

3/5/94 Maya Miller on Vietnam

This is March 5, 1994 and we're talking with Maya Miller. And should we just go ahead and do the Vietnam part, and you can say whatever you want about that, and then get into a little bit about Black Panthers.

Yeah, yeah (laughs). That sounds like a good format. I just have a few things to say about Vietnam. I have I find, a very little to say, although it was a very important factor in everyone's life. But as with the Civil Rights Movement, I felt here very much on the fringe because there weren't any big demonstrations. There weren't any demonstrations to speak of in Reno. What I think about most immediately is our dinner table listening, because we used to have arguments about whether the television should be turned off, because then it would have scenes from the war. And, do you remember? And also the number of people killed, the number of Vietnamese killed, which was always vastly inflated by General Westmoreland, and the number of U.S. killed, which was kept within very modest bounds.

But the thing about looking at scenes from the war, that I kept insisting that we had to do, I remember saying that I thought that that was just a very small way that we could get a sense of what our responsibility was. And I remember saying at one point, "Well as long as we let this war go on, we're going to have to watch it every night at dinner, even if it spoils our meal!" But it wasn't anything that I seemed to find any way to work on here at home. And that's where Tommy Whitehead came into the picture. I think it must have been earlier that he came to camp with his arguments about peace. It was the first intellectual analysis of =what the war was about that I had encountered. And what Tommy did was to take a speech that McGovern made on the floor of the Senate opposing the war, and blow it up and put it on the outside of his old car that he had. He had an antique car that he would drive around in and this speech was on the exterior of that so everybody could read it. And then since he was helping at camp in the summer, he would have arguments about the war with the more military folk involved, like Conkey, who felt that there was more reason for it, perhaps, than Tommy did.

Why don't you say who Tommy was and where he came from?

Oh well Tommy was about 6 years older than you, and lived down the road from us, had a brother that was close to his own age, Johnny, and they both were sons of farming family, but a farming family that was very highly educated. So both of them were valedictorians of their high school classes, and went on to Reed College and to Stanford.

They went to Carson High?

Yes, uh huh. That's where they were Valedictorians. And Tommy would farm during the summer, but he would also work at Washoe Pines, and help us with the haying and some of those things. And that's how we got into these conversations. Then at one point, He asked if I would – he was applying for his Conscientious Objector Status, and asked if I would go with him to the Draft Board in Carson City and I said, "Yes, sure."

And then he showed me the Quaker document that had spelled out for young men like Tommy the process that you should go through, and how you should try to take somebody with you from the community who could witness what you were saying and what was said to you. I was happy to be part of that role, and the process was indeed interesting. Because it was a group of people from Carson who had never seen anything like Tommy before. Tommy brought his tape recorder, and set it up. And in the middle of the inquiry, they had a phone call from outside the glass – and there were glass windows all around this room that we were in, and someone who was calling the shots was on the outside of the room. And they phoned in that we should remove that tape recorder. And so Tommy, with much ado, did, and said, “oh sure” (laughs). That would of course be some sort of major spying on the Carson Draft Board. But they asked all these weird questions, like “What would you do if Canada invaded?” (laughs.)

His problem was that he was not a Quaker himself, nor did he belong to any of the religions that were outright opposed to war. He had gone to an Episcopal Sunday School, as a child. But he had no religious conviction which was a sure way of getting Conscientious Objector status. But he had a very carefully reasoned out objection to being part of killing, and killing a people who had really done nothing to us.

How long a process was the presentation to the Draft Board?

Well, he had written it out, and his part took maybe a half hour, and then they asked their questions over another three quarters of an hour.

How many people were there?

There were about six. One of them was someone that I knew quite well who was in the National Guard. I can't remember his name. It was not an evil group, but it was one that believed in the war and hadn't really tangled with these questions in such profundity as Tommy gave them the opportunity to. (laughs)

Did they seem taken aback?

