

Oral History Transcript — Dr. William Davidon

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Interview with Dr. William Davidon
By Patrick Catt
At Haverford College
July 11, 1997

Transcript

Catt:

This is July 11, 1997, with Professor William Davidon at Haverford College. And the first thing I'd like to ask, is it okay if we tape record the interview?

Davidon:

Please do.

Catt:

Secondly, any quotations that I'd like to use from the interview in my dissertation, I will check with you before doing so for accuracy and your release. I will send you a consent form when I

send you the transcript back for your proofing again, and also for your release. It can be a conditional — or what I like to do is I donate a copy of our interview to the American Institute of Physics, History of Physics Center for their records as well as mine. And then you're going to have a copy of the final transcript when it's released for your own personal use. And if you'd like a copy of the tape as well, just let me know and I'll make one for you.

Davidon:

Great, thanks very much.

Catt:

The first question deals with activism. Political and social activism in your family's history. You can take this as far back as you want and you can extend this as far as you want to distant cousins, in-laws, things of that nature.

Davidon:

I guess my family, to the best of my knowledge, doesn't have a history of social or political activism. My father was sort of liberal in his general political thinking, but not politically active. He was a civil engineer. Growing up, particularly in the Depression period, he was a very [???] a good bit. So I would say that very little political influence from my parents. As a teenager I personally began to be sort of more involved. One of my first political activities was when Norman Thomas was prevented from speaking in Jersey City by Mayor Ed [???], and a group of us went up [???] [???] for him in Jersey City for his right to speak. But that was not something — my parents didn't discourage me from this involvement, but it wasn't something they were involved in themselves.

Catt:

And your mother, what was her...?

Davidon:

Her primary activity was at home. She didn't have a job outside of the home. And again, I think she was generally liberal in her general orientation. She supported Roosevelt and the New Deal, but was not politically active.

Catt:

Roosevelt Democrats, would that be...?

Davidon:

Yeah, I'd say.

Catt:

Where did you grow up?

Davidon:

From when I was three to when I was sixteen in Newark, New Jersey. And then just before I finished my senior year in high school, my family moved to the St. Louis area.

Catt:

St. Louis.

Davidon:

So I finished up high school in St. Louis. Then went from there, started Purdue for the equivalent of a couple years of college, but it was a chaotic time. This was during World War II. Purdue shifted to a naval training program. And then from Purdue went to the University of Chicago, where I did the rest of my under graduate and all my graduate work.

Catt:

Your religious denomination?

Davidon:

Jewish.

Catt:

Orthodox?

Davidon:

No, I would say Sartarian.

Catt:

How about your interest in science? How did you get interested in that?

Davidon:

Well, I was interested in electronics and radio probably from when I was ten or eleven. I got an amateur radio license when I was fourteen. So when I went off to college I just assumed I was going to electrical engineering, it just never was a question. And I was very unhappy with the sort of very rote approach to science and engineering at Purdue. A chance encounter, somebody suggested I'd be happier at the University of Chicago. And I switched from engineering to physics and from the very engineering oriented education to a scientific education by going to Chicago. So it was a big change from a random conversation.

Catt:

When you were growing up, you had role models or heroes, were they scientists? For example, Einstein?

Davidon:

I would say both the way of thinking scientifically as well as the general view of society on a lot of Einstein's writings. I worked for — the first presidential election that I voted in was the last one that Norman Thomas ran in. It was 1948. I worked for Benjamin Schwartz, but I was involved deeply in Norman Thomas' campaign. I don't know if I'd call either Einstein or Norman Thomas role models, but they gave some flavors to what my interests were.

Catt:

Some influences and direction?

Davidon:

Yeah.

Catt:

Okay. In high school, you mentioned campaigning or leafleting for Thomas, was that the extent of your activism? Were you involved in high school government or other social?

Davidon:

There was a group of young people, socialists. This was in Newark, New Jersey.

Catt:

[Inaudible]?

Davidon:

[Inaudible]. I was peripherally involved in that. I wasn't very active then. Also, I guess the passivist leanings were certainly part of my thinking, but the general horror of war.

Catt:

When you moved to St. Louis, did you find that a dramatic change from New Jersey, either politically or socially?

Davidon:

I was a loner to a large extent. I didn't really have close social ties in high school. It was only from a period of — we moved there, I think it was around December of '42, and I went off to Purdue in June of '43. So it was really a short period of time we were there in St. Louis. It was certainly different general ideas. The high school where I was in Newark was one which most of the students there were very interested in education. Most went on to college. Southwest High School in St. Louis was much more diverse student body. A smaller fraction went on to college. So it was a change, but I wasn't there that long with the change to make that much difference.

Catt:

When you got to Purdue, you were there for how long?

Davidon:

Bits and pieces. I was there — I went there in June of '43. Then in fall of '43 there was a break because they were switching over to a program to run for the navy officer's training program. And so I was back in St. Louis for a few months and then back to Purdue for another couple of semesters. That was summer of '43 and then '44. I started in Chicago briefly in '45. I was in Chicago there too, only for a few months and went into the Navy.

Catt:

I was going to ask you, during this time a lot of people your age are going into the service.

Davidon:

Right. I went into the Navy in March of '45 and was in the Navy until August of '46. I went through an electronics training program, an eleven month training program. When I finished that whole program, they asked who knew how to type and I was one of the people who knew how to type, so I typed people's discharge papers for the summer of '46, and then we

discharged ourselves.

Catt:

Interesting. I almost want to ask why didn't you go in earlier.

Davidon:

I enlisted just before I was eighteen. I was seventeen when I enlisted. And went in when I just became eighteen.

Catt:

When were you born, I guess I should ask.

Davidon:

Born in 1927.

Catt:

That helps me out with chronology. Do you label yourself a passivist at this time? And if so how did that fit in with —

Davidon:

I was a passivist in general orientation, but I was I guess politically undeveloped. I really hadn't thought through all of the ramifications. So I would say it wasn't until the '50s that I became sort of more firm in my opposition to the war.

Catt:

When you made the switch from engineering to physics, what type of physics were you interested in?

Davidon:

As an undergraduate there wasn't that degree of sort of specialization, the increasingly theoretical foundations of physics. My thesis was approached in an unconventional way. It was a formulation of electrodynamics, which I was sort of interested in on my own. I was working on it independently and didn't really know whether anybody would ever be interested in it as a thesis project. And only as it developed did I finally get Marvin Goldberger to be willing to be a sponsor of it. So that became an acceptable topic and got me my Ph.D. But I kept moving towards the more political and mathematical aspects of physics.

Catt:

May I ask what the title of it?

Davidon:

It's a [???] Formulation of Quantum Electrodynamics.

Catt:

When you were in Chicago after you came back to stay in the fall of '46, and then until you finished your Ph.D. in what year?

Davidon:

My history in Chicago also is sort of chaotic. I got my bachelors in June of '47. And I got married in '47 when I was twenty years old. And did some of — in fact, I did the course work for my graduate work, but then had a job off campus designing instruments for isotope applications. Didn't really know whether I'd ever pursue graduate work systematically. I finally got my masters while I was working off campus and was strongly encouraged to continue for a doctorate. But even then it was theoretical work I was interested in and I didn't want to go through the mechanics of finding anybody at Chicago. I didn't want to shift what I was doing. I wanted to do what I wanted to do and I didn't really care what was going to come of it. So I was working off campus and really only very loosely tied to academic work. And just sort of fortunate for my professional development that Marvin Goldberger was a sympathetic person and was willing to put up with my independent and [??] [??] ways, so I was able to complete my doctorate.

Catt:

And what year was that?

Davidon:

That was in '54.

Catt:

So I take it...well, the University of Chicago and physics in this period is if not, it's one of the leading centers for research. You have Fermi there.

Davidon:

I was off campus. I didn't really get much of the benefit. After I got my doctorate then I left this company where I was doing this electronics design work and did some work at the University, actually some experimental work at the university, which was [??] [??] [??]. And that brought me closer in contact with the academic world than I had been as a student. There was also at that time, this was now in the mid '50s, when I got more involved in that whole matter of nuclear bomb testing. There was an active group in Chicago. Art Rosenfeld and Jay Orear and others sort of began to push for an end to atmospheric bomb testing.

Catt:

My next question, your political activism and social activism during your graduate school days.

Davidon:

Almost nil. I'd say it was more after I got the Ph.D. and I was there at the university that I began to be more involved. Of course, the initial focus was stopping bomb, the bomb tests.

Catt:

Our chronology is going to slip as we go through because sometimes I'll go back on events. What was your overall reaction to the Cold War, but within that, to McCarthyism starting in the '50s?

Davidon:

I would say McCarthyism was early '50s, and I was not directly affected by it. Not in any way

that I'm aware of. I was unhappy with the kinds of things that were going on, but they didn't touch me personally. One sort of [??] McCarthyism, just before I made the switch from working at this electronics place to going to the University I considered going to Argonne Labs. And there I was denied security clearance. I believe mostly because of some of the political activities of my sister in-law and her family more than anything I had been involved in. I'm not really quite sure just what was their political faction. However, after being in Chicago for a couple of years, I then switched to Argonne Labs, which at that time did not require clearance.

Catt:

What was your reaction to the Oppenheimer/Condon security trial cases?

Davidon:

I was very, in a private way, unhappy with Teller and the role that Teller played in casting doubt on Oppenheimer's loyalty.

Catt:

Professor Teller was at Chicago at this time?

Davidon:

I was at Chicago at the time.

Catt:

Professor Teller was also at Chicago at this time?

Davidon:

I think he was still at Chicago. I'm not quite sure just when it was he actually left Chicago, just when it ends. He was certainly at Chicago while I was a graduate student. But I didn't do anything about it. I was unhappy and muttered to people whom I knew about my unhappiness, but I didn't take any active role in protesting or try to build support for Oppenheimer.

Catt:

How about the Rosenbergs?

Davidon:

Again, I was a passive critic of the government's killing of them, but I didn't get involved. At that time lots of organizations were trying to build support for the Rosenbergs, but I never got involved.

Catt:

Did you know anyone (this just sounds like a standard question), anyone who was blacklisted?

Davidon:

Not to my knowledge.

Catt:

Or removed from tenure because of their political involvement?

Davidon:

I didn't have any personal contact with people who were suffering.

Catt:

In your interactions with Marvin Goldberger, did you ever discuss either the social responsibility of scientists or politics in any way?

Davidon:

Not at that time. Later on when the Vietnam War was becoming a more major thing, Goldberger was part of the Jason Group and I had some exchange with him about the Jason Group and what many of us thought the Jason Group was doing in legitimizing some of the more advanced weaponry in Vietnam. He was trying to convince me that they weren't playing the role that I thought they were playing. But this was just an exchange, considering later on this would have in the mid '60s [???] [???]. Back while I was staying as a graduate student, while I was working on my thesis I was working. I wasn't a graduate student in the typical sense of a student. We never really had much discussion of political issues.

Catt:

Even amongst other graduates?

Davidon:

Like I say, there was a group of us in the context of bomb testing. Other students.

