

Why I Am a Socialist

A socialist has never, in the United States in my lifetime, been a popular thing to be. Most people associate socialism with the barbarities committed by the late Soviet Union and its one-time satellites. As a political system socialism is widely thought to be unworkable, contrary to human nature. Even with the obvious advantages of a single-payer state-run healthcare system demonstrated by every other industrialized nation on the planet, the media and most politicians keep up a solid refrain insisting that “socialized medicine” will not work. Even the labels “liberal” and “progressive” and the description “do-gooder” are avoided by those seriously seeking public office. This may be changing as I write, for the use of government for the exclusive benefit of big corporations has led to war, fiscal instability, and the increasing impoverishment of the majority of citizens, not to mention a steady stream of appalling robberies in the name of free enterprise and deregulation, but the capitalist system with all its contradictions still has massive support. Critics of any aspect of that system can expect job loss, media ridicule, and frequent jailing. Nevertheless, I remain what my experiences have convinced me is the way to be.

One of my earliest memories, in the late 1930s but otherwise impossible now to date, is of a burning pile of wheat. It was a tremendously long pile stretching for maybe a block near the tracks of the Rock Island railroad in Enid, Oklahoma, and maybe five feet or more high. Men were pouring kerosene on the wheat to facilitate the burning. I was with Pat O'Donnell, an elderly neighbor who sometimes babysat me. I asked Pat why they were burning the wheat. He said they were burning the wheat to keep the price up so that the farmers would not go broke. I knew that wheat made bread and that there were people who needed bread who were not getting it. A few blocks away from the Brisben and O'Donnell households there was a place called Hooverville, after a president defeated before I had been born. Some of the children in the Hooverville had spindly arms and legs and swollen bellies. I had been told these were symptoms of malnutrition. I asked Pat why they did not make the wheat into bread and give it to the people in the Hooverville. If the farmers needed more money, we could have Mr. Archie Butts take it out of the bank and give it to them.

Pat had a good laugh about that one, and he allowed as how my notion made as much sense as President Roosevelt and Henry Wallace burning the wheat. We had just

been to the bank to see Mr. Archie Butts. He was a nice man who lived in our neighborhood. Sometimes in the evening we could see him mowing the lawn in front of his unpretentious house. The Brisben and O'Donnell lawns were mowed by Mr. Wilson who came by once a week or less often in dry weather with his medals from World War I pinned on his overalls. Pat O'Donnell had missed a mortgage payment on his house because one of his children had been laid off and had not been able to send a check to her parents. Mr. Butts said that was all right but that Pat would have to make up for that payment within three months. Pat put his knuckle to his forehead when he thanked Mr. Butts. It was many years before I understood that gesture. As a boy in Ireland he had saluted members of the gentry by tugging his forelock. When I knew him, only a couple of years before he died, he was bald and had no forelock. Mr. Butts was not the sort of person who required that sort of obeisance, but Pat had instinctively repeated the gesture of his youth.

I pestered everyone with questions about the burning wheat but never got a satisfactory answer, not even when I began to study history in college. I read a lot of books and still got no answer. Finally, I talked to people who were or had been socialists: they repeated a formula that under capitalism production is for profit, under socialism production is for use and wheat will not be burned when there are people who need it. This is obviously an oversimplification, but it is equally obviously the direction in which society needs to move. I have known a lot of working farmers, some of them quite greedy, but I have never met a one who was happy about the product of his labor being wasted. I never developed a taste for farming or for hard physical labor of any kind, but I have known a lot of farmers who felt that they had the most useful job in the world and took great pride in doing it with skill. I felt the same way about teaching students and being able to work for greater freedom and dignity for other people.

My parents had dealings with Archie Butts, too, whom they sometimes at home called "Uncle Archie", but I was warned against saying that outside the house. The house payments were minimal, rural relatives and friends sometimes gave us poultry or dairy products, my mother was an excellent seamstress and my father did not wear out clothes in a hurry. He wore shirts with detachable collars up to 1940, for instance. We always had a car, the first one I remember being a green Chevrolet with a gearshift on the floor

that required me to move my knees when I sat between my parents, then a brown Oldsmobile with the shift on the steering column and a fender dent that reminded me of a catfish skeleton. That was our last car with a running board. Then we had a white Chevrolet that lasted us until 1947, although its paint job deteriorated long before that and it was without a grille for the final two years we had it. My father wore a white shirt and a tie to work every day, although he hated ties, and we had status as store owners, although the store made very little money before 1940.

Improvements in our living standard were causes for celebration. I recall one in 1940 when my parents decided that they no longer had to deal in used furniture for the store to be profitable. When my younger brother was on the way, my mother insisted on an electric refrigerator to replace the icebox, two full weeks in the hospital after the birth, and an extension telephone in the bedroom so that she could continue to do business while the baby was small. I did not know the term “bourgeois” then, but that is what we were, and I saw nothing wrong with that and still do not. The bourgeoisie is the only truly self-critical class that has developed so far, and self-criticism is a valuable thing.

It is also a very insecure class in a society that is constantly transforming itself, and its members lie to each other and themselves a great deal. In the summer of 1939 I strongly believe that my parents and I took a trip to California. Episodes from that trip have been in my memory and in my bad dreams from the date of that trip until the present. When I tried to talk about that trip to my parents, they maintained that it never happened, that what I thought I remembered was the result of my vivid imagination and my misguided politics. Sometimes there is documentary proof of my false memory, as in my vivid image of seeing the oil well the Wild Mary Sudik burning on the southern horizon, something that took place too early and too far away for my memory to be valid. Sometimes I have reliable eyewitnesses or documentary proof that my parents’ memory was false and mine true, as in my memory of Uncle Irvin Brisben telling me he got shot in the butt by one of the patrons of his bar in the early 1950s. Often it is my memory versus what they told me later, and they are long dead and cannot defend their versions. Sometimes I wish I did not remember these things, but I do.

My parents had cash in hand because of a lucrative decorating contract my mother had just finished and business at the store was otherwise almost nonexistent. We had

heard that business conditions were better in California, and my parents decided to check this out. It was about six weeks before my fifth birthday. We had a tent and camped out some nights, although other nights we stayed in tourist cabins to take advantage of abundant hot water for bathing and a hot plate for cooking. My mother was a superb cook under such circumstances, but we ate at roadside diners, too. I was a great fan of Popeye's friend Wimpy, a notable hamburger eater, and I ordered a hamburger as often as I could, washed down with a bottle of Nehi orange pop.

