

# Ronald Reagan and Student Unrest in California, 1966–1970

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The 1966 California gubernatorial campaign was supposed to have been about big government, welfare, and high taxation, but as the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan recalled:

after several weeks of the campaign I had to come back and say, “Look, I don’t care if I’m in the mountains, the desert, the biggest cities of the state, the first question is: ‘What are you going to do about Berkeley?’ and each time the question itself would get applause.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of student unrest on the Berkeley campus of the University of California brilliantly highlighted the populist themes of Reagan’s campaign: morality, law and order, strong leadership, traditional values, and anti-intellectualism. California higher education had, he argued, failed the heavily burdened taxpayer who financed the system and the parents who entrusted their children to it. Reagan’s adroit handling of this issue helped him win comfortably in 1966 and gain reelection in 1970. Yet during his first term, unrest escalated sharply. He was more effective at radicalizing students than at taming them. But this failure was unimportant to Reagan since, win or lose, his confrontation with students had enormously beneficial side effects: it embarrassed and weakened California liberals; it camouflaged

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1. *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 7, 1973.

education cuts; and most significantly, it allowed him to establish a nationwide reputation as a tough and dynamic leader.

The turmoil on California campuses in the 1960s, and the general subject of student protest, has received considerable attention from historians and social scientists.<sup>2</sup> Most studies agree that student protesters did more to alienate than to impress those outside the university community, but how politicians on the right took advantage of the public's alienation has so far not been examined in detail. In the case of Reagan, the issue is recognized by Lou Cannon and Gary Wills, but not given its due emphasis.<sup>3</sup> Cannon suggests that Reagan, in his approach to campus unrest, "was more restrained in his practice than he had been in his rhetoric."<sup>4</sup> While true to an extent, Cannon does not explain the reasons for this restraint. Wills's more cerebral study, although largely neglecting campus unrest, provides some insights useful to understanding the governor's approach—for instance, Reagan's penchant for pretense, his communication skills, and his attitude toward higher education. Some of the most discerning observations about Reagan's reaction to unrest are found in *The Year of the Monkey*, a fascinating memoir by William McGill, chancellor at the University of California, San Diego, during the period of crisis and later president of Columbia University.<sup>5</sup> This article draws on the insights of prior studies as well as original research to produce a closer examination of Reagan's handling of campus unrest. Despite his failure to control the turmoil, Reagan was able to manipulate the reactions of

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2. Fred Halstead, *Out Now!* (New York, 1968); W. J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War: The 1960s* (New York, 1989); Thomas Powers, *Vietnam: The War at Home* (Boston, 1984); Gerard De Groot, "The Limits of Moral Protest and Participatory Democracy: The Case of the Vietnam Day Committee," *Pacific Historical Review*, LXIV (1995), 95–119; W. R. Berkowitz, "The Impact of Anti-Vietnam Demonstrations on National Public Opinion and Military Indicators," *Social Science Research*, II (1973), 1–14; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, 1989); and J. J. Gustainis and D. F. Hahn, "While the Whole World Watched: Rhetorical Failures of Anti-War Protest," *Communication Quarterly*, XXXVI (1988), 203–216.

3. Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (New York, 1982), 147–154; Cannon, *Ronnie and Jessie: A Political Odyssey* (New York, 1969), 232–257; Gary Wills, *Reagan's America* (New York, 1988), 206, 318–319.

4. Cannon, *Reagan*, 149.

5. William J. McGill, *Year of the Monkey* (New York, 1982), see esp. 60–63, 80–83, 158–171 and 229–232.

both the university community and the general public in a manner enormously beneficial to his career.

Serious unrest first broke out at the University of California, Berkeley, during the Free Speech Movement protests in late 1964. A protracted strike ended when Governor Edmund G. (“Pat”) Brown ordered the arrest of 800 demonstrators on December 3, 1964. Brown thereafter found himself in an awkward predicament. The mass arrest had been enormously popular outside the university: the governor’s office received over 4,500 messages, with seventy-five percent of them praising Brown. But the system of university governance—designed to minimize political interference—allowed few similar opportunities for tough action. The governor was but one of twenty-four members on the university’s board of regents. Each of the nine campuses was an essentially autonomous unit headed by a chancellor who answered to the university president, not the governor.<sup>6</sup> Brown’s instinctive liberalism militated against the aggressive action which Reagan loudly promised.<sup>7</sup>

According to Reagan, “the people” made student unrest a campaign issue by repeatedly asking about it at public meetings he addressed:

the opposition tried to make out that I was persecuting the university for political purposes. I wasn’t. I had never mentioned Berkeley as an incident, or as an issue, until those question and answer sessions.... I learned that the people of this state had had a very, very deep and great pride in the university system. Because of that, they were very emotionally involved and disturbed with what was happening to what they thought was the great pride of California. My own position was born of the answers I gave to those questions.<sup>8</sup>

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6. There were eight ex-officio members, of whom the governor was one, and sixteen members appointed by the governor for terms of sixteen years. The campuses were located at Berkeley, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Davis, Santa Cruz, San Diego, Irvine and Riverside, with the San Francisco Medical Center included as a ninth campus.

7. In June 1961, Brown welcomed “this new, impatient, critical crop of young gadflies” who were protesting on campus. Box 36, Reagan Papers, Hoover Institution Library, Stanford, Calif. I am grateful for the help of the staff of the Hoover Library, and I am especially indebted to Pruda Lood, an exceptional archivist.

