

Interview with Norman Corwin

Date: April 9, 1999

Interviewer: Rick Tejada-Flores, Judy Ehrlich

Camera Rolls:

Sound Rolls:

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 Norman Corwin, conducted by Paradigm Productions on April 9, 1999 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”.

00:00:11:00-00:00:38:00

Interviewer #1:

Norman, I need you to speak—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member:

I'm rolling.

Interviewer #2:

OK, so, you're rolling?

Camera Crew Member:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

Would, would you just start by introducing yourself?

Norman Corwin:

I'm Norman Corwin, citizen, senior citizen and I live in Los Angeles, and I am now in the company of film makers.

00:00:39:00-00:03:16:00

Interviewer #2:

Would you talk a little about what the mood of the country was during World War Two? How would you describe it?

Norman Corwin:

The, [pause] America at the outset of World War Two was in very good mora—good shape. Let me say that again. America at the outset of World War Two, that is to say when war was finally declared in Europe, was apprehensive, but the home front was solid. It was prosperous, it had, it had a, a president whom, whom we, it loved and reelected more times than any other president had been. And it was Europe's affair, to begin with. There was a, an element of the American public, however, which was very disturbed and more worried than, than the general populace about what was going on. The incursions and the desperate kind of savage inclinations of Hitler were manifest to all thinking people. And we, I was one of that company, it was a large company, a rather large minority, I would say. And we were, we were apprehensive about getting involved in the war as we had in a previous world war, but we were prosperous, and, for a while, the majority of the people believed that the Spanish war, the Spanish Civil War to which Hitler and Mussolini gave great hel—help, was their affair, not ours. And it was only the, due to the attrition of the war as it progressed to the point of the threat of invasion of, of Britain, that it got down to serious cases, and we considered this a menace.

00:03:17:00-00:05:10:00

Interviewer #1:

Well, in that period when, the popular phrase is, storm clouds are gathering, did, did war seem inevitable, or did it seem that, that it might be resolved without war, without dragging America into the war?

Norman Corwin:

To the majority of American, of the American people, war at the beginning does not, did not seem inevitable. We had the example of getting drawn into the previous world war and there was a great deal of caution and a feeling that it's not going to happen again. Lightning doesn't strike twice, generally. And, I think that the inexorable progress of the German, the Nazi war machine, which was a juggernaut of, of great power, that began to appear as what it was, a menace, a very real menace. There was, however, a stubborn kind of resistance to our getting involved in that war, the America Firsters, so called. I remember that this was the time when Hemingway wrote a play called The Fifth Column, and I don't know whether he wrote it or

whether it was written based on his experiences in, in Republican Spain, but that term became, found itself applied to those who were opposed to American entry in that war.

00:05:11:00-00:06:04:00

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. Did you at the time, did people make a distinction generally, and did you personally, between Amer— earth— Earth firsters [laughs]— America Firsters and pacifists, and make a distinction between people who were to the right and opposed to, to supporting the European War and people who were opposed to, to war on principle?

Norman Corwin:

It was clear to most thinking people that there was a difference between those who were against American involvement for political reasons, having nothing to do with morality, and, and those who were pacifists, sincere, devoted and people, well, with scruples. Yes, that, that distinction was quite clear.

00:06:05:00-00:09:00:00

Interviewer #2:

It was. Uh huh, generally true. Would you say, if you could talk a little about radio and the role that it played and the role that you saw yourself playing in, in, as the war started, and as the war, and as people began to see themselves as a home front for a war that was going on in Europe and in Asia.

Norman Corwin:

When World War One was raging, I was too young to have informed opinions. So with the advent of the events leading up to World War Two, I was quite conscious, for the first time, of political forces and of international entanglements and of the kind of savage internecine disposition internationally of nations against their neighbors, and I felt that this war was in the terms later applied to it, a Good War, if any war can be good, and please reserve an asterisk for that reservation. The, Hitler and Mussolini and the Japanese were so horrendous, their, their attack was so, their attack I mean not militarily in, but their attack rhetorically, the, the fascist doctrine that was implemented by Mussolini to the admiration of a great many people because he made the trains run on time. And there were people who believed in bu— doing business with, with Hitler. Of course there was a, the hidden, or at least the, the guarded antisemitism which, which rejoiced in what Hitler was doing to the Jews. The, he had admirers. And internationally, he had admirers, the Cliveden set in, in Britain. And of course the, the fact that our, national hero, Charles Lindbergh, thought kindly of his Nazi hosts when he was courted by them.

