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Headline: The Big Spill

By Nick Welsh

Workers on Union Oil's Platform A were pulling the drilling tube out of well A-32 at 10:45 on Tuesday morning, January 28, 1969. The tube was stuck, but they kept pulling anyway, for another 450 feet. In the process, they dislodged critical drilling mud, and all hell broke loose. Gas and mud from 3,000 feet beneath the ocean's surface shot into the air, splattering the panicked workers on the platform with grease and grime. They managed to plug the well, but nothing could control the oil and gas. Eight hundred feet away from the platform, the sea boiled furiously.

The oil had burst through its fragile geological formation, ripping five long gashes through the top of the ocean floor. At least 77,000 barrels escaped in the first 100 days of the spill. The Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969 remains a morality tale all the more tragic because it could have been avoided. In short, the federal agency regulating offshore oil production—the United States Geological Survey—granted Union Oil, an oil company with a reputation for cutting corners, permission to waive federal safety regulations when drilling in an oil formation that was known to be extremely volatile and fragile.

Santa Barbara's catastrophe sparked a local environmental movement that fused the youthful and militant energies of student activists with the money, connections, and indignation of well-established blue-bloods. Together these forces were directly responsible for founding the Community Environmental Council, a major think-tank; starting numerous grass-roots organizations like GOO, the January 28th Committee, and later the Environmental Defense Center; and opening UCSB's Environmental Studies Program, the first of its kind in the nation.

These forces played a key role in the victory of the statewide initiative that created the California Coastal Commission and contributed to the State Land's Commission decision to ban oil drilling in state waters for 16 years. Nationally, they aided President Richard Nixon in his push to reduce special tax breaks enjoyed by the oil industry and, most important, the forces played a major role in Nixon's decision to sign the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) on January 1, 1970. The law stipulates that the environmental consequences of federal projects be considered before the appropriate federal permits are issued, requires that public hearings be held, and that the public be given access information previously viewed as the property of the developer. The state of California passed a similar law, known as the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)....