

INTERVIEW I

DATE: October 23, 1982  
INTERVIEWEE: BENJAMIN SPOCK  
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger  
PLACE: Don Gardner's residence, Bee Cave, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Dr. Spock, would you begin by telling us how you came to campaign for Lyndon Johnson in 1964?

S: I'd been invited three times earlier to join the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy and turned them down the first two times, saying that I was not an expert in radiation and besides, I was a reassurer of parents, not an alarmer. Homer Jack, the director then of SANE, had the sense and the persistence to ask me a third time over a period of about three years, and this time it got to my conscience, and I said, "Okay, I'm convinced that if we don't have a test ban treaty more and more children will die of cancer and leukemia or be born with mental and physical defects." So I joined SANE and within a year they made me co-chairman, not because I had become an expert but because I was assumed to have an influence with the mother vote. And I presume that it was as a spokesman then for the disarmament movement that Lyndon Johnson's campaign committee asked me to participate on radio and television in the 1964 campaign. And I said, "I certainly will," because Lyndon Johnson said, "I will not send American boys to fight in an Asian war," whereas Barry Goldwater was making all kinds of brutal statements, "All we have to do is wipe that little country

Spock -- I -- 2

off the face of the earth. Why do we allow ourselves to be bothered by them?" So I said, "I'll certainly campaign as a citizen, as a pediatrician, and as a spokesman for the peace movement."

G: Do you recall who it was that contacted you?

S: I have no idea at this point. All my correspondence up until recent years is in the library of the University of Syracuse, and that probably could be found there. I just talked to somebody this year who went up to consult my memorabilia in the library, and they said everything was catalogued; it was very easy to find things. My correspondence that I still have is nowhere near that well organized, so I'm impressed that, receiving all my old junk, Syracuse has got it organized.

They fed me a number of radio interviews. There was one very impressive television commercial for Lyndon Johnson, a half-hour commercial in which they had Professor [George B.] Kistiakowsky of Harvard and the admiral who had been head of the CIA--

G: [William] Raborn?

S: Raborn, right. And they had a man who has subsequently been dean of MIT [Jerome Wiesner]. Anyway, there were five or six people sitting around a table and we competed with each other to say how statesman-like Lyndon Johnson was and how totally irresponsible what's-his-name--

G: Goldwater?

S: Goldwater. I'm sorry, the one place I have to admit my age is that I cannot remember names. So please, when you see me struggling, fill in.

Spock -- I -- 3

They told us that Lyndon Johnson was so impressed by this commercial that he saw it three times in the White House; so impressed to see these very august people [who] all said he was the statesman. Well, it was interesting.

I want to jump from there and say that after I became alarmed and indignant about Lyndon Johnson's catapulting us into a real war in Vietnam, I called Wiesner at MIT and said, "Don't you think it would be worthwhile for as many of the six of us [as possible] to get together and approach the President through a letter or ask to go and see him? Because if he was that impressed by having our backing, then he'll be impressed by our dismay." I was kind of discouraged that Wiesner--he had been Kennedy's science adviser--said, "Oh, no. I think as individuals it's all right to try to approach him, but we shouldn't try to get together." Well, I concluded he's been part of the establishment too long. He startles right away at the idea of an organized effort to get to President Johnson.

G: Could we talk for a second about your view of the nature of the war? From reading some of the communications that you made to the White House and some of the statements that you made for newspapers and at the trial, your view of what the war was about inside South Vietnam did not coincide with the administration's view of what the war was about.

S: To put it mildly.

G: What was the nature of the war?

Spock -- I -- 4

S: Of course for a number of years, with U.S. participation beginning actively in 1954, I didn't really know very much about it. I vaguely remember reading in Time or Newsweek that our man [Ngo Dinh] Diem was proving to be effective and doing a good job and that he was going to keep South Vietnam from going communist, and I left it at that until I got into SANE and began having to find out about the various disarmament and war threat issues around the world. The more I looked into that, especially after 1965, the more horrified I was to see that from my point of view we had no business [there], never did have any business. We were first trying to get the French chestnuts out of the fire by supporting them in their effort to reconquer, to turn Vietnam back into a colony. I get morally indignant very easily. That's what my mother bequeathed to me. I didn't like her morality but I obviously get indignant the same way.

