

Interview with Bill Yolton
Date: ca. 1998
Interviewer: Judy Ehrlich

Interview gathered as part of *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors*. Produced by Paradigm Productions. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Interview with Bill Yolton, conducted by Paradigm Productions ca. 1998 for *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors*.

00:00:11:00

[picture, no sound]

00:00:18:00—00:01:08:00

[picture and sound]

Bill Yolton:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

But if you keep that in mind, if you think I'm really—

Bill Yolton:

Mm-hmm, right.

Interviewer #1:

—missing the point, and there's something that I'm not getting—

Bill Yolton:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

—to here. Would you begin by introducing yourself?

Bill Yolton:

Mm. I'm Bill Yolton. Much more formally, you might think of me as the Reverend L. William Yolton, the former executive director of the National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors. But as Bill, I guess I've done lots of things, including, as a, a young man having to think out my position on this, and then over the years, working with students, and serving on boards like a, for the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, and then working for the Presbyterians on conscience and war issues, and teaching in seminary, and this sort of thing, and then finally ending up my career as the director of NISBCO. That's—

00:01:09:00—00:01:13:00

Interviewer #1:

You're too young to have been a World War II CO, aren't you? You're—

Bill Yolton:

Absolutely, I'm too young. I'm the next generation.

00:01:14:00—00:02:05:00

Interviewer #1:

You're Korean War period, or Vietnam War period?

Bill Yolton:

I'm Korean War period. My father served in the Second World War as a physician and he was shot, actually by friendly fire, and died there in the Philippines.

Interviewer #1:

Oh.

Bill Yolton:

And that's always been kind of a caution to me. You know, in a way, as a physician, that's a, like a 1-A-O position, and at that time I was trying to struggle with my own personal understanding, of the faith and what it requires, as well as honoring my father's service and memory. So, that's, I have a lot of sympathy for people who do serve in the military.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

In fact, in, part of my life we helped organize a ministry for veterans, so I have a claim on saying this is not an us, we, you, they, or anything like that, it's us together.

00:02:06:00—00:03:45:00

Interviewer #1:

You talked about that last night—

Bill Yolton:

Mm-hmm, yeah.

Interviewer #1:

I thought that was an important point about the, the, activities of veterans, and the Veterans for Peace. Actually, you have to tell that story, before I forget, about the Presbyterians being the war church.

Bill Yolton:

Oh, that's right. I—

Interviewer #1:

I think that's a great story.

[whispered production discussion]

Bill Yolton:

It's sort of like—

Interviewer #1:

And then you get back to how the churches fall out on these, but—

Bill Yolton:

Yes, I was saying, the, pointing out—

[loud crash]

Bill Yolton:

—in the room was—

Interviewer #1:

What happened?

Bill Yolton:

—in the room was one of the two, people in the Southern Presbyterian church who became COs. It was not easy in that time to, for you to take the stand in a conservative denomination, who actually have a teaching that you're supposed to obey the civil magistrate. Well, it finally does become the case that the principle on which you're judged to be a CO is not whether, any longer whether you belong to an historic peace church, but really the principle is whether your religious training and belief lead you to these convictions. So it can come from anywhere, or really not from any formal training, the courts say, so I was representing this Presbyterian, sitting in for him at a, a local board meeting out in Media, Pennsylvania, which is, pretty Presbyterian territory. And the chairman of the local board leaned over the table, and waggled his finger, and said, to the kid—I mean, you, you have to see, it's a kid, you know, when you're faced with all these authorities—he says, you're a Presbyterian? Well, I'm a Presbyterian, and we're a war church! [laughs] And that's true. I mean, that's where a lot of America was when we went into the Vietnam War.

00:03:46:00—00:04:07:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

That, that was, both off-mic and over-modulated. Do you—

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

—want to do that again? [adjusts microphone]

Interviewer #1:

So, what—could you do it again?

Interviewer #2:

You know what, we don't know what kind of board it is from this story. It's a, was it a draft board?

Bill Yolton:

A draft board, yeah.

Interviewer #2:

OK. I, I think we need to know that.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah. Let's do that one more time, for a few reasons.

Bill Yolton:

OK, all right.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sir, when you lean in, you, you lean off-mic.

Interviewer #1:

Should we—if he's gonna do that—do, you do that, don't you?

Bill Yolton:

Oh, I wiggle.

Interviewer #1:

I think he wiggles. I think he leans forward.

Bill Yolton:

I wiggle.

[cut]

00:04:08:00—00:04:13:00

Interviewer #1:

—elbow room?

Bill Yolton:

If she watched me last night, and she knows my—

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Bill Yolton:

—twenty, twenty feet is—

[cut]

00:04:14:00—00:05:31:00

Interviewer #1:

—a little room there, and maybe—

Bill Yolton:

OK, I...

