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## The Paris Exile Conference

## A Debacle

Ann joined me back in New York before returning to Cambridge, and we celebrated the arrival of 1973 at what I described in a letter to Tom Michaud as “a posh party” in the same Chelsea apartment where we’d held the funder to benefit the Herndon’s case. On New Year’s Day, a Monday, I was back at the office. As a slow news day, Safe Return had chosen January 1<sup>st</sup> to officially launch FORA, its Families of Resisters for Amnesty support group, hoping to at least get a bump from the tabloids and the wire services.

The “tie-in to the holidays,” we suggested in our press release, was a deliberate appeal to sentiment. With Hanoi having been “bombed back to the negotiating table in Paris” - or so it was presented in the U.S. media - the war might be ending, the prisoners coming home, but for the exiles there would be no homecoming this holiday season. While acknowledging that we had little time just then to devote to FORA’s actual development, we assured our comrades at UP and AMEX that we fully intended to get an organizer on the road soon to advance that campaign. The near term goal was for whatever press attention we attracted to “generate requests for info,” and then slowly pull together a few local branches “in New York, Chicago and on the West Coast.” FORA’s impact would be short lived, if, on occasion, dramatic, a story I take up separately in a later chapter.

Dee Knight’s weekly report dated January 2<sup>nd</sup> starkly noted, almost with alarm, that “there are 50 more days between now and Feb. 19,” the date set for the first session of the exile conference. The sense of urgency was the voice of an editor/ publisher approaching a deadline.

What was now designated AMEX's "Paris Amnesty Conference Preview" issue would be put to bed mid-month, and Knight anxiously awaited copy from the group in Sweden as well as his protégées in Vancouver, all of whom were slow to deliver. Tod was also drafting the strategy piece on FORA for AMEX I have mentioned earlier.

In his report Knight stressed that his second concern was to "assemble a decent Canadian delegation while not alienating everybody else in this country." Suddenly he seemed less confident about being in the vanguard vulnerable to ambush from out of the ideological blue where his enemies - the amnesty rejectionists - were lurking. Knight had hoped Gerry Condon could come to Paris, but, in lacking landed immigrant status, Condon's departure from Canada might put his return there in jeopardy. Given such ambiguous circumstances, Knight speculated that Condon "would probably be just as well off SRing at the [ACLU's] Washington, D.C. conference," which Schwarzschild had again pushed back to early April. Knight closed his letter referring to the "communications problems" between Safe Return and his partner, Jack Colhoun, based on the fact that we could travel and Colhoun couldn't. "Therefore, don't rub it in, but come up more often," Knight decreed.

I am at a loss to deconstruct this comment after so many years. There had been a reference in an earlier letter that perhaps Tod and I weren't taking seriously enough Colhoun's discomfort about his exile dilemma, that we had done nothing to explore the Army's position concerning his particular case. The fact was that there was nothing we could do, and that Colhoun, despite an attitude of entitlement to special treatment that seemed to fuel his perpetual indignation, was as vulnerable, if not more so being an officer, to the whims of military justice as any other deserter. But it is also clear in retrospect that he lacked the constitutional fortitude that prompted more desperate men like Herndon and Michaud to make their cases in the form of a

public challenge, and risking prison, an option Gerry Condon - but not Colhoun - would eventually choose, and not during the ACLU event, but two years later, and without the participation of Safe Return.

The best laid plans... as the poet lamented... It was from this point, “50 days” before the conference that ours began to go awry, the unforeseen opportunities for intrigue and sabotage, having adequate time to ferment, would now uncork from every quarter. The grand scheme to unify the exile community behind a set of amnesty demands had been promoted by Tod and me following the creation of Safe Return. In the abstract, as a political program, the idea was sound. In practice it was doomed to failure primarily because we had lacked the capacity to harness or neutralize the forces that would ultimately conspire to prevent it. I don’t mean “conspire” here in the sense of a conscious conspiracy. It was more a combination of impossibilities rooted in the objective conditions. One could say that a shortage of trust among the principals was a major contributing factor. But even this would be grandiose in its overreaching generalization. Our endeavor was hamstrung in advance by a collective lack of political development, uneven access to media and money - engendering resentments - and - for some - limited mobility. The entire exercise was one of improvisation, which all the players confused with a more solid grounding in reality. Working from hindsight, one can see that the unraveling of our alliance was inevitable; still, as the New Year turned, that plans might go off course was neither anticipated nor discussed.

In New York, we had our own list of priorities and loose ends to attend. Not only was it Safe Return’s responsibility to provide the conference funding, but we were also charged with assembling a sizeable delegation from the U.S., representing a broad swath of Movement organizations, many of which were only beginning to add amnesty to their own established

agendas. Giving away a free trip to Paris was the easy part; navigating each group's political trip wires was another matter entirely. The selection of a delegate from VVAW, now that we understood the impossibility of having Eddie Sowders in that role, would await the outcome of the veterans' national meeting in California during the first week of January. It seems that every tendency on the New Left spectrum of Leninist oriented groups had its master plan to salvage and preserve VVAW for the post-war years. VVAW's main internal currents, ideological preferences notwithstanding, pitted the vet-centric faction, who wished to limit membership to those who'd actually served in, or in the case of the Navy and Air Force, around or over, the actual combat zone, against those seeking to open membership to supporters, women for the most part, and other veterans of the Vietnam era already informally active in the organization or in parallel efforts in the GI resistance. The faction calling for greater inclusion also advocated for a name change, wishing to attach 'Winter Soldier Organization' by hyphen to the VVAW acronym.

The vet-centric forces prevailed, but a sharp decline in overall combat veteran membership - many vets seeing no reason to continue their active affiliation now that the U.S. role in their war was finally ending - coinciding with the strong countervailing disposition in the New Left generally to combat sexism - and to include women with full rights of membership - ensured their victory was only transitional. Given the centrality of this internal organizational debate to VVAW's assembled delegates, there was little time or interest to plot VVAW's orientation toward amnesty. Thus, a West coast-based comrade of Tod's from our CCI days, Sailor John McGarrity, a former Merchant Marine who was also a member of VVAW, got the nod without objection to represent the organization in Paris. Sailor was by no means Tod's proxy, but they tended to similar political views and analyses, and that made him a trusted ally

for Safe Return. Over the years, the collaborators with which Tod and I had the closest and most cooperative relationships were those with whom the conversations was not about seeing the moment differently, but about the tactical means to address it.

That same week we finally composed a note to Fritz Efav in London, the first time we had entered into direct contact with him or his organization. Given our orientation toward deserters, and the reverse snobbishness we at times expressed toward middle class draft resisters, this lack of prior communication, however shortsighted, was perfectly consistent with our class-based emphasis on resistance in the military. After a boiler plated line or two speaking to the “fairly common perspective” we shared with Efav on amnesty, we launched into a cautionary lecture on the need to unify the exile community while explicitly asserting “the question of the real responsibility for the war.” Nixon, we predicted, would manage “to extort a cease fire agreement from the peoples of Indochina,” after which “he will reveal his hand on amnesty... and the sell-out will come swiftly and furiously.” In opposition to this scenario we proposed “that the exiles in England should encourage its members to contact their parents and other family members to participate in the work of FORA.” We urged his feedback - much of which would prove to be unwelcome - before the conference.

Owing to the increasing tempo of our own pre-conference activities, we did not linger on these efforts to convert the London exiles. Some of the dialog among the conveners now turned to the event’s actual agenda. And in the Safe Return report dated January 6<sup>th</sup> we argued that ‘day one’ should be confined strictly to the press conference since the delegates from the U.S., flying through the previous night, would need some recovery time from jet lag. Rhetorically we added, “Is there really sufficient material to fill up a full three days?” Clearly nether Tor nor I thought there was. “All that remains to be done is that exile and U.S. groups put their heads together to

map strategies and commitment for joint work in the U.S.” We didn’t ignore that “the groups invited (VVAW, WILPF, SCEF, CAMP News, ACLU, etc.) have their own agendas, priorities, manner of work and political outlook.” It made no difference to our collective goals that each group would seek to advance the cause in its own way, from “petitioning Congress and the policy makers... to organizing independent movements with a class analysis... [and] through personal acts of resistance, like not paying a phone tax.” What did matter was that the main objective of the conference “will be achieved if it is driven home that resisters, 1) give quite a damn about amnesty, and 2) have a highly evolved position of exactly what a just amnesty should look like!”

We proposed that Dee and George serve the meeting as alternating co-chairs, and that resolutions not be reported out from the workshops, but that “the Conveners Caucus (that’s us) may consider resolutions with absolute right to veto or table.” As for filming, we confirmed that our “close and trusted friend” Pam Booth will assemble a crew, and “any other filmmaker who is similarly willing to submit their work to the Conveners for advice and consent should [also] be allowed to work the conference.” This latter condition was clearly aimed at informing Marvin Bernstein that we would play ball with him only if he respected our input. There’s nothing written that suggests we imagined we could censor what he chose to exhibit, although that was clearly our desire.