We were stopped at the California border. Everyone with an Oklahoma license and a lot of traveling gear was. I learned much later that these were Los Angeles policemen with no authority to police the state border, but only a mandate to turn back as many "Okies" as possible. My father's neckties in our packed luggage that we unpacked at their direction were for us. The fact that we were carrying so little hard cash was against us. My father's check book and a bank book showing a healthy balance were for us. Eventually we were let through, but my mother was asked so many questions like "Have you had a blood test for venereal disease lately?" that she began crying. I could see the muscles in my father's jaws tightening, but he did not explode. Somehow I knew that he could not, and that frightened me worse than the actual explosion could have done.

We spent at least one day picking peaches. My job was to pick fallen fruit off the ground, examine it for bruises, and put it in a basket. I filled three baskets by the end of the day and earned fifteen cents. My parents earned more than a dollar apiece at five cents per box. We did not have to be doing this, I was told. It was just a fun way of saving money in territory where checks on Oklahoma banks were sometimes hard to cash. Our brown Oldsmobile with the fish skeleton dent could be filled with gas for slightly over a dollar. Tourist cabins with kitchen privileges seldom charged more than a dollar. I was given my fifteen cents and told to spend it any way I liked. Since I was part of the family money-saving scheme, I ordered a hamburger and a Nehi orange the next time we stopped at a diner. They did not have Nehi, so I had a Mission orange, which seemed to be the local favorite.

When we got to the Los Angeles area, I was asked if I wanted to meet any movie stars, since Hollywood was really part of Los Angeles. The most famous Oklahoman in

Hollywood was Will Rogers, but I knew he had been killed in a plane crash in Alaska about the same time that my grandfather Jody Quinn had died. The only other person I had heard of from Oklahoma who even might be in Hollywood was the athlete Jim Thorpe, who had been a champion at absolutely everything. My father said he would try to find Jim Thorpe for me. Somehow he succeeded. I was taken to a tavern on Main Street in the skid row section of Los Angeles where Jim Thorpe was drinking beer with his friends. Jim Thorpe told me to train hard, pay attention to my folks, and not to bother about life's little setbacks. He felt my four year-old biceps and predicted a great future for me in athletics. My father offered to pay for a round of beers for the table, but Jim Thorpe refused. Jim Thorpe may have been down and out, but he was still a great man. So, on that occasion, was my father.

I have one last 1939 California memory, a bad one. I was sitting on the running board of our car on an unpaved street, possibly in Bakersfield. My parents were visiting someone in the neighborhood, and my presence was no longer required. A group of children, not much older than I was, approached carrying clods of dirt. They had probably identified me the way the border cops did, by the Oklahoma license plate and all the traveling equipment. They threw clods at me, yelling "Okie! Okie! Okie!" I ran down the street screaming in terror. My mother rescued me very quickly.

She explained to me that the bad boys were mistaken. We were not Okies. Okies had no place to go back to. We did. Okies wore raggedy clothes. We did not. Okies had lost their land and their businesses. We had not. I was never to think of me or my family or any of our relatives and former neighbors who were traveling around California that year as Okies. We were different. The bad boys with the clods had known better, and, despite my mother's comfort, so did I.

I have been called many bad things in my life: traitor, commie, fag, nigger-lover, honky motherfucker, pussy-whipped, weirdo-beardo, terrorist ally, and many more. Okie is the only one that really hurt, because I was too young to know that I was a good person despite the epithet. It still hurts a little. My brother, born in 1941 after renewed rains and high crop prices because of the coming war had begun to erase the category, does not feel this and uses Okie as part of his e-mail address. I cannot do that. Even today, if you call me Okie, you had better be another one. You had also better smile when you say that.

That early experience has helped me to relate to friends and students who have been called “nigger” and other bad things when they were too young to know better. If my memory of being called an Okie in California in 1939 is false, it is a false memory that has done me and a lot of people I have tried to help some real good.

Once I learned to read, I read all the time, especially, according to my parents, when I should have been doing other things. I read a lot of comic books and adventure books for boys, but, in the summer of 1946 when I was not quite twelve, I decided that my new status as an incipient adult meant that I should put away childish things and read only material intended for adults. The librarian at the local Carnegie library reported to my mother that I was checking out inappropriate and sometimes subversive books, but there was nothing effective that she could do about it. I liked detective stories best. My mother’s cousin Army Streets, who shared my taste, gave me a subscription to *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, which I devoured every month. In a 1946 short story contest conducted by that magazine, a story called “A Matter of Chemistry” by William Faulkner won second prize. An introductory note said that Faulkner, while not well known in America, was considered by the French to be one of the four greatest American writers, the others being Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and John Dos Passos. I resolved to read them all.

My politics and everything else about me had already been subverted by the first adult-level book that I had read all the way through by myself at age eight and have re-read many times since. It was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. I especially admired the part where Huck, confronted with a decision either to help his friend or conform to the religious, social, and political mores of his time and place, said “All right then, I’ll go to hell,” and resolved to help Jim escape from slavery. That is the most liberating line in American literature. It did not bother me that Jim was called “nigger”. That term was almost as common in 1940s Oklahoma as it was in 1850s Missouri. My mother told me not to use that word because only white trash said “nigger”. I obeyed her, but I certainly heard it a lot.

John Steinbeck became a great favorite. It was the local opinion that *The Grapes of Wrath* had insulted the good people of Oklahoma, none of whom were like the trashy Joad family, although quite a few of my schoolmates seemed to be. The Joads came from

a different part of the state anyway. The dust storms had been as bad as Steinbeck described them but not did really affect decent people like us. I had clear memories of my mother tacking wet bed sheets over windows in a vain attempt to keep out the dust and my father showing me some men digging a tractor out of a dust drift and telling his three year-old son that that was a tractor mine. I also had clear memories of our California trip, but I gave up arguing with my parents about their reality after a couple of times. *The Grapes of Wrath* struck me as moving, real, and humane, as did *Of Mice and Men*, *The Red Pony*, and much else that Steinbeck wrote.

Few people today read John Dos Passos' *USA*, although it has remained constantly in print. Leftists are embarrassed by the fact that Dos Passos became increasingly reactionary in later life. Rightists are embarrassed by the fact that a novel filled with influential literary innovations should be passionately concerned with left politics. It was in 1948 a still famous book, but it was not to be found in the Carnegie Library. I bought it in a Modern Library Giant edition that cost me two dollars and fifty cents. That would be two and a half days' wages working at my father's store in 1946 or on my cousin's farm in 1947, thirty-six lines of pins set in the bowling alley where I worked in 1948, four hours of work at my first real adult job at a pop-bottling plant in the summer of 1949. It was a bargain. I spent months going through it, stopping to look up names of people and organizations with which I was unfamiliar. I thought the suggestive montages of the newsreel sections and the prose poetry of the short biographies of real people that were interspersed with the biographies of representative fictional characters to be quite wonderful. I still do.

