

Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with
Louis Vitale

May 19, 2004
San Francisco, California

Interview Conducted By
Mary Palevsky

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Mary Palevsky: *We're going.*

Louis Vitale: Well, my name is Louis Vitale. I was born in Los Angeles County, San Gabriel—it was east San Gabriel, it wasn't actually a city then—on June 1, 1932. So I'll be seventy-two on the first of this month, June first. My father was actually born in San Francisco, but his mother died not long after he was born, and they went back to Sicily. He grew up there, or at least from five to twelve or seven to twelve, something like that. And when he came back here he really was an immigrant, he didn't know the language or anything; even though he was technically native born he was still seen as an immigrant. So I grew up in a family with that kind of mentality. He was in the fish business. He was successful; it was a moderately good-sized business. He was extremely grateful to this country that when they came back he said—I remember him telling me one day how they came up here to San Francisco, we came to a family wedding and he was staying at a suite at the Hilton and his brother was there and they were having a party for my dad's birthday. And my dad was musing on the fact as we drove in that he remembered walking the streets of San Francisco when they came back and wondering if he would ever, ever be able to eat in one of these restaurants in San Francisco. I say that because my father was extremely grateful to the United States, that he had been a street kid in Sicily and here he wasn't. He never graduated from elementary school. He had one year of schooling because of this going back and forth, and yet he was at one point the president of the National Fisheries Institute of the United States. Because he was very active in the Italian-American community, he was introduced in the Senate on his birthday. Something like that, so he felt—I'm not saying

there's any great success in America—but he felt that he had received a level of well-being in the United States, socially, politically, economically, that was unimaginable to him as a child.

I grew up in that kind of milieu, went to good schools and so forth. I spent a little time at Notre Dame. I transferred from Loyola because I needed to be closer to home. But anyway I grew up around people who were upper middle class, that kind that Andrew Greeley talks about. The fastest upward mobile group in America had been these immigrants that came around the turn of the century, mostly Catholic immigrants, and he was too. I felt a lot more entitlement than my dad did, and I didn't have a whole lot of hesitation when it later came on to taking some more questioning stances than he did.

But anyway I started out well. Like many of our political figures today, I went to college. The Vietnam War was coming. We all, or most of us anyway, went into ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] so we could go on and finish college, and come out officers. I went into the Air Force. I was an intercept officer. The book [Ken Butigan, *Pilgrimage Through a Burning World: Spiritual Practice and Nonviolent Protest at the Nevada Test Site* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003)] says that I was a pilot but I wasn't. I was an intercept officer, which is the back seat jock in two-man intercept aircraft.

What does that mean, "intercept officer"?

The intercept officer is in a two-seater air defense fighter. I ran the radar, ran the intercept. The pilot would get us there and then I would direct the intercept so that we would shoot down the plane, with the radar lock-on, directions and all of that. I was also a navigator so I could've been in a bombardier. But as far as navigating on strategic aircraft, I had that much alertness that I didn't want to do that. That's the only thing I can remember as a kind of social conscience or social protest, I didn't like the idea of dropping nuclear bombs on anybody. But other than that, I

voted for Republican candidates. I thought Eisenhower was a good general so he'd be the right person to run the country. I had that kind of mentality.

Let me ask you a question. You said "dropping nuclear bombs" so you know that you're in a plane that's going to drop nuclear bombs.

I figured I'd be in SAC [Strategic Air Command], yes. I did have a slight astigmatism to distance, which is why I wasn't a pilot, but I had good grades and things so I could pick pretty much choose [00:05:00] where I went and what I was in. And so the action would have been in SAC, in the Strategic Air Command, for that field. I went into these interceptors because I could see shooting down bombers that were coming in but I didn't see myself as being on a bomber crew. There's a magazine I have, I could show you. The Italians did one in which they did an interview with me and they got a little mixed up: they have a front page story in which it tells about me being the pilot of the Enola Gay who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. I can't believe it. It's unbelievable. I thought, Oh my God, my enemies have done this to me. I was stunned when that came out. But anyway, it was a mix-up actually. I think it was the tail gunner of the plane over Nagasaki who entered a monastery, and so since I was being interviewed, because I was a known Franciscan who had been in the military but was a pacifist now, I think they mixed those up or something like that.

Anyway, so I came out of the Air Force very young. I debated about maybe making it a career. This was in the 1950s. I graduated from college in 1954 and I was in until about 1957, 1958, in the military, and when I came out I debated about possibly staying in. The guy I flew with and I, we were just super gung-ho. We thought we were the most noble, dedicated guys in the Air Force, just like people you see testifying from Iraq or any of the other war zones. My family were all in business, and my uncle had sent me the applications for Harvard Business

School. That was just beginning to be the thing, to go get an MBA. And then I had just gotten this desire to be a priest and as I searched that out, it was maybe to be a Franciscan and follow the way of St. Francis, and I had that application in my hand. So either one of those two applications—Harvard Business School or go to the Franciscans—or stay in the service, and I debated those. I chose which clearly was the least desirable for my father by leaving the Air Force and going to the seminary, entering the Franciscans.

So that's what I chose to do, but I still had the same kind of politics and so forth. I was very loyal to the American position and the American way of life. I'm technically a "Korean vet" but the Korean War was really basically over, and so we were in the beginning ages of really the Cold War as I entered the Franciscans. In our training, the first years, you're undercover. We had a couple years of college at Mission San Luis Rey, also very remote, and then we had a year of spiritual training at Mission San Miguel, very remote at that time. We never went out, never went anywhere. We didn't see magazines or newspapers or much of anything like that. So I adhered to those kind of politics. Then I spent four years at Mission Santa Barbara in theology school and we were still very much confined, housebound. I remember that my pulse was so low that if I went to give blood I'd have to jump up and down, and I'm very hyper normally.

But I began to get exposed through some of my mentors, some of the teachers. Very many things were happening, and that was the early 1960s. Well, most significant for us was the Vatican Council in the Catholic Church. It was beginning to raise questions. The fact that as the bishops from all over the world came together, they brought questions from where they were coming from. And the forum itself was the first time in about a hundred years that there was a forum, because normally things just came down and here it was and you were told what to do. But this was a somewhat democratic forum, and so we began to raise questions we had never

raised before, which were regarding Church practice: why do we go to church and we don't understand what's going on because they're speaking Latin? Or why is the priest facing the other way? *Et cetera, et cetera*. There were a lot of just superficial things, but then to me what was fascinating, and for some reason really struck a chord with me—even though I had not been a social activist—really touched a note with me was the questions coming from the poor of the world. What can we say about the poverty of the world and the struggles of the world? And then somewhere and I don't even know where it came from, I got the sense of war and all of [00:10:00] that. The Vietnam War was going on, so when I got out of the seminary that was a very big thing. And in fact, the last year I was there we even were allowed to go to a peace march and I began to, well again questioning, why are we doing this? Why are we there? I used to fill questionnaires out on this, as to What made you change from being so pro-whatever the United States was doing and then to be so challenging?

But I guess part of it was that process of what was going on in the Church. And then I extended that to society, people I was around. I remember coming out of the seminary and right away saying to somebody, Do you know anybody that's doing anything about the Vietnam War? I met a young Maryknoll priest and he was quite involved. Well, he says, well, come with me, we're meeting with some clergymen and we've got a group in Los Angeles called, let's see, it was—we got involved in supporting the draft resistance, I forget now, "Clergy for Support of Draft Resisters." And so that was what I felt committed to. I got involved with them.

I also got involved with César Chávez and the farm worker movement. Our Franciscans were involved with him very early on. He was just becoming active at that time, but that was considered radical in the Church. And the area where he was, the bishop was not open to people

coming in there and supporting him. They were very locked in with the growers. So we would go in there and we'd bring food and things and then we would go out into the fields and support those who were striking and observe what was going on. I got to know César Chávez. I was extremely impressed with his nonviolence. That was really my first encounter with that.

Would he talk to you about it or would he talk to groups of people about it?

Yes. He did both. I had good access to him. In fact one time he did this twenty-five-day fast. It was broken when Bobby Kennedy came and Walter Reuther and all of that. And I remember that I went to the breaking of the fast. That poster there [indicating poster] was given to me by his wife. That's a little bit of recognition—I think they had a recognition breakfast or something. Anyway, I was there when they had this historic breaking of the strike. I remember Walter Reuther was there, the president of the United Auto Workers. And right at Delano in this place called Forty Acres, which was the headquarters of the farm worker union, were these big towers and they were the Voice of America. And I remember Walter Reuther pointing out in the shadows of the Voice of America, which broadcast to the world the wonderful lifestyle of America, [saying] we have people living like this. So I was very impressed with these kinds of people. Also I even was involved with some civil rights leaders. That was going on too. I was in Chicago; I went to Chicago for summer school and met Dr. Martin Luther King and that was all very active. So it was really a very exciting time, stimulating time.

