

San Jose State University

A Campus in Crisis:
The Vietnam Protests at San Jose State University

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Preface

When discussing the protests held during the Vietnam War, the major universities spoken of are Kent State and Berkeley. Often overlooked are the smaller universities that participated in rallies and marches, sometimes with violent results. The students at these smaller universities made the flame of the early protests into a fire. They helped spread it throughout the country. San Jose State University, then known as San Jose State College, although not known for its anti-war demonstrations, had a thriving anti-war sentiment.

This essay shows how our local university reacted to the Vietnam War, through its protests and rallies. It includes detailed accounts of the Dow Chemical Protest, as well as marches held after the Kent State shootings. The changes that occurred during the 1960's were radical and affected many people across the nation. Here is one view from our corner of the world.

In Vietnam

There was a flash-
 silver and gold...
The rice ponds blazed with new water
The jungle burst into gold
 and sent up little birds of fire.
Little animals with fur aflame.
Then the children flamed
 running--their clothes flying
 like fairy kites
Screaming--their screams
 dying as their faces seared
The women's basket burned
 on their heads.
The men's boats glazed
 on the rice waters...
...then the rains came.
The forest lay singed and seared
 a hut crumbled
 and all was still
LISTEN AMERICANS
 LISTEN CLEAR AND LONG...
--THE CHILDREN ARE SCREAMING
 IN THE JUNGLES OF HIAPHONG...

Barbara [last name unknown], age 12
Special Collections, San Jose State University

The 1960s saw a drastic shift in Americas' consciousness. This shift made the sixties synonymous with change. As the 1950s ended, many people looked to the future, and the 60s in particular, with anticipation and expectation. The election of President Kennedy symbolized their desire for the country to transform itself into a greater power. The ideas of the past could finally connect with the future. Yet, by the end of the decade the public, especially the youth, had lost hope in their country. The fight for civil rights opened their eyes to the injustices and inequalities of the state. Also, the Vietnam War experience had cast a large shadow upon the nation. What began as the United States just advising Vietnam, turned into a violent war. The escalation outraged students who saw the involvement as optimizing the negative force their government sustained. They would not sit back and be treated like little children expecting to be seen but not heard. It was time for them to stand up and be taken seriously. Some began protesting the government actions. Eventually, the attitudes of the small anti-war movement grew to envelop the nation.

The students' unrest during the sixties, while more often associated with radical universities such as Berkeley, was not limited to them. With the war intensifying the involvement of universities and colleges also increased. San Jose State College saw drastic changes from peaceful marches to more violent displays of anger. Throughout the sixties the college students and some faculty were holding mellow rallies and protests, but the winter of 1967 saw extreme violence hit the school during the Dow Chemical Company riots. This marked a change of participation within the

demonstrations. They went from a majority of the participants being militant youths to the general student body engaging in the protests. From then until May 1970 the movement remained steady until the unthinkable happened, the deaths of four students at Kent State University in Ohio. The deaths triggered a rush of marches and violent protests throughout America aimed at the actions of the authorities. San Jose's first march after the deaths had some violence, but the following one was self-policed and non-violent.¹ The Kent State ordeal made many realize that protests and violence did little to end the war. San Jose State Colleges' Vietnam War demonstrations during the sixties are few, but people must not assume that students and faculty were complacent during the war.

To understand the unrest that was taking place at San Jose State, it is important to know who the participants were and the events that led to their movement. As the decade started most people were looking forward to the future. They had elected a new president who was young and energetic. President Kennedy was a war hero who symbolized goodness, bravery and vitality. Jerome Klinkowitz wrote:

There is little wonder that Kennedy struck his countrymen as a hero, for that was how Kennedy perceived himself. Nor was Kennedy a hero in a vacuum. The American people were prepared to follow a hero of his style, putting aside the father-protector image of General Eisenhower for the younger, bolder, more innovative style of the war-hero Lieutenant.²

¹ Nolan, Mark, "SJS Student Apathy Not In Evidence", *San Jose (Calif.) Spartan Daily*, 6 May 1970.