I asked my parents questions about the IWW. They recalled it only as a terrorist organization that burned farmers' wheat fields, something for which I have found no confirmation among the IWWs I later came to know. My parents felt that the faults and virtues of Henry Ford tallied pretty much with the Dos Passos portrait. They could not tell me very much about the stock market crash. Neither they nor their friends had speculated in stocks, although Grandma Quinn had lost some money that her husband had invested in one of Samuel Insull's companies. They had survived and eventually prospered despite my father's bout with tuberculosis and the general hard times, and my parents said people of good character usually could.

Their big disagreement with *USA* was the attitude of the book. Dos Passos had a low view of the human race, and even most of his radical characters end up disillusioned or making fools of themselves. The implicit message of the book is that there is something basically, radically wrong with the American social and economic system. My parents categorically refused to accept that judgment. Negative thinking was contrary to the gospel according to Norman Vincent Peale and all the local civic clubs, and it was dangerous to hold views that differed greatly from those of the majority.

It was becoming more dangerous. Dashiell Hammett had become one of my favorite detective story writers. Suddenly, the three radio shows based on characters he had invented went off the air, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* stopped reprinting his earlier stories, and his books went out of print. He was doing time in a federal prison for refusing to name his associates in what was deemed to be a communist front organization. The Weavers, led by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, were the most popular singing group of the time, but their records disappeared from stores and airwaves, and their concerts were canceled. A Democratic congressman from my district lasted only one term because his association with a world federalist organization was thought to be subversive. My grandmother's last illness was draining my parents' savings, but it was subversive to advocate much-denounced "socialized medicine" even in the mild form that passed fifteen years later as "Medicare". It was not exactly subversive to admire baseball players like Jackie Robinson and Satchel Paige, but I was made to feel by some of my friends that such admiration was odd and unwholesome. I recall that the great pitcher Allie Reynolds, a Cherokee, was cheered when he told my junior high football team banquet that Negro players might last for a time on some teams but that they would never play for his New York Yankees.

I thought Allie Reynolds was wrong, and I was already intervening in a tentative manner for what I thought was truth, justice, and the American way. I went to Sunday school and my parents less often went to church at University Place Christian Church, which was associated with Phillips University. The last Sunday school teacher I had much to do with there was a dynamic young man named Don McMillan. He was later a missionary in the Belgian Congo until the Belgians kicked him out for spreading subversive ideas of self-government. African students could not attend Phillips then, for

state law forbade the teaching of racially integrated classes on pain of a one hundred dollar fine, each day being a separate offense. However, Phillips did have students from India, including a dark-skinned young man named Peter Solomon.

Peter Solomon had been told to move to the back of the bus, which his friend Don McMillan thought was an outrage. Don proposed to his Sunday school class of fourteen year-olds that we talk to the owners of the bus company to tell them that, although Peter Solomon was as black as Sambo, he was indisputably a Caucasian and thus not subject to segregation ordinances. Don went down to the bus company offices with his anthropology text, accompanied by two of his Sunday school students, the son of a Phillips professor and me. Don gave a short anthropology lecture to Mr. Lookabaugh, who ran the bus company. Mr. Lookabaugh agreed to show a picture of Peter Solomon to his drivers and to instruct them to let him ride anywhere he chose. A few days later I saw Peter Solomon exercising his new privileges. It was a real rush. It began to occur to me that racial distinctions were a lot of nonsense. Even those of indisputably African heritage ought to be able to sit where they wanted, go to first-run movie houses, attend the same schools as me, and even use the same drinking fountains and toilets.

Mr. Lookabaugh had asked me if my parents knew that I was backing up my Sunday school teacher and his anthropology text. I told him that I had not consulted them in advance but that he could call them if he wished. I have no notion if he did; certainly my parents never talked about it with me. My parents were decent people. They opposed lynching because sometimes the victims were innocent. When African Americans worked at our house, they ate at the same table with us, although they were very quick to stand up and get out of the dining room if the doorbell rang. My parents told me that my views on racial equality were admirable but that I would be well-advised to keep them to myself. They were in business and could not afford to alienate a large section of the community.

Even before reading *USA* I was influenced by an unremarkable novel by Helen E. Howe called *We Happy Few*. An idealistic character in it quoted some lines from Eugene V. Debs' speech to the jury when he was on trial for his opposition to World War I: "While there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." Somehow that suited me right down to the

ground, just like “All right then, I’ll go to hell.” I bought a copy of Debs’ writings and speeches, edited by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., which I still have. I do not recall Debs being mentioned in any history course I had in grade school, high school, or in my college undergraduate years. Debs was judged to be a loser, and school history emphasizes winners, but I came to love the man. Many years later I visited his quite ordinary grave near Terre Haute with a group of Socialist comrades and was called upon to improvise a speech. As it climaxed I recited the Debs credo and could see the lips of everyone in my audience of a couple of dozen moving along with mine.

Despite the great difficulty in completing writing assignments that afflicted me most of my life, I loved newspaper work. I began by writing occasional features for a local weekly when I was barely fourteen. By the time I was fifteen and sixteen I became a half-time proofreader and later reporter for Enid’s daily newspapers. I believed this was going to be my career. I thought if I could spend the rest of my life typing with one finger while I took an interview over the telephone with a cigarette dangling from my mouth and the old-fashioned earpiece scrunched between my shoulder and my ear, I would be happy.

I loved to hang around the police station, write sport features about my high school teams, and even to cover the stuffed shirts who spoke to the local civic clubs. I loved being the first to get the news off the teletype and to know all the scandals that could not be printed, such as the death of a prominent elderly businessman at a local whore house. That particular house became a place I visited frequently, although I never had intercourse with any of the girls. The madam and the girls made a big fuss over me, fed me many cups of their excellent black coffee, and listened in awe as I phoned in such stories as my publisher thought fit to print. Being a customer would have been almost like violating an incest taboo. I even helped some of the girls who were my fellow high school students with their homework and got a discarded typewriter from the newspaper so that one of the girls could practice her secretarial skills.