Well they finally ruled against him. They didn't rule that day, but they ruled against him, and then there was another whole process that went on. His mother had to go to request his papers – all of his papers – because then he was inducted. He was drafted and went down to Alameda Bay, which was the staging center where they induct you. There he went through that whole preliminary process down there and then came to the place where they say, “Now you can step forward and you will be part of the U.S. Army,” and he declined to step forward. This also was all spelled out in this book if instructions about how you do it to have a proper record and to be not just flouting all the laws, but to be regardful of your obligations, but at the same time, of your conscience. And so then he was charged again with something, and that charge simply hung over him during the rest of the war – a matter of years.

I remember something about him getting letters from them and sending them back for that. I think he was sort of saying, "there's no such person." And they never did come after him.

Yes, yes, un-huh. Not after that, no. But that was an interesting introduction, really, to the way the Conscientious Objection was to be made, and then later when Eric was due to be drafted, he decided to do it where he was going to college, which was down in San Jose, and that was the nearest draft office to Santa Cruz. And because almost any draft board down in the Bay Area would be more lenient than Carson City Draft Office.

I think Carson City actually had a record that they had never granted CO status. (I don't know the source for this).

Well, I'm glad anyway that Eric didn't have to go up against them as well. Although I was perfectly prepared to have that happen for him. I was interested in the fact that that was what he wanted to do. I'm glad. It seemed like an infinitely better way than some of the other modes, like going to Canada.

Is that what Tommy's brother Johnny did – go to Canada to avoid the war?

I think he must have had some sort of physical disability. You know there were physical disabilities of various kinds that kept people out and people would make happen to themselves (laughs) "Can't use you cause your feet's too big!" But Eric's I think, was a very good exercise as was Tommy's at that point in a young life – an exercise in figuring out what you really think about some very profound subjects, like killing and dying -- but mainly killing. And I think that it was a valuable challenge to have to meet at that point. I'm grateful that he had to do that, and I didn't have to do it! (laughs)

Well, did you have an opportunity after that to participate in any kinds of activities?

That's the thing I realize is sort of absent in my calendar. In the year that National Welfare Rights – you were at Putney and that NWRO had its meeting up in Rhode Island, which was like '66? Or '69? – we met some of the people there. Dave Dellinger, who was an outstanding peace fighter, and Pete Seeger. Some of those people had been also confronted by Welfare Rights' desire to have celebrities joining the ranks of anti-poverty. And so we got to know them to begin with there. But by and large, I didn't really know people who were demonstrating against the war. Every once in awhile, the ___ fighters, like the Scotts from Reno, would come onto the news with bringing in somebody from the outside to speak about peace. But there really wasn't an active part here. Then when I got onto the National Board of the League of Women Voters, my charge was that of dealing with poverty and race, and what happened during my years working on the Board was that I found that I was totally absorbed with those two rather large and demanding issues, and came sort of slowly to the realization that the League was going along and not declaring itself on the war. And that became sort of an embarrassment. You'd be there in Washington, and at a national Board meeting or at one of their big conferences, and you'd hear the sirens going because there'd be a big demonstration, but you wouldn't be

part of it, and the organization was not part of it. And the time that I finally decided I had to quit the League was after their National Convention, when they have just the state leaders in and it's a big do and a number of state people from Massachusetts and Arizona and a few states – California, of course – came trying to get the League to take a stand of some kind against the War.

And the president, Lizzie Benson, was determined that this was not going to enter the League's program and that it was a confusion that would be too disturbing to the organization. And so, she had the podium, and she was also a very commanding person. And night after night, in my room, try to strategize what to do next. Like the first one was a motion, asking the League to make it known that they were opposed to the Vietnam War. And that failed, or was set aside as not germane (laughs). But one after another parliamentary procedure was invoked in order to not deal with this issue.

This was the weekend when President Nixon actually had invaded – we'd sent our airplanes over Cambodia, which we said we'd never do and which we never acknowledged that we did, but we had. And these thousands and thousands of young people came to the city determined to shut Washington down, and it was the occasion of which something like 14,000 were arrested one morning around the White House. But as it built up, they brought in the National Guard and there were things like a couple of busloads parked right outside our hotel, with National Guard troops in them ready to quell the riots.