² Klinkowitz, Jerome, *The American 1960s: Imaginative Acts in a Decade of Change*, (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1980) 5.

The public wanted Kennedy as their champion. Even the Cuban Missile Crisis could not dent his armor.³ That is one reason why the assassination of Kennedy shattered the American public. They watched as their cultural icon die.

As Kennedy took the reigns of the government, civil rights came to the fore front of social issues. The early sixties began with protests for the rights of African-Americans across the nation, particularly in the South. It brought the problem of racism and the inequality into the lives of middle class America. It gained the empathy and support from many middle class youths. The civil rights movement also set the stage for the Vietnam War protests later in the decade and the equal rights movement of the seventies.

While the assassination of President Kennedy and the civil rights demonstrations captured the attention of America another threat to peace was lurking in the background. The Vietnam War had its beginnings in the fifties with the Geneva Conference in 1954. The Geneva Accords, Dr. Lela Noble, an associate professor of political science at San Jose State College said in her address on Vietnam, April 26, 1970:

...as far as everybody who signed it was concerned: it was to set up a unified government for Vietnam, but allowing for a kind of procedure that would let people get their feet on the ground to start with, and then get organized in the two-year period.⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ Noble, Lela Ph.D., "What Happened In Cambodia?: Background Information On the U.S. Entry Into Cambodia," An Address on Vietnam, April 26, 1970, at the Campus Christian Center, Special collections, Walquist Library, San Jose State University, San Jose.

Theoretically the Vietnamese would be able to set up their own government. The United States said they would abide by the agreement, but they would not sign it. By 1960, the United States broke this agreement.

After his election, Kennedy sent missions into Vietnam to ascertain the conditions.⁵ Eventually these missions turned into troops. In a letter to the general public the Associated Students of San Jose State College reported that in 1965, under President Johnson, the government abandoned its pretense of being on advisory missions in southeast Asia.⁶ Troop deployment steadily rose, with a marked increase of fighting strength in 1966 and in 1968 General Westmoreland requested a 40% military increase.⁷

By the time Richard Nixon was preparing to campaign for the presidency, the unofficial war America was fighting had taken thousands of lives. Nixon campaigned on the basis that he would stop the war. Yet in 1970, two years after his election, he escalated the war by invading Cambodia.⁸

As America's policy in Vietnam changed, so did the attitudes of the people at home. When the advisors were first sent to southeast Asia only a small number protested. As more troops went to Vietnam and more casualties came back people became angry, but still many did not speak their minds. In the early stages it was mainly militant youths and some intellectuals who displayed their disapproval. Not until the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Associated Students of San Jose State College to Citizen, Special Collections, Walquist Library, San Jose State University, San Jose.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

authorities began using violence on the demonstrators and when the government invaded Cambodia did the general populace begin to re-evaluate its views. After the invasion of Cambodia the total number of people who voiced their opinion against the war increase. "Public opinion poll," stated Klinkowitz, "which in broad samplings of the population had never counted more than 25 percent firm opposition to the war, now [1970] registered dissent at just above 50 percent."⁹ The war began to tear the country apart.

San Jose State's student and faculty reactions were a microcosm of what was taking place across the nation. Early on, militant student groups such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and faculty groups like Professors Against the War (PAW) were active on campus. PAW had a table set up distributing literature to people as early as 1965. They would hold teach-ins to inform students about what was going on in Vietnam. Teach-ins were as Dr. Jack Douglas explains "trying to apply the conditions, social, or things about the war to our particular, or their particular discipline."¹⁰

PAW was concerned with informing people about the atrocities of the war and why the Vietnamese were so angry. "It was obvious," said Douglas, "that they [the people the government was backing] weren't really representing the Vietnamese people there."¹¹ Education was one part, but the major emphasis for PAW was on the students being drafted. Many of San Jose's students were drafted to fight a war they did not support. Some say that the draft was not a big concern, but Douglas indicated that after

⁹ Klinkowitz, Jerome, *The American 1960s: Imaginative Acts in a Decade of Change*, (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1980) 77.