Interviewer #1:

—but, is that OK?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Bill Yolton:

Well, it's a good story.

Interviewer #1:

It's a great story. I loved—

Bill Yolton:

It's a good story.

Interviewer #1:

—it, yeah.

Bill Yolton:

And it's typical of the times—

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

Bill Yolton:

—because the Presbyterians have always been thought of as, sort of like, you're, supposed to be obedient to the civil magistrate. And in the room last night, there, one of the two COs from the Southern Presbyterian Church was there. In fact, he finally had to leave the Presbyterian Church, he got no support. And I remember in my own time, a war later, in the Vietnam War, two wars later after the—I was helping with COs in their claims, and went along with a guy who was going to the Media, Pennsylvania, local draft board to have his CO claim examined. And the chairman of the board sort of quizzically looked at him, and said, you're a Presbyterian? I'm a Presbyterian, and we're a war church! [pumps fist] And it's that kind of, struggle that kids had to make their claim in a climate in which the whole society, the draft boards were made up of people who served in, World War II, and they're gonna make sure you do, too, now, when it's your turn. And the whole idea of CO is hard for a lot of people to get.

00:05:32:00—00:07:56:00

Interviewer #1:

Talk a little about that. Talk a, we, I—you are a conscientious objector yourself?

Bill Yolton:

Yes, that's my own view, yes.

Interviewer #1:

Could you just go back a little bit, talk about how you came to that decision, with the conflict of your father—

Bill Yolton:

Sure, sure.

Interviewer #1:

—having died in World War II, and, and how you came to make that decision—

Bill Yolton:

I think it's probably, let's think characteristically of what it's like to be a kid. You start out sort of with your parents' beliefs. In fact, it's hard to stay at home if you're, in too much conflict. But the transition from being a kid to being grown up is finally to turn around and have the beliefs, your own. For some, in traditional families and traditional cultures, there's no shift; you just carry on, and there's no questioning. But in our culture you begin to ask these questions, 'cause you have to decide—you're not gonna be just a farmer like your father; you may decide you're gonna go on to further education. Those are steps which, make changes from where you were. And so I had to do that as a young boy, even in this time while I was, thinking about my own father's death. At that time I didn't know that he was killed by friendly fire.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

And thinking about the Scriptures, thinking about what you believe—and our family also had a whole set of books that I could read and be, exposed to. So I really came to the conclusion that the teaching of Jesus was nonviolence, and found in my own pastor a supporter of those views, found that there was a, universe of other people out there who think these same ideas. Actually, when I went to college—I was one of the first two kids from my town ever to go to Harvard. And when I got there, I decided to, study philosophy. In fact, before I went, that's one of the reasons I wanted to go there. And so they still had tutors for the Honors Students, so finally, when I got eligible for one, they first had me read, *Why I'm Not a Christian*, and then defend against Bertrand Russell. [laughs] Try that. [laughs]

Interviewer #1:

[laughs]

Bill Yolton:

And then the next year my tutor had me read *Why I'm Not a Pacifist* by Reinhold Niebuhr, and have to defend against that. As it turned out, eventually, when I went to, went on to

seminary, Reinhold Niebuhr was my teacher and my tutor—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

—so...

00:07:56:00—00:08:03:00

Interviewer #1:

So you went to Union?

Bill Yolton:

That's right. I went to Union in New York.

Interviewer #1:

And what, what years were you at Union?

Bill Yolton:

I was in Union from, '51 through '54, and—

00:08:03:00—00:08:48:00

Interviewer #1:

U-huh, uh-huh, and, and, at what point did you, really become clear that you were a conscientious objector?

Bill Yolton:

I guess it was when I was on my way into college, and there I became acquainted with others, and was, got involved in religious stuff, and began to do a lot of reading.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

And even, Perry Miller, who was the, sort of the American expert on Puritans, took me to lunch at the faculty club, to encourage me and to say, I don't believe what you believe, but go. [laughs] So that was that nice kind of encouragement, to say, it's all right—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

—to have my faith beliefs about not killing people. Turns out there are a lot more people who have those views, and it goes on all the time, more and more people.

00:08:49:00—00:09:01:00

Interviewer #1:

How did your mother feel about your position?

Bill Yolton:

I think my mother was very supportive at all times—

Interviewer #1:

So she—

Bill Yolton:

—and—

Interviewer #1:

—supported you—

Bill Yolton:

—these—that's right, because she trusted that I was not doing anything irresponsible.

00:09:02:00—00:09:38:00

Interviewer #1:

As a Presbyterian, were you, you were brought up as Presbyterian—

Bill Yolton:

Yes, that's right, that's right.

Interviewer #1:

—you became a Presbyterian minister—

Bill Yolton:

Mm-hmm, that's right.

Interviewer #1:

—but that was not the teaching of the Presbyterian Church.

