

Silicon Valley corporations are only behaving like corporations.

High tech's image tarnishes

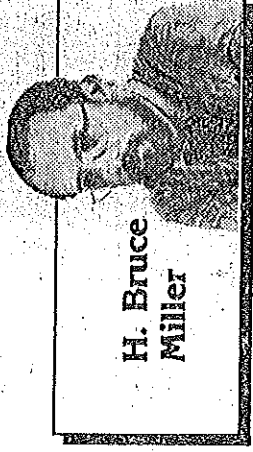
HERE was a time, not long ago, when the corporate image of Silicon Valley was as shiny-bright and squeaky-clean as Donny Osmond's bicuspids.

But lately the old image has begun to look somewhat the worse for wear. Almost every day, it seems, the papers carry a new story of hazardous chemical gunk seeping out of a high-tech firm's storage tank into somebody's water supply.

Many of us are shocked and dismayed by all of this. It's as if we picked up a paper and saw that Donny Osmond had been busted for running an international kiddie porn ring. We don't expect it, we feel we've been betrayed.

When you think about it, though, we've got no reason to feel dismayed and betrayed. Silicon Valley corporations are only behaving like corporations.

Consider the way they've maneuvered in Sacramento to dilute and delay regulations on the storage of hazardous chemicals. It's a classic study in the effective alliance of high tech and low politics.



H. Bruce Miller

Assemblyman Byron Sher, a Palo Alto Democrat, wrote a bill that would set standards similar to those already adopted by eight cities in Santa Clara County. The bill made it through the Assembly but got stalled in the Senate Health and Welfare Committee after heavy pressure from industry groups such as the American Electronics Association and the California Manufacturers Association.

The trouble with the bill, the electronics people say, is that it would give local governments the option of setting their own stricter standards. The AEA and CMA want the state law to supersede all local

Continued on Page 2B

2B Sunday, July 24, 1983 ■ San Jose Mercury News

High tech shares corporate ills

Continued from Page 1B

regulations. Otherwise, they say, they'd have to contend with a "patchwork" of local rules.

INDUSTRY spokesmen insist — and insist and insist — that they want to protect our water and that they support state regulation. Indeed, they'd welcome state regulation. Only not *this* regulation. Environmentalist Ted Smith of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition doesn't buy that line.

"What they're really trying to do is just stall things," he says. "The pattern, with the electronics industry as well as the petroleum industry and manufacturers in general, is to stonewall and stall regulation as long as they can. You'll see that everywhere. They certainly would rather live without regulation than with it."

Maybe Ted Smith is too cynical. But you don't have to be a cynic to notice the discrepancy between the high-tech firms' public-spirited pretensions and the political games they play.

At the insistence of industry, Sher's bill was watered down to make it weaker than the Santa Clara County ordinance in some important respects.

For one thing, it doesn't cover nearly as

many hazardous substances. It allows more flexibility in monitoring for seepage. And it would apply only to tanks that are "substantially" below ground level. (The local law, more logically, covers all tanks that could leak chemicals into the soil.)

If the Sher bill were passed in the form the electronics firms want, the stronger Santa Clara County ordinance would be tossed out. In other words, Silicon Valley firms tell us they want to help protect our water — but they support a measure that would take away some of the protections we've got and prevent us from enacting new ones.

Of course, the high-tech firms aren't doing this out in the open; they're doing it by proxy through the trade associations — playing, as one Sacramento observer put it, a "cat-and-mouse game."

"They don't want to put themselves out there because it would be bad public relations and bad press," the observer said. "On the other hand, they're doing the groundwork, to some degree out of the public eye, to modify the bill substantially or to kill it."

As I said before, it really shouldn't surprise anybody that Silicon Valley corporations are behaving this way.

For a long time we clung to the idea that people in the electronics industry were a spe-



H. Bruce Miller

cial breed — honest, imbued with civic virtue, more concerned with the public weal than with private profit. It was a comforting notion, but it never made sense.

Electronics executives are not 19th-century robber barons, true. But nobody gets to the top of a billion-dollar corporation by being St. Francis of Assisi. In the ethics department, a guy who sells computer chips isn't intrinsically different from one who sells cars or steel or cigarettes.

Now we're feeling the pain that always accompanies the loss of a cherished illusion. In the long run, though, the loss of illusions is often healthy. Maybe we'll finally learn that we can trust the electronics companies as long as we cut the cards.

Columns by H. Bruce Miller appear Sunday in the Mercury News and Tuesday and Thursday morning in the San Jose Mercury.