0:09:01:00-00:11:12:00

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

So there was a, a, a division already in place before Pearl Harbor. There were people, beginning with FDR, who were disposed to go to war, who felt that there was no avoi—no evading it, no avoiding it. And of course, as it related to those who had strong feelings against war, against killing, that, that is ages old and it certainly surfaced quite early in the proceedings. But then conscientious objection, is to me, the dramatization and realization of a very, very old principle, that two great forces, are the two, perhaps the two greatest forces in modern life, perhaps in ancient life as well, are religion and war and the conscientious objector finds himself torn by the, by the passions existing on both sides of that. [background sound] One of the, and religion is a, is a great force, and God knows, there have been many wars fought in his name, savage, brutal wars. And, we have only to look to Northern Ireland today, for an example of that.

00:11:13:00-

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

We have only to look to the perceived, what is perceived to be the threat of the Muslim fundamentalists. It's a very unsettling phenomenon. Nothing has abated in terms of religious passion. And [clears throat] personally, I have always felt that the conscientious, conscientious objector who is acting out of religious principle, a sincere, sincerely felt religious principle, is heroic. In it takes courage. It takes more courage to resist the concept of killing, even for one's country—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—than it does to go along. To many people—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—I think to most conscientious objectors.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:12:14:00-00:13:39:00

Interviewer #1:

But the popular perception, I think, and I want, I want you to tell me if you, if you saw this or if you think this summed up the mood of the country was that, was that somehow conscientious objectors weren't patriotic. That, that people had a responsibility, you know, everybody has to do their part, and that they weren't, that they had an obligation to their country. Do you think that's a valid criticism?

Norman Corwin:

The concept that everyone has to do everything he can for his country, in a time of danger, in a time when the country is threatened [clears throat] is a very important and forceful concept and one which activates, fortunately for the, for the security of the country and for its fortunes, it activates a vast majority. I think that the conscientious objector in World War Two had a harder climb, a tough—it was a tougher, a tougher job, a tougher position to maintain and to assert than perhaps in any previous war, and certainly not nearly in the class of what happened in the war in Vietnam.

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

00:13:39:00-00:16:00:00

Norman Corwin:

And to a lesser extent, the Korean war. But I speak from the experience and position of a worker in radio. I wrote, I directed, I produced. I speak from the position of one who felt that we were fighting nobly, that it is, that I myself would take up arms to defend against monsters of the likes of Hitler, that this was a, a menace to which one could not be, not, not be neutral. Yet at the same time, I personally, I cannot speak for, for the, the, the statistical figures of attitudes among people, I personally had sympathy for those who, out of, out of obedience to not only religious instincts, but to their own consciences, could not take up arms and kill, that [clears throat] they had the authority and the, the permissiveness of one of the sacred commandments, "thou shalt not kill," very clear those four words. And I, I personally could not understand why such people should be held in contempt and be the victims of

opprobrium. Yet at the same time, I could understand the feelings of people whose sons, brothers, fathers had gone off to war and here was John Doe, conscientious objector, refusing to take up arms.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

00:16:01:00-00:17:26:00

Norman Corwin:

What to me was a palliative in this set of circumstances was the fact that they were willing to do work to assist in the war effort.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

If a conscientious objector drove an ambulance in a theater of war he was risking his life, but he was certainly not killing.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

That satisfied his needs not to be able to kill, though he might himself be killed—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—doing that. And my, I salute those people. Where you, where you get somebody who just, finds, objects to going to war because it's inconvenient—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—or because it takes him away from his family, or his job, or his profits, or his schooling, or whatever, that's another matter.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

That's tragic, it's unfortunate, but war is never pretty, it's never polite,—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—it's invasive, it's disruptive, and at, at best, it's, it's all those qualities short of bloodletting, and torture.

00:17:27:00-00:19:33:00

Interviewer #2:

You know I think, I think we look back now and people see this very unified nation, fighting the war, arm in arm, all, you know, fighting the good fight, the good war. Did it feel that way at the time? Did it really feel that their was that kind of solidity and were there, was there room for people who disagreed with that position for whatever reason, or were, was that really an unacceptable position to take?

