

Interview of Ben Dobbs, DEMOCRACY AND THE AMERICAN COMMUNIST MOVEMENT

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

JULY 17, 1987

FURMANOVSKY

We're going to begin, Ben, with a discussion of your background: where you were born, when you were born, and a little bit about your parents. Why don't you tell us your full name and what name you were born with?

DOBBS:

I was born on February 23, 1912, in New York City. My full name and the name given at birth was Benjamin Abraham Isgur. I lived there till I was about six years of age and I have no memory of it whatsoever, any experiences in New

York or anything of that nature. My family consisted of my mother [Ida Levy Isgur], my father [Michael Isgur], and two sisters. One sister [Lillian Goldstein] is two and a half years older than I am, living presently in New York City, and one sister, my twin [Marcella Stack], now lives in San Francisco and hasn't lived in Los Angeles since 1931. My father was a painter and paper hanger, a union member all of his life and a highly skilled workman. He was a very gentle man in the sense that I don't recall any act of violence on his part. He had a very positive outlook towards life, he enjoyed his family, and as far as I know, not only as far as I know but everything I'd ever seen, my mother and father never had any serious quarrels or serious arguments or serious fights. Generally, I would say it was a very happy marriage. He, as a union man, was very much devoted to his trade and to his family, and very close to his two brothers [Isaac Isgur and Abraham Isgur] and three sisters [Rebecca Blacker, Bessie Steinman, and May Isgur], all of whom moved to Los Angeles somewhere between 1915 and 1923 or '24. They all wanted to be together, and as a result we had quite a happy family life with a whole number of cousins. We'd go out on outings together, picnics, tourist spots in Los Angeles, rides to various places in Southern California. Generally speaking, it was a nice family group with these Sunday outings as well as tea and singing parties, dinners together, mutual cooking. All of us lived in Boyle Heights; that's a part of the city of Los Angeles which at that time was primarily Jewish, but also had a relatively large number of Mexican people and some Japanese.

FURMANOVSKY:

Where did your family come from?

DOBBS:

My father apparently, I never did get it really straight, but I think that he left Czarist Russia in 1905. This of course was to escape military conscription. Then he settled in the United States where he met my mother. My mother apparently came about the same time; she was three or four years younger than my father. But she came here as a younger person and was able to attend school, and therefore she was very literate both in English and in Yiddish. He was more literate in Yiddish than he was in English, although he learned the language quite well, could speak it fluently as well as read and write. She was very literate and a very, very smart woman. She was able to

make a living for our family when my father was unable to work due to various injuries. I recall once he had a broken leg and one time he had a broken arm; and both times she was able to figure out how to make a living for the family since that was the only form of revenue. At that time there was no workers compensation, or possibly it was his own responsibility and he never got any compensation. And therefore to have some income for the family when we were very young, she used to be able to either go to work or at one time she even opened a grocery store in Los Angeles and did quite well in the days before the supermarkets. She read a great deal, but her life was hampered by muscular dystrophy that developed in the last ten years of her life to where she was practically immobile. She couldn't go places, could barely walk across the room without any assistance, and this held back her development. My father worked as an individual contractor; that is, he would go out and find a job for himself to paper someone's house. He was a very skilled workman, and for thirteen, fourteen years he worked at one Warner Brother's studio in Burbank, California. He was eliminated from his job in 1945 for his participation in the big [Conference of Studio Unions (CSU)] strikes that took place in 1945 and '46. He apparently was of that age where they didn't hire anybody back, and as an active union man he was eliminated from the film industry. But he was ready to retire from full-time work anyway and he had no trouble finding work when he wanted to because he was well known as an expert workman. He wanted me to learn the trade and I'm sorry now, of course, I didn't do it, because to have a trade like that is always very valuable. But I was too arrogant, I guess, to want to learn his trade, so I never did it. Politically he was probably best defined as being a social democrat, he was always on the "right wing" of all the struggles that took place, both in his union and his Jewish fraternal order. His conception of socialism, as he told me one day, was, "What more socialism do you want? I have social security, or at least the beginning of it; I've employment insurance, or at least the beginning of it; I'm allowed to join the union without any fear and that's as much as I want of socialism. Why should anybody want any more?" And therefore he, while never active, did consider himself a socialist. My discussions with my mother, I recall, were about religion or about her family and about her life. From an early age, her belief was that religion was simply a hopeful message of some vague kind rather than any kind of practical realization or reality to anybody's problems. She always had some conception

of God as that of being all of nature, rather than a supernatural being that could help anybody. I found this very useful in my later life and have always thanked my parents for not muddling my head with any religious education. They were Jewish, but did not spend too much time on Jewish holidays and cared very little for Jewish ritual. They considered themselves part of this group of people and were concerned deeply with the problems affecting Jewish people and, you know, concerned about the welfare of Jewish people, but it did not take place with any kind of activism or anything of that nature.

FURMANOVSKY:

But in the early twenties, when you were a young boy, you were moving in Boyle Heights Jewish circles, basically a working-class Jewish community in Boyle Heights. Who did you mix with? What school did you go to?

DOBBS:

Yes, before I do that, let me tell you a little bit about my sisters first. My two sisters spoiled me something fierce, in other words they were very protective of me, and we always got along well as far as I remember. My older sister, with whom I still maintain contact although she lives in New York City, especially worried about me, and my twin sister, we got along very well. Both of them are socially active to this day, having participated in union activities and union struggles for, I would say, most of their lives. My sister in San Francisco presently has the same debilitating illness that my mother had, a muscular dystrophy that slowly is making her paralytic, and while it has limited her political activity or any other kind of activity, she copes with it and does the best she can and is married. My oldest sister, living in New York, became a social worker and then executive of the Jewish Family Service in New York City, and worked for that one agency for something like thirty-three years before she was forced to retire. She retired as a psychiatric social worker and for years took individual cases, and now has a very comfortable retirement. She's in fairly good health and goes around and travels a great deal. Every year she goes to one country or another, and she visits us about every three or four years. I went to Malabar Street School, this was about three blocks from my house on Malabar Street in Boyle Heights. This was a school that was predominantly, at that time, Jewish, with Jewish children in a highly Jewish neighborhood, and with a large number of Mexican kids who

came from further east from where I lived around Indiana Street. I never had any trouble with school; I always got either A's or B's and was a fairly good student and fairly responsible. I had a group of kids we ran around with, you know, mostly street activity, never any kind of gang activity in that sense, but always ran around together skating all over the neighborhood or riding with our bikes all over the neighborhood. I don't have any particular memories of my grammar school days. I always went to summer school however, and therefore was able to graduate high school at a relatively early age. At that time, roughly about 1926, 1924, I believe that there was some experimentation with the development of the junior high school system, so I went at that time to what was known as Boyle Heights Intermediary School, I think that's what it was called, and later became Hollenbeck Junior High School. This was near where Roosevelt High School is now. I went there but my sister, my twin sister, didn't go there. I went because I went to summer school so often. I don't have too many memories of junior high school. That's situated around Sixth and Soto streets in Los Angeles, and of course I walked every day to and from school.

FURMANOVSKY:

Where did you live actually?

DOBBS:

I lived at 2737 Malabar Street. This is about, oh, I guess two and a half blocks east of Soto Street, which is a main drag of Boyle Heights, and four blocks north of Brooklyn Avenue, which of course is a main drag of Boyle Heights, although not the main drag of East L.A.; although Boyle Heights was part of East L.A. and is relatively close to downtown, it's about four miles from downtown Los Angeles. As I say, I don't have too many memories of my grammar school days or junior high school days except I didn't find high school or junior high very difficult, I always got either A's or B's. I remember just running around with kids, I don't remember any social activity or any other kind until I got to high school. When I got to high school I was relatively young, this was in 1926, I went to Lincoln High School. Lincoln High School at that time was primarily famous for a man that later became a very famous actor, by the name of Robert Young. I mention him because he and I were the only two to get what might be called honors in the dramatics department. At

Lincoln High School I had very little trouble with the studies, I don't remember being too brilliant a student of any kind, but I never failed to get anything less than A and B, except in one course, and that was in chemistry, which didn't interest me at all. [laughter] It was about the only C in all the years I went to grammar school, junior high, or high school. Under the tutelage of the dramatics instructor, Harold M. Turney, who thought that I had a very fine speaking voice, which of course has subsequently been wrecked by smoking and hollering and speaking at street meetings later, but it was a very fine speaking voice and he was attracted to it and urged me to go into dramatics, which I found very interesting. I was the lead in two plays at the Lincoln High School; one was called **Merton of the Movies** and the other one was *Seventeen*. I forgot who wrote **Merton of the Movies**, they later made a film of it and it was on a stage circuit for many years, and I thought I did very well at it, as everybody else thought. Mr. Turney later said that he could have gotten me a scholarship at the Paramount School for young actors and the Pasadena Community Playhouse. But for some reason or other, I guess mostly because I never intellectualized about acting and never thought of it seriously as a profession, I did not want to go into it, although he urged me to. I was just a very good juvenile high school actor, that's all, and was recognized as such by the high school and, as I say, was given honors. I recall making a speech at the graduation of high school in 1929, where I just turned seventeen, from Lincoln High. I remember being influenced very much by the principal of the school at that time, a woman by the name of Ethel Percy Andrus, who became very famous--actually there's a building named after her now on the USC [University of Southern California] campus for a study in the problems of the aging. For some reason she took an interest in me and urged me to become a cheerleader, you know, one of those people that lead yells at the football games and baseball games, as a purpose of showing some leadership. She wanted me to do that and thought it would be a good influence on me as well as on the student body because I was so well known as an actor. Actually she urged me to become a cheerleader, which I did. As I understand it, at least that's my best memory of it now, she was able to get special dispensation for me to be able to go to UCLA, in spite of that one C. (You couldn't at that time get into UCLA if you had one C.) So anyway, I remember her quite well, she became very famous, as I say, in education and studies of the aged. She also helped organize the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP).

FURMANOVSKY:

So she was able to get you a scholarship to go to UCLA?

DOBBS:

Not a scholarship, I didn't say a scholarship, just to get in to UCLA. At that time, if I remember correctly, the registration fee was something like nine dollars, and then they tried to get twenty-five dollars from you to join the associated student body, which I didn't do of course because twenty-five dollars was hard to come by at that time.

FURMANOVSKY:

This would have been in 1929, then? Presumably you graduated in the summer of 1929?

DOBBS:

No, I graduated in winter, in February of 1929, just as I became seventeen. I didn't go to college immediately, I worked from February, in other words, till September, when the campus opened. This was the first freshman class at UCLA on the new Westwood campus. Now, there was one other thing that I think might be of some mention in this whole period. When I was fourteen, working in summers and some weekends and holidays, I worked for an uncle [Max Blacker] in a sheet metal shop down on First Street right near Alameda [Street]. And I found this very useful. I am not too handy with my hands, but was able to run errands, and to do rough sheet metal work such as bending the metals, lining up the metals for a craftsman, which my uncle was, as only the two of us worked in the shop. Then when I was sixteen I worked in a shop owned by another uncle [Isaac Isgur], and that was when he manufactured caps. He manufactured primarily for a big hat and cap retail organization at that time called the New York Hat Stores, subsequently they've gone out of business because nobody wears hats in Southern California anymore. Anyway, I worked there and also enjoyed and got a certain amount of training in that shop, both as a floor boy, as well as on weekends working in the New York Hat Stores as a salesperson or sweeping up and doing things that kids do on a shop, running around and being busy in downtown Los Angeles. This was the job I had in the seven months between graduating from high school and going to college. So I was able to save some money, although I think my wages were

something like fifteen or twenty cents an hour at the most at that time. But I began to know downtown Los Angeles very well, and over the years you notice the same nut screaming at street corners and the same newsboys working in corners, and I became acquainted with most of them. But it was very useful for me to go to work at an early age because I appreciated the value of labor as well as seeing the conditions under which people worked, and while they were union shops, it was a hard work, and of course the pay was very low at that time. My work consisted primarily of sweeping up, oiling the machines, and shipping the end product. And then because I'd taken printing in high school I was able to print the labels on the caps, which my uncle found very useful for him in his shop, so I was able to work there. Actually, even when I started college I worked there several hours a week, while at weekends I worked in a gas station on the corner of Brooklyn and Cummings [Street] as a grease monkey and general services around at that time at gas stations, you know, working on tires, and greasing cars and washing cars and things like that. While we were never broke, I don't recall any hunger in our house or any real desperate situation, this of course was in the depths of the Depression, which affected me keenly. But I never had any real luxuries. In other words, I couldn't have gone on to college had I not worked, because there was no other way of getting the fees and expenses that college entails. You had to have transportation. At one time I was in a pool with other people. You know, to get to and from Boyle Heights to UCLA was quite a chore; it took nearly an hour in those days. But you needed all, well, people have expenses and while, as I say, there was no problem of needing the money to live on, in that sense, I needed money to go to school. There was one period at that time when my father had a broken arm and my mother had opened this little grocery store; well, the whole family had to help out because that was the only way you could make it in one of those mom and pop stores. This was of course before the days of the supermarkets. Well, they were beginning to develop, but it was very difficult putting in long hours all the time. So I went to college at UCLA starting in September of 1929. Now, I can't think of anything else relative to my early life.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, how would you describe yourself? If you could look back on yourself when you were seventeen years old, about to enter UCLA, what sort of boy

were you? What sort of friends did you have? What sort of values did you have, would you say? Was there any Jewish content in your life, any political content?

DOBBS:

No, there was no ethnically Jewish life that I recall. As I say, I had no religious training whatsoever. I don't remember being connected in any way with any Jewish organization per se; I don't remember being in any organization per se, oh yes, except two things: One, the high school experience of working in dramatics with this teacher, Harold M. Turney. He later became the dramatics coach and teacher at the Los Angeles Junior College [now Los Angeles City College] and made quite a name from himself after UCLA moved out of the Vermont Avenue campus. The other thing is that we had a group that we ran around together with, where we cleaned up an empty lot on the corner of Wabash [Avenue] and Folsom [Street], where there's now a public library, and we used that to play games. We called ourselves the Hawks, and we used to challenge certain groups like YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] or other such groups, neighborhood groups, and we played football and baseball. I had not too much skill but I enjoyed it. And then one other thing is, the latter part of high school and before I went to college, Mr. Turney had organized a sort of a little stock company of actors, situated primarily through Hollywood High School, night school, where we put on some plays. We traveled around in various churches and put on these plays. I forget some of them now, but I remember enjoying that very much, and always taking a leading part in those plays. I remember once we were down in San Diego I got bit by a stingray, that's all I can remember about it really, except that I know we did it. I had, you know, you hook up with personal friends, some of whom I have maintained to this day, on occasion I call them or they call me, but I guess at my age most of us are either dead or sick or just not around anymore. I don't recall being too intellectually motivated along any lines. I would say I was relatively immature. While I did some reading, it had no real direction, I just loved to read novels. I would go into the library and say I'm going to just start with the A's and just read every book in the library, and I don't know whether I'd ever got past the middle A's, but I did a great deal of reading, did a great deal of reading of boys' adventure stories, things of that kind, but I don't remember any direct intellectual pursuits at all.

FURMANOVSKY:

Or any political--

DOBBS:

No, no politics that I can recall when I went to high school, not even any real concern. I remember I had some communist neighbors, but I don't remember too much about them except once they took our whole family to a fund-raiser for Russian relief. I mean that's the only thing I can recall of anything in that period. The Russian relief of course was during the terrible famine that went through the country after the revolution, or after World War I. But I have no real memory of any political orientation or any intellectual development, in spite of all the reading. My older sister was more motivated, in that she ran around with a group of young people that were motivated towards becoming lawyers or doctors or social workers. I later learned they joined the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL). She went to New York under a scholarship from the Detroit Family Service, for instance, which recognized her ability and she got her master's degree and then bought herself out of the contract. In other words, she refused to live in Detroit. She wanted to live in New York and has lived there to this day. But I think I was pretty immature and while I was very-- I think I was bright, I had no real motivation or any real direction.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you started UCLA I guess at the Vermont campus--

DOBBS:

No, no, I was in the first freshman class at the Westwood campus. It was very raw. It wasn't really developed at that time. I think the only thing there that was built was Royce Hall and [Powell] Library, and you walked through quite a bit of unpaved parts of the campus. I remember the chemistry building [Haines Hall] and the physics building [Kinsey Hall] were almost built, it was even before Kerckhoff Hall was there, which is now just a little tiny part of the union or the student center. I enjoyed very much going to the campus, you know. We're going to get to that in a moment, in case you have any questions about my earlier life.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right, right. But now you have a familiarity, you have a working-class background, you lived in a neighborhood that was largely Jewish working class and it wasn't-- You had some communists living next door and you don't have much recollection of that, but they didn't seem particularly strange.

DOBBS:

Oh no, they were very good friends of the family. And my father had some friends he used to either play pinochle with or work with that were communists.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah. So it wasn't they didn't seem--

DOBBS:

Nothing strange about it, and socialism was not a dirty word in our house, it was sort of something that would be better than the fear and uncertainty. I remember now talking to my mother. She would tell me that the great fears of working people are two: one is unemployment, the other one is war. She felt very keenly about both of those things. But I don't recall being active at all on any kind of organization, any movement, or directing me towards that-- Oh yeah, I do remember a couple of things. I remember my father took me to hear Eugene V. Debs when he got out of prison, after World War I. I don't remember what date, it must have been in the early twenties. And then I remember going to a banquet at the new socialist building on First and Saint Louis [Street], where Debs was a speaker. I don't remember, it was very small, maybe a hundred people or something of that nature. But the meeting I recall was at the Hollywood Bowl; I may be wrong but that's my memory.

FURMANOVSKY:

And would Eugene Debs have been some kind of hero to your parents?

DOBBS:

Oh yes, oh yes, no question about it. One, because of his lifelong devotion to socialism; secondly, as an active trade unionist and believing in industrial unionism; but mostly because of his very self-sacrificing attitude towards the war when he went to prison. You know, arrested for a speech he made in Canton, Ohio, or some such place. So, again, it was just one of those social

things, and it's funny that I had forgotten that up till this minute, but I do remember doing that. I know I didn't join the Young People's Socialist League. I didn't join any such organization or any other organization, at least that I know of, except this group that we ran around with and called ourselves the Hawks. How we got that name, I'll never know.

FURMANOVSKY:

And did your parents oppose World War I, that you remember, did they ever talk--?

DOBBS:

Well, World War I-- I was born in 1912, and I was just a little kid.

FURMANOVSKY:

But later on in the twenties and the thirties, would they--

DOBBS:

I couldn't judge that. I imagine they would be opposed to war, but as to whether or not they would, let's say, take the direction of being conscientious objectors or demonstrating, I don't think they had that activist bent at all, nor were they pacifists.

FURMANOVSKY:

And when you later became politically active--I'm asking this question now, even though I'm moving ahead--were your parents ultimately fairly supportive, when you became--?

DOBBS:

No, they were not supportive and they objected a great deal, and they urged me to do something else. But I can't say that they-- Well, I became politically active. Don't forget, I was already eighteen and nineteen years old, I had a life of my own. And that's why I viewed the experience of working at the age of fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, you know, I viewed that as a sign of independence; and it gave me that kind of independence, not only financially, but also I could think and do for myself. So by the time I became politically active I was ready to move out of the house, it wasn't that-- It was

altogether different than some youngsters have today, I had developed that area of independence, I guess, mostly by working.

FURMANOVSKY:

All right. Why don't we move in to the years at UCLA. This would be 1929, '30--

DOBBS:

No, 1929, the fall of 1929. I remember, it so happens that the people that I went with on a carpool were all communists, everyone of them. All either communists for themselves or communists because of their family. I remember once very early on meeting some of these kids. I would say something about reading something in the newspapers. They would say, "What newspaper did you read it in?" And I would say the [**Los Angeles**] **Examiner** or the [**Los Angeles**] **Times** or whatever the papers were at that time. There were seven or eight Los Angeles newspapers then, the [**Los Angeles**] **News**, [**Los Angeles**] **Herald-Express** and so forth. "Well, you can't read those papers, you have to read the **Daily Worker**, it is the only one that tells you the truth." So I would probably start picking up a **Daily Worker** here and there to read. But they were most all of them communists, of course all of them very decent fellows, very nice guys, and they shared their cars--I didn't have a car at that time--and they'd come pick me up and we'd go home together; although later then I went to work when I got a car on my own and would work after school. My main memory of college is that, one, I was very much let down by the-- Well, here was a big shot in high school, you know, and working that whole period between graduating high school and graduating college, working with this dramatics group at night through Harold Turney's little stock company. Well, all of a sudden you get completely deflated by these huge lecture courses, which were primarily what I took at school. And secondly, and I don't know why this happened, I really don't know how it happened, but I had completely no motivation for what I was going to school for. In other words, whether I was going to prepare for a lawyer, no, I don't want to be a lawyer. Prepare for a doctor? No, I couldn't even get a B in chemistry. Could I be a, you know, something? What was I going to college for? And therefore I had no real motivation, and frankly I was a very, very poor student. I don't remember walking into the library once, all the time I went to school. And that was at UCLA.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you feel out of your depth?

DOBBS:

I don't know that that was it, out of my depth. I think it was just out of my milieu. All these kids in their Greek societies and knowing each other, and I'm traveling two hours to go to school.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, that's what I meant really.

DOBBS:

I don't think I was out of my depth intellectually. I just didn't give a damn.

FURMANOVSKY:

I meant in terms of socially, did you feel different, a Jewish Boyle Heights kid from a poor background with these relatively middle-class kids?

DOBBS:

No, not from that angle. I don't recall that. I think primarily that I was let down. I was busy with other things, such as working or traveling to and from school. I didn't want to be in a fraternity. I went to one pledge thing and it just didn't appeal to me at all. I don't think that there was any envy or anything of the class--There was a certain amount of loneliness, i.e., how do you get to know these people? They are just moving in different circles. Not that I felt less or better than they, just left out, that's all. And the main thing, I guess, was that I just hadn't developed any kind of intellectualizing of any kind of life's problems, including my own future.

FURMANOVSKY:

You were living at home at this time?

DOBBS:

Oh yes, I was living at home.

FURMANOVSKY:

And who were your friends at UCLA?

DOBBS:

Well, I had some friends, first of all the carpool, and, secondly, I was already beginning to tend towards the Communist Party, or the Young Communist League [YCL]. I didn't join the Young Communist League till a few years later, but I began to be more acquainted with this kind of group of people, and I think a little later we actually organized a political organization called the William Z. Foster for President Club, or something like that, where we heckled a couple of meetings where Norman Thomas spoke. I don't remember we did too much of that.

FURMANOVSKY:

That would have been in 1932?

DOBBS:

Probably 1931, '32, yeah, but I don't remember going to school then; so maybe my memory of it is all loused up because I didn't go to school long. I think I went to work in '31, really. I just get mixed up on these dates. I do know this, that there was one half year where I went to [University of California] Berkeley. I was in an automobile accident and got a cut in my eye and was able to get some money, and so I said, "Well, maybe I'll do better at Berkeley." So I went to Berkeley. At that time I was going around with a young woman [Eleanor "Lolli" Milder] who also was a communist; we later got married in 1933. She had some friends and family that was going to Berkeley. I had a real, well, I just had a hell of a good time, but I don't remember studying anything, and there I-- The only time that I had any kind of organized activity was when I joined the Hillel Club, which is a group of Jewish people, but that was mostly because, again, they were putting on shows and putting on radio shows for some reason or other, and so I activated myself around there And then I got into the dramatics department at Berkeley and was offered a lead in a couple of plays, but I didn't want to do it. I thought, the hell with it. I was going to quit school anyway, and so I became active but I was already beginning to be more politically motivated and it began to give some direction to my life. This was because in addition to the dramatics, in addition to the radio work I was doing, I was running around with these young people who considered themselves

communists. I don't know that they belonged to any organizations either, but I know that I didn't. Going to Cal, that must have been the latter part of '29, the early part of 1930, probably 1930. So it was long before I became really politically active in a sense, but I was going in that direction. I don't recall the year of the Foster for President club. I know that, well, during the demonstration in San Diego in May of 1932, in the early part of the year, I was parading myself as a student, but I wasn't a student, you know. I had been a student. I spoke as a student leader or was active in a campaign for Leo Gallagher, who was a lawyer who was fired from his job at Southwestern Law School. He himself was not a communist, but a lawyer for the party. He was a very devout Catholic, and really a wonderful fellow. But I have no memory of these damned dates and how they run into each other.

FURMANOVSKY:

You once told me about a couple of friends of yours: Norman Leonard and Barney Young.

DOBBS:

Well, yes, they were at UCLA at the same time. Norman Leonard was a very fine young man; he later became a lawyer in this Smith Act case which I was involved with in 1951. And Barney Young, I met at-- He was going to Berkeley. He also went to Berkeley, let me put it that way, and I ran into him in either 1930 or 1931.

FURMANOVSKY:

And these were YCL members, or they just moved in that crowd?

DOBBS:

I don't know whether they were or not. See, many of us were tending towards the communist movement, because there was no other active, open, left-wing movement besides that, except for the YPSL's, which didn't attract us at all. (YPSL being the Young People's Socialist League.)

FURMANOVSKY:

Why was that?

DOBBS:

I really don't know, I guess they weren't involved in the headlines of the time. I have no memory of that. But we were friends in the sense that we were together on the campus. I don't recall any long-term social relationships with them at all, you know. Just that we knew each other, that's all, on the campus.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, you said that you carpoled with young communists and actually you were influenced by them and they read the **Daily Worker**. So to what extent was your ultimate connection with the YCL a product of your relationship with them, and to what extent was it something that came out of your background or the Depression, which must have hit at that time?

DOBBS:

Yes. It was a combination of things. First of all, as I say, I'd known communists as a kid, neighbors and some of my dad's friends; secondly, socialism was not a dirty word; third, I liked these people. And there were a great many young people at that time that gravitated around the communist movement, and I think I was impelled more by personal relationships, as well as of course beginning to think about things like, you know, beginning to think about social problems--which you couldn't cross the street without running into, whether it was a direct result of the Depression, or the people you ran into. The Depression had a profound effect on all of us, and maybe that's one of the reasons why there was so little motivation. I think I was too negatively impressed with the-- Well, would America bounce back? In other words, what does a kid of my generation do? What's the use of being a lawyer if you can't get a job? Or what's the use of being of a doctor when doctors are starving to death? Or what's the use of having any kind of outlook with the complete collapse that the country was in? And I think it was around that kind of negative understanding of the social fabric of American life, or the resiliency of American capitalism or whatever. This might have been a reason for that time of low expectations and therefore low motivation. And so it began to draw us in. But I was really drawn in more, I would say, by some of the social milieu, until I began to do some reading. Well, I became thoroughly convinced when I read the **Communist Manifesto**, that's all I needed to read, plus the fact that there was conversations. My twin sister was married to a communist [Walter Stack] at that time. We had, I remember, long discussions into the

night on the various applications of Marxist thought to social problems and social conditions, and this of course led to more reading and more reading and more reading. And I remember very early, I had a job at a place called the Millhander Rubber Company, and there I had the ambition of being a-- **Ambition**, that's not quite the word. I wanted to be a mold man, that's the man that molds the tires. The shop would work all day, in other words from seven to five, ten-hour day, ten- or twelve-hour day, getting tires remolded during the day and all night. I wanted to work at night. When you mold tires, they have to have a certain amount of time under heat and pressure, let's say, an hour, takes the time for the tire to be molded as a retreaded tire to where it can be ridden, although God help the people that rode those poor tires, [laughter] Well, if you could run the molds, that is, empty the mold, fill it with a new tire, go to the next mold, some fourteen molds; if you could do it in thirty minutes then you had thirty minutes of your own time, and that thirty minutes was where I read all of the classics. And I mean most of the classics at that time were published in a form, twenty-one volumes, called the Little Lenin Library, and that was my reading. And the guy that I worked with--there were only two of us working at night--would busy himself getting drunk during the night, and I would busy myself reading. I learned how to handle those molds very well, although it was hard work, and my arms used to be covered with burns because you're working with live steam. But that thirty minutes an hour was a great deal of time for reading, and so I did a great deal of reading in that time.

FURMANOVSKY:

Not very light reading for an eighteen-year-old boy.

DOBBS:

No, it wasn't light reading at all. As I say, I had begun to intellectualize on some of the questions. I began to read, I began to read serious stuff, magazines, books, as well as these Little Lenin Library pamphlets, which you could just put in your pocket, you didn't have to carry around whole number of books while you were running the molds. So it began to develop that way. In the meantime, as I say, my sisters were removed: One sister had moved to New York, one sister became a union organizer and lived in various places in

California, and I was the only one that was seeing my folks. And it was during this period that I had my first marriage, in 1933.

FURMANOVSKY:

We'll come on to that because we're still in '30, '31.

DOBBS:

Yeah.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

JULY 17, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

I want to ask you a question actually related to the Depression. When you used to go home after a day at UCLA in early 1930 or so, what would the Depression mean in terms of what you actually saw around you, while going home into Boyle Heights and--?

DOBBS:

Well, truthfully, I don't remember the kind of open things that you'd hear people talk about. For instance, I never saw anybody put furniture back in anybody's house that everybody saw. I never saw anybody illegally open electricity, any of those things. It was more that you know that the country was in an absolute collapse. You know that my father would have to seek a day's work, although he would get it because he was such an expert craftsman. He didn't work steady, but there was no hunger in the house. The only thing about the Depression was the fact that there was this continual feeling of resistance that the communist movement organized. You knew that there were demonstrations, and you knew there was the growth of organization; although I don't recall any particular incident myself.

FURMANOVSKY:

So physically Boyle Heights looked the same. You went home, everybody was in the house--

DOBBS:

To me. I'm not sure that it did for anybody else, but that's the way it looked to me.

FURMANOVSKY:

You didn't see Hooverilles when you happened to go into downtown?

DOBBS:

No, I didn't. I knew they were there, but I don't recall seeing them.

FURMANOVSKY:

All right. Well, you said that you were working part-time on the rubber company?

DOBBS:

No, that was a full-time job. As I say, I worked some of the time in the days, in order to try to get that night job so I could-- And by a night job I mean you go to work at four and you get out at midnight, you know, or something like that, or three to eleven. That shift, what did they used to call it? The swing shift. And that gave me the opportunity to do the reading. It gave me the opportunity also to go to meetings. I began to go to meetings.

FURMANOVSKY:

And these were meetings of what?

DOBBS:

My first connections with the movement, as far as an organized force before I joined the [Young] Communist League, was around three main activities: The first was, and I have a very dim recollection of it, a thing called the Rebel Players. After all I did have a certain amount of dramatic experience, both in high school and in college, because of my college mostly up at Cal, which is very vague in my memory, except those radio shows and the shows we did through the Hillel. We put on a play that I just don't remember at all, that had something to do with the worker in a steel mill and resisting the boss and that kind of stuff. It was there I met my future wife [Eleanor Milder] and her sister, Malvina. (

[Malvina later married Bud Reynolds and as Malvina Reynolds at about fifty years of age went on to become a nationally famous singer and songwriter.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) It was then I met more adult people that were in the communist movement. And we put on this play and, you know, in the theater at that time you didn't put on a play for a long run, you put on a play for one night, or maybe two performances, and that was the end of it. But a group of us within that play organized a group called the Blue Blouses. This was before I was in the Young Communist League. The Blue Blouses was the kind of thing that you see now, called guerrilla theater. It was very stylized, in that everybody wore the same clothes. The blue blouse was generally the blue work shirt with a pair of jeans, and a capitalist would have a cigar and a high hat and the worker would have sleeves rolled up and the woman would have an apron, something of that nature, but all had the same costumes. There were some very talented people in that group, who could write skits and write parodies and so we began to do a great deal of putting on shows. We put on shows at picnics, you know, workers' picnics, communist picnics, we put on shows at mass meetings, we put on shows from the back of a truck at street-corner meetings. You couldn't have a meeting in the city of L.A. at that time that would not be broken up by the Red Squad, but you could meet in Los Angeles County; and after all Los Angeles County is where most of the working-, some of the working-class districts are, so we'd go out there. And then something began to happen, in that we'd be advertised or we're going to go out to put on a play at a street corner and the speakers wouldn't show up, so I began to develop as a public speaker, and I became pretty good at it. Well, it made me read the papers so I would know what I was talking about. What I would do is give, I guess, amateur versions of Marx's **Communist Manifesto** or something of that nature. Our speeches were dealing mostly with the questions of the Depression and mostly with the glories of the Soviet Union, where there was no unemployment, there was medical insurance; and it was all the things that we talked about which later became some of the aspects of social legislation in the United States in the thirties. But anyway, working in the Blue Blouses we put on a lot of shows. I remember once we went up on a truck to a mass meeting for the release of Tom Mooney, a political prisoner illegally convicted

on a frame-up of a bomb where many people were killed in a San Francisco Preparedness Day parade in 1916, and he spent the majority of his life in prison. On driving this truck from Los Angeles to San Francisco we'd stop at some little local park in some little town on the way up there, we'd put on our play, attract crowds, raise some money, and continue on. We must have put on maybe ten stops. But that's the kind of thing we did. The pure guerrilla outdoor-theater type of activity that many groups do now, and we developed, as I say. I don't recall being a talent as one in the sense of writing plays, or writing parodies, but I was a pretty good actor, and I could act different parts and different voices, and it became a very popular group in the left-wing circles. But at that time, as I say, I met Malvina Reynolds and her sister Eleanor, and they were members of the John Reed Club. Now, the John Reed Club was probably the most active left-wing group of artists, writers, actors, all in the professional fields, including the regular professions like doctor, lawyer, etc. They had quite a large group and they would always put on, to me, a very intellectual, stimulating --although I don't remember taking part in any activities, particularly, but stimulating lectures that would give me things to think about. And at that time it was the cream of American cultural, intellectual life: it had people like Loren Miller, Langston Hughes, Will Geer; I remember he and I put on a play together once. I don't have too much of a memory of it, but over the years I would meet Will and we talked about it. Then Langston Hughes came in and would read his poetry. It really was a very very stimulating group. Its main avenue of expression of course at that time was the **New Masses**, a very popular and well-written magazine that followed the magazine called the **Masses**, in which John Reed and others participated in the development in the twenties. This was in the early thirties, and that magazine lasted a long time. It featured all the left-wing writers like Mike Gold, or, well, who can remember their names? But it was a very popular magazine put on sort of a-- Its distinctive mark was a sort of butcher-paper print out, and it was very good and that was one of the activities of the John Reed Club, the writing force, circulation, discussion of the articles of the **New Masses**.

FURMANOVSKY:

Was it clear to you that the John Reed Club and the Blue Blouses were organizations that were sponsored by the Communist Party?

DOBBS:

Well, when I say the Blue Blouses, it was a group maybe of eight or ten people.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right, and where would you meet? Would you meet in somebody's house?

DOBBS:

Either in somebody's house, or at that time we would meet mostly in the communist center that existed in Los Angeles. Los Angeles had a communist center; the building is still there, it is on the corner of Mott [Street] and Brooklyn. Downstairs was a vegetarian cafeteria, and upstairs were rooms where one could have classes and one could have meetings up to, in addition, a large hall, maybe for six or seven hundred people, what is now a dance hall, to this day, yeah. It's mostly-- It's a Mexican dance hall, you know, because the area's so completely made up of Mexican people. But anyway, that's the kind of place where we met. I forget the address, but it is on the corner of Brooklyn and Mott. Or we would meet in people's homes, or there were other centers where you could meet. I think that maybe one or two of the trade union centers, like the TUUL [Trade Union Unity League] Hall or something like that, but there were places where you could meet as well as workers' homes. But it was a very small group. The John Reed Club used to rent halls, but I don't remember where. I remember one was in Lincoln Heights somewhere, but I don't remember where. The John Reed Club was far more independent of the Communist Party, but supported completely by it. There they had many different wings of the socialist movement. Maybe many of them were communists; some were not socialists. The Blue Blouses, while it wasn't part of the YCL [Young Communist League], was at the call of the service of the YCL, the way I described that I began to do the speaking for YCL meetings where the Blue Blouses would perform. I would say that most of the members were members of the YCL. By most, I mean of the six or eight of us, maybe half; one guy, the only one I remember--they were all getting ready to go on-- became a bacteriologist; one became quite a famous actor, and I remember he had a real leading role in a wonderful show that was later put on by the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union] called Pins and Needles. Well, he was the player, I've forgotten his name, but he played a very active

role in it. One guy became the editor of the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] newspaper, the **Dispatcher**. They all entered into one phase or another of political social activity. I've forgotten their names and I've forgotten what all of them did. The lady I was going around with at the time, Eleanor, was not in it, but I was active in it, and my sister [Marcella Stack] was in it. That came out of this group that we called the Rebel Players and it became a much more active group. We were out five, six nights a week, you know, on some kind of either preparing or rehearsing or putting on plays or going to mass meetings or going to picnics, one thing or another.

FURMANOVSKY:

So it couldn't be long before somebody said to you, "How about joining me?"

DOBBS:

That's correct. Now, that happened, I think, in the summer of 1932, that Jack Olsen--who's still alive and lives in San Francisco--asked me to join the Young Communist League; which I did. Now, you see, in those days, much later, much different than the mass recruiting the Communist Party did, it was very selective; in other words, when you joined the Young Communist League you were sort of given the idea, well, this is what your life is going to be. In other words, you joined to say, "This is what I'm going to do." I'm not saying that that was everybody's attitude, but that's my memory of it. And, therefore, while I was very active, very active--I think I was on the Scottsboro Committee or the ILD [International Labor Defense] or some other thing--once you join the Young Communist League that becomes your life direction. And that was my attitude, although I was still working at this Millhander Rubber Company. But the first thing I did, in joining the Young Communist League, you're assigned to various types of activity. Some people were assigned to do concentration work, that is, to go to certain factories and distribute leaflets and find out some way of relating to the workers. Other people would be assigned to commute to the college. Others would be assigned to go to work in a factory, if you could get a job, although no one could get a job. I think at one time I was the only working member in the whole organization. But I was assigned to work with the Young Pioneers. Now, the Young Pioneers is an organization of children from eight or nine till thirteen or fourteen, before

they could join the Young Communist League, and mostly of course they were the children that might be called the red diaper babies; all of them were from communist families. My memory of them is that I had nothing really to do with the children themselves. I was assigned to be the literature agent; that is, I would go around to the various groups, the various group leaders, various teachers, distributing this magazine called the **New Pioneer** and then picking up the results of the sales and sending the money on to New York where it was being published. It was a very popular magazine, a very nice little magazine that was directed towards these children. It was a highly developed magazine. See, most of the movements at that time, I don't recall any other left movement; the communist movement was the whole thing in any field, whether it was intellectual field, whether it was in the dramatic field, whether it was in the children's field, the trade union field. Who the hell else was active?

FURMANOVSKY:

I got the sense that the Communist Party was a dynamic organization, whereas the Socialist Party was getting--

DOBBS:

That's right. The Socialist Party hadn't yet overcome its real, you know, the splits during the war, the break up of the Second International, you know, where most of the parties joined their own countries to conduct the war, and their hatred of the Soviet Union. I might say a part, a great part, of our discussions and studies was the developments in the Soviet Union, where we felt very keenly and read a great deal about their struggle to overcome, you know, the civil war and the development of their collectivization, the development of their industry. This was a matter of very deep concern to us. Would it work? Because to us that was the model of socialism. And long part of it, I would say, was responsible for later years of a great deal of our sectarianism (

both in our thinking as well as the publication of several books in the early thirties. These books were very influential and were looked upon as party policy. I am not positive if these are the correct titles, but they are close: **Toward Soviet America** by William Z. Foster, and **The Road to Soviet Power**. In my opinion the approach in these books led to our belief that the

Soviet Union's experience was a model for us. This was a poor substitute because we studied this more than the history, culture, modes of thought, economy, etc., of our own country.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

)But it was a key thing relative to our own personal development. Of course many of the adult communist leaders had some relations with the Soviet Union. Either they came from Russia or they went to Russia, but I don't ever remember even wanting to go. That wasn't the issue. The issue for me was, would they build Dnieperstroy? Would they build Steeltown? Or would they collectivize the farm? Would they do all the stuff that you could read? Much of our literature came from the Soviet Union. We were particularly impressed by a publication called **Inprecor, International Press Correspondence**, which was the organ of the Communist International, and that almost would create the agenda of our meeting sometimes, the things that they would write about. And that kind of discussion went on endlessly, because as I've said, most of us or many of us were unemployed and we used to hang around that cafeteria and have these discussions maybe all day long, and at night we would distribute leaflets, urging this, that or another kind of resistance to what was going on. Anyway, I, at that time, that was the early part of '32, was working, and because I was working two things happened: One is that at that time already I think-- I don't remember when the National Labor Relations Act was passed.

FURMANOVSKY:

In the following year.

DOBBS:

In the fall of when?

FURMANOVSKY:

'Thirty-three.

DOBBS:

'Thirty-three? Well, then it was 1933, yeah, that's right, in 1933 we began to have some efforts to organize our trade. Now, in my trade we worked in small shops, the trade was to be the most difficult people to organize, namely things like gas stations and other vulcanizing places, that is, tire-repair places, but we did have a small local union. You see, you got to learn about these things. I remember my first meeting I went to I went in my work clothes. Well, the workers were horrified. Here's the guy dressing in his work clothes. This is a night off for workers. It's a night away from home. It's a night where you can spend your five cents for a beer and your five cents for a cigar. You don't come there dressed in your work clothes. [laughter] I had to learn that!

FURMANOVSKY:

So what did that tell you, I mean--?

DOBBS:

Well, what it had told me is that workers considered this their night off, you know, their night away from their family, their night to deal with other people as workers. It wasn't too active a union, but we did have a charter as a federal local. And the second meeting I went to, you see, I'm all dressed up, so I get elected secretary of the local. Here it's altogether different. The workers are not anxious to take leadership of these things. The union couldn't support a full-timer. We would have most of our speakers from the [Los Angeles County] Central Labor Council, you know, things like that, and there were some organizing efforts, but it was very difficult. We had a local, I would say about fifty members. Well, if you had a local of fifty members you were lucky to get ten or twelve to a meeting, you know? But at that time it just took part in the general overall wave of organization that was sweeping the country. But the second thing is, because I was working and because I was in the union, two other things happened. One is I immediately got addressed and contacted by a committee headed up by communists for employment insurance, where I began then to be connected with some of the materials coming from the national office directly, and I became interested in that. But at that time the party's main aim was the organization of industrial unions. And because I was the only worker I was made the youth director of TUUL, Trade Union Unity League. I have very little memories of what we actually tried to do, but I can

remember two things: One was organizing assistance to what at that time was a very important strike in Los Angeles of the milkers. (

[This strike took place before the dominance of the big international or national unions. This was before the Committee on Industrial Organization was started in 1936. By "milkers," let me make clear the union consisted of those men who milked the cows in the great dairies situated in the southeast section of Los Angeles County. The union was organized by TUUL personnel and I think the Los Angeles Milkmen Union was affiliated to TUUL.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

)

FURMANOVSKY:

I think that was--yeah, 1934.

DOBBS:

Yes, already '34. Oh, I left out something I wanted to tell you about 1932. But anyway, 1934 was the organization of these milkers and it was a very bitterly fought strike because the miserable wages and working conditions were absolutely horrible and the bosses were determined to break that union. Los Angeles at that time of course was famous for being the worst scab town in the United States, and so they didn't have too much trouble breaking up the union. There was considerable police violence. At one time the union hall was raided by vigilantes, purported to have been organized by Hoot Gibson, the movie actor. I don't know whether that's true, but that's what we were told. And there was considerable defense of the workers, all with tear gas and riots and everything else taking place. So I remember that and meeting with a group of young workers, who were milkers, and trying to organize some youth activities. And I think we had one or two parties, that kind of thing.

FURMANOVSKY:

That strike was probably led by Meyer Baylin.

DOBBS:

Well, Meyer Baylin was the leader of the strike, that's correct. He was the head of the TUUL. I don't remember the name of the union, it might have been called the milkers industrial union, I don't remember. But Meyer was-- He's still alive, by the way! I recalled it to his memory the other day when we got to talking about something when he came and visited me. Second thing I remember is with a group of young needle trades workers sponsored by the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union. We organized a social club of young people, and we had several meetings discussing--at that time it wasn't so much unionization, but how do you get people at the level of which they are willing to join, and later we would talk about unionization. And that time it had the nature of a social club. I remember a couple of parties, maybe a dance, but later it broke up because of the real unclarity and real, well, the curse of America; racist attitudes developed when a couple of black workers came into the meeting and they began, you know, wanted to dance with the white girls or with the Mexican girls and this caused a great deal of friction, and so the thing blew up.

FURMANOVSKY:

I remember reading somewhere when I was doing my research, that you actually-- Weren't you taken to task and you had to apologize for--

DOBBS:

For not being able to handle the situation, that's correct, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

You had to apologize for white chauvinism--?

DOBBS:

Well, it isn't that I was accused of white chauvinism per se, but I didn't know how to handle that situation. In other words, I gave in to the fact that the club didn't exist and I didn't break up the dance, see? So that while I might not have been accused of white chauvinism, definitely I was accused of not being able to handle the situation.

FURMANOVSKY:

And when you were accused of something like that in the Young Communist League--

DOBBS:

There was a trial.

FURMANOVSKY:

Was it something that you took very seriously and that you accepted the criticism?

DOBBS:

Indeed I did.

FURMANOVSKY:

You weren't resentful?

DOBBS:

Yeah, I have forgotten that. I remember that now. No, I don't recall a great deal of resentment. I was just flabbergasted at the inability to handle the situation, not knowing what to do, being practically alone to solve the problem. And this was a pretty bitter thing. So I was brought to trial. People testified as to what was happened, and I had to admit that I didn't know how to handle the situation, that I didn't stop the dance and have a big discussion of what is racism and what is white chauvinism and so forth and so on, but just sort of let the thing collapse of its own weight. People went home.

FURMANOVSKY:

What I am getting at is the discipline aspect, something you didn't have any problems with?

DOBBS:

Well, no. The disciplinary action taken at that time was that you had to read and prepare certain papers on what is racism and what is white chauvinism and how could I have done better and that kind of thing, but I don't remember any other disciplinary action. But that did take place. I was on trial.

FURMANOVSKY:

You didn't find this an intrusion.

DOBBS:

No, I found it absolutely a-- I wish they would have had the trial before the event, then I would have known what to do, at least according to the standards that were set.

FURMANOVSKY:

So in other words, accepting Young Communist League discipline was not something that you found difficult?

DOBBS:

Not at all. In later years I found it very helpful, when I went in the army. Discipline was no secret word to me, you know? But it probably was the right thing to do, to be very critical of me at that time. I think I accepted it, and I think I learned from it. Not many people had that experience because very few people tried to do anything outside of their own little happy group, where these problems don't exist. But it was the efforts to really organize a section of American youth, and especially untrained; and the unions at that time, most of the unions at that time barred black people from them, except the industrial unions, you know, the unions of the TUUL. And here was a situation that was way beyond my understanding of what to do. If I remember correctly, it was that I didn't stop the dance and have a discussion. Instead I just sort of let the thing peter out.

FURMANOVSKY:

You mentioned the needle trades. In 1933 there was an enormous strike in the needle industry.

DOBBS:

If there was I don't remember it. I was told that there was, but I don't remember it at all. That was led by an AF of L [American Federation of Labor] union, of course. I worked primarily through the industrial union which was not AFL but was affiliated to the TUUL. They gave me the leads and the connections and what shops to go to and where to distribute the leaflets and so forth and so on.

FURMANOVSKY:

And it never really took off, the TUUL in Los Angeles?

DOBBS:

No, it was these huge sporadic events like the milkers' strike, or some of the activities of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, which was made up of a large group of needle trade workers who had been expelled out of the AF of L. But as far as the mine workers, steelworkers, the autoworkers, and those that had some real base in the TUUL--they didn't exist in Los Angeles. It was just primarily, I would say, agitation, education around the concept of industrial unionism.

FURMANOVSKY:

Tell me about the incident involving the [Ku Klux] Klan in Long Beach.

DOBBS:

Yeah. Let me get back to one other thing and then I'll get to that. I forgot to tell you that in the summer of '32, when I joined the Young Communist League and was assigned to work with the Pioneers, although limited to this literature direction, I went to a-- I was a counselor in a children's camp in the Santa Cruz Mountains. And this was a very good experience for me. For one thing, I was doing something I'd never done before and that is to deal with, you know, be a whole summer up in the mountains, a beautiful setting, plus working with these children. That is, developing the program that had been developed towards recreation, hiking, picnicking, things of that kind, certain amount of classes in a very elementary form of what is communism, what is the meaning of the Depression, the Scottsboro Boys, etc. It was a good experience, and I think it lasted about ten weeks. The director of the school, a man whose name I've forgotten, was a very brilliant fellow, a Communist Party member in Santa Cruz, and he was just a real inspiration to me as to how to live and how to speak and how to function. I've forgotten his name completely, and I haven't thought about it for years. If I was told his name I probably wouldn't link up the two, it's that vague in my memory. But that was in 1932, by that time I'd already become a fully devoted young communist.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah. That camp would have been something akin to the one that Peggy Dennis mentions in her book, where she met Frank Waldren. It wasn't a Pioneer camp, but it was a communist-sponsored camp in the summer.

DOBBS:

Well, we never had, I don't recall a big adult camp. We did have this-- It was more like the way the Jewish Community Center Association now has a whole network of camps. They weren't training schools as such, they were conducted for children, with a great deal of children's activities like the swimming and hiking. It wasn't just loading their heads, you know.

FURMANOVSKY:

Inevitably, most of the children who went would have been children of working-class Jews from Boyle Heights or other--

DOBBS:

That's correct. Well, it wasn't only Jews. The big effort of course was to get black and Chicano kids there. Most of them were communist kids, yeah. That is, communists' kids.

FURMANOVSKY:

I mean, I've had problems when I interview people, I keep bringing up the Jewish thing, and they think I'm hammering away--

DOBBS:

The fact was that most of the party in L.A. at that time was Jewish. But L.A. really broke through to where it became a big organization, primarily with the development, which I had no personal dealings with, of what was known as the Relief Workers Protective Association. I don't have any memories of it because I wasn't directly involved. But this became a mass organization which developed first of all in those areas of the city where there were no Jews, and secondly, it became a very militant fighting organization and later became the Workers Alliance or some of these other unemployed organizations, which I never had any direct relations with because of my then becoming a Young Communist in 1932.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you became a full-time functionary of the YCL?

DOBBS:

Not until 1935.

FURMANOVSKY:

In '32 you weren't a full-time functionary?

DOBBS:

Oh no, I continued to work at the rubber company there.

FURMANOVSKY:

So what were you at the time of this incident involving the Klan?

DOBBS:

Well, I'll go into that. I'll tell you what began to happen. I began to devote so much of my time and so much of energy in the communist movement, either with organizing efforts along the needles trade club or the general activities of the Young Communist League club as to distribute leaflets and to go to meetings and to be supportive at meetings, that I developed what the doctor said was an incipient TB. I never realized it was serious until years later when I went into the army, and the doctor asked me whether I had TB. There actually were some scars on my lungs. I didn't know it was serious, but I took the doctor's advice, which was to go away. And some worker put me up, that is, not a worker, a farmer. A guy had a little chicken farm in Riverside, and I stayed there for three months and just did nothing, absolutely nothing. Maybe the last month I would take a little walk. Other than that I just did nothing and ate a great deal of nutritious food. They were very wonderful people; I've forgotten their name. I would have milk shakes three times a day, and I was really run down. I was in bed with incipient TB. So the night that I was to go there, that is, the day I was to go there, the night before, I went to my, what later became my-- I don't think I was married at that time, or married yet. It was November of 1932 and I stayed at the home of the woman I later married, Malvina Reynolds's father, their home in Long Beach.

FURMANOVSKY:

Their name was what?

DOBBS:

Their name was Milder, David and Elizabeth Milder. There was this family which I married into, there was Malvina Milder, who later became Malvina Reynolds; and Pete Milder, which was their son; and Eleanor Milder, which later became my wife known as Lolli. Well, the night before I was to be taken to this farm, there was a Scottsboro Boys event at the Milder home. I was there because, as I said, I was going to the farm the next day, so they asked me to speak. So I spoke about the Scottsboro case, made a collection speech, and there were other speakers and some entertainment, singing, that kind of stuff. And then the whole party, which might be forty or fifty people, they all left. And that left in the house the Milder family, less Eleanor, and two guys that were seamen, you know, waterfront workers that stayed in the house. We were having coffee after the meeting before we went to bed--it must have been about eleven or eleven-thirty--and a gang of Ku Klux Klan suddenly broke into the house. Now, we knew they were Ku Klux Klan because they told us so, and, secondly, they had a burning cross out on the lawn, which attracted a large number of neighbors. And if I remember correctly they said, "Take it easy, we just want you to go with us." That's all they wanted. [laughter] Well, we fought as best we could, but there was only the five of us--by the way, the two other guys, the seamen, they hid in the closet, and I don't remember what happened to them. But the raiders beat up Dave pretty bad, and I believe they broke Pete's arm, and me, I just got beaten into the ground with rubber clubs. You know, you don't feel a great pain at first except you're stiff for a week afterwards. Then all of a sudden I found myself on the floor and then bound with ropes, and Malvina and I were bound together and put in the same car. The fight didn't last long but it drew an enormous number of neighbors who were held off with armed and uniformed men from Orange County, a sheriff's office. I don't know how it happened, but I remember a uniformed policeman from Long Beach coming and saying--this was in Long Beach by the way, on Third Street, but I don't remember the cross street-- "What's going on here?" I definitely remember the guy saying, "Well, Captain Dungan said we could do this, we're just taking these people out for a ride." "Well, you can't do that." "Well, but they're bunch of communists, you know." "Well, you don't have the right to do that." He phoned into the headquarters. So once it became known, and once this cop's car was there, the neighbors came in and against the opposition with these men, these armed sheriffs. So it broke it up and we started howling, "Let us out of these cars." And so they

pulled us out of the cars and then untied us. Then later the police came. And these guys are still hanging around, they didn't fear anything, it had all been arranged with the guy there who was a captain of the police department, Captain Dungan was his name, and he was the equivalent of Captain [William "Red"] Hynes in Los Angeles, the head of the Long Beach Red Squad. Long Beach is a sensitive town in this regard, because it was the center of the navy. So they put us in cars and took us to the police station. Now, these guys, who had nothing to fear, they're hanging around and they start playing pool and they start playing cards in the office recreation area; and we're put in cells. Then about three in the morning I guess they let us out. Then I remember about four in the morning knocking on the door, and we thought they'd come back, but it turned out to be naval intelligence. They came in and took every book in the house. And here I was going away for three months where I was going to do nothing but read, I had a whole bunch of books, and they took those. And then they left. The next day Leo Gallagher came. Now, Leo Gallagher was the lawyer I told you about. He was really a wonderful fighter. He was just a militant. At that time there were whole bunch of unemployed people. So he went down to this place in Long Beach on the pier there, which later became the "university by the sea"--it used to be a forum, a discussion group--and he told me, "We're going to go to the police station to see what they're doing about this thing that happened last night." By that time of course there were headlines in the papers and everything, and they all jammed in the police station: "What are you going to do?" Here's this congressman: "Oh, well, we've got some people arrested, we're going to indict them and turn it over the district attorney." And these guys were indicted. There later was a grand jury investigation. But at one point in that grand jury investigation I said, "Look, I'm not under investigation, you don't have the right to ask me these questions: What did I say? What did I see? Who did I talk to? These are the guys that committed the crime, not me." And I identified several of them during the trial. I never knew and I never followed up what happened because I went away. And for three months I didn't do a thing. I don't even recall reading newspapers in those three months. I might listen to the news on the radio, but I have a very vague memory--except I did exactly what the doctors told me to do. Then I was away for some three or three and half months, and when I got out of there I went to Berkeley to spend some time with my sister [Marcella Stack] who was already married. And then

Eleanor and I got married in Santa Cruz, I think it was April of 1933, but I don't remember that even. Anyway, we got married and she was a fine woman, and to this day a fine woman. She was a photographer, a really expert photographer. And I remember dragging those goddamned cameras around, you know, big cameras in those days, big box cameras, but she had a good couple of cameras that her father got her. And we got along pretty good except this: I was so--at that time, especially when we moved to San Francisco--I was so completely wrapped up in the movement that I was just absolutely neglectful of her needs and her interests or anything else. I was just too egocentric I guess, and completely wrapped up in my work. I thought we were getting along, but apparently there were great needs on her part that I certainly didn't help, I certainly didn't satisfy.

FURMANOVSKY:

That wasn't at all unusual, was it?

DOBBS:

Well, I don't know that people were as stupid as I was. It might not have been unusual, but I was very cruel. It isn't that I did cruel things, don't get me wrong. It's just that I paid no attention, that's all, you know? Here we are, we're married, you know what I do, you know what I've devoted my life to, and apparently I was very stupid and very cruel.

FURMANOVSKY:

You were a very committed guy by this time?

DOBBS:

Oh yes, yes, and that's it. I'm getting four dollars a week of workers' money-- I'm getting paid. And of course the pay-- I'd already started as a full-time functionary when we were married. Well, she knew what I was getting into. She was just as devoted as I was, don't get me wrong. She was a very devoted, active communist. She would just spend days walking up and down the streets in the black community where she became known as Mrs. Communist.

FURMANOVSKY:

Really?

DOBBS:

Oh yes, she was a fine, extremely active woman, and very smart, much smarter than me and much better looking. But obviously it was not her life as it was mine. Although she wanted it to be, let me put it that way. And I was very cruel in that sense, without being a cruel person. I just didn't view that as part of my responsibility, that's all. Completely insensitive, completely insensitive to her needs and her problems. She later had something in the nature of a nervous breakdown. But then even that went right over my head, right over my head, in terms of what had to be done to create a good marriage. And I don't blame her at all for leaving me. I just have no rancor whatsoever, but she did, she did. And she didn't do it in a good way, but she did, you know. Like I came home one day from a meeting in New York and there's someone else in the house, some other man was living there, and so she simply said, "You're through," you know, "I think you can get a place someplace else to sleep." Well, it came as a complete surprise, that's how stupid I was. I have no bitterness, no rancor, and I don't blame her one bit and I'm glad she got out of it. Obviously she was able to develop a real life for herself. I later found that she adopted a Chinese baby. And just recently I ran into a book in the Sisterhood Bookstore in Westwood, and there's a page or two on her as one of the creative women of America. I didn't even know that! I didn't even know her name. I went to see her to say goodbye in March of 1942-- By the way, the divorce took--she left me in 1937, so I was married to her for four years; it wasn't six days. In other words, she tried, I'm sure. I went to see her before I went into the army just to say goodbye, and it was very uncomfortable. We just had nothing to talk about. I felt very bad about that. But what can I say? I just, I guess, had no understanding of family relationships, no understanding of the responsibilities, no sensitivity to the needs of another person, and no big desire to create a life together. Just, "this is my life, either join it or quit, that's all." Very bad, very, very immature.

FURMANOVSKY:

And of course the Communist Party was quite happy to have the Communist Party be your wife?

DOBBS:

Well, no, I will never say that. And I don't think that that was anybody's attitude. That would be a real vulgarization. I don't blame anybody but myself. The party lived with and sustained many, many, many happy marriages. It isn't like it is today, it's nothing like that. I don't recall a great number of people, couples, living together a few years before getting married. I don't remember anything like that even happening. I know that I didn't want to do it. You either got married and you lived together, or you didn't.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, Dorothy Healey has talked a lot about the Communist Party helping, in a way, relatively speaking, sexually liberated--

DOBBS:

That's true, that's true for all radical movements, but I don't remember doing it too much, see? And I don't remember-- If anything, they were sorry to see the breakup of a marriage, that's my impression. But I was just absolutely insensitive and stupid. And I'm not saying I didn't love her. I didn't know what the hell it meant, in terms of developing--

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, you were very young.

DOBBS:

Well, I wasn't so young. In 1933 I'm already what? Twenty-one, twenty-two years of age?

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, that's pretty young by today's standards.

DOBBS:

I think back on those days: How the hell could I have been so stupid? Of course the wife I have now [Ada Martin Dobbs], she taught me lots better and maybe I learned something. We've been married now forty-one years. Although I will also say this, that it's completely directed around what I want to do. My wife is completely supportive of me, as far as I can see. But then I've learned to be supportive of her--that's what I didn't do, you see? But anyway, I enjoyed that family. I consider the Milder family a wonderful family. Malvina

at that time of course was an extremely brilliant woman, extremely intelligent, so easy to talk to--

FURMANOVSKY:

She wasn't a singer at that time?

DOBBS:

She would sing for her family, and would sing at workers' picnics. She didn't have a great singing voice, but it was before she developed as a musician and a writer of music. She sang a lot of the old folk songs that probably were sung in Great Britain in the year 1400 or something like that.

FURMANOVSKY:

Traditional folk songs, yeah.

DOBBS:

And she also worked her songs--

FURMANOVSKY:

But she didn't start to write her own songs until she was forty-five, I read.

DOBBS:

I don't recall her writing songs. But always playing her guitar, and always singing--but she didn't have a great singing voice. She later developed into a certain type of singer with a singing voice that was widely accepted. But she was a wonderful person; I just loved to be with her. Her father was one of these tremendous, outgoing, happy people. He ran for mayor on the Socialist [Party] ticket for the city of San Francisco in 1916 and literally was driven out of town because of his participation in the Tom Mooney case. He was the first secretary of the Tom Mooney Molders Defense Committee. He was a veteran of the Spanish-American War, he was in the navy, and he developed his business as a naval tailor. When that Ku Klux Klan event took place, he thought that he'd be driven out of Long Beach. But instead he found a great deal of support. Because so much of the navy is Catholic, so much of the naval officers are Catholic, he actually profited from it businesswise. Because of the hatred that the Catholics had toward the Klan and vice versa. So he turned up to be all right, except that he suffered with, I believe, a broken arm or broken leg or

something out of that struggle. But he was a wonderful man. And Liz Milder was really one of the smartest, most intelligent women I've ever met. And whereas he's always bubbling over, she sort of balanced it. Well, let's look at the real facts. He was very active in a thing called the Friends of the Soviet Union. And any minute they'd recognize the Soviet Union and the world would be safe forever. He's quite a character. But I love that family.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

JULY 22, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

We left off last session, Ben, in about 1934. But before we go on I want to see if there's anything you want to add about your earlier life as a teenager, or in your early twenties.

DOBBS:

Yeah, I'd like to add several things. First, I know that when I went to a grammar school as a very young person in New York City, before we came to Los Angeles, I was left-handed, and at that time they made us write with our right hand, they didn't allow kids to use their left hand. And I blame that to this day upon being a little less handy than most people and having very poor handwriting. I can't write with my left hand and I can't write with my right hand, so I've always blamed it on that. However, I did want to add some things relative to when I was a teenager and I was going to high school and early college years. That given the opportunity to usher at all kinds of cultural events and therefore being able to attend free of charge, I don't think I missed a cultural event for a period of three years in Los Angeles, which included concerts, operas, big shows like at the Shrine Auditorium. You know, all kinds of cultural events--the Shrine, the Philharmonic, the Hollywood Bowl. Also I don't think that, for a period of three years, I missed one performance or one show at the Pasadena Community Playhouse, which at that time was probably the leading little theater in the United States of America, with well-known Hollywood actors and others directing and acting there. So that I had a very rich cultural life, that was very useful, and of course I still maintain an interest in cultural events. Also I was always finding ways to make some extra money, such as selling programs at football games, and therefore becoming interested

in sports. I would go to the baseball games at the old L.A. baseball park, when it was in downtown Los Angeles. A lot of people don't know that there was such a park before it went to Wrigley Field, and of course before the building of Dodger Stadium. And I still go to ball games, at least two or three a year, with either groups or by myself, or sometimes my wife or daughter would go with me. I also caddied for several years. That was every Saturday and Sunday, hitchhiking out to the Hillcrest Country Club, which is way out on Pico [Boulevard] across the street now from the [Twentieth Century] Fox Studios and Century City, that's where the Hillcrest Country Club is. It used to be known as the Jewish country club, because at that time Jews couldn't get into any of the country clubs around Los Angeles. So I caddied there, carrying bags, and there I learned how to shoot craps and play poker and do all the things that people do. Now, what effect this might have had on my life is that I think I was less sectarian than most communists. I had a wider range of the activities of American people and found it much easier to get along with people when I was in the army, or even talking to people about YCL [Young Communist League]. I could talk to them about other things, such as cultural events, such as sports, such as playing poker, one thing or another. I attribute that, I think, to being much less sectarian than most. Let me give you an example. I ran into a guy in the army who was so sectarian that he just couldn't get along with the fellows whatsoever. He actually was driven crazy by the fact that these are Americans; he felt completely alone. And no matter what I could do to help him, because we were both sort of in a punishment situation for being communists--which I'll get into later, when I discuss my army activities--but he found it impossible to relate himself in any way to these people; whereas I could get along, I could play poker, I could discuss baseball, I could discuss football, I could discuss what Americans talk about, and so I found it very useful, and very good training for myself. Let me look at my notes because I made some notes since our last discussion. Oh yes, take a thing like vaudeville. There was, I would say, a period of two years when I never missed the vaudeville show at the old Palace, and then after the Palace, the Orpheum was built in Los Angeles. And so the great entertainers of the day, later people who became very famous when radio developed, TV and movies developed. And I always did that--you know, was interested in that kind of thing. Of course I was particularly interested in the drama and never missed a performance at the Pasadena Community Playhouse, which was the leading little theater at

the time. Also in Los Angeles about that time, in other words, I would say about 1925, '26, '27, '28, '29, there were two very, very good stock companies operating. One was conducted by Edward Everett Horton, who later became a movie star, and the other one by Frederic March and his wife. They used to put on plays at the old Mason Theater, and I don't think I missed one of those for several years. Anytime there was a play-- But those were stock companies, and of course very expert and very well done. And sporting events-- Well, I would go to football games, track events. I particularly remember going with my sister to see Paavo Nurmi run, who was the first great popular runner of long distances. And these were the kind of things that interested me and what the people generally talk about or get interested in. Most of this, of course, was before I became a communist, and my interest in those things have continued up to this day. I would go to ball games two, three times a year, I used to be able to get passes and would go more often, but I don't do it anymore, so now I go with people or sometimes even by myself.

FURMANOVSKY:

So what about the transition to becoming a real, almost a full-time activist in the YCL and having to give up, I guess, a lot of these things? I imagine you would have been quite pleased when the [Communist] Party sort of started to reorient itself towards the idea of attracting ordinary Americans, and are making a full-out effort to do that and starting to actually have sports events within the party?

DOBBS:

Well, the only sporting event within the party was the thing that was put on by the Young Communist League. I don't remember when it started, but I took part in some of the events in '32, '33 and '34. And that was what they called National Youth Day. This was a day where the YCL would try to organize mostly track meets, you know, in a competitive way, and then would end up with a demonstration against militarism and war. And I was involved in that quite a bit. In addition to that, every once in a while, as a form of concentration--that is, to acquaint itself with young people--we had an organized baseball team that would go down to various large factories and see if they had baseball teams that we could compete against. In that way we related ourselves to young people on the basis of sports. A little later I can tell

about some experiences in building a sport center in San Francisco in 1936, and '37--I mean '38 and '39, but I can go into that later. But it's that kind of thing-- Although I never was very much of an athlete, I understood the games and could actually teach people the rudiments of the game, without being too good an athlete myself--although I did participate. And this of course was partly due to the experience we had that I told you about when I was very young. We had this organization called the Hawks, where we had a football team, a baseball team, a basketball team, and actually played some YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] teams around here and other such groups. So that it was just part of life. The interesting thing that happened in the early days of my being a Young Communist was, of course, the very sectarian attitudes that we had towards other social movements. While the Communist Party to this day looks upon any other, or many developments in the social field as their rivals; in those days we looked upon everybody as our rivals or everybody as sellout artists, such as we were extremely critical of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. We were extremely critical of the Socialist Party, calling them social-fascists and so forth. We were extremely critical of any aspect--whether it was the church, whether it was social activities of such groups, and maintained a very sectarian life. Now, much of this was changed by the development of what became known as the period of the popular front, which started 1934. Now, I became a full-time activist in 1934. In other words I said, "I'm going to to devote my life to the building of the communist movement." I was asked to quit my job and I became a full-time functionary early in 1934. And one of the first things we began to work on, which really broke the sectarianism of the YCL, was the American Youth Congress.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, we'll come on to that in a minute. Before we get to that, we must do-- What do you remember about the EPIC [End Poverty in California] movements here in Los Angeles?

DOBBS:

I didn't take too much part in the EPIC movement myself, but what I remembered, of course, was this profound change in Democratic Party politics in California. The only real connection I had with the EPIC movement was

when I was on a delegation--I forget what year it was, so it must have been in their heyday in '33 or '34--part of the delegation with the state committee of the Communist Party to an EPIC convention here in Los Angeles, where we tried to become an independent organization within the EPIC movement--and we were rejected by that convention. While there was a formal arrangement, at that time many people coming in to the EPIC movement, particularly young people, became radically inclined. It was a great radicalizing influence upon their lives. So many of them came into the Communist Party, many of them came into the Young Communist League. One of the developments that was taking place in that period, and lasting for several years, up to the war as a matter of fact, was the development of several youth organizations of tremendous size. And this is why I say the experiences around the American Youth Congress were so important in developing the struggle against sectarianism which for so long held back the communist movement. As an organizer for the Young Communist League, I never was a leader of any of the youth organizations, I never was a leader of any of the mass activities such as, let's say, on the campus, or in the black community at that time which was beginning to raise. But as a Young Communist League leader I was always consulting with people that were involved in those activities, giving leadership where possible, where possible having their problems discussed by the leading committees of the Young Communist League. In other words, trying to unite all these various movements into a unified whole, trying to give both strategic and tactical advice. >So there began to grow a large number of youth organizations which, while I intrinsically had nothing to do with them per se, I became known as a person that could sit down with any kind of group of people and give advice. Consult, give leadership to, if you will. These consisted of, first, of the large student movement that grew up at that time, the American Student Union, which was conducting very serious fights, primarily against militarism. When I went to UCLA it was compulsory to be in the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps]; there was no movement, there was no struggle against it. But in 1933, '34 and '35 there was a considerable struggle against compulsory ROTC at land-grant colleges. And that was part of it. The other part was the right of Young Communists to remain in school, because there was a pretty widespread program of expulsion of radicals from the campuses. And so this twofold effort, this twofold campaign, always was something around which I met with students, gave advice, leadership and

conducted some very serious and mass struggles, particularly against militarism. That was the American Student Union, which was the formation, I think, that was a result of the unity which began to be fought for in the adult movement, as this impact of the Sixth World Congress, in other words, the unification of the National Student Union, and the Socialist-Party-influenced National Student League. They united to form the American Student Union.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right, in 1935.

DOBBS:

At that time also because of these radicalized young people, who were influenced by the EPIC movement, came into the Young Communist League, began to form a big movement called the Young Democrats of California. The distinctive feature of the Young Democrats of California was that they developed the slogan that Young Democrats should be young Democrats, in opposition to the national Democratic party slogan that "you're never too old to be a Young Democrat." And actually these developed all kinds of youth activities, dances, and social events. And I remember with what horror the leadership of the national Young Democrats came to Los Angeles to see a mass dance with mixed couples, black and white, dancing together and enjoying themselves. [laughter] The southern leadership of the national Young Democrats didn't like that. But this was the largest organization in the state; it grew to several thousand members. Now, in addition to that, there are a whole number of youth organizations-- I don't know whether they even exist today; if they do, they become so inbred that they don't play any public role. For instance, I'm thinking of such things as the Epworth League, which was the mass movement, mass organization of the young Methodists. There was a Baptists Union, I think they called it, of young people. Every church had its own youth development. When we began to work on the American Youth Congress, of which I will go into more detail later, we became acquainted with them. I found that not being sectarian and recognizing that if people want to have faith that's their right--I don't have to argue religion with anybody--that I could go into churches and speak about the common needs of young people without arguing with them. If they want to have faith, fine. So I met with, I

spoke before several churches as well as unions and other youth organizations in the development of the American Youth Congress.

FURMANOVSKY:

And you spoke openly as a communist?

DOBBS:

I always spoke openly as a communist, always. I was never in the lead of a mass organization where I had to hide. I was a leader of the Young Communist League. And our aim--and we achieved it to a great extent--our aim was the development of the Young Communist League as one in the family of youth organizations; and we sought and did win the recognition of that role. We are an organization, we are an independent organization, and yet we're able to give up all of our program on socialism, for instance, for a program of immediate needs, and coming into agreement with young people on what they're willing to agree on; but always insisting that the Young Communist League should be part of the family of youth organizations. And that was the role we played.

FURMANOVSKY:

Wasn't it also the policy of the party, though, and the YCL, that if a few YCLers, who were not known to be YCLers, could be in leadership positions of these organizations-- For example, Milt Newman was a member of the YCL and was very active in the Epworth League as a leader, and Jim [James] Burford was a member of the YCL and was a leading member of the Young Democrats but without actually revealing it.

DOBBS:

Well, they might have revealed it to some, they kept no secret of their relations to me, for instance, of being as I say that family of youth organizations. My approach to Young Communist League members working active in other organizations was that they become the most loyal, steadfast members for the program of the organization that they were in. Their job was not to create these as socialist organizations, but to be the best fighters for the program of their organization in the struggle against those that would keep the organization back, such as racists in the Young Democrats, or

something of that nature. So that this was very clear; in some places they were known as Young Communists, in some places they were not. One thing they were always recognized as the left, to use that expression. I think it's become widely used nowadays, of the "left" within organizations. I will mention just one other organization of some interest and that was the young YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association]. Through the activity of some communists and noncommunists, the women in the YWCA took the leading part in opening up the whole problem of the American Youth Congress. I'll just say, parenthetically, that one of the things that the American Youth Congress did in California was establish something called the Youth Legislature, the California Youth Legislature, where we convened as young people and acted for a couple of days in Sacramento as the legislative body, and therefore created a series of legislative enactments that would be favoring young people. Did you know that that continues to this day? Not under the leadership of the YWCA, but they do it on their own. It's no longer a coalition, united effort. But every year there's the model California Youth Legislature, conducted by the YWCA. And that's something that grew out of that movement. In 1934, based on the experiences of the American Youth Congress nationally, the Young Communist League took part in a movement called by Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt. Their aim was--whatever Mrs. Roosevelt's aims were--the Young Communist League's aims were to create a unity of young people, with special interests of young people, primarily in reaction to the Depression; some economic amelioration of the conditions of young people; plus against war and militarism; plus the whole idea that young people have to fight for a future, the future isn't going to be given to them, especially under the impact of the Depression. We called together in Los Angeles one of the largest, broadest meetings of the American Youth Congress and developed an active American Youth Congress that lasted in Los Angeles up to the war. In other words, all those years from 1934 to 1939. Of course, it broke on the basis of the war because of the various positions that people took relative to the war. But anyway, we organized this American Youth Congress, the Young Communist League was part of it. I was the representative of the Young Communist League on the executive committee, and we took part in several very, very important campaigns; the first of which was to change the political climate of Los Angeles. At that time, and for many years preceding 1934, the Los Angeles left was literally terrorized by what was

known as the Red Squad. This was headed by a guy by the name of Captain [William "Red"] Hynes and his lieutenant, whose name I've forgotten. And again, parenthetically, when I was in jail I met the son of that lieutenant--I'll think of his name sooner or later--and he told us that he brutalized his family in the same way he brutalized the left-wing movement. But anyway, that's the end of that parenthesis. But to change the political climate of the Red Squad, which was dominating the politics through a mayor by the name of Shaw, Frank [L.] Shaw. So one of the activities of the Youth Congress, where many of the members and active people of the Youth Congress--I myself did not take part--were part of the coalition that were able to recall Frank Shaw as mayor and put in the administration of Fletcher Bowron, which changed the political climate of Los Angeles considerably. Secondly, it showed the activity of the Young Democrats and the EPIC movement that changed the whole climate of politics in California, which as early as 1938 was able to elect the governor, who was, had been an active member and leader of EPIC, Culbert L. Olson. The third campaign we took part in here in Los Angeles was of course the development of the National Youth Act. The National Youth Act was a series of legislative enactments that was aimed at ameliorating the economic condition of young people and led to the development of the National Youth Administration, which was part of the New Deal. And this developed along two fronts: assistance to students to go to school and, secondly, a development of work projects. While we did not favor the CCC, it was one of the things that came of it, you know, the Civilian Conservation Corps. While we looked upon it possibly as a step to militarism, I think that was a mistake now looking back at it, because it did help a lot of the young people to get work, work experience, which enabled them to live a better life in the future.

FURMANOVSKY:

Part of the party critique of it was that there was considerable racism in the administration and that there were military people running it.

DOBBS:

Oh, it was led by the army, of course, led by army personnel--that was our main objection to it. But nevertheless I think it has helped a lot of young people too. We, I think, maybe had a little bit of a narrow position. Racism has got to be fought in America wherever you are. There's not going to be any

aspect of American social life that doesn't have racist overtones. It's the most pervasive, reactionary, antidemocratic thing in our society today, to this day. Well, anyway, those were the main campaigns of the American Youth Congress. We had several mass meetings, several demonstrations, and literally it was a very, very active organization. And we had that big conference in 1935.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, thirty thousand young people were represented, according to the congress, in California. How accurate that is, I don't know.

DOBBS:

Now, this of course led to the development, you know, later of the united front policy; where we not only looked upon other social movements, we no longer looked upon them as our rivals or enemies, but actually those things that helped in the amelioration of the conditions of people. Actually all of them grew under the aspect of this. There was no rivalry between them, yet each of them were able to develop their own program but under the aegis of doing things that they couldn't do by themselves; creating this unity and necessity for the American Youth Congress.

FURMANOVSKY:

Wasn't it also true that the party had the policy that if they were the dominant organization in the American Youth Congress, so much the better? And if there were members of the Communist Party in other organizations who didn't reveal the fact that they were Young Communists, but who played the major role in organization, maybe towards the ends of that organization. But nevertheless the party obviously wanted to lead the congress, and did its best to do so.

DOBBS:

Well, I guess, on an overall judgment, I think that's correct. Unfortunately that's what happened. And I say unfortunately because I wish some other people would show the same devotion, loyalty, hard work that the Young Communist League did, see, because we could always do a better mobilizing job. But unfortunately that's true, and unfortunately it led to many

sectarian mistakes, and unfortunately perhaps it led to its demise quicker than it should have, but those were problems.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you think that the party could have been more open on this, or do you feel that really there was no way that the party was going to gain by revealing the identity of its members in these other organizations? In other words, was this level of secrecy essential for any progress to be made, or was it ultimately harmful?

DOBBS:

That's a hard question to answer you, because I could answer it from hindsight and say that possibly it would have been better had we been more open. But I'm not sure. Maybe the red-baiting would have been so fierce at that time that it would have resulted in the destruction of everything around us. It's hard to judge. Now, I will say this. That part of my approach to the Democratic Socialists of America is to be as open as possible and identify ourselves as quickly as possible. But I'm not sure that it helped a great deal, I know that certain candidates that seek our support will not acknowledge it publicly. So I don't know how to answer your question, it's a judgmental question. Although at that time we felt that to avoid the red-baiting of our people who were active in various phases of social life, that they could play a more useful role for the conditions of the people, not themselves, but other people, and therefore we urged that they not identify themselves except to their closest co-workers. After all, we were out to recruit. So if we were models in these organizations-- How are you going to recruit if you remain a secret forever; you just don't make a public position of it, you don't flaunt it. And that was our approach at that time, and I'd say it would be our approach today.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah. The larger point I was trying to get at, and I was wondering what you think about this, is that if you accept the view that anticommunism is one of the central issues in the world today, and is at the root of much of evils in the world today, of the Cold War. But looking back on anticommunism when it actually was anti-Communist Party, the one thing that the Communist Party didn't succeed in doing was breaking the back of anticommunism. And the

party had to accept the fact that anticommunism and red-baiting was so powerful, even when the party was at its peak in the 1930s, that it was necessary to be somewhat secretive, or less secretive than earlier, but--

DOBBS:

Right. Let me put it this way. If the main instigators of popular thought, if you will, hegemony of popular education, hegemony of popular press, hegemony of popular movies, spend millions and millions of dollars on anticommunism, how is a little tiny organization like the Communist Party going to defeat it? So that we had to, that was the only thing we could do. But, you know, an anticommunism of course is prevalent today. [Ronald W.] Reagan didn't get elected president without being a boy scout and speaking of his anticommunist rhetoric. Now he's running into problems because of it, but anticommunism has always been a major ideological thrust of the ruling circles in the United States. And I use that term for political shorthand of course.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right. But there was a brief period in the mid and late 1930s, the popular front period, when there was the possibility or the hope that anticommunism as an ideology could now be essentially broken, and the Communist Party could emerge as a legitimate organization and wouldn't have to hide itself. And of course it was open and there were 100,000 people in the party.