The final foray we made on the League was to suggest that we invite in the demonstrators for a little R and R since so many of them were children of the League members (laughs) or people who might be children of League members. Because that's what they'd done with the National Guard. The hotel had invited them to come in and shower and have a little rest (laughs), and so here we went on meeting and making these profound decision that had nothing to do with what was overwhelming Washington at the time. And by the time all of that ended and we had been frustrated with these parliamentary maneuvers, I just realized that I was spending 10 hours a day doing volunteer work for an organization that wasn't willing to speak up about the War, and that I couldn't do that. And I wanted it known why I was resigning. So, right after the meeting, I went up to see you in Putney and talked about it a little bit, and then went back to Washington, and then I realized I really didn't have any place where there was a typewriter where I could write out (laughs).

Your resignation? (laughs)

A carbon copy of my resignation, yes! So, I went to the National Welfare Rights office (laughs), and borrowed a typewriter there to use and wrote out my resignation. And it was ironic, because George Wiley was not there at the time, and when he got back, he was so angry that I'd resigned from the League because I was their sort of entrée to this middle class American women's group. But then I took my letter over to the League office and left it for Lucy, but showed it to the woman who had been my paid person in the League office for race and poverty issues. And it was so strange, because she brought

out of her drawer her letter resignation which she had written over the weekend also, because she, too, had just come to this same feeling that she couldn't go on.

(New page, not sure if it's the right one)

_____ *on the same issues.*

Well, I do know if you were conscious of the ferment that was going on among Black people and poor people, you realized that those were the people that were fighting the War. It very seldom touched people of our class. I realized that I knew nobody who was over in Vietnam all during the time I lived here. And the people that were over there were the poor Irish people from Boston and those place, many of whom had heard nothing but really laudatory stories fro their fathers about the great days of World War II. So that they were geared to thinking that war was something that was a fine expression of your patriotism. And then the ones that were by and large drafted were ones who didn't find a way of staying out, didn't to college – college exempted you.

The thing that happened during the same convention, though, that really did shake up the League was Kent State. We had a very big contingent from Ohio and they were really shaken by it.

Kent State was in direct response to Cambodia then, right? So all that happened in that one week that you were meeting over there?

I think so, yes. And at night you'd be in the hotel – I can remember going to the window and just watching because the sirens were just always going. There was such tension. And to have the numbers – thousands and thousands of students come into the city trying to shut down the government!

Did it feel as though they were being successful in shutting it down?

No, it didn't!

Aside from the sirens, was it bureaucratic business as usual?

No, no, it wasn't business as usual because they did shut down the bridge coming into Georgetown, and there were these mass arrests, which really took a large part of the police force to process. And then they had these weird little machines that had been developed for the police handling of crowd control- and they were like motorized tricycles. They were little, and they could cut into crowds and around among people. In the early morning, I would go out and just hang out with the people who were the peace makers, and as they were milling around the city – our hotel was right on one of those circles -- just down from Dupont – and you would see these little troops on tricycles go cutting into and through the groups and dissipating them. And it was really eerie. You know, they were licking up food where they could at drustores and all, while we were having these measured meals in the hotel! (laughs). It was such an eerie contrast and such

a on to make you feel as through you were part of an establishment that you didn't want to be part of .

Well throughout the War was one of your feelings that there were a lot of people protesting the war, and your work around (poverty) issues was YOUR work?

Yes, I think it must have been that because, and there was not much of a handle here other than the Quakers. (There was not – I don't remember in Reno anti-war groups the way there was actually around the Gulf even, or the Central America wars. I think by then we learned that we wanted to be part of something.)

