Obey the Rules

Or Get Out:
Ronald Reagan and
the San Francisco State College Strike

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Ituated in a decade where a larger global community experienced alarming turbulence, the strike at San Francisco State College embodied the unrest of a significant portion of the United States during the latter half of the 1960s. Spanning from November 1968 to March 1969, the strike involved a complex interplay between contending students, faculty, administrators, the Board of Trustees, and politicians. This interplay, rather than the actions of any single group or individual, became the primary force driving events. In the end, the issue of control over the educational process connected these different groups, with each seeking to gain hold of what others refused to relinquish. One particular actor, Ronald Reagan, played a multitude of roles as an ex-officio Trustee, politician, and a self-appointed voice of the people. Existing in both the background and forefront of events, Reagan’s talents lay in his ability to glide between these multiple positions when necessary, conceding and demanding power when appropriate. Positioning himself as California’s public spokesperson, Ronald Reagan utilized his roles as both Trustee and Governor to end the San Francisco State strike in a manner that would shift authority and control of the educational process from campus administrators and faculty to a centralized Board of Trustees subservient to the Governor’s “law and order” politics.

Scholars have yet to provide a critical analysis of Reagan’s role in the San Francisco State strike. However, a few historians have dealt explicitly with Governor Ronald Reagan and the academic environment of California during the mid-to late-1960s. In “Liberalism Overthrown,” Matthew Dallek examines the simultaneous rise of a conservative movement and fall of the old liberal order in the late 1960s. Set within the context of California’s 1966 gubernatorial race between Reagan and Edmund G. “Pat” Brown, Dallek explains that Reagan’s elevation into California politics arose from his manipulation of public fear during the University of California’s Free Speech Movement and his promulgation of a rhetoric embodying “law and order” and morality on campus. In
a similar fashion, historian Gerard De Groot's "Ronald Reagan and Student Unrest in California, 1966-1970" argues that Reagan's prominence in California's political landscape resulted from his exploitation of majority fears surrounding student protest of the 1960s. To demonstrate his point, De Groot explores how Reagan handled the University of California's post-Free Speech Movement experience through a mixture of "law and order" oratory and deliberate provocation of the liberal campus community. De Groot states that in combating the problem of student unrest on the Berkeley campus, Reagan underscored the populist themes of his gubernatorial campaign, such as "morality, law and order, strong leadership, traditional values, and anti-intellectualism." Not only did Reagan's handling of the Berkeley campus illicit a steady stream of public support, his actions solidified a successful reelection in 1970.

While Dallek and De Groot tend to mask their own biases with a veil of sincere objectivity, others examine the topic of Reagan and higher education in California through the lenses of their own political persuasion. In "Governor Reagan and Academic Freedom at Berkeley, 1966-1970," Garin Burbank takes an approach steeped in his own conservative bias. In Burbank's view, Reagan, the epitome of a triumphant citizen-politician, successfully achieved and maintained academic freedom at the University of California predominantly because of a strong and pragmatic grasp of conservative virtues. At the same time, student radicals' naïve political methods, coupled with liberal educators' equally callow educational practices, furthered Reagan's victories. From the opposite side of the political spectrum, Martin Smith's "Lessons from the California Experience" takes an unashamedly liberal perspective in examining Ronald Reagan's effect on higher education in California. In looking at Reagan in the context of the 1967 California gubernatorial campaign and the post-Free Speech Movement turmoil on the University of California campus, Smith examines three points in an argument highlighting Reagan's incapacities in the educational realm. First, Reagan's conservative nature prevented him from appreciating or truly supporting public institutions of higher education, as the conservative Reagan felt more comfortable with privately funded universities and colleges. Second, Reagan's passive personality and fiery political rhetoric allowed him to rely on his subordinates to make most policy decisions. These underlings proved equally inept in dealing with California's complex system of public education. Third, Reagan's lack of interest in higher education prevented him from understanding campus problems in an even general sense.

Although these scholars approach the topic of Reagan and higher education in California in a variety of ways, the historiography fails to assess Reagan's role in the San Francisco State College strike. Focused solely on the interaction with the University of California, scholars fail to examine the broader scope of Reagan's influence in the educational arena of both the San Francisco Bay Area and California. Moreover, scholars...
concentrate only on Reagan as the Governor of California, failing to take into account his roles as Regent of the U.C. system and Trustee of the state colleges. Like Dallek’s perspective, my analysis of Ronald Reagan centers on how a conservative politician seemed to survive and thrive in a “radical” environment commonly associated with the successes of the New Left and radical protest. Whereas Dallek and De Groot focus on how Reagan’s treatment of campus unrest affected the power struggle between liberals and conservatives solely in the realm of state politics, this essay will focus on the power struggle within the campus itself. After all, one common element among the divergent parties involved in the San Francisco State strike was the struggle for sovereignty, autonomy, and power in the educational process. Students from groups like the Black Students Union (BSU), the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), coupled with faculty members of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) local, attempted to acquire a greater degree of control over their own educational experiences. On the contrary, Ronald Reagan, among others, wanted to shift power in the opposite direction. As a result, Governor and Trustee Ronald Reagan maneuvered his power through the strike with the purpose of securing educational authority and influence for himself and a loyal Board of Trustees in a centralized off-campus arena.