DOBBS:

Well, not in the thirties, that later developed in the forties. However, let me put it this way. That's why I stress this point of the Young Communist League being a family, a part of the family of youth organizations. Let me give you an example. One of the things that we did was that after the election of Fletcher Bowron, we decided to have a reception for him in the name of the American Youth Congress. It had played an open role in the recall of Mayor Shaw and the election of Fletcher Bowron. Well, I raised it, in the executive committee of the American Youth Congress, that maybe I shouldn't attend. After all, why put a bean in his nose? Well, they insisted that I attend. And I attended, and when he went around and shook hands with all the young people there, he shook my hand, he gulped, and went on to the next one. But the point is, how

else can you fight anticommunism except being as open as possible? But we were open as an organization within this other group of organizations, rather than through the participation of some individuals that might not have identified themselves as communists, even though they were communists. I felt that this was a way to defeat anticommunism. And yet you can see that I retreated before it, because possibly I would do harm to the American Youth Congress. My last concern was not the ego trip that I was having by shaking hands with Mayor Bowron, but what I wanted to do was maintain the American Youth Congress [by being] willing to sacrifice my own individual participation. But the young people themselves, at that executive committee, insisted that I attend that function. And I'll put it to you further, that in 1942 when I went into the army, there was a whole group of these young people who wanted to have a big reception for me, and they did have that reception for me, as a member that they were, you know, pleased to work with all those years in the development of these organizations.

FURMANOVSKY:

But meanwhile, weren't other organizations on the left that were noncommunist, weren't they pretty shocked when they later discovered that, yes, the Young Communist League of the Communist Party was a separate organization and open about its activities, but then they discovered that there were actually communists who were secret, that were in their organizations and they didn't know about it. And then suddenly with the Nazi-Soviet Pact, when the party split apart, the different organizations split, suddenly everybody knew who the communists really had been, and who had been--

DOBBS:

Yeah. But, you see, I don't know the answer to your question. Of course it happened, and of course it had a bad effect on these organizations. I don't know what we could have done about it, see?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, I'm not saying that I know either--

DOBBS:

But I will tell you this, the Young Communist League was much more open than the Communist Party about all its activities. We had centers in L.A. for a while that later developed in the forties when the Young Communist League was much bigger. We had seven open centers in communities; a lot of them were vandalized, a lot of them were wrecked, but, nevertheless, we maintained them as social, cultural, educational centers. I don't recall the party ever having that, but we had-- The party had offices. But we had community centers, you know, we'd get together, we'd rent a storefront in the name of the Young Communist League; and I'm not talking about the youth, I'm talking about the Young Communist League, and they conducted their activities as best they could, and sometimes with a great deal of resistance. The ones in Boyle Heights, for instance, in the Jewish communities grew; in the Mexican-American [community] they were vandalized and broken up; on the Westside they grew. So that we did everything we could as openly as we could. Now, would it have been better had all along the lines we'd been open? Possibly, but I don't think so, because of this virulent anticommunism which, as I say, is a major ideological thrust of the big shots.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, you mentioned that as a functionary of the YCL you could meet with the leaders of these noncommunist left-wing youth organizations. But now, what would happen if the party had a sudden policy that it wanted to push? Would you be able to tell Young Communists who were secret members of noncommunist organizations that this is the party position, and that this is what you should push when you're at the next executive meeting of your mass organization?

DOBBS:

We did that, yes. As I told you, the part of my job is an organizer for the Young Communist League, in addition to meeting with our executive committees, meeting with clubs or whatever we called them at that time, branches perhaps, in the communities, of teaching classes, being part of the workers' schools. At that time there was considerable interest, so that all kinds of groups asked us to teach on the fundamentals of Marxism. I did that. Those were the open things. But also there was a considerable amount of time given to giving advice of how to apply party policy within the strictures of their own

organizations. Yes. I thought I mentioned that, that there was a great deal of consultation with all kinds of groups. I remember in the course of strikes, or in the course of some struggles on the campus or other places that I would meet clandestinely with Young Communists to give them advice as best as I could or to make some judgments as the best way to conduct themselves. I don't think that we ever had in the youth movement, and I was closest to the youth movement than anything else, a strict dictum that this is our policy and you must carry it out. It always was: "This is our policy, how do you apply it to where you are?" Sometimes they could apply it, sometimes they couldn't. This was especially true in days that later developed in the tremendous anticommunist hysteria that swept through the state of California in '38 and '39 under the leadership of what was at that time the [Jack B.] Tenney Committee [California State Legislature Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities], which overturned much of the social legislation that was adopted during the Olson administration. So that it was difficult. But it also came about because of an overall change in party policy, plus an overall change in what was beginning to happen. Don't forget that it was in this period that you found the growth of the labor movement. Now, this was due to some activity on the part of communists, and a great deal of greater activity on the part of a greater number of noncommunists. But you have the growth of the labor movement. You had the growth and the beginnings of at least the struggle against racism and chauvinism in this country, started by the Communist Party in the early thirties, that then developed into organizational forms through which black people operated. You had the growth and development of some agricultural organization which the Communist Party took a leading role. And you had some beginnings of a fight back against the Depression, which of course found its fruition in something the Communist Party didn't start, but certainly took a heavy part in, in some of the fruition of the social legislation of the middle thirties under the leadership of Roosevelt. In other words, the climate in the country changed, as well as the possibilities for growth and organization. And, as I say, it happened, and especially in the youth movement, with the growth of these religious groups, and with the growth of sports organizations, and also the growth of political organizations. And lo and behold, there we are in the middle of them as a recognized part of the family of youth organizations. So there was a change in the country, and especially a change in our policy. We no longer looked upon these people as

rivals; we sought to achieve unity on anything that people were willing to agree on because of what we saw happening overseas. And, of course, I'm referring to the advent of Italian and German fascism; and we were determined to see that America wouldn't go through that horrible experience. So in 1934 you found this all burgeoning. Well, let me give you some other problem. I remember going with a delegation to meet with the leaders of the Young People's Socialist League. And they, of course, were supposed to be our most bitter enemy. But you know what happened to the Young People's Socialist League? All the leadership of it joined the Young Communist League. And of course I will say that one of the things-- I don't recall the American Youth Congress having a specific program, but one of the main campaigns of the Young Communist League in 1936, '37, '38 was the struggle for Republican Spain, and this was a tremendous radicalizing influence, but I don't remember whether the AYC had a program on it, I just don't remember it at all. But there were big adult organizations; while the youth played some part in it, we were not the leading factor. One of the main things that happened at that time, of course, was that so many of our people went to Spain to take part in the military struggle there.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right, and we'll come on to that. Why don't we then rejoin our chronology. You were deciding to become a full-time organizer?

DOBBS:

In 1934.

FURMANOVSKY:

In 1934. You were in Los Angeles during most of 1934, were you?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. I was in Los Angeles through most of 1934 and most of 1935. These events of which I speak, that is, the big activities of the American Youth Congress that I took part in, were mostly in '35.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you have any recollection of the San Pedro longshoremen's strike in 1934, when there was a YCL delegation that went to help on the picket lines there?

DOBBS:

That strike was a very difficult strike. I don't know whether many people are aware, but L.A. was almost an open port. The guts of that strike was San Francisco. And L.A., I frankly I don't remember too much about the activities of the party. That was mostly in the hands of whatever party people that were on the waterfront. I don't remember our having a group on the waterfront till after the strike. But L.A. was almost an open port. L.A.'s scab, strikebreaking tradition held up.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, with the help of the San Pedro Red Squad.

DOBBS:

Yeah, well, San Pedro, Long Beach Red Squad. That's why the events that happened, that Ku Klux Klan raid, you know, it's indicative of it.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about the party's antiracist work? I know that the party set up an organization called the Young Friends of Ethiopia in 1935, I guess related to --

DOBBS:

I've never heard of it.

FURMANOVSKY:

I guess related to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

DOBBS:

Our big struggle at that time was on two fronts in '35. It was primarily around such things as allowing black children to swim in public swimming pools, and our biggest fight, and it was very early in my membership in the YCL, was the Brookside Park [Pasadena, California]. It was a long, long campaign to break the racial bars of Brookside Park, which they did, sooner or later.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you say a little more about that. Did you play a role in that? Did you go down to Central Avenue and meet with young black organizers who were beginning to--?

DOBBS:

Oh yes, I remember teaching several classes and I remember we opened a center there. As I told you last week I think, my wife [Eleanor Milder] was extremely active in that community, going door to door, selling literature, having street meetings. I spoke at several street meetings and we had a group of young black people coming in the organization. Probably the most charismatic of these people was a very talented young man by the name of Lou Rosser. He was a very fine actor and he took part in some plays through the little theater movement that we had. I guess it was called the Worker's Theater or something like that, although I don't remember my own participation in it except earlier in the early thirties around that and the Blue Blouses. But he was very charismatic and became quite an effective leader. There were also others. One was killed in Spain, by the name of-- I forget his name. Well, all number of young people. Then some of the biggest growth of the Young Democrats was in the black community; many of them were YCL members, but I have no particular memory other than teaching some classes, going to and speaking at some street meetings or something of that kind.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, I have the name of Hursel Alexander.

DOBBS:

Hursel Alexander? He came from Omaha, and was already very well developed-- He was an excellent orator; he became active as did his brother. He had a brother, Frank [Alexander], that later was one of the leaders of the Communist Party in Los Angeles. Hursel Alexander came from Omaha and he developed quite some activity in the Young Communist League, yeah. Together with his brother Frank.

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FURMANOVSKY:

Now, you were in Los Angeles through September 1935, approximately.

DOBBS:

That is correct.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, if I remember correctly, there was sort of a crisis in the Communist Party sometime around this time, relating to the organizer, the section organizer.

DOBBS:

Yeah. Well, let me say that as the head of the Young Communist League in Los Angeles in those years '34, '35, I of course was a member of the executive committee of the L.A. Communist Party. This was not an honorary post, I was a member of the Communist Party by that time, but it was-- One of the features of the Young Communist League, as distinct from youth organizations in the sixties, was that we were proud of our association with adult organization, and we recognized the leadership of the adult organization. The leader of the Communist Party at that time, in '34, was a fellow by the name of John Leech. My memory is that he came into the movement through his activities as an unemployed person. In other words, active in the Relief Workers Protective Association, and then I believe in the Workers Alliance or some Los Angeles counterpart of a very big mass movement that was developed. Somewhere later in the middle of '35, and I don't know the details, or I don't remember the details, he was exposed as a stool pigeon, as an instrument of the L.A. [City] Police Department. My own feeling is he was not sent in as such, but they had something on him. And what it is I don't know. But he was replaced. A temporary replacement until another local person could be found. Louise Todd became the head of the L.A. CP. Louise Todd later became the secretary of the Communist Party for the state of California. She had been active in San Francisco and was a state officer, and was sent to Los Angeles to recoup after the damage that a stool pigeon could do to the organization. But I have no memory of it, except that I know it took place and I worked very closely with Louise, and we became very fast friends--which continues to this day by the way.

FURMANOVSKY:

I mean, just generally at this time there were a number of spies in the party and perhaps in the YCL too who would later be uncovered, later on in the decade or in the forties. Was it the Holthers?

DOBBS:

The what?

FURMANOVSKY:

The mother and son group?

DOBBS:

Who?

FURMANOVSKY:

Holther. But generally there were a lot of spies?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. Well, this was part of the Red Squad's activity. Not only did they have the open terrorist activity--and by terrorist I mean breaking up meetings, breaking up street meetings, leading really massive assaults against demonstrations and things of that kind with a great deal of brutality. They undoubtedly sent spies in the organization, or was able to find something that forced the person to be a stool pigeon. I know they had something on this very charismatic leader that came into the Young Communist League by the name of Lou Rosser. He's the only one that I can think of at the moment that was active in the YCL at that time. He testified against us at the trial, in 1952, after the war, the Smith Act trial. He did take the stand against us and spoke about me there. I'll tell you about that later. But that's true, that was part of the policies of the Red Squad. By the way, they not only broke up communist meetings, they were very instrumental in breaking up some trade union meetings as well. That was one of the instruments that was able to maintain L.A. as an open-shop, scab town for so many years. But, as I say, this was broken in 1935 with the recall of Frank Shaw.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, that was actually later, the recall was in '38; but the movement began about that time. Yeah. Lou Rosser was in the play **Stevedore**.

DOBBS:

Yeah, well I don't remember that, I might have seen the play. Oh, he was really something, he was a very, very charismatic man. What a massive popularity he had in the Young Communist League and in the community. He was very well known.

FURMANOVSKY:

What were the circumstances that led to your being asked to become--?

DOBBS:

Well, I don't recall any particular circumstances except the inability to build a Young Communist League in San Francisco. (

[In the fall of 1935, I was asked to move with Eleanor to San Francisco by the state organizer of the YCL. His name was Jack Olsen; he had recruited me into the YCL in 1932. The state and city offices of the CP and the YCL were in San Francisco at 121 Haight Street. Jack was the state organizer and I became the city organizer. There was a very small YCL chapter in San Francisco. Our activities were having classes on Marxism, holding street meetings, having some social events. I would painstakingly follow every possible lead to get young people to our meetings, classes, and other events.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) I don't remember much of anything except some activities around a case in which a member of the YCL was indicted for murder after the big strike, a fellow by the name of Archie Brown.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, why don't you tell us a bit about that?

DOBBS:

Well, Archie Brown was a member of the sealers union, affiliated to the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union [ILWU], one of the

waterfront unions that was organized due to the successful longshore-maritime strike of 1934. They did things like scaling the ships, cleaning them so that they could go back out to sea. So Archie worked as a sealer and he was a member of the union. In the course of one of the meetings there, in which there was a continual fight between the forces that supported Harry Bridges and the left, and the anticommunists in the union-- That doesn't mean that Bridges was a communist--I don't know whether he was or not--but there was this left group within the sealers union. In the course of one of the fights, one of the members was killed. Well, because of the role Archie played in the waterfront strike generally--and by the way, there were several pamphlets written about him, you know, real scurrilous, terrible stuff put out by the waterfront association describing him as a terrorist--they picked on and framed Archie Brown for that murder case. So he was in jail, and one of our activities was the building of an Archie Brown defense committee. Actually, what happened in this trial was that it was so much exposed as a frame-up and that the man did not die as a result of any fight, but he had an aortic aneurysm, which was proven by medical testimony, that even the prosecuting attorney begged the jury not to have another Tom Mooney case, and urged that Archie be acquitted--which he was. And later he was then made an active member of the longshoremen's union, the San Francisco local, and went to work as a longshoreman and headed up the progressive forces in the longshoremen's union for many, many years until his retirement just a few years ago. I saw him a couple of weeks ago in San Francisco, as a matter of fact, and was able to say hello to him. We were very good friends, and I had met him in 1932. I have very little memories of the Young Communist League in San Francisco, as such. I remember we were struggling for meetings, teaching classes, speaking at street meetings, doing everything that I did. We did develop at that time an American Youth Congress committee as well. It wasn't as broad or as well organized as the Los Angeles group, but had some very talented people in it. And one of the things that they did was the development of a sports center, arising out of the longshoremen's strike. Arising out of the longshoremen's strike was a very important instrumentality, that later broke up because of internal dissension, known as the Maritime Federation of the Pacific. Now, this of course was led by Harry Bridges after the 1934 maritime and San Francisco general strike. The ILWU went from the ILA [International Longshoremen's Association] and then became the ILWU as

a CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] union. (The ILA was an AF of L [American Federation of Labor] union.) At any rate, the leader of the American Youth Congress at that time was a fellow by the name of Gus Brown, who subsequent to that became a union official in L.A. I haven't seen or heard of him for many, many years. They set up a very important committee that developed a sports center in San Francisco. It was developed on the waterfront, and it had two or three floors. They bought a building and really fixed it up with all kinds of rooms for classes, sporting events. I even think it had a bowling alley, I'm not sure about that, but it had a pool hall, had a library, had places where people could play basketball. Here you ran into the major contradiction in the problems of building a youth organization. Very few youths went to that center. We looked upon it as a center for young people; but young sailors coming off the ships, they don't look for sporting events, [laughter] they look for something else. But a lot of people used it, but few youth. That's one of the contradictions of building a youth organization, and it's plagued us always: What are the specific features that attract youth? If a twenty-one-year-old kid gets married, is he a youth, or is he an adult? So anyway, that's a problem that's always plagued us in the building of the youth organization, and it sure hit hard at that sports center. But it lasted for years as a very active center and became a very useful building for all kinds of union activity, much of which I'm not familiar with. There were two things that took place of some interest while I was organizing the Young Communist League in San Francisco. One was because of my membership in the tire vulcanizers local in L.A. It was a federal local, it was before the growth of the large international unions; by international unions I mean like the Rubber Workers [Union of North America] or the UAW [United Auto Workers] or the USWA [United Steelworkers [of America], etc., these federal locals. I was able to get a transfer into the local in San Francisco, and I became active there because of a group of left-wingers that wanted some help, and they figured that I could do it since I didn't have to work for a living--I was working for the Young Communist League for six dollars a week. So I joined the union and became active in that group. It was really funny in this respect: The leaders of the union, especially the business agent, was a very inept, incompetent drunkard. He would open the meetings by saying, "Well, since there's nothing to talk about let's go have some beer." So we'd all shoot down to the saloon at Sixteenth [Street] and Capp [Street], you know, at the basement they had a

bar. And one day, under the leadership of this group that we got together to do something about the union, I got up and said, "Well, I'd like to talk about something." In other words, before we go to the saloon I want to-- "What's going on? What contracts do we have? Is there any organizing?" "Well," says the guy, "if you can do a better job than me you be chairman of the executive committee of the union." So I did. But then what happened, some of the other side said, "We're going to get this guy." Because every progressive idea that arose in an AFL union at that time was put to the door of Harry Bridges; in other words, "We're going to get rid of that agent of Harry Bridges." So they said, "Well, why aren't you working in the trade?" And I would pretend that I was sick, and they said, "We'll get you a job." And they got me a job at the Firestone company in San Francisco. [laughter] Two days later they fired me as incompetent; that I didn't know what I was doing, you know, to get rid of me. So they kicked me out of the union. That was that one experience. The other was a more interesting one. A group of young women in the Young Communist League at that time were working in places like department stores and Woolworths. They were not all working in the same place. So getting together we tried to figure out what to do, and we decided to go down to the Retail Clerks Protective Association, RCPA. We went down there, joined as a group, and asked for permission to help organize the department stores. And they said, "Well, that's silly, you are not going to be able to organize the department stores." Well, actually, these young people-- I didn't take any part in the organizing of it itself, I was active and I became a member, that is, I paid my dues. But I was active in the Young Communist League, and I never had any aspirations of doing anything but being a Young Communist League organizer; never occurred to me to be a union organizer, except I was useful in advising these young people on tactics. That union [Department Store Employees Union, Local 1100] took off like wildfire. It just grew by leaps and bounds where I had to choose: Am I going to continue with that or am I going to continue with being a Young Communist League organizer? So I bade them all farewell and I went to work as a Young Communist League organizer. And that union of course developed its own leadership, became a very powerful union, and to this day is a union and I believe part of the progressive sector of the San Francisco labor movement.

FURMANOVSKY:

And it was tremendously difficult--

DOBBS:

I know it lasted for many years, Local 1100. And many of these young women were leaders of that union for many years. So that kind of activity is how I busied myself, in addition to teaching classes, trying to find young people to recruit, and so forth and so on.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about the 1936, '37, longshore strike and that struggle between the Bridges-CIO wing versus--?

DOBBS:

The forces around Harry Lundberg. The Young Communist League did very little with that. That was mostly in the hands of the Communist Party and Communist Party members, and I honestly can't give you any details. I don't remember it, that's because I wasn't involved. In 1936 I became what's known as the organizational secretary of the Young Communist League.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right. Which would be what, the number two position?

DOBBS:

That would be the number two position. The chair was a fellow that came from New Jersey, a fellow by the name of Frank Carlson, an extremely able, extremely smart, a very, very fine young man. And his wife Lillian [Carlson], who I knew as I kid, as a youngster; she lived in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles where I lived, before she went to New Jersey and she and Frank got married. He had been an editor of the **Young Worker**, which of course was the paper of the Young Communist League, the newspaper, its organ. But he was a very able man. This guy could do everything. He could make up songs, he could sing, he could play the clarinet, he could dance a whirlwind, as well as being very smart. Well, he became the chair, and he was a real idea man. That idea, that sports center came from out of his head. Gus Brown put it into effect. Let me give you a kind of idea that he had. For instance, he said, "Now look, the forty-niners came from the East to the West to develop their fortunes. Why don't we develop the new forty-niners? They are going to come from the West

and go with a covered wagon to the East, demanding the enactment of the National Youth Act." And actually it became the new forty-niners. We got a kick out of it later when they named the professional football team the [San Francisco] Forty-niners. But that's the kind of idea; and sure enough, we put on a little financial drive, we got the American Youth Congress interested, and a group of people did go from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., in a covered wagon to demand an enactment of the National Youth Administration, and they got publicity wherever they went. That's what I mean by an idea guy. The idea of the model youth legislature [California Youth Legislature] came from him. In other words, this guy, he was tremendous.

FURMANOVSKY:

Very much a popular-front orientation.

DOBBS:

Oh yes. Plus an organizer of the Young Communist League; deeply concerned with the problems of the YCL, within this activity of being part of the family of youth organizations. The job irked me after a while--what the heck do you do in an office of a small organization? I would go over and give advice, let's say, or meet with students at Berkeley, or lecture or teach a class; the same thing with Oakland, we'd do something there, whatever; the same thing wherever we had Young Communist League organizations. At that time, the Young Communist League, in striving to make a difference between itself and the Communist Party, a difference in that it shouldn't be so closely-- It should be closely related but it shouldn't mirror it so much. And we got the idea in California of developing a group of youth organizations that would have a similar program. That is, against war, against fascism, against racism, for the passage of the American Youth Act, for the application of the American Youth Act, cultural, educational, social organizations. And we developed the idea of working with the only contacts we had, who were mostly the kids of Communist Party members, or well-known left-wingers. And I developed the program of going from town to town, trying to develop them into youth organizations.

FURMANOVSKY:

Trying to develop who into youth organizations?

DOBBS:

Now, some of these young people, either kids of communists or left-wingers in any given community. For instance, in San Jose, there developed quite a large organization, I forget what it was called, it had some name relative to San Jose. But the point I'd make-- I would hitchhike down to San Jose, because we had no money, or I'd hitchhike up to Santa Rosa, or up to Sacramento. And in every town, not in every town, but in some of the largest cities we began to have formations of these youth groups that were not given the name Young Communist League, although they adopted much of the Communist Party program, or the communist program of the day, but did not associate themselves in name with the Young Communist League. We were going to call them something to the name of a league of progressive youth, or something of that nature, I forget. But what I would do is I would, let's say, hitchhike to Salinas. People would put me up and from there I'd go to Monterey, where we had a youth group. Or I'd go down to Gonzalez, where we had a few youth. Or I'd come to Los Angeles and stay with my folks and then I'd hitchhike to San Diego, hitchhike to Santa Barbara, hitchhike to San Bernardino. In all these little towns, where there was no Young Communist League at all and it was very difficult to sustain an organization, we'd develop these youth groups. And I just had to go around all the time looking for leadership, things to do, how to sustain them; and actually some of them developed into relatively large-size organizations. We had a fine one in Monterey, a very good one in San Jose, and a good one in San Diego. I don't remember what they were called. But that's how I busied myself, and I hitchhiked literally hundreds upon hundreds of miles in the state of California all during that period.

FURMANOVSKY:

And your ability to relate to people growing out of your--?

DOBBS:

Oh yes. I was a very good teacher, that is, I thought I was a good teacher. People liked my classes. The classes were divided sort of into an analysis of current events such as what are the hot spots in the world today? or what's happening in the world? And the other thing, of course, was around the question of Marxism. Now, I found two things of interest there. One, that there were young people there that were receptive. But it's very difficult. You

know, it's easy to be an organizer, come and make a speech, and then run. How do you sustain a youth organization? And to this day that has not been answered. CED [Campaign for Economic Democracy] has never been able to answer these questions; DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] is not able to answer those questions. How do you sustain an organization? How do you develop a leadership? For instance, we [DSA] had a group in Riverside, which is no longer there; we had a group in San Bernardino, it's no longer there; CED, the same experiences. So I'm not sure we learned it then; I'm not sure we learned it now. But that's always the key problem where you have the communist movement develop in a large urban area, but never able to really sustain it in any of the so-called rural areas. Now many of them are no longer rural. San Jose is now what? The third largest city in the state? But anyway, that was an effort at that time. And the other thing that began to happen is that I began to see party people throughout the state that never saw any other party leader. So I had to become the spokesperson for the state organization within the party. In other words, I was the only party leader they ever saw. What's going on? What does the party think about that? What does the party think about this? Can you teach a class for us? Can you come and talk to our club? Can you solve this or that or another problem? And while it took a great deal of my time, it also increased for the first time, really, getting much closer to the problems of the Communist Party, in addition to being closer to the problems of building a youth organization.

FURMANOVSKY:

And would you meet regularly with Bill [William] Schneiderman, the secretary--?

DOBBS:

Oh, I was a member of the state board, and I was a member of the state executive committee, oh yes. And Bill, let's see, that reminds me of something very important now--

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you bring it up?

DOBBS:

I'll bring it up. One of the early--the earliest memory I have of the Young Communist League, was an idea fostered by Sam Darcy--this was in 1932--that the YCL should become a semimilitary organization, go out for military training, have uniforms. I remember Archie Brown made a tour through the states speaking to as many groups as he could, that is, YCL or communist groups, raising money to buy uniforms and projecting this idea of parading. This was Sam Darcy's application of what do you do with fascist gangs that were arising in Germany. Well, it never got any place. Thank goodness it never got any place, because that's all you need is a quasi-military organization in the name of the communist youth. [laughter] But that was-- I don't recall being in favor of it, that is, actively doing anything about it; nobody else did either.

FURMANOVSKY:

I remember there was a scare about that in the paper, obviously somehow it got to the newspapers because I remember reading about it.

DOBBS:

I don't recall that at all.

FURMANOVSKY:

So even though it never happened--

DOBBS:

But Sam Darcy spoke on that a great length in a number of places, and as I say, Archie had a statewide tour about it at that time, but it never got anyplace. Anyway, I found that experience for the first time being acquainted with the party problems, especially in these small towns, where it's very difficult-- You know, it's a bit difficult in every place, it's a thousand times more difficult in the small town unless you are able to build some kind of institution. For instance, in San Bernardino they built a massive unemployed movement that almost got political power in the city in that period, in San Bernardino. And then there's a use for the party; but what it does in a small town unless it's able to build some institution around it, I don't know. At that time the party had the idea, and still has, I guess, of building a whole number of I guess they used to call them transition belts. How do you build a Friends of the Soviet

Union? or how do you build the International Labor Defense? or the International Workers Order? A whole number of what we'd called mass organizations. And so sometimes in these small towns, it drove these party people crazy, trying to build everything that the party called on them to build out of a very small constituency. And that's one of the problems that we faced. Anyway, I remember, I want to tell you one other thing that took place. It's one of the most exciting moments of my life. As a member of the state committee of the Communist Party, it came January 1, 1938, we had been very active even though we ran a candidate, I believe, against Culbert P. Olson, and Sam Darcy ran against Upton Sinclair, if I remember correctly.

FURMANOVSKY:

In '34.

DOBBS:

Yeah, that was in '34, but this was '38. Culbert P. Olson was elected governor. He carried out his pledge that the first thing that he would do would be to grant a pardon to Tom Mooney and Warren K. Billings. As a member of the Communist [Party] state central committee, state committee, we had been invited at the request of Tom Mooney. I went with the rest of them to the chambers of the assembly and the California Senate, where Olson gave the pardon to Tom Mooney. And I say that's one of the proudest moments in my life because the Tom Mooney campaign--and now nobody remembers it at all--was one of the central campaigns of the Communist Party and the Young Communist League in California for so many years. This was the man that was convicted of a bombing in San Francisco in 1916, I think I mentioned that. But at any rate--

FURMANOVSKY:

He almost went back on his word, didn't he? Culbert Olson pledged that he would release Mooney but then he almost went back on his word, as someone told me, and pressure was put on him and in the last moment he came through.

DOBBS:

I have no memory of that whatsoever. All I know is that it took place on either January 1 or January 2, the day he was inaugurated.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes, 1939.

DOBBS:

Nineteen thirty-nine, yes, that was after the '38 elections. As I say, being able to see that event, which during the whole course of those years was such an important part of our lives and our activity, seeing that come to fruition was actually a great thing. I think he had trouble with his wife, divorced his wife, and it was messy. But he went on a tour throughout the country. I had already come back to Los Angeles. I left San Francisco at that time, in other words, the first week or so of 1939, then moved back to Los Angeles--which I'll go into in a moment. But I just want to say, to finish up on this, it was in this period that a meeting was organized at the Coliseum to welcome Tom Mooney. Tom Mooney of course was much more famous in San Francisco than in Los Angeles, and it was a bitter, bitter, cold day, and there was a very small crowd in that huge stadium. Well, by small crowd I guess it was somewhere in the neighborhood of ten, fifteen thousand people in that huge stadium. It didn't look like anything. But that was a great event in my life, all that thing around Tom Mooney. I came back to Los Angeles in 1939. Apparently what happened is that Lou Rosser, together with one or two other YCL members, got into a series of terrible scrapes. I don't know what kind, but it had either to do with drugs, or with drunkenness or something of that nature. And it really played hell with the YCL organization here in Los Angeles. I have always looked upon Los Angeles as my hometown. After all, I grew up here. And I was already beginning to wear out this youth organization business of traveling around the state and these state conferences, and giving advice to these little groups that we had and so forth, so that I welcomed the idea of going back to Los Angeles. Los Angeles at that time had a very healthy Young Communist League, even though it was shaken by these events around Lou Rosser. Some very talented young cultural people, some of whom had had experience in Hollywood, some of whom knew people in Hollywood. They had developed these centers of which I spoke before, and they still maintained very actively and under fairly good leadership. And the American Youth Congress was still active. Matt

Pellman was still here, although I think he was a party functionary at that time.

FURMANOVSKY:

Ed Alexander?

DOBBS:

Ed Alexander was in San Francisco. He was the state educational director, a very, very fine charismatic fellow, another one of these guys that could do everything: dance and sing and write poetry. He was wonderful. He then later moved to Seattle, and I haven't heard of him since. But anyway, I came back to Los Angeles to take the place of Lou Rosser, who had already at that time was the chair of the YCL, the head of the YCL in L.A., and I took his place.

FURMANOVSKY:

He left?

DOBBS:

Yes, he either was expelled or he left, I don't remember. I honestly--either I don't remember or maybe I never even asked, you know? I just don't remember what the scandal was. But anyway, I came to L.A. and L.A. had a flourishing YCL at that time, and we continued to do a great deal of work. Now, already at that time we were coming close to the developments around the war. We had already begun to run into serious questions about the struggle within the American Youth Congress as to its approach to collective security, for instance. We'd already run into, the party had already run into some real problems of the role of the party relative to the big Hollywood Anti-Nazi League [for the Defense of American Democracy] that had developed. The party had already begun, shortly after that, the whole question of how to react to the Nazi-Soviet Pact. A whole number of very party-destroying things took place, let me put it that way. I don't remember too much about that period, I can't remember anything that really stands out, except two things: One, was that many of our young people began to get drafted in the army. I forget when the draft came into effect, I think it was sometime '39 or '40, wasn't it?

FURMANOVSKY:

I think so, yeah.

DOBBS:

(

[And we set the policy that every young male leader in the YCL at all levels of leadership must at once work with and develop a female substitute.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) In other words, for every man who faces the danger of draft, and everybody in the YCL did, must be replaced by a young woman; which meant a whole leadership training course, and we did a lot of that. And there were some very talented people here in L.A. at that time, so I had no problem of finding a replacement for myself. But in any rate, I don't have any clear memories of what the heck we did in '38 and '39, except continue along the lines of the American Youth Congress. And the independent social, political, and educational YCL activities.

FURMANOVSKY:

The party here was led by Paul Cline. Did you--?

DOBBS:

The party was led at that time by Paul Cline. Cline was also one of these very able, attractive--I thought he was a very brilliant fellow, I really, really liked him. We got along very well. I might say in that period Eleanor had left me in 1937, and then we got divorced. In 1940 I got married again, to a young woman by the name of Harriet Moscovitz. She was a beautiful woman, a very talented dancer. (

[I had heard somewhere, and I do not recall any follow-up on this, that she had been a candidate as a dancer in an important ballet company. I was told further that in the course of her training, she had strained a ligament or torn a muscle and had to discontinue her ambition to become a professional ballerina.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) I think it was a constant source of frustration for her. I fell very deeply in love with her, and I thought she loved me too, but apparently she didn't enough because she left me about a year and a half later. I either did not understand or get an explanation as to why. My dad [Michael Isgur], I remember so clearly saying, "Don't marry her, she's a sick girl." And I don't know why she left to this day. I've seen her many times since. Every time I would go to New York I would go visit her, spend an evening with her, you know, just take her out to dinner or something, because she was living in absolute bone poverty, although she came from a rich family. She hated her father for some reason or other, something that he did to her mother. They were divorced before she was born. But she never would take a dime from him, **never**. And her mother was a working woman. I don't know what happened, I really don't.

FURMANOVSKY:

Was she active in the party?

DOBBS:

Oh yes, oh yes. She was active in the party, active in the Young Communist League. She led some cultural stuff. She's a very smart woman, went to Hunter College or some such place. Is there a school like that in New York, Hunter College? She was just a very unhappy, very frustrated young woman. I thought I could cure her, but obviously I didn't. She was a very fine woman. I have a lot of respect for her to this day. I haven't seen her now for many, many years. I haven't been to New York for twelve or thirteen years. The last time I saw her she said, "Let's see go see if we can get tickets for **Fiddler on the Roof**," which was one of those impossible things. But it happened to be the night of a terrible blizzard. Someone was wandering around, saying my friend didn't show up, I put fifty bucks in her hand and I got the two tickets. So I was able to see Zero Mostel and **Fiddler on the Roof**.

FURMANOVSKY:

Fifty bucks, even twelve years ago in New York?

DOBBS:

Well, these were scalped tickets and I wasn't taking any chance on losing them. It was a terrible blizzard that night. Anyway, I haven't seen her all these

years. She left me in '41, I think it was. So we were not married long. I think we got married in '39.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you remember anything about the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the impact--? Do you remember the day--?

DOBBS:

Yes, yes I do. I'll tell you that first of all we looked upon it here, let me put it-- I looked upon it here and I defended it along the lines that the Soviet Union, having failed completely to carry out its aim of social security-- Not social, I'm sorry.

FURMANOVSKY:

Collective.

DOBBS:

Collective security, of course. Having failed completely to carry that policy out, the Soviet Union was I felt in danger of meeting the onslaught of the prepared German army. I felt that they were being betrayed by, they had been betrayed by the inability to come to the assistance of Czechoslovakia, because of the refusal of Czechoslovakia, the refusal of Poland. And therefore I agreed to the way Stalin placed it, that they were not going to pull the chestnuts out of the fire of the imperialist countries.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about the Communist Party?

DOBBS:

Now, the Communist Party, well, it suffered a great deal. I would say much more so than the Young Communist League, primarily because you see we had a greater, more varied program of activity than the Communist Party. In other words, we had a social life, we had a cultural life. Well, the party had built these huge organizations--and I tell you, that was a powerful organization, The Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, I believe. And here it's based completely on its struggle against German fascism and suddenly the party members had to change their position. And so the party suffered a great deal, but I can't give

you any details because I don't remember them, except the collapse of these organizations. There were several. But I thought that the YCL did fairly well by accepting the explanation I gave. I do want to say this, and I must say it, that when I came back from the war in 1946, I was asked by the state committee of the party to prepare a report on the party's program during the whole period of the war. And I went back and I read every paper and every magazine I could that was published in English by the world communist movement. And I was absolutely horrified at what I read. I just never realized it; that not only were we in favor of the pact but we were almost in favor of Germany. Now, I was not aware of that until I read all that stuff that was published by the Soviet Union while I was away. In other words, no one came out and said, "You're in favor of Germany." But I tell you, the diatribes against American imperialism, against British imperialism, for the movement in India, etc., that said, "Don't support the war." What's this horror? You know, it was an out-and-out plea for support to Germany against the imperialist powers. I didn't realize that it had gone to that extent. So it just wasn't a pact to see that Germany didn't attack Russia, but it was a pact to assist Germany against America, against France, and against England. I never realized that it went that far. I never realized that so much assistance was given to Germany by the Soviet Union. In other words, I was wrong in my saying that it was a pact just to protect the interests of the Soviet Union against an attack where they would be helpless before this huge army. But I didn't know it. Either I'm stupid, which of course I was, but I didn't know it until I really made a study of everything we wrote and read. Then I remembered that I had in my own home a couple of people from India with an out-and-out pro-German, anti-British talk. In other words, "Our main concern is to hell with Great Britain, to hell with what's going on in Europe, we've got to do everything to weaken Britain so we can gain our independence." At that time that could only have been a pro-German position. What the hell else could it be? And later there were groups of course that went in from India, went and became part of the Japanese army. But I didn't know it at the time. I didn't realize it at the time, but only until I read it. And I made this report, with the bitterness that I'm expressing to you, I made it to the state committee. And it was accepted. Although many of the people there kept reading this stuff, I was in the army for four years and didn't see it or hear it until I got four years worth of stuff and read it in a six-month sitting. It was-- I was horrified at what I had done.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about--

DOBBS:

I would have quit. I think I would have quit the party at that time had I seen what was happening.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, I think a lot of people obviously didn't see it.

DOBBS:

I didn't quit, of course not. But I would not have seen it had I not had that accumulated, massive amount of material all in one setting. In other words, you read it, it's like watching a freight train, it's imperceptible when it comes. Well, you've heard it coming all along. But when you live next to the railroad tracks sooner or later the noise doesn't bother you, you get used to it. Well, it was the same thing with people who read this stuff every month. But when you read it in its totality at one sitting--it was a horror!

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, what always strikes me is the specific, the antiwar position that the party took in 1940-41. I always think of the Woody Guthrie song, I can't remember the title, where he's not sure which way he's going to shoot his gun.

DOBBS:

Well, of course. Well, the Communist Party was very active in promulgating the slogan which the western-- I see even in Al Richmond's latest book, **A Long View from the Left**, he attributes to one of the staff members of the **People's World**, "The Yanks Are Not Coming."

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, Mike Quinn, right?

DOBBS:

Mike Quinn. I just read that the other day [**On the Drumhead**, by Mike Quinn], a fascinating book by the way. Have you read it?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah.

DOBBS:

I thought it was, especially the essays. Anyway it was just a-- I was shocked, I just didn't see it. And maybe no one saw it and maybe it's something that developed in the course of the war itself.

FURMANOVSKY:

But what you must surely--

DOBBS:

It wasn't so clear on the day of the pact; the day of the pact it was not clear.

FURMANOVSKY:

But surely what you must have seen was a fairly rapid breakup of some of these mass youth organizations into two factions; one of which basically supported the communist line and one against it.

DOBBS:

Well, that's why I said before that these mass movements: the Young Democrats, some of the black organizations, the American Youth Congress, they lasted up until the war. Of course that's what broke it up. Well, plus the fact, don't forget that the leadership of the youth organizations was drained by the draft.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right.

DOBBS:

I didn't get drafted immediately because I was married at that time. At that time if you were married, you had a, what was it? A 4-F or something like that. I forget what it was. It wasn't 4-A. Then, let's see, I think that's about all I can remember. What happened is that this crisis of Lou Rosser-- I went to L.A. Oh, I remember. I went--

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, why don't we wait and we'll turn over the tape and you can tell us that story.

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

AUGUST 3, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

When we left off, Ben, you were about to be transferred from L.A. back to San Francisco to work for the YCL [Young Communist League]. So why don't you take it up from there?

DOBBS:

Yeah, I forget the particular crisis that caused the change of venue for me. In other words, something happened in the state office of the Young Communist League, which was situated at 121 Haight Street still in San Francisco, and I was asked to go back to San Francisco and assume the post of the state chairperson or state president--I forget what we called it at that time--of the Young Communist League. That was a very unpleasant period for me, mostly because of the difficulties I was having with my second wife, Harriet [Moscowitz]. I have no real memory of what we did at that time in the Young Communist League or in the movement. It is obvious that the war, you know, the phony war that was going on in Europe, or what was described as the phony war-- The American Communist Party had the position that we would not support the war under the basic slogans of "The Yanks are not coming." One thing happened that might be of some special interest and that is on June 21, 1941, the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany. I remember I was doing a great deal of speaking at that time, speaking before organizations and street meetings and things of that kind. I was scheduled that Sunday to go speak at a meeting in a park. I forget the name of the park, Golden Gate--not Golden Gate Park, but one of those parks, on Fell Street I think it was, where they had regular Sunday forums by the Communist Party. Bill [William] Schneiderman at that time was the chair of the Communist Party and he said that I shouldn't speak, that he would speak instead of me. Of course what it immediately indicated was the complete change of American Communist Party policy: That now that the Soviet Union was attacked, the two main thrusts of our policy was to get the other countries, that is England, France, and so forth--although

France had already been defeated I think--to join to offer all help to the Soviet Union in what became of course a terrible conflict. And secondly, was the support of all the United States to the Soviet Union. In this period, too, was already the beginnings in the Communist Party of what might be called Browderism; that is, the change of the party policy not only towards the war but in many cases towards the other Western democracies, not only urging them to continue their support for the Soviet Union but that possibly we were entering a new phase of world relations, of a close relationship between the Soviet Union and capitalist countries, if they would continue or would start a policy of aid to the Soviet Union--which they did. Now, certain things happened at that time, I mean had happened earlier, which began to have an effect on our movement here. First was of course the dissolution of the Comintern, or the Communist International. I think it was in 1943. But this had already begun. In other words, it wasn't so much that the American Communist Party had that independent strength, but partly it was part of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union not to have an international organization that in any way would foreshadow or any way would be an obstruction, or possible obstruction, to the winning of aid to the Soviet Union for the war. Second, I might say that such things as the beginnings of the discussion for the dissolution of the Young Communist League was already being discussed. In other words, to start a broader organization and one not so closely related to the tactics, practice, theory of the Communist Party. We had already begun to discuss this. It was not resolved until a year or two later, and I want to tell you about that. For instance, we stopped singing "The Internationale" in the Young Communist League and in the communist movement. And that's related to something that I will also tell you about when I got to Europe in 1945. But anyway these changes began to take place. I, of course, with having so much difficulty with my wife-- Obviously she was going to divorce me and that obviously would change my draft status. And so in April of 1942, April 1 as a matter of fact, of 1942, I was drafted into the army. When my wife left me I wrote to the draft board saying that in all likelihood I was going to be divorced and therefore I had no more dependents, and therefore I would leave it up to them what they intended to do. I had no intentions of volunteering whatsoever but I did want to clear my draft status. Then I made a tour through various parts of the country, including the Northwest, for the Young Communist League to speak in terms of the preparation of the YCL to go into

the army; not only my going into the army but so many of our members were already going into the army. Every youth of our age was going to be drafted.

FURMANOVSKY:

And what was it that you would tell them, or what was your position?

DOBBS:

Well, what I would tell them was, first of all, full support to the war; secondly, to welcome the draft. We were not sympathetic with conscientious objectors. We viewed it as a just war and a war in which one should participate. Third, is that we should stop our completely adversary position in the labor movement, but to seek ways and means of increasing production and things of that kind. You know, carrying out the Communist Party policy, looking for less adversarial positions and more positions that would lead to national unity and support of the war. The party's policy at that time was full support to the war, even though the United States of course was not yet in it. Although I believe, let's see, what was it? December of 1942--or was it '41?

FURMANOVSKY:

'Forty-one.

DOBBS:

'Forty-one when the United States was attacked at Pearl Harbor. So we changed completely our whole position of opposition to the war, opposition of the main elements of American foreign ruling circles, imperialism, etc., and became a whole policy of rapprochement, of nonadversary, of support to every phase of the war including war production. So those are the things that I recall talking about.

FURMANOVSKY:

What did it mean to you, this change? Was it something that--

DOBBS:

Well, the only thing it meant to me was I was all in favor of the war, I was all in favor of support to the Soviet Union. After all, the life of the Communist Party and the Young Communist League in all those years that I was in it from 1932 to that period, and then following of course, was always devoted, the central

part of our program was for support for the Soviet Union. We were completely uncritical and never would even brook the slightest critique of the Soviet Union. Fundamentally because we believed it to be a socialist country. Secondly, they had been beleaguered by hostile, you know, being surrounded by hostile states. They were of course set up, I think, by the imperialist powers to have a war with Germany and bleed both those countries "white," so to speak. I believed all those things and I believed them thoroughly. That's why that I told you that when the Nazi-Soviet Pact came about I thought it was a very important diplomatic victory won by the Soviet Union, in that it at least gained them some respite; but at the same time I have my criticism of it, as I said, in that they did more than just use it for building their own defenses. At that time some of the worst features of Stalinism began to appear. But that's something I learned later.

FURMANOVSKY:

What I'm getting--

DOBBS:

It's not what I believed in at the time. Defense of the Soviet Union and unwillingness to in any way compromise, agree with, sympathize with the whole cabal of the socialist movement that was so bitterly anti-Soviet, the rest of the socialist movement, as well as of course with the professional red-baiters, professional anti-Sovietees and so forth. We would brook no sympathy for them whatsoever.

FURMANOVSKY:

What I'm getting at is, was it in some sense a relief when the policy changed from one of having opposed this war, "The Yanks aren't coming."?

DOBBS:

I don't recall that as my fundamental reaction. Mine was that by gosh I want to get in this war. It's not that I'm warlike or that I'm a hero of any kind. But I wanted to contribute the same as all other Americans were called on to contribute, basically for the defense of the Soviet Union as well as the clarity that we were beginning to get of the nature of German fascism, and that is the smashing of nations completely. And I felt that this was a real danger to the

United States, as well as the growth of incipient fascist movements that had begun to develop in the United States.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you have any recollections of the party's, in the period before the Soviet Union was invaded, of the party's overtures towards sort of right-wing isolationist organizations in San Francisco.

DOBBS:

I don't think that it had, I don't recall any such thing. Now, that doesn't mean that there weren't. But my tendency and my feeling at that time was to welcome, without overtures to these people, but to welcome any voice that projected a program of opposition to America's entry into the war. And I say I think this was a very, very serious mistake on my part. I feel very keenly about it. I remember making a speech to a conference where I gave the complete Soviet line and was taken to task by Paul Cline, because he and the party leadership did not rejoice in the fall of France. They did not rejoice in the practical destruction of Great Britain, you know, in terms of the bombing; whereas I had a tendency to do that because of, as I say, the whole atmosphere that was built up. But I didn't feel it in any way as a sense of relief. I rather felt it in the sense that, well, the war changed. The thing that German and British imperialism and American imperialism wanted did not come about. They were forced for the protection of their own country and their own capitalist interests to ally themselves with the Soviet Union. Finally, no matter how late, collective security had been solved. So that I think I have made the worst mistakes there in terms of not really understanding the true nature of a fascism which came about during the war and maybe after.

FURMANOVSKY:

All right.

DOBBS:

But not relief. And as I say, I'm no hero. I never had that figuration. But I wanted to get into the war or at least get into the army, let me put it that way.

FURMANOVSKY:

And so shortly after that you were drafted or--?

DOBBS:

Yes, I was drafted April 1, 1942. My father [Michael Isgur] drove me to the draft office on Hollywood Boulevard. And it's really funny, you know, you go in there for your physical examination, and while I had certain trepidations about joining the army, although as I say I wanted to do my share, I really felt glad and proud that I was able to fulfill the physical. And strangely enough the doctor there asked me whether I ever had had TB. I had never known it left a scar on my lungs, because he noticed it in the X ray or whatever. And also like one time I had a slight nerve deadening, a nerve in my back went out of kilter, and he asked me whether I had that. In other words, I had begun to have a little atrophy of my muscles on the left side of my body. I never noticed it but the doctor noticed it. But he said, "Congratulations, you've passed. You're now in the United States Army." There they swear you in at the draft station if I remember correctly. They give you a meal ticket and a ticket to get to Sixth [Street] and Main [Street], which was the PE [Pacific Electric] station at that time. I was sent to Fort MacArthur. Fort MacArthur was just used as a processing center.

FURMANOVSKY:

Where was that?

DOBBS:

In San Pedro, California.

FURMANOVSKY:

What were you classified as?

DOBBS:

In terms of what to do, duty?

FURMANOVSKY:

Fitness.

DOBBS:

Oh, fitness. I was classified 4-A to be drafted at once. I was changed from 4-F to 4-A. That came about with the divorce. 4-A was changed to a member of

the Army of the United States. Now, don't confuse the Army of the United States with the United States Army. The United States Army is the volunteer army. The Army of the United States are draftees.

FURMANOVSKY:

What does the A signify?

DOBBS:

Full fitness of the combat units.

FURMANOVSKY:

And the 4?

DOBBS:

The 4 was simply a designation. In other words, they had other designations, and I'm not familiar with the status of the designations in the draft service.

FURMANOVSKY:

So it was off to Fort MacArthur straightaway?

DOBBS:

And immediately to Fort MacArthur. They gave you a meal ticket. In other words, you could eat in some Main Street cafeteria and then board a red car, they had the big red cars then, to go to San Pedro and it took you right to the fort.

FURMANOVSKY:

This was in what month?

DOBBS:

April 1, 1942.

FURMANOVSKY:

April 1, 1942, all right.

DOBBS:

I always thought it was sort of funny to be drafted on April 1.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, it is.

DOBBS:

Anyway, there I had some interesting examples that I'd like to give you because they were both humorous as well as telling. First, I just want to tell you that the position of the Young Communist League was that you're on a leave of absence when you became a soldier. In other words, you're no longer a member of the Young Communist League. You're completely separate from the organization, in effect you're on your own. You're not urged to organize cells. You're not urged to organize any discussion groups. You're not urged to do anything. You're just urged to do what the officers tell you to do. That was the policy of the Young Communist League to the best of my understanding-- and not only to the best of my understanding, but that's all I saw happening. So I was sent to Fort MacArthur. At Fort MacArthur the first thing that happened of some note was that I had to decide what I was going to do about my communist affiliation. Now, as an old lefty in the movement since 1931 you always knew that the Communist Party was a main object of spying and that kind of stuff by the United States government and its security institutions, the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and so forth, that had no love for communists. I did not know what their policy on communists was going to be. But I determined from the moment that I got into the army that I would tell them of my communist affiliation. I don't know whether anyone else did. I honestly don't know. But I do know that what happened to me later, which I shall tell you, happened to many other people, whether they told them or not. But I told them. How do you tell them? When you get down to, the first thing you do is go to your classification center. When you get to Fort MacArthur, before they give you uniforms or anything else, you go to a classification center that lists your [place of] birth, your birthdate, your interests, IQ. We got an IQ test and one thing and another to determine, I guess, in the silly way that the army did it, what you should do. So the first question asked me was, "What did you do for a living?" You know, what's your occupation. I said, "I'm an organizer for the Communist Party."

FURMANOVSKY:

What was the reaction?

DOBBS:

Well, the reaction of the interviewer was, "Jesus, comrade, don't tell them that!" Now, that's one of the funniest things that happened to me. It so happened that the guy that was doing the classification also was a member of the Young Communist League. So his first reaction: "Jesus, comrade, don't tell them that!" I said, "Write it down. I'm going to tell them that. If they don't like it, they can lump it. They can expel me, it's just fine with me because I can go back to my activities. Because I'm not going to be looking over my shoulder all the time." Because I had decided that that's the thing to do. So his reaction was to just write it down. He says, "Gee, you know what I'll write down, I'll write down that you helped them form production circles to increase production. That'll look good on your record." "Write it down. Write down whichever you want. I'm just telling you the truth. Every question here I'm answering as truthfully as I know how." I've forgotten all the million and one questions there were, but I did answer that question. But it was very funny that the first guy I ran into was a member of the Young Communist League--not from Los Angeles, of course, because I would have known him; he came from some other place. And then I got a funny reaction. He looked around to see if anyone heard him say that because he just loved those two little stripes he had. He didn't want to take any chance on losing those stripes. But that's the funniest thing that happened. The other thing was when you stayed at Fort MacArthur all you did there really was go through the classification center and get your clothes. In other words, you turn in all your civilian clothes, you put it in a basket or whatever, and you get your full uniform. And of course they supplied everything. You didn't get pajamas but they supplied everything other than pajamas. In other words, socks, shoes, underwear, everything. And of course you do that and you wear it. You learn how to make a bed. And of course you hear the first silly speech of the sergeants, you know, that you're in the army now and they don't like goof-offs and so forth and so on. I, of course, sort of sneered at that: Why couldn't they be more democratic, more gentlemanly and so forth? But I found that when I became a sergeant I acted exactly the same way. So anyway, first thing is that most people stayed at MacArthur about three days. For some reason or other I was stuck there for eleven days. Now, that meant that I was on KP about eight days, after they pulled out about six teeth out of my mouth. They thought they were in danger of abscessing, and that caused some difficulty. So anyway, I think I washed

every dish in the United States Army at that post. But nothing happened. In other words, nothing other than that KP. Finally after these eleven days I was sent to the infantry replacement training center at Camp Roberts, California. Now, this is in central California near a town by the name of Paso Robles, and it's in a very hot area. Later of course it became historic because it was designated, and I think they still designate it as one of the places for the incarceration of antiwar people in the event America ever declared war or a national emergency. But it wasn't at that time. This huge field where hundreds of soldiers learned to drill, the hills in which you learn certain tactical questions-- And there the same thing happened to me as happened to me at Fort Roberts. It's really very funny. I come into the barracks and there's, you know, the barracks has maybe eighty people. They all get assigned to different training units and I'm sitting there all by myself. By that I mean it's all infantry, only infantry, although they had an artillery camp there too, but that was separate. This is an infantry replacement training center. And everybody that I was with or in the same barracks immediately got assigned, whether it was A company or B company, C company, etc., in the training units. That was one of the main ways in which the army trained people. They had different ways which I'll go into later. But anyway, I'm sitting there all by myself. That night a guy comes into the barracks and he says, "Are you Ben Dobbs?" I say, "Yes." He told me his name but I have forgotten it. And he says, "I was the secretary of the Young Communist League in Minnesota. I'm now responsible to assign people. Now, if I assign you to headquarters company, which is just a little bit better, a little bit softer than a rifle company or a machine gun company. But what if I get caught?" "Oh, for Christ's sake, do what comes naturally. Let's say you don't know my communist record, just do it the easiest way and then you'll say, if anyone says anything to you, he has qualifications to whatever you put me to. I don't care. I'd just as well be in a machine gun company or a rifle company or anything else." But apparently he had pity on my senior years. By my senior years, this later turned out to be somewhat of an advantage. Because you should know I was already thirty. And thirty is, what, anywhere from ten to five years older than everybody else in the army. So he must have had tender sympathy for my senior years and he put me in a headquarters company. Now, a headquarters company is a little bit different than a rifle company because you're dealing more with questions of communication; you deal with the question of decoding stuff. And other than

that you go through basic training, the same as everybody else, drilling, marching, shooting a rifle, and stuff like that. The interesting thing was in this headquarters company, because it was supposed to be men a little brighter, they had certain things organized in the USO [United Service Organization] such as these trivia question contests. What do they call them? They have them on TV once in a while. So I won a lot of prizes for my battalion. And, oh, everybody thought that was great stuff. It was the silliest stuff, you know, going in and taking part in those tests. It's like me competing with a bunch of grammar school kids, after all the reading, studying and, you know, just living that much longer than the majority of the kids there. But I would win cigarettes, win prizes for the training battalion and so forth and so on.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you became a popular guy.

DOBBS:

That's right, that's right. So it was very funny. Anyway, I stayed there for three months, the worst heat of the summer; it was May, June, and July. And then again everybody else got transferred out of the company except me. I remember-- I'll just make a comment at this time that when you become a soldier you fall into certain habits of being a soldier that are not particularly good, there's nothing good about it. For instance, I think my first half a year there I wrote to some thirty-seven people; many of whom answered my letters, many of them didn't. But I wrote to thirty-seven people. I felt responsible to keep in contact with them. The second year you're writing to eleven people. The third year you're writing to your mother and your two sisters. And the fourth year you got ahold of a telephone wherever you get a chance. In other words, you begin to live up to your environment, you begin to live within your environment. And that's what happened. So I spent a lot of time writing letters. I don't remember ever going to the USO for entertainment or for doughnuts or any of that stuff except these occasional quiz contests. That's what they were called, quiz contests.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you write to your comrades in the party?

DOBBS:

Oh yes, I wrote to thirty-seven people. Who else am I going to write to?

FURMANOVSKY:

And could you write to the Communist Party headquarters, 121 Haight Street?

DOBBS:

Never, no, no. It was always to friends, always to friends. Let's see, I wrote to Dorothy Healey, I wrote to my mother [Ida Levy Isgur], I wrote to my sisters [Lillian Goldstein and Marcella Stack], I wrote to kids who were in the district committee with me. And I wrote to some people that I was fond of and maintained relations with. I wrote Harriet even though the divorce was pending. I just wrote to a lot of people, that's all.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who were you friendly with at the camp? Who did you start making friends with? Can you mention--

DOBBS:

Well, I don't remember any friends with anybody. You know I just got along well with everybody. I'm one of these guys that could play poker and shoot craps, and I did. And I always won money playing poker and lost it at shooting dice, but that's a different story. But I don't remember any close friends because I didn't go to town. I didn't go adventuring, looking for women or anything of that nature. I never went to the USO for entertainment. I continued my reading because you could get books. They had, as a matter of fact, a very good system of books in the army. They were shaped differently where you could put them in your pocket. But they had all the classics, all modern novels in their army library. You could get all kinds of books. Anyway, that's what I did. So other than those two experiences of running into communist business, you know, it was routine. And in telling you some of these stories of my army life which I--There's some very cute stories. You know, there's no use telling you the stories about the drilling or the heat or the cold or the fear or the aspects of the training, or the thousand and one miserable details, whether it's collecting garbage or cleaning garbage cans. There's no use telling you that stuff because everybody did it. So I'm going to just tell you those things that are unique to me.

FURMANOVSKY:

It might have affected you differently. Everybody's unique.

DOBBS:

But they were all there. Oh, yeah. It's funny. For instance, one day I'm assigned to clean the garbage cans. Well, I took that as seriously as drilling or anything else. So I became the expert garbage can cleaner. And the army system is if you find an expert in something, you use them. So I'm cleaning garbage cans for weeks on end. I would use steel wool and brushes and really clean them good. But that's the army. And then of course the drilling and the-- I had no trouble whatsoever with army discipline in the sense that living and being in the leadership of the Young Communist League, you have a certain discipline anyway. There's a discipline involved. Anyway, I lived through the basic training and did well. I don't recall any particular friendships. I do remember that some eight or ten years later, walking on Hollywood Boulevard doing my work or something, some guy behind me is going, "Hut, two, three, four." He was a guy in my training platoon. I had forgotten him. But he recognized me, we said hello and said good-bye. But I don't recall any particular friendships.

FURMANOVSKY:

And from there you were sent--

DOBBS:

Again everybody else got transferred out except me.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right.

DOBBS:

So I was assigned after that, after laying around for a few days, again to KP. Because when you have nothing to do in the army they can always put you in a kitchen, especially these huge camps. So I was sent to a place called Camp Stoneman. Now, this was a brand new camp. It was a replacement center and also a port of debarkation. In other words, it's only about an hour from San Francisco and it's in Pittsburg, California. There I ran into some reds. I have

one particular memory of a young-- I wasn't there alone, but again I was all by myself. I wasn't with people that I had trained with. I just was sent there by myself. They give you a railroad ticket and your order so in case some MP stops you, you can tell where you're going. Of course it was just a bus ride away. So I got to the camp, and it was raw. There were no flowers, nothing, just opened up. On the third or fourth day I was there, a division marched in that was getting ready to go overseas. And there I saw a man who was a member of the Young Communist League I hadn't seen for several years because he was drafted right before I was. A very, very wonderful guy. He was one of these guys that within fifteen minutes is surrounded by twenty people, he's got a guitar out and he's singing songs. One of these extremely charismatic fellows. He was a Mexican and he joined the Young Communist League because of the struggles in the Imperial Valley. He was an agricultural worker. He was very, very articulate. His name was Smiley Rincon.

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, yeah.

DOBBS:

And so I saw him. Because I had no attachments to anything, I went searching for him in that area of the camp where this division was quartered prior to its going overseas. So I found him. We spent an evening together talking about old times in YCL. His division was sent to the Philippines eventually, and he was killed. Why I tell you this story is later I've been arguing with people who insist that he went to Spain and had been killed in Spain. I just remember so vividly this conversation I had with him in that Camp Stoneman. Then later I was able to verify it with his family and friends in L.A. that he was actually killed in the Philippines and not in Spain. I was there maybe two or three weeks, that's all. And again, it was either guard duty, standing over men with guns while they're sweeping the yard or something like that, or KP. Then I went to an interesting place and that was at Angel Island, which is right in the middle of San Francisco Bay. It's hard to see from San Francisco because it's hidden by Alcatraz. Now, that camp was also a port of embarkation--or is it debarkation when you go? I forget which it is. I think it's embarkation. Debarkation is when they come in. It was an old, old, old army post with the

single beds with the big bedsteads with symbols of the United States Army. And there again I was there completely by myself as a replacement.

FURMANOVSKY:

Were you beginning to wonder why you kept being sent--?

DOBBS:

I really didn't wonder. I **knew** why. No one really knew what to do with someone with that on his record. The army had no clear policy, which I'll tell you about later. So anyway I hung around there. But there I was getting sick and tired of being on permanent KP. They had a system where if you had a visitor--and they allowed visitors--they afforded them transportation on a boat that brought them from San Francisco across the bay to Angel Island. Then you could have lunch with them and you could spend a half day with them until the boat, you know, the schedule of the boats to take them back to San Francisco. These are the nature of ferryboats. Well, I said I'm not doing this stupid KP forever. And all they charged was thirty-five cents. So I drew up a list of comrades and friends in San Francisco. I think I must have had eight or ten visiting me every day. They'd have lunch with me and then we'd just sit and chat about the problems of the party and the problems of this, that, and another thing, personal problems, whatever. I'm living the life of Reilly. I'm out of KP, which is probably the best thing that ever happened to me. Anyway, I hung around there. I was there for, again, just two or three weeks. Then finally I was sent to a combat unit. Now, this combat unit I was sent to was the Forty-fifth Division. I think that the Forty-fifth Division was part of the Seventh Army. I'm not sure whether it was either the First or the Seventh. But it was a division that probably had more casualties than any other division in the United States Army. I think it had seven battle stars. It landed first at Sicily and then went through the battles in Italy, you know, the long terrible battle on the Italian front. Then it marched up the peninsula, the Italian peninsula. Then it landed in southern France, and had an enormous battle record. We were in a place called-- Well, I joined them in Fort Devens, Massachusetts. In Massachusetts at that time in the Forty-fifth Division it was difficult to get passes because they practically tore up New York. They were one of the divisions that paraded in New York on some occasion, I forget which. I wasn't

in it at the time. But it had a very bad reputation. But it was a real fighting unit.

FURMANOVSKY:

You mean for rowdiness?

DOBBS:

For rowdiness, yeah. It was made up of two major units: the national guard of Oklahoma and the national guard of Arizona. That was the two basic units that made up the Forty-fifth Division. It got a great deal of fame because of a fellow by the name of [Bill] Mauldin who drew cartoons that were widely printed throughout the United States. He later became a political cartoonist for the **Saint Louis Post-Dispatch**. For all I know he still is. I saw some book that he wrote recently. He had these cartoons about the two infantrymen that became very, very famous. Joe and his friend Willie, I forget what he called it, GI Joe and Willie or something like that. Anyway, that was a division that was a very rough division. They hadn't had a promotion in that division for seven years because it was such a stable unit that had been together for so long. It was a national guard unit. The captain of the company was a national guard captain. In civilian life, he was a policeman. Finally I'm in a combat unit. Here I was already in the army five or six months, floating around, and finally I'm in a unit. And I'm attached to a rifle company, in other words as an infantryman. There we had very extensive training at Fort Devens. By that I mean long marches, long hours in the field, long hours on the rifle ranges, and considerable training until we were sent to a place called Pine Camp, New York. Now, this is the hellhole of creation. There's nothing colder in the United States than Pine Camp, New York. It's situated at Watertown. This is, I think, right on the shores of Lake Erie. I really don't know because there was nothing to see except snow all the time I was there. I was there in November, December, part of January. It was terrible. You couldn't do any field exercises because you couldn't go out in the snow. I remember one field exercise that was called off within an hour because so many soldiers had fallen down and broken their legs or broken their arms or their elbows or something. It was terrible. And we weren't dressed for it. I mean to do guard duty without being dressed for it, guard duty where you just either ride around in a jeep or walk around a post seeing whether any spies are going to come into camp. And

without being dressed for it was just misery. It was so cold. And everything, whether it was collecting garbage or anything, was just under these terribly cold conditions. The only thing that happened to me there of any interest was that I got to be fairly good friends with a young Mexican who had been in the national guard of Arizona. He had a friend that also was in the national guard of Arizona, in our same rifle platoon. He said, "You better talk to my friend." I've forgotten his name. I says, "Hey, what did you want to tell me?" He says, "I get ten dollars a month for spying on you." I says, "Really? Well, what is it you're supposed to find out?" He says, "What I'm supposed to look for, go around. Do you ever hang around the motor pool? Do you ever see him pouring sand into the gas tanks? Do you ever see him talking to strange people?" That's what I'm supposed to report on for you. But I'll be damned. I don't see anything wrong with you." I say, "Why do they tell you to do this?" He says, "I really don't know. They said you were some kind of dangerous man, whether you were a criminal or what, they never told me. All they did, they give me this ten bucks a month and they told me to do it." I said, "Well, who told you to do it?" He says, "Well, some guy from Intelligence G2." (

[The leadership functions that make up the staffs that are responsible to the commanding officers in all major units of the army are designated by numbers and letters. Letter G means staff for a general who commands divisions and the letter S is for units below this such as battalions and regiments. The numbers are divided as follows: 1 is for Personnel; 2 is for Intelligence; 3 is for Operations and Training; and 4 is for Supply, including ammunition.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) I says, "Well, what do you tell them?" "Well, all I know is that you shoot craps, you play cards, you go out with the fellows whenever they go out, you go to Boston on your weekends if you get a pass, you do your duty." That is when we were at Fort Devens and I would go to Boston. I'll tell you about that. So anyway I said, "Well, then I know why all these stallings took place." This guy came out and told me that in that many words, and it struck me as very funny because I'm not scared of anything. As I say, I'm not looking over my shoulder.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you tell him what you thought it was?

DOBBS:

No. I didn't find any occasion to. What the heck for? So anyway that was an interesting thing that happened. The only other interesting thing that happened to me is I would go into a pass in Boston and when my mother found out that I was going to be in Boston, near Boston, she wrote me and told me that she had a cousin that was in Boston. I always made it my practice to look up people, whether communists or relatives; anything to break this army routine of landing at Scully Square and then wondering what the hell to do with yourself. So I visited and I found a cousin. They had three kids in the family. One was a major in the chemical corps. But I never could have any talks with him because he was very busy, in other words, on this whole business of chemical warfare. But I never found out anything about it. But I did connect up with my friends with Boston. Whenever I'd get to Boston, I'd go visit them. They lived in Brookline. They were very wealthy people, which reminds me of a story. The first time I got into of Boston, I was terribly hungry for a Jewish meal. I liked that food once in a while. So I come into Boston. I find a policeman and I ask him, "Where do your Jewish people live in Boston?" He says, "You want the rich Jews or the poor ones?" I said, "I want a Jewish restaurant." He says, "Then you better take the poor ones." So he told me where apparently there's a little Jewish area there and I remember going into a delicatessen and eating a Jewish meal. The rich ones lived in Brookline; that's a suburb of Boston. So I got a kick out of that. But anyway, I was in this Forty-fifth Division and up there at Pine Camp, New York. Then finally this division began to take seriously the question of preparing to go overseas. We were sent to Camp Forest, Virginia, and there we began to do the kind of exercises that you do to prepare to go overseas. For instance, you get all your equipment changed. You get more modern equipment, whether it was the rifles or whether it was the, I think the M-16 was then developed, or the M-1 instead of the old Springfields. I don't remember. Then of course the ship-to-shore training, climbing down these huge rope ladders from the ship to the little landing boats. About ten days before we were sailing, before we were ready to go, I got an order transferring me to the post military police. Now, just one word about this. This was an indication of the army's policy. It happened to a whole bunch of people at that time, all of us communists. We

were taken out of combat units and put into service units. Now, I will tell you this. The day before I was transferred I was on what they call regimental detail. That means certain men from each company are assigned to go up to the regiment office and mop the floors and fix the garden and dust the office furniture and do all the work to get ready for the day's work for the regimental clerks and so forth. And I'm a kind of a guy that if I see a piece of paper I'm going to look at it. So I see orders for the day. And sure enough, my name stands out as if it was written in bold letters--"Ben Dobbs." I think at that time I made PFC [private first class], yeah PFC, then the serial number, "ordered to be transferred at once to the post military police pursuant to order number so-and-so as a potential subversive and premature antifascist." So I knew that that order was coming. I really saw it. It was one of those strange things. Because I look at pieces of paper when they're laying around and there they are, ready for the colonel or the adjutant or the sergeant major to put into effect to send out the order. So the next day while we're in the field training a jeep comes out for me, and they call out my name and bring me to my barracks and tell me I'm going to get picked up in an hour or so and transferred. Well, I knew it was coming. I had already been in this unit now for several months. I think it was, well, I got there in November--December, January, February, March--I think sometime in March or April. I became very well known. I used to talk a great deal about the nature of the war, how to end the war, the need for an alliance, the military events as reported in the newspapers. I used to talk openly, freely with anyone who would talk. We used to have pretty good discussions. Because not only then was it the national guard of Oklahoma, but it had already begun to be filled with replacements, draftees, many of them from New York, New Jersey, and from the rest of the parts of the country sent in by the infantry replacement centers such as Camp Roberts. So I'll never forget that the night that I'm sitting there in my class-A uniform ready to be transferred and all these guys march in off the field and say, "What's going on?" They say, "Ben is going to be sent to Washington to show them how to win the war. He told us how to win it. Why doesn't he tell them?" I said, "No, fellows, I'm going to be transferred to the military police." "Why is that?" So I gave them a long lecture on the nature of the Communist Party and the Young Communist League. They said, "Why can't we join? If that's the way to get out of this goddamned outfit then we'll join." "No, it's too late for that."

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

AUGUST 3, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

That story makes me think of something I omitted. I wanted to ask you how you got on with young people from such a different background, the national guard of Oklahoma, kids from there, and you being ten years older, from California, the Young Communist League.

DOBBS:

I think you asked me a question earlier about why did I think it was important to tell you about going to ball games and learning how to shoot dice, play poker, and going to the theater. It's because I became an American. I'm not just hindered by or just taken up with the narrow confines of the Young Communist League. That's what I found. You could talk to anybody. I don't remember flaunting my membership in the Young Communist League. I told the army, but that doesn't mean I told every soldier. Some I told, some I didn't. But I don't think that I flaunted it at all and, therefore, you get along. You get along if you do your duty. You get along if you're not a fink. You'd get along if you participate with them in the things that they want to participate in, whether they're going to a movie or playing dice or playing cards. You participate with them in discussing current events. Soldiers are not stupid, they're just plain Americans. So I had no difficulty getting along. My closest relationship was with a young Mexican who was one of these guys-- He could do everything. He's one of these guys who was so handy, and I'm clumsy. He'd always be making up my pack or preparing me for inspections, you know. He was just that way. He was the kind of guy that if he saw a guy faltering on a march he would carry his rifle for him. He was that kind of guy, although he was very slight. But he was determined that I try to speak Spanish. He wouldn't let me speak English with him because I had told him I had taken up Spanish in high school and lived in a Mexican neighborhood. So we got along fine. I went to town several times with a young fellow from New Jersey. I learned how to tell the difference between an easterner and westerner. We'd get into a crowd and within ten minutes he's at the head of the crowd and I'm still way in the back. The difference between a New Jerseyan and a Californian. The New Jerseyan moves and the Californian loiters. What

difference did it make? I just got along with everybody. I don't recall any animosity until later, which I'll tell you about.

FURMANOVSKY:

So the reaction to when you did talk about your being a member of the Young Communist League--

DOBBS:

As I say, I talked to the whole group. All the guys that lived in the barracks. In other words, the squad I'm in and the platoon I'm in. "Why did you get transferred?" Well, I told him why I got transferred.

FURMANOVSKY:

But did they understand? What did it mean to--?

DOBBS:

Well, I say that it meant nothing to them except insofar as from the worst angles of it: "Tell us how to get in so we can get out of this crazy outfit." Because this outfit was getting ready to go overseas. There was no question about that.

FURMANOVSKY:

What was the feeling about going overseas among ordinary people?

DOBBS:

Men didn't like to go overseas. No, no, you didn't find any patriotism in the army. But they'll do it, whether for fear of punishment or whether fear of their peers. But I don't know that anyone jumped ship. I don't recall anything of that time. But I'll tell you about that later because that was one of the most interesting experiences of army life. But you didn't find any great patriotism.

FURMANOVSKY:

So if you could get out, people would jump at the chance?

DOBBS:

Oh, absolutely. To get transferred to the military police. I was transferred to the military police at Camp Forest, Virginia. Now, Camp Forest is very close to

Norfolk. Norfolk was a shipping port. You ship from Norfolk to Europe. But I don't remember anyone jumping ship. I don't remember a great deal of patriotism. I was much more patriotic than most of them--than all of them. I'll put it that way. I used to talk a great deal about the nature and the character of the war, maintenance of the unity between the Soviet Union, United States, Great Britain, and China. This was the whole pitch all the time. This is how to win, how to be a good soldier. That was my aim.

FURMANOVSKY:

And what was the reaction?

DOBBS:

The reaction was very good. I had no, I don't remember any animosity whatsoever. I just don't remember any. You must not forget that I had no fear of being exposed as a communist. I had already told them that, see. This is a big hindrance to many people in discussing questions frankly with outsiders. I had always mingled with "outsiders." So I had no real difficulty. I remember no animosity whatsoever. When a guy tells me that he's spying on me and he says that he thinks it's stupid, why should I be afraid? But that day I told them all why I was being transferred. They all honestly thought, they said, some of them said, "Well, you're going to Washington to show them how to win the war. You showed us how to do it." This is a true story. So the next day I'm in the military police. This was to me an absolute horror. I want to tell you one other thing. I forget what the detail was but I think it was when I was at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, I got a five-day pass, or a weekend pass it might have been. I went into New York because there was a convention of the Young Communist League. Now, I couldn't get into the convention. (It was limited to members and I'm on a leave of absence.) I remember sitting in a restaurant across the street, and the friends of mine from Los Angeles that were delegates to the convention would come and tell me what was going on. It was very interesting. I got a kick out of that. Here I am drinking coffee all day in this restaurant in New York. And by the way, I could go to New York because I didn't have to have a lot of money. I had a sister in New York [Lillian Goldstein] and I would stay at her home or her apartment, she and her husband [Milton Goldstein]. So they had all kinds of messages running back and forth. I mention it because this was the convention--so it must have been

in 1942--that dissolved the Young Communist League. I hated to see that. I didn't see the advantage of it. It dissolved the Young Communist League and I think in the next day it formed what was known as the American Youth for Democracy, with which I had no experience whatsoever at all because I had no relations to it whatsoever. But that was a turning point obviously, which as I say, was under subject of discussion just barely into that when I was getting ready to go into the army. So the YCL was liquidated. I think it was a fellow by the name of Carl Ross who was the secretary of it at the time, and I was very fond of Carl. I thought he was a very fine young man. I think at that time I was already being invited to--I know I was--meetings of the national committee of the Young Communist League. Anyway, I got out of the Forty-fifth Division and went into the post police of Camp Forest, Virginia. Now, of course there's a big difference between the post police and the military police in combat units. This is the post police. What are its functions? Its functions are first of all to do police duty in the cities, to see that the soldiers have their buttons buttoned and they're not drunk or they're not stealing anything or whatever, to travel on trains and to check passes, to see that they're well-shaven, their buttons are buttoned, and that they salute their officers. They take care of the gates, you know, saluting officers as they come in and asking visitors what their business is. They would patrol around the barracks where there are women troops, WAC troops, to see that no soldiers interfered with them. (

[A word of explanation: The army at that time in early 1943 had already formed the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, the WAACs. Later, they were named the Women's Army Corps, WAC. They performed functions such as teachers, interviewers, typists, etc., all military functions except combat.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) They [the post police] also directed traffic on the post. When I got into the post police I found that it was primarily made up of people who were also "potentially subversive." Now, that meant in addition to some Young Communists that I ran into, there were those accused of pro-Nazi opinions. I found the New York communists a very difficult bunch to be with frankly, because they were from the East and they were very sectarian. They were in a complete funk. They felt put upon. They did not get along well because

everything was a fight for them. Now, let me tell you it's very difficult. And what is the most difficult thing of all? Racism. Because the racism is so pervasive in our society. Well, I found out you just can't fight it every minute of the day. You got to find the issues around which to talk about it. You know you would make yourself clear that you're not a racist and you disagree with the racists, and that's where the animosity began to develop very sharply. Because we weren't the only "potentially subversive." They also had some Nazi sympathizers in that outfit, or potential Nazisympathizers, and they usually were a bunch of bastards. No one dealt with them. In other words, completely separate. There I made no friendships whatsoever except with one kid who had been a member of the Young Communist League, but this guy was impossible to deal with.

FURMANOVSKY:

What did he do?

DOBBS:

Well, he would fight on everything. In other words, if he heard the expression, you know, a detrimental expression about Negro people, he'd immediately react. Well, you can't do it all the time. The guy's not going to let you live. They would pick on him. One of our duties as military police was to patrol the PX's, that's the post exchange. The post exchange at night is a glorified saloon. That's all it is. In other words, you wonder where all these drunkards came from. You realize there's a lot of drunkards in the United States. You get one from every village and put them in the same PX, you're going to get drunkards. If you get guys in old units, they become ganged up. In other words, guys from a squad who operate all the time, go to the same PX--that's a gang; recruits that by themselves are easy to deal with. This guy [the member of the Young Communist League] would go to a PX and would get in an argument with somebody. Well, one day he got in an argument with a gang that was ganged up. They took his club and his gun away from him and they beat him, gave him a hell of a beating. Now, when you talk to rookies, let's say in a replacement center, or guys that have just come in, they're not ganged up. So you can separate them. You can isolate the troublemakers. Well, let me tell you, when you're dealing in a PX and these guys are rough, and you run into guys that trained together--that's a gang.

FURMANOVSKY:

And they stick together.

DOBBS:

Yeah, they stick together on everything. Well, he got into that kind of argument. I just avoided those kind of arguments, that's all. You can't win them, you're not going to convince anybody in a ten-minute conversation. But I did do one thing. I did protest the segregation policy in an army theater, and I was told we're living in Virginia now and Virginia still has [segregation] laws. I said, "This is not Virginia. This is army property." And I expressed a protest. Well, they later broke it down. I'm not saying it was due to my protest, because I'm sure that I'm not the only one that did it. But I did it. In other words, you find somewhere there to fight. But you just can't live if you're fighting every minute of your life against people you know you're not going to change their mind, whether they come from Tennessee or Mississippi or some such place.

FURMANOVSKY:

Were there a number of blacks in this division?

DOBBS:

There were no blacks at all.

FURMANOVSKY:

None?

DOBBS:

No, no, the army was completely segregated. There's black troops, but you have no regular contact with them. (

[When I talk about segregation, I mean there were no mixed or multiracial units of any kind in the army at that time. I believe most black soldiers were assigned to engineer or supply (warehousing, truck-driving) units. There might have been some direct combat units but they would be all black and separate. I believe there was a black Army Air Corps unit of flight officers. The army was ordered to desegregate by President Truman. The actual practice of racism was

evident in the movie theater. I experienced some incidents later when black soldiers were refused food at white units.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

)

FURMANOVSKY:

When you talked about the segregation, you were talking about racist comments that you would hear rather than actual practice of racism?

DOBBS:

Yes, yes. That too.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, who were these potential Nazi sympathizers? What sort of kids were they?

DOBBS:

They were a bunch of bastards. You couldn't talk to them at all.

FURMANOVSKY:

But who were they, what sociological background, where were they from?

DOBBS:

Most of them were working-class kids or farmers.

FURMANOVSKY:

How had they been identified as being potential--?

