

Lydon, Sandy

# Tolerance for protests wore thin in 1972

## Vietnam War issue brought bloody confrontation

**I**T WAS NOON on Friday, May 1, two days after the Rodney King verdict was announced, and a large crowd of Santa Cruz High School students was assembled on the south side of the Front and Water Street intersection chanting and waving signs. Most of the kids were on the sidewalks, but some had spilled over into Front Street and for a time they blocked traffic. The demonstration had a sense of goodwill and respect about it. The students chanted and waved at passing cars, but nothing was thrown, and most of the drivers caught in the intersection took the momentary delay with patience and good humor.

It was the two policemen in the intersection who caught my attention. The afternoon was warm and both officers were in shirt sleeves. With smiles of resignation they directed traffic through the intersection and tried to keep the students out of the street. For the few minutes I was stopped at the intersection I saw no helmets, no anger, no nightsticks. A few drivers were inconvenienced for a couple of minutes, but the students were allowed to express themselves and then they dispersed. No harm done. A "typical Santa Cruz event."

As I sat there in my car, I remembered the bloody confrontation that occurred on this same spot almost 20 years ago to the day. Things have changed a lot around here in 20 years.

### Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

Everything was peaceful.

The anti-war momentum picked up after Nixon announced on May 8 that the United States was mining Haiphong Harbor. Student protests broke out all over the United States the following morning, and a large group of demonstrators

presented Harry with an initiative calling for the immediate pullout of all U.S. troops in Vietnam and an end to the bombing of the north. The board agreed to hold a special meeting the next night at the Civic Auditorium to hear testimony on the initiative.

The Civic was jammed that night, and Harry noted that unbeknownst to the assembled crowd, a large number of Tac squad officers were hidden behind the curtains ready to whisk the supervisors out the rear door should there be violence. "We weren't just sitting out there," said Harry.

After a lengthy and peaceful hearing, the board voted 3 to 1 to send Harry to Washington to ask President Nixon to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam. (Cress was the lone dissenting vote as an angry Dan Forbus had left the meeting before the vote was taken.) Paper bags were circulated throughout the crowd to raise Harry's air fare to Washington. The board majority made it clear that they were acting as individual citizens, but agreed to formally take up the anti-war initiative at the next regular board meeting.

That evening, after the meeting adjourned, all hell broke loose on the streets of Santa Cruz. What began as a peaceful candlelight parade on Front Street ended as a night of police batons and broken glass. Harry and his wife, Kay, joined the parade. Flanked by the Tac squad, the parade moved down Pacific Avenue. Neither the newspaper accounts nor Harry are certain what started the violence, but Harry remembered watching the officers beat a man with their batons in front of the St. George Hotel.

"The guy was on the ground and three officers just whomped on him for a while before leaving him there on the sidewalk," said Harry. The order was given to "clear the



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Henry Mello, with microphone, and Phil Harry, with striped tie, on the steps of the County Government Center, May 9, 1972, during a rally.

and simplicity of sending the chairman of the Board of Supervisors to Washington D.C. to ask the President to stop the war. Phil Harry had no illusions about what would happen when he got there. "I knew nobody was going to give me the time of day in Washington," he recalled.

Upon arriving in Washington Harry went to Burt Talcott's office (Talcott, a Republican, represented Santa Cruz County) where Talcott said that he could not arrange a face-to-face meeting with the President. California's Senator John Tunney did not keep his appointment with Harry, and it was only through the intervention of anti-war stalwarts Senators Harold Hughes, and Frank Church, that

the initiative found its way to the Senate floor where Cranston read it into the Congressional Record. Message delivered, Harry returned to California that same evening. "I knew that the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors did not have a direct role in foreign affairs," said Harry, "but by hearing out the crowd and taking a stand on the war, I am sure we helped keep the demonstrators in Santa Cruz from going on a tear."

**I**USUALLY mark the beginning of the dramatic changes in the county's recent political history with Phil Harry's election in 1970 and the creation of the first liberal board majority in the county's history. Depending on your politics you can praise or lament the suc-

ceeding 22 years of political change around here, but I don't think anyone misses things like the Night of the Batons.

**Where are they now:** Henry Mello now represents the county in the California Senate, while Ralph Sanson chose not to run for re-election to the board. Sanson now practices law in Watsonville. George "Hoot" Cress, now deceased, was defeated for re-election by Pat Litkey. Dan Forbus, who died last year, retained his seat on the board for many years. Phil and Kay Harry moved to San Diego in 1978, and Phil is the Assistant Public Defender for San Diego County.

*Sandy Lydon is on the history faculty at Cabrillo College.*



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Protesters and police clash on Front Street in Santa Cruz, May 11, 1972.

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## Protesters and police clash on Front Street in Santa Cruz, May 11, 1972.

**I**N THE old days, that crazy intersection now punctuated by the Town Clock was known as the Lower Plaza to distinguish it from the original (and Upper) Plaza on Mission Hill. Assembling and demonstrating on the Lower Plaza was a long-standing tradition in Santa Cruz, and such momentous events as President Lincoln's assassination, the end of the Civil War, and the end of World War I all saw large crowds assemble there. In the spring of 1972, however, Santa Cruz's tolerance for public demonstrations had worn very thin. The issue, of course, was the Vietnam War.

On April 15, 1972, President Nixon resumed the bombing of North Vietnam after a three year hiatus, and on Friday, April 21, 500 demonstrators assembled in front of the Post Office and then marched to the Air Force recruiter's office on Seabright. Though there was a large police presence on the second floor of the McHugh-Bianchi building across from the Post Office, ev-

blocked Highway 17 near Pasatiempo before they were removed by CHP and Tactical squad officers. The demonstrators then marched down to the County Government Center to place their concerns before the county Board of Supervisors, which was holding its regular Tuesday meeting.

Nothing represented the changes that rural, conservative Santa Cruz County had undergone better than the 1972 Board of Supervisors. The Board was chaired by liberal Democrat, Phil Harry, who was joined on many issues by Aptos attorney Ralph Sanson and Henry Mello from the Pajaro Valley. Live Oak's Dan Forbus and the San Lorenzo Valley's George "Hoot" Cress made up the conservative minority on the board.

**I**N a recent telephone interview, Phil Harry recalled that the Board agreed to meet the crowd out on the steps rather than risk such a large group in the govern-

ment paper accounts nor Harry can certain what started the violence, but Harry remembered watching the officers beat a man with their batons in front of the St. George Hotel.

"The guy was on the ground and three officers just whomped on him for a while before leaving him there on the sidewalk," said Harry. The order was given to "clear the streets" and officers ran down the street swinging clubs and knocking down both demonstrators and bystanders. Most observers said that the force used by the police was unnecessary.

The next day the violence continued, and when demonstrators appeared on Front Street they were attacked by baton-wielding police. More than 100 hundred protesters were arrested, including Pat Litkey, then candidate for George Cress's seat. The image of demonstrators being chased by baton-wielding policemen through the streets of Santa Cruz was a frightening one.

The following week, after a lengthy repeat of the testimony given at the Civic, supervisors approved the anti-war initiative on a 3-2 vote. Harry left the meeting and went directly to the airport to catch a plane to Washington to deliver his message to President Nixon. I remember being struck at the time with the wonderful naivete