Although Ronald Reagan’s political roots embodied the liberalism of the New Deal era, his vehement anti-communist stance and dislike of government’s regulatory relations with big business drew the Hollywood actor to the right of the political spectrum in the late 1950s. As authors Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin point out, “Reagan adeptly turned the rhetoric of the New Deal on its head. He spoke with the same reassuring empathy and scorn for unearned favors from government that had once helped liberals gain the allegiance of working-class whites, both North and South.” When Reagan ran for the governorship of California in 1966, he presented himself as a citizen-politician free from political and civil attachments, despite what Isserman and Kazin consider “close ties to the [Barry] Goldwater ring of the GOP and the financial backing of a ring of wealthy businessmen from the Los Angeles basin.” With a campaign focused on the utilization of law and order to combat such incidents as the Los Angeles Watts riot of 1965 and the continuing turmoil at the University of California at Berkeley, Reagan unified the Republican Party, creating a mainstream appearance for a party oftentimes associated with conservative extremism. In a race against the two-year incumbent Edmund G. “Pat” Brown, liberals believed Reagan had no chance of beating the governor, who committed himself wholeheartedly to California’s advancement. To their dismay, the Republican candidate won a landslide victory.

In a debate between Brown and Reagan during the 1966 gubernatorial race, the mediator asked Reagan how the ongoing student distur-

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bances at the University of California at Berkeley differed from his own involvement in campus protest. In his autobiography, Where's the Rest of Me?, Reagan told the story of how, as a member of a strike committee at Eureka College (III.), he shut down the college and demanded the resignation of the campus president after the economic effects of the Great Depression forced the president to drastically change the curriculum. In answering the mediator’s question, the Republican candidate replied, “This is like comparing Castro’s take-over of Cuba with the American Revolution.” For Reagan, the fundamental difference between his own admirable participation in student protest and the new era’s educational unrest lay in the fact that campus turmoil in the 1960s centered on a minority group of dissident students and faculty, depriving a campus majority of their educational opportunity. His involvement at Eureka College, on the other hand, comprised the concerns and demands of a righteous majority. Regardless of how he differentiated the two experiences, campus conflict would plague Ronald Reagan’s first four years in office as turmoil at San Francisco State College came to a boil.

If Ronald Reagan’s gubernatorial election came as a shock to many, his ideas for the future of education in California posed an obvious change of pace from Governor Brown’s instinctive liberalism. During his gubernatorial campaign and his early days in office, Reagan spoke of the “Creative Society,” a political belief in less government and bureaucracy. This conservative outlook supported publicly subsidized universities and colleges only when the private sector failed or was unwilling to finance educational institutions. For education, the “Creative Society” immediately created a tuition system and a string of budget cuts, ideas foreign to the heavily subsidized higher education system in California. Both these plans were not easily implemented. While the tuition proposal eventually became a student fee palatable to many, the budget cuts faced significant opposition. For Glenn S. Dumke, chancellor of the California state college system, the budget cuts represented “a most serious problem.” Dumke stated that the budget cuts could only be accommodated through limited enrollment and a cutback in student programs and services. Reagan eventually limited these cuts after an agreement to extract new student fees enabled him and the state legislature to trim less budgetary fat. These issues represent a precursor to Reagan’s role in the San Francisco State Strike itself. Even before assuming office, Reagan took the reins and attempted a new course. Dissatisfied with California’s higher education system, Reagan sought to make large and immediate changes that fit into his conservative framework. These efforts provided the campus community with a glimpse of larger changes to come.

As an ex-officio member of both the Board of Trustees of the California state colleges and the Board of Regents of the U.C. system, Reagan had an important share of power in determining the direction of higher education in California. The Master Plan for Higher Education,
implemented on December 18, 1959, created a Board of Trustees and removed the State Board of Education from control. The Governor, also a Trustee, had the power to appoint Trustees, who possessed the ability to appoint the college system's Chancellor. As the Governor had the power to appoint officials with his own political persuasion to a sixteen-year term, he was able to influence their course of action. However, Reagan made it clear from the start that his authority as both Governor and Board Trustee would reflect the wishes of the public as a whole rather than his own political interests: "Similarly, when I sit with the trustees of the state college system, at the request of the legislature, I consider myself merely one trustee among twenty-one... [I]n this way the public interest in California can be upheld without undue political interference," stated Reagan in 1969. Although Reagan portrayed himself as just one Trustee with one vote, he did not play a passive role as events started to snowball on the San Francisco State College campus in late 1967.

Reagan's reaction to the events leading up to the San Francisco State strike provided an indication of his actions to come. On November 6, 1967, several African-American students assaulted James Vaszko, editor of the Gater—a student newspaper—for writing a disparaging article concerning the activities of the BSU. A few weeks later, the college Board of Appeals and Review suspended Vaszko's assailants to the dismay of a small group of protesting students. On December 6, their anger reached a boil as students disputing the black students' suspension broke into and occupied the Administration Building on campus. Rather than calling in the police, College President John Summerskill decided to close down the campus.

The Governor's response exemplified his "law and order" political style during the remainder of the strike. A day after Smith closed the campus, Reagan sent a communication to the Regents of the University of California and the Board of Trustees to make clear his desire to establish guidelines for campus administrators to follow during any campus disturbance. These guidelines consisted of four principles. First, campus administrators would not tolerate campus violence and vandalism. Second, local police agencies had jurisdiction over the facilities of the colleges and universities. Third, during experiences of criminal activity, campus officials, including administrators and faculty, were to notify and cooperate fully with local police. Finally, campus administrators were also to notify local police agencies if they received advance notice of anticipated criminal conduct. This call for "law and order" that dictated the manner in which campus administrators and officials were to operate in times of campus disturbances is an early example of Reagan's attempts to influence the Board of Trustees to reign in the autonomy of the campus administration. The guidelines argue that campus administrators and faculty should relinquish control over campus disturbances to law enforcement immediately, to support Reagan's demands for law and order.