8. Ronald Reagan, “On Becoming Governor” (Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California, 1986), 21.

Stuart Spencer, the public relations specialist hired by Reagan to run his campaign, told a slightly different story: “we jumped on [student unrest] as an issue,” he recalled. “I think Reagan escalated it into an issue and it started showing up in the polls.”<sup>9</sup> Brown was unable to devise an effective response. “The university thing drove us nuts,” recalled Richard Kline, a Brown staffer. “It was just utterly strange. All these things happening around us and why couldn’t they be controlled?... It was a mystifying time, and we were totally unprepared to run for re-election in ’66. I don’t think we understood any of these things.”<sup>10</sup> According to Frederick Dutton, a Brown appointee on the board of regents, “the person who had the responsibility—Pat—had to see the problem more in grays than his outside political critics. Pat had the grays and Reagan had the black and whites.”<sup>11</sup>

The students, by their eccentric rascality, did much to bolster Reagan’s campaign. A dance on the Berkeley campus in March 1966 provided conveniently provocative material. As Reagan described it:

The hall was entirely dark except for the light from two movie screens. On these screens the nude torsos of men and women were portrayed, from time to time, in suggestive positions and movements. Three rock and roll bands played simultaneously. The smell of marijuana was thick throughout the hall. There were signs that some of those present had taken dope. There were indications of other happenings which cannot be mentioned.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Stuart Spencer, “Developing a Campaign Management Organization” (Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California, 1980), 31.

10. Richard Kline, “Governor Brown’s Faithful Advisor” (Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California, 1981), 25–26.

11. Frederick Dutton, “Democratic Campaigns and Controversies 1954–1966” (Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California, 1981), 146.

12. Cow Palace speech, May 12, 1966, box 48, Reagan Papers. Reagan’s description of the dance, repeated at every opportunity, appealed to the prurient sensibilities of his natural constituency. The dance was investigated by the California Senate Subcommittee on Un-American Activities, chaired by state Senator Hugh Burns. Its report concluded that the Berkeley unrest was part of a worldwide Communist conspiracy. California Legislature, *13th Report of the Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities* (1965). After an internal UC investigation, Chancellor Roger Heyns concluded that “there appears to have been several instances of genuinely unseemly behavior” at the dance, “but certainly not warranting the political outcry which ensued.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1966.

Reagan argued that the dance revealed a “leadership gap” at Berkeley:

this has been allowed to go on in the name of academic freedom. What in heaven’s name does “academic freedom” have to do with rioting, with anarchy, with attempts to destroy the primary purpose of the University which is to educate our young people?<sup>13</sup>

Academic freedom had little to do with students protesting or staging a controversial dance.<sup>14</sup> Yet to Reagan, it was the root cause of campus anarchy. The issue conveniently widened the net with which he ensnared those deemed responsible for Berkeley’s troubles. He recognized that he had little to gain from merely lambasting militant students. If, however, those students could be shown to be supported, or “indoctrinated,” by radical, or “Communist” professors, the problem could be magnified, and his call for tough action would seem more appropriate. And if the radical professors were defended—in the name of academic freedom—by liberal colleagues, then the list of enemies would grow conveniently longer. The UC administration could, in turn, be blamed for failing to uphold “the high and noble purpose of the University” and Brown for his “policy of appeasement...dictated by political expediency in this election year.”<sup>15</sup> From such small acorns of innuendo did the big oak of a political campaign grow.

Reagan promised that, if elected, he would appoint John McCone, the former chief of the Central Intelligence Agency, to head a commission to investigate why “the campus has become a rallying point for Communism and a center of sexual misconduct.” He further vowed to implement a “code of conduct that would force [faculty] to serve as examples of good behavior and decency.” Chancellors would be told “that it is your job to administer the University properly and if you don’t we will find some-

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13. Cow Palace speech, May 12, 1966.

14. Reagan tended to confuse academic freedom, which protected teaching staff, with freedom of speech practiced on a university campus. Witness his April 2, 1966, speech in San Jose, when he claimed that academic freedom “stops short of vulgarity and obscenity forced upon those that don’t want to hear it and certainly freedom of speech, when some Americans are fighting and dying for their country, must stop short of lending comfort and aid to the enemy.” Box 25, Reagan Papers.

15. “A Plan for Action” (speech announcing candidacy), Jan. 4, 1966; Reagan campaign news release, Sept. 9, 1966, *ibid.*

one who will.”<sup>16</sup> It did not matter that a governor had no such power, since the proposals, however spurious, embarrassed Brown and enhanced Reagan’s reputation as the dogged hero of the taxpayer outraged by campus unrest. His supporters cared little about the nuances of higher education policy; they simply wanted a governor who would address their fears. Yet those fears were largely Reagan’s creation. At this stage the turmoil was essentially confined to Berkeley, where activists constituted a minuscule proportion of students and faculty. In the midst of the unrest, Berkeley was voted the “best balanced distinguished university in the country” by the American Council of Education.<sup>17</sup> But this news made less appealing copy than lurid tales of sex, drugs, and communism preferred by the predominantly pro-Reagan press. “Reporters and editors possessed no experience enabling them to interpret what they saw,” complained William McGill, chancellor at UCSD.

They did not trust our explanations. Routinely they would check our views against the views of spokesmen for radical groups. What was printed was a mass of competing claims, making us seem more troubled and divided than we actually were.<sup>18</sup>

The liberal *Sacramento Bee* regretted how

the public has been saturated with the misadventures of the few at Berkeley. It has read of beatniks stumping the campus, of LSD parties, of promiscuity, even of the occasional Communist preachment by an infiltrator. It has become so concerned with the one that has strayed...it has lost sight of the 90 and 9...who represent the real student body on the campus; the solid, responsible core of young pursuing an education at one of the world’s best-ranked schools.<sup>19</sup>

Three weeks before the election, a Reagan aide admitted confidentially: “If the disorders boil into public prominence again...on balance it would be good for our campaign.” But

Some prediction of these disorders *before* they happen and emphasis on Brown’s ineptitude...may put him in a defensive position so he cannot

16. *Carpinteria Herald*, July 14, 1966; Cow Palace speech, May 12, 1966.

17. Berkeley finished ahead of Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Stanford. *Sacramento Bee*, July 12, 1966.

18. McGill, *Year of the Monkey*, 71.

19. *Sacramento Bee*, July 12, 1966.

capitalize on action he may be forced to take in the next several weeks. Since Berkeley and Higher Education are one of the public's greatest concerns, Brown cannot be allowed to, at this late date, pre-empt the role of saving the University from the radicals and the dissidents.