Catt:

And that's after you received your doctorate?

Davidon:

Right.

Catt:

How did you get involved in that?

Davidon:

I guess the first very specific thing I can think of was that Walter Sullivan was a science writer for the New York Times, and had an article debunking, or he thought he was debunking the concern that many people were raising about the injury from the fallout from the 1954 explosion on the Marshall Islands. He said that this talk about there being natural uranium involved in the explosion was absurd because natural uranium doesn't sustain a chain reaction. So a group of us wrote a letter to the New York Times pointing out that the role of the natural uranium was not to sustain a nuclear reaction, but to capture neutrons and add to, as a tamper explosion, to add to the size of it. I guess there was quite a bit of a sort of fuss. First the fact that Sullivan was thought by many people to sort of be an unofficial government spokesperson, and to have his sort of authority challenged by a group of graduate students, it sort of spurred the graduate students on and it would proceed to producing local discussion. That sort of got me more involved with other people who were interested in alerting people to the dangers of nuclear war and nuclear weapons in particular.

Catt:

Were you a member of the Federation of Atomic Scientists? Did you join?

Davidon:

Yeah, I think I joined. These things are sort of informal and it's a little hard to say what joining consists of. But somewhere along the way in the mid '50s I think I sort of became an official member of the Atomic Scientists of Chicago, which was the local group of what was soon to be the Federation of American Scientists.

Catt:

What were your actions or impressions or thoughts regarding Sputnik and this over-arching view of Soviet Unionists? I don't want to use the rating term of evil empire, but...

Davidon:

I wrote an article for the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists shortly after Sputnik and it was essentially [??] [??] of the modern Roman circuits. The spectacular shows with instruments of death for the arousal of the public enthusiasm. It was Roman circuses which would divert people from their problems by having someone else being in the ring being slaughtered. The focus on missiles and the drama associated with missiles and the launching of Sputnik was certainly being used to push military developments and missiles. I wrote this article sort of trying to focus on the dangers associated with missile development rather than the excitement of Sputnik launching.

Catt:

But it also stimulates the government to act, and then they passed the NDEA, National Defense Education Act, which starts to throw a lot of money into science, especially into physics. Perhaps in answering that, after you left the electronics design company, went to Argonne, were you there at this time and how long?

Davidon:

I was at Argonne from '56 to '61. I was at Nuclear Chicago, which is the company where I did the designing instruments for the isotopes from about '49 to '54. I was in Chicago from '54 to '56 and [??] [??] [??], and then at Argonne from '56 to '61. So I was at Argonne at the time that Sputnik and the nuclear developments. I was at Argonne most of the time. Actually there was a six month period in the first half of '58 when I was a visiting professor at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Catt:

Did you receive any government or military support for research while you were at Argonne?

Davidon:

No. Although Argonne itself was financed by the AEC, though administrated by a consortium of universities to de-politicize the AEC involvement. In fact, I found the interest at Argonne and the activity at Argonne on political issues to be greater than I found it at Chicago. It was an active group of people that got together, more or less monthly at Argonne, to discuss what was happening on other bomb testing and military developments. And I also started becoming more involved with peace groups in the Chicago area while I was at Argonne.

Catt:

Peace groups?

Davidon:

American Friends Service Committee, ad hoc groups concerned about nuclear bomb testing and nuclear policy. I was on the board when that group got formed. And it was during that time too that I did a lot of public speaking on the issues of nuclear weapons and spoke to some groups and pointed out that the energy released in a single, large, nuclear explosion is greater than the energy released in all the bombs and shells of all the wars within our history. And that particular quote got picked up by Khrushchev at the United Nations. It said that according to a nuclear scientist Davidson, such and such is the case. Apparently people were physically searching for who this Davidson was, and I got this phone call from a reporter while I was in Chicago, saying, "Did I make such a statement?" That was the first I learned of Khrushchev and made this claim. With things such as that, I was not so much involved in the professional opposition to what was going on as in sort of peace groups and discussion groups focused on this outside of the organizational structure.

Catt:

Were you a member of the APS at this time?

Davidon:

Probably. At one point I was a member of the APS. I'm not quite sure when I became a member of the APS. It could have well not been until the late '50s early '60s that I became a member. I guess I can tell by — I think I started getting physical reviews regularly in the late '50s. So that must have been when I became a member.

Catt:

Okay. This is a speculative question. How do you think most people viewed, or the American society viewed the scientists during this time? Or physicists, perhaps.

Davidon:

I think there were contradictory views, and with justification. There were contradictory groups. There were different groups of scientists. I think there was one group about which the public sort of had some kind of vague feeling for the scientists who were working on weapons. It sort of mixed together the technical problems and engineering problems associated with weapons developments with scientists. And sort of view scientists as being the source of missiles, bombs, high tech weaponry of one sort or another, and that's sort of one view of scientists. On the other hand, I think much of the public was aware of the fact that scientists were trouble makers, iconoclasts, disrupting the smooth functioning of things. Scientists were making — you know, this group was in Chicago. They should have been able to make some public focus on the dangers associated with nuclear weapons, and that was part of the image some of the public has of scientists, of sort of disrupting the smooth function of government and the military and being...I don't know what the right focus is, but being outsiders, being the ones who keep things from going smoothly. I think that people have sort of both views. The scientists as munitions maker and the scientists as disrupter. And in which scientists play both roles.

Catt:

I'm just curious that you don't mention the scientists as leading the charge for a better world — better living through chemistry, for example. Atoms repeat and atoms are your friend.

Davidon:

I don't know if I sensed that positive view in the public — the scientists as the benign developer of things.

Catt:

The reason I ask is there's been studies on anti-intellectualism and its effects on science. The term egghead, I don't know if you were ever called that.

Davidon:

Very much so. In fact in the context of Stevenson's campaign, a group of us met with Stevenson in pushing the anti- bomb testing.

Catt:

This was in 1960?

Davidon:

This was the '56 Stevenson campaign. He ran in '52 and '56. I was at Argonne in '56 and met with Stevenson, and the sort of calling people egghead provoked Stevenson as well as the group of scientists who were exploiting him. Sort of called that or that was the image that people had of him. That's part of what I meant when I said the disrupters, the sore thumbs, the ones who don't let things go along smoothly.

Catt:

Okay. With the money coming into Argonne, did you ever sit down and discuss either with those in charge or with your colleagues, that perhaps there were some ties that may lead to this misuse or misapplication of the research that was going on? Was this ever discussed?

Davidon:

Oh yeah. There were lots of different kinds of things going on at Argonne. I was in a political physics group working on very esoteric problems that were totally unrelated to nuclear weaponry or nuclear power or technological applications. So it didn't really affect the physics group directly. But [??] [??] with some reactor development as one of the functions of a laboratory. There were people from that division who were the ones that we talked with and were there. We were buffers. I guess the phonetical physics group where most of our time and energy was. Sort of buffer from the [??] the fact that the universities ran out [??] [??] avenues [??] [??] provided money, but the consortium of universities actually did the running of the place. But also the head of the phonetical physics group, Morton Hamermesch, was a very solid buffer between the administration and the scientists. So I was becoming increasingly physical active during that time and occasionally got us noticed in the press, etc. I never was under any pressure. At no time was there any indication that I should lay off opposition to bomb testing or to government policies because I was [??].

Catt:

These are just some larger events that were going on around the country and internationally, just to get a sense of your reactions to them. To the Castro Evolution, and then following that, Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs?

Davidon:

In '61 is when I left Argonne. I sort of had a whimsical interest in teaching. I wasn't doing anything about it, but I liked the idea of teaching. Through no initiative of my own, but I was the committee for setting up the policy. The husband of one of the faculty members here at Haverford knew that I was sort of interested in teaching, and in '61 when there was opening here at Haverford, asked me if I was interested in coming here. So I came to Haverford in September of '61. The Cuban Missile Crisis was '62, so I was no longer at Argonne. I was involved a lot in talking to people about the dangers of nuclear war in '62. The Cuban Missile Crisis sort of provided a very sharp and defining focus on the dangers of nuclear war. I had very mixed feelings about the extent to which I was becoming sort of involved in political activity since part of me wanted to just have a quiet scientific life. So I was sort of, in some sense, resentful of the growing involvement in alerting people to the dangers of nuclear war. It was that more than — I was I'd say emotionally sympathetic to the Castro revolution and the overthrow of Batista, but I really didn't know much about the details of what was going on in Cuba. But I was very concerned about the Cuban missile crisis. At the same time, I started to say, being unhappy about the diversion of my scientific interest because of that. To the point that in '62, just after the missile crisis, I decided this kind of life wasn't really what I wanted. I just wanted more of the peaceful, scholarly life, and applied for and received appointments in New Zealand at The University of New Zealand to go teach physics there. I thought that would be more satisfying than agitating against nuclear war. But the arrangements that I had put to make with son for his spending part of the year in New Zealand and I didn't want to go there if it meant having very little contact with my son, so I ended up staying at Haverford. But I bring all of this in to indicate that there was a tension. I was agitating about nuclear weapons and the dangers of nuclear weapons in the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis, at the same time resenting the diversion of my time and energy scientifically.

Catt:

When you came to Haverford, what was the nature of your scientific work?

Davidon:

It was theoretical work on examining the consequences of basic symmetry principles for particle physics.

Catt:

I don't know much about Haverford physics, and I'm assuming that a lot of your interaction with other physicists was from say from Penn or Princeton?

Davidon:

I'd say there was some interaction from Penn. Most of my scientific work I tended to do on my own. So I gave seminars at Penn and talked to people, but in terms of really detailed work was on my own. And then I continued to have sort of professional exchanges from the people at Argonne. Hans Ekstein was a physicist at Argonne, and he and I published joint papers while I was at —

Catt:

How do you spell his last name?

Davidon:

Ekstein, E-k-s-t-e-i-n.

Catt:

In early '60s, '63, '64, you also had civil rights issues starting to generate interest. What was your reactions and involvements with that?

Davidon:

Sympathetic. In terms of actual activity I went down in the march from Selma to Birmingham. I went down to Birmingham and I took part in a march there. Locally there was an effort to challenge the practice of some of the local barbers in refusing to serve Black students or Black people that are students or not. So a group of us went and tried to integrate the barber shops in the area. By this time I was sort of involved with some activities for American Friends Services Committees, both in their peace education program as well as in civil rights.

Catt:

What was it like for you down in Birmingham?

Davidon:

It was a short, two day [???]. It was part of a show of solidarity. Some people I knew were going so I went with them.

Catt:

You weren't there for the final march into Montgomery?

Davidon:

No.

Catt:

Maybe I'm confusing this, because there was a march from Selma into Montgomery and then there was another one from Selma to Birmingham.

Davidon:

Now I'm getting mixed up. I'm not quite sure. Now that you mention Montgomery, I think I'm wrong. I think it was Montgomery that I went to, not to Birmingham.

Catt:

That's the very famous one where Martin Luther King, Jr. is going across the bridge, saying, "They'll enter Montgomery over my dead body."