We adamantly insisted that UP produce a black deserter - suggesting Herb Washington, who was employed by the Swedish government’s social service program on behalf of the exile community - be included with the delegation from Sweden, and that every effort be made to include GIs stationed in Germany, the springboard for most deserters who chose European options for refuge after leaving their units. Resistance still raged throughout the armed forces,

and we were always keen to publicize that fact. Funding, we reported again, was under control, and we were prepared to “pay for a few cheap hotel rooms,” recommending the Hotel St. Jacques at \$8.50 a night/double, where we had holed up for the Herndon caper.<sup>1</sup> We would delay the official announcement of the conference for another ten days, when “SR will begin working over the national U.S. press... [with] meetings and backgrounders.” However highly we then regarded George Carrano’s abilities, we did not intend to leave critical “last minute arrangements” exclusively in his hands, and made it clear that “Mike will arrive in Paris a few days early.”

Throughout the remaining days of January an exchange of letters crisscrossed the Atlantic that showed trouble brewing from the one corner of the European exile community we least expected, a tiny faction of deserters still resident in France. In revisiting these documents I can see now that Tod and I, distracted by our own involvement with other critical conference details, had depended too much on George Carrano’s interpretation of the entente achieved in these exile circles we had hoped to placate and even coral under our brand for the duration of the conference. Carrano’s reports had firmly asserted that the political apostasies and deviations of those we considered minor players in this undertaking, Efav in England, the filmmaker Bernstein on his safari among the European exiles and GI resisters, Max - that mysterious Bolshevik Svengali of the G.I. resistance in Europe - representing Rita-ACT in Heidelberg , and, not least our sometimes, but ever-ambivalent and unpredictable ally, Joe Heflin, of the Paris Quaker Center, had been calmed, bought off (with inclusion) or otherwise marginalized.

Added to this list of irritants was another late entry, Susan George, of whom we demanded much, but denied any voice in the actual planning. Based in part on Carrano’s dismissive put down a month earlier, Tod and I viewed her as a dilettante and meddler whose only usefulness was, essentially, secretarial; that she would later characterize her role as

“material and facilitating,” is evidence that male activists still had some ground to cover in confronting their sexism.

Thus the two hot-shots in the offices of Safe Return on lower Fifth Avenue in Manhattan couldn't have more clumsily misplayed a potentially valuable resource person, nor more myopically underappreciated her actual contributions, and, more to the point, our dependence on her. Not only was she being asked to provide interpretation services, enlist the participation of Mendes France and her fellow Paris based American expat, the author Mary McCarthy - though we could hardly fault her for failing to deliver either - but she was also to locate and negotiate the use of a meeting hall, contact media, plus organize hospitality, or, failing that, make arrangements in a suitable hotel for all our delegates. We certainly didn't seek her input, which might have been extremely useful, on the contemporary French political climate. Beyond that we acted like we were doing her a favor - and, in fact, such was the cachet of radical shakers and movers at that time when our market share - modest perhaps, but measurable - still lingered in the public eye so that, by simply involving her, we were actually offering the equivalent of a backstage pass. In any case, Ms. George was not shy in voicing her displeasure, and I suppose we found that most irritating of all.

The first sign of trouble was a letter received mid-January from Fritz Efaw, covering all conveners, in which he refers to a twenty minute phone conversation with Marvin Bernstein, who called him from Paris. Bernstein, it appeared, was spreading fears about the French police, “who can be pretty tough bastards,” wrote Efaw in an agitated tone. Bernstein was by now in contact with the few individuals who remained among, or who drifted in and out of, the much diminished deserter community in Paris. Like John Herndon, this was a gypsy lot; they wandered from necessity to survive. In substance they'd become street people, while in form,

each of them would have come to politicize his desertion according to the accepted narratives of the G.I. Movement, so much of which constituted rebellion against military authority, sanctioned by the New Left ethos as a legitimate marker of resistance, and therefore worthy of political support.

Whether or not any of these deserters in question had an interest or talent for a cadre role in the apparatus of the political culture, in the G.I. movement or elsewhere, was another question entirely. They did not number more than three, four at the most, and, as individuals, hadn't shown much prior commitment to work in consort, or to come up with a plan of exile beyond drifting, leaving their fates in the hands of destiny. Nor were they engaged concretely in the amnesty campaign, which was the only space that Tod and I and the others had for dealing with them these days. Their *politics* was immediate and real. They focused primarily on a concern for personal security, and were now being stirred up to think that the conference would bring the police down upon them for public political action in violation of the terms of sanctuary provided by the French government. Certainly they had to watch their step, not be a nuisance or public eyesore. The agenda of the French government was to not rub the nose of the American government too openly in this most delicate fracture in the two country's bilateral relations, and the fact that, with immense popular support, the French followed a sometimes noisy opposing line on the Vietnam War.

The fears among this rump faction of deserters were at least unjustifiably overheated. Still, I suspect that cops like to pick on street people in most cultures. All the more so if you're a foreigner with a tenuous residential status, and possibly unkempt in your personal habits; you don't have to be at a demo with a protest sign in your hands to incur their unwanted attentions. I have myself witnessed such behavior by New York's finest on the streets of Manhattan, the

tormenting of some cornered but harmless lumpen soul, inevitably a black man whose very being seemed to fill the cops with cruel intent and a zeal for the use of disproportionate force.

Moreover the cops, with their smirks and bared teeth, appeared to enjoy causing mental anguish to these abandoned strays, individuals especially vulnerable to what this threat to their freedom, should they be taken, has in store for them. The line in Kris Kristofferson's famous lyric is provocative, but it isn't true. Freedom is considerably more than "just another word for nothing left to lose."

But the New York cops also have a deserved reputation for being much more benign in their contact with the public, even protestors, than their counterparts in other large urban centers of the U.S., notably Chicago and Los Angeles. As for *les flics*, the Paris cops? Yes, one had formed the opinion that there was something ominous about the French Gendarmerie, that they did not take you gentle into the dark regions of correction. Such opinions and comparisons, and to what degree they may or may not have applied to the fears now placed before us, were irrelevant. The fact was that nothing we proposed to do at the conference would compromise, or pose an objective threat to the security of any deserters still resident in France. Clearly Efav had been spooked, and now, with impulsive disregard for arrangements long in place, urged us to move the conference from Paris to Canada, Stockholm or Copenhagen, or, he jested, "how about Canton, Sidney, Bermuda, Havana?" Personally, he preferred Canada, "because I would have friends travel up from Boston to see me."

A day or so after hearing from Efav, we received George Carrano's latest report. He too mentioned having heard from Bernstein that "the deserters in Paris are as untogether as ever, and it appears very unlikely that they can play any constructive role at the conference." It's clear that Carrano does not harbor - or at least express - distrust at this point toward Bernstein, who had

informed him of a meeting that Steve Cobb and Joe Heflin arranged with a couple of the deserters. Heflin was still attempting to create his own entity, the Union of American Exiles in France, “probably supported by Fritz Efaw in England,” Carrano speculated glumly, demonstrating that the Efaw’s pledge to not aid the formation of such a ‘union’ had been diplomatic, but insincere. Bernstein also seemed to be the source for Carrano’s statement that Heflin “keeps talking about how the conference will endanger the security of the exiles in France, and that it is inadvisable given the present political situation there, elections and police crackdowns.”

Dismissing Heflin as an ineffectual wannabe, Carrano adds with a bit of froth that “most of the deserters hate Heflin’s guts.” As for Steve Cobb, “[he] is unable to provide any kind of leadership.” In any case, the meeting “broke up in a fist fight” between Cobb and another man. Where Cobb was concerned, this was a significant variation on the profile we were presented with in the account Carrano had sent of his December visit to Paris, in which he announced that Cobb planned to leave Paris, seek asylum in Stockholm, then return for the conference as a member of the delegation from Sweden. This maneuver was, in part, a recognition articulated by Carrano that any official delegation of France-based deserters at the conference could be problematic. We certainly never suggested they weren’t welcome to attend unofficially. Nor had we really given this possibility much thought, owing to the lack of cohesion among these men, a deficiency Joe Heflin was apparently attempting to remedy at the eleventh hour, and which, perhaps unconsciously, expressed his resentment at not having been more closely consulted around the conference planning.

Next, Carrano wrote directly to Fritz Efaw, confronting and dismissing his concerns. The letter, which he copied to AMEX and SR, is a clever and well constructed blend of prophesy -

false it would turn out - and paternalistic put down, defending Paris as the conference venue, and embracing the Paris deserters politically, while “not gloss[ing] over the contradictions present in that community and allow [ing] ourselves to fall victim to them.” Bernstein meant well, Carrano conceded, but he was emotionally unsettled by “a head on collision with the social reality of the deserters in Paris, something he should have never subjected himself to,” by which Carrano means, I suppose, that Bernstein was not street wise and also out of his political depth. Thus he informs Efav that “we have from the outset considered the deserters in Paris too few in number and too down-trodden by their experiences to make any organized contribution to the conference.” Bernstein was wrong, moreover, that the conference will elicit an unfavorable response from the French government, “to warrant its intervention... or police repression against the war resister community.” Didn’t Efav understand that the French government wouldn’t “respond negatively to a movement which can contribute to removing deserters from their midst.” Efav should resign himself to the fact that the conference will take place in Paris, and that he should stop “throwing darts at the map in search of... [another] venue.”