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Immediately following Reagan’s call for guidelines, the Trustees held a meeting in Los Angeles on December 9 to discuss matters at San Francisco State. At the meeting, the Board, including Reagan, declared a state of emergency on the campus and adopted resolutions similar in nature to Reagan’s proposals. While expressing the desire to avoid a seemingly fortified campus, the Board decided the legal responsibility for law and order belonged with the local authorities. The Trustees also curbed the school administration’s discretionary power, ordering suspensions or dismissals of students and faculty who used force and violence at the college, thereby circumventing the normal operating procedures of the administrators. Moreover, the Board requested a Task Force Committee to evaluate Summerskill’s actions and to provide recommendations as to his future position as president of the college. However, Reagan did express general happiness with the president’s dealings with the continuing campus unrest at San Francisco State. A resolution from the Trustees’ meeting on January 25, 1969 attests to Reagan’s sentiment, although, ironically, Reagan was not present. At this time, the Board unanimously passed the following statement by Trustee Donald M. Hart, chairperson of the Task Force Committee: “I now propose to the Board that Dr. Summerskill’s service . . . merits his continuance in this office and that the Board give him its cooperation, confidence, and support.”

Summerskill’s remaining time as president exemplifies the changing power struggle embodied within Reagan’s policies towards education. One month later, on February 22, 1968, Summerskill announced his resignation, charging that Reagan’s administration created a form of higher education “eroded by political interference and financial starvation.” More specifically, Summerskill accused Reagan of lacking interest in higher education, as the Governor’s budget cuts made it impossible to maintain campus operations at a normal level. In terms of what Summerskill considered an encroaching political administration, he stated, “The government and the trustees have to decide whether they are going to run the state colleges or set policy and place their confidence in the professionals to manage the campuses.”

Although Summerskill had resigned, he—still—faced another round of campus strife before his resignation became effective in September. In early May, the TWLF, a newly formed coalition of minority student groups, created by Sociology Professor Juan Martinez, brought 200 minority high school students to campus to demand waivers of admission requirements for the fall semester. Subsequently, at the end of the school year, the administration notified Martinez of his dismissal. Shortly thereafter, on May 21, nearly one hundred students occupied the Administration Building. With the support of the TWLF, the students voiced a series of demands of the administration: to reinstate Professor Martinez, to create a special admissions program to recruit “third world” students into the college, to hire “third world” faculty to facilitate the program, and to remove the Air

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Force ROTC from campus. Such activism did not please the Chancellor or the Trustees, especially Reagan. Summerskill, unable to accommodate the students' demands, became embroiled in a power struggle between his superiors and the students. At this point, Summerskill reached his limit. On May 25, 1968, the President quit his job and boarded a plane for Ethiopia, some three months before his official resignation took effect.17

Up to this point, Reagan remained quiet concerning the campus activities leading up to Summerskill’s flight. A month earlier, for example, his educational adviser, Alex C. Sheriffs, contacted the Governor concerning a March campus demonstration opposing the campus Air Force ROTC. Reagan’s response reveals his detachment from the situation and provides an example of his renewed interest: “This is really something and [the demonstrators] apparently got by with little notice.”18 With growing unrest on campus, Summerskill’s early leave of office forced Reagan and the Trustees to quickly find a replacement. However, the situation did not alarm the Governor, who had expressed a growing displeasure with Summerskill’s management of the campus during the last few months of student protest. During a Board meeting immediately following Summerskill’s departure to Africa, Reagan made this point clear. George D. Hart and Theodore Meriam reported that Chancellor Dumke dismissed the President after consultations with the Trustees. Dumke rejected these accusations. Regardless of the actual events, Reagan’s response rang clear: he expressed his pleasure with Dumke’s actions given Summerskill’s inability to handle the situation properly.19

Five days after Summerskill walked off the job, the Board of Trustees appointed a new President of San Francisco State College, Dr. Robert R. Smith. Before Smith had a chance to settle into his new position and assess the situation on campus, Reagan took the lead again in directing the Board of Trustees to reclaim what he considered their proper leadership. Twelve days after Smith’s appointment, Reagan sent a letter to the Trustees, addressing himself as Governor of California and posing a series of questions regarding the problems he had with the manner in which the Board, the campus administration, and the faculty had dealt with San Francisco State up to that point. The letter concluded with a final powerful remark: the Board must reassess its own goals and move to action in a timely manner by changing the “degree to which they have delegated away responsibility and abandoned principle.”20

The power struggle that encircled Summerskill did not simply end with the election of a new president. Instead, George Mason Murray, a graduate student and Black Panther Minister of Education, heightened tensions for everyone involved with the campus. On September 10, the English Department at San Francisco State hired Murray as a teaching assistant. A few weeks later, rumors surfaced about an alleged speech in which Murry called on African American students to bring guns to camp

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pus for the purpose of self-defense. The Trustees met to discuss the matter on September 26. The Board, in an eight-to-five vote, passed a resolution requesting President Smith to reassign Murray to non-teaching duties. A day later, Smith said he doubted whether he should honor the "request." After a month of indecision, Chancellor Dumke, upset with Smith's blatant refusal to honor the Trustees' request, ordered Smith to suspend Murray. After wavering, Smith finally suspended the graduate student.21

This action served as an important catalyst for disgruntled students. The BSU, joined by the TWLF, had been attempting, in vain, for years to convince the college to allow for a larger degree of self-determination and autonomy in their education. This removal of an African-American teacher espousing themes central to the BSU/TWLF struggle was the last straw. Five days later, on November 6, 1968, the student strike began. The BSU and the TWLF—who lead the strike—offered fifteen demands, including a Black Studies Department within a School of Ethnic Studies, fifty full-time faculty positions for the department and school, the reinstatement of Murray, and the admission of all non-white students who applied to the college in the upcoming fall semester. During the next week, strikers employed what some observers called "the strategy of the flea," disrupting the College's normal functions by disrupting classes and igniting fires, among other disturbances.22 Following Reagan's plan, when students marched on the Administration Building, President Smith called the police for help. As confrontations between police and students turned violent, Smith decided to close the campus for one week on November 13, 1968.23