Davidon:

No, this was Montgomery, because Birmingham was chaotic and this was peaceful and exuberant with a lot of support from people on porches of the houses we were passing by. It was a happy, exuberant inclusion of the march. It was Montgomery. So I was just wrong when I

said Birmingham.

Catt:

Okay. Were you yourself ever threatened while you were on this march?

Davidon:

No.

Catt:

When you came to Haverford, was it tenure track?

Davidon:

Right. I came here as an assistant professor and got tenured here in '68.

Catt:

Going down to the march, doing some of the other activities that you were doing, did colleagues in your department or amongst the college, did they ever take you aside and say perhaps this isn't what you should be doing right now?

Davidon:

I would say the colleagues in the physics department felt that I was nuts. Particularly Fay Selove, the person who was instrumental in my coming to Haverford. She was undoubtedly the best known physicist here at Haverford. She felt that this activity was taking too much of my time, that she had high expectations of what I could do in physics and she felt that because I spent a lot of my time in political activity that I wasn't doing as much as I could in physics. She communicated this clearly to me. It wasn't a pressure for me to change. It was just that she lamented the fact that I wasn't doing more physics.

Catt:

How do you spell her name?

Davidon:

S-e-l-o-v-e. Actually her full name is Faye Eisenberg. Her name is Eisenberg and A-j-z-e-n-b-e-r-g. Selove was her husband's name.

Catt:

He's a Penn.

Davidon:

He's a Penn and she ended up leaving Haverford and going to Penn. The only other occasion when there was any sort of, I wouldn't really call it pressure, but a nudge to not do as much political activity is if there was a protest at a pretty wealthy nearby Presbyterian church. Where one of the people who is influential in the church was also influential in Acme Markets. I think he was some executive director of Acme Markets. And there was an effort to get Acme Markets to put pressure on some of its mega growers in southern New Jersey. There was this group, I'm not sure of the name of the group. The group that I knew of anyway, were students from [???] [???]logical Center, had organized this protest at the church to try to get Acme

Markets to support the organizing campaign by the tomato pickers. Shortly after this protest the president of Haverford at that time was a John Coleman. John pulled me in and said that my taking part in such activity doesn't threaten my job at all. At the same time, I should ask myself is this the most effective thing I could be doing? It of course supports the goal of this protest, but it creates a lot of problems with the college and some of the people contributing money to the college are likely not to give money because they see faculty members taking part in such protests. Why don't I sort of think twice as to what's most effective. So it was a very sort of gentle leaning on me to sort of cool it a bit.

Catt:

Were you publishing?

Davidon:

Less than I would have. I would say there was a period of time from the mid '60s to early '70s that I did not publish. So there was a gap in my publication. I was working on a textbook which I never finished. Actually, when I got my tenure in 1968, Fay Selove was the one who sort of put together the material. And she said even though there was a dearth of my publication [???] [???] a few years prior to that. The fact that I was working on this text and talking with groups about the text was seen as sort of a legitimate professional activity. But there's no question. I would say from the mid '60s to early '70s, political activity rather than research was my primary activity outside of teaching. MALE: What about the free speech movement that was taking place on the West Coast?

Davidon:

Very little contact with it at all.

Catt:

When did you first hear about Vietnam?

Davidon:

Early '60s. The Committee for Nonviolent Action was I think [???] [???] [???] among the earliest activities. Briefly there was a [???] [???], which to begin with was really closer to the colleges than our building, which a couple of blocks away. Building parts for helicopters that were being shipped to Vietnam. The Committee for Nonviolent Action, in which I had gotten involved with some activities for [???] [???] action when I was still out in the Chicago area, opposing the missile base. There was a missile base in Nebraska that we tried to make more people aware of the danger associated with the missiles. The Committee for Nonviolent Action sort of hadn't been organizing anything that year until somebody started focusing on this [???] helicopter thing. They moved and expanded to a community further from here in Springfield. And the first time I got arrested was handing out leaflets there against the building of helicopters to be shipped to Vietnam. That was in the early '60s.

Catt:

1965.

Davidon:

'65.

Catt:

In '64, I'm going to assume that you didn't vote for Goldwater.

Davidon:

You assume correctly. Actually it's interesting. My son had been living with his mother in '64. He was about sixteen years old. He felt his mother was too conservative and wanted to live with me for a while. So he came east in '64, and then to rebel against me he voted for Goldwater, but I was working against Goldwater.

Male voice:

For Johnson?

Davidon:

For Johnson. It was in '64 before Johnson became tied to Vietnam policy.

Catt:

If we go back to '60 briefly, were you active — Well in '60 and '64 were you active locally in trying to canvas for candidates or?

Davidon:

In '60 I was in Chicago.

Catt:

Chicago, right.

Davidon:

And then it was...

Catt:

Kennedy, Nixon.

Davidon:

Kennedy and Nixon. I guess I wasn't too involved in campaigning. In '64 I was much more involved because of Goldwater's sort of general — I don't know how to put it. It wasn't that he was for nuclear war, but he was much more bellicose in his efforts.

Catt:

Wasn't exactly opposed to using them.

Davidon:

Open to using the threat of nuclear weapons to achieve political justice.

Catt:

I know the inter-war activities are extensive. One of the first things that happened with the draft, and what was your reaction to that?

Davidon:

The registration for the draft started a little bit earlier. I remember registration for the draft. It was prior to the Vietnam activity that [inaudible] registration. I'm trying to remember when draft registration started.

Catt:

I was thinking '64, but it really doesn't become a big factor until '65.

Davidon:

Well, it became an issue on campus certainly in the mid '60s. I just don't know for sure just when it got started. Six months later, a group of us at Haverford, mostly another fellow in the physics department and I, started putting out a newsletter to keep track of how different people either at Haverford or Haverford alone were coping with the draft. Some different forms of resistance to the draft, acquiescence to the draft, some went into the military. And we just sort of gathered information and put out a newsletter. I didn't get involved in draft counseling. There were a few other people in the college who were [inaudible]. I did get involved in helping organize draft resistance. There was a very active resistance group in Philadelphia. Raising funds for them and helping organize activities there. And then on a national level I was member of Organize and Resist, which was a national organization to support draft resistance.

Catt:

That's just one that I have to grab. You wrote a piece on there that we'll talk about a little bit in the '70s. So the group, Draft Resistance, was this the same organization?

Davidon:

Resistance was a group largely of draft-aged men and women, whereas Resist was a group of older people who generally were not themselves faced with the draft, but they then not only raised funds for draft resistance, but for resistance within the military and for various kinds of anti-war activities. It was organizing Resist that the government came down with conspiracy charges against Arnold Kaufman and Ben Spock and others. I was never involved directly, but I was one of those involved in pushing, but I was in [??] [??] Resist. I have no recollection of writing this at all.

Catt:

I'm going to stop the tape just for a second. Let's talk about Pugwash. I'm sorry, we kind of skipped right by it.

Davidon:

In the summer of '58, a small group did a study on the capability of other countries to make nuclear weapons, and this was under the auspices of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in the Boston area. There was a big Pugwash conference in Vienna that fall. I guess this was in the late summer. I went and presented the results of that study to the Pugwash conference. But that sort of got me into the Pugwash process, and once you get to one Pugwash meeting you get invited to subsequent ones. There was a big one in London in '61 I guess it was. And then there were a couple of smaller symposium. There was a symposium; Social Responsibility of Scientists that was held in Czechoslovakia shortly after the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia in '69. I guess the Russians invaded in '68 or '69. I think it was '69. Then there

was another seminar in Japan, in '75 I believe, in response to an appeal by Ukowa [?] for scientists to seek an end to nuclear weapons. So those were the only Pugwash, those two main big conferences and two smaller symposium, the Pugwash conference.

Catt:

We talked about testing issues and Pugwash was a big player in that and I'm just going to blast right through it.

Davidon:

Yeah, in fact thinking back on that. When Sullivan was debunking the danger there was a new development. It was partly in response to the call that came from that Pugwash conference. That a group of scientists signed an appeal. With Einstein, one of the last things he did was to issue that appeal. That was in the aftermath of this big test explosion in March of '54. This radically changed the threat to human civilization. It was Sullivan saying that it wasn't anything new in that explosion, all this talk about a three-stage weapon involving uranium in large quantities was all absurd.

Catt:

What was your reaction when you learned of Hiroshima in Nagasaki? It was in Chicago, but yet

—

Davidon:

I had been a student there. I knew there was something going on; I didn't know exactly what. And there were certainly rumors that it was some program involving nuclear processes, whether it was nuclear bombs or something. So it wasn't a total surprise, but the specifics were a surprise. I was in the Navy at that time and at that time didn't really know whether this would lead to a much more rapid end to the war. I would say it's really not till years afterward that I became convinced that this was a horrible mistake to blow up cities with nuclear weapons.

Catt:

Then with the Super in '54, of course, this divides a lot of physicists. The high end of Oppenheimer and Teller, which really gets played out.

Davidon:

The notion that thermal nuclear weapons were so far beyond the [??] of [??] [??] [??] means of mass murder, not warfare. In fact, a lot of the military opposed it then, but even more so I think now that there is growing unhappiness within the military with these kinds of weapons. Partly on the humanitarian grounds. And I think in Oppenheimer's case, not so much humanitarian grounds, it's just diversion of resources.

Catt:

And that's right. A lot of the money that was being, especially after Sputnik, during this time was not going for basic research. It was going for flight research. This is an issue that we're rapidly approaching in our list of questions here we're going to talk about. So you were involved in draft resistance, not draft counseling. What was your take on the status of science students? Initially their giving deferred status because of in the draft?

Davidon:

At least in the undergraduate level, there was to my knowledge never a preferred status to science.

Catt:

Only at the graduate level.

Davidon:

I think the undergraduate level it was across the board. There was student [???]. One of the pressures there was students had to maintain a certain grade average. And there was a feeling among faculty members not wanting to be involved in deciding which students lose their deferments by giving them a grade. The general atmosphere — college as a whole was unhappy with that sort of pressure on the whole grading system at the college. I don't recall whether Haverford did anything specifically about it, withholding information from the government about the status of grades, or what local responsibilities were.

Catt:

Were you ever put in a situation, obviously without naming names, where —

Davidon:

Where I gave failing grades to people?

Catt:

This moral issue. The student deserves this grade, but I don't know, if I give the student this grade chances are the students going to end up...

Davidon:

I think fortunately I simply finessed that whole problem. The period in which they were serving to funds based on grades was very short lived. There was wide spread opposition to that and they switched to a lottery system. So my recollection is hazy, but I don't think there's a time when I really sort of gave people higher grades because of that effect on [???]. This growing in the '60s was not only this raising funds to support Resistance, but as this sheet indicates, looking for a variety of forms of direct action to take rather than just voicing protest.

Catt:

Conscientious objection is another one that —

Davidon:

Right. In fact at Haverford there's one tradition of conscientious objection. And so there were other faculty members who were giving much more traditional counseling and getting conscientious objection raised. My own sort of focus was more on physical resistance rather than religious conscientious objection.