The memo claimed that the problem was "being heated up just so Brown can kick a few people off the campus and be a hero to the uninformed public."<sup>20</sup> In truth, it was Reagan who turned up the heat. Six days after the above memo, and undoubtedly in response to it, he urged the Berkeley branch of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to cancel a speech scheduled for October 29 by the civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael. Carmichael's appearance would, the news release claimed, "stir strong emotions and could possibly do damage to both parties."<sup>21</sup> The message to SNCC, released to all the major California papers, was a clever tactic, not unlike a red rag to a bull. No self-respecting radical group would bow to this type of pressure, yet by going ahead with the rally, SNCC cast a brighter light on Reagan's campaign. Carmichael cooperated by delivering a suitably militant speech, widely covered by the pro-Reagan press.

Reagan won the election by just under a million votes and, significantly, performed especially well in traditionally Democratic working-class areas.<sup>22</sup> Cognizant of his campaign promises, he immediately gunned for the University of California. Although he could not theoretically dominate the regents, he was confident that, since he represented "the electorate with 18 million people," he could bully them.<sup>23</sup> The first significant casualty was UC President Clark Kerr, a well-known liberal Democrat reviled by a faction of conservative regents from southern California. Just after the election state Superintendent of Public Instruction Max Rafferty, a Reagan supporter on the board, indicated that the much-vaunted McCone Commission might not be necessary if the regents "agree to fire Kerr as they should have done two years ago."<sup>24</sup> The decision to dismiss Kerr was taken at

20. BASICO staff to Ronald Reagan, Oct. 12, 1966, box 36, Reagan Papers.

21. Reagan campaign news release, Oct. 18, 1966, *ibid.*

22. Reagan polled 3,742,913 votes, Brown 2,749,174. Cannon, *Reagan*, 117.

23. Boalt Hall speech, n.d. [1966], box 25, Reagan Papers.

24. *San Diego Evening Tribune*, Nov. 25, 1966.

the January 20, 1967, meeting, the first attended by Reagan.<sup>25</sup> He apparently had no intention of forcing Kerr's removal so quickly, but a showdown became inevitable when Kerr sought a vote of confidence from the board, a move which alienated his key supporters.<sup>26</sup> Californians nevertheless interpreted the incident as evidence of their governor's determination to stamp his authority on the university.

As governor, Reagan's higher education policy played on the same populist themes and the same promises of aggressive action stressed during his campaign. "In all the sound and fury at Berkeley, one voice is missing," he warned. "And since it is the voice of those who built the University and pay the entire cost of its operation, it's time that voice was heard."<sup>27</sup> He was certain that the public "has...a remarkably clear view of the sources of campus disorder."<sup>28</sup> But a clear view is not necessarily a correct view. Reagan, like his public, did not really understand the disorder, but he did understand the gulf dividing the university community from ordinary citizens, and he did his best to widen the breach by enflaming prejudices on both sides. McGill recalled:

Unlike senior public officials in other states, Governor Reagan chose to exploit his role as an outsider in politics—voicing opinions that the public wanted to hear rather than softening public opinion to protect the state's educational institutions during a time of crisis.<sup>29</sup>

The following statement by Reagan to a Sacramento Bee interviewer in 1969 seemed calculated to inflame passions:

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25. The vote went fourteen to eight in favor of dismissal, with one abstention and one regent absent. Kerr was the absent regent. UC Board of Regents, Minutes, Jan. 20, 1967 (executive session), box 2, John H. Lawrence Papers, Hoover Institution.

26. This description of the event is supported by interviews with Elinor Heller and Robert Finch, both of whom were present at the meeting. Heller, "A Volunteer Career in Politics, in Higher Education, and on Governing Boards" (Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1983), 587–592; Finch, "Views from the Lieutenant Governor's Office" (Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California, ), 64. See also McGill, *Year of the Monkey*, 62. Reagan told McGill in 1978 that he was not in the room when the decision was made, which leaves a mystery as to how his vote was counted among those favoring dismissal. See UC Board of Regents, Minutes, Jan. 20, 1967, box 2, Lawrence Papers.

27. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 3, 1966.

28. Reagan to William Scranton, Aug. 21, 1970, box 48, Reagan Papers.

29. McGill, *Year of the Monkey*, 158.

There are too many in the academic community who consciously, or unconsciously, bare their contempt for the ordinary citizen who may not have had the benefit of a college education, but who is sharing a very heavy tax burden, some of which goes to pay the cost of professors' salaries and administrators' expense accounts.

The same taxpayer...is asking why violence and disruption are openly encouraged, or even tolerated, on the campus he finances—in the name of academic freedom.... He is wondering...why some instructors are able to use the classrooms to indoctrinate and propagandize his children against the traditional values of a free society in this country.<sup>30</sup>

However unfair to the university these statements may have been, they were accurate appraisals of the public mood. Because he understood that mood, Reagan profited politically from it.

Reagan was very good at communicating with “his” people. Supposedly “off the cuff” remarks echoed their chauvinism. On one occasion he told an audience how a group of protesters “were carrying signs that said ‘Make Love Not War.’ The only trouble was they didn’t look like they were capable of doing either. His hair was cut like Tarzan, and he acted like Jane, and he smelled like Cheetah.”<sup>31</sup> Sensational allegations proved useful in stoking paranoid fears. “I have a letter in my pocket from a professor,” Reagan stated in December 1968, “who asked that his anonymity be preserved because he fears for the safety of himself and his family.”<sup>32</sup> In 1969, he speculated that demonstrators arrested at San Francisco State University were all “either on parole or have records of previous arrests for prior activities of a similar nature”—the message being that sentencing had to be made stiffer.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the most outrageous allegation came in February 1969, when he claimed that thirty-five “Negroes” had attacked a university dean “with switchblades at his throat” forc-

30. Transcript of interview with *Sacramento Bee*, Oct. 26, 1969, box 6, Reagan Papers.

31. Transcript of *CBS Reports: “What about Ronald Reagan,”* Dec. 12, 1967, Miscellaneous Speeches and Scripts, 1964–74, Reagan Papers.

