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Protest in Practice:

The University of California, Irvine's Place in the Anti-Vietnam War Movement from 1965 to

1970



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The Vietnam War created a substantial amount of political turmoil and civil unrest in America, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. The University of California, Irvine was among many college campuses that participated in resistance against the war. At a time when massive violent protests were breaking out at universities across the country, however, UCI remained oddly peaceful. While this reality is used to insinuate that student protests at UCI were insignificant, I will prove that the lack of violence and national attention is exactly why student protests at UCI are of such vital importance. *Instant University* by Samuel McCulloch along with several articles from the UCI school newspaper, “The New University”, and multiple student publications outline the respectful nature of student activism on the UCI campus and describe specific events that occurred from 1965 to 1970. These sources, nevertheless, do not reflect on the overall importance of this specific movement in relation to the larger anti-war movement. Until we appreciate how successful the uniquely rational approach taken by UCI students was, we cannot accurately see what factors contribute to an effective protest or fully understand the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States.

American involvement in Vietnam which began in 1945 and lasted until 1973 was intended to stop the spread of communism. Although military actions were initially supported by the majority of American citizens, as the war pressed on, the mounting national debt and the growing skepticism over the morality of the war brought political tensions to an all-time high. These tensions caused an increasing number of individuals to join the anti-war movement. The movement, which began in 1965 with the escalation of American military advances in Vietnam, was unparalleled in “size, duration, and intensity” by any previous anti-war campaign.¹ The Tet Offensive in 1968 and covert bombing of Cambodia in 1969 brought anti-war sentiments in the

¹ Small, Melvin, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds* (Wilmington, DE Scholarly Resources, 2002) 3.

United States to an unprecedented level. The feeling of dissatisfaction with American military conquests, along with a mounting distrust in government, sparked a nationwide rebellion.

The members of this rebellion called themselves the New Left, and were “first embodied in the white, college-educated, upper middle class.”² The New Left university students were characteristically progressive, idealistic, and often “disillusioned with the world they inherited from their parents,” which caused a rift between the two generations known as the “generation gap.”³ The students realized that they were not satisfied with the ‘American Dream’ that the previous generation worked so hard to achieve.”⁴ This dissatisfaction toward the supposed ideal life grew into dissatisfaction with the government and American foreign relations, and thus fueled the anti-war battle. From 1965 to 1971, 26,358 students were arrested on campuses, 14 were killed, and thousands were injured and expelled.⁵

Many people believe that the only influential student protests were the massive, and often violent, riots that gained national attention from the media and took place on college campuses in large cities such as Berkeley and Chicago. These events, however, were partly counterproductive because they were often used by conservative government officials as evidence for disregarding the whole anti-war movement. “At Berkeley alone during the 1968-1969 school year, there were six major confrontations between students and the police, which resulted in twenty-two day of street fighting, 2,000 arrests, 150 suspensions or expulsions, and twenty-two days of occupation by the National Guard.”⁶ Richard Nixon himself, stated that “the anti-war movement helped rally Americans to his foreign policy because the ‘demonstrations...polarized the debate and left [him] with more support for the war than [he]

² Keffer, Heidi, *The People VS. Ronald Reagan: The Rise and Fall of the New Left at California State University, Fullerton* (1995)134.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Small, 87.

⁶ Small, 87.

