

EDITORIALS

Rough sailing for the Navy

Protester Brian Willson bears primary responsibility for the accident that severed his legs at the Concord Naval Weapons Station Sept. 1. He foolishly and illegally challenged a moving train. But in American society, as crazy as it may sound to some, an agency being protested against has a certain degree of responsibility for the health, safety and welfare of even protesters who engage in bizarre and extreme behavior.

That ethic of responsibility, however strained, has developed through more than 25 years of extensive protest in this country, from militant takeovers of college buildings to attempts to levitate the Pentagon in which protesters put flowers in soldiers' rifles. It probably couldn't be otherwise in a nation so protective of the right to dissent. It's an ethic that has been reinforced by criticism, made public this week, of the Navy's role in the Willson incident.

In a non-scientific sampling of readers by the Times in September, a heavy majority blamed Willson and his fellow protesters for the incident in which a weapons train rolled over him when he was protesting in the tracks. A Navy report on the incident and a congressional hearing have focused attention on the other part of the equation: what the Navy could have done differently to prevent the accident. As it turns out, the Navy could have done a lot of things.

The weapons station command had information on the protest in advance that was not passed on down the line. False assumptions were made up and down the chain of command about the readiness of weapons station personnel for a protest encounter. False assumptions were also made about the train's speed and ability to stop and whether the protesters would get out of the way, as they had done on previous occasions.

It appears that weapons station leaders assumed a plan was in place for police to clear the tracks of protesters if a confrontation developed. But there was inadequate communication and follow-through to ensure such a safe outcome. The Navy has disciplined the station's commander, Capt. Lonnie Cagle, and public works chief, Cmdr. Clayton Ching, for their roles in the incident and other weapons depot personnel may be punished.

Yet common sense remains the best guide in assessing the train protest mishap. The accident would not have happened if Willson had not decided to take his protest to the extreme, absurd extent of practicing civil disobedience against a 123-ton locomotive. An agency targeted by protesters cannot be expected to anticipate everything that protesters might do to put themselves or others in danger.