

Looking Over the Wall to See What a Stranger is Up To

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These days, very near the end, images from long ago pop into my head, seemingly on their own; I don't know what prompts them, and I let them take me where they will. A couple of days ago, it was of a moment from the mid- to late-1980s in Burlington Vermont.

In another life, I did a lot of theater as a director and actor. At the end of a play, you've seen it, the actors come down stage (near the audience) and form a line and take bows for thirty seconds or so. During curtain calls, as they are called, I would scan the audience, quickly moving from one face to the next.

It was a final-bows moment that came to mind a couple days ago—I don't remember the name of the play. There was an elderly, balding man in the middle of the house (audience) of around one hundred people looking straight at me and smiling and applauding. He radiated gentility and peacefulness, and kindness and respect and affirmation directed at me or so it seemed. I stopped scanning. For me, it became just the two of us; he was in focus and everything else out of focus. I nodded to him, though he didn't nod back, or I didn't pick it up.

Those few seconds at the end of the play, that special human connection, stayed with me and later that same night it hit me, "Oh, I know who that man in the audience was. He's aged, but that was David Dellinger!"

I don't know if David Dellinger's name means anything to you, but for a time back in the late 1960s, he was very prominent in the national news as one of the Chicago Seven, as they were called. The Chicago Seven were anti-Vietnam war protestors put on trial for conspiring to incite a riot and crossing state lines to incite one at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago that nominated Hubert Humphrey as its presidential candidate.

(President Lyndon Johnson had declined to run for a second full term amid the national upheaval over the legitimacy of the war.) The riot, to call it that—the term may not fit—was marked by live television coverage of Chicago police ferociously clubbing demonstrators or rioters, whatever the best term for them. I watched it on television in Minneapolis horrified.

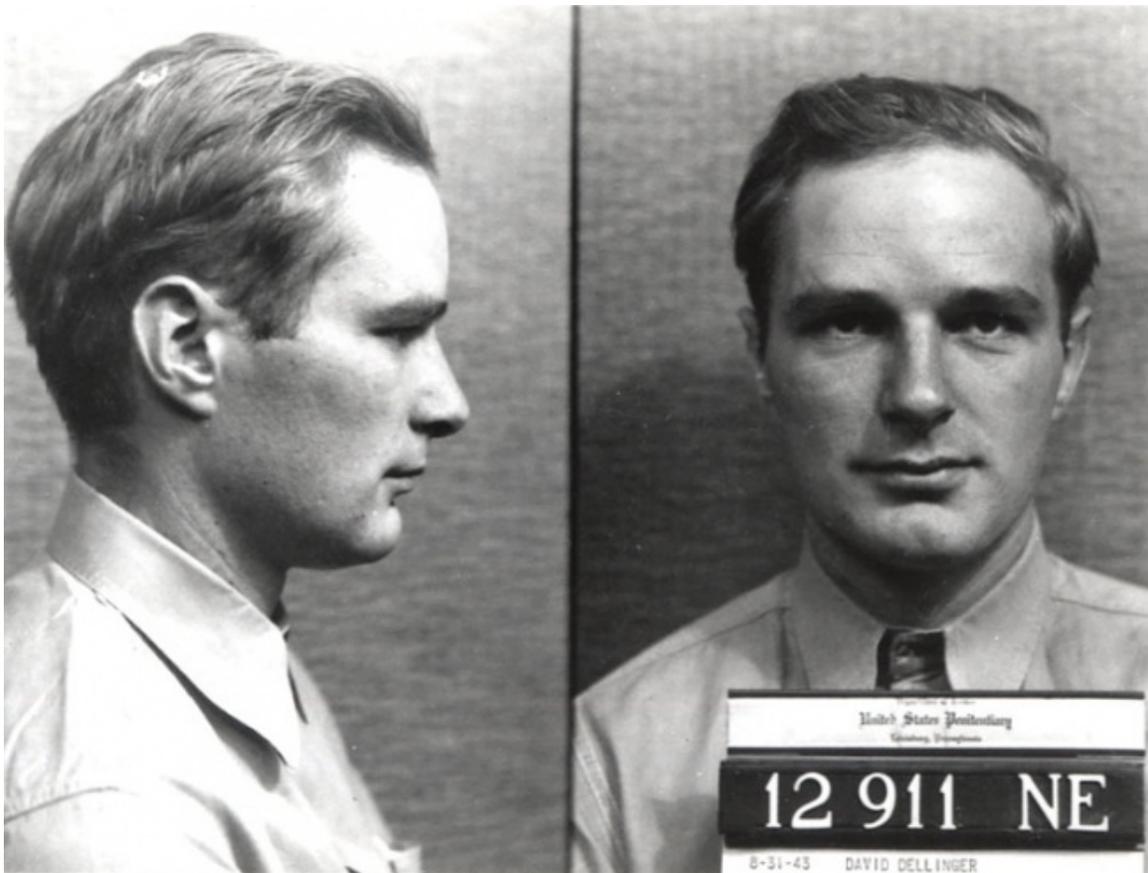
The trial became a highly publicized platform in which the seven defendants managed to put the war itself on trial. The proceedings were tumultuous, with one of the defendants, Bobby Seale, a Black Panther Party leader, put in shackles by the judge, Julius Hoffman, for being disruptive. (Seale's case was eventually separated from the others and the Chicago Eight became the Chicago Seven.) There was intense and personal sparring between the defendants and Judge Hoffman, with Dellinger prominent in that. All seven were acquitted of the conspiracy charge; five, including Dellinger, were convicted of crossing state lines to incite a riot.