Bill Yolton:

No, the teaching of the Presbyterian Church was permissive, but not explicit about that permission. It isn't till 1969 that the Presbyterians adopt a policy that clearly recognizes the rights of people to be conscientious objectors, or even, to take, to take the consequences of resisting—

Interviewer #1:

Right.

Bill Yolton:

—the whole system. But that's the position of the Church now, and a small number continue to take it.

00:09:39:00—00:11:09:00

Interviewer #1:

Is, if you could look at, back at how the churches, in the period preceding World War II, cut this deal with the government, and if that was, in, in retrospect, a, something they would've done again? If you think that there were more, that the positive benefits of the CPS alternative service concept outweigh the negative benefits, and just, sort of—

Bill Yolton:

Sure.

Interviewer #1:

—look at that, that kind of—

Bill Yolton:

Well, the people who support COs are divided on this question. I'm one of those who said, this is the best deal you could've gotten, it's what was possible at that time, and that people acted responsibly in doing it; to have done otherwise would have abandoned people to the situation at World War I, where seventeen people were sentenced to death—actually none of them, all of them got their sentences commuted, although the last one was out in '34. That's a long time. And the, there were seventeen who died from other causes, because of their treatment that they had in prison by the military at that time. Really bad time for people, and for human rights in the U.S.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

If you ever have, historians go back and really examine their, that period and they'll discover how our lack of tolerance, our self-righteousness and national chauvinism really overrode the rights of all sorts of people, which again made it possible to take the, and intern the Japanese.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

Same pattern.

00:11:10:00—00:12:36:00

Interviewer #1:

So are you saying that, that that was particularly to [stutters], a problem during World War I, but that same kind of tolerance was true in World War II, as well.

Bill Yolton:

Well, it's the problem, you see, if they hadn't worked this out, it would've been a tough time.

Interviewer #1:

I see.

Bill Yolton:

And the, actually Friends, Brethren, Mennonites met together, really for the first time, in '37, around this problem. That's what, it brought them together.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

And, most historians sort of think of the war as, sort of like, surprising America, sort of like the Blitzkrieg in '39, all this sort of thing. Well, the practical reality is that both people favoring the draft and people working for alternatives for conscientious objectors were thinking about it in the late thirties.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

And as a result, we ended up with a bill, for the first time in the, of, in our history, and with, with the exception of the British Commonwealth, no place on earth had such a provision to allow people who objected for reasons of conscience to participation in war in any form. It was sort of forced in the U.S. to make it look as much as possible like World War I, where you had to be a member of a recognized pacifist sect, but they got around the Constitutional problems by making a generic definition. You had to have these beliefs by religious training and belief.

00:12:37:00—00:12:43:00

Interviewer #1:

So that allowed a Presbyterian with those beliefs—

Bill Yolton:

That's right—

Interviewer #1:

—or a Catholic—

Bill Yolton:

—that's right—

Interviewer #1:

—or a Jew—

Bill Yolton:

—that's right.

Interviewer #1:

—or a Baptist—

Bill Yolton:

And that's how they got into CPS.

00:12:44:00—00:14:06:00

Interviewer #1:

That's how they got—now, what I never, what I didn't understand was how somebody like the secretary to the fascist leader got into CPS. There were some people who slipped in because there was nowhere else to stick them?

Bill Yolton:

That's right, that's right. You ended up having these—it depended upon a local board's decision, and that was—to have centralized it would have been impossible. They were forced to the local board decision of volunteers, frequently veterans; all, never women. It isn't till the Vietnam era that you get women included on boards, and so forth. But, this beginning effort to try to make adjudications about whether or not you're a CO were also advised by an FBI investigation. And this whole process led to allowing people to, be, assigned either to the military—22,500, approximately, went into the military as, doing, doing, like, medic stuff. And the rest, the 12,00, went into Civilian Public Service, often based upon old CCC camps, which were converted for this purpose. A few places were built de Novo to work at, and so forth, but, this took available space and used people for this.

00:14:07:00—00:16:06:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. And the purpose of the CCC camps, as you—could you compare what they said they were for, and what you really think they were for?

Bill Yolton:

Well, the old CCC camps from the Depression, were, really a, a jobs program for poor guys. And in the face of having no place else to put young people who were emerging into the job market, they made a lot of conservation projects and forestry stuff available, and they helped begin the building of trails and roads in national, parks, and this sort of thing. But when the CPS men were put there, there was no trumpeting of this. This was done quietly. And just as much as the Japanese were interned, I believe that the CPS men, the Civilian Public Service men, were interned. And the government wanted them out of sight and out of mind, they didn't want them agitating, and you know what happened in the Vietnam era when they were out on the streets. But, the internal, mood of the CPS camps prevented the men from thinking of it as an internship, internment. They, instead, because, for instance, Mennonites were clear that we're focused on service, they, the, all the three churches that sponsored the camps assigned education directors to the camps; the men themselves took charge of making sense out of what they're doing; they began training themselves in peace education issues; so—one group was being trained to go to Europe. Another group actually got as far as on the boat to China to work in China, before they were stopped by amendment. So this is an important process, in which the men themselves picked up on what the intention of the churches was, for this to be a service and education experience. Otherwise, it would've been a disaster.

