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Interview with Dave Dellinger

David T. Dellinger

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LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview #235
DELLINGER, Dave

DELLINGER, DAVE

Non-violent activist, member of the Chicago 7, lecturer, writer, and educator

Interviewed: February 11, 1994

Interviewer: Ron Chepesiuk

Index by: Alyssa Jones

Length: 2 hours, 25 minutes, 18 seconds

Abstract: In his February 1994 interviews with Ron Chepesiuk, Dave Dellinger revealed his view of his involvement during the anti-war movement. Dellinger was a non-violence activist and a leader of the anti-war movement of the 1960s. Dellinger discussed topics such as the sixties counterculture, Ho Chi Minh and their friendship, non-violence, self-esteem, drugs, the Chicago 7, Abbie Hoffman, and the legacy of the 1960s. Dellinger also discussed his views of activism of the 1990s, his view of the Clinton administration, the U.S. government and military, violence vs. non-violence, and the impact of the end of the Cold War on the anti-war movement. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: People's Fast for Justice and Peace in the Americas, Columbus Day, Indigenous Peoples Day, Clinton Administration, nature mystic, sexism in activism, 60s legacy, 70s legacy, peace movement, anti-war, Cold War impact, CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador), National Committee for the Independent Political Action, PVA (Progressive Vermont Alliance), capitalism, socialism, Gandhi, Albert Camus, *radix*, non-violent protest/activism, social justice, Vietnam War, Howard Thurman, Sis Robinson, Gloria Steinem, self-esteem, SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordination Committee), SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), Ho Chi Minh, Youth International Party (Yippies), Abbot (Abbie Hoffman), *Soon to Be a Major Motion Picture* (Hoffman autobiography), sixties counterculture, LSD, marijuana, cocaine, Jane Fonda, Chicago 7(8), *Destructive Generation* (Collier & Horowitz)

Interview Session I (February 11, 1994): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:01:36 *Question:* Our relationship started in September before the People's Fast for Justice and Peace in the Americas. What was the purpose of that fuss? *Answer:* It was to call attention to the society created by Columbus and the people who followed him.

- DD asked to make Columbus Day, Indigenous Peoples Day.
- 00:02:27 *Question:* Did you petition Congress to do this? *Answer:* No, just made a general statement. DD and colleagues did speak to Congressmen about the issue.
- 00:04:26 *Question:* What kind of response did you get from people? *Answer:* DD didn't get response from the media, but people were very supportive and sometimes surprised by the facts. They were encouraged by the people who joined (on the steps and fasting), and by people who just wanted to know more about the gathering.
- 00:05:48 *Question:* Why did the media stay away? *Answer:* Why is the media controlled by huge corporations? The media was concentrating on the elections, but the *LA Times* did publish an article.
- 00:06:23 *Question:* Was it as successful as you wanted it to be? *Answer:* Nothing is ever as successful as we want it to be as long as there are unemployed people, poor people, and very wealthy people. It was successful in receiving a positive response from people.
- 00:07:32 *Question:* When you say the steps, where were you specifically? *Answer:* They were on the north steps of the capitol.
- 00:07:41 *Question:* How long did you fast? *Answer:* 42 days, but his wife and doctors didn't want him to do it. He went on fruit juices for the last three weeks to prevent doing permanent damage to his body.
- 00:08:13 *Question:* But you're back to normal now? *Answer:* Yes, but it took some time. DD felt great during the fast and after, but it took four months to gain back his weight.
- 00:08:36 *Question:* Is it difficult being an activist at your age? *Answer:* No
- 00:08:41 *Question:* What keeps you motivated? *Answer:* Charles Dickens quote about the worst of time and best of times. He's seen the bad time, but he's also seen the potential in the movement.
- 00:09:19 *Question:* Are you still involved with the same things you were involved with in the 50s and 60s? *Answer:* DD calls himself a "nature mystic" and always interested in the environment, but didn't involve himself in politics until recently.
- 00:10:21 *Question:* There was a lot of sexism in the movement? *Answer:* Yes. DD continues answering previous question.