DOBBS:

Well, that I don't know. I'm not a cop. In other words, they got it in the post MP's by either their records or the FBI, I guess.

FURMANOVSKY:

That they had joined one of the [German-American] Bund or something.

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. But I wouldn't talk to them.

FURMANOVSKY:

I imagine there were quite a number of them you could not have related to.

DOBBS:

I'm not sure I wanted to, because as I say, you were fighting on every question.

FURMANOVSKY:

So many other things, yeah.

DOBBS:

Whether it's the nature of the war or whether it's the nature of the United States. I tell you when I was in that military police, I'll tell you some other things, but that was the worst period of my life. I tell you I was a completely demoralized person.

FURMANOVSKY:

And this is because of what? This is because of the constant--

DOBBS:

The military police. I'm not a cop!

FURMANOVSKY:

You just hated doing the job?

DOBBS:

I hated doing the job. I hate to tell people to button up or get sober: "Give me a word, mac, and I'll tell you where you're sleeping tonight. I got a club and a gun and a brassard that makes me an authority." I just couldn't do it. So let me tell you a couple of experiences. When I got there, the first couple days I was there you get sort of acclimated. (

[The company is divided by day-by-day assignments of one kind or another. There is no regular day-to-day or even hour-by-hour assignment. One might be assigned to one duty and the next day be assigned to another.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) For instance, you're eating five times a day if you want to because there's no set hourly duties. Sometimes guys are two hours on and four hours off, sometimes four on and eight off. Sometimes they're out off the post all day. Sometimes they're on a train for three days. There's no schedule like there is in the regular combat unit. So you have to get used to that. And you had various types of duties. Don't forget, as I tell you, I'm older than most people still in this unit and this is post police. My first days were traffic. I didn't mind that. I can direct traffic as well as the next guy. That's standing in the main centers of the posts and allowing people to go this way, and then you stop them and you allow the others to go that way; and all you've got to do is to be sure you salute every officer that crosses your line of vision. So I didn't mind that. That was my first duty. Second one was guard duty at the WAACs' barracks. You walk around the barracks two hours, then you try to sleep for four hours. That's twenty-four-hour duty. I didn't mind that for a few days. Then one day I got assigned to town duty. That is walking a beat like a policeman. After that town duty I don't recall any particular incidents, but I went to the company commander. You know, you ask for permission to talk to the company commander and so forth. I went in and I told him that I couldn't stand that town duty. I urged him to give me any kind of duty so I wouldn't have to do town duty. I'd be willing to do permanent KP, anything: "Because, one, I can't do a good job and, two, I hate it. I'm not built for it. I'm not made to look after people." Well, right away: "You know you can get court-martialed." "I'm not refusing an order. I just want you to change the order." Well, he put me on a gate that was way, way, way on the outpost of this huge military installation. And what you do is that you get up in the morning, four or five o'clock, and they give you a bag, put a sandwich in it, and they take you out in a jeep and you're at that gate. Now, it was a gate that nobody used. But it was a gate. Well, this was terrible. It was so bad. I mean, what do you do all day? You can't read all day. You never see a living soul. If a snake walked by, it would give you something to talk to. Well, I would do silly things like I think I

tried to write a dictionary. You know, every word I knew, how you spell it, what it meant. You could read. You couldn't just shoot your gun and have target practice because you had to account for the bullets that you used.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you could read, you could bring a book with you?

DOBBS:

Oh, sure. You could bring a book with you. You're just sitting in a little hut, that's all. Just a little sun-baked hut and you just sit there. It really was a terrible experience. And it went on for several days. You don't even see MP's. You don't see nobody. And then that ten or twelve hours later a jeep would come and pick you up and take you back to the post. You got to report the next morning to get taken back to this gate. But that's what that captain did to me because I said I don't want to do any train duty or street duty. The cities around there were all little towns.

FURMANOVSKY:

What did that involve, doing duty in the city?

DOBBS:

In the city? Well, it involved walking up and down the streets patrolling. If you found soldiers that were drunk, you had to throw them into jail or put them, give them to the--

FURMANOVSKY:

Soldiers in uniform?

DOBBS:

Oh yeah, yes. You had nothing to do with non-soldiers. You would go into the saloons to see whether anyone was tearing up the joint. You would see that the soldiers had their buttons buttoned and their ties on straight. You would be told that if you saw someone you wanted to arrest, all you had to do was bring them to the city jail. You're armed with a gun and with a club and do just whatever a cop does.

FURMANOVSKY:

Would there often be fights?

DOBBS:

Yes, oh yes. There would be fights. I don't recall any. I would go the other direction anyway! I just can't stand watching over people. Well, he put me on this gate. But one interesting thing happened: Once you become part of the gate detail, which is a separate, you know, got its own function, there came a day when the main gate needed someone to operate it. Now, there's a gate where you're in class-A uniform in addition to regular highly polished shoes and boots and you had white things across your chest, crisscrossed across your chest, joined by a very brightly polished buckle. You had to whitewash these stripes, these things across your chest. What do you do when you cross it that way? How can I describe it on the tape.

FURMANOVSKY:

I know what you mean.

DOBBS:

Across over your chest attached to your belt. It had to be whitewashed every day with chalk and this buckle had to flash brightly and your class-A uniform had to be perfectly pressed and absolutely clean and every button had to be polished. So I got on this main gate. But what happened was that I knew how to handle myself on a main gate. When people came to ask, how do I get to a certain place, I was able to tell them. How do I contact a certain soldier? I would get on the telephone, and through this vast myriad of hundreds upon thousands of soldiers I was able to find a person. In other words, I'm able to handle the gate the way it should be done. "Well, you're going to be on our permanent front gate detail." So I got out of that horror of town duty. Now, all this time my patriotism is beginning to ebb a little bit, see. Because look at it, they're kicking me around every post I've gone to; I've been to half a dozen already. I'm hanging around all by myself. And this army policy is now very clear: They're not going to allow us to go into combat. They're not going to allow us to have anything to do with the army. You're now with goof-offs. You're watching people to see if their nose is running on the streets. You're doing nothing but saluting officers all day long at these gates. So I said the hell with it, I'm going to start watching out for my good time. In other words, when

you get a pass, take it. When you get a furlough, run. You get out of KP, do it. Over all this time I'm just a private, or PFC, which paid four dollars more I think. So I'm on these gates. Let me tell you how abysmally stupid post policy can be. Let me give an example. One day we're on a parade, and that's always a big thing, the band is playing and banners are waving and you're in troops and you're marching at attention in the parade. After the ceremony, our commanding colonel, the post commandant, comes in with his little swagger stick and he's very upset. Now, you're not going to believe me, I know, but I'm going to tell you anyway. He was not satisfied with the way our shoes were laced. He was not satisfied with the fact that every little eyelet on a shoe, you know where the laces go through, he wanted the paint scraped off so that the brass would shine. And instead of the shoelaces being crossed, he wanted them laced lengthwise. How did I get into this crazy outfit? It was a two-hour lecture and practice with lessons on how to lace shoes. Another colonel came in one day and he has interviews with everybody. He was getting to be in charge of a new stockade and he had to staff it.

FURMANOVSKY:

What is a stockade?

DOBBS:

Well, a stockade is the name for an army prison, except that it's not a building. It's surrounded by barbed-wire fences or maybe link fences with barbed wire and watchtowers and limited areas where soldiers can't go. It's a jail without a building except where the guards sleep, which is in regular barracks. And so he's looking for people to staff it. So when I come in and salute he says, "You're just the kind of man I'm looking for. You had infantry training several times. You were in the Forty-fifth Division. You've had training in how to shoot a shotgun. You've passed your qualifications for shooting a pistol. You've had now maybe three or four months"--I forget, already I think it was four months or five months--"military police duty. There's nothing wrong with your record. You're just the man I'm looking for." So I tell him, "You better turn my record form over and see where I come from." Because I'm desperate. Bad enough in this stupid military police to go be a prison guard. So he says, "I see where you were a communist organizer. Well, I'll have to think that over." Well, sure enough, three weeks later I get transferred to what is known as the 232d MP

Escort Guard Company at Fort Meade, Maryland, near Laurel, Maryland. It's halfway between Baltimore and Washington. Fort Meade is an old, old established army post. Now, this stockade was a fascinating operation. It's the kind of thing that nobody knows about it because it's never publicized. It's hard to believe. This was a separate set up stockade in this huge old military installation with its wide lawns and its red brick buildings. It's like, if you saw, if you went to see the movie, James [Jones]'s movie--

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, I know the one you mean.

DOBBS:

You know the one in Hawaii. And so the army barracks look like and that's like-

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, From Here to Eternity.

DOBBS:

Yeah, that's like that kind of barracks had a huge library, huge officers' clubs and NCO clubs and privates' clubs. In the middle of which on this side is this huge stockade. Now, the interesting thing about this stockade that made it absolutely unique, it's one of only two in the United States. This was called the Eastern Seaboard Processing Center. It's made up only of those prisoners who could not be joined up with their regular units. In other words, men who had jumped ship. Let's say that they were deserters or AWOL. Their outfit goes overseas; they can't be joined up with them. They're then sent to the Eastern Seaboard Processing Center. So that 80 percent or more were men that could not rejoin their regular unit, who in effect jumped ship.

FURMANOVSKY:

Before they were shipped out?

DOBBS:

Before they were shipped out. Now, the thing that's hard to believe is how many thousands there were, literally thousands of American soldiers that wouldn't go overseas. Now, you ask me what the reaction was when the

division I was in was getting ready to go overseas and I said I didn't notice any. They might have jumped ship. There were ways in which this stockade was policed. (

[And now I am involved in a place that in a few years, there must have been thousands that went through it. Let me explain how a place like this was policed. First of all, there were two units or companies of about eighty men each, I guess. On a weekly basis, these companies alternated the responsibility for the policing of the stockade. One company was on duty for a week--no passes, no leaving the area, and the duty sergeant had to know where you were at all times. The men in the company not on duty that took over on alternate weeks were allowed to get passes to get off the post and were free of all duty. The duty consisted of watchtower guarding, taking prisoners on work details, guarding special enclosures where prisoners awaiting trial for various criminal offenses were held. What to me was so terribly demoralizing was that every day, especially on Monday and Tuesday, there would be long lines of prisoners usually handcuffed to one MP, each waiting to be processed to get into the stockade. After they were admitted, the MP's would leave to escort some more. We were in a war, but the only soldiers I saw were prisoners and police. No troops, no training, no activity, no patriotic endeavors. Only prisoners and police. I as an antifascist had to participate in this travesty of military life.

Of course I had nothing to do with the administration so I do not know what happened to the hundreds that came and the hundreds who went out every week. I was mostly on watchtower or special-enclosure guard duty. I'll tell you what my hunch was. Many were released from the army as "Section 8," that is mentally ill. The vast majority were probably chained and marched to ships, and sent to the huge replacement centers in Europe. I am sure that these men were a large group of men AWOL in Paris. I was told by one MP that they estimated the number at about 40,000.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) I will tell you this, though, that when I left that camp in Virginia-- Again, I was all by myself to go to Fort Meade, Maryland. So I took a couple of days off to visit some friends of mine in Washington. Well, you're not supposed to do that, you understand--in effect I was AWOL. But I took the two days off. I visited them and one of them was a bigshot in the War Manpower Commission. His job was to get people, soldiers or anybody, to go into the

merchant marine. They were getting bumped off by the hundreds in that period. One funny event took place. He was authorized to eat in the cafeteria where generals could eat. So there am I, a buckass private, eating in the same place with all these generals, because I'm his guest, see. There never was a place that I wanted to get out of faster than that in my life. But anyway, I took those days off. So when I came in to that MP escort-guard company, they asked, "How come you're late?" "Well, I missed my train and I got lost." "Well, we'll show you how to miss trains and get lost brother." So the first thing, I was on KP for five days, which is usual. And then I'm on a gate. And then they transfer me into the other company. See, there were two companies. So this other company that did its twenty-four-hour duty from then on, they could get passes for the seven days. They put me on special duty with the company that's going back on duty. I put in my seven days there. Then they detached me from special duty and put me in my regular company, so I do my seven days there. Then they transfer into that other company, and I did my seven days there. So in all I did thirty-seven straight days of duty in this highly demoralizing situation--that is, for **me** it was demoralizing. And I began to drink booze. Anytime I could get under the fence and buy some booze or something. After the five months as post police and then these two months or thirty-seven days or whatever in this situation, all because of a stupid army policy that is depriving what later turned out to be a big publicity factor, in the sense that so many communists did a fine job as soldiers. They were very widely publicized. There was Bob [Robert] Thompson who got a commission. I think he made captain. And then there was another comrade in the Pacific theater of war, Boucher or something. A number of communists made very fine records as soldiers, I guess, but these two were highly publicized.

FURMANOVSKY:

Especially in the OSS [Office of Strategic Services]. A number of them in the OSS.

DOBBS:

Yes, I read about Irving Goff and a couple others who did fine. But on account of this stupid army policy which deprived the war effort--which was what I'm concerned with--of some of its best fighters, it has me chasing these kind of criminals and so forth. Ridiculous. Well, I was thoroughly demoralized. I don't

remember getting any passes at that time or anything else. It was after these thirty-seven, thirty-eight days of duty that the army suddenly changed its policy. I was reassigned to a combat unit, and so I got transferred to another replacement training center. I think this was some place in North or South Carolina, I forget which. There I was told that some communists owned a bookstore, the university of something or other. Chapel Hill, is there a Chapel Hill?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, yeah.

DOBBS:

What university is that?

FURMANOVSKY:

That's [the University of] North Carolina.

DOBBS:

North Carolina. So I went and visited them. Wherever I could meet anybody who I could talk to openly and relax and have convivial, good conversation, what's going on in the world? what's going on with the party? I would go there. The main thing there as a replacement you're either on KP or guard duty. Now, KP of course was something that I had enough of. Guard duty I could do standing on my ear. That's all I've been doing for seven months. So I would always take guard duty because if you had guard duty, one day of guard duty you and get a three-day pass. Well, as I said, when I got out of that demoralizing situation, from then on, I'm watching my good time. Whenever you can get away, go, or whatever I could do to get a three-day pass, do it. So I do the stupid guard duty. Guard duty is taking a gun and taking some men out. Let's say they have to clean a road from here to there. So they have to pick up the cigarette butts. This is the army. We're not doing any harvesting or planting, I didn't mean that, but picking up cigarette butts or straightening ruts in a army road or whatever, anything of that kind of detail. And then you stand over them with a gun and you're out there for three, four hours, and then you march them back and you're free. Well, that's all I wanted was to get free. But I'm in this camp in North Carolina and I did that kind of stuff. And I would visit

people. I'd think of Chapel Hill once or twice. Then I was in the replacement depot and I would do this guard duty, and I would continue to just wait to see what was going to happen. I was there for just three or four weeks. But it's clear that the transfer came about because of a change in army policy. I don't remember seeing anyone else in the same position I'm in, because we're all scattered. But I do know that the army has changed its policy and I'm ready to be transferred back into a combat unit. (

[The key point, however, is that this policy undoubtedly saved my life. The Forty-fifth Division I was taken out of had as many or more casualties as any other division.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) Now, the thing that was interesting in this following period--I'm not particularly proud of this but I'm saying that that's what happened--I just ceased being a patriot, that's all. I'm getting on, I'm already in the army fifteen or eighteen months. I'm scattered from hell to breakfast. I'm laying around in these camps by myself. I've washed every dish in the United States Army a hundred times already. I've chased a million prisoners already while they're raking up a yard or picking up cigarette butts or watering a lawn. All I see are prisoners and cops, prisoners and cops, prisoners and cops. I became very unhappy. Every time I could get away I left. I might have gotten some furloughs in that time. I think that before this outfit I was in, the Forty-fifth Division, went to Virginia, I think I got a five-day furlough. That's all they would give you. But I lived on the West Coast and you can't go to the West Coast on a five-day furlough. So I would go to New York. I think I went to New York during one of these furloughs and I went to something like seven Broadway shows, you know, two matinees and five nights. Then I'd get on train and get back. That's while I was stationed at Watertown, New York. I had a place to stay and I liked my sister and her husband and we got along fine.

FURMANOVSKY:

Were you keeping in touch with the party?

DOBBS:

Only with people, never with the party as such.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you buy the **Daily Worker**, for example?

DOBBS:

Well, I didn't know where to buy it. You know you can't buy it in Watertown, New York. You can't buy it in an army post. But if I found it, I would buy it. I remember once, I forget where it was, I think it was Boston when I was at Fort Devens, and I saw one of these shows which at that time were only made up of newsreels. I think I was in Boston. I went and saw a newsreel. It had a newsreel of a war situation on the Russian front. I found someone at the door there that was raising money for Russian war relief or something, so I think I gave him the three hundred bucks I had in my pocket and had to get back to the post because I was broke. I don't recall any other contact with the party, except on furloughs to Los Angeles. I'd always go to the party office. I don't remember any at that time. I think my furloughs came later where I could go to Los Angeles. Because from the Forty-fifth Division you couldn't get a furlough for more than five days. From replacement depots there's no such thing as a furlough, because you're not in a unit. I think the only furlough I had was that five days. On occasion from Fort Devens, when I was in the Forty-fifth Army Division, you could get a weekend pass. You'd either go to Boston or New York, which was another three hours away.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, I've lost track a little bit of the chronology in terms of the dates. When were you given return to this replacement center?

DOBBS:

You mean at Camp Roberts?

FURMANOVSKY:

Where we last left off.

DOBBS:

That must have been sometime in the middle of 1943. Sure. Maybe towards the end of '43. See, I was in the replacement depot at Camp Roberts for three

months, and I was two or three months at least with the Forty-fifth Division, so that's six. Then between that, the two or three replacement centers, take another month. Then there's seven months in the military police. So nearly a year and a half in this office. So it must have been towards the end or perhaps the middle of 1943. And I'm in this camp in North Carolina waiting to get assigned to a unit.

FURMANOVSKY:

And did you get assigned?

DOBBS:

Yes. I got assigned to a unit that I stayed with almost until the end of the war. That was the Sixteenth Armored Division. Now, the Sixteenth Armored Division indicated-- How far have we got to go?

FURMANOVSKY:

It's okay.

DOBBS:

The Sixteenth Armored Division indicated another method by which the United States Army trained soldiers. The first method, as I told you, was to send them to replacement training centers; that is, a replacement training center for artillery, for infantry, for medics, for communications, for every armored service in the army. The other method was to get a bunch of recruits and send them into a division. In the division their first six or eight weeks would be basic training. Then they would have company problems and then battalion problems, and eventually division problems. Then that division either would go overseas as a division or all the recruits would be taken out of the division and they would go overseas leaving a cadre to then train the next recruits. Did I explain that clearly?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah.

DOBBS:

All right. So I'm sent into the Sixteenth Armored Division. Again, it's two guys and myself--that's all. These two guys, when we came in, they immediately get

assigned to some company and I'm assigned to an infantry battalion. There were no troops to train. All there was was what the army called cadre; the same word that the Communist Party uses. This, in other words, is a cadre outfit. Now, don't forget by that time I'm already in the army eighteen months perhaps, see? I'm no raw-ass recruit. I've been through the hell. That's the military police. I've been in a combat unit and I already know how to get around things. When I come to this outfit, this battalion of cadre and these thirty-seven sergeants and one private. That's me. And I'm not going to put myself in a position where thirty-seven sergeants can tell me what to do, or tell me how to button my clothes or how to comb my hair or how to take a shave. But above all how to tell you what to do, because they're waiting for troops to train. In the meantime the army must always keep these people busy. You've got to be busy. Well, they're busy telling me what to do. So I see the situation. But before I figure that out, let me tell you what happened. I come into this headquarters to be assigned, and the guy looks at my papers, the adjutant, he's an officer, he's a lieutenant, second lieutenant, looks at my transfer papers and he doesn't know what to do. You could tell the man is completely perplexed. What does he do with this character that has just walked in? He's already got my packet full of trainings, transfers, everything else, and also admitted communist, taken out of one unit as a potential subversive. I come staggering into his brand new lovely outfit that he just joined two weeks ago as a cadre. Well, that was most peculiar. I knew what was happening; I was just getting my kicks. He puts me in another room in this little battalion headquarters with my bags and tells me he'll let me know. Well, it was the funniest thing that ever happened to me because I'm sitting there, in would come an officer pretending to look at something but while he's looking for something he's glancing at me sidelong, without me knowing that he's looking at me. He can't find what he's looking for. He gets up and he walks out. Ten minutes later, in walks another officer. He glances at me, I stand up and salute and he salutes. And he pretends he's looking for something but he's really looking at me. He walks out and in walks another officer. This kept up for an entire day, where every officer including the commanding officer of that division came in to look me over. See? In the meantime they're trying to get orders. In other words, they're calling the division, they're calling the corps, they're calling Washington. I didn't know who the hell they were calling. Then I start raising hell. I said, "What the hell's

going on here?" "Oh, you want to eat?" They bring me food. See why they kept me locked up, so to speak, in this little room.

FURMANOVSKY:

What was it they had to determine? What would be done with you or what?

DOBBS:

Exactly. Finally: "Say, Private Dobbs, we'd like to talk to you." Okay. "Well, I guess you saw that we didn't exactly know how to handle your papers." This is a true story. This went on all day, these people looking at me like a wild animal. I'm getting my kicks because I don't give a damn. I have nothing to hide. "We have got orders now. We're glad to have you in our division. What would you like? Would you like to work in the battalion headquarters? Would you like to work in division headquarters? What would you like? We want to do anything to make you feel completely welcome into our division and into our battalion." I said, "This is silly. I'll tell you what to do. You put me in a rifle company and get off my back. That's all I want." "Aw, come on, you shouldn't have that attitude." I said, "Well, that is my attitude. I'm so sick and tired and I just put in seven or eight months in the goddamned military police. I just want to now go into the army. So just put me in a rifle unit." So they put me in a rifle unit. And then I come in this battalion, and all the NCO's [noncommissioned officers] of the battalion are eating in one place, because it's only divided between five companies. A battalion has four companies. There's thirty-seven people. That's nine people or so in each unit, give or take. So they all eat together. I see this situation. I come in. They're having chow. Here's one private--me--and all these sergeants. I have to figure out what to do. It so happens that the first sergeant was in the army a little longer than most people. He was a very able young man. He'd come from upper Michigan. The rest of these sergeants; what they are as cadre trainees is that most of them are fairly new in the army, you know, but bright because they're able to teach soldiers. All of them came out of either regular units or they came out of these replacement training centers to begin to train troops. And there's not a soldier in sight. No recruits have come in. See, they just have this cadre waiting for troops and being kept busy with every screwy detail in the world. So I make a deal with this first sergeant. And I said, since I know my way around, I said, "Sergeant, when was your last furlough?" He says, "Well we

don't get furloughs in this outfit." "So when was your last furlough?" "Oh, about a year and a half ago." "Oh that's outrageous. I'll tell you what I'll do sergeant. I'll be your permanent charge of quarters." Now, the charge of quarters is the guy that sits in the office and he deals with the first sergeant. He's got to wake up the KP's to be on time for work. He's got to handle the passes when guys get them. He's got to run the office. "And you won't have to get a new charge of quarters every day. I'll be your permanent charge of quarters. In the meantime you can train me as to what has to be done. And then, by gosh, you can get your furlough." Now, the deal was just that cold. Well, he went for it. First of all I'm as old as he is. He's a little older than the others. His name was Victor Mishelli. He's a very nice guy and a good soldier. He sees a way of getting out of a lot of work however.

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FURMANOVSKY:

You were talking about the deal that you made with the first sergeant.

DOBBS:

That's right. That I would be the permanent charge of quarters, in other words would do all of his work, he would teach me how to be a first sergeant, and he would be able to get his furlough. In the meantime, there's nothing for the group to do except the worst kind of details, because there's no soldiers to train. So sure enough he agrees with me. The other guys didn't care, you know, because what do they do, what do they care, you know: "He's one private, let him alone." And this is the cadre outfit. And I just came from all this stuff of the military police and the replacement center in North Carolina. This was in Fort Smith, Arkansas. The name of the camp is Camp Chaffee. Anyway, the city was Fort Smith, Arkansas. So he makes the deal, we make the deal, and three or four weeks go by. In the meantime, there isn't anything you can't learn in the army because everything is so routinized. Everything is written down on the books. In other words, there's a book for everything in the army. And you have to keep the files; and you know the army filing system is really something. You've got a book I forget what it's called, rules and procedures something, and you'd get a letter, change the word "exit" to

"egress," you know. And then you'd have to take out one page, rip it out, put it in this other page with that change. You know, it's a bureaucracy. So I learned how to handle the front office and he became satisfied, and the officers are not objecting, the other sergeants are not objecting. He becomes satisfied, and he asks for a furlough and he gets it. He's assured the guy who was the battalion sergeant major that PFC Dobbs can handle the job. The most difficult thing, you've got to submit what they call a morning report. Everybody that comes in, everybody that gets a pass, everybody that does something, what does the company do. You've got a list of names of what they did. That's a morning report and it goes every day, and that's made the official record of the United States Army. In other words, if you want to know where I was on August 10, 1943, it would be somewhere in the files in a morning report of a company I was in. So I learned how to do that. All you do, you know, it's just a simple typing job; except the army, wasteful on everything else, this is within the narrowest possible margins. So anyway, that was it. I know how to make a duty roster, how to be democratic in a duty roster. In other words, whereas the guy did garbage detail one day, he shouldn't do garbage detail the next day, you know, you go down the list, telling each individual what he has to do. A couple of weeks went by, Sergeant Mishelli got his furlough and I'm acting first sergeant, running the company. The officers and NCO cadre have nothing to do except details because there's no troops to train, when suddenly in come the troops. You know, within two minutes, in other words, from no troops to train, every battalion had about 245 rookies. Now, that of course was a tremendous load. You had to assign them into barracks, you had to assign the sergeants to the squads, you had to assign squads, you had to assign companies for this battalion, except I'm doing it just for the company. Everything went smoothly. We had no hitches, no problems. So one day a colonel, the colonel of the battalion, is making an inspection of the companies. He says, "What's going on?" Here we have no problems, no complaints, the troops are beginning to get trained and the first thing of course they train them is drilling. And by the way, I was a very good drillmaster. Things were running smoothly, no problems, and in walks this colonel. And he says, "What's going on here? Who are you?" I salute: "Private First-class Dobbs, 39233820, acting first sergeant." He says, "I don't understand this. There's tech sergeants, there's staff sergeants, there's buck sergeants-- and there's a private running the company. So I don't understand

it." So he calls in some other cadre people. Well: "Sergeant Mishelli said that this man is capable and we have no complaints." And he calls in another guy who says, "Well, Sergeant Mishelli said that he would be back in two or three days or ten days or whatever, he's running the company. You tell me." I said, "Colonel, first of all, you can always get my service record. The day I joined the army I told people I was a member of the Communist Party and I still would like to be. When I get out of the army I'll be a member of the Communist Party. And this meant that I've always been stopped, I've been in the army nineteen months, I've never been promoted, I've always done my duty, you'll find nothing wrong with my service record. So when I asked Sergeant Mishelli it was made clear that I could do the job." So he said, "Fine. You mean to say you had that discrimination because you're a communist?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I want you to come into my office tomorrow." Next day he says, "I'm interested in this." He says, "I looked at your service record and what you said was true, but I don't understand it." And he says, "Well, you know the army had this policy." I told him about getting out of the Forty-fifth Division into the MP's and now being assigned to a combat cadre division. He says, "Gee, that's the first time I've heard of it. You know, I was a white commander of black troops, and I didn't like the way the army treated black soldiers. So I think I'm a better communist than you are. Okay. So it's your business, you know." He says, "Why did they call Australia 'down under'?" So I told him my idea, it's because England's in a certain place and having discovered Australia, it's down on the other side if you look at a globe. That's why they call it that. He says, "Fine, you're a corporal. From now on you're a corporal," and he writes out the order: B. Dobbs to be a corporal. Well, I was glad to do that. It was something! At least no more KP So then the army had a policy of how to get people to like being in the infantry. I don't know whether you're familiar with that. The way to do it was to give them a wage increase. But you can't give everybody a wage increase, you can't give any one group a wage increase without a whole struggle in Congress. Therefore, all you've got to do is to say that instead of a corporal being in charge of a squad, you have to have a sergeant to be in charge of the squad. Well, this is nearly every sixteen or eighteen dollars a month more. So in other words, if you are a corporal you almost automatically became a buck sergeant, three stripes. So five days after I became a corporal, I become a sergeant, because the army changes policy towards how do you get people to want to be in the infantry. (

[So I became a sergeant. About three months later, this colonel promoted me to staff sergeant. That meant an emblem of three stripes up and one down on the sleeves of my uniform. A staff sergeant has a lot of privileges. He does not need a pass to leave the post. He is not questioned on city or town streets by the MP's. He is entitled to go to NCO clubs for first three-graders (and there were many real fancy ones I went to). If a staff sergeant gets drunk, the MP's usually took him to his barracks instead of to jail. In short, it's a big deal.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) This colonel knew about the party's struggle against racism and against chauvinism. But because he thinks that he dealt more fairly with black soldiers than anyone else, therefore he was as good a communist as I am. And when we began to discuss communism, he says, "You know, I think that it just fits in with my approach. That is, yes, I am my brother's keeper. Well, I'm going to see that you don't get punished anymore because I don't agree with the army's policy." In the meantime troops were being trained, and I'm still in permanent charge of quarters. I then went to Sergeant Mishelli: "Mishelli, I've got what I want, you got what you wanted. Now I want to go back to the troops, I want to be a squad leader." So he says "Fine." I get out of that damned orderly room and I become just a plain ordinary soldier as a squad leader with my stripes; I'm now a staff sergeant. In the meantime, troops are being trained and the division is slowly taking on a form. That is, it's going from basic training to battalion training to company training, battalion training, division training, months are going by-- Anyway, things began to happen and I'm beginning to get back to a normal way of living as a soldier. And I'm beginning to develop friendships with the sergeants. You don't develop too much friendships with the men, because they're going to go. And it was determined that the first two or three groups that came into our outfit would be trained, and they would leave and we would remain as cadres. So I'm in that camp now nearly a year and a half.

FURMANOVSKY:

So it's already-- What's the date now?

DOBBS:

Well, I'll tell you in a minute. Because things then began to happen too, see? As I say, I'm getting stripes and Mishelli, we've got to be very good friends and we would go out together, you know, visit the town. I would have other friends we'd go visit, go out of town, play poker with a regular poker set, go to the NCO club and drink beer and agitate guys about the war. I'm getting along fine. I don't remember any outside contacts, but I do remember getting some furloughs to go home, because you're entitled to thirty days a year in the United States Army on furlough. Actually, I don't know whether you know it but after the war they figured out how much time you had on furlough and they sent you a check for the number of days that you didn't get. It was a way of getting out of the bonus problem that hit them so hard on World War I. So anyway, I would get some furloughs. I don't remember anything particularly happening on furloughs cause I'm already a soldier, I'm beginning to drink a little heavier, chasing girls a little bit more. You know, I'm not married, nothing. I would come to town and I would always visit Paul Cline and then Carl Winter, who were the leaders of the party here. I don't remember going to San Francisco because I would come home and stay with my folks, because I wanted to see them. And after two, three days I thought, "What the hell am I doing here?" You know, what the hell, what do you do here! So I never took long furloughs. So I'd go back, but I don't remember anything particularly happening after that event with that colonel that gave me all these promotions; except that whenever there would be a long hike, you know, like an overnight hike or something, he'd always call for me to ride with him on the jeep so that we could discuss politics. But he eventually was transferred someplace else, a new colonel took over, and a different relationship developed. In the meantime I'm doing my duties, except there was a fellow by the name of Major Girton. I mention his name because he comes up later in my history. Major Girton was the intelligence officer of the division, or of the battalion, not the division, no--of the division. And he had it in for me--not personally, I didn't have anything to do with the man personally. But one day he saw me drilling the platoon and he sent down an order that Ben Dobbs, who was drilling the platoon, acting as a battalion sergeant, must now have certain restrictions placed on him. One, he cannot enter an orderly room. He cannot go to any classes that teach any form of communication. He cannot be a platoon sergeant. He cannot be a sergeant of the guard. He can't be, in other words, in any sensitive position. What could I

be? So my captain, who was a very nice kid who had been in the outfit all these years, you know, we became fairly well acquainted, because it's a cadre outfit. He says, "Why don't you take off?" I said, "The captain is smarter than you. They are just waiting for me to take off. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll be the best goddamned rifleman in your company." And I was. But that's what happened because of this Major Girton.

FURMANOVSKY:

And what would be the job of an intelligence officer in this context?

DOBBS:

Well, intelligence in the army is to find out what's going on with the enemy.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right. So what does he do when you're not--?

DOBBS:

Well, what he did--who the hell knows! I'm not an intelligence officer. But generally speaking it's, I guess, various skills. But he took it upon himself to protect the security of the army against the guy that's liable to sneak around and put sand in the gas tank, you know, that kind of stuff. Or he might have hired more spies, although the only one that ever told me about it was that kid in the Forty-fifth Division. I don't know what the intelligence officer did in this kind of-- You know, when they would work out exercises they would say, "Well, where are you going to get your intelligence? Or where are you going to get the information concerning the enemy?" But he made it his business to be an anti-red. He comes into my life a little later. I'll tell you about him, Major Girton. Because I developed a phrase that was swept through the division: "You're hurtin' with Girton." But anyway, I was in this peculiar position and then the troops were ordered-- We didn't know whether the troops were going overseas but it was clear that the whole division was going to go overseas. I thought, "Oh Christ, they'll take me out again." Because I wanted to go overseas. Now, this was already in 1944, February of 1944. This happened in December, something like that. But I remember, since no furloughs were allowed, then I demanded a furlough. I remember getting one-- anything to get rid of them, see. I went to Los Angeles, and I saw my folks. I

saw Paul or it might have been Carl at that time. I would always go to the party headquarters. If there was any function I would go to it, like a mass meeting or party or a dance or something like that. And of course the people I ran around with on furlough were either party people, or AYD (American Youth for Democracy) or whatever, but I can't remember anything that was particularly outstanding. So anyway, it was time to go overseas--this was the end of January, the beginning of February--and I didn't get detached, and I went overseas with the outfit. Now, on the train going to New Jersey to the port of debarkation-- because it was clear we were going to Europe, thank goodness, instead of Asia--I got called in by the new colonel, a guy I didn't know very well, of our battalion. He says, "I'm told that you have no platoon sergeant. I said, "Well, that's right." So he says, "Well, why is that?" And I tell him, I tell him the whole story and that I had been the acting platoon sergeant. It so happens that the guy that was a platoon sergeant was the guy who was a retread. He had already gone through a tour of service in Italy, and he knew he wasn't going to go overseas. When he got transferred out, I started running the platoon, and then I got tied up with this guy Girton, and I got taken out. I went on furlough and we're getting ready to go overseas. So I'm in the train with him, with this colonel, and he says, "Well, I don't know why-- I'm not going to stand for this discrimination, when you go out of this room you're going to be the platoon sergeant." So I got that fifth stripe, see, three up and two down. Now, I'm living in paradise plus. I've got the platoon, I'm the platoon sergeant, and we're on the train going to New Jersey and then going through all the procedures ready to go overseas. Now, this was already, it was clear that, first of all, D-Day had already taken place, this was February of 1944, '44 or '45. When was the war over? 'Forty-five, wasn't it?

FURMANOVSKY:

Are we talking '45? D-Day was in '44.

DOBBS:

D-Day was '44? So this must have been February of '45 then, yes, because D-Day was in June. That's when I got overseas. We landed at Le Havre and we were sent to a place, oh, I guess about forty-five miles out of Paris--and Paris was off limits, I remember that. And we'd be living in a big chateau, tearing it to pieces, built in 1620 or something like that. I don't remember the name of

the town. I think it was near Rouen. We'd go into town, go to movies and then wander around the streets. There was a little village whose name I have forgotten up on top of the hill, and we were in a valley in a wooded area and waiting for orders. We landed there, it must have been February of '45. Now, February of '45 is significant in that the Rhine [River] was already crossed. This was the big push to end the war. I'm in the Sixteenth Armored Division, the newest and the best equipped division of the United States Army, and we're sitting in this hill on this valley in France. And we were never activated. Now, I don't know the truth of what I'm going to tell you, but I'm going to tell you that it's true that I heard it. I have no way of knowing it. The general of our division had been expelled once from the European theater as a thorough incompetent, and therefore General [George F.] Patton, because we were in the Third Army, refused to call this division into action. And there we are, we're in this drive to end the war. We're sitting on this damned hill or in this valley in France, and our big problem is which battalion was going to win the baseball championship. So I decided to grow a moustache. But I tell you, I decided to grow a wild moustache.

FURMANOVSKY:

[laughter] What's the significance of this?

DOBBS:

Just a complete disgust, that's all, and I'm not going to change it until I see some kind of action, any kind of action. And that is something I'll never understand as long as I live, why an outfit as fully equipped as we were and trained no worse than any other division, except we had never seen any combat, was just not used at all.

FURMANOVSKY:

And do you have a sense from what you've read or heard that it would have made a difference if you had been activated?

DOBBS:

No, the German army was in full retreat. It might have ended the war a day earlier, I don't know.

FURMANOVSKY:

The Battle of the Bulge was over, yeah.

DOBBS:

Well, the Battle of the Bulge was in an altogether different area. We later got into Germany. I'll go into that later, about when we got into Germany and Czechoslovakia. But the war essentially was over except for this big drive. When did the war end? It ended in May. February, March, April, so the war was practically over. Now, this is something that I'll never understand and I think maybe we'll leave it like that, okay?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah.

DOBBS:

And I'm really running out of gas.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

AUGUST 12, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

Is there anything further you want to say about your rapid promotion up the ranks of the army in 1945?

DOBBS:

Yeah, well, as I told you, there was this fellow, Major Girton who was head of intelligence for the battalion, that was the Sixty-fourth Armored Infantry Battalion. Now, the difference between armored infantry and regular infantry is armored infantry is on vehicles, in other words you don't march as much. Each squad has a half-track. A half-track has wheels in front and a track in the back and it holds twelve men plus machine guns and things like that. But anyway, on our way to Europe, our way to Le Havre after, oh, training maybe three or four batches of recruits who had come into the battalion--we would train them, then they would go overseas and we would remain as cadre--this Major Girton saw to it that I was not allowed to be an active platoon sergeant because he thought that I was a potential subversive. But at any rate, on our way to Le Havre on the train, I got called in by a colonel who I had never met,

but was the colonel of our battalion. He asked me how come, you know, how come I was in this platoon and it didn't have a platoon sergeant. The platoon sergeant was a young fellow who had already served a term in Italy and was taken out just before we were getting ready to go overseas. So I told him it was because of my communist record in the army. He said, "I don't give a damn about that." And I left that room after my conversation with him on the train, and he promoted me right there to technical sergeant. So I became a technical sergeant. We all got into this huge ship and we landed at Le Havre, sometime early in February of 1945. The only thing we did that I can recall of any interest in France--on top of this hill where we were living in this big chateau; the whole battalion was quartered there--was the kind of training we did. Simply marches, hikes or night operations with our vehicles, [learning] how you move together in darkness. There are just two incidents that I want to report of some interest. But before I do, let me tell you I was in this Sixteenth Armored Division, this Sixty-fourth Infantry Battalion, from its very inception, from the day it got activated, coming in there as a cadre, and then went overseas. So everybody knew me. Second, I want to make the point, I was older than most people in the army; I was already in my thirties, most of them were either nineteen or twenty or twenty-one. Because I was known and because I was older, I was always given special responsibilities. I remember two that might be of some interest: The first was that we were assigned at a certain point to take a prisoner-of-war train from Belgium into France and bring them into a prison compound. These were of course German prisoners, the war was already practically over; as I said, this took place the latter part of March. What that consisted of was my platoon was assigned to pick up these prisoners. We went by train into Belgium, I think it was near Namur, and we picked up this huge train of German prisoners. They were placed in open gondolas, cars, trains, and the train had no priority at all. In other words, it took us several days to go from Namur into France, which is not a long distance, but we were always pushed off on sidings and allowed other trains to go through. The only duty we had was to protect these Germans from civilians. In other words, when the train would stop, the platoon would have to get off the train and surround the train with arms so that the civilians wouldn't get to the Germans. There was no danger of the Germans escaping--where were they going to go? When we brought them into the prison camp, the thing that struck me is something I had read about, but it

is the kind of thing you don't believe until you see, and that is the way these prisoners were herded into that camp by people who were German prisoners. But I guess the best description of them as it later came out in the Holocaust and other such things, is capos. In other words, they were the agents of the captors, so to speak. Well, there was such a scene of brutality, the way they shoved these prisoners around, beat them to keep them in line, rushing them through to get a bite to eat at full speed, and then just left them in this huge compound, no cover over them at all. It struck me as very, you know, that type of brutality which by that time wasn't necessary.

FURMANOVSKY:

Weren't they under the overall command of the Allies?

DOBBS:

Who, the German prisoners?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah.

DOBBS:

Well, sure.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you had the German capos.

DOBBS:

That's right, these German capos handling these German prisoners. All the Americans who guarded this camp, they had nothing to do except sit around with their guns and sound big and order the capos around, who were extremely brutal to the other German prisoners. After we got them there we then just got on the train and went to Paris. At that time Paris was already off limits, so we were told that we had to leave Paris that night. Trucks would come pick us up at the Gare du Nord, which is where our train landed, and we had a few hours to be in Paris. So I decided to go look for communists in Paris. I didn't know where to find them, I knew not one word of French. But I said, what I'll do is I'll simply get on the subway and get off at the second or third stop, and I did. And it so happened, apparently, that this subway just made a

trip around the Gare du Nord, so I landed in the Montmartre district of Paris. I saw a line of communist posters. It happened to be the day that they were celebrating the return of the slaves from German compounds, from factories, from farms, celebrating their return to Paris. And that was that day, it just happened to be that day that we had come back from this prison camp. So I told the platoon, we then placed guards for our stuff, and I said, "You guys, just be back here at four o'clock," and I just took off. Well, I found this line of posters. I said these line of posters has got to lead me somewhere. And they led me to what in America might be called a beer garden. In other words, it was a big saloon, a bar, where people from the neighborhood would gather and have their festivities, and especially they were having this party for the celebration of these people who were coming back from being held prisoner by the Germans during the war. So I walked in there and said, "I'm an American communist, and I'm looking for my comrades in France." Well, I was really welcomed with open arms and, sure enough, it was a center of communist activity. The bartender, the owner, was a communist and he sent his two kids out to tell the neighbors that an American communist was there to visit with them. Now, this was the days when Americans were still welcome in France. Later they were not, they were treated very roughly in France later. But we were still very welcome, and partly because, I guess, they looked upon us as liberators. Secondly, they hadn't seen many Americans at that point. So these kids went out and before you know it the place is jammed full and we really had some party. The only trouble is I got terribly drunk drinking this French calvados and brandy of one kind or another. Then about thirty of these men, communists, all gathered around me because I told them I had to get back to that station at four o'clock. All apparently we had to do was go down a hill, but in going down this hill to the Gare du Nord we stopped at every saloon, the party continued, and I was terribly drunk. The trucks came to pick us up and the driver says, "Well, I'll show you guys something of Paris at least." But unfortunately I didn't see a thing, I was just laying at the bottom of the truck. And then we got back to camp. The interesting thing is that it was my platoon that was selected for that thing; none of the other people went. But I didn't think it was worth taking my moustache off. So the moustache continued to grow very wild, and I didn't like it, but I was going to keep that moustache on until I see some kind of action. Well, our only function of any positive character was to go around collecting shell casings and to save the

brass. I don't know what they did with it later. Finally we got orders to go into the battle zone. We got into our half-tracks, and it was just like a tour through France and Germany. It was leisurely, no combat of any kind. We just saw the countryside. We actually put up benches on our half-tracks so everybody could see out of them, and we just made this nice leisurely trip across Germany. I remember very clearly our coming to Regensburg, and, of course, we toured the city and we had some billets here and there, bivouacs at night. But it was just one of these tourist trips, the whole division did that. We landed at Regensburg, and we were given orders either on April 4 or 5. In other words, the war is practically over, but we were given orders to proceed to the city of Pilsen. Pilsen is a city, oh, I guess at that time a city of 150,000 people. But it was very famous for being in the locale of what's known as the Skoda plant. The Skoda plant was a major industrial plant completely, at that time, for German war production; it employed as many, I was told, as 50,000 workers. The whole countryside around Pilsen was used to furnish Skoda with food as well as with workers, as well as with whatever was needed to keep a plant like that going. Pilsen is also famous of course for its beer. It really was a very lovely city. It wasn't too badly beat up. It hadn't been bombed, nor was it shelled, because the front never reached it. Anyway, my platoon was selected as the point. At that time the armored divisions were divided into three combat units where you would be made up of infantry, artillery, tanks, antitank guns, as well as other elements of a division. My platoon was going to be the point. We were told, shown on a map where we were going to go, and we were going to lead the division. Now, the purpose of a point is to go along a given path or along a given area, and if it reaches or is contacted by the enemy, such as being fired on, then it stops and makes an estimate of the situation, reaches battalion or division headquarters, tells them what the situation is, and then the officers decide what to do. So my platoon was the point. Our point consisted of my platoon of four squads, plus three tanks.

FURMANOVSKY:

This would be approximately how many people?

DOBBS:

Well, my platoon had four squads of twelve men each, that's forty-eight, and each tank had three people. So forty-eight plus nine is fifty-seven people.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right.

DOBBS:

We started down the road according to our orders. Half-tracks go about thirty-five or forty miles an hour, that's all they could go. I don't know where it happened, but somewhere as we were going along I got the impression that we were lost, that is, that we did not go on the path that was given us. Now, all the road had signs on it that kept saying "Nach Pilsen." So it was not clear that we were lost, but I questioned it, and I asked the platoon leader, a lieutenant, to stop and for us to discuss what was going on. And we looked on the map--he had the map, I didn't--and sure enough we determined that we were lost. Now, it's not the first time in American history that a point got lost, but we were lost, that is, we were on the wrong road. So this lieutenant says, "Look, I'm going to go off and look for the division. I'm going to get back to the road to see where we cut off and I'll get in touch with you." So I was left with three squads, that's thirty-six men. He took one squad, one half-track, and he took off. I never saw him until several days later. So I was left in command. We proceeded down the road as we were told to do. There was absolutely no danger, no firing, no nothing, except we came to a town; I think the name of the town was Stribro or something like that. One of those Czech words that I never did learn how to pronounce. It's a very large town, it was very early in the morning, maybe about six o'clock in the morning, and what we saw was a lot of Germans, and women in line collecting food to take to their German lovers who were still in bed. We come into this town and it's full of Germans. They saw us, and I didn't know what to do, except what they knew what to do. What they did was say, "Thank goodness you came, you are going to save us from the Russians, you're going to save us from the Czechs." They were ready to surrender. Their officers came. They saluted me properly, and I saluted them, and I said, "What are we going to do?" And they says, "Well, we'll go with you." I said, "Oh no, you're not going with me." So I had them line up and there was one guy, one little guy who I ran into--you know, citizens started gathering around us to see what was going to happen--and I asked him if he was a Czech. Now, this already in the Sudetenland--once you get over Regensburg you're in the Sudetenland. So he said, yes, he's a Czech. So I said,

"Can you people use these guns?" These Germans were very well armed, it was a battalion. In other words, again, about two hundred men.

FURMANOVSKY:

Is the war over at this point?

DOBBS:

Well, the war is over in the sense that they were finished. The war had not been officially declared over until the eighth or ninth.

FURMANOVSKY:

These men were armed but had not been disarmed.

DOBBS:

I disarmed them, that's what I was going to tell you. I had them march into a school building and put their arms down and march out. They weren't interested in fighting. They were through fighting. All they were concerned about was, "Will you protect us from the Czechs? Will you protect us from the people?"

FURMANOVSKY:

The Czech civilians?

DOBBS:

The Czech civilians. Because there were very few there. But they had no place to go. They didn't want to go anywhere, they had their own food and everything, but they didn't want to fight. I said, "You can't go with me." We gathered up their arms and we deposited them in the school building, and then I just lined them up. And I told the German officers, I says, "I'll tell you what to do, you just give them a right face and march them off, out of this town, so that you won't be victimized by the Czechs." And we got in our half-tracks and went in the other direction. In other words, I told them you march west, I'm going east.

FURMANOVSKY:

West, into--

DOBBS:

Wherever they were out--for all I know they're still marching. I don't even know what happened to them, I just took off. And we continued down the road. As we continued down the road, I remember going up a hill and then when we got to the top of the hill, to the crest of the hill, there spread out before was what us might be termed the plains of Bohemia. We were coming into the valley there, the valley of Pilsen. The only thing you could really see off in the distance was what looked like an airport; and it turned out to be the Pilsen airport, which was a major German airport. And here am I, looking over this thing, all by myself with these thirty-six men and the three tanks. Now, off in the distance you could see all kind of antiaircraft guns and emplacements; in other words, the landscape is dotted with antiaircraft protecting the Pilsen airport. And the tanks, the three tanks, they say they're not going down there--and they took off.

FURMANOVSKY:

Not going down there, why?

DOBBS:

They didn't know if the Germans knew the war was over for them, they didn't know whether they were going to get fired on. They had no chance with-- These Germans had these tremendously effective antitank guns--what were they? 185s, the 88s, whatever they called them, I forget. They would have been sitting ducks. So they said, "We're not going down there." "Well, let's just see what happens." So we were sitting around for a while, and suddenly over every one of these antiaircraft guns and this land pockmarked by the dugouts, where the guns were, was all covered with white sheets. It was really an amazing sight to see. I said, "Well, I'm not afraid of white sheets." I mean, they were all surrendering. See, they had seen us, or someone had reported to them that we were there. So we went down the hill, and as we were going down the hill I see a group of German officers. They came to me and saluted and they said, "We want to surrender our position." I says fine, and we lined them up and I said, "Now, all you guys stand and get them over on one side of the road." And before you know it, it is crowded with all kinds of civilians, people from the area.

FURMANOVSKY:

Czech civilians?

DOBBS:

And others.

FURMANOVSKY:

Germans.

DOBBS:

No Germans.

FURMANOVSKY:

Sudeten Germans.

DOBBS:

Sudeten Germans, perhaps. Most of them were either French or Italian or Russian, in other words, people who had been in that area who saw the Americans come and were going to liberate them. So what I decided to do is I told the Germans, you stay on one side of the road, and the civilians all on the other. I'm talking somewhere between five and eight hundred people, a huge mob. The civilians said, "Do you have any food?" I had no food. All I had were these thirty-six men. All some cuckoo had to do was to fire a shot and I wouldn't have known what to do. But they weren't about to fire a shot. So then night began to fall. I was there practically all day. I sent a runner back; I told one guy to go back and see if he could find someone to ask what to do. He came back later and said he couldn't find anybody. So I said, let's go to the airport, at least get them under cover. You've seen these movies of treks in the salt mines, that's what this looked like. On one side I had the Germans, on another side I had the civilians; and all of us marching to the airport. When the civilians found I had no food, all I said to them and to the various groups of them was, "There is nothing I can do, take off, go home. Those of you that live in France and Italy and those places, go west. "

FURMANOVSKY:

What were they doing there?

DOBBS:

They were either slaves or workers in the factory or in some way attending the German troops. I wasn't making a sociological study at the time. I was worried about what the hell were these thirty-six men going to do if some German nut with four or five hundred soldiers fires a shot? So, anyway, we all marched to the airport. Now, at the airport there was no trouble whatsoever. They were willing to surrender too. Now, amazingly, there were airplanes, there was gasoline, but they had no pilots. In other words, all the pilots had all been dead, all shot or killed. So here was this huge airport. I took the officers and I locked them in a room. I said, "You guys have more field rations than I have, just behave yourself." And I had them surrounded by my platoon. The civilians started leaving--I don't know what happened to them--but there I am stuck with this gang of Germans with my thirty-six men, and pretty soon others started surrendering. I remember there was one of these what they call Todt battalions made up of thirteen- or fourteen-year-old kids. They came and surrendered. There was a group of German women soldiers, there weren't many of them, but there was this group of around thirty who came and surrendered. "You people just have to take care of yourselves. I'll see that no one bothers you, that's all I can do." And I didn't even try to disarm them, there were just too many of them. So they hung around waiting for orders and I hung around waiting for orders.

FURMANOVSKY:

Were you in radio contact with your--?

DOBBS:

No, but I sent a runner into Pilsen because I found out that Pilsen was only six or eight miles away. So he came back and he said officers will come see you. And the next day they came to see me.

FURMANOVSKY:

What officers?

DOBBS:

Well, it was the colonel from my battalion. And he said, "Gee, you've done a fine job here, I want to talk to the officers." And that was the first inkling that I

got of that kind of propaganda that had already begun to spread around. Where an officer who had surrendered stepped forward and he saluted my colonel, and he says to him, "We would like to join the American army and we can proceed at once to fight the Russians"; because the Russians were only about thirty-five miles away. So I told the officer what he said. Between my Yiddish and my year of college German that I had taken in 1930 I was able to get along; as long as I knew that they knew no English, I could get along. So I told the colonel what he said, and he says, "Well, I'll let you know what to do, in the meantime I've got to take off." That night everything is still. At the airport there was a Ford, a British-made Ford, a beautiful little car, so I rode around that all night, checking out posts and seeing that the men were kept busy and whatnot. I had some rations. At that time they had the 10-and-I rations; one carton was for either ten men for one day or ten days for one man. Whatever. It was very good rations. It was not the old C-rations that you probably know about, you know, the little cans where you heat it. So we had some rations, rations were brought to us. But the next morning I got a message from division. And that was that at this airport I am to take my three half-tracks, get some sheets, and wrap some sheets around my half-tracks, make big flags or banners, you know, like a flag with white sheets. And I was told that what you're going to do is that there will be a plane coming in the next day or two, and that plane will have high-ranking officers, Germans, Americans, and British, and you're going to take them in your half-tracks. You'll take them into Czechoslovakia as fast as you can, where fighting is still going on, and you'll see to it that these are meeting with the German officers. And that's why you're having these white flags. And they will try to get the Germans to stop fighting. Now, what the fighting consisted of--and I didn't see it, but I was told later--it consisted of rearguard action on the part of certain fighting units for the rest of the German army that was in Czechoslovakia to sift through the lines and surrender to the Americans so they wouldn't have to surrender to the Russians. Well, I was thrilled, I was finally going to see something. So I got everything in readiness, ready to go. I'm going to go finally see something of real interest; although I did get my kicks out of it with the last three days with those Germans and civilians and whatnot. And just as we were ready to leave, the plane came with the German, British, and American generals. Just as we were ready to leave, a platoon of reconnaissance tanks came. Now, these are little armored vehicles, but they can go fifty and sixty

miles an hour instead of the thirty-five miles an hour that a half-track can go. And there, they took all my sheets, all my banners, they did to their little tanks what I did to my little half-tracks, and then they took these generals and off they went. Now, I was in that airplane that night, you know, one of these British bombers--I forget what it was, the Lancaster or whatever--and I heard these speeches of Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill saying that the war was over. In other words, it was already either April 7 or 8. That I got a thrill out of. That was an historical setting. But we were there another two days, and finally we got orders to march the Germans into a prison camp in Pilsen and rejoin the battalion. And I did. Now, when I got to the battalion-- Now, don't forget, here I am, in complete battle array, been out in the field all the way from the fifth to the tenth or something like that--and dirty. As a platoon sergeant, I had a machete, I had my carbine, ammunition, grenades. I said to the captain, "Captain, I'm going off to look for my party." And everybody knew me--now you mustn't forget that. He says, "Well, we don't know what kind of orders we'll get, so I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll give you three hours. And you take those three hours." "Sergeant Hawkins, take over the platoon, I'm leaving." And there I went, sauntering down the streets of Pilsen to look for the Communist Party. Now, at that time, the people of Pilsen were already tearing down the German signs and putting up Czech signs in the streets, the buildings and whatnot. People were very busy. I didn't know a word of the language; I never did learn a word of the language. I started looking for the party, and all over the city where I walked you could see pictures of Stalin. Now, if you see a picture of Stalin in, let's say, two feet by two feet, that's a big picture. If you saw one by six feet, then you know that that must be a communist; that was my reasoning. So I walked into a building where there was a huge picture of Stalin, and it turned out to be a saloon, a bar, and I asked whether if he knows if there is any communist activity or communist organization. "I'm an American communist"--I made that very clear--"and I want to find communists." And he said, "Well, there are some upstairs." I went upstairs, and there was a huge room, like a big ballroom, but big. I walk in there, and there are about forty or fifty youth. They were busy doing things. One group was rehearsing something, in another place they're making signs, in another corner they're building benches or making a table. I walk in, in this complete battle array; they've been under fascism, now just released. They celebrated their revolution on April 5, so this must have been about April 10 or 12 or 11,

something like that. And a hush falls under the group, and I say I'm looking for the communists, I'm looking for the Communist Party, I'm an American communist. One young fellow steps up and speaks in English. He says, "Do you know any songs?" And I got a kick out of that, you know, songs, it was a form of mutual friendship. I didn't know what to sing, so I sang a song that we sung in the YCL, the Young Communist League, purported to be the song of the red air fleet. It goes something like, "Our planes are set, we're ready for the battle, high in the air, our engines loudly roar. Our planes are set, we're ready for the struggle against world imperialistic war. Fly higher, fly higher, fly higher, our engines loudly roar"--something like that--"and we're going to fight the anti-imperialist wars," something like that. "Our emblem is the Soviet star." The YCL sang this song long before World War II. So it didn't ring a bell. By that time, I got up on a table, I was sitting on a table, I put my rifle down, took my helmet off, and they gathered in a semicircle around me and brought out guitars and balalaikas, some of them, and they sang a song. Well, I didn't know what else to sing, so I sang a song; I forget what it was, I think it was the Wobbly version of Casey Jones. So they sang a song, and then I sang another song, I've forgotten which, and then it suddenly dawned on me that what they wanted was the song of socialists throughout the world or communists throughout the world, "The Internationale." So I sang "The Internationale." Well, they stood up and I stood up, we sang "The Internationale" and there was hugging and kissing. I was welcome. Now, what this turned out to be was the cultural section of the national association of Czechoslovakian youth. But there was this one fellow who asked me if I knew any songs, he actually was a communist.

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, I see, so--

DOBBS:

The others were or weren't, I never asked. But he says, "I'll take you to the Communist Party headquarters." So he took me to a building which was already being painted red and it had a huge golden sign, you know, painted in gold, "Dum Lenin." Now, I don't know any Russian, but I knew enough to know that this meant the house of Lenin. So he took me in there, and the guards stopped me at the door and said you can't go in with your gun. So I said, "Take

the damned gun, I don't want it." I gave him my rifle. They introduced me to the head of the cultural section of the Communist Party. We talked a little while, and already it's beginning to get late. (I only had three hours.) So I said, "I really don't have too much time, can I meet some Communist Party officials other than yourselves." They said, "Sure." I went up to the top floor and I met a man who was the district organizer, I think his name was Steckel, I don't remember exactly, and I introduced myself to him. He got on the telephone immediately--he could speak no English--and he called a man who later identified himself to me as a young Jewish fellow who had been in the Czech army that had been stationed in Great Britain. There were two Czech armies; one was in England and one was in the Soviet Union. He was in the one in England. In other words, he came from a fairly wealthy family and was able to get out before the Germans marched into Czechoslovakia. And he joined the Czech army there. He was the editor of the Communist Party paper in the city of Pilsen, it was called the Pilsen Pravda. I've forgotten what his name was. I think it was Koenigsberg or something like that. He and the district organizer, Pan Steckel, said, "This man is your host. You will be our guest. He will deal with you and whenever you want to see us, you'll get in touch with him, if we want to see you, he'll get in touch with you. Welcome to our country." I got his address, I got his telephone number, the office of the paper. Later he was joined by his wife and kid (he had a child in England). They came later. So I had dinner with him several times at his house, they would come to where I was.

FURMANOVSKY:

Which was where?

DOBBS:

In the city of Pilsen, but I will go more into that later. In the meantime I had made my connections with the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. I enjoyed tremendously that whole business about do you know any songs and all this little party that went on. Now, Czechoslovakia at that time was in very bad straits. First of all, there was no transportation, they were getting ready for the cold weather, it was already April. For instance, they had no coal. They had nothing in the city. Food was very scarce. While the city wasn't bombed badly, there was some damage, food was scarce, they had very strict rationing. Inflation was horrible because the Germans just printed Czech money by the

ton, and conditions were very bad. My platoon at that time was then sent out into Sudetenland, into the mountains. So I went with the battalion and my platoon was sent off again by itself into a little town, I forget the name of it. I remember we sort of, you know, the forty-eight men in my platoon-- Sometimes the lieutenant was there, sometimes he wasn't there. And we bivouacked. In other words, we put up tents, we didn't sleep in people's houses. Just over the hills from where we were were the Russians. And they came over, groups would come over, and we would sit around and talk. They would bring booze, and I would tell my platoon, don't drink that booze. It was a horrible raw potato distillate; I don't know what the hell it was made out of, potatoes or whatever. You've got to be careful, these guys are really rough gentlemen. There were no problems whatsoever, we got along, we were there to-- I don't know what we were doing in that village, I don't remember anything about it except that every once and a while the Russians would come over and we'd talk. And they would get boozed up and go home. I told the platoon, "Don't go over there, because I don't know who these people are, apparently they're always drunk, don't get in any trouble." Well, nothing happened. I guess we were there for about two weeks, then we came back to the platoon, came back to the company. And the only thing I can recall is that we would be sent out to visit various farms. In other words, we would look for farms where they had compounds. You would find a whole number of buildings, a barn, a house, storage rooms, a stable room, things like that. We'd go in, we'd march in, ride in with our half-tracks, and before you know it, there would be groups of people who had been working there; they were mostly Europeans, they were not Czechs, and they were not Germans. We would take them in our half-tracks and take them to a place where they would be deloused, registered, and somehow from there they would be sent home, either east or west. We did that for several days, and it was a terrible thing to see. I mean, the conditions under which these people had to live--these people were virtually slaves to these Sudeten Germans in that area. One day I'm called in to see the colonel of my battalion. He says to me-- By that time already the army is beginning to go to pieces, the war is over. Men began to go home. Now, I don't know if you're familiar with the point system of how men were allocated to go home, I don't know whether I should describe it.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you describe it.

DOBBS:

Well, very briefly, points were given for, I don't remember all the details, but points were given for all the months in service, the number of months overseas, for any kind of decoration, for battle zones, for purple hearts; and these points were based on an allocated system. The men with the highest number of points would be attached to units that were going home, and then they would go home. I had very, very few points. All my service was in the United States, with the exception of February to April overseas, or maybe it was June by that time. So I had very few points, and I had no hope of going home at this time. I got called in by the colonel. His name was Pickett, Colonel Pickett, a young fellow. A West Point man, of course. He says to me, "The sergeant major is going home, and he recommended that you become the battalion sergeant major. Do you think you can do the job?" I said, "Well, there is nothing in the army I can't do, for a very simple reason: Everything in the army is controlled by the books. You know, if you need a court-martial procedure, it's in the books. So there's nothing I can't learn." He says, "You think you can do it?" I says, "Yes, but I want to tell you something. In the division there's a fellow by the name of Girton, he's the intelligence officer. He gets excited every time he sees me get any kind of promotion, and, secondly, there are first sergeants. I'm only a tech. I don't know whether [Victor] Mishelli will like it." That was the first sergeant in my company. He says, "I don't give a damn what anybody else thinks. Why has this Girton got it in for you?" I said, "Because I'm a communist organizer. I had been one, and in all likelihood I'll be one when I get out of the army." He says, "Well, I don't give a damn. If you grow a moustache like you got, you can be my sergeant major." That's where the moustache came into play. Now, sergeant major is the ranking NCO in a battalion. In other words, he gets his orders from the colonel as to what has to be done. We need so many men to dig a trench, we need so many men to collect brass, we need so many men to police the area, you know, and allocate these tasks to the companies to carry out the orders of the colonel. Now, at this point, I later found out that the American army in Czechoslovakia had no military functions whatsoever. In other words, the Czech army, the part from the Soviet Union, the part from England, got together at once, and those people who stayed in the army became the army

of Czechoslovakia. In addition, they had what they called a revolutionary guard. These were workers, either full time or part time, and the only insignia they had was a red armband. They were reconstituting the police department. So they said, we have no function whatsoever for the American army, this is our country. It so happens that one of the provisions of the Yalta Agreement was that all foreign troops had to leave the country, I forget when, it was either November or December 1. That was an order from the Yalta [Agreement]. So Americans, behave yourselves, you're our guests. We will do everything we can to make you happy, but you have no military function whatsoever.

1.9. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO

AUGUST 12, 1987

DOBBS:

When we got through with this slave operation, we then went into bigger cities. We went into a city by the name of Kraslice. At least that's the way we called it then, a very beautiful little city, famous for its manufacture of musical instruments and glass, by the way. Beautiful glass works. We had no military function whatsoever. But our platoon was there, and I'm in effect the secretary to the colonel. I'm living in the same house where the colonel lives. In other words, we'd take over the biggest house, which was the house of the former Nazi **gauleiter** or whatever, and we turned it into our battalion headquarters. We did whatever we were supposed to do--keep the troops happy. Now, I began to look for the party again. There was no communist party there, but there was a social-democrat, a Left Social-Democrat, I've forgotten his name, but he was a very fine man. And he explained to me what the setup was. Czechoslovakia at that time was governed by a four-party government. In other words, every party had its representatives in the government, out of which they then elected various commissars and commissaries, or whatever they call them. These four parties were, first of all, the Communist Party; secondly, the independent left wing of the Social-Democratic Party; third, the right wing of the Social-Democratic Party, which was a separate party; and, fourth, was the Christian Democrats, which you know is traditional throughout Europe. These four parties ran the government. Now, there were a lot of disagreements as to how fast they

should proceed to socialism, or how fast should the country be run. One thing that they determined was that they were not going back to the old Czechoslovakia. The Social Democrats might have wanted, you know, what we call our type of democracy. The CP and Left Social-Democrats said, "No, we're not going to do that. We're going to make guarantees that we'll never go back, that we'll never endanger our country again." Now, one of the rough things that happened was there was something like two million Germans in Czechoslovakia, the Sudeten Germans. They [the Czechoslovakian government] were determined that these Germans were to be expelled from the country, and they got agreement from the four, the four great powers. This was going to take place in 1948. In two years, in other words, all Germans would be expelled out of the country. Now, this was one of those brutal things, you know, whether you agree with it or not, but it was the law. And this Social-Democrat that I ran into, he explained to me how the government was run. In all avenues of government. Now, the problem was, especially in the Sudetenland, you want to keep up the production of the country. So that every German--at least that's what I was told--was instructed to train a Czech. So the problem was getting Czechs to come into the Sudetenland, and they were very shorthanded. The only trouble is that it developed a huge bureaucracy, in this sense: Whenever a communist would show up or another recently demobilized Czech soldier would show up, he would get a government job, whether commissioner of agriculture or water commissioner, or whatever. He would become immediately, you know, not part of the productive forces. In the meantime, they're trying desperately to get Czechs to come into the Sudetenland. They had a lot of problems. For instance, a lot of the people, especially those that had money and were able to escape the Germans, they wanted the Czechoslovakia that they had left; they wanted their positions back. Well, they weren't going to get them back. Because they were determined that they would, in one way or another, go to socialism. You had the huge industrial organizations like Skoda. Well, they're not going to give it to a private corporation--it was confiscated. Or the famous Bata shoe works. Czechoslovakia is an industrially developed country, so that the whole base of it became socialist. So the problem was how rapidly do they move to socialism. Now, these were some of the discussions that I had with the comrades later when I got back to Pilsen. See, I'm still out of Pilsen. I was in this town of Kraslice where the guy says, "Yeah, we're waiting for communists."

We need people to start running things around here. We can't trust these Germans. We got to get rid of them. We've got to replace them with Czechs." Well, then a Communist Party guy came, and we became very good friends. He had his wife, he had two kids, and he had a big house. And of course later more than one family moved in to it, because they needed housing badly. It was the house where a gauleiter had lived. But later it was pretty full of other families living upstairs and downstairs. But he was a very fine guy. Unlike the Social-Democrat leader, he would go around armed. One day he said to me, "Why don't you come with me and we'll go to a district committee meeting at Karlsbad?" I said, "Karlsbad is in the Russian zone." He says, "That's all right, you'll wear my clothes." I said, "No, I love these stripes too much, I'm not taking any chances of going with you to Karlsbad into the Russian zone. I'm happy here." We had no military function. I don't remember any peculiar incidents, except relations with the Social- Democratic family and my relations with the communist family. It was purely on a social level, except for the discussions about what was going on.

FURMANOVSKY:

So what was your battalion doing?

DOBBS:

Nothing. Well, they'd go on hikes once and a while, there would be parties, there would be lectures, you know the army continues. You still have your lectures on VD, you have your lectures on how to take a machine gun apart, you have your lectures on military courtesy, you have your lectures on articles of war. Nothing.

FURMANOVSKY:

What was the attitude of the men, just couldn't wait to get back home?

DOBBS:

Get home. That's all they cared about.

FURMANOVSKY:

And what about you? Had you been offered a chance to go home, you would have gone?

DOBBS:

Of course. I wanted to get home, except I'm having such a good time--

FURMANOVSKY:

That's what I'm saying.

DOBBS:

--that I really didn't give a damn. No, but I knew what the point system was and I knew I was really at the bottom of the barrel. After being in the army nearly four years by this time, I had 52 points. Men at that time had to have 180 or 200 to get home, see. But they had dances. People from the villages and from the surrounding areas and the Americans would have dances every weekend and whatnot. Well, that was this little town. We had no function there, so then the army began-- Well, it got to be depleted. Well, I'm still in the Sixteenth Armored Division, and I'm called back into Pilsen. Now, when I get there, the colonel says to me, he says, "Look, our division has been designated as a unit to take men home. But I'm not going home and you're not going home. So you stick with me and maybe we'll try to finagle something. I have your papers here, you're being transferred." I think it was some artillery unit in the city of Pilsen. "But don't go yet," he says to me. And before you know it, thousands of troops are leaving the division and thousands of troops are coming in in order to go home. At that time, I think we were in a town called Marianske Lazne. At that time it was called Marienbad. One of these little jewels of a city made-- It was a resort area or spa for years which the former royalty of Europe gathered at. So we were there, and one day-- Well, I'll tell you one other little story that I got a kick out of. Paul Robeson was going to come sing. Now, I was either in Kraslice or some other town, but I heard that Paul Robeson was going to sing. I think it was about forty miles away.

FURMANOVSKY:

Sing for the troops?

DOBBS:

Sing for the troops. It was a USO [United Service Organizations] thing, see. And they had arranged transportation for anybody that wanted to go, except a

terrible storm came. It rained. Oh, it was a terrible storm. So they changed it. Instead of a big open field, it was going to be in the opera house in Marienbad, and I traveled the sixty miles in this terrible storm. One guy wanted to go with me, we were the only two from our battalion that went. We heard Paul sing. Later I asked him if he remembered it. (I had met him afterwards.) He says, "Why didn't you come back and say hello to me, man! We could have found something to talk about. Then I would have taken you to a wonderful party, a party given by a couple of generals. They had all kinds of rich people there. And they asked me to sing those lovely Negro spirituals, and I sang them all the Red Army songs." I got a kick out of that. Anyway, I was brought back to Pilsen, transferred to an artillery unit; except before I got there Colonel Pickett told me that he wanted me to stay with him. The whole division and the men were getting ready to go home. High-point men were coming in from all over the area. See, it wasn't that whole battalions came. It was individuals, some companies perhaps, but all men with points who are ready to go home. After all, they are in Czechoslovakia. They have to get to France before they can go home. And I'm in this artillery battalion. Here I am, it got so funny. I'm the only one left of the battalion, and I'm driving a truck--I never drove a truck in my life--full of soldiers going through these mountain roads. I don't know how we got away with it, but we did. Then the colonel says to me, "I can't do anything, Ben, you better join that outfit in Pilsen." Because we were in the mountains somewhere. I decided to take a little vacation and I hung around Marienbad. There was always action, you always see a line, you get into the line and you get something to eat. You see a line, you can go to a movie, you see a line, you get into some entertainment. And of course I took advantage of that to have some adventures of my own. Then finally I ran out of money and I went to the military police and said, "I'm lost, I don't know where I belong and can you help me find my outfit? I never saw my papers." So they got me to this outfit in Pilsen. Now, when I went to this outfit in Pilsen, a corporal is acting first sergeant. So he sees me coming in with all these stripes and immediately he's worried about his wonderful job. I wasn't a sergeant major anymore, now I'm just a plain ordinary tech sergeant. I missed getting a promotion by about five days, see, because a battalion sergeant major should be a master sergeant, not a tech sergeant. So he sees all his beautiful nice job he had going out the window. So I made a deal with him: "You leave me alone, I'll let you alone." There was then about a ten-day period that was so funny. I would get up in

the morning, have my breakfast, and then I would saunter over to the barber shop and for a cigarette or two, get shaved, and then I'd just wander around the city. But one day I was in the building there where I was sleeping and an officer said, "Who are you?" I said who am I, I belong to this company. He said, "111 never saw you before." "Well, I can't help that." He says, "I got to put you to work." Well, the work I had at that time was taking a couple of convoys of trucks and military equipment into Munich, where they were just dumped onto some company that was supposed to take care of them. I think later they were either destroyed or thrown out or something. But that was fun, I got the chance to see Munich and got a chance to see the countryside a little bit. Then I get called in one day to Twenty-second Corps headquarters, and they want to give me a job. Now, the army had a system where you are given a military designation. In other words, if you are in infantry, if you're a rifleman, it's a 745. If you're a machine gunner, it's something else. And the army is divided into four major sections: 1 is Personnel; 2 is Intelligence; 3 is Operations; and 4 is Supplies. Now, when I became a sergeant major, I was taken out of 3 (Operations) and put into 1 (Personnel). So when I come to report to the Twenty-second Corps, as I'm ordered, I'm in Personnel. So what do you do with a personnel sergeant? So they said to me, "We want you to run a hotel." So I don't want to run a hotel. For one thing, if you're in a hotel and an enlisted man, you have no military function. You know, you become a pimp. If you run an officer's hotel, you become a dog robber, what we called it, you know. So I want no part of that.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why did they want you to run a hotel?

DOBBS:

Why didn't I want to?

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, why did they want you to run a hotel?

DOBBS:

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[Since the army had no military function in Czechoslovakia, all kinds of housing and places for entertainment of U.S. troops were provided for American use by the Czech government.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) Because there were hotels that needed to be run. I'll tell you about this hotel in a minute. They needed sergeants of some caliber with experience, of some training, with some stripes, you know, to do things. They had this hotel.

FURMANOVSKY:

A hotel for whom?

DOBBS:

For the American Army. So they said, "This hotel is different. It's a hotel for field grade and general officers only. Transient." In other words, it's a transient hotel, it's not for regular personnel. No one below a major can stay there, only a major and higher colonels and generals. And, secondly, it has a nightclub, and this nightclub is for Twenty-second Corps officers only. "You'll be the only enlisted man, there will be a captain running the hotel, but you're going to do the work that has to be done." I go to this hotel, a beautiful little hotel, right in the heart of Pilsen, four or five stories, Hotel Continental. It has this wonderful nightclub, except I can't go into it because I'm an enlisted man, I can't go into the dining room because I'm an enlisted man. Now, it's run by the army in this sense. We are in charge of the hotel, but all of the personnel are Czechs: the office personnel, where you register, the people that make the beds, the cooks, the waiters, the orchestra, the guy that serves the beer. All Czechs and only two Americans, that's me and this captain. I don't think I saw the captain three times in the four months I was there. By running the hotel, what were some of the functions? Well, first of all, you had to get coal. In other words, you had to keep the place warm. Now, this meant that I had a magical piece of paper. That magical piece of paper said Sergeant Dobbs is authorized to requisition a vehicle at any time that he needs it. Sergeant Dobbs is authorized for the use of prisoners of war anytime he needs them. So what I would do, for instance, is go get coal. I had a map of where coal mines were, or where they were distributing coal. I'd get some big trucks, get some

German prisoners; and our trucks couldn't get into where they'd distribute coal because they're made for little carts, they're not made for army trucks. So these Germans would have to load the coal by hand, and that's what I would get the Germans for. They liked it. It got them out of the compound, and secondly, they got sandwiches out of it, they got some food out of it. The truck drivers liked it--they were usually black truck drivers--because they got a chance to see the countryside. So that would be one function. Another function would be to deal with a produce merchant that was in the city and go pick up vegetables for the officers' mess, and by "mess" I mean where people ate. Third, there was a rule that all the liquor production could be used by the Americans. In other words, they were given a ration of the famous Pilsen beer, they had all the production of what they called a champagne--it was horrible stuff--and a brandy. So I would get the trucks and go pick that up for the nightclub. Now, for myself, since I couldn't go into the mess hall, I had a suite of two rooms. In other words, I had a reception room and a bedroom. Now, in the army, in an officers' mess--and this is an officers' mess--officers are supposed to pay for their meals. They get a food allowance, but they pay for their meals. So I had to do the same thing. I could get a food allowance for my guests and I had to pay twenty-five cents for a meal for them. I of course got my food free. Well, let's say I wanted to have some guests. Say, well, I have ten guests; well, here's \$2.50. That would be given to the hotel personnel, Czechs. Well, about twice a week I would have people from the Communist Party leadership, or people they wanted to bring, and would have regular dinners served in my room by the waiters. Then one of the waiters would go get a musician and he would play the piano for us or he would play the violin for us while I was having a little dinner party with my guests. I would start to unbutton my shirt, and before you know it people are already unbuttoning it and washing it and ironing it. Clean sheets everyday. It was the lap of luxury like I never heard of in my life. And all I had to do was once a week to go get some coal or once a week go get some vegetables. Because the hotel was run completely by Czechs. If there's any problem they would take it up with me and we'd solve it. In the meantime the nightclub kept running. And one bad thing, of course, was on weekends women would come from all over the countryside to try to get into that nightclub. For one thing they could get cigarettes, candy, things Americans had--and the Czech people had nothing. Well, that's something, whatever adventures there were need not be told in

this particular interview. Anyway, it was this lap of luxury such that for four months I was literally the pinup boy of Pilsen. Let me give you some examples. One day, I went to where our troops were. I never had any connection with these troops at all--I'm living in this hotel. I see a room full of clothes and blankets and I ask, "What's this?" "Well, we're leaving and this is all the surplus stuff." I said, "What are you going to do with it?" "Oh, probably burn it." And I used my little piece of paper and I load it into a truck and I go to the town square in Pilsen by the big church there, there's a big square traditional to Middle-European towns, and I distribute all the blankets and clothes to anybody that wanted it. Burn it--when these people have nothing!

FURMANOVSKY:

What was the reaction when you distributed all the stuff?

DOBBS:

Well, of course, everybody knew me in the city. Once I decided to invite--

FURMANOVSKY:

What did they know you as?

DOBBS:

A friend of the leadership of the city. I decided to invite people at Thanksgiving, you know. So I asked the captain who was at the hotel and happened to be there, a quartermaster captain. I says, "I'd like to order three turkeys so I can invite some people to dinner." "Fine." He writes me out a slip: "Give the sergeant three turkeys." I get to the warehouse. Now, to me it meant three turkeys; to the sergeant that ran the warehouse it meant three cases of turkeys, see, six to a case. Well, I had all these turkeys to distribute to the people. I took them of course. Anybody gives you something, you take it--you learn that in the army very quickly. Second, being a known communist, that is, to all my personnel and all the party people. The town is run by the communists. See, the major is a communist, the chief of police is a communist, the chief of the fire department is a communist. The head of the brewery is a communist, and he saw to it that I always had two cases of this wonderful Pilsen beer on hand. And the people who made the beds, you know, they would get their home-made slivovitz, a Middle-European fruit

brandy, and give it to me for a bottle of Pilsen beer, which they couldn't get. So that's how I became, I called myself the pinup boy of Pilsen. If there's an opening of a show, I'm invited. If the waiters union has a dance, I'm invited. If there's a demonstration, I'm invited to be on the witness stand. Because all the time I'm having these relations with the Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

And what would you discuss at these meetings?