00:16:07:00—00:16:20:00

Interviewer #1:

But the government really didn't have that intention?

Bill Yolton:

No, the government had no intention of this at all. In fact, the Selective Service System blocked it at every point, the Senate blocked it at every point. It was difficult to carry this off.

00:16:20:00—00:16:53:00

Interviewer #1:

And FDR opposed it, is that right?

Bill Yolton:

FDR was not eager, first of all, to see this going forward. He actually, opposed the initiation of the draft, originally, in the first time it was proposed in the middle of 1940, believing that in the, when the war came conscription would be easy.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

And it was by a narrow vote—six votes, originally. When the vote was to be renewed, it was by one vote only. And to the credit of Jeanette Rankin, she voted against the draft, both for the First World War and for the Second World War. [laughs]

00:16:54:00—00:17:31:00

Interviewer #1:

Excellent. The, you, that, that issue of, whether it's internment or not is one I think that's very—

Bill Yolton:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

—interesting.

Bill Yolton:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

I think people never call themselves internees—

Bill Yolton:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

—they call themselves assignees, or—

Bill Yolton:

That's right, that's right.

Interviewer #1:

—CPS men, or CPS-era, or whatever; and yet it seems to me when somebody locks you up for four years [laughs] and tells you can't, you know—

Bill Yolton:

You can't leave, that's right.

Interviewer #1:

You can't leave, that's [laughs]—

Bill Yolton:

Or go to jail. [laughs]

Interviewer #1:

—yes, or go to jail, I mean, that's—

Bill Yolton:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

I mean, you had a choice of this or jail, and that seems to me like, well, you always have a choice of, when you break the law, of going to jail. But that, the law that you should be sent off—

Bill Yolton:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

—seemed, looked to me like internment. And yet it was an attitudinal thing you're saying—

Bill Yolton:

That's right.

00:17:31:00—00:18:48:00

Interviewer #1:

—that made it possible for people to do that with a positive attitude, and—but for a lot of people they didn't have the tradition of service, they just had the CO, and—

Bill Yolton:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

—were they the troublemakers in the...

Bill Yolton:

We, there were a whole range, you see, 'cause you've got, you even had anarchists in the group, as well as the secretary for the, Gerald L. K. Smith, who were there because local boards hadn't much other place to put them. But you had people who—in the early stages, Dijkstra, who was the first Director of Selective Service—and didn't last, like four months. But he was the President of the University of Wisconsin, used, used to dealing with young people, had a notion of human rights and, and a reasonable expectation, so there were, even were persons that he approved who were, didn't even fit the definition correctly. He allowed people who were selective objectors—that is, those who had reasons for objection to this particular war. So that, that ended when, once again—remember, Hershey, actually, had been working in the thirties, working on plans for an eventual draft in the then War Department, now the Pentagon. But then, after Dijkstra resigned, then Hershey was put fully in charge of the whole process.

00:18:48:00—00:20:15:00

Interviewer #1:

What I don't understand, and I should by now, but it's a little unclear to me, is why, the, the CPS system was, was a part of Selective Service. But the Selective Service was not strictly a part of the military, correct, it was civilian—

Bill Yolton:

Well, it was technically—

Interviewer #1:

—controlled—

Bill Yolton:

Now the whole, idea—

Interviewer #1:

When we talk about boards, can we just say draft boards? I think that would be a lot, people,

people maybe—

Bill Yolton:

Sure, OK.

Interviewer #1:

Can you see?

Bill Yolton:

The, the whole idea of the Selective Service System was to create a, a system independent of the military, which was really a sham, because at the Second World War, with so many people involved supporting the war, and with military officers operating the Selective Service System—and by the way this continues to this very day. This is supposed to be a civilian agency—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

—and although its budget is in the same category items as the Defense Department, it's not a part of the Defense Department budget, it's under the so-called Independent Agencies, and actually is reviewed by a different committee of Congress.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

But in practice, most of the personnel over the years have been military in their past, or often military persons who are on leave for this purpose, or are reassigned temporarily.

00:20:15:00—00:20:44:00

Interviewer #1:

So General Hershey was not acting as a general in his role as head of the CPS camps?

Bill Yolton:

Well, [pause] well, he was still drawing military rank in the process—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

—and got military retirement, and that was his—he was General Hershey.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Bill Yolton:

And it was Colonel Kosh who was actually, adminis- supervising the camps on behalf of Selective Service.