- 00:11:53 *Question:* A lot of people say that activism today isn't as intense or as committed, do you agree with that? *Answer:* In the 60s there were a couple of issues that had all of the attention; civil rights or anti-war. Now, there are many issues that are all being focused on, but can't possibly be as focused with so many.
- 00:13:01 *Question:* This is the result of the 60s? *Answer:* It has a lot to do with it, but it has a lot to do with the legacy of the 70s. Many people moved toward spiritual matter and made cult heroes. Out of the 70s came a healthier spiritual movement.
- 00:14:30 *Question:* Are you part of any peace organizations now? *Answer:* Never made an organization a single emphasis. Comes and goes from many organizations while maintaining relationships. Locally, DD was working with North County Coalition for Peace and Justice. DD also worked with CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador) and the National Committee for the Independent Political Action, PVA (Progressive Vermont Alliance) and many others.
- 00:16:16 *Question:* How do you support yourself? *Answer:* Done a number of things. DD lectured at college, taught part-time at universities and colleges, and wrote books and quit teaching to make more time to write.
- 00:17:36 *Question:* Speaking of the peace movement, what impact has the end of the Cold War had on it? *Answer:* The ending of the war was probably a bit of a downer for peace work, but people realize now that America is acting like a super-power still. The peace movement is still needed to keep the U.S. from getting out of control in other places.
- 00:20:10 *Question:* Has it had to change its focus? *Answer:* Not really since the peace movement has always focused on preventing U.S. terrorism at home and in other countries. The movement has to make some adjustments, but its focus is the same.
- 00:21:28 *Question:* The end of the Cold War was supposedly a victory for U.S. capitalism. *Answer:* DD disagreed with that theory. When the Soviet Union failed, the U.S. failed. The U.S. then had debt in result of the Cold War.
- 00:22:01 *Question:* You are looking for a third way between Soviet and American power blocks. What kind of society are you looking for? *Answer:* DD wanted to see people rise together, distribute income by putting a limit on the maximum and minimum salaries, and creating a society of solidarity. Food, shelter, and travel should be supported. The trickle-down theory won't fix anything, despite people trying it over and over again.
- 00:24:46 *Question:* When you start talking about wealth distribution, then people start thinking about communism. *Answer:* DD described both U.S. and Soviet Union

democracies.

- 00:26:00 *Question:* Is capitalism a totally failed system or does it have a redeemable value? *Answer:* Capitalism has failing qualities, but that doesn't make the U.S. evil. America is a land of promises.
- 00:27:31 *Question:* Socialism is a hard word to say in the United States because communism is associated with socialism. *Answer:* Explains the relationship and goes back to the capitalist society's qualities.
- 00:28:22 *Question:* In your statement on why you fast, you said that the military industrial complex is threatening to erupt. *Answer:* People are very disillusioned and won't put up with it indefinitely.
- 00:30:22 *Question:* In the past, capitalist systems always come out of it, but this seems to be lasting forever. *Answer:* DD agreed, talked about the Great Depression, WWII, and how America usually bounces back and supports capitalist system again.
- 00:32:36 *Question:* What will be the outcome when this eruption takes place? *Answer:* DD didn't know what would happen after the eruption.
- 00:34:15 *Question:* Are we going to see much change in the country with Clinton in office? *Answer:* No. DD talked about small things that Clinton could change, but not much because every president must make compromises in order to be elected and stay popular.
- 00:36:49 *Question:* Are you still as committed to non-violence as a means for social change? *Answer:* Yes, but never used it as a reason to not get involved. Non-violent action is a tactic and a way of life; must lead by example.
- 00:38:24 *Question:* There's no place for violence in achieving social change? *Answer:* Violence is a double-edged sword, but DD didn't devalue the violent activist groups.
- 00:39:14 *Question:* Influenced by Gandhi, but you don't follow him blindly? *Answer:* Never followed anyone blindly. Used quotes by Albert Camus when giving speeches.
- 00:40:42 *Question:* People call you a radical, are you comfortable with that? *Answer:* Yes, but explained that radical comes from the Latin word *radix* meaning "root". DD said he goes back to the root. **[turns into unrelated conversation]** DD questioning about the book being written.
- 00:42:10 *Question:* Could you explain how you became committed to non-violence? Did you have a transformation? *Answer:* Father was a chairman of the Republican