We were now in the final days of January as Carrano followed up his note to Efav with UP’s detailed weekly report, still assessing the damage from the skirmish on our flanks, so unanticipated, so suddenly exposed. The letter was co-signed by Lew Simon, but it is the voice of George Carrano, rigorous and self-assured, lacquered with a thin veneer of venom, the stern rebuke of a natural commissar chastising the discontented and fearful parties, and dismissing their grievances as signs of personal weakness, if not outright provocation. Carrano had by this time received a ten-page letter from Marvin Bernstein, “an evaluation of the political/social situation in Paris” supposedly circulated to all co-conveners, but which I do not find in the Safe Return collection, and have no recollection of ever having seen. If I had, there is no doubt that

my response would have mirrored what Carrano advised, to “not accept the uncollated data in Marvin’s report... his highly personal exaggerated emotional response... at face value.”

Carrano recognizes that “the situation in Paris is far from good,” and now lays the blame squarely on Bernstein “for allowing the false impression that the deserters in Paris would play a major role (and act as formal hosts) in the conference...” Bernstein, moreover, was “erratic and equivocal” in his statements about Joe Heflin and Susan George, endorsing them one moment, condemning them the next. Nor did Heflin, Carrano’s favorite whipping boy, escape his wrath for continuing to stir up the deserters by advocating the creation of their new exile union. But Heflin was suddenly removed from play by the death of his father. He would return to the States and miss the conference entirely. In his stead, a new deserter, known to Carrano, had risen to assert leadership, and who he describes as “an arrogant counter-culture rock singer” who’d recorded a song called, *Amnesty* that was “very, very bad from every angle.” There is talk in this disaffected circle, says Carrano, citing Bernstein’s letter, of “a press conference denouncing the conference, of plans to plant drugs at the conference hall, etc.” Where this left us, according to Carrano’s analysis, was confronted by two unpleasant, interrelated realities: a potential reaction from the French government in response to “a likely attempt at wreckage [of the conference] coming from the deserters themselves.”

You would think that news of this magnitude had struck a heady chord back in New York, and that we and our allies in Canada might have been slightly unnerved by such menacing and untoward developments. The opposite was true. In Safe Return’s brief report, which went out the day we received the latest news from Carrano, we register no fear of any serious threat to the fruition of our actions as planned. The disruptions in Paris aren’t even taken up until after three chatty paragraphs to update our own news.

What was objectively the biggest news of all, the signing of a cease fire almost a week earlier - and within the last forty eight hours - on January 27, 1973 - the signing of the Paris Peace Accords between Hanoi and Washington, we would only reference obliquely. The U.S. war with Vietnam - condemned and opposed widely at home and across the globe for a decade - was suddenly, or at least officially, over. But that's not the way Tod or I or most antiwar activists would have seen it. Despite Nixon's claim of achieving "peace with honor" by withdrawing U.S. troops and "changing the color of the corpses," the radical Left in all its flavors understood quite well that a proxy war might continue indefinitely between the armed-to-the-teeth American-backed puppet regime in Saigon, and those forces, like the Viet Cong in the South, and the heirs of Ho's policies in Hanoi, who refused to abandon their struggle, however protracted it might prove, to achieve a unified and independent Vietnam. The war was far from over we believed, and the antiwar movement would continue to oppose and organize against whatever form U.S. participation might now assume. Later there would be time to take up the battle for how history would record this war. But not yet. Among committed antiwar activists, the general line was not, let's celebrate a phony resolution to this horrible war that so many of us have already devoted significant chunks of our lives to opposing, but rather, same old, same old: *la lotta continua*.

Tod and I did mention the cease fire in an aside to UP, offering both praise and criticism for their statement to commemorate the occasion, in which, however, they simultaneously expressed pessimism on the odds of achieving the type of amnesty our movement promoted. For this PR gaffe we lightly scolded them. "We must always be confident in the success of our objectives; let's not do Nixon's work for him." Attention for the conference is "gathering steam" from the media, and from within the antiwar movement, we reported. Sid Peck, the leader of one

of the two major antiwar coalitions, Peoples Coalition for Peace and Justice, told us that amnesty was to become a central part of their program. In the later stages of the war, PCPJ, and their ideological rival, the SWP dominated National Peace Action Coalition (NPAC), had been the principal mobilizers of national actions and demonstrations. Peck and his co-thinkers were johnnies-come-lately on the amnesty issue. “Where has he been for the past year and a half,” we grumbled with a mixture of self-congratulation and distrust toward this Movement umbrella group, ranging from the Communist Party to the War Resisters League, toward whose collective orientation on any given action we often expressed some shaded differences, but not to the exclusion of working together where we could, and generally being on friendly terms with any number of individuals in that broad national milieu.

We told our allies that we were finally ready to go public and would announce the conference in New York or Washington “early next week, Feb. 6 or 7.” We invited Dee, who Tod had just seen in Toronto, and we would have a Gold Star mother on hand as well. “If AMEX wants to do a similar thing in Canada (on a different date),” we added, “SR has no objection.” UP had already done so, and reaped a sympathetic article in Sweden’s newspaper of record, *Dagens Nyheter*, thus putting notice of the event in circulation throughout Europe.

Only after dispensing with these housekeeping details did we move on to the heart of the matter. “As far as the Bernstein/Efaw communiqués, we think that George’s letter expresses our point of view very well... we’re not going to have our crucially important political program blunted or cast aside by a tiny (two, three?) band of self-appointed wreckers and splitters... George will have two weeks (and Mike one week) to prepare a means of dealing with any contingencies in Paris.” This vague threat was backed up apparently by “a document that casts

real doubt on the claim to exile leadership” made by Carrano’s rock singer. “Copies will be available if needed in Paris.”

As for the contents of a defamatory document capable of smothering the conflict, I can find no record of it, nor do I recall its existence. Clearly we had recognized the name of the deserter stirring up the trouble, or at least Tod did, since his contact with the Paris resisters had been more extensive than mine. Reading that name today rings no bells for me, so I will not record it here for history, especially since I would never meet the man, and his name never came up again around subsequent events as far as I am aware. We ended our report by conveying to Dee and Jack that we would soon expedite their airline tickets, and also that we would send the plane fare to Gerry Condon, who it seems had decided to risk his status in Canada after all, and attend the conference. We appended an upbeat note about getting a Labor delegate from the United Auto Workers to join us in Paris, and, closing with an uncharacteristic burst of enthusiasm, exclaimed that the “conference is going to be the first step in a burgeoning movement for amnesty. Right on!”

Included with our report was another typed sheet containing a “partial list of participants to Paris Exiles Conference,” here reproduced in full:

Robert Random	Clergy & Laity Concerned, Gold Star Father.
Pat Simon	Gold Star Mother
Pete Kelly	Co-chairman, United National Caucus, United Auto Workers
Bob Musiel	CCCO - National Counseling Organization
Ed Murphy	Executive Board, War Resisters League
John McGarrity	Vietnam Veterans Against the War
Henry Schwarzschild	American Civil Liberties Union

Burt Steck	CAMP News International GI news service
Virginia Collins	Southern Conference Educational Fund
Dwight Large	United Methodists Amnesty Project
Delia Sanchez	Antiwar sister of American POW
Undesignated	Families of Resisters for Amnesty (FORA)
Undesignated	Women Strike for Peace
Conveners:	AMEX - 4 reps
	Up From Exile - 5 reps
	Safe Return - 2 reps
Exile Organizations:	Vancouver American Exiles Union -1 rep
	Union of American Exiles in Britain - 3 reps
	Resistance in the Army (RITA) 2 reps, active duty GIs
	Others: There are numerous resisters who have lived in other

countries, under or above ground and thousands who have lived underground in the U.S. These resisters will also be represented at the Paris Conference.

[To the above, we added the following annotation:]

\*Gold Star Parent - Parent (s) of a son who died in Vietnam

\*Among exiles/resister organizations, representation is divided fairly evenly between draft evaders and deserters.

\*American resisters in Paris will be represented symbolically.

Here were the solid accomplishments of two month's organizing compressed into a single page of names and their affiliates. The final point, the disclaimer concerning the 'symbolic representation' of the Paris deserters,' was something we apparently now felt the need to state

explicitly. At the same time, while I perceive evidence of considerable annoyance in my re-reading of these texts, there is no sign of panic. Nothing to suggest that we did not believe ourselves to be still in full control of the situation with just three weeks to go.