32. Reagan press conference, Dec. 17, 1968, box 31, *ibid.* If there was such a letter, it was probably sent by Hardin B. Jones, a professor of physics and one of Reagan’s faithful insiders on the Berkeley campus. See Hardin B. Jones Papers, Hoover Institution.

33. Reagan speech to Republican State Central Committee, Sacramento, Jan. 26, 1969, box 29, Reagan Papers.

ing him to admit them to courses.<sup>34</sup> A subsequent investigation could not substantiate the story, yet Reagan's original yarn received considerably more coverage than did the reports of its fabrication.<sup>35</sup> None of this should be surprising, coming as it did from a man who had a utilitarian attitude to truth. Lies were justified if they buttressed a greater good. But it is perhaps not fair to accuse Reagan of lying. The pretence was perfect because he was usually unaware that he was pretending.<sup>36</sup>

"Dissent must stop short of interfering with the rights of other individuals," Reagan argued in June 1968.<sup>37</sup> The following February he promised that he would protect the rights of those "legitimately trying to get an education."<sup>38</sup> This meant, in truth, the tyranny of the majority. He frequently praised the concept of freedom of speech, but when asked about Communist speakers on campus, he replied that "free speech does not require furnishing a podium for the speaker.... I don't believe you should lend these people the prestige of our University campuses for the presentation of their views."<sup>39</sup> These provisos severely limited effective protest, as Reagan intended. Civil disobedience was, for instance, out of the question since "you rarely if at all can do this without interfering with the basic rights of someone else, and this [you] have no right to do."<sup>40</sup>

The rights of the majority would be protected "at the point of a bayonet if necessary.... [T]here [is] no limit other than the limit as to the force that is available to me when someone's rights are involved."<sup>41</sup> The conflict with campus militants was, according to Reagan, a war. He referred to "moment[s] of confrontation" and the need "to make a stand."<sup>42</sup> Allusions to Hitler's Germany were frequent; radicals were compared to Hitler's Brownshirts, with whom there was "no longer any room for appeasement."<sup>43</sup>

34. *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, Feb. 19, 1969.

35. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb. 21, 1969.

36. A point discussed at length by Wills in *Reagan's America*. See, for instance, p. 111.

37. Transcript of *Face the Nation*, CBS Television, June 15, 1968, Miscellaneous Speeches and Scripts, 1964-74, Reagan Papers.

38. Reagan press conference, Feb. 6, 1969, box 31, *ibid*.

39. Reagan press conference, Feb. 7, 1967, *ibid*.

40. Transcript of *Face the Nation*, June 15, 1968.

41. Reagan press conference, Jan. 8, 1969, box 31, Reagan Papers.

42. Reagan press conference, Dec. 17, 1968, *ibid*.

43. Transcript of *Face the Nation*, CBS Television, May 4, 1969, Miscellaneous

Even more striking was Reagan's actual use of military power. The U.S. Army base at the Presidio in San Francisco was asked "to gather information upon which [Reagan] might base appropriate future plans"—in other words, to spy on students.<sup>44</sup> The most overt use of military force came during the People's Park demonstrations of May 1969 which resulted in one individual dead, another blinded, and hundreds injured. At one point, a National Guard helicopter sprayed CS gas indiscriminately on the Berkeley campus. The outcry in some quarters was tremendous,<sup>45</sup> and a subsequent inquiry judged that excessive force had been used.<sup>46</sup> But Reagan remained unrepentant: "there was no alternative. Whether that was a tactical mistake or not, once the dogs of war are unleashed, you must expect that things will happen and that people, being human, will make mistakes on both sides."<sup>47</sup>

Reagan's combativeness was an effective magnet for public support. The more aggressive the governor's response, the more serious the threat seemed and the more support Reagan received. The universities were presented as a battlefield in the Cold War: as in Southeast Asia, so too in Berkeley, the dominoes would not be allowed to fall. According to Reagan, campus militants, like the Viet Cong, were highly organized,<sup>48</sup> followed an alien ideology, employed guerilla tactics, and were funded by the communist bloc.<sup>49</sup> "This is guerilla warfare," Reagan argued,

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Speeches and Scripts, 1964–74, Reagan Papers; Reagan press conference, Dec. 17, 1968, box 31, *ibid.*

44. Edwin Meese to Lt. Gen. Stanley R. Larsen, Oct. 16, 1968, box GO127, *ibid.*

45. The usually conservative *Oakland Tribune*, May 22, 1969, called the action a "piece of arrant recklessness" and accused the Oakland police of introducing "a kind of stormtrooper philosophy into the Berkeley confrontation."

46. The grand jury of Alameda County on November 7, 1969, criticized all of the actors in the drama, but reserved special censure for the police. *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, Nov. 8, 1969.

47. Transcript of Reagan meeting with UC Berkeley professors, Sacramento, May 21, 1969, box 178, Reagan Papers.

48. Reagan press conference, Dec. 17, 1968, box 31, *ibid.*

49. "Why," Reagan asked, are "some of the leaders of these campus revolts who have no visible means of support...able to travel from Hanoi to Budapest, Havana?" Reagan press conference, June 16, 1970, box 32, *ibid.* He threatened to ask the Internal Revenue Service to investigate sources of student income, an idea given short shrift at a governors' convention in March 1969. The governors concluded that Reagan's proposal would constitute an intolerable level of federal intervention in state education systems. *Sacramento Bee*, March 3, 1969.

adding that “the only thing that can win in campus guerilla warfare is...you eliminate them by firing the faculty members and expelling the students.”<sup>50</sup>

“To advocate firm action is not political interference in our educational system,” Reagan argued. “Such action is necessary to preserve that system.”<sup>51</sup> This proviso allowed him a great deal of latitude. Prior to 1967, university campuses were essentially self-regulating sanctuaries with their own laws and police forces. Reagan found that he could bypass the chancellors’ authority if he claimed that, by intervening, he was fulfilling his “responsibility to the taxpayers of this State with regard to the protection of...state property.” Local police agencies were given the authority to intervene “when they believe things are getting out of hand and that the law is being broken.”<sup>52</sup> This policy removed from the decision-making process those most familiar with local problems and most able to negotiate with militants. Berkeley Chancellor Roger Heyns argued:

Because any particular disruptive episode on a given campus comprises a unique combination of history, circumstances, and participants, that specific campus is best able to determine how the episode should be handled and should be left free to handle it in its own way.<sup>53</sup>

The right of the police, or Reagan, to intervene also implied the opportunity to provoke. McGill concluded: “The presence of police on campus had the predictable effect of radicalizing large numbers of normally inactive but angry students.”<sup>54</sup>

Reagan’s rosy memories of his own student days inhibited his understanding of a massive, complex, sometimes impersonal institution devoted to excellence in research and graduate training.<sup>55</sup> Christian-oriented Eureka College, with a student body of

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50. *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, Feb. 21, 1969. The big difference between the campus war and Vietnam was that in California a satisfactory victory was attainable at relatively low cost.

