

John Garamendi & the Stanislaus River: A Personal Reflection

Melinda Wright, 1994

Twice during the Stanislaus campaign, people fighting to save the river had the unforgettable experience of being on the wrong side of John Garamendi's political agenda. When one is staring down the barrel of a gun it is possible to get insights that would remain obscure to mere witnesses or to the public at large. As environmentalists consider whom to support in the 1994 gubernatorial campaign, it is imperative that the insights gained from the Stanislaus battle be shared. This review of Garamendi's tactics is meant to remind those who were there, and inform those who were not.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Federal

In 1980, Jimmy Carter's re-election hopes were being dashed by the Iranian hostage crisis. Americans experienced impotent rage as Iranian militants threatened, postured, lied, and doled out dubious scraps of information about the hostages. The hostages were constantly on everyone's mind, but Carter had also won the animosity of the powerful dam building interests (everyone from Kern County growers to Kaiser Steel and Goodyear) by going after a "hit list" of dam projects. Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus drew further outrage from California agribusiness by refusing to immediately fill New Melones reservoir. By this time, nearly a decade of struggle on behalf of the river had resulted in a legally mandated, temporary halt to filling the dam.

State

In 1980, Jerry Brown was Governor of California and Huey Johnson was Secretary of Resources. The Resources Agency had firmly committed to holding New Melones Reservoir at the level of 808 feet elevation (Parrotts Ferry) in order to uphold Decision 1422 of the State Water Resources Control Board, and to protect the Stanislaus Canyon from flooding (Decision 1422 stated that the canyon should not be flooded until the irrigation water was contracted).^{*} The economics of New Melones were so uncertain that Secretary Johnson had referred to the project as "New Lemones".

1980 Flood Conditions

After heavy rains in the winter of 1979 - 1980, every other reservoir in California was full and making flood-stage releases, or spilling. Mobile home parks, planted fields, and orchards were flooded. New Melones did not have to make maximum releases. In order to protect crops that had been planted in the river channel, and orchards planted below the level of the river behind levees, the Army Corps released about half of what a full reservoir would have had to release. Even then there was much outcry to "fill the dam", and in the second week of March releases from the dam were cut to a 500 cfs "fish flow" (see chart). The devastation of the Stanislaus River Canyon accelerated as the reservoir reached its highest level ever.

Flow comparison: March 14, 1980

New Melones inflow: 2,750 cfs

Release at New Melones Dam: 463 cfs

(Just south, Tuolumne River) Don Pedro inflow: 3,006 cfs

Release at Don Pedro Dam: 7,000 cfs

^{*}As of March, 1994 the irrigation water has still not been contracted.

Local

In 1980, John Garamendi was a State Senator representing the foothill area around Calaveras County, and he was up for re-election. Every foothill and valley assemblyman, state senator, and county supervisor vied to link their name with "fill the dam" sentiment, since they tied their success to the support of agribusiness. To follow this path as a Democrat, Garamendi would have to distance himself from the Brown and Carter administrations. This is how he responded to that pressure.

FILLING THE DAM USING FLOOD CONTROL

Although any politician could have taken advantage of the floods, Garamendi demonstrated a positively brilliant flair for using the devastation to his own advantage. Not seeming to grasp the notion that a half-full tub holds more additional water than an already-full tub, and saying that "flooding caused by the dam is pure madness, Garamendi called a field hearing of the Senate Agriculture Committee on March 14, 1980, at the Grange Hall in Ripon (just north of Modesto). Garamendi, John Thurman, and others sat at a table across the front of the hall, but it was mainly Garamendi who conversed with speakers and ran the show. At the Ripon hearing, he revealed his ability to:

Take advantage of other people's misfortunes

Two hundred people, mostly farmers, attended the hearing. Garamendi encouraged farmers to describe their flood losses and blame those losses on New Melones operations. In fact, farmers were getting more flood control from New Melones that year than anyone had ever expected the project to give. Garamendi used the anger, sorrow, and frustration caused by the floods to lambast those who had worked to save the upper Stanislaus Canyon. No one seemed to notice that he offered no real solutions for flood problems, and no real help.

Use scapegoats

Farmers and politicians made statements on the order of "why in God's name should we build a dam and not fill it." "We paid for benefits of flood control, water, power, jobs, recreation, and now those rafters are robbing us," etc. This frustration was merged completely with the emotions caused by the floods. Garamendi set up two scapegoats: State and Federal bureaucracies, and Friends of the River. When agency representatives and environmentalists testified, they were antagonized, chastised, and ridiculed by Garamendi who set himself up as the leader of the attack against them, whipped up sentiment against them, and tried to blame them for the floods.

