

COMMUNITY PROTEST
HAYDEN WALKS IN VIETS WALKOUT

An essay presented
to the California Pioneers
Historical Papers

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INTRODUCTION

On Friday evening June 5, 1987, The Sixty-Sixth Annual San Jose City College Graduation Ceremony took place in the San Jose Civic Auditorium. This commencement which should have been a "peaceful, dignified, family event"¹, immediately turned into a state of utter confusion when California Assemblyman Tom Hayden appeared on stage.

Hayden's sudden appearance caused an array of emotional feelings which included boos, jeers, and surprisingly even applause and satisfaction. According to an article written by Mr. Russell Fischer of San Jose City College, "Hayden's sudden appearance prompted about twenty graduates, mostly Vietnamese-Americans and their families, to walkout in protest."²

This walkout, however, did not just occur all of a sudden. In fact, it was the culmination of many events which included Hayden's past anti-war activities in the Sixties, his invitation to speak at the college graduation, Vietnamese and faculty protest against his appearance, and the eventual cancellation by college president, Byron Skinner. Moreover, it was the cancellation of Hayden's proposed speech which raised the very touchy issue of "Freedom of Speech" and also proved how strong and influence the Vietnamese Community has on San Jose.

All this tension and turmoil finally led to the
Vietnamese Walkout of the San Jose City College Graduation
Ceremony.

TOM HAYDEN

Tom Hayden, who is most often associated with the Vietnam War and radicalism during the Sixties, is definitely one of America's most controversial political figures. In order to understand the Vietnamese Walkout more clearly, it is necessary to explore the background of Tom Hayden, to see why some people have such strong feelings about him.

During his college years in the late 1950s, Tom Hayden was involved in many radical activities and protest groups such as the House Un-American Activities Committee demonstrations, National Student Association, and the Student Association, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

In December 1961, Tom Hayden formed the Students for a Democratic Society, (SDS), a national organization to coordinate student political projects around the country. In an article he wrote in "The Activist", he expressed his feelings at the time: "Radicalism as a style involves penetration of a social problem to its roots, to its real causes. Radicalism presumes a willingness to continually press the query: Why?"³ The SDS project, however, was not overly successful, and after its demise, Hayden looked for other activities, namely, the anti-Vietnam War movement.

In 1965, Tom Hayden along with Herbert Aptheker, a

independent radical history professor, journeyed to North Vietnam for the purpose of establishing a contact between the North Vietnamese Government and the American peace movement. This visit to Hanoi gave Hayden a new perspective on life and was a definite turning point for him.

In 1967, Hayden attended a conference in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, at which American antiwar activists met with leaders from North Vietnam. The conference was for the purpose of the North Vietnamese Government to release some captured American soldiers as a gesture of solidarity with the peace movement. This purpose was finally met when three prisoners of the Vietcong were released into Hayden's custody to be escorted home.

A year later, Tom Hayden was indicted for causing riots in Chicago. These riots resulted when Hayden along with others demonstrated against the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The end result was the Trial of the Chicago Seven which became a classic confrontation between radicals and the judicial system. When it finally ended, Hayden was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison for contempt of court and causing riots. Hayden's riot convictions, however, were overturned on the grounds that the judge had conducted improper rulings on the case. A year later, Hayden's sentence was dismissed because of the appeals he brilliantly coordinated.

With the end of his legal troubles, Tom Hayden again turned to the peace movement in Vietnam. However, with the end of direct American involvement in Vietnam, in 1973, the mass appeal of the peace movement began to lose its allurement. The Saigon Government was also nearing its collapse and many critics began to blame Hayden for its demise. The American people began calling him a "traitor" to the country and the lives lost at Vietnam. This of course did not help Hayden's image at all, so consequently popularity rating began to slip, especially among Vietnamese-Americans.

Hayden is still a very controversial figure, although he has reformed from his radical ways of the Sixties. Tom Hayden is now a Democratic legislator, who is trying to escape his past but probably never will.

In 1986, Tom Hayden was elected to a third term in the California Assembly, despite stiff Republican opposition. Hayden is also the chairman of the Assembly Subcommittee on Higher Education, and is known to be a strong advocate for community colleges.