Let me ask you this thing, because what I'm hearing and I'm wondering if this would be a correct way of understanding what you're saying. When you leave the Air Force as a young man, your choice to go into the Franciscans, something must have been calling you in a direction of a religion as opposed to say an MBA, as you say, but it almost sounds as if it's when you have been there a while that this, for lack of a better word, epiphany or some kind of insight comes.

Sometimes you hear people saying, I knew that I was called and so I went into the—whatever religious order it might be, but it sounds like there was a progression somehow.

There was. There was probably two stages actually. I haven't really thought about this very much, but one would be, I was in college, I was a very big social activist, you know, "party-party." I ran for student president or senior class president on a party ticket, "party-party" ticket. I actually lost. I've always been ashamed to mention this but I think that all of a sudden I got this, How could God let me lose when I'm such a good guy? or something like that. It rained the day of the elections and my friends were farther away from the polls and they were in the business school and they weren't going to bother to go, something like that, you know, how could this happen? All of a sudden I got this light on that maybe God wanted me to do something else. Now I was ready to go join the Jesuits right that day and all of that, and I said, *Take it easy; graduate.* And then I graduated and went in the service. But there was that religious call, it that kept coming back to me when I was in the service, even though [00:15:00] I was pretty "party active." The last year I was there I bought myself this little Jaguar roadster, I had to have it. I just found a new girlfriend and I was like "party-party" and all of that.

But I had this other thing in me—there was some other call there—it was basically a religious call. And then I was searching where to join and I thought the Jesuits would send me to school and I didn't want to go to school. The Franciscans ended up doing the same thing. If you join the diocese priesthood you're stuck in the diocese. People warned me that I'd be too close to my family, my family said I'd be too close to my friends and I'd never have enough time to concentrate on what I was doing. I saw a book at the Trappist monastery on religious groups and it had the Franciscans and it said that you have to have a love for God, a love for your fellow man, I guess they said at that time, and a good sense of humor. And I thought, Oh that sounds

like a good outfit to go with. But I think it was destiny. I think either God called me or there was an instinctive part of me that gravitated toward that. I'd met a couple of Franciscans that my folks knew. While still in the service I remember this one young airman who'd been with the Franciscans who said, *Once the little poverello St. Francis gets a hold on you, you can never let go.* I guess there was something there that I hadn't even really wrestled with—I do remember the fact that I did read a book about him and I was very struck by the fact that he had come from a business much richer than mine, but businessman father and gave that up. And I guess I—maybe because it was romantic or what, but that did touch me, I do remember that, it touched me.

So I don't know. But I think it was when I went to the religious training and then was going through theology school, and then the changes that were going on between the Church and the society. In other words, the 1960s. It was like it was in the air, the chemistry of the 1960s. It would either take you one way or the other. And even though all my family, all my family, were to the right, I went to the left. In fact a very good friend of mine who was extremely radical, more radical than I was, although he went out of the country, very, very radical, his brother was an FBI agent and we used to laugh about how in many families that the religious journey, pilgrimage if you want, took us in a kind of different direction.

I remember when I did come out of seminary, I was sent to UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles] to graduate school because they were going to have me teach in the Order. We had a college. And they chose sociology because they didn't have anybody doing that, which again seemed to be a good choice for me. I went to UCLA and the Watts riots were going on, there was just all this activity, and of course the youth movement. So I got a lot of exposure to a lot of things, and I got involved there in the peace movement. And I remember Dr. Spock

did this thing. Remember? He did this thing where he collected draft cards, and of course these were kids that their mothers had raised on his books, and he got a prison sentence. He and [William] Sloane Coffin, I think, there were two or three of them, they got these prison sentences. So we said, well, we'll do just what they did so they'll have to send all of us to prison if they want to pursue this.

So we did that. I was in Los Angeles going to UCLA, and living in our Franciscan house in downtown L.A. I remember going over to the federal building and saying [to myself] on my way there, what are you doing? Everything that you have held dear—your patriotism, you love the country, you're a veteran, your position in the Church—you're going to get thrown out doing this kind of stuff. *And* your family, you're going against all of those. And I remember thinking that, and then it was just like this is like the cutting of the umbilical cord or something. It was like, well, there I am. I can do no other. And it did happen. Really all of those came down on me, not super heavy. I managed to slide under the ropes partly because I was a graduate student, and even as a religious priest I had more freedom than somebody who was in the parish in Los Angeles I would've gotten more and more control on me. But in the Franciscans we're just a lot more open than other groups were. Our head, our what we call Provincial, was very open.

Who was that at that time?

Alan McCoy. He's in L.A. now. Anyway, he got very involved in all the Latin American [00:20:00] stuff in the Church. So I was open to a lot of that. I almost got involved with the Berrigan brothers [Philip and Daniel]. We were trying to find them the just before they did their first action. They invited this Maryknoll friend of mine but we couldn't find them. They were at some hotel, so we missed the opportunity.

So I became involved as an activist, but meanwhile I went to school. I was finishing a graduate program. Our college had closed by then.

Where had the college been?

In Oceanside, at San Luis Rey Mission. The bishopric of Reno, which included in those days all of Nevada, contacted our Provincial—he'd heard about something. We had what they call a chapter, an assembly, and some of us had actually brought up the fact that we should be doing more work with the poor and maybe some work around peace. And it got in the papers and so the bishop there was wanting to do something in the city, particularly in the Westside community. He had worked in Open Housing in Michigan and so they asked our Provincial if we had anybody who could come and work there and our Provincial said, well, before we do anything like that, we'd probably want to do a study or something, and we do have a young Franciscan who's working in sociology and he could come over there for three months, or I think he said less than that, thirty days or something.

Anyway, so I went over there and started looking around and living in that neighborhood and seeing what we could do, how we could support welfare mothers and farm workers and that sort of thing. Meanwhile the Vietnam War was still going on. This was about 1968. And so there was a very small group of people—Leonard Storm, who was the head of the biology department at UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] and a very active Quaker, and a small, small group of people—that were protesting the Vietnam War, and I joined with them. We had some little tiny protests and then I remember that I got a letter from someone who later became one of the editors of *Commonweal* magazine. He said that we're winding down the Vietnam War but we just had a discussion that the real threat for humankind now is nuclear bombs. They were just growing and growing, nuclear bombs and this nuclear arms race. And somewhere about that time someone mentioned to me about the nuclear test site [Nevada Test Site] near Las Vegas, and when I was younger, even in the military, I can remember seeing pictures of the above ground tests going off and the impact it had and all that. I said, *Is that still going on?* So I asked a

minister friend and he asked some parishioner, Ron Kiehn, I think it was. There was [Harold] Cunningham, [Frank] Strabala, and Ron Kiehn, or something like that.

I can look that up. So these are the REECo [Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company], EG&G [Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier] people.

Ron was in this other minister's church and so he said, I'll ask him. He'll know what's going on. And then he said, Yes, they do do this testing, and he said something about protests. He said, Well, the government has found out if you do the most objectionable things in very remote places, nobody's going to bother you. And I remembered that there were some military evaders that went on trial here in the Presidio in San Francisco and there were so many protesters that they moved it to Barstow. They moved the trial to the military base there in Barstow. There was this one priest that I knew, an Episcopal priest who worked for Clergy and Laymen Against the War in Vietnam, and he went to represent and to protest, but he was the only one. They had a little motel or something out in the middle of the desert. He stayed in a motel, but they had a remote place and they didn't get bothered by anybody. And I thought about that and I thought, "yes." I still find that challenging, this statement that the military figures, if they do the most really despicable things in places that are very difficult to get to and unpleasant, nobody's going to bother them. [00:25:00] So we began then to look into that, and actually we began with Dr. Storm and his wife Trudy and they had a couple kids and then a couple of other people, just a few of us.

Do you remember names of those people?

No, I don't remember. Anyway, Storm was a real figurehead at that time, between the university and the Quakers, and you'll find him in the university records for sure. He's deceased, so his wife Trudy remarried and lives, I think, in Bakersfield.

So we would have little vigils at the Atomic Energy Commission, the AEC. This would be around 1970 or maybe very early 1970s.

