

Dawn of Discord

Even before the first rays of sun managed to climb over the coastal hills of northern California, it was obvious that February 3, 1988, was going to be a gloriously beautiful day. The skies were so clear that the windshields were coated with frost, but the chill added an extra measure of freshness to the morning. The air had the crisp, clean smell of the sea; a full moon was setting into the Pacific; and the morning was serenely quiet.

Along most of that stretch of the coastline at that hour, the only sounds came from the surf and the seagulls, but in the picturesque coastal town of Mendocino, there were sounds of human voices, as well. The voices belonged to people who were not just out to enjoy the views of the ruggedly natural coastline. Dimly at first, and then more distinctly, the pre-dawn light revealed a group of protesters, complete with signs and baby carriages. They were bundled heavily against the morning chill, but otherwise high in spirits, talking excitedly with one another as they jogged, marched, and ambled northward along the coastal highway. By the time the first rays of sun brought warmth to the ground, and to the people, the group stretched out for more than a mile along the highway.

Their walk would have been warmer if they had waited for the sunlight, but few of them even considered that option. Their destination was the tiny town of Fort Bragg, about a dozen miles up the coast, where they planned to head for the local Eagles Hall. It offered the biggest room in town, with a capacity for several hundred people, but they were worried it would be full before they got there.

Like the Eagles Halls in most small towns, this one was often empty, and the event that was scheduled there that morning was the sort of thing not normally associated with standing-room-only excitement. A federal agency was scheduled to hold a hearing on a draft version of a technical report. The hearing was not even scheduled to start until 9:00 that morning. In this case, however, the technical report had to do with a proposal to sell offshore oil leases, and the betting was that anyone who arrived much after 7:30 would be too late to get in the door.

The betting proved to be right. By the time the slower of the marchers managed to make their way to the Eagles Hall, the security guards had

stopped letting anyone in, and the crowd outside had already swelled to more than a thousand. Estimates vary, but for much of the hearing that was to follow, just the crowd that was outside, waiting to get in, would swell to somewhere from 3,000 to 5,000 people. And things were no longer quiet.

It was not exactly as if the protesters on the outside found themselves with nothing to do. Anticipating the crowd, agency personnel had managed to hook up a loudspeaker, making it possible for at least one small segment of the crowd to hear the comments being made inside. A church down the street was broadcasting the event on closed-circuit television. The street had been cordoned off, and there was no real scarcity of interesting diversions for those who were unable to get in. Musicians played; officials made speeches; at least one politician's motor home dispensed coffee, donuts, and campaign literature, although the first two ran out before the third. A number of people simply enjoyed both the spectacle and the sunshine, with the weather warming up to its promise of a sensational day.

For those who were so inclined, it was also possible to become part of the spectacle, joining in with some of the ongoing demonstrations. In one of them, for example, organizers put together a "slick-in"—recruiting volunteers, providing them with the appropriate costumes (black plastic bags, of course), and even giving them some training in the rudiments of "oozing" and "sliming," before the event got underway. The demonstrators were obviously having such fun that the "oil slick" managed to recruit more volunteers as it proceeded, visibly growing as it oozed its way down the street. The onlookers enjoyed themselves, too, as did those who continued to make signs or speeches, or who hung politicians in effigy. A few members of the still-growing throng even expressed sympathy for the poor people who had to be cooped up inside on such a lovely day.

The several hundred souls inside the Eagles Hall may have been vaguely aware of the activities on the outside that they were missing, and all of them knew about the beautiful weather. Few of them, however, showed any inclination to leave, to enjoy the weather themselves, or to make room for the long, long lines of people who still hoped to get in. The activities outside, while lively enough in their own right, were little more than a side show. The main event was taking place inside.

Up at the front of the room, sitting at a long table, were a set of officials from the U.S. Department of Interior, from Washington, D.C. A local activist was to say later that she "felt sorry" for this group of people, in that they were in a kind of limbo—"high enough up in the agency to be here, but low enough that they had to sit there and listen to us." For the most part, they were also "high enough up in the agency" to have learned not to show much in the way of emotion when they were presiding over a public hearing, but to

Sign at Motel in Fort Bragg, California, 1988, exhorting people to make their opinions known.



Protesters at the Fort Bragg hearing, the same day, making their opinions known.



the extent to which it was possible to tell anything from the looks on their faces, it appeared that they might have felt a little sorry for themselves too.

