



Beatniks and Politics, Nothing is New: Analyzing the Factors Surrounding Cal Poly's Anti-War
Movement during the Vietnam War

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By

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Introduction

The Vietnam War was a conflict that brought about existential questions about the future of North and South Vietnam, but also the United States. The United States' involvement in the war created a rift on the home front that polarized the American populace during the events of the war. The legitimacy of the United States' involvement in the war was brought under scrutiny not only by foreign powers but by an increasingly skeptical American public. A burgeoning population of post-Second World War young people were coming of age and were beginning to ask questions about the legitimacy of the United States' presence in Vietnam. The divide between those who supported the war and those who decried it was only exacerbated by the actions of radical groups who used violence to seek out an end to American involvement.

Many of the loci for political activism and antiwar movements were American colleges and universities, such as Kent State and UC Berkeley. My paper aims to examine the political atmosphere of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo during the Vietnam War and determine what factors helped contribute to a lack of violence on campus. Understanding how students going through life at Cal Poly reacted to flashpoints during the war, such as the draft,¹ both in-country and at home, can help provide us with a better understanding of anti-war sentiment on campus, and what factors contributed to shaping the opinions of the faculty and student body. Discerning the similarities and differences between these locations in question helps us see the larger picture in reference to American anti-war activities during the Vietnam War. This topic's research relies primarily on academic newsletters, yearbooks, articles in *Mustang Daily*, and correspondence

¹ *Mustang Daily*. April 6, 1971. "Draft Ceiling Up but still Lower than Last Year"
<https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2670&context=studentnewspaper> accessed January 21, 2020.

between President Robert E. Kennedy, as he was the president of Cal Poly throughout the war (1967-1979).

James Farrell writes in *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism* about the influences of the beat generation, the ban-the-bomb movements, and the formation of Postwar radicalism as a whole, taking time to reconstruct the events that led to shifts within the public's eye that fell beneath the shadow of the Vietnam War. Farrell argues that political personalism was responsible for shifting many institutions and persons towards becoming politically active during the radical sixties, tracing its initial development from the Catholic Workers movement² to Additionally, "The Minds of the Dissidents: Cal Poly Student Unrest during Robert E. Kennedy's Presidency" by Brigette Sadowski argues that Cal Poly's potential for unrest was largely kept in check by the actions and rhetoric of President Kennedy.³ *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks* by Penny Lewis also serves as a secondary source informing my research, as it helps trace the roots of the American anti-war movement during the Vietnam War. Lewis challenges the memory of the anti-war movement during this time, making the argument that its inertia depended on the actions and involvement of diverse working-class Americans, not an established elite.⁴

My work would follow along the line of Brigette Sadowski's examination of student unrest during the Kennedy Administration. However, while Sadowski makes the argument that Cal Poly's stability during the war can largely be attributed to the actions of President Kennedy, I propose that Cal Poly's lack of a sizeable, politically-conscious liberal arts college,

² James Farnell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism*. (London, Taylor & Francis, 2013).

³ Brigette Sadowski, "The Minds of the Dissidents Cal Poly Student Unrest during Robert E. Kennedy's Presidency 1967-1979" (California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2017).

⁴ Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory*. (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013).

demographic makeup and population, and rural location provided greater reason for the school's lack of dramatic anti-war activity during the Vietnam War.

Setting the Stage

Cal Poly is not often regarded as a hotspot for anti-war activity during the '60s and '70s. This is with good reason, as Cal Poly managed to avoid much of the more violent and caustic unrest that was sweeping across the nation regarding Vietnam. Unlike Kent State, Berkeley, or the University of Michigan, Cal Poly never experienced any significant violence on campus and never became a politically charged locus for the anti-war movement. This has been attributed to the actions of the Kennedy Administration by scholars like Brigette Sadowski, and the mild disposition of Cal Poly's political anti-war organization SNAP when compared to other similar groups on more notorious campuses. SNAP cooperated with the Kennedy Administration, making sure that their protests, such as the one that took place during the visit of the Dow Chemical's visit to the campus in 1968, were quite cordial.⁵ However, beyond the Dow Chemical protest, there is a profound lack of any substantive, coordinated demonstrations by the student body at Cal Poly during the '60s and '70s. As the war progressed and the country's anti-war constituents decried events such as the My Lai Massacre and Nixon's incursion into Cambodia, the silence emanating from Cal Poly's campus became perplexing. After the shooting at Kent State, Governor Ronald Reagan made the decision to close all universities in California for a period of four days. Following this, anti-war demonstrations on campus petered off, with most of the anti-war activity being reduced to guest speakers visiting campus, which usually received some attention from *Mustang Daily*.⁶ What were the qualities about Cal Poly at the time

⁵ "Cool at Poly," San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, 7 February 1968: 20.