DOBBS:

Well, I want to tell you a couple incidents. One day they called me in and they said, "Can you come visit?" They call me and they say, "Ben, can you get us a carton of cigarettes?" "Sure, that's no problem, what do you need it for?" "Well, we're going to have a recruiting drive. We like to give prizes and we thought that it would be a very good prize to give a pack of cigarettes." You got to understand, cigarettes was a medium of exchange in Europe, all through Europe, you know. It wasn't as expensive then as it was earlier, but you could still get ten bucks for a pack of cigarettes. So I got them a carton of cigarettes. But I'm interested and ask, "What kind of recruiting drive are you going to have?" "Well, we're going to have a recruiting drive to where we want to increase the membership of the Communist Party by one million. We want one million members," So I said, "There's only 14 million people in the country. You just got rid of fascism. What kind of party can that be? Every phony, every guy, every no-goodnik is going to want to join the Communist Party if it's that easy to get in. What experience do you have with them, how were they taught, what is the nature of your Communist Party?" He says, "We think it's the only way you can control the government. Our first aim is to get as many Skoda workers as possible into the party, our second is as many people, particularly youth." I said, "Well, I don't understand that. To me the Communist Party is supposed to be the leading educational instrument." He says, "Well, that's not our conception, our conception of the party is a governing party." Now, I didn't know, but it's obvious they were preparing for the events of 1948, you see, which I wasn't there. But obviously in 1948, they defined it as the outspoken expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and they eliminated all other parties, only the Communist Party became the governing party of Czechoslovakia. Well, I didn't know that at the time, nor did

I see it. But I had this big fight with them as to what is the nature of the Communist Party. It still is my opinion, the big difference I have with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. I mean, my big disagreement with them, as well as my understanding of the Communist Party in this country. That's it's primarily an educational institution. It isn't supposed to be made up of opportunists and careerists and so forth and so on. But if you seek a party of one for every fourteen people, without any experience at all in terms of your knowing them, what kind of party can it be?

FURMANOVSKY:

But you said the town was run by the communists. Didn't you get a sense that the Communist Party was gradually on the ascendancy, that the power was possible?

DOBBS:

You got to know that in western Bohemia, which includes Pilsen, the party got 90 percent of the vote in 1947 when the elections took place. The party was a tremendous powerful instrument. Now, another thing, I'll give you an example of the recruiting. When I first got there, the party had a very real problem that they discussed with me. That is, that it was very hard to get workers to work. Why? Because what do they get for it? There's nothing to eat that isn't rationed. There's nothing to buy with your pay. What do you get for working? So why work? We just went through slavery, we want a rest. They had already begun to develop some degree of social legislation, so that it is a very real problem. So that party had two campaigns that I was just fascinated by, and I saw it work. If you won't work for money, then work for your country. And they had a plan of a million hours of free labor to rebuild the Skoda plant. Now, the Skoda plant had been destroyed, destroyed just at the end of the war. It was no longer a military target, but because it was going to be in the Russian zone the Americans decided to destroy it. That's the story that I was told, and I know it wasn't destroyed until three weeks before the end of the war. It was no longer a military installation because there was no transport. You know, the entire transportation system of Europe was destroyed.

FURMANOVSKY:

Incidentally, where was the Red Army at this point?

DOBBS:

They're about thirty miles away, situated primarily in Prague, just outside of Prague, I think.

FURMANOVSKY:

What was the nature of this line?

DOBBS:

I don't know. Well, it was the usual posts. You've seen them on roads, you know with the--

FURMANOVSKY:

But I mean the delineation between that part of Czechoslovakia that was controlled by the Russians and that part of Czechoslovakia that was controlled by the Czechs themselves.

DOBBS:

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[Mike, you are confused by the nature of the Soviet occupation. It was just like ours. The Soviet army had no military function. These armies of occupation were not used to subjugate or run the country. We were there, I guess, to stop any repetition of a German invasion. The country was run by the Czech government, protected by the Czech army. The occupation of Czechoslovakia was different from the occupation of Germany. The U.S. Army had outposts also at any road or where there was a borderline between the Soviet and Allied zones.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) I'll tell you a little story about what I saw in Pilsen. They had this marvelous campaign for a million hours of free labor to rebuild Skoda. About that time, Skoda had maybe about eight or ten thousand workers in production and about twelve thousand in construction to rebuild it. The campaign was a million hours to rebuild Skoda, so that Skoda would have a roof for the winter.

Then they had a campaign of free labor in your own community, in your own workplace, for the cleaning up of whatever war damage there was. And you know, it was really a thrill for me to see workers and youth and women marching down the street singing to the various places of work or to the Skoda plant.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who ran the--

DOBBS:

These were party campaigns.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who, for example, would run the Skoda plant?

DOBBS:

It was run by the local committee in Pilsen, later was taken over by the war department, the commissariat of war.

FURMANOVSKY:

Could workers be paid? Where would the money come from?

DOBBS:

Oh, they were paid. It came from the government, the government had money.

FURMANOVSKY:

From?

DOBBS:

Well, governments have money, they collect taxes or whatever.

FURMANOVSKY:

But the government's been around for, what, a few weeks?

DOBBS:

Yeah, well I'm not talking about the early days. I'm talking about the experience that I began to see when I got to Pilsen three months later. Governments have money even if they have to print it. Later, of course, they went through some real problems I'll tell you about. But let me give you a couple of more experiences with the party. I had this discussion about recruiting. While I'm in the boondocks, I see in this Stars and Stripes, the U.S. Army newspaper, this little teeny item, "Communist Party of the United States announces receipt of a letter from Jacques Duclos of the Communist Party of France," saying that the U.S. CP was engaged in an anticommunist revisionist policy. That was the famous [Earl] Browder policy, which of course I knew about, but I didn't experience it because I was already in the army. And the famous Jacques Duclos letter, of course, was the one that started this huge debate in the party, as to the nature of the party, the nature of Browder's policies, I guess arising out of one or another of the international conferences--that the bourgeoisie was going to be different, the Grand Alliance of the U.S., Britain, and the Soviet Union would continue. This was before the Cold War.

FURMANOVSKY:

And Jacques Duclos was the head of the French Communist Party.

DOBBS:

He was the head of the French Communist Party at that time. So I went to the party office in Pilsen and asked, "What do you know about this?" "Well, all we know about this is that you Americans are crazy anyway, so let us show you our coal production figures. Those are the things that really count." In other words, they didn't know a thing about it, but I had no other place to go. Later, of course, I got letters describing what was going on. Another experience I had with the party was when they called me in one day and said, "Can you get some whiskey for us." And I said, "What do you need it for? I can get it, no problem." They said, "We have nothing. People come through here, we'd like to be able to have a toast or a drink, you know." All right. Well, that overjoyed them. I brought them two bottles of scotch and a case of this really bad Czechoslovakian champagne from the nightclub. They said, "What can we do for you, what would you like?" I said, "There was nothing you could do for me. I'm not married. I don't need your glass and I don't need your fancy peasant costumes. I don't need your dolls, I don't need musical instruments. There's

really nothing except one thing. I'd like to see the Skoda plant. I'd like to see it." They said, "You can't. It's been taken over by the commissariat of defense, by the war department." Well, if you can't, you can't. Now, this was the very end of our visit. I'm just getting ready to go home. So we had a little party with the whiskey I gave them and I left. The next day I got a telephone call: "See if you can get off for tomorrow and you'll come to the office, but be here early." Two colonels and a captain from Prague came to give me a personally conducted tour of the Skoda plant. Now, that was really a thrill, one of the few thrills of my life, you know, where you walk in to a department, the workers would stop working, someone would bring tea or coffee or soup and we'd talk about America. How am I going to live with the great unemployment? Will I be able to get a job? Here we're all set, you know, we're going to have socialism. You don't have socialism in the United States? Why don't you? And one thing led to another and I got to another department. I spent eight hours on that tour, and that was really something. You got a real feeling of, at that time, a tremendous spirit on the part of the people. I later asked them, "How come you're able to do this for me?" You know, really, they put themselves out. They said, "Look, Ben, a million American soldiers went through Czechoslovakia, and only one came to us. That's why."

FURMANOVSKY:

That's quite a statement.

DOBBS:

I later ran into a few communists that were in Czechoslovakia as soldiers, but they didn't do what I did. Maybe they were too busy fighting. I was too busy having a good time. [laughter]

FURMANOVSKY:

You mention that the Czechs are always looking to the future, but what about when you would talk to people? What about that five years they'd just gone through?

DOBBS:

Well, they really didn't want to talk about that. They just didn't. It was really funny. First of all, in Sudetenland, I will never forget the one time I was at a

party or something, and a bunch of Germans-- Mostly in Sudetenland where I was and these other places, most of them were Silesians. Silesia was a place where Hitler took over from Poland and he forced the evacuation of the country. I sang this famous song from Spain, you know, "Freiheit"? They thought it was a German song. Hitler was perfect, there was nothing wrong with Hitler, it was just the bad people around him. And people did what they were told to do. "We loved Hitler. But all those-- Goering was terrible, and Goebbels was no good." Everywhere, everywhere that was it. Just complete innocence. We didn't wreck the world. I remember once when we were bivouacked and a German woman came by: "They wrecked my clock, the soldiers wrecked my clock." I said, "Well, you people burned up the whole goddamned world." "Yeah, but it's my clock." What do I care about the world? No feeling of guilt or responsibility of any kind. Let's see, what else did I talk to them about? I remember one day, and this really distressed me, and it was a real lesson to me about what are the problems of developing a real consciousness of socialism and the need for a new society. This was a real kick in the ass. (

[I had to see for myself the terrible destructiveness and the pervasive character of nationalism.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) I came in the CP office one day, and there's a tension in the air, I mean you could just feel it. And I'm with this guy, I forget his name, this young Jewish fellow that was the editor of the paper. And he was together with a few of the other guys around there. I said, "What's going on?" "Well, we're in trouble, we're in trouble." "What's the trouble?" "Well, our party is in a battle with the Communist Party of Poland." "Why the battle with Poland?" "Well, they want to keep Teschen." Now, Teschen was an area of Czechoslovakia that Hitler gave to Poland, and the Czechs wanted it back, and the Poles didn't want to give it back. It happened to be a wonderful area where they were planning a hydroelectric plant--at least that's what I'm told. And they're serious. We may even go to war. I said, "You people are crazy. You just came out of a war. Now you're talking about another one. Why don't you have a meeting and settle it. There are not supposed to be arguments about borders. You're supposed to

be communists. Communists aren't supposed to argue about borders." Of course, later they argued about Chinese and Russian borders. Borders are supposed to be eliminated under communism; at least that's my conception of communism. The tension and the cry for war and the bitterness and the hatred was there. I said, "I just don't understand you people." Well, later it turned out that it was settled by an international conference in which, I think, the Russians took part. It was a joint hydroelectric project and it's very successful. But that tension and that business, that whole nationalism, it is just so pervasive. Well, that was another kind of argument that I had with them. Plus these other things. I always could find something to talk about. Sometimes they could help me, but such as the Duclos letter, they couldn't. Now, take another example. I was at a demonstration where there were Russian troops. I was really struck by how dirty they were. I said, "These people came to a public demonstration, couldn't they have been cleaner?" "Ben, how many uniforms do you have?" "Oh, I don't know, I got two class-A uniforms. No, I got three uniforms. I have six summer uniforms and I have two coats. I have one coat nicely tailored for style." "But Ben, they only have one. Ben, where do you sleep?" "I sleep in a hotel." "Where do your troops sleep?" "Soldiers sleep either in barracks or in billets." "Well, Russian soldiers sleep in the field. They don't sleep in billets. They don't take away people's property. Ben, how much soap do you have?" "Soap? All you want." "Well, they had none. So don't be so critical before you understand what the situation is."

FURMANOVSKY:

What would these demonstrations be about?

DOBBS:

Well, they were celebrating the Russian Revolution. See, November 7 was that particular demonstration.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you were in Czechoslovakia until--

DOBBS:

Until December 1. Let's see, so these were the kinds of things. Or else you would have the lighter moments. I went to a party one night and there was a

group of young waiters, you know, from the waiters union, and they said, "We want to go to America." I said, "What for?" "We want to be coffboys."

"Coffboys, what's that?" "You know, boom, boom, boom, boom. Coffboy, like horses." I said, "Cowboy! Do you know what kind of work cowboys do? Do you have any idea what kind of life a cowboy's life is?" Their conception of what a cowboy's life was purely based on American film. They had no conception whatsoever of the hard, dirty work and living conditions under which most cowboys lived in the period in which these pictures were made. But that's--

"Coffboys." What else? Well, we talked about nearly everything, you know. Plus as I say, a very warm and friendly relationship with a few of the families that I got connected with. I'll never forget, you know, you come in with these cuckoo ideas. A guy says, "I'd like to invite you to dinner to my house." It was the guy that dispensed the beer at the place, a real character. And I said, "Yeah, well I'd like some good national dish," you know. And I'm thinking in terms of the French cooking or Italian cooking. Now, what kind of international dish can you have with cabbages and potatoes? That's all we got. So that's what you're going to get, cabbages and potatoes. But everything-- I got around all, I had nothing to do except look for adventures and look for ways to help. I was just having a hell of a good time. As a matter of fact, at that time the army had a wonderful policy of allowing soldiers to go anyplace in Europe, free of charge, on a furlough; and I never wanted to go anyplace because I was having such a good time in Pilsen, living in this hotel. As I say, my duties were very light. All the work was done by them. They liked their jobs. They were getting five cents an hour plus a cigarette and candy ration. Now, that's big wages. And that went for-- The cooking was wonderful. Army chow with a Czech cook is very good; it isn't an army cook. So I just had a very good time and I tried to be helpful. I'm trying to think of a few more incidents. The best incident I think, the most thrilling for me, was this conception of the visit of the Skoda plant. That really impressed me. For one thing, at that time there was a very fine spirit among the workers. There was a democratic spirit. I found them to be beautiful people, especially the men. Very handsome men. You know, in France I was struck by the beauty of the women, and in Montreal, for instance, the beauty of the women, but in Czechoslovakia it's very handsome men. I used to go around the streets. And I often wondered, because I'm the kind of guy, I have this terrible soldier's attitude; if the person isn't in your outfit, you know, he doesn't exist. I never wrote, I never kept in

contact with him, I never had the slightest desire to go back there. I'm just not a traveling type, like I didn't take these furloughs. Let's see, I'll try to think of some more stories I can tell you, but that was an experience that no one else could possibly have. I was just in a position to have it. I had those wonderful stripes, living a life of Reilly. I tried to maintain some kind of political perspective by the discussions I had with them. I was horror-struck by this story of the example of this pervasive nationalism, as well as what I thought was the destruction of the communist elan in terms of what the nature of the communist party was or should be. And I got along.

1.10. TAPE NUMBER: vI, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 3, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

I think in our last meeting we talked about Czechoslovakia, and we were sort of at the end of your experiences in Europe before being shipped back.

DOBBS:

Right. As I told you, all troops were ordered out of Czechoslovakia on or around December 1. There were three things I wanted to tell you about that I thought were interesting. First, with a touch of humor. There was this Major Girton in the Sixteenth Armored Division. He's the guy that stopped me from being a platoon leader, platoon sergeant. And he was the guy that was the head of battalion or division intelligence. He kept badgering me over the years. Well, when I got to where I was running this Hotel Continental--and I told you there was a nightclub attached to it--that was opened to Twenty-second [Army] Corps officers only. Well, Major Girton looked me up and came to see me at the hotel, begging me to let him into the nightclub. And I reminded him of what he had done to me. I says, "Girton, first of all, I won't do it. No. First of all, I can't do it, and even if I could do it, I wouldn't do it." I finally got some degree of revenge. The second story I wanted to tell you I think is important. It's relative to [Communist] Party finances in Czechoslovakia. October 1 was the date that the Czech government had set for a devaluation of their currency. In other words, their country had been flooded with German Nazi printing of Czech money. So on October 1 they had decided to take in all the old money that was printed and submit new money,

basically on what a worker earned per month. Then the workers had the right to go to a bank to turn in all of the money they had. The only trouble was, they had to explain any excessive amounts of money, and it was very heavily taxed. But the point is they turned in that money and received new money in exchange, roughly equivalent to a month's living, what normally they would spend for a month--food, rent, things of that kind. Now, the amazing thing is that while the government was having this exchange of money on the October 1, the United States Army set the date of October 3. And this was just a ploy on the part of the finance officers in that area that just bled the country dry in terms of what they tried to do, in terms of stopping inflation. In other words, if on October 1 a Czech didn't turn in his money it was worthless. You could literally pick up thousands of dollars worth of it in the streets, and the army gave two extra days that you could turn it in for new money. You know, just an outrageous thing, both to the financial structure of the United States, but it destroyed what the Czech government wanted to do because a lot of people took advantage of it. Well, I will admit, I went to the party and said all I have to do is sweep the streets, in effect. I'm working in this hotel for transient officers, all I've got to do is submit a name or a group of names, and I said, "I can get you \$10,000 without the slightest effort." They said, "Well, we don't want you to do that. This is our country, it is our plan to end inflation, and we'll have no part of your schemes to give us money." So I didn't touch it at all. In other words, I did nothing to literally walk in the street and pick up hundreds of dollars.

FURMANOVSKY:

So who was it that-- You mean people in the army could have, on October 2 or 3, exchanged Czech currency for--?

DOBBS:

New Czech currency. See, the army has the policy of paying you in the currency of the country. They don't give you American money, they gave us Czech money for our wages. So that the opportunity was there, literally, to pick up hundreds of dollars in old Czech money, three days later turn it into the army office for new Czech money. Now, where did it hurt the Czechs? Of course it devalued the new currency. American army officers-- Well, someone made a killing. (

[Since I was living at the Hotel Continental, I had no need for money. I simply did not go for my pay on the first of the month. I was officially attached to the Twenty-second Corps Headquarters Company. I did not draw my \$152.50 for several months. On the last day of September--one day before the issuance of the new currency which was pegged at twice the value of the old currency--I got about \$700 in pay in the old currency. On October 3, I turned in my \$700 and got the value of \$1,400 in the new money. I then went to the post office and sent home \$1,400 in postal money orders: I committed no crime. I followed orders, got paid in old currency and exchanged it for new. It is a demonstration of how the finance officers of the U.S. Army could have made a killing at the expense of the Czech and U.S. governments.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) Well, it wasn't Ollie [Oliver] North, but it was somebody else who just made a killing on this Czech money. So that I just thought that this was of some interest because it showed the kind of finagling that went on, and the party's refusal to have any part of anything unprincipled, such as picking up old currency and exchanging it. So that I didn't touch it either. Because I certainly didn't want to hurt the Czech government, the Czech party. But I did have the idea in the back of my head, you know, what's wrong with picking up a few hundred bucks? So I thought this was very interesting. I then asked, "Well, how does the party get finances, how do you finance yourself?" "On the basis of dues." Remember, I told you they had a recruiting drive for a million members. Well, what they did is they aligned this with a tremendous teaching program. In other words, every one of these new people had to go to CP classes and CP school, to make sure--it was a very literate country, by the way, Czechoslovakia--that they understood, let's say, the basic course of Marxism or the direction of the government, or the kind of Czech march towards socialism that they wanted in Czechoslovakia. So they assigned a whole number of people as teachers. I said, "Well, how do you pay them?" They then explained the following to me, which I thought was interesting. They could produce their newspaper for roughly a quarter of a cent. It was a very small paper, limited by the amount of ink and the amount of paper and the amount of labor and the amount of printing presses that they had. But they couldn't sell it for less than a penny because there's no currency lower than a penny, so they made an enormous amount of money by selling the newspapers. And of

course, it was a very popular newspaper in that part of Bohemia, which was western Bohemia, where Pilsen was located. I got all this from discussing with the party, that this is how they got the money to run the party as well as to have a relatively large number of teachers teaching these new recruits that were coming into the party at that time. I had forgotten to tell you these stories in the other parts of this interview, around this proposal for the recruiting drive. Finally, another humorous aspect. As I said, all troops were ordered out on December 1. That included Russian troops as well. I was in this transient hotel for field-grade officers only. So the night of the first, the morning of the first, I see a group of army officers that were staying at the hotel, all of them wearing side arms, that is, guns. Now, this is not procedural in the United States Army. The American Army, as distinct from other armies, never went around armed in noncombat areas. But these guys are all armed. I said, "Why are you guys armed like this?" He says, "We're going to the frontier where we're lining up with the Russians, about twenty-six miles away, and we're going to see that they leave." I said, "What are you going to do, take on the whole Russian army with the few little guns you have?" "Well, we're going there to protect ourselves, because we don't know what's going to happen." So about three hours later I saw them come back. I said, "What happened?" "Well, they left two days ago." It was just that stupid. I thought I would tell you one other thing. The army had a very good policy of allowing furloughs at that time; in other words, you could go to any place you wanted to go. While I never went, I did take advantage of their organized trips to Prague. Prague, you know, is the main capital and center of Czechoslovakia. What you would do is you would get in a truck--it was only about an hour away, maybe thirty-five or forty miles into Prague--you were then picked up by members of their committee called the American-Czech Friendship Society, which mostly was very young people who were desirous of learning English, that was their main drive. They would take groups of us to organized tours. Unfortunately, the first place you were taken to was where you went into the black market. Now, the black market, you have to figure it this way, here's a huge army from the Soviet Union with money but no things. Absolutely poverty-stricken. On the other hand, you had in the American army people who were loaded with all kinds of commodities, whether it's clothes, whether it's shoes, whether it's fountain pens, whether it's wristwatches. So the minute you walked into this black market you were besieged by dozens of Russian soldiers, you know,

anything you were willing to sell, the shirt off of your back. And the amount of money was no problem, they just shoved your pockets full of money.

FURMANOVSKY:

Czech currency?

DOBBS:

The same currency we were paid. So that was the first thing we did. They took us to places like the castle, the castle wall, that is. But it's very interesting. They had this huge wall protecting the castle that had been built a thousand years before, where they had soldiers living in the wall. They showed these little teeny houses where the soldiers and their families lived, protecting the wall. They took us to the old synagogue. The "new" synagogue--There's an old "new" synagogue in Prague. The "new" part is 1,300 years old. In other words, it's one of the oldest Jewish synagogues in the country. Then they took us to the movie studios where Prague had its film industry, a beautiful setting by the Moldau River. Then, they would take us to see various other parts of the city, especially where construction was going on to repair some of the war damage, which wasn't too heavy in Prague. The only thing is that you had to be out of town at the end of the day, because the Russians didn't want Americans wandering around, even though they were armed and we weren't. (Russian soldiers were armed all the time.) But anyway, I got a chance to see Prague, I went there two or three times, and it was always very interesting to talk to these young people and to see the city. When I left Pilsen, as I say, with the Twenty-second Corps, 140th Company, I still had very low points. So I was transferred to a couple of other outfits, I even forget the names of them, and spent some time in some cities in Germany. One was in Augsburg. The thing that struck me more than anything else--this was a huge military establishment. It probably was a major training center--there was not a pane of glass broken in that huge military establishment. Augsburg was a center of the aircraft industry for the German military, the Wehrmacht. There was destruction there, but in this huge military establishment not a pane of glass was broken. It's really one of those things that makes you wonder what the hell was our policy relative to bombing? And I can tell you that this was true. I stayed there for over a month in these big barracks at Augsburg, although we had no military responsibilities whatsoever. We were simply waiting for a ship

to go home. I went to one or two other cities in Germany for I guess, oh, five or six weeks. So from December, January, February, I wandered around Germany and finally landed in Le Havre, France, oh, I guess it was the beginning of March or the end of February.

FURMANOVSKY:

'Forty-six.

DOBBS:

Yeah, that's it, the end of '46. That's right. And there we hung around this camp for about fifteen days. It was made up of thousands and thousands of American soldiers waiting for ships to take them home. The only interesting thing there, other than waiting, was a character that I ran into. Also indicative of something that I think is the kind of thing that you hear about in the newspapers today of graft and corruption. I ran into a guy who was a first sergeant and we were both--we were the joint first sergeants of the group we were with--acting first sergeants. I, of course, was in personnel and he was a regular first sergeant. He had been the first sergeant of an ordnance company which dealt with the weapons and the fixing of weapons. This guy had thousands of dollars on him, based on weapons that he had sold. Repaired, sold to, well, not to the American army, I can assure you. This guy was a real operator. I remember he asked me to go into business with him. Well, I'm not a businessman. What he did was he would walk through the entire camp at Le Havre waiting to go home, where there would be people from the city selling perfume. He would say, "I don't want a bottle, I'll buy up your whole trunkload of perfume." Well, he must have spent about \$15,000 buying perfume. Because everytime there was anyone selling perfume, he'd buy the whole bunch.

FURMANOVSKY:

Where would he put it?

DOBBS:

Well, that's the whole point. He would hire guys to protect it. We were living in a, at that time it was like these Nissen huts. You know, these half-shell huts made from aluminum. They were like the barracks. Nissen huts, I think they

were called. And he hired guys to protect this load of perfume. Now, before you got on a ship to go home, you went through the process of changing what foreign money you had into American money. Of course that was one of the biggest jokes of the whole war. They had you sign statements as to where you got money, how much did you get for wages, how much did you spend, how much did you win in a crap game. And of course, you're supposed to report this religiously in a currency-control passbook. When you got to the point of exchanging the money they simply threw the passbook away. That's typical of executives planning a plan, and then leaving it to corporals to carry it out. So you change your money into American money The moment we got on the ship, he sent these guys out that he had protecting the money, runners through the entire ship. I think there was some 8,000 soldiers. I think it was the Queen Mary, but I'm not sure, because you never got up to see anything because you were down in the hold all day long, for the entire six days of the trip. He sold all of this perfume for American money, made himself a fortune. And here's me, a poor businessman who didn't go into business with him. But that was a killer. We finally landed in Oakland and then went to a camp, which I believe was in Marysville, California, and went through the process of getting demobilized.

FURMANOVSKY:

Just having seen not too long ago John Huston's film *Let There Be Light*, about returning World War II veterans and having to adjust back to the United States, or having just seen *The Best Years of Our Lives*-- In other words, what I'm saying is what kind of attitude was there among the men on the boat? Did you find a lot of people who were very disturbed, who had been in combat situations? What sort of--?

DOBBS:

Well, I don't really recall. My own feeling is that many of them were in the same position as I was. There weren't many combat veterans by that time because of the very, very low point status. So I really can't give you a picture. I did not see Huston's picture, but I don't recall anything. I'll tell you the truth, I was on KP most of the time. In other words, well, the time that you spent on these transport ships coming home, frankly, was standing in line to get something to eat. You stood in line for hours to get breakfast, you know, the

lines snaked through this entire ship. No sooner did you do that, you gulped your breakfast down, stood in line to have lunch. Now, the lunch on the British ship, where they only served twice a day, was only an apple--to live up to the American regulation of three meals a day. See, then you stood in line for supper. I don't know if the food is good or bad, I've forgotten. But I was on KP most of the time; not because of any punishment, but because the group I was with was made to do KP. They did it by company. So I really don't know what the attitude was. I only recall one thing, and that was going from New Jersey, going from the ship to New Jersey to the camp we were at-- I forget the name of it, either [Camp] Dix or something like that. And that was that the soldiers were just amazed at seeing buildings standing. Because this was something you did not see in Europe very much. We just crowded around the windows to see the fact that here was a country to come back to with absolutely no scars. The other thing, of course, was that on the docks, most of the men got sick as soon as they drank a glass of milk, because you didn't have milk at all the time you were in Europe. You know, the Red Cross was there handing out milk and donuts. I don't even think they had a band playing when we came back, because I didn't come back until March of 1946. Very-low-point man, well, probably the lowest. And I don't recall, I can't answer that question about what the attitudes were. I don't even remember talking to people about it. Just, let's go home, let's go home. We waited several days to get an airplane to take us to the West Coast. They took soldiers. The policy was to take them as close as they could from where they were inducted. Because the policy in the army was that if you got inducted in San Pedro, and they took you to Marysville, you got five cents a mile for the distance between Marysville and San Pedro. So the policy was to take people as close as they could to where they were inducted. In other words, the airplane that I was on was all people coming from California. The other thing was when we landed in that camp in New Jersey, there was little or no discipline. The only thing that I recall was, I went in to New York to see my sister [Lillian Goldstein] a couple of times. But I don't remember any noteworthy things there, except people hollering at me "Where are you going?" and "You're liable to stop us from going home." Just nonsense. I couldn't stop anybody from going home. If I miss the plane, I miss the plane. I'll take the next one. What difference does it make? So, we landed in Oakland, then to Marysville, then I went into San Francisco. My first concern in San Francisco, of course, was connecting back up with the people that I

knew. I think there was one other thing that I really-- I don't remember exactly what happened. But I think that while I was still waiting in New Jersey to go home that I went to the party office. And I had to talk there with people that I knew, who were now leaders of the Communist Party, most of whom I knew as Young Communist League members. I had not made up my mind, but I thought very definitely of not going back to being a Communist Party functionary.

FURMANOVSKY:

Really?

DOBBS:

Yes. That was my first thought. In other words, while thinking about what are you going to do after the war. Well, I hadn't thought too much about going back to school because, as I told you, I was a very poor student. But I thought that I would not go back as an organizer. I honestly felt that. Not that in any way I didn't have the same enthusiasm from the party that I've always had. But I knew that, of course, it had to be the party. In other words, it wasn't the Young Communist League; I was already thirty-four years old. So then I went to the party office, and there I got the shock of my life. That, as a result of the [Jacques] Duclos letter, the party literally was shattered. It was a process of rebuilding. The way they put it to me is, "You just can't leave at this time. You've put in so much, from 1934 as a full-time functionary, from 1934 or '35, until now. You've just come back off of a leave of absence, where you had these experiences in the army. You just cannot desert us now. You can go anyplace you want." In other words, you could be a district organizer in Michigan or Pennsylvania, any place. Well, I wanted to go home, that's what I want. My home is Los Angeles. My home is California. "California needs you too!" Well, I felt that if that were true--which I examined when I got home-- then I certainly would try to be a party organizer again.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you explain why this letter, the Duclos letter, would have shattered the party. I mean apart from--

DOBBS:

Well, what it did, you see, is that it brought out all the differences that existed. In other words, those that, let's say, didn't agree with [Earl] Browder then made a whole attack on what the party had been doing for the last three or four years. Those that agreed with Browder became very defensive. They had the battle of the quotations. In other words, which book are you reading, and which page of the book are you reading. It was just a very bitter factional struggle that took place. And people who lose usually quit.

FURMANOVSKY:

But there wasn't a mass exodus, was there, at that time?

DOBBS:

I believe there was. I believe there was. I really have no-- All I know, is when I got back to California, and they asked me what I wanted to do, and I wanted to go back to Los Angeles. "Well, Los Angeles doesn't want you at this point"-- for reasons that I never could fully understand-- "but you would do a great thing if you would go to San Jose." San Jose was fifty miles or so from San Francisco. There was no party. You had to start as if it was 1919. Now, there was a residue of people who had been in the party. There was a residue of people who had been involved and continued to be involved in one kind of struggle around one issue or another, but as far as a party organization is concerned, there wasn't any. So this convinced me that the party was shattered. When I came back to San Francisco, I began going around with my wife Ada [Martin Dobbs], which I'll go to later. But, I didn't stay there long. I just stayed two or three days, and then went to Los Angeles and bummed around for a month before I decided what to do. They begged me to go back up north, and I went to San Jose a month later, some time in April. I was considered a high-paid person at that time. I think I was getting \$28 week. Later, I'll have a whole discussion about the economics of being a Communist Party functionary. But the party was shattered with a very bitter struggle, and around the most esoteric things, you know, the things that the Communist Party always concerned itself with. Is it a right danger or is it a left danger? Are you being a leftist? You're being a revisionist. You're being a rightist. It was pretty bitter.

FURMANOVSKY:

Where did you stand, if anywhere?

DOBBS:

Well, if anything, I stood with the majority of the party. In other words, I did not-- You see, I found myself in a very funny position. I wasn't involved in the debates. I wasn't involved either in what the Browder position fully meant in terms of liquidation of the party. I wasn't involved with that at all. Nor was I involved in the big debates that took place in '45. I was concerned primarily, and I guess, had I been involved, I probably would have been on the side of Browder. But it was clear to me at the end of the war--and don't forget it was very soon after the end of the war--that the whole question of the incorrectness of any kind of alliance that won the war still being operative, i.e., unity between the Soviet Union, United States, Great Britain, and China, that's gone. That's gone. There's no such way of maintaining an alliance. Secondly, the huge strike waves that swept the country at the end of the war made very clear that there was going to be continuation of the class struggle, not a doing away with it. So in the long run, I probably agreed with the majority of the Communist Party at that time. And that is the necessity to reconstitute the party; the necessity for a party to be involved in issues; and that the party that would be necessary to have a grounding again in Marxist thought. That frankly, was I think what determined me to do what the party asked me to do, and that is to go to San Jose. That whole period was very strange for me because there were some people that wanted me to be the head of the party in L.A. and take part in a plot to remove the president of the L.A. party, and I would have no part of that.

FURMANOVSKY:

That was that time?

DOBBS:

That was at that time Nemmy [Ned] Sparks, which I'll go into later when I got back to Los Angeles. There was a time when, you know, I still hadn't made up my mind. As a matter of fact, I'd even decided to go back to my original name of Benjamin Isgur. I thought it was a phony business that might have been true in 1931, where it was the sort of style to change your name. It probably came about from two factors. One, the excessive activities of the Red Squad of Los

Angeles, where you're liable to get arrested at any moment. Why give them a right name? And the second thing is I had an uncle [Isaac Isgur] who was very much afraid that his name would be involved with communist activity, so I took the name that Eleanor [Milder], who I was married to at that time, who had taken the name of Dobbs. Just made up a name, that's all. It had no meaning, other than not using your right name, that's all. Anyway, I'd even decided to go back to using my real name. Ada and I were married with the name Isgur. We named our first daughter under the old name of Isgur, we named her Louise Isgur [later changed to Dobbs]. Now, I just found it impossible, however, to drop the name of Dobbs. All my army records were in the name of Dobbs, all my political history was in the name of Dobbs, everything I had ever done was in the name of Dobbs. Then finally, actually during the Smith Act, right after the Smith Act trial, I had my name changed legally. You know, which was a purely perfunctory thing. My attorney [Leo J. Branton, Jr.] and I went into court, and told the judge we wanted to change my name. And he said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, I've lived under this name all these years, and I want to change it." Then I said, "As a matter of fact, it was the name I was arrested and just convicted under the Smith Act. I'm not running away from that. That was the name under which I insisted that the trial be held." So he granted it without any further argument. But that was in 1952 or '53. Anyway, I came back to San Francisco, went to Los Angeles for a month, had discussions with the party people there, and decided to go back to party activity and party work. I went to the district organizer, a fellow by the name of Bill [William] Schneiderman, who I had tremendous respect for. They asked me whether I would go to San Jose to be the party organizer, which I did. I found the party completely smashed. But there were two things that were going on at that time that made it a very important center. First, San Jose had always been a major cannery center, and it was one of the two or three major areas, together with Oakland and possibly Fresno, of the struggle between the [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters and the progressive, I believe at that time it was the United Cannery and Agricultural Workers of America. The old UCAPAWA [United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America] they used to call it. There was a very big struggle between these two unions. It was involving maybe 50,000 workers as to which union would have the right to represent them. And it was an NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] election. So it was important to have the party in such

a place and to have the party in such a campaign. Secondly, there was a campaign, if I remember correctly, to fight for the legalization and continuation of one of the presidential decrees of President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt, and that was the establishment of fair employment hiring practices, or something of that nature. In other words, to do away with hiring on racial preference, but to guarantee the right of black workers and Mexican workers to have jobs.

FURMANOVSKY:

And the canneries, were they predominantly Hispanic or Mexican?

DOBBS:

I really don't remember.

FURMANOVSKY:

Because I know that Dorothy Healey was--

DOBBS:

The canneries were very indigenous to the community. In other words, because it was seasonal many people who worked in other industries, housewives, things like that, became cannery workers for the few months of the cannery season. These were primarily fruit canneries. Now what did you say about Dorothy?

FURMANOVSKY:

When she first joined the party, that was one of the first strikes it was involved in, in 1931, in cannery plants in San Jose.

DOBBS:

In San Jose?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes.

DOBBS:

I really don't remember. Isn't it funny? I don't remember. All I do know is that the main staff of people that I worked with, in trying to create more of a

campaign and create interest and involve a few people in the party, there were no Mexicans. So the point I'm trying to make is I was asked to go to San Jose because of these two major things that were going on. Now, I lived with some people who had a little business. I lived in an attic, and began to get to work to organize the party. So what are you going to do? I have a list of names of people who had been in the party, and decided to organize a class. That is, no people were ready to go to a Communist Party meeting. So I organized a class on Marxism and began to teach it. One interesting cute thing that happened at that time, and it was a lasting lesson for me, in this class of, I don't know, maybe twelve or fifteen people--it was the only thing I had in the city of San Jose--was an old machinist. And one day, I came late. I was involved in something and came late to the class. So when I walked in late, he said, "Well, an organization in which the business agent does not come on time can't be worth very much." And he walked out. I've made it my business from then on to never be late for a meeting. I don't think I've been late once to a meeting for the next fifteen to eighteen years. Because of the lesson of that machinist. But I got him back. Anyway, it was out of this class that we organized the party and took part in a couple of these campaigns. There was one very progressive union, and I will say that to this day it has remained so, as San Jose is one of the progressive bastions in terms of a council of labor unions, like the San Jose Federation of Labor, or maybe they call it the San Jose Labor Council--it always was very progressive. And it is to this day. Well, it was progressive then, too. So they were very helpful in organizing this campaign for the cannery workers; although they could not do it openly, because it was an AF of L [American Federation of Labor] setup, as opposed to the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] union. Then, of course, there was the [International Longshoremen's and] Warehousemen's Union, which was organized by Harry Bridges in '37 or '38, which had a big local in San Jose--and very progressive people led that. So that there were people to work with, in terms of an area for recruiting, as well as the carrying through of these two campaigns that I mentioned. So we reconstituted the party. One other thing was a lasting lesson to me that came up. In the middle of my being there, there was a railroad strike. I think--I'm sure it was in 1946, obviously, probably in the spring of '46. There was a national railroad strike which President Truman broke with the use of the U.S. Army. I don't remember too much about the strike, but I do remember this: We issued a very small leaflet,

maybe a quarter-page of an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven- inch sheet and got it mimeographed, saying that there was a Communist Party in San Jose, and the Communist Party in San Jose is very supportive of your struggle. Something like that. It wasn't more profound than that. I and someone else distributed those leaflets in the railroad yards. Just about that time, as part of the process of rebuilding the party, we began to organize a forum on current events. I forget whether we rented a hall or met in people's homes. I think we rented a little hall, probably the union hall that was sympathetic to us. Bill Schneiderman came down to make a speech. In the middle of the speech, in walked about twelve burly people, who I thought had come to break up the meeting. Instead, they came up to tell us that they were so proud, that they had read our leaflet, and that they welcomed the support of the Communist Party. And to show how progressive they were, in responding to Truman, they changed their party membership. They switched from being Democratic Party members to Republican Party members. The lesson there is the pervasiveness, the longstanding pervasiveness, the natural, how would you say it, false- consciousness of the American people in terms of the political setup, that there's two parties, and you're either a Democrat or a Republican. What the hell difference does it make? But the pervasiveness of this two-party system. And of course the pervasiveness continues to this day, and has made it in spite of several efforts, in which I took part in and which will come up later in this narrative, to organize a third party. You just can't break through that. But a third party has to come on the basis of major political developments and political splits, rather than the kind of new efforts that we always tried to do, whether it was in 1947 and again in 1967, and again in '77. It just doesn't happen that way.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about your experience with the teamsters? Was there violence?

DOBBS:

Not that I can recall. There might have been, but I don't recall any. But I do recall the 90 percent of their campaign was based on that the UCAPAWA was a communist-led union, and that red-baiting was the key to their campaign, and subsequent victory. Because the teamsters did win that general statewide vote. (It was throughout the state, it wasn't just San Jose.) I don't remember

the figures, although I do know that I looked into it at the time, or where the major centers were. But the UCAPAWA was pretty badly defeated. And being defeated, the cannery workers were under the jurisdiction, union-wise, of the teamsters. The teamsters built locals. And, incidentally, that struggle continues to come up over and over and over again--of the rank and file of the cannery workers against the leadership of the teamsters. Although my feeling is--I've made no study of this--unfortunately I've found that I have many lapses in my approach to research and so forth, as I don't know what's happened to the industry. Whether it's the same, whether it's changed. I do know that San Jose has changed. San Jose is now, what, the third or fourth largest city in California. It's gone through a tremendous industrial development. Very close to the Silicon Valley there. It's an altogether different operation. I stayed in San Jose for about six months. The reason, as far I can tell, why I wasn't asked to come home immediately to Los Angeles--and I wanted to, that's my home--was that the leadership of the party here was a man by the name of Nemmy Sparks. He was the chair of the party. Dorothy Healey was the secretary. I had known, of course, Dorothy from the early days of the Young Communist League. Nemmy I had never known. His party history was, I believe, in Wisconsin and in the educational department in New York. He was a brilliant man, absolutely brilliant. He saw his job mostly as thinking, reading; and Dorothy and I just ran our legs off. We did all the work. But I didn't object to that, because he was a brilliant man. And every meeting with him, to me, was--and as I said, one of my big problems was not to too heavily intellectualize in anything I was doing--to me a real eye-opener and he was a very successful organizer. There was a man who, I believe his name was Morgan, although I'm not sure, who I had met, who was the labor secretary. Morgan Hull? Could it have been Morgan Hull?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes.

DOBBS:

Yeah, he was the labor secretary, except he was in a terminal stage and lying in a hospital and dying. So Nemmy didn't want me to come to Southern California because he didn't need a new labor secretary--he had a labor secretary. Although I could have come for other things as well. But there was a

very full staff. They had a suite of about five offices on Sixth Street between Main [Street] and Spring [Street]. The party was quite strong, and he wasn't too anxious to have another person come and challenge for leadership, I guess. But anyway, when Morgan Hull got real sick, then I came to Los Angeles and found, as I said, him in a terminal stage. I went and visited him.

FURMANOVSKY:

He was a newspaperman, right?

DOBBS:

Yes. I believe he was originally a newspaperman. But he was the labor secretary of the party. I did not know him very well at all. But I do remember visiting him maybe two or three days before he died, and him saying, "Ben, you got to do everything possible to help the [Conference of] Studio [Unions] strike." So this was my first step, my first experience as the labor secretary. Other than my early experiences in the trade union movement, which I had described to you, other than the very generalized experiences with the Needle [Trades] Workers Industrial [Union], or the very general and loose activities around the [Los Angeles] Milkers [Union] strike, I didn't know particularly anything about the labor movement, except insofar as my reading had led me to it, or my general experiences or knowledge of Marxism, or you might even say Marxism-Leninism. But I was willing to take the job and was willing to try. And I came in and my first experience was with the strike of the studio workers that was then going on against all the major studios. I believe I told you my father [Michael Isgur] had been a studio worker.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes.

DOBBS:

He was a painter. The studio strike at that time, was led primarily by the painters local [International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades, Local 644]. It was headed by a man by the name of Herb [Herbert K.] Sorrell, who was the president of the painters local, who built the Conference of Studio Unions. Now, the Conference of Studio Unions comprised mostly the--how shall I say it?--the people directly concerned with the building of the sets and

things of that kind. In other words, it was the machinists, the electricians, the painters, the carpenters. The Conference of Studio Unions did not involve the technicians, the cameramen, the makers of films, none of that. All that was in the leadership of an organization called the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, IATSE, something like that. Now, there's no question that this was a gangster-led union. There's no question that these were undemocratic unions. There's no question, however, that it had the majority of the studio workers under their jurisdiction. Sorrell felt that these people were given a raw deal, which they were. Now, the Conference of Studio Unions had two interesting aspects to it. Do you have to change the tape?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes.

1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO

SEPTEMBER 3, 1987

DOBBS:

The Conference of Studio Unions had two interesting aspects to it. For one thing, its unions that it had all had sister unions, with whom it had fraternal relations in other aspects of the building trades. In other words, it was part of the Building Trades Council. This meant that they had allies throughout the city in the rest of the labor movement in the city. Secondly, it had not only aspects of the other industries, but it became a very influential force in the council of the AFL. As a matter of fact, it became a very progressive force, and it led some struggles for progressive leadership and the change of policies. Now, I wasn't too familiar with that. All I'm telling you is these were facts--that it had that kind of influence in the labor movement as a whole, and particularly in the AFL council. The fight, essentially, was a jurisdictional fight. In other words, who shall control the majority of the studio unions? I don't remember any aspects of elections or anything of that kind. It simply was a mass of picket lines, and it had been going on for several months before I came to the city. Before I came in. My first meeting was with a group of people that were involved in the strike; whether they were leaders of the strike, I don't know. But my main concern was that I could see no way in which the strike could be possibly won. For one thing, it did not have the

complete support of the majority of the workers in the industry. Secondly, the opposition showed a complete tie-up between the owners of the industry--the producers and, of course, the reactionary leadership of the IATSE. Third, as a part of the AF of L, from its most corrupt relationships from the executive committee down, the executive council down, it [the IATSE] had the support of the majority of the leaders of the AF of L. That was even in this area. And fourth, is that any union like, let's say, the film technicians that lined themselves up with the Conference of Studio Unions--and some of them did--were immediately split between people who supported the Conference and people who wanted to stay with their old unions. So that the guilds, for instance, had that same problem. Many of them could not endorse the strike; otherwise they would go down the drain too, or have these splits in the union. So I took the position: I don't know how this strike could be won. And I said, therefore, to me, the main concern was how do you protect and maintain the unions. Because if you lose a strike like this, you're liable to lose the unions. Secondly, you're liable to lose all the progressive factors that led to this union being such a progressive force in the Central Labor Council. So I took the position that our people in the unions had to do everything possible to have leadership calling off of this strike--finding some form to settle it. To get out of the situation.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you just reiterate what the strike was over specifically.

DOBBS:

As far as I know, it was for who would control the membership of the people who worked in the industry. I could see no other issue.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who was striking against whom, then?

DOBBS:

Basically, it was the Conference of Studio Unions striking against the IATSE, and its alliance of the studio owners and the rest of the AFL, for the Conference of Studio Unions to represent the industry against the producers.

FURMANOVSKY:

On the grounds that the IATSE was corrupt and so on?

DOBBS:

Exactly. Exactly. Now, there were stages at which some discussions were possible to put an end to this strike. But Sorrell was determined not to put an end to it. Now, as I told you, my father was in that union, the painters local. He was in the union when the union really first began to be organized in 1937 and '38. And while he was not an active man as such, and I don't remember him ever being arrested or anything of that nature, he did take part in the strikes of that period. He also, at that time, had won his twenty-five-year membership in the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators, [and Paperhangers of America]. This meant, of course, a certain knowledge. But anyway, Herb Sorrell knew him. Well, I had, through various friends in the industry--and we had a lot of people in the industry, I would say in the excess of two hundred--had said I would like to speak to Sorrell. He took the position that he wouldn't speak to any leader of the Communist Party, but he would speak to Mike's son--that's me. My father's name was Mike. So I had a meeting with him. And I'll tell you, it was a horror to listen to this man. For one thing, he would scratch his head and look at me and say, "Well, why are you raising these questions in the course of the strike? I'm just a dumb painter. I don't know anything what you're talking about. Danger to the union? Of course we might lose, but oh, I love to hear the cracking of bones on a scab's legs." I looked at him with horror! What the hell kind of policy is that? To be led by a man who scratches his head and says, "I'm just a dumb painter." You know. Secondly, he mentioned something in the course of the thing that just struck me as very peculiar. It was, "I was playing golf with Pat Casey the other day." And Pat Casey was the head of the negotiators for the employers! So who the hell plays golf with the head of the opposition. So I began to have some real misgivings around Herb. Towards the end of the strike, Sorrell was presumably kidnapped. I remember helping to organize a fairly successful meeting at the Olympic Auditorium in which he emerged from his kidnapping, that he escaped his kidnappers so that he could speak at the mass meeting. The thing just seemed phony to me from beginning to end. And I began to openly talk about ending this strike. Anything anyone could possibly do to end the strike. The party trade unionists had been absolutely committed to this strike. Absolutely committed.

FURMANOVSKY:

The party trade unionists in the--

DOBBS:

Both the trade unionists in the industry and the rest of the party organization. As I tell you, Morgan Hull, the day he's dying, he says to me, "Please, do everything possible to help win this strike." And I took the position that it can't be won. It just cannot be won and you've got to get out of it. So every opportunity where there was a way out was not taken, to where it ended up in an absolute chaos and absolute defeat for the Conference of the Studio Unions.

FURMANOVSKY:

There was a lot of violence outside the Burbank Studios--

DOBBS:

Oh, there were thousands of people arrested. And the arrests were peculiar, in that the paddy wagons were lined up and the workers would just march into the paddy wagons.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you describe a little bit more of what you remember, in terms of what it looked like.

DOBBS:

Well, I don't remember really, because I came at the very-- I was close to the very tail end. All I know is that it was impossible to get full support. We didn't fill the Olympic Auditorium. (That's the fight arena there.) There were already disgruntled voices: "Where are we going?" The splits that had taken place in the one union that finally did support the strike, that was the film technicians, all these people there immediately lost their jobs. I don't really--I never saw the big picket lines, the arrest lines. They took place before I got there, all these massive arrests.

FURMANOVSKY:

I was under the impression that Herb Sorrell was fairly close to the Communist Party?

DOBBS:

Well, he might very well have been. All I'm telling you is that what I know. Namely, "No, I won't speak to a Communist Party official, but I will speak to Mike's son." That I know. Now, he was close to the party in that he was looked upon as generally a very progressive, honest trade unionist--and in all likelihood he was. But, after all, he was scratching his head and saying "a dumb painter," which he probably was! So he's just one of these enigmas. I don't know. I haven't heard of him since. In other words, I don't know what he's doing now, I don't know what he did after the strike. All I know is the party and progressive forces were wiped out. The older workers like my father--wiped out. The progressive forces in the Central Labor Council--wiped out. It just swept the progressive movement straight out of the AF of L here in Los Angeles. And the AF of L, with all due respects, was at least ten times bigger than the CIO ever was in this area. This city was and is an AF of L town.

FURMANOVSKY:

It wasn't still led by [John W.] Buzzell, was it?

DOBBS:

No, Buzzell--that's one of the things about the movement led by Sorrell to establish a progressive wing in the Central Labor Council, they got rid of Buzzell.

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, did they?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. When I was a worker, Buzzell would come to our union meetings. You know, he'd cough, "Oh, I do so much for labor. Why don't I get rest?" He'd give us that kind of speech all the time. And I don't remember too much about the inner politics. But, no, they kicked him out in an election.

FURMANOVSKY:

And there was what, a little more moderate leadership?

DOBBS:

Yes. I forget who it was, and I took no part in it, because I was mostly concerned with the terrible course of this strike. Actually, what was really bad about it, is that I sort of became known as "Ben the strikebreaker" among my best friends. You know, all of our comrades who were working the union. Now, it so happened that after a half a year of examination of the strike in the CP is that my position to try to end the strike was absolutely upheld. Absolutely upheld. But it's one thing to be saying "Yeah, I told you so," which I never did. But that's not-- It doesn't help very much when you see a whole movement wiped out over an industry. And I'm not talking just about communists. I'm talking about those that associated themselves with the progressive policies of the Conference of Studio Unions, which was destroyed, absolutely destroyed.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you have any theories as to why such experienced trade unionists in Los Angeles would have made such a decision to go with the strike that was unwinnable, and you were able to see it right away?

DOBBS:

Yes. You see, if with a small base of a Conference of Studio Unions you're able to accomplish so much of progressive education and progressive development, just think of how much you could do if we had the entire industry! It was just that simple. We think we can win! Now, this problem of thinking we can win, you know, it always leads to problems, because it always leads to an underestimation of who you're fighting. Let me give you another example. I used to meet with a group of carpenters who were CP members. They were very influential among other progressive carpenters. This group won an election in one local union. So they used to say, "One local union, it's the biggest local union. Then, by that time, it will be the biggest union in the district council. From winning the union we can win the district council. Then winning the district council of carpenters, we can win the district council of the building trades. And from winning the district council of the building trades, we can win the carpenters union. And by winning the carpenters union-- By gosh, we'll be in control of the labor movement!" But it doesn't happen that way.

FURMANOVSKY:

It's almost like a pyramid structure.

DOBBS:

Well, but that was the-- I honestly went through a discussion like that. I said, "You guys got to protect your base." Sure enough, one day they went a little bit too far in some progressive demands, and the international union stepped in and they expelled half a dozen people. From then on, you're fighting a defensive battle. It was a completely undemocratic thing to do. We were undoubtedly on the right side. But you can't go to court. Now, why can't you go to court? No court will touch a union problem unless, quote, "You have exhausted all other avenues for relief." So ten years later when you go to a convention, whether you win or lose, it's too late anyway. The workers that got fired had to go look for other jobs or had to go do other things. But the point I'm trying to make is that people have this simplistic approach, especially to things like inner-union struggles. That all you've got to do is you capture the biggest this and it will help you capture the biggest that, and before you know it, you're leading the whole country. It doesn't work that way.

FURMANOVSKY:

Weren't the gangsters in the IATSE eventually kicked out, [George E.] Browne and [William] Bioff?

DOBBS:

Browne and Bioff, I think, were eventually indicted in something. I really don't remember.

FURMANOVSKY:

But it was later. It was after the strike?

DOBBS:

Later, of course, it was after the struggle. Well, the big publicity, of course, was the gangster control and the absolutely miserable conditions under which these other people worked, though they were highly skilled people. As compared, let's say, with the-- You see, another thing that happened was that with the higher wages won by this Conference of Studio Unions, it had an

effect of raising wages in the entire Building Trades Council. So that it isn't that they did it on the basis of purely gaining more dues; it was based on raising the whole wage level. If you're paying studio painters, let's say, 20 percent more than painters everywhere else, the painters everywhere else are going to get that 20 percent too. So that it had an effect on raising wages everywhere through the entire industry. Plus, an initiative of organizing. And don't forget, arising out of, you know, the scab town of L.A. and here you have a war that's created the conditions for organization. There was a major spurt of organization through the entire city, plus the fact that the CIO came to town, you know, things like that.

FURMANOVSKY:

What did you find when you came back to L.A. in terms of what had happened during the war, war workers moving in and the city expanding?

DOBBS:

Well, I don't remember having too many observations about that. All I do know is this, that you could just see the tremendous growth in the city in the six years that I was away. I was away from Los Angeles for six years: four years in the army, a year and a half when I was in San Francisco before the war, six months after the war when I lived in San Jose. So I was away from L.A. for six years, and the outstanding thing, of course, was the tremendous growth of the city. Secondly, the growth of its industrial sector, its industrial growth. We never foresaw that it would be a major automobile center, a major rubber center, a major steel-fabricating center, a major furniture center, and, of course, the major aircraft center. The Los Angeles area became, next to the Chicago/Detroit complex, the biggest center of industry in the United States.

FURMANOVSKY:

And it wasn't, you wouldn't have considered it a scab town in 1946? Enough had changed?

DOBBS:

Well, except this. You see, the only thing that was really solidly organized were those that were organized on the basis of victories elsewhere, together with victories here. In other words, if the UAW [United Automobile Workers]

signed a contract, it affected UAW plants here. If the [United] Steel Workers [of America] signed a contract, it affected steel plants here, and so on down the line. So that most of the unions, at least that's my perception, that had some strength in terms of organization here were those that were based primarily in the CIO unions; with the exception of waterfront. With the exception of longshoremen. Ships would not do their main hiring here. They did that in San Francisco. In spite of the growth of the unions what you found was that L.A. was still not an organized city. What was the percentage of needle trades workers, an industry involving 90,000 or a 100,000 workers? It never went beyond 12 or 14 percent. What was the percentage of culinary workers, the percentage of carpenters, painters? It was very small. So that you had to-- Well, I don't say it was the open scab town that it was in the thirties. It certainly was not an organized city. It's major strikes were mostly by the CIO unions. There was a big strike by UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America], and then, of course, the aircraft strike which I'm not too familiar with. I just came too late for some of those things to really play any kind of role.

FURMANOVSKY:

Before you talk a little bit more about what you did as labor secretary, why don't you tell me little bit more about the party functionaries. Nemmy Sparks was--

DOBBS:

Nemmy Sparks was the chair. Dorothy Healey was the organizational secretary. I was the labor secretary. Then there was Pettis Perry. Pettis Perry was one of those very interesting phenomena of what the party could do for people. If I remember correctly, he came into the party almost as an illiterate field-worker, and he became quite an intellectual, quite an intellectual force. I later think he made some very fundamental mistakes and fundamental errors, which led to a very disastrous period in the party. I'll go into it in its proper time.

FURMANOVSKY:

Related to the white chauvinism.

DOBBS:

Yes, that's correct.

FURMANOVSKY:

Among some of the other people who were around at the time.

DOBBS:

Then there was Rose Chernin [Kusnitz], she was the educational director of the party at the time. And later, she became the head of the Committee for the Protection of the Foreign-Born, which became a very big organization because of the attack on the foreign-born under what was known as the Walter McCarran Act [Internal Security Act, 1950]. Incidentally, the Walter McCarran Act was just used this year, after a hiatus of ten or twelve years, against a group of Arabs here in Los Angeles.

FURMANOVSKY:

You had Emil Freed.

DOBBS:

And Emil. I don't remember what his job was at the time, but Emil was very active, and he became-- He was very active in a machinist strike, or a struggle of the machinists union [the International Association of Machinists] for democracy, as an aircraft worker during the war. When I met him, I think he was a functionary for the Civil Rights Congress, but I'm not sure of that. I had met him before, of course, and actually his family was friends of my family when we were still kids. Emil was a fine man. He later built the institution known as the Southern California Library for [Social Studies and Research], something like that.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now what was the status then of [Philip] "Slim" Connelly at this time?

DOBBS:

At that point, Slim was the secretary-treasurer of the CIO council.

FURMANOVSKY:

Los Angeles CIO?

DOBBS:

Los Angeles CIO Council. But he also was, I think, on the national executive board of the [American] Newspaper Guild. And he also was an official, he might have even been president, for a while of the state CIO.

FURMANOVSKY:

And he was not--

DOBBS:

Slim was a very, very smart man, and he was a very capable organizer. The council was one of the most democratic and far-reaching councils in terms of progressive policies in the country, and it undertook all kinds of issues. Including, I think, [issues] during the war--which I'm not familiar with--[such as] helping to build the Labor's Non-Partisan League, which became a very influential, independent force for progressive democratic politics. But I'm not familiar with that at all. I'm sure that others have spoken about that.

FURMANOVSKY:

But Slim Connelly was not officially a party member, was he?

DOBBS:

Well, he was not officially known as a party member, let me put it that way. But everyone knew where his sympathies lay. I think at that time he was a member of the party. The same might be said for John Howard Lawson. A very famous film director whose books are still very influential in the industry; that is, in acting and directing, and that kind of stuff. He represented the cultural workers in the party, which I had no relations with whatsoever. Slim, of course, I worked with daily on the basis of labor secretary, because he was the head of the CIO council. I was very fond of Slim. Great guy. Let's see, who else? There was a young woman by the name of Wallace, but I don't remember what she did. There was someone by the name of Ann, and I don't remember what their function was at all. People ran the office. They had a big office there. They had a big library, which later became the basis of the Emil Freed library [Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research], you know the library--!'11 go into that later. But I took over the job of labor secretary pretty quickly.

FURMANOVSKY:

And the **People's World** at that time, they were probably at its peak circulation?

DOBBS:

Um, I imagine it had a big circulation. It's office-- Slim, at that time, let's see--

FURMANOVSKY:

He took it over a little later--

DOBBS:

A fellow by the name of, I don't remember. Oh, Sid Burke was the Los Angeles bureau head of the **People's World**. Al Richmond, of course, was the chief editor in San Francisco, together with the man who took a very heavy part in the factional fight, a fellow by the name of Vern Smith, an old Wobbly. And George-- I think his last name was George--

FURMANOVSKY:

Harrison George?

DOBBS:

Harrison George was the editor. I think Al describes this pretty much in his book [**A Long View from the Left**]. Anyway, Burke was the editor when I came to L.A. Of course, I would say one of the main functions of the party was the maintenance of the financial needs--the meeting of the financial needs of the paper, which is just tremendous, somewhere in the neighborhood maybe of a quarter of a million dollars. Alice Sparks, Nemmy's wife, was the circulation and finance director in L.A.

FURMANOVSKY:

But it was a very important tool, wasn't it?

DOBBS:

Well, yes. Just like a newspaper is an important tool for any organization or any movement. As small as some of them are, at least a newspaper becomes a very important tool. Well, the **People's World [PW]** was the main, open

expression of CP policy. It later became a very important one, in that a woman by the name of Sadie Duroshkin came to town and developed a whole network of street stands which made the PW an open public paper. In other words, I think it had a slogan, "Read the other side." You know, something like that. Let me say a few things about the movement in L.A. First of all, there was a strong party organization. It was based, at that time, on the organization of sections. Now, some of the sections had full-time people. If I remember correctly, there was a fellow by the name of [Alvin] Averbuck that was head of the Eastside section. My wife Ada became the secretary of the Eastside section. Then there was a cultural section. Then there was a South Central area, I forget who was the organizer, but Perry spent most of his time there. Then there was a Harbor organizer. I've forgotten most of the names. Frankly, I just don't remember them, when I got back here in '46. The second thing, the party had over the years developed a network of supporting organizations. Now, many of them were led by communists, although by no means exclusively. The largest of which was known as the IWO. The IWO was the International Workers Order, which during the McCarthy days was destroyed by the insurance commission in the state of New York, which took away their right to supply life insurance. They grew up mostly in the old days. They were in the fights with the Jewish people, with the Arbeiter Ring, you know, the Workers Circle. So they became an independent organization in the late twenties. But they actually began to grow as a federation of ethnic and language groups. In other words, they had a Russian society, a Hungarian society, and a Greek society. Every ethnic group you could think of had their individual societies. They became the IWO. Now, the biggest section, of course, was the Jewish People's Fraternal Order. And then they had a very strong women's division, called the Emma Lazarus Section, or division, I forget what they called it--they're very sensitive about that--made up of women, named after the American poet Emma Lazarus. That is a very important network. I remember one year, I must have spoken twice a week as a public speaker to these various groups. Secondly, it had a certain amount of resources which were open to us, places for meetings, things of that kind, which don't come easy. There were some things about our Smith Act trial which I'll tell you about later with all these ethnic groups. But there was a wide network. Secondly, there was an organization called the International Labor Defense. I think that's where Emil [Freed] was active. Now, they, of

course, were also started in the twenties as-- Well, they started with the Sacco and Vanzetti case. But they became very instrumental in being the center of organization for our trial, for instance, which was later developed. But primarily around the defense of political prisoners. Later, it became the main instrumentality in the fight for racial equality, you know, in the struggle against white chauvinism. So there's the International Labor Defense. You know, they had a magazine of their own, called the **Labor Defender**. (

[Several organizations developed under the leadership of people of the ILD. I believe one of them was the Committee for the Protection of the Foreign-Born, an organization devoted to U.S. constitutional civil liberty guarantees; another, the Civil Rights Congress with Hursel Alexander and Emil Freed. There was also an organization that dealt with the large Mexican population--I believe it was the Congress of Spanish-speaking People. (My memory on so many details seems to be shot.) There was also the National Negro Congress. I believe many of these organizations were national in scope with L.A. local chapters.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) Before 1933 there was an organization named the Friends of the Soviet Union, which later became the basis for the American-Soviet Friendship Society, which developed after the Soviet Union was recognized. Together with these, there was what generally became known as the "progressive" unions. Now, this was most of the unions that I worked with in the course of my activities as labor secretary. Some of the elected leadership were party people. But they were progressive in the sense of their general overall political outlook. And I'm referring to unions like the UE, the ILWU. They had a communication workers union [American Communications Association]. They had, well, eleven or twelve of them. I've forgotten what they were but they included furniture workers [United Furniture Workers of America], municipal workers [United Public Workers of America]. The party at time also had considerable strength in an organization called the California Council of Democratic Clubs. This was of course the development of progressive Democratic Party developments, which arose after the Upton Sinclair campaign in '34, but which then went through the period of '38. And then I've described the building of the Young Democrats. But the CDC remained as a very powerful organization then, with some influence from the Communist

Party, that later became areas of a great struggle--whether or not to continue with the progressive wing in the Democratic Party or to build an independent party. So the party was not isolated. It had avenues through which it could bring out policy, express its policy, organize activities on some major issues. One of the very earliest things that we did was promote the whole idea of Negro electoral representation. We had avenues through which to project party policy. So in addition to the press, there was other avenues that were much much bigger than the Communist Party as a whole, through which, either through speaking or through education or the development of party cadre within these organizations, it was able to exercise a great deal of influence. Now, I want to give you this picture because it's this network which later became destroyed, as the main aspect of McCarthyism. Because what McCarthyism did, among other things, was draw up a list of proscribed organizations, such as the destruction of the IWO. Some groups fought it. The National Lawyers Guild fought it and won. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade fought it and won. But on the whole it had a very damaging effect on this whole structure of mass independent organizations. And there were others. Like the effort to build a national Spanish-speaking Congress, efforts to build--! forget what it was called--but they had a big building on, was it Third [Street] and Spring [Street], I think, of Latino organizations.

FURMANOVSKY:

And meanwhile, there was still the California [Senate Committee on] Un-American Activities going under [Jack B.] Tenney.

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. But that developed before the war, mostly. It had its biggest struggle around a fellow by the name of Jack Tenney, who just changed the whole character of the [Culbert L.] Olson administration, because everybody started running. Running, running, running, in fear of red-baiting. Now, I entered as labor secretary, as I say, sometime towards the end of 1946. In other words, I really started in 1947. Now, my main concern, what I did most of all, is meet with various groups of people involved in the left-led unions, as well as with CP people who were in the AF of L unions. But it was the left-led unions that gave us a better opportunity. Secondly, we had rank-and-file groups in nearly every union. For instance, we had an institution where I would meet maybe

once a month with all the elected officials of unions. Well, most of those were left-led unionists. They were willing to meet with me. Some were party members, some were not. I would meet regularly with them. We had groups at that time in auto, steel, rubber, utility (that was one of the left-led unions [Utility Workers Union of America]), communications, longshore, warehouse, electrical, fur, furniture, etc. So it was my business to meet with them. We would discuss the situation of their local union. The nature of their struggle against the boss, as well as the nature of the internal struggle--in addition, responses to major social issues of the day such as peace and justice. Because in every union, and in every organization, there's a right and a left and a center. It was always my approach [to ask] how do you create a unity, what is the basis of agreement between the left and the center, to fight the right. The right which was usually boss-controlled. So it was mostly a combination of talking to these various groups, of figuring out what to do, of how do you advance the interest of the unions. It was never my aim, working within any kind of mass work, to define any of these organizations that I had connections with, to make them into a socialist instrumentality. Now, this is a fight that went on for many many years. In other words, what's the task of a communist within a union? I always took the position that you're not going to make a socialist union. You want it to be the best instrument for the interests of the workers. A communist, therefore, is the one that most devotedly carries out the program of that union and fights democratically to increase the democracy of the union--not only of the union, but any organization. Now, let me give you an example. Later years when I was in the Peace and Freedom Party, there was a concerted effort in the Peace and Freedom Party to develop it into a socialist party. I'm just giving an example. My position was that this would be the destruction of the Peace and Freedom Party. What I was hoping for was a viable political alternative to the two-party system based on a generally accepted populist program. They were all: "How come? You're a communist, you don't want this to be a socialist organization." Well, my answer to that was, "You want a socialist organization. Join the SWP [Socialist Workers Party] or join the Communist Party, join the Socialist Party. There's enough socialist organizations around. But there's no viable political force on the electoral sphere of America." Well, it later became a socialist organization. But the moment it did, I ceased to become an active in the Peace and

Freedom Party. I just used that as an example of what my approach was to any union or any organization.

FURMANOVSKY:

And was this also the party's official approach?

DOBBS:

Generally, it was the party's official approach, yes. Now, there may have been vulgarizations in how to carry it out. But that was the party's program. And I kept talking about it all the time. So in addition to meeting with various groups, I did a considerable amount of public speaking. In other words, to speak before any group that I could. Together with Pettis Perry, Nemmy Sparks, Dorothy Healey, we were the secretariat. It was the leading circle of the party. We used to meet with the section organizers. We met with the political committee, the district committee. There was a district committee, and then there was an executive of the district committee. That's what it was. So it was a very busy life. But I was a very hard worker. I met with all of these groups including organized commissions or committees to deal with specific problems. Our major concern at that time, outside of the internal affairs of the unions in their struggle against the boss, and how to protect the interests of the workers, was right after the war, starting in '47, there was a tremendous wave of antilabor legislation. The key of which, the most vicious of all, was of course the Taft-Hartley Act, which was passed, I believe, in 1948. But there was a whole wave of antilabor legislation. And what the heck can you do? You can only do so much, you know. But that was the main work that I was involved in, in a political sense of how do you mobilize the workers in this fight against antilabor legislation.

FURMANOVSKY:

And starting from '47 the beginnings of conflict within the CIO on a national level?

DOBBS:

Well, that came a little later. I'm inclined to think that, well, there always was the fights in the AFL and CIO.

FURMANOVSKY:

Within the CIO.

DOBBS:

Yes. Because that's the only place-- You see, when I say that the AF of L was so overwhelmingly predominant in California, this was not true for the other industrial sections of the country. So the majority of the national party's attention was on the CIO. With me, it was on the AF of L--except for the meeting with these officials that I told you about. Well, that's where we had most of our organized groups. But I was convinced that the AF of L was going to be the major problem. Labor policies can't be based on just the progressiveness of the CIO. It had to be based on an understanding of the general problems of the estimate of the situation in the labor movement as a whole. And I'll give you some examples later of real struggles in policy, and what position I took on it. So there was a question of the fight against labor legislation up to and including the Taft-Hartley Act. Now, it was our position, of course, to force a vote on it. To vote against it. It passed, and then Harry Truman vetoed it. But he didn't conduct any kind of campaign to carry through the veto. So in the long run, we placed Harry Truman as responsible for the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act. Now, the main thing in the Taft-Hartley Act that affected us directly was this question of the declaration that as an elected official of a union that you are not a member of the Communist Party. They had to sign such a declaration, which of course had the effect of penalty of perjury if proven to be false. Now, what happened, and this is the thing that you're referring to, the union leadership went way beyond this. Not only did they ask the leaders of unions to sign it, but everybody should sign it, whether shop stewards, executive board members. They spread it as far as possible within the union movement, which just then caused this tremendous struggle between the left and the center and the right within every trade union movement. And that became the fulcrum, as it were, of the fight within the trade union movement. Because it made the main issue red-baiting. Will you or won't you sign the document? And what will you do after you sign it? Are you going to live up to it? And, secondly, it created a tremendous fear on the part of everybody who signed it; it's always looking over his shoulder. Because, don't forget, all this is accompanied by continued attacks on Harry Bridges, the second, third and fourth trials on deportation, the [William] Schneiderman case on deportation. All this was already foreseen by legal

struggles to stop the Communist Party. One other thing. In addition to these political questions, i.e., against labor legislation, the advice on unions organizationally, I was responsible of carrying through the following program (it had its negative effects and it had its positive effects): That was to organize the party organization based on industry. In other words, we developed a whole series of clubs, party clubs, based on people in which industries they were related to. In other words, we had a warehousemen's club, we had an electrical workers' club, we had a longshoremen's club, a series of clubs. Now, the same thing was true for the AF of L. Now, one industry where we had a lot of members was, of course, in the needle trades industry, based on traditions and whatnot. So we had a needle trades section. But then we had a building trades section. I would say they were able to build organizations of roughly around 600 members here in L.A. in the industrial section. The positive aspects were, of course, it made the relation of policy to practical needs. In other words, the work of these clubs became to a greater extent, what are we doing in the industry? To a lesser extent, what aspects of socialism are we talking about? Well, much of this was lost. It was one of the great failures of the Communist Party: To give up its independence and its independent socialist analysis, in terms of the practical pragmatic work, to where we almost became "the business agents of the business agents," to use an expression, instead of our own independent political position. That was one negative factor. The second negative factor was that it took the workers out of the party organization as a whole, leaving it then to very important elements of society, but stripped of its working core, except of course for the housewives of working families. That was a very negative effect. The third negative effect was that it created a certain elitism within the party. In other words, it split the party a little bit.

FURMANOVSKY:

How is that?

DOBBS:

Well: "Are you in an industrial section or in a community section? The community section doesn't do anything." That kind of stuff. But the main difference, the main aspect of its weakness was this splitting and the taking of the working class out. In other words, it made campaigns relative to labor

almost the property of the trade union clubs. And issues of labor, which have always been the center of any communist party, became only the center of a relatively small group of people. As for the rest of the CP, labor policy became a mystery to them. Well, actually, it's not a mystery. But people made a mystery out of it. Labor policy--big deal! Well, we did build those organizations. Now, did it have positive effects? Yes. For instance, whenever there was a labor convention, we had instruments through which you'd then put on a fight for policy. For instance, arising out of the needle trades clubs, and arising out of the building trades section and the AF of L section, we were able to prepare for an AFL state convention where we presented as the main issue the election of a black to the executive council of the California AF of L. Here, there was never a black in the executive council of the AF of L. Yet we had an instrument through which resolutions could be adopted, people could be mobilized, speeches could be made on the subject, in preparation for the convention. When we got to the convention, a couple of unions which we had no relations with whatsoever, particularly the bricklayers union for instance, became a forum to put on their fight. And I tell you that tied up a convention in 1947 like you've never seen. Because here was the executive council, obviously caught short on a major moral issue of the day, and yet, how do they make this change? Of course, they've changed since then. Now there are several blacks on the executive council. But in 1947 there were none. What happened there, though, is interesting. The state Federation of Labor is controlled by three fundamentally reactionary groups, which is the heart of the California labor movement. First of all, the teamsters. Secondly, the maritime workers, after the breakup of the Maritime Federation [of the Pacific], and that's mostly led by the SUP [Sailors Union of the Pacific]. Third, was the culinary workers, which are the elite, you know, of the culinary industry--a very small fraction of which is organized. But that became the center of opposition. So whenever there's anything progressive the goons from the sailors union would patrol the aisles, see? Anyway, that fight was on. Of course, it was badly defeated. But I tell you, it was something to see the way that issue was discussed, debated, and presented. But the interesting thing is that in the course of this, for once an independent caucus of unions grew up. In other words, it just wasn't these above-mentioned three industries. But there was a tremendous unity of independent unions, many of which did not agree on this fundamental question of a black but agreed on

other programmatic aspects. So at that time, a whole series of very progressive resolutions were adopted. Now, what I'm trying to demonstrate is that an organized core that has some kind of policy has instruments through which you could carry it out. And while there were some very good resolutions adopted, the central question of a black to be on the executive council did not carry through. That was in 1947. I think it was in Sacramento. It was a wonderful experience, you know, for people to learn how to really operate in a mass way.

1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 22, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

Ben, we talked about the [Conference of] Studio [Unions] strike in 1946, and I think we were just about getting on to the subject of the beginning of the Cold War.

DOBBS:

Yes. I forget the exact date, but I think it was sometime in either '46 or '47, where the Cold War started with the famous speech of Winston Churchill in-- oh, I don't know. He spoke before some university [Westminster College].

FURMANOVSKY:

It was in Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946.

DOBBS:

March of '46 in Missouri. The British empire was dissolving, falling apart because of the struggle against colonialism, but he called on American capitalism to begin to control the world, to pick up the pieces so to speak. In so doing, he announced that this meant that their entire policies must be related to the defeat or containment of the Soviet Union, that supported the movement to free the colonies. This started the Cold War. I don't want to discuss the Cold War as a whole, but just some of the effects it had on the labor movement, because as I said, I was labor secretary of the Communist Party at the time. What became clear is that part of the instrumentality of the Cold War was an agreement between the owners of the major trustified

industries in the United States with the labor movement to continue to give them certain concessions, while at the same time they carried on their antilabor legislation. They carried on a real fight in the labor movement. They did give them concessions, for which they demanded a price. The concessions generally were that they wouldn't have head-on collisions with them. In other words, if there was a strike, for instance, they closed the plants. They didn't have large numbers of scabs go into the steel mills or the auto plants or the rubber plants. They didn't have that kind of head-on collision. They didn't set off to destroy the labor movement, but to keep it in check. So that one of the things I'm pretty sure they demanded was, I would say, a sort of three-point program. The first was the agreement for the labor movement to support completely the Marshall Plan. Now, the Marshall Plan was designed primarily for the rebuilding of capitalism that had been destroyed by the impact of the war, both in Japan and, primarily, in Europe. Now, the party, I think pretty much following the line of the Soviet Union, made this a major point of contention. On hindsight, I don't think it was the correct thing to do. But that's only on hindsight. Because what we did is we mobilized all the forces that we had for a struggle against the Marshall Plan. This was one of the main things, the reason that was given by the right wing of the labor movement for the attack and smashing of the left wing of the labor movement. The second thing emerging, with the beginning of the Cold War and the beginning of the alliances for possible war, developments such as NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization]. The main problem arose that this was the time for the development, on the part of the party's opinion, of a labor party. Now, this of course was poison to the leaders of the AFL [American Federation of Labor] and the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. They had made an agreement with the Truman administration. So the other main point of contention with the labor movement was the question of the labor party, or a third party. The third party was started in New York with the movement called the Progressive Party, whereas here in California, we had what was known as the Independent Progressive Party. This was the party that was started by the initiative of two major institutions: One was the organization called the California Legislative Conference, a conference of trade unions and interested groups on legislative matters, and the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union, which is one of the left-led unions on the waterfront. We conducted quite a campaign--the necessity was to get

somewhere in the neighborhood of 180,000 signatures for people who said they would not mind seeing a labor party, a new party being formed, although this did not in any way pledge nor register them to the new party, the Independent Progressive Party of California. This started in California in 1947, in preparation for the 1948 election campaign, which of course was headed up by [Henry A.] Wallace. That is Wallace, the former vice president of the second or third term of [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt. This was very bitterly contested in the labor movement, and actually was quite a split in the communist forces. I remember meeting with some of the national leaders of the trade union movement of the left-led unions, who were communist, meeting in caucus with us in California, and then pleading with us to remove any kind of resolution at a state convention relative to a third-party movement. And so this was a great split.

FURMANOVSKY:

What was your view?

DOBBS:

My view was that we should favor a third party. Well, I'm pretty sure that I did. On hindsight, again, I'm not so sure it was the correct thing to do. First, because it caused that kind of split, but also it caused a split with a number of progressive Democrats, who were leaders of the whole tradition arising out of the progressive Democratic Party politics in California, who felt that this was not the way to go. That if we maintained the building of the left within the Democratic Party, it would [go] further for putting pressure for a people's program, which was necessitated at that time.

FURMANOVSKY:

And the basic reason for the Communist Party supporting a third party was because of Truman's vote for the Marshall Plan and what was perceived to be the imminent danger of a new war.

DOBBS:

Exactly.

FURMANOVSKY:

And also the loyalty oaths? Or was that later?

DOBBS:

The loyalty oaths came a little bit later. It was primarily the Marshall Plan and Truman's failure to, I would say his basic failure to fight the attack on the labor movement, which later resulted in the Taft-Hartley Act. So that what we found is already the key issues, relative to a struggle between the left wing and the right wing of the labor movement. Now, at the same time, I think there were certain built-in things that sounded like progressive advances, but really created certain weaknesses within the labor movement as a whole. I just want to talk about one issue, and that's the union-dues checkoff. I don't know whether you're familiar with that. The checkoff was a system where the employer paid the dues. In other words, when workers went into a union, they had a contract recognizing the union rights within the plant. They, then, instead of creating a movement where the leadership of the union would at least have that kind of relationship with the rank and file to collect the dues and mobilize them for meeting, the employer paid the dues in a lump sum to the union. In other words, they took it out of the workers' checks, and they paid the dues. But it seemed to me at that time, and I said so, that it stripped an inner function for the inner-strengthening of the labor movement. So that that weakened it considerably. The other thing that-- I don't think there's been any discussion on this anywhere else. I don't recall any discussions. But the labor movement, instead of centering its fight on wages, working conditions, conditions in the plants, speedup, health and safety, and so forth, developed a legislative program that, instead of fighting against the government for health insurance, social security, even increased unemployment insurance, made separate contracts with the employers to provide health insurance--and even supplemental unemployment benefits. Now, in themselves, it's good. It's good for unions to have health programs. The only trouble is, it split the working class right down the middle. A small section, largely in the large, trustified industries, and a certain amount of it spilled over to, let's say, the building trades industries and other contracts; but on the whole, it split the working class right down the middle, in the sense that certain ones had concessions, had some benefits. But the vast majority of the labor movement had no benefits. And especially today you can see the results, when you discuss the health insurance programs in the United States. So that so many millions have no health insurance of any kind whatsoever, and that they're weakened in the struggle because the others have it. The same thing relative to the huge

struggle around pension rights. Again, pensions are good, but what resulted was a real split in the unions between the new workers coming in and the old workers. The old workers were already looking forward to their pensions, and, of course, it split the demand for wages, hours, and working conditions, which is the main concern of young people that come into the union. So you had both the contentious struggle between the right wing and the left wing, and then for the development of the health programs, the pensions programs, the supplemental employment insurance programs, the checkoff system. You had the growth of this huge bureaucracy within the union movement to carry out these functions that took them away from their absolute responsibility to the rank and file. So you had both, as I say, contention on political questions and a certain inner weakness within the labor movement. It's in this context that the struggle between the left wing and the right wing took place. Now, how did the struggle in the left wing and the right wing show itself? First of all, there were a select number of unions that were called left-led unions. They were the ones that carried out a struggle for conditions within the unions, for democracy. They were able to be models of democratic unions, models of democratic and honest, progressive union leadership. They were able to show a continual fight for the interest of the rank and file on the shop floor, as well as in the legislative chambers. But at the same time, they had one major weakness that affects the entire labor movement. And, again, I don't see too much discussion on it. But I'm willing to bet that not more than 2 percent of the members of the labor movement locals attend meetings. They don't go to union meetings. Now, what's interesting about that is that when the unions were organizing, the union meetings were held very close to the plant, immediately after a work shift. They changed that to where the unions met at night--so nobody went. And to this day, the attendance of the union movements, is very, very small. I remember one union with about five thousand members. Voting on a contract, they couldn't get a quorum to the meeting, to have the vote on the contract. You know, a three-year contract. Well, these are internal weaknesses that exist both in left-led unions, but they also exist in other unions. But the thing is, the left-led unions didn't have the staff, the money, the resources, to fight the onslaught that took place. Now, the form that it took place was by the developing of rival unions of an international scale, that were hugely financed by the leadership of the biggest unions, the steel workers union [United Steelworkers of America], the

rubber workers union [United Rubber Workers of America], the auto workers union [United Automobile Workers], and so forth, that created dual unions all down the line. In other words, here you had a union that enjoyed the majority membership of the electrical workers in the United States, the [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE)]. So alongside of that they set up an independent electrical workers union [the International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers (IUE)]. Now, that fight took place in every plant. Instead of working together on unity, on wages, hours, and working conditions, the fight took place for several years around elections as to what union should represent the workers in each plant.