51. Reagan press release, Nov. 20, 1967, box 48, Reagan Papers.

52. Reagan press conference, Dec. 12, 1967, box 31, *ibid*.

53. Roger Heyns, transcript of statement to the McClellan Committee, July 15, 1969, box 58, Berkeley Chancellor Files, CU-149, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

54. McGill, *Year of the Monkey*, 106.

55. As Richard Peairs, then West Coast Director of the American Association of University Professors, remarked: “Not only is the University of California not Eureka College—even Eureka College isn’t Eureka College anymore.” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 7, 1973.

187, was as far as one could get from the University of California. "My idea of higher education," he remarked, "is four years on a campus with red brick walls and you leave with a tear in your eye."<sup>56</sup> He did not hide his preference for private education on the small liberal arts college model.<sup>57</sup> This explains in part why he was notoriously stingy with research funding and scathing of those who put research before teaching. He made caustic remarks about universities "subsidizing intellectual curiosity" and was fond of pointing out that Michigan State University awarded masters degrees in the repair of band instruments.<sup>58</sup> This issue had nothing to do with the University of California, but the reference to it suggested that all state universities were similarly absurd. When asked about providing ethnic history courses, he surmised that the problem was one of bulk: "history has grown, fifty more years history than fifty years ago. So the books either have to get thicker or they have to skim down some of the things that some of us learned earlier." How was one to fit ethnic studies into an already overstretched curriculum? "I am not an educator. I don't know the way." But, he surmised,

some years ago one of the studios in Hollywood made a series of colored shorts, called "Historical Shorts." They portrayed the episodes or the incidents leading up to Patrick Henry's speech, Paul Revere's ride and a number of other things. I've wondered sometimes if film...could dramatize the contributions of the...so-called minority groups.<sup>59</sup>

Simplistic statements like these encouraged academics to underestimate Reagan, much to his advantage. But for the large number of Californians who found universities perplexing, his anti-intellectualism was an attractive political creed. The *San Diego Union* argued that "his success has been due to his willingness to

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56. *Ibid.*

57. Reagan was fond of giving important speeches on campus unrest at private colleges or to bodies representing such colleges. "However successful we are in balancing teaching and research in public institutions, this is a situation that offers the independent college a great opportunity—not only to further the cause of academic excellence, but to survive as an alternative choice for those seeking higher education." Reagan speech to Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, Los Angeles, April 30, 1973, box 29, Reagan Papers.

58. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 11, 1967; transcript of press conference, California Council for Adult Education, March 12, 1966, box 25, Reagan Papers.

59. Reagan press conference, Dec. 17, 1968, box 31, Reagan Papers.

speak his mind, to speak common sense. Common sense may be 'simplistic,' as the liberals like to call it. But the people understand it. And they can't act unless they understand the issues."<sup>60</sup>

Reagan expected professors to be like those he remembered at Eureka, in other words, teachers concerned "not only with the intellectual but also the moral development of the students."<sup>61</sup> **Student unrest was the fault of liberal teachers who had turned the universities into "staging areas for insurrection."**<sup>62</sup> **Professors were failing as moral mentors because they neglected teaching in favor of research.** In 1973 Reagan concluded that the main reason behind the unrest "was not Vietnam. It was not student power. The grievance mentioned most frequently was the student's inability to find the professor, the too common use of graduate teaching assistants in the classroom."<sup>63</sup> There was a grain of truth to this argument, but Reagan was more concerned with attacking liberal educators than with addressing students' needs.<sup>64</sup>

In January 1969, Reagan complained about left-wing professors "in the social sciences" who awarded credit if students "listen to one speaker but who urge them not to go listen to another."<sup>65</sup> No hard evidence was provided, but statements like this caused some academics to fear the introduction of a political test. On this issue Reagan was carefully ambiguous. When asked whether university teachers should take the loyalty oath, he replied that "a governmental body has the right to ask that of any employee."<sup>66</sup> But he angrily denied that he favored an actual

60. *San Diego Union*, Nov. 27, 1967.

61. Reagan press conference, Feb. 2, 1967, box 31, Reagan Papers.

62. Reagan, state of the state speech, Jan. 9, 1968, box 48, *ibid.* Reagan never missed an opportunity to drive home this message. During an interview on the *Joey Bishop Show*, he cynically turned a question on the assassination of Robert Kennedy and the need for gun control into an extended tirade against the "permissive attitude"—most evident on the campuses—which was destroying society. Transcript of the *Joey Bishop Show*, June 5, 1968, Miscellaneous Speeches and Scripts, 1964–74, Reagan Papers.

63. Reagan speech to Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, Los Angeles, April 30, 1973, box 29, *ibid.*

64. Columbia University professor Jacques Barzun and longshoreman Eric Hoffer told Congress on May 9, 1969, that "radicals are ruining universities and the fault lies partly with faculty members who abandon teaching in favor of plush research jobs." *San Diego Evening Tribune*, May 10, 1969.