Here is a picture of the Chicago Seven. Jerry Rubin seated (I don't know who the woman is) and standing from our left to right, Abbie Hoffman, John Froines, Lee Weiner, Dellinger, Rennie Davis, and Tom Hayden.



Only Froines and Weiner are still alive. You might want to check out the 2020 movie, “The Trial of the Chicago 7.” John Carroll Lynch plays Dellinger. I’m not a fan of its writer and director Aaron Sorkin but gave it a try. I didn’t connect with it.

In 1993, Dellinger, then 77, wrote his autobiography, *From Yale to Jail: The Life Story of a Moral Dissenter*.¹ It was around this time when I read it. From the book, it turns out that this is David Dellinger.



He was imprisoned twice during the World War II period, before and during the war, for refusing to register for the draft. A divinity student at the time, Dellinger was eligible for a deferment, but he rejected preferential treatment. While in prison, he was abused to the point of torture, force-fed when he went on hunger strikes, and

for weeks at a time put in a tiny pitch-black “hole” with only a toilet, but he never broke.

I don't remember the details of the Yale-to-Jail book, but I was strongly affected by it, that I know. One major influence, and it remains with me to this day, was Dellinger's anti-war posture. A recent example of it, in a 2019 article I wrote on Calvin Coolidge, U.S. president from 1924–1929:

Something close to my heart, The Kellogg-Briand Pact was formulated during Coolidge's years. Frank B. Kellogg was Coolidge's Secretary of State and Aristide Briand was the French Minister of Foreign Affairs. It was also known as The Pact of Paris. Its official title gets at its thrust, The General Treaty for Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy. I say close to my heart, because I've had it up to here with one government program in particular: mass destruction and killing.²

Incidentally, as a boy, Dellinger met Coolidge in the White House; his Republican Party bigwig father was a friend of Coolidge's. Coolidge is reported to have rubbed David on the head and said, “He's a smart one. He'll go places.”

In 2006, Canadian academic Andrew E. Hunt wrote a biography of Dellinger, *David Dellinger: The Life and Times of a Nonviolent Revolutionary*, which I read around the time of the book's publication and liked.³

To set the stage for my commentary on Dellinger, here's *The New York Times* obituary of him by Michael T. Kaufman, dated March 27, 2004. It does a much better job than I could summarizing Dellinger's life.

David Dellinger, whose commitment to nonviolent direct action against the federal government placed him at the forefront of American radical pacifism in the 20th century and led, most famously, to a courtroom in Chicago where he became a leading defendant in the raucous political

conspiracy trial of the Chicago Seven, died Tuesday in a retirement home in Montpelier, Vt. He was 88.

His death was reported by Peggy Rocque, the administrator of the home, Heaton Woods. An avuncular figure among younger and more flamboyant mavericks, Mr. Dellinger emerged in the 1960's as the leading organizer of huge antiwar demonstrations, including the encirclement of the Pentagon that was immortalized in Norman Mailer's account "Armies of the Night." At the same time, making use of his close contacts with the North Vietnamese, he was able to organize the release of several American airmen held as prisoners and to escort them back from Hanoi.

In the often-turbulent world of the American left, Mr. Dellinger occupied a position of almost stolid consistency. He belonged to no party, and insisted that American capitalism had provoked racism, imperial adventures and wars and should be resisted.