00:20:45:00

Interviewer #1:

But the legislation was Civilian Public Service—

Bill Yolton:

That's right, that's right.

Interviewer #1:

—under civilian control—

Bill Yolton:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

—in work of national importance.

Bill Yolton:

And as a matter of fact, at the end of the war, one guy got out of his assignments and so forth, because the judge looked at the signature, and here it says Colonel Kosh, and he says, well, this is military direction, not civilian direction, you're free. The, that's a, an unusual case—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

—but some people got the logic.

00:21:12:00—00:21:23:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

Just the—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—you know, 'cause of the time.

Interviewer #1:

OK, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

What?

Interviewer #1:

OK, so, Karen just reminded, the more religious stuff.

Bill Yolton:

OK. Let's talk about the groups—

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

Bill Yolton:

—that made up the CPS camp.

00:21:23:00—00:22:37:00

Interviewer #1:

Yes, the religious groups that made up the camps, OK good.

Bill Yolton:

And thirty-eight percent were Mennonites, and that's over 5,000 of the 12,000. You have to see that another big group were, about two thirds of the 6,000 who went to jail were Jehovah's Witnesses, and most people don't count them, but you have to realize that they insisted that, because we are ministers, you have to give us the ministerial deferment and not a CO requirement to serve. And it was on that principle that they were arguing they were all ministers.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. So they—

Bill Yolton:

And so they would have been eligible for CO—now some local boards assigned them to CO camps and they went into the CO camps, so there were JW's—Jehovah's Witnesses—in the, in CO camps, as well. But the big bulk of them were in jail.

Interviewer #1:

The big—

Bill Yolton:

And so the biggest group are probably Mennonites; second, Jehovah's Witnesses; then third, Church of the Brethren; and then you get down to Quakers, who most people are, identify, they must be the ones, but there were only about 930 Quakers of various groups, and, believe it or not, after that, 844 Methodists—a big block of Methodists.

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Bill Yolton:

There was a strong tradition of Methodist perfectionism, about living the life of Christ and not engaging in violence and war.

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Bill Yolton:

As Methodists have acculturated in the modern society, that's, a lot of that's lost, but it was still alive then.

00:22:57:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs] Excuse me. [cough] We gotta change the tape, all right?

Interviewer #1:

OK.

[cut]

[switches tape]

00:23:02:00—00:23:53:00

Bill Yolton:

Let's get to the next—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Bill Yolton:

—question when they're ready. And then we may want to clarify the JW's.

Interviewer #1:

OK, fine.

Bill Yolton:

Want to ask me that? [laughs]

Interviewer #1:

I think you did that. I just, I just—

Bill Yolton:

Yes, OK.

Interviewer #1:

—hadn't understood it before.

Bill Yolton:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

But I may have stepped on you when you said it—

Bill Yolton:

Yeah.

—'cause I was saying, oh, really? Why don't you explain that, that what the—

Bill Yolton:

Well, basically, the Jehovah's Witnesses would have qualified as COs, and it's their insistence that, no, indeed, their primary calling was to be ministers, not just to be COs, and they wanted that recognized. And therefore if some local boards, instead of sending them off to jail, got them, classified as COs, and they did their service in the CPS camps, and those individuals were willing to do that. But the big bulk went, went to jail. And they do it around the world. That's the big bunch in the Greek prison at the moment.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

They're JW's.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

Well, the—

Bill Yolton:

I think all but one are JW's.

00:23:54:00—00:24:04:00

Interviewer #1:

How many are in Greek prison right now?

Bill Yolton:

There are almost 300.

Interviewer #1:

Is that right? That's increased since I—

Bill Yolton:

So, you have to see this witness goes on as numbers of COs increase around the world—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

—that this is gonna be a bigger problem everywhere.

00:24:04:00—00:24:29:00

Interviewer #1:

That so?

Interviewer #2:

Sorry, could I ask a diversity question? Are, are Jehovah's Witnesses happy about being referred to as JW's? [pause] Maybe we should just call them Jehovah's Witnesses.

Bill Yolton:

All right, that's probably better, yeah, yeah, OK.

Interviewer #1:

I [stutters], that's a good question.

Bill Yolton:

Well—

Interviewer #1:

I think they do call each other that.

Bill Yolton:

JW's, yeah, I think it—

Interviewer #2:

Well, black people call each other nigger, but, [laughs] sometimes, you know.

Interviewer #1:

—might not like being called that.

Bill Yolton:

Sure.

00:24:29:00—00:26:01:00

Interviewer #1:

It's all right. Jehovah's, you just said something that just, oh shoot. Jehovah's Witnesses... oh! Was that the same position—I don't know if this happened in World War II, but I think the position that Muhammed Ali took during Vietnam—

Bill Yolton:

Oh, this is fun—

Interviewer #1:

This is a lot of fun—

—let's just look at the question.

