstration, February 1, 1968. Box 35, Folder “Demonstrations – campus-wide 1967-1968. Student Unrest – 1960s and 1970s”, Special Collections and Archives, California State Polytechnic University, CA.

³ Phillips, Charles, "May 4, 1970," *American History* 39, no. 2: 16. *MAS Ultra - School Edition*, 2004.

⁴ S. L. Halleck, "Hypotheses of Student Unrest," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 50, no. 1 (1968): 2.

passionate student activists, such as SNAP, but they did not just strive for reform at any means because they also believed peace was a valuable asset in obtaining reform.

Greil Marcus argues in his scholarly journal article, "1968," that the violence he witnessed at Berkeley in 1968 was the cause of a snowball effect starting in 1964 with the Free Speech Movement that set a tone of tension on campus. This, combined with an act of police cruelty in 1968, caused students to act more unruly and violent.⁵ This contrasts with the tone at Cal Poly, which had always been more conservative and did not have any known history of police cruelty, causing protests to be consistently peaceful. In "Styles of Handling Student Demonstrations," Merry Selk compares San Francisco State University to the University of Chicago and how each campus dealt with student protest in response to a faculty member being fired. At Chicago, the administration dealt with the unrest well and there was no violence. However, at San Francisco they dealt with the unrest through a different approach and their protests ended in violence. Selk states that in both situations the demands of the protesters were not met and yet they had such different outcomes. He attributes this, in part, to the presence of police officers at the protest and their aggressions towards dissenting students and faculty.⁶ This gives another interesting perspective on protests and may help explain why Cal Poly never experienced violence, because there were police present at some of the protests. However, Robert E. Kennedy warned them that, "In every instance in which violence occurred, it appears

⁵ Greil Marcus, "1968," *Common Knowledge* 15, no. 3 (2009): 331-332.

⁶ Merry Selk, "Styles of Handling Student Demonstrations," *Bulletin of The Atomic Scientists* 25, no. 6, 1969: 36-38.

from news media presentations to have been a reaction to some attempt on the part of the police using force to push people around.”⁷

This paper will give insight into the mindset of Cal Poly students, faculty and administration and how they had kept the peace on campus. This type of research has not yet been done and will give a new perspective on why protests either stay peaceful or end with violence. During Robert E. Kennedy’s presidency at Cal Poly from 1967 to 1979, Cal Poly experienced many protests on several different topics, but all ended peacefully, without incident. I argue this is largely because of the peaceful mindset of the student body, faculty, and administration to keep the peace, making Cal Poly a more conservative campus compared to other California Universities, such as the University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco State University.

“Learn By Doing”

In her scholarly article, “Cal Poly: Liberal, not Radical,” Jennifer Freilach argues that Cal Poly has a significant liberal presence, however, Cal Poly’s “learn by doing” education approach caused students to be more education based rather than action and potentially violence based.⁸ Cal Poly protests did not consist of angry radicals yelling at a crowd and telling them how to think, on the contrary it was angry liberals informing their peers of their opinion on political issues and openly allowing those who disagreed with them to voice their opposing opinions safely. This is shown with the several debates they had hosted on controversial issues. There is a poster from Cal Poly in May 1968 announcing a debate called, “Debate Resolved: Campus

⁷ 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, CA: California Polytechnic State University, 2001),

⁸ Jennifer Freilach, “Cal Poly: Liberal, not Radical,” *La Vista* 1, 2015.

Demonstrations Serve an Educational Purpose,” in which they had two faculty members with opposing views argue whether they believed peaceful protests could benefit students educationally.⁹ This openness for discussion and debate could spark the thinking of students and help them decide what they believed and where they stood on these topics, forming their own opinions and making educated political decisions. Cal Poly also had open debates and discussions among students, which were a main event during the Vietnam War Moratorium in 1968 and 1969.¹⁰

In an article in the *Mustang Daily* on November 4, 1968, Kathy Lovett interviewed a few different people from different organizations on campus on how their opinions about peace demonstrations and protests and whether they were effective. One of the people she interviewed was David Freeman, the “Big Brother” (the equivalent of the president) of SNAP at the time, who stated, “Demonstrations can be a part of the education process on this campus. You have to educate people to certain views before anything can be accomplished.” Another person Lovett interviewed was the chairman of the Black Students Alliance, Doyle McGhee, who believed that all other possibilities for solving the problem should be attempted before resorting to demonstrations.¹¹ This is further evidence that the students at Cal Poly were discussing the viability of demonstrations, and they respected each other even though not everyone on campus agreed with how things were being handled. This respect allowed people to carry out their own agendas without conflicting to the point of violent outbreaks.

