Overview of the Standing Rock Pipeline Protests

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The Standing Rock protests against the construction of the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines has been in the news over the course of the last several months. The purpose of this essay is to discuss this event and its context in greater depth. The essay will start with an overview of the pros and cons of the proposed pipeline. Then, it will proceed to consider the protests against the pipeline and their aftermath. Finally, the essay will reflect on the potential effects of other protests similar to the Standing Rock protests that have happened or continue to happen.

**Pros and Cons of the Pipelines**

To start with, it is worth describing what these pipelines even are. According to the BBC (2017), the Keystone XL pipeline is "a planned 1,179-mile (1,897km) pipeline running from the oil sands of Alberta, Canada to Steele City, Nebraska, where it would join an existing pipe. It could carry 830,000 barrels of oil each day" (para. 1). The Dakota Access pipeline is a similar project that is planned to begin in northwest North Dakota and end in southern Illinois. The main idea of both of these projects is to enable the more efficient transportation of oil. For example, the route of the Keystone XL pipeline would essentially establish a southeastern diagonal line between the starting and ending points, whereas as the infrastructure currently stands, the oil would first need to be shipped east and then south. The principle here, of course, is simply that a straight line is the fastest way between two points.

**Cons**

A key argument that has been made against the pipeline projects is that they will reinforce the mentality that it is acceptable to depend on oil, during a time when more and more people are arriving at the consensus that it is essential for the future of both the nation and the planet to shift toward clean and renewable forms of energy. For example, Bernie Sanders (2014) is on record as saying the following: "at a time when the scientific community is virtually unanimous in telling us that climate change is real, that it is caused by humans, . . . it is absolutely imperative for the future well-being of this country that we listen to the scientists and we begin the path forward to break our dependency on fossil fuel, not accelerate more drilling for the dirtiest oil on the planet." In other words, an investment in massive pipeline projects would directly imply a commitment to continuing to rely on oil as a primary source of energy; and according to Sanders, this is the exact opposite of the direction in which the country should actually be moving at this time.

Moreover, there is a specific concern that has been raised with regard to the well-being of the Standing Rock Sioux, a Native American tribe. As Worland (2016) has reported, the Dakota Access Pipeline "would travel underneath the Missouri River, the primary drinking water source" for the tribe; "and "builders of the pipeline insist they have taken extraordinary measures to safeguard against disaster, but opponents point out that even the safest pipelines can leak" (para. 4). There is also some concern regarding the cultural prerogative of the tribe, and the potential effects that the pipeline may have on ancient burial grounds. There is thus antipathy to the reinforcement of the oil industry in general, but there is also concern for the situation of this Sioux tribe in particular. The Dakota and Keystone XL Pipelines have both been involved, sometimes interchangeable, in the protests.

**Pros**

The main benefit of the construction of the pipelines would clearly be economic in nature. The Keystone XL Pipeline would enhance trade between the United States and Canada, and the Dakota Access Pipeline would make it easier to move oil about the United States. There is also been talk of the jobs that would be created by the projects. President Trump has suggested that the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline would create 28,000 American jobs; however, it seems likely that this is another characteristic exaggeration on his part. As Varinsky (2017) of *Business Insider* has pointed out, the actual number is probably closer to 3,900—and it is unclear what percentage of even that number will consist of permanent and not just temporary jobs.

As long as the United States is in fact dependent on oil an energy source, it is fairly clear that the nation would do well to boost its domestic production, as well as its trade relations with Canada. This is because otherwise, the United States would be at risk of becoming beholden to the interests of hostile nations. For example, the Middle Eastern alliance of oil-producing nations known as OPEC (2016) produces a huge share of all the oil in the world; and the decline of the power of OPEC is recent times is directly related to the fact that the United States has begun ramping up its own domestic oil production. Developing domestic capacities may thus be very important for the United States, even in terms of national security, no matter what climate change science may or may not say.

**Protests and Aftermath**

The Standing Rock protests kicked off in North Dakota in April 2016. The protests themselves have a fairly dramatic narrative arc, filled with standoffs with both private entities and the police, legal injunctions, and accusations of mistreatment and unfair play. Describing the specific events in order may fall beyond the scope of the present essay. The main point here would be that the protesters established an actual camp at Standing Rock, with the intention of engaging in nonviolent protest in order to prevent the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline. There were numerous warrants issued for arrests on the grounds of trespassing and disorderly conduct: For example, one was issued for the journalist Amy Goodman, which raised broader concerns in the news about the implications for the freedom of the press (Levin, 2016). This sort of dynamic essentially went on for several months, with agents in charge of construction forcibly evicting protestors if and when the situation came to that.

An important point to note about the Standing Rock protests is that they may have in time turned into something larger than an event meant to demonstrate against the pipelines per se. Rather, they may have fused with the broader liberal movement against the Trump presidency that has emerged ever since the results of the election came in last November. This is because President Obama actually took heed of the protests against the Keystone XL pipeline back in 2015 and rejected the construction of the pipeline. He did so largely on the grounds that the United States must serve as a global leader in the fight against climate change, and that the construction of the pipeline would be antithetical to this crucial strategic objective (Campbell, 2015). President Trump, however, reversed this decision and mandated that the construction of the pipeline should go full speed ahead. It would be fair to suggest that from liberal perspective, this means war. The numbers at the protest camp grew considerably in the aftermath of the presidential election.

In any event, the protest camp at Standing Rock is now no more. Cuevas, Sidner, and Simon (2017) reported on the 23rd of February 2017 that "the remaining protesters at the camp, near Cannon Ball, North Dakota, would be allowed to leave without being arrested so contractors can continue clearing up the protest site near the controversial 1,172-mile long pipeline" (para. 5). Most of the protesters took up this offer, which resulting in a lot of chanting and other demonstrative gestures but little in the way of actual conflict with law enforcement. Relatively few arrests were made when the camp was cleared out. An ironic detail that may be worth noting, just for the sake of it, is that by all accounts, the protesters—who were primarily advocating for the environment—left the camp a total mess.

**Similar Events**

In its essence, the Standing Rock protests can be understood as a case of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience refers to an action that one knows is illegal on the basis of the fact that the existing law is in conflict with one's own conscience. Events like the Standing Rock protests that have occurred all over the world are primarily based on the perception that the threat posed by climate change and environmental degradation is far too serious to not take matters into one's own hands. Moses (2016), for example, reported in May 2016 that "around 1,000 people closed the world's largest coal-exporting plant in Newcastle, Australia and other bold actions are happening at power stations, oil refineries, pipelines, and mines everywhere from the Philippines, Brazil and the US, to Nigeria, Germany and India" (para. 2). These protests generally do not have long-term effects; however, they may have great symbolic value within the public consciousness, such that at a certain point, they may produce a critical mass shift through which the people of the world begin to think about the environment in a different and more sustainable way.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this essay has consisted of a discussion of the Standing Rock protests against the construction of new oil pipelines. The essay has considered the pros and cons of the pipelines, the protests and their aftermath, and events that are similar to the protests. It is clear that the people involved in the protests were passionately committed to the cause of environmentalism, and they believed that the construction of the pipelines would set their cause back. It is possible that they were right about this. Given the current global economic and political situation, though, it also cannot be denied that the United States developing its own oil infrastructure is in general a good thing. The issue is thus characterized by complexity.

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