And to hear, for instance, that at the end of World War II the French government first promised Ho Chi Minh that they would stay out and allow the country to be free, and then they secretly, without any warning to him, landed troops instead. Then that bloody French-Vietnamese war that lasted from 1948 until 1954 with terrible loss of life on both sides. . . . The Geneva Accords, where [John Foster] Dulles first agreed that we would respect the Geneva Accords, and the ink was hardly dry on Dulles' signature when he and Eisenhower decided that we should try to control South Vietnam where the French had failed. That seemed, to use one of my mother's most used words,

Spock -- I -- 5

despicable to me, that we first promised that we'll keep hands off and then turn right around and do the opposite.

I was brought up with a terrific conscience that's been a burden to me all my life. I tend not to get indignant at other people unless I feel that there is strong moral evidence that they've done the wrong thing. I used to be a very timid person and even up until I was sixty years of age very cautious about expressing an opinion. But the one thing that would loosen my indignation and drive me into action was somebody doing something that was unquestionably wrong, and this was my feeling about Dulles and Eisenhower.

Then--I forget what year it came out--a graduate student at Princeton [Mitchell Zimmerman] and I wrote a book on Vietnam [Dr. Spock on Vietnam]. I don't know whether you've seen it. He was going to do all the research and I was going to do all the rewriting, and it turned out--through a very harmonious relationship--a very good book. It was only a hundred pages long but it set out the issues very clearly, especially from a Vietnamese point of view. It was in writing that book that I became aware that Eisenhower, when asked why the United States was making such an issue of Vietnam, said in his ingenuous way, "Why, it's all the tin and tungsten in that part of the world. We want to control it." And another statement of Eisenhower's that meant a great deal to me was when he said, "Every expert that I consulted agreed that if we let the election be held that had been promised to the Vietnamese people, north and south, they would have voted for Ho

Spock -- I -- 6

Chi Minh 80 per cent." Well, to Eisenhower that meant of course we had to steal South Vietnam by imposing our puppet.

Then of course hearing how much Diem was hated, how tyrannical, arbitrary and increasingly paranoid he became, this was a good explanation of why the people wouldn't accept him. One of the things that he did was take back the land that had been distributed amongst the peasants by the communists when they controlled most of South Vietnam as well as North. Diem took the land away from the peasants and gave it back to the absentee landlords who lived in Saigon. So it seemed to me that one didn't have to pussy-foot or hem and haw and equivocate about Vietnam. All justice was on the side of the Vietnamese, and all the wrong was on the part of our government.

I want to go back just a minute. I did enough so that Lyndon Johnson called me up a couple of days after the election. It took him a number of hours to find me in University Hospitals in Cleveland, so a lot of people in the hospital knew that the President of the United States was trying to reach me. It led to rumors that I was being offered the secretaryship of Health, Education and Welfare. He finally got on the phone and thanked me for my radio and television work and then said, "Dr. Spock, I hope I prove worthy of your trust." (Laughter) I said, "Oh, President Johnson, of course you'll be worthy of my trust!" I mention this because I think this is part of what set me up to be so indignant. Not only was I asked to help him get elected, but he acknowledged that I had done something and he actually hoped to prove worthy of my trust. Some of my friends since have said, "What

Spock -- I -- 7

do you suppose he had in mind when he said, 'I hope I'll be worthy of your trust'?"