In tune with our advisory to the other conveners, Safe Return did announce the Paris conference, both piecemeal through select contacts at major newspapers, and at a press conference in New York. On Friday 1<sup>st</sup>, a Thursday, we had spoken to a reporter from the Boston Globe. In fact, he probably sought us out to respond to a new round of statements Richard Nixon made that were hostile to resisters and amnesty. Several days earlier the President had reiterated what he'd first stated the previous October that "those who deserted their country in a time of need would pay a price, not a junket in the Peace Corps, but a criminal price..."<sup>2</sup>

In our interview with the Boston Globe, we took the position that Nixon's statement was significant "for what it didn't say," and for implicitly stating in the context of that political moment the terms of the amnesty he would hope to dictate. We enumerated the President's unspoken list of resisters who would be excluded. When Nixon talked about those "deserting" the nation, he meant only the draft evaders, we said, whose actions he took personally as a judgment on his war policies. He was paranoid about opposition, and counted draft resisters among his legions of enemies. He wanted to punish them for political reasons, and to put them on the wrong side of history. To accomplish that, we suggested, the smart move for him would be to get behind the very punitive bill the right wing Senator Taft of Ohio had introduced in the Senate. He could take the initiative; offer the appearance of closure, "Tell the people... 'the war is over... I've given you your amnesty.' He'll come out smelling like a rose," I said a bit too cockily.

Nixon, of course, would not prove as politically astute as we credited him, nor would such a solution have put the issue to rest. Those militant flames would not have been doused so easily. In any case Watergate would prevent Nixon from ever taking any action on amnesty. As for the *Globe* reporter we had provided him, not only with the view he wanted to balance Nixon's position, but an alternative analysis of the issue as well. At some point we must have slipped in the news the reporter then appended in his short final paragraph, that "Safe Return will discuss amnesty with American exiles from Canada and Europe at a Paris conference beginning Feb. 18."<sup>3</sup>

Our official press announcement occurred the following Monday, and generated a story in the *Times* under the byline of George Vescey, "Amnesty Strategy Parley Set for Paris." On the strength of his talent as a writer, Vescey went on to fill the big shoes of the legendary baseball writer, Red Smith, in a long career of his own as one of the *Times*' principal sports columnist. Vescey and I had gone to the same high school in Queens. His younger brother Pete was in my class, but George was several grades above me, and I did not know him there. This was merely a coincidence, and had nothing to do with the fact that George would feature Safe Return in several articles he was to write for the *Times* on amnesty. He liked us, and opposed the war, and he knew how to couch his personal views around selected content without crossing the standards of "objectivity" imposed by his employer. The effect was to make us appear, as we had in the *Globe* article where we were named in the actual headline, as a leading national advocate for amnesty alongside - even slightly to the front of - much more powerful entities like the Council of Churches and the ACLU.

Dee Knight, if he was there, went unquoted. For our Gold Star mother we had invited Louise Ransom, a well-off Westchester matron whose son, Mike, was killed in Vietnam. Louise

was a formidable presence, highly intelligent and well-spoken. She and her husband had been very close to Mike, and there was a correspondence among them, later published, that showed them involved in an informed and troubled family discussion about the war [note TK]. Mike seemed to possess that sense of honor which is found occasionally among the higher orders, and he saw the war as much a matter of his duty and the next man's. Louise, who blamed the government for Mike's death, was outspoken in her support for amnesty, and offered a high minded message of common decency to counter Nixon's bile. Vescey quotes her saying, "I presume to speak for the dead. And I believe that it will dishonor the dead if we discredit these other victims of the Vietnam War." Vescey mentions the Paris conference in the article's lead paragraph, and Tod is quoted extensively about its purpose and he names the cast of participants, sharing credit with AMEX and Up From Exile. <sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, in the months ahead, Louise became outspoken as well in her criticism of Safe Return. She could be very abrasive, and I didn't like her, nor did Tod. Moreover she came to believe that she, under the umbrella of the National Council of Churches, would make a much more effective coordinator of a resister family group. Since we had already conceived of FORA as performing that role, and had taken several steps to give life to that idea, we would summarily dismiss Louise's demand that we step aside. In fact, she would prove little inclined to mingle with the hoi polloi, who were the majority among the resister families. She was more comfortable preaching among her own caste. And there were the obvious political differences as well, in terms of the church and liberal message of reconciliation while ignoring the criminal nature of the war. But this tale must be interrupted, and picked up again farther along.

While the planning for the conference occupied the bulk of Tod's and my office time, as I can see clearly when examining the paper trail, there were always the subplots that played out on parallel or tangential tracks where we tended past and future work related initiatives, and carried on our private lives. For old business, between us and separately, Tod and I corresponded weekly with Tommy Michaud, still in the Navy slammer. The letters reveals our tender feelings for him personally, and our concern for his well-being and future, and, not incidentally, his political education. There was discussion of me making a side trip to Portsmouth while visiting Ann in Cambridge. But the prison didn't permit visits from non-family members. Tod was under no such restriction as Tommy lawyer. He talked about going too, but his schedule was too jammed up then, so that never materialized either. We did make some effort to get Tommy a passport so he could join us in Paris, but this option was mooted by the fact that he was scheduled for release several days after the conference opening.

In a letter dated January 17<sup>th</sup>, addressed 'Dear Brother Tommy,' I mention my plan to arrive in Paris on or around the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, and that I would mostly concern myself while there with the media. In New York, I complained, "everyone has been knocked out by colds," including me "for several weeks." It was the height of winter, cold, damp and dreary, and I was certainly pushing myself, always vulnerable to sinus and respiratory ailments and still on heavy medication for tuberculosis. I mused wistfully that I was longing for spring, and then shifted abruptly back to the political program. I'd enclosed a copy of FORA's inaugural press announcement, urging Tommy to keep organizing around the issue as long as he was in the brig. He should emphasize especially the issue of less-than-honorable discharges, based on the assumption that all his brig mates would eventually receive bad paper on release from confinement.

I reminded him that the resisters needed to contact their family members first, and explain the amnesty program before, as FORA, we would attempt to mobilize them. Tommy's article leading to his public surrender in Miami and subsequent experiences with incarceration, would be out soon in AMEX, and I promised to rush him a copy as soon as we got our hands on one. But the big publishing news was around the Herndon case. Jim Reston's book, I wrote, "is off the presses, and will soon be in the bookshops." For Tommy's political edification, I sent a favorite read of my own, *The Prophet Armed*, the second volume of Isaac Deutscher's biography of Leon Trotsky covering the Red Commissar's role in victory over the Whites during Russia's civil war following the October Revolution; and I suggested that he leave it with the prison library when he got out. In closing, there's a shift in voice from news bearer to mentor:

Take time now to write your final impressions of prison life; anything at all, including your observations of everyday life; conversations with the other inmates, the guards, "professional people," like the MDs, etc.; what it's like looking out the window on a picturesque scene of snow covered birch trees and frozen streams - anything at all. Don't try to make it self-consciously political. Just write.

Advance copies of Jim Reston's book had been distributed for comments by McGraw Hill. One immediate response came via a letter to the book's editor Joyce Johnson from Senator Mike Gravel. Gravel wrote, in part, that he "was pleased to assist in ensuring that John Herndon's case would be kept in the public eye," while praising Reston's "very sensitive study..." In the pre-launch period, the marketing to distributors and retail outlets, and the necessary coordination between production and delivery from the warehouse, we shared in the author's nervous anticipation. Jim was a writer of considerable ambition, searching for a subject

and approval from a reading public. And he remained chagrined about McGraw Hill's skimpy budget for publicity and promotion.

I have never known an author not to bitch about a publisher's insufficient promotion of his or her work, but then I've never traveled in blockbuster circles. McGraw Hill was not thinking 'best seller' here, so the book and media tour would be limited to a few targeted urban markets, and many of the TV and radio interviews, along with a few speaking gigs among the faithful, would be arranged by Safe Return. The notices for *The Amnesty of John David Herndon* wouldn't be in for over a month. Meanwhile, we had negotiated a slower payment schedule with Jim at his request for our share of the advance, and signed an agreement for a percentage of any honoraria he received from future gigs we would book on his behalf. As always, our dealings with Jim were on a cordial and mutually beneficial footing. All our alliances should have run so smoothly.

There's a letter in this late January period that gives a side glance of those days from Tod's vantage point. He is writing to Linda Alband, a Movement activist in San Francisco, close comrade of Sailor John McGarrity, and supporter of Safe Return. Tod is looking ahead to mid-April when he intends to travel on the West Coast. He's asking Linda "to arrange a couple of speaking dates (with fees)," in several cities in California, like LA and in the Bay Area, also Portland, Oregon. Linda attended the recent VVAW national meeting, and Tod comments pessimistically that he doesn't sense "the organization is any closer to solving the difficult questions of political focus and class orientation..." It's certainly true that ideals concerning the 'class struggle' saturated our thinking and rhetoric in this period of heightened revolutionary desire and fantasy, and that we scripted our thoughts from a lexicon of magical incantations from the Marxist canon. But what Tod was referring to here, this explicit criticism of VVAW's lack

of ‘class orientation,’ given the organization’s rapid evolution toward explicit Leninism, is an ellipsis I can no longer unravel.

Tod mentions that the “Herndon book... was already featured in a story in the *New York Post* and carried in the [affiliated] Hall Syndicate, so maybe it will catch on...” I sense our expectations for the book’s success were, at best, guarded. As for the exile conference, Tod passed along details of travel arrangements for Gerry Condon and Sailor John, neither of whom were exemplary correspondents, asking Linda to suggest Sailor fly to Paris with Gerry directly from Vancouver, an economy measure, instead of coming east and joining our flight from New York.