otherwise would have.” He went on to state that the activists “‘hurt their cause’ because they ‘were very violent.’”⁷ Although Nixon used the violence to strengthen his campaign, Berkeley students nevertheless made protest history. The fact that they were recognized by the national news and elicited a response from the President of the United States proves just how influential the University of California students were. Aside from violence detracting from the protesters’ message, the prominent counterculture that developed in many of these areas, further served to hurt the movement’s image and give Conservatives more reasons to disregard the students’ opinions. This was the case at CSU Fullerton where political goals gave way to drug-use and the free-speech movement became known as the filthy speech movement.⁸ Many individuals on this campus joined the movement primarily because they enjoyed the act of protesting and not because they believed in what they were protesting for. On the Fullerton campus, “protesting became too popular, too fun, too diffuse, and lacking clear objectives. ‘The act of occupying a building is contagious. It combines heroism, fun, and the chance for solidarity, community, and communion-all so desperately craved by the young.’”⁹ These things are so desperately craved by the young because big, quintessentially history-making experiences create meaning for people, especially college students, who are at a time in their lives when they are questioning their identity and purpose. Protesting gives them this sense of purpose. In all protests there is some element of meaning-giving present that keeps the movement going by motivating people to participate. This mass participation (driven by the sense of purpose gained by the protestors) helps achieve the grander goals of the protest (i.e. free speech) partly by making protesting more attractive. However, if this superficial level of protest is the only dimension present, as argued by Keffer in the case of CSU Fullerton, the protest will be largely unsuccessful, primarily due to

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Keffer, 151.

⁹ *ibid*, 137.

the negative relationship developed with the community and administration because of it.

Despite the eventual deterioration of anti-Vietnam War activism at CSUF, many students and faculty members took part in the protests because they genuinely believed in the cause.

Originally, there was a considerable amount of students and eight faculty advisors involved with the movement on the Fullerton campus. These individuals, unfortunately, were overshadowed over the course of time by the thousands of aimless participants.

Although no massive, nationally recognized, riots took place in Irvine, UCI students were, in fact, politically active. Instead of large attention-getting events, however, UCI students set an example for holding effective protests by conducting themselves in a peaceful fashion and maintaining good relations with the administration and the Orange County community. Irvine students, led by Chancellor Daniel Aldrich were highly conscious of the Vietnam conflict and the political rifts that were rocking the nation. Since the campus was located in a conservative suburb of Orange County, however, the students did not take the most radical approach because they knew that it would be highly ineffective. Instead, Irvine students fought against the war by holding sit-ins, informational meetings, hosting alternative education classes, and inviting liberal professors and activists to speak. Through this peaceful and rational approach, the students remained largely aware of the cause they were protesting for and were actually able to reach some success. By 1969 (when the campus was only 4 years old) community members that originally supported the Nixon administration and the war began to protest alongside UC Irvine Students. While CSUF is also in Orange County, it was primarily a commuter campus during the 1960s. Many students only came to campus when they had class and left immediately afterwards. This occurrence, in addition to the fact that there were 7,300 students at Fullerton and only 3,000 at UCI during 1966, contributed to the reason why different tactics were used by

the activists on campus.¹⁰ The variation in the student to faculty ratio changed the dynamic between the student body and the faculty and led to inconsistent modes of action between activists on the two campuses. At UCI, there was a much more intimate relationship between the students and the faculty and consequently more respectful and effective communication.

Set in the heart of “one of the most politically conservative counties in the state,” Irvine students simply did not have the option to lash out against the administration and riot.¹¹ During the 1960s the small business owners and ranchers that had originally occupied the Irvine area were replaced by large corporations, which eventually transferred political power to a small number of individuals that represented corporate and government interests.¹² Orange County became the home of many defense related industries, such as: Hughes Aircraft, Autonetics, Ford Aeronautics, Beckman Instruments, Nortronics and military bases like Santa Ana Army Air Base, the Naval Ammunition Depot, and El Toro- U.S. Marine Corps Air Station.¹³ These war related companies employed approximately 31,000 people by 1962 and brought billions of dollars into the Orange County area.¹⁴ Needless to say, the economic dependence of Orange County on war related businesses contributed heavily to the area’s conservative political opinions. Unlike the campuses in large cities, the extremely conservative nature and substantial military presence in the small suburban Irvine community would not sustain radical student activism that “posed an inherently liberal danger” to the surrounding areas.¹⁵ Therefore, the political atmosphere of Orange County helped to shape student activism in Irvine because the

¹⁰ McLaren, Pamela and Cathi Douglass, “Double Vision Two Veteran Titans Look back at Fullerton’s Early Days As CSUF Celebrates its 50th Anniversary (Fullerton: Titan Magazine, 2007).