OK. So this is earlier than your later protests?

Yes, this is pretty early. Oh yes, way before. Yes, definitely. No, we didn't do that until 1982. So at that time we didn't even have the energy to go out to the test site so we gathered there at the Atomic Energy [Commission] building. It was the Atomic Energy Commission, then it became ERDA, Energy Research [and] Development Agency, and then it became the Department of Energy [DOE].

So the AEC building in Las Vegas was where at that point? People talk about—I can find it.

Yes, it's—I'd know if I—not too far from where it is—no, they've moved now. Where are they—Bechtel's at a different place now.

They're out at Losee Road up in North Las Vegas now.

It was right west of Circus Circus [casino]. That's the road that goes down there—I forget what that is. There's a post office on that road and there's a—at least there was. It was the next major road over from the Strip there, or on the other side of the freeway.

Right. That's fine.

Yes, anyway, so we would have these little gatherings. This one gal, Diana, and then the Storms had their little kids, they'd be in the circle and we'd just do an hour or two of protest. And so then we found out about the neutron bomb. I think it was the first time we went out there, and I'm not sure what year that was. It was the early 1970s, and we went out to the test site and had a little vigil out there. And that was the beginning. Now if you talk to Sister Rosemary Lynch—have you talked to her?

I'm going to.

OK. Rosemary talks about the first witness at the test site and this book, Butigan's book, is about the second witness that started in 1982. But Rosemary really talks about how before people came from California and so forth, they were working out there. And I was part of that when I was still there. I was there regularly until 1979 and then I was elected to the head of our province order and I went to California, but then I would go back for these protests. They were there all along, and I think with the Sagebrush Alliance, but Rosemary was part of that. And then we started going out there and there was an incident when the *Hibakusha* [Japanese survivors or Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings] came and so forth, and we did different things out there at that time. Nobody got arrested. There was a group that came from Japan, the survivors.

But anyway so we started getting involved with that. Our role was, we were there, we had put together a little group called the Franciscan Center with a little bit of funding from the diocese, and it was a center for social justice in the southern part of Nevada. We were working with welfare mothers, with open housing, and we did some work around farm workers up in what do you call it? It's a city when you're going north towards Utah and they have casinos there now. Overton. In that area.

I was always very fascinated by the issue of the test site and I think that that comes from having been in the military. Rosemary was interested also. There was Fred Landau, he was working at the university [UNLV] and may still. [00:30:00] Anyway, I should know because I knew him really well. We would do things around, trying to raise the issue. I remember we came over here to this area one time and there was a conference in Santa Cruz not about nuclear testing but just nuclear weapons. We went, Fred and I went to that and we said that we were representing Nevada where they did nuclear testing. And he was saying, They don't do that anymore. You know there's been a moratorium on testing, because they were just

thinking of above ground testing. And even within people *in* the antinuclear *movement*, they didn't know anything was going on. They were doing *lots* of testing at that time, lots of testing. And fortunately the person who was conducting this is a well-known activist but I don't remember his name either but from Columbia University I think. He said, well, yes there is, they are doing some, *but* it's all going computer and within another year or two it'll be gone, and this was still in the early 1970s.

So anyway we made our little fledgling efforts. Well, then what happened was that I remember when Rocky Flats [Colorado] became a big issue, about the nuclear weapons there, and they developed some large actions there where they got a lot of people. Meanwhile there were some hearings around nuclear exposure, at the Nevada Test Site, so they had hearings in Las Vegas. Very, very interesting. Sister Rosemary was quite involved in that. And there were congressional people that came. They got lots of people. But that's where we were shocked. We had people off our street going and testifying how they would be sitting on their porches and they were just getting Geiger counters and it was going off the scale. They were jumping up and down on the porch; they were so hot at that time, how many family members had died and all of that sort of thing. I guess that was after Baneberry so there was a lot about the Baneberry victims. Sister Rosemary had known some families, she had gotten to know families, the widows thereof and so forth, and the lack of response they were getting. So we were getting more and more interested in that, about survivors and all of that. But I remember when these Rocky Flats people came to testify, Rosemary and I were talking: How do you get all these people to come? They said, well, you have to build an organization. You got to have a \$100,000 and a staff of, I don't know, three or four people or something like that if you're going to organize. So I go, Where are we ever going to get anything like that? So I guess we'll just have to be resigned to just doing our little thing, you know, a few people

going out if we know of a test or something like that. And then what happened was that in the late 1970s—1982 was the eight hundredth anniversary of the birth of St. Francis and we got a notice—in 1979 I left Las Vegas and I went to Oakland because I was elected to be our minister provincial for the Franciscans of the western United States. So I had to move there, but that meant I was overseeing the province in the western states and I would occasionally come to Las Vegas.

And anyway one of our graduate students—well, the Franciscans have a theology school at Berkeley. There's a seminary, graduate theological union, Protestant and Catholic, and there are three Catholic seminaries, so we have a seminary there. And I actually was teaching there part-time, teaching a course here or a course there, and at one point there in—it would've been, it would be about 1979, something like that, 1979, 1980—Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit who's very big with antinuclear and antiwar, he and his brother Phil, came there for a semester to the Jesuit school to teach and just got everybody radicalized; they were doing their draft file stuff and all that. And so the students, they cooked up on Ash Wednesday, they were going to do something, some kind of protest thing, and they decided they were going to have a religious service and then they would do an action. And the action was—and this was starting to happen on campus—the action was to have a sit-in at the chancellor's office at UC Berkeley because of the connection between UC [00:35:00] Berkeley and the lab, the lab there in Livermore, and also—well, I knew that it was also the test site. They were really doing it because of the lab. And so I was asked to come and do a prayer. Well, I knew what that was going to mean. I am never able to resist these things, so I went with them and we got arrested at the chancellor's office. There was a young man who was a graduate student at our theology school, came to me and he said that he had heard this about the Franciscans and wanted to prepare for the anniversary of St. Francis's birth

in 1982, which was still a couple years away. And what about if I could find a stipend for him because he had a wife and so he was married, to do a project among the Franciscans in the West on different issues of peace. And I said, That would be fine as long as you look into what's going on in Nevada and see if you can do something there about the Nevada Test Site. Well, they did a number of things but the one that really caught the imagination, well that was the one in Nevada. It turned out to be then that during the whole of Lent we would have a presence there.

What's the student's name?

Michael Affleck.

So that is Michael Affleck. That's who I thought it was.

Yes, Mike Affleck. That's Mike Affleck. He actually already had a doctorate from New York somewhere, something like that, and he was supposed to be teaching back there. He had a teaching job back there. He came out on a trip with his wife and somebody suggested, well, maybe you ought to go seminary. And so he ended up doing that and became a disciple of Dan Berrigan's and got this going.

And so Mike really got that going in Nevada and it ended up getting mostly focused on that. And then we got a house. The sisters had a house available that we were able to get a hold of during Lent, it was all of Lent, and we were out there the whole of Lent. And that's when we started building that up. So Mike started like a year or so ahead of time but then we were there all of Lent. And things evolved, and they evolved rather quickly—a fairly good turnout of people all along during the time; full house anyway. And a lot of us would go over different times during that Lenten time and then for Holy Week. And there was a question that was raised, because in other places like Berkeley, there were a lot of groups that were doing that, that felt that well, to really make this witness effective one has to engage in some form of civil

disobedience—which Ken Butigan talks about a lot in his book the *Pilgrimage Through a Burning World*, the effect of civil disobedience as a way of expressing dissent with what is going on and saying this should never be and trying to speak of ways of transformation. And we went round and round about it. At that time there was a lot of stuff going on at Berkeley, you know, it was the 1960s, which really happened mostly in the early 1970s. And there was window breaking and all that sort of stuff, but a lot of nonviolent actions were happening at Livermore. We were conscious of that but we were also conscious of the fact—those of us that were living, Sister Rosemary, myself, *et cetera*—that Las Vegas was way behind the time on all of this. It was a much, much, much more conservative city. I remember I was involved with, as I said, a lot of the César Chávez situations and the farm workers and we went to a Safeway and all we did was just give out an informational leaflet and the police descended upon us. I said, well, that's the difference, to get the police to come. In Berkeley you've got to be breaking windows or something for them to even take a look. So we were questioning whether that would be such a turn-off if we got arrested. And that went on during Lent, that there were people going out to the test site but really it was doubtful whether there would be any kind of an actual action where people would get arrested. That was discussed for a long time and [00:40:00] different groups even—I was involved in an affinity group over here where we were discussing that, Anne [Symens] Bucher, Duncan McMurdy, and others.

