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The Nuclear Attitude at Middlebury College, 1960-1970s

Nuclear energy and fear are inherently, intricately linked. Beginning with the stunning devastation of Hiroshima in 1945, nuclear power appeared an unimaginably destructive power, so powerful the mere possibility of a nuclear war planted fear inside the minds of citizens. Within a small liberal arts college in rural Vermont, Middlebury students attempted to process the fear and moral questioning that accompanied this power by passionately debating nuclear disarmament and its ramifications for world peace. Student groups both supporting and opposing nuclear disarmament vehemently debated their respective opinions in campus buildings, hurled accusations of communism at each other, drew several speakers regarding disarmament to Middlebury, and attended the first Intercollegiate Conference on Disarmament and Arms Control. However, this fervor animated by world events like the Cuban Missile Crisis rapidly shifted attention to a much closer threat: the construction of a nuclear power plant in Vernon, Vermont by Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corporation in the late 1960s. Now witnessing a nuclear presence in their backyard, students aggressively disassembled and examined every aspect of this event, from Middlebury College's close involvement with the nuclear power plant, the college's nuclear disposal and use policy, the moral implications of nuclear power, and the new term of "environmentalism" emerging from the first Earth Day in 1970. As Middlebury College student Tom Arcidiacno stated in *The Middlebury Campus* in 1977, "[p]eople will fear the unknown and to them, nuclear power is an

unknown. They see Hiroshima in their backyards.”¹ For Middlebury students in the 1960s and 1970s, nuclear power suddenly transformed from a hypothetical presence thousands of miles away to their very own nuclear power plant mere miles away, catalyzing the individualist environmental movement at Middlebury College.

Although material appeared in *The Middlebury Campus* regarding nuclear disarmament immediately following the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima, it was in the 1960s that the powerful activism at Middlebury College truly announced its presence through a sudden onslaught of *The Middlebury Campus* articles. Spurred into action by a discussion over nuclear testing and disarmament by then-executive director of the greater New York council of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) at Middlebury in 1961, two groups formed mere days after the discussion.² Middlebury College soon possessed its own chapter of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) and the National Committee for a Realistic Nuclear Policy (CRNP).³ With the former advocating a reduction in nuclear arms and the latter recognizing “no other choice but to maintain nuclear weapons...as a weapon to fight off an enemy bent on world domination,” the college rapidly transformed into a battleground for politically-rooted, explosive debates between the two groups.⁴ Middlebury student Jeffrey Entin and founder of the CRNP appeared particularly adamant about his position, stating that in addition to SANE promoting unnecessary fear and panic, “I would not be surprised if

¹ Larry Welkowitz, “The Roving Reporter,” *The Middlebury Campus*, May 11, 1977, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/2818>.

² “Nuclear Policy to be Discussed Tonight at 8:30,” *The Middlebury Campus*, November 9, 1961, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/4952>.

³ “Placid No More,” *The Middlebury Campus*, November 30, 1961, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/4530>.

⁴ “Placid No More.”

there is communist participation in SANE.”⁵ Visible in the overall tone of the nuclear debates and Entin’s quote is a deep concern for the political consequences of nuclear disarmament, and particularly tension between communist influences and the United States during the 1960s.

The Middlebury Campus did briefly mention the environmental consequences of nuclear war—radiation—in the early 1960s. On October 27, 1960, Prof. Howard Woodin, who five years later led the founding of the Environmental Studies program, gave a lecture in Warner Hemicycle entitled “Biological Effects of Radiation.”⁶ The paper did not provide the details of his talk, however. Another item, a 1962 article entitled “Don’t Read This,” reprimanded students for their casual pollution of the campus and reminding them to “make the effort to erase the trail and keep the countryside for the rest who use it.”⁷ While there is some evidence of an expectation to maintain the environment for communal enjoyment, this early 1960s debate over nuclear disarmament primarily displays the political realm in which Middlebury College students regarded the issue of nuclear use and its consequences.

Further reminded of the ever-present nuclear danger by the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Middlebury students continued to endlessly debate the role nuclear power played in world affairs. Most significant amongst the endless debates between the SANE and CRNP was their attendance at the first Intercollegiate Conference on Disarmament and

⁵ Jeff Alderman, “Anti-SANE Group Formed by Entin,” *The Middlebury Campus*, November 30, 1961, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/4540>.

⁶ *Middlebury Campus*, October 27, 1960, p. 4.

⁷ “Don’t Read This,” *The Middlebury Campus*, May 17, 1962, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/4622>.