Disregard the facts

One agency representative who testified was Mary Ann Mark, Deputy Director of the State Department of Water Resources. She gave excellent predictions of river levels which foresaw much less flooding than the inflated predictions used by Garamendi (she turned out to be right, too.) She was booed by the boisterous crowd and interrupted and harassed by Garamendi, whose theatrics included staring pointedly at his watch while she was talking. If the flood tragedy was going to be much less than predicted, Garamendi did not want to hear it.

Twist the facts

Garamendi called it a flood control hearing, but the real game was to lobby to fill the dam for the cash benefits of cheap federal water for agribusiness. An environmentalist testified about how much higher the releases would be if the dam had been filled and operated as planned. The Army Corps' own research mentioned exact places that would have been flooded, such as the Ripon sewage treatment plant. These places, of course, were high and dry at the time of the hearing. Garamendi must have had trouble coming up with an antagonistic question, because the question he chose was: "Do you know how much we need the water from this dam?" It was an unusual question to ask at a flood control hearing. Unfortunately, the gaffe was not caught.

Use negative emotions

The more people hated the scapegoats, the more they loved Garamendi, so he poured fuel on that fire. He was riding high on a wave of anger, hatred, disgust, bitterness, contempt, rage, and fear. The hearing lasted from 9AM to about noon. Afterward, outside the Grange Hall, Garamendi was interviewed for a television newscast by Kent Pierce of KCRA (Channel 3) in Sacramento. One statement he made before the television cameras was not carried on the subsequent newscast. Nevertheless, it was intended to be. That statement by John Garamendi is as follows: "Friends of the River is holding New Melones Dam hostage in the midst of the O.P.E.C. crisis."

CALAVERAS COUNTY AND FRIENDS OF THE DAM

The previous summer a group called "Friends of New Melones Dam" had been formed at a meeting in Angels Camp. Garamendi and other area politicians had sent representatives to that meeting to show their active involvement. In 1980 the Friends of the Dam began to get seriously out of line.

Beginning on Saturday, July 26th, an unofficial Calaveras County faction of Friends of the Dam carried out a well-planned, illegal blockade of the Camp 9 Road (the access road to the Stanislaus). Pickup truck drivers staged breakdowns and accidents, even after Calaveras sheriff's deputies arrived. Raft company buses full of commercial passengers were stranded for hours. In at least one case, a gun was pulled on a bus driver by a "friend of the dam." Although the Calaveras Sheriffs Department acknowledged that the blockades were illegal and that they were familiar with many of the perpetrators, no arrests were made.

After the third weekend, the illegal blockades were thwarted by BLM rangers. Friends of the Dam started holding official "pancake breakfasts" at the Camp 9 put-in. Members ate pancakes, waved signs and toilet seats (why??), and heckled rafters as they launched. Batter and syrup left over from these pancake breakfast/heckling sessions somehow managed to get dumped from bridges onto the people who passed beneath the bridges on rafts.

On the fifth weekend of Friends of the Dam presence at Camp 9, Tim Riedell, a river guide who was on a trip the next day decided he had better sleep near the boats to guard them. In the early morning hours, he was kicked, beaten, and left for dead in his sleeping bag. He regained consciousness in the morning, was discovered by friends, and taken to the hospital with a broken jaw, a concussion, and other injuries. Although the Calaveras Sheriff's Department had partial descriptions and the first name of one of the suspects, no arrests were ever made.*

A week later Calaveras County's own State Senator, John Garamendi, was a guest of honor and speaker at a Friends of the Dam rally in the park at Angels Camp. Speaking less than 10 miles away from the Camp 9 Road, to a crowd that certainly included the blockaders and pancake breakfasters and very likely the persons guilty for the beating, Garamendi did not discourage their violence. He did not even mention it.

*Articles and photos of Tim in the hospital can be seen here:

https://www.stanislausriver.org/explore/#sort=uploaded&name_or_description=tim%20riedell

HAS ANYTHING CHANGED?

Garamendi's actions concerning the Stanislaus were far beneath the standards required for a state-wide leader. If actions speak louder than words, then his actions defined his ethics as follows: If it's politically good for Garamendi then it is right. If it is politically bad for Garamendi, then it is wrong. Each person must be their own judge of whether his subsequent actions - the campaign against Gray Davis, the disappointments of the bottle bill and his 1992 convention remarks, the timing of his resignation from the State Senate seat - form a continuing pattern. Theoretically, fourteen years can make a big difference in a person.

Realistically, the rise of John Garamendi to State office has been disturbing to watch, and the idea of Garamendi as Governor is even more troubling. He is very good at achieving his own goals, but it may be that those who trust him and depend on him now could also, some day, find themselves on the wrong side of his political agenda.

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