FURMANOVSKY:

And who would set up these independent or bogus unions?

DOBBS:

Well, I'd say they were set up primarily by the top leadership of the CIO.

FURMANOVSKY:

In order to do what?

DOBBS:

In order to raid the left-led unions, to make them helpless and drive them out of the union movement.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, you're talking after the period when the expulsions begin, right?

DOBBS:

That's right.

FURMANOVSKY:

Could you give an example, perhaps when you were labor secretary, let's say in 1947, when this was beginning to happen, where you were engaged in an attempt to prevent a union from--

DOBBS:

Well, I was engaged, as I said, in this way: My main job, at that time as labor secretary, was meeting with both rank and file and leaders of some of these left-led unions. We had connections with the leadership of the left-left unions as well as rank and file in other unions. In all of them, we tried to organize a struggle against raids. Now, it's true that Los Angeles unions-- For instance, we didn't have a big GE [General Electric] plant here, or a big Westinghouse plant, where this UE strike situation arose of between UE and IUE. But in every little place where the UE had a contract, IUE came in and raided them. By raiding them, [I mean] calling for a decertification, calling for a new election. And I would try to sit down with them and say, "What are we going to do?" But these internal weaknesses had already sapped the strength out of these unions. For instance, in many cases we had the very bad system of having these progressive-led unions adopt progressive resolutions, where the discussion didn't take place among the rank and file but the minuscule number of attendants at these local union meetings. All these were used as evidences of "red control," see. So that what you found is, let's say, on a certain day, you would read in the newspaper that such and such a union has been formed in such and such a plant under contract and a decertification election is called. The election will take six months, and there was constant struggle between the union on the one hand and the raiders on the other. This took place in all the UE locals, in all the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] locals, with the exception of the waterfront. It did not take place on the waterfront, to my knowledge, or to my memory. It took place among the communication workers [Communications Workers of America (CWA)]. It took place everywhere there was a left-led union. These rank-and-file groupings or leadership groupings, financed by either the AF of L or the CIO leadership, would come in and raid these plants, bringing about new elections, and in many cases, under intense red-baiting, under the intense red-baiting that followed the war, under the intense red-baiting of the Cold War--the whole country, don't forget, is wound up with this fight against the Soviet Union--and these raids just literally stripped these unions to pieces. Some left-led unions, however, do still exist to this day. In other words, they've been able in some places to withstand the raids. Since they do and were led by progressive, honest trade unionists, many of them went on to continue organizing and struggling, and they still do to this day. And that's why there's a UE, there's an ILWU, there's a whole number of unions.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about the argument that some of the left-led unions, and I suppose when we say left-led unions, in some cases we mean they were openly led by people who were believed to be communist--

DOBBS:

People who were identified as communist by HUAC [the House Committee on Un-American Activities] and police. There's another trick that was pulled, see. At that time, the Communist Party was the main target of the attack. The government also did several other things that were used in this fight within the labor movement. For instance, the attorney general, I forget who it was at that time in the Truman administration [James McGranery], issued a list of organizations, a whole number of organizations that he said were not communist but were communist-infiltrated. Then there was a group called communist-influenced. So that, no matter what you touched, any progressive organization whatsoever was tainted by the government as being red. For instance, the big destruction of a major organization that had large numbers of rank-and-file people in many of the ethnic groups was this organization called the International Workers Order. Now, I mentioned, I don't know whether I discussed it last time, but what happened there, the New York Insurance Commission took away their insurance. Now, that was the main instrumentality of their organizing, to come before these, especially in the East, you know, with large numbers of Slavic workers or Serbian workers or Yugoslavs or Hungarians or Greeks. They organized these huge associations on the basis of "We can give you some health and life insurance." It continues to this day, by the way. So that when the government just took away their insurance rights, it took away their main organizing tool. So many of them remained as cultural and educational groups, but were just shadows of their former selves. But the point I'm making is that in the labor movement, what it would say is, "Your union, which is in the shop, supported such and such an organization, which is ascribed by the government as a red organization." That's the kind of red-baiting it was, you see. That your business agent signed up and is a member of the executive board of such and such an organization. Now, there are only two organizations, to my knowledge, that fought and won against this listing, incidentally. Because there was some resistance. One was the National Lawyers Guild, which was taken off of the list, and the other one

was, strangely enough, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, made up of the veterans who went to fight on the Republican side in Spain. But the point I'm trying to make is that this Cold War had its effects outside and it had its effect directly in the unions. As a result--and as I say, this took a long time, a long time in the sense that it took several months--these raids took place, this internal battle between the workers in the shops sapped the strength right out of the union movement. Now, there was one other thing that happened. That is it wasn't only to destroy each individual union, such as these left-led unions, but it was also to destroy any influence in the combination of unions in the central labor councils. In other words, there was a council of CIO unions. Here in Los Angeles it was led by a group of very progressive people, centered around Philip Marshall "Slim" Connelly, who was one of the defendants in the Smith Act trial of 1952. He was the secretary of the CIO council. The president of the California council was a man by the name of Mervyn Rathbone, who later became a stool pigeon. So that weakened that whole operation. But anyway, we had, I remember one campaign where it was carried on with a fervor and heat and enthusiasm and struggle of a regular election campaign to maintain Slim Connelly as the elected leadership. And he was elected. Now, how did they destroy his leadership? They went into the [American Newspaper] Guild, and ganged up and called for a big special meeting with a whole plot developed, as if it were a plot to overthrow the government, you know. But it was a plot to destroy him in the newspaper guild. And they didn't elect him as a delegate to the council, which destroyed his membership in the council, which destroyed his leadership in the council. In other words, there was tricks night and day. There were several meetings, led by a man who later apologized, sort of, to the progressive movement. He's dead now. A man by the name of Paul Jacobs, who was employed by, I forget which union, to do the dirty job on a CIO council here in L.A. Later he ran for Senate on the Peace and Freedom [Party] ticket. He apologized publicly for the job he did on the left progressive unions.

FURMANOVSKY:

He wrote a book about that called **Is Curly Jewish?** I think.

DOBBS:

I don't remember the book, but I remember that--about his apologizing. I was at the convention where he more or less apologized, when he decided to run for the United States Senate on the Peace and Freedom ticket, when he was endorsed at their first convention in Richmond, California. I think that was in 1968.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about the argument that some people on the left have made that the communist-led unions or the left-led unions during World War II, as a result of their superpatriotism and their support of the no-strike pledge, and their collaboration with sort of the Philip Murray-"type, middle-of-the-road, CIO leader, paved the way for their own demise in '47, '48?

DOBBS:

Well, a lot of that, that whole business of the no-strike pledge, how it worked out in the unions, the weakening of the fight for civil rights within the unions, I'm not familiar with because I was not here. But I do know, of course, how others have written about it, such as Al Richmond's book [**A Long View From the Left**]. It has a whole essay on the whole question of what he calls the "break-up of the left-center coalition." And that the party's struggle within these unions was extremely weakened by their effort to maintain a unity with Murray and others, only to be betrayed by them. Or, not to be betrayed, but to be taken in and then sold out--let me put it that way. But I myself was not familiar with that.

FURMANOVSKY:

But weren't you involved on a local scale with these national kinds of things? I mean, by virtue of being labor secretary of the Communist Party, your job was to meet with the left-led unions and to advise them or to consult them.

DOBBS:

Not the union, the union leadership. We would meet with groups. I don't remember, I spoke to unions during my cases, but I don't remember speaking to unions about these issues. It was meeting with rank-and-file groupings or leadership groupings, but never in the union as such, on this issue. We were pretty provincial here in L.A. We acted pretty independently. I will say this, in

many cases, at least in some cases, I would urge our left-led unions and our people who were in leadership to go to the AF of L, rather than getting smashed by the CIO leadership. Because, as I told you, as I said somewhere in the course of my discussion here, that I was always impressed with the fact that the American Federation of Labor unions, the craft unions, many of which adopted industrial-union methods, were far greater in size than the CIO unions. In some cases, the union leadership was maintained and built powerful unions, very powerful unions. Because, instead of fighting head on, they simply organized within the AF of L. And the AF of L was eager to get them because they were capable organizers. They didn't carry out the same policies in the AF of L. See, most of this was directed in the CIO for a very simple reason. These were the main trustified industries of the United States. They were the guts of the progressive movement. They were the heart of Labor's Non-Partisan League, which I had no experience with because that also was during the war period. They were the heart of independent political action, which led to the third-party movement as an instrumentality against the Cold War; which was not successful, but it did play a role in trying to push politics to the left. But anyway, these left-led unions, in many cases, just became shells of what they had been. The destruction of leadership in the CIO council made it into a red-baiting center. And, of course, the unions were helpless. In the meantime, we had rank-and-file groupings in auto and steel and rubber and all these groups that fought in these unions for, you know, some kind of democratic policy. I must say that when the Korean War broke out in 1950 many of our comrades were beaten up in the shops because they had been identified in the struggle for policies that were instigated by left-wing politics, and therefore looked upon as communists and were beaten up in the shops. A lot of that took place. So that what you had was both from the outside and the inside of the labor movement this intense red-baiting. And that's all it was. No one could say we can win better conditions for you, because they couldn't attack the union leadership on that front. They could say we can win better conditions because we can get along better with the bosses than your leadership. So you got to kick them out because they're nothing but a bunch of communists. And why are they communists? This guy was on this proscribed list. He was on this proscribed list. He was seen talking to this person. He was seen talking to that person. He was related to the national organization, many of whom were on this proscribed list or that

proscribed list. That's the kind of red-baiting it was. Together with the very intense red-baiting that started with the Cold War, engineered by Churchill and Truman, under the impact of the opening of the Cold War. Then, from then on, the whole struggle in the world has to be between those forces that have any sympathy to the Soviet Union and those forces that have to recognize the "American Century." The American Century, that became the big dream. And the American Century was vulgarized by some magazine-- which magazine was it--Colliers magazine? Something like that. Well, its outstanding thing was "What would Russia look like when America conquered the world?" Americans would have the tremendous task of teaching the Russians how to say no instead of yes; or how to say yes instead of no. I forget which one, because Russians learn how to use only one word. The cultural achievements would be the national tour of "Guys and Dolls," as an example of the tremendous cultural advance over the "dark ages" of Russia. You know, all that kind of nonsense. I don't think the magazine lasted two months after they did that, but that's the kind of nonsense that just spread throughout the country. Now then, this is what became the framework for the attack on the Communist Party as such, and the old progressive movement.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you get back to the Progressive Party, and maybe you can tell us what the disputes within the Communist Party were, whether to support-- I mean, obviously that was party policy. It was to support Wallace. But what were the arguments?

DOBBS:

Well, the basic dispute around the question of the Progressive Party-- First of all, I would say this in my opinion, the majority of the rank and file of the Communist Party accepted the program of building the Progressive Party. For one thing, they found it more difficult to participate in the Democratic Party clubs because of the red-baiting that took place there too. So that there was a feeling that you had to build, and this was the time to build a Progressive Party. Now, there's nothing new in American politics about the efforts to build a Progressive Party, because the two-party system was exposed years and years ago as being both parties of capitalism. Labor never had its own party. Labor never had its own influential newspapers, never had its own television,

never had its own radios, never had its own church as it were. So the minute a worker leaves the plant, he's completely under the influence of the entire superstructure controlled by capitalism. So the need for a Progressive Party was always recognized by progressive forces. Now, was this the time to get it? My feeling now is that was a very narrowly based party. Narrowly based in that, as I indicated to you, only two organizations initiated the program. And they called conferences. The vast majority of the rank and file of our party supported it by the tremendous task to get the 180,000 signatures and the vast majority of the signatures were gotten by the CP. You know, every day it was a battle in the streets. Literally a battle, where people would be mobilizing from the clubs to go into the neighborhoods, the shopping centers, and house to house, and every meeting, to get signatures to join to put the Independent Progressive Party on the ballot. It was a continual, ideological struggle with everybody to get that single signature. Well, to get the necessary signatures was an enormous task. We tried to do it in the labor movement, and with some success. But I must say, without a great deal of success. I will never forget my going to a convention of the AF of L. Here's 2,500 workers, and not to be able to get one vote for a resolution calling for support for the Progressive Party. Well, my God, what have we done?! So, that's one angle, that it was very narrowly based. Now, the dispute was-- And it related itself primarily in California, where you had this history of a free-swinging struggle around issues in the Democratic Party, arising out of the fight against cross-filing, resulting in the building of a mass organization known as the [California] Council of Democratic Clubs, of which, by the way, [Alan] Cranston was the first president. Presently the U.S. senator from California. This was a big organization. They used to have conventions of 2,000 to 3,000 people that would discuss issues.

FURMANOVSKY:

And this was an offshoot of the EPIC [End Poverty in California] movement, the Olson wing of the Democratic Party.

DOBBS:

That's correct. It was very much influenced by the thinking of the EPIC movement, although it didn't have EPIC's program whatsoever. But the point is, it made a free-swinging discussion on issues of movement within

the Democratic Party, where they had big rank-and-file formations of people to go and get out to vote. That hasn't been seen until, I must admit, very recently. Like in the present L.A. councilmanic picture. There hasn't been that for years, of this kind of mobilization of people around political questions. What was the dispute? The dispute was: Are you going to give up this movement that has been developed over the years for a struggle within the Democratic Party, which created a progressive state central committee, a progressive county committee. You're giving up that struggle, pulling out all the left progressive forces, and putting them into something that we think is doomed to failure because it's so narrowly based.

FURMANOVSKY:

In other words, it doesn't have a trade-union base.

DOBBS:

It doesn't have a labor base. It didn't have a mass black base. See? It primarily was left-progressive people.

FURMANOVSKY:

To what extent was the California Council of Democratic Clubs a left-led organization at this time?

DOBBS:

Well, you could get nearly any resolution you wanted adopted. You could get progressive positions adopted. Their issues conferences were way in advance. I remember when they had one on the recognition of China when it was a dirty word in the entire political structure.

FURMANOVSKY:

But there weren't a lot of Communist Party members in it, were there?

DOBBS:

Of course, but these were pulled out. That's the point I'm trying to make.

FURMANOVSKY:

So, in other words, noncommunist members of the California Council tended to be opposed to the Progressive Party?

DOBBS:

Of course.

FURMANOVSKY:

Even the more left-wing ones?

DOBBS:

Many of our people were opposed. That's the point I'm making. There was a lot of, not dissension in the sense of splitting off, but a lot of discussion where so many of our people who were influential in the Democratic Party felt that we're pulling the rank-and-file support away from them and going into something that can't win.

FURMANOVSKY:

Was there any dispute amongst the leadership? For instance, was Nemmy [Ned] Sparks--?

DOBBS:

No, I think our leadership was united. I don't recall any big differences in our leadership. I think I would be in a position to know, but I just don't recall any. In other words, I don't recall Nemmy being opposed to the third-party policy. I don't recall Dorothy [Healy] being opposed either. I think that they reflected some of the thinking in terms of a warning, "How do we create more of a base for it?" Now, the truth of the matter is, the Independent Progressive Party didn't last very long. I do remember the very bitter struggles we had as to whether to continue to build it or to give it up. Now, what happened is that--it isn't that we wanted to do it--but pretty soon the whole leadership of the Progressive Party almost totally became communist. Not totally but almost.

FURMANOVSKY:

But everybody knew that, obviously, the election was going to be lost. I mean, it was obviously symbolic.

DOBBS:

Well, I'm not talking about '48. We didn't think we were going to lose the election. We thought we'd make a better showing than we did. But don't forget, this thing was kept up until 1952.

FURMANOVSKY:

Okay, but we're talking now about--

DOBBS:

'Forty-eight.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah. I mean, even in '48 it was obviously a symbolic gesture.

DOBBS:

Well, I think it was a little more symbolic in the sense that I didn't think we'd think we'd win. We thought we'd win in some congressional districts, and that we'd win in some assembly districts. I didn't think we could defeat Truman-- not Truman, [Thomas E.] Dewey. Or Truman. Of course, everybody expected Dewey to win. But that was the real reason why all the labor people and everybody in the progressive Democrats were so opposed to building the labor party, I mean a third party, the Progressive Party. They felt that not only was it doing away with the fighting aspects of the left wing of the Democratic Party, but it would also lose a lot of votes.

FURMANOVSKY:

And possibly let Dewey in.

DOBBS:

And possibly let Dewey in, of course. That was the basis of their thinking that it was an effort for such a narrowly-based organization.

FURMANOVSKY:

What was the argument of the party against that, then?

DOBBS:

That we are ready for a third-party movement. We did it ourselves. We saw Truman and Dewey as Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did the people seriously think there was reasonable chance of congressmen and assemblymen being elected?

DOBBS:

Perhaps. I don't know. We worked as if we could win something in the elections. We worked, let me put it this way, if not to win, at least to make a good showing for the creation of the continuation of the party, and from then to broaden its base. Instead, its base was narrowed.

FURMANOVSKY:

What do you think now, looking back at Henry Wallace himself as an individual?

DOBBS:

Well, we were-- Well, I don't know. I thought that he played a very positive role. By the way, one of the outstanding speakers at the launching of the third party, the Progressive Party in California--I don't know whether you know it or not, but at a big rally at Gilmore Stadium--was Katharine Hepburn. She was the keynote speaker. But I haven't seen a progressive word from her since. But it [the Independent Progressive Party] was so narrowly based. So much of it was only communist leadership. I, for one, felt that it had played its course and that it was no longer a viable political force. And there were others. I believe the lawyer, [Vincent] Hallinan, the San Francisco lawyer, a quite famous lawyer from a famous family. I think he ran for president in 1952. I think it was very narrow, but he did run. It was gone, that's all. It was just gone. What happened then, of course, is that many of the people that had been involved in political practices and political activities went back into the Democratic Party clubs and other organizations.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, meanwhile, before even the election of '48, twelve party leaders in--

DOBBS:

Now, we're talking about-- I tried to set, even within the narrow confines of discussing with the labor movement, and just hinted references as to the type

of red-baiting that went on in the country, the collapse, I would say, of the hope for impact of a third-party movement nationally. Together with the whole attack that was launched against the party legally. From then on, the party was very much on the defensive. One of the reasons, I'm convinced, the government launched such a many-sided front of an attack against the party was that it forced the party to become a defense organization. So much of our efforts were on raising money, supplying lawyers, organizing picket lines and demonstrations in support of arrested people. You know, where so much of our political program was just in words rather than in application, because we were so much involved in defending ourselves. So that when the Smith Act trials opened up in New York in 1948, they arrested I think it was the central committee, or the presidium or the secretariat.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes, in July.

DOBBS:

July of '48, was it? But that then became the whole, well, the work of the party. How to defend these people for a trial that we said shouldn't have taken place, because it's a trial of thought control, a trial of books, a trial of, you know, words instead of deeds. The whole trial was around books. We had an open struggle with them [the Communist Party national leadership] in 1950 as to the different basis for their defense from ours. The national committee, in its effort, tried to defend the party. In other words, everything that the party did, everything that the party spoke, everything that the party tried to do, for the defense of the theoretical and political positions of the party--and I'm just putting this in a phrase--we took a different position. Our position was that the Smith Act is an attack on the Constitution of the United States. That the party is the target of the attack, which would have its effect on the destruction of civil liberties for all people. Now, the difference was that when the Smith Act trials started in New York, and their policy was to defend the party, then the immediate application came: We have to change to party into a semilegal organization. See? That's what started this whole business which later developed as the underground movement, which I shall discuss later.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why does that follow? Could you just explain that again, the semilegal part?

DOBBS:

Well, if you defend the party and make that the key issue of the question, you don't deal then with trying to broaden out and strengthen all the antiprogressive, you know the pro-Constitution, the pro-civil liberties forces. You just deal with those that agree with and are willing to defend the party as an institution. But if you try to defend the party as an institution, you can say, "Well, if we lose, then the whole party loses." Therefore, you have to change the party to protect it.

FURMANOVSKY:

I see.

DOBBS:

Well, that's exactly why we then fell into what I think was the worst trap of all that the party fell into.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, before this, before your arrest in October 1950, what sort of opinions, let's say in 1948, what sort of views did you have of the central figures in the Communist Party at that time? For example, did you tend to be more on the side of [William Z.] Foster or [Eugene] Dennis or--

DOBBS:

That came later. That was much later.

FURMANOVSKY:

So at this point, there was no, to your--

DOBBS:

No, to my memory, that was not the question. You see, the big fights between Foster, Dennis, and others arose out of the interpretation of the Stalin period after his death. The interpretation of the effects of the Stalin period on the United States. The effect on the Communist Party in the United States. I'll go into that, because I was a member of the national committee at that time. My

memory is vague, and I don't intellectualize too much on these things, but that's an altogether different period.

FURMANOVSKY:

So at this time--

DOBBS:

At this time, as far as I know, the party was united. Now, there might have been some questions raised, I don't remember them, as to whether "defending the party" was the correct tactic. I remember that when we in California in 1950 decided on a different course, then we had to defend our position. But I don't remember it as being discussed within the membership. I remember we were told that they had the arguments with the national committee. But I don't remember any debates. I remember the clarity with which we discussed it here. I will say this, that--and then I want to go into something else--I will say that I was arrested to go to the Smith Act trial six weeks after other people were arrested. So for a lot of these arguments, as to what should our strategy be, I wasn't there. See? I came in after these arguments were settled. My history is that I was never at the right place at the right time. When Browderism developed fully, I was not there, and when this developed I also was not there. I was "underground." (

[Before I discuss the Smith Act, I want to talk about another issue. When the twelve or so major officers of the national office were arrested and indicted under the Smith Act, the attack on the CP did not stop with that issue. They devised another. We were notified that some seventy L.A. members of the CP would be subpoenaed to appear before the L.A. federal grand jury. We did not know what for except vaguely about communists working for the U.S. government. The attack and the subsequent campaign around it became known as the case of the Los Angeles 21.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) It fits in this period because of two reasons. First, it showed the many-sided attack on the party. And it showed the defense that we had. It was primarily around the defense of the Fifth Amendment, of the U.S. Constitution, rather than more openly the attack of the, you know, on the nature of our party. I

remember going back East for a discussion. I can tell you this. Well, I'll put it in its historical period. Strangely enough it was this fellow that is related somewhere to Maurice Isserman, who's now the--

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, Abraham.

DOBBS:

Abraham Isserman. I had a big argument with him and finally walked out, as to what our tactics and strategy was.

FURMANOVSKY:

What date are you talking about now?

DOBBS:

I'm talking about 1949.

FURMANOVSKY:

Okay, so the L.A. 21--

DOBBS:

Started in October of 1948.

FURMANOVSKY:

October of '48. And what was it? Why don't you explain it a little more.

DOBBS:

Now, the case of the L.A. 21--I call it the L.A. 21 because that's the number of people arrested when it ended, somewhere in the middle of 1949. It went on for a little over a year. Actually in 1948, Ada [Martin Dobbs] and I had gone to the opera the night of October 23 to celebrate her birthday, to see **Carmen** with some people. We got word somehow that something like seventy subpoenas were issued. Some people got on the telephone to warn relatives and comrades. But it was decided that I would stay home to see what happened. So I stayed home, and about six o'clock the next morning, fourteen of us were picked up, i.e., were handed subpoenas to appear forthwith before the federal grand jury in Los Angeles, in the Federal Building that's on Spring

Street, yeah. Right across the street from the Hall of Justice, which is on Broadway. Maybe it was around 8:30 a.m. that we were called in one at a time, one at a time--that's what took all day, you see--into the grand jury session. In the grand jury room, I recognize the guy that used to run around with my sister's friends from Lincoln High School. And oh, he looked at me--and he was ashamed. Man, he was ashamed. He was a sort of a toady. He was running the errands for the district attorney, getting the water, emptying the ashtrays, all that kind of nonsense. What a jerk. Anyway, I got on the stand. We had our lawyers there in the hall. They were not allowed in the grand jury room. I was asked four questions. First of all, the first question is, "Who do you know that's employed by the United States government that's a member of the Communist Party?" And of course, our position at that time was that this is an out-and-out Fifth Amendment case, because the party is going to be on trial in New York, or is already on trial in New York, and therefore any relation to the party as a member immediately places you in the danger of going to jail--because that's what the trial in New York was all about. (

[So we had decided to answer the questions put to us by saying, "I refuse to answer the question because the answer might tend to incriminate me. I refuse to answer by the use of the privilege of the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution." I must say that at this time we discussed no other alternative defense because the danger of being indicted, arrested, and by our own answers possibly convicted was very real. You must know that if one answers one question, one must then answer all questions or risk being subject to prosecution. For instance, if I were to be asked, "Do you know Ada Dobbs," and I answered, then I must answer, "Do you know John Doe." If you say no and they can get a witness to show that you do know John Doe, you are subject to a charge of perjury which carries a sentence of fourteen years in jail. So if you answer one question you then must answer all, then one faces the danger of becoming an informer or stool pigeon.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

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1.13. TAPE NUMBER:VII, SIDE TWO

SEPTEMBER 22, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

You said that they asked you four questions.

DOBBS:

Right, that was the first one: "Do you know any government employees?" And instead of-- Well, I don't remember what alternatives we had because we had decided on a straight Fifth Amendment defense. So I refused to answer the question. The second question, "What do you know about the table of organization in the Communist Party?" Now, the reason they asked this question was that one of the big canards and slanders directed to the Communist Party is that, essentially, we were all robots, that we do what we are told, that many questions are decided elsewhere. And if you give the table of organizations--clubs, sections, divisions, at that time, county, district, national office--if you give that table of organization, first of all, it shows you know all about the Communist Party, you're a member of the Communist Party, even though you've refused to answer. And that secondly, well, if you are this level then you followed this order. And if you're at that level, you'd follow that order. And everybody has to be the same robot, automatically following orders. We have no heads of our own. So that was the meaning of why they asked that question. Then they asked the question, "What do you know about democratic centralism?" Now, democratic centralism is the organizational principle of the party. It was based on what our understanding was of a real weakness in the development of the Socialist Party over the years, and that is that people in the Socialist Party both could be socialist and yet could take different political positions. So democratic centralism is based on discussions at the various levels of the party, and the decisions become binding on each member. But these are on basic political questions, or basic political estimates. It's not based on where you're going to be next Wednesday or next Thursday. It's based on an estimate of the world, or an estimate of your locality, an estimate of your neighborhood. But they tried to change the whole meaning of it, that if you understand democratic centralism, then again, you obey the orders that are given you, like an army. Armies, for instance, are centralist organizations. When the generals decide, the army moves. Well, that's how they tried to make that kind of picture of the party. The fourth question was, "Do you know Dorothy Healey?" Now, the reason they mentioned Dorothy Healey was that she probably was the most widely

known, oh, without any question, the most widely known communist in Southern California. She was the head of the party in Los Angeles. If you knew her, spoke of her-- You see, in a grand jury, if you answer one question, you must answer all questions, because then you're open for criminal contempt of court. So you don't answer any question. But they asked that question because of her position in the Communist Party, and because she was not picked up that day, see. I was the only, quote, "leader" that was picked up that day. The only member of the, what'd we call it? We called it the secretariat I guess.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who were the others then?

DOBBS:

Who were picked up? Well, there were fourteen of us. Let's see if I can remember. There was Harry Daniels, there was Philip Boch. There was Henry Steinberg.

FURMANOVSKY:

These were people who were what, minor?

DOBBS:

Oh, yeah, they were all leaders of the party, at one level or another.

FURMANOVSKY:

But not full-time functionaries?

DOBBS:

Oh, no. No, I was the only full-time functionary. I think there was one person that was maybe a staff member of the Civil Rights Congress at that time. But many people were not arrested. They asked us the question about Dorothy because she didn't get the subpoena. Now, the interesting thing, what was my reaction, I don't know whether you asked me this question on the tape, but of finding a subpoena at six o'clock in the morning? Frankly, I expected it. It's all in a day's work. I never worried about things like that.

FURMANOVSKY:

It's still not very pleasant, is it, to have men bang on your door at six in the morning.

DOBBS:

Well, they were very polite. By the way, those experiences of being polite to me were for some reason or another somewhat unique. In some places, they were very rough. Oh, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

You, at this time, you had been married a few years and you had a child?

DOBBS:

Well, I had a son, Morrie [Morris Smolan Dobbs]-- and I was going to have a special session of this interview on my family--I have a son, Morrie, who is not my son biologically. He's my son in the sense that Ada and I were married when he was a year old or thereabouts. His father, Ada's first husband, was killed in World War II, in the Battle of the Bulge. He was wounded and then died in the hospital. Louise [Dobbs] was born in June 1948, so we had, in addition to Morrie, this four-month-old baby. That's right, June. Morrie was about three years old by that time, and Louise was about four months old. That's what happened at that time.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you didn't find that traumatic?

DOBBS:

No, not really. No, I take these things-- I didn't find jail traumatic either. You learn to roll, you know, you live with the conditions at hand. Just like I didn't find so many things in the army traumatic. No, I didn't find it traumatic-- but the others might have, of course. Others were very upset by it. But Ada was tough. I'm tough. So I had no problem with it, really. I'll tell you a good story. I don't remember when it happened. But there used to be a wonderful guy, not used to be--well, used to be--he's dead now. A wonderful, wonderful lawyer, probably the outstanding civil liberties lawyer in the United States, who probably did more in court on civil liberties cases than any other. He probably was the most outstanding spokesperson against the internment of the Japanese during World War II. He was the legal counsel for the ACLU

[American Civil Liberties Union] in this area. And while he was not a communist, and probably not sympathetic to us, he was very friendly in the sense that he recognized the danger of the attack on the party to the whole civil rights issue. His name was A. L. [Abraham Lincoln] Wirin.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right. He had been with Leo Gallagher and the others.

DOBBS:

Yeah. I forget when it was, but I want to give you an incident of what it's all about, what I'm talking about, relative to my, you know, it being traumatic or whatever. I forget what year it was, but he and I for some reason or other were selected to debate on television two outstanding fascist spokespeople of the United States, guys who were going around the country making a real racket out of developing anticommunist schools.

FURMANOVSKY:

This would be approximately when?

DOBBS:

Must have been '48, '49, '50, somewhere in that period.

FURMANOVSKY:

On television? There was no television.

DOBBS:

Whatever it was, there was television. It might have been a little later--I honestly don't remember. But there was such an incident. I also debated these people with a strange partner, what is her name? [Madalyn Murray] O'Hair, the famous militant atheist in the United States. But anyway, this was with Wirin. And Wirin said, before we went on--we didn't have a discussion on how we were going to handle the debate, because I had my ideas of how to do that too--but he said, "I've got to speak to you, but I can't speak to you here." We were in the reception room of the studio. A fellow by the name of Les Crane had a TV show at that time, one of these talk shows. So we wandered around the halls of that studio and finally found a place where he thought he could speak to me privately. And he said, "Ben, do you know

what's going to happen to you? Do you know what they've got planned for you?" I said, "What have they got planned?" "Well, they're going to harass you. They're going to pick you up." I said, "Look, it's all in a day's work. Whatever they do, they do." He couldn't understand that attitude. Lawyers are funny. But he was a remarkable man. He later was a lawyer in our case by the way, one of the lawyers.

FURMANOVSKY:

So getting back to the court--

DOBBS:

But getting back to the case of the L.A. 21. So they asked us these four questions. Now, by the time all fourteen of us had been called in and refused to answer, several hours had passed. And we went down to a federal district judge who had been a [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt appointee to the federal bench, who was looked upon as a liberal. His name was Hall, Pierson M. Hall. And it was reported that we wouldn't answer the questions, so each of us had to get up on the witness stand and he asked us the same questions. And we refused to answer him. So then the instruction of the court was that you must go before the grand jury to answer that question. So this took hours. By the time each of us walked in, were asked the same questions, you were ordered by the judge to answer it. The grand jury sat there patiently. And we just as forthrightly refused to answer the questions. We then went back to the judge, and were asked the questions again. And, as I say, this took hours, you know, fourteen of us going through this rigamarole.

FURMANOVSKY:

Were you refusing to answer on the grounds of the Fifth Amendment?

DOBBS:

Only on the Fifth Amendment.

FURMANOVSKY:

And this was by advice of?

DOBBS:

The lawyers, the lawyers that were with us in the halls. Our lawyers at that time were John [T.] McTernan and Ben Margolis. Dorothy, Nemmy, and I had discussed it and agreed to this defense when we heard about the subpoena.

FURMANOVSKY:

This was without consulting the New York office?

DOBBS:

Without consulting anybody, except that we decided to do it. It was the lawyers' advice, and among ourselves we discussed it. By the time these hours went by, we finally were ordered to answer the questions, I think the third time. And I think it was about four o'clock in the morning that we landed in the L.A. County Jail. You should know that L.A. County has a contract with the federal government. There's no federal jail in Los Angeles. I believe there is one now in Terminal Island. I know there is a federal jail on Terminal Island, but maybe it wasn't there at this time. So we were housed in the L.A. County Jail at about four o'clock, and we finally wound up in our cells at six or seven o'clock in the morning. We were in jail, and in the meantime people are mobilizing. And I tell you, they must have had a picket line that morning in front of that county jail of at least two thousand people. We were way up on the tenth or eleventh floor, and you could hear the shouting. All the guys, you know, the prisoners, would look out the window, and you could look down and they'd say, "Boy, you guys are not alone." That's the distinctive feature between us and other prisoners. From then on you gain respect. You know, later I was in jail with a guy by the name of Mickey Cohen, who was a famous gangster. So he said, "I don't have nothing against you. You're in the communist business, I'm in the gambling business. We're both businessmen. You know, we're equal here in jail." But the point is, we were not alone. But I think we were in jail for about thirteen days at that time. I don't really remember. But we were in jail. But in the meantime, more people were being picked up. Two one day, three another, two another, then days would go by where nobody was picked up. After thirteen days our bail was paid and we were released, and on the same floor at the door to the cells and jail office where we were released we were handed subpoenas to appear forthwith before the grand jury again. Directly from the jail into the grand jury. And we refused to answer the questions again. The only difference in the question,

instead of "Who is Dorothy Healey," the question was "Where is Dorothy Healey?" And I said, "I don't even know where my kids are, but I'm going to refuse to answer the question anyway." So we went back to jail that night. Right back to jail after being released on bail. And so we were in jail, oh, that time I think it was only five or six days. I don't remember any of the discussion or what happened, you know, who went to court, who went to the appeals court--I don't remember any of that. But all I do know, we got out again on very low bail. And by this time more people were being picked up, but days have gone by. We're already into November, maybe even into December.

FURMANOVSKY:

You're actually in jail during the election?

DOBBS:

Yes, I guess so. I guess so. Well, maybe we were out for a few days. Then, I forget when it was that Dorothy Healy was arrested. By the way, every time new people were arrested, the whole rigamarole would start all over again. So I think I was arrested a total of three times. That means in jail, and into the grand jury, before the judge, back to the grand jury, back to the judge, back to jail. In the meantime, it began to grow towards the case of the L.A. 21. Now, in that case I think I really began to develop as a public speaker. For one thing, I was speaking all over--street meetings, union meetings, meetings that were held, fund-raising meetings. But it was only on this issue. We had several very well-attended, big meetings at the Embassy Auditorium. Since I was the only full-time functionary until Dorothy got arrested, I did a great deal of public speaking in that period on the issues of the case. My position simply was "Yes, I am a communist. I'm going to tell you, the audience, at each meeting because you can't put me in jail. Those people can put me in jail. That's the difference." And we'd then have a discussion, not only on issues of the case, but they would ask me questions about the Communist Party. I spoke with several unions, several churches, several organizations of one kind or another.

FURMANOVSKY:

What sort of response did you get?

DOBBS:

Generally, it was very sympathetic, because no one can understand this question of an indeterminate sentence. I forgot to mention that. We were always, at first, always put in jail on what they'd call civil contempt of court. Now, civil contempt of court is that you can purge your sentence. In other words, you can get out if you answer the questions. You can say, "I want to answer the question." You go and answer the questions, and then you're out of jail. No one could understand the business of an indeterminate sentence, because nobody knew exactly when your sentence is up. So to be in jail forever around such silly things as that; people didn't understand it. Now, we later found out that you're in there for the term of the grand jury. But what's the trick of going and getting another grand jury? So that in a sense it's an indefinite sentence. And that's what people didn't understand or sympathize with. Anyway, after Dorothy was picked up, we went through this rigamarole once more. And this time, not only were we charged with civil contempt of court, but I think Dorothy, myself, and one other person--I don't remember who it was. It might have either been Harry Daniels or Henry Steinberg. But we were sentenced to criminal contempt of court. And we went back into jail that night. We were sentenced to a year and a half in prison. Again, that was before the court of Pierson M. Hall. In the meantime, the lawyers were fighting, the lawyers were getting bail, the lawyers were arguing. We were having big mass meetings, speaking for all kinds of organizations. And then, finally-- I forget which court it was. I don't remember if it was the United States Supreme Court, though it might have been, it might have been. But they ruled that we were absolutely correct in our position, in terms of our defense. We did not have to answer those questions, because of the Smith Act [trial] in New York. In other words, we were completely vindicated by a political position as far as going or staying in jail was concerned. (

[Shortly after our effective defense under the Fifth Amendment, reactionaries forced a new law granting immunity against prosecution under certain conditions if arrestees used the Fifth Amendment. The experience of Colonel Oliver North and the others who violated the law in their efforts to overthrow the legal government of Nicaragua are instructive.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) I remember going to New York. Dorothy couldn't go, and Nemmy was reassigned to New York as national education secretary. So Dorothy and I became the major leaders of the L.A. party. She became the chair of the party, and I became the organizational secretary, and still taking care of labor problems, legislative problems.

FURMANOVSKY:

How did you get these positions? Who was responsible?

DOBBS:

Well, we were elected by a county committee. You see, the party at its conventions elects a district committee. We were elected by the district committee of L.A. County. Later I think it became Southern California, but at that time it was L.A. County. And that's where one gets elected. And that's to whom you are responsible. You submit regular reports on your activities.

FURMANOVSKY:

So it was purely democratic if Foster or Dennis had not approved of your being--

DOBBS:

They wouldn't have a word to say. They might come into a meeting and say that we should be removed. But they couldn't remove us. Oh, no. We were only elected by that committee. They could never say you're removed. They could probably win their position, but they'd have to do it that way. No, we weren't that undemocratic. No, no, no, we weren't that undemocratic. You couldn't even do that to a club chairman. You'd have to go to the club and say, "We think you should change leadership." But you couldn't just say, "You're out."

FURMANOVSKY:

But who was responsible, for example, for Nemmy being reassigned?

DOBBS:

His assignment was requested by the national leaders. We discussed it at a district committee meeting and agreed. They were reassigned. We took it up, and he and Alice [Sparks] went to New York.

FURMANOVSKY:

It was the district committee, so it wouldn't be New York?

DOBBS:

No, it would be at their suggestion--they suggested it.

FURMANOVSKY:

They would suggest it.

DOBBS:

Anyway, the case of the L.A. 21 lasted, as I say, roughly about a year and a half. But it was one of those one-sided attacks that cost a lot of money, and we had to have lawyers, etc. But we still functioned, because as I say, we were only in jail for relatively short periods of time: thirteen days, eight days, five days, two days, you know, within this period. Dorothy got picked up, I think, some time in 1949.

FURMANOVSKY:

She wasn't hiding, was she?

DOBBS:

Well, hiding--ridiculous!

FURMANOVSKY:

She was "unavailable"?

DOBBS:

She was "unavailable." She wasn't home. She was living, I think, the next block over, with a family. By the way, there's nothing, it's the most inefficient police force in the world you have here in the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. And the least intelligence in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. They're interested in counter-revolution, they're not interested in intelligence--stupid! They couldn't find anybody. National committee members were unavailable for years, and finally turned themselves in. The only one arrested was Gus Hall, because he went to Mexico. Well, Mexico is almost a colony of the United States on those kinds of issues. Anyway, we won that case. That was

'49, and in the meantime the Cold War was heating up. I don't remember, I think the Korean War started in 1950. However, the party made one very serious estimate of the situation at this time. The party made the decision, and it was under the thesis that I spoke of before, that at the main theoretical basis of defense the national committee was a defense of the party, The party sent a person here and we had meetings to where it was almost declared, you have to examine your membership to see which people you think would be able to stand up under a fascist onslaught. In other words, they had determined, they made a political estimate that if they go to jail, that is, they, the national, New York Smith Act people, go to jail, this would be the eleventh hour of American democracy. And that we'd be ready for a fascist takeover, the destruction of the Constitution. Now, some of us questioned it, but we didn't question it very much. We really didn't know. We didn't know really until we were arrested and out on bail. What the hell kind of fascism is that?

FURMANOVSKY:

I see what you're saying.

DOBBS:

You know, bail. We could go around and speak, and have meetings. And the party was never attacked. The leadership was attacked! The party is continuing to function, the paper is published. Functions are held to raise money for the paper, the party distributes leaflets, meetings are held. And this is fascism? It's nonsense! But we made two very serious mistakes.

FURMANOVSKY:

But you could argue, couldn't you, that the Communist Party in 1933, in Germany, for the first few months--

DOBBS:

We had enough that we knew about had happened to the white terror in Eastern Europe after World War I. We knew about fascism in Germany. We knew about fascism in Italy. But we mechanically took those experiences and put them in the United States. It was such a mistaken estimate that it just was damaging to the party beyond anything we had ever done.

FURMANOVSKY:

But, presumably, if you didn't argue that much, it didn't seem totally implausible to you at the time.

DOBBS:

Exactly. I didn't say it was-- We followed instructions.

FURMANOVSKY:

I mean, you had the Alger Hiss case, you had the Paul Robeson riot in Peekskill [New York]--

DOBBS:

Of course. That came later I think.

FURMANOVSKY:

The [Ethel and Julius] Rosenberg case was coming up. There was expulsions from the unions. I mean, I'm not trying to argue the case, I'm saying--

DOBBS:

I'm saying that we didn't question it as we should have until we got out on bail, two years later.

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, I see. You didn't question it until two years later?

DOBBS:

That's what I'm saying, yes. But the point is, we began to question it two years later when we're under the Smith Act and we're out on bail.

FURMANOVSKY:

This guy, whoever was sent by the party, he came--

DOBBS:

Well, it was John Gates.

FURMANOVSKY:

John Gates, he came in what, in mid-1950?

DOBBS:

In the middle of 1950, right, right. The Korean War had already started. The Korean War, if I remember, started in 1950. We made three mistakes, based on their instructions. The first mistake was we tried to organize the party on the basis of groups of three. Now, this is a ridiculous position. Three people don't make a meeting. We had an enormously difficult time of putting it into operation.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who drew up this plan?

DOBBS:

The central committee, the national committee. To prepare for the eleventh hour of fascism. John Gates was traveling around the country. He was tried and convicted under the Smith Act. The second question. We had to question everybody in our own minds, or in the minds of club chairmen or section organizers, "Who do you think won't be able to stand up?" And then tell them we don't want them in the party anymore. Well, this was ridiculous. I think we expelled or got rid of or dropped something like 1,500 members in Los Angeles. Absolutely ridiculous.

FURMANOVSKY:

Without consulting them?

DOBBS:

Well, we would consult them, yes. We think we are running into tough times, and we suggest you drop out.

FURMANOVSKY:

Suggest?

DOBBS:

Of course. Some might not have, I don't remember. We didn't do it personally. We asked other people to do it. In other words, I did it with some, but mostly it was club chairmen or section organizers.

FURMANOVSKY:

But they, in effect, had to resign.

DOBBS:

Yes. By the way, most of them welcomed resigning at that time. Because everybody could see what was going to happen. So it isn't fascism, they're in trouble anyway, you see. The third thing we did was to decide to build an underground apparatus. Now, I don't know at various levels how this was done. What I was told was simply to go away, not be seen, not do anything to be seen, to leave my family; that in the event that the party is destroyed legally, that I would then figure out how to pick up the pieces and reconstitute the party.

FURMANOVSKY:

Underground?

DOBBS:

Underground. In the meantime, we were buying presses, mimeograph machines, trying to teach people to run these things. And one of the guys that, sure enough, we taught to do it became a stool pigeon in our case, you know, and brought in the silly diagrams that were done by people learning how to cut stencils. But that was the third mistake. Now, as I say, it was suggested that I leave. And I left. I did it. And I went to a person's house, and I did nothing for six months but be in that house. I never walked out of that house.

FURMANOVSKY:

And where was that?

DOBBS:

It was here in Los Angeles. A person that I knew as a child, as a kid. He was a very good friend of mine. He had no associations with the movement.

FURMANOVSKY:

But why was he prepared to do it, just as a friend?

DOBBS:

Exactly. He would do anything for me. Just like I had trouble with my teeth. My cousin came to his dental office at one o'clock in the morning to work on my teeth. I had some abscesses that were driving me crazy, the pain was so

great. People were willing to do those things. And what we did is we rounded up people who were going to drive us to meetings, if we were going to go, to drive others to meetings, houses where you couldn't have a meeting but you could have this kind of thing. We used up every resource this party had.

FURMANOVSKY:

So, meanwhile, you were holding underground meetings--

DOBBS:

Well, it just so happens I wasn't. Because I was in this group that wasn't supposed to go to meetings. Others were, but I don't know how that worked.

FURMANOVSKY:

You were supposed to just wait and listen?

DOBBS:

That's correct. Then later, they added two more in my position, and we would meet. But what would we meet about? You know, "What did you see, what did you read, in the newspapers last week? What's going on in this great world of ours? What are you doing? How are you keeping yourself protected? What are you doing to make a living?" But that was later. First of all, my job here was to just stay in that house. Later, then two other people were assigned. I said it's driving me crazy. And I went to a city. I took a different name and whatnot. And went to a city and got a job at the General Tire Company Agency.

FURMANOVSKY:

Where was that?

DOBBS:

In San Bernardino [California]. Then I went to Portland [Oregon] and got a job with the Greyhound Bus Corporation.

FURMANOVSKY:

This is all during that six months?

DOBBS:

No, this was a little over a year. No, the six months I just sat in that goddamned house.

FURMANOVSKY:

And meanwhile, what, you'd call your wife and--

DOBBS:

I never called her. Oh, no, not once.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you'd send messages to her.

DOBBS:

Well, we--every once in a while we'd be called to a meeting. I think maybe there were two meetings in that period, where we'd get picked up real late at night and wander around and be sure we weren't followed, go through a tunnel under a freeway or some damned thing, have a half hour with Dorothy or somebody, and then go back.

FURMANOVSKY:

So to what extent did you start really questioning this?

DOBBS:

As I said, not until we got out of jail, not until we were arrested and got out on bail.

FURMANOVSKY:

But if you could remember your thoughts when you were having--

DOBBS:

My thoughts were, I don't know what the hell I'm doing here, maybe someone knows what I'm doing. Maybe I'll get some instructions or ideas. But it didn't go beyond that. I didn't question the policy. As I said, we were so stupid!

FURMANOVSKY:

But I'm trying to go beyond--

DOBBS:

I don't know how to answer your questions except to say, truthfully, I never thought about it. I could tell you a bunch of lies if you want me to.

FURMANOVSKY:

No, I mean, you were reading the newspaper every day, and pretty terrible things are happening. The Rosenbergs are arrested.

DOBBS:

And what I got convinced of reading the newspapers every day is that we were a very isolated party. A very isolated party.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you started thinking then?

DOBBS:

Right, I started thinking about our general policy, and what I found is that we had no real influence on the thinking of the American people. But I didn't go beyond that. I didn't question, was I doing the right thing or not? I was wondering whether I could do it differently, such as going off and getting a job somewhere, instead of being just like a goddamned vegetable sitting on a couch. I point to the couch because where else could I sit?

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you get any sense of who was actually responsible for this policy?

DOBBS:

Well, I think generally it was the national committee.

FURMANOVSKY:

But who? I mean--

DOBBS:

No, I have no way of knowing that. I think it was a unanimous suggestion. I will say one thing. When this business of examining who is to stay in the party and who shouldn't, one day Dorothy called me up and says, "We've got to just stop

this goddamned nonsense right now. Absolutely stupid." That was Dorothy. The only one that ever questioned it. But only that aspect of it. Now, she might have questioned it in other forms, might have questioned it to herself, but I don't recall any--

FURMANOVSKY:

And meanwhile, were people who didn't go underground, were they holding open Communist Party meetings?

DOBBS:

Of course. Of course. Just as if nothing happened.

FURMANOVSKY:

So the People's World came out every day, or every week?

DOBBS:

Of course. That is what was so stupid about it. Instead of looking at the mass thing, we looked at the little teeny things, see? That's why I say it made no sense whatsoever. This was even after they went to jail in New York. There wasn't an eleventh hour, there wasn't fascism. But what there was was the attack on the leaders of the party, where I think some 105 people were arrested under the Smith Act, in various stages of litigation in various parts of the country. Every district had its case. But that happened in 1951, I think. I'm talking about 1950, where this policy of "we're going to have fascism at any moment" is what operated the party. But the United States, in spite of all this and things you mention, was not and is not fascist.

FURMANOVSKY:

Just out of interest, when you heard about the Rosenbergs and that they were going to be executed and so on, what did you-- I mean, did you just basically think the Rosenbergs and Alger Hiss and all these people are completely 100 percent innocent of all of the things they were charged?

DOBBS:

No, I didn't know. I don't remember any judgment. I do know this though, I don't think we defended them as we should have. I don't remember ever meeting with or taking part in the organization of Rosenberg committees.

FURMANOVSKY:

But what I'm getting at is when you were in the party, did you have any sense that there were people in the party who did pass secrets of some kind?

DOBBS:

I never thought of it that way, never.

FURMANOVSKY:

You thought it just didn't happen, or you just didn't know about it?

DOBBS:

I say it might have happened, but I would have no connections with it. I never knew of any such things. We never did any such things. I never did. Now, that's one of the worst things that happened in this party. I think that when Rosenberg and Hiss were first arrested, I think we turned our back on them. Never questioned it as a frame-up until later. But it never dawned on me, it never--All I know is we never had anything to do with that kind of stuff. Nor would I.

FURMANOVSKY:

I'm not questioning whether you had anything to do with it. But was it your assumption that it didn't happen at all in the party?

DOBBS:

No, I couldn't make any such assumption. I didn't know--maybe they're not party members, I had no way of knowing. I had no way of knowing whether Hiss was a party member or not. Later I found out that people did know him, in Washington. But I never knew him. But that was years, years, years later, where some guy happened to tell me one day that he actually had the car that he was supposed to have driven someplace to pick up a pumpkin or something, you know? But I never knew that until years later. I never thought of it. Now, you'd ask why. Well, that's my problem. There's a lot of things I didn't think about. Now, maybe they are spies. I don't know whether they're communist or not.

FURMANOVSKY:

No, I'm just wondering to what extent did you think or know that there were people in the party who may have been doing things like that.

DOBBS:

I would have no way of knowing. Would have no way of knowing.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you were away then, for the best part of a year--

DOBBS:

For over a year.

FURMANOVSKY:

A little over a year, what from mid-'50 to mid-'51

DOBBS:

That's correct. I was away until it was already obvious that I was caught.

FURMANOVSKY:

You were caught?

DOBBS:

Yeah.

FURMANOVSKY:

Where were you caught?

DOBBS:

Portland, Oregon.

FURMANOVSKY:

When you said you were working as a--

DOBBS:

I was working for Pacific Greyhound Corporation, in the garage.

FURMANOVSKY:

And then what happened. One day--

DOBBS:

One day, there they are. A bunch of guys are asking me questions. That happened to the two other people that I was associated with. We thought, "We are caught! Let's get the hell out of here." So I went to Boise, Idaho. And there it was obvious that I was caught. Because there they were, following me openly. Three cars and nine men at all times.

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, I see. So you were being followed but you weren't arrested?

DOBBS:

That's right. That's right. Oh, didn't I make that clear? As I say, I went-- I had no indication whatsoever. In San Bernardino, after I left my friend's house in L.A., I grew a moustache and I wore glasses and I went to work for the General Tire Company. This was a murderous job; fifty-four hours a week, for I think ninety-five cents an hour. I worked as a tire repairman and vulcanizer and would go out to, let's say, the Knudsen Dairy and check all the tires. Or when customers would come in to the General Tire store, someone else would vulcanize them, I would take the wheels off and repair the tires. My hands became so painful, you know. But I did my job. I wasn't going to lose the job working for the General Tire Company.

FURMANOVSKY:

Just living on you own?

DOBBS:

Living on my own, living in a little rooming house.

FURMANOVSKY:

No communication with--

DOBBS:

No communication with-- Let's see, was there communication? At that time I was part of a committee of three. There must have been. Someone must have known where we were living. I think I went to one meeting, not a meeting;

when I say meeting, someone picked me up, I'd go meet Dorothy or someone else, we'd talk a little bit, and then I'd scam.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you noticed at some point that you were being followed?

DOBBS:

No, then I went to Portland. Not because I was being followed. I went to Portland, Oregon, and I got a job. That was interesting. I went around to all kinds of places. You know, I never had a trade except for the time that I worked in that rubber plant. Remember I told you I worked in a rubber plant? I didn't know any other trade. So I would go to these places, you know, tire repair places, garages, gas stations. (I worked as a kid in a gas station.) Finally, some man told me, he said, "Look, you're not going to get a job this way. Go to the union hall, and tell them you're out of work and you want a job." So I went to the teamsters union [the International Brotherhood of Teamsters], and just as I'm sitting in the office with the business agent, the telephone rang just then. He said, "I don't know. I got a man here. Maybe you'll interview him." He sent me right there and then to Pacific Greyhound, in the garage, and I was hired right away. Hired me right away to work the night shifts at the Pacific Greyhound Bus Company. What I did there was checking the batteries on the buses, checking the tires on the buses, filling the buses with gasoline, and driving them through the cleaners, you know, and then mopping the inside and taking all the vomit out, all the newspapers out, cleaning the inside of the buses. The only record I had to make was of gasoline that was expended and to make sure that no one--that only gasoline was used for the buses. No one else was supposed to get any gasoline. There were seven working, I remember there were seven working in the garage at night; three days graveyard and then two days swing shift. It was hard, but it was like a vacation after working a fifty-four hour week, see? It's only an eight-hour day, and it's at night. We have no boss breathing down your neck. You know, you're told what your job is. And actually, I used that experience, I think there were seven guys working there; we belonged to four different locals. I tried to describe it to somebody, a Soviet trade union official, years later and he didn't believe me. Four different locals. Seven people working, four different locals!

Two guys were mechanics, two guys were something else-- I forgot what they were. I forgot. And I was the only one that was doing bus-servicing work.

FURMANOVSKY:

You were using an assumed name, another name?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, an assumed name.

FURMANOVSKY:

You had no documentation, though?

DOBBS:

Well, I didn't-- Yeah, I had documentation. I forget, but I had a driver's license. Well, maybe that's what caught me. I **don't** know how I got caught. I'll tell you very frankly, I'm telling the tape, I don't know how I got caught. Don't ask me any questions. All I know, one day, there they are. A whole bunch of guys have the place surrounded, and one guy is asking me questions, and I'm giving him every lie I know. But I know that I'm caught. So I left. I remember I had just bought a car.

FURMANOVSKY:

But they didn't take you in then?

DOBBS:

No, they did not arrest me. I had just bought a car, and I wanted to sell it. I had to deal with the license problem. So I rode from Portland to Salem, which is the state office. I was able to get my ownership canceled, and I went back to Portland and I sold the car. I never got a driver's license, a Portland driver's license. I remember I had to make that trip to get my money back. Because I, you know, I didn't have an unlimited source of money. I sold the car, I got on a bus, and I started traveling around. I went to Boise, Idaho. When I got to Boise, Idaho, the people following me tried to hide that fact, but they couldn't hide anymore, because now I'm all by myself in a little town. In other words, I said to myself, well, I have to find a job. They were taking job applications for a refinery off in the mountains somewhere. There was some kind of metal refinery. They had a very hard time getting people to go to that job,

completely isolated in one of these terrible refineries, I forget which company. But I had to go to the airport to get a physical and to apply for the job. So here am I, carrying my bags to the airport, and there was a bunch of guys there applying for jobs, and it dawned on me that they were all FBI agents. They didn't have bags, they were following me. Three cars going as slowly as I am, and followed by nine guys on foot. So I said, "Oh, the hell with it," and I went back to my flophouse room and called Ada, and I said I'm coming home. There's no use continuing to be "underground." So I got on a bus in Boise, Idaho. I think I went to Reno. Yes, it was Reno, yeah. I went to Reno, and I said, I'm just not going to let these guys see me gambling." I had no money to begin with, you know, to spare. I walked into every gambling hall. And I tell you, it was fun to see these nine people scattered throughout, protecting every exit, see? Protecting every exit. In other words, the little flophouses, the little railroad workers' hotel in Sparks, Nevada, three or four miles out of Reno. And they're drawing pictures of the buildings, and one guy's assigned to the roof, another guy's assigned here, another guy's assigned--nine of them!

FURMANOVSKY:

And none of them said a word to you?

DOBBS:

No! I wanted to say, "Carry my bags, at least!" You know? They didn't pick me up. Then finally, I went to Reno. I stayed there, I think, just one night. But I went to every gambling place, and those poor guys just followed me by foot every place I went.

FURMANOVSKY:

But you weren't going by bus?

DOBBS:

Just walking around Reno.

FURMANOVSKY:

And they were driving?

DOBBS:

They were driving. Three cars and nine men at all times. Except, you see, they have a system, too. In other words, I don't know what federal district Boise, Idaho, was in relation to Reno. It might be a different federal district. So it would be different cars and different men. But they would pick me up somewhere as district jurisdictions changed. I left Reno, and when I got to Bishop, California, that's a changing of a district from the Northern California district to the Southern California district. And you could see the shift change! The agent in charge goes to a telephone and I hear him say, "Well, we had a wonderful fishing trip. We've got the fish with us. Come pick it up." Or, you know, whatever, or "Will you be here soon?" The shift changes, the cars change, the guys change. Two of them would get on the bus with me, and the rest of them would get in their cars and follow the bus. At one time I remember coming out of Winnetka, Nevada, the bus had to go up a long hill. And it was very slow going up that steep hill, and it was late at night. And the windshield, the reflection mirror, you know, this rear-view mirror caught the lights of these three following cars. The bus driver was being blinded. He stopped the bus and he told them, "Why the hell don't you pass me? Why are you following me? I'm going six miles an hour up this mountain." They told him to get back into the bus and said, "We know what we're doing." We got to Bishop, California, and they changed shifts. I called Ada: "Meet me in San Fernando and the bus depot." She picked me up, and they followed us home. Now, that went on for three weeks. It went on for three weeks. I hadn't seen my two kids for over a year. We began to be a family. We began to go out places. I remember once we went to--I forget the name of the town. Crystal Lake. It's on the road between San Bernardino and Lake Arrowhead. I forget the name of the town. I know it's near Crystal Lake. I forget what day of the week it was, but it was very heavy traffic in this mountain town, and here's these four cars, my car and these three cars causing traffic jams. There's honking and I'm having the time of my life. It was a lot of fun. One day we went to the beach, and these guys, I thought they'd go crazy. They saw me walking into the ocean, and the whole gang, you know, they thought I was going to get on a submarine or something, I don't know. So the whole gang started running in with their clothes. I'm in a bathing suit. They started running down the beach with me, see? It was just hilarious! Every night, they would be in the driveway, running their motors so they could keep the radio and the heaters on or whatever they wanted. During the day, the little

Mexican kids--we lived by that time in an almost completely Mexican area-- would holler, "Fink! Scabs! Fink! Rats!" They'd throw stones at them, and I tell you, it was really a riot! In the meantime, my sister had come to visit. You know, my sister who lives in New York [Lillian Goldstein]. All her friends came and there's the FBI sitting there. For three weeks! I had no idea what would happen.

1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE

OCTOBER 1, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

I think we left off, you had been on the run, kind of. And the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] had been tracking you. They had been outside your house, and finally they arrested you. The other Smith Act defendants had already--

DOBBS:

As I say, about twelve of the Smith Act defendants had already been in jail for a month or five weeks. I had no contact with them whatsoever and did not know what was going on. Except I do know they were unable to get any kind of reasonable bail. So when the three of us were arrested--because I was arrested on the same day that Frank Carlson and Frank Spector were also picked up (we were not together)--the three of us, therefore, due to some technicality, were always a little bit separate from the other Smith Act victims, just in terms of the technicalities, not the politics, not the trial. The amusing thing about my arrest is I was in the movies with my kid, Morrie [Morris Smolan Dobbs]. As I was telling you, I used the three weeks I was at home after being away for a year to get together, back with my family. We went out a good deal. I took him, who was about six and a half at the time, to the movies. We went to see Alice in Wonderland downtown at the Hill Street Theater, which is on Eighth [Street] and Hill. In the middle of the movie, I felt a hand from behind me flash a badge in front of my face, and said, "Well Ben, we have to go now. We're picking you up. I guess you know what this is all about." And I said to my son, I said, "Morrie, I'm sorry, we'll have to leave now. I have to go with these people, you'll come with us." So we just walked out. It didn't cause any stir in the movie. I didn't make any fuss or anything.

Maybe I should have, I don't know. It didn't occur to me at the time. But when I got to the foyer outside the theater, I came to a dead halt and said, "I'm not going with you people. I really don't care whether you have a warrant or whatever you have. I'm not going until we find out what you're going to do with my little boy here." And they said, "Oh Ben, you know us better than that. We'll take care of that." And they took us home; that is, they took us to my home on Malabar Street. My wife Ada [Martin Dobbs] heard us arrive. My little kid was thoroughly terrified, and he just got out of the car and he ran down the street. Strangely enough, not into our house but to the house of a friend. We never did--I never did figure out why that happened because, you know, we got involved with other things, and I didn't see him for, oh, maybe half a year--four or five months anyway. But anyway, Ada came out and said, "What's going on?" And they said, "Oh, Mrs. Dobbs, we're going to take Ben with us. He'll get in touch with you shortly." So she made some comment to the effect, "Well, I see what's going on." And so we rode off. Now, strangely enough, unlike the way the arrest was made in other places, where I heard there was some brutality and even some guns drawn, for some reason or other the FBI was extremely polite with me. I have no way of explaining why. I don't know anything, except that they were very polite, and they took us home. As a matter of fact, it was only about five or six blocks away from my house in Boyle Heights. On our way to the FBI headquarters, which at that time I think was at Fifth [Street] and Spring [Street], they very apologetically handcuffed me. We went up to the office, and there every corridor and every turn had all kinds of guards. We paid no attention to them, and they took us in. There I saw the two Franks [Frank Spector and Frank Carlson], and there we were fingerprinted and then taken to the Federal Building. When we got to the Federal Building, there's another cute little incident. What happened is we were put in the charge of the federal marshalls. They took all the papers and everything that was done by the FBI, and tore them all up. They said, "Those guys are trying to take our jobs. They're not civil service. They're all appointed. They get paid better than we do, and this is our job to do the booking." It just shows that little interplay between these two agencies, fighting each other for the jobs. They were particularly mad at the FBI because they're not under civil service. By the way, this is reflected in a book I read just the other day about, oh, some spy or something that was running around, and how the marshall's office was trying desperately to keep some kind of foot in the federal

operation, other than handing out subpoenas and stuff like that. The book was **The Flight of the Falcon**. So, anyway, then of course, all the fingerprinting started again and the filling out of the papers. Then we were taken to the L.A. County Jail, which was not new for me, because as I told you, I think, the L.A. County Jail has a contract with the federal government to house federal prisoners. When we got to the county jail, we were put in the same tank with the other male Smith Act defendants. We were in a special tank called "high power," which I think is a section of the jail that is kept for people that they want to protect from other prisoners.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right. Yes, you mentioned that last time.

DOBBS:

Yeah, apparently the theory was that we had to be protected, as were other screwballs in that cell, or in that tank. The tank consisted of thirteen cells and the corridors alongside the cells. Well, we started staying in jail. We had nothing to do. That's one of the distinctive features about a jail, of course. It's an establishment area of a transient population. It's not a prison. There's nothing to do except clean up the place, or keep it clean. And you'd get your three meals a day. I think the lunch is somewhere in the nature of an apple or a sandwich--I forget which, but it's not a full meal. The meals are mostly very starchy. Although, I'd learned to ride with these things. I learned that in the army very quickly. You got to do with what-- You got to take life as it comes. But anyway, all we did there was read, play pinochle, talk, you know, and try to get acquainted with the other prisoners in the tank. Now, what we were in jail for was the question of lower bail prior to the trial. The judge that was assigned to our case, a fellow by the name of William C. Mathes, who now is dead, was a very, very reactionary man. He would tolerate no bail for us whatsoever. He sort of had that sneering attitude: "You people think you can overthrow the government, a strong powerful government like the United States?" Yet, his biggest regret was that he couldn't give us a bigger sentence than he gave us. So he took it out on us on the bail problem. (

[The other Smith Act defendants had been in jail for about four weeks before the three of us joined them. Judge Mathes had set bail at \$75,000 each, I

believe. For fourteen people, that was more money than we could possibly raise.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) To get that bail lowered, our lawyers had to go from the district court to the Ninth District appeals court, which was refused, then to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ordered lowered bail; the judge pretended he didn't know what lower bail meant. So he lowered it to what was also an absolutely unreasonable amount. I can't remember exactly but it was about \$50,000. Finally, after going up to the Supreme Court again, all this taking a great deal of time with the attorneys, not to mention the money. And in the meantime, there's defense committees going on, there's struggling, there's mass meetings. But we were in jail, all fifteen of us. Now, the fifteen represented basically the district executive committee of the Communist Party of California. For some reason or other, the San Francisco United States Attorney's office didn't want the case. So the people that were arrested in San Francisco came into the Los Angeles case. Which at that time, the United States attorney was a fellow by the name of [Walter S.] Binns, a very incompetent fellow, bumbling around. They didn't have a special lawyer. They had a fellow on their staff by the name of [Norman] Newcombe, who, because Binns was so incompetent, then carried through on the trial. And he was a lush. He would call up our lawyers at night, tell how sorry he is, you know, and that he shouldn't be doing it. But the next day, he would try to do everything possible to keep us in jail. Anyway, we never could get bail. The trial kept getting postponed. Now, two interesting things happened at that time. First, one of the main arguments for bail, or lower bail, was that we had to have a place where we could work to prepare our case. And the judge said, "Well, I'll let you prepare your case. We'll have set aside in the Federal Building a place where you can have your books, where you can have continual discussions with your lawyers, and you can prepare your trial." Which was done. In other words, what they set aside was a room called the "bull pen" in the Federal Building, which is across the street from the L.A. County Jail, which at that time was the Hall of Justice on First [Street] and Broadway. And this, the Federal Building, was on First and Spring. So he decided that they would do that, and so they set aside this bull pen. And every day, we were chained, put

in handcuffs, tied together by a big chain; that is, the men were--the women were not. And we were just taken over to the Federal Building, where we were put in this bull pen. It was very crowded and sometimes very hot. Then, we would do whatever we had to do. I was assigned to write a paper on the question of why I tried to evade arrest. I related to the fact that there's nothing new about that in American history. It's always been done--hiding from subpoenas, or hiding from arrest. Mentioning such things as the Underground Railroad and stuff like that. But I wrote a paper on it. I don't think it was ever used or needed for the trial, but we thought it might be. Other people were assigned to write other kinds of papers around the whole question of the defense of the Constitution, as reflected in the denial of First Amendment rights, etc. Now, while we were waiting for lowered bail, we were preparing for our trial, so it might do well to spend a moment defining the Smith Act. The actual indictment was that we were charged with "a conspiracy to advocate and teach the overthrow of the United States government by force and violence, as speedily as circumstances would permit." Now, that "speedily as circumstances would permit" was designed to avoid the whole business of getting around the question of that in order for people to be arrested for what they say, there has to be a clear and present danger to what they say. In other words, a person can't come into a theater, the historic, classic example, and scream "Fire!" and then demand, well, I have my First Amendment rights, even though it caused panic and people were hurt. There was a clear and present danger. So in order to say, "Well, we're not accusing these people of a clear and present danger, but the opportunity may arise for them to overthrow the government. And that's what we're trying to avoid." That was the nature of the charge. So a lot of discussion and preparation of the trial in that little bull pen there took the form of discussion around what do we mean by the clear and present danger? What's the difference between acting and doing? How does the Constitution speak of the First Amendment? Is this a reasonable defense? How far do we go in defending the party as an institution, what the party has to say? And here, I might say, that in the course of the trial, we ran into some several things relative to the history of the party. For instance, the early history of the party, much of the history is devoted to getting recognition from the Soviet Party. In other words, I don't know if you ever saw the picture Reds with Warren Beatty, that explains that a little bit. We had books, **Towards Soviet Power**, by [William Z.] Foster.

FURMANOVSKY:

Towards the Soviet America.

DOBBS:

Yes, **Towards the Soviet America**. Well, then it was Olgen, Moses [Moisshe] J. Olgen, who was editor of the Freiheit, who wrote a book called, I think, Towards Soviet Power. These were written in the very early days of the Communist Party, books which later were rejected as our policy. But, nevertheless, those were the books that were used widely in the trial, and we made a study of these books.

FURMANOVSKY:

In an attempt to explain them and put them in an historical context?

DOBBS:

That's correct. That was what we tried to do, of course. Also, part of the fact that the party went through changes as it made different estimates of the situation. But those were books that were hard to get around. It was due to a very sectarian period on the part of the Communist Party of the United States. Anyway, we prepared for the trial. But the one thing that happened there in the bull pen that's worth telling about was that we found that if we went across the street, let's say at nine o'clock in the morning, and were delivered back to the county jail at four o'clock in the afternoon, we missed the main meal of the day. Because the meal there is served at three o'clock. You know, they feed somewhere in the neighborhood of 3,000 prisoners in the county jail, considering there were a changing 3,000, but there was always that average. Well, they wouldn't serve us any food. The judge says, "Well, it's no fault of mine. You're the ones who wanted to go off into your room to study. Well, you're doing that. You have to make your own arrangements for food." At that time, as I tried to explain before in an earlier session of this interview, there was a widespread number of sympathetic organizations around the Communist Party. Some of them had this ethnic character to them. In other words, they were made up of Hungarians or Jewish people or Greeks or Italians. They took on the job of supplying us with food. And every day, one or another of these groups would bring in hot food. All this was organized and extremely well prepared, and extremely well organized. At a certain part of

the day, we would put aside our books and have these meals. Well, soon what began to happen--and this went on for weeks--what began to happen is each group began to compete with each other as to which one could bring us the better meals. Well, I tell you, we ate ourselves sick! We all began to gain weight, because the food was absolutely delicious. All of it was this ethnic food. In other words, the Greeks would bring in Greek food, and Hungarians Hungarian food, and Jewish people Jewish food, and the Italians, you know. Well, we really ate ourselves sick! Not sick in the sense of being ill, but we just ate and ate and ate because the food was so delicious. We stopped eating at the jail altogether except in the morning where you have your coffee and your cereal. So that was one thing that happened while we were preparing our trial. That wonderful contribution in the movement in keeping us so well fed. Eventually, we were granted bail. But I want to say there was one other thing that happened to me in this period. I forget exactly when, but towards the end--I think after bail had been granted. So let me discuss the bail question here a little bit. We were granted bail by the order of the Supreme Court, ordering the Ninth District Court of Appeals to set bail. They set the bail at \$10,000 for some and \$20,000 for others. Now, the distinctive feature, the difference between \$10,000 and \$20,000, was if there was any reference to violence in the covert acts as outlined in the indictment. Then the bail would be \$20,000. Well, what were these covert acts in the indictment? "Well, Ben Dobbs attended such and such a meeting and made a speech. Ben Dobbs made a speech where he spoke about violence. Ben Dobbs taught a class and the book was Stalin's Foundations of Leninism." These were the kinds of indictment. These were the overt acts. Well, of course, that's ridiculous and silly, but that's the way it worked out. I was given \$20,000 bail because I had said something to the effect that when we came home from the war-- I think it was about that time, '47 or '48, that there was a big international campaign to ban atomic warfare. I think it was called the Stockholm Pledge, the Stockholm Peace Pledge. And we had a big meeting. Several hundred people attended the meeting where we organized the campaign, where I made a speech that the peace movement, in order to be successful, has to have both depth and breadth. Now, by breadth, I mean it has to include people of all political views and all religious views. It must not be limited. It can have communists and pacifists. It can have Jews and Protestants and Catholics; black, white, Latino and everything. In other words, that's the breadth. Now, the depth is that not

everybody will do the same thing. But we wanted a peace movement where some people would just sign a petition. Others will come to a mass meeting. Others will come to a demonstration. And I said, as a matter of fact, you have it so deep in France now, relative to the war that's now going on in Algeria-- you know, the struggle for Algerian independence--that French longshoremen threw rocket launchers into the sea before they would let them be used against the Algerian peasants. Well, that was the act of violence that I was supposed to be accused of. Although I had just read it in a newspaper and quoted the newspaper. So I was one of those that had to get \$20,000 bail. Now, the assignment that I had relative to that, because of my activities as secretary of the L.A. party at that time, and because of my longstanding membership in the L.A. Communist Party--that's already twenty years, outside of the years I was in the army, this was in 1951--was to raise the money for the bail. Now, it's obvious we had no such money, because you say fifteen people, even at \$10,000, it's \$150,000. Some at \$20,000-- I think the whole bail bill was somewhere in the neighborhood of \$230,000 or \$240,000. The party had no such money. You can't go to bail bonds, because even if bail bonds were permitted--which in federal cases are usually not permitted, because you have to have cash or United States government bonds--we had to borrow the money. Now, there was a lawyer by the name of [Benjamin] Barney Dreyfus, a very wonderful young man from San Francisco. He and I set up this bail fund. We actually raised and borrowed all that money to get people out on bail. Because then what happened is the night-- Oh, by the way, I want to say that the term fifteen was reduced to fourteen because one of the defendants, [Mary] Bernadette Doyle, was very ill and was separated from the case. So the assignment that I had relative to, other than the bail, was that Frank Spector and Frank Carlson and myself could not be released from jail. They got out first and then later, us, because of this technicality that I spoke of. I don't know why. It was a matter of a week. But anyway, two things happened of some note. First of all, I was put in the same tank with Mickey Cohen. Mickey Cohen was a very famous--nationally and local--gangster. He was considered to be the head of the mob here in Los Angeles. Well, he had grown up in Los Angeles in the same area that I grew up in, Boyle Heights. And, you know, because jail is the great leveler, he sort of felt that we had something in common. He's a businessman, I'm a businessman. Well, what way did he mean? "Well, I'm in the gambling business, you're in the

communist business! We're both businessmen. You're not a thief, I'm not a thief. You know, I'm a gangster, not a thief." So we have something in common. Well, he had that jail bribed from top to bottom. First of all, you're not supposed to have money in jail. But he never had less than \$2,000 on him. How did he bribe the jail? Well, everybody in that tank got all the pies--pies were distributed twice a week at thirty-five or forty-five cents a piece; everybody was allowed to have three or four candy bars; everybody was allowed to have a quart of milk. Everybody in that tank got everything to which they could possibly get, and he paid for all of it. He would buy boxes of playing cards; that is, the guards would go out and buy boxes of cards for him. He would distribute them to the entire jail. Just say, "Mickey's sending it. Mickey is sending it to you boys." Little things like that. One day we had a meal that was edible. So he right away got up a petition to the sheriff, thanking him for the wonderful meal that he provided the prisoners. Except not me! I'm not signing any petitions thanking-- I'll sign a petition saying that the food generally is lousy. I'm not going to go out of my way to tell him one meal was edible. But anyway, we began to talk and play pinochle. Well, my two codefendants, they were just outraged at this. Because how can you mingle with a gangster? The guy's responsible for murdering people! And he probably was. He would never give any details of his gangsterism, except he would tell me about his gambling. You know, with pinochle at huge stakes with all the executives in the movie industry mostly.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you ever talk politics?

DOBBS:

No, no. There was no use talking politics with him. But I will tell you what he talked about. One day he's pacing up and down the cell, and he said, "How come--You say you're from Boyle Heights. How come I never knew you?" I said, "Well, Mickey, we just didn't travel in the same circles, that's all." And he paced for-- "Except I bet you my mother knows your mother!" "Could be, but I've never heard her talk about it." Anyway, he had the idea that Boyle Heights was his. And here's a guy who says he's from Boyle Heights and he don't know him. Well, that was very cute. By the way, he was the kind of guy who had to wash his hands every ten minutes. A real psychological problem. He could play

a game of cards, except every three hands he'd have to have a new deck of cards. You know, he'd get up and wash his hands, and there would be a new deck of cards. The other thing is, a cute story, because you said you wanted something personal. Anyway, we played pinochle three or four times. I'm not a good player, and this guy was a shark. It's a little bit more difficult than most card games, pinochle is, and he was very good at it. It wound up, I think I owed him \$22. So I said, "Well, Mickey, I don't have that \$22. You're not allowed to have money in jail. I'm going to get out. You know, we're just waiting for bail. My comrades had already been put out on bail. There's just the three of us in this tank. And when I get out I'll send you the \$22." He's pacing up and down, the man is obviously angry: "What do you mean you can't pay a gambling debt? The highest mark of honor is to pay a gambling debt, and the greatest crime is not to pay a gambling debt. You pay with your life if you don't pay a gambling debt!" Well, what is he going to do? And he's pacing up and down. I'm telling you, the man is serious! So then he says, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll loan you the \$22." So I said, "Fine." And in all seriousness, he takes out his wad of bills and he hands me \$22. I said, "Hey, Mickey, I want to settle up now for the card game I lost. Here's the \$22 I owe you." He takes it calmly, folds it with the rest of his money, puts it in his pocket. I said, "Now, Mickey, how do I pay that \$22 back?" He said, "No one has ever had to pay those kind of loans. It's not a gambling debt. I loaned you, I've borrowed lots of money that I never pay back." That's the gangster mentality, huh? I swear to this day, I think the man was absolutely sincere in that kind of stupidity. Anyway, he also was in jail for trying to get lower bail, by the way. That was also something in common with us. I think there was even a time when his hearing and our hearing took place at the same time in the Supreme Court. In other words, our lawyers had some association with each other. Anyway, we got out on bail finally. We raised the money, and we-- One other cute thing. There were three of us. So we said, well, we have to study for our trial. So instead of being taken to the bull pen, we were to be taken to an office up in the district attorney's office, that is, the federal district attorney. There was an old guy just sweating out his retirement, a marshall. He told us his wife had been a member of the ILD, International Labor Defense, years ago. So every once in a while he would bring us a half a pint of whiskey, so we'd have something to drink with our meal. You run into these funny things all the time. I remember once in jail a guy, a cop, you know, slips by me and seeks my hand. And I look in my hand

and there's a \$20 bill! "Here's a contribution to your case." You know, you run into the funniest things. So anyway, we finally got out of jail. I can't think of any other jail stories to tell you, because generally, as I say, I don't find it hard to take. It's all in a day's work.

FURMANOVSKY:

I wanted to ask you, in terms of preparing for your case, to what extent was there consultation, direct or indirect, with the New York office?