The question was, let me see if I understand this, that if you did an action that you were arrested, it might be so negatively seen by the public that it would be counterproductive?

Exactly. A big stimulus in this was Daniel Ellsberg. He had gotten involved. Mike Affleck had connected with him and got him involved. We had gotten involved, as I said, I got involved there. When we got arrested at the chancellor's office, it was a high profile arrest. There were

people invited, Daniel Ellsberg was there, Robert McAfee Brown, a very noted theologian and scripture scholar, Dan Berrigan was there. And so Dan Ellsberg was big *for* getting arrested. He came there with that in mind and he had with him a woman who was a very active leader of the Green Party in Germany. She was there, expecting to get arrested. And so they came in. We'd been there most of Lent and people I thought were coming up with the agreement that they weren't going to get arrested. I think Mike Affleck seems to have had a stronger desire or agenda towards people getting arrested. I was open to it but I was open to the fact that maybe it was going to be too counterproductive. And so we had this hot engagement, I think on a Friday—no, Good Friday's when we did it. Just a day or at the most two days before, and came to the conclusion that we would do it. And it turned out, I thought, very positive. We really had no idea what would be the consequences. We thought it could be five years in prison or whatever. *So Butigan talks about that, but so you guys decide to get arrested on Good Friday, you're saying.*

Right.

And so tell me a little bit—

That had been kind of the thought. If we did it that would be the time to do it, that it would be—something like—I didn't think of that till I read through his *Pilgrimage* book, but the fact that we did do this Way of the Cross. At that time we went all the way up by Camp Desert Rock, which you can't do now. Before that, by the way, we used to just go up to the gate and just have a little group of people right there by the gate. Then they moved us back to Camp Desert Rock, halfway. It was five miles, so like two-and-a-half, and now we're right at the entrance there. Butigan describes the event, the group came with that long rope with 792, or something like that, bombs on it, one for every bomb that had been dropped, or tested.

The knots. It was knotted for each one of them?

There was a cardboard bomb.

Oh, there was a little bomb hanging down.

Like maybe a foot long, a black-shaped bomb.

Oh, I didn't get that clearly. I think—he talks about it but I didn't get the—

Yes, [pages turning] I have some other pictures that I was looking at recently that—Butigan's book, he does have it in there, I think.

He has a picture.

Yes, I think he has a picture of the procession with the bombs. Anyway, so that's what we did. In fact, if you look in his book you'll see a lot of pictures from the earlier days. They first I think did that convert sign banner carried by young Franciscans and people got disturbed that it sounded like we were trying to religiously convert people and we said *No, no, no, convert the test site to some peaceful uses.* So I know for myself, I just was talking about this the other day to somebody about how I remember being in classes in the Air Force on the use of nuclear weapons and with kind of like good feelings, you know. We saw the dimensions of what would be the impact of a bomb, it would take out a city or whatever. And so when I started then seeing this from the other side, what it would mean to take out a city, I've always been just so struck by that. It's just the evil of it. They were not evil people, because I knew people at the test site and had the experience of working with them—I was actually on a contract. Jerry Furr, this minister, and I were hired by [00:45:00] them—I'm not sure whether it's REECo or EG&G; I think it probably was REECo, although the contract I think had to be approved by the Atomic Energy Commission [it was to evaluate their equal opportunity program]—sitting out there talking to people about what they were doing and all of that. The one thing that I found out is

that radiation was always such a big issue, but what people did—this was the thing that I found—they always would say, Well, it *used* to be dangerous but now we have *much* more safety precautions. And I remember they used the imagery—they said that when doctors used to test their X-ray machine they would do it on their arm and if it got a red spot, then it was working. That's just how they found out if it was on. Well, imagine today if you're going to get a red spot deliberately from an X-ray machine. And then they said you look at all the old doctors; they have fingers missing from those X-ray machines, doctors and dentists. I said, Oh great!

So they would say that as a sort of—

Kind of a defense. We'd have lunch and there'd usually be some of the, I forget now, there's a name for people who do the radiology stuff—

Well, they're health physicists, is one name and RADSAFE [radiological safety] and stuff like that.

Yes, something like that. Yes, the “rad” lab folks and stuff, but it was a fairly good profession, the people that were involved in checking the safety and so forth. They were professional people and they would talk about how it *used* to be dangerous and the Downwinder thing, and they would admit to the fact that they didn't tell things really as they were but they didn't really know. They used to give out these pamphlets and all that to the Downwinders, Don't be worried. And at that time they would go with Geiger counters and so forth: Well, it's really safe, but then somebody would tell about, Yes, but somebody put their Geiger counter in the ground and all of a sudden—and that's where the grass was the cows ate and stuff. But now it's safe. It's always: Now it's safe, the levels are now safe, the levels are now safe, the levels are now safe. So that was a constant, somewhat

of a prevarication. They weren't telling exactly the truth here. But maybe it was as they thought it to be.

I wanted to ask you something if it's OK because it's interesting, listening to you, you're articulating two parts of the story. One is the social issues surrounding the test site, what you were just talking about, whether people are safe living in its vicinity. The other is what you described as the evil of the bomb itself, that it could destroy a whole city. And it seemed as if you were saying you knew about this when you were in the military because you discussed what it could do, but its meaning changed. The meaning becomes different somehow.

Yes. I don't really know. I guess I just thought it was a necessary evil. Our whole thinking in those days—I remember going one time from Las Vegas down to an activity at the Trinity site in Los Alamos [Alamogordo, New Mexico], this is quite early on, and they were opening it up once a year. Once a year you could go there. And the land is still hot. It'll warm you up.

Yes, I've been there a couple of times.

Yes, and they put on the fence pictures of the newspapers from that day. I don't know if they still do that, but they did.

They do.

And part of what was interesting was that they describe it—this has been a long time now—the target was this large logistical facility for things for war; not people, not a civilian population, but this big logistical facility. But I think we had absorbed somewhat the idea of saturation bombing of cities, and that's really where the turning came. Daniel Ellsberg talks about that, how Truman and Churchill and Stalin gathered out on the presidential yacht down in the Caribbean or [00:50:00] somewhere like that and made the decision that they would do saturation bombing of cities, even though it was against all of the codes of warfare. Because the Germans were doing it

then we could do it, and then that carried on in Tokyo. They did all this firebombing and they'd just incinerate whole blocks. But we somehow didn't know a whole lot about that but accepted the fact that we were bombing cities, because I remember thinking, Yes, well, we're bombing cities. And so the fact that you were using a bigger bomb just to kind of get it over with quicker, I accepted that. Even as a kid—I was twelve or thirteen when that happened, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

So this was the first time I began to—because of the Vietnam War and all that, you began to think of what it's really like seeing the impact of napalm. I remember the images that changed public opinion in the U.S. It's supposed to be the little girl running with fire, with napalm. Well, the same image around World War II—the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—were these kids cremated or their image on the sidewalk or whatever, running around naked and burning and so forth.

So I began to then think with horror of the fact of wiping out a whole city. A nuclear physicist, Ted Taylor, told me about one time he did a lot of tests at the test site and he said that he was remembering or somehow looking back to when he had to go to testify in Congress or to congressional committee about a test that he had done and realizing that it would not have wiped out every single person in Moscow, you know, with dismay. And then he's now—some years ago—he was just appalled to think that he was ever involved in anything like that.

So it was that kind of awareness that was beginning to really hit home with me. But I don't know. As you can see, I've been involved in *so* many different kinds of issues and I most recently went to prison for the School of the Americas--the "School of Assassins—and that appalls me terribly, except for the fact that I see they're all interconnected. Still, the one that grabs me the most is the nuclear issue. I tend to think it's because of having that early-on

exposure to it and being part—well, what Butigan calls the “nuclearism”—that I was part of that. I was part of our American nuclear—we were supposedly getting nuclear missiles, even when I got out, and I was on a SAC base where we had to lie. We were told not to tell the truth to the people, that we had nuclear bombs in their town. People were beginning to sense that we might have nuclear bombs on the base outside of Kokomo, Indiana. It then became Grissom Air Force Base. It was Bunker Hill, then Grissom, and now it’s closed. So I was part of that secret. We don’t tell people that we have nuclear bombs right near their homes. We were supposedly being prepared for nuclear weapons. There’s my famous story, we were sent up, scrambled, to shoot down a plane that had been clearly identified as a Russian bomber on its way towards—from Indiana there we were guarding Chicago and Detroit, so it had come over the DEW line [Distant Early Warning] and it was heading that way. It’s not like a missile where you have twenty minutes; you had hours. And so we were sent up to scramble to go up after it. When you go after a plane like that you had two ways in those days of approaching it. One was, if you were going to shoot it down you did a 90 degree angle and you shot missiles at it. Or, if you were going to identify it you had to come from the back, come up and look. But from that, to get back to a 90 degree angle took a lot of doing, so generally you didn’t want to have to do it that way. So we said, Well, we’ll do an identification pass because this is a strange plane. And they said, No, do a firing pass. And we kept going back and forth about it. But the commander of the plane actually was the pilot and the pilot has the final say, not the ground radar.