In a way, that was too bad. Except for the fact that they "had to be there," they might even have enjoyed the proceedings. Their task, at least according to the official notices, was something that would scarcely have been expected to be one of the most memorable events in years—it was the "Hearing on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Lease Sale 91." In reality, what was playing out in front of them included great theater as well as a great outpouring of human emotion. Interspersed with the usual, technical assessments—a misplaced punctuation here, an erroneous resource estimate there, a missing evaluation of impacts in a given area of concern—came a series of comments that were neither typical nor technical. Hundreds of citizens had signed up, many of them weeks in advance, in hopes of letting the bureaucrats know just how strongly they felt about the issue of offshore oil drilling along their coast. It was clear, in fact, that at least some of the people in attendance did consider this to be "their" coast, although a larger number made the point that they considered the coastline to be a national treasure, with many of the latter group noting that they were speaking on behalf of a much wider public.

In their effort to "reach through to the people behind the facades," as one of the citizens later put it, and to make their case to the stone-faced bureaucrats at the front of the room, the people presenting testimony were also offering a bit more creativity than your average technician. Some of the voices thundered, others whispered, and still others choked with emotion. Guitarists performed songs that they had composed for the occasion; school children sang music and performed plays that they had written as well. At one point in the hearings, a man dressed as "Coyote" came up to the podium. He noted with approval the representation of his friend the buffalo on the Department of Interior seal, but then asked melodramatically, "Where has the buffalo gone? Are you *protecting* the buffalo? . . . Coyote's worried!" At another point, in the effort to demonstrate what a California-style earthquake could do to an offshore oil platform, a belly dancer, suspended horizontally by a set of accomplices, placed a plastic rig on her mid-section and began to gyrate. The oil rig performed its part of the drama impeccably, and the crowd roared its approval.

The crowd roared in other ways, as well. Well-prepared organizers had printed hundreds of cheap but effective placards, with black ink on 11" by 17" pieces of colored cardboard, each of which featured the word "NO," a diagonal slash through an oil rig in the middle of the "O," and a small black footprint. In addition to the placards, which were frequently brandished, the entire auditorium was decorated with signs of almost every size and description, save that none of them indicated much in the way of support for the

proposed "lease sale." Most of the signs also used terminology and images that were far more colorful than the beleaguered agency representatives might have preferred.

While some of the best showmanship was to wait until later, the first handful of speakers gave some indication of what was to follow. The first speaker, the California Lieutenant Governor, left no doubt about his opposition, and the reaction of the crowd left little doubt that they agreed. The second speaker, the Chair of the Coastal Commission, spoke of his Commission's responsibility to protect the coast, and he made it clear that he would not take that responsibility lightly. The California Attorney General said not only that he was unalterably opposed to the federal proposals, but that he considered them to be illegal; he promised that if the sale were to go forward, he would take the agency to court, and that he would prevail. A member of the local County Board of Supervisors, noting that the Board had voted unanimously to oppose the sale, was more than willing to join in: "We will fight you page by page through this nefarious document." A Supervisor from Sonoma County underlined the point: "Welcome. You are surrounded. We ask your unconditional surrender." The idea of offshore drilling along this coast, he announced, was "as ridiculous as paving the Grand Canyon."

Yet that was only the beginning. The officials were to hear similar messages from representatives for both U.S. senators from the state, for twenty-three Members of Congress, and for a string of cities and counties, all along the coast. A social scientist in the audience, long accustomed to "keeping score" of support and opposition in hearings such as this, decided there was little need to continue once the first twenty speakers in a row voiced levels of opposition that ranged from polite to adamant, without a single speaker voicing even lukewarm support for the proposed leases. All the while, not content simply to roar their approval, the crowd cheered, screamed, and even chanted—"No! No! No! No!"—waving the signs that carried the same message, and stamping so emphatically, in rhythm with the chant, that the building literally shook. The people who were outside might have been enjoying themselves, but those who were inside were making a statement—and in a way, they were making history.

The hearing, once scheduled to "continue until 8:00 P.M., or until all testimony is received," went on into the wee hours of the next morning; the bureaucrats at the front table had just a few hours of sleep before the entire scene was recreated in new ways the next day. Again the next day, the proceedings stretched well past midnight before the agency representatives—and those who felt sorry for them—pleaded about prior commitments, about others who had reserved the hall, and about the fact that, after all, given the consistency of the testimony, they were getting the message.