In view of his reputation as a strong community college advocate, in January of 1987, San Jose City College President, Byron Skinner invited Hayden to speak at the college's graduation. Word of this invitation, however, outraged the Vietnamese Community and some faculty members,

since they still blame Hayden for his past actions.

Trouble ahead seemed inevitable.

PROTEST ON BOTH SIDES

When the Vietnamese Community learned of Hayden's invitation to speak at the graduation, they were utterly outraged, but surprisingly they did not raise any questions against it, until Mr. Jan Henry Groenen, apolitical science instructor at the college, raised the issue. The following is the text of a letter written to Byron Skinner, College president, by Mr. Groenen, and was printed in The Times, the college's newspaper:

Last week I read your April Newsletter and discovered that you have invited one Tom Hayden to be this year's graduation speaker. I am appalled. I hereby request that you cancel this arrangement and find a speaker more acceptable to all or at least most members of our college community and the community at large.

In case you have forgotten, let me remind you that during the Vietnam conflict more than 58,000 Americans fought gallantly and died honorably on the Vietnam battlefields because their president asked them to. At the same time the Haydens were cavorting with the enemy's leaders in Hanoi apparently providing aid, comfort, and propaganda support for the Communist conquest of South Vietnam.

Once the communist forces captured South Vietnam, hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of freedom loving South Vietnamese fled their homeland seeking refuge in the free world. Many of these Vietnamese refugees came to the United States of America --- the home of the brave and the free. I have been informed (but cannot verify at this time) that somewhere between one-fourth and one-third of our graduating class are Vietnamese refugees.

In view of these facts, I fail to understand how you have the nerve to ask that man as our graduation speaker. I am indeed appalled and offended. Whoever thought this one up and sold you on it has done a disservice to you, our college,

and community. It is my opinion that this action is tantamount to forcing the national convention of the NACCP to listen to a racial by the Grand Wizard of the KKK, or forcing the Jewish survivors of the Nazi death camps to listen to Kurt Waldheim's justifications of his Nazi past.

Inviting or not inviting Tom Hayden to be our graduation speaker has nothing to do with freedom of speech. If he is invited to our campus for a presentation of his views that is fine by me. During the twenty-two years I have been a member of the faculty at San Jose City College, all kinds of people with many different views and opinions have appeared on our campus. I have never protested before because I do believe that a college campus is and should be the market place of ideas. That much I can and do accept as part of this year's academic theme of "Freedom and Responsibility"

On this occasion, however, I must protest. The graduation ceremony provides a captive audience. None of the Vietnamese students or their families participated in the selection of Tom Hayden. If they attend the graduation ceremony they have to listen to this speaker. This violates the whole concept of "Freedom and responsibility".

It is for the above stated reason that I feel that inviting Tom Hayden to speak at our graduation breaks the bonds of decency and is probably the most grotesquely obscene act of incivility I believe I have witnessed in my twenty-nine years as a teacher. Our Vietnamese graduates deserve better. I just can't believe that anyone connected with education can be so insensitive to so many of our students' history and feelings and to the battlefield sacrifices of so many Americans.

I conclude by repeating my request that you cancel Tom Hayden and arrange for another. please inform⁴ me of your decision as soon as possible.

This letter clearly illustrated the resentment felt by Mr. Groenen and the Vietnamese Community towards Tom Hayden's invitation. Mr. Skinner finally agreed to withdraw the invitation because of threatened Vietnamese demonstrations in downtown San Jose. Mr. Skinner after all, wanted to

ensure that the graduation would be a "dignified, peaceful, family event."⁵

When Mr. Jack Burrows, a social science instructor learned of the withdrawal, he too was outraged, along with other faculty members. Jack Burrows, who was scheduled to receive the college's "teacher of the year award" at the graduation, said that he was furious with the college when they submitted to pressure and cancelled Hayden's speech, refused to accept this award.

