

## INTRODUCTION:

The original inspiration for the gathering which is described in this book actually occurred at another event sponsored by Pendle Hill. In November of 1996 we convened the alumni of Civilian Public Service Camps to lead a reflection about the meaning of the CPS camp experience for those who participated. We wanted to reflect upon, and to appreciate, the significance of the lives of leadership and of service which grew out of the CPS camps, lives which did so much to guide not only the evolution of the Religious Society of Friends and of Friends organizations in subsequent decades, but which also significantly helped to shape and form the wider movements for social change in society as a whole.

The experience of that gathering was an enchanting one, a quite mysterious and marvelous blend of historical documentary, vigorous debate, searching spiritual inquiry, and family reunion. The proceedings of that conference are recorded in the book *Friends in Civilian Public Service*, also published by Pendle Hill.

Now it happened that at the November, 1996 gathering of CPS alumni there were three or four Vietnam War-era activists in attendance. They were deeply touched by what transpired, as was anyone privileged to be present. Before the CPS gathering was over, we were receiving urgent suggestions that a similar gathering be held focused upon the Vietnam War era.

I have to admit that we at Pendle Hill hesitated for a long time about this. The situation regarding the alumni of anti-Vietnam War activism is obviously not analogous to that of CPS campers, and we were uncertain that there was the same sort of common thread that would make a gathering cohere. The group of enthusiasts from the Vietnam War-era who had actually experienced the CPS gathering was small; the question was, were they representative of any definable group? Chel Avery, whose magnificent staff work is at the basis of the present report, began an exploratory and consultative process.

What Chel discovered is that there was, indeed, a constituency of people who felt an urgency to begin the process of documentation and reflection upon the experience of anti-Vietnam War activism. But the urgency had a different coloration about it than had been the case with the CPS camp alumni. Aspects of the CPS camp experience were known and understood: the criticism of the peace churches for collaborating with the War Department in operating the camps had already been aired; the differences between those who had found in the camps a positive life-transforming experience and those who had been so offended that they had rebelled and left the camps was known; the experience of spouses was familiar; many of the impressive outcomes of the camp experience had been related in some place or another. The urgency in the case of the CPS camp experience was one of time. It was felt that there was a need to get this panorama into view in one place, and to collect first hand experiences, while significant numbers of the participants were still available to contribute to the process.

For obvious reasons, the element of time is much less a factor when the matter of anti-Vietnam War activism is in view. We picked up a different sort of urgency. It was as if something haunting and unresolved had been left unexamined for too long. So, with the help of an excellent committee and Chel's planning, we proceeded to organize the gathering of which this book presents an account. It was much more an excursion into unknown territory, much more a reflection on unsolved dilemmas. We are grateful for all who gathered to participate in this adventure. I am sure the efforts they made to understand our experience, to tease out meanings from it, and to assess learnings for the future, will be valuable to anyone interested in the struggle for peace.

One hundred years ago, the decade of the 1890's provided two occasions for reflection by the establishment-oriented historians of that era. The first occasion was the great Chicago World's Fair, held in 1893; the second was the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897. To the official mind of those days, a retrospective look at history had a great simplicity. Everything had converged in the establishment of North Atlantic civilization's ascendancy, with its capitalism and its colonialism, over the rest of the world. This was the consummation of a process which had begun 400 years earlier with Columbus' transit of the Atlantic and Vasco da Gama's voyage to the coast of India. History, viewed in retrospect at that moment in the 1890's, appeared to have resulted in the attainment of a stable state. It seemed quite plausible that the global ascendancy the West had attained was going to be permanent.

As we look back over the succeeding century's two world wars, countless regional wars, world wide economic depression, Russian Revolution, the progeny of other revolutions the Russian Revolution spawned, the Cold War, and the breakup of colonial empires, it is amazing how naive the perspective of the historians of the 1890s seems. For within twenty years of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee the over-riding conflict of our own tragic and bloody century had been defined. As one pundit put it: the spectre of communism was haunting Europe.