DOBBS:

That, I don't know. There was a steering committee. I was not on that steering committee. I think the steering committee was-- Well, there was Bill [William] Schneiderman of course, Al Richmond, Dorothy Healey, and Oleta O'Connor Yates. And I think one other person, but I can't remember who. I was not on it. They might have had some connections. The only connections that took place, as far as I know, could have been done by other people's correspondence. Because mail, presumably, is censored. I don't recall any discussion of mail. There might have been some discussions while we were out on bail. But I have no way of answering that.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about the lawyers? I mean, it was what John [T.] McTernan and--

DOBBS:

No. Our lawyers, when we finally went to trial, we had five lawyers. First of all was, of course, Ben Margolis. Ben Margolis is a man that I have a tremendous respect for. He's one of the outstanding labor lawyers in California. He was considered probably the dean of labor lawyers during the growth and expansion of the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] here in California and the progressive movement of the AF of L [American Federation of Labor]. He was not the lawyer in the [Conference of] Studio [Unions] strike, by the way. That was a different lawyer, also a progressive lawyer, a fellow by the name of [Frank] Pestana. The second lawyer was A. L. Wirin. Al, his name was Al Wirin. I think it was Abraham Lincoln Wirin, actually, but we called him Al. He was a man that I had known for many years. He was not a communist. In many respects, he probably might have been an anticommunist. Except he felt

that we were such a target of civil liberties, and the defense of civil liberties meant the defense of communists and the right to speak. In many cases, or there were some cases, where he would rent a hall and say, "I want you to use the hall." It was the only way for us to get a hall to have any kind of mass meeting. Al Wirin would do that. I had known him over the years. Actually, I think I told you at one time, he and I were a team to debate a couple of fascists on the "Les Crane Show." So I knew him over the years. He was one of our lawyers. The third was Norman Leonard. Norman Leonard is a lawyer from San Francisco and he had been an associate of Margolis and McTernan, I think. But in the San Francisco--No, he wasn't an associate at that time. I think he had his own law firm, or it might have been a law firm with somebody else. I don't remember. But he was in San Francisco. But I had gone to school with him at UCLA, and we were in that little teeny radical group I told you about at UCLA. I hadn't seen him for years, and suddenly he turns out to be a lawyer. The fourth lawyer was the first black lawyer to be brought into a white firm. And that was into the Ben Margolis firm [Katz, Gallagher, McTernan, and Margolis]. (He was separated at that time from the Ben Margolis firm.) And that was Leo [J.] Branton, Jr. Leo Branton was my lawyer. In other words, each of these lawyers were assigned to groups of defendants. I think Branton was the lawyer for me and Henry Steinberg, and maybe somebody else, I've forgotten. The fifth lawyer was a lawyer who was a very famous labor lawyer. And I think he was the lawyer for the painters international union [Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators, and Paperhangers of America], and well as Painters locals here. But I don't know what happened to him and I've forgotten his name. Is it in the book there?

FURMANOVSKY:

Schulman?

DOBBS:

Schulman, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

Alexander Schulman.

DOBBS:

What was his name?

FURMANOVSKY:

Alexander.

DOBBS:

Yes, Alexander, yes. Most of the fighting in the court was all done by Wirin and primarily Ben Margolis.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you don't think there would have been any instructions, consultations, going from the Communist Party in New York to these lawyers?

DOBBS:

No, I don't think so. I don't think so because, as I told you, we had a different theory of the case altogether. So I have no way-- They might have fought it out and got permission. But I have no personal knowledge of that.

FURMANOVSKY:

That wouldn't be something that you would have talked about amongst yourselves?

DOBBS:

Well, as I said, it was talked about the first five weeks when I wasn't there. I must admit, I don't recall any such discussions. The issue was settled by the time I got there. Then the problem was of getting lawyers. Anyway, these were the five lawyers. They were tremendously sacrificing, self-sacrificing. They did not expect the trial to go on nearly five or five and a half months. They had a flat fee and they had trouble maintaining their offices because I think, with the exception of Ben and Schulman, they all had one-person offices. Of course, Wirin was the legal counsel of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] at the time, and they had many lawyers on their staff. But it was a very hard thing for them to do, and to maintain their offices at the fees that they were getting. The party was just exhausted in raising money for the political aspects of the case, as well as for the legal aspects of the case. We had an office that was set up for the technical work of the trial, the defense committees, legal research, and things of that kind. And this was at Ninth

Street between Broadway and Hill. Now, during the preparation for the trial, I had two assignments. First, as I say-- Well, there were three assignments. First was the raising of the bail, which I was directly instrumental and responsible for; which then meant that I would be directly responsible for the return of the money, because all of this was borrowed money. The second thing I was responsible for was a device--We got an order, permission from the court. Well, let me put it this way. To appeal a case, you have to have a transcript of the trial. Now, this was going to be a long trial. To get a printed transcript would have cost a fortune. So we got permission from the judge to take the proceedings of the trial, as given to us by the official court stenographers, reproduced--that is, printed. You know, xeroxed or something of that, some printing device. Then bound for the day's transcript, and then to be set aside for the appeals courts. Now, we had to take the official court transcript and retype it for the kind of reproduction process that we used. So that meant getting teams of typists five days a week to come in after the day's trial and to sit at their typewriters until it was finished. Then someone would take it to a printer. Then the printer to do it. And then to have them bound and then to be mailed. What we did is we mailed them to all other parts of the country that already had some forms of Smith Act litigation. We had to give a copy to the judge. We had to give a copy to the prosecution. We had to have copies for our defense lawyers. And then to set aside and preserve copies for the appellate court. Now this was thousands of pages! It turned out to be a shelfful of books, you know, a six-foot shelf of books! This was an enormous job, and I think we got about forty men and women, mostly women, to come in and do that typing and to do that work. It was a tremendous responsibility and a tremendous job. It saved us, I think, about \$100,000, because it was--As it is, it cost us about \$30,000 because we had to buy the pages from the court typist. So it was quite a job. That was my second responsibility. The third responsibility was a more difficult one, but it was also related to the fact that I was secretary of the party. And that is, if we were given any prior notice of a witness against us, to find out as much as we could about that witness. In other words, let's say a witness from Los Angeles comes, and his name is Stephen Weber. I think he used the name of Wereb instead of Weber. So he said he was from the Inglewood club. Then I would contact the Inglewood club in L.A. and sit down with the people at night, after the trial: "What do you know about this guy?" And we would get something. We were able to then

find out a little bit about the nature of these stool pigeons. Now, why this is important? Of course, one had to attack the credibility of witnesses, as a key aspect of American trials. Anyway, we start getting these things ready, start preparing these things. We were out on bail I think for a month before the trial actually started. If I remember correctly, it started early in January of 1952. And the trial went on. Now, to me, I must say the trial was a tremendous bore. You know, after all, how interesting can it be to have some jerk get up there and say, "Yes, I was treated in a very bad fashion. And someone from the Communist Party of some other state held me in a cellar until I confessed. And I confessed because I wanted to get out of being tortured." It was a lot of nonsense. It had nothing to do with us--nothing to do with anything at all. It was their effort at the nature of the Communist Party. Or why a guy got expelled from New Jersey, for instance. Who the hell knew him? Nobody knew him. And you know, you listen to this stuff for a while and sooner or later it has a litany to it. Secondly, the continual effort to tie everything relative to the books. The books was the main thing in the trial. I really don't remember too much of the testimony--some of it was very funny. And then we had to be there every day. And it dragged and dragged and dragged and dragged. The lawyers are desperate to speed it up. The attorneys are desperate to speed it up, and the judge is desperate to speed it up. But the incompetency of the federal government was just enormous. I mean, they didn't know their way up. As a matter of fact, one of the funniest things that happened is that here is this viciously anticommunist judge who would never grant us any bail, who finally had to have this forced bail on him to let us out. I'll tell you a story about that in just a moment. That is, he was forced to give us bail. At the end of the trial, he praised our lawyers for what they did. And inferentially, he said nothing about these jerks of prosecution, government lawyers. You know, he went out of his way to praise our lawyers.

FURMANOVSKY:

The prosecution lawyers?

DOBBS:

Yeah, the defense lawyers. The prosecution lawyers, he considered them jerks, and said so many times during the trial. He would sneer at their incompetence, you know, "Is that the best you can do? Are you through

questioning?" That kind of stuff. Let's see, it brought to mind something I wanted to mention. The trial. It went on. Now, there were three things about the trial that I want to tell you. First of all, my father [Michael Isgur], who had been, as I told you, a right-wing socialist, never had any real sympathy with the Communist Party. His heart was broken when he actually saw me at work in this tire plant. Because after all, in a Jewish home, a working-class home, what is the ambition? That your son not be a worker. And here, you know, I wasn't of low intelligence. I could have been a lawyer, a doctor, whatever I set my mind and heart to, at least he believed that. And all I wanted to do was be an honest worker and a communist organizer. Well, he had already retired. My mother [Ida Levy Isgur] had already begun a stage of semiparalysis due to some kind of muscular dystrophy, so it was very difficult for her to get out of the house. But he attended that trial every single day and was just outraged at what he saw. And just the last year or two of his life, he became very sympathetic to my efforts.

FURMANOVSKY:

Really?

DOBBS:

Yeah. Not only personally. But he saw what this trial did to everything he believed in this country. He had a very personal definition of socialism: he was able to attend unions, able to have free speech, and unemployment and social insurance. But as far as he's concerned, that's better than socialism. So he became very sympathetic. And I would say at the end of the trial, I was making some kind of collection speech at a meeting, and he very demonstratively walked down the aisle to give me a check for a hundred dollars. I think it was for the defense, but it might have been for the paper [**People's World**]. But it was very touching and very moving. But he attended every minute of that trial. Ada, of course, was busy on the defense cases and taking care of the children. So she didn't attend much of the trial. But he did. As I say, the trial to me was a terrible bore. I was not mentioned very much in the testimony, except three incidents which were very funny, really. There was a woman who ran the elevator. The elevator woman, you know, that took people up and down on Market Street where the state offices for the Communist Party were. Sometimes we'd have our meetings there. Open offices, registered and rented

in the name of the Communist Party. We'd get into the elevator, and go up, and we'd say hello. She'd say hello. After the day's meeting, she'd take us down. You know, an elevator operator. Everybody's sympathetic and friendly, and she appeared as a witness in our trial. She testified that in 1944 I had gone to several meetings and she remembers them very well because I had been taken up in the elevator. When it was pointed out that actually I was in Europe at the time in the army, she said I'm sure that he was such a big shot that the army, you know, let him come home and come to the meetings every month, you know. Well, all it did was get a smile. The second evidence against me that I can recall is a guy was on the stand and he said, "I attended a class that Mr. Dobbs taught." "Well, what was unique about the class? What was it about?" "Oh, it had something to do with Stalin." "Was there anything peculiar about the class?" "Yeah, on the table near which he stood or he might sit (it was a small class) there was a book." "And what was the book?" "It was **Foundations of Leninism** by Stalin." "Did Ben do anything with the book?" "Yes, he riffled the pages." Well, that was an enormous bit of testimony. After all, it tied me directly to the book. I had riffled the pages. Well, it was that kind of nonsense. The lawyers then read some paragraphs from this book. Third, was Lou Rosser, this fellow whose place I had taken because of some scandal when I was sent back to Los Angeles in 1938 after being the state secretary of the YCL [Young Communist League]. So Lou Rosser was the man that I had replaced. Now, it's obvious they had something on him because he then was a witness against us in our trial. And he fumbled around, you know, "Yes, the party developed an underground apparatus." "Where did you meet?" He said, "Well, our underground apparatus used to meet at Ben Dobbs's house." Now, if you can find anything sillier than that, let me know. An underground apparatus at the home of an open Communist Party member, an open leader of the Communist Party. That's the kind of stupidity that the testimony was. There were other stupidities relative to other people on trial. The one that strikes me most was this elevator woman. She testified about one of the women who needed shots of some kind or other. So she would give her the shot. So one day she's giving her the shot, and the defendant says to her, "Be careful, because I don't want to bleed, because every drop of my blood belongs to the Soviet Union." You know, the nonsense you can get! Or there was another woman that came in and was asked to testify, and she testified. She was asked to identify Al Richmond. She says, "Now, let's see, they told me

he would be wearing a brown suit." Sure enough she selected one of the people that was wearing a brown suit. Well, it wasn't Al Richmond, it was one of the lawyers. She said, "Oh, I've made a mistake. Let's see, who else is wearing a brown suit? Oh, there he is. That's Albert." He was wearing a brown suit. I mean, it was just stupid. You know, all the laws of evidence meant nothing. The prosecution didn't care. Their incompetence was amazing. It was so stupid, and other than these little humorous incidents it really was a terrible bore.

FURMANOVSKY:

Was it in any way something of an eye-opener to see a lot of stool pigeons and people that you had known, that you didn't realize the full extent of the infiltration of the party, or was this something--?

DOBBS:

Well, let me tell you, that's hard to judge. Why do I say that? What do you do about it? What can you do? We tried to unearth stool pigeons. Maybe sometimes we were correct, and maybe sometimes we were not correct. You can't out-cop the cops. We're not a police organization. And I'll tell you, it's extremely difficult. Is a political disagreement the work of a stool pigeon? It would be if the guy says, "Let's go bomb the Federal Building," or something like that. You'd think that's a stool pigeon. That's an agent provocateur. Other than that, how do you-- Let me give you some stories. There was one other bit of testimony. This fellow Frank Wereb, I think his name was, testified that he went to a mass meeting. He went to the mass meeting with some friends, and Ben Dobbs made a speech asking for money. "And Ben Dobbs made a wonderful speech, so all my friends asked me, 'Well, aren't you going to give him money?' So I gave \$75. Because, really, it was a wonderful speech." Now, how the hell can you know whether a guy like that's a stool pigeon, a spy?

1.15. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE TWO

OCTOBER 1, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes, you were saying about--

DOBBS:

There's this observation: I found that stool pigeons generally are three different categories. The first are people that were embittered against the party. Now, that could happen in the everyday work of any political party or any organization. You read it in the newspapers everyday where there's disagreements and embitterment--even in the Republican Party. (

[Many people could easily become embittered either by being excessively criticized or wrongfully accused of some political error--or being the subject of gossip. It was not easy to be a member of the party. Many sacrifices were expected and members experienced disappointments at some results of campaigns, or at mistakes made by the party. There were many things that very subjective people could be bitter about and this could become antiparty. This is especially true in relation to disagreements on policy matters.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) The second kind of stool pigeon were people that it's obvious that the police had something on them. They would be either harassed or put on trial for some crime or misdemeanor, or whatever, and therefore testified in order to get out of any trouble. I think that was the case with Lou Rosser. I'm convinced that he was not a stool pigeon when I knew him as really a wonderful, talented, charismatic man. He was just great in the early days that I had met him in the YCL.

FURMANOVSKY:

Have you any idea what they had on him?

DOBBS:

No. It must have had something to do with booze or with drugs. I have no idea. Because there was no way of getting at this. There was one guy I knew that our investigations had shown, as I told you, that thing I was responsible for, he was a bigamist. See, that was shown to be part of the problem. Now, I can't say which ones are which, but it was clear that that was some of them. They were not stool pigeons when they came in. Then there were people that just didn't have a political thought in their head, the third kind. It was simply, "We don't care what happens. All we were asked to do. We went to the

meeting, they paid us our money. We gave them a list of the people who were at the meeting. That's all." There were a whole number like that. It was just that bald. Every one of them had to testify to the amount of money they received. But it was clear that they--After all, there were twenty-two witnesses in our trial. Some of them coming from back East, some of them related to other Smith Act cases like-- I've forgotten their names even.

FURMANOVSKY:

Lloyd Kamiin was one?

DOBBS:

Well, Lloyd Hamlin I think was an L.A. man. I think he was one of these guys that didn't care about anything, except he was instructed to give names. There was an old party leader that became a stool pigeon, but he was very embittered against the party. I've forgotten his name. He made the circuit; he testified in a number of places. Because that's one thing you should know. While we were on trial, and immediately after the trial, cases were started in various other parts of the country. I don't know how many but I think there were close to 105 people involved in Smith Act [cases], various stages of litigation, both during and after our trial. Because we had a different outlook than the national committee--which after all had gone through two different trials with two different groups of defendants and had already been convicted and sentenced twice and sent to prison. As I say, the trial went on for I would say about five months. This huge work of getting that testimony ready for the appeals court; it was clear that we were going to be allowed to appeal it because there were direct constitutional questions involved. The only defendant that testified for our defense was Oleta O'Connor Yates. A very fine, very, very fine young woman. She was much younger than anyone else. I think maybe she was the youngest person in the trial, although had already been an experienced communist leader. She was the head of the San Francisco party, I believe. She was the only one that testified in our trial, a long testimony. She was jailed several times during the trial for contempt of court because of her refusal to name names. In other words, she would only name names of the people that were right in front of her, but would give no other names of any other member of the party. This judge, he just hammered her and slammed her in the jail, maybe three or four times. One story about

that is that after we were out on bail, she was in jail. She was on Terminal Island, the federal jail for women. She had been there a couple of days, and we finally got a court order to get her out of jail. Ben Margolis's secretary and myself spent the entire day, the entire day. First of all, we had to raise the money. Well, I didn't have too much of a problem there, it was only \$5,000 I think. Secondly, we had to get documents signed. In other words, we had to go to the district attorney. Then we had to find the judge to sign the document, and then it had to go back to the district attorney. I forget all the details. But I'll tell you the two of us--this remarkable woman and myself, Ben Margolis's secretary and myself--we rode around all day and finally got down to the jail and presented all the papers and she was called to be released from jail. And she refused to go.

FURMANOVSKY:

She refused to go?

DOBBS:

Yeah. She said, "Well look, I've been put in and out of jail now for four times. Let me rest! So, I'll rest here. I know you can get me out, but maybe Mathes will put me in again." She absolutely refused to go. Well, we were just horror-struck after the day we put in! You know, but she wouldn't go out of there. Then two days later her husband came down and he convinced her to get out of jail. Well, everything was all prepared. All they had to do was sign her release papers. But that was the kind of thing that hurt people.

FURMANOVSKY:

Were there any arguments at all amongst you from the jail? I mean, reflections on the party, any significant differences, or was that sort of--?

DOBBS:

I don't know. I don't recall any. You know, it's so hard to remember. We might have joked about it. Frank Carlson, who I think I described to you when he first came and became the leader of the Young Communist League here when I was the secretary, the state secretary, he wrote a little parody mixing up various songs. And Ada and his wife Lillian [Carlson] and himself and me, we put on this show where we'd sing some of the songs that he wrote. It was

really very funny, but I have no memory of it at all. And we'd go about that trying to raise money for the case. It was very clever. But it did have, you know, a little humor, a little satire perhaps. But I don't remember any arguments.

FURMANOVSKY:

I mean, there was no thinking about the fact that the party was now going in decline, that people were leaving--?

DOBBS:

I'll tell you, we had a good spirit in the party. That's the amazing thing. Later, the spirit wasn't good, and I'll tell you about it. But generally the spirit of the party was good, and the response to the case was excellent. We were looked upon as heroes, you know. As I said, at that time, and also during the case of the L.A. 21, I did an enormous amount of public speaking, as we all did. Maybe it was mitigated by the fact that when weekends came all the people from San Francisco, the Bay Area, they took off. They went home. So I don't remember any arguments. Then we tried to function, a little bit at least. But not very much. But I don't recall any arguments. Generally, I found that this whole business of tying us together with assistants from these groups that had brought us the meals, and the fact that the courtroom was jammed every day, I felt that the spirit in the party was pretty good at that time. So the trial lasted all that time, and finally it was finished. And finally we were convicted. Now, when we were convicted, each of us were able to get up and make a speech for the court. I think I showed you the speech that I made. I couldn't repeat it now. But I read it the other day, reread it the other day, and it holds up. I'm not ashamed of what I said. In effect, what I said was that given the opportunity, we spoke at every forum. And given the opportunity, we spoke at every street meeting, and that our view was that this country would be better off with a socialist reconstruction of society. And that there's nothing wrong in stating that and advocating and teaching it. Oh, we made different types of speeches. Not everybody said the same thing. There was no consultation with anybody as far as I know. We all wrote or memorized our own little speeches. We knew we were going to have the right to give them. But to this judge it meant nothing. His only regret was that he could only sentence us to five years or a \$10,000 fine. And he said so. He couldn't understand us. How

people who are threatening to overthrow the government could be fined only \$5,000 or five years in prison, when a guy that steals a loaf of bread can be sentenced to ten or twenty years in prison. He just couldn't understand it. So when it came the end of the trial, he said that as far as he's concerned the only bail that he will ever grant these people are the four square walls of a jail. So the day after the trial, we were back in jail. We were in jail there for a month, where, again, we had to go through this whole procedure of getting out on bail. Now, it was at this point something really funny happened. This judge was so vicious that he asked us to submit to him every name of people that gave money to let us out on bail. And he put them on the witness stand to testify as to whether they knew what the money was for, and did they know the defendant. Because every bit of bail was relative to a certain person. It wasn't, you know, here's fourteen people, there's \$280,000. Because the bail was set at \$20,000 each. So it was such a vicious thing to do. That went on for about one day, I think. And the next day he was sick. So another judge came up from San Diego, who was just assigned to take over this case. He said "What's going on here? This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. The government wants the money, that's all we care about." The bail was ready, so everybody just took off. In other words, he just told, in effect, told this judge that he was nuts, and he let everybody out. Except that, again, me and the two Franks, we waited, I think it was another five or six days before we got out on bail. Finally, as I say, the Supreme Court instructed the appellate court to set the bail, and they set it at \$20,000. I will say that we raised every bit of that money. It was all borrowed. Some of it is really amazing stories. A man came forward with \$70,000. Nobody knew him. He was a peach farmer in some agricultural section of California. He read about the case in the paper. He was absolutely outraged, and brought in \$70,000! And put it up in bail for us. This was amazing. He lived way up in Northern California, by the way.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you get any money from the old woman who used to contribute to the party, Kate Crane Gartz?

DOBBS:

Oh no, she was long gone. Long gone. She was more I think a Socialist Party contributor rather than a Communist Party contributor.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, she would always give money to the party for trials.

DOBBS:

She did? I've heard of her name. I never met her or anything. I thought she was associated more with Upton Sinclair.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes.

DOBBS:

The only thing I ever had to do with Upton Sinclair once is at UCLA, we figured--he spoke for the Socialist Party candidacies--and we figured out how to get him to say a good thing about the communist movement. He was very sympathetic to the Soviet Union at that time, in 1932, so we just had a list of questions about the Soviet Union. So, instead of speaking about the socialist candidates, he spoke about the Soviet Union for the whole hour that he was there. The YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] building, on Hilgard Street I think it is, at UCLA. Anyway, so that was the trial. These funny things happened. My memory of it now--basically it was a bore. I had these three assignments and worked very hard at it. And, you know, the trial all day and running all night, either raising the money or finding out about these witnesses, seeing that typing was done, or seeing where things had to be substituted, whether the printing was done, and whether it was distributed properly. It was a big job.

FURMANOVSKY:

So tell me about the post-trial period then. That must have been a strange period.

DOBBS:

Yeah, the post-trial period is where we ran into real heartbreaking problems. Very, very heartbreaking problems. See, as I said, for a year and a half prior to the trial was the establishment of an underground leadership in the Communist Party at different levels. I didn't have too good a picture of it while this was going on. I was in that strange never-never land where you go off, be

by yourself, don't have meetings, don't talk to anybody, except later it turned out there were three of us. And you have no organizational or political responsibilities. Then there was a group that had organizational and political responsibilities. They might have had ties to the district committee, but they had a functioning county committee. The party as a whole never stopped functioning. They had club meetings, they had section meetings, there were mass meetings, the paper came out, the paper was distributed; and yet, they had this underground leadership. When Dorothy and I and others from Los Angeles--who considered ourselves the leadership of the party, we had been elected at a convention--wanted to start functioning, we found that these people did not want us to function! I don't know whether it was personal. I don't know whether it was political, whether it was a source of power-- Because why do you have power in a dying organization? Because then the party began to shrink. Because, as I said, for one thing, we had used up an enormous amount of resources in building this underground apparatus. And frankly, we just couldn't function. We would go to a meeting and we would urge this policy, and they would say, "No, you got to follow that policy." We had some differences around electoral tactics, some in trade union problems, perhaps.

FURMANOVSKY:

And who was this new leadership?

DOBBS:

You want their names?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, why not.

DOBBS:

Well, one of them was, the leader of it was Hursel Alexander. I think Hursel's dead now. And there were others. I've forgotten who they were. I only met with them maybe two times in the course of a half a year. But generally we'd see people at a club meeting. They'd say, "Well, who the heck are you? We don't have to respect you. You're not the leadership of the party. Those

people are the leadership of the party." But we found it impossible to operate. I said the hell with it and I went off and got a job.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, what was the essence of the difference?

DOBBS:

I honestly don't remember. In other words, I can't give you a specific difference event.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did the people who were in the leadership tend to be kind of very rigid?

DOBBS:

Yes. Oh, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

That's what I'm getting at.

DOBBS:

Well, that's my impression now. I don't remember what we fought about. In other words, rigid on what question? I don't remember. Now, later when we began to have fights in the party, I can tell you some of those things that we differed on. But that period, I have no memory of whatsoever.

FURMANOVSKY:

We're talking now about what period?

DOBBS:

Talking about '52, '53, right after the trial. Where they maintained this underground leadership and those of us who wanted to function, who now said this underground stuff is just nonsense, were on trial. We've got out on bail. We're out on bail pending a Supreme Court decision. See? They said, well, that's--

FURMANOVSKY:

I see, so technically, you were supposed to-- There was still an underground organization in '52, '53.

DOBBS:

That's what I'm saying. We're out on bail pending a decision of the Supreme Court.

FURMANOVSKY:

So, technically, you were going against the official party policy as laid down by the--

DOBBS:

Exactly. There were certain disagreements. I'm sorry, I cannot give you the details of the disagreements. But we would come into a meeting and they'd say, "We don't have to listen to you. We're getting our leadership someplace else." Now, this happened to Dorothy, it happened to me, it happened to Frank Spector; all the L.A. people who were trying to bring about some leadership in one way or another to this organization. Trying to maintain an organization. And here's the organization--absolutely legal, beginning with people that they never meet with except in the form of correspondence. See, these people didn't go to club meetings or section meetings or district meetings. They had their messengers and their runners using up all of these resources. Going from place to place, using up these resources. Never going home. I'm not saying that they weren't wonderful, self-sacrificing people, but it made no sense! Completely isolated. We met with them two or three times, but I don't remember what we fought about. I honestly can't remember a single detail.

FURMANOVSKY:

But you noticed, I assume, that the party was somewhat smaller than it had been earlier?

DOBBS:

Yes. Yes. People were beginning to get real scared. That's right. Actually, I think that at this time I went to work. I went to work in a machine shop. A friend of mine who had some influence in an industry got me a job in a machine shop in that industrial complex between San Pedro [Street] and

Central [Avenue], just a little bit south of Slauson. It was a machine shop, FIMCO. Why was it FIMCO? Because it had to do with furniture. Well, its main job was the maintenance of a flannel, a big flannel producer. Where they would take lint cotton, you know, cheap cotton lint, run it into these carding machines and it would come out flannel that would be wrapped and sent to furniture manufacturers. Anyway, that's what the main function of that. And I knew from nothing. I think I was making \$1.25 an hour perhaps. I was running errands and began to pick up some skills. Well, they bought a punch press; so I was taught to run it. They bought a drill press; I learned to operate the drill press. But I was, at best, a wrench mechanic. There were machinists there who were running the machines to make the carding machines that carded the felt. But I would run around, run errands and stuff like that. But I just loved to work. I really liked to work. And my children were growing.

FURMANOVSKY:

Meanwhile, you were going to occasional meetings of the party?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes! I still functioned wherever I could function.

FURMANOVSKY:

But you didn't have a particular--

DOBBS:

I don't recall having a particular post, except that I had been org [organizational] secretary and responsible for legislative work and for CP peace activities, and for labor work as before.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, why weren't you reinstated, given that you had simply gone underground and people had taken your place while you were underground and on trial? Why didn't you simply come back as org sec then?

DOBBS:

Because these other people wanted leadership. They didn't want us to be in the leadership.

FURMANOVSKY:

But who was it up to?

DOBBS:

Well, that's the whole point. It wasn't up to anybody. It was a struggle. There were no conventions called, no conferences called. So it was just who has the reins.

FURMANOVSKY:

Couldn't there be a telephone call from Eugene Dennis or a telephone call from--?

DOBBS:

Not to my knowledge. I don't know what Dorothy did. I don't know how she handled this period, but I don't remember a damn thing about it--except that we weren't wanted. We'd come to party organizations, they'd say, "We don't want you. We don't have to listen to you. We wish you didn't come. We got a letter from those people." See? Now, there were no conferences because people were afraid to go to conferences. I don't remember the details, I honestly don't remember any of the areas of disagreement. Read Dorothy's tapes. I don't know.

FURMANOVSKY:

So when did you start getting involved in the debates over what would later become the debates over the future of the party in the mid-fifties, '56, '57?

DOBBS:

Well, that's much later. Much later.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you take us up to that. What was happening?

DOBBS:

Well, as I say, I don't know when we got back into the leadership of the party. But we were. Eventually they did away with the underground apparatus, and many of us who were on trial came back in the functioning of the party. The

only thing that I can recall that happened shortly after was that Dorothy and I were subpoenaed by the criminal division of the Internal Revenue Service [IRS]. The tax people. The criminal division! Those who had been in the underground apparatus were also involved. And there we were given the same advice that everybody gets when they're subpoenaed by the criminal division: "Don't say anything." It had to do with how did these people live. I don't remember any of the details either. All I know is I was responsible to get the money to give to their families. Very low wages, you know--

FURMANOVSKY:

To give to which families?

DOBBS:

Of these people that were underground. See, they were separate from their families. Their families had to live. And they had to get their wages. Well, I don't know why the government didn't pursue it any further, maybe because so little was involved. But I remember we were subpoenaed and we signed some kind of documents. I forget what it was, but it was never pursued. I remember John McTernan represented us. At one meeting, they wouldn't let him defend us because he didn't have a certificate to deal with the criminal division of the IRS. So another lawyer by the name of [George] Altman defended us, but I don't remember the details of that either. Except I do know that we were scared to death! Because, you know, when you go before the criminal division of the IRS, you're dealing with the key stinger. They can really sock it to you. After all, they're the ones who got Mickey Cohen and they're the ones that got Al Capone. And all I was was giving these little families--I think there were about ten people involved--something so that their families would be in some way provided for, very low party wages. Because we didn't have any checking accounts. Everything was done in cash, for a very simple reason: Twice the party funds had been sequestered by the U.S. government.

FURMANOVSKY:

So where was this cash kept? Where was it?

DOBBS:

Well, mostly I dealt with it. See, I did that as secretary of the party.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you had to have cash--

DOBBS:

Well, yes. You collect dues and you collect contributions and you go out and you raise money. Well, that the party did all the time. So we go into '56--

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, when did you get your leadership back? I guess '54? When did the party officially come out from underground?

DOBBS:

I think around 1954. I quit my job and went back to work for the party.

FURMANOVSKY:

And so Hursel Alexander would then be removed and you--

DOBBS:

Well, it isn't that they were removed. Some of them entered into leadership. Or what they did is, well, Hursel went out and learned a trade. I don't think he wanted to be in leadership anymore. Others either became party functionaries--

FURMANOVSKY:

But these people who had been saying that they weren't going to listen to you--

DOBBS:

Some quit the party.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, there must have been some resentment that you would be put back over them.

DOBBS:

No, that was not it. They quit for other reasons. This came about, don't forget, about the time when Stalin died. And already there were the exposures of what was going on in the Soviet Union. The whole repression and the whole Stalin period, the whole exposures--that began to take precedence.

FURMANOVSKY:

I never asked you, we somehow omitted it. At one time you mentioned Pettis Perry in the context of the 1930s, a black and former sharecropper who had--

DOBBS:

Yes, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, he later became involved in this white-chauvinism campaign. Now, did that happen around this time?

DOBBS:

I think so, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you talk a little about that, because Hursel Alexander also was black. I'm just wondering whether any of this ties together.

DOBBS:

Well, I don't remember when this took place. I honestly don't. You see, you must remember we had this peculiar experience in Los Angeles. I don't know whether it went on up north. I don't think anyone would challenge Bill Schneiderman's leadership of the party. He was just so outstanding. What time is it by the way?

FURMANOVSKY:

It's quarter to six.

DOBBS:

I'm just trying to think when that happened, about 1953 or '54, when we just did away, you know, the party just did away with this underground leadership. We created one leadership and we began to have meetings again. At a district

meeting that took place in San Francisco, Perry opened the whole discussion on the nature of white chauvinism in the Communist Party. Now, it was a very stinging indictment of individuals, of-- The party was rife with white chauvinism in his opinion. Well, it's typical of the party, that when one has a critical position on some questions, some people then multiply it. And it ran through the party in a very terrible form. For instance, I'll tell you very frankly, I was charged with white chauvinism. What was the incident? The incident was at a meeting in San Francisco. A guy was speaking. And I grimaced, you know. In other words, I disagreed with what he was saying. I grimaced, you know, "Oh, shit," something like that. Well, I was charged with white chauvinism because he was black. Well, I just wouldn't give in to it. See? I said, "It had nothing to do with your being black. I disagree with what you said, and I said so. I spoke at the meeting." But that's the level at which it went.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, why do you think, and what does it say about the party at this stage, that he was able to get this policy adopted?

DOBBS:

I don't know. I think it was just, well, it was an explanation of how come we're losing all of our black comrades. Why is everybody running? Why are we losing so many black comrades? My own feeling is that if anything else, it drove every black person out of the party! Why should they be in a party that's made up of white chauvinists? It was exaggerated something terrible. And it comes about, in my opinion, because we were losing people because of the fear. Twenty-two stool pigeons!

FURMANOVSKY:

But what I'm getting at is is this an example of the McCarthy era, the creating of a certain kind of paranoia within the party that allowed someone like that to bring up this relatively bogus issue or exaggerated issue--

DOBBS:

No, I don't say it was bogus. You see, it was exaggerated in the course of its development. In raising it as a problem, yes--

FURMANOVSKY:

Why wouldn't people put their foot down?

DOBBS:

But then the way that it was taken down to the most stupid forms. The one that I keep thinking about didn't happen in L.A. But it happened in New York, where someone got a watch. And the watch has a little leather thing on it. And it brought to mind, she was waving this leather thing, you know, playing with her watch. And it brought to mind the slave, the lash on the back of slaves, to somebody. That woman was expelled.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why wouldn't people like Schneiderman or Carlson or yourself or others be able to stop this thing before it got out of control? What was it that--?

DOBBS:

Well, that's the whole thing. It's the kind of thing you can't stop, because the party has always been extremely sensitive on the Negro question; at that time it was the Negro question. To even say we should stop it was a form of white chauvinism. It wasn't stopped until Bill [William Z.] Foster wrote an article on it and said this has gone too far, some two years later. All the damage had already been done. Now, you see, how do you fight a thing like that?

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, the thing I'm getting at is from what I read it sounds like in the 1950s a number of black communists in L.A. came to the fore as leaders, and it coincided with this white-chauvinism campaign. And among the most dogmatic pro-Soviet party members were these blacks.

DOBBS:

I don't recall any big emergence of black leadership. The party always--

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, Hursel Alexander and--

DOBBS:

He'd been a party leader for years!

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, but he became-- I'm talking about the struggle in '56, '57, that among the most hard line, the leaders happened to be black.

DOBBS:

Oh, well, that's different.

FURMANOVSKY:

I was wondering whether there was any explanation for that.

DOBBS:

Yes, that's a different question. I think it's a different question. I don't exactly know when this white chauvinism took place. First of all, I think it was due to the fact that we were losing people because of the fear. When you ask any party person-- When there's an organization that has got twenty-two stool pigeons in a trial of fourteen people, and you ask someone to join, the first question is, my God, is this another stool pigeon? First. Secondly, I think it had something to do with that fact that not only were we losing members, but we weren't possibly as vigorous in the campaign for Negro rights as we should have been. Maybe some things were compromised a little bit. I don't recall any. But in the minds of people like Perry, who I never for a moment questioned his sincerity on this question-- He was already very sick with TB when he came back here, I think. I forget when he got back.

FURMANOVSKY:

He had already been a national leader by this time?

DOBBS:

Yes, oh yes. Although he attended that meeting as a district member.

FURMANOVSKY:

I'm just wondering whether there wasn't an element of opportunism, that this was a way of--

DOBBS:

I don't think so. I honestly don't think so. Because what is there to gain?

FURMANOVSKY:

Leadership.

DOBBS:

Well, Ben [Benjamin] Davis [Jr.] had been leader for years. Perry was a leader for years. [Claude] Lightfoot was a leader for years. These are not the people who went crazy. It was the white crazy ones that went crazy. It isn't that Perry went around accusing everybody of white chauvinism, but he opened the door that all these white people, so many white people who were nuts walked through it. This example of seeing somebody with a watch, a little leather badge saying that it brings back, it was white people--

FURMANOVSKY:

So the most vigorous accusers of white chauvinism were whites in the party?

DOBBS:

Right. Of course. Of course. Well, that's what I think happened. All right, this guy that accused me of white chauvinism because I grimaced at something he said, he was a black worker and a good one. I did disagree with him. He was the kind of guy that wondered why the party didn't put on a fight for blacks to become foremen on jobs, where you ran into this constant struggle between the class position and the national position, you know. But what happened? There were cases, and they were heard. Some of them were stupid; some of them made sense.

FURMANOVSKY:

Didn't a number of black communists raise the, or re-raise the issue of the Black Belt or the black republic?

DOBBS:

I forgot to mention that. You see, that perhaps is when this whole thing came into being, this whole struggle as to what is the party's position on the Black Belt. That may very well have entered in at that period. I forget when it was taken up, it was around that time. There was a lot of discussion on it. First of all, it was my understanding that in the twenties an early part of the history of the Communist Party of the United States, where the black question or the

Negro question was discussed in the international communist movement, the international communist movement said that there was a possibility of a course of development, where it would be a national question of the United States, seeking a national secession movement. The reasons that they outlined it was that there was a contiguous majority in the Black Belt of the South, of a majority population of black people. Secondly, that they had a certain common historical background: slavery, repression, and so forth. Some of these things constituted a narrow definition of the national question as propagated by Stalin and his national question. Some of us felt that this-- I want to make one point, that in spite of these theoretical formulations, the party's struggle against racial oppression in this country, to me, is one of the high marks of the party's work in the United States of America. No one cared what your position was in terms of what would be the final solution. But what began to happen, and especially after World War I it began to happen, was that the contiguous majority of the Black Belt broke up. It broke up on the basis of two questions. One, of course, was the changing of the agricultural situation of the South, with the break up of much of the sharecropping. And secondly, the urbanization that took place. The vast migrations to the northern cities, the cities where jobs could be gotten. And then the mass migrations into the southern cities. You know, Birmingham, with its huge population of black steelworkers. So this area of majority had been broken up. Secondly, you found the rise of new middle-class spokespeople of the black community who wanted equality. They didn't want a separate nation, they wanted equality. Third, you find the development of mass movements, plus beginnings of some understanding of the need for black-white unity, especially around the trade-union movement, some of the political questions involved, etc. So we felt it was time for the party to rediscuss this thing. In rediscussing it, we found that the [Communist] International didn't say that that was going to be the course; it was one of the alternative courses that history might bring about. Some of us took the position that the real fight had to be against segregation. It had to be for full equality on all levels, which had always been the party's position. Full equal rights, socially, politically, economically. Now, part of that discussion might have led to the discussion of white chauvinism. But I don't ever recall it going that way.

FURMANOVSKY:

But were there some blacks who were arguing that they should go back to the Black Belt?

DOBBS:

None of them found themselves in the Communist Party. That's when many of them left. Probably the most famous is Harry Haywood, who left the party. Cyril Briggs never left the party, but that was his position. It never was the position of Hursel Alexander. It never was the position of Pettis Perry. It never was the position of Ben Davis. Not of Claude Lightfoot. But some of the people left the party because of this political disagreement. Frankly, I don't know how many of them there were. I don't remember any in L.A. The truth of the matter is the L.A. black party membership declined probably at a much faster rate than anywhere else. I personally think that it was very well founded. A fear, you know. It's a burden enough to be black. And together with our losing-- Now, we began to feel a loss of one, if not two generations. The party wasn't refurbished by new young people coming in. The youth program of the party began to go to hell with the dissolution of the AYD [American Youth for Democracy] and the YCL, and the flip-flopping around from one organization to another.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why had the AYD been dissolved?

DOBBS:

I have no way of knowing. I have no way of knowing

FURMANOVSKY:

So what, there was a new organization, technically--

DOBBS:

Well, I think they organized the Du Bois clubs somewhere in that period. I think that was in the sixties. Du Bois club, yeah. See, some of us felt that, well, during the Vietnam War especially, you know, that every communist that was young should go into the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], not build their own separate organization. But that's a different story, and I'll get into that I think a little bit later. But the point about this whole period of this white-chauvinism debate, there are many cases, you know, where a person

would say to somebody else, "I'm not going to hire a black person because they come from a poor ghetto where they're liable to bring in a disease." Now, instead of discussing the question, right away she's charged with white chauvinism. So there's that kind of trial. I know there was one incident like that. As a matter of fact it was brought to mind just the other day by somebody. We went to dinner at somebody's house and they asked me what I remembered about that. There were such cases. But generally speaking, I don't think it reached the hysteria that it did in New York and Chicago. Because it was hysterical. Finally, it had to be discussed by William Z. Foster in the famous article that he wrote in **Political Affairs**, which tried to create some balance on the subject of how do you fight for equality, you know, without this hysterical approach of the fight against white chauvinism. Although the fight against white chauvinism is one of the major principles of the Communist Party. Lately, we don't even call it white chauvinism. Now we call it racism, which I think is an altogether different thing. But that's a different problem. Anyway, we got back into the leadership and it was around this time that the whole issue of Stalinism and the whole issue of what was going on in the Soviet Union came to the fore. And this, of course, was one of the major reasons for the mass exodus out of the Communist Party. For one thing, it showed that we had been following a false path, a false model. That the paradise didn't turn out to be a paradise. That everything that we had said was a lie turned out to be true; whether it was the gulags or the prison camps or the repression or the trial, the murder of the delegates to the Congress of Victors. Who the hell knew about these things?

FURMANOVSKY:

We'll get on to that next time. I just wondered, just before we end, in 1953 it was I think, there came news--three years predating [Nikita] Khrushchev's speech--there came news of the execution of a lot of the Jewish, Yiddish intellectual writers.

DOBBS:

Yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

I was wondering whether you had any recollection of--

DOBBS:

I have no recollection except this: That the **Freiheit**, the Yiddish newspaper supported by the CP, for the first time, began to take a real independent position in the Communist Party on this question. It played a heroic role and later became a main target on the part of the Gus Hall section of the Communist Party leadership, who strove for years to get Paul Novick, the **Freiheit** editor, expelled. I think Dorothy and I and maybe two others were the only ones that voted against his expulsion. But the **Freiheit** really didn't back off of this question at all. But it didn't affect the party as a whole. That's what's so disgraceful about our party. Either we recognized something or, you know, we'd just ignore so many things; especially when it came from the Soviet Union. And generally, as I said, we believed in everything they did! See? If they say these people were spies, they were spies!

FURMANOVSKY:

I'm just wondering if there was just the beginnings of doubts, prior to Khrushchev's speech at all, or whether it wasn't until that point--

DOBBS:

No, I don't think we ever had any real beginnings of doubt. Certainly not in an organized way. Now, some might have, a really independent thinker like Dorothy might have. But I don't recall it. I won't say that I was smarter than anybody else. Some people began to have doubts. Of course. But I don't know that they were to express it. I'll tell you, you see, when somebody would express a doubt, they would be-- I remember a guy saying-- he was a leader of the YCL, not the YCL, some other youth organization, whatever it was at that time--that he didn't like Stalin's style of writing or speaking. They brought him up on charges! Of being anti-Soviet! See, that was done by Betty Gannett, one of the real hard-liners. I don't know where she is now. I guess she's dead.

FURMANOVSKY:

When something like this would happen, you don't have any recollection of you having any kind of reaction at all?

DOBBS:

Well, on that one I did. That one I thought it was just stupid to bring up charges. Since when do you have to like somebody's style of writing? But then he-- Well, I don't remember what happened. But that's the whole thing, you see. We did departmentalize so many of these things. Jewish people being slaughtered--that's the Jewish question. I'm not saying it's good, but I think a little bit of that took place.

FURMANOVSKY:

I'm just curious that it was in this period when the party's going through all of these stresses and strains, it's at this point that a number of leaders arise in the Communist Party here who are extremely hard-line. More hard-line than people had been ten or fifteen years ago, like Betty Gannett, like Pettis Perry. And I'm just wondering that there was sort of a vacuum that allowed them to emerge as leaders, and people who were more flexible, somewhat more flexible or potentially more flexible, like yourself and Dorothy, then found yourself at odds with these hard-liners.

DOBBS:

Well, that was a whole period that, I think, requires another-- Because then, for the first time, I was in the national committee where I began to see some of these things happen. It came about, of course, I think, fundamentally with the collapse of the whole love, adoration, isolation--call it what you will--of the Soviet Union. We just began to look at everything with a much more critical eye than we'd ever done before. Now, in terms of the hardliners, I really don't know. I don't know. You see, all of them are old people by now, by then. Whether they would stand up to criticism of their leadership over a period of time. In other words, it wasn't so much that Foster was defending his position as to what to be done; he was defending his position of what he had done. And the same with some of these other people. Now, they could never stand up to that criticism. Therefore it seemed to me that they had to fight to maintain their position, even though they found themselves in the minority. (Foster found himself in a minority.) Now, the thing that happens is that those of us who were fighting Fosterism and asking and making him try to remember where the hell he's going, they all had agendas of their own.

1.16. TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE ONE

OCTOBER 15, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

Last time you pointed out, Ben, that all of the major opponents of [William Z.] Foster in the period around 1956 had agendas of their own which they were pushing, and you found it difficult to go along with any one of these groups.

DOBBS:

Well, no, that isn't quite true. I went along with one of the groups. Well, what do I mean by different agendas? First of all, there was one group that actually, in one way or another, called for the dissolution of the Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

Which group was that?

DOBBS:

Well, I would say it was primarily centered around John Gates. I've forgotten some of the other people, but he had a large group around him. In other words, they were conducting a fight within the party, where it was already clear they had both feet outside the party. I couldn't agree with that, because I was a firm believer at that time of the actual need to strengthen and improve and make changes in the Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

Were they hoping to create, perhaps something on the lines of [Earl] Browder's Communist Political Association of--?

DOBBS:

I think that was more or less their aim. Maybe it was not as clearly placed, and it wasn't placed on the same theoretical principles that Browder placed his. In other words, he based his idea of a communist association on what he thought was going to be a different period coming out of the war. He did not foresee the Cold War. He rather saw a combination and the continuance of what he called the Grand Alliance. Therefore, there would be a progressive foreign policy and a progressive internal or domestic policy on the part of the corporations and the government. The John Gates group didn't base it on that. What they based it on was the whole communist movement and the U.S.

Communist Party was compromised by the horrors of what were disclosed by the [Nikita] Khrushchev report. Anyway, that was one group. In other words, you couldn't quite ally with them--and yet you had to--in the fight against Foster, but you couldn't ally with them on their position of doing away with the party. At least I couldn't.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, Foster accused them of being part of sort of a gang, he called it the [Robert] Clarke-Gates-[Joseph R.] Starobin group.

DOBBS:

That's who it was.

FURMANOVSKY:

Was that a fair characterization in your opinion?

DOBBS:

Yeah, those were the people. Those were the players. What got me particularly mad at that period around these people, both Clarke and Starobin, I believe, had been reporters in the Soviet Union. And never indicated a single word of criticism or given us the facts of what was going on in the Soviet Union. They were the sycophants of the Soviet Union in the Daily Worker or whatever the name of the paper was. And this particularly angered me at these people because I felt that they were not taking a principled position. They never raised voices relative to criticism in the Soviet Union. And yet, that was their main pitch when they came back to the United States.

FURMANOVSKY:

But you agreed with much of what they were saying?

DOBBS:

Yes, much also of what they were saying in terms of that we needed to change the Communist Party. We couldn't continue with the left sectarian positions taken by the Fosters and others. Now, the other major grouping, of course, was the [Eugene] Dennis group, which sort of-- Well, their main slogan, particularly through Eugene Dennis, was, "Our main enemy is Wall Street. It's not in this room." In other words, let's quit all this arguing. Let's unite. Let's be

friends, and just see if we can find some kind of middle course, keeping everybody happy and everybody in. And didn't, you know, didn't make the kind of sharp fight that people like in the third group I was in. And I took part. I took part in both the debates and the internal struggles. I don't remember going to any faction meetings. I don't remember that. But I took part. I took part very strongly, in terms of an antiliquidationist position, and that we had to change the Communist Party. And in what respects to change it? First of all, to make it much more realistic in terms of a common estimate of what the situation is in the United States. Secondly, how can we make it more democratic? And particularly the evils of what was called democratic centralism, which was centralism of the worst kind--and very little democracy. Now, by that, let me make very clear. There were open debates. There was discussion. No one rode roughshod over people. But, always, it was the idea that whatever comes from the national office is rule, and you either had to agree with it or you had to find ways to fight it. Later, it became very sharp in terms of some of the real disagreements that I had with the Communist Party leadership, and the reasons I left the Communist Party. So that the aims that we were looking for was, as I say, first to have more of a mass policy, i.e., how do you relate more to the realistic appraisals of the mass movements in this country?; where are they?; where are they going?; what is it you got to fight against the corporations with; what kind of coalitions policy to develop; and as well as making changes in the Communist Party. Instead of the sort of, "Let's solve all of our problems by being nice and friendly," the Dennis group and the Foster group, which was defending their leadership over this whole, over this past period. A leadership that brought about the isolation of the Communist Party from the mainstreams of American thought. Now, I'm not saying these problems are easy. These are always the problems of the socialist movement, you know. But nevertheless, there were these, I would say these three groups. Now, let me say also, the Foster group also had different groupings within them, with agendas of their own. In other words, you had Foster fighting for his positions in terms of the past. Then you had a group that later became the Progressive Labor Party, that split from the Communist Party. And of course, they caused real havoc--I'm not really familiar with it except reading of it now--real havoc in the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. But that was a group that was way out to the left, later became almost completely pro-Mao, you see. But they were part of that group fighting with Foster in order to

defeat the "revisionists" and that group around John Gates, or the group that I was associated with. So you had different types of coalitions, but essentially it was around the question of changing the Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

But I still find it a little bit difficult to understand exactly your differences with Gates. Now, I know as a personality he was not that attractive. But it seems to me that you were part of the same generation, but basically Gates represented a group of idealistic, young people who had come into the party through the YCL [Young Communist League] in the 1930s and now had been in the party for around twenty years, and had been very loyal and very devoted. I'm reading this latest book by Maurice Isserman [If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left] and he seems to say that Gates was quite moderate, in the sense that he waited for Dennis to make his position clear, and he wasn't being an extreme liquidationist and that that would really be a little bit unfair to call him that.

DOBBS:

Well, let me put it, first of all, in terms of Gates's personality. You must know that I was in a peculiar position. I never worked with these people. I would go to a meeting, and the meeting would last two days. I'd come in on an airplane, go to the meeting, go home. In other words, my relations with them was only on observing what I saw at these meetings, or later, what they wrote in the various bulletins. So there was nothing in John Gates's personality that I didn't like. He was friendly, you know. I'd known him all those years. We were in the YCL together. That was my generation. However, my distinct feeling is that Isserman is wrong if he says that Gates was playing a moderate position. He was not playing a moderate position. His position was for the liquidation of the Communist Party. Now, whether it was the liquidation in a sense of looking for something new, that is, a new organization, or was it in terms of the Browderist form of a social educational--

FURMANOVSKY:

That's what it was.

DOBBS:

That might have been. But it wasn't any of my recognizing the abrasive character of Gates. I have memories of Gates carrying out the orders of what I thought later were historically shown to be extremely stupid, and that was the development of the Communist Party by groups of three, kicking out--we lost nearly 1,500 members, as I told you last time. Well, so in that way he was carrying out orders! So that I had nothing against Johnny Gates. Of course, in those times, you know, there was very little camaraderie. It was all so bitter, these fights that took place within the party. I'm not talking about what happened at the convention; the convention later was more interesting, although my memories of it are quite vague. But these were meetings of the national committee, oh, roughly about sixty or seventy people I think.

FURMANOVSKY:

Of which you were a member?

DOBBS:

Yes. I think I was a member at that time. I think I became a member of the national committee in 1956.

FURMANOVSKY:

What do you remember about these?

DOBBS:

The conventions?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes.

DOBBS:

Now, the conventions is where we tried to codify some of the changes we wanted made. It primarily rose around the argument of the right to dissent. In other words, that within the battle for democratic centralism, some of us wanted to increase the democratic part or side of democratic centralism. Let me define it this way: there's a period of several months prior to a convention, where any kind of debate is open and accepted and welcomed. But the moment the decision is made, from then on, there has to be complete unity. That's first. The second thing is that, let's say you have a committee of twelve

people, and they have a majority vote. They may have big disagreements among those twelve people, but they did not express those disagreements for public debate. In other words, the twelve people come in, they're the central committee or the presidium, or whatever they called it, and they would make a decision. Let's say the vote is seven to five. You never knew the position of the five! You only knew the position of "the majority view." Now, the right to dissent, we tried to center our fight on that question, in terms of democratization of the party so that-- Well, our point was if we examine issues, campaigns, positions, estimates as they go along, if you have the right to dissent, then you always question what is happening to those decisions. Are they being carried out? Are they realistic? Do they make life? And it was around this question that the biggest arguments took place. Because the feeling was on the part of many that the right of dissent would destroy what was the basic Leninist principle of the Communist Party, its unity in action, which they called democratic centralism. And it was this that we were trying to modify, we were trying to change. The other thing was a more open press. In other words, it should be open to other avenues of left-progressive people, not just the voice of communists. And this was of course one of the characteristics of why we were able to maintain the People's World in California so long. Because that was an action on the part of the People's World. In other words, it did have articles and opinions from people other than communists over the years. These were, if I remember correctly, the two main aspects of the fight. Then, it had some reflections in various codification; by that I mean changing the constitution. The third thing that came out of that, although it carried out later, and later it had a very disastrous effect I think in the party, was the development of a "programme." I mean a programme with two m's and an e, you know, a fundamental document that would lead us for a long period of time. It took years to write that document! Then, I will tell you this, that it wasn't many years after it was adopted, maybe two years after it was adopted, that it was completely violated by the leadership of the Communist Party under Gus Hall. So that what you had was a very bitter fight. I would say that the majority of the convention agreed with us, in terms of the need to change the party.

FURMANOVSKY:

How do you define the "us"?

DOBBS:

The "us" was the grouping around Dennis, at that time, because the fight against Foster had already been resolved. Dorothy Healey, Al Richmond, William Weinstone, to a certain extent. Aptheker, you know both Herbert and the daughter, I forget her name. She was very famous up there in Berkeley. Bettina [Aptheker], right. I don't even know where they are now. I know Aptheker still writes and gets around and lectures. He lives in California now I think.

FURMANOVSKY:

The Foster group was made up of Foster and who else?

DOBBS:

I've forgotten their names. Well, Lannon, Al Lannon who later moved to Los Angeles. I've forgotten them.

FURMANOVSKY:

Was Pettis Perry there?

DOBBS:

I don't remember. I think Perry at that time was already very sick. Perry was sick and in a sanitarium for several years. He had TB and was here in Los Angeles. I don't remember.

FURMANOVSKY:

Let me describe to you how the Gates position is characterized in this book, because it seems to me, from what I know about you, that this is a position that today you would have no trouble with. That's why I'm just trying to get to where you stood in '57. This is what he says: The Gates faction could agree on the large abstract issues. They sought a genuinely independent and democratically organized movement, free to set its own policies and to criticize the shortcomings of the communist regimes. They believed that the American road to socialism would be democratic and peaceful, that when socialism was finally established in the United States it would guarantee full civil liberties, including the right to advocate the restoration of capitalism, and they no longer considered their own party to be the sole repository of political

wisdom, and hoped to unite or at least cooperate with other noncommunist radicals. It seems to me that that's something that you could subscribe to.

DOBBS:

I agree with every word of that. Except it doesn't state what his position was, that to carry out those things was to do away with the Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

And create a political association?

DOBBS:

Exactly. Now, it was my position, and I think of that now that you remind me, there was a very big fight on the question of the independence of this party from the thinking of other parties. We had to develop our own program, which was a complete break, you know, from the past history of all socialist movements in this country, prior to the Communist Party, and including the Communist Party. I don't disagree with a word of that. The only point is that Gates said, to carry this line, we had to liquidate the Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

And create a political association?

DOBBS:

And create a political association. But who knows what that political association would be?

FURMANOVSKY:

But you said earlier on that in many ways, looking back on your position in the forties, you were more or less a supporter of Browder, and that you didn't think that the Communist Political Association in 1944 was a bad thing.

DOBBS:

I didn't--I wasn't involved!

FURMANOVSKY:

Right, you weren't involved. But that general kind of line. I mean, you really felt in 1956 that it was wrong to create a political association, a more of an

educational organization. You thought the Communist Party could remain more or less as it was, but simply just become more democratic or more--

DOBBS:

Or to carry out the kind of aims that Johnny talked of, that Isserman defined as Johnny's position.

FURMANOVSKY:

So really, to all intents and purposes, your position, ideologically, was identical to Gates, only in terms of the way in which to achieve this.

DOBBS:

Well, one might put it that way. But, more specifically, not only the way to achieve it but the instrument through which to achieve it. That's the difference.

FURMANOVSKY:

Then where did Dennis differ from Gates?

DOBBS:

I don't remember. I don't remember these debates. Well, Dennis was very strongly opposed to Gates's position. Let me put it this way. So Isserman makes a totality of what Johnny Gates says. Now, to think that Johnny presented it this clearly in all of his debates would be wrong. In other words, maybe at one meeting he'd emphasize one thing, at another meeting he emphasized another, at another meeting he emphasized this. Maybe he spoke about these at public meetings that I wasn't at. Who the hell knows?

FURMANOVSKY:

He even says in that book that California communists tended to regard Gates's proposal as unnecessarily drastic, panicky, and liquidationist.

DOBBS:

That's right. That's all I said.

FURMANOVSKY:

So what was happening then in Los Angeles?

DOBBS:

In Los Angeles, you see, one particular characteristic of Los Angeles that you got to know, and it's very hard to explain, and I'll admit it's hard to explain. We're three thousand miles from New York, [away from] the stultifying, bureaucratic effect of a leadership like the kind of Foster and that gang breathing down your neck a hundred times a day, examining everything you're doing. It was much different for us in California. We always had a much more open, much more comradely, much more democratic spirit in our work here in L.A. We were much more involved with the mass movement than the internal kind of things, when you're dealing with the national secretariat, when you're dealing with the national leadership. Let me give you one example. Now, this example is not in the history of this thing, it comes up later in my experiences, but it's an example of what I'm trying to get at. A woman by the name of [Madalyn Murray] O'Hair, the militant atheist, she and I, for some reason or other, were thrown together in a debate with two fascists, in a thing called the "Les Crane Show." It was a television show. Completely unrehearsed, completely unprepared. I didn't meet her until we got to the show. So we debated it, whatever the issues were at that time. It was very, you know, a big fight, and that's what Les Crane liked. And of course, this was a syndicated show. The experience I want to tell you came about later. After the show was over, I said to her, "Well, what are you going to do? It's only nine thirty or so." She said, "Well, I think I'll go to my hotel room, I'm going home tomorrow." I said, "I'll tell what to do. Let's do some political table-hopping." So we went to a Democratic Party headquarters. We went to a Peace and Freedom Party headquarters. We went to a Socialist Party headquarters. We went to another Democratic Party headquarters. We maybe went to about six different places. I was welcomed as a friend in all these places. It was election night for the primary elections. She says, "I've never heard of any communist being able to be welcomed and treated like that. Everybody knows you. Everybody loves you. Everybody respects you. They have disagreements with you, of course. But they know you. You're part of them!" She says, "I never saw a communist do that in my whole life." And she apparently had some relations with the Communist Party in Baltimore and other places.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, she goes back to the thirties--

DOBBS:

Yeah. She says, "Well, my goodness, no other communist could do that!" I said, "Well, any communist in Los Angeles can do that." You know that, because of the way we were treated. Well, what I mean by it's hard to-- It isn't that we had a different policy, it isn't that we had a different line. But we just had a different way in which we went about our work. Well, let me give you another example of what I'm getting at. When the terror came, that is, the going underground and all that sort of stuff, we were the only ones that kept our offices open. I didn't ever say I was not a communist. It was just an altogether different atmosphere, the way we worked and the relations there. And that's why we didn't have the kind of internal fighting and the bitterness that later came out, where so many of these people became viciously anticommunist and viciously bitter. We didn't have that kind of experience. We had people disagree with us. We had people quit. But I don't remember the vicious infighting and bitterness that was expressed later, that I later heard about in New York.

FURMANOVSKY:

In fact, the party in Los Angeles, the membership didn't go down nearly as drastically.

DOBBS:

That's correct.

FURMANOVSKY:

From 5,000 in '49, it was still as much as 3,000 in '56.

DOBBS:

That's correct. That's correct. So the point I'm trying to make is that this different spirit gives us a little bit of a different approach, or at least to me, as trying to understand what the hell the fighting was all about in many of these places. Now, we had large committees, in other words, we had a large district committee. We had a separate district at that time. We created a separate district in Southern California after the attack in '49. Because we just couldn't stand the expense anymore of going up to San Francisco every month for meetings. It's a lot of money involved. And, secondly, the atmosphere was

different. So we created two districts. I forget when that was. And we did unite around certain statewide projects that would have discussions and unity around saving the People's World. So that in our district, we had a large district committee. We met regularly. We had a board made up of people of diverse opinions. And we just didn't have that kind of bitterness. That's all. We had sharp struggles. There was a guy that ran against Dorothy Healey twice for the head of the party.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who was that?

DOBBS:

That was William C. Taylor. But never once was it thought of getting rid of him. You know, there always was a good working relationship with him even though there were very sharp disagreements. Mostly we disagreed because I thought he was very lazy and said so.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah. He was an ally of Foster.

DOBBS:

Not only was he an ally of Foster, but there wasn't a meeting that he wouldn't then call the people in New York and tell them what was going on. But the point I'm getting at--we lived together.

FURMANOVSKY:

So there just wasn't the kind of bitterness.

DOBBS:

No. Not at all. Not at all.

FURMANOVSKY:

What was your reaction, then, when the Red Army came into Hungary and in a sense violated--

DOBBS:

Let me try to explain this. It was a contradiction, in my thinking later, especially when it was recalled to me by my difference of opinion on Czechoslovakia. First, my overall reaction to the Stalin disclosures by Nikita Khrushchev was, of course, a real tragedy in my opinion. You see, the problem is I could not be convinced that Stalin was not doing it for what he thought was correct. In other words, he had done it in the name of the fight for socialism. Much of it caught us by surprise. We heard about it, that is, we, Dorothy and I. I'd read something in the paper and I'd call her: Well, there's something new. She'd call me: Well, something new has come up. In other words, it was reported every day in the press in one way or another. It wasn't until later that we got the famous Khrushchev report. I think we got it from the **New York Times**, if my memory serves me correctly.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, the State Department first got it, and then it was in the--

DOBBS:

I think we got it from the New York Times. By it, I mean the complete speech. The thing that still sticks in my mind to this day, is that Khrushchev would describe something terrible and then make some kind of quip about it such as, "Well, so he reduced the committee from seven to five. Stalin was playing the numbers game." Then they would have in parentheses, "Laughter in the hall." How could those bastards laugh, with blood pouring out of that? I just became thoroughly disgusted. And from then on, somewhat cynical. From then on, somewhat bitter. We had not believed about the gulags. We had not believed about the slave camps. We had not believed about the frame-ups. We had not believed about what happened after Zhukov was murdered. We believed that all that was capitalist propaganda. Now, I was that simple-minded about it. Then I find out that, well, after a more careful reading of the press, a more careful examination of what they were saying-- And then don't forget there was under Khrushchev a thaw. There's no question about it. So we began to say that maybe they'll come out of this thing. But then they put a clamp on it. And that clamp, I think, was the outrageous, absolutely outrageous internal formulation that the reason for all of this horror of Stalin period was that it was due to the "cult of the individual." Now, that is the most anti-Marxist thing anybody can say. But the point is, however, that there was an

international spokesperson that clarified so much of us. Palmiro Togliatti, you know, in his famous testament made a far greater examination of Soviet life than the Russians did. Because they put a clamp on the problems very quickly, because they were afraid of full democratic developments. They don't trust in their own people. This is something that, as I say, created a bitterness and a cynicism, and frankly became much of the reasons why we had a continual running argument. Finally it was a thing that drove me out of the Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

But so many of what must have been your best friends--

DOBBS:

Quit the party.

FURMANOVSKY:

Quit the party then.

DOBBS:

Yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you still have fairly amicable relations with some of them?

DOBBS:

Well, we actually-- What happened here in L.A., what began to happen is that when we began to make these changes in '55 and '56, (the kind that generally describe what you read to be Johnny Gates's position), which was our position, Gus Hall traveled around the country in his desire to be elected as general secretary, and just gave us all the impression that he completely agreed with much of what we had to say. He had been in prison for nearly eight years, give or take, I don't know, maybe some good time off, I don't remember. He also got three additional sentences because he jumped bail after the first New York Smith Act trials.

FURMANOVSKY:

So he sort of had no enemies?

DOBBS:

See, so he's going to unite the party. Frankly, we had a lot of confidence that he could. Because he was a mass worker; he had been involved with the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]; he had been involved as an organizer; and he didn't have the old traditions of Foster. Of course, I think either Dennis was already extremely ill or was on his way out. So there wasn't going to be that kind of contention. At the 1957 convention we had a great deal of confidence that we could change. So many of the things that we had codified about changing the party had been accomplished, and especially the developments around the program and the discussion and the bitterness around some of the aspects of that period. But everything that we adopted had been turned around in 1957 under Gus's leadership. Everything! There was a group in L.A., and I must say these were my closest friends. People who I grew up with in the Young Communist League. This was Frank Carlson and Harry Daniels, I think his name was.

FURMANOVSKY:

Lou Baron?

DOBBS:

Lou Baron, but also people who I love to this day: Louise Todd, Oleta O'Connor Yates, Loretta Starvis Stack, a whole group. Lillian Carlson. I think there were some thirty-seven that signed a statement and tried to create a movement within the L.A. party and the California party, urging people to quit the party. (

[The statement listed the changes made by the 1957 convention that reversed the direction towards a more democratic, less sectarian party. They concluded that no matter how vigorously the fight to improve the party could be fought, the party under Gus Hall's leadership could not be changed and that they were quitting the fight and quitting the party. They pledged to stay together and to build a new organization. In their statement, they indicated they had allies, meaning Dorothy and myself and some of our co-workers. This did us considerable damage as we fought to maintain the party.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

) Now the thing that hurt me more than anything, not one person told me that they had that group. No one. And we were like brothers and sisters. We had gone through the toughest days together, a period of twenty years. Not one person told me. Until the day before they issued the statement, one person told me. A fellow who was active in Philadelphia who moved to Los Angeles. And this really hurt. But nevertheless, I couldn't agree with them. Mostly because the fight was still going on. And mostly because we had maintained a leadership in L.A. that united around the fight to change the CP. At this time, we had a meeting with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn the day of the week that this came out. I took the position that we cannot and must not put up a fight against these people. These people are socialists. We have these disagreements. They're going to be in the struggle for the movement in America, and we're going to maintain relations with them. I took that position publicly and also in our own district committee and in this meeting with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Now, to this day, some of these people are my best friends.

FURMANOVSKY:

In retrospect have they explained why they didn't tell you?

DOBBS:

Well, I never asked them. I never asked them. It's an embarrassing question. It's like if you-- I never asked them. Well, they felt that we would take steps to stop them, and they didn't want to do that. Now, don't forget, their program was designed on going into every club that they could reach, and urging people to quit. Well, we weren't going to permit that.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you're saying it was a completely destructive program. They didn't have any--

DOBBS:

No, no. They said that we will maintain an organization to carry out the kind of program that we think will solve the situation and build a new socialist movement. The truth of the matter is, they didn't stay together three months. Because they found they had more disagreements among themselves than

they had disagreements with us. Some of them later became very effective and I worked very closely with some of them on some mass campaigns, particularly relative to the war in Vietnam, which had already begun.

FURMANOVSKY:

I was going to ask you about Hungary? Did you want to say something about that?

DOBBS:

Yes. Now, let me go into that. On the Hungarian situation, I agreed with the position of the Communist Party on the defense of the Hungarian revolution. The press openly described the murder of communists and the hanging of Jewish people from lampposts. This, to me, was not a democratic movement in Hungary. It was openly financed and openly abetted. I didn't view it as a genuine revolution, but as a genuine counterrevolution.

FURMANOVSKY:

You feel that way today?

DOBBS:

I feel that way today.

FURMANOVSKY:

But now, this says here, "The American CP national committee had adopted a resolution in 1956, declaring that any Soviet military intervention in Hungary would violate the essence of the Leninist concept of national self-determination."

DOBBS:

I don't remember any such resolution. But maybe you are right. I think perhaps Gates was editor of the paper and wrote that.

FURMANOVSKY:

"A week later, fighting raging in Budapest, Dennis made it unmistakably clear that he was parting company with Gates. He argued in the **Daily Worker** that the Soviet army had the right to intervene in Hungary to prevent the establishment of an imperialist--"

DOBBS:

That was my position.

FURMANOVSKY:

That was your position, and you still feel that was right?

DOBBS:

Yes. In Hungary, yes. See, that was 1956. Now, I will admit, of course, no one really knew. No one really-- how shall I put it--no one knew the deadliness of the whole Stalinist period, relative to these countries. That came out later. You know, the insistence on the Soviet model of socialism be followed in most detail.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, doesn't that then suggest that in fact it was a flawed but genuine revolution?

DOBBS:

No question that it was a flawed-- Well, over here we were growing up, thinking in terms of a socialist society that had no flaws. And lo and behold, it did have flaws. But I will say that from the actions of what happened in Hungary, it was a vicious, bloody thing in which many, many good people were killed. See, in other words, it was not a mass revolt against the bureaucracy and the stupidity of the Hungarian Communist Party leadership, but rather, in my opinion, to restore a capitalist reactionary regime. But at least the Soviet Red Army saved the party and they saved the country, I think. Now, that's my opinion today, which is not the same, of course, in Czechoslovakia. Which took place twenty years later, or was it thirty years later?

FURMANOVSKY:

No ten, twelve. Twelve years later.

DOBBS:

'Fifty-six to '68. Yeah. Well, twelve years.

FURMANOVSKY:

So meanwhile in Los Angeles, I think in 1957, there was a fairly large exodus. I think the party membership dwindled to 1,500 by the end of 1957.

DOBBS:

Yes, that's right.

FURMANOVSKY:

And it really was a fairly severe blow, I would have thought. What did you start feeling now, by 1957, with the party no longer able to have quite the influence it did but still a reasonable membership. What did you perceive as being the goals of the party? I mean, there wasn't much that could be done in the CIO, which now had gone back with the AF of L [American Federation of Labor].

DOBBS:

Well, no. We still had some people in the labor movement. We still had some people in the political movement. We were very deeply concerned and active against the war in Vietnam. We were deeply--not too deeply, but had some relations to the black liberation movement. These were the things that began to take place. The party played a very positive role and achieved quite considerable support in some of the peace movement activities. And I will say that L.A. was the only one that had a unified peace movement on the war in Vietnam. No one else was able to achieve what we were able to achieve. By saying we, I don't mean me or us alone, I mean the peace forces were able to maintain unity and we were able to conduct ourselves in a way that helped unite socialist forces in the war against Vietnam. You see, to me the big problem of a communist movement is what does a communist movement do when the revolution's not on the agenda? Now, this goes whether the movement is advancing or whether it's retreating. In other words, I've always placed it, in my own mind and in public speeches, that a communist party or a socialist revolutionary organization can grow only in relation to its struggle for democratic demands. By that, of course, I mean small "d." And what are the democratic demands? It's the labor movement. It's the liberation movements. It's relations with the black communities, with the Chicano community. And later, of course, its whole development relative to the political struggle and the women's movement. But the point I'm making is that sometimes, then, you have different organizational emphases. At one time,

we would say what we got to do is bring forward the independence of the party. Another time we'd say it's time the communists went into other organizations. In other words, how do you make a correct estimate of the situation, and how do you make the organization fit it? I will say that this is true any time you try to build a revolutionary organization. I learned it best-- For instance, did you ever read the book Trinity by Leon Uris?

FURMANOVSKY:

I know of it, yeah.

DOBBS:

You know of it? Well, you see the different tactics of the IRA [Irish Republican Army] in the course of their struggle, that they sometimes did this, they sometimes they did that, sometimes they emphasized this, sometimes they emphasized that, based on the situation in the country, the situation in their organization; and how do you jibe the two into some kind of political program. Well, that's always been our aim, and I would say I think that this was one of the high qualities of Dorothy's leadership.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, what did you feel in 1957, let's say the period from '57 into the early sixties? What did you perceive to be the role of the party? I mean, okay, there had been Brown v. Board of Education. There had been the Montgomery [Alabama] bus boycott. In 1960, you start getting the sit-ins and then the freedom rides. First of all, that was in the South--

DOBBS:

Well, there were supportive movements here, raising money for it, urging people to go, mass demonstrations in support of it. We had all that. We had all that.

FURMANOVSKY:

What do you remember about the main thrust of the party during this period then, in the late fifties and early sixties, prior to the antiwar movement? Because that seems to be a sort of almost an area of vacuum. I don't really know that much about what the party was doing at that time.

DOBBS:

Well, that's what the party was-- Well, the big thing that the movement took part in--some of us, the whole party didn't--was the growth of the Peace and Freedom Party in 1967. So that was some of us. I was very active in that.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, what was the basis of the Peace and Freedom Party? Who were the key organizers?

DOBBS:

Well, the key organizers primarily were independent socialists in Berkeley, some anarchists in Berkeley, and some people here. I guess mostly John Hague; I think he is an anarchist. And there they had one of the Drapers, I forget which one, was very active.

FURMANOVSKY:

And you felt that you could work with these people?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. Oh yes. Oh yes. I wasn't in the beginning. We had our fights with the Peace and Freedom Party, in terms of what was the best way to get on the ballot. Some of us felt that it should be a petition campaign. Their tactic was to increase the registration. They would never have won, had it not been for the development of the American Independent Party, which at that time was George Wallace's party--an out-and-out racist operation. Well, it was in revulsion to that that more signatures were gathered in the last ten days than had been gathered in the whole year prior to that.

FURMANOVSKY:

And this was to put the party on the ballot when?

DOBBS:

Nineteen sixty-eight.

FURMANOVSKY:

In '68, okay.

DOBBS:

Wait a minute, are we still talking about '57?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes, I want to know more about that because I'm really in the dark about that period, as far as the Communist Party.

DOBBS:

Well, I'm in the dark too. I don't have any minutes in front of me!

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes, but even just in general terms, I just don't know what the party was doing because--

DOBBS:

The party was doing what it was always doing. It was building the circulation and financial support for the **People's World** newspaper. It was spreading the paper as best as it could. It's main concerns in '57-- 'Fifty-seven, what the heck were the issues? Who was president?

FURMANOVSKY:

That was [Dwight D.] Eisenhower.

DOBBS:

Well, we still had our friends in the labor movement. We still had our friends in the Democratic Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

Cuba I remember was an issue for the--

DOBBS:

Many of us were active in defense of the Cuban revolution. There were always demonstrative actions. I myself joined the Friends of Cuba. And, you know, there that was taken over right away by one of the leftist groups that made it impossible to work in. We had some disagreements in relation to an analysis

of the Castro movement. We were clearer than the national office was on it, I can assure you of that, because we had some Cubans here.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why wasn't the party, do you think--maybe I'm wrong in this--more active in the civil rights movement in the sense of sending young members of the party down on the--?

DOBBS:

Well, for one thing, I want to tell you right now this is where we began to feel very keenly the loss of maybe two generations. See, following the trial two generations were lost to the movement. In other words, we didn't have a lot of young people. Most of our activity now, relative to liberation-- And secondly, I will say this, that the big fight around white chauvinism had developed. Remember we had talked about that? We didn't have a strong corps of black people in the party anymore. A guy like William C. Taylor never could talk to a noncommunist, and he was our leading spokesperson in the black community. We had better relations, we white people had better relations than he did. There wasn't much, but we took part in supportive actions mostly.

FURMANOVSKY:

So in other words, what you're saying is that--

DOBBS:

But we didn't-- We had already lost our youth movement.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, you at this time would have been about forty-five to fifty, so--

DOBBS:

What, my age?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah.

DOBBS:

Fifty-seven.

FURMANOVSKY:

So you weren't old by any standards, and there were still a lot of people in their forties. So it wasn't as people tend to think, that by the late fifties the people in the Communist Party were sort of ancient. But actually, you were in your prime, really in many ways. I mean, you were just entering middle age actually. And what about these Du Bois clubs and other--

DOBBS:

My memory of them is so vague. The Du Bois club, I think, happened later, I'm not sure. We had, we tried to maintain some youth leadership. I remember raising money to maintain some people in the field, but I don't remember too much. I think we were deeply involved in the internal fight, of course, around Hungary, around saving the party--mostly organizational measures. I don't remember whether we had any open schools at that time, I don't remember. I just don't remember.

FURMANOVSKY:

When did the party start trying to make serious overtures, then, to the student movement?

DOBBS:

That was one of the fights that we had with the national office. I forget when it was, but here was this burgeoning youth movement, and I'm trying-- I don't remember when it was that it became very popular for communists to be invited to speak to universities. Because I had some wonderful experiences around that.

FURMANOVSKY:

Would it be around '63?

DOBBS:

Possibly, yeah. I don't think it was '57 or '58.

FURMANOVSKY:

When McCarthyism had really ended.

DOBBS:

Yeah. I don't remember when it was that I was in before the House Un-American Activities Committee, even. I don't remember that. I believe it was in 1969.

FURMANOVSKY:

The party didn't run candidates in the elections?

DOBBS:

Well, we did. We ran Henry Steinberg for board of education. We ran Dorothy Healey for county assessor. It must have been in that period, we did some of those things. We ran Bill Taylor for Congress. Yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

And did Dorothy have her radio program around this time?

DOBBS:

I think so. That was a period, I think, that she had it six months, and I would take it for six months. I forget when Dorothy ran for county assessor. It must have been in that period. That's right.

1.17. TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE TWO

OCTOBER 15, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

You mentioned that during the crisis in '56, '57, that Gus Hall, a man who sort of had a clean record and didn't belong to any particular faction and had credibility as a mass organizer--

DOBBS:

Because he had been in prison, right.

FURMANOVSKY:

He had come to you and in effect said that he agreed with your position and he was looking for your support. Obviously he was fairly ambitious, he wanted to become general secretary in the vacuum created by Dennis's illness, and

Foster was pretty old too. Now, then it appears that he retracted or went back on his--

DOBBS:

Well, let me make it very clear. When I said that Gus came to us, he didn't come to us, he made a trip around the country and visited every party organization, and we were one of them. What I mean with that are two things we can have. As I say, first, there was the changing of the constitution to all the changes that we had made. In other words, the right to dissent, which we had in the constitution, was taken out.

FURMANOVSKY:

It was taken out of the constitution?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

How could this be done without a vote, or without?

DOBBS:

Well, it was done by vote.

FURMANOVSKY:

And why was it that--?

DOBBS:

The convention in '57 or '58, I forget what year it was.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why was it that you were outvoted then?

DOBBS:

Because of the power of Gus Hall, and the kind of friendships and relations he established around the country. It was at a national convention these things happened.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why, in retrospect, do you think he went back on all this?

DOBBS:

Well, because I think the Soviet ambassador told him to. That's my opinion. Now, I may be completely wrong, but he, from then on-- You see, in that whole period, even though there was this opening of the Stalin revelations, Khrushchev, you know. And they stamped out the opposition, they stamped out what they tried to do. They held back on making the changes. Gus Hall was a direct representative in the Communist Party of the thinking of the leadership of the Soviet Union.

FURMANOVSKY:

But this hadn't been apparent to you when he came looking for your support?

DOBBS:

Not at all. Not at all.

FURMANOVSKY:

So it was kind of a surprise to you.