With the strike in full swing and the campus shut down, Governor Reagan assumed a pivotal position. Reagan used oratory and rhetoric equal to that of the strikers in an attempt to force the reopening of San Francisco State. In a public statement made a day after the President shut down the campus, Reagan expressed shock and dismay at the shutdown. For Reagan, Smith's decision was "an unprecedented act of irresponsibility," as a school administration should never deliberately abandon a leadership position provided solely by the people.24 The reopening of the campus was absolutely essential for Reagan. If students insisted on disrupting the campus and if teachers failed to honor the trust of the people in educating their children, Reagan stated, "[the striking students and supportive teachers] will have to get their educations somewhere else."25

For Reagan, the campus administration and faculty, led by President Smith, simply fueled the fires of violence at the College by failing to follow through with orders from their superiors. In reaction to Chancellor Dumke's demand to suspend Murray, the Academic Senate at San Francisco State called for Dumke's resignation. For many faculty members, the Chancellor's actions usurped the normal disciplinary powers from the administration. Reagan responded, characterizing such threats
as a ridiculous manipulation of academic freedom achieved through the coercion of the administrative personnel out of self-interest.  

The reasons behind the campus closure revealed to Reagan the need for new direction in leadership. Campus administrators and faculty, he believed, had wrongly reacted to the violence of a few in a desire for an easy way out. In a public statement on November 16, three days after the closing, Reagan called for new leadership in place of a wavering administration. In Reagan’s plan for law and order, the Board of Trustees would fill the leadership vacuum, while the local police would implement orders through force. Speaking as Governor and voice of the people, Reagan believed that the people of California now looked to the Board of Trustees for direction, as the campus shutdown highlighted the Board’s responsibility to the public to take “whatever measures are necessary” to reopen the school.

In a special meeting of the Board on November 18, Reagan and the Trustees gathered to assess the problems and put together a plan of action. During the meeting, Reagan, once again, demanded the opening of the campus “by any means necessary,” disregarding President Smith’s pleas to approach the volatile situation with only minimum policing. In the midst of the discussion, a member of the Academic Senate read a statement stating its full support of Dr. Smith’s campus closure. Pleading with the Trustees to allow the College to use normal operating procedures, the statement expressed the need to reassure the public that “the suspension of formal classes was not an act of irresponsibility, but a genuine response to a disturbed state of affairs that made the continuation of formal teaching itself an irresponsible act.” Shortly thereafter, the Board ignored such sentiments and passed Resolution 68-11, directing Smith to reopen the campus immediately. The Board also announced that no negotiations with striking students would occur, except through the ordinary channels of communication, and not during a time of distress. The bill’s passage signified a definite power shift. The Board now established the boundaries of Smith’s future actions. During the meeting, Reagan stated that the resolution simply endorsed “what has been the status quo for a good many years” and established a delegation of authority rather than a usurpation of power.

While Governor Reagan expected the college administration to abide by the Trustees’ resolution, reaction from on campus as well as the public sidetracked the Governor’s intentions and led to a showdown between Smith and Reagan over campus jurisdiction. Democratic Assemblyman John L. Burton of San Francisco questioned Reagan’s commitment to his position, suggesting that Reagan escort the first student to class. Faculty members expressed similar reservations. Richard Axen questioned Reagan’s purpose in what the professor termed a battle for power as the Governor attempted to “nip in the bud student power, faculty power, and black power all at once.”

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Instead of reopening the campus to classes, the faculty, with the recommendation of President Smith, set out to establish a series of convocations to discuss the main issues behind the strike and possible solutions. With the college shut down since November 13, the first convocation began seven days later on November 20. In reaction, Reagan promised reporters prompt action to force disobedient faculty members back into the classroom if they did not observe the Trustees’ orders. However, during the convocation, police and demonstrators continued to clash. With such violence prohibiting any sense of normalcy on campus, President Smith refused to obey Reagan and the Trustees’ orders, and kept the campus open only for the continuing convocations.32

When the Board of Trustees met for a special two-day meeting on November 25, they did not foresee President Smith’s next move. Stating his inability to reconcile the growing conflicts between the Trustees, students, faculty, and political forces of the state, Smith offered his resignation, which the Trustees accepted. With Reagan emphasizing the voluntary nature of Smith’s departure, the Trustees adopted a series of resolutions affirming strict penal regulations for the mounting violence on campus.33

However, the Trustees had to deal with one more issue: a suitable replacement to fill Smith’s vacancy. Ultimately, Governor Reagan desired a president who would undoubtedly follow the Board of Trustees’ guidelines. For Reagan, the continued closing of the campus and the convocations represented a disgraceful situation and simply spawned further vacillation. In his view, the College administration and the Academic Senate were acting like children in catering to the demands of dissident students. At an impromptu press conference during the Board’s two-day meeting, Reagan stated, “It is time the College administration and the Academic Senate acted in an adult manner and put this thing in its proper perspective.”34 Reagan wanted changes on campus to restore order and open the classrooms. For instance, Reagan called upon the state legislature “to take back into Government some of the authority over the college system.”35

In order for that to happen, the Board of Trustees required a more compliant president. Allied with a new campus president, Reagan could then be assured that his methods would be implemented on campus. They found their man in Dr. S. I. Hayakawa, the new acting President of San Francisco State College, an administrator embodying Reagan’s politics of law and order. Reagan and Hayakawa had not met before the two-day meeting of the Board of Trustees. After learning that Smith had quit his position, Reagan, knowing that Hayakawa backed an open college policy, suggested the acting president as a replacement. Other Trustees proposed alternative candidates, but it was clear to many that Reagan wanted Hayakawa. Since they had drafted a resolution demanding an open college, the Trustees needed someone to do their bidding. During the meet-

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ing, Chancellor Dumke called Hayakawa on the phone to alert him of his nomination. Upon returning to the meeting, Dumke stated Hayakawa would accept the position with certain strings attached. Jokingly, Dumke said the strings were the very issues passed by the resolution, such as providing law and order on campus, and disciplining dissident students and faculty. Delighted, Reagan replied, “We’ll not only go along with the strings but we’ll even forgive him for Pearl Harbor.” Reagan had found his man. The Governor’s statement obviously reflects his narrow-minded perspective of Japanese Americans some thirty years after World War II. Moreover, Hayakawa’s ethnicity must have played a large role in Reagan’s persistence in hiring the Japanese-American semanticist. For Reagan and other conservatives, Hayakawa represented a minority member supportive of the status quo. With such a figure on his side of the conflict, Reagan believed he possessed yet another advantage in his attacks on dissident minority groups like the BSU and the TWLF.

