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Historical Issues

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High Noon

By **Michael Stusser**

The first thing I heard at Cal's freshman orientation was: "Don't let school get in the way of your education." This concept—however whimsically intended—would radically alter my world view.

The tables on Sproul opened my eyes to a plethora of extra-curricular activity: the Alliance for Revolution, the Hare Krishnas, CALPIRG, and the Society for the Elimination of The Man, to name just a few. As I looked over the various organizations listed in the ASUC Guide, the Berkeley Non-Partisan Developmental Committee (BNDC) caught my eye; its purpose, to foster dialogue on critical issues of the day in a social setting, while providing divergent points of view from across the political spectrum. With nine presidents listed, but no phone number or address, my search ended there until, a few months later, my friend Doug Hamilton mentioned the club over cocktails. "The BNDC is really an amazing group of people, though we're kind of exclusive. If you're interested, I'll bring up your name...."

The following week, Doug called to say I had made the cut, but warned me of one of the BNDC's steadfast rules: individuals who missed more than one Friday morning meeting per semester would have their membership revoked. Luckily, I'd ingeniously arranged to have no classes whatsoever on Fridays, so I soon found myself in the hallowed den of the Berkeley Non-Partisan Developmental Committee, a.k.a. the basement of the Phi Tau fraternity. Arriving early with notebook in hand, I encountered five fellows at the house bar, each—shockingly—drinking a beer at 9:30 in the morning.

Tentatively, I introduced myself: "Hi, I'm here for the BNDC meeting? I'm Doug's friend."

"Hi, I'm Rocky," one chap responded heartily, "and I'm the president." He was immediately interrupted: "No, I'm president," said another. "I'm president," bellowed yet another of the leaders. Unfazed, Rocky continued, "Want a beer? The meeting's about to start, we're just waiting on a few more members."

As 10 o'clock spun to 11:15, beers and dialogue flowed in the darkened room: everything from Reagan to sweat shops to Pink Floyd. Members continued to drift in, greeting each other with a smile, an insult, and a beer. Finally, as I accepted my fourth drink of the morning, my liaison Douglas arrived.

"Roll call!" Rocky suddenly yelled. He began calling out the names of historical figureheads: "Il Duce?" Present! "Caesar?" Present! "Czar?" Silence. ("Oohs" and "aws" filled the room as the Czar faced imminent dismissal for failure to appear).

The meeting was called to order, and members began discussing the day's agenda. The BNDC social director was thinking of setting up a formal dance—could the members muster up dates? The second item concerned the deadline for the group's ASUC funding application: the \$800 kept the organization (and taps, apparently) running, and they didn't want to miss out. A guy named Mac volunteered to submit the app, although in his blotto state



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he didn't bother to jot down the deadline.



BNDC presidents Michael Stusser and Doug Hamilton

Finally, Doug stood—unsteadily—to announce that week's discussion topic: UC's divestment from South Africa, an issue raging in the heart of campus. Members' opinions provoked strong sentiments, pros and cons—and, sadly, some belching. At the height of the debate, three minutes before noon on the bar clock, an out-of-breath straggler burst in screaming "Present!" dove over the bar, and began to chug a brew (the Czar, avoiding the guillotine). Then, at precisely 11:59, the members belted out a drunken rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Why the song at that hour, I had to ask, and why the giant rush from late delegates?

"Well, this is the BNDC—the Before Noon Drinking Club," replied one of the presidents. "We gotta close the meeting somehow."

Today, salons, book clubs, and Internet chat rooms give individuals a chance to debate the issues of the day. It's democracy in action—a truly grass-roots approach that doesn't rely on politicians or the media to tell us what's important. Looking back, the BNDC served the same purpose, creating what so many great organizations strive for: empowerment, dialogue, and communal participation. We were just too drunk to know it at the time.

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