On the last day of January I wrote Tommy Michaud another letter that bordered on the ecstatic. I’d just seen the copy he’d sent of his prison’s ‘newspaper,’ not rediscovered alas, but to which I reacted with passionate indignation in my letter. “God, what a mind fuck. When the master has such total control over every aspect and potential comfort of your life, he can really bend you, cripple you - to do his bidding. He can make some a thoroughly witting tool of their own destruction and oppression. No wonder the image of the boot-licker, lackey, scab, etc. is such an onerous, odious one to most working people. As long as there is struggle, there can be no excuse for cowardly collaboration; as long as we are human we can make no excuse based solely on our apparent impotence. There is so much hidden strength in our numbers, our work and our feelings.” Such was my state of mind as Tod and I tunneled forward into February, and, despite the turbulences of the past few weeks, bore our annoyances with a confidence that would prove vastly unjustified.

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In retracing the record of correspondence through mid-February, the steady pace of something slowly unraveling persists. No single occurrence or provocation can be pointed to as the indispensable cause. News that Mendes France was unavailable, “too sick to attend,” had already been conveyed to us by George Carrano. Now we heard directly from Mary McCarthy who cabled from Paris declining our invitation to address the conference, stating that she was “more at home with the ACLU approach.” McCarthy possessed a Trotskyist-grade venom for the Soviet dominated U.S. Communist Party and its numerous fellow travelers among her peers, and tarred much of the New Left with a similar brush. Despite her intellectual credentials and political pretensions, there was little outside the liberal mainstream about McCarthy’s political views, which were essentially those of a socially elite European Social Democrat. I have formed this opinion of McCarthy, perhaps with indecent abruptness, from being in her company as a house guest in Maine on a number of occasions, as I have mentioned elsewhere, and long after the events being discussed here.

Steve Cobb, the deserter we had been led to believe was under Carrano’s influence, suddenly wrote directly to Tod and I to “state the views of exiles here in France.” The content of his letter was a garbled *mélange* of grievances culminating in a threat that, “if we ruin this conference, then it might teach you to communicate better.” We were to contact him “before the 15<sup>th</sup> [of February], for that’s when we go to town. We have been quiet too long.” What it all boiled down to was that Cobb and one or two other members of the Paris exile community, to include Joe Heflin, hadn’t been given a proper role in the event we were organizing. They reacted like locals anywhere, as if a bunch of outsiders were infringing on their turf. There was also a bizarre accusation that Safe Return had ripped off a thousand dollars earmarked for AMEX.

George Carrano, having received a separate version of Cobb's threatening letter, went into action first, writing to Dee and Jack, asking them to "get a letter off to Cobb, clarifying AMEX's position." What Cobb had conveyed to Safe Return was that the money accusation originated from a co-worker in the circle around AMEX. Carrano, however, believed "that the current attitude of Cobb can be traced directly to Marvin Bernstein whose role is becoming increasingly more irresponsible. Many of the "false charges, i.e. about Safe Return, monies being taken..., Sweden badly split, etc. are provocative fictions disseminated... by Bernstein..." And here we finally learn an interesting fact bearing on Carrano's legal standing when he inserted the remark that, "only Bernstein knew that [my] indictment was overturned." The legal action had apparently been procedural. It was determined that Carrano had been drafted out of line as punishment for his youthful antiwar activities. As a leader of the European resisters, Carrano would naturally have wanted to down play this recent development that meant he was no longer literally an exile, when, of course, that had been his legitimate status for the past five years.

It appears as if neither Tod nor I saw in Carrano's aggressively stated arguments any sign of defensiveness, as opposed to the way a gifted, ambitious politico of the period - which is how we saw ourselves - might have acted under attack by taking the offensive. The tone of Safe Return's reply to Cobb, signed by Tod alone, was more conciliatory. Tod had spent time with Cobb while in Paris the previous October, following the conference in Copenhagen. "I honestly thought," Tod wrote, "that we were taking each other seriously as activists in the struggle for amnesty." Tod is "hurt" by the accusation of being a "rip-off," and refers to his meager Movement salary - now a whopping - \$80 a week, "my sole income," which was roughly equivalent to the \$400 monthly I received from my disability. As for the security of the exiles in

France, “we never intended that any French group be publicly identified with the conference.” To Cobb’s complaint that he and the others were kept in the dark about our plans, Tod refers by date to letters “sent to you and Joe [Heflin]... If Joe didn’t pass these on to you and others... take it up with him.” Choosing to ignore Cobb’s implied threat to disrupt the conference, in his word, “to go to town,” Tod closes with a plea for unity, urging Cobb that we “put any misunderstandings behind us, and put the issue of universal, no-strings amnesty up front where it belongs.”

The “rip-off” reference had been to the rumor that SR had stiffed AMEX out of \$1,000. In fact, we had brokered a grant from Carol Bernstein and Ping Ferry, and passed on two-thirds of the \$3,000 gift to AMEX, part for the magazine and part to cover their travel costs to Paris. It seems that Knight had initially imagined they were getting the entire amount. He then wrote to Ferry directly for clarification, and was told by him in return that the monies were “to be used for expenses of the international discussion.” This apparently did not prevent Knight and company from carping about the split, at least among themselves, leading one of their co-workers to spread the “rip-off” rumor as fact to the exiles in France. No good turn goes unpunished.

In the wake of Cobb’s letter we received the weekly report from UP in which Bernstein and the flap with Cobb go almost ostentatiously unmentioned. The names of the delegation from Sweden, four deserters and two draft resisters, are listed with a commentary on the difficulty in making the travel arrangements to Paris. All the charter flights from Stockholm were already booked owing to the overlap of the conference with “a major Swedish holiday.” The upshot was that travel on a commercial flight - since trains passing through West Germany were out of the question for security reasons - was going to be virtually double what we had budgeted. The rest of the report is devoted to conference logistics, confirming the names and addresses of the two

meeting halls, a hotel for the press conference, another for the event itself. Then UP passes on that “Susan George has suggested that we not have the press conference on the first day... [to] remove the threat from the French government/deserters;” to which Carrano responds, “this is out of the question,” and that he will deal with Susan when he gets to Paris, now delayed until the 12<sup>th</sup>.

It may have been “out of the question” since SR had already published the conference schedule, announcing the press conference for 11 a.m. on February 19<sup>th</sup>. We were still lacking a big name for the kick off, thus confining the occasion to showcase the variety among members of the resister delegations, and listing as “key participants” the gold star mom and the trade unionist. Lew and George suggested we make an eleventh hour attempt to enlist Columbia Law School professor, Telford Taylor, one of the Allied prosecutors during the post-WWII Nuremberg Tribunals who had published a widely acclaimed book judging the conduct of U.S. commanders in Vietnam, like General William Westmoreland, by precedents established at Nuremberg, and at the post-war Tribunals in Tokyo.

Nothing came of that, and we resigned ourselves to not having a fan dancer to bait the media’s appetite. As to hospitality for delegates, Susan George had enlisted the help of several friends, still with little effect. Then a letter arrived from my friend Agnes who, with her partner Bernard, had lent Ann and me their chateau in Brittany, saying that she too had struck out on hospitality requests among her friends. All seemed to have horror stories after hosting American guests who: “*telephont aux USA sans payer la mete; qu’ils volent des objets; qu’ils fument sans faire attention.*”<sup>5</sup> We were left with the “cheap hotel” as our only option.

The press conference stayed in place for the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup>, with the afternoon reserved for informal meetings and interviews. The morning of the opening session, February

20th, was to be reserved for the three co-conveners, with AMEX delivering amnesty's "historical overview," UP addressing the "politics of exile," and Safe Return, "amnesty's prospects in the U.S." Two sets of concurrent workshops would follow after lunch, Strategies and Tactics for Exiles and Undergrounders, and Veteran and Active Duty Organizing for Amnesty, followed by Electoral Strategies, and Approaches to Third World Communities. For the morning of the final day, two more workshops were scheduled, Building FORA, and, The Role of the Antiwar Movement. There would be a closing plenary for the presentation of "exiles' amnesty demands," and an event ending press conference "to present the Conference Manifesto."

Despite the conceptual clarity expressed in the scope of the workshops, what we had envisioned as the content of that "manifesto," is anyone's guess. In fact the whole program was probably sucked out of Tod's and my imaginations the very morning we undertook to commit a schedule to the printed page. Somehow just getting it down on paper made it real, gave us a set of facts to project onto the enterprise without any clear sense of how the forces set in motion, the flesh and blood conferees, would play out, and even potentially undermine or risk the leadership we thought was rightly ours. Maybe we actually believed a spirit of cooperation among the activists would emerge, but I doubt it. We were dancing to our own music.

Tod decided to send a second letter to Steve Cobb. It was a rehash of the points in his earlier note, except the tone of concern about Cobb's threat of disruption was more pressing. "Representatives from every major U.S. organization involved in the question of resistance to the war will be in attendance - along with many exiles... It would be very destructive to have guys in France opposing amnesty at the same time. Please, please carefully consider the damage that could result from you making negative statements."