When the campus opened on December 2, 1968, Hayakawa demonstrated just how seriously he wanted law and order. After striking students placed a sound truck in front of the campus, and pushed for the continuation of the strike, the new President jumped onto the truck and tried to rip the wire from the speakers, causing heated confrontations between students, faculty, and their new administrative leader. For the next few days, Reagan greeted with joy the reopening of the campus and Hayakawa’s actions. In a publicly televised statement on December 3, Reagan congratulated the administration, faculty, and students for resuming and attending classes in addition to supporting what he considered the valiant efforts of Dr. Hayakawa. As Reagan stated, the thousands of telegrams and letters showing support for both the Governor and Dr. Hayakawa demonstrated the fact that the great silent majority on campus and in the state of California would not stand for anything less than the pursuit of orderly education over anarchy. Immediately, Reagan and Hayakawa seemed to have a good working relationship. As Dr. Hayakawa stated, “in all good management, I will report to the Governor who has offered me any help I need.”

With violence between students and police intensifying following Dr. Hayakawa’s appointment, the strike took a different path. Many faculty members belonging to the American Federation of Teachers Local 1352 (AFT) began to take action. The union voiced its anger concerning the Trustees’ unwillingness to allow negotiations with the student groups to bring an end to the strike and the violence on campus. In response, Governor Reagan’s “Report to the People” on December 8, 1968 made his intentions clear. Criticizing campus disorder, Reagan refused to negotiate with students or faculty as long as the strike disrupted normal campus activities. Reagan also stressed that the Trustees governed the college campus, not a coalition of students and the Academic Senate.

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Without hope of negotiation, the campus AFT, on December 11, sought strike sanctions from the San Francisco Labor Council. However, these efforts spurred others in the community to try to reach a settlement. San Francisco Mayor Joseph Alioto formed a citizen's committee for this reason. Rather than grant immediate strike sanctions to the AFT, the Labor Council called in labor arbitrator Ronald Haughton. Backing Reagan's statements, the Board of Trustees rejected any local attempts for mediation. Regardless, Haughton, Alioto, and others supportive of negotiations continued pushing for a resolution to the conflict. On December 13, Hayakawa closed the campus for Christmas break one week early due to continued campus violence. Although this response was similar to President Smith's actions earlier in the year, Reagan and the Trustees did not protest. Instead, the Trustees, without the support of Reagan, agreed to send a number of Trustees and their representatives to meet with AFT members, the Labor Council, and Dr. Hayakawa in order to hear grievances. The intermittent three-week meetings proved unhelpful to those interested in a quick and effective solution.

Despite the desires of some participants in the meeting to find a settlement to the strike, it became evident that the Trustees and their representatives came only to discuss, not to execute, an end to the crisis. While meetings began, Governor Reagan issued public statements making clear that he did not see appeasement as an option and that the police would continue with their business on campus to keep the college running and to protect those who really wanted an education. Reagan even suggested a plan to fire professors more interested in closing down the college than upholding their contracts to teach, stating that the overwhelming majority of the faculty opposed the actions of the minority dissidents. With Reagan's public clamor, the hopes of the parties at the negotiation meetings quickly sank. To make it worse, a group of Trustees not present at the discussions met on December 18 to pass a decision suspending or dismissing outright all student and faculty members participating in or threatening violent disruption on state college campuses.

Nevertheless, the discussions continued with each party secretly planning its next move. While the Labor Council realized it would probably have to grant the AFT strike sanctions soon, the union's leaders, such as Art Bierman, began public relations work to explain the AFT's position in the strike and to label Governor Reagan as one of the prime road blocks to preventing a viable solution. In a newspaper ad with the headline reading, "We Need Your Help. Don't Let Mr. Reagan Turn S. F. State into an Orange County College of the North," Bierman attacked Reagan's imposition of his will on San Francisco State, calling the politically appointed Trustees "absentee rulers." Despite three weeks of sporadic meetings, the Trustees remained intransigent. With the possibility of negotiations frozen for the indefinite future, the San Francisco State College local of the AFT 1352 went on strike the first day Hayakawa reinstated classes on January 6, 1969.

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As the first teacher’s strike in California’s history of public higher education, the AFT represented a segment of the faculty’s grievances against a power shift that they felt hopeless to control. Like the students, sovereignty and autonomy over their involvement in the educational process was an important aspect of their lives. Bent on dictating the interactions between students, faculty, and administrators, the Governor and the majority of Trustees worked to weaken this control. Reagan’s idea of maintaining law and order at all costs ran counter to the views of the AFT strikers. In an airport interview in Sacramento the day before the AFT went on strike, Reagan made his point clear, stating the campus must be made safe for students who wanted to learn, and faculty who wanted to teach, “at the point of bayonet if necessary.”44 During his “State of the State” address to the California state legislature a day later, Reagan again reiterated his policy and goals concerning the issues of the strike, lashing out at campus provocateurs he considered “criminal anarchists and latter-day Fascists.”45 From Reagan’s viewpoint, the striking students and faculty spoke for a minority and did not represent the silent majority on campus. Because he believed education exemplified a public privilege and not a right, Reagan swore to do whatever it required to protect those who wanted to participate in the educational process.46