65. Reagan press conference, Jan. 14, 1969, box 31, Reagan Papers.

66. Reagan press conference, Oct. 31, 1967, *ibid.*

political test. “The term is foreign to my vocabulary, the idea is opposite to my way of thinking, and, indeed, such a test would be illegal.” He was nevertheless concerned about “faculty balance on some of our campuses,” charging that “there are political tests in certain departments.... If a man is not far enough left, he doesn’t get hired.”<sup>67</sup> This was especially true “in the social sciences” where faculty were “shirking...responsibility and short-changing the students and subjecting them to indoctrination and not education.”<sup>68</sup>

In response to this alleged problem, Reagan asked regents at the October, 1968, meeting to seize powers which had devolved to the academic senate over the years. These included powers to govern the university community, to set and enforce moral standards, to hire and promote staff, and to select and supervise courses. When the regents refused to countenance such a massive extension of their authority, Reagan was livid. The people, he claimed, “are demanding that the *university be governed by Regents* who by virtue of the Constitution are accountable to the people for their actions.” Instead, he maintained, the regents

showed disdain, deliberate unconcern, for the interests of the people—some through timidity, some with an apparent lack of understanding of the nature of the university’s problems and even of their responsibility to the people, and, of course, by some who clearly feel accountable to no one at all.<sup>69</sup>

After the meeting Reagan concluded that the sixteen-year-term for regents was “a problem requiring serious study.”<sup>70</sup>

Reagan often threatened punitive action to frighten recalcitrant administrators, faculty, or regents into doing as he wished. During his first year as governor, the McCone Commission proposal was a loaded gun used to make the university community squirm. Whether the commission materialized de-

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67. Reagan press release, n.d. [1967], *ibid.*

68. Reagan press conference, Jan. 14, 1969, box 31, *ibid.*; see also his press conference of July 5, 1967.

69. Speech to Channel City Club, Santa Barbara, Oct. 21, 1968, box 29, *ibid.* The Regents had not in fact rejected the Reagan proposal, but instead tabled it for discussion at the next meeting. See Board of Regents, Minutes, Oct. 17, 1968, Bancroft Library, University of California.

70. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 27, 1968.

pended upon “a number of things, including the situation at the University,” Reagan explained. The new president might “make such an investigation unnecessary.”<sup>71</sup> These threats usually achieved their aim, as was the case with the proposal to review the length of the regents’ terms. That threat, when combined with the embarrassing controversy over whether to reappoint the neo-Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse at UC San Diego, convinced a sufficient number of regents to toe the Reagan line.<sup>72</sup> At the April, 1969, meeting, the regents voted 13 to 10 to reinstate the board’s right of veto in faculty hiring, a power voluntarily surrendered three years earlier.<sup>73</sup> Aware that the reform undermined the autonomy of the chancellors, which he had once praised, Reagan rather ingenuously argued that since it was the regents, not the governor, who had assumed new powers, the change did not constitute political interference.<sup>74</sup>

Reagan repeatedly threatened to dismiss professors who participated in illegal demonstrations, telling them in January 1968 to “obey the rules or get out.”<sup>75</sup> Nearly a year later, he was promising “before long months were up” to put in force “a concerted plan to get rid of those professors, who have made it apparent that they are far more interested in closing the school than they are in fulfilling their contract to teach.”<sup>76</sup> Yet he acted upon none of these threats. As Kerr reflected in 1973, Reagan was “quite restrained with the faculty. He wasn’t restrained with the students—using gas in Berkeley and all that—but he was with the faculty. A couple of serious academic freedom cases could have blown the place apart.”<sup>77</sup> Such a scenario Reagan could not afford. Despite all of his criticisms of esoteric research, he re-

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71. Reagan press conference, July 5, 1967, box 31, Reagan Papers.

72. The issue of political bias became especially prominent during the controversy over whether to reappoint the neo-Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse at UC San Diego. Reagan confessed that it would be easier to tolerate Marcuse “if the faculty was not so out of balance.” Reagan press conference, Feb. 25, 1969, box 31, *ibid*. The Marcuse controversy is discussed at length in McGill, *Year of the Monkey*, 38–112.

73. Board of Regents, Minutes, April 18, 1969, Bancroft Library.

74. “We have gone a long way toward trying to preserve and maintain academic freedom and autonomy on the campuses.” Reagan press conference, Dec. 12, 1967, box 31, Reagan Papers.

75. Reagan, state of the state speech, Jan. 9, 1968, box 48, *ibid*.

76. Reagan press conference, Dec. 17, 1968, box 31, *ibid*.

77. *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 7, 1973.

alized that the UC system was the foundation upon which California's high-tech industry was based. California received fully twenty-five percent of all defense department contracts.<sup>78</sup> Academic freedom cases might also have resulted in embarrassing defeats in the courts. It is important to realize that from Reagan's standpoint constant threats were more important than action, because he usually achieved what he wanted with mere bluster. The pretense of power impressed voters and frightened faculty. He genuinely did not want to assume control over the universities, being merely interested in intimidating and discrediting them. "He was an astute pragmatic politician who would not, when push came to shove, make stupid mistakes in dealing with the radicals," reflected McGill. "He simply wanted to make hay at their expense, and he knew that the general public was delighted with his militancy."<sup>79</sup>

Tuition charges were another issue Reagan used to impress the public. Although part of his strategy to cut the costs of higher education, they were presented not as a budgetary measure, but as one designed to control unrest. Tuition "might affect those who are there really not to study but to agitate, it might make them think twice about paying a fee for the privilege of carrying a picket sign."<sup>80</sup> Reagan's first attempt to introduce charges of \$250 at UC and \$180 at the state colleges was defeated by the regents on August 31, 1967, by a vote of 14 to 7—proof that they did not automatically bow to his wishes.<sup>81</sup> Although they rejected the principle of tuition, they allowed Reagan to raise the revenue he wanted by approving an open-ended "student charge." After the meeting, one regent summed up the case for conciliation: "You can't pick a fight with the governor. He can hurt you in a hundred ways." Another regent, who rejected this strategy, argued: "Even making one's bow to the absolute necessity of getting along with the governor, I don't think you can allow him to use the university as a personal political arena."<sup>82</sup>

78. Wills, *Reagan's America*, 376–377.

79. McGill, *Year of the Monkey*, 82.

80. Reagan press conference, Jan. 10, 1967, box 31, Reagan Papers.

81. "A Vision for Higher Education—Governor Reagan's Equal Education Plan" (Aug. 1967), box 74, Jones Papers; see also *Oakland Tribune*, Aug. 31, 1967.

82. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 11, 1967. The identity of the regents was not disclosed.

The tuition issue is but one example of the effect Reagan had on the once-independent board of regents. Previous governors had attended few meetings, perceiving a conflict of interest between the role of regent and the primary overseer of the state budget. Reagan used the meetings as a forum for personal publicity. He usually held a press conference before a meeting to announce what he wanted, and another after it to describe what he had achieved and to complain about the obstacles placed in his way. No one of opposite viewpoint on the board had the same charisma, authority, or access to the media to compete effectively with Reagan. An official at the August, 1967, meeting remarked that he had “never before” seen regents “argue basic educational policy questions in terms of what would be acceptable to the governor.” The board became “completely politicized” after Reagan took office, one regent complained: “The governor is popular, he comes to all the meetings, he becomes the focal point and everything that is said gets picked up and put into a political context.”<sup>83</sup>

The university was handicapped by its inability to communicate with the public as effectively as Reagan did. Recognizing this problem, Jay Michael, a member of UC President Charles Hitch’s staff, suggested to UC Berkeley Chancellor Roger Heyns on December 26, 1967, that the university should at least try to explain student unrest in terms understandable to the common people. He offered a draft of an article unashamedly written in a “style and form...not intended for the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences.”<sup>84</sup> Heyns submitted the draft to an adviser, Robert Cole, who rejected it, in the process confirming the university’s inability (or unwillingness) to speak the language of the people:

The style is hopeless. It is for the most part—sensational, melodramatic—a kind of minor league *Parade Magazine*.... There are also some minor lapses of grammar and so on, such as gratuitously split infinitives, etc.<sup>85</sup>

Heyns thanked Michael for his concern, but suggested that his

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83. *Ibid.* Reagan did not actually attend all the meetings, but he did attend far more than his predecessors.

84. Jay Michael to Roger Heyns, Dec. 26, 1967, box 62, Berkeley Chancellor Files, CU-149.

85. Robert Cole to Heyns, Feb. 5, 1968, *ibid.*

article was too sensational and dramatic. "Berkeley needs less of this rather than more," he argued. "We are, in fact, eager to keep out of the public eye (and the public press) rather than seek additional publicity."<sup>86</sup>

Thus, with virtually no effective competition, Reagan monopolized public opinion on the campus unrest issue. In June 1969, an *Oakland Tribune* poll showed eighty-four percent of Californians in favor of tuition charges. Respondents parroted Reagan in arguing that tuition would "weed out the non-serious student and promote respect for school property."<sup>87</sup> During his first term, Reagan's approval rating was always comfortably over fifty percent. Significantly, his popularity was at its lowest in the spring of 1968, when the campuses were most quiet.<sup>88</sup> His popularity surged in 1969 after prolonged confrontations with militant students at San Francisco State and Berkeley. The People's Park crisis demonstrated that even the most aggressive action against students inspired significant public approval.<sup>89</sup> These polls reflected a nationwide tendency to support tough action against militant students. Affirmation of the right of students to protest (even peacefully) steadily declined during the decade, to less than forty percent in 1969.<sup>90</sup> A Gallup Poll in March 1969 found eighty-two percent in favor of expelling militant students and eighty-four percent in favor of withdrawing their federal student loans.<sup>91</sup>

Public disgust with students was easily extended to professors. There were always sufficient deviants among the faculty

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86. Heyns to Michael, Feb. 19, 1968, *ibid.*

87. *Oakland Tribune*, June 21, 1969.

88. The polls were conducted by the Field Research Corporation and reported in the major California newspapers. *San Francisco Examiner*, April 25, 1968.

89. In August 1969, the California Poll still put Reagan's handling of student riots at the top of the approval list, with 35 percent of those polled so listing it. This was down from 50 percent six months earlier, but was still the second highest score Reagan received. In February 1970, when the campuses were significantly quieter than a year before, the handling of unrest was still at the top of the approval list, with 22 percent of those polled so listing it. *San Jose Mercury*, Feb. 18, 1970.

90. Republican research report, Feb. 7, 1968, box 8, Reagan Papers. See also *Sacramento Bee*, March 31, 1969.

91. *San Diego Union*, March 13, 1969. What is interesting is that this trend occurred at the same time as a significant decline in public support for the American effort in Vietnam; therefore, sympathy with one of the students' main causes was not translated into sympathy for the students.

to give credence to Reagan's complaints. The danger of even a few miscreants was recognized by President Charles Hitch who reacted angrily when some professors devoted lectures and seminars to a discussion of the Cambodia invasion in early 1970.

the faculty must come to realize, far more forcefully than they now do, the extent and the intensity of public displeasure with the University, and the consequences which seem likely if we do not somehow succeed in turning that displeasure back to trust and pride.<sup>92</sup>

University administrators did a great deal more about the problem of unrest than was widely known. In a speech at the Comstock Club of Sacramento on April 14, 1969, Heyns attacked the "myth...that the administration at Berkeley has failed to enforce the rules and to punish those who violate them." Impressive statistics on arrests, prosecutions, and fines were provided.<sup>93</sup> But the public was more impressed by Reagan's stories about weak administrators. The universities were further handicapped by the fact that the students were entitled to due process, and legal wheels turned slowly. As Richard Lyman, provost at Stanford, commented: "Americans...have a great appetite for quick, simple, drastic solutions to political problems. Laws do not work that way."<sup>94</sup>

"We are beset by dangers from the Left and from the Right," Hitch warned colleagues in June 1970. "Our hope and our current course lie in the moderate Center."<sup>95</sup> In fact, the moderate center had already been destroyed. Just as Reagan had successfully politicized the regents, so too he had politicized the people of California in a manner highly beneficial to his party and to his own career. The campus unrest problem was a much-needed shot in the arm for right-wing Republicans who had been humiliated by Barry Goldwater's defeat for President in 1964. As one moderate California Republican remarked:

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92. "Remarks of the President to the Assembly of the Academic Senate," June 15, 1970, Lawrence Papers.

