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Ayers Lecture at SMC Leaves Audience Polarized

By Jennifer Wake



Protesters gathered outside Saint Mary's Soda Center prior to scheduled lecture by '60s radical Bill Ayers Photo Andy Scheck

Tensions were high inside the Saint Mary's College Soda Center last week during a lecture from the college's guest speaker, former '60s radical, now professor Bill Ayers. The speech was punctuated by occasional outbursts from protesters, calling Ayers a murderer, countered by students shouting for disrupters to "Leave!" and "Go Away!"

Nearly 600 people came to see Ayers, who gained national attention during the recent presidential election, in which republican candidates referred to him as "a domestic terrorist" who "palled around" with Barack Obama. More than 150 people stood outside to protest the event, holding signs emblazoned with slogans such as "Shame, Shame, Shame!"

"We were pleased with the turnout," said Lafayette resident and co-founder of Flags for America, Jim Minder, who helped coordinate the protest. "We consider it a success since our primary goal all along was to make the community and alumni aware of who Saint Mary's was inviting onto their campus."

Prior to the event, Ayers, 64, explained that he had watched himself be turned into a "cartoon and a caricature" during the presidential election. A former leader of the radical organization the Weather Underground, which was responsible for bombing several public buildings during the 1960s, Ayers went on to become a respected education professor at the University of Illinois. He is also the author of several books, and was named Citizen of the Year in Chicago in 1997.

Ayers' recent accolades, however, didn't change the viewpoints of many of those opposed to his past actions.

The chair of the Saint Mary's College Republican Club, Scott Cullinane, stayed outside during the lecture, stating he did not want to give Ayers "the honor or

satisfaction of my presence."

Others sympathetic to the protesters, like Orinda resident Jim Boucher, believed in Ayers' right to speak. Boucher brought his daughter, Noel, (a senior at Miramonte) to the lecture to hear Ayers and see the protest. "I formed my own opinions, and I hope she'll form her own opinions," he said. "It was a great opportunity to give her a civics lesson in her own backyard."

Lafayette resident Gabriel Froymovich, however, said Ayers' lecture "was cogent, but rang hollow in the context of his past."

"Ayers orchestrated the murder of police and is widely quoted as not regretting doing so, not ruling out repeating it and as wishing that he did more," he said. "How can he then talk about 'the incalculable value of every human being'? It was disrespectful to his victims."

While members of the Weather Underground have been tied to attacks that killed several people, Ayers has denied that the group was ever involved in killing or injuring another person during its six-year existence. Although a fugitive who lived underground during the 1970s, Ayers was never convicted of killing anyone.

Minder and many other protesters spent the day talking with students about the Weather Underground and Ayers' involvement. "I'm sad to say that it appeared that most of the students we engaged had already made up their minds, even though there is a lot of factual information out there on Google to refute their arguments," Minder said.

Saint Mary's sophomore Darryl Tom, who is studying kinesiology and hopes to become a PE teacher, said he didn't know much about Ayers' background. He simply came to hear about education reform. "Hopefully, there's going to be change, because the education system is not looking too good," he said.

Ayers' lecture steered far from the topic of terrorism. Even while expletives were shouted toward him, he spoke in a quiet, measured tone. He cited the urgency of social reform and the need to switch the current education system from one which teaches obedience and conformity, to one which encourages imagination and courage.

"I want small schools, small classes, more teachers, more contact," he said. "I want small groups of people asking questions."

Ayers spoke of activism, asking the audience to "pay attention, be astonished, and do something," and spoke frequently of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his work.

"I urge you to read all of his speeches, especially the one from April 4, 1967. That was the speech in which he came out very eloquently against Vietnam."

Although supporting the right to protest, Ayers said he was offended by one thing: "They said I would warp your impressionable minds. I thought: What books shouldn't you read, also?"

Many of the questions asked after the speech were made by students and focused on education reform. Minder and Cullinane were both disappointed that protesters weren't given the opportunity to express their thoughts during the question/answer portion.

"The protest's secondary goal was to make sure they had a counterpoint to the 'one-sided lecture' by Bill Ayers," Minder said. "Our goal was to present the students with the truth, as told by eyewitnesses to events about 40 years ago. Just when it was our turn to counter Ayres' statements, the moderator called time and told everyone to leave."

Ayers did stay after the program was over to talk with anyone who wanted to speak with him, and was quickly surrounded by a large group of audience members.

"Some individuals walked up to Ayers afterward," Minder said, "but this is not the same as using a microphone and having a dialogue in front of everyone in the room."

"I tried to get up to him," Froymovich added, "but the throngs of people trying to ask questions were too thick."



Education professor and former '60s radical Bill Ayers answers audience questions following his lecture at SMC Photo Jennifer Wake

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