¹⁰ Dr. Jack Douglas, interview by author, tape recording, San Jose, Calif., 30 October 1996.

the lottery system was enacted, the protests diminished.¹² People did not want 'our boys' being shot up for a cause they could not stand behind. The government did not propagate the war well.¹³ In previous wars, although there was some disagreement, the threat was clear and the government's propaganda was better. In World War II "we had to sacrifice to destroy the Nazi's and keep the Japanese from invading the west coast" pointed out Douglas.¹⁴ The Vietnam war did not have this.

PAW tried anything they could to keep students from being drafted. Dr. Douglas recalled them giving students' money for support while they were resisting the draft.¹⁵ In a few cases they suggested that students leave the country to avoid being drafted.¹⁶ Some psychology professors even certified that students were unfit psychologically to fight.¹⁷ They would take drastic measures to help their pupils.

The tension was building up on San Jose's campus. In the winter of '67 the movement hit a turning point. On November 20, 1967, the campus administrators allowed Dow Chemical Company to hold a recruiting session at the college. Approximately 200 people positioned themselves at the front of the Administration building to protest Dow being on campus.¹⁸ Dow made napalm an agent in bombs being used by the United States in Vietnam. About 3,000 bystanders surrounded Seventh

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Nurre, Mark, "Police Use Gas, Club on Crowd," *San Jose (Calif.) Spartan Daily*, 21 November 1967.

Street by the Administration building, just to watch the proceedings.¹⁹ Shortly after the crowd organized "someone," reported the *Spartan Daily*, "dashed a container of what looked like blood against the doors of the building, and the crowd continued to demand that Dow leave campus."²⁰

The San Jose Police Department bused officers to the campus and once there they formed ranks on the north side of Seventh Street. Some of the protesters rushed to meet them. Vice-president Dusel, who was in charge of the college while President Clark was in Puerto Rico told the demonstrators that as long as they were peaceful there would be no need for police.²¹ During Dusels' speech the police continued to the administration building, past the vice-president. As the police went on, the crowds demanded to know why they were brought on campus. "They went right past me." Dusel responded, "I can't control the police...it's out of my hands. I don't know who called the police-I asked the police to stay here but they deliberately went past me."²² Dusel went on to say that the police disrupted plans for a peaceful discussion between Dow, SDS and PAW scheduled for later that day at Morris Daily Auditorium.²³

Dr. Douglas, a member of PAW, was at the front with Dr. Dusel. "I was standing behind the vice-president who was trying to keep the police from coming off

¹⁹ Egner, Dick, "SJS Still Target of Picketers: 3000 Rally After 'Peace Talks' Fail," *San Jose News*, 21 November 1967.

²⁰ Nurre, Mark, "Police Use Gas, Club on Crowd," *San Jose (Calif.) Spartan Daily*, San Jose, 21 November 1967.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

campus. Coming on campus," called to mind Douglas, "and one of his underlings up above got so excited that he called the police in."²⁴ So in spite of the vice-president, the police entered the campus. Apparently the crowd had thrown rocks and bottles at the building which prompted the police to take action.²⁵ The authorities used clubs and tear gas to disburse the group. This caused the protesters to react out of fear which only escalated the situation.

Immediately after the demonstration police arrested twelve people, with more arrests to follow. Sixteen people got hurt, including one faculty member. "Peter Collins," reported the San Jose News, "an associate professor in foreign languages... was hit by a gas grenade."²⁶ These bombs were about one foot long and weight approximately ten pounds.²⁷ "I was almost hit by a tear gas bomb, but a guy [Peter Collins] I know who was standing right in front of me got hit first. I always claimed that he saved my life," laughed Dr. Douglas.²⁸

Many of those beaten with clubs or gassed were bystanders. They were not protesting. This angered many who up to that point were indifferent to the cause. The mere fact that the police "indiscriminately" beat on people ignited protests, not quelled them.²⁹

²⁴ Dr. Jack Douglas, interview by author, tape recording, San Jose, Calif., 30 October 1996.

