

# THE AMERICANA GAME

by Karen Wald

The Americana Game is a new type of political propaganda that requires total "audience participation". The game was played at San Francisco State during the "Ten Days". Many who would never attend a speech or a rally stopped to view this new political media on the lawn. Almost all of the Commons Lawn was staked out in a maze of lines with cards bearing descriptions of some facet of American life, picture collages representing the same thing, forks where the player must take a choice, and cards of "chance" at which the player's next step was determined by the card he drew.

The starting point for the game began with a series of picket signs introducing the player to the socialization process in America. Cards bore such inscriptions as "25%: Your parents read Spoc! — you have Pacifist tendencies", "30%: Your parents read Reston & Lippman — a typical liberal, wishy-washy upbringing. You realize the problems of society but can rationalize anything."

After early socialization comes high school, and the first Choice. The player must decide to follow the path of continuing high school (after cards give him a good idea of what THAT'S like) or to drop out. If he continues, his next choice isn't until he graduates. If he drops out he is immediately faced with the draft. This is a common barrier represented by a chance card at a great many forks in the road. If the player is drafted, he is sent over to the induction center. There he goes through basic training, where cards inform him, "Your sergeant has an IQ of 56. He makes you stand at attention for 2 hours because you looked at him funny" and "Do 50 push-ups for not knowing that the spirit of the bayonet is 'to kill' ". After basic training, a chance card sends him into the U.S. Striking Force around the world (Guatemala, Detroit, Laos) or to Vietnam. If sent to Vietnam, a chance card either lands him in the VA hospital for life, or dead.

## The Drop Out

But if the high school student chose to drop out, he may have been one of the lucky few who didn't get drafted this time. He is now a member of that great minority group (poor white or black) of "high school drop-outs". Rows of cards depict what his life is like, the difficulty of getting a job, the condescension, and finally, getting laid off when the company "suffers" a 1% drop in intake. The player is now back in the slum he was born in, and must make a choice. If he hasn't gone off to become a junkie, the choice card tells him, "As you have seen, whenever you have begun to improve your life, something has happened to knock you back down again. You now see that under our social system it is very hard for a person like you to better yourself. You have 2 choices. If you want to fight the system and try to overthrow it, if you want to risk going to jail, risk losing what little you have, risk getting killed, then take the path to your right."

If he decides not to risk it, the player becomes a lucky of the system, and ends up secure and well off, but at the price of the oppression of others. If he decides to "fight oppression" he goes along a path that has signs describing JOIN, SCEF, the Panther's Ten Point Program and the beginning of repression. A sign soon greets him: "The COPS are looking to arrest YOU and kill YOU because you are fighting to end racism and control your life and your community" and points

out that the Panthers are only one such group facing this.

Along this path, a chance card may inform the player "you have been arrested as a result of your struggle against the system. You are held on \$40,000 bail until your trial (6 mos.). A white, middle class jury (who already knew you were guilty because they read the papers) convicts you in 23 minutes. You are sentenced to 20 years. Go to jail near the start of the game" (the jail is a frequent chance card, and is to be described later). Or, if the player is lucky, he may get away, and continue to organize and struggle. Or he may be dead, "accidentally" shot in a riot. If he continues to the end of the line of struggle the final card recites the Declaration of Independence.

## And After High School?

But what if the high school student continues instead of dropping out? At graduation, he must choose whether to go to work or to college, or whether to take a side trip and become a hippy (a path he may also get to from some stage of his college or worker career). If he becomes a worker (assuming he has overcome the inevitable barrier of the draft) his life is described as he trudges along the path. A card bearing a string of beads directs him "This is your assembly line. Please move the beads to the right, then back." But as a worker he comes to a choice fork as other workers form a union and decide to strike for decent wages and working conditions. He must decide whether to go on strike with them with all the hardships that entails being described for him or to scab. Cards make it clear the cops and the news media are all on the side of the boss.

The scab ends at a dead end. But the path isn't easy for the strikers, either. Overcoming the hardships of the strike, he is faced with a sell-out on the part of the AFL-CIO leadership who have been pressured by the government, and enter into a sweetheart contract with the boss. Another fork appears for the player-worker to choose — the path of the AFL-CIO, with its security and benefits, but also the human cost — or independent union activity? If he continues as an independent union organizer he ends up on the path labeled "revolt", and fights the system as the radical high school drop out did, with this path too ending with the Declaration of Independence.

## The College Kid

And now back to the college student. If he avoids the draft (and his chances of this are good) the cards and pictures give him a good dose of what college life is like — classes of 1500 students, taught by televisions; dormitory rules, etc. — and then the choice, to continue or drop out. The path to the left is dropping out, and (after the draft barrier) sets him on the path where