Interviewer #1:

—yeah. Is that, did that—

Bill Yolton:

It's the—

Interviewer #1:

—come up during World War II?

Bill Yolton:

We didn't have, so, I'm not sure whether any Muslims involved in World War II. I'd have to, we keep a book that has all this data in it. I'm, doubt that there was a Muslim in the group, but I could be wrong. But there were over a hundred different religious bodies, and this is a far cry from World War I, where the main historic peace churches—the Friends, the Brethren, and the Mennonites—which, by the way, at, going into World War II, there were seventeen different Mennonite bodies that had to be kept track of.

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Bill Yolton:

And you're talking about, they're down to about a dozen who participate in the Mennonite Central Committee now, partly through consolidation of groups. But, even the, one of the big events of World War II was to get Mennonites to know one another and trust one another—

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Bill Yolton:

—and as a result, to trust the Mennonite Central Committee, which had taken care of them in the camps, to do lots of other things—and everybody knows about disaster relief and all the stuff that Mennonites do. And the trust to do that, and the willingness to adventure out in the world and do it, came mostly through the impetus of the experience of the Civilian Public Service camps.

00:26:02:00—00:26:24:00

Interviewer #1:

So it really changed the way Mennonites acted in the world.

Bill Yolton:

Oh yes, indeed.

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Bill Yolton:

And out, as a result of it, their having to deal with the government, it gave them courage enough to open an office in Washington.

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Bill Yolton:

So it's a, it's changed Mennonites, and they've entered the modern world through this process, and they, of course, are of, among the most responsible and faithful groups in our society to this day.

00:26:25:00—00:28:15:00

Interviewer #1:

Hmm. In fact, can we jump onto the, sort of, what—well I, I know, we wanted to, hear a little bit about the Catholic—

Bill Yolton:

Yes.

Interviewer #1:

—role in the, how Catholics understood their, the, peace witness.

Bill Yolton:

Oh, this is fun—

Interviewer #1:

—and how the—

Bill Yolton:

—to talk about what happened to Catholics—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Bill Yolton:

—in this period of time, and push it into the present moment.

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

Bill Yolton:

At that time, you would have to say that the, the Catholics who became COs—a small group at the time of the Second World War—were radicals. They were the ones who took the Gospel seriously in their private and personal lives, who lived out the Catholic Work, Worker lifestyle of living with the poor and feeding them. They, were a group of people who saw the radical dimensions of the Gospel, the implications that go all the way through St. Francis, back to St. Martin of Tours—a whole tradition of saints who took these positions, and they just were following in their train. And so they also became COs, without official support from the hierarchy.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

They organized a, some people say a front group for it, the Association of Catholic Conscientious Objectors, and they actually operated two camps, one up in New Hampshire, and a, basically a, the Alexian Hospital, the Alexian Brothers Hospital in Chicago. And the—of course, these are people who are radical Catholics, and also always suspicious of false motivation and this sort of thing. So they, it was hard to run camps with them in it. Plus you were running camps with, anarchists, and socialists, and Mennonites, and—and they finally,

actually, a lot of these people got pumped off to programs that were run, actually, by the government themselves, itself, because they were hard to control, in the other camps—some of them left there 'cause they didn't want to be prayed over in the religious camps.

00:28:16:00—00:28:45:00

Interviewer #1:

How did socialists get into the camps?

Bill Yolton:

Oh, well, obviously a lot of the socialists rightly felt that unless you have a war that's not run by Wall Street, but is run, on behalf of the people around the world, solidarity forever! So that their judgment as to the war also was to say that this is not for the purposes—maybe Hitler ought to be defeated, but we're not gonna do it unless it's in terms of greater justice.

00:28:46:00

Interviewer #1:

But the, how did that, fit the description of, of—

Bill Yolton:

Well, you've got again, local boards which are making these decisions.

Interviewer #1:

Huh.

Bill Yolton:

And sometimes local boards were really unfair. People, were rejected for the wrong reasons, and this sort of thing. That's been the history of Selective Service. Now, fortunately, fifty years later, there are regulations that require the local boards to be balanced, to represent the, be representative of their community, to have, at least try to get half women.

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Bill Yolton:

They used to have a, an age limit that was then imposed on the local boards, but when Reagan became President—so if you can be President at seventy-five, surely you can be on a

local board at seventy-five. It used to be sixty-five for a while. But also to require that you have to, all be, allow witnesses, allow the hearing to be open, allow rules to be, procedure to be followed—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

—and to allow you to be represented by an advocate—to have a whole bunch of things, and even get reasons for why you were rejected. These are all changes in—and improvements—from what the, the way it was when local boards operated for these guys fifty years ago. So when I list all those things, you say, weren't those always true? And—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

—the answer was no, they basically were kangaroo courts. They could do as they pleased.