⁶ , "Peace candidate Spock to rally support here," *Mustang Daily* (California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, CA), October 27, 1972.

that inhibited a larger expression of anti-war attitudes? What were the factors at play in the minds of the students and faculty that allowed them to “skip” much of the unrest that seemed to be sweeping the rest of the country? What does it tell us about Cal Poly?

Kennedy’s Intentions, Actions, and Motives

Sadowski makes the argument in *The Minds of the Dissidents: Cal Poly Student Unrest during Robert E. Kennedy’s Presidency 1967-1979* that President Kennedy’s administration “did care about the well-being of Cal Poly students and that they were willing to acknowledge students’ endeavors for peace.”⁷ One of the examples she cites that I believe shows a clearer picture of intent about the Kennedy Administration involves the rationale Kennedy cites from his memoir, *Learn by Doing*. During the February 1968 Dow Chemical protest led by SNAP, Kennedy describes looking with fellow colleagues out over the crowd of hundreds of students organizing in front of the administration building. Kennedy had been preparing for this several weeks in advance, and it seems that despite the more nonchalant descriptions that Kennedy gives in *Learn by Doing*, he was very proactive against any forms of violence unfurling from any potential demonstration.⁸ However, unlike Sadowski’s assertion that this was done with a more positive and innocent intent, Kennedy’s own reasoning behind his tactics during the protest provide an alternative picture. In a cunning crowd control move, Kennedy understood that a feeling of anonymity from being in a demonstrating crowd was a primary factor in pushing students towards acting in a violent matter. To counter this, Kennedy intentionally peppered the crowd with a suitable ratio of professors, roughly one professor for every 25 to 30 students. The

⁷ Brigitte Sadowski, *Minds of the Dissidents: Student Unrest during Robert E. Kennedy’s Presidency 1967-1979*, March 2017. 3

⁸ Grace Arvidson, “Memorandum to Staff”. 29 January 1968. Box #35 Folder #6. Student Unrest 1960s and 1970s. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

intended outcome from Kennedy was that these professors would serve as icons for identification; unruly students would be less likely to succumb to violent impulses under the guise of anonymity if they were in the midst of professors that they recognized, and *vice versa*.⁹ A proactive decision to secure safety, but not one done when the administration has genuine trust in organizations like SNAP and politically-conscious students. Furthermore, when in comparison to demonstrations that were happening elsewhere in the country, SNAP's methods and means for protesting were rather mild; SNAP leadership stated that they abhorred "violence in all its forms,"¹⁰ and provided many avenues for the Dow Chemical event that February to proceed with minimal interruption. For instance, although SNAP had initially planned to demonstrate inside the administration building where the presentation would be taking place but decided to cancel after learning this would interfere with the university's administrative work.¹¹ It is clear, particularly when looking at contemporary unrest at places such as Kent State and UC Berkeley that much of the onus for keeping the peace fell on the shoulders of the agitated student body, not so much the actions of President Kennedy.

Learn by Doing presents an issue wherein our narrator is not entirely reliable. President Kennedy's actions absolutely played a role in maintaining a peaceful atmosphere on campus, but his role is ultimately overstated. Kennedy himself speaks to the other factors at play in his memoir that helped enable a more peaceful campus, "Our location in a rural area of California's Central Coast, away from the pressures of racial and poverty tensions, had given us lead time to

⁹ Robert 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): 289-290

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

plan ahead.”¹² Indeed, the racial and economic homogeneity of Cal Poly compared to other, more politically active campuses at the time appears to be one such factor that inhibited profound and potentially more disruptive demonstrations. Despite this, it’s not as though poverty and racial tension did not exist in the Central Coast. Perhaps, what Kennedy may have been trying to get at lends itself more towards the physical location of San Luis Obispo in relation to the rest of the state. Physically, economically, and socially, Kennedy is acknowledging that the campus itself is insulated, which results in national trends trickling in at a slower rate than they would in a more interconnected campus, such as UC Berkeley. Kennedy has seen the struggles that other, more politically active campuses are facing, and less so out of a desire for benevolence and more to keep the peace, Kennedy was keen on nipping any potential incidents before they could cause trouble. Kennedy’s stated intentions of respecting students’ ability to express themselves politically comes under further scrutiny when considering correspondence between himself and gentlemen such as William M. Ketchum, assemblyman of the 29th District of Kern, San Luis Obispo, and Tulare Counties. On 11 April 1969, Ketchum sent an enclosed letter to Kennedy warning him of a connection between student unrest and communist conspiracy.¹³