A child of patrician privilege, he had since his days at Yale learned and practiced strategies of civil disobedience in a variety of causes, steadfastly showing what he called his concern for "the small, the variant, the unrepresented, the weak," categories he cited from the writings of William James.

In the federal courtroom in Chicago in 1969, when Judge Julius J. Hoffman presided over the trial of opponents of the Vietnam War charged with criminal conspiracy and inciting to riot at the Democratic National Convention a year earlier, Mr. Dellinger loomed over his co-defendants in age, experience, heft and gravitas.

The next oldest of the defendants, Abbie Hoffman, was 20 years his junior. Mr. Hoffman and Jerry Rubin were Yippies who mocked authority in star-spangled shirts; Mr. Dellinger favored quiet business suits. Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, John R. Froines and Lee Weiner had led student movements; Mr. Dellinger had not.

Within this radical bouquet of representatives from what was called the New Left, Mr. Dellinger stood out as a link to a homegrown pacifist strain that had its roots within America's Old Left.

Paul Berman, who wrote about the radicals and revolutionaries who rose to prominence in the years around 1968 in "Tale of Two Utopias," said that Mr. Dellinger "came of age in one of the tiniest currents of the American left — the Rev. A.J. Muste's movement for World War II pacifism, a movement based on radical Christian values and vaguely anarchist instincts. No rational person observing that movement during the 1940's would have predicted any success at all, and yet during the next two or three decades, Mr. Dellinger and his pacifist allies transformed whole areas of American life."

Mr. Berman said that they "did it by supplying crucial leadership in the civil rights revolution and by playing a central role in the mass movement against the war in Vietnam."

"Dellinger, himself," Mr. Berman said, "became the single most important leader of the national antiwar movement, at its height, from 1967 through the early 1970's. You could quarrel with some of his political judgments, but he was always sober, always resolute, always selfless and always brave."

If his co-defendants in Chicago captured most of the attention of the news media, in the eyes of Judge Hoffman, it was Mr. Dellinger who had been the most guilty. The jury had acquitted all seven on conspiracy but found all but Mr. Weiner and Mr. Froines guilty of inciting to riot. Of the convicted, Mr. Dellinger was given the harshest penalty by Judge Hoffman, five years in jail and a \$5,000 fine. He was also sentenced to two years and five months on the basis of 32 citations of criminal contempt for comments he made during the five-month trial, which ended in February 1970.

Two years later, with all the defendants free on bail, an appellate court, citing prejudicial conduct by Judge Hoffman, voided the convictions for inciting to riot. The next year another court upheld Mr. Dellinger's contempt conviction, but declined to impose sentence.

Mr. Dellinger was by his own lights more radical than many of his like-minded compatriots, a figure who often found the strategies and tactics of close colleagues like the

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mr. Muste, his mentor in radical pacifism, too conciliatory.

When Mr. Dellinger was a young man, he had, for the experience, ridden boxcars with hobos during the Depression. Soon after, he drove an ambulance behind Loyalist lines in the Spanish Civil War and he traveled through Germany to witness the rise of Nazi power. He resisted the draft and in prison took part in hunger strikes to integrate the mess hall of Danbury prison. He edited Liberation magazine, which Mr. Mailer once described as "an anarchist-pacifist magazine of worthy but not very readable articles in more or less vegetarian prose."

In the 1940's Mr. Dellinger met Elizabeth Peterson at a Christian students' meeting, and they married. She survives him, as do two sisters, Nancy Marshall, of Massachusetts, and Elizabeth Cushman, of Sarasota, Fla. Also surviving are three sons, Patchen, of Seattle, Daniel, of St. Johnsbury, Vt., and Howard Douglas, of Nazareth, Pa.; two daughters, Natasha Singer, of Schnevus, N.Y., and Michele McDonough, of Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.; nine grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

David Dellinger was born in Wakefield, Mass., on Aug. 22, 1915. His father, Raymond, was a lawyer and chairman of the town Republican Party, influential enough to take his son to a private White House lunch with Calvin Coolidge. His grandmother was active in the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Like his father he went to Yale, where he did well in his studies and was elected captain of the cross-country team. He also became close friends with Walt W. Rostow, who years later would face him from the other side of the barricades as a senior adviser on Vietnam to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. He was drawn to pacifism through readings of Tolstoy and most particularly of "The Power of Nonviolence," by Richard Gregg, an American who had spent years working with Mahandas K. Gandhi.