Back to the War. It was not so much a choice. It was just what had come to me, you know, and that sort of is generally the story of my life. I don't charge forward and make new paths. I just have taken what was there because when I was invited on the National Board, it was as this head of Human Resources. And so, that's what my job was and there was no peace person and there was no peace platform, because that was their decision – not to. The thing that happened to me at the end of this weekend, however, before I came up to see, I think it must have been the peace gathering on the Mall. I went out, just to hang out in that and sit around. And as I was telling you, I sat around with some people, who were there from Wisconsin or someplace, and who explained to me that the guys I had been talking to were narcs who were long-haired and had on their psychedelic costumes (laughs) and dressed up in places (?) My more learned friends on the subject of demonstrations assured me that I mustn't confide in any of them (laughs). But that day, I remember so well going over and seeing the woman who was, I think, the first president of the League of Women Voters. And she was out there with the group remembering that in the early days of the League, when the League started, the ystarted with a platform that included anti-war. And so it isn't that it wasn't a part of the League. It was just that the League had gathered up this kind of modus operandi of having things you studied and coming to conclusions about them and those being the subjects that you dealt with. But the foreign policy one somehow didn't include war.

Did they ever end up taking a stand?

I don't think so. And I don't know where they were on Central America.

I think Jan said they studied Central America and actually did take a position against the funding of the war.

Did they? Uh huh. Well, I'd like to think that our complaints made some dent, even though it didn't change while we were there. But it helped to move them along to some realizations. That happened in relation to abortion. They weren't taking any stand on abortion nor the ERA to begin with, but they came around.

Did Lucy Benson get back to you about...?

No, she ignored it. I was very disappointed.

Gosh, I would think so.

Yes, it's part of my assortment of organizations that I sloughed out of, without any "hip, hip!" (laughs)

Without fanfare. But there must have been a lot of people who were with you in sentiment.

Oh yes, yes. Rita Cortez, the woman who sent me the eagle, who was a Puebla leader, a leader in the Pueblo Indian Movement, was one of them. And Massachusetts was a state of course that has always been so full of peaceniks it was also strong. And I guess ultimately, they came out. But I don't think they made it during the Vietnam War – although the Peace Talks dragged on indefinitely, it seemed (laughs).

I remember until '75. And then during those years also, did you have opportunity to argue the war, or did it seem like the same polarizing thing. Did it seem like the rest of the country where you'd be at somebody's house and the issue would come up and you'd have to talk about it or make your views known?

I don't remember being in very many situations where I was confronted with that. I just was in the world at large, as it was, almost as it was with yellow ribbons. But that isn't really true. By the time of the early 70s, people were really tired of the War, frightened by the implications, and frightened by the dissention it had caused in this country. But I'm puzzled by why it is that I don't have any kind of major crises that occurred in my own life around the Vietnam War.

But it seems you never had a moment of realization it was wrong. It was maybe something you always felt.

No, not always, but really began to understand with that McGovern article of Tommy's and then you began to see what was happening in centers of population and in the colleges. You know, you just do have to think how important the draft was to middle class people's minds. The realization of their own children.

McGovern ran for president in '72. And in that year he also came – just before that he came to the National Welfare Rights Convention. Do you remember that? That was in October of '71. Here it says, "Kit's school", and "Peru," and "NWRO in Rhode Island."

And then you supported, you gave money to McGovern?

Yes, yes. But also what they did at the National Welfare Rights was to get McGovern to accept their platform on Welfare, which was an adequate income. An many people credit that as one of the reasons for his failure! (laughs)

He took that on – he was very decent, yes. But that indeed then, you're right about the sequence. We supported McGovern, but then we also had supported the National Welfare

Rights with money. And it was those two things—the McGovern and the NWRO – that undoubtedly were the reason for putting us on Nixon's Enemy's List And I don't know when that was. Was that in '72?

I don't know. We should find out. What do you recall about that, and how did you find out?

Oh, somebody called me in the early morning from the newspaper – from the AP, and read it to me off the wire. And it was that they had just published Nixon's Enemy's List, and there were three from Nevada: Dick and me, and this George Gunn (laughs), who actually was not a Nevadan, but a Californian who had a ranch in the eastern part of the state.

And was there any fall-out from that?

Well, no, no. It made the paper. And it was a happy reputation because by that time, Nixon had begun to lose his...

..mind?

(laughs) Well, his mind and his guilt. Not his g-u-i-l-t, but g-i-l-t, you know, golden boy image, and was getting tarnished. That must have been '73. '72 for McGovern, and then right after that for the Enemies listing. That is notable – I must remember to put that on my (laughs) little list of honoraria (laughs).

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