²⁵ Egner, Dick, "SJS Still Target of Pickets: 3000 Rally After 'Peace Talks' Fail," *San Jose News*, 21 November 1967.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dr. Jack Douglas, interview by author, tape recording, San Jose, Calif., 30 October 1996.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

A few weeks after the Dow incident, arrests were still taking place. Among those taken into custody was Professor David Eakins. Police arrested Eakins during the Christmas break, which some felt was done to avoid more demonstrations.³⁰ Police claimed that Eakins had hit an officer with a sign. Within the confusion anything was possible, but Douglas doubted it was intentional.³¹ One of the reasons it took so long to arrest Eakins was because the police used photographs taken during the incident to locate dissenters.³² After developing the film, police used the pictures to locate dissenters. "Dave was singled out. He was taller than the other people," laughed Douglas, "for one thing you can see him better in the pictures."³³ Some felt the arrest of Dr. Eakins was an attack on the faculty and the anti-war movement.³⁴

The arrests and suspensions of students angered many, especially the SDS, who called for "No Political Suspensions" in a rally flyer they distributed.³⁵ They insisted that there was "a growing nation-wide effort to crush the anti-war movement, to crack down on dissenters," and encouraged other students to join the protests so that the authorities could not get away with it.³⁶

³⁰ "Political Arrest of San Jose State Professor," ad hoc Faculty Committee Against Political Arrests, Fall 1967, Special Collections, Walquist Library, San Jose State University, San Jose.

³¹ Dr. Jack Douglas, interview by author, tape recording, San Jose, Calif., 30 October 1996.

³² Messiner, Classroom Discussion, History 100W for Dr. Van Beek, San Jose State University, San Jose (Calif.), 28 October 1996.

³³ Dr. Jack Douglas, interview by author, tape recording, San Jose, Calif., 30 October 1996.

³⁴ "Political Arrest of San Jose State Professor," ad hoc Faculty Committee Against Political Arrests, Fall 1967, Special Collections, Walquist Library, San Jose State University, San Jose.

³⁵ Students for a Democratic Society, "No Political Suspensions," a rally flyer, Special Collections, Walquist Library, San Jose State University, San Jose.

³⁶ Ibid.

Dr. Robert Clark, president of San Jose State College at the time of the unrest exhibited patience towards the students. In a statement by Dr. Clark, the College Crisis, he said the following about the protesters:

More often the young are sensitive to the pain of others, quick to visualize horror, and to suffer with those who suffer. Yet they do not lack courage. Oddly enough most of them are not pacifists; most of them, I believe would be quick to defend their country in time of need. It is this war, the method of fighting it, and our stubborn inability to extricate ourselves from it that invokes their passions.³⁷

His statement also includes items that he felt the administration could do to ensure safe protests. None of the suggestions were to end the demonstrations. He stated:

Responsible public officials and educators have acknowledged the right of students to free speech, the right to dissent, the right to express their convictions through peaceful demonstration...[the administrators] will not permit the disruption or suspension of the college programs through acts of violence or coercion...We must understand that these disruptions will continue until this nation can redress the grievances of an undeclared war and of unrealized civil rights, and that however irritating the disruptions may be we must deal with them through due process...We must understand that law and order are not primarily or even largely a matter of police action. Law and order prevail in a society, and that includes a college campus, because the citizens or students and faculty want and insists upon law and order.³⁸

Clarks' reaction to the demonstrations showed an incredible amount of tolerance.

It also showed that although he disagrees with the violence, he believed in the ideas

³⁷ Clark, Robert D. Ph.D., "The College Crisis," Special Collections, Walquist Library, San Jose State University, San Jose.

³⁸ Ibid.

behind the protest. The shift from the militant youth to the general public was under way.

Students continued to display their disapproval of the war through the end of the decade and into the next. Participation in these displays increased in sized due to the escalation of the war and the malice inflicted on protesters across the nation, but by the late sixty's interest was ebbing. In April 1970 Nixon invaded Cambodia which spawned a renewal of protesting.³⁹ Kent State University students in Ohio held a protest against Nixon and the invasion in May, 1970. Armored National Guardsmen were sent to the university to keep the peace, but instead they killed four students.⁴⁰ The country, particularly academics, viewed the deaths with shock, dismay, and disgust.