¹¹ McCulloch, 128

¹² Olin, Spencer, Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County since World War II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 233-234.

¹³ McGirr, Lisa, Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001)

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ McCulloch, Samuel, Instant University The History of the University of California, Irvine 1957-93 (Irvine: University of California Irvine) 148.

activists understood that they had to approach the movement in a different way, if they wanted to achieve any success.

In response to Irvine's conservative nature, UCI turned into "a place of tolerance and orderly dissent."¹⁶ Likewise, as a result of the liberal activism coming from the university, the city of Irvine was not as conservative as many of the surrounding cities such as Newport Beach, Tustin, and Orange.¹⁷ The students at UCI organized events geared toward educating the campus community about war related issues instead of attempting to disrupt everyday activities. This was explicitly stated by Mike Krisman, a former UCI Students for a Democratic Society member, when he described the members as "seeking change but not disruption."¹⁸ These sorts of attitudes led the *LA Times* to commend the tactics employed by students and faculty by placing headlines such as "Dialogue Minus Violence: UCI Builds a Tradition" and "UCI-A Lesson in Dissent" on articles regarding the campus.¹⁹ These titles served to perpetuate the type of activism occurring at UCI, while simultaneously helping to keep conservative Orange County community members tolerant of campus events. In other areas, radical student action that ended up in the news with less charming titles prompted authorities and community members to retaliate in order to maintain the appearance that they could control the situation. For example, during the People's Park Movement that took place in Berkeley (which the media heavily covered) the National Guard was called in to subdue the students and help handle the situation. In this way, the peaceful and communicative tactics used by UCI students and the media attention that resulted from it worked in the students' favor by not startling the community into oppressive action

¹⁶ *ibid*, 150.

¹⁷ Eubank, Christine

¹⁸ McCulloch, 148.

¹⁹ *ibid*,130.

Due to the mature, civil approach that UCI students took toward having their voices heard, the faculty was largely supportive of students' right to protest.²⁰ This is not to say that student-faculty relations were always perfect. However, the tradition of cooperation between the administration and the students began with the formation of the Academic Senate in 1965. Although the faculty and the students did not see eye-to-eye on every issue, the differences were usually successfully mediated without much conflict. Arguably the most important faculty member, Chancellor Daniel Aldrich, relentlessly supported the students. Aldrich was a different type of administrator, described as "the perfect selection for the job" by Clark Kerr, he believed in freedom of speech, claiming that "[Irvine students] have a right to express themselves as long as they are not destructive or obstructive."²¹ Daniel Aldrich felt that it was of the utmost importance to guarantee all members of the campus a safe channel through which to voice their thoughts and opinions.²² He formed an advisory committee of students in an attempt to remain in-sync with the concerns and views of the students and staff. He did not feel that it was appropriate to involve authorities with campus affairs, and overall, he was an open-minded individual that connected with the students in a way that made him adored by most of the student body and faculty. Student activism was undoubtedly shaped by Daniel Aldrich; the fact that he approved of student protests against the Vietnam War, continually defended students from conservative community members, and ultimately treated the students as equals, led to a harmonious environment where there was no need for violence to have your ideas heard. Samuel McCulloch wrote that "[Aldrich's] ability to encourage open discussion diffused any real danger of student riots at UCI, even when other campuses were exploding."²³ Although the Chancellor

²⁰ *ibid*, 117.

²¹ *ibid*, xi.

²² *ibid*, 128.