So we said, We’d better just go take a look.

[00:55:00] And we did and then we called back and said, You’re sure?

And they said, Yes, why?

And we said, There's a lady waving out the window.

It was an airliner and we would've shot it down. So some of those experiences came back to me, the perilousness of all of this, the arbitrariness of all of this. And then what if it *was* a nuclear plane? What if we did what we did and then we missed it, it had dropped nuclear bombs on Chicago or something like that? So it's all just madness, just madness.

Well, was that the only time that you were in a real-life situation like that where you actually thought that—?

Yes. But the one thing they said about Air Defense Command is [that] Strategic Air Command is *waiting* to go to war; Air Defense Command is always *at* war. Because we were always on guard in case somebody was coming.

Yes, but I guess my question is—no, you've explained it but I'm wondering, well, that must have been something emotional to actually think this was the actual engagement this time.

Yes. And you didn't want to miss, I guess.

You didn't want to miss.

Yes. There was also just a lot of stuff that as you got a little distance from it you began to realize. For example, we would have exercises and there were times when they would have you—if you so-called “missed the intercept,” you didn't show on radar that you would've shot it down, you would switch films so that it looked successful. All these exercises always came up around budget time, to try to show the Congress that we just really deserved a whole lot more money because we were so effective. My lack of credibility in the military grew as time went on, and so I'm not very much surprised at what's going on right now.

So anyway then things really took off. This was only going to be for that one year. That was the idea, the eight hundredth anniversary, and so we tried to get as many people from

different—particularly Franciscan—groups that we knew to come. And had quite a successful Holy Week and it was pretty dramatic. We did get arrested. We did not know what would happen. People were beginning to get some big sentences for going on military bases. And since this seemed to be the number one secret, we might get five years or something like that. And we finally got arrested, we also didn't know that the arrests didn't come from the government itself but that it was contracted out to Nye County. When we went to court, good old Judge Sullivan came out, Bill Sullivan, and he said right off the bat, he made the decision that he was not going to send people to jail for trespass. But what he was going to do was fine people, and then people weren't going to pay the fines. So when we first went to court, they told me to be the spokesperson. So I got up and Dan Ellsberg said our major goal was to be in jail over the Easter weekend. Well, we could see already now it was down to like a trespass thing; it wasn't going to be five years or something. And we thought at first when we went in—in fact we stopped the bus and Dan went out and bought all this stuff to eat because we thought we *were* going to be in jail for a while, at least a month or something. So the judge came out and said well, he wasn't going to keep us but he was going to fine us.

Well, we're not going to pay a fine.

Well, all right, you just sign your way out on your own [recognizance].

Well, we're not going to sign.

I kept getting these clues from Ellsberg.

And so we had these lawyers on the phone—he was telling these lawyers, You got to keep us in. And he says, That's against my oath as a lawyer. My oath as a lawyer is to get you *out* of trouble, not *in* trouble. And so finally Sullivan says to me, well, Father, you may have more influence with God out there, but in here I'm the

one who has the final word, and you're going out. I would've said they would really lock us up if we didn't—on a different charge, and we didn't want to do that.

So anyway we went out. And then we had this really very exhilarating experience of Easter and they had these white balloons they let go and they went over—big wind over the test site, and we felt like at least we were calling attention to the test site.

And you celebrated that mass, the Easter mass, or—?

I'm not sure. I think it may've already been given to somebody else. I can't really remember.

[01:00:00] Good chance that I did, but I don't really remember. Anne Bucher would remember all these things. I don't have much memory for that.

But you remember the balloons.

I do remember the balloons. I remember that was very exhilarating.

So then the next year there were some of the local people, Sister Rosemary and others, just decided to go ahead and have some kind smaller, localized event. And then we decided that maybe we should do something—those of us who were in the Bay Area where we had more resources—something for the next year. And then we did that and then we decided that this needed to be an ongoing presence, that we really had to continue to raise this issue and try to bring about an end to testing and that that was achievable. That Baneberry incident that I mentioned to you, just hearing the test site officials out there say that it came close to being shut down, made me conscious of the fact that that was doable. There's an issue, which is more than I could get into or would be prepared to talk about at any length, but even pretty early on we managed to get other groups around the country interested. Not very far out, we did the first August Desert Witness and in that one we did solicit groups, eastern groups, mostly that are connected to religious groups. But there was FOR, Fellowship of Reconciliation, there was the

Sojourners magazine which is a religious group, I think Pax Christi, I'm not sure, but I remember those. They got together around the August desert witness and helped to put it together, staff it, and all of that. So we didn't have a whole new infusion of a lot of money but we were able to bring people together and bring people out there. And there's been criticism, and I know it's in Ken Butigan's book about the strategic question, that it's expressive for people to go out there and feel good about doing this, but what was this doing to change the picture? We did have organizers that were good ones, like David Hartsough—a Quaker activist—and people that came and helped us. David actually worked for us for a little while in terms of organizing. And our goal was to get people to go back home and to work with groups in other parts of the country. Nevada's not a great base for influencing congress, and yet we had people that were connected, had offices in Washington. That was a really major strategy, to get to their congressional representatives, because we were getting people from all over the country. And so they did do that. And eventually even when George [H.W.] Bush won, we got a moratorium on testing. We got shorter ones before that, and so I think that to a certain extent it was effective. Also, as we kept doing those witnesses, we developed the ability to have, if you want to call them demonstrations or actions, at the test site ad hoc whenever there was a group. So I remember that we had the, what would they call it—it is doctors in the public health profession used to have a big convention in Las Vegas. And people in that field and others went out there—I know Ann Druyan, she was Carl Sagan's wife, she was out there with the group. And she actually got arrested, and that made a dramatic impact. And her husband was actually out there. Shortly after that he came out with his theory on nuclear winter, that if we set off a major exchange the dust and all could darken life on this Earth. And those had *huge* impacts on people. Sagan and his book had a *lot* of impact on people. So I think yes, the events were pretty

expressive but they had real ramifications and we were *not* oblivious to that at all. We were having lots of conversations on it. But we also didn't have the ability to do a *major* organizing in Washington. And we also brought in other groups. There was the Nuclear Freeze [Movement] and other groups, and then of course there was Greenpeace, this American Peace Test that started. They brought much bigger groups. When they started bringing these big groups—we had created the attention. I think Greenpeace was the first one to come, but then some of these others came, and they were able to mobilize lots more people than we did. [01:05:00] They had *lots* more money. But we continued and they said, well, why did you continue? We continued because we felt that the faith presence was very important and very significant. And by the way I'm a student or whatever, I suppose practitioner, of social movements. That's what I studied in my doctoral work, religious and social movements, and believe that the way to get a social movement going is to draw people—let me put it this way, let me say it again. The social movements that were going were mostly around issues, and somebody came up with the Vietnam War so people organized around the Vietnam War. I was in Berkeley. I was teaching at our theological school. Do you know Berkeley?

Yes.

If you know Berkeley well, so you've been in this area. Well, when you go down University Avenue and you get to the freeway, the 101 freeway, there used to be a lot of hitchhikers there. There really aren't anymore but there used to be a lot of hitchhikers there and we called it the Greyhound station of Berkeley or whatever. And they would all hold up signs and the signs would tell, Going to L.A. or going here or going there, and you can first turn north and you can go south. I remember one time being there, one weekend, and I see all these signs and they said, Isla Vista. Isla Vista? Why are people—and I actually knew where Isla Vista was because of

going to school in Santa Barbara. Isla Vista is where the University of California, Santa Barbara is. Well, Isla Vista erupted that weekend. There was this huge student uprising, because we're talking about the era of the student uprising, the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley, and so it was a network going out.

