

100 years after America's deadliest quake, evidence gone and questions remain

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A century after the deadliest earthquake in American history leveled San Francisco, key events in its aftermath remain shrouded in mystery. Kevin Starr, professor of history at the University of Southern California and California State Librarian Emeritus, argues that ineptitude and fear turned the natural disaster into a manufactured catastrophe.

Some 450 people attended Starr's talk at Kresge Auditorium on Sept. 29—the first of seven in the Quake '06 Centennial Lecture Series presented by Stanford and the University of California-Berkeley. Stanford history Professor David Kennedy introduced Starr, who is author of a dozen books on California, including a multi-volume history. Quoting from Vachel Lindsay's poem honoring William Jennings Bryan, Kennedy described Starr as a "Gigantic troubadour, speaking like a siege gun / Smashing Plymouth Rock with his boulders from the West."

In what Kennedy called a "conspicuously stentorian voice," Starr argued that actions by "the oligarchy of San Francisco" in response to the earthquake revealed the "inner evil subconscious" that belied a city "frightened of its underclass" while "entering upon the high tide of its identity."

True Western spirit

The estimated 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit San Francisco at 5:12 a.m. on Wednesday, April 18, 1906. It shook the city in two phases lasting 45

seconds. "City hall... collapsed instantly," Starr noted. "Facades fell from homes, revealing the furniture within."

Starr said that despite claims after the disaster that "everyone behaved magnificently, with courage, panache and intelligence," as an "example of true Western spirit," city officials made questionable decisions before and after the earthquake.

Three years earlier, Fire Chief Engineer Dennis Sullivan had warned the board of supervisors that the city's water system needed correction, but it was never fixed. Water mains burst in the earthquake. Citing San Francisco Is Burning author Dennis Smith, Starr asserted that the second greatest catastrophe in the event was the death of Sullivan, who was mortally wounded in the earthquake. Sullivan had "extensively studied the [1904] fire of Baltimore," but without his direction, a "fractured leadership," headed by U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Frederick Funston, repeated the mistakes made there.

Starr dismissed as folklore accounts claiming that two firestorms naturally swept through San Francisco after the quake. He noted that Funston had "assumed de facto control of the city" and decided within hours of the quake to fight fire with fire, despite having no experience in firefighting. "The army and a reluctant but bullied fire department seemed determined to destroy San Francisco," Starr claimed. "The black powder used to level many buildings turned [them] into Roman candles.... The more this technique failed, the more it was employed."

Starr jocundly claimed that "one of the gentlemen in charge" of dynamiting buildings was "heavily under the influence of alcohol as he banged away at buildings that otherwise could have been saved." But a report submitted by Capt. Le Vert Coleman, head of the 1906 dynamiting party, suggests a different handling of the incident. Coleman wrote that he found John Bermingham, superintendent of the California

Powderworks and a civilian expert on explosives, to be "so far under the influence of liquor as to be of no service, and, lest he should in that condition cause serious accident," Coleman "sent him away."

Questionable judgment

In another example of questionable judgment, Mayor Eugene Schmitz issued a shoot-to-kill order early in the disaster, despite "no evidence whatsoever of wholesale looting," Starr said. "Practically the first thing he says... is that looters would be shot on sight." At least 15 alleged looters were killed.

Rumors and official accounts portrayed San Francisco inaccurately, Starr claimed, including tales of Asian-like "ghouls roaming streets" biting earlobes and fingers off the dead for their jewelry. In the "collective civic meltdown," unassimilated minorities were the first target, he said. Publicly, the controlled language of promotional literature even ignored the earthquake itself. "The accepted, politically correct designation was the Great Fire of April 1906, not the Great Earthquake and Fire," he said.

Katrina parallels

Recent re-examinations of coroners' reports from 1906 have concluded that 3,000 to 5,000 people died during the event, much higher than the official death toll of about 300. Starr asserts that the higher figure was "squashed by an oligarchy eager to rebuild the city, hence to disconnect it from its reputation of being a dangerous place." He added, "Did the denial of these casualty figures... suggest other denials as well?"

The greatest mystery of the earthquake remains the disappearance of its archives. Henry Morse Stephens, a professor of history at the University

of California-Berkeley, was commissioned to build an archive of the earthquake for the university's Bancroft Library. After his death in 1919, the library de-accessioned his records. They have never been found.

In comments linking the reconstruction of San Francisco after 1906 to the question of rebuilding New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Starr pitted the geological reasons not to rebuild San Francisco against the intrinsic persistence of cities: "Once they're dreamed... once they've been there, they never disappear."

Starr will repeat this lecture at UC-Berkeley on Thursday, Oct. 20, at 7:30 p.m. in 155 Dwinelle Hall. The next speaker in the series, author Malcolm E. Barker, will continue with historical and social perspectives on the earthquake in his talk, "Through the Eyes of the Survivors," on Tuesday, Oct. 25, at 7:30 p.m. in Kresge Auditorium. Other speakers in the series, which continues to March 2006, will focus on other aspects of the 1906 quake, including Earth science, engineering, preparedness and disaster response. The series is funded by the President's Fund, the John A. Blume Earthquake Engineering Center, the School of Earth Sciences and the Bill Lane Center for the Study of the North American West at Stanford, and the University of California-Berkeley.

Source: Stanford University

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