I learned how much the cops had to be paid off, how many complaints from citizens it took before the place was raided, the minimum that the police had to find in the raid, and how long the place had to stay closed before it could open again. The most interesting fact was the extortionate rent that the madam had to pay. The building was

owned by the brother of my publisher, who also allowed whores to operate in a hotel he owned nearby.

Then I decided to go to hell more or less deliberately, which I have frequently done all the rest of my life. I reported a routine raid on the whore house. I included the name of the owner of the building, my publisher's brother. When I turned the story in, I was given a severe lecture and was demoted back to proofreader. An hour later the story landed on the proofreader's desk. I put the landlord's name and home address back in. It actually went out in the early morning edition that served the farmers, although it was spotted and killed before the city edition. I was fired and blacklisted as a reporter throughout northern Oklahoma and southern Kansas. My young journalism professor at Phillips University thought my blacklisting indicated courage, but he died of a stroke before my first semester there was over, and I decided to abandon any notion of being a crusading reporter except for writing for radical journals of small circulation.

Now I had to choose a career. I had already rejected an opportunity to run a store with my father or to manage the family farms. My grandmother Brisben would have dearly loved to see me become a preacher, but, always a skeptic, I was unable to believe what I was supposed to believe, and I had already seen the tragedy of good men who had to make a living preaching things they secretly believed to be nonsense. However, I shared with most preachers a marked aversion to heavy labor. I might make a lawyer, and I was sure that I would make a good professor, but what was I going to profess? I love literature, but I decided that I would keep on reading and analyzing it even though I took no courses in it. Also, I had misgivings about teaching it. Talking about books that you like and trying to get others to like them might be a lot of fun, but it never seemed to me a really honest way to make a living. I also wanted to be a creative writer of some sort, but my efforts in that direction had a way of drying up quickly, even though my imagination works very well. Eventually my block diminished, but I was terribly afraid of being judged and found wanting, especially of being subject to the contempt my father would have shown.

If I majored in history, however, I could study something I already deeply loved and direct my studies in a systematic way. People had behaved absurdly throughout recorded time, and the study of history would be like reading endless new chapters of

Gulliver's Travels, a book I loved more with each rereading. History was a common prelude to law school and perhaps politics, history teachers were in demand at all levels, and I might even find some answers to puzzling questions. Why was it necessary to burn wheat while others were hungry? Why did segregation persist even though most white people realized its absurdity? Why did war seem necessary to prosperity? Why were my parents the way they were?

I loved the minutiae of mainstream politics. My father's former business partner George Streets had become mayor of Enid, and I loved hanging around at local Democratic gatherings. Politicians are generally charming people who genuinely enjoy doing favors for others, even if they are not being bribed. They tell wonderful stories. When I entered the University of Oklahoma at Norman, I joined the Young Democrats. I admired Senator Mike Monroney and my fellow Young Democrat Fred Harris who was already in the state legislature even though he was still a law school student. The two chief factions of the state party were run by E. K. Gaylord, who had a near monopoly on Oklahoma City media and owned several important businesses and by Senator Robert Kerr with his expanding energy companies. I did not mesh well with either faction, although George Streets was a strong supporter of Kerr. All the maneuvering was fun and some of the ideas advocated had merit, but mostly both factions were chiefly interested in defending things like the oil depletion allowance.

My professors were not radicals, but many of them had become ardent civil libertarians because of the perceived danger from Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin and his allies. One of my best teachers, William Livesey, had refused to sign a state loyalty oath because as a Quaker he could not agree to bear arms for his country in time of war. The university had kept him on and even promoted him, but he could not be paid until his case was decided by the US Supreme Court. The oath was likely to be declared unconstitutional, but Livesey had three teenage daughters and was treading water financially for several years. A lot of people were victims of this sort of nonsense. McCarthy sent two investigators named Roy Cohn and G. David Schine to investigate US Information Service libraries. The best evidence of subversion they could find were several copies of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. Mike Monroney on the floor of the senate called Cohn and Schine "a pair of Keystone Kops". Monroney was called an

anti-Semite by McCarthy, who was without shame, for disrespecting the judgment of his young investigators. Of course I was anti-McCarthy, but I never got into real trouble because of that stand, although once I was threatened in my dorm lounge for publicly supporting Edward R. Murrow against him in the spring of 1954.

I did pull one joke on the McCarthy staff. My dormitory from 1953 to 1955 was called Robertson Hall. I received a letter addressed to Mr. Robertson Hall at Quinn Brisben, Norman, Oklahoma. It was a request from the Wisconsin senator's staff to report on university conditions. Mr. Robertson Hall did so, saying that he suspected one professor of having voted for William Jennings Bryan in 1896 and another of having read the Russian book *War and Peace* all the way through. I never received a reply.

My most serious risk of hell at the university came when I joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NAACP had been fighting segregation in the state university for years. Ada Sipuel Fisher had been admitted to the university law school by order of the US Supreme Court. Joseph McLaurin had been admitted to the graduate school but had been segregated within the university. I recall seeing him sitting separately from other students with a screen around him when I attended a special session for high school speech and debate students in 1950. Thanks to evidence gathered by the Oklahoma NAACP headed by Roscoe Dungee, publisher of a paper called proudly but in those days unfashionably called *The Black Dispatch*, the courts ruled that McLaurin's treatment violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution. When I arrived at the University of Oklahoma in September, 1952, there were a couple of dozen undergraduate black students, all of them supposedly majoring in subjects not offered at Langston University, Oklahoma's state-supported all-black school. They had formed a student branch of the NAACP. I joined it.

God did not strike me dead, but I did suffer some adverse consequences. Oklahoma had few good swimmers then, for our swimming pools often closed because of drought in dry summers and because of polio epidemics in wet summers. The university wanted swimmers to match its magnificent football team. They got them by persuading most of the South African 1952 Olympic swimming team to come to the university. The recruits were told that they would feel right at home; for Oklahoma's racial mores were

much the same as South Africa's. Thanks to the NAACP, this was ceasing to be true. The South Africans felt betrayed, especially by the NAACP's token white member. They gave me several warnings, and then one night they beat me up near the library after it closed. It hurt, but I suffered no serious or permanent injury, and I did not report the incident. It probably would not have done much good, for athletes did pretty much as they pleased in those days. The swimmers did report my activities to the head of Air Force ROTC, telling him that I was a subversive character who ought to be watched.