And as much as I was involved in all these different groups—the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, the farm worker movement, and on it went, a couple others. Anyway, they were mostly people who were around given issues, but what happened with our actions was that we specifically started with organizing people around the anniversary of St. Francis, so we had Franciscans and other religious groups, and that was the constituency we went to. We advertised to and still do. We go to church groups, their faith groups, and that sort of thing. So what was very intriguing to me was that what developed in the way that the groups happened is that they would develop by different church groups, so we'd have all of Lent. And in the beginning it mainly built up and then Holy Week and everybody came that one week. But it evolved to having weeks during Lent, weekends—a Methodist weekend, an Episcopal weekend—and that continued to develop. And sometimes a Jewish weekend, even a Mormon weekend, which was significant, and a Muslim weekend came all out. Or maybe two or a couple of them would be at the same time, and they would organize their own symbolism, their own religious expression. For example, the Episcopalians are big on the Eucharist and the cup, and they did a very interesting thing where there were some people on the other side of the fence and some people on this side of the fence—and we always stressed the fact that everybody's part of it, everybody shares, there's no big thing about getting arrested; you might or you might not—and people on the outside were passing the cup over the fence to people who were getting arrested. And then there was a Church of the Brethren who don't have Eucharist but they wash

each other's feet, so they put a bench through the fence and they washed the feet. And of course we had masses and we had the Franciscan weekend. But the impressive thing was that a lot of people came not because they were activists; they came because of their religious expression. Those who would come would go home and talk about this in their churches, and maybe there would be a minister and he would talk about it from the pulpit and he would relate it to the Christian scriptures or whatever the scriptures were, and people were then coming out of their religious commitment.

And I saw that also carried to the Sanctuary Movement when people were trying to escape from El Salvador and they were getting across the border, and people were [01:10:00] giving them rides and so forth, north to Canada or to other places of disbursement. Or later the sanctuary became public where you put them in a church and announce it, that they were there, to get the political support. And I was very impressed with that. Housewives who heard about this at church, who heard these people talk, who heard the minister or someone say, well, Jesus says, I was hungry, you gave to me. I was naked, you took care of me. If you did it for the least of mine, you did it for me. And they felt then called. And they'd never done anything like this in their life, but they'd get in the family station wagon and they'd go out and they'd carry these families. The risk that was involved in that, just taking strangers, picking them up at the border of Mexico and driving them towards Canada, but they were willing to take those risks and even to go to jail, which was very, very impressive to me.

I read a manuscript of Ken's book but I never read through the text until you talked about it. And I said, I'd better get through that text, so I did and it's stirred up things with me. But I have probably a very, very deep feeling about the kind of spiritual dimensions of all of this. To me there are many dimensions. So I believe that there are dimensions of this that are

related to the universe that are beyond just what we see. Albert Einstein said we've only explored the first level of observation and understanding and there's whole other levels in which we can understand things and know things which are interconnected. And already now there's super string theory and the tiny little strings, everything's connected together. I just think there are things that I have seen happen in the desert that most people who don't have a theology or a science [degree], maybe they'd understand it, but to me they work and I'll tell you how. Ken mentions it but only briefly but—are you almost out?

Let me—yes, if we're going to—let me change disks—

[01:12:07] End Track 3, Disk 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 1, Disk 2.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disk 2.

I actually always say when I give talks that I'm not going to tell this story but I end up doing it. One year we had this exorcism. We went this whole Lent without a test—and usually they're having a couple of tests a week, but they didn't test the whole time. We had these contemplative sisters from up north, Trappistine sisters, and they were there and holding signs, and all during Holy Week and all they didn't do anything like that and didn't do any testing and all that. Then we just finished and we got word that they were going to do a test. And then there was some word on the walkie-talkies that it could vent because there might've been water at the bottom of the [drill] hole [of the test], which was one of the theories around Baneberry, that maybe there was water at the bottom of the thing and that caused it to vent. So anyway we decided we'd better go back, because we'd all left, so we went back and we did kind of like an exorcism, sort of the old Catholic exorcism which was more direct. These were somewhat symbolic exorcisms. We did one at Los Alamos, kind of symbolic: whatever this demonic power is, may it

be driven out of this place and out of the sky. And so we decided we would do a mass and then we would incorporate in that a kind of an exorcism, not expecting to see devils come falling from the sky but just kind of like that expression of whatever these evil powers are. When people that are good people, like in Germany or something, do something monstrous—even Hannah Arendt said Adolf Eichmann wasn't a big enough man to have done such a monstrous thing. There's somehow a something greater than any of us that takes over, and that's what I understand as the demonic. A lot of people talk about thrones and dominations being institutions, that they seem to do something worse than the people that are part of the institution. Maybe all those people in the Pentagon aren't really that bad of people but they're just doing horrifically evil things. That gets in the mindset somewhere that, well, we've got to escalate, we've got to do this and we've got to do that, and pretty soon we're burning babies and all that stuff. And so anyway we did this little exorcism and did this mass. This well-known sister, Marjorie Tuite was there and she gave a little homily and we used the Gospel story about Jesus driving the demons out of this man and where would they go and he drove them into the swine and the swine ran into the river. So she talked about that and somebody said, where would the demons go? because we used that Gospel story. And she said, well, I guess just into the ground here. So anyway at the end of the Mass there was a ceremony, we take holy water and go around and bless it and just call on God to take whatever this evil power is out of this place. And I was doing this chant, and we were singing, and I was sprinkling with holy water and saying to drive this demonic power out into the sky, maybe, into the ground, whatever, and then we stopped it. And I stepped over the rope at that time—there was a rope there by Camp Desert Rock—and I'm not sure, one of the sergeants took me by the arm and I handed the holy water thing to someone and just at that moment there was

this explosion. They had cancelled the test—they were supposed to have them that day—because of the winds. If the winds were going towards Los Angeles they would never have them, only if they were going downwind to Utah. And I saw this big black cloud come up, and being in the Air Force I had seen crashes and they're the only thing that give that dark a cloud; it's so black because of the fuel. So I thought that's what it was, and it was in Little Skull Mountain up on the hill—I think Ken tells something about this—in the Indian burial grounds area, just after Easter. So they arrested us. They were taking us to Beatty [Nevada]. We were talking about it and when we got there one of the officers sitting in the front seat, he said, well, it was a plane crash. It was on the radio. Later *Time* magazine had a notice that it was a plane flown by a general from Langley Air Force Base who was the head of all testing and so that it was probably a test plane, or it could've been somebody had taken a MIG and defected and they were trying this out. But he had come to fly this super secret plane. So later we understood that to be a Stealth fighter, and later actually I talked to somebody who had been stationed—they had the Stealth fighters in the [00:05:00] northern part of the test site—and to someone who was there and he said yes, he saw that happen and that general was killed. And when we found that out we just shuddered. And in fact the young man who had helped us plan the thing just got in his bunk at the jail and just cried to think, how could this be? This man was killed, and he had a couple of children. Certainly we weren't trying to have anybody killed but somehow it's just this sense, I can never shake it, that somehow the powers of good and evil—not that they are evil people or anything but there's just a struggle that goes on that somehow—how does that do that? I don't know. Most people I tell this to, they don't have a theology that fits. I think the science people are closer to understanding how that could happen. People don't want to think God caused this to happen. God can maybe make somebody get well but not this. But it convinced me more than

ever that we are really waging a struggle for good in a world that can do some things that are very evil, and that somehow there's a purpose to putting yourself out there, and that even prayer has an impact. Maybe it's not always something you would want, like this person's death, but that it's striking out. And in fact sometime later when we went back to Judge Sullivan's courtroom—because we told him that when we got into court, how this had happened—and he said, Ever since you guys came in here and told me about that plane crash, whenever I'd get a cold I kind of wonder if you guys had been praying about me or something. He was even touched by the story, seemingly.

Anyway, I was last year, a year ago, I was in prison at Nellis Air Force Base for an action at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. But I was sentenced there for three months. I think it was early, maybe just in December. And I had seen a couple of planes take off at night and they were A-10 Warthogs. And the A-10 Warthogs have been accused in the earlier Iraq engagement of doing the depleted uranium bombs. And in fact Phil Berrigan and Steve Kelly the Jesuit and Susan Crane and others had done a protest there—Ploughshare protests around those A-10 fighters, because I saw two of those go up one night. And all the planes that did the bombing in Iraq, or seemingly all of them, trained there at Nellis. They would drop bombs over the Nellis bomb range which is on the Nevada Test Site and I think somewhat, from what I can figure out, near that area where this Stealth fighter crashed. And by gosh, two of them crashed into each other and one of them crashed right where that was. And the thing that's really intriguing to me is that activist and former priest Phil Berrigan was dying at the time and people said he was still wrestling with how do we stop these nuclear weapons and all that. And I said, My gosh, maybe even the heavens are reacting to Phil's intercessions, or something like that because I thought two of those; that's kind of a big coincidence.