But his personal commitment to nonviolence came after a football game in which Georgia beat Yale. New Haven "townies," who resented the Yale students, swarmed onto the field and tore down the goal posts. Mr. Dellinger joined in the

melee and chased one young man, whom he hit and knocked unconscious. He recalled: "I shall never forget the horror I felt the instant my fist struck solid flesh. When my victim fell, I dropped to my knees, lifted his head and I cradled him until he came to. I walked him home. I never saw my enemy again." He pledged he would never hit anyone again and forswore all violence.

In "Armies of the Night," Mr. Mailer's account of the famous antiwar protest march on the Pentagon in 1967 that Mr. Dellinger helped to organize with Mr. Rubin, the writer compared the radical leader in nonviolent action to an alumni officer at a Yale reunion. "He had the hard-working, modestly gregarious, and absolutely devoted sense of how mission and detail interlock, which is so necessary to good class agents, that rare vintage mixture of New England incorruptability and good fellowship."

Mr. Dellinger graduated magna cum laude from Yale in 1936 with a degree in economics. He received a fellowship that enabled him to attend Oxford, where his interest in pacifism deepened. Returning to the United States, he entered Union Theological Seminary in New York, intent on becoming a minister, though he never got around to choosing a denomination. In 1940, as war clouds gathered, the United States required men to register for the draft. Mr. Dellinger and seven other seminarians announced that they would refuse to do so, despite assurances that as candidates for the ministry they would not be inducted into the Army. He wrote that accepting such a de facto exemption would in Gandhian terms amount to complicity with violence.

Mr. Dellinger, who was president of his class at the seminary, was expelled with the other dissenters and denounced from the pulpit by prominent churchmen across the country for what they contended was his doubtful patriotism. Mr. Dellinger had been living in a black neighborhood in Newark with several other draft resisters. Mr. Dellinger was tried for draft evasion, convicted and sent to Danbury prison for a year. In 1943, with America at war, Mr. Dellinger returned to Newark and was again summoned to report for a preinduction physical examination. Again he refused to report. He was arrested and convicted of draft

evasion and sent to Lewisburg, a maximum security prison, for two years.

In 1956 along with Mr. Muste and Dorothy Day, the Catholic anarchist, he founded Liberation, eventually becoming its editor and publisher. It was the escalating war in Vietnam that brought Mr. Dellinger into heightened prominence. In 1965, he helped to sponsor the first major antiwar demonstration in New York, which took place in October, involving liberal and radical groups. Mr. Dellinger, along with a few other opponents of the war, sent invitations to antiwar groups to join in another protest against the war during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 1968, focusing on what was anticipated as the renomination of President Johnson. Although Johnson declined to run again, groups massed in Chicago, where violent clashes with police led to the indictments of the Chicago Seven and Bobby Seale of the Black Panthers. For a while it was the Chicago 8, but Judge Hoffman had Mr. Seale removed from the trial and the courtroom after ordering him bound and gagged after he insisted that he was being denied his right to a lawyer of his own choice.

Even before the trial ended, Mr. Dellinger, who had earlier established close contacts in North Vietnam, flew to Hanoi in August 1969 to escort home three American servicemen who had been held as prisoners. He made a similar trip in 1972, and during much of the war he served as a conduit to North Vietnam, advising the Hanoi government which Americans should be permitted to visit there and making travel and visa arrangements. During the peace talks in Paris, he was a consultant to the North Vietnamese delegation.

In the 1970's, Mr. Dellinger and his family moved to a house on a dirt road in Peacham, Vt., where he made what he described as a precarious living teaching in the adult education program at Vermont College in Burlington and writing. In addition to his autobiography, he wrote "Revolutionary Nonviolence" (Anchor Books, 1971), "More Power Than We Know" (Anchor Books, 1975) and "Vietnam Revisited" (South End Press, 1986). The dedication of this

last one read, "To all veterans of the Vietnam War; those who fought in it and those who fought against it."

I've spent time the last couple of days making sense of what difference my contact, limited as it was, with David Dellinger has made to my life. This is what I came up with:

I've noted how seldom in my life I have experienced affirming, loving connections with people and concluded it was too seldom. If I had the chance to do it over, I would have made it a priority to seek out positive, uplifting contacts with other people.