So were people outside of the room. The then-current issue of *North Coast News* ("The Coast's Home-Owned Newspaper") had carried the headline, "Activists Hope For Invasion By Land," noting that local activists were "unabashedly hoping that a brief invasion by national media" would "help thwart an invasion by sea-borne oil rigs" later (Waataja 1988, 1). One of the earliest speakers, referring to the man who was then the U.S. Secretary of Interior, added that his hope was for the hearing to be remembered as "Hodel's last stand." As the hearing proceeded, there was evidence that the hopes were not to be entirely in vain. All of the major networks had their cameras there, complete with camera trucks and satellite dishes outside, as did a number of independent news outlets. All across the country that night and the next day, citizens and leaders alike were to be able to get at least some small inkling of the outpouring taking place. What they would see would easily justify the prediction on page one of that day's issue of the *Santa Rosa Press-Democrat*, that the hearing would be "the biggest political event on the Mendocino County's coast in anyone's memory; the kind of happening that people will talk about for years" (McKay 1988, 1).

By the second day of the proceedings, several hundred miles down the coast at a meeting of the same agency's Scientific Advisory Committee on offshore oil development, the social scientist who had been taking notes at the hearing reported to his colleagues that he was "still dazed" by the intensity of the reaction. He put that fact in context by noting that, far from being a stranger to hostile hearings, he was a specialist in technological controversies, someone who studied facilities that had all the popularity of nuclear waste repositories and toxic waste dumps. He had spent a total of nineteen hours in travel, just to be able to observe a half-dozen hours of the hearing, but he found the spectacle so striking that he said he would be "more than willing to do it again" (see also Botzum and Garner 1988).

Thousands of miles to the east, in Washington, D.C., the top officials of the agency were perhaps a bit dazed as well, although it is safe to say that they had little enthusiasm for going through such an experience again anytime soon. At least to date, they have not had to do so—but therein lies a story as well.

So intense were the feelings on the offshore oil issue that the California congressional delegation, reflecting the wishes of their constituents, had already succeeded in imposing congressional moratoria on offshore leasing anywhere along this stretch of coast, even before the Fort Bragg hearing. Despite brave protests from officials in the Department of Interior and the White House, additional moratoria were destined to follow. Within a year of the Fort Bragg hearing, in his first budget message to Congress, the freshly elected "environmental president," George Bush, was to announce that, in

the interest of making decisions on the basis of facts and not just emotions, he would ask the National Academy of Sciences for an assessment of whether or not the government already knew enough to proceed with leasing. His announcement was to cover not just the coast of California, but also the coast of southern Florida, where protests had been at least slightly less graphic, but where the Republican governor of the state already had taken the federal government to court in the effort to stop the proposed lease sale there.

If he had known about the answer in advance, President Bush might not have asked the question. The National Academy report was to conclude that certain kinds of scientific evidence were in better shape in some regions than in others, but in none of the relevant regions was it possible to say that the agency already had enough information to be able to move forward with selling offshore. The report went on to say that a pair of bureaucratic distinctions treated as having considerable significance within the agency—arguments that a lease did not automatically confer a right to begin exploratory drilling, and that a company finding oil would not automatically be granted permission to start pumping or “producing” the oil—appeared in reality to have little practical importance. Technically speaking, the agency may have had the right to intervene at any point in the process, but no one could think of a single case where a company had leased a tract but been denied permission to begin exploratory drilling, or had found commercially valuable quantities of oil or gas without then receiving permission to move into production.

Almost exactly two and a half years after the Fort Bragg hearing, on June 26, 1990—the same date when major newspapers around the country were carrying the headline that the President had “moved his lips” on his “no new taxes” pledge—newspapers in northern California were featuring a different bit of news from the White House. President Bush, the long-time Texas oil man, declared a moratorium on any plans to develop offshore oil along the coasts of central and northern California, or of southern Florida, until beyond the year 2000—after his own term of office would have ended, even if he had been able to win re-election.

While politicians are often accused of stalling on topics they find to be too sensitive, this one was different: aside from the fact that the president’s decision would mean that the oil in these two regions would be inaccessible to his friends in the oil industry, the program for leasing offshore oil reserves is one of the few in the entire federal government that makes money, rather than just spending it. Over the thirty-four years before the Fort Bragg hearing, the annual revenues for the federal government from the offshore leasing program had averaged almost \$3 billion per year, making this program second only to the Internal Revenue Service as an official source of money for Uncle Sam (Louisiana Department of Natural Resources 1989).

Meanwhile, Back at the Gulf . . .

The morning of February 3, 1988, had also been a relatively quiet one in the Gulf of Mexico. There were no mountains here, but the setting of the same moon, and the rising of the same sun, were observed over the waters of the Gulf of Mexico by a fisherman who was several miles out to sea, off the coast of Louisiana. Even in the gray light before dawn, his position in the Gulf would have been easy to spot; just a few yards away, lit up with a kind of intense, industrial light that many people associate with an oil refinery, was something that obviously had not been put there by Mother Nature. As the sunlight stretched across the waters and the darkness dissolved, any of the people who were assembled at the Eagles Hall in Fort Bragg would have been able to tell that the man was fishing, literally, in the shadow of an offshore oil platform.