Anyway, I'm only saying that to say that my convictions about this go about as deep as anything can go—that I feel very much it's like an intuitive wisdom or it's that part of you that knows things that your brain can't even really absorb. That somehow there's an engagement here that's very critical for the survival of probably the universe, maybe even beyond the human race or beyond this planet or at least involving this planet. We didn't think of nuclear winter when we started out—we thought of a city blowing up. And it was Carl Sagan who extended that. A lot of scientists today are talking about in this age, like I say, the super string theory and all that, having the energy fields that interact in the world, that interconnect through the universe. Even universes, now eleven they're talking about, et cetera. I don't know. I think there's something out there in that test site that's way, way beyond anything we really can grab onto, so I feel that certainly on the surface of it all is the fact that there's these massive dissections of mass destruction. I mean I heard you saying, where were the weapons of mass destruction? Well, I know where they were because when we were at the Nellis prison camp we were [00:10:00] sleeping right in the middle of the weapons storage, and I even saw nuclear trucks go in and out. Frank Strabala who'd been at the test site, run the test site, told me that, I don't know why nobody's ever doing anything about, he either said, one of the largest, or, the largest nuclear weapons storages in the world that are right here at Nellis Air Force Base. And they were right where we had our prison camp. So anything we can do to stop that, it seems to me, is still critically important and may have influence [on] the future of the universe. I don't know.

But anyway, I'm very committed to continuing on in that struggle, and it looks like we're going to be starting up again and they're talking about these low-level weapons. General Lee Butler, he used to be head of the Strategic Air Command, he was head of the Strategic Air

Command in the Clinton administration until in the end he retired in 1996, and he's raised this stronger than almost *anybody*, How can we be doing this?

I know about Butler.

Yes. How can we be doing this? And he said, I was the one who had them designed, ordered them, placed them, and then he was saying at the end he was going to the Pentagon saying, This is nonsense. We've never asked them. We never talked to these people. We don't know that they're out to annihilate us and we're going to annihilate everyone if we continue on this course. So he's very, very opposed. Gorbachev who is very big in it now, he spoke at Berkeley here just recently. There's a peace center there at the Presidio. They know that this is madness, just madness. What's interesting, when I first saw Butler and heard him say *all* the things *we* had been saying *all these years* and everybody was saying, Well, you just don't know. You just don't know. But he knew. He knew. And Frank Strabala was that way. From the beginning he was in it, and he started getting involved with us because of just kind of religious stuff. He knew a Franciscan, Richard Rohr, he liked his preaching and he came because he wanted to hear him when he came here to preach. And then Richard got into it. Frank would come out with us but he never got arrested. And then two bishops got arrested one time, and when he saw the two bishops get arrested he got arrested. And I know later, not long before he died, they had some kind of recognition event where they were calling together all the ones who'd been at that top level at the test site there in Nevada, and I think he just read about it in the paper the day after and what they had said, and he was furious. He said, Those guys *know* they're lying. They *know* they're lying, in what they're talking about. They were the top level people that he had been connected to.

So the struggle goes on, and I think it will. We're trying to gear up, particularly if they start more open testing. They are doing these subcritical tests and I know they're shortening now

the startup time, but already the conversion of some of the weapons, the ground busters and all that, I think they're going to go back till somebody sets one off somewhere. To me it just seems very easy, we could move into that. Just like we went from exposing these people to being naked to having somebody's head cut off to then you start bombing somebody. [When reviewing this transcript, Fr, Vitale later added a note regarding his concerns about "Complex 2030," the *Reliable Replacement Warhead* program and the activities underway at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory on this continuation of the development of nuclear weapons]

Oh, you're talking about the escalation in Iraq and the parallel—

Yes, yes, but I think it'd be a very short step to starting full scale testing again or some major testing anyway, because they're not that sure of the weapons unless they test. [There's even the new program "Complex 2030;" to renew all nuclear weapons by 2030. The first stage has already been awarded to Livermore Lab.]

Right. That's a whole interesting sort of scientific argument too, about the necessity to test.

Yes.

I'm curious, when you describe the really huge struggle of good and evil that you were talking about, personally— when you do what you did at the School of the Americas and then you go to prison or any of these other things, do you feel personally afraid when you're doing these things ever, when you're getting arrested, when you're stepping over these bounds?

Not really.

You don't?

I mean there's a superficial thing. It's a kind of instinctive response if something's unexpected—

Yes. Or unknown.

Unknown, yes, unknown, when you go, what's going to happen? But no, I don't really—now, I'm not walking into combat or something like that. In fact a good friend of mine, Charlie Liteky, was a Catholic chaplain in Vietnam and he received the Congressional Medal of Honor [00:15:00] and then he went down to El Salvador and he saw what was going on—or maybe it was Nicaragua—with our support of the Contras against the Sandinistas. During the Vietnam War he got his award because he had gone right under fire and taken twenty or twenty-three, something like that, soldiers and dragged them on his back and dragged them out of combat. They were wounded. He was there during the time of Iraq, and he said he was *far* more frightened because these were missiles coming off of ships and all of a sudden just blowing up Baghdad. And he said the “shock and awe” thing, he said it was far—now maybe it was because he was older—but he said it was far more frightening than what he had experienced in Vietnam. Now if I was there maybe I would have been scared out of my pants, but no, not getting arrested or anything, no. No, I don't—in fact I've learned to trust—there's kind of like a deep part down in me that says, *This is right*. And I did that at Fort Benning knowing—I was standing there talking to people at the gate, particularly John Dear, he's an activist Jesuit, and he said that he had talked to the prosecuting attorney the day before and that he had said—the U.S. attorney—he said, *They're definitely going to get people six months in prison. They're going to go for that.* And I knew we were rebuilding here at the church and I thought, *Oh, I can't be gone for six months, and it turned out I got three months because I had not been there before. Most of them had been there before and got “ban and bar” letters. So anyway I thought, Oh, how can I do this? But there was just something in me that said, No, you've just got to do this.* When I follow that I always feel good about it, and I've always felt that way at the test site, yes, I'll do more.

So hopefully we'll turn around and get some wisdom, maybe, yes, some kind of wisdom. I'm afraid that it's going to take something terrible like Chernobyl or one of those things that turn people around. And certainly in certain parts of the world—what can happen in nuclear reactors, the same thing as a bomb going off somewhere—but I don't see how that's not going to happen. I got in an argument recently with somebody, I mean somebody tried to convince me, Well, the one thing I think you're wrong on, it's because we have nuclear weapons that there's never been a war. And I said, I don't believe that for a minute. And every president—and there were so many records of where they almost set off the nukes. You know, there's a well-known incident on the East Coast where the radar people saw missiles launched and coming and then as they were just ready to fire, they found out that it was a training film. The report should've gone up the channels and they should've fired; they just didn't. It's too cumbersome to try to get to the president and get the firing signal and all that, get out his little black box. But anyway they would have, could have, and it was by mistake they had put in, instead of a blank film, a training film, tape. So I don't believe it's because we have nuclear weapons. I say it's God. I think that one can also say that I think God builds us into human beings, that there's just something in the human—there's a human wisdom that we draw on sometimes that keeps us from destroying ourselves. We don't have the instincts animals have to protect themselves but at least, yes, there's some level maybe that we do.

Some kind of self-preservation?

Yes. And you see that happen where something seems like there's no way out of this and all of a sudden there's turnaround. Right now, for instance, just a little example—you could say, well, what the reasons are—but there's a little example that the murder rate has gone down in Oakland [not at the moment, it's very high]—and I know that people then got on to that. But I mean there's just some things that happen that all of a sudden things calm down for a while, a

pandemic like AIDS or something, at least AIDS did in this country. Now it's pandemic in Africa and such places, and hopefully there's a universal wisdom that comes. Nobody can exactly go back and trace exactly what it was that turned it around. I don't know. Maybe something like that'll happen.

I don't know. I don't know.