Catt:

Do you recall the first anti-war demonstration here at Haverford or the first anti-war demonstration you participated in?

Davidon:

At the college. I recall the demonstrations at the college. There were groups of people from the college taking part in activities in Philadelphia or in this area. But the college itself, the college as a whole — I guess I should say that — the administration sort of helped organize a trip to Washington in the late '50s to visit with representatives and senators. A lot of people, students, faculty, administration, all went down to Washington. That was one of the few times the college organized things locally. There were certainly lots of individuals at the college who were involved in signing the call to resist to general authority. There were quite a number of faculty members here to sign up the call.

Catt:

What about the growing — in '65 you also have the emergence of SDS and this new left student movement. What was your —?

Davidon:

My sort of — and I don't even recall how I got on the mailing list or getting subscriptions to Science for the People. I know when it started being published.

Catt:

1970.

Davidon:

1970. That was later than I realized. I guess that was sort of a window to sort of more activity within the scientific community and more radical physical activity. So they started publishing in '70...

Catt:

Well, the newsletter that comes out in '69. The first year is basically a newsletter and then you start seeing Science for People Magazine with the red fist and flask, and that's in '70.

Davidon:

So this triple IS meeting was here in Philadelphia, that was probably in '70.

Catt:

1972. I was talking about SDS, Students for Democratic Society.

Davidon:

Oh, I'm sorry. Well, let's see. What association did I have with SDS? I guess I was — of course your own statement sounded great to me. I don't remember doing much other than reading it and talking about it with people, but I was never organizationally involved.

Catt:

Okay. Never a faculty advisor?

Davidon:

No.

Catt:

Did they have a presence? Did SDS have a presence here?

Davidon:

I don't recall it. There may well have been one, but there was a very major issue. There was a student here at Haverford from Philadelphia who had a small scholarship from the Philadelphia Board of Education, and this student, and I have a block now on his last name; it may come to me. In any case, he organized medical relief to the Mass Liberation Fund [?] at that time. There was a big fuss about the faculty raising money for medical supplies to (quote) "the enemy," and the Philadelphia Board of Education withdrew his scholarship. A number of us went down to testify before the board as to why they should not remove the scholarship. And I was involved in that. What happened is the Board did revoke the scholarship, but Haverford College replaced it, took up the slack. I surprise myself by not remembering his name, but I hope it will come to me.

Catt:

I'm sure it will.

Davidon:

Russ Stetier was his name. S-t-e-t-i-e-r. He ended up working with Josiah Thompson. Josiah Thompson was a faculty member here in the philosophy department. A colorful character who ended up leaving Haverford and setting up a detective agency in California. And Russell Stetier went and worked with him in this detective agency.

Catt:

What about involvement with the black power, Black liberation?

Davidon:

No involvement at all. In fact, I think they distanced from the separatist movement. Focusing on race divides the opposition to [???] [???] [???].

Catt:

That same question would be for women's liberation, I'm assuming.

Davidon:

I'm assuming, yes. I like to think of myself as sharing the struggle for people's rights, whether they're male, female, gay, straight, black, white. I'd like to keep people interacting with one another rather than going off their separate ways.

Catt:

Okay, so more civil liberties then. What about environmental issues and ecology?

Davidon:

I have a mailing list of [???] concerned scientists in this area. So whenever I get stuff from either the Union of Concerned Scientists or other places, on global warming or environment issues that I think are of interest, I forward it on to the other people on my list. But that's about the extent of my involvement in environmental issues. It's not — I guess nuclear

weapons I think endanger civilization. Global warming, I think, may in the long term represent a very serious threat, but it's not within — it's not my focus.

Catt:

What about SSRS? Again, when did you join them, whatever that means, and I know that you were the president.

Davidon:

I was the acting president while I was up in Denmark, actually.

Catt:

1967.

Davidon:

I was in Denmark in '66, '67. I was a play soldier in a sense. I wasn't an active president but I was — there wasn't anybody. As I vaguely recall at the time there was somebody who was generally just like struggling to become president in a formal sense. I wasn't really active. So this was in...I'm trying to remember. I guess I was somewhat involved in SSRS while I was in Chicago. That would have been 1960 or so.

Catt:

Right, 1961. It says you were the Vice President from '61 to '63. President from '65 to '67.

Davidon:

For two years I was president. That's more. My memory has twisted it.

Catt:

This was going into '68 that you're running for education chairman.

Davidon:

We put out the newsletter. Actually, my former wife and I put out the SSRS newsletter. And that was sort of a more solid activity.

Catt:

How did you find out about this organization?

Davidon:

I don't really recall.

Catt:

It's not really important.

Davidon:

The person who was really far more active than I in that area was Mal Benjamin, continues to be a good friend of mine. What I vaguely think happened is that I was peripherally involved out in Chicago. When I came to Haverford, I think Mal Benjamin was some official within in SSRS at that time. When I got to know him, I think he sort of got me more involved and I ended up

helping put out the newsletter with my former wife.

Catt:

Her name is Ann?

Davidon:

Ann Morris. She's in the Philadelphia area still. So if you wanted to call her or write her.

Catt:

Why SSRS?

Davidon:

The position of the group is one I'm very comfortable with. The group as a whole is not officially passivist. It encourages individual scientists to sort of think through for themselves how best to steer the uses of science into constructive ways. At the same time it sort of encourages individuals to make that choice for themselves, but the tone of the group is a passivist tone. I'd say most of the ones in the group are ones who oppose military uses of technology, across the board. It's sort of sufficiently disorganized to make me feel comfortable. It's not a highly structured group in ways [inaudible] that structure.

Catt:

It has an interesting history during the time that we're looking at, because the membership you would expect that it would just explode, people would really want to join.

Davidon:

I think it provided the seed for professional organizations to set up their own groups. I think the general feeling was that in the long run that's a better approach than having a separate organization. So Mal Benjamin was very active within the IEEE in setting up a group on science and society. And then the physical society, which you probably know more detail than my memory, has set up a science and society group. And I think this was a period when this was happening in a lot of organizations. And I think the SSRS kind of faded away as other professional societies sort of took on that role.

Catt:

The chemists, surprisingly, do it earliest of all with the committee on chemistry and public issues I think in '65. What does SSRS — Is it still going on?

Davidon:

No. It's faded away, and I don't know that it was ever a well-defined entity. The groups met less and less frequently. I think the newsletter stopped when Ann and I stopped putting it out, and that was still back in the mid '60s I think.

Catt:

I think even into the '70s it was still going.

Davidon:

The newsletter stopped going out, and as I recall too there was a problem with meetings

because there one or two people who were frequently disruptive at meetings. So people didn't particularly enjoy having the full meetings, and then there were splinter groups that would have unofficial meetings because they wanted to have the best, pleasant interactions. And that sort of led to it slowly fading away.

Catt:

So would it be fair to classify it or categorize it as a liberal organization? Moderately liberal?

Davidon:

No, because I think in the present context, liberal to many people suggests the role that's contrary...

Catt:

I'm talking about at the time.

Davidon:

...to the traditional role of liberal.

Catt:

I'm talking about in the '60s and early '70s.

Davidon:

I don't see it so much liberal as I see in terms of governmental policy and government tried to ameliorate hardships and difficulties and concern by government for human welfare. Whereas I think SSRS is much more individualistic and anarchistic in its orientation, rather than liberal. So I don't know whether that's a distinction which I'm making clearly or not. People have different associations with the word the liberal. And one of the associations that many people have is in terms of relying on the government or large organizations to perform socially constructive activities. And I would say that's not the thrust of SSRS. The SSRS is not primarily a lobbying organization. It wasn't trying to influence legislation. It was more trying to encourage individuals to act responsibly. If you ask people whether they voted for republicans or democrats, probably more people in SSRS would vote for democrats than republicans, but that wasn't so much related to their activity as SSRS members.

Catt:

Okay. We're going to talk about this issue towards the end of the interview. It says in April of '66 you participate in the Committee for Nonviolent Action anti-war protest in Saigon.

Davidon:

Right. A group of six of us, I guess it was, A. J. Muste was a pacifist minister, a leader, organizer, [???]. He was sort of the elder spokesperson of this group of us. CNVA got a hold of some money and decided one thing to do with it would be to try to give support and publicity to what was often referred to as the third course. A group in Vietnam that opposed the U.S. involvement, but also opposed Chinese or Russian influence in the area. We wanted to make it clear that there was a group in Vietnam that sought independence from outside influence and that sought this using peaceful means through nonviolent resistance. There were some contacts made with Thich Nhat Hanh, who was a Buddhist monk who was active in this study.

Catt:

Could you spell his name for me please?

Davidon:

Thich Math Hamh. I'm not sure I'm going to spell it correctly, but I'll do my best. T-h-i-c-h, M-a-t-h, H-a-m-h. That's with a question mark. So we went to Vietnam. The fact that we were going to Vietnam was supposed to be a big secret, but as is often the case with disorganized, anarchistic groups, some people take secrecy more seriously than others. So it was a secret to some and not a secret to others. But the reason we wanted to keep it quiet was because we wanted to be able to actually get to go into Vietnam, meet with people for the period of a week, and then at the end of that time have a public demonstration to show our opposition to the U.S. forces. And we were able to do that. We got into Vietnam, and the day before we were planning to leave we made our presence known. There was a very chaotic press conference held in Saigon, and then we had a demonstration where we were whisked by the police from our demonstration to the airplane on which we rode and had reservations. We held the demonstration when there were no longer any flights out until the one we wanted to leave on. So between the timing of that and the fact that a lot of the people and Saigon police seemed surreptitiously to be sympathetic to us. They weren't whole-heartedly trying to cause us trouble. They would block our path, but then they would get involved in conversation among themselves and we could move closer to the U.S. embassy. We would hand out leaflets to passerbys and they would make a half-hearted attempt to take the leaflets, but then they would set them down in places where other people could pick them up again. Even though the press coverage of it appeared a lot of opposition to our presence, we had the feeling that there was a particular support for our [???] [???].

Catt:

And you're doing this in April, which customarily most people are teaching.

Davidon:

That's right.

Catt:

So when you come back, I don't know if the administration —

Davidon:

Well actually what I did is try to be gone. Because of the secrecy business I did not tell the administration precisely where I was going. I did say that I was going with a group of people to a demonstration outside the country and that I had made other arrangements for my classes being covered. So they knew in advance this was going to happen. Never the less, when I got back, it was a week and a half later, because by that time it did receive a lot publicity, particularly among those people who were more supportive of government policy and the administration and the faculty. There was a feeling of, "What in the world am I doing demonstrating in Saigon when I'm supposed to be teaching?" And there was a public meeting actually on campus. And to this I tried to present my view of the situation. In terms of my classes being covered, that was arranged that people not infrequently make trips for professional reasons. This is a very different reason for the trip. But in terms of meeting my college responsibilities that was met by [???] [???]. And also the newspaper coverage did not

focus on building support for the good of force. Just the people protesting U.S. involvement. Why do that there? Why not protest here? And I think most people began to realize what was done in Saigon there was more sympathy.

Catt:

Besides yourself and A. J. Muste, do you know who the other four?