At San Jose State College those attending the school, as well as outside participants, showed the revulsion they felt towards the authorities' actions by taking part in marches immediately following the Kent State ordeal. Unfortunately the march on May 4, 1970, turned violent.⁴¹ The San Jose Mercury News observed that, "attempts to keep San Jose State College antiwar demonstrations cool failed...as San Jose police and approximately 200 student marchers clashed at

³⁹ Dr. Jack Douglas, interview by author, tape recording, San Jose, Calif., 30 October 1996.

⁴⁰ Schultz, Judi, "Seven Arrested S.J. Police, 200 Students Clash," *San Jose Mercury News*, 5 May 1970.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Fifth and Williams Streets."⁴² Seven or eight people received treatment at the campus Health Center after being beaten with clubs or maced.

Reporters from the Spartan Daily were included in the injured number. R.L.Beadle assistant editor for the Daily, Rich Hessel photographer, and Doug Freeman a reporter for the campus Radio-Television News center seemed singled out for attack.⁴³ As the Daily reported, "Beadle, moving back toward the campus was clubbed from behind by a detective, then, when he hit the ground was repeatedly beaten and kicked by uniformed officers armed with clubs and blackjacks. He had shown his press pass three times to police. Beadle took seven stitches in the scalp at the Health Center."⁴⁴ The Daily also reported that Freeman "had his tape recorder smashed by a club-wielding policeman. He was knocked down and slugged by a plainclothesman, handcuffed, and hauled to a police wagon."⁴⁵ Another photographer, Bruce Rozenhart, apparently had his camera confiscated and returned without the film.⁴⁶ San Jose Mercury News also reported the attacks on the reporters.⁴⁷ To the Daily staff and the college students, the police were purposely trying to eliminate the press.⁴⁸

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Turner, Craig, "Campus Reporters Roughed-Up During Fifth Street Encounter," *San Jose (Calif.) Spartan Daily*, 5 May 1970.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Schultz, Judi, "Seven Arrested S.J. Police, 200 Students Clash," *San Jose Mercury News*, 5 May 1970.

⁴⁸ Nolan, Mike, "SJS Student Apathy Not In Evidence," *San Jose (Calif.) Spartan Daily*, 6 May 1970.

Tuesdays march, May 6, was "in marked contrast to Monday's violence."⁴⁹ Thousands of protesters marched through the streets surrounding San Jose State College. The route taken by the demonstrators stayed around the school. When a few people attempted to take the progression through downtown the leaders of the march stopped them, insisting that they stay by the college.⁵⁰ Demonstrators encouraged students from around the campus to join the marchers, but anyone caught causing problems were expelled.⁵¹ This procession intended "to show the police and the community that students can peacefully protest."⁵²

The violence around the country during demonstrations hit a cord with protesters who were coming to realize that physically fighting the authorities did not end the war. Throughout the country people began to see that destructive protesting did not gain the support of the general public.⁵³ In some cases it would "retard the growth of antiwar sentiment."⁵⁴ Participants did not want it to be just a student revolution. One of the original goals of students was to bring awareness to everyone, but after Kent State "debate of the war, both pro and con, dissipated into

⁴⁹ Turner, Craig, "Thousands March In Protest of Police, Nixon and Cambodia," *San Jose (Calif.) Spartan Daily*, 6 May 1970.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Small, Melvin, *Covering Dissent*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994) 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

a feeling of resignation and defeat."⁵⁵ At San Jose State the reduction of antiwar protests and rallies on campus demonstrated peoples surrender.

San Jose State College is rarely associated with the antiwar protests occurring in the sixties. The surprise people display when learning about the active movement on campus betrays this lack of association. The few publicized demonstrations the college held indicates the strength of the sentiments the students and faculty had against the war. Those involved with the protests, although not as flamboyant as other schools, made their point well. There is little doubt that San Jose State College during the Vietnam Era embraced the feelings of the nation.

⁵⁵ Klinkowitz, Jerome, *The American 1960s: Imaginative Acts in a Decade of Change*, (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1980) 77.

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