

FROM THE EDITORS

Here in California, predicting the Big One is practically passé, and getting our attention requires more than a plain old earthquake warning. We prefer to contemplate the truly spectacular, like the (disappointingly misguided) prediction that a massive tectonic event will one day carry Southern California out to sea to become an island west of San Luis Obispo.

Earthquakes are real things and they are deadly, but California faces another equally dangerous threat. Our deeply fractured geology is matched by a deeply fissured society. For decades, enthusiasts have circulated a half-serious proposal to separate the North Coast from California. Bay Area and Southland have repeatedly squared off over the diversion of northern rivers to southern farms and cities (with many Northern Californians fulminating about secession). Today's culture wars never had better antagonists than the polarized voters of our coast and interior.

All of which reminds us that there's no compelling logic behind California's state boundaries, themselves a product of a hasty 1849 meeting in Monterey, where the primary goal of most was to grab the mountains and their glorious Mother Lode. California not only has no geographic unity, it has more diversity of landforms and more species of plants and animals than any comparable area of North America. Nor has its society much in the way of traditional coherence. In 1542, when the Spanish made their first landing, there were a great many natives occupying today's Golden State, dispersed in constellations of small villages and speaking dozens of different tongues.

Today, few places of California's size have a population more vast or variable. Of the more than 190 nations on earth, 177 have representatives in the Silicon Valley alone. This kaleidoscopic social diversity surely creates less friction than the class disparities, the widening chasm between rich and poor, Bel Air and Fresno, that threatens to become a black hole pulling us all in.

If California has long represented a certain kind of chaos, perhaps the most astonishing thing about the state is that it holds together at all. And yet hold together it must if we are to have what states provide for their citizenry, namely law and democracy. So what brings Californians together to make common cause? What shared experiences bind the myriad stripes of Californians into a *public*, a body of citizens with common concerns?

Boom has been born in difficult, even interesting times, which might help explain why there are so many reminders of ruin in these pages: decaying bunkers, abandoned homes, and the burned-out districts of post-riot Los Angeles. Yet thinking about disaster can be a powerful impetus to rethink the future of any community. In this spirit, John Aubrey Douglass offers a vision of a future university system that might actually be built from the still-impressive but declining old one. Few projects could be more important. Closing college campuses to the people they should serve will not only rob us of a crucible of the state's modern culture and economy. By rarifying a once-common experience—going to college—it will abrade our sense of public purpose, depriving Californians of a rite of passage that has bonded millions of people across generations, ethnicities, and virtually every kind of difference.

We still await the Big One. But looking over the State of California today, it is easy to see that some gigantic political and economic events have shaken our sense of public trust and threaten to rattle our society into fragments. Earthquakes are catastrophic, and the communities that survive them are defined by their response to the common purpose of rebuilding. In the wake of recent events, the question is not whether the land will sit still long enough for us to build our futures on it, but whether we can call up a sense of mutual responsibility to get the building done.

Louis Warren

Carolyn de la Peña