

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #2

1968: Year of Social Change and Turning Point in Vietnam and the U.S.

Oral History

Lou Cannon

Lou Cannon was a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1960s covering Ronald Reagan's time as governor, and a Reagan biographer.

... and he noticed that at every speech he gave the question came up about Berkeley disorder. Sometime it—usually it came up in a [*cough*] ... often it came up in a hostile way. Sometimes—occasionally it came up in a friendly manner. Often it came up just as an informational question—what do you think should be done about the situation at Berkeley? What Reagan later called the mess at Berkeley. And Reagan decided—at a time that his own polls, the polls that were being taken for him, did not show this as any kind of an issue—that he would incorporate it in his campaign speech. And so he started putting in a line or two about, uh, the mess at Berkeley. And, uh, in his speeches. And later the polls showed that it was quite a major issue. But Reagan picked this up as an issue before—before his managers or the polls did. It's ... it's not accurate, I think, historically to exaggerate the role of the university in Reagan's campaign. There were a whole number of things that were going on in California in those days. The biggest thing, uh, uh, that—is that the sort of California dream, you know, this, um, dream that William Faulkner called sanctuary on earth for individual man, which was the American dream nowhere better realized than in California was beginning to, uh, uh, become if not a nightmare exactly, it was beginning to turn sour for a lot of people. Uh, you were getting, uh, these great, first great congestions on the freeways, you were getting smog, you were—you know, higher taxes, uh, people—the good life wasn't quite as good as it seemed. And then you had a series of events I think that would alarm people more than anything that was happening at Berkeley. I think that was clear, was what was happening in Watts. The Watts riot was a ... was a real, real wake-up call. And again, it's like ... there's this analogy. Just as the upheavals in Berkeley came—became before the ... the



great student upheavals in '68 and '69, so did the Watts riot. I mean, it was in 1968, you know, '67 and '68 that you had these great urban riots and disorders in eastern cities. Los Angeles had it 1965. And, uh, and that shocked a lot of people, particularly in Southern California. And then right through the campaign—it's been, ah, largely forgotten now—but there was a demonstration in ... there was an incident in Hunter's Point in San Francisco during the campaign. I think it was in September where, um, um, a white officer shot a, an African-American youth. And, um, there was a ... sort of a mini-uh, riot, which was put down. But all these things, um, reminded people— you also, in, in, in that year had the um, um, the great grape strike by Caesar Chavez and, um, you saw the rise of the United Farmworkers. So there is—it wasn't any one thing. And then I—the other thing I put in there is that Brown had done something that was, in retrospect, unwise. To avoid a tax increase, at the suggestion of his finance director, Hale Champion, he had changed the state's accounting system so that it counted revenues from 1967 as well as '66, you know? It counted revenues when they became due instead of when they were collected. Um ... Brown's people thought—well, nobody will understand this so it won't be an issue. Well, the fact that nobody could understand it made it more of an issue. And, um, so you had a ... you had a governor who—who was tired. I mean, he ... and who had accumulated the inevitable scars of incumbency after two terms and wanted a third term. And then you had all these other things happening. Um, if you ... if you just had Berkeley, if you just ... I don't know if you just had Watts, because Watts is a pretty big just. But any of these other things, um, by themselves I don't think would have done much. But the whole was larger than the sum of the parts, um. People really had a feeling in ... in California that it was time for a change. And Reagan symbolized and represented change.

Interviewer: The Vietnam War itself, to the extent that it as a disruptive factor, the extent that the anti-war movement caused protest and the fact that Reagan had presidential aspirations and the Vietnam War was going to be an issue that he was going to have to deal with—how did that factor in not only, not in the election so much, but as he was serving as governor?



Well, the Vietnam War was, I think, uh ... always, um, always hovering around in the background in those years. Even before it became, um, um, a disturbing national issue that it became after the Tet Offensive, which is when—in '68, when people turned against the war. But in 1965 and '66, when Reagan is running for office, um, the American people basically support the war. But to say that they basically support the war isn't to say that they liked the war. And ... and people who were unhappy and who were disturbed, um—one of the components of the Goldwater movement, um, which ... which Reagan came out of, in a sense, was ... was great dissatisfaction with the way Lyndon Johnson was conducting this war. They didn't—Goldwater consistently charged—and I think history has proven that he was right—that Johnson wasn't leveling with the American people about what he planned in Vietnam. This was a ... Pat Brown was a big supporter of Lyndon and the war. During the 1966 campaign, Pat Brown finds it necessary to join with Alan Cranston in deposing the leadership of the California Democratic Council—the volunteer group that had really, um, been responsible for the rise of the ... responsible is too strong. But it certainly played a great role in the rise of the Democratic party in California. So even in '66, when the war is not the issue it became, um, um, a year or two later—particularly after Tet—even in '66 the war contributes to this general feeling of dissatisfaction, um, upon which, uh, Reagan capitalized. Afterward—during Reagan's governorship I think Reagan's position on the war was pretty straightforward. He thought— he believed in it. He thought we ought to try to win it. Um, he didn't like this notion of just leaving people out there, um, in a war where our objectives weren't clear. In '76, when he ran unsuccessfully for President he had this line that always brought people to their feet—you know, let us pledge that we're never going to again, you know, send our ...you know, boys to die in a war we're not prepared to win. In 1968, um, in the middle of Reagan's first term for governorship—in the middle of Reagan's first term as governor, George Romney is, um, um, at that time supposedly the anointed char—