As a side note to such a process, Reagan expressed a desire that exemplified this power struggle on campus. He asked the state legislature to help him consider whether shorter terms for the Regents of the university system and the Trustees of the college system would better protect campuses across the state. Of course, shorter terms meant more appointments for Reagan, which would have inevitably led to a larger amount of political influence and less diversity in the governing boards of higher education in California had the legislature not rejected the plan.47

Faced with such a challenge, the AFT presented its list of demands to the President and his administration, the Board of Trustees, and the Governor, in an attempt to bring balance to what the AFT considered a diminishing sense of control over its responsibilities. From President Hayakawa, the AFT wanted the resolution and implementation of the BSU and TWLF demands, educational reforms pertaining to grievance procedures, and amnesty for all faculty, students, and staff participating in the strike, among other items. The demands the AFT directed at the Trustees included a promise from the Trustees to accept all agreements with the President and the union, removal of the campus disciplinary rules passed by the Trustees during their meeting on November 26, the creation of specific funds for the maintenance of existing teaching positions, and lighter work loads. Concerning this last request, the AFT also demanded Governor Reagan appoint a special joint committee of the California State Assembly to oversee negotiations between the Trustees and the AFT in order to provide the proper financing to enact these demands.48

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In order to successfully negotiate a settlement, the union had to tackle Reagan's influence within the Board of Trustees as well as his growing popularity with Californians statewide. Condemning the AFT strike and upholding Hayakawa's open-campus policy, Reagan's reaction to the AFT demands surprised no one. Reagan viewed the AFT's decision to go out on strike as absurd; private employees, rather than public agents of the state, solely held that right. Finding the AFT's demands farcical and inseparable from the students' ridiculous demands, Reagan publicly warned the union that striking teachers would not receive pay for unauthorized absences and that those faculty members absent from their work for five days would be terminated.49

With both students and faculty on strike at San Francisco State, Reagan refused to back down and bend to the demands. As Washington Evening Star reporter James Kilpatrick suggested at the time, the AFT strike represented a turning point in the public consensus of the ongoing crisis at San Francisco State. When the strike began, a significant portion of the public, including members of California's greater educational community, would not have supported Reagan's "bayonet" statement and his increasingly belligerent methods. However, after the AFT strike, as Kilpatrick suggested, Reagan proved more in touch with a changing public attitude and increasing demands to "expel the fascist students and to fire the faculty members who enter into conspiracy with them."50 Standing as the voice of law and order for a considerable number of sympathetic Californians, Reagan became even more unrelenting in his pursuit to assume control over the situation at San Francisco State.

A survey of a portion of letters sent to Governor Reagan from the public demonstrates his widespread support. Although the examined collection fails to account for dissenting opinions, the evidence still shows a significant degree of public agreement with Reagan's policy at the College. Hundreds of letters poured into Reagan's office in Sacramento from all parts of the country, the majority dating from early January to mid-February 1969. The men and women who wrote to the Governor were diverse in class, age, and occupation, and their letters show overwhelming support for Reagan. In a majority of letters, the writers emphasize hope for law and order, fear of a Communist coup on campus, and anger over tax dollars spent on troublesome faculty and students. As Jay Taylor, from San Diego, wrote in January 1969:

We are heartily in accord with your views. . . We . . have only contempt for those who would destroy the society that sponsors their education and tries diligently to teach them the best standards of social responsibility. Keep up your crusade.51

Some letters even express the desire for Reagan to take more control of the situation at San Francisco State by "showing more intestinal fortitude in cleaning up the mess." Such statements demonstrate that Reagan was not alone in his appeals for law and order on campus.52

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Reagan's dealings with the AFT and labor officials took center stage throughout the remainder of the crisis at San Francisco State College. After Judge Edward O'Day of the San Francisco Superior Court issued an injunction against the union's strike on January 8, 1969, Labor Council Secretary George Johns charged that Reagan played an instrumental role in the order's issuance, as well as in halting the early mediation efforts in December and in the interference in talks between labor and Trustee representatives. Despite the injunction, the strike continued, and Johns, along with other local union officials, sent a telegram to Reagan and the Board of Trustees on January 10, asking the Governor to permit the Trustees to continue their efforts to resolve the demands of both striking students and faculty. In response, Trustee Chairman Theodore Meriam acknowledged Reagan's attempts to end the discussion sessions, but stated it was Board policy, and not Reagan's word alone, to disallow negotiations with the strikers. Johns refused to acknowledge Meriam's reply, recalling an explicit order by the Governor to end a meeting earlier in the week that would have undoubtedly settled the strike. Johns told reporters in San Francisco, "It was the governor. He told the state board what to do and they did it . . . The trustees were terribly embarrassed . . . One man actually was in tears."53 Reagan made no objection to Johns' statements, telling reporters he contacted Chairman Meriam in an effort to end mediation efforts because the Board had not authorized any representative committee to negotiate in any way.54

Despite these charges, Reagan increased his attacks on the striking faculty. During a news conference on January 14, the Governor presented his idea for a new state law requiring college professors to report attendance in classes. Prison terms would accompany violations of such a law. During the conference, Reagan also stepped up his charges against the liberalism of faculty members throughout the public universities and colleges in California. "A preponderance of liberal faculty members," stated Reagan, was indoctrinating college students in California.55 As a remedy, Reagan called for the achievement of more balance in political views of faculty members, so that students could hear and study all possible viewpoints. However, at that time, Reagan did not suggest how the campus community could achieve such balance.56