Connecting with Dellinger has discouraged a simplistic us-them, good-guys/bad-guys mindset I can get into. Understandably, particularly in recent years when my leaning-right views have solidified, I could write off Dellinger, a left-wing radical, as *the other, them, the enemy*. Coming to know him, even indirectly through reading about him, while I don't see him as a comrade in arms, still, he is basically *us* to me. While I don't agree with Dellinger in a lot of ways (which means in some ways I agree with him), I acknowledge that he wasn't a fool or evil. In racial terms, he was a White man and a good, laudable, one. I was around Jerry Rubin when I was in California in the '70s working with George Leonard, a prominent figure in what was called the human potential movement. Rubin was married to Leonard's daughter at the time. Little guy. Bright. Funny. Well-intentioned. Refreshingly candid (he wrote about his small penis). He was Jewish, as was Leonard. I liked and admired them both then and hold them in high esteem now. Life is complicated, and I've concluded that I will do best by it if I ground myself in that complexity.

Looking into Dellinger's life got me clearer on what I consider to be the measure of a man. From an affluent background, educated at Yale and Oxford, Dellinger had every advantage, but he gave them up for principle and what he saw as justice, enduring financial hardship, prison terms, hunger strikes, physical assaults, and death threats for what he believed in. I picked up on how others described Dellinger: "Sober, resolute, selfless, always brave." "Hard-working,

modestly gregarious, an absolutely devoted sense of how mission and detail interlock.” “A gentle man of great courage and rare integrity.” “He treated everyone with respect, including his adversaries.” He affirmed a skittish and hurting actor thirty-five years ago who remembers it to this day. Dellinger married a woman in 1942 and stuck with her through thick and thin until the end. He was a devoted parent to his five children. In sum, Dellinger’s example keeps me from putting someone on a pedestal just because they have a successful podcast, if you get my drift.

Engaging Dellinger’s outlook helped me get me out of my intellectual comfort zone. Alain Benoist’s ideas are fine, don’t get me wrong. But the *Sermon on the Mount*, which greatly influenced Dellinger, might have something important to say too. Being encouraged to learn about Christian pacifism and secular anarchism and [A.J. Muste](#) and [Dorothy Day](#) has been healthy for me.

Looking into Dellinger’s life underscored that I can learn from those whom I consider to be on the other side of major issues. For example, he was very effective in organizing, direct action, and getting tangible things accomplished. Especially with the 2006 biography, it was helpful to get a sense of how someone unfriendly to my outlook might see me. In a 2018 article, I advised the reader (and myself) to

do less talking and more listening, including to people who disagree with you. Hear them, see things from their side, see yourself from their perspective. If somebody is accomplishing something you’d like to achieve—such as approval, encouragement, support, and good results—look into how they are doing it.⁴

Reading about Dellinger’s (sorry to report) intellectual narrowness, shallowness, and rigidity has invited me to think about my own tendencies in those directions. He kept things at a superficial level—America is a racist, sexist, oppressive place, case closed—and ran with it, albeit effectively. As far as I can tell, it

never crossed his mind that Whites might have issues, that Jews and gentiles might be adversaries, or that problems might have individual as well as collective causes and solutions. He remained entirely confident that he had things figured out; no need for self-analysis and self-criticism. Observing Dellinger's life has prompted me to be vigilant against thinking I've got everything wired. With reference to the White racial movement, I questioned

the degree to which white racial activism links the wellbeing of Western culture and white people to certain immutable and unquestioned orthodoxies in religion, ideology, politics, sexuality and gender relations, art, lifestyle, work and leisure, and schooling. Are we overly collectivist, authoritarian, male-dominated, closed-minded, hero-worshipping, exclusionary, and intolerant of anybody who is different from our central spokesmen?⁵

Reading Dellinger's biography reminded me that this isn't going to last. Dellinger, so engaged with life, busy here, there, and everywhere, ended up in a nursing home with Alzheimer's. He's gone, forever; eternity is a long time. Life doesn't end well. I have one shot at getting whatever it is done—work, love, pleasure, responsibility to others—and the clock's ticking.

Endnotes

1. *Poseidon Press*.
2. Robert S. Griffin, "Where is Calvin Coolidge When We Need Him?" *The Occidental Observer*, posted March 19, 2019.
3. *New York University Press*.
4. Robert S. Griffin, "Don't Give People a Club to Hit You Over the Head With," *The Occidental Observer*, posted March 11, 2018.
5. Robert S. Griffin "The White Racial Movement and Gays," *The Occidental Observer*, posted May 20, 2018.