ABSTRACT / The floods of 1966 in Northern Italy provoked varying reactions from officialdom and the press. Political and administrative problems received as much coverage as the environmental effects of the disaster, but learned opinion gained a new, if rather temporary, status in the newspapers of the time. In retrospect, economic recovery seems to have occurred more rapidly than predicted in the gloomy forecasts of the time, although a clear picture of the disruption caused by the floods took weeks to emerge.

Oh! let us never, never doubt
What nobody is sure about!
—HILAIRE BELLOC

On the night of Friday, 4 November 1966, the worst flood in over 400 years washed through the city of Florence in Northern Italy, destroying lives, property, and priceless treasures. Journalists in Italy and the rest of the world dipped their pens into the floodwaters and wrote for months. Over twelve years have passed since that traumatic night, and it is now possible to examine with detachment the contemporary reaction—the flotsam of prejudice, denunciation, and sensationalism bobbing about in a murky sea of fact, fiction, and conjecture. A study of such reaction may help us to understand how future hazards are to be faced and how environmental decision-making has been affected during the aftermath.

A Brief Summary of the Event

On 4 and 5 November 1966, 200–250 mm of precipitation fell on the Ligurian side of the Apennines in Tuscany and Emilia–Romagna, and of this, about 180 mm fell on the fourth. Thus, between 15 and 22% of mean total annual precipitation fell on the Arno basin in northern Tuscany in 48 hours, and between 10 and 15% fell during the first half of this period. Heavier precipitation occurred in the basins of southern Tuscany, such as the Ombrone, where up to 44% of total annual precipitation fell in the 48-hour period (e.g., 268 mm at Batignano, see Fig. 1). The regions of Lombardy, Veneto, and Venezia-Giulia were also badly affected; for example up to 150 mm of precipitation (25% of the mean annual total) fell on the Adige, Barchiglione, Isonzo, and Brenta basins, and up to 300 mm (35%) fell on the Piave, Livenza, and Tagliamento catchments during this period. In addition, a cyclone over Venice brought winds of more than 100 km/hr and sea level rose to 1.9 m, flooding the city and remaining 1.1 m higher than datum for more than 24 hours.¹

The severity of the problem was far from uniform. Catchments such as the Arno (about 5000 km²) were already saturated by melting snow, although less than 10 mm of rain had fallen on 3 November. Thus the peak flow arrived very suddenly. The Ombrone basin, and many of the montane basins north of the Po river suffered severe erosion as they had a relatively large area of exposed sedimentary deposits. A greater precipitation and discharge had been recorded on 2 September 1965, in the Tagliamento basin in Venezia-Giulia, but the dis-

charge of 2200 cumecs reported for the Adige river has a calculated recurrence interval of 70 years. Maximum stages of 11.0 and 10.33 m were reported on 4 and 5 November 1966, at Nave di Rosano on the River Arno 16 km upstream from Florence, but further downstream at San Giovanni alla Vena the maximum stage of 8.94 m recorded at this time had been equalled in 1929. Further north, Lake Garda rose by 0.37 m and discharged water at the rate of 110–130 cumecs into the River Mincio.

But it was in the city of Florence that the most spectacular damage occurred. The Arno burst its banks at 5:00 a.m. on Friday, 4 November 1966. Subsequently the water level rose to a maximum of 1.8 m in the Duomo, Santa Maria del Fiore, 2.4 m in the Baptistry, 3.65 m