Norman Corwin:

Whether the position of the, of the objector was permissible depended on, on a number of factors, one's upbringing, one's relationship to an actual or potential combat—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—fighter. There, there, I felt there n—to be no great—

[background sound]

Norman Corwin:

—burning issue. The occurrence in print or in publicity of any kind, of conscientious objection on any large scale, was nil.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

I cannot recall it. There were certain people who, because of their celebrity, and that alone [clears throat] were, were noteworthy—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—as having expressed reservations about—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—about taking up arms—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—and were conscientious objectors. The, the film actor Lew Ayres was one of them. But it was not anywhere as close to the level of consciousness in public awareness that we, that occurred wholesale—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:



—in the later wars.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:19:34:00-00:21:16:00

Interviewer #1:

Let's switch gears a little bit. One of the reasons we're having this conversation is because your creative work during those years dealt with those issues. You, you, you wrote about a wide range of things, but you wrote very powerfully about war. And, and one could look at your pieces and say, this is art, and yet you could go back and read them as propaganda. What, how do you see the work that you created during the war?

Norman Corwin:

My work has variously [clears throat] been received as, [clears throat] as inspirational, as propaganda. I never felt it was propaganda. There's a pejorative ring to that word, unfortunately. Propaganda is persuasion, but all, all life is, is subject to persuasion. The parent persuades the child to a course of live—life, to a set of morals. Religion persuades us. In the, in the, in scripture, God persuades us. And Moses persuaded his people. And he tried to persuade Pharaoh, and he had to have help from on high to succeed at that. So, propaganda is persuasion. You might as well say that, that the ad in today's paper is propaganda. That the commercial on the, on the, on, on television is propaganda. Of course it is!

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:21:17:00-00:22:52:00

Norman Corwin:

But I wasn't selling a product, I was selling my own feeling about the war, that it had to be fought, that this was an evil force. We could not simply abandon all of the American principles of democracy and the positive, the positive elements of, of, of what America stood for, deriving from the, from our founding fathers, deriving from a war that we fought to gain a national existence. And so, my, I celebrated the victory in that war, the very title of, of the concluding program that I wrote was On a Note of Triumph. And it was a triumph in which, which the world had to rejoice, because we had beaten a monster. We're on our way, we won, you know, victory in Europe wasn't the end of the, the game. But I, in, in a circuitous way, I answer your, I, I, I answer the question rhetorically of whether my work was propaganda. Before—

Interviewer #1:

[clears throat]

00:22:53:00-00:24:25:00

Norman Corwin:

—the tide in World War Two turned, and I think it turned around the time of Stalingrad, when they, they were stopped for the first time, the Nazis were stopped. There was a period when the act, the enemies, the, the America Firsters and the fifth column in this country was eagerly promoting anti-, anti-British sentiment with phrases like, "the English will fight to the last American." England lost, the British lost Alamein in one day's fighting and it looks v—it looks very, very bad. And at that time CBS asked me if I would go, on the, I think on the instance of the White House or somebody in Washington, had suggested this to CBS, who then relayed the suggestion to me, would I go to England and do a series called, \_An American in England\_? And I recognized the, the purpose for it was to, to blunt that anti-British feeling. This was divisive, and English, England was our front line, they were our ally and they'd been fighting a lo—, a hard and bitter war and getting bombed and, for a long time before we got into the war. [clears throat]

00:24:26:00-00:25:49:00

Interviewer #2:

What year was that?

Norman Corwin:

That was 1942. And I said I would do this if, I wrote a memorandum to this effect, if it would not devolve into simple propaganda. I think I used the word. That if I could write as I saw it, then I would undertake it. But I did not want to be [clears throat] directed, I did not want to act under directions from the office of war information, from the [clears throat], the Army, the Navy, the Pentagon, from anybody in Washington. I wanted to go as an American in England.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

Something that the title very modestly promised. And they agreed with that, and the series turned out to be that.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

And yet, it was, it was pro-prop—prosecution of the war. I cannot say that I found it in my conscience to object to, to, to writing in any way that could be helpful to the prosecution of the war.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

Short of blatant, clear propaganda.

00:25:50:00-00:27:45:00

Interviewer #1:

But we listened to some of your plays recently, the ones that NPR reissued. And one play struck us particularly, as, when you take away the specifics, as making a strong argument against war and I'm talking about *They Fly Through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*. Now that was specifically written in response to *Guernica* but it could also be written as a condemnation of aggression and war, couldn't it?