- Committee, never had a transformation really. Family was upper-class. Junior high school was when everyone from town went to the same school and he fell in love with a poor Irish girl. His best friend was a poor Italian boy and DD found out how prejudice people were.
- 00:44:08 *Question:* You had a sense of social justice at a very young age, then? *Answer:* Sense of social justice developed at a young age. Many events during that time turned him away from violence.
- 00:47:53 *Question:* Where does the transition from non-violence to actual activism begin? When did you become committed? *Answer:* Radical from his freshman year at Yale when DD saw a campaign about helping non-academic employees join the union.
- 00:51:19 *Question:* Are you still religious? *Answer:* No, spiritual, but DD belonged to the local congregational church. Didn't believe in the Christian mythology.
- 00:52:32 *Question:* Was there a defining event? *Answer:* No. DD's book says the defining event was when he left Yale, but there really wasn't one even. Went to Seminary to learn, not necessarily to become a priest, but became offended by the upper-class of New York that he and some others decided to move to Harlem under threat of expulsion. Worked at an inner-city church in 1939, then the draft law was passed and he and 7 others decided to not sign up and went to prison. If anything, prison was the defining event.
- 00:56:25 *Question:* It must have been lonely in terms of what you believed. *Answer:* DD always found people who agreed with him. There was a strong movement against World War II and he learned much from older people, like Howard Thurman.
- 00:57:42 *Question:* They were actually invited to Yale? *Answer:* Some of them came to the Yale Sunday Chapel or outside of Yale for conferences. Prison gives you confidence. Gloria Steinem speaks a lot of self-esteem; it comes from doing things you believe in.
- 00:59:09 *Question:* You said the 50s were a time for sowing seeds and the 60s were a time for harvesting. Can you explain? *Answer:* If some people not stood up against the Korean War, or McCarthy, and having boycotts and sit-ins.
- 01:00:56 *Question:* The actual success of the movement was laid in the 50s because of the experience that was gained. *Answer:* Yes. Sis Robinson, Black woman who refused to pay her war taxes and went to prison. DD and other did a hunger strike until she was released. Planning and work involved in doing sit-ins, boycotts, and strikes. The sixties came out of all that careful planning, preparation, and small movements of the fifties.

- 01:04:44 *Question:* When did you become aware of Vietnam? *Answer:* DD became really aware of it at the Easter Anti-Nuclear March in NYC, a coalition event in which DD was a speaker. Students were raising signs in the back of the crowd saying “U.S. out of Vietnam” and ordered them to put the signs down.
- 01:06:05 *Question:* Why? *Answer:* It violated the rules of everything concentrating on nuclear bomb issues.
- 01:06:15 *Question:* What year was this? *Answer:* 1963. The same thing happened June 12 of 1982 when nearly one million people called for nuclear freeze in NYC. DD and others told not to mention Israeli invasion of Lebanon or South America. Even later, in 1966 or '67, people were upset that people were talking about Cuba and Black Rights during Vietnam War. Back in '63, DD spoke of Vietnam even though he didn't know much about it at the time.
- 01:08:35 *Question:* How did you get directly involved in it? You became an organizer. *Answer:* DD and colleagues automatically started organizing things because they were already in the midst of protesting the war. April 1964-65, the SDS called for a national mobilization against the war and most of the prominent peace leaders were against it. DD was one of the few who supported it and after that they created the Assembly of Unrepresented People, which was planned by northern civil rights peace activists and SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) people.
- 01:12:58 *Question:* You became friends with Ho Chi Minh? *Answer:* DD went to Vietnam, first during the thick of the war and pressured the Vietnamese to let the press in to cover the war. Led to Harrison Salisbury going to Vietnam.
- 01:15:09 *Question:* What was your impression of Ho Chi Minh? *Answer:* DD loved him, but was suspicious ahead of time because DD thought that his “wispy beard and gentle face” were covering up a sinister man. DD had read about Bernard Paul finding out about Ho Chi Minh killing thousands of people. In actuality, HCM hadn't done anything; instead, some of the peasants had gone into the agricultural area and burned down the farmhouses and killed the people. HCM congratulated DD on fighting for the P.O.W.s and arguing against the war crimes tribunal. DD was very impressed by HCM and the Prime Minister of Vietnam.
- 01:19:42 *Question:* You get a lot of heat from Jerry Ford for being under the spell of HCM and that you and the others were being led by the noise by Hanoi. *Answer:* Unlike Jane Fonda, DD did not agree to be photographed on an anti-aircraft weapon or take any of the products offered that were made of materials taken from fallen U.S. planes. Explains why Jane Fonda did such a foolish thing.