The big *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case and its fellows were being argued before the Supreme Court. The court told Thurgood Marshall and his team of NAACP lawyers that they preferred to decide the case on historical grounds, rather than on the psychological evidence that Dr. Kenneth Clark and others had presented. I was one of hundreds who examined the records of state legislative debates to see if the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment had intended to forbid racial segregation in the public schools. It was an interesting search and solved my term paper problems in a couple of history or constitutional law classes, but none of us found any conclusive evidence either way.

By the time the *Brown* decision was handed down on May 17, 1954, two more books had deepened my feelings and changed my attitudes. The *New Yorker* had published a favorable review of a new novel called *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. My aunt Effie Brisben gave me five dollars for Christmas every year of my life, and I used most of my 1952 money to buy a copy of that book. It was a journey into another world, a world that was also profoundly my own. Best of all, this author was an Oklahoman like me, a proof that people like me were capable of creating world-class literature. In July, 1953, Ralph Ellison came back to Oklahoma City to visit his mother. I hitch-hiked up from Norman, and we spent most of a Saturday morning on his mother's front porch talking. I asked him if the character who makes the narrator participate in an all-in wrestling match before presenting him with a brief case was based on a certain Oklahoma City businessman. Ellison said that, indeed, that man was one of the real models for the character. He felt that Oklahoma was a place of infinite possibilities, where people could rise or fall tremendous social distances. He recommended that I read Constance Rourke's *American Humor*, the best book he knew on the growth of American stereotypes. We had

both had the experience of hawking the Sunday edition of the state's most powerful newspaper, the *Oklahoman*, on Saturday night to make a little spare cash. To get the proper swing into one's street cry, an extra syllable was commonly added: "Get your Sunday OKlaHOM-i-an paper!" He inscribed my copy of *Invisible Man* "For Quinn Brisben, a fellow Oklahomian, Sincerely, Ralph Ellison, Oklahoma City, July, 1953." That copy is tattered from many readings, but I still have it.

C. Vann Woodward's *The Origins of the New South* also affected me strongly. Like his later *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, it showed that segregation laws had not immediately been enacted by all the Southern and border states as soon as the last federal troops left after Reconstruction. These laws had come piecemeal and gradually. Although there had been no true equality in the South of the 1870s and 1880s, un-segregated public accommodations had existed with little protest. Segregation was not really carved in stone. It had developed over a long period of time in response to certain social pressures, and the social pressures that were building up in the early 1950s could bring it down. It was the first but not the last time that I understood that history could be a liberating discipline and that scholarship and activism could be of equal use to a cause.

It was going to be a long fight. The night after the *Brown* verdict was handed down, I joined a celebration in the cramped office of the *Black Dispatch* in Oklahoma City. I remarked that it had been a hard fight, and I was glad it was over. Roscoe Dungee let loose a string of cusswords remarkable even for the Oklahoma frontiersman that he was, and told me that the fight had barely started even though its beginnings were long before my birth. It was likely to last far longer than his lifetime or mine, which I now know to be the truth. Roscoe Dungee was certainly part of that fight for the rest of his life. There is a school named after him in Oklahoma City, but I seldom encounter his name in even the most detailed histories of the movement. I cannot imagine that Dungee would mind, for he worked not for personal fame but for results.

Like many persons born in the Depression and raised during World War II and the Cold War, I felt the need of a steady relationship with a person of the opposite sex at an early age. My Enid steady from my sixteenth to my nineteenth year was a very good person to whom I owe much. She gradually came to understand that we were not really suited to each other and broke off the relationship. Shortly before that, in June, 1953, I

wandered into the Lower Division library in the north end of the football stadium at the university. A student librarian asked me if she could help me pick out a book. I ended up taking her to the movies. The next year after my relationship with my Enid steady had ended, I started dating her again. After our fourth or fifth date we understood that we were going to spend the rest of our lives together. We are still together in the sixth decade of our marriage. Being loved by such a person bolstered my self-confidence wonderfully and gave me the courage to think and do things that would otherwise have been impossible for me.

I cannot live without a family and a full range of creature comforts. I can do without fine clothes, big cars, and many luxuries, but I cannot do without a roof over my head, a substantial library of books and tapes, frequent plays and operas, and hot showers. I have risked jobs only when I was sure I could continue to support my family, risked jail only when my term was almost certain to be brief and never supported causes to an extent that would endanger my lifestyle. I risk my life only if I like the odds. I sympathize with people who have a psychological need for even greater luxuries than I have, especially those who dare not act on their beliefs or even state them for fear of losing jobs or making the neighbors surly. I agree with Thoreau that this is the root of the quiet desperation in the great mass of American lives.

My studies were helping me to recover the repressed memory of a great fear. I did research on the suppression of opposition to World War I in Oklahoma and on the race riots that took place during and after that war. I began a master's essay on the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma during the 1920s. I spent many hours in the stacks of the university library, in the Oklahoma City offices of a publishing house that had once put out a magazine called *Harlow's Weekly* that covered Oklahoma politics, in the morgue files of the *Daily Oklahoman*, and in the collections of the Oklahoma Historical Society in the state capitol. I learned that the Socialist Party had flourished in pre-World War I Oklahoma, that it had replaced the Republicans as the second party in the state legislature, and that it had elected hundreds of local officials. It had held colossal mass meetings at which Eugene V. Debs and Kate Richards O'Hare had spoken and which used the Ameringer family German brass band as a warm-up act. I learned that Frida

Ameringer, with whom I sometimes worked on NAACP projects at the *Black Dispatch*, was the widow of a famous Oklahoma Socialist.

Oscar Ameringer had not only been an effective Socialist organizer and publisher but also had a ready wit that many compared to that of Oklahoma's idol Will Rogers. Ameringer had written an autobiography with a foreword by his friend Carl Sandburg which was out of print in the 1950s but which had been a best seller in 1941. He had said "Politics is the art of getting money from the rich and votes from the poor while claiming to protect each from the other." This was fascinating to me, for wit had already become my weapon of choice. I had grown very large very early but am terribly badly coordinated. When I was in my early teens someone who had gone all the way to Kansas City as a one hundred and twenty-six pound Golden Gloves fighter could cut me to pieces. He would be praised for outfighting someone who was so much bigger than he was. If I landed a lucky punch, I was a big guy picking on a little guy. On the other hand I could make a remark about such a person that would not only make his friends laugh but would not get through to the butt of the joke until I was well out of sight. I noticed that many serious reformers became young martyrs, while favorite political wits like Mark Twain and George Bernard Shaw lived to be old. Decades later when Frank Zeidler told me that my speaking style reminded him of Oscar Ameringer, I considered it one of the greatest compliments I ever received.