DOBBS:

Yes, yes, it was. But, you see, you chide me how do I remember things in the thirties but I don't remember anything in the fifties. I find it hard to answer. Maybe because so much of it was involved with internal activities. Maybe so much of it was due to movements over which we had very little leadership role, such as the developments of the student movement. Because we had no more youth! Such as the developments in the expressions of the black liberation movement, because we had so few young people who were relating. In other words, this whole group around SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] or these organizations--we had no relations with them. We had working relations with some of them, some of the local people. But nationally, I don't think we had.

FURMANOVSKY:

But attempts were made to form connections with them. I was just reading today about how members of the Communist Party approached the sit-in students in Greensboro [North Carolina] in 1960, offering support and money.

DOBBS:

Yeah, as I say, there were several supportive actions, but that isn't the giving policy of leadership which are the things I remember from the thirties. That's the big difference.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, basically the reason I brought up Gus Hall is because when you started making overtures to young students in like '63, '64, he was not supportive, I assume.

DOBBS:

That's correct. Let me tell you what happened. There was a national committee meeting, where the main point on the agenda was a report by Gus Hall. This report was called "The Struggle against Petty-Bourgeois Radicalism." Now, petty-bourgeois radicalism, of course, is the use of radical phrases. It has no class base. It has no relations, whatsoever, or even is against the labor movement as part of the establishment--which are the words that were used. It developed these slogans, you know, "Don't trust anybody over thirty," you know, all the things in the development of its counterculture. Some of the aspects of that day. Then Gus made this whole speech relative to petty-bourgeois radicalism and said that we had to fight it as a major ideology that was sweeping the country. We had to conduct the ideological struggle. And there was one main way to do that, and that was to establish a youth organization. We took the position that we had just begun to develop some young contacts. And we took the position that these young people of ours, communists, should go into the growing SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] movement. This is what Gus Hall was fighting against. He felt the only way to really fight this petty-bourgeois radicalism was to develop a youth organization of our own. I think at that time, I forget what it was called. Liberation League Against--Perhaps Young Workers Liberation League?

FURMANOVSKY:

Something like that.

DOBBS:

Something like that, I forget what it was called.

FURMANOVSKY:

What did you think of his analysis?

DOBBS:

Well, we disagreed with him. We voted against his report. It was one of the very few times a report of Gus Hall was voted down at the national committee.

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, it was voted down?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

So then how was it that these organizations were set up?

DOBBS:

Because the bureaucracy and the attitude of the national office of the Communist Party continues regardless of the vote of the central committee. You know, you got to understand something, and today it's still the style of the Communist Party. Let's say a convention or a central committee opens with a report of the national office. That report is the document that gets published, no matter what happens in the three days of the debate. Even now, you don't get a report of what happened at a convention of the Soviet Union, you get [Mikhail] Gorbachev's report. That's still the style in which the Communist Party operates.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you think that this was Gus Hall's--? Do you think he was effectively taking orders, if you like, or was this his own--?

DOBBS:

My hunch is he was taking orders.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes, but why would the Soviet Union be particularly interested in--? I mean, on the whole, they would have been fairly supportive of a student movement that was challenging American imperialism.

DOBBS:

Well, first of all, every social movement, no matter how big, of this kind, that declares the Communist Party is irrelevant becomes an enemy! That's the secret of it. And it's any movement. In this case, you had a mass development of a movement. And it, in the thinking of the CP, becomes an enemy of the Communist Party, because the Communist Party says, "We are the vanguard." That's it. And these were some of the things that embittered us so much, you see. Because here we see a mass movement developing around us and we're struggling to establish relations with it, and Gus Hall comes out with this kind of nonsense.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right. And when there had been a mass movement in the thirties, the party was quite happy to join in with it, although, of course, it was able to take leadership positions.

DOBBS:

Exactly, exactly. And I'm trying to figure why don't I remember so much of '57? Because we were so peripheral, we were so marginal to it all, to the main developments in the country.

FURMANOVSKY:

But you didn't find this a sufficiently disillusioning experience to want to leave or join some other--

DOBBS:

Not at that time, no. Oh, no. That time it was a struggle to save the party, a struggle to save the paper.

FURMANOVSKY:

Incidentally, did your wife [Ada Martin Dobbs] go along with your view?

DOBBS:

No, no, she didn't. That group that I told you about in 1957; my wife would have been with them, had it not been for her attitude to me. In other words, in 1957, she said, "I've had it," just like these other people had said, and she dropped out of the party. But she said, well, we have children and we have a family relationship. I have to support the family because you're not getting, you know, you're not making a living wage. So that's what I'm going to do. And we've gotten along very well since then. But she was with that group. They were her closest friends in San Francisco. But you asked the question, did we still maintain friendships with them? We absolutely did.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you think your wife would have the same-- I should ask her really--would have the same analysis of Hungary as you do now?

DOBBS:

I don't know really. I don't remember. I don't remember about Hungary, but I certainly remember about Czechoslovakia. But I don't remember about Hungary. I don't remember any serious political disagreements with my wife. You know, she's very astute, she's a very smart woman. I want to devote a little bit in this interview to a chapter on her, but not now. So I would say in '57-- I'm trying to think of certain campaigns that took place. I don't remember. I have no sharp memory of it. All I know is I always was very hardworking and was very busy raising money for the party and very busy organizing meetings.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why was it that the party couldn't actually send a contingent of members to go on Freedom Rides?

DOBBS:

Well, we had no youth. We had no people.

FURMANOVSKY:

No, I mean why would it have to--?

DOBBS:

Well, I wasn't going to leave my family.

FURMANOVSKY:

So it had to be people who were able to do so.

DOBBS:

Well, maybe some went, I don't know. I don't remember.

FURMANOVSKY:

I mean there weren't youth. There must have been--

DOBBS:

Very few. Very few. You see, you take for instance this aspect that I described to you of the circle of organizations that were organized. They never had any youth. In other words, the Hungarian group, which is a very strong group, they had a building, and they had events--their kids weren't in it. The Jewish kids were not in the movement of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you have any theories to explain that?

DOBBS:

Sure, they were developing as Americans. They were leaving a culture of the past.

FURMANOVSKY:

But I mean, no, let's look at--

DOBBS:

Later, they all came into the struggles in Berkeley, you know. They all led them all in the upsurges that took place in the sixties. That's where they showed up, see. But they weren't there in the fifties.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about your children, who I guess would now be what, at this time--?

DOBBS:

Louise [Dobbs] was born in 1948, so '57, '58 she was still a ten-year-old kid. Morrie [Morris Smolan Dobbs] was three years older, well, he was only thirteen or fourteen.

FURMANOVSKY:

I asked you to talk about the period, let's say, around '63 to '65, the kids are--

DOBBS:

Well, in the sixties I had an interesting experience with my son. When he went to junior high school or high school, he would bring kids over with me to argue with me. See, he would tell them my dad's a communist. They'd come over and argue with me about the glories of American capitalism. Five years later, he'd bring them over to glorify me! "Gee whiz! You were a communist all this time, struggling against the reactionaries?" Boy, and they'd sit and listen to my stories. Altogether different attitude. Now, that's true. Oh, he always brought kids over to argue with me.

FURMANOVSKY:

So why don't you tell me a little bit about these efforts to make formal or informal contacts with SDS chapters of the universities here and--

DOBBS:

I don't remember too much of that. The only thing I can recall--and this is largely because of Dorothy--is that whenever people from the national office of the new organizations or traveling organizers which they had would come to town, we'd always meet with them. She would invite them to discuss their program with us. We were always very sympathetic to them. We met quite a few of them that way. I don't remember any formalized approaches here. I just don't remember any.

FURMANOVSKY:

So when would you then date your--? I mean, I know when you left the party, but was there any inkling that you were about to leave before Czechoslovakia, or was that very much a--?

DOBBS:

No, Czechoslovakia broke my mainspring, is the way I placed it. I didn't want to be a spokesperson anymore.

FURMANOVSKY:

I see. You were absolutely opposed to it.

DOBBS:

Absolutely. Absolutely. But, you see, I was part of that group that continued to fight in the national committee. We demanded a special meeting, but we got wiped out. We got, what, I think the vote was about 75 to 11, something like that.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who was there supporting you, apart from Dorothy and all the people in California? Were there equivalent groups around the country? Where were they--

DOBBS:

Oh, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who were these people and where were they?

DOBBS:

Not too much. Not too much. The central committee, well, those people that disagreed, of course, left. I think we got eleven or twelve votes. For one thing, we had all of the California votes, except Bill Taylor wouldn't vote with us, of course. [Albert Jason] "Micky" Lima--

FURMANOVSKY:

Where was [William] Schneiderman at this point? What was his position?

DOBBS:

I don't remember. Schneiderman had quit. He didn't quit the party, but he got out of the leadership of the party. Just one day in a state committee; and by

the way his book doesn't reflect this at all. His book was, he called it--I don't know, something about a "red on defense" or something like that [**Dissent on Trial: The Story of a Political Life**]. But it was during this period that Bill Schneiderman-- Were we one district or two? I think we were still in one district. I just forgot when we became two districts, I don't remember. But Bill Schneiderman one day just said I'm quitting.

FURMANOVSKY:

For nonideological reasons, then.

DOBBS:

Well, I'm through. I'm tired and I'm through, that's all.

FURMANOVSKY:

But you say you had pretty much California. You had Mickey Lima. You had most people in California.

DOBBS:

Yeah.

FURMANOVSKY:

And I guess, what, there were a few pockets elsewhere, but not much?

DOBBS:

That's correct. That's correct.

FURMANOVSKY:

New York was pretty, what?

DOBBS:

We might have got one or two votes in New York. But I honestly don't remember who the eleven were, eleven or twelve, I don't remember.

FURMANOVSKY:

So after Czechoslovakia, you felt that you didn't want to be a leader but you wanted to--

DOBBS:

Well, I wanted to remain in the party. I wanted to remain "a leader," that takes certain party responsibilities. But I just didn't want to be the open spokesperson. I did not want to be a full-time functionary, and I went back and I got a job. F

FURMANOVSKY:

What did you do?

DOBBS:

But I want to go back a little bit.

FURMANOVSKY:

Okay. Go ahead.

DOBBS:

In 1960 or '61, there was the McCarran Act [Internal Security Act of 1950]. Now, the McCarran Act was the one that said that every communist must register.

FURMANOVSKY:

Are you talking about '51? Or is this a different act?

DOBBS:

I think it was '61. Either '60 or '61. I'm not saying when it was passed, I'm saying when the Supreme Court made its decision that okayed it.

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, okay.

DOBBS:

Where every person had to register as a member of the Communist Party. And then they defined what a Communist Party member was. They were traitors; believed in espionage, believed in terror, believed in overthrow of the government, and so forth. Defined it in the law. Several of us were indicted throughout the country. I was indicted. What the sentence was, it was going

to be a \$10,000 fine for every day after you were, you know, declared that you had to register and didn't do it. A \$10,000 fine.

FURMANOVSKY:

You were registering as sort of an alien--

DOBBS:

An alien, well, that's what the law said. I'm registering as a member of the Communist Party, which is a foreign agent, and so forth and so on. At that time, I felt very keenly that this could destroy the party. I took the position that maybe we ought to think in terms of a united socialist educational movement. Now, we only had one argument, one debate on it, in our county committee. Not the county, but the county executive committee, which is mostly I think eight or ten people. And while we had some disagreements, they said, well, write it out, and you're going to New York to a meeting. Dorothy was on one of her trips to Europe at that time.

FURMANOVSKY:

What was your official position, by the way?

DOBBS:

Acting district chairman, at that time. I was the secretary of the party. When Dorothy was in Europe, I was the head of the party. She would go maybe a week, two weeks, that's all. She wouldn't go for a long period of time. My position was thoroughly rejected. The central national committee decided to stick and fight, that they could lick this thing, which they did. In other words, every section of the law was declared null and void. They had one section that said that you're not entitled to social security; well, that became the Foster case. And one section said that you can't get a passport; that became somebody else's case. One section of it--I forget what it was-- But in other words, section by section it was all thrown out by the Supreme Court. Very quickly. There was one test case, and that test case was a fellow by the name of [William] Albertson. And the agreement was between the Communist Party lawyers and the government lawyers, that that would be the test case. And that went on for some time. But the point I'm trying to make, in this period, in this period in '60, I knew the party was going to be very badly damaged, in

terms of public support, in terms of money and all that sort of stuff. And it was decided that some of us would go to work, see? So Dorothy was going to be a full-time functionary. Bill Taylor, I think, was going to be a full-time functionary. And I would get a job. There was friend of mine, who I hadn't seen for maybe thirty years, but an old friend of the family, an old red. His whole family was red. They were very active in the twenties. A fellow by the name of Sam Gerber. He owned a dry-cleaning machinery company [Sam Gerber and Company], and an old friend of mine told him that Ben can do a job for him. He had just moved from one building to another, and was establishing a fairly successful business. So he gave me the job. The job, at that time, was working in a-- First of all, he had a school. The school was made up of people who had to take exams to pass a test to become licensed by the state of California to become dry-cleaners. So that was at night. I would have certain responsibilities around that, registering, and things of that kind. Secondly, he was building a parts department. So I was in charge of the parts department. Third, he needed an inside salesman. But as a technical industry, I had to learn a great deal to be an inside salesperson. Fourth, it was being in the inside, running the office, as it were, doing the billing and okaying the invoices, you know, all that sort of stuff of a jobber. None of the machines are produced in California. They all come from out of the state. So it was running the office. Then, of course, expediting the work of installers and mechanics. There were no labor-relations problems because the mechanics primarily were individual mechanics. Because if they worked for somebody they got eight dollars an hour, if they worked for themselves, they'd get twenty dollars an hour. But they had to maintain vehicles and tools of that kind. That's for installers, and it's a technical industry. I was very good friends, became almost part of the family with Sam Gerber. I had known him for many, many years and I had run into him, you know, over the course of years, and would say hello and things like that. His son-in-law and his daughter had been members of the party. His son-in-law had actually been an organizer for one or another of these youth groups--I forget which one it was--that we were trying to build at that time, during that period.

FURMANOVSKY:

This isn't related to Serril Gerber, is it?

DOBBS:

No. Serril Gerber is somebody else. Serril Gerber was in the YCL way off in the thirties. No, this is not Serril Gerber at all. Serril Gerber was banned and outlawed by the school department. He couldn't get a job in the public school system, but he got a job in some private school somewhere. I had known Serril, he was a very fine guy. Very, very smart young man. I hadn't seen him for years until one day I was invited to play poker somewhere, and there's Serril Gerber. He was a wonderful guy, and his wife Lillian [Gerber], who had just come from Detroit when they got married. Anyway, so I went to work. In the meantime, we were beating this McCarran Act, declaring it null and void. So we were beginning to reestablish the party. So what would happen with me? Let's say I was working, worked a year and a half, and then I'd say, why the hell am I making money for the boss even though he was a good friend? Well, I don't want to do that. I want to be a full-time revolutionary, you know. Although I'm still active in the party--don't get me wrong. And I would quit the job and go back to work for the CP. And the agreement was, anytime you want a job, just come in and go to work, that's all. I mean, that was the relationship. I would stop in and see him once in a while. Well, once the CP ran out of money, so I went and worked and I was able to draw my party pay amount--whatever it was, \$60 a week. And at this place I'm making \$200 or \$300. So I was able to pay someone else as a functionary. So I would do things like that--work part-time, put in a day here, a day there, five hours here, five hours there. Because I was very useful, very, very useful to the company. In other words, all the skills I had learned in the party I was able to apply to private business.

FURMANOVSKY:

What were these skills?

DOBBS:

Well, organizing things. Expediting things. Seeing that things get done. Seeing that billing is proper. Seeing that the proper equipment and the mechanic and everything else is at the right place at the right time. For instance, in a dry-cleaning plant you may have to take a wall out to be able to get a machine in. So you got to get someone to take out the wall, and you got to have someone to rebuild it. And you got to get an industrial mover, and then you got to get the installer, someone who knows how to install steam equipment. Anyway,

that's what it was, expediting mostly. So I would go to work on the private job, then I'd quit and go back to work for the party. It was around this time that I had some of the best experiences in the early sixties. It became very popular, it was part of the upsurge in the youth movement, for groups to invite communists to speak before them. So there's a couple of experiences that I just thought I would tell you. One was at a college in Utah, I forget where it was--

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, I think you told the story.

DOBBS:

Some creek, or springs, something in Utah--I forget the name.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes, you spoke to the Mormons. I think you put that on the tape a while back.

DOBBS:

What it was was a Mormon school, it was part of the Utah school system. And I was invited to speak. I was invited by the student activities committee. I went there, and it was a school of maybe 2,000 people. But it was a school that didn't have a black, didn't have a Chicano. It had some foreign students, who I later met, and they all told me they were afraid to open their mouth about anything. So the two interesting things that happened is, first of all, we were going to meet in a small room--not a small room, but it wasn't the major auditorium--and it was such a jam of people, the whole school, they finally decided that they had to change the place. So we marched across the campus, it was like a parade, to the auditorium. And we took that over. And then-- This is all very polite, you know. Because the funny thing is the kids that invited me--you would think they were comrades of ours, but they weren't. They were just kids that felt responsible for me, you know. So that what happened was I had developed a speech, about a forty-five-minute speech. And I had become quite a good public speaker at that time. So we got into this auditorium, and the first thing that happened was they said, "Mr. Dobbs, we don't want to embarrass you. We know you're an atheist. So will you please go backstage while we have our prayers." First of all, it wouldn't have

embarrassed me. But I'll go backstage. And right in the middle of their prayers a bunch of guys walked in. It was the football team. And in my day when we went to college the football team were always the most reactionary guys. I says, "Oh my God, all these people! And I'm left alone!" So what happened was one of them came up and said, "Mister, could you tell us where we could find some chairs? We want to hear the speaker." They didn't know they had me as a speaker! The other thing that happened was somebody got up and said that we have to counteract the poison that this man is going to give us, and he's invited someone from the Moral Majority organization. Except that speaker wants \$250 and the student activities committee won't give the \$250. So they are going to make a collection here in this jammed auditorium. And they collected \$32. So that was the end of that. [laughter] So I made my speech, and then there were questions and answers. At eleven o'clock or so we were kicked out of the auditorium and we all marched over to the student union building. Now, that is not everybody, just who were interested, but that too jammed the room we were able to get. And there I took the position that you people don't know from nothing! So I'm not going to answer your questions "yes or no." I will speak on the subject that you ask me about. We kept that up till nearly two o'clock. And then about ten kids came into my motel room, and we stayed there until I had to get an airplane to Salt Lake City. I was on my way to New York. But that was one of the finest experiences I ever had. The other one I want to tell you about was in Long Beach. It was California State University, Long Beach. There, what happened, there was a tremendous amount of publicity and very sharp opposition to my speaking. But the administration took the position that the student assembly committee asked for him, they're going to get him, and we don't care what opposition. And then there were pickets and there were sit-ins, articles in the papers, all full, you know, about stopping this man from speaking. Well, anyway, I got there, and someone had stolen the lectern, the thing that you speak off of. And the meeting was outdoors. And there were 6,000 people there! Just jammed. Here am I in the wind trying to collect my notes and my clippings. So I just sort of threw everything away and made a speech for about an hour. Now, the one experience there that I reported to the national office, I said that this is our problem: What are we going to do about this problem? I had 105 questions submitted to me in written form. A hundred and four of them dealt with the Soviet Union. Not one relative to the problem in the United

States. Not one relative to the program of the Communist Party in the United States. Not one! The only other one was about the Du Bois clubs, or some such thing, about our youth movement, whatever it was at the time. And I hadn't even mentioned it in my speech. But that, to me-- And I went to the national office, I remember, and said, "This is our problem. How are we going to solve this one?" Because, that to me, more than anything else, describes the fundamental problem of the Communist Party in the United States: It's not looked upon as an American institution. Because here were 6,000 people! It wasn't a couple of disgruntled Trotskyites or something. It was 6,000 ordinary young people. But that meeting went off. Oh yeah, there was one question that was asked me that didn't deal with the Soviet Union--there were 106 questions. It was, "Do you know that you're parked illegally?" [laughter] Anyway, that was a big meeting. But the interesting thing that happened there is that this was covered in the Long Beach papers.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you have any idea what the date would be on this?

DOBBS:

No, I just have forgotten. It must have been sometime in '63, as you suggested. See, all I know to get the correct date is that I was not a full-time functionary. At the place where I was working, one day in walks a guy who lived in Long Beach who was a national representative of one of the major manufacturers of laundry machinery in this country. He comes in to my boss and says, "Do you know who you've got working here?" And he showed him that whole spread in the newspaper! My boss of course knew me. So he said, "Gee, I didn't know we had such a famous person here! Isn't that wonderful? He's so smart! We didn't know he was so famous!" That was the line he took. And then what happened is the next day, the next time he comes to see my boss, he says to me, "Hi, Governor." And I said, "Well, you know I'm not the governor." He said, "Yeah, but you're liable to be. So I got to remain your friend." One other thing happened. A couple of rivals in the industrial field, in other words rivals to my boss, called a meeting of people in the industry, with an effort to drive my boss out of the industry. He says, "You see what he's got. If he's got a communist working for him, he must be a communist!" And my boss said, "Well, hell, don't you move, just keep on working. We'll fight this

thing out." He got in touch with his main distributor. Everyone in the business has a line. In other words, this machinery company handled the Detrex dry-cleaning machine. Some other company will handle the Pantrex dry-cleaning machine, or whatever. And they told him, we don't go for that bullshit. Just forget it. Everything's fine. So nothing happened after these several meetings that took place--at least three meetings took place. Now, I know that because one of my boss's rivals was a very good friend of mine who had formerly been a Communist Party member! So he would come and tell me all about the things that were taking place. The third meeting I had was very interesting, too. And that was at, I forget which one. I think it was one of the [Claremont] Colleges where Walter C. Knott, the founder of Knott's Berry Farm--a real fascist, you know. Well, his administration wouldn't allow me to speak in an auditorium, so I sat in the student union lounge, and the kids who wanted to hear me would go out and grab people off the campus. "Come in and hear the communist!" That went on for nearly seven hours. Because every time, every hour there would be another group of people. Finally, I couldn't be heard from where I'm sitting here to you, I was so hoarse from talking so much. So that ended it. But that was my third experience. I had a couple others. One was cute. I went down to a place in northern San Diego County. And what happened there is the meeting was announced and all the people, mostly reactionaries mobilized by the right wing, filled the auditorium. Then when the lecture was supposed to be held there was no place for the students to sit because it was all filled by adults from all around northern--and all of them reactionary--from northern San Diego County. You know, Fallbrook, Vista, these kind of places. So I told them I wouldn't speak unless they rigged up the outside with loudspeakers so that these kids could hear me. And they did. During the question period, one guy gets up and says, "All the years I've spent in the Soviet prison camp. It's nothing like you're talking about Russia." Then some kid gets up and says, "The Soviet prison camp you spent at was at the Illinois state hospital for the insane!" Those kind of cute things. But one thing happened: There was a lot of people and someone of the group that invited me said, "You can't go to speak because there's people with guns!" And someone else took the position, "If they're going to shoot you, they'll shoot me first." And the committee surrounded me and took care of me. Of course, it later turned out that these were cops who were determined to see that there was no trouble, [laughter] They later escorted me out of the meeting,

and I couldn't get rid of them. As they followed me as I was going home in my car--I wanted to go visit somebody in northern San Diego County--and I finally stopped on the road and said, "What are you guys following me for?" "We're following you till you get out of San Diego County because we want no trouble in San Diego County." That was a different attitude, you see. But I couldn't take them to where I was going.

FURMANOVSKY:

There's still a lot of, particularly at this time, a lot of FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agents in the party. I mean, I know why--

DOBBS:

Well, it was after the trial. None of these-- these were open police. Oh, they might have had. Later, by the way, I'll just mention this. It came out later that through the examination of the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] files that I was not a target after 1976, I think.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right, but you were a target even at a time when the party was so small.

DOBBS:

Yeah, probably yes. Now, this was a period in which I say there was this open activity of the Communist Party. Because Dorothy was speaking everywhere, other people from the national committee were speaking everywhere. I spoke at at least seven different places, and always with huge and very sympathetic crowds, in that there was no heckling, very attentive and always many questions. We were very, very active in demanding an end to the Vietnamese War. At around this time, 1967-68, we developed in L.A.-- I don't mean we, the Communist Party, but we, the peace forces, developed a really unified peace movement known as the Los Angeles Peace [Action] Council, that lasted for years.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who were the components of this council?

DOBBS:

It had all the peace organizations at that time, from left to right, you know. Some churches, not many. But there were the Trotskyites and the various split-offs from the Communist Party at that time that had begun to develop out of the Communist Party. The council was led by a fellow by the name of Irving Sarnoff, a very, very talented, able, imaginative, creative young man. He really kept this movement going. A staff member for a while was Don Healey. There were other staff people. We had our headquarters on Western Avenue near Melrose [Avenue]. And it was a very popular place--we put on huge demonstrations.

FURMANOVSKY:

But they were students.

DOBBS:

No, some students, but also adults.

FURMANOVSKY:

But was this a mostly-- Who else, who were the other organizations? Was the SDS represented on this organization?

DOBBS:

I think the SDS was there, yes. The SDS, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, this Long Beach committee against Vietnam, or some other community committee, the Trotskyites were there.

FURMANOVSKY:

And by this time the party could sit at a table with Trotskyites?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. We had to create a united front.

FURMANOVSKY:

Would you get into trouble from the national office for this?

DOBBS:

No. No. I don't recall any bit of trouble whatsoever. As a matter of fact, the CP tried to duplicate this. The council continued for years, the only one in the

country. We took part, for instance, in the big demonstrations in San Francisco in 1966 where we filled Kezar Stadium. We were the ones that had the big demonstration that was attacked most viciously by the Los Angeles Police Department, where [Lyndon Baines] Johnson spoke in Century City. There was a great deal of violence. We put on several big demonstrations, you know, with 20,000 to 30,000 people. It was a very active peace movement.

FURMANOVSKY:

And the party played a fairly prominent role?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. The party played a leading role. I was on the steering committee and would attend all the meetings. I represented the party there. And a very active group. We had a peace commission that would examine relations with people and try to plan the next steps and things of that kind.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did this lead to an influx of members?

DOBBS:

Some growth, but not very much. The whole period-- in this period, it was very little recruiting. People were scared to recruit! You know, what nut is going to join the party that any minute you'll have to go to prison?

FURMANOVSKY:

But was that true in '67?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

That was the last year of the House Un-American Activities, the California one. It was pretty much discredited by then.

DOBBS:

Was it? Well, then that's when I went before the House Un-American Activities Committee. And that was terrible. There was a whole group of

people at that time that were subpoenaed, and I think I was the only communist, you know, an open member of the party. I was subpoenaed, and it was very embarrassing because I was on the stand for nearly seven hours. And people thought, "My goodness, seven hours, this guy must be telling them everything he knows." Well, actually what happened is that they'd say, "We have testimony showing you were at the Communist Party convention of such and such a date." You know, and I refused to answer. Then they would read the minutes of the convention, or whatever they had on the convention. Then they would describe another convention or another meeting or another demonstration. And they would come in and show pictures of me at a demonstration, and me talking to Frank Wilkinson and Hugh DeLacey--you know, this shows what a terrible person, and so forth and so on. But other than that, there was nothing to it. Because their influence had already been diminished. Nobody listened to them anymore. They presented no real problem to the progressive movement. Everybody laughed at them. Big demonstrations were held against them. Big picket lines were held against them at that time.

FURMANOVSKY:

But that didn't mean that the party could recruit, even though--

DOBBS:

The party found it very difficult to recruit in this period. There were some people around the **People's World**.

FURMANOVSKY:

Wasn't it perhaps because of the image of the party being old-fashioned to young people?

DOBBS:

Partly that. Partly that, but I think mostly it was due to fear, because at that time there were a large group of young black people that came into the party. I think primarily around Angela Davis, perhaps, and a group of Mexican young people began to come into the party. But I think that most of it was fear. And there were the young people. We had a quite active group called the Che-Lumumba club, which was quite active. And they took part in many of the

student activities and organized many good things on the various campuses. So those were the sixties.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you end this session by talking about your decision to leave the party.

DOBBS:

No, I want to tell you a couple of other things first. As I said, at that time the Peace and Freedom Party began to develop. The Peace and Freedom Party, I think had its main base-- Well, it had a bunch of screwballs in it, too. This fellow by the name of [Robert] Avakian, who later became the head of the--his father's a judge somewhere--he became the head of the RCP, the Revolutionary Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

And was this an offshoot of the party?

DOBBS:

No, it wasn't an offshoot, but he was in it. Michael Lerner, who's now developed this magazine in the Jewish community to compete with **Commentary**. I forget its name--

FURMANOVSKY:

Tikkun.

DOBBS:

Yeah, **Tikkun**. Then there was, as I say, one of the Drapers. Not the guy that writes for the **New York Review of Books**, but I think his brother, and his wife. Then there was Farrel Braslovsky. Some very, very fine, capable people. But they were determined to build this Peace and Freedom Party through the method of getting official party registrants. I registered fairly early as a Peace and Freedom member. Because I felt that there has to be some kind of left-political viable alternative to the two-party system. I've always felt that. I had some misgivings as to how or whether this would be it. Now, one could write a whole book on the Peace and Freedom Party, and maybe someday somebody will. From the very first, I thought it was doomed to failure. It had a very

interesting history. See, our first argument within it--which we had to settle before the decision was made, and that was to determine how you get on the ballot. There are two different ways of getting on the ballot in California. There's a huge number of people who sign a petition to say we want to see a third party as we did in 1947. We want to see this party on the ballot. It doesn't mean any commitment whatsoever. The other way is to register as a member of the Peace and Freedom Party. This required something like 105,000 registers, and the other required something like 190,000 signatures. So it decided to go on the registration course. And I think I mentioned before that they did more in the last ten days than they did in the whole year prior to that, because of the impact and the real revulsion against the registering of the American Independent Party, whose campaign was going on at the same time. The American Independent Party is nothing of real influence now, but they've maintained the registration. And people think they're registering for an independent party. They don't recognize the relationship at that time with the racist [George] Wallace movement. It was Wallace, Strom Thurmond, and others. Anyway, this Peace and Freedom Party was very interesting in that it had this very heavy dose of left-anarchist sectarianism of the worst kind. For instance, they defined their approach as to build a party that has no similarities with any other American party. So, in other words, whenever you'd come around to the question of form, you couldn't discuss it. Because, you know, what experiences do Americans have, relative to a party? I went to one meeting--and I was on the state committee--I went to one meeting that when we started to discuss the agenda, I says "I'm willing to bet," and I made a motion, I forget what it was, but "I'm willing to bet that sooner or later you're going to adopt this motion." Relative to an agenda! Six hours later, the agenda was adopted. It was all the things that are described I think by [Maurice] Isserman [in the book **If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left**], on what are some of the outrageous, stupid things that happened around what they call "participatory democracy." No one could be a leader. No one could come in with an agenda. No one could come in with a program. No one could do anything. Now, the first meetings of the Peace and Freedom Party, I'll bet you that 50,000 people attended in the first month. At the end of the second month, you couldn't get eight people together in a room. It just was so stupid. Because they never could decide on anything!

FURMANOVSKY:

And are these people that you mentioned before, like Bob Avakian, these are the people that were--

DOBBS:

It was always a constant battle. Always a constant battle as to what to do. And with that, I went to several meetings. I went to one meeting in Texas when the Peace and Freedom Party wanted to start a national party, where I see where Gore Vidal defined himself as being, in his book--I just read his book Lincoln--where in introducing, Vidal would say he was the vice-chair of the People's Party of California. My memory of him, he was sitting in the back of the room, manipulating a bunch of kids, and he never said a word. At that time, the big struggle was to build a People's Party out of this fairly successful experience [in starting a] party in California.

1.18. TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE ONE

OCTOBER 15, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

You were saying, Ben, that you went to a meeting of the Peace and Freedom Party.

DOBBS:

An effort to form a national party supported by the Peace and Freedom Party. This was in Dallas. I think this was in preparation for the 1970 elections, where the problem arose as to how to build a national party. Now, you have to understand, we had a big delegation from California. There were maybe six people from Texas, four people from Vermont, three people from Michigan, and eight people from somewhere else. And I took the position that this is no way to build a party. That what we should do, is each of us go back to our own states, see what the possibilities are for an independent candidate, and then come together and decide who that candidate should be. But no, they had to go ahead and form a national People's Party. I was the only one that voted against it. Only one. Then, well now, what's it going to look like? "What do you mean what's it going to look like?" "Well, who's going to be the president? Who's going to be the chair? Where are you going to have your offices?" "Gee, we never thought of those things!" Now, that's how ridiculous the thing was.

Same thing happened in Albuquerque [New Mexico]. Now, they always had a candidate, and their candidate was always Ben [Benjamin] Spock. Or somebody would argue about who should be the vice-presidential candidate. The first convention of the Peace and Freedom Party in 1968 was in Richmond [California], where it was just the funniest convention I ever attended. Paul Jacobs--he was the guy that helped drive the left out of the labor movement--became the candidate for the U.S. Senate. There was found a very patronizing attitude to the black liberation movement. And the man that said the following words, "Any black person that joins this movement is a misguided political freak," became the candidate for president of the United States. A man by the name of Eldridge Cleaver. Well, how can a party be so stupid? You know? And of course they were establishing relations with the Black Panther Party. I took the position that for a party to live in the United States, you must relate its program to the black community, not to one single section of it, you know. I was just a voice in the wilderness. But I hung on for nearly six years. The big fight began to develop in the Peace and Freedom Party, because from then on it was just small groups, little small groups, a small central committee. To be on the state committee all you had to do was go to a meeting. You know, I mean it was just ridiculous. It had no form, it had no purpose. The purpose was to run candidates and Ben Spock, but it had no money. It was such a tragedy. It had such possibilities. Later, it split on two fundamental questions. The first question: Well, here we are, a third-party movement, what do you do with a person like Ron [Ronald V.] Dellums? There were some who felt, especially some people in Oakland, that they should support Ron Dellums. But the other group thought this is violation of third-party principle. You have to run a candidate against Ron Dellums. You got to run candidates against everybody. Well, that's how stupid you could get, you see. In other words, it ceased to be any kind of political force. The second thing that happened was a group arose within the Peace and Freedom Party that wanted to define the party as a socialist party. And they couldn't understand my position as a revolutionary socialist, to say what do we need a socialist party for? If you want a socialist party, join the Trots, join the Communist Party, join the Socialist Party. We need a political alternative in a populist form. But they voted to become a socialist party, and then they adopted even harsher principles of democratic centralism than did the Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

Who were these people?

DOBBS:

Well, who remembers their names? John Hague-- Who remembers them?

FURMANOVSKY:

But they were young people that came out of the student movement?

DOBBS:

Young. Sure young. I was always the oldest one there.

FURMANOVSKY:

Let me just ask you in a general way on the question of the Old Left and the New Left. Did you not feel a lot of times very frustrated about the fact that the New Left seemed to have learned so little from the Old Left and seemed to--?

DOBBS:

Well, as I say, they had their main slogan, you know, "Don't listen to anybody over thirty." I get along fine with these people, by the way. Oh, yes. We would have political debates and we'd go out together. And sometimes they'd listen to me--sometimes. They'd listen to me, but they were so intent upon what they considered principle. For instance, a third party has got to be against the Democrats and against the Republicans. So let's say there's another third party in California called the American Independent Party [AIP]. They supported aspects of the American Independent Party, because it's a third party. It's opposed to Democrats and opposed to Republicans. I remember one meeting where an issue actually arose where they invited a speaker from the AIP to come to our meeting. The only ones that walked out was me and the gay caucus. Because they were outraged. How can you have these people come to a meeting? There was maybe thirty people at the whole meeting, you know, a state committee meeting. Stupid! See, this narrow third-party ism. Then, at the later convention of the Peace and Freedom Party--I guess it was maybe eight years ago, in 1980--I was very much in favor of the [Barry] Commoner candidacy, who was trying to build the Citizens Party, and thought that this would be a new surge of independent politics. Some unity between the Citizens Party and the Peace and Freedom Party had to be developed. So I introduced Commoner and nominated him for president of the U.S. What's

the first question they ask him? "Are you a socialist? If you're not a socialist, we're not going to support you." And he got eleven votes. And Dave [David] McReynolds was the one candidate favored by the Socialist Party. That's when Gus Hall tried to become the candidate of the Peace and Freedom Party. The eleven votes for Commoner was the balance of power that stopped Dave McReynolds or Gus Hall from winning. So then they finally nominated--they were going to change all of California traditions and California will shake the world!--so they nominated two women to be president and vice president. It was ridiculous. Not that I'm opposed to women. I'd like to see women run for president, but that's not the reason. It was so tragic, so tragic. The Peace and Freedom Party had such possibilities. And because of its start and because of the stupidity of the people that ran it and their complete left-sectarian attitudes towards American life and customs-- From when they opened the convention, and I'll never forget, they sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" in the most insulting manner. You know, what sense does it make? Why give that to the enemy?

FURMANOVSKY:

It must have rung a lot of bells from the party in the early thirties. Some of the same kinds of things that--

DOBBS:

Not quite that bad.

FURMANOVSKY:

Not quite the same, but some similarities.

DOBBS:

At least we believed in organization.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes, but I don't mean that aspect, I mean in terms of--

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. Disrespect for American life, yeah. But not that bad. Oh, no. We had a different type of sectarianism. We all liked to wear leather jackets. See, but we didn't say that people that don't wear leather jackets are stupid. We wanted

to wear our leather jackets! But we never castigated anybody else. That was the difference. We had our own little sectarian world, but never disdain for the rest of the country like these people had. It's so tragic in the sense that it had a possibility. It had created new movement. It had brought new people in the political process. It created an instrument for struggle. And it turned out to be nothing. As I say, I went with them for many years and finally broke and ceased my activity and support. Now, one other thing and I'll be through with this story. I did run for Congress in 1968. I discussed it with the leadership of the CP and the P and F. At that time, it was a fellow, I forget his name, but I think it was Mike Hannon. He was a very nice guy. He ran for district attorney, which is also an interesting story. He had been an L.A. police officer, and he later publicized the tremendous racism in the L.A. Police Department. And he ran for district attorney. He had a meeting where he was announcing his candidacy, there were about one hundred people there. He had to end the meeting by saying, "I'm not running for God, I'm running for district attorney!" You know, what are you going to do about everything in the whole world? As many in the group demanded. Well, that was a good comeback: "I'm not running to be God, I'm just running for district attorney of Los Angeles County." He was not a sectarian. He was a very fine man. He was a Socialist Party member. Anyway, I ran for Congress, this is in 1968, and I discussed it with him. I ran in the district where no other Peace and Freedom person ran. In other words, I wasn't going to run against anybody else. It was a district where there was no organization of the Peace and Freedom Party. Some of the districts, particularly on the Westside, and a little bit on the Eastside, had some organization. This was in the area around Carson, Torrance, San Pedro. The Democratic Party candidate there was a fellow by the name of Anderson. He's still the congressman, Glenn [M.] Anderson. Anyway, I called several meetings and could find no interest at all among the Peace and Freedom registrants, about 150. In other words, I addressed myself to the membership of the Peace and Freedom Party, and I could find no interest at all. I enjoyed campaigning, though, for one very simple reason: I didn't have to organize meetings. Yet I spoke nearly five nights a week. Let other people organize the meetings! You know, whether it was a candidates night here or League of Women Voters there or something here. You know, every night speaking. I just loved that. The only thing is that the minute I get up and speak, someone would say "Well, aren't you Ben Dobbs the communist?" And I'd say yes. Then

I'd have to speak about the Communist Party instead of the Peace and Freedom Party. But I would always try to find a way of doing it, because I looked upon not only this party as a viable political instrument, but also with the possibility of the unity of the left, on some electoral program, where we wouldn't fight each other but would unite on a program of the Peace and Freedom Party, and yet be able to explain our own party differences. Anyway, right in the middle of the campaign, right in the summer, August 1968, right prior to the November elections--because I got the nomination for the finals, I got enough votes to get the nomination--was the invasion of Czechoslovakia. And there, the Peace and Freedom Party, of course, took a position very much castigating the Soviet Union, and then went to great lengths in its anticommunism and its defining the Soviet Union as an imperialist country--which I don't agree with, which maybe we can discuss that some other time when we discuss Czechoslovakia. And I ceased wanting to be a spokesperson and full-time functionary for the Communist Party of the United States because of its position on Czechoslovakia. I spoke on my position at all CP meetings. But I just really stopped campaigning. If I got an invitation, I'd go and speak. And yet, strangely enough, I got the same percentage of the overall vote that other Peace and Freedom candidates got--roughly 2.5 percent. Some maybe got 3, some maybe got 1.5. But I got about 2.5 percent, which still is what the vote of the Peace and Freedom Party generally gets. My first experience with the Peace and Freedom people, or an early experience, was at a CDC [California Democratic Council] convention. Now, the CDC was, of course, always the left wing of the Democratic Party. And of course communists were very active in the CDC. At that time the CDC was in a tremendous struggle in California, because of the movement against the war in Vietnam. There was a group within it that was opposing the election of [Lyndon Baines] Johnson, or opposing his running. The reason they opposed him, of course, was the Vietnamese War. On the other hand, it was an absolute departure from any political practice in the United States, of a party rejecting its own incumbent president. And yet, they did it. And yet the Peace and Freedom Party, at the [CDC] convention, where there was this tremendous struggle to oust Johnson, not support Johnson, issued leaflets: "What are you doing? What are you good people doing in the Democratic Party? It's time you quit and walked out." You know, just absolutely stupid. Instead of relating with them on the issue of the defeat of Johnson.

1.19. TAPE NUMBER: XI, SIDE ONE

OCTOBER 28, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

We're now in the late 1960s, really '68, '69, in resuming my conversation with Ben Dobbs. Perhaps you want to talk a little bit about your position on the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and how it differed from both the Communist Party and the Peace and Freedom Party.

DOBBS:

First of all, about Czechoslovakia, I think I told you at some other time, Michael, that actually my disagreement with the Communist Party of the United States was so sharp that I defined it as a period in which my "mainspring was broken." In other words, from then on my heart really wasn't in it, like, you know, the full self-sacrificing and very hardworking activity that I carried on for over thirty-five years. Of course, I want to make it very clear that I'm just not dealing as to whether I disagreed with what the Soviet Union did. After all, I don't pay dues to the Soviet party. I pay dues to the American party. My objection was the American party, unlike so many Communist parties throughout the world at that time, particularly the Italian party, and even the French party, the Spanish party, and many other parties very sharply disagreed with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the American party, particularly under the leadership of Gus Hall, took on itself to be the main spokesman supporting the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the world communist movement. In his name, you know, he boasted about how his pamphlet was distributed to eighty-one countries. Of course, I'm sure that some other people helped him distribute those pamphlets. But actually the American party became probably the weakest party throughout the world, and became the major spokesman for the Soviet Union. So that was my main thing, the disagreement with the leadership of the CPUSA. Now, let me make very clear that my main objection to the invasion, of course, was first of all to the use of a military force to solve a political problem. Second, we were quite aware of the situations that were taking place in Czechoslovakia. It was fairly well known, the meaning of the [Alexander] Dubcek Spring, the spring of 1968, what changes were being made: the slogan of socialism with a public face; the question of new economic programs in terms of more incentive to workers; to

loosen up on the centralization; fourth, the business of breaking from their pattern of following so much the Soviet Union in everything, which was insisted on in the postwar years, the immediate postwar years; and finally, the application of immediately preparing for a convention of the Communist Party to codify some of the changes that were already in the wind, both on the economic sphere, the political sphere, and particularly the democratization of the country. Because Czechoslovakia was unique in that it had a democratic history, a democratic tradition since World War I, as distinct from probably any other country in Western Europe and most certainly in Eastern Europe. Of course I'm not talking about Germany, which went through that traumatic period of nearly ten years under Hitler. However, the main point is that the Communist Party, USA, as I told you, had discussed for years a "programme." That is, we were going to present a fundamental program, not in the sense of immediate aims, but what is it that the American Communist Party was trying to do. That is, a picture of socialism in the United States and the U.S. road to socialism. And among other things, because of the upsurges that took place in the communist movement, the split between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of China; the disengagement from many of the European parties of its complete noncritical approach to the Soviet Union following the Stalin upheaval, or the Stalin exposures; the struggle against any kind of single center of influence, you know, like any kind of one center would be the center of the communist movement of each country and especially ours. The Communist Party in the United States in its program stated very clearly that its relations with other communist parties, and other so-called socialist countries, was to deal with them on an equal basis; the recognition of, while the Soviet Union had certain lessons to teach the world and its application of winning socialism and strengthening socialism, its application of socialist principles in the course of the war, that we did not view it as the center of the world communist movement. Second, that we felt that socialist states should develop a fraternal, noninterference attitude in relation to each other. Well, this was completely violated by the [Leonid] Brezhnev Doctrine. It was like saying "A" and then doing "B." It was like saying that we believe in sunshine, and yet, here you are in a very dark period. In other words, a complete violation of not only what the Soviet Union said, but more particularly what the Communist Party of the United States wanted to do. Well, that violation was too sharp for me to accept. Secondly--well, I will

admit, I was very appreciative of my experiences in Czechoslovakia. I got to love those people. They were just great. And finally, let me say this: You know, my feeling always in being a communist, and I find myself a little bit bashful about saying it, but I had a Utopian view towards it. In other words, I had never viewed ourselves as being--that we're going to grab power and live a privileged life. It was always that we were going to lead people. We were going to teach and we were going to explain. I always said to myself, well, after the revolution in the United States, I'd have to go to Alabama and continue the struggle against racism. And here all of a sudden you find a communist movement like the leadership of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] that is quite opposite from anything that I ever thought that a communist movement should be. Not only in terms of its being a ruling party but in terms of the application of military force to carry out its objectives. In other words, to carry out the same theory of [Karl von] Clausewitz, you know, you use military force to carry out political means. This, to me, was an outrageous violation of everything I thought communists should be. Now, one could say, well, how could you have been so naive? Well, how could I have been so naive? But I was. In other words, I'm a communist, they're communists, we're brothers in arms, we're brothers in concepts, we're brothers in ideas, we're brothers in relationship of ourselves to society. Rather than this extremely narrow militaristic way in which the Brezhnev Doctrine worked itself out. Now, as I said, you see, I didn't have the same view in Hungary, and I'll tell you why. You see in Hungary, and if you recall my discussion about the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia when they went through that recruiting drive, well, the Hungarians did the same thing. The party collapsed! Therefore, everything collapsed. And for people to boast that they're hanging communists from telephone poles and they're hanging Jews from telephone poles; I didn't view this as a serious effort to democratization. I viewed this as a fundamental counterrevolution, which was not the same in Czechoslovakia. It's interesting to note, about a month before the events in Czechoslovakia, Gus Hall came here for a meeting, a large meeting of our district committee, you know, maybe about two hundred people. I forget who it was that asked him, could you explain your position on what's going on in Czechoslovakia? Well, he didn't want to answer the question, but he said it this way, "As far as I know, the situation in Czechoslovakia is being led by the Communist Party. As long as the Communist Party continues to lead the

situation, I'm sure they'll be able to straighten it out." The problem is which party was he talking about? He wasn't talking about the Czech party. He was talking about the Soviet party! Well, this to me is the outrageous position taken by the American Communist Party, and I'm not sure whether I told you, but I sided with a number of people demanding a special meeting of the national committee.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, in addition to Dorothy [Healey], what sort of group were you?

DOBBS:

Well, we didn't have a regular caucus or anything like that. I don't recall anything like that. It was that we all presented our arguments to the best of our ability in opposition to a major report that Gus made on the situation in Czechoslovakia, and we all fought his report. I think there were about seventy or eighty members in the national committee at that time, but we only had about eleven votes. I've forgotten many of the people that voted with us, although I think I discussed that with you. Now, in relation to the Peace and Freedom Party--because I said that I didn't want to campaign on their program either. You see they, as I say, developed a whole series of a very virulent anticommunism, which always was within certain elements of the Peace and Freedom Party, even though at that time the Peace and Freedom Party had begun to fall apart. But they primarily described the Soviet Union as an imperialist country. Now, to me, the question of imperialism is related to economic structure and economic function. For a party or a country like the Soviet Union that spends a tremendous amount of its national product in support of movements of liberation, and in support of what they call the socialist world, instead of extracting wealth from these countries, supported them, there's not an imperialist policy. So I don't describe it as an imperialist country. Now, I will say, it came out later, they did some outrageous things to help speedily overcome the tremendous damage of World War II, but it does not deny what I say in terms of a fundamental approach. I have never seen any real figures, but I've heard estimates that the Soviet Union spends nearly \$30 billion a year in support of some of these countries that, because of Soviet assistance, have even higher standards of living than the workers in the Soviet Union. A tremendous sacrifice put on by the workers of the Soviet Union in

support of world socialism, or what they conceive of as world socialism. And certainly as long as the Soviet Union is there, there can be no denial of its fundamental role in terms of the liberation from imperialism and the breakup of the world colonial system following World War II. Because it was there. So to me that's not an imperialist country, nor is it an imperialist policy. And I refuse to campaign on that kind of slogan. And I will defend-- In other words, I still think that to this day. Well, anyway, when my "mainspring was broken," I didn't want to continue as a Communist Party spokesperson. Now, I did, however, continue to make public speeches, and I would express my views, and I did go to national committee meetings and continued the fight. It's interesting to note what happened at the national committee meeting that took up the question of Czechoslovakia. The Southern California district, because we took the position that we want to reaffirm the policy of the Communist Party as adopted by its program of the independence of each country and the fraternal relations between each country without interference from each other; with the complete violation of that, we wanted a review of the Czechoslovakia situation. Well, we were defined as strikebreakers. Now, no one ever voted on the situation before. "Strikebreakers," without ever having voted as to whether there was a strike or not. Because we took an independent position. Because it wasn't two days after the Czechoslovakian events that Gus Hall came out and said we fully support the Soviet Union in their efforts to make safe the situation in Czechoslovakia. Now, that debate, to me, was one of the most poverty-stricken debates I ever heard. You heard all kinds of arguments. For instance, Gus would outline some of the leaders of the Czech party and say how at one time or another they were seen going into a Social-Democratic Party headquarters, or at one time or another they had written an article that not everybody had agreed with, or at one time or another they associated themselves with some people who later were exposed-- I mean, all kinds of slanders against people.

FURMANOVSKY:

Where would he get this from?

DOBBS:

I don't know. If you want me to guess, I'll guess: He got it from the Soviet ambassador! But I don't know. I have no way of proving that. Then you had one argument that goes like this: He says a very good friend of mine, a highly developed political comrade, was in Czechoslovakia. He heard the noise of the tanks in the streets and he got up in his hotel window and looked out the window and he saw Soviet tanks. He says, "Well, that's wonderful," and he went back to bed. In other words, how could you be so crass about the invasion of a country? Incidentally by 600,000 troops. Which is about what? About one for every eight people or something in Czechoslovakia. No, I guess about one for every twenty. But it just was, you heard the arguments, "Well, this is the exception that proves the rule." In other words, the rule has got to be noninterference. Well, every rule must have an exception, therefore this is the allowable exception. I mean, how could you get so stupid? Then there was another argument along these lines: That Czechoslovakia has a unique place because of its borders. Well, why is it a unique place because of its borders, because it abuts Austria? Did they feel that there was going to be an invasion? Did they feel that Czechoslovakia was making deals with Germany? Well, everybody is screaming about the need for trade, the need for trade and relations, the need for socialist competitive relations with their bordering states. Why all of a sudden to make that an argument, in terms of justifying the invasion of Czechoslovakia? Well, it was just a stupid debate from beginning to end. But it was very fierce--

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you feel that most people that supported the position were doing it in a sort of mechanical way by this time, that the people who were sort of behind Gus Hall were people who had decided, who had cast their lot with the Communist Party?

DOBBS:

I want to deal now with what I think, which has been to me a very disturbing thing, and probably if there's anything I regret at all in my years of communist activity, it would be this. That in this period of tremendous debate, and I will say it was tremendous debate, people wouldn't sit at the same table with me. Or some guy gets up in a line to get something to eat, he finds himself next to Dorothy Healey and says, "Oh my God! I can't stand next to you," and he goes

to the end of the line. I mean that kind of silly, petty crap. That there began to grow up, or I guess it grows up, a certain institutionalism. And especially a party that's been under such attack-- And I was part of that. A party that struggled so long to keep its press; a party that struggled so long to maintain its members; a party that would make adjustments from time to time based on the political situation; a party who sacrificed tremendously in terms of its members and in terms of being beaten by the police or arrested. A party that showed its dedication to the American working class, in my opinion, by the leading role it played in the development of programs such as industrial unionism, recognition to Soviet Union, unemployment insurance or other types of social legislation, and in the struggle for black-white unity. That in these narrowing and internal battles a certain institutionalism crept up. In other words, a loyalty to the Communist Party, regardless why the Communist Party was formed for in the first place. Now, I couldn't accept that. I began to notice-- And I say, now that I think about it, I probably did the same things. In other words, I'm not saying that everybody was always wrong and I was right. I was just as wrong as others in this narrow, institutionalist character, where the love and devotion and adherence to the institution is more important than what the institution was supposedly set up to do. I felt this very keenly, that it was something that really began to develop. You take for instance-- After all, I had been in this movement all these years, fifty years or more, and to find people with whom I was in jail, the people with whom I struggled in friendly debate, or even agreed with me so long, that if they saw me they would cross the street and wouldn't talk to me. You know. And you wonder what gets in their heads. Many believe that I betrayed the movement because I left the Communist Party. No one could accuse me of no longer being a socialist, no longer being an adherent of socialism, no longer entering into all forms of political struggle on key issues facing the people, you see. So you've had this feeling that this growth of institutionalism became almost a fetish, an obsession, rather than the purpose for which the institution was organized. As I say, I can think of periods in my communist activity where I fell into this trap. But my gosh, I wasn't going to fall into it any more. As I say, you could say, well, how could you have been so naive? Well, all right, so I was naive. But at least I will tell you this, I was completely honest in my approaches. I'm not sure that this is the standard of so many other people. There were people that based on years of experience, I knew that they knew better. The point is that

they knew that I knew that they knew better. Yet at the same time would take this absolutely ridiculous position, and, in my opinion, betrayal of world socialism by their support of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the words of the Communist Party of the United States.

FURMANOVSKY:

Meanwhile, how would you react to people who left the party in '56 or '57?

DOBBS:

I had no-- Well, as I think I told you, we had a meeting the day or the week that this happened [a group of Communist Party members resigned en masse in 1957, urging that others join them. See pp. 484-87.--Ed.], when we read their statement. I never ceased to associate with these people. I've always had the most friendly relations with these people. As a matter of fact, I just got in the mail today an invitation to the wedding of one of the, not one of these people, but the children or maybe even one of the grandchildren of these people. I never felt any bitterness to them at all. I felt a little bit personally shocked by the fact that no one told me that it was being done except that one person who had spent most of his party experiences in Philadelphia.

FURMANOVSKY:

During this time, in the mid to late sixties and early seventies, who did you associate with socially? Was it your old friends, including those who had left the party?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. I couldn't think more about Oleta O'Connor Yates. I couldn't think more of Louise Todd. I couldn't think more of Frank Carlson. I couldn't think more of Elizabeth Spector. I couldn't think more of the hundreds of people that left the party or the fifty-seven that signed that document--

FURMANOVSKY:

But twenty or thirty years before that, imagine the situation where people had left, say, in 1945 or 1938, your reaction would have been probably a little bit different.

DOBBS:

Well, I don't know that I ever took it in that personal sense. I've thought about that, and as I say, I've been guilty of this institutionalist character. I've been guilty of carrying out party policy, as I understood it. But on the whole, I don't think that I bore the same sectarianism and sectarian mistakes and rigid institutionalism other people did. I remember very clearly that debate, the meeting that we had that was attended by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, where I said I would not under any conditions change in any way my personal attitude of love and affection for these people who left the Communist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

What I'm getting at is not that, it's this. Isn't it true that when those people left in '56, '57, that their leaving, that you could understand their leaving in a way that perhaps would have been harder to understand people leaving ten years earlier, fifteen years earlier?

DOBBS:

That's right.

FURMANOVSKY:

In other words, it could have been you, in many ways, because they were your friends, they were people who had similar kinds of opinions as you, and it was just at this particular moment they had made a different decision.

DOBBS:

Well, the decision you see-- It isn't that we disagreed politically so much, as the decision that I thought it was still possible to work, at least in this district. And by the way, they made that clear in their letter that California maintained the open policies of making changes in the Communist Party, but didn't see these things coming from the national committee after they had turned back and changed many of the things that we won in 1955 and 1956. That was their whole pitch. As I say, they said we're going to continue as a socialist group-- but I don't think they lasted for two months. Now, many of them continued to be very active mass workers, and are doing splendid jobs and socially useful activities. I don't want to mention any names now. But there are people doing

absolutely outstanding work on social avenues and social legislation and social struggle in this field today. Absolutely splendid. And I recognize them as such.

FURMANOVSKY:

What I'm getting at is that if we could place you, Ben Dobbs, in any kind of category, that you would be, you would fit in that group of people that joined the YCL [Young Communist League] in the early or mid-thirties and became somewhat disillusioned later in the fifties. Except the difference between you and them is that the majority of people who were like you left at that moment, and you were one of a relatively small minority that stayed another decade. And that makes you a little bit different.

DOBBS:

I imagine that if it had not been for the six years that I was away from Los Angeles, then four years away in the army, my attitude would have been different. I want to make that very clear, because a lot of these people, especially the young women involved, who I had a tremendous amount of respect for, I lost contact with them. Or if I maintained contact with them, it was purely on personal rather than political relationships at the time I was in the army. In other words, I would see them when I was on a furlough or something of that nature. So that might have had something to do with it. I can't recall, you know the whole group of people that left, you know, when other crises in the party, whether it was the Stalin thing or the [Nazi-Soviet] Pact, that I actually felt bitterness. I don't recall that.

FURMANOVSKY:

No, I'm not suggesting that you felt bitterness. I'm just saying that ideologically and socially and in many other ways, you fit in much more to that group that left in '56 than in any other group. You don't fit in well--

DOBBS:

Oh, no question about that. And that's the group I'm talking about.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right. You don't fit in with the group of sort of diehards, that stayed come what may, and may still be in the party.

DOBBS:

But this is with whom the struggle was, the old diehards. You see, to struggle with these people, stay in and help fight. And don't give up the fight. And who was the fight. We're not fighting ourselves, we're fighting the old diehards!

FURMANOVSKY:

But I'm sure a lot of the people who left in '56 and '57, who are now still your good friends and who you mix with socially, probably still rib you a bit and tease you. You know, why did you stay in this at all?

DOBBS:

Never. Never. I tell you I had a peculiar experience. The recent experience was a couple came in one day to the executive committee of our district. I think he was a member; his wife was an extremely active member. Both of them had been members for years and years and years, probably the early days of the YCL, except they were in New York whereas I grew up in Los Angeles. They came in and said, "Well, we have to quit the party." I said, "Well, why?" They said, "Well, because of the position of the Soviet Union on the Jewish question." Well, we had some debate, you know, we had a little argument. But they quit. I still see those people. It just so happens that I called one of them for a donation for the Democratic Socialists of America [DSA]. And he refused to give me money. On what grounds? Well, because the DSA is critical of the Soviet Union's lack of democracy. Well, how do you jibe this with what you did there in 1957 or '58? He said, "Well, that was different." You know. But maybe he just used that as an excuse not to give money, although he always was very generous. But the point I'm making is that I probably felt closer to the group that quit. I felt very personally hurt by the fact they didn't tell me, and maybe personally by the fact that here we had given up a strong fighting force. But at the same time, let me say, I did not view them, I did not criticize them for wanting to start something new. Go ahead! See what you can do with it! To me, I do not look upon any socialist movement as a rival to the Communist Party. That is in the last ten years. Earlier, 1930s-1940s, yes, a socialist movement that's in competition with us. Because the whole question of an estimate of socialist forces was that it is so small, so meaningless to the entire working class that any group including ours calls itself the vanguard. You know, I remember reading editorials in the Daily Worker, something

would happen and, "The workers will never stand for this and this and this." But they stood it. "The workers won't stand for what Reagan just did." But they stood it. So you get this kind of rhetoric, but I knew that we were not the vanguard party of the working class. I knew, for instance, as distinct from many of the New Left, that thought we could have had a revolution in 1936, you know. That's nonsense! We knew it was nonsense. Our theory of revolution was always the following: You have to have the leadership of the decisive sections of the working class. And that corporate capitalism and the working-class people couldn't live in the same way anymore. They had to change. That the bourgeoisie could no longer live in the same way, they had to change. And there had to be a party that was able to lead this discontent in the way of socialist revolution. I knew we never had the leadership of a decisive majority. We didn't even have a fractional minority even, much less a decisive majority. But we didn't kid ourselves about things like that. Very few really listened to us except on major mass issues. Now, that's why I began to, as I say, not want to be a spokesperson. I had to think some of these things over. I didn't do a great deal. All I said is, I'm not going to go to the press or TV or radio. I'm just not going to-- I'm going to go to my club meeting, tell them why I quit. And there were some things--because I quit in '72--in the three-year period, as I say, my main thing was getting to work on my dry-cleaning-machinery job, assisting my wife [Ada Martin Dobbs] more and getting closer to my three children [Louise Dobbs, Morris Smolan Dobbs, Michele May Jones], because I must admit, I had been more concerned with the problems of the party than I had been with the problems of my children. Our Michele was born in 1959. And I was going to change on that. I said I'll never break a date with my wife again as long as I live. I may not make any, but I won't break them if I make them, [laughter] I was just going to pay more attention. I had this beautiful little girl, and my other daughter [Louise Dobbs] was growing up, you know, she was fourteen or fifteen, and the little one was three I guess. And I was going to spend more time with my family. In the meantime, I was working hard. You know, I was not being a full-time functionary, but I had time to read all day or to study or to go around here and there. I was selling my labor power. And my work at Sam Gerber's was the kind of absorbing job that maybe was eight to ten, twelve hours a day. So I was leading a different life altogether. In the meantime, much less activity, but I attended my club and I did things that the party wanted me to do. In addition to beginning to have

differences, three things emerged that began to be very disturbing to me, and I finally quit. First, Al Richmond had written a book--that is, Al wrote the book, called A Long View from the Left, which I thought was a splendid book. I helped distribute it. Dorothy [Healey] helped him publish it. We encouraged Al to go to Czechoslovakia. He came back and brought us the report of which we thought was a complete denial of democracy in that country by the Soviet Union's invasion, their struggle against the censorship and things of that kind, which he saw with his own eyes. He was very badly treated by a mass meeting that we had here in Los Angeles with booing and heckling and that kind of thing by the old diehards. So Dorothy and Al resigned from the party for many reasons. Two years later, the Communist Party got around to expelling Dorothy and Al, even though they had resigned. To me, the purpose of expulsion from the Communist Party is to demand nonassociation. So I declared from the very beginning that no one is ever going to tell me that I can't associate with people like Al Richmond and Dorothy Healey, because these people have been friends and co-workers for years and years and years. So that was my first point; in other words, I'm through with that kind of nonsense of nonassociation. Secondly, because I refused to be the district organizer. Gus came here and urged me to be the district organizer, you know, to run for office, and I refused. And then they sent in a man by the name of Arnold Lockshin. This is a young man that just absolutely proved to be a--to my mind--a monster jerk and a real fool.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why was that?

DOBBS:

Well, for instance, I don't think that he ever had any real party experience. He came out of a different type of movement. He came out of, generally speaking, what might be termed as the civil liberties movement, and had a very mechanical application to all kinds of political problems. From the very day that he came, we began to have very serious arguments. So there would be committee meetings where, because of this institutionalism--to give it a word--the votes would come to be 6 to 1, 8 to 1, 9 to 1, you know, I'm voting by myself. And I wanted to discuss some of the political problems involved. So it began to be very uncomfortable, in addition to the fact that they knew that I

disagreed so much with several aspects of party policy. Third, the major disagreements arose primarily out of Gus Hall's analysis of the 1972 elections. I don't know whether I discussed this with you before. The 1972 elections, if you recall, was the campaign of [George] McGovern versus [Richard M.] Nixon. First of all, it was very clear that for the first time in this country, massive independent social movements had begun to arise. There was, first of all, the movement against the war in Vietnam, which swept the country and actually won a majority of the people of this country. Secondly, the tremendous upsurge at that time of the civil liberties struggle, you know, the whole business of breaking Jim Crow in the South, to a certain extent, and elevating the struggle for Negro liberation or black liberation, to levels unheard of before in this country--that we'll never go back to, up to and including the election of a large number of black politicians and so forth. And third, of course, was the absolute eye-opening of the women's movement, a movement which incidentally the Communist Party never did recognize. Mostly because of the CP's narrow rigid class positions, relative to the women question. But these were vast social movements. Now, in my view, it is true that they began to ebb by the time McGovern got the nomination. But they were absolutely instrumental in winning that nomination and capturing that section of the Democratic Party, and the McGovern nomination was very clear. It was also very clear, from the moment of the nomination, that the leadership both locally and nationally in the Democratic Party immediately deserted and betrayed McGovern. Now, the Communist Party position, at that time, was suddenly proclaiming that the key aspect of the election campaign was the election of Gus Hall. Now, I disagreed with that. I felt that the main application of this opportunity of the people's upsurge I described had to be the defeat of Nixon. To me, Nixon was a horror, and I don't have to go into that. History proved that. But the interesting thing is that Nixon had made large steps towards rapprochement with the Soviet Union in that period. And actually, the CPSU looked upon him as a real figure for peace, which he may have or not have been--I doubt it very very much. Now, Gus told us that he had a great deal of explaining to the leadership of the CPSU why we had to oppose Nixon, primarily because of a tremendous anti-black, antilabor, anti-civil rights, anti-women's position, that was held by that section of the Republican Party represented by Nixon. This, to us, was the victory of the ultraright in the Republican Party, even though [Barry] Goldwater had been

previously defeated. But nevertheless, I know that delegations that went to the Soviet Union and they were urged to support Nixon, and couldn't understand our position of rejecting Nixon and supporting McGovern. So the Communist Party fundamentally didn't support McGovern. They presented the candidacy of Gus Hall as the key to the 1972 elections, and I thought that was just absolutely complete nonsense.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, by doing that, they were in effect saying that we're not going to go with McGovern.

DOBBS:

In effect. In effect, they would say, we're for the defeat of Nixon, vote for Gus Hall.

FURMANOVSKY:

But that was their way of saying what about McGovern?

DOBBS:

Well, actually, then they would just repeat all the descriptions of a capitalist party that called itself the Democratic Party. I always viewed it as a capitalist party, there's no question about that in my mind. But they couldn't attack McGovern the same way they attacked Nixon, so they used other arguments. But the main point is they didn't make as their major slogan the election of McGovern as the instrumentality--the only instrumentality--that could possibly defeat Nixon. This was made worse by three things that took place. First, the publication of a major report to a national committee meeting, which I did not attend because I was already on my way out. I was already sick at that time. I had begun to develop this emphysema. At that national committee Gus delivered a report entitled, "A Lame Duck in Turbulent Waters." That is, Nixon was the lame duck, the turbulent waters were the politics of the time. This of course was after the election of 1972. Nixon was not quite a lame duck; he had four years to serve, and the turbulent waters were turbulent--but not because of the Communist Party. But the key approach of Gus in that report was that the Communist Party had made a decisive turn, in the fact that the working class and the working people of our

country had made a decisive turn in recognizing the glory and contribution of the Communist Party. I thought that that was just sheer nonsense.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you think that he was sincere in this?

DOBBS:

Well, of course Gus is always sincere.

FURMANOVSKY:

But I mean you think he genuinely believed it?

DOBBS:

Oh, sure. He spoke before a lot of people. He spoke before a lot of people. But how-- You got to justify a cockeyed policy because he created it and it made no sense. He didn't get as high a vote as the Socialist Workers Party. He didn't get as high vote as the People's Party. The CP I believe was on the ballot in only about fifteen states.

FURMANOVSKY:

But I mean to actually believe that this would be true, that the Communist Party could get a mass vote in '72, surely that would be someone who was more than just merely out of touch with reality.

DOBBS:

Well, I'm just telling you what he said. I don't know what got into his head. I don't have any respect for Gus Hall whatsoever. See, I don't know whether he's sincere.

FURMANOVSKY:

But what I'm getting at is, do you think this was something that he came up with, or that he was told to say?

DOBBS:

Oh, no, no. I don't think that they tell him what to say about the U.S. Everything is taken on tape, so they know what he's saying. But the point I'm trying to make is the opening sentence of that is, "We've made a decisive turn,

in terms of the mass, power, strength, and influence of the Communist Party of the United States." And it's ridiculous. But more importantly, he announced at that time that the Communist Party was no longer going to be, you see, the instrumentality that mobilizes for other movements. It was going to do things in its own name. In other words, we're going to cease being the business agent for business agents. We're going to open up everything and speak in our own name in the unions and in the political parties. We're not going to assist the Democratic Party to defeat the OOP, which of course was the main aim, our main policy for many years.

FURMANOVSKY:

Not officially. How do you--

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. It was official. It was official.

FURMANOVSKY:

Had the party run in '68, as a separate party?

DOBBS:

Yes, but it was never made into a key thing. It was always made as, in terms of at least this is our program, but it never was made the key aspect of our campaign.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, had the key aspect of the '68 campaign been to defeat [Lyndon Baines] Johnson, or--?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. No, not to defeat Johnson, to defeat Goldwater at all costs.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, but that's '64. In '68 when it was [Hubert H.] Humphrey versus Nixon, had it been to defeat Nixon?

DOBBS:

Humphrey versus Nixon, right. No, it wasn't for Humphrey. It couldn't have been possible, you know. It was to defeat Nixon, let me put it that way. The main thing is, we had people in the Democratic Party. We had people in the trade union movement. And all of a sudden, Gus is saying now that the main thing now is the independent position of the Communist Party. And to me, that was ridiculous, but it comes from a line that says we have now changed the thinking of the American people towards the Communist Party. Therefore, now is the time to be independent. Let me tell you how stupidly it worked out in local application. I was, at that time, having a discussion with people in the [Los Angeles] Peace Action Council, which I have described to you, a major contribution to the fight for peace, but now this was '73 or '74, where it was clear that the Vietnam War was winding down--I had described to you how, in my opinion, this was a model for the country, of the maintaining the unity and the diversity of the peace movement for the previous years. So I began to ask them in 1974, what are we going to do? It can't continue like this, we just can't make a telephone call and 25,000 people are going to show up for a demonstration. Those days are over. We have to develop a different policy. Now, there were some people, and I would say as the majority of the people in that movement, that said that we have to, now, with the fact that we've developed this tremendous following and developed this mailing list, we now have to launch an independent movement based on issues, and we're going to organize this independent campaign. My approach was that we had to think more deeply about coming to grips with the entire foreign-policy question. In other words, the Vietnam thing was not an accident. It arose out of a foreign policy that was being followed by American imperialism, or the American government. No one is discussing this from a broad point of view. I thought that this is what it should be, the Peace Action Council should become after the war. In other words, something in the nature of an educational organization, that deals with foreign-policy questions and reacts to foreign-policy questions. For instance, like now there's ships and bombings going on in the Persian Gulf. Do you see any movement against it? Not at all, you see?

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, hadn't the New Left developed a fairly clear program?

DOBBS:

The New Left had already begun to go to pieces.

FURMANOVSKY:

I see. But they had developed a fairly critical, I mean--

DOBBS:

Only on Vietnam. Well, let me put it this way, that's the only public expressions that it had.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, all of those writers in the New Left publications had taken issue with American--

DOBBS:

Oh, I don't know, maybe I didn't follow them closely enough.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yes, but I see what you're getting at.

DOBBS:

But all I'm saying is, we had this debate, and I was completely in the minority. But at one meeting, without my knowing about it--and as I told you, I was the representative of the Communist Party in the Peace Action Council--at one meeting, there came in about five different people, who had been active in one way or another, whom I knew. They did the stupidest thing I've ever seen in a meeting with people who were not communists. First of all, I didn't get them there, but everybody accused me of packing the meeting, but Lockshin sent them to the meeting. Because, after all, we were in a contentious debate at the council. But these people said things like this: "I represent the such-and-such chapter of the women's fraternal order, and I'm also a member of the Communist Party." See? "I represent this chapter of the unemployed committee, but I'm also a member of the Communist Party." "I represent this organization, but I'm also a member of the Communist Party."

FURMANOVSKY:

And these are people who had been coming to meetings before?

DOBBS:

Never!

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, they were new.

DOBBS:

Never! It isn't that they were new, they were involved--

FURMANOVSKY:

So they were sent by the party.

DOBBS:

Sure! This character Lockshin mobilized them to go to that meeting, see. But the clumsy way in which they identified themselves as communists; that's what Gus Hall said they should do, see. And the clumsy way in which they gave the impression of packing a meeting! Well, I felt completely isolated from them. They took no part in the discussion, they didn't know what the hell we were talking about to begin with! Well, anyway, that to me was one of the stupidest tricks, and I raised hell about it. So I began to run into a whole number of disagreements. Then, one day, some young woman, a very active young woman, was assigned by the party to try to develop some coalition approaches, to develop a committee around the whole question of inflation that had begun to creep into the country. Ruth Yanatta Goldway, or whatever her name is, you know, later became the mayor of Santa Monica. She developed the whole concept of a fight against inflation, and she developed some kind of meat boycott or something, and became very popular. A wonderful woman. And, so this one young woman, not Goldway but who was assigned by the party, started calling people together, and I was invited to go to the meeting. Then she reached me and said, "Is there any chance of your getting some money for us? I don't have a dime for the committee to get started." So I asked someone to give her some money and he did. Well, Lockshin just raised hell with me! "How dare you raise money." I said, "But you assigned her! You didn't give her any money!" There's not a penny of seed money, you know, to get the thing started. And I just wouldn't agree with their analysis of that. So the third thing that happened, at the second or third

meeting I attended, and you know, I said my name is Ben Dobbs and I am from the Communist Party. There are fifteen to twenty people and they introduce themselves. And a comrade who was there passes me a note: "You no longer can represent the Communist Party. I represent the Communist Party." The guy who was also a member of the leading committee of the CP. The only thing is they hadn't told me about it! I was just outraged. I had never seen activity like that before. So, disagreements began to develop. Well, then this expulsion of Dorothy came up. And I said, you're not going to get me to not associate myself with Dorothy. That's completely nonsense. She was living in Los Angeles at the time. Finally, there was at that time a committee, a very weak committee, but dominated by, I might say, some leftist elements around the whole question of Chile. And we never were able to develop a real movement against [Augusto] Pinochet or in support of [Salvador] Allende. I didn't go to the meeting; I was only told about it. The Communist Party delegates there at that meeting, the representatives, began to come into a very serious conflict with some of the people there. Maybe the party people were correct, and I don't know exactly what the issue was, but it was something around some slogans or something relative to the fight against the counterrevolution that had taken place in Chile at the time. You know, the Pinochet government. And the Communist Party decided to build a new united front. The only condition that they would make was that people had to agree with the Communist Party position before they could join the committee. Well, I've never heard of anything stupider than that, in terms of how to develop a coalition. A coalition is where you give up a part of your program, and you ask others to do the same, to come to some kind of common agreement, programmatically, of what you intend to do. Well, this was discussed as a matter of high policy in a committee meeting, where after a number of these events had taken place, and I said I just cannot go for this nonsense. That's absolutely stupid. And they tried to prove the success of their policy by showing that Mrs. Allende had a very successful mass meeting in L.A., that was done by this small committee. I says, "My daughter, my four-year-old daughter could have raised a mass meeting for Mrs. Allende and got that crowd. Don't use that as an example!" So I said, "Well, I just can't work with you people anymore, so I'm just going to quit. I'm not going to go the press, and I'm not going to attend any more national committee meetings. I'm not going to make any statements. But I'm no longer a member of the

Communist Party. And I'm going to go to my club meeting, that's the only place I'm going to go because I feel responsible to my club." You know, that's our little group of local communists, I forget who they were at that time. And I said, I'm through, that's all.

1.20. TAPE NUMBER: XI, SIDE TWO

OCTOBER 28, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

Ben, you were going to summarize your reason for leaving the party.

DOBBS:

Yeah, well, very briefly, because I don't have the documents with me or anything like that. I didn't keep any of the minutes. But first, of course, the whole question of the very sharp disagreements on Czechoslovakia. Secondly, other disagreements, particularly around the youth policy with the national committee, which I just I just briefly discussed with you before. Third, some of these crazy actions on the part of this fellow, Lockshin, who recently by the way got an enormous amount of publicity. He became a defector. He went to the Soviet Union, he and his wife and two kids. Although, he had either been expelled or dropped out of the Communist Party many years before, here in Los Angeles, because the people couldn't stand him. In other words, like I couldn't stand him, they couldn't stand him a year later. Anyway, and then of course, the really ridiculous question of the expulsion of Dorothy [Healey] and Al Richmond. Then, of course, this stupidity around their definition of a united front. And, most of all, was their analysis of the 1972 elections and what I thought that they meant by the complete change of policy. There was one little interesting thing, if anyone wants to do any research on it, to get that pamphlet called "Lame Duck in Turbulent Waters." As usual, the Communist Party prints the report, then regardless of the discussion, that report is what's submitted publicly. Within each report, there's always a thing called a "summary of discussion," where again Gus would take maybe an hour to summarize the result of the meeting. One of the things he said--and to me it was a tremendous indictment of the Communist Party--he said, "This meeting made a complete change of a policy that we've been following for thirty years, and not one person discussed it." Well, how can you deal with that kind of

operation? See? And that's what I mean by the deadly stranglehold of institutionalism. Because it was a complete turn, that suddenly the main aspect of our policy has got to be the question of independent role of the party, arising from this phony analysis of the impact of the party in the '72 election campaign.

FURMANOVSKY:

Before we move on, Ben, to your post-party activities, the story of Arnold Lockshin is quite interesting, because it was a big story in the papers recently. This, the first report, was that some professor had mysteriously defected to the Soviet Union and nobody knew much about this guy. The next thing, more information comes about. In fact, you were called by the **Los Angeles Times**, weren't you?

DOBBS:

Yes, I was. Well, first of all, as I say, I had mostly a very, very bitter struggle with this guy Lockshin, and I had no respect for him at all. He came here with his wife, and if I'm not mistaken, then, they had two children later. My understanding is, but I never could get a story from any Communist Party member--they just wouldn't tell me--why he either was expelled or had dropped out of the party, about a year after I had had these disagreements with him, a year after I dropped out. I only saw him once after I left. He was collecting signatures to have Gus Hall as the candidate for the '76 elections. I saw him in the parking lot where I go shopping, and I signed the petition. I have no objection to Gus Hall running. I have no intention of voting for him. All it was, was that the CP was getting signatures on a petition that would give Gus the right to be on the ballot, to run as an independent candidate. Now, then as I understand it, Arnold Lockshin, after he either got expelled or dropped out of the Communist Party, he went to work at UCLA as a biochemist. I think that's what he was, a biochemist. A very smart man along certain lines. Politics, he didn't know from anything--at least in my opinion, with his stupid mechanical application of party policy. I'll give one more example of this mechanical application. I was very much concerned about the second election of [Thomas] Bradley for mayor. Lockshin was absolutely opposed, in any way, of the party supporting Bradley, because he wasn't a member of the Communist Party. I said this is sheer stupidity! If nothing else,

the support of Bradley is in itself a struggle against racism. We had to support Bradley. Two months later, it came to the attention of the national committee that the party in L.A. wasn't supporting Bradley. They sent [Henry] Winston out here to see what the hell's going on. No one reported my debate at the committee meeting that time. I said, look, we've got three weeks. I make only one proposal, that every party member just go to a Bradley campaign office and volunteer to do some work. That's all. Arnold, however, said no to that proposal and suggested that we build an independent committee of students, we build an independent committee of trade unionists, we build a group of independent committees for Bradley. A lot of nonsense! You don't do these things in three weeks! But that was Lockshin. That's the kind of cockeyedness that would come out of his application of a policy.

FURMANOVSKY:

He would be appointed by someone like Gus Hall because he knew he could--

DOBBS:

Oh, he was appointed in the sense that he was sent here, and then he was voted in by the committee.

FURMANOVSKY:

Were there any able people that you really respected that were still in the party at this time?

DOBBS:

No, I can't really say that there were. They were either so old, or else set in their ways and their functioning.

FURMANOVSKY:

Now, what happened to the Jewish group that--?

DOBBS:

Well, they still went on. They still went on. They were the most devoted institutionalists, you know.