²³ *ibid*, 150.

and the students disagreed on certain issues such as who got a vote in the renewal of faculty positions, Aldrich always remained open to the students' views. For example, in the case aforementioned, Aldrich allowed the students to debate on the topic, hold a "live-in" in the Writing Center (when there was no class), and call an emergency Senate session, consequently earning him respect and praise from even the students that disagreed with him.²⁴ The positive relationship between Chancellor Aldrich and the students not only allowed protests within the campus to remain productive, but also benefitted the relationship between the students and the wider Orange County community because he was diplomatically able to keep community relations stable in a way that the students couldn't. Therefore, having the support of the Chancellor proved to be an invaluable tool in preserving the existence of student activism on the UCI campus.

The peaceful relationships between UCI students and those around them sometimes caused the media to disregard Irvine protests and deem them insignificant. This was the case on Vietnam Moratorium Day, October 15, 1969. The OC Register reported that "Vietnam Moratorium Day was for the most part, a quiet day in Orange County."²⁵ It goes on to further state that "Wednesday's demonstrations came off with scarcely a bellow on most campuses" and "no incidents whatsoever" were reported.²⁶ While the article is not untrue, it implies that local campuses, UCI included, paid little attention to the nationwide Vietnam Moratorium Day, which is completely inaccurate. Ironically, in the very same issue of the OC Register, only a few pages away, a large photo exists that depicts a congregation of students, captioned "Peaceful Rally- Thousands of UCI students and others including children jam Gateway Plaza at the Irvine

²⁴ *ibid*, 124-125.

²⁵ (Orange County: The OC Register, October 16, 1969) B8.

²⁶ *ibid*

campus to hear Vietnam Moratorium Day speakers...’’²⁷ UC Irvine, along with other Orange County college campuses, participated fully in Moratorium Day. UCI formed its own Irvine University Moratorium Committee that was responsible for orchestrating the October fifteenth moratorium activities on campus and produced several Bulletins that were distributed to UCI students and faculty. In one Bulletin, the committee stated their “purpose [was] to organize public support for the demand for immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam.”²⁸ Observance of the Vietnam Moratorium Day was formally supported by ASUCI, “The New University”, the Academic Senate, and Chancellor Aldrich. The Moratorium schedule included two hours of Alternative Education Classes to be held on the 3rd floor commons covering topics such as the Military-Industrial Complex, Population, the history of the Vietnam War, and Imperialism. These classes were followed by picket lines and a rally in Gateway Plaza that featured several activist professor and student speakers.²⁹ As a whole, “...the activities and agendas at UCI were appreciably more constructive than were those at most other UC campuses” because of the rational, focused way the students conducted themselves and the productive relationships that they maintained with the administration and the community.³⁰ The incidence of faculty and staff coming together to produce protests against the Vietnam War also occurred at other universities, such as Rutgers University where moratorium day activities were predominately orchestrated by the faculty.

While UCI students were not unique in participating in Moratorium Day, they were original in the way that approached it. In Berkeley, the plans for Moratorium Day included a demonstration in front of a local business and a march through the campus and community.³¹

²⁷ibid, B10.

²⁸ Irvine University Moratorium Committee, Bulletin#1(Irvine: New University, October, 9 1969)

²⁹ Sorokin, Jack, Vietnam moratorium alternative activities (Irvine: New University, October 14,1969)

³⁰ McCulloch,117.

³¹ UC’s Mobilize (Irvine: New University, October 9,1969)

While the actions of Berkeley students were undoubtedly aimed at the common goal of stopping the war, they reached little success, despite the high level of national attention they received. The students at Berkeley, who were not supported by their Chancellor, were anticipating resistance from the community and local police. This anticipation led to hostile Moratorium Day activities that, through design, could only produce a negative relationship between the community and the students and consequently reach little success.