I'm basically an optimistic person and I do have a lot of belief in the human race or human people. I think basically people change. I mean Gorbachev changed, Reagan [00:20:00] changed, de Klerk changed. You know, people do change. I mean Gorbachev and Reagan got together there those years, and Reagan was on his way over and he said, I will not be fooled. This is Darth Vader; he said, I know this is the Evil Empire. And they got together and Gorbachev had not said much to give him any different impression. Then they opened the door and said they had signed on to zero nuclear weapons. Zero. And then all the good boys standing around said, No, you can't do that. You can't do that. We'll be out of work. So who knows?

Well, thank you very much.

OK.

That's really given me a lot of good information. I wanted to ask you just—the lady who gave the homily, Sister Marjorie—

Tuite. T-U-I-T-E, I think.

And your friend Liteky is—?

Charles Liteky. He lives here in San Francisco. His wife's here. I know his wife, how to get a hold of his wife.

That's OK. At this point, just for the transcript that we get it spelled right. That's the main thing.

Oh, OK. Sure. You're right, yes.

You've given me a lot of time, so before I turn the machine off, I don't know if there was anything else that had come into your mind as you were talking that maybe would be useful.

I think I probably did. That's what I was doing towards the end there, things kept coming into my mind. Let me just think for a minute. I guess one of the things that I—this is a little bit afield but I'll just say it anyway. I came out of prison in January [2003], I guess, a year back, just before the big rally started to stop the war here in San Francisco and Washington. [Fr. Vitale later served a six month sentence after being arrested at Fort Benning in 2005]. In fact I was in L.A. and the next day was one of those rallies and I went with Martin Sheen and some others to that, and Dolores Huerta from the farm workers had me get up and tell my story. She got me up and I ended up telling my story briefly but anyway the young people—well, two things. One is that there's so many young people getting involved, a whole new level of young people getting involved, and then the massive numbers of people. See, like we've always said, *well, you're not making any difference, but things are making a difference* and I think it's all these kind of movements that have gone on through the years that are now paying off in that people who didn't *feel* strong enough about it to join in. For example, this flag here that I have that's from Italy, they're all over Italy, they were all over. Thirty million people got out on the streets in Europe and in Italy there, and the *Pace*, peace, is what it says on a rainbow flag, and they were everywhere in Europe. But the person, Wayne [surname unknown]—oh shoot, I can't think of his name. I'll have to call you up and tell you or something.

Yes, when we get to that point, I'll ask you. Don't worry about it.

Anyway, he was the head of the Pacific Stock Market. And I was meeting with most of the young people around the Direct Action to Stop the War, is what they called it, and they were

planning an action after the bombs started. When the bombs start, that next day we will gather and then we'll do something to maybe shut down the financial district or something like that, sit in here and there to just show we can't keep going like this. But he came in and he said that he was a retired colonel in the military and he was the just-recently-ex-president of the Pacific Stock Exchange and he'd never been to any protests in his life. But he and his wife—I think she's English—had gone to the rally the week before, and they'd never done that before, a couple of weeks ago. And then there was a second one and they went to that one, and then they said, well, what do we do next? And so he led us in a protest at the Pacific Stock Exchange. We actually sat down in Montgomery Street, and it was before the bombs even started, because I got a call from somebody like Charlie Liteky with the people in Baghdad and they were saying, well, don't wait till it starts. Try to get it *not* to start, so he led us to do that. People like that that are a new group—we didn't have those people going to the test site. Well, Frank Strabala was in [00:25:00] the end, but anyway, that kind of mobilization that is happening in the millions. I mean there were literally, you know, there were just a couple people down and it really came down to just Bush and Blair. And they're on a little island down there in the Azores and thirty million people out on the streets and all the world leaders at the UN [United Nations] pretty much are against the war—well, I think there's a definite shift away from war. It's like the shift away from poison gas in the First World War and just things like that that are happening. I think there's a shift, *I* think there's a shift away from capital punishment. It's been over two years and we haven't executed anybody in California. There's just not the *will* there. Intellectually people can say it but there's not the real will. But I think there's some kind of a shift going on, and I think the young people have a really different way of approaching things than we had. I don't think they're—like at the School of the Americas there's a challenge

to the older religious establishment crowd from young people who don't start with any givens. They come together, and they have been doing that through the years at our activities, to the Nevada Desert Experience and the other groups where they form what they call affinity groups and then they have a spokes-council. Each would send somebody to it and they come up with different decisions. They don't hold to the same codes that we have. Ken has in his book that nonviolence code which we only thought was for a few actions right now so we can get organized, but it has been going on, other groups adopted it. Maybe it's too strict. But anyway they have different ways of approaching things, and I don't know what form these movements will take, but I know that, gosh, I can't remember this man's name, he was saying the same thing, how impressed he was, you know, if they ran the stock market like this, the way people participate. All of that is very exciting to me, and they're willing to risk all. I think in my era people were so much more concerned with getting their career, getting their degree in school, getting into a good position in business—and probably most of the people in America are that way—but there are many of these very brilliant young people that have dropped out of even high—not even graduated from high school and they're brilliant and they're putting their energies and their brains and their inspiration and their lives on the line to bring about a different kind of society. So I think we're going to see not only changes in technology but changes in social behavior and social protest movements. I think in the religious communities there'll be some of that and I think there'll be more of what Ken Butigan was talking about, more of a serious—there's been a movement in social activism and social movements from just social action. Get out there and stop traffic or get arrested or whatever it is you're going to do, not go to work or whatever. But there's been the combination of the active and the contemplative which he brings out a lot, how people in the desert always had an contemplative experience. That's my

next thing. I might be out of here in another year or so from the parish itself and I want to spend a lot more time in the desert. That's what I was going to do twelve years ago. I was on my way there. I was living there and then that's what I was going to do and somebody asked me if I could take his place for three months because he was having some health problems, and I never came back. I've been here for twelve years. So now I think in another year I might be moving on and go back there and spend a lot more time in the desert and just absorbing the spirit of that, and then how do we reflect that? And that's kind of I think where we are. But we have I think somewhat of a strategic agenda of getting people to voice test ban treaties and things like that, but I think we have another part of us that just says there is a human spirit that unites all of us all around the world. The spirit of nonviolence in the 1980s swept through the world—this mega-transformation in Latin America, in South Africa where Nelson Mandela became president and there was no bloodshed, and in the Philippines Marcos left and there was no bloodshed, and then all over eastern Europe, the Soviet Union. Gorbachev changed, de Klerk changed, Reagan even changed—those are happening throughout the world and I think that all of those connect. I think that the desert—you know, maybe it is the little super strings are connecting but the energy fields are coming together. Joanna Macy, who writes a lot about that kind of energy, she pulls those things together. There's a way [00:30:00] we're interconnected and I think those interconnections are building up. Some of that is even expedited by the Internet, and yet I think it's on another level too, so I don't know where all that comes from but I believe in it. There's something happening that I can't explain, but I can feel it. Exciting times in a lot of ways. Scary, but exciting.

Well, you answered what was going to be my next question, which was when you planned to come back, go back, to Nevada.

Oh, yes. Well, I'll be there in August this year.

For that—?

Yes, for that experience. We're going to have Richard Rohr who's a really great speaker and prophetic guy. He's going to be there, and then next year is 2005, sixtieth anniversary of the bombs, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And Pax Christi, which is a big Catholic peace group, is going to have their annual assembly there, so that'll mean some hundreds of people, and we are encouraging other peace groups to be there and had planned to have—the last pretty big one we had was at the millennium, the new millennium, when we went out at midnight and our acting president, Martin Sheen, led us across. We had Bishop Tom Gumbleton and others, several hundred people. And we crossed right exactly at midnight to say, A millennium without nuclear weapons. I think there'll be—because they're coming down the pike.

Then you personally would like to go back.

I would, yes. We have a person on our Nevada Desert Experience staff, Amy. Amy organized—it's just a small group of people but there's a Catholic paper, the *National Catholic Reporter*, and two or three weeks ago they printed a front page story of that with probably about five pages, just this small group going there and going to the Sedan crater and all that—I don't know if you saw that. Did you see it, that paper?

I didn't see the paper, no.

Oh, but you saw the crater.

I saw the crater. Yes, but I'll look it up now that you told me about it.

Yes, yes. It'd probably be four, five weeks back.

Yes, I'll look that up.

And a very—full-page pictures, and I was really surprised that it would get that much coverage because it was only just a few kids that went. But there's something capturing people's interest in these things that are expressive and strategic at the same time. Contemplative-active. There seems to be a lot of interest in that. Well, there we are.

Great. Thank you very much.

[00:32:46] End Track 2, Disk 2.

[End of interview]