Davidon:

Yes, I don't know if I can spell all their names. Bradford Lyttle. L-y-t-t-l-e. Let's see, Barbara Deyne, D-e-y-n-n-e. Two other people (there were six all together) I'm not sure.

Catt:

Okay, I can probably uncover that. I was just curious.

Davidon:

I can probably uncover it as well. In fact, I think I have the information in a drawer at home.

Catt:

Okay, I would appreciate on that. It says from '66 to '67 you were a Fulbright Fellow in Denmark.

Davidon:

There too there was an interesting political slant to it. In prior to going on this grant, I was among those who was refusing to volunteer war taxes There was a group of us not doing ourselves and encouraging other people, one way or another, to make it difficult or make it more difficult for the government to get money for waging war. I nevertheless had gotten the Fulbright grant. But then a local congress person decided it would make a good political issue to try to revoke the grant from somebody who's refusing to volunteer war taxes. So there was a fuss about — I ended up being called in by Handlin (Oscar Handlin I think was his name; I don't know just what his title was, but something within the Fulbright program) pleading with me somehow or another to not be causing him an embarrassment. That is to say, the Fulbright program is valuable. They don't want it getting mixed up with politics. And here I am because of the fact that I both had the Fulbright grant and I'm refusing taxes, if they cancel the grant that will [???) the Fulbright program. If they don't cancel the grant they'll lose support in Congress for future funding. Couldn't I somehow gracefully bow out in some way. I don't know if there was amicable conversation I think. I'm sure I ended up not convincing him. I ended up with both the grant and making the government seize the taxes rather than my volunteering. Which I think had some value. Haverford agreed at the time to object to the government seizing the money from my paycheck. So I think it influenced individuals who thought about the issue otherwise who wouldn't have thought about. Also, while in Denmark, most of the time I was in Denmark was more in mathematics than physics research, but I did take part in some protests to the Vietnam war while there. And there too, there was sort of official entity, in that case of the embassy, that was sort of lamenting the fact that I was causing them trouble, but no action was taken against me.

Catt:

This was in Copenhagen?

Davidon:

No, Aarhus.

Catt:

Oh, okay. I'm sorry.

Davidon:

In '66, '67, I had this Fulbright grant for research. And then in '76, '77 I had a Fulbright grant for travel and a Noteta [?] grant for expenses while in Tricrano [?]. So those were two times that I had grants.

Catt:

Okay. In '67 when you come back, obviously the war is starting to pick up and you keep in tune to the events. And it says you sent your draft card, registration card to the Justice Department on the 20th of October. On the 27th you made a little explanation to the Attorney General, copied two FBI agents from the office, who tried to interview me in October 26, 1967. I was going to ask while you're doing all of this, going back into your anti-testing statements up through your involvement in going to Saigon, was the FBI ever coming to your office?

Davidon:

No, the only time the FBI came to me was just one time, and these two people came and sort of tried to press for details and I just didn't talk to them. That's not true. There was one other time too. I was involved in helping Dan Berrigan stay under ground for a while. Dan Berrigan appeared at a church in Germantown while he was under ground and gave a sermon for that church. I was very much involved both publicly and in the aftermath of that and then privately, previous to his appearance, and helping him get into the area. Well the FBI came around to me after that and wanted to press me for more information. So those were the two occasions. Under the Freeman Information Act, this was much later, this was in the mid '70s, but I sorted information [inaudible]. There was lots of stuff. In fact, I didn't remember a lot of these dates. In the Freeman Information Act material it specifies when different things happened. So obviously they were following these activities and recording it. It was interesting, under the Freeman Information Act, they gave me this big box. I paid ten cents a page for this big box of materials. A lot of things that I knew I was conspicuously involved in were not covered there. And there was this fellow in the FBI and I said, "I strongly suspect that you have more information under these headings." And he called back over enthusiastically two days later. "Oh, you're right. We hadn't discovered these things before." So there was sufficiently more material that I didn't want to... A lot of the stuff in the files were just newspaper clippings and things like that. Every once in a while we'd get something sort of private [inaudible].

Catt:

You knew that they were of interest.

Davidon:

I think it's important for people involved in political activity to be reasonable. To neither be paranoid nor to be sloppy. There are things that are to be kept secret. You don't think about them, but you don't go around suspecting everybody you're talking to of being an agent. I think that's paranoia because it produces more damage than the government's investigation.

Catt:

So you sent your draft registration card along with others. I imagine a whole lot of people. And what was the outcome?

Davidon:

Well that was sort of one of the things that led to the charges against Spock and Corrigan and others. It was that protest at the Justice Department that sort of tried to use the confrontation with the Justice Department to challenge the generalcy of draft.

Catt:

So that would be more [???] ?

Davidon:

Certainly turning and [inaudible].

Catt:

Right, because at that time it was —

Davidon:

Yes, [???] [???] endless [???]. That's an example of I'd say classical civil disobedience. It was done openly as well as concealed [???] [???] [???].

Catt:

Then it says you were arrested in Philadelphia for anti-Vietnam war leaf-letting outside the civic center.

Davidon:

Right.

Catt:

This is in?

Davidon:

This is the production campaign.

Catt:

October.

Davidon:

'72, I guess it was.

Catt:

No, this is October '68.

Davidon:

'68, two different marches.

Catt:

Well let's go ahead and talk about that because there's a couple of things that happened before that. First of all, Tet Offensive is in '68.

Davidon:

It was a mixed response. The Tet Offensive was a show of, in some sense, a show of strength, in other sense a show of weakness, but nevertheless by the military from north Vietnam. In terms of the ability of people in Vietnam to lead an independent life, the Tet Offensive was an indication of the less and less chance for the people there to be independent. It was just as a U.S. offensive. The military actions by either forces supported by the United States or forces supported by China and Russia are antithetical to people within Vietnam leading an independent life. So it was not a nice sense of [???] [???]. Also, but just from a military standpoint, the North Vietnamese suffered huge military losses. It was a disaster in [???]. Nevertheless it was a propaganda success. You asked for my reaction to the Tet Offensive. That's some of the tension between. On the one hand, because it did contribute to opposition to the war. More people were unhappy with the involvement in the war because it was a sign that the war was not about to be won by the United States. There wasn't really a light at the end of the tunnel that sort of made people more disillusioned that the U.S. military, and in that sense it was good. But in terms of the rights of the people in Vietnam or in terms of a larger struggle for human rights it was not [???].

Catt:

What about '68 Democratic National Convention?

Davidon:

I did not go to Chicago. That kind of demonstration was not my cup of tea. At the same time, I was very much — because Humphrey was carrying on in Johnson's steps, I was opposed to Humphrey. Even though that meant opposing Humphrey in some sense as support for Nixon.

Catt:

Third party candidate?

Davidon:

None that resonated with me. My role at that time was opposing Humphrey. I wasn't opposing third party candidate, I just wasn't supporting one. I shouldn't say nothing. I think Dick Gregory, as I recall, was a candidate. Not only did I but I still do have, some of the dollar bills. You ever see the dollar bills of the Gregory campaign?

Catt:

No. [Recording stopped.] We were talking about the Gregory campaign.

Davidon:

So I was sympathetic to Gregory, both in his lifestyle and his role of opposition to the war. But what I was more actively involved in was opposition to Humphrey. There was an arrest. Humphrey was speaking at the civic center, and we were handing out leaflets against the war. We were handing them out on the same side of the street that the civic center is located, and the police wanted us to stay a further distance away from there and we refused to leave, so we

got arrested.

Catt:

Did you take part in the larger anti-war movement or march going on in Washington? There was the October 15th moratorium where there was a large march.

Davidon:

Many of those I did. No only I did, but often one of my daughters. I have two daughters who at that time were small. One was born in '64 and one was born in '67. Many of these activities I would go with one of them and my wife would take the other.

Catt:

That obviously meant that you had some sense of safety by taking your daughters with you.

Davidon:

Right.

Catt:

We talked about this a little bit before. Within the APS there's an effort to get society of, now we're dealing with physicists, to take a stand on this issue. I mentioned Charlie Schwartz has the amendment. Were you actively attending APS meetings during '67?

Davidon:

I didn't spend too much — when Charlie Schwartz came here to Haverford [??] [??] visitor around that time. [Inaudible sentence]. My only involvement with this was more in the context of this movement in Washington, which I'm not sure just now what the movement was. I wanted to speak about deactivating bomb casings. Jay Orear told me afterward when I started talking and he saw the [??] [??] and he thought this was all going to be quite theoretical, and then at the talk I then held up pieces from the bomb casing and talked about more details of how to actually get information as to where these things were going on and what we could do about them. So it wasn't a very political basis. That not only surprised Jay Orear, but also was the reason why we received a lot more publicity.

Catt:

That was, if I'm not mistaken, in 1971. We're jumping ahead a little, but that's the session that talks about Pierre Noyes. Essentially it's all (quote) "radical" physicists. And Jay is the one proposes the abstracts don't get published from the bulletin APS. This is the first time they don't publish any abstracts, which causes even more of a division.

Davidon:

I guess they didn't want to just not have one aspect not published, so they just refused any —

Catt:

The whole session, which people started saying this is a violation not only of the constitution, but also censoring your rights. Because once they said this is — I guess used to further the forum for physics in society.

Davidon:

But the forum survived that turmoil. I haven't even followed, but it's done useful things now that's respected. It became respected.

Catt:

Did you like the idea of having a forum?

Davidon:

In so far as substance grew, sure. There's always a useful tension between legitimacy and accomplishing something. If you have too much legitimacy you tend not to accomplish very much. I haven't really followed whether the forum has continued to push the limits as to what can be accomplished or whether it's sort of become [???], or something to sue for [???].

Catt:

Okay. To go back, in Chicago there's a famous meeting, because of what happens with the Schwartz amendment being defeated. Well, actually they went to debate. This broader issue, should the APS open up and have discussions of social and political issues? And this takes place in Chicago in I guess January of '68 before what happens in November.

Davidon:

Before the Democratic convention.

Catt:

Were you at that meeting?

Davidon:

No.

Catt:

And the next thing is the March 4, 1969 nationwide research moratorium, Day of Concern. You are listed as the organizer of Haverford College. So could you tell me a little bit about what happened?

Davidon:

I think they had — I don't remember in detail. It was a day of encouraging people to come to meetings that were organized on campus. We had people talking about what was going on. Russ Steiter was on the campus at that time, the fall semester. And he talked about terms of medical aid. And he talked about draft resistance. I think at that time we then started this newsletter I mentioned. Another fellow in the physics department and I were giving out to keep people informed as to how students and ex-students were responding to the draft. So these were some of the kinds of things that went on campus. I don't think there was — there was a group of Haverford students who had a walk-in to — there was a draft board in Denmark, and around that time, though it may not have been at that particular day, there was a walk from campus to that draft board. And that received some attention from the local press. Around that time, again, I don't recall what occurred exactly when, there was a weekly vigil at the post office, which involved not only people from Haverford, but from Bryn Mawr and also to a lesser point from the surrounding community, just having a once a week vigil at the post

office. These are some of the kinds of things, but I can't really pin down just what occurred on that day. It all becomes a bit blurry.