00:29:58:00—00:33:09:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. And, and the things that, if you look, at the broad range of the religious groups that were in the camps, did they, is there something that stands out to you as something, would be interesting to people, surprising to people? What, what other kinds of little high points? I think you've done a good job—

Bill Yolton:

Sure.

Interviewer #1:

—explaining kind of who was there, but...

Bill Yolton:

Well, the interesting thing is that you this many principled young men together, together with staff people, and often their wives and other people who came as nurses at the camp, or dieticians, you bring together a pressure-cooker of some of the brightest, most dedicated, and eager young men and women that you could ever have. And out of that came the discussions,

the bull sessions that went on into the night, and even when they were doing their, forced labor—which is what it was—of cutting down trees, and planting seedlings, and weeding them—these men and women were engaged in the discussion of what the future should be like.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

And so many of them went on to higher education, became the professors who started Peace Studies programs, who worked on the Peace Tax Fund, who've, have worked on the issues of developing conflict resolution strategies—all the things in this world, and getting, carried over into the new ecology movement, because they were engaged in ecology efforts and they know what it's about.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

So they got their hands dirty at the early stages. And among the biggest things that happened, of course, is the revolution in mental health care. They refused to be violent in the [gestures air quotes] insane asylums. They changed even the language about lunacy and insanity to talk about mental health. They trained, for the first time, attendants to pay attention to the needs of persons and of, to learn about the, the illnesses they were dealing with, and not to be violent. And they took it on themselves. Often they were beat up, some of them were permanently injured out of what they did, but as a result of—they kept journals as to what was going on in the hospitals, they sneaked them out at night to the local Episcopal rector, who kept this record down in Virginia, and finally, when the testimony came they had a journal of all the things that had happened, and all the violation of patients' right—and you overthrew the hospital administration. Happened not only in Virginia, but in Ohio, and finally, of, the main story in a Life Magazine issue in 1945, about Bedlam. That's the beginning of mental health reform in America. Out of it, the Mennonites were so impressed about their experience they founded six psychiatric hospitals. And you also have to see the effect of the, the tests that were made on people. They would experiment on these COs—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Bill Yolton:

—and they eventually—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

[whispered production discussion]

Bill Yolton:

—eventually after all these tests on the COs, we ended up at the, the time of, what to do about Europe? At the end of the war, shall we do as we did at the end of the First War? [imitates angry voice] Let them starve. Or shall we begin the Marshall Plan—

00:33:10:00

Interviewer #1:

Wait, wait a minute. I think we've got it. Here, I'll move back—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sorry, we're just—

Interviewer #1:

OK, we—

Interviewer #2:

Just it—

Interviewer #1:

Wait, you don't like the—

Interviewer #2:

'Cause I—

Interviewer #1:

—camera angle?

Interviewer #2:

—no, just—

Interviewer #1:

We should stop, though—

Interviewer #2:

I'm sorry—

Interviewer #1:

—and restart, 'cause we stepped over, over all that. I think we need to do it again.

Interviewer #2:

I'm sorry, it's just, his eye line—

Interviewer #1:

Do we—

Interviewer #2:

—is way over here.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Well, yeah, there is the fire in the background, but that's—

Interviewer #2:

Yeah—

Interviewer #1:

It's OK? All right.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Well, no, I'm saying—

Interviewer #2:

It's just, just—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

I shouldn't have said to stop, it's just that—

Bill Yolton:

OK, let's jump again.

00:33:32:00—00:34:37:00

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Bill Yolton:

One of the biggest things that you have to recognize is what happened because of the experiments they did on the COs. They experimented for malaria; for jaundice; infectious hepatitis; what happens when you've, subjected to extreme cold, extreme heat; high altitude, what it does to your diet and, food needs, your ability to attend to things; and starvation. And the starvation stuff became the key to this question, is, what will we do to Europe? When you're starved you can't even think straight. You lose motivation, you can't work. And so reconstruction, if you starve Europe, that was the wrong thing to do, and the medical experts could testify as to the effects of starvation. And that's part of America's support for the U.N., Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, and many of these COs then went straight into that to work on it, and on the whole idea, finally, of a Marshall Plan. So a—

Interviewer #2:

Steve Cary was—

Bill Yolton:

—wonderful contribution that they made.

00:34:37:00

Interviewer #1:

That's very important. Yeah, and, and I, I stepped in the beginning of it. Could you do that one more time, 'cause I think that's really important, and Steve Cary was talking about the fact that the mistake we made after World War I was that we, was an unjust peace, and—

Bill Yolton:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

—the, the suffering in Europe after the war caused—

Bill Yolton:

Sure. Now where are we on this, now? Where do you want, me to pick it up?

Interviewer #1:

Just to pick it up, the part about, just that last—

Bill Yolton:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

—the whole last take that we made, starting with, the important thing was the, the medical experiments.