Norman Corwin:

Of course, look, the fact that I was, that I was pro-American involvement in World War Two does not mean, never did mean, and that does not now mean that I am, that I am a, a hawk and that I approve of war as a means of settling differences. In fact, [clears throat] I wrote a program called *Could Be* at the instance of the United Nations. And that was based on what could be done if the nations of the world attacked their common problems instead of each other.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

And it was a program based on existing technologies, it was not *Buck Rogers*, it was not pie in the sky, it was not, it was not sci-fi, it was what we could do with existing technology at that time. And the, the fan letter that, of which I'm proudest, out of that program, came from Admiral Nimitz, who was the architect of the greatest battle, destructive battle in naval

history, but he recognized that in the, that in the proposition that I set forth, and demonstrated through this program called \_Could Be\_, he recognized and approved of the same kind of energy and resources coming together for the good of man, for peace.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:27:46:00-00:29:21:00

Norman Corwin:

I have written a piece that is some months away from going on the air at this moment. And there is in the line, in it, the line to be spoken by Walter Cronkite on the last night of the millennium that, that, "the highest dignity of man is peace."

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

And so it should ensue, that we subscribe to that. Another line I wrote was, forgive me for quoting myself but there's nobody else around to do it at the moment, "May the shade of the oak spread wider than the shadow of war." That is the, to me, the ultimate, I am a man of peace, I would be a pacifist under all circumstances except when fighting a, when opposed by a terrible, terrible monster. I see no virtue in allowing yourself to be destroyed—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—by evil.

Interviewer #2:

Do you think most—

Interviewer #1:

Let's stop. We need to change tape. This is, this is great.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, it's good.

Interviewer #1:

Do you need, would you like a glass of water or anything?

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

00:29:22:00-00:32:12:00

Camera Crew Member:

Rolling.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah. Go ahead.

Norman Corwin:

That, are you recording?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, if you'll, if you don't mind, look at Judy.

Norman Corwin:

Well, but, I, I don't want anything that's self-aggrandizing—

Interviewer #1:

No, no. No.

Norman Corwin:

—to have been.

Interviewer #:

Norman Corwin:

I, I did a program on the 50th anniversary of the surrender of Japan—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—and Charles Kuralt narrated it.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

And, [pause] I, oh, what?

Interviewer #2:

Talking about complexity.

Interviewer #:

Talking about the language, and how, how you, your language is so eloquent, and you don't want to dumb down your language for the sake of [unintelligible].

Norman Corwin:

Yeah, and it, it used the language that you're, you're alluding to. And I thought, this was the first time any program of mine carried the credit at the end, if you wish to buy a tape of this—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—and I thought, well, NPR, it's not commercial, you know, not all stations take it, they, and if I get, there are fifty orders for this, I'll—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—I really seriously thought, if there are fifty orders for this cassette, I will consider that a very handsome return, not financially—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Norman Corwin:

—but you know.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

Two thousand.

Interviewer #2:

Hmm.

Norman Corwin:

So, that's, took me by surprise, that that were that many people who, you know that doesn't count the people who would like to but didn't, didn't want to spend it, or who just don't have the time, or they don't have the address, and they forget it, you know. So, that gave me a little hope. Then another, another reversal of the tendency to dumb down is the reaction to the impeachment—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—drive.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

Where the only reason that he was not impeached was because of the publics, the polls.

There was such defense.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

And that, I thought was, I gave credit to the, you know, to the electorate.

Interviewer #:

Mm-hmm. It was really ahead of the media. Yeah—

Norman Corwin:

Yeah! Way ahead.

Interviewer #2:

—absolutely. Way ahead, really.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, and that forced them to [unintelligible]

Norman Corwin:

And so, so you know, you can't say—When I think of dumbing down, I think of \_Forrest Gump\_ being named the Best Picture of the year.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Norman Corwin:

I, I, you know, I think of all the manifestations of, that, that wrestling, professional wrestling is the big, is the big number one draw in television today.

Interviewer #2:



That's true.

Interviewer #1:

I thought it was very significant that the comments on your cassettes was that, that comment from Bob Altman who, you know, who is noted for doing complex, intellectual challenging work, you know—

Norman Corwin:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—that, that he recognizes that quality in your work.