Catt:

Well perhaps we'll be able to uncover some. Generally, what was your idea? How did you receive this idea of scientists presenting...having this public display of concern?

Davidon:

Particularly in so far as the war in Vietnam was sort of fitting a highly industrialized society using advanced technology and fighting a much more non-industrialized world, somewhat agrarian society. Scientists I think are the special awareness of what's involved in the automated battlefield and making people aware of the nature of the automated battlefield. Which is something that scientists and engineers ought to take opportunity and responsibility.

Catt:

I take it this also the time you were joining the Union of Concerned Scientists? This is when they're established?

Davidon:

They're established around that time. My impression is that over the years they tend to focus more on the environmental issues than the military ones in some sense. I'd been a supporter of the Union of Concerned — I guess in terms of organizationally the Union of Concerned Scientists and Federation of American Scientist have been two groups that I consistently support.

Catt:

Now this says in May of 1969 you're arrested in D.C. for the anti ABM leaflet for visitors outside the White House. Which I was going to say in '69 there's the big meeting in Washington where there's the famous debate that Brian Schwartz is able to coordinate to talk about the technical issues involved in the ABM, which everybody knows they weren't political issues. So there's a large debate that takes place where you have three pro and three con views. I think Hans Bethe was there and George Rathjens and a few others. Were you at this meeting?

Davidon:

No, I was not. I remember being frustrated because I wasn't at the meeting, but I don't remember the circumstances for why I wasn't.

Catt:

That would be in January anyway, so this was in May. Could you tell me a little bit about —

Davidon:

Well, again, as I recall this was The [???] Committee for Sane Nuclear [???], it changed its name to the Justice Committee, but I think it was Sane — it changed its name, but [???] [???] [???]. They had a public meeting together with some other groups, and then after the meeting or as part of the meeting, people went to the White House. I think people were being asked by the police to stay in a very restricted area, and there were a group of us that said that we had a right to distribute leaflets in all public areas, not a restricted area. And that was why they

arrested us this time, they wanted to stop people from hanging out in a general area.

Catt:

Also in '68, I tend to get ahead of myself a little here, but going back to '68, this is when you get tenured. Was there any problem with you getting tenure?

Davidon:

I don't know. I wasn't involved in the internal discussions. The only concern that was raised to me was the fact that I had not been professionally as active in the mid '60s through '68. I hadn't published up in the early '60s and then nothing. But I was working on the book and there was various ways to substantiate that. And giving talks professionally, of course. The concern was more the dearth of the usual kinds of professional accomplishments more than the content of my focus. At least no one expressed to me reservations of giving tenure to someone who was taking part in demonstration.

Catt:

Were there any cases of tenure being denied at Haverford during this time?

Davidon:

Oh, yes. Not everybody was on a ten year track to receive tenure, but to my knowledge there was no correlation to the political aspect.

Catt:

No firings?

Davidon:

No firings. Haverford was a good place to [???] [???].

Catt:

Okay. That's 1970, so I will get to that. Well, January '70. It says January 22, 1970 was closed. You closed the draft board for a few hours, but chained ourselves to front doors.

Davidon:

In fact, a picture of that got into the Haverford News and one so of the things that I'm known for on campus is being chained to the door. Of everything else I've done...

Catt:

You think that was a reaction to Cambodia?

Davidon:

I think so, but I don't remember the dates that well. It was certainly the time of the Christmas bombings was I think in late '70. The invasion of Cambodia wasn't until spring of '71?

Catt:

I thought it was 1970.

Davidon:

I don't remember exactly. It must have been '70. So it probably was in response to some particular one of those things. And a group of us went down and chained ourselves to the draft board. It just slows down the process that we definitely had closed for half a day is one result, but also it draws more public attention to the fact that there are people who in some sense have some standing in the community who feel sufficiently strongly about this to stop the draft briefly and do this.

Catt:

Then it has February, May, and June, join in destroying draft records. Several filled out the draft boards, filled out the Georgetown, Delaware.

Davidon:

Being involved with groups of people who go into draft boards and take records and either destroy them or in some cases mail them back to the individuals whose records they are, with notes telling people how they can [inaudible]. I think part of the feeling there was to make opposition to the draft not just something that well-to-do Haverford students can find ways around, but which many of these draft boards cover areas of where people don't have as many options. And give people some extra options. Because when the original records are destroyed the records [Inaudible] more opportunities for adding things to the files. And it draws people's attention to these committees, which some of these activities were done in conjunction with Philadelphia Resistance. And then put up notices in the area telling people where they can get draft forms. It was a combination of the destruction of the records themselves and using that as a way of bringing it to the attention of people in these communities that they have other options.

Catt:

Then '70, in September you're arrested at the Pentagon for protesting chemical and biological warfare.

Davidon:

The particular reason was that this was a group largely of Quakers who wanted to plant a tree on the Pentagon property. We were refused the right to plant the tree on Pentagon property, so we, together with the tree, were arrested. In fact, I've got some home movies of the group that was carrying this tree into the court room and having actually all charges dropped. So we were arrested, but not convicted of anything.

Catt:

Going back to destroying draft records. Obviously that's —

Davidon:

Illegal.

Catt:

Yes. And any repercussions from that?

Davidon:

No. In this case, at the time there were sort of groups taking responsibility for the destruction

of draft records, and all of sudden involved in some of the public taking of responsibility. But there was no public identification as to who the particular individual was destroying draft records. There were different styles. The Berrigans had some cases where they stood at the location where the draft records were destroyed and were arrested on the spot. In these cases no one was arrested at the site of the destruction of the draft records, and there were groups subsequently that joined and took responsibility. Only many years later did people specify, even men in some cases, [??] [??] specify who actually destroyed records. So I never had any direct political — To my knowledge I've never been about to be charged for anything political [??] [??]. In [??] a group of some 28t people were arrested in a draft board destroying the records. I was out of the country at that time. This was when I was in Norway. But there the FBI had kind of played a big role in especially provoking these things. One of the participants was working with the FBI. So they had a lot of detailed evidence as to just who was involved when. And the government brought charges against people, and they were all found not guilty for a variety of reasons. One, because of the entrapment issue. In fact, one of the people involved was working with the FBI. But also because of the climate of the times. People were increasingly sympathetic to resistance of the draft. So juries were willing to find people not guilty. They had more demanding standards of proof. Let me put it that way. If you basically are sympathetic to the person being charged, you want to see more proof that they've done something wrong. So as time went on the government became less and less willing to try to arrest people when it was so hard to make a conviction.

Catt:

I'm just going to go through this list and then we'll come back to my questions. The next thing, you joined Quaker Action Group Project blocking U.S. naval practice bombing the Island in Puerto Rico.

Davidon:

The Navy was using this new island for target practice. And the people who lived on the island. The shells were always supposed to land in a different area than where the people lived, but it still interfered with the lives of the people on the island. So partly it was to build support for this indigenous group in Puerto Rico, opposing the U.S. Navy, but also in a larger context of building opposition to the military, and the purpose of the shelling was to train people in refined equipment, which would then be used in Vietnam and possibly elsewhere. So there was the larger opposition to the U.S. military as well as sympathizing [??]. So a group of us went down there and the action part of the project — well there's different aspects of it. There was an educational component to make more people in Puerto Rico know what was going on. But then a group of us went into the area that the shelling took place to sort of push the Navy into the position of either bombarding public figures or stopping the shelling. It delayed their shelling. It stopped for a while. Actually, in that case, two of us were there. Tom Davidson and myself were among those being the unindicted co-conspirators in charges that were brought against the [??].

Catt:

Right, and this in January '71. The same time, named us in the unindicted —

Davidon:

The people there very much did not want local action to be stigmatized much by charges of bombing and kidnapping. They asked us to quickly leave the project. So when these charges

came out, Tom Davidson and I came back to this country. So we did not stay for the rest of the project. The project went on for a while.

Catt:

The next thing is also again in January, or this says March. Says, meeting in the White House with Tom Davidson, Beverly Bell, and Henry Kissinger.

Davidon:

Right. Henry Kissinger I think, liked to think of himself as a maverick and independent person who could do as he pleased. When Hoover made these charges that a group of people were claiming to kidnap him, I think he took it as somewhat of a joke. And through a whole series of events he kept saying he was open to a group of people coming and talking with him about the war, but he wouldn't talk about the charges for kidnapping. So all of those who met with Kissinger were among those that one way or another remained in this indictment. But we went to talk about the war. As I commented publicly at the time, contrary to some, he's a good listener. He listens to what people say and responds without giving routine responses. That is a number of issues we raised concerning the U.S. policies in Vietnam. One of the immediate ones was there had been threats, what we perceived as threats to the use nuclear weapons. He tried hard to dispel us from thinking there was any serious consideration to the use of nuclear weapons. So it was sort of, to some extent, fun and games and the novelty of being in the White House with Kissinger with people who were being accused of plotting to kidnap him. And also, particularly Tom Davidson (?) and myself were trying to sort of test the situation. We came with briefcases stuffed with irrelevant stuff to see whether or not we'd be searched when we came into the White House. And in the middle of the meeting I excused myself to go to the bathroom. I wanted to see would I be followed in the White House if I went to the bathroom. There's that fun and games aspect of playing with the White House, testing the limits. The substance part of it was talking with Kissinger, and then using that as an occasion to afterwards talk with some columnists about what went on, and about why we were talking about our views on the war with Kissinger.

Catt:

Were you followed?

Davidon:

Not to my knowledge. Our briefcases weren't searched. You could have brought anything in. As far as we could tell we weren't followed.

Catt:

This says March 8, 1971, media.

Davidon:

There was a burglary of the FBI office in media. My role in it has never been made public, and I won't make that public now. The public part of my role in it was a couple of days later I received in the mail a packet of materials that were taken for media. I presented them at a meeting — I'd already been scheduled to give a talk to a group of ministers and I presented this information and a number of newspapers and magazines picked up on that. And that sort of began the publicity from that media burglary. So I was sort of known as somebody that was

involved. And also when people — there were mailings to various newspapers from the group that took the materials. And when individuals from different newspapers wanted to get more material, I sort of became a contact person. People would contact me and say they would like information and I would tell them I would try to get it to them. And often they would end up with materials. So I was clearly linked within some way. And that's one of the things when the FBI and the Freedom of Information Act, all the stuff they gave me made no reference to media, and I was convinced that they must have stuff in their files concerning media. So when I was talking to this guy in the FBI, I said check under what the FBI refers to as med-burg, media burglary, see whether my name comes up there. I think I already mentioned he called back a short time later all enthusiastic. "Yes, yes, your name came up lots of times." And there's a whole new packet of materials.

Catt:

It says you joined in a blockade of a munitions ship, I guess that's USS Nitro bound for Vietnam.

Davidon:

Mostly canoes and one or two motor boats. The project in which we were trying a meeting with some of the Navy people in [???] to get to know them and to build rapport with them. To the point where I guess on one of the ships, a fellow jumped off the ship and joined us so he could also protest going off to Vietnam.