00:35:05:00—00:36:23:00

Bill Yolton:

You have to see the importance of what happened because of the medical experiments. Sure, they were all keyed up for military needs, and that's what justified the paying for them, but they were about, what do you about malaria? What happens if you're subjected to extreme heat and extreme cold? What happens if you're, starving on a life-raft? What happens if you've got infectious hepatitis, jaundice? And, what happens if you're being starved; what happens to your attention span and your ability to work and think? And it's that, that sort of information which has helped change the world, develop new remedies, and, and help change the world for a better, safer place. But the effect of the starvation studies was to provide the evidence for the discussion at the end of the World, War as to what you do about the, the European countries? Should you just let them starve, as we did at the end of World War I, and produced World War II? Or shall we feed them? And the starvation evidence was part of, you need to feed these countries. And so UNRRA—United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, in which many of these COs got into and involved right away—and also the development of the Marshall Plan, are all part of a different attitude about how you deal with the world after the World War.

00:36:24:00—00:38:31:00

Interviewer #1:

That's pretty good. It was better the second time. Or the third time—

Bill Yolton:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

—whichever time you've done for me. Let me, I know we don't have much time.

Bill Yolton:

Sure.

Interviewer #1:

What I'd like you to do is just, 'cause you're so good at looking at the big picture—what do you think is the—and you've answered that, to a large extent, just now, but the legacy of World War II COs in a nutshell?

Bill Yolton:

Oh.

Interviewer #1:

What's, what are the important things that we've inherited from this group of men?

Bill Yolton:

The legacy of World War II COs—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Start over, she—

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry, I stepped in—

Bill Yolton:

Sure.

Interviewer #1:

—yeah.

Bill Yolton:

The legacy of World War II COs is a broad one. You have to see, it's not just the testimony about being a conscience objector to killing. But they helped start Peace Studies programs, which are the serious attention to the causes and to the possible remedies for war. The whole, out of that spins out all these conciliation studies: how do you carry out the ways people are brought to agreement? You also have to look at what they did in terms of [pause] issues in our society such as civil rights. They came out, while in as COs they integrated the jails. They wouldn't sit down in a situation where there was failure to allow us all to sit down together; and they broke patterns wherever they went. And when they came out, they led the first civil rights ride through the South to integrate the buses that were the, the interstate transportation that went across the South. So in so many areas they took the lead, and had the sense to work on this. Then in other things like the development of a sensitivity about, should we pay taxes for, and what should our investments be? Should we, we invest socially responsibly? And because many of them were involved, themselves in these big, primitive ecology programs, they then became converts to the new movement for ecology in our society. So they've been at the forefront of many of the new directions our society's going.

00:38:31:00—00:39:05:00

Interviewer #1:

Who are some of the names in the ecology movement? I know names—and, and the social investment. Are they—

Bill Yolton:

Well—

Interviewer #1:

—are they individuals?

Bill Yolton:

—yes, Luther Tyson was among the group that helped found Pax World Fund. The, the ecology stuff, well, we, Wirksworth, who is right here at this meeting is busy doing that right now at Missouri, University of Missouri, and so forth. So that's the whole range of people that have been involved, often have a, somewhere at the bottom there's a CPS man.

00:39:06:00—00:40:19:00

Interviewer #2:

What about the legacy of just the tactic of nonviolence?

Interviewer #1:

Oh yeah, OK. Just, and I think you brought it, you brought it up—

Bill Yolton:

Sure.

Interviewer #1:

—without us asking about the civil rights movement.

Bill Yolton:

Sure.

Interviewer #1:

Maybe you know a little about how—or a lot [laughs]—about, how the CPS—well, the, not CPS, actually. COs from prison, more, but, and Bayard Rustin and, and the group that went to prison—

Bill Yolton:

Sure.

Interviewer #1:

—that, worked with King, and—

Bill Yolton:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

—and influenced him in terms of—

Bill Yolton:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

—the, adopting nonviolence, and how they—

Bill Yolton:

Yes.

Interviewer 31:

—utilized—

Bill Yolton:

Right.

—nonviolence in the civil rights movement.

Bill Yolton:

You would have to see that, so many of these people, like Bayard Rustin, who you mentioned, got involved in the civil rights movement and there they seeded the civil rights movement with people who were not willing to engage in violence, and instead had talked night after night, after what they should do; they were students of Gandhi; they wanted to build this into their own way of dealing with these issues, so that the CPS people are, have been heavily involved in the whole development of nonviolence as a way of dealing with conflict. Very important, and that's where the future's gotta go.

00:40:20:00

Interviewer #2:

Yeah?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Good.

Interviewer #1:

We got it. That was great. We're, we're gonna need to talk to you more, but not right now—

[sound begins to warp out]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:40:29:00