Burrows also accused the college of being "spooked."⁶ He called the decision by college administrators a violation of the constitutional right of freedom of speech. Burrows claimed that the college administration was "motivated by greed and freight when they made their decision"⁷ to cancel the speech of Hayden. He also accused Mr. Groenen of being a publicity hound who was just making something out of nothing.⁸

In letters written to college administrators, Jack Burrows wrote, "There was a time at City College when we entertained speakers of any cause or persuasion who reflected the wishes of the student body. Now we submit to the pressure of a tiny group of immigrants and to a gaggle of publicity hounds."⁹

GRADUATION DAY

On Friday evening June 5, 1987, the 66th annual San Jose City College Graduation took place in San Jose's Civic Auditorium. The commencement started out very calmly but tension was still in the air.

Early in the ceremonies, Jack Burrows stepped forward to be honored as the college's "teacher of the year", but minutes later Mr. Burrows announced that he was going to give his award up to Mr. Tom Hayden, who then walked on stage. Hayden accepted the award and said, "Thank you", but made no speech. His cameo appearance on stage lasted only two minutes.

When Hayden appeared on stage, Peter Trankinh, a San Jose Vietnamese business man, immediately ordered his fellow Vietnamese-Americans out of the hall. Hayden seemed surprised by the walkout.

According to an article in the San Jose Mercury News on June 6, 1987, seventy-five graduates about forty percent of the graduating class stormed out of the Civic Auditorium.¹⁰ This number, however, is quite a difference from the eighteen to twenty counted by the faculty members present.¹¹

After Hayden left, many of the Vietnamese students returned to the auditorium, according to faculty members

who were present. After the ceremony, many of the students and faculty members expressed their views on the whole incident.

Graduate Do Te said of Hayden, "He is a traitor to the American people who died in Vietnam. I hate Hayden because he supported the Hanoi government of North Vietnam."¹²

David Yancey, president of the faculty senate, told the audience, "I believe most faculty members support Tom Hayden's right to appear."¹³

Skinner said later of Hayden, "I had no damn idea that man was coming!"¹⁴

Meanwhile as graduation was being conducted downtown, another faculty member, Jan Henry Groenen, was leading a silent vigil in honor of the Vietnam War, dead at the campus football field.

In this two hour vigil, about one hundred and fifty people gave tribute to the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam and died gallantly.

CONCLUSION

Before this report concludes it is necessary to recognize and analyze the major points of the whole event. These points are the following: the lessons to be learned, could it have been avoided, and finally a victor if any.

The lesson to be learned from this most unusual event is that you should never underestimate the influence of a small minority. This lesson is present when the college did not anticipate the amount of resentment the Vietnamese Community had on Hayden. The college also did not realize how much trouble their invitation could cause.

Secondly, this entire event could have been avoided if the college had been more cautious in their selection. In other words, they should have known how controversial Hayden was.

Finally, in view of this whole event, it is quite apparent that there is no victor, since both sides had honorable causes to defend their actions. From Doctor Borrows' side, it was the preservation of the freedom of speech right, while Mr. Groenen contends that the Vietnamese graduates should be treated fairly.

But in the final analysis of the Vietnamese Walkout of the San Jose City College Graduation Ceremony, only you the reader can decide on what's what.

NOTES

1. Dale Lane, "Hayden shows up, Viets storm out", San Jose Mercury News, 6 June 1987, pg. 1A.

2. Russell Fischer, "Hayden - Faculty Member of the Year", Faccc Bulletin, January 1988, pg. 4.

3. "Hayden, Tom", Current Biography, 1976, (1976 ed., xx, 182).

4. Letter from Jan Henry Groenen to Byron Skinner, college president, (printed in The Times, May 15, 1987, pg. 2).

5. Dale Lane, Op. Cit., pg. 1A.

6. Therese Iknoian, "Teacher to refuse award after SJCC cancels Hayden talks", San Jose Mercury News, 5 June 1987, pg. 1A.

7. Interview with Jack Burrows, by (Tom Lien), 13 April 1988.

8. Ibid.

9. Therese Iknoian, Op. Cit., pg. 1A.

10. Dale Lane, Op. Cit., pg. 1A.

11. Interview with Jack Burrows, Op. Cit.

12. Dale Lane, Op. Cit., pg. 1A.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

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