Yet, after all the horrors and humiliations of the twentieth century, here we are in the 1990's, and the landscape looks strangely similar to that of the 1890's. The Vietnam War seems to have been, with all its pain and tragedy, merely the last spasm in a titanic conflict. The feared heap of falling dominoes has not arrived at our own door; rather it is the huge effort at social transformation based upon the theories of Karl Marx which now lies everywhere in ruins. The communist experiment was certainly one of the most spectacular commitments of thought and labor ever devoted to the logically planned improvement of human life -- an effort at social transformation which was expected to be matched by nothing less than the transformation of human nature itself, an effort that at once challenged us, bewildered us, and frightened us. Yet it seems to have collapsed before our very eyes. At the same time, in England and America, the Thatcher and Reagan administrations set in motion an unprecedented redistribution of wealth away from working people and the poor to the already rich in two democracies. The theory seemed to be that rich people will work harder if they get more money as an incentive, and poor people will work harder if they get less. This bizarre redistribution of wealth is a singular achievement! And now, instead of the spectre of communism haunting Europe, the spectre of capitalism haunts the

globe. And what is most eerily reminiscent of the attitudes of the 1890's, the pundits of the 1990's have proclaimed the victory of the European/American political and economic systems, and some have even announced the end of history.

The other day I heard on National Public Radio an interview with the author of a recently published book in which she gives account of her upbringing by counter cultural parents during the 1960s and 1970s. As I recall the interview, she describes how her father felt that they were living at an enormously significant moment in history, a moment when a world transformation was about to take place, a moment which demanded all we could give to it in order to make the desired changes come about. The words described a feeling, a passion, I can well remember. The fact that her father was explaining to her why he had become what we now would call a deadbeat dad, why he had neglected her, is, in a certain sense, both ironic and very relevant. The protest era was indeed one in which the world was turned upside down: an undeclared, constitutionally illegitimate war in which so many lost their lives; criminality in the White House; loss of faith in the institutions and traditions which define our country. Yet the outcome of it all seems to have fooled everyone. Was the administration naive in fearing the communist threat? Were the protestors naive in feeling that a special moment in history had arrived which held revolutionary possibilities?

While there is clearly much in the capitalist spirit that is enterprising, socially productive, and laudable, there is also much that is immoral, socially damaging, and reprehensible. The free play of market forces can provide needed discipline; it can also produce chaos and many victims. Socialism and communism were invented because capitalism can be very offensive. Greed and the desire to make a fast buck do not necessarily lead to benefits for society. The fact that communism has failed does not necessarily mean that capitalism has succeeded. We suspect that the self-complacency of the 1990s will prove as short-lived as that of the 1890s. This, at least in part, accounts for the sense of urgency about reflecting on the Vietnam War period and the protest movement which Chel, in her explorations, picked up. There is a temptation to look back on the period in a mood of cynicism, because the historical situation has so changed as to seem to render the feelings and experiences of that time to have been strictly a passing phenomenon, and perhaps even illusory. But we also suspect that we should look back on the time as a source of hope because so much was learned and experienced that will be relevant to a future in which history will not, after all, have come to an end, but a future in which the issues the Vietnam War epitomized will rise again in some form. Learning, preserving, and reflecting upon that experience is a vital responsibility we owe to such a future.

The fine committee which helped us prepare the event reported here wisely determined that for an initial conference it would be useful to focus on the Vietnam War years in the experience of Friends as individuals and the Religious Society of Friends as a community. It would clearly have been unwise to try to be too undefined in what we focused upon. The topic could open up whole universes of possibilities. But perhaps it is not presumptuous to suggest that if, as I personally believe likely, there is future need for an awareness of the experience of the Vietnam War period, it is the Religious Society of Friends, and perhaps the other peace churches, which are apt to

provide the thread of continuity between that future time and the past. So it is important that we Friends undertake some careful discernment and take stock of our experience. I am grateful to all those whose participation made the following study possible. I am confident that it is a valuable contribution to Friends' search for a faithful peace witness.

Daniel A. Seeger

Based upon welcoming remarks at the Pendle Hill Conference

FRIENDS and the VIETNAM WAR

Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

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