Catt:

Then December '71 question mark. Made hundreds of bomb casings unusable at AMF plant in York, PA.

Davidon:

The question mark is just the date. I don't remember the date for sure and looking at defining the methods making it a reconstruction of that date. But this was York, Pennsylvania, was American Machine Foundry produced these bomb casings, 500 pound casings for the Navy. And they're just sort of kept in the railroad siting. Most people in this immediate area went there and stripped the thread. They have a part that screws together. You strip the threads so they had to be re-machined. They couldn't be used then. So it was partly delaying the use of these bomb casings, but partly again, making more visible opposition to the war.

Catt:

I want to say, and the government's response to this?

Davidon:

As far as I know, nothing. I was never in any way contacted or investigated. I'm sure there must have been some sort of investigation, but nothing that affects me in any way.

Catt:

Okay, fair enough. In '72, joined in the ground in two C-130 planes at Willow Grove Naval Air Station.

Davidon:

There again, in the aftermath of it, there was a public taking of responsibility by a sizeable group of people who had pieces of some of the parts of the airplanes distributed among the group. No one personally took responsibility for it, but I was clearly involved in the whole process. I was among those that passed out pieces from the airplane publicly. These transports were being used to carry supplies to Vietnam. What happened is a group of people went in, made the planes inoperable by cutting hydraulic lines and electrical systems and painting on the side of the plane, "Bread not bombs." In fact, one of the local newspapers, I think it was the Philadelphia Bulletin, had a photograph of the plane with "bread not bombs" written on it. In that case, I think a month or two later there was a little article about the planes being repaired and back in use. So it was a delay of a month or two in the use of these planes. But part of the result I think is the delay of the planes, but part of the result is the public opposition to the war.

Catt:

Okay. Did you join the University Conference? Do you know of it? NUC?

Davidon:

No.

Catt:

As you're doing this, all these activities, still keeping up with your teaching?

Davidon:

The teaching I always kept up with. The research activities suffered.

Catt:

Were colleagues and faculty ever stopping you in the hall and saying, "You're giving Haverford College a black eye with all this?" Not black eye, but —

Davidon:

[???] [???] at that time was a time, not in the context of anti-war stuff, but in terms of the [???] at the Presbyterian church where the president said yes to this in the frame of fund raising at the college. People were not giving funds to the college because of the fact that the college was not firing me. At the same time I had a friend in the alumni office who said that sometimes people give more money to the college because of vocal opposition to the war. So it's my guess that the college, that even though there were some people that gave because of the opposition, those who supported the war, or who at least supported the government's policy, probably were in a position to give more money. So it may have been costly to the college. I don't know. Among the staff at the college there was more support for the government and sort of more sense that people were giving the college a bad name. I think I was sort of one those that many of the staff felt was doing inappropriate things. But we tried to upset. We tried to have get-togethers with faculty, students to explain what was going on and why we're trying to do this. There were certainly — at many colleges and universities, we were very disruptive. And I think there was very little disruptive going on at Haverford. There was an effort made to try to draw people together.

Catt:

Around this time, I think it was in '70, I'm not specifically clear on the date, there was a battleship that was —

Davidon:

New Jersey.

Catt:

New Jersey that was brought out of moth balls and was going to be sent to Vietnam, and there was a protest where again small boats were used to try and block it.

Davidon:

Sailboats.

Catt:

Were you part of that?

Davidon:

Yes, I was on the sailboat. That was the action of a group that I think called itself April Action. I think this took place in April, if I recall. When was King assassinated?

Catt:

'68.

Davidon:

It must have been around that same time.

Catt:

Okay, earlier. Nassons [?] had mentioned this. They suspected that you were out there, but they didn't know. I was just asking about it, that's all. What was your reaction to the assassination of Martin Luther King?

Davidon:

Within the struggle for civil rights, I think King was one of clearest in terms of solid commitment to nonviolence, and to wanting to see an integrated society at a time when many people were torn in the violence of [???]. Also, some people were focusing on [???] and the segregator, changing the nature of the segregated society. So I was, for very [???] reasons, very much resonated with King.

Catt:

What about Kent State and Jackson State?

Davidon:

I was certainly moved by it, but I don't know if I did anything. I'm trying to remember the time.

Catt:

This was in '79. I'm jumping around a little bit because I'm going back and trying to —

Davidon:

I'm trying to remember. When was the thing at Willow Grove with the airplanes?

Catt:

'72.

Davidon:

So that wasn't... Because I think one of these activities, I vaguely recall, was shortly after the Cambodia and the Kent State. The Kent State was right after Cambodia. That was back in '70?

Catt:

So that may be destroying draft records. I'm sure that it went away.

Davidon:

I think in one of these activities there was some in which the killings at Kent State and Jackson State, but I don't remember now.

Catt:

Okay. You mentioned you're concentrating on teaching. In your position you had a lot of power because you're shaping minds. Did you ever talk in your classes about the issues that were going on?

Davidon:

It was my standard policy for the last class of each semester, particularly in physics classes and less so in math classes, to spend one full class period talking about nuclear weapons and the dangers they opposed. A little bit of the physics of nuclear weapons and politics as well. So that was something that was a standard thing of mine. There were occasionally people that grumbled a little bit about that, but in terms of most of my teaching, I would say it was only by indirect influence. People certainly knew about the things I was involved in, and there was discussion and meetings outside of classes on campus that many times students would take part in. But in my classes themselves, except for this last class of the semester policy, I would say there would be no direct influence.

Catt:

Did you ever teach a course on science in society?

Davidon:

There's a program that was called General Programs at Haverford. Mostly misplaced freshmen were taking it. Which started as a writing course, which was social responsibility of science was the focus of. Students did a lot of reading that related to the social responsibility of science and actions by the scientists of history and wrote papers about it. That was the one time that there was a course of this type.

Catt:

Do you know when that would be for that?

Davidon:

I don't know for sure. It was probably in the mid '60s, '65, '66. I guess, I don't know for sure.

Catt:

This may be a good place to ask about a copy of your vitae that may have that on there.

Davidon:

Right. One easy way to get it to you is I have it on the Web. Do you have access to the Worldwide Web?

Catt:

Yes.

Davidon:

So on my web page is my curriculum vitae.

Catt:

What was your reaction to the Apollo? The whole manned spaceflight?

Davidon:

Intrigued by it. Thinking it's sort of one of the more exciting and challenging things that the government engages in. I wish it were done a smaller scale with less emphasis on humans in space and more emphasis on gathering information. But I find it a challenging event. I particularly like the Mars exploration. It was done in the right way and in a way that builds...

Catt:

What's the social relevance of this?

Davidon:

I think having challenging exploration with longer range than meeting immediate needs is healthy for a society. People do not live by bread alone. I think space exploration or undersea exploration or studying the Human Genome are big projects which I think are exciting, even if they don't lead to technological useful development. Often they do lead to some technologically useful skill, but I don't think that's the primary. The primary role is to give some excitement, some direction to society.

Catt:

One thing that we discussed earlier, books such as *The Making of Counter Culture*, *One Dimensional Man*. Talk about, I don't want to say the evils, but the subtleties involved in science and technology and their connection with the military, with corporations, with government. The issue that really gets pushed to the forefront. And in some cases those on the left that are supportive of you in your anti-war activities could also be critical of you because you're a scientist—you're adding to the problem. Were you ever involved in discussions such as these? And how did you handle it?

Davidon:

They're mostly more general. Not only anti-science, but an anti-intellectual current in a lot of methods somehow a primitive life is a better life. And I have very little sympathy for that.

Understanding of the world, both the understanding of scientific activity, but also exploring the mathematics of logical structure, is a challenging human activity. It's a challenging, uniquely human activity. The glorifying, sort of primitive, anti-scientific, or anti-intellectual attitudes I think are demeaning to me. It cuts them off from what they're capable of doing. So people turn to astrology or mysticism or superstitions of one sort or another are debasing what could be a healthier society.

Catt:

What scientific societies were you a member of during this time?

Davidon:

I was a member American Physicist Society. I was a member of the American Mathematical Society.

Catt:

Ever attend any meetings?

Davidon:

Of the?

Catt:

AMS.

Davidon:

I did attend one or two meetings of AMS, but I attended more of the Mathematical Association of America. There was a southeastern Pennsylvania division of the MAA that met once a year. So different colleges and universities in the area [inaudible].

Catt:

Do you remember any activities going on at any of those meetings?

Davidon:

No, I don't recall anything concerning the science and society aspect. The focus of most of these meetings was teaching mathematics.

Catt:

So you had no awareness of mathematics action group?

Davidon:

No.

Catt:

AAAS?

Davidon:

The only AAAS meeting I went to was as a trouble maker at this one at the science for the people. I've not been a member of AAAS nor have gone to the meetings.

Catt:

That was in Washington in '71?

Davidon:

No, that was in Philadelphia.

Catt:

I'm sorry, Philadelphia in '72. Could you describe your role?

Davidon:

We handed out leaflets. I remember spending more time duplicating leaflets on ditto machines that didn't work too well. More I guess the one key memory was of the struggle was getting materials available. Then there was the process of the people running the meetings [inaudible] balance of getting stuff out, but not wanting to get the government to extraneous issues.

Catt:

The infamous blue table that science literature was going to be. Where was it going to be located?

Davidon:

I remember there being struggles about these things. I don't remember the details.

Catt:

There also was an anti-war march with VVAW that just happened to be going on and scientific people joined with it, the [???] organization. Did you take part in that?

Davidon:

I don't recall.

Catt:

You don't. Okay.

Davidon:

There were lots of walks that I did take part in. I don't remember which is which.

Catt:

What was your view of Science For the People?

Davidon:

Well I think initially was a real favorable one. The general idea appealed to me. I guess I found the [???] after a while repetitious, and I guess I wasn't as comfortable to, with [???] [???] methods. He used a style that I can remember feeling that I wasn't really comfortable with. A belligerency, a chip on the shoulder attitude. I feel more comfortable sort of trying to reason and work with people rather than to set up walls and barriers. That to me just doesn't work. They didn't try to see common interests, but rather were interested in seizing the [???]. These are memories and attitudes of a long time ago. I don't remember all the details.

Catt:

Right, right. Okay. It is. I'm just going to throw off a list of other radical organizations that you may have joined. Medical Aid for Indochina?

Davidon:

No.

Catt:

Computer Professionals, People for Peace?

Davidon:

No. I know of that, but I wasn't involved with it.

Catt:

Committee for Social Responsibility in Engineering?

Davidon:

No.

Catt:

Spark? SSRS? Yes. Okay. We talked about Resist.

Davidon:

Resist, I was on the steering committee with Resist. So party for the time, at the time I was very actively involved with fundraising. We had once a month meetings of the steering committee. So yes, I was very much involved.