During this period, one of Reagan's primary concerns focused on making any settlement of the student and faculty strike not appear as a concession to the campus troublemakers. For Reagan, no campus authority could negotiate while members of the campus community continued the strike, since negotiations would suggest a capitulation under duress. As ex-president Robert Smith states, "Such negotiations had the further liability in the minds of the governor and many trustees that [the negotiations] could set a precedent of collective bargaining by public employees."57 However, Reagan realized that the strike had to be settled in some fashion, as public opinion would not allow San Francisco State to remain in a crisis for an indefinite amount of time.58

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The Board of Trustees again took up these issues during its meeting in Los Angeles on January 20. In order to achieve a favorable settlement, Reagan demanded that any agreement to begin discussions with the striking students and faculty could not provide the public with any sense that the Board negotiated with the rebels. For Reagan, the image of the Trustees as the paramount figure in dictating the terms of any end to the strike remained the most important consideration. During a politically charged meeting, Reagan finally reached a compromise with those Trustees wanting to continue discussions with the AFT and the Labor Council. This vague compromise would not allow negotiations. Instead, the wording of the resolution allowed a committee made up of Bay Area Trustees to pursue discussions only.59

Although the Trustees as a group had achieved a significant compromise of opinion, Reagan left the meeting unsatisfied. As the meeting adjourned, Reagan laid into a large number of Trustees who desired actual negotiations with the striking student leaders. For Reagan, only manipulation of campus and governmental authority concerned the students. After all, said Reagan, the problems of violence at San Francisco State represented the workings of a large number of white students, such as Students for a Democratic Society, manipulating and using a small number of African-American students for their own pursuits. In reply, Trustee Edward Lee, the only African-American member of the Board, charged the Governor as “almost totally naïve concerning the Black movement that is sweeping the country today.”60

Despite this small achievement towards renewed discussions between AFT representatives and a committee of Trustees, Reagan maintained his firm stance on the situation. A day after the meeting of the Trustees, Reagan appeared on the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite, where the Governor equated the situation at San Francisco State with “a kind of Vietnam” that must be won with dedication to the idea “that whatever it takes, there will be no retreat,” demanding, “we will win this battle.”61 However, talks between the Trustee committee and labor officials continued, despite claims that the Governor persisted in his attempts to halt all discussions. While many Trustees and labor officials hoped that an end was in sight, they realized Reagan’s influence already significantly affected the power structure of California’s public higher education system. During the latter half of January, the Governor had introduced over forty bills for approval by the State Assembly. Although many of these bills would not pass into law, Reagan’s intentions remained clear, as all of the bills shared the common purpose of restricting the freedom of school administrators and students.62

To make matters worse, Reagan made a further attempt to alienate the plight of the striking students in the eyes of the public when, during a press conference on February 18, the Governor related an unconfirmed
story of forty students with switchblade knives demanding college admittance at the office of the dean of admissions. Although Trustee Edward O. Lee immediately denied the report, Chancellor Dumke quickly confirmed Reagan’s allegations. The following day, Reagan flatly stated that ex-President Smith had reported the tale. However, members of the campus community quickly denied the switchblade incident. After Smith renounced the Governor’s report, Dean of Admissions Charles Stone expressed a similar sentiment, stating, “I don’t know what the hell [Reagan’s] talking about.”

For the next few days, Reagan maintained his position on the story, insisting that Smith had relayed the story to a group of Trustees during a meeting last year. In the end, only Reagan and two members of his staff continued to verify the incident. Not one Trustee or campus administrator ever capitulated their resistance to the allegations. Although the mystery switchblade story fell on deaf ears, the result was just the same. Whether he purposely fabricated the story or not, it became clear to President Smith and other campus members involved in resolving the strike that Governor Reagan used his executive privilege and press availability to mar the judgment of the administrators in order to wrest more control of the situation at San Francisco State.

With discussions under way between the Trustee committee, union, and labor officials, the faculty strike’s end seemed near. However, Reagan still had one last chance to leave his mark on the situation. On February 24, representatives of the AFT announced a tentative settlement between the committee of Trustees and the teachers’ union. After Louis Heilbron, chair of the committee, and Frank Dollard, executive vice president of the College, signed the proposed agreement, the union representatives, led by Art Bierman and Gary Hawkins, accepted the settlement on the conditions that the entire Board of Trustees ratify the agreement and that “a peaceful and free academic atmosphere prevails on the campus.” The settlement called for guarantees of amnesty for striking teachers, the full reinstatement for teachers removed from positions because of the strike, and the preservation of the pre-strike number of teaching positions, among other stipulations.

Reagan, however, attacked the settlement, promising reporters that he would try his best to urge the Board of Trustees to reject the unlawful settlement. Everything about the settlement bothered the Governor. For Reagan, any deal with the AFT would establish the union as the sole bargaining agent for a faculty whose majority did not belong to the union local. Moreover, Reagan rejected the proposal that striking teachers could not have their pay docked for missed time, since any issuance of a pay check to the striking teachers under such circumstances would constitute “conspiracy to fraud, a felony, because you cannot pay a state employee for an unauthorized absence.” The Governor also expressed anger at

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the mediating Trustee committee, as their compromise on January 22 allowed only for discussions, not negotiations, with any striking campus group. For Reagan, this action by the Trustees constituted an endorsement of the “right to break the law.” The question remained whether the Governor could dominate the Trustees in such a manner as to reject the proposed settlement.

The fifty-two day old teacher’s strike ended on February 26, two days after the release of the proposed settlement, as the Board of Trustees agreed to the provisions. Reagan, however, still forced his influence onto the proceedings. While the Trustees allowed Acting President Hayakawa to carry out a large majority of the provisions of the settlement, the Trustees decided the one provision concerning the establishment of a teacher grievance procedure. Yet, Reagan complained that any agreement of this provision signified capitulation to the strikers. Hayakawa pleaded with the Governor, imploring Reagan to “worry less about appearances and more about the reality.” In the end, Reagan voted for the grievance procedure’s acceptance after the Trustees adopted a resolution stating the Board of Trustees’ action did not amount to any negotiation with the faculty or “concessions to union demand.”