Norman Corwin:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:32:13:00-00:34:10:00

Interviewer #1:

Let me, let me quote another line, though. In On a Note of Triumph the narrator asks those questions, the big questions, and the answers then were answers for 1945, very specific answers. But, you know, but the final question is really the most important question, what have we learned? From that experience, from the process. Here we are, what have we learned?

Norman Corwin:

Well, we learned [pause] from it that we learned nothing from World War One, and I think today we're in danger of finding that we have learned nothing from World War Two.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

It's very hard for the l—, for the lessons of history to stick and it was not for nothing that

Santayana, if it was Santayana, said that those who, who forget history are doomed to relive it.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Just like we're about to.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, 'cause here we are, fifty years later, you know, and—

Interviewer #2:

Fighting a war in the Balkans.

Interviewer #1:

—and what, we look back at World War Two and we have Private Ryan and we have The Thin Red Line and—

Norman Corwin:

Right.

Interviewer #1:

—is that, is that really World War Two?

Norman Corwin:

I, I think that what has happened since, certainly since the atom bomb, is that people at last now understand that war is not a glory, that it is not glorious, that it has, that it has nothing but a train of negatives, that it is the lowest denominated [sic], denomination of, of humanity.

00:34:11:00-00:36:13:00

Interviewer #2:

Do you think, at the time though, looking back on World War Two, as I listen to the, to some of the radio programs that you produced, it felt as if you were really, that your aim was, in, as I hear it, was to really get people behind the war effort, to get, you know, get people to come together, and really, you know, send their sons off, do whatever needed to be done to, to fight this evil war, to fight this evil opponent. Was that your intent and would you, did you, do you still, was that, do you feel good about that now, looking back on it? And, did it work? Was that effective?

Norman Corwin:

Whether I still feel justified, or "good," about having written work in radio, reaching a great many people, advocating and inspiring them to assist and contribute to the prose—successful prosecution of the war, I have no regrets about that. I have not had reason to change my mind about the, the quality of that war, the objectives of the war, even in the way it was fought. I have only the sadness, which we all share, for those who were lost in it. And I, I, [pause] indeed, was looking, over Memorial Day, as we speak now Memorial Day is not far distant, and I was looking over something that I wrote for a Memorial Day and it, it encapsulates much of what I felt. If you wish, it's a short piece—

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

Norman Corwin:

—if you wish, I, could—

Interviewer #2:

That'd be great—

Interviewer #1:

—Let's just cut for a second—

Interviewer #2:

—I was just thinking—

Interviewer #1:

—I can go get it for you. I don't wanna—

[cut]

00:36:14:00-00:37:04:00

Norman Corwin:

What made me think of it was how I feel looking back—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. It's perfect.

Norman Corwin:

—at what I wrote.

Interviewer #2:

When, when did you write this?

Norman Corwin:

About three, four years ago.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

It's not been published anywhere.

Interviewer #:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

[reads] "Remembrance is a light sleeper. No blast of trumpets is needed to awaken it. No booming bells, no saluting guns. They make important sounds but they're for occasions. No one need remind us on the verge of June to think about those unable to be with us, the men of big and little wars who fell on hard ground, or clawed at sand or stained snow red. Or s—"

Interviewer #1:

Sorry, I'm sorry, I screwed up. Once we lose the paper, it doesn't work because then we don't know that he's reading.

Camera Crew Member:

Let's erase it.

Norman Corwin:

Start again?

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

Please.

00:37:05:00-00:41:16:00

Norman Corwin:

[reads] "Remembrance is a light sleeper. No blast of trumpets is needed to awaken it. No booming bells, no saluting guns. They make important sounds but they're, are for occasions. No one need remind us to think about those unable to be with us, the men of big and little wars who fell on hard ground, or clawed at sand or stained snow red or stumbled among jungle vines or dropped out of the sky, or went down in the drink. This is their day," speaking of Memorial Day, [reads] "this is their day. Not entirely of course. They wouldn't want the ball game to be cancelled in their memory, nor the freeways empty, nor the beaches left to crabs and gulls. They'd prefer to sit listening to surf, to watch sheets of foam smooth the shore like a planetary trowel to check on the girls in their scanties swimming or lolling or tanning themselves. They'd rather swig coffee from a thermos or just sit and soak up sunshine. They wouldn't want us to turn in our tickets to the rock concert of the symphony or stow away the fishing tackle and instead stay home and meditate. Nor would they want us to put off the running of the Indy 500. They'd rather sit in the stands and enjoy the crowd, the spectacle, the action, looking for speed and excitement, but no accidents. They've seen enough of men and machines smashed up. They have only the earth now to keep them warm. They were gathered like leaves stripped from trees by a great wind. They've forgotten the battles, the sieges, the marches, the bivouacs, the bitter campaigns. They've left that all to historians. It's quiet where they are today, in a muster of crosses and six pointed stars. But missing from the cemeteries are some who just disappeared, who were dissolved in waters off Midway and the Philippines, in shallows and abysses on the floor of the hard-used Mediterranean, below the roots of the awful run to Murmansk, beneath pavements of ice in the Arctic Sea, along the raceways of the continental currents. Each year on Memorial Day, from several ports, small crafts set sail carrying wreaths of flowers, and when they're far enough out, they cast the wreaths overboard. The speech of flowers, like the call of dolphins and whales, travels long distances in water. They are meant to say for us, we remember you. We take our ease in freedom because you surrendered yours to the shackles of war. You commended to our keeping the good times and the good things. And if the soldiers who rest in Arlington and elsewhere, could reply, translated for us by the flowers that we lay on their tombs, might they not say, old men make wars, young men die in them. Cool it all of you everywhere. Work it out, don't fight it out. Might they not ask, you say we died in honor? You want to honor us? Then live in honor. Might they not petition us, let there come a time when the shade of the oak will spread wider than the shadow of war. Flowers are hieroglyphs of love, they go on errands of remembrance. If they find any of the missing, let them tell them that their country lives, that the flag flies. that the republic stands."

00:41:17:00-00:41:57:00

Interviewer #2:

That's really nice. Thank you. That's that's—

Interviewer #1:

That's really, that's very—

Norman Corwin:

So, you know, your asking—

Interviewer #1:

That's, that's—

Norman Corwin:

—it's a long answer—

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

—to my question how do I feel about what I've written—

Interviewer #1:

That's a, that's a great answer.

Interviewer #2:

Handy you have that.

Interviewer #1:

Are you, are you thinking of publishing it?

Interviewer #2:

Is that part of the Cronkite piece?

Norman Corwin:

No

Interviewer #2:

No, you said, but that isn't part of something that's just about to be publi—be broadcast?

Norman Corwin:

Well, I've been asked by somebody if they could use it for this, but I don't think it'd make a difference. If it is used, it'll be in a narrow context, I'm sure.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

But it would be appropriate for us to—

Norman Corwin:

I, I—

Interviewer #1:

—use it in this?

Norman Corwin:

—yeah. I think there'll be no problem there.

Interviewer #1:

It's, that's, it's, it's great.

Interviewer #2:

Very sweet. Very sweet.

Interviewer #1:

But, you know, one thing we sort of—I'm sorry—

Camera Crew Member:

[inaudible]

00:41:58:00-00:42:34:00

Interviewer #1:

—OK. one thing, we've been sort of hopping around or shifting focus, but we never really gotten you to talk again about the '40s and about how important radio was and what it meant to people and how radio helped form that community.

Norman Corwin:

Hmm. All right?

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

Norman Corwin:

[pause] It's a little hard for anybody over forty today, I mean under forty, let's begin—

Interviewer #1:

That's all right. Yeah.

Norman Corwin

—that again, cut that out.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

00:42:35:00-00:46:54:00

Norman Corwin:

To those who were born post-television, it's a little hard for them to understand just what radio meant in the time of the Roosevelt administrations, the war, the great Second World War. Radio was front and center. It did not have the competition of the tube. It was a medium in which the listener participated, by, by listening, because the listener furnished the decor, the sets, the, he cast it, and, and all of that. And there was no term in, in radio equivalent to the boob tube or the couch potato. Radio was national. And, when I, in my, I was not, I was not in the top rank of, of ratings, I was far from that. In fact, my programs were frequently broadcast opposite Bob Hope who was the number one show of, in, in radio, in the ratings. But still, I reached millions, and there were 400 stations around the country, 400 plus, that



carried my work simultaneously, that of mine and others. And so it, it was wonderful to, to put out a program in, in New York and hear from all over the country and get letters from people you would never have been played, you would never, whose, whose, who would never have occasion to see your work in a theater or read it in a book, but they were, you, you met them, through this. And—