FURMANOVSKY:

But wasn't there a breakaway of--

DOBBS:

Yes, there was a fight, and actually it became a--I only read it in the minutes. There was a fight, over the years, of the national committee of the Communist Party with the editor of the Jewish communist newspaper [the **Freiheit**]. While it was communist, it was also independent. But it supported the Communist Party in the main, and it arose out of the communist movement. Its first editor was one of the main spokespersons of the Communist Party of the United States, a fellow by the name of [Moses J.] Olgen. I am not sure about Olgen's first name. But the editor now--and I believe he's still editor, even though he's ninety years old--is a fellow by the name of Paul Novick. Novick was absolutely unmoved in his fight against anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, and I agreed with him completely. The paper was always full of the proof of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. Apparently the CPSU instructed Gus one day to just destroy the leadership of the **Freiheit**, that is, to change the editorship. The only thing is, they couldn't do it because they did not get the support of the Jewish members. Actually, well, there was a central committee meeting. First of all, Paul Novick was expelled from the CP. I voted against his expulsion, one of the very few votes against the expulsion. You should not expel a person after having been nearly sixty years in the Communist Party, you know. And who has the following of many progressive Jewish people including communists. But they never could move in on that paper, simply because the supporters of the paper to this day honor Paul Novick as a real hero of the American working class. And a more sacrificing person working on this paper has never been seen. Although I myself made a motion, I think it was twenty years ago, to do away with the paper because it plays no political role whatsoever. It's in a language that's a dead language in the United States. Who speaks Yiddish? The young Jews speak Hebrew or English, they don't speak Yiddish.

FURMANOVSKY:

But why would you want to destroy it? I mean, if its--

DOBBS:

Because it didn't amount to anything!

FURMANOVSKY:

But if people enjoy reading it--

DOBBS:

Who could read it? They couldn't see anything.

FURMANOVSKY:

But there's people who read it today.

DOBBS:

You don't spend \$200,000 a year for the twenty loyalists, for Christ's sake. That money could be used for the development of an English press. Or, put out an English paper for Jews. Jews read English, they don't read Yiddish.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, that brings us onto a subject actually, in a way, the whole idea of culture in the party, and of the rights of ethnic groups to maintain their culture and their language.

DOBBS:

Look, this is a language that is respected by nobody under the age of seventy-five.

FURMANOVSKY:

But why do you say that, when in the last ten to fifteen years there's been quite a substantial rediscovery of Yiddish, books being published in Yiddish, young people going to Yiddish universities.

DOBBS:

I don't know about that.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, there has been.

DOBBS:

I don't know about it. I don't know. All I know is that Hebrew is the language of Israel. The Jewish people in America, that's one of their big problems, their relations with Israel. But no one can question their loyalty towards it, how

many billions they get every year. It's not the language anymore. They're struggling by their teeth to maintain a Yiddish paper in Israel. And here, 90 percent--no, half of the paper is already published in English. So I said, let's make a paper for Jews, on the Jewish question, to fight for Jewish ethnicity. But not in the language that's dead. Now, I may be wrong, but that was my position. Now, mine was not a position that actually hurt Novick, because he's struggling against anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, and the position of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the U.S. was to remove him as editor. But they tried to move-- They had a whole meeting of the national committee devoted to criticism of the **Freiheit**. They couldn't do a thing about it because nobody listened. Yeah, everybody voted for the motion at the meeting, but the supporters of the paper did as they pleased. As I say, they raise a quarter of a million dollars a year to maintain that paper!

FURMANOVSKY:

But, ironically, there's still this corps of old-timers, Jewish old-timers, who read the **Freiheit** and are dedicated--

DOBBS:

Oh, those who give money to **Freiheit**, I'm not sure they read it.

FURMANOVSKY:

Oh, they read it. And the Jewish Current, which is in English--

DOBBS:

Well, that's in English.

FURMANOVSKY:

But then there's also a similar group, the same age, who are still in the party. And they don't talk to each other.

DOBBS:

That I don't know.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, getting back to your own life in the post-party period.

DOBBS:

In the post-party period, first of all, as I say, I had been diagnosed as having emphysema, I think as early as 1971 or '72. I just couldn't move very far or very fast. You know, I had great difficulty to breathe. But I continued working. I had also had some surgery in 1970. I had some surgery on my prostate, deep surgery, where they had to cut me open, because it was so bad. I began to have real physical problems. In addition to being relatively nonenthusiastic about the movement anymore, and being supercritical, and maybe even a little cynical. I went back to work in 1969. I think I told you that after we got out of jail in 1952, I went and got a job and worked there for a couple of years. I worked at FIMCO at that time, Fiber Machine Company or something like that, but then later I got a job through Sam Gerber at Sam Gerber and Company, in the dry-cleaning-machinery field. I would quit and I would go back to work. And I would quit and I would go back to work. Then finally, in 1969, I spoke to my boss who had taken Sam's place. "Arnold," I said, "I want to come to work and I'll stick. I'm not going back to work for the party under any circumstances." It was about that time, also, that I began to do this heavy public speaking, like at Long Beach, and this place in Utah, and this place in San Diego County, two or three colleges, junior colleges. And I did that kind of speaking, you know, for the party. I continued to be active in some leadership capacity, around either trade union work or legislative work or peace work, or something of that kind. But it was not the same. It was not the same. I just really started going downhill, in terms of my health. So when I quit the party, that is, I'm talking now about working and speaking for the party, which was between 1969 and 1972, or middle of '73. As I say, I was working, was beginning to go downhill in terms of my health. Then I finally quit the party, and I really went on a year's leave of absence, did nothing for a year. Except, you know, I continued to read, and things of that kind.

FURMANOVSKY:

When did you start thinking about joining the New American Movement [NAM]?

DOBBS:

In the meantime, let me say, I didn't have too much contact with Dorothy or with others. But there had already been organized with some of my friends, or

some people that I know, around this question of the New American Movement. I began to read some of the newspapers of the New American Movement. I wasn't too impressed with it. They had far too much of an academic air for what I'm concerned with. It had emphasis on other than class questions, let me put it that way. It had a complete non-policy as far as electoral strategy or tactics are concerned. It rejected completely the whole arena of electoral politics. I began to be interested in three different things. First, I began to look into the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee [DSOC]. They had this policy of, at least in words, of trying to create a left wing within the Democratic Party. But they generally pretty much flopped over into the Democratic Party camp, and became Democratic Party hacks, in addition to other than fighting for some left-wing independence. But at least it made some sense to me, to say this is where the majority of the workers and the black people and the Chicano people feel that they can get some electoral gains, and therefore continue to support it. That made sense to me, so I interested myself in that. Secondly, I interested myself in what I thought was the real potential of the development of an independent organization, that might have made a political impact in this country. That was a movement called the National Conference of State and Local Alternative Public Policy. They had three big conferences and I went to two of them. I didn't go to the first, but I went to the second, the third, and possibly the fourth. What they did-- They still have a publication called **Ways and Means**, where what they do is they propose legislative and public-interest questions, with a very rich library of source material, films, and things that they would advise. In other words, they would say to a person, or a person would say, "I'm interested in a good public-transportation bill." They would go to work, and they would give him or her all the kind of resources to have a good bill, or a good water bill, or a public-bank bill, or a public-insurance bill.

FURMANOVSKY:

Almost like a left-wing think tank.

DOBBS:

It really was, and it was very, very good. Now, the point is, they called these huge conferences, that were attended both by, at that time, and now I'm talking about '74, '75, '76, there was a large number of very progressive

legislators or other government officials on the state, county, and city levels, primarily in Colorado, New Jersey, some from California, and a few other places, a large number, or either appointed or elected left-wingers. Secondly, they also enjoyed the support of some of the best of the grass-roots movements, like ACORN [Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now]; Massachusetts Fair Share; this group in Illinois that I've forgotten their name, they get some publicity every once in a while around someone by the name of Heather Booth; the Ohio Public Interest Campaign; and there's a similar movement in Pittsburgh. So you had this wonderful combination of left-wing politicians and these big grass-roots movements. For instance, some of its main spokespersons were, now, a guy that's in Congress, [Barney] Frank from Massachusetts; the guy from Texas, [Jim] Hightower; you know, really a wonderful group. My hope for that was that it would develop into some kind of--other than national networking and other than a resource center--a movement, an organization combining these two great elements. But that was a battle that was fought out and lost. It had its own self-perpetuating executive committee, its own self-perpetuating staff. All it did was put out these huge educational conferences that were really excellent. Really wonderful material came out of them. There was the first-- For instance, ten years before there was any discussion of the effect of closed plants, they were already discussing the deindustrialization of the United States. Discussing questions of public-interest banks, and public insurance companies. But they, the leaders of it, fought any concept of an organization. So now, you know, how many conferences can you call to discuss the same thing over and over and over again? So now it's completely as a resource center, for development of resources. I guess they get funded somewhere. But that's all it's become. When I say that's all it's become, I mean it fulfills the function that the people had started it wanted it to be. And secondly, there isn't that large group of progressive legislators anymore, I guess. They were pretty much wiped out with the Reaganomics, you know.

FURMANOVSKY:

There's quite a few left, I think.

DOBBS:

Well, I don't know. I don't know any of them.

FURMANOVSKY:

John Kerry of Massachusetts--

DOBBS:

Oh, yeah, there are a few left. I think there's a new group coming in. See, but this was a-- They had a whole bunch from Colorado. They were all wiped out, wiped out after one session.

FURMANOVSKY:

The ones that were elected in the McGovern era, or the McGovern--

DOBBS:

That's right. That's right.

FURMANOVSKY:

That group has been wiped out.

DOBBS:

They were wiped out. But I think that that had a real potential. This was followed, by the way, or concurrent with it were two huge conferences in California, headed up primarily by the early development of Tom Hayden's movement, the Campaign for Economic Democracy [CED], where one of the main objectives was to develop a coalition of public interest on public issues. But that was given up very quickly as a continual organization or movement either because of the success that Hayden had in building the CED or the fact that they didn't want to develop that road of organizing. But I will say I made the motion at one of the meetings there, that we try to find some form of keeping together as a coalition. I practically was laughed out of the hall. In other words, nobody supported me. Mostly because the CED didn't want it.

FURMANOVSKY:

Why do you think they didn't?

DOBBS:

Well, I just think that, for one thing, the CED took off on a big splurge, of immediately getting somewhere in the neighborhood of 7,000 or 8,000

members, you know, to give their fifteen bucks a year. Secondly, the big popular campaign that Tom [Hayden] ran as United States senator, where he got a huge vote, a third of the Democratic vote. And so he figures, "What the hell do I need coalitions for? Why give resources to that? Why give staff and money to the development of these conferences when I can do it from my own organization?" Subsequent to that, I think that he's become a terrible opportunist, and now is developing an altogether different approach as far as Campaign California is concerned. Although I don't know of any legislator that's as advanced or progressive as Tom Hayden, in spite of his opportunism. But he does the right thing at the right time at the right place, and then he does the wrong thing at the right time and the wrong place. You know, such as approving wholeheartedly the war against Lebanon, the invasion of Lebanon, and things like that. I think that's to get the Jewish vote there in the western part of the city. That's a real demonstration of opportunism. Anyway, I interested myself in those movements and would go to those conferences. By that time, 1975, I already became a member of the New American Movement. Now, the New American Movement, as I understand it in Los Angeles-- First of all, Dorothy and a few others organized a series of discussion groups, or a discussion group that gave themselves the title of Forty Socialists Looking for a Party. I never went to a single meeting, because most of that took place in '73 and '74, when I was, as I say, taking a leave of absence and did nothing of any political character whatsoever. I knew it was just going to be for a year, so I had no intention of dropping out of political activity. Then, there was a small group that called itself the New American Movement. I think it was sometime around 1974, that this group of Forty Socialists--I knew some of them, some I didn't know--joined the New American Movement. So I joined the New American Movement. Now, I liked the New American Movement, I guess, on three fundamental issues that I could take part in. First of all, there was an effort of activism. In other words, they were going to be active in this, that, or another social-issue campaign. Even though they had a very, I would say, a very wrong policy relative to the trade union movement. They were very much dominated by the New Left concept that the trade union movement is part of the establishment. And there they were in the throes of discussing the attitude to the labor movement. It really was a debate that had gone on in the New Left for years, and to me, of course, the labor movement has got to be the heart of any progressive movement, because you're never going to get

anywhere unless the labor movement acts on it. But they did have a degree of activism around the various issues at that time. There was a problem with a young woman that was being sentenced to death because she protected herself against a rape in a jail, or something. I've forgotten her name. There were other such kind of activities. But they had this stupid policy on trade unionism. Secondly, they had this ridiculous policy on non-electoral policy--no election activities whatsoever. Also, on the basis that the Democratic Party is so corrupt and the Republican Party is so corrupt, you can't do anything with it. And the Peace and Freedom Party isn't going anywhere, you can't do anything with that. So, let's not do anything. But nevertheless, I look upon that as a struggle, too. Because one thing that I like about the NAM, is that it's not a party, it is a multitendency organization. So, alright, I'm a tendency. I have the right to a tendency as much as anybody else. And therefore, I was going to strive to make this organization into a democratic organization and an activist organization, because I believe that a socialist movement can grow only on the basis of activity in the broad democratic, small "d," movement. Otherwise, what do you need it for? To discuss how you're going to get socialism? You're not going to get it without the public agencies. Well, how do you get the public, people's agency? Well, yeah, I guess that's as good a word as any other. So the fact that it's a multitendency organization meant that it doesn't define itself as a vanguard. It doesn't look upon itself as a rigid established thing, with a set of rules as to how socialism would be won. It allows the unity within diversity, lets the contending parties debate, and so forth. Debate both around theoretical questions as well as around application to policy. Second, the possibilities within a multitendency organization, to increase the active participation in the labor movement, and in the political spheres. Third, they proclaimed that it has no model as an organization or as an application of socialism. The Soviet Union is not a model. China's not a model. Cuba's not a model. Even Albania is not a model. Of course, other communist or socialist organizations had adopted one or another of these as models. But that we would try to learn from all of them, in terms of the struggle for socialism. Generally, however, I would say it was more sympathetic to the Soviet Union because it had a, not a majority, but it had a good section of old communists that joined.

FURMANOVSKY:

But was it majority New Left, on the whole?

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. I would say that how it grew, my observation of it, was that after the war in Vietnam, people would stay together on the various campuses, primarily. These were New Left people that were involved in the struggle for black liberation, or for the struggle in Vietnam, they stayed together. And small groups in various places, primarily college campuses, came to the conclusion that socialism was the answer. Now, how to get that socialism, what kind of socialism, this is what you mean by a multitendency organization.

FURMANOVSKY:

Right, well, some of them had joined the Revolutionary Communist Party, and the Progressive Labor Party, and the Weather Underground, and so on.

DOBBS:

Oh, yes. But not these people.

FURMANOVSKY:

But these people were more--

DOBBS:

They had either discussion groups, as I described Forty Socialists Looking for a Party, or they actively organized themselves into the New American Movement. But it was a very loose combination of individual clubs, and the New Left says you don't need a leadership, and beware of the leadership. So you had a very loose combination for many years, until I would say a big convention of '75 that resolved some of these problems. It didn't resolve the problem of electoral activity. It did in some measure resolve the problem of activity in the labor movement. Secondly, it resolved the problem of a twofold course of activity. One, to take part in democratic struggle, and the other one is to maintain an educational organizational independence of activity such as the development of schools, the development of forums, the development of educational activities, in the name of the New American Movement.

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NOVEMBER 6, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

Ben, you talked about your early interest in the New American Movement [NAM] in the mid-seventies. Why don't you tell us again how you got involved in the movement.

DOBBS:

Well, as I said, I think I mentioned that in 1973 I was already beginning to feel bad, in the sense that that's when I knew that I had emphysema to a pretty bad degree. So I took a year off of any political activity whatsoever, spent time with my family. Not that I had any hope, of course, of recovering from emphysema. You don't recover from it, you just try to avoid its getting worse. But at any rate, it was at this period I took a year off. But I had contact with Dorothy [Healey]. I would see her once in a while, or other old-time comrades. She was involved in this movement called the Forty Socialists Looking for a Party. It was a whole group, and they carried on several discussions. I had no contact with them whatsoever, and then there was a small group who distributed the paper, and so I saw their paper--I forget what, I think they called it **Moving On**, or something like that. First of all, let me say this. I found that the New American Movement was primarily academic. In other words, it was a bunch of groups in various universities, mostly in the East, and possibly in the Middle West--I think maybe even stronger in the Middle West than in the East--who came out of the New Left movement, you know, both the civil liberties movement, the civil rights movement, and the war against Vietnam. After the war, you know, some of them kept together and they started to grope with the idea of becoming socialists. This meant, of course, that they had no common agreement as to what they meant by socialism, or even how to get socialism. But they maintained a whole series of discussions, and then there began to be this national network formed in a very loose, national federation called the New American Movement. They had some of the, I would say, organizational weaknesses, or organizational phony ideas of organization. For instance, they didn't believe in organization. They didn't believe in having leadership, because leadership would, they thought, immediately be suspect, in terms of organizing bureaucracy. They didn't believe in leadership in terms of anyone giving any individual group advice. So

it became a very loose and very absolutely non-centrist. They had what they called a NIC, a national interim committee, and they didn't know what it was interim to! But it was somewhat in the nature of exchange of experiences. Somewhat in the nature of trying to find some common theme to develop a national organization. This then began to take form in a number of debates that took place. I would say some of the interesting theoretical questions that were posed, was, first, the concept that not everybody has to go to socialism in the same way. Or, not only--I'm not talking now about any other country, I'm talking about individuals, or groups. In other words, to have widespread discussion on the nature and the path to socialism. So that from the very first, it developed in the nature of a multitendency organization. It had a whole number of, well, I believe they only had one disciplinary case, where a person just made himself so completely obnoxious that he tried to turn the whole organization around into antisocialism. It became a big trial. I don't have any details of it, but I remember being told about it. The second thing was they had big discussions on the expanded nature of the working class. The Communist Party had always conceived of the working class as primarily that of the industrial worker. The NAM developed a definition of the working class of all who have to sell their labor power in order to make a living. In other words, that's their only commodity; their only value was to be able to sell their labor power. This includes, of course, academics. It includes now the greatest section of lawyers, and even a growing section of doctors. All the professions now, most of them go into one or another form of monopolized medicine, or monopolized law. There was the article recently of the law firms with as many as six and seven hundred employees, lawyers working for them. So you see, they had this concept of the expanded working class. Third, they still maintained a very loose attitude towards the trade union movement. In other words, they felt that the trade union movement was so much of an establishment organization. Of course, there's some element of truth to that, that they more went along the lines of organizing workers on a community basis, rather than an industrial basis, and would pay little or no attention to the policy question in the trade union movement, or interference in the trade union movement. Fourth, of course, was the whole question I think I discussed last time, that they looked upon no country as a model to socialism. They neither accepted the Albanian, the Cuban, the Russian, the Chinese, or any other model. They felt that we would definitely be an indigenous American

organization. There was one thing in the history of the name that is of some interest. They really made a misestimate of the situation of the country in 1971. First of all, they were convinced that the Communist Party had collapsed, and it was of no relevance whatsoever. So there were no tendencies to go back to the Communist Party, there was nothing like that. Of course, that idea of the Socialist Party had been dead for twenty-five years already; no one had ever thought of the Socialist Party as any kind of alternative. But they had the idea that with the development of the recession--I forget which one, around Nixon, and I forget which particular economic theories that Nixon developed at that time--after the war, that there would just be a mass influx into their new organization. Really, they had that idea, that everybody would be looking for socialist organization; there they were, ready to take in anybody that had the vaguest idea of socialism. This, of course, is a lot of nonsense. But that was deep in their thinking, in terms of trying to develop somewhat of a centralized organization, although keeping it very loose. But that was an estimate, and it was a wrong estimate. They later had to pay for that. Now, in what sense did they pay? Well, for people who thought they were going to have immediate success, you know, instant revolution, like some people drink instant tea or instant coffee, and it doesn't come about, then there's a certain amount of demoralization that sets in. But at the same time, it did create a very active discussion, which I began to take part in when I joined in the beginning of 1975. And that is, what is the nature of the organization? What are the things that create a common thread? Can there be the possibilities of working together in, not while making a centralist organization, maintaining a very rich degree of democracy, but at least having something in common. First, let me say, they completely rejected, in '74, '75, and I think as late as '76, any concept of participation in electoral activities. This was not their form. Second, they did begin to see the relationship between participation in democratic, small "d," struggles and the building of the organization. So that there was an emphasis in some places of organization for people of the NAM to join other organizations, like unions, or like the teachers' federations, or like even the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association], or any, you know, get-together with people, because of the recognition of the relationship to democratic activity and the building of a socialist organization. Third, there was a concept of developing more of a central organization. In other words, that people would be elected, not only

because of their advanced academic positions--which I think was part of it-- but because of their activity within the organization and the devotion to developing some kind of center. That began to define the organization a little better. I forget the exact areas of the debate, but there were three problems presented that had to be settled, and which were settled by the convention in 1975. I don't know why I don't remember them very well, but all I do know is that the convention in 1975 developed the position that I was very much in favor of, that is, the question of participation in activity; reexamination of our attitudes to the trade union movement; reexamination of our attitude towards political activity, by that I mean electoral activity; and reexamination of the development of more of an activist corps within the organization. So that, in 1975, we had already begun to go in that direction. Now, that's when I joined. I became a member of the national interim committee, and I must admit, I was not a good member. In this sense, the national interim committee was based sort of-- Without being elected by the lower organization, because you were elected at the convention, you were nevertheless made responsible for all the activities of the national organization to the lower organization. In other words, anything that happened in the seven western states was my responsibility, but I never accepted it as such. Secondly, the test of being a national leader, in the same sense that now professors have to live or die with the slogan of "publish or perish," the same idea was given to the leadership of NIC. You either had to print articles or you weren't doing your job! Well, I was not about ready to write articles. Third, you had to think about huge national problems. I based my responsibility to develop the organization locally. It doesn't have sense to have a national orientation if there's nothing down below! And we were tremendously unclear by these various problems of what is our relation to the unions, what is our relation to the workers, and how to establish worker community control. All these kind of things were way beyond our capacity. So how do you develop some kind of local movement, local organization? So I must admit, I probably was not accepted very much as a national member. So I didn't even run in 1976 for the NIC, because that was elected yearly, at the yearly conventions. Fourth, I ran into a real problem. I just disagreed completely with their approach to conventions. I might as well comment on it at this time. I must admit, it might be because of my long years of communist training, but to me, a convention has three major functions. One is to come to some kind of, based on the experiences of people

throughout the country, to some kind of estimate as to what is the political situation in the country. What is it you're dealing with. Where therefore, after you've discussed the political assessment of the situation of the country, what then is the political assessment of the status of the organization? And then, what do you do about it? How do you make some kind of active program to be able to carry out the building of the organization, as well as either changing or strengthening the existing estimate of the organization, depending on the politics and situation in the country. Well, their idea of a convention really was just a vast series of educationals. And they really were wonderful. For instance, for a trade union workshop, they would get leaders of the trade unions to discuss the situation in their unions, having no relationship whatsoever to NAM. And so they would say, "Gee, look what we learned about the miners!" They didn't have a miner within a hundred miles of the organization! Or here's the way some people organized the needle trades, or something like that. I mean it was just--

FURMANOVSKY:

Very academic.

DOBBS:

Very academic. Very abstract. All of the convention was that way. There were wonderful meetings, in the sense that if you went into it, and you opened up your head and everybody poured knowledge into it, then you sewed your head back together. It didn't lead you anyplace. It didn't lead the organization anyplace. The organization adopted no positions. There were no policies. You know, no estimate of the country. They would even have what they called a keynote speech on the third or fourth day of the convention instead of opening the meeting. So I just couldn't stand those conventions. I just couldn't stand them, because to me, they were--you know, I can read everything that the people are going to tell me. I just kept running into arguments with them, and I never did win. I haven't won to this day, I might say, because it's sort of become the pattern. I don't know how many conferences the people that are going to listen to this have attended, but recently all conferences take that form. In other words, no one ever deals with the practicalities of the situation, it only deals with how brilliant a speech can one make at this conference, even though it has no relation to reality of either the organization or of the world.

And I must admit, I had become turned off, a little bit cynical towards the organization. To discuss a topic, they would discuss the situation in Afghanistan, for instance, by getting an academic whose mother lived in Afghanistan to give a tourist guide or something. But you don't get any kind of discussion on the politics of a subject. I'll put it to you bluntly. I became sick and tired of listening to so many academics. Because they live on cloud nine someplace. Although they have a very worthwhile use-- And I'm not an anti-intellectual, that's not my point. The point is that conferences gather together people to accomplish something other than personal enrichment. They've got to come to, they've got to, rather, advance towards some kind of common estimate and common endeavor. That's what I'm getting at. I'm not an anti-intellectual at all.

FURMANOVSKY:

In many ways, this is what many Old Left people think about the New Left, that one of the primary goals of the New Left was sort of personal enrichment.

DOBBS:

Of course.

FURMANOVSKY:

And this is a carryover, and to you it seemed perhaps in some ways self-indulgent, and certainly not effective.

DOBBS:

No, I wasn't thinking of it in terms of self-indulgence so much as I was thinking of it in terms that many of these meetings and the three conventions I attended had no real purpose. In other words, here we spend thousands of dollars to either form a convention or to get to a convention--after all to go from Los Angeles to Boston, or Los Angeles to someplace else--and then wind up with nothing. You know, where do you go from here? And then you come back to confront the same problems, the same estimates that you had when you came in with, what have you advanced? So you could say, oh, well, they issued this newspaper; let us issue a newspaper. You know, some little minimum exchange of experience. Nobody ever discussed any activity. Nobody discussed what they were doing. Because it wasn't called for. This was

a constant battle, and it still goes on to this day, because, I must admit, the last two conventions I went to of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee [DSOC], which I'll get to in a moment, had the same feature, exactly the same feature.

FURMANOVSKY:

But meanwhile there were things, just about at this time, beginning to go on here in Southern California and Los Angeles with the rent-control movement in Santa Monica--

DOBBS:

Yes, yes. But that was not too much NAM activity. I want to say that what began to form throughout the country, in response to one or another impetus, began to be certain movement. You take, for instance, the organization in Los Angeles now, I guess it's been in existence some ten years, called the United Neighborhoods Organization, UNO. That was an organization based primarily on the parishes in the Catholic church. But it became a mass organization. They have no relation whatsoever with any other organization, except now they help build an organization called the South Central Organizing Committee, SCOC. There they took up one question, insurance, and they developed a struggle around the inequities of the insurance system in California. They took on the-- I see where they're taking on the question, for the first time, of a national legislative question now--the question of the minimum wage. They had a demonstration last Saturday in Los Angeles, in the rain, by the way. But they would take on things like that. I remember once they took on a campaign to register voters, and they found such an overwhelming weight of non-citizens. They had to give it up; or they felt they had to give it up. But a number of the kind of populist organizations arose. Now, of course, you had a very talented organizer, like in Santa Monica, this fellow Tom Hayden, which I don't want to discuss particularly. But he was a very brilliant organizer, and he developed this Campaign for Economic Democracy [CED] that within a short period of time had several thousand members. But it too had some of the aspects of the New Left, and a very, how shall I say it?, a very embittered and negative attitude to some of the experiences of the Old Left. For instance, he was determined--and I'm not saying what I think of his program, he said it--that never would there be any

democratic-called conference or convention to determine the policies of this organization. Under no conditions will the membership decide the policies of this organization. It will be decided by a committee made up of representatives of the areas. You know, completely undemocratic. Now, a lot of those people, when he got the political bug, for instance, to run for the United States Senate, thought, well, that isn't what we joined for. We joined to be an issue-oriented thing, and suddenly we're involved in electing Tom Hayden to the Senate. So it had its ups and downs, based on the initial organization. *[The main thing I am trying to explain is that with the upsurge of new activity after the Vietnam War--rent-control movements, CED, UNO, the National Conference of State and Local Alternative Public Policy, many communitarian groups such as ACORN, Massachusetts Fair Share, Ohio Public Interest Campaign, Chicago Midwest Academy--NAM did not nor did its members play any meaningful role. We may have been "wise observers," but with the exception of a few here and there, we were not active participants.]

FURMANOVSKY:

Why don't you talk a little bit about some of these Old/New Left conflicts.

DOBBS:

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[What was the relation between the Old and New Left? I was not an active observer of all the issue, but I think I can characterize it this way. The Old Left thought the New Left were a lot of crazies and kooks and in the main were revolted by what may be termed this countercultural aspects. The New Left simply thought the Old Left had lost their opportunity to gain big ground during the Depression--that history had passed them by. They were compromised by their defense of the Soviet Union and were completely irrelevant to the new developments.]

Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed sections during his review of the transcript.

) There were no open conflicts because not many of the Old Left would have anything to do with these organizations. I joined the CED right away and took part in the discussions. I will say there was one very positive thing that he [Tom Hayden] did, in the development of the Campaign for Economic

Democracy. It was around the question of, he was very--before the organization really took off, and the vast expanse of membership--he had a very definite idea towards coalition. In other words, he called two conferences. I was on the organizing committee with both of those conferences, worked with Tom on them. One was held in Los Angeles, and one was held in Oakland. And these were gatherings of close to eight hundred to a thousand people. Tremendous organization, tremendous educational values. For instance, Dorothy Healey was one of the major speakers, as well as Ron [Ronald V.] Dellums and others. But the determination was that they must not create organization out of these things. I practically was booed out of the meeting when I suggested why don't we at least maintain some kind of networking. Why don't we create something in the nature of an organization? This is new. It's something that's necessary. There's nothing like it in the country. It had the same fundamental weakness, I believe, of the conference that I discussed when I first joined NAM I became very much interested in, and that was this National Conference of State and Local Alternative [Public] Policy. See, a vast, big, and rich educational--but no approach to organization or organized methods of national struggle whatsoever. And yet the basis was there for it. I still think that has to be done. The only thing that's even similar to that now, I would say, is [Jesse] Jackson's approach to the Rainbow Coalition, or something of that nature. But this is what this country definitely needs. Some form of an agreed on, other than laundry list, small, concentrated program of some kind of united action of all the progressive groups. Because there's many of them. Of course, there are efforts to organize them, but I don't see anything on a national basis. There have been efforts, I think-- Well, I'll get to that in a moment. Anyway, it was around these issues and problems that I began to be active in the New American Movement. I always had an approach to some development of mass struggle, such as I joined the Campaign for Economic Democracy, and found that it was very difficult to move towards organization. I didn't attend too many of the local meetings because I was involved with NAM. I attended the conferences of the State and Local Alternative Policy, and would feel just tremendously enriched by the really very interesting discussions. But nothing ever happened. Anyway, there was one organization that I also became interested in, and that was the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. I don't know whether I've discussed this before with you. They were very, very weak here in Los Angeles.

They were organized primarily around Mike [Michael] Harrington. Now, Mike Harrington is a very brilliant and a dedicated long-term socialist. He was a member of the Socialist Party for many, many years, and developed a movement that was created by a split within the Socialist Party.

FURMANOVSKY:

He was a protege of Max Schachtman, right?

DOBBS:

He had been a follower of Max Schachtman, which I'm not too familiar with, by the way. But let me put it this way, this split in the Socialist Party was, I would say, around three different forms that took place. First of all, way to the right, and even to the right of [Ronald W.] Reagan on many questions, is what's called the Social Democrats USA. This involves some of the top labor leaders who are considered socialists and the Jewish labor movement, the leadership of the Workmen's Circle in all likelihood. People like the guy that just died, I forget his name, you know, the [Asa] Philip Randolph Society--

FURMANOVSKY:

Bayard Rustin?

DOBBS:

Yeah, Bayard Rustin. Some of the people in the labor movement that had at least something of that tradition. But they became a very reactionary organization. And I would say its entire dedication is toward anticommunism. Secondly, is the traditional Socialist Party, who proclaim themselves as the party of [Eugene] Debs and [Norman] Thomas. Their distinctive feature is the go-it-alone electoral policy. They have some very splendid people, and I met most of them because I go everywhere. Where people gather, that's where I go. I went to their convention. I went to a couple of their conventions. Wonderful people, but just all so obsessed with an anti-Soviet, anticommunist bent, but not the vicious type that you find in the [Social Democrats] USA. But they're just a shell of their former selves. I went to the convention of a national organization, that at one time really commanded the respect of the American political forces. There were forty-two delegates at the convention. A national convention.

FURMANOVSKY:

This was the Socialist Party?

DOBBS:

The Socialist Party. And they had some very nice people. They issue a little newspaper here in the state of California called the Socialist, and generally speaking, they are active on all kinds of campaigns, in which I'm active in. You know, you see them in the demonstrations. Most of them, now, because of their go-it-alone policy, are involved in the Peace and Freedom Party, here in California. Where they are nationally I don't know. They still will run their own ticket nationally. I believe they've already made their nominations. I forget who they are. But that's a go-it-alone policy. Now, the three distinctive features of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, which was the third group, are as follows: First, it developed around the personality of Harrington. Now, Harrington is a professor, but he became extremely well known in this country about a quarter of a century ago with the publication of a book called **The Other America**, which was in response to [Lyndon Baines] Johnson's "affluent society" and showed that there was real poverty in the United States. This really swept the country, so much that it very definitely and admittedly moved the Johnson administration to the development of what he called, i.e., Johnson called, the War Against Poverty. And there was the development of a whole number of very important social programs. But which all were aborted because of the growing U.S. participation in the Vietnam War. It isn't that he destroyed the programs, but it just ceased to become matters of national interest. But the point I'm trying to make at this point, is that this propelled Mike into being a tremendous political force in the United States, in his own individual aspect, i.e., writing for articles, radio, television. People would demand his comments on various events of the day. He became very well known. And he also became very well known in the international movement, because the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee became an affiliate to the Socialist International. I don't think the Socialist Party of the United States is in this Socialist International. (Strangely enough, the Social Democrats USA is, but it has no influence whatsoever.) But Mike thus became, as I say, one of the major factors for the growth of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. Second, he and the group around him set themselves up to get support and in name only, by a very minimum

national dues, for people to sign up as members. Calling for no particular responsibility to the organization. Just as members. Well, this was a tremendous success. So much so that I remember reading an article about this time, '77 or '78, in **Business Week**, that said socialism is no longer a dirty word in the labor movement. Because what it showed was a whole number of top leaders of the labor movement signed up and joined the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. It's got people like Gloria Steinem, Julian Bond.

FURMANOVSKY The head of the communication workers, what was his name?

DOBBS:

I don't know, I don't remember. But now there's a whole number. The outstanding leader-- Who?

FURMANOVSKY:

[William] Winpisinger?

DOBBS:

Winpisinger is the president of the International Association of Machinists. That's an extremely important union. Winpisinger, and the head of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Very close in fraternal relations with the United Automobile Workers. A whole number of unions were friendly and the DSOC grew by leaps and bounds. Well, as I say, the key problem there was, as far as I could see, no approach to community organizing, no approach to building the organization. Now, this didn't mean that in some places they didn't have locals. I don't know what they did. I know the L.A. local was very small and very weak. But they would do things. For instance, it wasn't so much of building the local, but they would embark, let's say, on "Big Oil Day." They had such a campaign. So they reached several organizations, they reached several unions, and they had a demonstration with speakers on what's happening in the oil industry. Of course, the big problem was the program of nationalization of the oil industry. It was "Big Oil Day," and it came and it went! Then they had a program called "The Main Enemy Day," or something to that effect, where they would go to some people: "Well, who do you consider to be the main enemy of the American people?" So someone said, "It's my boss." Someone said it's the head of the utilities, and someone said it's head of someone's-- And they gave them little prizes of pigs. You know, a

little doll like a pig, because these were the great pigs. They went to a place that seated maybe a hundred people, and that was the beginning and the end of it. But no ongoing political activism. Now, the interesting thing is most of these people are extremely active. Who's going to say that Ed Asner isn't active, or Julian Bond isn't active, or Gloria Steinem isn't active, or William Winpisinger isn't active? But they have nothing to do with the organization. So all they do is-- They undoubtedly send in their national dues, see. However, this was the nature of the organization. Now, I joined it because of the main feature, regardless of these names and things, and the point I'm trying to point out, which was very positive. After all, it's better to have 7,000 members who give their names, than not to have such membership, right? But that is their approach to American politics. Their approach to American politics was the recognition that for whatever, the black people, the Chicano people, the main instruments of the trade union movement are involved in influencing and trying to get their gains or their results or their objectives through the aegis of the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party had this tremendous coalition, and it's got bosses and workers. It's got black and white, contending forces at all times. DSOC felt that if a strong left could be built within that coalition, that this would be the way to affect American politics. So together with this number of very important people that joined DOSC, the personality and achievements of Mike Harrington, under certain conditions, is able to play a real role. In other words, he could sit down with [Edward] Kennedy and others and discuss issues. See, because he had that kind of base. But that doesn't build an organization. Because if you live by the sword, you can die by the sword. What if Kennedy isn't in office the next day? Then what do you do? So, there you find the weaknesses of the organization. I must admit, instead of having, let's say, an estimate of what did Reagan mean to the country, other than our vituperation--and correctly so--it didn't come to any basis other than what should our policy be. Or, we can't talk to him, so we've got to wait for a progressive to be elected. And this develops into a theory! It's absolutely the opposite of what I think a political party, a socialist organization should be. So that you had this strange feature. But I liked their electoral policy, so I joined both organizations. But something happened, roughly about 1977 or '78. There began to be student organizations of the Democratic Socialists of America. For one thing, it's relatively respectable. It isn't like the Young Communist League. It's got faculty adherents. It had supporters of the

academics that probably gave their names to be members of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. But in a number of campuses, close to 1,500 people joined the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. Now, what is this distinctive feature around youth? They want to do something! So, lo and behold, the issue of participation and activism began to permeate the organization. This is what gave birth to the possibilities of a merger between the New American Movement and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. The New American Movement was relatively strong on the West Coast, where there was little or nothing in the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. The Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee had some people in the Middle West. The NAM was stronger in the Middle West, Ohio, Pittsburgh, although Pittsburgh may not be defined in the Middle West, but Ohio, Pittsburgh, Chicago, these places. DSOC was very strong on the East Coast, predominantly in New York and Washington. We had very little. So we complemented each other. And so, there was an active, two-year discussion on the question of a merger between DSOC and the New American Movement. They were finally merged, I guess about five years ago now, and became the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). This development was distinctly different from what's happening in the socialist movement, which continues to split, split, split. You know, every organization splits eighteen times. We were the only ones that were able to create a merger.

FURMANOVSKY:

And you were in favor from the beginning, weren't you?

DOBBS:

Absolutely from the beginning. For the reason that I joined both organizations!

FURMANOVSKY:

And if there was one main argument of those that were opposed--

DOBBS:

The main argument for those that were opposed in NAM was the virulent, virulent anticommunism within the DSOC.

FURMANOVSKY:

And how did you--

DOBBS:

Well, we compromised on it. We compromised on it in this sense: They recognized that there, there are no employers [in the Soviet Union and other communist-governed countries]. In other words, there is a basis for what might be a socialist reorganization of society, but because it's not democratic, we don't recognize them as socialist. In other words, they say that there's no great, you know, there's no bosses running the country. A bunch of bureaucrats run the country. But it's not democratic, and certainly it's not democratic. So that they won't recognize it as socialism--that sort of formulation was the compromise. But the point I will make, and I don't want to make it cynically, the new organization was also defined as a multitendency organization. So I can be a tendency. And my tendency is to say that these countries have conquered or overcome the main contradiction of capitalism, therefore they have the potential for real socialist development and must be supported. But the point is, the new organization didn't develop into an anticommunist position. While there are many anticommunists in the organization, while there are many non-Marxists in the organization. While there are even anti-Marxists in the organization, both locally and nationally, the debate continues to be friendly because we can be united on immediate struggles. We can be united in support of the labor movement. We can be united on working within the Democratic Party. We can be united on electoral struggles. We can be united on key aspects of economic program, even though there's disagreement on some international developments. Secondly, and above all, [the merger] strengthened the feminist movement, because NAM was a very strong feminist organization. (I must be very self-critical about my failure to discuss this.) It strengthened the whole concept of the liberation or the movement for gays and lesbians. So there a number of good features about the development of the merger; although I will say in this nonpublic forum, I'm not satisfied with the merger. It didn't bring about what we had hoped for. One, an increase of activity, because of increased influence. Secondly, it did not become the magnet for the countless numbers of people who, for one reason or another, consider themselves socialists, or even think in terms of socialism. And DSOC brought a tremendous financial debt to the merger.

FURMANOVSKY:

So in other words, the kinds of people that become involved in grass-roots organizations, like the rent control here in Santa Monica--

DOBBS:

Well, not so much the rent control; it is not a socialist movement. You know, rent control is an issue that no one has to have any ideological position towards, except that he or she wants lower rent.

FURMANOVSKY:

No, but I mean many of the the activists did not join it.

DOBBS:

Well, except many of them were sympathetic. In many small, in every small town in California, where there were DSA and Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED) groups and DSOC groups, you couldn't tell the difference between them. They worked so closely together. Because how many radicals are there in a small town, you know? Or a small campus. But the point I'm trying to make is that but we didn't attract the large numbers of independent socialists. And then, of course, there's always the organizational problems. That is, how much attention does the national leadership pay to the organization? What is the relationship between the national organization and the local? And here, all the major weaknesses of DSOC come home to roost.

FURMANOVSKY:

But, ironically though, or perhaps interestingly, one of the leaders of DSOC is the son of Dorothy Healey [Richard Healey].

DOBBS:

No, not really. You see, he is not now a full-time DSA organizer and never was. By the way, one of the things that it did attract, of course, were some Communist Party members, but most of them, I will say, had their hearts broken by this organization.

FURMANOVSKY:

Had they? Why?

DOBBS:

Because DSA is not an activist group! We have about four hundred members in L.A. But I don't think there's more than thirty-five people active within the organization. It's not based on activism, see? So I'll give an example, my wife [Ada Martin Dobbs]. When my wife retired, she put in two years to be a member of the merged organization, DSA. Well, she can't live with the continual struggle to get something done. Where are these people? How do they view the organization? She's breaking her heart to have good meetings, interesting meetings, develop programs. They're not interested; they do not attend. She calls on them to do things and nothing happens, so she said the hell with it! That's the attitude of so many of our people. I spoke to a guy that's been active politically for thirty years: "How come you're no more active?" "I find it difficult to stand the anticommunism that some older DSOC members spew out." You know, whether it's one of the outspoken members of the national committee like Irving Howe. This is an anticommunist pro, in my opinion. So, how do you live with these people? So a lot of our Old Lefties, you know, they liked the organization. They probably contributed. But they're not going to break their hearts to build it. There certainly is no revolutionary elan. But I say all this is part of building an organization. You struggle. You raise your objections where you can. Some of us are more active than others, and then finally, we're getting a little older. I can't do what I did fifty years ago, or twenty, or even five years ago. So it's an organization with problems. But I will say this. I can't think of any other organization that has the potential that this one has, you see, because we're able to live with these differences instead of going off in our own little closets and proclaiming ourselves as the vanguard of the working class. They don't. Secondly, it still has this base. In other words, I don't know of any other socialist organization that is able to speak in terms of 6,000 or 7,000 members. We didn't have the growth that we expected, but the campus groups continue to be very active. In some place they're the only progressive activity on the campus. I would say they made their high mark in the anti-apartheid struggles. Secondly, in the election campaign. On every campus. It was either, you know, you're either a Young Republican or a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. Unfortunately, there's no middle. And that's what our problem is.

FURMANOVSKY:

What I find quite interesting, relating it back to you personally, is that in some ways, it seems to me, you've come full circle, in that your great period of activism in the thirties was in the Communist Party during the period of time when it considered the Democratic Party, in some ways, the main vehicle for change. And it was going to have as much influence within the Democratic Party in organizations allied with--

DOBBS:

That wasn't so much the thirties, except starting in the middle thirties, you know the latter part of--

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, the popular front. Now, in a sense, forty years later, you've come back to the same position through DSOC; the basic goal of DSOC is to influence the Democratic Party from the left to make it an organization for--

DOBBS:

Well, to make it an organization that fits the needs of the people.

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah. And so, you have come full circle. Yet, there was a time in the forties, let's say, when you, perhaps quite rightly, said that the Democratic Party is not a vehicle, that in 1945, '46, when [Earl] Browder was removed, you went along with the party in saying that, no, the Communist Party has to exist as a separate organization, which must, you know--

DOBBS:

I don't-- There never was this contradiction in my mind. Never. Never.

FURMANOVSKY:

So, ever since 1935, then, you could say you've seen the Democratic Party as the main vehicle for--

DOBBS:

It isn't that I see it. What I see is that I think that the majority of the working people, the majority of the black people, and the majority of the Latino people, they think that the Democratic Party--

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, that's what I mean.

DOBBS:

Well, so then I have to be with them.

FURMANOVSKY:

And this has been your consistent position for the last fifty years then?

DOBBS:

Always. Always. Always. Now, there are times when the Communist Party can do certain things that under the present it can't. For instance, sometimes we used to have big clubs and build centers, you know, where workers could gather. Well, sometimes you can't do that, because they're either under attack, or you don't have the members, or you don't have the money. So you develop a different tactical approach. That's why I say you must always examine the political situation in the country, the strength of the organization, and what do you do about the relationship between the two. But always, that as long as the basic constituency of the Democratic Party consists of the main areas of the exploited and the oppressed, then to me it becomes the main instrument for political activity. Now, that doesn't mean that at certain times I didn't favor the idea of a communist candidate. But that's for different reasons. So what good would it be for the Communist Party to endorse a Democrat? All we need is that kind of an attack. So you utilize the minimum activity of the popularization of Communist Party program, in other words, a left program, to influence the liberal, or moderate program. Or to influence it that way. There's nothing wrong with that tactic. But as far as the overall political emphasis of this country, it was always to be with the major constituencies of the oppressed and the exploited. Secondly, even to this day, can we truthfully say-- By the way, it comes about, is there a difference between a Kennedy and a Reagan? Is there a difference between a [George] Deukmejian and a [Thomas] Bradley? Is there a difference between a Pete Wilson and a [Alan] Cranston? I have my criticisms of both, but there obviously is a difference. A difference of approach, a difference in program, and a difference in attitude. And a difference toward coalition. Who does Pete Wilson coalesce with? So that that always existed in America. We always try to

pose the question, and we flip-flopped around, but that doesn't mean that I flip-flopped around. Let me put it this way. At one time we openly said the Republican Party is the favored party of the corporations of this country. Now, does that mean that the corporations don't help control the Democratic Party? Of course. So the difference hinges on "most favored." Now, let me give another example, take for instance, we were always bitterly criticized, we communists, were always bitterly criticized when we developed the slogan of, "Defeat [Barry] Goldwater at All Costs." Well, was there a difference between Goldwater and [Lyndon Baines] Johnson? Of course. Yet, it was Johnson that led us into the Vietnam War. Even though it had been started by [John F.] Kennedy, of course, with the counter-insurgency and all that stuff. So the people say, well, why did you support Johnson? Our attitude is that it never is the individual candidate alone that determines a policy. It's always the question of the relation to social forces, and the role that they play. How can you expect an individual candidate to go beyond what the social forces are ready to do? Now, can there be any denial in the early stages of the real differences with Goldwater? Johnson was able to get away in his full support of reaction in the Vietnam War. And yet, I think it was absolutely correct to work for the defeat of Goldwater.

1.22. TAPE NUMBER: XII, SIDE TWO

NOVEMBER 6, 1987

FURMANOVSKY:

I wanted to ask you Ben, many New Left people who became politicized in the early sixties that didn't have the experience of the Old Left and knew nothing about it, when they were confronted with, let's call it the bankruptcy of liberalism if you like, they turned to the view that the Democratic Party was not the agency, that it was a reactionary party. And that, okay, maybe it's slightly different from the Republican Party, but it's still a capitalist, bankrupt organization, you know, pro-imperialist. They became very disillusioned and many of them turned to--you know, people who came out of the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], and I guess some of them joined the Progressive Labor [Party] and other little splinter groups. What about your attitude to the Democratic Party in '66, '67, '68, '69? I guess you were still in the Communist Party then.

DOBBS:

Yes.

FURMANOVSKY:

Did you not feel then that the Democratic Party had become in some ways as bad, that Cold War liberalism was perhaps worse than--?

DOBBS:

Let me try to put this in some kind of perspective. I never had any illusions about the Democratic Party not being a capitalist party. I never had any illusions that the Democratic Party wasn't controlled by the huge corporations of the United States. I never had any illusions that the Democratic Party wasn't controlled by so many of the racists in this country. After all, it's had its base for over a hundred years in the solid South. This was not my problem. I didn't have to go through these throes of conscience. I never had this idea. My point is that what America needs is an independent party. It needs a mass, populist electoral party that's going to be anti-imperialist, antiracist, and big enough to confront the corporations and strip their power. Now, the problem, where does such a party come from? It can only come from those elements in both existing parties. In both parties, that will be of the oppressed and the exploited, to use it in political shorthand. Whom do the majority of the workers support? Whom do the majority of the blacks support? Whom do the majority of the Hispanics support? Whom do the majority of the women support? And where, if possible, will the majority of the youth go towards a better future? When that base is ready to build a new party, then it comes into being. It isn't the question of a few radicals going out to build a new party. But whenever there were efforts to build a new party, I went with them too. Because it always had that potential. When it failed that potential, then I was through with it. See, in other words, we didn't win the blacks, we didn't win the labor movement, we didn't win the constituent base. That remained with the Democratic Party. And as long as that is the case, then I view the Democratic Party as the arena of struggle. As well as the possibilities of different kinds of candidates. And this is developed further and further, in the realignment that is taking place. Is there any difference between a Reagan and a Cranston, or a Reagan and a Jackson? Or a Reagan and a Kennedy, or any of these people? Of course! Now, why does this difference exist in the

Democratic Party? Because that's where much of the base of support is. It's different. The New Left of which you speak never made any distinctions between the parties or its candidates. They said, well, everybody's no good. And I heard them very convincingly place the argument, "Where do we want to fight? We want to fight at the weakest point of the bourgeoisie. We want to stop their rotten, lousy society. Now, in electoral politics, big business has the strength. Why? There's the laws. You know, after all, there's no laws and no structures created by the capitalists to bring about their own defeat. They have the strength. They have the money. They have the politics. They have the politicians. So the electoral struggle is out. So where do we, the New Left, fight them? We fight them in the streets." See? Now, that was the fundamental proposition. Can political power and public decision-making be gained in the streets? Okay, so they were right in saying Johnson led us into the war. Why do you support the Democrats? Well, I don't support the Democrats because of Johnson! I support the Democrats because that's where the majority of the people are. And the distinctions with the Republicans are growing. Until you build an independent, discernible left in the existing parties--that's the other part of the proposition--you will never be able to lay the basis for a third party. Secondly, how do third parties grow in the United States? Many efforts have been made to develop them outside of the two-party system. But they only were successful once, and this is when one of the major parties split apart. What was the issue that split them apart? The saving of the Union. Or, the development of slavery and that gave rise to the Republican Party of Lincoln. That's the only time! So one must draw a conclusion from that: That when the issues become so sharp--and maybe they're sharpening now, maybe they'll sharpen around Jesse Jackson--that the possibilities of a mass breakaway, and thus a new political realignment, will take place. It never was on the illusion that the Democratic Party was anything less than a capitalist party. It always was. And it always will be. Now, there are some people that say, maybe this political realignment will come about by changing the nature of the Democratic Party. Maybe that will. I don't know, let history write one or two things. I don't have to write every chapter. But all I'm saying, one must always keep one's mind on the subjective, as well as the objective, factors. Objective being the nature of our society, the nature of the economic system--not the electoral system, but the economics of the country--the nature of the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world. And the

subjective features, what do you do about it, and with whom? Until we're able to solve those problems-- But the point I would make above all this, is that it can only be done on the basis of the struggle around issues. You will never change Congress or any others, unless there's a fight for housing, unless there's a fight for economic demands, unless there's a building of the trade union movement, unless there's a building of the national liberation movements, to use a political phrase. But the point I would make above all, to build an independent force within the Democratic Party that speaks to that constituency that must break away and continue to build independent issue-oriented organizations and movements. And what do I mean by an independent force? One, it has to be a discernible, independent left. Some of its elements: One, it has its own organization within the Democratic Party. Secondly, it has its own program. Third, it makes its own alliances. In other words, you may agree on the support of some guy running for assembly; you may not have to agree on the support of a guy running for president, or vice-versa. That's what I mean by making your own alliances and coalitions. When we're able to develop something like that, then we can begin to talk about the basis for a third party, or an independent party, or a new party, or a people's party, call it what you will. Now, I have tried on three separate occasions to build this party from the outside. I was very active in the Peace and Freedom Party, and there I ran into the big debate. Why isn't it a socialist party? I have my own socialist party! I don't need a new one. Secondly, I was active in the Independent Progressive Party, and later in the Citizens Party of Barry Commoner. But they all lost their support relatively quickly. Well, you don't die with things. You go from one stage to another, based on your political estimate of the situation of the country. Now, one could say, well, that's Utopian. Of course it's Utopian! If we don't have any ideas of where to go, then what's the use of living! So the point I'm making is that I believe that the socialist movement can be built only, only, on its participation in immediate struggles. In immediate struggles, even though they are reformist, even though they are transitory. I believe, first, that the socialist party can only be built on the immediate struggles and in coalitions including the forces around the Democratic Party. We must maintain a coalition policy, because no socialist movement can go it alone, in this country, where the big debate in the socialist movement that's been going on for years, why don't we change the name? Why don't we be socialists without calling ourselves socialist? Then

people will flock to us by the millions. But they won't know what they're flocking to! See, but that debate goes on. So I say you can't go it alone. Secondly, I've come to the conclusion that no social force can go it alone. The black people are not going to win liberation by themselves. The women are not going to win liberation by themselves. The Chicanos are not going to win liberation by themselves. And the workers aren't going to win liberation by themselves! So there must always be the extension of a coalition policy. My concepts are different than other people that I work with. A coalition is not just an alliance or a merger. A coalition is similar forces, even contending forces, but agreeing on a certain thing. You know, there was a massive coalition to get rid of Nixon. It wasn't done just by some guy at a hearing. See? Nobody, even big business, wanted Nixon anymore, for whatever reasons. But who gained by it? Can you imagine such a thing as the dumping of a president of the United States of America and politics goes on as if nothing happened. So who gained by it? The big corporations that wanted to get rid of him because he was already an embarrassment to them, a threat to them, based on international relations. So that the point I'm making in all of this, is that I'm convinced of constant change of tactics to meet new conditions. I was very sympathetic to the ideas of what was known as Eurocommunism, based on some new concepts of the international socialist and communist movement. Based primarily on independence from the Soviet Union. But also based on examining the national character and national culture of your own country, from which you derive your policies and derive your theories, rather than from some other place. So this has been, I would say, my overall estimate of the Communist Party leadership is that they never changed their basic views. Now, the answer to me as to how to change is based on self-criticism. We all used to have self-criticism in the New American Movement. You know what it came to? "I don't like the way you chaired the meeting, or you didn't smile at me when I smiled at you." And that kind of stuff. Self-criticism should be examination of a policy. Where are you going, and for what purpose, and with whom? That's what you examine every day of your life. I don't say you should discuss a policy-- You make one on Tuesday, and discuss it on Wednesday. You make it on Tuesday, and you don't discuss it until it's had some results, good or bad. Then you discuss it! But to me, I don't know any other way to solve the problems of the socialist movement. And the point I'm making is that I think that I'm a little bit of a minority on these views, and the point is, I don't give

up. So, others say, well, I ain't going to take it anymore, so let them go their own way. Maybe next year I'll retire and say, all right, I've had it. But I will have been seventy-seven years old!

FURMANOVSKY:

I was going to say, that's definitely a theme in your life, not giving up, I would say.

DOBBS:

Yeah. That's the main thing. That's why I welcome the opportunity to speak at every opportunity. How shall I put it? It isn't that I'm an rose-eyed optimist. I must admit, I've developed a little cynicism. I see, for instance, the main media of our culture in our country, and it makes me sick to my stomach to see these TV commercials. You have people listen to that crap every day. So I'm willing to give up on the country. But how can you give up on a country?

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, is there any sense in which, and I sort of want to turn this to sort of some more personal things, in which you are sort of disillusioned. I don't mean disillusioned politically, but I mean, when you compare your experiences in the Communist Party, say, between 1935 and 1950 or so, and some of the great successes during that period and what life was like on a daily basis, the camaraderie in the party, comparing it with the more recent period, are you in any way disillusioned?

DOBBS:

No. The only-- I would say the only really serious thing--it's not so much a disillusionment--is I wonder how I could have made such a fundamental error in my thinking. It's very painful to say this. I had such uplifting ideas of what a communist should be, that I never dreamt that any communist had any other idea or objective than mine. People come to me and ask, "How can you have such confidence in those people in the Soviet Union, or Bulgaria, or Romania, or Czechoslovakia?" And I'd say, "Because they're communists." I wonder now why I fell into that kind of Utopian, stupid thinking, if you will. Well, let's say I recognized certain policy differences between a state and a party, even

though the party may run the state, that I never dreamt that a Stalin could be a Stalin! That was the furthest thing from my imagination.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, you certainly weren't alone in that. Some of the most brilliant people, who now have similar views to yours, went through the same era with the same kind of--

DOBBS:

Yes, but as I say, I don't therefore draw the conclusion that my whole life was wrong, you see. That's the difference.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, it seems to me one of the great ironies is that, if there was a single flaw with the Communist Party, with all of its sort of uncritical stance towards the Soviet Union, and then the single biggest problem with the liberal movement from 1960 to the present day has been its uncritical anticommunism. But now, we may be entering a new era, where anticommunism is going to lose its appeal, partly because of what's happening in the Soviet Union, and for other reasons too. And hasn't that been the central problem with liberalism in America in the last twenty-five years?

DOBBS:

Well, I don't know what the hell liberalism is, when you come right down to it. I don't think that the big issue of liberalism is that it's tainted with anticommunism.

FURMANOVSKY:

You don't?

DOBBS:

No. No. No, that's not the big thing. The big issue with liberalism is that, in my opinion, it doesn't really recognize the class structure of this country. And because it doesn't, therefore, it may fall into the trap of anticommunism. What I mean by the class structure, I'm not talking about it from the, let's say, the rigid, orthodox Marxist point of view. Let me use a technical term, the liberal will not recognize the impact and strength and recognition of the

corporate character of American capitalism, let me put it that way, and its control over all aspects of society. And I will tell you very frankly, that's why I favor [Jesse] Jackson. He's the only one that mentions it even, even though he may not have an anticorporate program. Well, I don't know what his program is. But he at least says that it isn't the government that closes the factories, it's the corporations that close the factories. The government may not have moved to Taiwan. It's the corporations that move to Taiwan. And then the government supports them. Well, that's the nature of the government. But it's the corporations basically. Now, that's the big issue with liberals. That they will not recognize, or they cannot recognize. Therefore, they're always falling over themselves.

FURMANOVSKY:

Those are the two flaws in—

DOBBS:

Now, the two flaws that I find, both in my own thinking, and basically through experiences: First of all, there's just no question in my mind about it, and this I was absolutely convinced of due to the Czechoslovakian events, the Communist Party of the United States considers itself having the franchise with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It must follow the dictates of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Now, this is not new, either in the world, nor is it new relative to the Communist Party. I was very much interested, for instance-- Here's a guy, I don't know anything about him, Warren Beatty makes a movie. And he called it Reds and it's the story of John Reed. And the interesting thing was he shows episodes in which John Reed's faction of the Communist Party fought with other factions of the Communist Party, as to who's going to get the recognition from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Do you remember that?

FURMANOVSKY:

Yeah, I do.

DOBBS:

And that was what, two days after the revolution! You know, it wasn't fifty years later. Now, that was a very interesting thing. So that what you find is

that this adherence, therefore, denies them the possibility of becoming an indigenous American party. The second is that in examination of the party's policies, it would sometimes give up an independent approach. Now, what do I mean by that? And I'm not saying it's easy. But let's say when we had the slogan, "Defeat Goldwater at All Costs," we should never have accepted the Tonkin [Gulf] Resolution. We should have made that the key fight! But we didn't do it. Why? Because maybe this endangered the basic slogan. But that's what I mean by a self-critical approach. Now, those—and I'm just giving these examples. But a revolutionary movement must never give up. Now, I want to deal with a more difficult question. I'm the kind of guy, you know, I don't have great intellectual powers. But I like to examine certain things that sort of throw a light on the world. I'll never forget something that [Nikita] Khrushchev once said. And I forget where he said it, he says, "I come to the United States, and I get vast audiences. I speak at world affairs councils, human affairs study groups, and I get vast, apparently friendly audiences. And one day, I'm driving down the street in New York and workers recognized me--and they start throwing horseshit at me! Now, what kind of country is this?" Now, what does that show me? That those workers did not like the social structure, the single-party system, etc., and that they feared the Soviet Union. Now, the Communist Party in the United States always makes its estimates on subjective things, i.e., the fight against right and left sectarianism. But in a mass way, how can you be "behind" the workers' desire for change when they have that opinion of the Soviet Union? The struggle against right opportunism is not the key to a correct policy in the United States. I believe always that one must conduct the struggle against leftism and sectarianism. Why? Because the American working class has a low degree of organization. It has a low degree of consciousness. It's been filled with this bullshit of individualism, and he's responsible for the conditions of his life, rather than the nature of society. Now, this is a very hard thing to deal with. But wherever you go in the movement of the Old or New Left, you find leftism. By leftism, all you got to do is raise the right slogan, and the masses will follow you. Well, sometimes they don't follow you. But, on the other hand, you can never be "behind" them so much because of their basic thinking and organization. I used to read an editorial, that is, used to—when I got a little smarter--read an editorial in the Daily Worker, you know that this, that, or another in relation to an incident in the country and the editorial would state, "Workers will never

stand for it." But the workers did stand for it, you see! It meant the editorial writer wouldn't stand for it. Well, that's the problem. This question of flip-flopping all the time, instead of having your right course, how do you develop the consciousness of a people? How do you change their thinking? That's the main goal of a communist. Which leads me to the last point about this question. You see, communists in a communist party, including myself, that talked that we're going to run society because we're the vanguard party. Now, I began to change my mind on that question when I examined some of the experiences in the Soviet Union and other countries. To me, their biggest mistake—and I call it a mistake because I think it is, maybe they don't, that's a difference—is that they call the Communist Party the governing party, the ruling party. Now, if that's their governing party and their ruling party, then why do you have to develop democratic forms of participation? You know, why develop people's movements? Why develop Soviets, why develop people's courts, why develop things that people determine their own destinies if the Communist Party's doing the ruling and the governing? So then the Communist Party becomes the main thing instead of the mass organization and participation of the people in that country. They're not going to solve their problems until they solve that question, once and for all. By the way, I have a tremendously positive attitude to what this [Mikhail] Gorbachev is trying to do. Whether he succeeds or not, it's going to fall on that question of the role of the CP. But I can understand where he could be slow in solving this problem. Where else does he get his strength? You know, who put him in power? See, it isn't the people that put him in power; the Communist Party put him in power. Secondly, maybe it isn't correct to attack the first point of the greatest privilege and the greatest power. In other words, you work around it. But when he says that he's giving up the [Leonid] Brezhnev Doctrine, in effect, that maybe he's changing a little bit about, maybe, when he's talking about workers' councils and women's councils, and strengthening the Soviets as instruments of rule. I always had this dream, you know, that someday I would go to the Soviet Union and say I would like to see the Supreme Soviet. They'd say, "But it's not meeting." "What do you mean it's not meeting? Who runs the country? Is it adjourning for a couple of days? Then I'll wait a couple of days." "Oh no, we only meet two days a year." Well, they meet two days a year, what the hell good is it? Who needs it? See? But I've always had that cockeyed dream, you know. What I'm getting at, of

course, is that there's, "Well, the Communist Party runs the country. You don't have to come to a meeting of it." "Well, then who does govern?" "Well, we govern!" Well, that's not good enough. That's not democratic. And to me, the biggest criticism I have of Gorbachev is a statement that he made in his speech in 1987 in January. And you wonder, where the, what the hell world was he living in? The following statement: "We never really understood the relationship of democracy to socialism." What the hell world was he living in? Now, if there can be an indictment of real political backwardness, that's it. At least, hopefully he understands it now. Maybe he's saying that our mistake was that we didn't recognize it then. But to even make such an admission is really the most self-critical thing that anyone can say. But that's why I have great hopes for what's developing there. But he also admits that the opposition is tremendous. And it's interesting where the major opposition is coming from. You know where it's coming from?

FURMANOVSKY:

Where?

DOBBS:

It's coming from the workers. And I'll tell you why. It was in one of their statements, I forget who it was, some one of these wise guys, one of these advanced-thinking people in the Soviet Union, made a statement. Very interesting. He said, "The trouble is, the wages are not negotiable." Well, what do you mean they're not negotiable? Well, they're not negotiable for goods. In other words, if the workers can't buy what they want, and buy crappy stuff for their money, then why work? Why work? And secondly, if there's no differences in wage schedules, then why advance? Well, these are the things that the whole economic system is changing in the Soviet Union. See? But, that's a very interesting point this guy made. It's not negotiable in terms of goods. It's negotiable in terms of how much, or how little, but not in terms of what you get for your work. Which, of course, give rise to the famous Soviet joke: "If you call what you give me wages, I'll call what I give you work."

FURMANOVSKY:

I want to, in the last twenty minutes or so, to sort of turn the conversation around and look at some more personal things.

DOBBS:

*Just one more comment before we do that. What do I do now: I am on the steering committee of the local DSA, and I am a member of the Southern California Interfaith Task Force on Central America. I was honored last week at DSA's big annual garden party for my activity. The last two years I would select a campaign, tell the manager what * Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript. I can't do, such as walking or continual telephone contacting because of my emphysema, but I can pay my own way as I will do whatever you ask me to do--work on mailings, prepare precinct lists, run errands, and use my own car, etc. Well, I did this for the campaigns to elect Gloria Molina to the Los Angeles City Council, Jackie Goldberg to the Los Angeles school board, and Ruth Galanter to the city council. In all three cases we won. That's more that I ever won before. I also worked on Proposition V, for "Jobs with Peace," and we lost. I learned a long time ago that you can't win them all.] I had just one question that came up somewhere in the course of this that I never really went into, and that's the question of feminism. You see, I, for many years, had the age-old, communist attitude towards feminism. Which is what? That it's simply a class question. That some women are part of a worker's family, others are part of a capitalist family, and there's no relation between the two. But I've learned a lot since the women's movement developed, and that there is such an aspect of the relationship of the struggle of equality of women, outside of the normal question of worker versus capitalist. And that is the definition of the women's dignity, and the definition of their role in society. I'm all in favor-- And to me, the big problem of our feminism and feminists in our movement: I think they don't really recognize the key problem, that feminism as a struggle will not advance in the United States, or any place else, until there is the building of the autonomous feminist movement as a political force. It's still, it's tailing too many of the other political organizations. And that's why these organizations also flip-flop. In other words, for an organization to say that our only program is ERA [Equal Rights Amendment], and then when it collapses, they collapse. When their only program is a women's candidate, and when it doesn't win or runs into serious problems, like [Geraldine] Ferraro, then the movement has a tendency to collapse. Instead of the question of how do you emphasize it as an autonomous movement, for want of a better term, on the women's question. And to me, I must admit, it took years to understand

feminism. For many years, I wondered what are they talking about? What is it they're talking about? What is it they want? Well, they want equality, that's all they want. You know, they want an end to the patriarchal society.

FURMANOVSKY:

What was the key, do you think. Was the key, to you, coming to a different view, just simply intellectual reading, or was it something that came out of your being married, or was it something that came out of--?

DOBBS:

No, it just came out of watching some of our really brilliant young feminists in the New American Movement and the DSOC. For instance, I saw the Communist Party develop a women's organization. And I said to one of our brilliant woman leaders, "You know, that's an interesting thing. We ought to examine it." This young woman says that it's only for the fight for equal rights. Well, that's not feminism. Everybody should fight for equal rights. Feminism is the understanding of the nature of women's society, or women's role relative to society as a whole, relative to the family. That's feminism, not equal rights. Equal rights is only one aspect of our program. Finally it dawned on me. But I don't think it came from reading, because the reading on feminism and social feminism is as confused as anything else, you know.

FURMANOVSKY:

What about bringing up your kids in the sixties and seventies?

DOBBS:

This had different levels. First of all, I must admit that if there's any big weakness in my development, was that I never really made my children and family primary in my life. I was and am deeply in love with them and I believe it deepens daily, but Ada had the major responsibility for the raising of the children. I was helpful where I could. I never quote, "interfered." I never made large demands. But mostly to my first daughter [Louise Dobbs], who I think I harmed very much by not being there when she needed me. For instance, when I was underground, or when I was in jail—I never knew this until many many years later, maybe thirty years later—she felt that this was a rejection of her. That maybe my whole life, because of what I did, was a rejection of her.

Well, nothing could have consciously, on my part, have been part of the problem. In other words, I didn't consciously reject her. It's that I felt that everything that the party called on me to do was primary. And my attitude towards being a full-time functionary and the party was primary, instead of equal aspect of relationship to the family. Now, I still maintain that I have a very good relationship with my kids. Mostly, I think, this is due to the very remarkable woman that I married.

FURMANOVSKY:

Do you want to say a few words?

DOBBS:

Yeah, but my kids, they're good kids. And none of them are revolutionaries, because I imagine they have "scars." My son [Morris Smolan Dobbs] is a very fine progressive young man. He's not a revolutionary, but he's concerned with all the problems of his generation. How do you raise a family? How do you make a living? And he was very much interested in things like participatory sports, for instance, instead of spectator sports. So he took up scuba diving, he took up swimming, and he took up skiing, and wandered himself off in the mountains there in Mammoth [California], and always struggled to make a living, and did. And then got married and has two children, boys [Jeffrey Dobbs, Michael Dobbs]. He's a very fine young man. And he's a progressive kid, but he's far from a revolutionary. His wife [Elizabeth Bottles Dobbs] is much more advanced politically than he is. You know, at least she's a feminist, and she's a fighter. Well, he works hard to make a living. He works as a house painter. And now, he's got the key ambition to be a fireman. This was based on ten years of experience as a volunteer fireman in the volunteer fire department of Mammoth. But I'm afraid he's going to be thwarted because of his age. He's forty-three. But he goes running around from fire department to fire department, wherever there's an application to be filed. He always passed the physical and other tests in the top 5 percent. He's a good man, and he's very good with his wife and children.

FURMANOVSKY:

What do you think is the attitude of your kids, I guess maybe individually or collectively, towards the fact that you were a communist?

DOBBS:

This had its changes. I don't think they ever really resented it. I recall one experience with my son. We never really discussed this; he never had the patience to discuss anything. Whenever he would ask me a question, he would always get bothered by the fact that I couldn't answer it in two or three words. I would try to explain something, you know. And so, he would be a little bored with me perhaps. But one day, he saw some men sitting in front of the house, and he thought they were endangering me. And it so happens that he had a rifle, because he liked to hunt when he was a kid. I don't think he does it anymore. So he gets his gun, and he's watching these men. He's going to protect me.

FURMANOVSKY:

This was when?

DOBBS:

I don't know, he must have been fifteen or sixteen years of age. Maybe thirty years ago.

FURMANOVSKY:

So this was the fifties.

DOBBS:

Yeah.

FURMANOVSKY:

And these were FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] or not?

DOBBS:

Well, actually, what it turned out to be was a group of telephone workers waiting for the rest of the crew to show up. But he thought they might be endangering me. Well, he was very concerned and he wanted to protect me. Secondly, I remember once he brought over about three or four youngsters from school to argue with me about communism. Well, during the Vietnam War, he brought three or four youngsters over to see me: "Boy! Look who my dad is! My dad was in the fight long before anybody else!" See, so that he had

this pride. Now, there's no question about it, but that he was dragged to meetings, which he probably resented as a kid. You know, maybe he did, maybe he didn't, I don't know. But he wasn't dragged to too many of them because Ada was very sensitive to these kinds of problems. As I say, my first daughter, she now works as an office worker. She never got married. She's very much impelled sometimes emotionally into things, like the antinuclear movement. She takes a part in that, in demonstrations and things of that kind. Or once she was very much impelled by the farmworkers' struggle. So she quit her job and went to work in one of their offices. She had a little money to live on. She, of course, suffered more than anybody else because of the poor financial condition we were in while she was growing up. My son always worked weekends and summers. On the other hand, my younger daughter [Michele May Jones], she had all the advantages of a relative affluent business career of Ada's. Now, let me discuss this affluence for a moment. We have a very comfortable retirement, not because of me. I never made more than fifty or sixty dollars a week. I worked the first ten years as a YCL organizer, probably averaging about six or seven dollars a week, and being given the addresses of a few people that you could always drop in and have a place to sleep or a place to eat. When I was getting ready to go to prison after the Smith Act trial she, in a very scientific way, wrote down what could she do. Now, this was, of course, in 1952. Morrie was born in 1945, so what does that make him? Seven, and Louise, four. And so what could Ada do—could she become a teacher? She has all the qualifications of being a teacher. She graduated from, you know, Stanford University as a magna cum laude in 1939. She, by the way, grew up with an academic background. Her father [Percy Alvin Martin] was a professor at Stanford for years. He's got quite a name as a Latin American historian. He was one of those that chartered the path and many Latin American historians now give him that credit. And she was a magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year, you know, that kind of stuff. Anyway, when she decided, well, could she be a teacher? Well, how does a communist get a job as a teacher at that time? Because the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] followed us everywhere. Could she become a factory worker? Well, what if a kid gets sick? Could she become a social worker? Well, how do you get a job as a social worker with a communist record? So she finally decided to go back to school and to learn to become a bookkeeper. Well, she's very, very smart. She was able to learn in a year and

make contacts with certain auditors of businesses where she worked. For instance, they would say, "Well, we don't want you to take that job, because it's not good enough for you." Well, one auditor got her a job, got her a job with a certain company, where her work started at twenty hours a week, then the company developed and grew to be an office of thirty-seven people, which she managed and did most of the internal accounting and office procedures. She had to go to school for several years at night while she was working in order to keep up with the growing responsibilities. But the point is, it ended up to be a very rich-paying job, with really an astronomical pension. But it didn't come from me, you see. Now, the truth of the matter is that it's the wives that subsidize the party by allowing the husbands to function as full-time functionaries. Because it isn't that I got paid less than anybody else; I got paid the same as anybody else in the party. But in every case, their wives did better monetarily working at regular jobs, whether it's office workers, or in my case, Ada, who really ran into an comparatively well-paying job. Whatever the kids wanted, they could get. We didn't change our life-style particularly. But every member of the family had a car, when they grew up and were old enough to drive one. And Michele went to a private school because Ada wanted to get her the best possible education. And I'm dragged screaming and hollering, I'm opposed to it, and Ada says you can oppose all you damn want, but she's going to get the best education we can give her. And she too graduated magna cum laude at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Not that she had any idea of using what she learned to make a living, but she just wanted the best education she could get. Now, she's married and has become a very successful mother, with two beautiful little daughters [Frances Hope Jones, Lillian Jones]. But Louise didn't have those advantages. You know, it isn't that we were starving, don't get me wrong. But we just couldn't give people everything they wanted like we could with Michele. And with Morrie, he, from the very beginning, learned that he couldn't get everything that he wanted unless he did some of it himself. So at the age of fourteen he was already working. And it so happens that he went to work for a friend of mine, a comrade, who was a painter. And he taught him to be an excellent journeyman house painter. So that today, for instance, when he moved to this little town of Vista [California], they moved down on a Saturday and Monday he had a job, and on Tuesday he's looked upon as an up-and-comer in the industry. And now, if he takes a job as a fireman, he'll have to take an

enormous pay cut, because he's doing so well. I mean, he's an expert workman. As a kid, he learned how to work. And as a kid, he went with an uncle, and they built several houses. He graduated from Cal State L.A. [California State University, Los Angeles], in the industrial arts department. There's nothing he can't do. He's very smart, by the way, although he never read a book in his life until lately. That was my main complaint about him, you know. And I've said and done things that hurt him. Like one day, he said, "Well, aren't you going to congratulate me, I graduated college." I says, "It took you six years, but it should have taken you four!" I should never have said that, you know. Why didn't I congratulate him? You know, what the hell would it cost me? But, you know, he never read a book! He says, "But I did better than you. I got C's in my intellectual courses and A's in my industrial courses, B average. You didn't make a B average, you quit school." See? Once he said to me, I was talking about habits, you know. You got to have good habits. He says, "Well, you smoke, don't you? That's a habit. Your habits are worse than mine." Both my daughters are very bright. Now, the main thing of course, is Ada. Ada had the ability, in terms of her job, to be at the right place at the right time, but to know what to do, to really grow with the job. And I know that when she retired, her boss put on a party that must have cost the company \$10,000 in honor of her, you know. Yeah, at a very fancy country club, and booze flowed like water, and a live band, and some six hundred people showed up. He paid for it all.

FURMANOVSKY:

Sounds like a bigger testimonial than you got—

DOBBS:

When my fifty years of activity were honored. Oh, that's for sure. That's for sure. That's for sure. *[She earned it and I love her very much. My only real regret is that my illness probably prevents her from fully enjoying her retirement. I retired in 1977 and she in 1980. I try to make up for it by encouraging her to go on various trips and being fully supportive in whatever she does.]

FURMANOVSKY:

Any concluding remarks, Ben, in the last few minutes?

DOBBS:

Yeah, the last few minutes. I still have no real regrets about what I did with my life. I think I expressed my main critical attitude and criticism of myself. I could have been more intellectually involved. I think I have the head for it. But I wasn't. I became very pragmatic in my inner-organizational work within the Communist Party. That maybe my life would have been different had I gone to other things. But on the whole, I was so determined, and I felt that the Communist Party did have an answer to the problems *Mr. Dobbs added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript. of our country and the problems of our people. So in the long run, I really don't have any regrets, in spite of not being much more analytical and self-critical than I was during the years. I welcome the idea of this oral history. I don't know what good it's going to do anybody, but if anybody finds it interesting then I'll be satisfied. I don't know what else to say, Mike.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, I think it's just been quite an education, for me, the last twelve hours of conversation or so. I mean, I've been researching the subject for years, but you've given me a lot of insights. I think I know the facts. Your World War II experiences were particularly unique, and you yourself felt that they were pretty unique. I think they were.

DOBBS:

Well, I think they were unique by the fact that I just told everybody that I was a communist, that's all. I never had to be afraid of opening my mouth. You want to punish me, what can you do to me? Kick me out? Fine.

FURMANOVSKY:

And nowadays, you mix with your friends, still quite a number of old comrades?

DOBBS:

Well, we don't have the social life that we would like. Well, mostly because Ada works so hard, and always worked so hard; and I always worked very hard, by the way. So we don't have the social life that we-- Now, I just got an invitation, for instance, to go to a party given by a person I haven't seen three

times in the last five years. I know that when I go to that party, I'm going to meet at least fifty ex-party members, and we're just going to get along fine. They respect me; I respect them. Some of them are active; some of them are not. Some of them are old—they'll all be my age.

FURMANOVSKY:

But do you feel a bond with them all?

DOBBS:

Always, always. This bond was cemented in the roughest days of our lives, you know. We were kids, and not knowing exactly what we were doing and not knowing exactly where we were going. But, you see, you asked me a question about the camaraderie. Well, that was only part of it, and it really wasn't the richest part. There was a certain amount of, well, we all wore leather jackets or all smoked cigarettes, that kind of thing. But it wasn't the main thing, you know, it was a thing that you have with any person in any organization. A guy that joins the American Legion has the same camaraderie with his fellows in the American Legion.

FURMANOVSKY:

Well, perhaps. But what about the idealism?

DOBBS:

Well, that's a little bit different. The idealism is what led us to some good things, and it also led us to, I would say, to the biggest mistake I made. And that is not recognizing, and not knowing therefore, what the main struggle should be—towards the question of changing people's minds. And that's the key problem, to change--You see, I may be wrong, and I just want to say one more word and I'll be through. I think that this country's ready for socialism, because, you know, I remember certain phrases from Marxist books. The relationship between the productive forces; in other words, our ability to produce things in the United States is limitless. We're actually being hampered by our productive relations now. We don't want to produce anymore. No one has to work as hard as they have to work, in relation to the productive relations. Well, why isn't the country fully using these productive forces? Because capitalism can't do it anymore. So that's the beginnings of a

revolutionary situation. So why don't we have a revolution? The human agency-- Human people got to make history. The human agency to make social change. And I don't know of any other human agency except the application in a sensible way, of the examination of reality--which, to me, is Marxism. It isn't just what Marx wrote; it's the way Marx talked. And that is, how do you examine reality? And how do you use that to change people's minds, to change their consciousness? And it's always been the same. Maybe I know it now better than I did then. I thought there were easy answers. All you had to do was develop a baseball team and then go play the workers of Cudahy, and you would bring them to socialism, and that was the answer. It wasn't that simple. It just wasn't that simple.

FURMANOVSKY:

[laughter] That's a nice way to end. Okay, Ben, thanks a lot.

DOBBS:

One more thing. You must have a sense of humor for the long haul. Thank you, Mike.

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