- 01:20:55 *Question:* She's also apologized, what do you think of that? *Answer:* She did. DD asks if Chepesiuk saw the apology.
- 01:21:05 **[no question]** Chepesiuk says that he did not see the interview. DD says that he did because he knew it was coming. Fonda did not apologize for going to Vietnam, but instead apologized for getting in the plane that looked like it was going to shoot down an American plane. She got flack for saying she shouldn't have opposed the war even though that wasn't what she said.
- 01:21:36 *Question:* You saved American lives, did you ever get thanks for that? *Answer:* No, not from the government. The prisoners and prisoners' families were thankful to DD and his colleagues. **[RC and DD take a break and continue interview later]**
- 01:27:25 *End of Session I.*

Interview Session II (February 14, 1994): Digital File

- 01:28:06 **[no question]** DD and RC talking about DD's meeting on Friday.
- 01:29:57 *Question:* You have always been different from the stereotypical radical, did that ever cause problems with trying to relate to the people of the movement then and now? *Answer:* Not really. **[audio quiet here]** During the Chicago trial, DD served as a bridge between groups, but had difficulty with older group leaders because they thought the younger activists were irresponsible. During the trial, during the march against death of 1969, DD proposed that Abbie and Jerry participate in the rally, but Abbie and Jerry were banned. DD invited them to stand beside him anyway.
- 01:32:50 *Question:* It wasn't the monolithic, divided group that people thought that it was, then? *Answer:* No, DD's job was to stop the group from splintering that way.
- 01:33:09 *Question:* And develop alliances for the common cause? *Answer:* Yes. DD considered his best contribution was handling the meetings.
- 01:34:49 *Question:* So there wasn't a generation gap between you and the others in terms of being able to communicate? *Answer:* No, DD thought that since he had sympathy for them, it gave him the ability to communicate with the groups without always agreeing with them. DD respected them despite their different methods, and admired them for having a bigger imagination. The same with young activists that he met at colleges—they knew things DD didn't and didn't carry around the baggage that DD carried.

- 01:36:50 *Question:* What about the counterculture with the free-love and free-sex thing?
Answer: The sixties counterculture wasn't destructive, but it was excessive in the end. DD remembered that in Chicago, after getting out of jail, a big party with many young people taking LSD and Abbie Hoffman told them to leave DD alone.
- 01:38:54 *Question:* What about acid? LSD? *Answer:* The only time DD had a problem with someone on it was when Paul Krassner took it before going on the witness stand for their Chicago 7 trial and did a terrible job. DD and RC have a brief discussion on marijuana.
- 01:40:51 *Question:* Marijuana is harmless. *Answer:* DD agreed with RC and said that it may even be good for some people.
- 01:41:02 *Question:* It helps relax them. *Answer:* When DD's son was dying of cancer, the doctors gave him marijuana. DD left the topic of marijuana and moved onto the topic of cocaine and his refusal of it at a party.
- 01:42:09 **[no question]** DD continued discussing the merits of drug use and his ambivalence towards using them. If people have self-esteem and meaningful work, then they don't need work. DD advocated for the legalization of all drugs, even the serious drugs.
- 01:43:11 *Question:* That's totally un-American. The American thing is to suppress the drugs. America is backwards with its drug policy; trying to fix people instead of letting them fail and then helping them. *Answer:* DD agreed.
- 01:43:45 *Question:* DD asked how old RC was and where he teaches. DD also questioned RC on a few other topics. *Answer:* Chepesiuk was 45 at the time of the interview and worked as a Special Collections librarian at Winthrop University.
- 01:45:19 *Question:* You became friends with Abbie (Abbot) Hoffman? *Answer:* Yes. At the Chicago Trial, he was closest to Rennie Davis, but was always on good terms with Abbie. DD became closest to Abbie after the trial. DD saw Hoffman many times after Hoffman went underground. DD talked about Abbie's struggles while underground.
- 01:47:17 *Question:* You at one point thought the CIA might have had something to do with his death. *Answer:* DD still believed that was a possibility. In DD's mind, it was always possible, but they (DD and colleagues) were unable to determine what the cause of death was. DD said that Hoffman was not what people would usually consider depressed, he was instead rather optimistic. RC also spoke to Hoffman before his death.