⁹ “Debate Resolved: Campus Demonstrations Serve an Educational Purpose,” Poster May 16, 1968, Box 35 Folder “Demonstrations – Campus Wide 1967-1968,” Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

¹⁰ “Vietnam Moratorium Schedule of Events: October 15,” Schedule, Undated, Box 35, Folder “Vietnam War Moratorium,” Robert E. Kennedy Papers. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

¹¹ Kathy Lovett, “Leaders use Demonstrations for Peace,” *Mustang Daily* (California State Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA), November 4, 1968.

President Kennedy also published surveys in the *Mustang Daily* to get student reactions to political events that were happening at the time. He asked their opinions on things such as the draft, Governor Reagan's decision to close California State Universities for four days and how they felt about Cal Poly's student government. Some of the responses were surprising, for example, one student, Pat Wiseman, wrote back to Kennedy answering his eighteen questions. In this letter, Wiseman very thoughtfully and honestly answered each question, stating that he spent four hours on the letter, falling behind in his studies because he believed that it was addressing important issues. One of the questions Kennedy asked in his survey was, "Are the students at Cal Poly any different than the students at Kent State?" To which Wiseman gave an interesting response stating,

The similarities between Kent State and Cal Poly are surprising. Until the weekend of May 2, Kent State was probably more conservative than Cal Poly. Kent State is a rapidly growing school surrounded by rolling green hills. During the past year, antiwar rallies there attracted no more than 300 people from a student body of 19,000. A hearing for two Iranian students at Cal Poly drew a crowd of over 300. An unwise governor, mayor, or college president could easily turn Cal Poly into another Kent State. The potential is here.¹²

This is a powerful statement that shows that Cal Poly had not been a peaceful campus just because the students are conservative or are apathetic but it had remained peaceful because of the efforts of the students, faculty and, as Wiseman points out, the administration.

¹² Pat Wiseman, Letter to Robert Kennedy May 14, 1970, Box 35 Folder "Opinion Poll – Responses to Mustang Daily Questions," Robert E. Kennedy Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

Kennedy's Approach

In Kennedy's *Learn by Doing Memoirs*, he recaps his time as President of Cal Poly from 1967-1979. In this memoir, he takes a lot of credit for protests remaining peaceful. He points out that at the Dow Chemical Protest in 1968, that he had worked with the students and assigned them a time and place to meet and stressed to them that they needed to cooperate, as well, which included following his guidelines, such as cleaning up after the protest and not interfere with administrative work.¹³ He also points out how he allowed protesters at a rally, in 1972, to turn their signs around to show the people in the crowd what they were protesting, so when he asked them to sit they felt like they had been heard and they obey.¹⁴ Kennedy, throughout his memoir, when speaking of student unrest seems very concerned with everyone's safety. When he allowed the protest, he assigned security guards to the speakers so that if people in the crowd were to be unhappy with what they were saying, for instance, if someone who was pro-war spoke during the Vietnam protests, they would be protected. He also warned the police to avoid becoming aggressive with the students because it would only rile them up more and would be more likely to cause violent outbreaks.¹⁵

Kennedy also addressed student unrest in a speech made at an annual meeting for the Council of California Growers he titled, "Campus Unrest as seen from one President's Office." He was invited by the Executive Vice President of the group to speak on the topic, he claimed because Cal Poly had not experienced any violence yet and they were inspired by how Kennedy had handled the situations. He gave some major credit to the fact that he had read a lot of material on the subject, including journals, books and even other university presidents'

¹³ Kennedy, *Learn by Doing*, 289.

¹⁴ Kennedy, *Learn by Doing*, 303-304.

¹⁵ Kennedy, *Learn by Doing*, 288.

experiences with protests and violence, which gave him a better understanding of student activists, their motives and how to keep them from getting out of hand. He also stressed the fact that peace must be the top priority when dealing with dissenting students. He informed the audience that this was not a simple task that could be broken down into easy to follow steps, but something that needed to be dealt with with great care and thoughtfulness.¹⁶ This shows that administration had peace on the forefront of their mind when making decisions about protests, that students were not the only ones concerned with peace, but that many involved on campus were worried about the negative effects of violence and they believed it should be avoided at all costs.