...the people of the United States are getting fed up with the growing problem of turmoil on our campuses. The enclosed letter indicated perhaps better than anything I have seen, the nature of the problem facing those of us in the Legislature and in all levels of government in dealing with this problem. No matter what we do, we are going to face increasing pressure from those who, by their own admission, are dedicated to attacking our system.

¹² Kennedy, *Learn by Doing*, 287.

¹³ William M. Ketchum, Letter to Robert E. Kennedy, 11 April 1969, Box 38 Folder “Campus Unrest,” Robert E. Kennedy Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA

Ketchum seems very enthusiastic to share this letter with Kennedy, as it confirms the worst fears of many Americans at the time: communist subversion of American institutions from within, turning the young against the old.

A recent dispatch from the Communist Chinese government news agency also confirms such a connection. The agency chastised Governor Reagan for “trying to suppress the progressive wave of students’ struggle by fascist methods... our great Governor is doing what he was elected to do – he is trying, and quite successfully, to deal with these troublemakers they way they should be dealt with... I hope you will pass the enclosed letter around, to show your friends just what we are up against. We, in the Legislature, are trying to find a way out of this mess and we will certainly welcome your suggestions.

In addition, Kennedy received additional correspondence from state legislators like E. Richard Barnes, who sent to Kennedy as well as other California educators an excerpt from USA Magazine entitled “Student Subversion” by Alice Widener.¹⁴ Barnes prefaces the article forebodingly by suggesting that the recent demonstrations on campuses across the country are more than mere acts of “youthful exuberance.” Donald Koberg, an architecture professor at Cal Poly from 1962 to 1992, sent Kennedy a piece of literature that was floating around the University of Washington during his sabbatical titled “Here’s Some Inside Dope...” subtitled with “On what the communists plan for you this quarter.” The pamphlet speaks in war-like terms about organizing “loyal” students against communist subversives, whose goal is to bring about the revision of the campus constitution to take away any veto abilities that the administration

¹⁴ E. Richard Barnes, Letter to Robert E. Kennedy, September 1968, Box 38 Folder “Campus Unrest,” Robert E. Kennedy Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA

would have against political demonstrations.¹⁵ I was unable to find any responses penned by Kennedy to either of the aforementioned documents, but it appears that he was at the very least interested in the notion that the driving motivator for these demonstrations was less about genuinely concerned students and more about the potential for demonstrations to be the realm of dangerous, subversive, radical left-wing political agents. These letters to Kennedy begin to cast doubt on his self-proclaimed benevolence in his treatment and allowances to student protestors, as nothing in this regard is mentioned when Kennedy discusses the protests in *Learn by Doing*. His recollection of these moments of unrest are framed in a way that gives the reader an impression that Kennedy was genuine about his desires to give students a voice. However, the information revealed above shows that Kennedy's motivations and actions were not wholly based on such benevolent ideals.

Demographics & Location

When one compares the demographics and location of a learning institution like Cal Poly with more politically active student bodies during the Vietnam War, there are differences that should be considered. The size and demographic makeup of places like San Luis Obispo play an important role in determining the extent of potential unrest; smaller crowds are intrinsically easier to manage and control than larger ones. In reference to the May 4 shootings at Kent State, non-students would congregate on campus and involve themselves with the student protestors, introducing an unpredictable factor into a situation in danger of collapsing into disorder.¹⁶ Non-student interference aside, San Luis Obispo's population was dwarfed by places like Berkeley

¹⁵ "Here's Some Inside Dope" Undated, Box 38 Folder "Campus Unrest," Robert E. Kennedy Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA

¹⁶ Lewis, Jerry M.; Thomas R. Hensley (Summer 1998). "[The May 4 Shootings At Kent State University: The Search For Historical Accuracy](#)". Ohio Council for the Social Studies Review. 34 (1): 9–21

and Ann Arbor, with 116,716 and 100,035 residents, respectively.¹⁷¹⁸ With 28,036 in the city limits of San Luis Obispo, the community in 1970 had roughly the same amount of people as Kent during the same year.¹⁹²⁰ San Luis Obispo, and to an extent the county as a whole, was much more racially homogeneous when compared to a place like the Bay Area. Whites in San Luis Obispo have historically held a supermajority of the population, and this becomes significant when the impact of black and Chicano activism²¹ on the anti-war movement begins to come into action. Anti-war organizations like SDS at Kent State were often inspired by the burgeoning civil rights movement in the south, and later worked in tandem with many minority student organizations towards ending what was seen in many ways as a discriminatory war.²²²³ Despite rallies and events for black activist movements on campus, the students that would turn up would dwarf the black students in attendance, such as in one student meeting in 1968.²⁴ According to this kind of activism would be less fruitful in more racially homogeneous areas like San Luis Obispo, where a lack of non-whites may have contributed towards a less profound sense of immediacy and awareness about social justice and to an extent, the implications of the Vietnam War. Freilach writes about Cal Poly's student body during the anti-war movement, and how its campus seemed removed from the more radical manifestations of dissent that were plaguing other campuses:

¹⁷ <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Berkeley70.htm>

¹⁸ <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/ann-arbor-population/>

¹⁹ <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/kent-oh-population/>

²⁰ https://www.slocog.org/sites/default/files/documents/Chap%202%20Population_0.pdf

²¹ Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory*. (Cornell University Press, 2013): 187-188.

²² <https://news.berkeley.edu/2019/02/05/the-1969-strike-at-uc-berkeley-was-just-the-beginning-of-oliver-joness-battles/>

²³ http://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/vietnam_student.shtml#_ednref2

²⁴ Nina Zacuto, "Blacks, Whites Seek Unity," *Mustang Daily*, 11 Oct. 1968: 1.

Cal Poly students were not employing the radical tactics that their counterparts at schools like Berkeley were, but they were protesting over the same fundamental ideas. Even though protests were delayed at Cal Poly, it is important to note that many students were greatly dissatisfied [sic] with contemporary politics. Students at the neighboring University of California, Santa Barbara took a more radical approach to the escalating war. Gary Steenson, UCSB alumnus and retired Cal Poly professor, writes that Cal Poly “seemed like a diferent [sic] world.”²⁵²⁶

Cal Poly, through a mixture of demographics and distance from major centers of radical anti-war activity managed to skirt through the 60s and 70s without any violent incident. Kennedy may have been vigilant towards student dissent, but the administrative actions of one man fail to account for the other factors at play that left Cal Poly unscathed.

ROTC & Student Sentiments

The Cambodian Incursion set off events that would culminate in one of the most infamous moments in the Vietnam War on the home front, the Kent State shooting. Angered by the violation of Cambodian sovereignty, the university’s ROTC building served as a physical designation of the American military’s presence on their campus. Naturally, when their frustrations brought them out in droves, they descended on the ROTC building and set it alight.²⁷ Symbolically, this was a powerful statement about the student body’s stance on the military and the government’s seemingly wanton violations of other countries’ sovereignty and any further protraction of the Vietnam War. Having a physical space devoted to the military, the same

²⁵ Gary Steenson, email to Freilach, 29 Feb. 2014.

²⁶ Jennifer Freilach, “Cal Poly: Liberal, Not Radical.” (*La Vista* no. 1. 2017): 24.

²⁷ Thomas Grace, *Kent State: Death and Dissent in the Long Sixties*. (Massachusetts Press, 2016): 206-207.

military that was drafting American men to fight in the war, understandably brought about tension among many of the students. When violence erupted, the first targets were these symbols of the government. Kennedy and SNAP were both keen to the symbolic importance of the ROTC program before the Kent State shooting, however. In *Learn by Doing* Kennedy describes an advance warning from his wife regarding a presidential review that he was set to give to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo's ROTC unit. Kennedy learned of how the ROTC graduation at Cal Poly Pomona was the focal point for anti-war demonstrators who prostrated themselves on the ground in the path of the graduating cadets walking up the aisle, knowing that they would be trampled unless the order to halt was given- it was not. All of this happened within full view of journalists and camera crews, and it seemed to have spooked Kennedy. Contrary to the picture that *Learn by Doing* constructs of Kennedy being a champion of the rights of students and their right to free speech, his memoir goes into detail about the restrictive measures put in place to keep non-family members and students as a whole out and away from the event. SNAP was reduced to standing outside the venue, occasionally heckling a cadet as they entered the building.²⁸