The Socialist movement had been totally destroyed by World War I and its aftermath. The local Councils of Defense, under the leadership of Woodrow Wilson's propaganda chief George Creel, had engaged in thousands of acts of sanctioned violence during the war. The 1918 Socialist candidate for governor, O. T. Cumbie, had been removed from the Confederate pension rolls by the angry Oklahoma legislature. After the war the newly formed American Legion and the newly revived Ku Klux Klan continued the fight. In Tulsa a conspiracy in 1921 to destroy an emerging black middle class was fanned by the *Tulsa Tribune* and resulted in one of the worst riots in this country's history. When the Non-Partisan League governor Jack Walton, whom even Ameringer admitted to be a shady character, challenged the power of the Klan, he was impeached and removed. By the 1950s people were reluctant to admit that they had been either Socialists or Klansmen. Many Socialists were still afraid. One of my parents' best friends

refused to discuss with me why his father had named him Marx. George Streets, whom I considered a good friend as well as a family connection, did not tell me that his father had been a Socialist until decades after I had abandoned my research.

Ex-Klansmen were quite happy not to disturb the collective amnesia that had settled over the state, although a Enid near neighbor whom I had always liked told me that the Ku Klux Klan Ladies' Auxiliary drill team used to practice under her direction on her double-wide driveway. When I went to Tulsa, Richard Lloyd Jones, the publisher of the *Tulsa Tribune*, sat in the house designed for him by his cousin Frank Lloyd Wright and told me lie after lie, in the certain knowledge that no one was ever going to get a different version of the events published until long after he was dead. There was nothing I could do about it.

In Oklahoma City I followed the lead of a dissident former associate of E. K. Gaylord named Harrison and was able to copy a list indicating that the publisher of the *Oklahoman*, still the most powerful man in the state, had been at least briefly a Klan member in 1921. I requested an appointment with him in May, 1955. His enterprises had endemic labor troubles, and he employed many goons. One of them patted me down before I was buzzed through an electric lock into Gaylord's inner office. The publisher was a vigorous man although he was over seventy. Indeed, he died at the age of one hundred and one, having never fully relinquished his power.

He had done more research on me than I had on him. He told me I was a talented investigator, just the kind of young man his newspapers, and radio and television stations needed. He called the Enid publishing family that had blacklisted me a few years earlier "a bunch of horse's asses." I had stumbled onto some information of doubtful validity which had best be forgotten for a while. There were lots of scoundrels waiting to be exposed, and he could give me the power to do so. On the other hand, if I continued my present researches, I was inviting endless trouble.

I was seriously tempted, but I knew that most of what I valued in myself would shrivel and die if I gave in. I said that the profession of history had certain standards, which it does, although I did not yet know how few historians in this society are capable of meeting them. I knew I was deciding to go to hell again like Huck, but I knew this was what I had to do. I told him I would investigate further and that I was going to follow my

usual Saturday custom of seeing a couple of movies in the city and then hitch-hiking back to Norman. At about nine that night I was hitch-hiking at Southeast Forty-Fourth Street and Shields Avenue, the most southward reach of the city bus system on US Highway 77. A car stopped, a big Buick with four portholes under the side of the hood. I recognized the driver as the goon in Gaylord's outer office. He nodded to the other three men in the car. I did not run; it would have been pointless. Two of them hustled me into the back seat of the car.

The two who had forced me into the car held me down with my belly up. A third man in the front seat leaned over on his knees toward the back seat. He started beating my belly in a steady rhythm with what appeared to be a sock full of sand. It hurt. I think I passed out once or twice, but I am not sure. In those days there was nothing between the edge of Oklahoma City and Norman except the small town of Moore. Just south of Moore I was dumped out on the side of the road. Nobody had said anything. Following the example of Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront* and William Holden in *Stalag 17* I had not cried out, which would not have done any good anyhow.

It was raining. I tried to vomit but only managed to retch up a little phlegm. I got to my feet after probably about ten minutes. A quarter of an hour later I hitched a ride from a slightly drunken man who spread a blanket on the car seat so that I would not mess up his upholstery. He took me directly to my dormitory. I changed into dry clothes and walked to the student infirmary. I told the people on duty there that I had been beaten up. They x-rayed me. I had no broken bones. In fact I did not have a mark on me, for the men who had worked me over had been professionals. I slept until noon the next day, ate a bowl of broth, then slept until evening. I ate a cheese sandwich and drank some cold water and went to sleep again and slept until the next morning, which was a Monday. Then I got up and went to my classes, although I was still hurting terribly. I had appeared to have suffered no damage to my internal organs, but I was told to report back if I started coughing up blood.

The hurt died down before the pain pills given me in the infirmary ran out, and I never coughed up any blood. The campus police talked to me in the infirmary but lost interest after determining that the beating had not taken place in their jurisdiction. The beating had started in Oklahoma County, and I had been dumped out in Cleveland

County. I was told that I could report the beating in either place. I knew that it made no difference, for the man who had ordered me beaten up owned the authorities in both jurisdictions. I thought a long time about what persons I should tell about this. My fiancée was living in Minnesota with her mother until our planned August marriage. Telling her would only alarm her, and her mother lived in the kind of world in which she could believe that such beatings did not happen to people she knew. I did tell my wife after I had completely recovered and we were married.

I decided that I definitely could not tell my parents. Their total powerlessness in the face of such antagonists would hurt them in a way that I did not want them to be hurt. I was leaving Oklahoma right after my marriage to do graduate work at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and I did not think my offenses against power would follow me there. A few weeks later I found a list of Oklahoma faculty members who were allies of Dr. Edwin C. DeBarr, who had represented Ku Klux Klan interests on the campus in the early 1920s. The name of one of the professors who had to approve my master's essay was on it. I knew I had no chance of getting that essay approved, and that would not be soon. I decided to go directly for a Ph.D. degree in Wisconsin.

My wife and I were married in Enid a couple of weeks before my twenty-first birthday and headed north. I had foreclosed any chances for success in Oklahoma academic circles, but there were lots of other states. I should have paused in my studies and worked for a few years, but in those days one was liable to draft calls if not constantly enrolled. I was going to go directly for my doctorate and get a nice safe tenured position on the faculty of a prestigious university. For one thing, I did not quite fit the milieu and was made to feel it. I recall a professor, a brilliant and humane man but somewhat stuffy, who invited his seminar to an elaborate dinner at his house. He took me and his one African American student aside and explained multi-course meals. The safest thing to do was to work from the outside fork in. He was very nice about this, but it was clear that he somehow knew that our grandmothers had dipped snuff.

