

# David, Goliath and the Beach Cleaning Machine: How a Small California Town Fought an Oil Giant—And Won! By Barbara Wolcott, Capital Books

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# BOOK REVIEW

## *DAVID, GOLIATH AND THE BEACH CLEANING MACHINE: HOW A SMALL CALIFORNIA TOWN FOUGHT AN OIL GIANT—AND WON!*

Barbara Wolcott

Capital Books; 232 pg. \$25.00.

*Reviewed By Matt Brown*

What does a lawyer, two years out of law school, running on a dirty beach on the central coast of California have to do with a major lawsuit against an oil giant? That's the question that Barbara Wolcott answers in *David, Goliath and the Beach Cleaning Machine: How a Small California Town Fought an Oil Giant—And Won!*

Wolcott's book focuses on the small town of Avila Beach and how its citizens, upon learning that they were sitting on top of a large oil plume, fought to have Unocal, the company that had supported the town for so long, clean up the mess. At the center of the action are the lawyers and the bureaucrats who go up against the mighty corporation. The book describes how the environmental lawyers, the water experts, county and state politicians, state and county bureaucrats, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the California Attorney General's Office among others gathered their forces and used the full legal and regulatory arsenal at their disposal to hold Unocal responsible. Unocal, as it could be imagined, using its mantra of "spend no dime before its time" fought these gathered forces tooth and nail not to be held responsible for the oil plume. They used money, paper work, obfuscation, public relations campaigns, political pressure and, of course, legal maneuvering all in attempt to thwart the tiny town's efforts to force the oil company to take responsibility. In the end, when all the data was collected and the all facts surrounding leaks in the company's oil pipelines were known, Unocal decided to settle and the lawyers, bureaucrats, and townspeople got what they wanted—an environmentally clean and safe Avila Beach.

Or did everyone get what they wanted? In the background are Avila Beach's citizens—a collection of the old and young, the working class and the professional, brought together in this experience. During the suit their homes lost value. Because Avila Beach was a "company town" the town was divided between those that worked and were loyal to Unocal and those opposed to the environmental hazards that the company had created. The citizens of Avila Beach also lived in fear for their health, as conflicting answers were given as to the possible affects of the pollution. This was only exacerbated by the arrival of Ed Masry and his sidekick Erin Brockovich (both of whom Wolcott criticizes harshly) who played on the fears of the residents of Avila Beach. For those that called Avila Beach home, the legal triumph was a disaster

as some lost their businesses and still others lost their homes. As a result of the settlement, Avila Beach's downtown had to be destroyed—a downtown that had been the focal point and heart of town life. Wolcott highlights this tragedy in the aftermath of the environmental catastrophe. As the town was slowly dismantled, the town celebrated its past and it said goodbye to its landmarks.

In Wolcott's exploration of Avila Beach's struggle, the book provides a great introduction to the ins and outs of what happens in an environmental lawsuit for the novice lawyer. In its chronicling Unocal's tactics, it provides the inexperienced lawyer with insight into the roadblocks that will be thrown in a plaintiff's way. Wolcott also grimly illustrates the sometimes harsh costs of winning—the destruction of the heart of a town, the loss of residents, businesses, and tourists, and in the case of Avila Beach—a bit of the "funkiness" that the town cherished. *David, Goliath and the Beach Cleaning Machine*, may not be as riveting or compelling a read as *A Civil Action*, but it stands on its own as a further exploration of how the law helps us bring about environmental justice.