Apathy & Ambition

Perhaps the lack of action, particularly violent action, against companies involved with the Vietnam War can be understood more thoroughly when the employment prospects of many of the sizeable portions of the student body are considered. Cal Poly as a polytechnic school caters primarily, to this day, to engineering and agriculture students. When the numbers of students in each department are counted, one notes that students studying social sciences are dwarfed by the amount of STEM and agriculture majors during the height of the anti-war

²⁸ Kennedy, *Learn by Doing*. 289-291.

movement.²⁹ Schools with more significant humanities departments, such as Berkeley, are likely to be privier to the social and political ramifications of events like the Vietnam War and hence more likely to have a stronger opinion on the matter than your typical engineering student. If Dow Jones is seen as a potential employer for an engineering major once they are finished with school, it makes sense that they and many of their ilk would be disinclined to “rock the boat” by being politically boisterous or morally conscientious- even in the face of the draft. Some professions tend to lean towards the political right or left; in 2014 Crowdpac, a nonpartisan firm dedicated to political analysis used federal campaign-contribution records dating to 1980 to estimate where specific donors of a given profession fell on a political spectrum. Depending on the organizations and candidates they donated to, they were left or right accordingly. Their 2014 study showed that many academics and socially oriented professions were more likely to be liberal while followers of the hard sciences and agriculture tended to be more conservative.³⁰ The specificity of the study is problematic on the account that it doesn’t account for information prior to 1980, but it is fairly acceptable to say that generally speaking these leanings have remained rather consistent throughout time. With a small humanities department and a far greater size of the student body who are, while not entirely ambivalent, not too keen on becoming radicalized and violent, it becomes more difficult to chalk up the lack of violence on campus to the actions of a single university administration.

²⁹ *Cal Poly Report* Vol. 20, no. 9 (September 30, 1969)

³⁰ Andy Kierzs, Hunter Walker, “These Charts Show The Political Bias Of Workers In Each Profession” *Business Insider*, November 3, 2014. <https://www.businessinsider.com/charts-show-the-political-bias-of-each-profession-2014-11>

Historiography

Freilach writes about the political climate at Cal Poly during the anti-war movement, and “Cal Poly: Liberal, Not Radical” emphasizes the allowances afforded by the university to many student organizations like SNAP and BSU as reason for the lack of violence on campus. Freilach does hint at the capacity for political change on campus being realized through demographic shifts, mostly an “admixture” of students coming to campus from more politically active parts of the country.³¹ Through negotiation and mutual respect, Freilach argues, Cal Poly shirked its largely conservative attitudes for liberal ones during the Vietnam War, but they never veered into radical territory. Sadowski puts the onus on the actions of Robert Kennedy, pointing to the actions that he took during his presidency as the reason that tensions on campus never boiled over into full fledged violence. According to Farrel, the rise of political personalism contributed to increasingly conscientious and radical attitudes towards the Vietnam War. Political struggles became intertwined with an emerging notion of importance regarding the will and actions of an individual person, more so than a faceless mass. But political personalism can be suppressed through ambition and a desire to refrain from “making waves.” When Lewis’ thesis from *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks* is considered, that being that the brunt of the anti-war movement was spearheaded by heterogeneous middle-class Americans, it begins to lend further credence towards the environment of Cal Poly having a greater role in keeping violence off campus than what has been suggested.

Conclusion

³¹ Jennifer Freilach, “Cal Poly: Liberal, Not Radical.” (*La Vista* no. 1. 2017): 18.

Robert Kennedy's presidency at Cal Poly saw the height of the anti-war movement in the United States. While Freilach and Sadowski make the argument that his actions were the largest factors for determining campus unrest, the situation was more nuanced and multi-faceted than what is suggested. The trickling in of political personalism and political activism proved slow enough that the campus was not plunged into any significant periods of unrest. When the demographics, location, and size of Cal Poly is compared with more politically active campuses, it becomes clearer that the actions of an administration cannot be solely responsible for alleviating and preventing campus unrest. Kennedy's benevolent intentions are dubious; while he frequently received letters and news bulletins from assemblymen such as William Ketchum, it is difficult to tell how seriously he took the threat of "communist subversion" at Cal Poly. Regardless, Kennedy was understandably privy to the happenings of other campuses and had a clear incentive to make concessions to the student body if it meant a violent episode. Ultimately, the lack of violence and radical action at Cal Poly cannot be credited to a single administration, but rather a number of different factors such as demographics, location, and department size played a more significant role in limiting violence on campus during the anti-war period.

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