In SR's last pre-conference weekly report, we issued several warnings to our collaborators. First that PCPJ intended to push the link between amnesty and a call for war crimes trials, which Tod and I vehemently opposed, being of the opinion that the war crimes issue was not politically viable after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. And we urged everyone "to steer clear of the Quaker Center and the French exiles while in Paris." On a more hopeful note, we reported that "JH is in New York, and will try to cool things in Paris," an outcome we apparently believed was still possible.

Tod wrote belatedly to Tommy Michaud, apologizing for being out of touch during a work-consumed couple of weeks, with "the phone ringing off the hook." It was a warm, supportive letter urging Michaud to spend time with us in New York the week after his release, to figure out his next move, working with us or whatever he had in mind. Dan Berrigan had been asking for Tommy, and Tod suggested that maybe he might join up with Dan who was starting a new project focused on prisoners. Regarding the conference, Tod's reference is askance, mentioning only that "Mike has already left for Paris via Boston (visit with Ann)." Tod's letter is dated Friday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, and I had probably departed New York that same morning.

The weekend itself is a blank but for one enshrined recollection. I remember a wet, dark night, and the carnie-facade of the art movie house in Cambridge, and how the music in "The Harder They Fall," a Caribbean reggae gangsta flick, was a drug-like mood elevator. My plane left on Sunday night, getting me to France by the 12<sup>th</sup>, within the time frame I had long intended. The only thing I remember next is being in Paris with George Carrano.

Most of what occurred during those ten days I remained in Paris is lost to me. My memory's eye visualizes a dominant tableau, like a scene frozen in a postcard, the setting around

the hotel in the 13<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement, near the Place d'Italie, where George had gotten us a room. It was a workers' hotel with just a patina of comforts and the utilitarian, unadorned atmosphere of a sailor's home or one of the better rooms at a YMCA. None of my earlier stays in Paris had ever brought me to this neighborhood, an oversight I immediately resolved to remedy for future visits. It was tidy, quiet, inexpensive and anonymous, far from the epicenters of Right Bank glitter and the Left Bank tourist hubbub, but easily accessible to both. I do recall it was near the Pere Lachaise cemetery, and of my going there in an off moment, viewing, perhaps, the markers of Wilde, Chopin, Piaf and Gertrude Stein. If Mama Cass or Janice Joplin had been there, instead of Jim Morrison, I'd have visited their graves as well. In the morning, at the local coffee bar near the entrance to our hotel, several burly chaps in the long blue aprons of their trade would stand quaffing strong shots of espresso, bantering in good humor with the barista with voluble demands for the ritual *petit cognac* to kick start their day.

Beyond that, what occurred on Saturday of February 17<sup>th</sup> was so unnerving as to have erased virtually all memory of how I spent my time, both during the five days prior to this moment, and for several days thereafter. It was in the early evening, when Carrano and I were just about to leave our room for a meeting or a meal. Suddenly an explosion of violent knocking practically brought down the door, and as one of us rushed to pull it open, two very fearsome looking young men barged through the threshold flashing a piece of paper, shouting something in French about, "*interdite, interdite.*" Maybe it was because I was so completely and uncharacteristically caught off guard that the weight of the emotion I felt that moment, one of abject subjugation, remains so readily recoverable. Neither man was large, both barely average in height, but an aura of menace radiated from their taut, athletic bodies that was unforgiving and

almost predatory, the modern Knights of French Security sent out to chastise the trouble makers. It was *heavy*, as we used to say.

I glanced over the one page document they handed me. It looked official, composed in choppy, bureaucratic phrasing and legalese. The awful message it communicated was that the Paris Exile Conference we had been so arduously building toward for the past three months was precipitously, and without warning, banned that morning by the French Ministry of the Interior. As to the parties banned, the document names, first, Safe Return, followed by the Union of American Exiles - Joe Heflin's new entity, Rita-ACT - Max Watt's project based in Heidelberg, VVAW and - for the fifth name, quite arbitrarily, the Southern Conference Education [sic] Fund. It was stamped by the office of the *Prefecture de Police* with the typed-in name of the current *Prefet*, one Jacques Lenoir - Dark Jack - which was, one hopes, too corny and obviously ironic not to have been a *nomme de guerre*. There is, after all, a certain flair for melodrama in the Gallic temperament. Another name, signed illegibly, that of the deputy chief of staff to the *Ministre de l'Interieur*, is scrawled across the left bottom margin of the sheet.

The reason for this fateful decision was only vaguely explained: "*Considerant que la tenue a Paris d'une reunion consacree au probleme de l'amnistie des deserteurs et insoumis d'un pays invitant a la conference de la paix au Vietnam serait de nature a troubler la bonne atmosphere que le pays hote doit maintenir autour de cette conference et partant l'ordre pubic. Les reunions organisee du 19-21 fevrier 1973 a Paris par les groupements susvisee sont et demeurent interdites,*" This translates more or less as: Since a meeting concerned with amnesty for deserters and draft objectors of a country [i.e. the United States] invited to the [twelve country] peace conference on Vietnam [scheduled in Paris for later that same week] might disturb the good atmosphere the host country ought to maintain for said conference and

consequently the public order, the meetings organized for February 19-21 in Paris by the groups here listed are and remain banned.

I feigned not to understand what I was being told, nor what I had been reading, and somehow communicated that I wanted to make a phone call for the purposes of translation. Instinctively I sought to play for time, slow down the process to find some cover from these two threatening barracudas. I immediately dialed Maria Jolas, and passed the receiver to one of the agents who provided her the same explanation. Jolas then told me that there was no recourse, and that the man had informed her that, should we attempt to defy the order, we would be summarily dumped across the border into Germany.

This particular threat played heavily on my imagination. Two and a half years earlier I had been deported from Canada, en route to Moscow, and then Stockholm to testify at the Soviet dominated International Enquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam. Because I was to meet with local Communists during the brief layover in Montreal while awaiting the Aeroflot flight, and the fact that the legendary Quebec Uprising of 1970 then imperiling Canadian national unity was that very moment at its height, another Vietnam veteran witness and I were simply packed on a return flight under deportation orders, and sent back to the U.S. We eventually made it to Stockholm, but, at this moment, in Paris, given my state of confusion and shock, I remember very strongly wanting to avoid deportation from France, a country I was much more interested in revisiting than Canada.<sup>6</sup>

George and I must have gamed this development from several angles, and I recall no hint of disagreement, because Carrano readily agreed that we had no choice but to accept the order and cancel the conference. I'm certain he was as shaken as I was. Given that the Paris time zone was five hours later than New York, it would have been sometime after noon when I tried to

telephone Tod Ensign. This was the very day the large U.S. delegation was due to depart from JFK, and there was no guarantee I'd be able to reach him, not knowing with which of his women friends he'd spent the previous night.

It was at just the last minute Tod later told me that he decided to go by the office for some forgotten papers or materials, and I caught him there only by chance. Twenty minutes later, he has told me, and he would have already left for the airport. Tod was enormously disappointed; all that emotional build up, time and expense. It was a cruel blow, moreover he certainly adored being in Paris, perhaps even more than me. But, it was a measure of the unity of purpose and political outlook we shared that he immediately accepted my judgment. It fell to Tod then to inform the dozen or so other delegates who had already assembled in New York, and who, understandably would be almost as deflated as he was when they heard their prized junket to Paris was now to be denied them.

Memory failing me in all but one or two particulars, what happened next can only be reconstructed from a mere handful of letters and a single article, all, nonetheless, rich in detail and in their varied points of observation and opinion. Everywhere I went in the city over the next several days I was openly tailed by the French gendarmes on foot, or from a small fleet of clearly marked black Citroen police cruisers. Those Citroens crawled behind me as I walked the streets, and awaited me when I emerged from whatever building I'd had cause to enter momentarily. The atmosphere of menace was palpable and deliberate. Yet not a single policeman interfered in any way with my movements, nor did I make any attempt to elude them. I understood quite well the consequences of any gesture in defiance of the ban.

Where was George Carrano in all this? The other delegates from Sweden or Canada? The Paris exiles? I don't recall from memory. Did I make contact with Maria Jolas again? With

Agnes and Bernard? It's seems logical, but I have no recollection of having done so. Apparently I did not contact Susan George, or so she reports in a letter sent to all three conference co-conveners a week after the banning. Oddly, in evidence of some weird capacity for monumental compartmentalization, I did manage to get off an attractive postcard, dated February 20th, of Delacroix's *Carnets du Maroc*, to my parents and kid sister, Maggi, back in Babylon, L.I., scribbling with polemical indignation that, "We seem to be able to reconcile with Hanoi, but not with our own sons." And there is one other action I'm certain of having taken in that five day memory void before flying home, and only because of the news clippings before me as I write. Those 'ins and outs' in various buildings were to contact all locally based American journalists.