Our apartment, like that of most graduate students, was a bit short on furniture and our guests customarily disposed themselves on pillows. When I invited an African American friend to visit, I compulsively moved all the chairs into the living room. I did not want my friend to think I was white trash. Most of our best friends in those days were

Jews, over-represented in Wisconsin because the quota system was still partly in place in the Ivy League. They had experiences that I had not had and some of them had a precise style of argumentation that was new to me. To my Oklahoma ears their speech patterns reminded me of the clatter of typewriters. The strangeness gradually wore off and many of those we first met in Madison are still our friends.

My major professor was Merle Curti, a kind and learned man, but somehow I never got close to him. He had been Frederick Jackson Turner's last graduate student and shared my delight in a thesis that made sodbusters like my grandparents the cutting edge of the American historical experience. He was working on one of the first cliometric studies, an in-depth analysis of all the records concerning Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, as a way of testing some of Turner's ideas. The data that he and his students gathered rather clearly refuted, at least to my mind, Turner's notion that the frontier had been a class leveler. The rich stayed rich and got richer, while the poor stayed poor and drifted west one more time. Curti did not see this in his data, and he repeats Turner's idea of the frontier as a generator of equality in the book he published from his researches, *The Making of an American Community*. I was terribly disappointed.

There were visiting professors from whom I learned a great deal: Charles Barker, the biographer of Henry George; Thomas LeDuc, who had an incisive analysis of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal which was quite fresh at that time; and William Appleman Williams, whose ideas I did not understand at the time when I took his courses but which became integral to my thought in later years. I minored in sociology and greatly enjoyed the insights of Hans Gerth, a German émigré who was a follower of Max Weber and who had had C. Wright Mills as a graduate student. I devoured Mills' books; they were liberating and helped me organize my view of the world. I had an idea for a dissertation on Al Capone as a business entrepreneur. I pursued this for a couple of years despite the misgivings of my professors. Capone's associates were a notoriously close-mouthed bunch, I was unfamiliar with the subculture, and I finally failed to find the information I needed. However, I did find out some fascinating stuff. For instance the utilities magnate Samuel Insull was outrageously overcharging Capone for the gas and electricity to run his breweries. The feared Capone submitted to this racketeering by the respectable Insull like a meek little lamb.

After my failure with Capone, I decided to expand my undergraduate work on race riots into a dissertation. My professors, to say the least, did not share my notion that periodic eruptions of violence were central to the American experience and that racism, which was not a recognized word as yet, was more pervasive than most whites imagined. A decade later my friend Arthur Waskow wrote an optimistic book *From Race Riot to Sit-In*, which compared the violence of 1919 to the successful non-violent tactics of the early 1960s, but, as usual, I was a bit ahead of time in wanting to write about such things. I became discouraged, fell into what I now recognize was a deep depression, and my forward motion toward my degree ground to a halt. However, even in the depths there were three good things about Madison of which I took full advantage. There were great libraries maintained by the university and by the Wisconsin Historical Society of which I took full advantage, reading voraciously in a variety of areas, most of which had only a tangential relation to my studies. For instance I read every issue of *Time* magazine from its 1923 beginning onward in order to immerse myself in the milieu of an older generation.

The second great thing about Madison was the quality of the talk. I became an officer of the Wisconsin Film Society and participated in endless discussions about movies and related areas, and related matters seemed to encompass about everything. My fellow students were a brilliant group, less afraid than my Oklahoma friends to question the current consensus on many issues. We followed the Montgomery bus boycott and similar events with great interest. I recall particularly the incisive talk in late 1956 when both the US and Soviet alliances cracked. The US stopped the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt while the USSR was sending tanks to suppress dissidence in Hungary. The American voters overwhelmingly re-elected Eisenhower as if nothing had happened. I realized that much Cold War propaganda was absolute nonsense. In a small way I helped some Hungarian refugees get from Canada to the Madison campus.

My friends told me that since I believed in socialized medicine, racial equality, the absurdity of the arms race, and a fairer distribution of the nation's wealth, I was a socialist. In Wisconsin, where the Socialist Frank Zeidler was mayor of Milwaukee, this was not a particularly dangerous thing to be, especially as Joe McCarthy had been least effective on his home ground. I joined no party, but I began to think of myself as a

socialist. Although there were many decent Democrats like our local legislator Robert Kastenmeier, whom I helped with proofreading when the Wisconsin legal code was revised, I no longer felt in step with even the most liberal wing of the Democratic Party. I distrusted even the rising John F. Kennedy, for I knew from some of my fellow graduate students that he had not really written the book *Profiles in Courage*, which was published under his name.

Some of my Madison friends were close to the Communist Party and perhaps even members of it, although that was an impolite question to ask in those days and I never did. I did not see how anyone could justify the alliance between the USSR and Hitler's Germany in 1939, the forced collectivization policies which had led to the death of millions, and the suppression of independent tendencies in Eastern Europe. The ones I knew personally were decent people with much insight who certainly did not deserve the ongoing persecution to which they were subject. They introduced me to works like Herbert Aptheker's study of slave revolts and W. E. B. Dubois' *Black Reconstruction*. It was just that they had closed off part of their minds when they attempted to follow the Communist Party absolutely. I was never tempted to join the Communist Party except when I was really enraged but I tried to find ways then and later in which we could work together. Like most true believers they were ill-served by the bureaucracies that they allowed to command them.

Most people believe in at least some irrational things, ignoring S. N. Radakrishnan's warning that "If you believe absurdities, you will commit atrocities." People who close off part of their minds in their religion or some other area of their life should be tolerated and even loved as long as they are not hurting other human beings. We must all band together against irrationality when the atrocities start. The non-violent tactics of Martin Luther King and others were beginning to seem very attractive to me as a way of solving social problems.

Interesting non-university jobs were a third great thing about Madison. My wife had a job teaching art at Shorewood Hills School, starting at a salary of three thousand dollars a year. She loved the work and we shared its joys and difficulties. For lack of adequate supervision I floundered for most of a year as a Draper Fellow doing research at the Wisconsin Historical Society, but I did write articles on Wisconsin inventors for a

publication called *Thirtieth Star* that I hope were of use to public school students. I worked the summer of 1956 driving a pop truck. I made between sixty and one hundred dollars a week for a six-day week. My routes covered a wide variety of urban and rural areas. I learned a lot about small grocery stores, service stations and, lunch rooms of the sort run by what C. Wright Mills in *White Collar* called the “lumpenbourgeoisie”. I learned about the rhythms of economic life, noting, for instance, how a steel workers’ strike hundreds of miles away can cut the sales of Hires root beer in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin.