- 01:50:24 *Question:* How would you assess Abbie's role in the history of American radicalism? *Answer:* Hoffman has a legacy and was an important figure because of his sense of humor, easy-going nature, and big personality. Those traits sometimes landed Hoffman in trouble. Hoffman's autobiography *Soon to Be a Major Motion Picture* was exaggerated greatly.
- 01:54:13 *Question:* Were you surprised about being indicted for your actions in Chicago? *Answer:* DD thought he was too busy to have been surprised, but he didn't clearly remember being surprised.
- 01:54:56 *Question:* What significance did the trial have on the anti-war movement? *Answer:* There was a danger that it took too much time, energy, and money to fight against the government. DD and the others wanted to use the trial as an educational forum, so they tried not to act poorly in court. Seale was the only one to really misbehave and was ejected from the trial. The movement couldn't afford for all of them to go to jail.
- 01:58:02 *Question:* Was it successful? *Answer:* DD couldn't judge whether or not it was successful even though the trial got attention nationwide. One of the shortcomings was that only eight men were indicted, despite women also being involved significantly. Another was that other indictments across the country were ignored; made the Chicago Seven seem more important than they were. They were dramatized by people inside and outside of the movement.
- 01:59:51 *Question:* Did you expect to go to jail? *Answer:* Yes. DD discussed why they acted the way they did and his feelings on people on trial at the time.
- 02:01:24 *Question:* Don't you feel depressed that many of the defendants have become part of the establishment/system? Tom Hayden, Bobby Seale, Jerry Rubin. *Answer:* DD didn't believe Seale had become part of the system and expected to see him in April.
- 02:03:50 *Question:* Many radicals thought the country was heading towards Civil War. Did you share that belief? *Answer:* No, never in terms of military involvement, but DD thought that a Civil War had been happening throughout United States history. "People tend to seem to be, by nature, what they think they have to be in order to survive in a particular society." People go through the motions to get by, but are actually disgusted by the system.
- 02:05:41 *Question:* I was thinking more in terms of the Weathermen. *Answer:* DD thought that the Weather Underground movement was a grave mistake. DD visited many of them underground.
- 02:07:00 *Question:* When you look back at Vietnam, we're still fighting that war. Can you elaborate? Will we get over the karma? *Answer:* DD hoped America would never

get over Vietnam Syndrome. America was trying to make Vietnam a corporate place at the time of the interview; DD disagreed with this tactic, especially with how bitter Americans are about losing.

- 02:09:02 *Question:* America has learned from Vietnam. The military learned, at least.
Answer: Yes, American learned to stay away from ground warfare and censored the media.
- 02:09:31 *Question:* Have you read Peter Collier's (and David Horowitz) book, *Destructive Generation*? "The decade ended with a big bang that made society into a collection of splinter groups..." Do you believe that to be the legacy of the 60s? A fragmented America? *Answer:* DD hadn't read the book. DD thought the statement was oversimplified, but agreed that people did learn from the sixties; like violence didn't work, immoral and impractical politics didn't work, splinter groups were caused by other issues that could be focused on, and that the American government (visible and invisible) is guilty and untrustworthy.
- 02:12:00 *Question:* Do you plan to do this for the rest of your life? *Answer:* DD hoped that he would always do whatever he could to help fight social evils. Also hoped to continue to learn for the rest of his life. DD and RC conversed about Dostoevsky.
- 02:14:33 *Question:* It sounds like your next book should be on how to live a long and healthy life. *Answer:* DD had thought about writing a book on that subject.
- 02:14:41 *Question:* RC asked about sending DD a release form. The two discussed sending and editing the transcripts and DD's rights for editing. RC also asked for photographs to copy and send back.
- 02:17:46 **[no question]** DD was in the middle of discussing a convention in 1972 about the government supplying a Zippy with Quaalude to give to the demonstrators.
- 02:25:18 *End of Session II/End of Interview*