The fisherman was not there by chance alone, and he was anything but lost; through years of experience, he, and many others, had learned that the fishing was better next to the rigs. Other than thinking of the rig as a kind of handy, man-made reef in an otherwise silty sea, the fisherman thought nothing about it. He had no idea that so many thousand people, living along a different coast of the same United States, would have been so worried that just the same kind of structure would suddenly start to appear along their coastline. For him, the oil rig was as much a part of the setting as were the smell of the salt or the sound of the seagulls. Indeed, off the coast of Louisiana, it was difficult to get out of sight of an offshore production platform such as the one to which the fisherman was tied: by 1988 there were over three *thousand* platforms in federal waters, over three miles offshore, with many more in the state waters closer to shore.

About a month later, an actual lease sale was held in New Orleans for the central Gulf of Mexico. Representatives of the same arm of the Department of Interior offered for sale 33,580,616 acres of the Gulf bottom; 3,416,759 acres were actually leased. There was no need to arrive early; there was no crowd outside, waiting to get in, and no crowd inside to cheer or protest. Reaction to the draft Environmental Impact Statement for this sale (which was made public about a year in advance) can perhaps best be summarized in the only official response from the state of Louisiana, a letter from Governor Edwards to the regional director of Minerals Management Service (Minerals Management Service 1987, D.76):

Dear Mr. Pearcy:

Thank you for your letter of April 27, 1987, regarding LE-2.

I appreciate your taking the time to provide me with the Environmental Impact Statement for Gulf of Mexico oil and gas lease sale proposal [sic]. I am forwarding this information to Mr. Jim Porter, Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, for his review and comments.

If I can be of assistance in any way, please let me know.

Kindest regards.

Sincerely,

EDWIN W. EDWARDS

There were no comments from Mr. Porter, who was soon to become the president of Mid-Continent Oil and Gas, one of the largest industry lobbying groups in the state.

THE PARADOX OF THE PROTEST

In case it is not already clear, these two scenes were separated by more than a few months in time and a few thousand miles in space. They are also united by a paradox. In certain coastal regions, most clearly typified by central and western Louisiana, offshore oil development has long been welcomed with open arms; in others, obviously including northern California, just a proposal for the same kind of development is almost enough to open armed warfare.

What explains the difference? A number of "obvious" explanations are available, but as will be noted below, while they tend to sound straightforward and plausible, they also tend to be wrong. If we are to understand the paradox, we need to examine the facts more closely. We need to learn more about the people, the regions, and the issues—and that is what this book is all about.

The remainder of the book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the historical context within which the outer continental shelf (OCS) controversy has developed. Chapter 3 summarizes the results of a number of interviews that the two of us have conducted, comparing reactions in northern California with those in southern Louisiana. In the interest of providing an independent, quantitative assessment, this chapter also analyzes the responses to the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that was the focus of so much attention in Fort Bragg.

While there is a good deal that is important in the subtleties of the interview findings, the overall thrust will be that the underlying distributions of

Attitudes toward oil in Louisiana: Signs at "The Oil Center," Lafayette, Louisiana.



Attitudes toward oil in California: Signs at the Fort Bragg hearing, California.



opinion in the two focal regions does indeed appear to be just as polarized as might be expected on the basis of the vignettes in this chapter. In Chapter 4, accordingly, we shift from describing the differences in attitudes to analyzing them, identifying the factors that appear to be responsible for the dramatic differences in viewpoints across the regions. As will be seen, the underlying factors are neither as simple as they appear to some, nor as mysterious as they appear to others; to achieve a reasonable level of understanding, however, it is important to combine the kinds of considerations that are often found only in very different academic disciplines, considering historical factors, the nature of the biophysical environment in each region, and the social realities of the human environment as well.

Chapter 5 begins to explore the factors that seem to have contributed to the failure of a reasonably well-funded Studies Program to identify the sources of many of these problems in the past. While the discussion of shortcomings is quite straightforward and frank, Chapter 6 is an attempt to balance the criticism with an equally straightforward set of suggestions, in the form of a framework for guiding the studies that still need to be done. In Chapter 7, in closing, we take a second look at some of the most common of the "common-sense" arguments about the opposition, finding that the arguments may have been wrong, but that they may also have been politically useful, at least in the short term. As we suggest, however, the past usefulness of those arguments may need to be re-examined; while helping the agency and the industry to deal with (or to avoid) a number of past political pressures, the arguments today may be contributing to the problem of longer-term gridlock. To understand the reasons why, it is helpful to start at the beginning.