Arms Control at Swarthmore College in 1962.⁸ Attended by 400 students from 80 colleges and containing a personal address by President Kennedy, this conference consisted of three full days of presentations and debates over nuclear disarmament.⁹ Although it may appear in retrospect college students (particularly Middlebury students) integrated themselves into world affairs to a high degree, *The Middlebury Campus* article covering the conference reported the Middlebury representatives considered “apathy and lack of knowledge in the universities and colleges” the primary impediment to definitively resolving nuclear dangers, even at the Vermont campus where informative debates occurred seemingly biweekly.¹⁰ So while, in retrospect, Middlebury College appears highly informed and involved in nuclear disarmament, there may be a misleading impression of activism conveyed from simply looking at college newspaper articles. Nuclear arms played an increasingly large role in world politics after the Hiroshima bombing of 1945. Yet for the average college student in rural Vermont, world affairs doubtless often seemed intangible abstracts until the construction of a nuclear power plant in 1967 in Vermont irreparably shattered the Middlebury bubble of isolationism.

Just two years after a 1965 report detailed abnormally high rates of thyroid cancer in young children residing downwind of a nuclear test site in Nevada, construction began in Vernon, VT on a nuclear power plant.¹¹ The fledgling debate of nuclear power’s

⁸ Roy Godson, “Discussion on Disarmament Draws 400 to Swarthmore,” *The Middlebury Campus*, February 22, 1962,

<http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/4556>.

⁹ Godson, “Discussion on Disarmament.”

¹⁰ Godson “Discussion on Disarmament.”

¹¹ Gerry Rowland, “Ecology Activists Plan Protest at Power Plant,” *The Middlebury Campus*, April 16, 1970,

<http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/13772>.

environmental consequences at Middlebury burst into panicked concerned almost overnight. Endlessly circling and hypothetical debates about the impacts of nuclear missiles on countries thousands of miles away morphed into a rapidly growing mass of concrete and nuclear fuel just a two-hour drive away from Middlebury College. Amidst concerns of leukemia, cancer, permanent genetic damage, and a nuclear meltdown that would render Vermont inhospitable, opponents of the plant's construction argued for environmental repercussions such as thermal pollution.¹² Although the construction of the nuclear power plant in Vernon carried with it both economic and political repercussions, such as more jobs in Vernon and the political forces required to approve this project, Middlebury students primarily concerned themselves with the environmental and moral repercussions of such construction.

During this time period of the nuclear power plant's construction from 1967-1971, *The Middlebury Campus* regularly covered all elements of the nuclear power debate. Significantly, the newspaper released informative, argumentative pieces from different organizations in addition to reporting on events, suggesting a subtle change from visiting speakers' opinions to actual informative (albeit often admittedly biased against the plant's construction) articles. A 1970 article detailing the environmental concerns of nuclear power and issuing particularly strong statements such as "The Atomic Energy Commission...[has] kept many of the most alarming facts hidden from the public" drew an immediate response.¹³ In his response letter to the college newspaper,

¹² Rowland "Ecology Activists," April 16, 1970.

¹³ "Eco-Activists Fear Thermal Pollution At Vermont Yankee Nuclear Plant," *The Middlebury Campus*, April 16, 1970, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/13775>.

the Assistant Director for the Nuclear Safety Division of Reactor Development and Technology for the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission assured students every aspect of the process of the construction at Vernon was transparent to the public, if they so decided to go searching for the information.¹⁴ Furthermore, he argued, nuclear power offered the possibility of providing low-cost electric power with a minimum impact on the environment, even though they admittedly give off more heat than fossil fueled steam plants.¹⁵ The Assistant Director, whose son was in his third year at Middlebury at this time, notably sought to address two of the two main concerns overwhelmingly present in *The Middlebury Campus* articles: the distrust of large organizations like Vermont Yankee and fear of environmental repercussions from nuclear power.

The lack of confidence in large, powerful companies is unsurprising, considering in the 1960s Douglas Meredith maintained positions as both President of Middlebury College's Board of Trustees- and on the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corporation's Board of Directors simultaneously.¹⁶ Consequently, *The Middlebury Campus* 1969 article entitled "Trustee President Meredith Proposes Atom Power Plant for Lake Champlain", written by Middlebury student Steve Early, was both biased and merciless. Raging against Vermont Yankee for its purported disregard of Vermont citizens and for refusing "to recognize thermal pollution even exists," Early played the moral high card, imploring his audience to consider what Lake Champlain would look like in 30 years if Meredith

¹⁴ Andrew Presseky, "Atomic Energy Commission Staffer Answers Opponents of Nuclear Power," *The Middlebury Campus*, May 14, 1970, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/13795>.

¹⁵ Presseky, "Atomic Energy."