I drove a Checker Cab on weekends in 1958 and 1959. I got thirty-five percent of the amount on the meter plus tips, which were not generous as a rule. My most famous fare, Adlai Stevenson, who had received my first vote in a presidential election in 1956, gave me a dime tip on a dollar and a quarter fare from the Madison Airport to the Lorraine Hotel. The drunks whose driver’s licenses had been revoked were somewhat more generous. People whom I knew well did not recognize me when they got into my cab. Passengers would carry on intimate conversations with each other as if I did not exist. I wrote to Ralph Ellison saying that I was finally getting a gut knowledge of what it was like to be invisible. I encountered a variety of people among both passengers and fellow drivers whom I considered to be far more interesting than anyone I was meeting at the university, where I was increasingly estranged.

I saved my sanity and perhaps even my life by accidentally making my wife pregnant. In those days visibly pregnant women were not allowed to teach in public schools, and her contract was not renewed. I had to abandon graduate school and get a full time job. Fortunately, I had taken enough education courses in Oklahoma to qualify as a public school teacher. My services were not in demand in the Madison area or seemingly anywhere else in the state until almost Labor Day 1959. Then I found a school district in rural Kenosha County, Wisconsin, desperately seeking a new seventh grade teacher to teach the bumper crop born in 1946 and 1947. They hired me for a salary of four thousand dollars a year, plus a bonus of two hundred dollars for being male. I found a duplex apartment for seventy dollars a month just across the state line in Zion, Illinois, and we moved in. Within a few weeks I realized that I was happier teaching the general run of students in public schools than I ever would have been splitting hairs with brilliant

doctoral candidates and publishing esoteric articles in incomprehensible jargon for a tiny readership. I taught with some success and more or less happily for the next thirty-two years, and I still gladly talk to high school and junior high school audiences without fee whenever asked.

I still missed my well-stocked libraries and my learned and radical conversations. I subscribed to several magazines not available in local libraries, including *Anvil*, a publication of the Young Peoples Socialist League. I had read some interesting things in *Anvil*, especially a review of Elia Kazan's *Baby Doll* by Bob Bone. The review noticed, as I had, the wonderful down home faces in the background quietly enjoying the antics of the overheated white folks in the foreground. *Anvil's* last issue had already been published, but I got a personal letter of inquiry from the editor, for people sympathetic to socialist ideas were rather thin on the ground in Zion, Illinois. I replied, asking, among other things, the location of the nearest branch of the Socialist Party, since, at the age of twenty-five, I was too old to join YPSL itself. The nearest branch turned out to be forty miles away on the North Side of Chicago.

The next local meeting was held in the home of Max and Rose Weinrib on North Richmond. I was delighted with it. The Socialist Party was just as far from real political power then as it is now, but it was full of people doing great things in labor unions, civil rights groups, peace groups, and many other worthy outfits. It could serve as what we now call an interface for all the causes in which I was interested. Max Weinrib was the building contractor for housing in the suburban village of Deerfield that he intended to be racially integrated. The village condemned the land to create a park rather than let that happen. Carl Shier negotiated very difficult farm machinery worker contracts for the United Auto Workers. Norman Hill directed the Illinois branch of the Congress on Racial Equality as well as being state secretary of the S. P. Bert Ciepley and Irving Rapaport were fighting for their rights as dissident members of the Machinists' Union. Willam Bross Lloyd, Jr., put out a newsletter advocating freedom in Africa. Ben Williger could recall every strike and dissident campaign in which he had served, and he had been serving for more than fifty years even back then. I asked if an infant could be accommodated at meetings and Rose Weinrib said yes. I joined the party at once and my wife joined soon after. Our daughter Becky came in her pajamas and sat on all willing

laps in turn before being taken up to bed. Before her second birthday she had sat on the laps of Norman Thomas, Max Shachtman, Michael Harrington, Dr. Quentin Young, Timuel Black, Sam Farber from Cuba, and many other left celebrities.

Our first party cards were signed by the then national chairperson Frank Zeidler of Milwaukee. Within a year I was an officer of the local and then of the state organization. I joined Norman Hill's CORE also, helped several groups of striking workers in Illinois and Wisconsin and dispossessed sharecroppers in Tennessee. I also lost my first two teaching jobs partly because of my radical associations, but the demand for teachers to deal with post-World War II population boom remained high, and I was never without work during the regular school year. I did not enjoy the factional struggles that were constantly going on, and still do not, but I put up with them. I cared far more about campaigns against de facto segregation in Chicago, de jure segregation in the South, getting a union contract for Chicago teachers, ending nuclear testing, and defusing the Cold War generally than in the internal affairs of the S.P.

During the middle and late 1960s my wife and I became strongly opposed to the war in Vietnam. Greatly to our shock and surprise large sections of the party did not. My articles for the party press were censored by Penn Kemble, who later became a supporter of the contras in Nicaragua and a member of right-wing think tanks. Finally, a group mentored by Max Shachtman tried to disband the party and formed Social Democrats USA. Fortunately, many state and local branches had remained in being, and the national party reconstituted itself in 1973.

It is a small group, having no power base inside a labor union or as a left caucus in any major political party. It still represents valuable ideas that should not be allowed to die. I have spoken and written for its ideas in every public forum I can find, and I intend to keep doing so. I still believe that political democracy is increasingly meaningless without moves toward economic democracy. I believe that all forms of social inequality and exploitation are bad, and that poverty and war are worse.

When I was running as a Socialist for vice-president of the United States in 1976 as Frank Zeidler's running mate, I ran across an old Oklahoma acquaintance, Fred Harris. He had recently been a US Senator from Oklahoma and certainly the most decent of the candidates contending for the Democratic Party presidential nomination that year. He was

making a long-shot presidential run partly because he had not been able to get financial backing for another senatorial term from the oil companies and other Oklahoma big money. I was running on a platform that called for the socialization of energy countries, which has worked quite well in several parts of Europe as well as Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere, as an immediate demand. Fred Harris said that he thought that might be a good idea in the long run, but it was not the kind of thing he was free to say publicly. I was free to say it publicly, although I could not reach a large audience very often. I reflected that I would rather have that freedom than a position of so-called power that would make me a slave.

“As long as there is a lower class, I am in it. As long as there is a criminal element, I am of it. As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free.” “All right, then, I’ll go to hell.” That says it all.