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

Norman Corwin:

It, it, it had a, because it was not literal, and because the faces were not there to, to, to see, the, there was a mystique about radio celebrity. And, I remember once, an actor, Martin Gable, who narrated on *\_A Note of Triumph\_*, an actor who was so good that he was, he did things frivolous and, or I shouldn't say frivolous, but trivial and important, both. And he once visited me in the country when I had a, I had a retreat where I went to write my pieces, I had to deliver one every week, a, a new program. And he came for lunch one day, and my housekeeper who I—hearing, hearing his voice, went into a rhapsody. She, this was the man whose soap opera she was a fan of, and had been for years. And it was very, very exciting to meet the man she'd been listening to. It was certainly a vehicle quickly discovered by Franklin Roosevelt who initiated the, the fireside talk, fireside chat, brought, it brought government into the home and it was the first of its, the first medium which had an unseen audience, uncountable really, and which went through walls and windows, was in your bedroom, it was in your kitchen, it was in your automobile, it was in your earphones as you walked in the street.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

So it was a, a very powerful medium. Complex, it had it's, it's high uses and it's abuses, as does everything.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:46:55:00-00:48:19:00

Interviewer 1:

In, in terms of the letters you got and the feedback, specifically talking about your work supporting, supporting commitment to the war, to winning the war, did the kind of letters you

got back indicate that people agreed, supported, understood what you were trying to say and applauded it? Did they—

Norman Corwin:

Yes, but mark you, I was not, I, I was not the kind of writer, or the, my programs were not the kind of radio fare that brought cascades of mail. I will say, however, that a program known to m—most people, perhaps including a good many people watching this film, *On a Note of Triumph*, which we mentioned earlier, was the first and only time in my life when mail was delivered not in, was delivered in bags, mail bags fresh from the post office and they were upended and a flood of mail dropped out, thousands of letters. So, it was listened to. CBS made, well whatever I say, an extension of that would be self-aggrandizing and I'd rather s—refrain from it

00:48:20:00-00:49:25:00

Interviewer #:

Did you ever get, I'm interested, because sometimes you get crank letters, did you ever get people who, who attacked you, or criticized your points of view? [unintelligible]

Norman Corwin:

Oh yes, oh yes, not often.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

But a curious thing about the negatives, including hate mail, is that they always reach you. They, they, they bear the initial of executives who've seen it before you have and they're always dutifully sent along.

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

Norman Corwin:

But, I, I kept count, there were some 7,000 letters received on, on *A Note of Triumph*, of which eight were negative.

Interviewer #2:

That's not bad odds. What did? Hmm.

Norman Corwin:

But I've had negative reviews, you know. Including On a Note of Triumph.

Interviewer #2:

Really? Huh.

Norman Corwin:

You can't, yeah, no it's a mistake ever to think, and assume, or even hope, that you can please everybody.

Interviewer #1:

Well, I'm, I'm sure this program is gonna upset a lot of people, too.

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

Norman Corwin:

Oh, sure.

Interviewer #2:

We're hoping it will. [laughs]

Interviewer #1:

I don't think we'll get 7,000 positive letters.

00:49:26:00-00:50:17:00

Interviewer #2:

[laughs] Yeah, I've a feeling we may get a lot less than that. You know it's interesting, though, and, and we have talked about this, but maybe just in terms of const— contextualizing this, when people, even, even last night we had this experience of someone saying to us, there, there were not conscientious objectors to World War Two. I mean, I think that the idea that people, that there were within the populace, people who didn't agree with the war, that that's not in the consciousness of younger people today, people who weren't even, you know, even people of fifty, say, people who were born after the war. Do you think

that that is a, at the time, that the solidity—I'm, I'm sorry—

Interviewer #1:

What, what are you asking him?

Interviewer #2:

—I don't know what I'm trying to get at, We've al—I've asked you this already.

Interviewer #1:

Yes, I think we've already asked it.

Interviewer #2:

We could cover this—

Interviewer #1:

Well then, my question is, do you have anything else to say? 'Cause I'm very—

Interviewer #2:

I think we covered,

Interviewer #1:

—very happy with what we've—

Interviewer #2:

I think we've already covered that. You're right.