To fully appreciate why UCI students took the approach that they did, you need to have a comprehensive understanding of student attitudes on campus. To start, UCI students did not have the same relationship with their administration that Berkeley students did. Irvine students entered a brand new university in 1965 with a liberal Chancellor, a mostly liberal faculty, and a great deal of freedom to shape their educational experience. There was an extremely democratic feel to the campus that was actively protected by the faculty and greatly contributed to the type of protesting that occurred. By the time of the moratorium in 1969, the students had already held several successful peaceful protests against various administrative actions. They had experienced rallying support for issues and seeing the social changes they desired take place. This in turn created the attitude that the students had a voice in the campus community and that they could express this voice and be heard without the use of force. Specifically, the students effectively established an Academic Senate, a Student Government, a faculty evaluation program, and a Student-Recommended Faculty Program by 1970.³²

Therefore, because UCI student attitudes contrasted so drastically with antagonistic Berkeley student attitudes, Moratorium Day activities were approached very differently. At UCI, a vital component of the October fifteenth Vietnam Moratorium was to increase awareness of political issues and gain diverse support for the anti-war movement and the moratoriums to

³² McCulloch, 119-120.

come. The ASUCI President, Fernando Massimino called for a “periodic moratorium on ‘business as usual’ in order that students, faculty members and concerned citizens can devote time and energy to the important work of taking the issue of peace in Vietnam to the larger community.”³³ Massimino directed students to go to “businesses, homes, factories, high schools, and other gathering points in the community” to try and rally support.³⁴ This unique tactic of rationality and inclusivity led to an effective protest. Because of the peacefulness of those involved, an atmosphere of mutual respect was established, progress was made, and goals were reached. In response to the October fifteenth moratorium, U.S. Army officials cancelled an upcoming recruitment visit to UCI because “they didn’t want to interfere with any functions held.” The temporary removal of military personnel from campus was a major goal for the students, one that they adamantly protested for, and through their diplomatic conduct, were able to accomplish.

Nationally, Moratorium Day was effective for similar reasons to UCI. It involved around 2 million people in roughly 200 cities and involved “dignified silent vigils and prayer meetings held in several hundred small towns.”³⁵ It was favorably reported on by major television networks such as ABC and NBC. Newspapers such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, in addition to *Life* magazine reported that it was an unprecedented display of the nation’s dissatisfaction with the Nixon Administration and its foreign relations in a non-violent way.³⁶ The number of people involved with peaceful protests on that day shocked President Nixon. He was “surprised by the size and unique nature” of the Moratorium.³⁷ The participation of many middle class adults, not just radical college students, who engaged in dignified ceremonies and memorials influenced

³³ Massimino, Fernando, ASUCI Vietnam Positions Past and Present (Irvine: New University, October 9, 1969)

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Small, 110.

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *ibid*, 162.

Nixon not to increase the amount of violence in North Vietnam and “played a central role in making it difficult for Nixon to re-escalate from 1969 through 1971”³⁸

Ultimately, there is no objective way to judge the effectiveness of a protest. While most individuals would argue that success is influencing those in power and forcing them to change the policy in question, I insist that there are many ways for a protest to be influential.

Additionally, subtle victories often go unreported because the methods used to achieve them aren't considered noteworthy, as in the case of UCI. The real importance of protesting, however, is in the human meaning that results from it. Whether that means making history as the most rebellious, politically liberal campus as in Berkeley's case, or simply by participating in a protest as in the case of CSU Fullerton, the act of protesting creates meaning for people. At UCI, the suburban conservative atmosphere influenced the way that the anti-Vietnam War protesters conducted themselves. Irvine students consistently remained constructive and respectful through their protests and were effective at communicating rationally with authoritarian figures that could actually evoke change. While the students' peaceful tactics did not land them on national television, Irvine students created meaning for themselves when they redefined what it meant to protest and achieved many goals in the process. At UCI, peaceful protests, student congregation, and open discussion proved to be a valid form of enacting social change as well as an important vehicle for participants to establish a sense of purpose and find meaning in their daily actions, and by extension, their lives.

³⁸ *ibid*, 162.

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