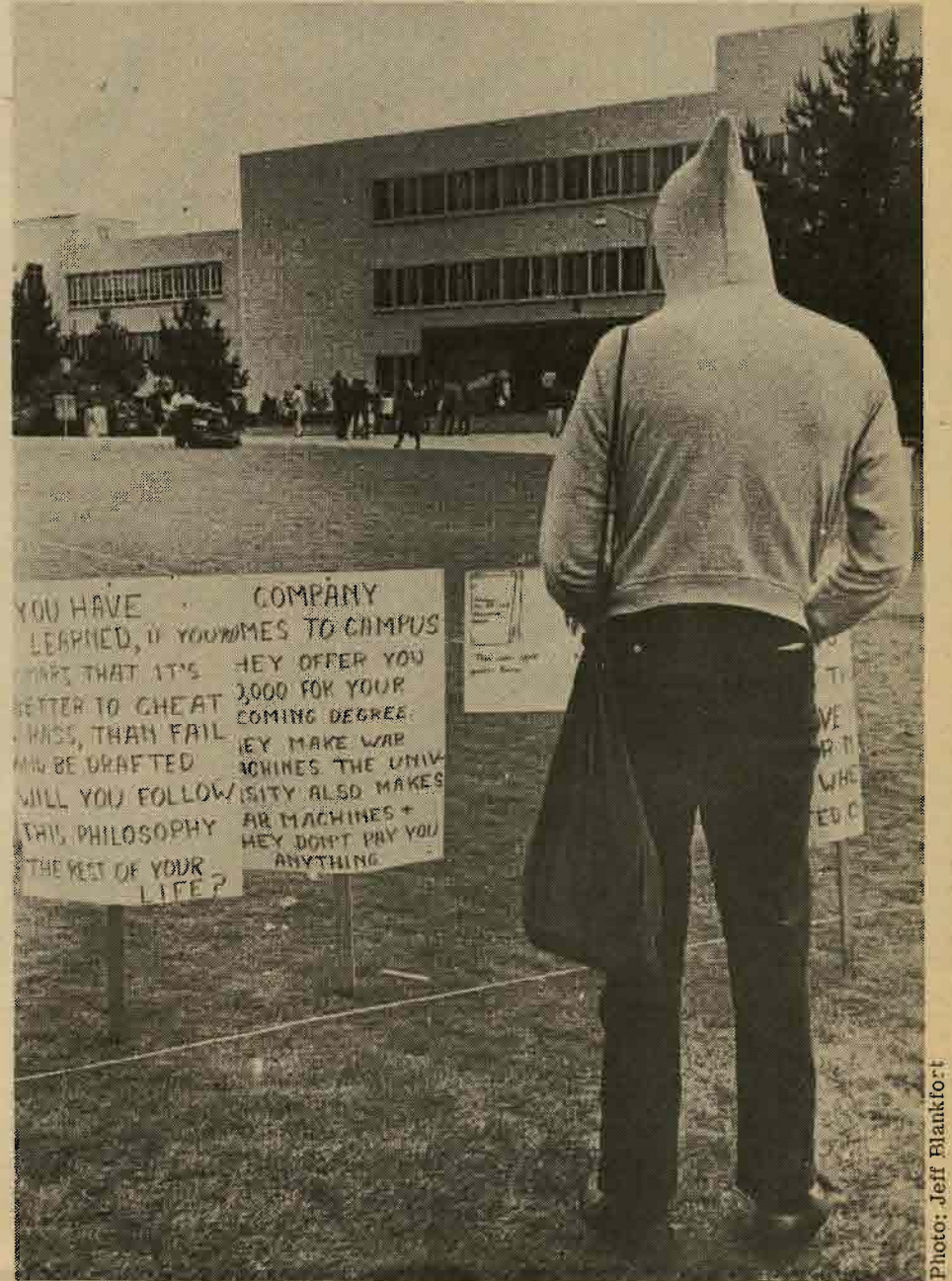


Photo: Jeff Blankfort

he chooses, as did the high school graduate, to become a worker or a hippy. If he continues, he has two choices. He can go to the right, acquiescing in college life even though he's seen what its like. He ends up after graduation in private business or government service. In either case he has material success, but again not without cost. As a government worker he's told he can't organize or demand higher wages — its unpatriotic. Private enterprise bears pictures of "You at 40" and concludes "Your children have run away. Why?"

But the college student may decide to continue as a student activist. The activist is shown, through pictures and photographs most of us are now familiar with, the trials and problems and repression he will face. After awhile of this he is given a choice, to go back and acquiesce, and a long line returns him to the path leading to graduation, business or government service. If he chooses not to do this, he will

be suspended. Once suspended, he becomes a full-time organizer — once again, if his drawing from the chance cards doesn't send him into the army as his punishment for not acquiescing.

## The Organizer

The organizer follows a line of cards describing the hardships he will endure — the problems with his family, the lack of income, the need to relearn all of his old concepts. There are no immediate rewards, but instead jail and beatings, all again revealed through too-familiar newspaper clippings. And again, he is given the choice of going back into the system. If he fails to give-in this time, he becomes a full-scale militant with increasing police attacks against him. But in the end, he too concludes with the Declaration of Independence.

A verbal description of this game cannot come close to actually walking through the maze, reading the cards, seeing the pictures, making the choices and taking the chances. You also lose the flavor of hearing the comments and seeing the looks all around you.

The coed, who clearly would not have been at a political debate, greeted a fraternity-type walking by, "Are you reading all these cards?" "Oh, no," she replied, embarrassed. "I was just walking by" and she continued along the path with him. But she had been reading the cards.

Inside the jail — a roped-off area separate from the rest of the game-maze, where a card instructed you to stay for ten minutes then re-enter where you left, — a "prisoner" sent there by a chance card asked me, in a very lifelike manner, "Are you a reporter describing jail conditions, or were you a demonstrator?" and another mumbled sincerely, "Gee, I hope I don't get any more cards that send me in here!" as he fidgeted away his ten minutes.

## Propaganda!

In the most candid and simple description of the huge life-game, one coed exclaimed in surprise, "Why this is PROPAGANDA!" "You're damn right it is," smiled one of the SDS organizers of the game. And for those organizers wondering how to end their radical isolation from a liberal campus with visual media, without losing the political content of what they are trying to do, the Americana Game proved a highly effective and successful piece of propaganda. ■



Photo: Jeff Blankfort