The headline for an article appearing in the *Chicago Daily News* by Paris correspondent, Milt Freudenheim, was "**France yields to U.S., bars amnesty parley**," an explicit corroboration of what I was by now claiming to all and sundry through the media as the true cause behind the conference prohibition. Freudenheim reported that, "U.S. Embassy sources confirmed Monday [February 19<sup>th</sup>] that the French government had been advised to bar an international conference seeking amnesty for Vietnam War exiles." To have allowed the conference, the embassy told Freudenheim, would be a violation of France's "policy of neutrality," the very policy that had provided asylum for the deserters, and allowed the Vietnamese liberation forces - the so-called Viet Cong - to maintain a bureau in Paris for their Provisional Revolutionary Government, alongside the Americans, as well as the governments of both North and South Vietnam.

It was a specious argument, but the French could play that policy's lay however they chose. And they chose to protect the dignity of the upcoming twelve nation conference, because it was tasked to maintain the cease fire between the major combatants in the war. Thus their

acceding to American “advice” was a no-brainer. Despite the possibility that the move might be unpopular among the *gauchistes* domestically, giving short shrift to the exiles was hardly going to topple the government. News of the ban also went out worldwide over the UPI wire. The short UPI article quoted my allegation but without confirming it, which gave Milt Freudenheim’s reporting the halo of a scoop.

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From this point forward the movements among the major conference coordinators became fragmented. Tod held a successful press conference in New York, featuring former U.S. Representative, Allard Lowenstein, a well known civil libertarian. In Paris Dee Knight and Jack Calhoun met privately with those delegates from England and Sweden who managed to get there, and then went on to Rome for an international antiwar conference. Elements of the French Left were outraged by the banning, and they immediately mobilized a public protest, which the police attempted to repress, but – unexpectedly - proved to be of considerable interest to French and European news media. I avoided getting arrested for several days, and left Paris for home via Boston, the way I had come. Thanks to several sources: “Down But Not Out in Paris” a wrap-up that Dee Knight placed in the next issue of AMEX magazine; Susan George’s three page critique of our organizing deficiencies addressed to the conference conveners; and several letters Tod dispatched from the Safe Return office to various interested parties, I can more or less reconstruct what happened among the others in my absence.

Nearly four decades after the banning, I asked Tod Ensign to help me fill in some of the details I’d forgotten in the wake of that disturbing event. His memory, like mine, was cloudy and often proved inaccurate against the accounts given in the documented record. As for the press conference he called for Monday, two days after he’d taken my call, he said, “What else

was I going to do with all those people we had invited to the conference?” Most were willing to stick around for a chance to publicly condemn the intransigence of the Nixon administration and the opportunism of the French. The New York press turned out, Tod recalled, but I have only seen one article, a long piece in the *New York Post*. It refers to Safe Return and VVAW joining “11 other groups in denouncing the French government,” but otherwise is drawn almost entirely from an interview with our Gold Star mom delegate, Patricia Simon, a school teacher from Newton Center, Massachusetts. She talked about the combat death of her son Davey with some bitterness, yet was uncompromising in her support of amnesty. Mrs. Simon observed that:

“Nixon says it makes a mockery of our sons - those are his words - makes a mockery of our sons if there’s not some price exacted from those who did not serve. “But I don’t demand a price, because the exiles did the right and moral thing... There is nothing to forgive.”<sup>7</sup>

The very day Tod was staging his press conference in New York, Dee Knight rallied most of the arriving exile delegates to a hall in Montmartre that Susan George had procured, both for their meetings, as well as to house them. In his “Down but Not Out in Paris,” Knight infers that he and I had spoken at some point following the action taken by the French. But at the actual moment when we were told the conference was being banned, “the delegation from Canada was stuck in another part of Paris, dependent on that city’s notoriously bad telephones for contact with Mike and George. By the time we were able to talk with them, Tod Ensign... had informed the U.S. delegation of the situation... and the flight was cancelled.” Joining Knight were four other delegates from Canada, including Jack Calhoun, four exiles from England, to include Fritz Efaw, and three from Sweden, including George Carrano and Lew Simon.

Since, as Knight's article reminded me, I had been required to sign a document from the police agents to certify that I had read and understood the order from the Interior Ministry, I suspect that, having made contact with Knight, I then urged Carrano to find and convince him and the others not to hold a formal gathering. I probably declined to meet with them because the cops were all over me. And, as I have confessed, avoiding deportation was now my major priority. I went to ground somewhere, possibly a cheap hotel on the Left Bank, maybe the one Tod and I had recommended for housing the U.S. delegation where I'd been with him and Reston the year before. Or maybe I crashed with Agnes and Bernard, who would have been outraged about the banning, and a source of sympathy and shelter for me. This latter scenario strikes me as most plausible, since I'm sure I wouldn't have just kept to my own company for four or five days until my flight home.

Knight's account also makes it quite clear that I wasn't alone in choosing compliance with the French order for ends of self-protection. When elements of the French Left called for a press conference to protest the government decision in the very hotel we had booked for our own opening session, "none of the exiles meeting in Montmartre were present." According to Knight, "we had decided collectively that this might be considered a violation of the ban..." If not as unnerved by contact with the fanged menace of l'etat, as were Carrano and I, the others were certainly as cautious. Even this initial response by French supporters at the Hotel Maurice was immediately suppressed by the police. These comrades, however, being intimate with the sacred and inviolable symbols of the French Revolution, and how they function in the protocols of the country's domestic politics, reconvened a half hour later at the Center of the League for the Rights of Man, where they were not interfered with. Susan George would later write that the French leftists "issued a statement in the presence of all three U.S. TV networks."<sup>8</sup>

Dee Knight now turned the inauspicious banning to some advantage. Having assembled what was in fact the core of the exiled war resister leadership in Montmartre on Safe Return's nickel, he records that "we settled in and started to get acquainted, and spent most of Sunday night [February 18<sup>th</sup>] trying to figure out what had happened and how we could pick up the pieces in the next few days.... We went ahead... to share experiences with each other about exile life in France, England, Sweden and Canada, and to put together a unity position on universal and unconditional amnesty."

I don't recall that either Tod or I felt threatened when Knight, from necessity, transformed what Safe Return had always envisioned as a scripted media event on amnesty for U.S. public consumption, into a private caucus for resisters to swap tales about life in exile. While we recognized such an exercise as valid and reasonable for members of the exile community, it was outside the scope of what motivated Safe Return. Knight's political posturing about achieving a unified stance on amnesty was disingenuous. As Knight himself reports, our purpose in Paris "was to plan how we would make our resistance understood and accepted by a majority of American people." Unity within these resister circles on the definition of amnesty had already been reached in the months of planning prior to the date set for the conference. Moreover, given our close alliance with George Carrano, I felt that his presence at these discussions would help keep Knight's rising animus toward Safe Return in check, if, in our absence, we became the target of unfair criticism.

Knight does engage in criticism in his analysis for AMEX, but the focus is collective; he does not yet point fingers for public consumption. Of his two main conclusions, I find myself in general agreement with one of them, that we were woefully unprepared for contingencies even though we had adequate notice of trouble's potential, and not just of the variety Tod and I had

anticipated for chilling out the Paris deserters, but for rebounding to a plan-B should the true threat we had never taken seriously materialize. Although here Knight offers the strange assertion that the banning might have been avoided had the Paris-based resisters constituted a local host committee, even as he acknowledges in his next breath that our motivation for not doing so was that overt political activity was forbidden them under pain of expulsion. While Knight certainly understood by the time he composed this account that the banning was probably unavoidable, stemming as it did from direct pressures by the Nixon White House on the French, he may have continued to suspect, and couldn't resist expressing through innuendo, that Cobb and his crew did rat us out to the French, or even the Embassy, and thereby played a role in the banning.

Not only had we failed to plan for what befell us in Paris, Knight argued, but we had been lax in "our security precautions." On this point I dissent. When Knight and Colhoun had wanted to announce the conference at Christmas, Tod and I had repeatedly cautioned that the timing was premature, and that too much lead time might indeed create a potential security problem. Although, what we characterized as security concerns probably had more to do with not playing our hand too soon in order to retain control over the planning and media relations, not the kind of security issue we were eventually faced with. In fact, the American Embassy appeared to have waited till the last moment to get on the case of the French government about the conference; whether they had learned about it one day before or one month before had no bearing on the intervention. It wasn't premature notice of our intentions that sank us, but some combination of over-confidence and distraction which led us to close our eyes to the dangers that had been right in front of our faces for many weeks.

A day after their “unity” meeting Knight reports that he and one of his AMEX colleagues split off from the Montmartre group, and departed for Rome to join other American activists, Sid Peck and other members of PCPJ, who had first stopped off in Paris to attend our conference. Ironically, these activists, along with several leaders of the G.I. resistance in Germany, to include a courageous active duty Air Force Captain who appeared in uniform, had participated in the solidarity event organized by the French Left to protest the banning. As for his own early departure from Paris, Knight acknowledges, quite reasonably, that he wasn’t going to let the failure of the conference interfere with his first opportunity to visit Europe. He describes leaving for Rome, waxing ecstatic about his “all night train ride over the Alps, and down the Italian coast to the glorious fallen mother city of Western civilization.”