However, for days afterward, Reagan assured the public he had not changed his position on the agreement that ended the teachers’ strike. Typical of Reagan’s denial of backtracking or compromise, the Governor stated that the Trustees’ acceptance of the provisions did not signify any settlement in response to the teachers’ demands. Instead, the agreement simply updated an outdated grievance procedure. Unwilling to accept any action that allowed for a portrayal of his capitulation, Lieutenant Governor Ed Reinecke insisted, “The Governor did not change his position. We did not, in fact, agree to any settlement of any kind.” Regardless of Reagan’s interpretation of the events, the AFT strike had officially ended.

The student strike at San Francisco State College continued, though, without much response from the Reagan camp. However, during the month of March, with Reagan’s public popularity peaking as a result of his handling of the AFT strike, the Governor stepped up his attempts to solidify his influence and control over the remaining crisis at the college and the future control of higher education in California. During the first week of the month, Reagan filled two new vacancies on the Board of Trustees with conservative appointees. Instead of accepting recommendations to reappoint Trustee Louis Heilbron, a liberal involved in the initial discussions with the AFT and labor officials, Reagan gave his seat to William O. Weissich, a conservative Republican.

With Reagan possessing the ability to count on more and more Trustees for support on decisive issues, the Governor gained far more control over the state colleges than he had originally possessed. The effect was
the same for the university and junior college systems. Already possessing a stronghold of support with the Board of Regents of the University of California, the Governor, in the last year, had appointed all of the fifteen members of the Board of Governors controlling the eighty-nine campuses of the California community college system.75

The Governor also made attempts during this time to solidify his influence within higher education as the executive of the state. During a speech to the state legislature on March 3, 1969, Reagan called for four items of legislation to achieve an educational atmosphere free of the issues surrounding the ongoing turmoil on the San Francisco State campus. These bills included provisions to expel any student of any grade level who entered campus property without permission. Furthermore, Reagan called for legislation that would allow for the dismissal, for a period of at least one year, of any student convicted of a criminal offense arising out of a campus disturbance. The Governor also called for laws granting the dismissal and ineligibility for future employment in a state college or university of any faculty or campus employee convicted of an offense concerning campus disturbances. Because of the ongoing months of crisis at San Francisco State, Reagan wanted to make sure nothing similar happened again. And if campus unrest reappeared, he wanted to be more capable of dealing with it on his own terms.76

In a manner lacking any sense of triumph, representatives of the BSU/TWLF and campus officials reached a settlement ending the final leg of the San Francisco State strike on March 20, 1969. Failing to grant the striking students all of their demands, the agreement did establish an autonomous Black Studies department within a School of Ethnic Studies, with full-time instructors receiving full-time pay and the power to hire faculty and determine its own future. Moreover, the College pledged to help promote minority recruitment and to accept several hundred “third world” students for the upcoming fall semester. Interestingly, the written record surrounding the end of the student strike does not reveal any of the same concerns or debates Reagan espoused during the conclusion to the AFT portion of the strike. For example, on the day the student strike ended, Reagan did not have a chance to hear the nature of the settlement or the discussions leading up to it. Unlike the anger Reagan expressed to any settlement with the teachers’ union, the Governor reacted to the possibility of an agreement with the striking students with sheer delight, describing the situation as “a victory for the people of California” and a “tribute” to the effects of a strong college administration.77 Without much fanfare, the five-month strike ended on March 21, 1969.78

The end of the strike did not signal an end to Reagan’s attempts to shape an educational system reflecting his interests. Six days later, at a press conference in San Luis Obispo, the Governor once again continued his verbal barrage against the faculty, telling the audience of his desire to

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institute a political test of prospective applicants for teaching positions in the University of California and state college systems. Despite the fact that state and federal laws prohibited the consideration of political persuasion in hiring public employees, Reagan contemplated the test in an attempt to bring balance to what he considered the “one-sided ideological viewpoint” of many faculty members.79 Later in the afternoon during another press conference, Reagan withdrew his earlier statements. However, he still expressed his desire for a better balance of philosophies and beliefs on California’s campuses. Many people believed that the public support Reagan had gained from such statements and his handling of the San Francisco State strike would surely help assure a victory in his 1971 reelection campaign. As Drew Pearson, reporter for the Washington Post, stated a week after the strike ended, “There is no man on college campuses more unpopular than Reagan . . . As a result, students vowed to prevent his re-election. But unrest on the college campuses has now insured his re-election. Reagan is a shoo-in as Governor for a second term—thanks to his enemies, the students.”80

At the heart of the strike, all of the parties involved, including students, faculty, administrators, the Board of Trustees, and the Governor, strove for what they thought to be a proper allocation of power in the educational process. In the end, Governor Reagan emerged victorious in many respects, shifting control and power over the educational system from the faculty and campus administration to a Board of Trustees more inclined to side with the Governor on major issues. Although Reagan himself held the position of Trustee, his influence brought an additional sense of urgency to the Board’s dealings with San Francisco State College. From President Smith’s initial closing of the campus in 1967 through the AFT settlement and beyond, Reagan held a significant amount of sway over the direction of the response to the strike. In effect, the Governor helped to switch educational authority to a top-down process, with Reagan’s Trustees acting more like representatives of the state than representatives of the College. As a result, the power structure and channels of authority on the campus changed in a manner quite opposite from its liberal past. As New York Times reporter Wallace Turner noted almost six months after the end of the strike at San Francisco State College, “The political winner was Governor Ronald Reagan . . . Now the conservatives and middle-of-the-roaders are in charge.”81

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NOTES

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