¹⁶ Steve Early, "Trustee President Meredith Proposes Atom Power Plant for Lake Champlain," *The Middlebury Campus*, February 20, 1969, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/13195>.

succeeded in his proposal for another nuclear power plant.¹⁷ Notably, Early described Lake Champlain as “one of our most prized natural resources,” recognizing such natural resources require preservation, a cornerstone of the environmental movement which simply did not appear in prior *The Middlebury Campus* articles.¹⁸ The entire situation with Meredith appears eerily similar to the 1964 novel *The Governor* by Middlebury alum Peter S. Jennison (advertised in the May 1964 Middlebury College Newsletter), which pits the Chairman of the Board of a small Vermont college against an influential Board member and the head of the Nuclear Power Administration over the installation for a prototype reactor at the college.¹⁹ Although only one novel, it appears this sentiment of anti-institutional mistrust, especially regarding experimental and dangerous technology like nuclear power, ran deeper than one article in a college newspaper. Regardless, Early did not have any conflicts over moral, economic, or political ambiguity in this complex nuclear power debate; Early ended his article by observing the same Head of the Board of Trustees was “also the head of a larger industrial concern which places its selfish, short-range interests over the lasting welfare of the people and state of Vermont.”²⁰

While spirited, the many protests of the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant failed. Although Middlebury students joined the rest of Vermont and the world on the first Earth Day in 1970, appropriately marching and protesting the plant’s construction while simultaneously picking up trash, they did not change the final outcome.²¹ However, the energy used for scheduling protesting of nuclear energy through a college “black-

¹⁷ Early, “Trustee President,” Feb. 20, 1969.

¹⁸ Early, “Trustee President,” Feb. 20, 1969.

¹⁹ “Middlebury Books,” *Middlebury College News Letter* 38, no. 3 (1964): 18, accessed 14 May 2015. <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/40693>.

²⁰ Early, “Trustee President,” Feb. 20, 1969.

²¹ Rowland, “Ecology Activists,” April 16, 1970.

out”, writing congressman about nuclear power, and countering protests with rallies supporting nuclear power did not disappear. Between the initial announcement of the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant’s construction in 1967 and its completion in 1971, Middlebury students consciously realized the intimate connection between the sources of pollution and cleaning up pollution itself, a sentiment absent in *The Middlebury Campus* prior to the Vermont Yankee incident. In the aftermath of the construction of the nuclear reactor in the early 1970s, *The Middlebury Campus* continued to showcase the attention Middlebury students gave to nuclear power and environmentalism at large. Articles such as a 1974 student opinion arguing for the further investigation into solar, wind, geothermal, and water-generated sources of power displays the beginning of Middlebury students’ desire for sustainable energy sources.²² Later in 1979, students pressured the administration to publicly reveal its radioactive material disposal policy.²³ Even if large protests and significant steps toward implementing these sentiments into the college’s energy policies came much later, the roots of such movements began in the 1960s and 1970s, riding the wave of environmentalism left from protesting the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant.

The reaction to nuclear power at Middlebury College during the 1960s and 1970s is particularly valuable because of the visible growth of environmentalism. Initially concerned with nuclear disarmament for its political ramifications, students grew concerned with nuclear power not only as an immediate threat to the environment, but

²² Fred Earle, “Is Nuclear Power Worth the Risk?” *The Middlebury Campus*, November 14, 1974, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/9598>.

²³ Judy Osborn, “College Burns Radioactive Waste,” *The Middlebury Campus*, November 15, 1979, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/3512>.

one that would impact future generations. After the 1977 arrest of 2,000 people in Seabrook, NH for protesting the proposed construction of a nuclear power plant in the town, interviewed Middlebury students strongly agreed it was not only the Seabrook residents right to protest, it was within their moral obligation to preserve the environment.²⁴ Just as Finis Dunaway argues in his 2015 history *Seeing Green*, environmentalism became an individualistic moral concern.²⁵ Although the debate over nuclear power would only continue with events such as Chernobyl nuclear accident regularly breathing new life into the ever-present debate about energy sources, the 1960s and 70s marked a tangible transition into widespread environmentalism at Middlebury College.

The Vermont Yankee nuclear plant is already closed, with decades of protest, economic hardship, and operating difficulties all contributing to its fate.²⁶ Federal law dictates that the remaining spent nuclear fuel must be stored in a long-term storage facility, yet no such plan currently exists for the Vernon plant.²⁷ The nuclear fuel responsible for decades of *The Middlebury Campus* articles, Middlebury student protests, and the growth of environmentalism on the Middlebury College campus will remain in Vernon, where officials assure it will be safe.²⁸ The future of nuclear energy and sustainable energy is continually evolving, but the sentiment expressed by Middlebury

²⁴ Larry Welkowitz, "The Roving Reporter," *The Middlebury Campus*, May 11, 1977, <http://middarchive.middlebury.edu/cdm/ref/collection/underpub/id/2818>.

²⁵ Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 207.

²⁶ Jess Bigood, "Vermont Yankee Nuclear Plant Begins Slow Process of Closing," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/05/us/vermont-yankee-nuclear-plant-begins-slow-process-of-closing.html>.

²⁷ Bigood, "Vermont Yankee."

²⁸ Bigood, "Vermont Yankee."

student Eric Stevenson in 1977 still resonates on the Vermont campus: “The environment should be everyone’s concern.”²⁹

²⁹ Welkowitz, “The Roving Reporter.”

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