93. Heyns, speech to Comstock Club, April 14, 1969, box 58, Berkeley Chancellor Files, CU-149.

94. *San Diego Union*, March 13, 1969. See also "Heyns Hits 'Myths' on Disorders," *Oakland Tribune*, April 15, 1969.

95. "Remarks of the President to the Assembly of the Academic Senate," June 15, 1970, Lawrence Papers.

For the first time, the Republicans don't see the rainbow ending in the middle of the spectrum. In the past, Republican conservatives, to survive, had to move toward the middle. But the law and order issue and the Reagan phenomenon have created a view that it is dangerous to occupy the middle.<sup>96</sup>

Campus warriors like Reagan who defied dissidents with bravado and muscle were like the war heroes of a previous generation; they benefited from the public's appetite for battling crusaders. Reagan was ideally poised to exploit the voter's taste for heroes: as an actor he knew how to strike just the right authoritative pose and to deliver the appropriate stern warning. His voice and facial gestures convinced voters that he meant business. Those most impressed were the blue-collar workers without a university education who resented the activities of the privileged elites on campus. A poll taken in 1969 found that "young people under 30, people who have been to college, and blacks tend to be much more sympathetic with student demonstrators than older, high school educated whites."<sup>97</sup> Any politician who appeared to take a firm line on student unrest stood to collect a windfall of support from "middle America."<sup>98</sup> And once Reagan attracted this group to his side, they never left him.

This windfall came Reagan's way in spite of his inability to control the unrest or indeed to alter fundamentally the shape of California higher education. He "never really won the big issues," argued Elinor Langer, a regent. But his failures were apparently immaterial. As the *Sacramento Bee* commented:

He has firmly attached himself to the public's highly emotional response to the complex problems dominating education and youth. He is not solving these problems. In fact he is not even trying. He is simply

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96. *Christian Science Monitor*, July 9, 1969.

97. *Sacramento Bee*, March 31, 1969.

98. Another beneficiary of this windfall was S. I. Hayakawa, who laid the foundation of his own career in the U.S. Senate with his tough action at San Francisco State University during turbulent 1969. See *Christian Science Monitor*, March 10, 1969: "Hayakawa...hasn't yet resolved the confrontation at his University. But a Gallop poll has voted him the most admired educator in the United States and each week's mail brings some 50 invitations to speak, on platforms all over the country." A poll in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 14, 1969, showed that Hayakawa had greater name recognition than any other California politician, excluding the governor.

making it crystal clear he is opposed to the rude and sometimes violent demonstrations which are so upsetting to the public.... At the moment the public seems willing to settle for this.<sup>99</sup>

Reagan had found an acceptable substitute for success. When challenged during his reelection campaign to explain why the turmoil was greater than in 1966, he was unapologetic, claiming that he had never suggested that he knew how to solve the problem. The fault, he maintained, rested with the “administration of the universities.... [W]e are limited to bringing about a restoration of order with force once disorder breaks out.... [T]he real solution lies on the campus.”<sup>100</sup>

Given the nature of public feeling, this was an issue on which Reagan could not lose. If he won a skirmish with students, Californians cheered, but if he failed to control the unrest, his failure merely underscored the threat of militancy and the need for greater vigilance. A poll taken in September 1969 found that a majority of Californians agreed that campus disorders were worse than when Reagan took office. But when asked about Reagan’s approach to campus unrest, 32 percent judged it about right, 39 percent not tough enough, and only 18 percent too tough. Even among Democrats, only one in four believed that Reagan was being excessively aggressive.<sup>101</sup> Reagan’s great skill was that he could sound aggressive without having to be aggressive. In April 1970, in response to trouble at the Santa Barbara campus, he remarked: “if it takes a bloodbath” to silence the demonstrators “let’s get it over with.”<sup>102</sup> There was a predictable outcry on the campuses and in liberal circles, but it is safe to say that the remark delighted Reagan supporters. He claimed it was merely a slip of the tongue, but that seems inconceivable, given one so astute at telling the people what they wanted to hear.

Yet one might ask what Reagan actually achieved. The evidence suggests that he radicalized students by ensuring that what the militants wanted to happen—namely violent confrontation—

99. *Sacramento Bee*, April 2, 1969.

100. Reagan press conference, March 3, 1970, box 32, Reagan Papers.

101. *Long Beach Independent*, Sept. 29, 1969.

102. *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, April 9, 1970.

did happen.<sup>103</sup> After the People's Park crisis, Reagan was nominated for honorary membership in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in recognition of his efforts in "the radicalization of the State of California."<sup>104</sup> Robert Newhall of the *San Francisco Chronicle* argued:

The Governor has created the unrest in the state, not controlled it, and I think he is doing it in a very surgical way.... There are people in this administration unscrupulous enough to wreck the University this way just to establish themselves better in power.<sup>105</sup>

Newhall's criticism seems excessive. Reagan was no Machiavelli; he simply acted in the way he sincerely believed was right. He never wavered from his conviction that an iron-handed response was singularly appropriate. "We have proven and proven to the nation that this is the answer and this is the only way to handle it."<sup>106</sup> He perhaps did not realize how prophetic those words were. **By turning a relatively small problem into a massive conspiracy to overthrow democratic society, and then by meeting that threat with maximum force, Reagan established himself as a leader worthy of national attention.** Shortly after his ouster, Kerr postulated that there was a "serious possibility" that Governor Reagan could become President of the United States.<sup>107</sup> By assuming such an aggressive stand on campus unrest, Reagan certainly made that possibility much more likely.

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103. This was an allegation levelled at Reagan by a Berkeley professor at a meeting in Sacramento on May 21, 1969. The professor was not identified in the transcript. Reagan predictably rejected the allegation. Transcript of meeting, May 21, 1969, box 178, Reagan Papers.

104. Reagan press conference, May 27, 1969, box 31, *ibid.*

105. *Berkeley Barb*, March 7–13, 1969.

106. Reagan press conference, April 9, 1969, box 31, Reagan Papers.

107. *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1967.