Student and Faculty Opinions

There were some, however, who believed the issues on campus were not as big of a problem as administration and SNAP were making them out to be. They believed students were disinterested and not a threat to the conservative campus. In Gerald Lee's article in *The Mustang* from July 30, 1969, it talks about how a counsellor, Mrs. Gloria Smith, had given a speech stating students had no authority to invoke real change on campus and this caused them to become disinterested in education and in political matters.¹⁷ In another newspaper article, "Inside Looking Out..." in *El Mustang* October 12, 1965, F. D. Jeans claimed that hardly any students voted in the student government polls because the school did not meet their needs and student government was a representation of the "system" so students turned away from it and formed

¹⁶ Robert E. Kennedy, Address at Annual Meeting for the Council of California Growers 8 April 1970, "Campus Unrest as seen from one President's Office," Box 35 Folder "Demonstration – General Articles and Publications," Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

¹⁷ Gerald Lee, "The 'Programmed' are 'Disillusioned,'" *The Mustang* (California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, CA), July 30, 1969.

their own clubs and activities the way they wanted to.¹⁸ Both of these articles give perspectives from a faculty member and a student who believe that protests were not an important issue for Cal Poly because people were too apathetic towards political issues on a local or national level. I agree that a major population of the campus during Kennedy's presidency most likely did not care about politics or the protests, but I disagree that it was not an important issue. There is plenty of evidence that there were many students on campus that were passionate about student government and the national government. Passion was not lacking; rather, it was redirected to less radical methods and more to action, or to educating those with less interest or ignorance about the issues. In a letter to President Kennedy, student Everett Chandler voiced his concerns for the Vietnam War Moratorium and how it could possibly become violent if he does not work with SNAP. This shows that even students who were not directly involved in the protests were concerned with keeping the peace and ensuring that there would not be violent outbreaks because the situation was not dealt with correctly. This is why the peaceful mindset on Cal Poly's campus was so important to building its conservative reputation because without it, Cal Poly could be another California university on the list of rowdy schools you should be mindful of.

Conclusion

Kennedy's presidency from 1967-1979 was during the height of the tensions caused by student unrest and student activists. Several other California universities, such as San Francisco State University and University of California, Berkeley during this time period were not as fortunate and experienced violence. Violence on a campus can have a snowball effect, causing even higher tensions and more students angry and influenced by the protests. At Cal Poly,

¹⁸ F. D. Jeans, "Inside Looking Out...", *El Mustang* (California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, CA), October 12, 1965.

students, faculty and administration were involved in the campus protests and all had one thing they valued highly, peace. For students, such as those involved in SNAP, violence was not a means to an end and one of their key goals was to educate rather than yell at others. They believed in Cal Poly's "Learn By Doing" motto and chose to actually enact it by protesting, but also allowing open discussions about political issues and allowing people with dissenting opinions to voice their opinions without fear of persecution or the threat of harm to themselves. This is a very important attribute to keeping the Cal Poly campus a peaceful one because everyone could be open and honest and remain respectful of their peers. The faculty were also very concerned with the issues that were brought up and they became involved in protests and these debates. They held debates in which they had faculty with opposing viewpoints have open discussions, setting an example for their students that it is alright to have their own opinion and to voice it and that by voicing their opinion they can educate not only others but also gain knowledge themselves.

The administration also played a huge role in keeping the peace on campus by showing students that their dissatisfaction is not going unnoticed by the heads of the school. Kennedy would listen to students, even if he had no real answer for them and would show them that although they tended to associate him with "the man," that he was indeed also human, like them, and that he understood how frustrated they were. He cooperated with them by giving them times and locations to protest, instead of denying them the opportunity to make their viewpoints known on campus, which most likely would have led students to become even more dissatisfied with the state of affairs. When students tried to crash a rally, instead of shutting them down and kicking them out, he allowed them shout their chants and wave their signs at the crowd and then when he asked them politely to remain quiet for the remainder of the rally, they obeyed and listened to

what the Chancellor had to say with respect. Kennedy made the decision to educate himself through the experiences of other university presidents and the research of professionals on student protest and this helped him to become the president that Cal Poly truly needed during that time, someone wise and sympathetic to the student activists' causes.

The 1960s and 1970s was a very intense time period to live in, especially on a college campus, when people were angry and passionate about the state of affairs in the United States. Many people did not know what or how they wanted to do to fix it, but they did know they wanted change. At Cal Poly, this meant discussions and educating people on the issues and for the people involved, such as SNAP, professors and President Kennedy, one of the most important factors for surviving this period without major incident was, first and foremost, a peaceful mindset.

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