00:50:18:00-00:53:45:00

Interviewer #1:

Do you have any parting thoughts? Anything we haven't covered that [unintelligible]

Norman Corwin:

No, I think the, at, at the root of this whole thing is the, is the concept of man's conscience. Conscientious objection takes it's name from it. And conscience is a very powerful force. [pause] I think that it is not always friendly and it, that conscience can, can produce suffering. Men and women have died on matters of, over matters of conscience. [pause] I,

when one thinks of the witches of Salem, one thinks of Joan burned, burned at the stake, and you think of the people who died for, driven by that. So, you know, the extreme is to die for your conscience, to be imprisoned for it is lesser, but it's—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—it's in the same, on the same side of the ledger, that conscience separates us from animals. And it is to, to me the great disasters, the traumas of all civilization have been the result of the acts of conscienceless people, you know. Look to, look to, [pause] Kosovo today.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

Conscienceless! How, you know, none of us in this room, would, we would, we would gladly go to jail, to prison, to save any of those children from, from di— from illness and death, exile, if it happened here, you know. So, a, the, to, to any, I think that any great consideration about conscientious objection has to go to the absolute core of the, of the subject, which is what is conscience, is it worth fighting for, is it worth living for, is it worth dying for, is it worth going to prison for? Is it worth the con—contumely of, of, of worth becoming a pariah?

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:53:46:00-00:54:57:00

Norman Corwin:

We had, it, it occurs oftener than one would think and in nonmilitary terms, when the, the great brouha [sic] over the, the ho— lifetime honor given to Kazan raised an issue of conscience.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

So, and as it relates to, to me and that question, which really impressed me that you should ask if I, if I had any regrets or any, any negatives about the work I did during the war toward the prosecution of the war. And I am happy to be able to say with a clear conscience that I do not.

Interviewer #1:

So—

Norman Corwin:

But believe me if I, if I did, I would, I, it would be very hard for me to live with it.

Interviewer #2:

Mm -hmm.

00:54:58:00-00:54:25:00

Interviewer #1:

What you were saying about conscience, maybe conscience is like anything else, that it, it, it, you have to actively exercise it, otherwise it will atrophy.

Norman Corwin:

Oh yes, sure.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

Oh, there are, there are many analgesics and anal—anaesthesias for the conscience, you know, there are, many people are skilled at that, well-rehearsed in that.

Interviewer #2:

Most. [laughs] Sounds about right—

Interviewer #1:

I, I think we can stop—

Interviewer #2:

That's a, can I—

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry.

00:55:26:00-00:57:03:00

Interviewer #2:

—just ask one question about, just related to that other—

Norman Corwin:

Sure.

Interviewer #2:

—issue I was talking about before, about how you think that radio continues to be a medium that brings communities together or defines community.

Norman Corwin:

The qualities of radio which brought people together and which were able to define community persist, on a smaller scale. I, I live however in the somewhat thread-worn and tired hope that people will ultimately tire of the guns, and the auto chases, and the, the explosions that are standard television fare and they will, they will, return to the quiet conscience-serving qualities of radio which can be high—highly civilized. However I'm realist enough to know that I shall not live to see that. One can always hope, but I think sometimes satiation is a good thing and it works, it works kind offices—

Camera Crew Member:

[coughs]

Norman Corwin:

—in, toward, toward purifying our culture.

Interviewer #2:

Just a little bit more about that. You say—

Camera Crew Member:

[coughs }

[cut]

00:57:04:00-

Interviewer #2:

Just, just quickly, if you would share with me your thoughts about how people see radio as something they relate to, how people relate to radio in the contemporary—

Norman Corwin:

Today?

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, in contemporary, as contemporary listeners of radio, what does it mean to people?

Norman Corwin:

[pause] That's a hard one for me to answer Judy—

Interviewer #2:

OK

Norman Corwin:

—because I don't think it's, it's clearly defined at all.

Interviewer #2:

Well, maybe, well you've already answered what it meant to people then, so I think we're OK, it's fine.

Norman Corwin:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—I think what you said before—

Interviewer #1:



[unintelligible]

Norman Corwin:

You see, the only answer I could give to that would be downgrading—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Corwin:

—and I, I think it's too soon to do that.

Interviewer #2:

OK, OK

Interviewer #2:

Having—

[cut]

[end of interview }

00:57:41:00