Catt:

Okay. Did you ever refuse to work on a scientific project or take funds for a political, religious, or moral —

Davidon:

The closest I've come to that was on a couple of occasions I've been asked to referee things by either corporate or military groups. Since I'm known for some of this applied math work that I did, several times I guess the Army asked to me to referee [inaudible], and I wrote back saying my understanding was that the military is only to support work with military applications, and since I do not want to support military applications, [inaudible]. There was a division made in appropriations with the Mansfield Amendment, [???] [???] military appropriations bill, which was supposed to stop the military funding and non-military work, but it's not [inaudible]. I used that focus for refusing to referee these papers. And then wrote a note to the person who authored the paper to explain why I refused to referee their work.

Catt:

For example, one thing about Science For the People, it mentions here in 1970 Charlie Schwartz, it talks about you were at...

Davidon:

This is the Jason Project. You mentioned that earlier.

Catt:

Right, and Trieste, where he was going to speak. Maybe you could describe just a little bit about that, what happened there.

Davidon:

Yeah, I was sort of saying my reservations with Science For the People, this is sort of an example of some different matter of exaggeration, of not being careful with the facts. Particularly if you're trying to convince people who hold a different view, when one pushes things to the extremes to make it easy for other people to find a flaw in the extraneous part of your argument, which makes it easier for them to reject all of your argument. So that by in this case, when you add exaggerations or misstatements then people reject the whole thing. Also the actions in Trieste. I'm trying to remember. I think I remember what that is. There was a meeting of an international organization for political figures that meets in Trieste, and several of the people who were participating from the United States in that meeting were involved in the Jason Project. I don't think Marvin Goldberg was.

Catt:

Sid Drell was another one.

Davidon:

And there was [???] there, because the Jason Group was being asked for their overall [inaudible].

Catt:

There's the Science Against the People pamphlet that Charlie Schwartz and Berkley Sesvo [?] puts out. I'm sure you've seen it. The yellow cover with the bomb on it and it's basically — it looks at Jason and the connections to where these people are at and what they're doing.

Davidon:

I know there was a presence at this meeting in Trieste. I was already in Europe. I was in Europe for something else and people asked me would I come down to Trieste to take part in this. I don't know whether you can tell from the date on that letter better than I can.

Catt:

Here's just another thing I have that talks about political repression and scientists. And this is again from you to Charlie Schwartz, dated October 12, 1970. You can read what it mentions. You can see at the end it says W. C. Davidon.

Davidon:

I wouldn't really call that political repression. It's a relatively mild thing. When it says arrested and convicted for protesting military conscription, there have been a number of arrests for either leafleting or actions against the draft. I don't know, repression. People's lives were ruined by McCarthyism and other situations for their viewpoints. My life has not been ruined by my political activity. I think it cheapens the significance of repression to use it in that case.

Catt:

Of course we must remember this is 1970. This is 1997.

Davidon:

That's right, people's views change.

Catt:

But cases like with Curtis Powell obviously was. He is looking at going to jail for the rest of his life.

Davidon:

Is this something I sent out?

Catt:

This is something that —

Davidon:

I guess if I were writing it today I would try to sort of indicate that these are objectionable things that were going on, and I don't know how seriously treated some of these other people were in the very case. Some of these people suffered for years because of their political views, and others may have been hassled for a few hours. And I think it's worthwhile making that distinction.

Catt:

One reason I brought up that issue is it seems to me that it's trying to raise consciousness among scientists. It's a way of saying, "Well, you don't have to look for repression outside of science. We have it going on around us." Again, calling for scientists to be a little more active in the issues. Were you ever — I mean SSRS definitely that's one thing that they were trying to do. Science For the People, of course. Do you ever remember consciously thinking well I need scientists to get off their...to quit dragging their feet and get involved.

Davidon:

I often felt and did that for scientists to get involved. I guess I don't the best ways to get — I don't know, particularly now. I mean one feature of the opposition to Vietnam War is it was a very well-defined evil that one was trying to counter. One of the problems now is that it's not quite so clear as to just where to direct one's energy. But I certainly think it's important for people to be concerned with war. I wish I knew better what needed to be done.

Catt:

The title of my study is called Radical Scientists. Some people have said perhaps it should be more accurately Scientists Who Just Happen To Be Radical. You can't put the two together; you need to separate them. How would you define? Do you see yourself as a radical physicist or a radical who just happened to be a physicist?

Davidon:

I mentioned before, I think in my own case, I think my scientific work and my political work had really marginal overlap. I think in some cases they very much did overlap. For example, my

research interests in physics have always been a very political work component, and such a far cry from that to engineering applications. I never felt any sort of ethical dilemma and misuse of this theoretical [???]. In the case of mathematics, the work I've done in optimization, taking these and all kinds of different situations and it could well be that some of these is the optimization have been for the design of weapons. I don't know. The applications I'm aware of have more to do with biology and chemistry and radiography than they do military application. But at least there's a greater possibility. Many people face a much more difficult decision as to what science work to engage in and what organizations to work with. To call me a radical scientist, I like to think of myself as a radical. At least radical in the sense of not accepting [???] [???], and [???] [???] causes of what's going on and how to change them. But whether I'm called a radical scientist or a scientist who is a radical, I don't know. I don't feel strongly to that.

Catt:

I was going to have you try to offer a definition or some characteristics, some lists there. If you think radical scientists is someone perhaps on that list. Oh yeah, if you write everything about this person, that's all the definition that you need.

Davidon:

Well someone like Charlie Schwartz has been much more involved in focusing within the scientific community, whereas I'd say most of my political activity has not been within the scientific community. Most of my political activity was in other groups. In fact, I would say not primarily even academic groups. A committee for sane nuclear policy [inaudible] for peace action. There are some groups which have a scientific tilt to them. Like the Federation of American Scientists or Union of Concerned Scientists. But most of my activity has been with peace action or other anti-war groups. The Committee for Nonviolent Action, the Quaker Action Group. I've not been involved in the scientific community. Different people [inaudible].

Catt:

Right. Well, SSRS, as you said before, is a community of scientists, but it's not...

Davidon:

Scientists, and I guess made up of engineers or something.

Catt:

What forces, what events brought about criticisms of science during this time that you think were significant? Perhaps criticism is too strong a term. Perhaps brought more of a critical reassessment or critical reappraisal of the relations of science and society, science and government, science and the military, science and that other world out there.

Davidon:

I think the applied technology of war, whether it be in Vietnam or the Gulf War, certainly caused many people to be opposed to scientific developments. In opposition to nuclear weapons, many people not only oppose nuclear weapons but all things involving nuclear processes. The concern with the specific part of the problem has grown into a general uneasiness. Anything to do with nuclear processes or radiation is all sort of lumped together and then the people who are involved in that, I think are often looked down upon as creators of bad things. I don't know. I guess creating a world in which people don't any longer feel in

control is one of the things [???] [???] scientific community. Rapidly advancing technology makes it more difficult for people to really understand the world around them. When people don't understand the world around them, they can't influence the world around them. That loss of control, the loss of influence I think is often blamed on science.

Catt:

How would you classify or categorize your political views during this period?

Davidon:

Sort of a leftist with anarchist leanings. I guess in later years I've sort of become more mild in my political views. I'm more comfortable working with groups like Americans for Democratic Action, which is good, solid organization.

Catt:

Teachers for Democratic Culture? TDC?

Davidon:

I'm not familiar with it.

Catt:

What literature was important? Helped influence your thinking, your views on a lot of these issues? What literature? And this could be newspapers.

Davidon:

Einstein's writings. Let me read the ones you have there. I don't think any of the names here. Kuhn's Scientific Resolutions is something I read and was impressed by, but I don't know that shapes my world view of science and our society. The others, in some cases I'm not familiar with their writing. I would say, try to think of any single person, you mention Einstein. And Einstein's writings on society and political things I think I found very useful. What periodically did I read? Liberation, for quite a long time I read that.

Catt:

Nation and Monthly Review?

Davidon:

Nation's not down among those listed, but I now read it sporadically. There was a time when I read it. The others down here I've not read. I guess I've seen a few issues of Ramparts, but I've never systematically read it. Nor have I read NUC Newsletter, New Left Notes. The Science For the People I read regularly for a short period of time, just for the record. Some of that answers?

Catt:

Yeah. That's kind of, well — Do you think the activities, the efforts by radicals within physics and then more broadly, radicals within science have changed the scientific community?

Davidon:

It's changed the lives of people who did it. Very often in measuring the effort that's seen in

political activity, one has too grandiose standards. To change the lives of small numbers of people, that I think by itself has substantial value. I'm fond of quoting this statement of Camus, which I thought [???]. But you build living communities within the dying communities. You build little pockets of people who have lives with integrity and who do things that are worthwhile. Even if it doesn't change the larger picture, there's value in that percent.

Catt:

How about in your own case? Did your activism during this time, did it affect the way —

Davidon:

It certainly affected not only myself, but my family, my children. I think in most ways with a positive effect. I like the values of my children, and I think they wouldn't have those values if we didn't do many of the things we did together.

Catt:

But interestingly you talk about going back to research after.

Davidon:

I became much more involved again. In the middle to late '70s in physics, and then subsequent to that in mathematics. Only much more peripherally involved.

Catt:

Could that perhaps be an effect from the end of the war?

Davidon:

Well, I think the ending of the war removed a particular focus. I'm still very much concerned about the threat of nuclear weapons. It's hard to get a hold of it. Just in this last year there's been quite a number of developments, which I find encouraging. The decision by the International Court of Justice against nuclear weapons. The statements by generals and retired generals. The Canberra Commission put out a strong statement about nuclear weapons. Signs of the confidence of Tuscany Treaty. These are some of the things that have given me sort of more impetus to try to keep concerned with nuclear presence. There's a group called Abolition 2000 and I've been trying to give some support to. This is provided in the last couple of years.

Catt:

Some have argued, and again we talked about this, that science is politics in just another form. That our relations, the organization, what counts as knowledge, is all through negotiations and dealing with negotiations, social relations, you're dealing with politics. Somebody is always in a position of having power to judge or determine the course of research, what research gets done, who gets allowed to do that research, what findings come about and how that knowledge is used. And you stressed that you tried to separate your science and your politics. And others say that's precisely what made them the radicals. They wanted to join [???] — their science reflected their politics and vice versa, and that you really can't make any boundary between the two.

Davidon:

Different people approach it in different ways. I think the sociology of science is a very

different subject in a sense. When you're building an engine or computer or electrical power grid, you can argue about all the factors involved, but the criteria for whether the engine or the computer or the power grid is working properly are much less subject to the ambiguities of interpretation. You can tell whether or not the physical systems are working or not, separate from the mental images of the people who are engaged in working on it. I think it is difficult to distinguish the hard reality from the subjective evaluations. There is something called reality. There's more to our eyes than sort of dancing images. Sometimes those images of reality are distorted, but that doesn't mean that there's nothing substantial behind it. And I think the decisions as to whether the engine is completed or the power grid are working properly are for more solid and definite and subject to less ambiguity than are the criteria for evaluating literature or humanity.

Catt:

Okay. Well, I've run through my list of questions.

Davidon:

You want me to take a look at some of these?

Catt:

If you don't mind. We'll go ahead and stop the tape.