Meanwhile, Tod had written to Burt Steck in Chicago, the erstwhile CAMP News delegate, that I had returned to the U.S. on Thursday, February 22<sup>nd</sup> by way of Boston, having stuck to my original flight schedule. Several weeks later, Ann would show me a letter stamped, *retour a l’envoyeur*, that she had mailed after hearing news of the banning, even though, as she herself had written, there was little chance I would be in Paris to receive it. Apparently Pam Booth had put in her ear that I might be going on to Copenhagen, and not returning till the 26<sup>th</sup>, which brought forth the tender reproof: “I hope not. Two weeks is too long as it is.” Moreover, she added, “it sounds like you’re very sick.” If that had been the case, you’d think I’d remember it. But I don’t. Maybe I was not only bummed out, but under the weather. If so, that adds a shade of added justification to my mysterious disappearance.

By the time I made it back to New York, very likely extending my need for further decompression by spending the weekend with Ann, I found awaiting me a copy of the detailed critique Susan George had distributed to Safe Return, AMEX, Up From Exile, and to Fritz

Efaw's group in London. It's an instructive document, and I have no doubt that I was upset at the time by its contents. Unlike Knight's account, written weeks after the events recorded, Susan George composed her version of events within days of our collective misfortune. Ms. George begins what she calls her "post mortem" on a note that is both self-critical and conciliatory. "I did not sufficiently recognize the danger of the conference being forbidden," she laments, "although I made a few mild noises." Indeed she had, and Tod and I had mistakenly chosen to accept George Carrano's judgment on this matter over hers.

Ms. George goes on to say that she "did not consider [her] role in the thing political," but now that "[t]here are differences that need ironing out," she wanted "to contribute to maintaining the unity of the amnesty movement." The "differences" she refers to, as we would learn from some, like Sailor John, who had also made it to Paris, were aired primarily by Knight and Calhoun. By the time I arrived home, moreover, Tod had already expressed in a letter to Sandy Rutherford in Vancouver his anger over "some very strong personal allegations directed at both Michael and myself... [by] Dee and Jack." Susan George refers only vaguely to the "remarks [of] various people.... that Safe Return had only wanted to get themselves a good press book... and that the fact that the conference did not take place did not really affect them." Though she judged "this reasoning... not accurate," it has led, she cautioned, to talk about "break-offs," again presumably voiced by Knight and his AMEX cohorts, thus openly venting a position they had likely formulated by early February. This I now deduce in retrospect from the absence in the record of a regular weekly report from Toronto during this critical period in the last two weeks before the date set for the conference. It was during this same period that Knight had been in New York consulting closely with PCPJ, toward whose ideological banner he would now shift AMEX's allegiance.

Leaving aside the subject of “break offs,” Susan George next devotes a full page criticizing my actions, most pointedly: “Michael’s decision to ring New York as soon as he heard of the ban and tell the delegates not to come was precipitous.” In this, she stressed, Safe Return had taken “a very individualist position...” She then makes the rather laughable argument that the conference could have been saved in a “secret place... and the press informed in some cat and mouse way.” But, with that option foreclosed,

“Michael’s decision left us with... a single alternative: to have French people take over the problem and give the press conference, and it was at this point that I was obliged to take the political ball and run with it. Although the press conference could be considered successful, there was not even a statement from the deserters and resisters, apparently in keeping with an agreement made among themselves... This attitude, surely, was timorous in the extreme.”

What had seemed to frustrate Susan George even more than the “timorous” resisters, and Safe Return’s “elitist attitude,” was that “Michael, after having been followed by police for a day and a half, suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth... I find his attitude incomprehensible, and I think he should know it.” Unable to trace my whereabouts, she “finally sent a telegram to Ensign [but]... it did not arrive... because the cable address doesn’t exit...” This was true, and rather comical actually. When we had our Safe Return letterhead made up we included the line Cable: Home Free. This was Tod’s and my idea of a lark, co-opting certain forms for appearances, even - or perhaps especially - if they were devoid of content. We certainly never anticipated anyone would actually try to reach us this way.

About my disappearance I have already commented, however inadequately. As for the decision to accept the ban, what Susan George did not know then, was that it was hardly mine alone. Both Carrano and Tod supported the decision, which was immediately endorsed - however regrettable she may have found that - by the rest of the resister delegation already in Paris. And the reason, I suppose, that acquiescence was so inclusive was that none of us - including Susan George - could realistically provide a timely solution on how to avoid it, given the split second decision required to either dispatch or ground the U.S. delegation.

As I say, I am in total agreement with Susan George and Dee Knight is that “we should have made contingency plans.” But there was one random occurrence which Ms. George styles with exaggerated drama as her “fatal mistake,” and from which no contingency would have shielded us if one concludes that her point has merit. She faults herself for “being incommunicado for several hours when the conference was banned. Everyone likes to go to a movie now and then!” It does not ring true to me, however, that, had she been near the phone that evening and I had chosen to call her instead of Maria Jolas, the outcome would altered fundamentally, given that her opinions had been undervalued all along. So this ‘for want of a nail’ argument’ on her part was essentially trivial.

I can’t speak for Tod, but were I able to change one thing related to these occurrences, I would have made Susan George honorary co-chair of the conference, and had her deeply involved in the planning circle. Unfortunately, that scenario is a fantasy that cannot be retrofitted to the past. After the banning, Susan George was seeming committee a fantasy of her own, not least in imagining a capacity to mend our forces’ fractured unity. Whatever political ball she saw herself carrying was on a field of her own imagination. Susan George had none of the background or degree of involvement necessary to fully understand the internal dynamics

among the principal players of this undertaking, nor of the contexts within contemporary American radical political culture in which they were unfolding. Her own views on amnesty and the resister experience were parochial, defined by years of frustrating, essentially custodial dealings with Joe Heflin and the local exiles who had repeatedly turned to her and other members of an American expat antiwar grouping in Paris for political support and handouts.

By her own admission, Susan George had “misjudged the level of interest on the part of the press,” while still maintaining the contradictory view that excessive pre-conference publicity was somehow related to the banning. The fact that Safe Return’s programmatic orientation depended on generating press clippings actually lent some credence to the criticism that, if not indifferent to the banning as was alleged, Safe Return’s future prospects were least affected by that outcome. The skills for attracting high profile publicity flowed precisely from political and cultural instincts Tod and I possessed, and which our collaborators virtually across the board were lacking. In any case, as I have argued, it was demonstrably not the prior publicity that hurt us, but the degree of discomfort our inroads on amnesty had created within the Nixon White House. Clearly the American Embassy was not acting on its own initiative, and not at the behest, even with ample reason to suspect this, of an aggrieved deserter or two bent on disruption through provocation.

It is my view that our neglect to include contingencies in our planning was consistent with the scope of Safe Return’s ambition - and by extension those of our collaborators - to organize and lead a movement of exiles when measured against our limited resources, human and fiscal, to realize such a vision. Our ideas were bold and our intentions were honorable, but Tod’s and my style *de jour* choice - and we certainly drove the failed collective effort around the conference - was ‘fast and loose,’ always looking for the vulnerable spot in the Establishment

armor, and the quick score in the media. As I have emphasized more than once, we were very skilled in packaging our controversial politics for the space that the mainstream media allowed in those days for airing a radical social and economic critique, a space which had been pried open by the massive public and activist opposition to the Vietnam War.

We wanted, above all else, to have that space transcend the resolution of the war, and continue indefinitely into the future toward the achievement of what radicals envisioned, however vaguely, as “real change.” Entering the post-war period, amnesty was the vehicle Tod and I had chosen to extend our activist commitments. While we were, and would remain for many years, an essentially two-man operation, we understood ourselves to be operating within a Movement in which thousands of other activists shared our radical ideals. But patience in dealing with others was never our strong suit, and the impact of whatever projects we undertook rose according to our strengths, and fell by virtue of our limitations. Thus, the activities which preoccupied Safe Return in the late months of 1972 and into 1973 would constitute a watershed for Tod’s and my appetite for working in broad alliances with others New Left activists.

After the setback in Paris, however, Tod and I barely paused. We moved forward immediately with our efforts to build FORA as the best means to communicate the amnesty cause to middle-America through the newspapers they read and the news shows they watched on TV. In fact, far from being bowed, we intensified our efforts. 1973 would be a year of prodigious and impressive output for Safe Return.

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2. "Issue of Amnesty," by Anthony Ripley. *The New York Times*, February 4, 1973.
  3. "Nixon softening on amnesty forecast by spokesman for Safe Return Committee," by Ken O. Botwright. *The Boston Globe*, February 2, 1973.
  4. "Amnesty Strategy Parley Set for Paris," by George Vescey. *The New York Times*, February 6, 1973.
  5. "They telephone the U.S. without paying the bill; rip off household items, and don't pay attention when smoking."
  6. This incident is covered more completely in my *Vietnam Awakening*.
  7. "Grieving Mom Backs Amnesty," by Joe Nicholson, Jr. *New York Post*, Tuesday, February 20, 1973.
  8. In the pre-cable era, for national news, viewers could chose among the three major networks, CBS, NBC and ABC, and the Nightly News on Public Television.