Well, in that first week of February 1965 when he suddenly began the bombing of North Vietnam and the build-up of fighting troops, I was still co-chairman of SANE. I'd heard about this on that February morning from the SANE executives in Washington, and I was absolutely incredulous. It was a terrible shock. The other co-chairman of SANE was Stuart Hughes, professor of history at Harvard. With the two executives of SANE and us two co-chairmen, we cooked up a very indignant telegram to send to the President saying that this was wrong and it was going to prove a disaster. That night on the radio--and I wish I knew what station it was so I could get the details of it--a radio station, summing up the popular reaction, the national reaction to this bombing of North Vietnam said, "Everybody seems to have accepted it but Spock." (Laughter)

Well, I wrote the President indignant letters, furious letters. First of all, I was alarmed that we were going to get into a real war, that it could turn into a world war because I knew that the Chinese were saying that if there was any bombing of Hanoi that they would come into the war. And the Soviet Union said if there was mining of Haiphong harbor they would come into the war. I'm not sure that those threats had been made before that, but I knew that both of those countries were very concerned about showing support. Then I thought it was absolutely outrageous for the President to betray all of us who had voted for him.

Spock -- I -- 8

G: Let me ask you a moment.

S: Yes.

G: During your support for President Johnson in 1964 of course there was the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and I wonder if you'd respond to that.

S: I carefully ignored the Gulf of Tonkin incident, but I'll get around to that. I must have written three indignant letters in short order, I felt so strongly, and I always got replies from McGeorge Bundy. I was not only miffed that I hadn't gotten a reply from the President, but I was also outraged by McGeorge Bundy's condescension--an extremely condescending person. The general spirit of his replies was "My dear Doctor, you may be sure your views have been taken into consideration, but we found they have no merit." Somebody told me the way to get to the President was to write via Jack Valenti, so I enclosed a note to Jack Valenti saying, "Would you please, to satisfy me, put this on the President's desk? You can't make him read it, but I'd like to have a try at getting him to read my letter himself so that I'll know that he knows what I think both about the dangerousness of this action and about my indignation."

That got a reply from the President. I'd accused him in my last letter of ten either dangerous or outrageous things. He picked up, in his short note to me, just one of them, in which I said that he'd sprung this on the country without warning, this bombing of North Vietnam, turning it into an active war. And he was able to point out correctly that not only at the time of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution he had threatened retaliation, but that back at the Associated Press



Spock -- I -- 9

national convention in April 1964, he had also thundered at the the North Vietnamese and threatened that we'd do something. In other words, he had me on one of those ten points. Of course, he didn't answer the other nine points, but I was a little bit embarrassed to be caught.

Well, where do you want to go from here?

G: In numerous places you've been quoted as saying that the war was illegal--

S: Right.

G: --immoral and unwinnable. The illegal and immoral parts are very clear I think, but the unwinnable part has never, that I've seen, gone into detail. Why do you think it was unwinnable?

S: I'll have to admit that I was on shaky ground since I didn't know that it would be unwinnable. But first the French got badly beaten, showing that the Vietnamese were willing to fight to the last man if necessary to throw out these foreign invaders. And every time Johnson would send another hundred thousand men or more planes, with a promise "this will take care of [it], we'll really win now," it never did work. So I thought it was a reasonable guess that it was an unwinnable war. I remember at one point being shaken to hear that a French expert on Vietnam whose name I can't remember anymore--

G: Was it Bernard Fall by any chance?

S: Yes. At one point he became pessimistic and said it was clear that our overwhelming might was going to be able to grind them down, and I thought if Fall says that, how can I keep saying the war is unwinnable?

Spock -- I -- 10

I think it was just my moral indignation. Until proved otherwise I can say it's an unwinnable war, and obviously this would be a better argument with the President or a secretary of war than to say it was immoral, illegal, unconstitutional.

G: There was a question within the administration why you went the route of civil disobedience rather than what they would have called working within the system?

S: Well, first of all I was working within the system. I was writing letters to the President; I continued to write letters to the President. I wrote letters to [Robert] McNamara from time to time and I wrote letters to [Dean] Rusk. I kept on making speeches and I was invited to make more and more speeches because undergraduates, particularly, who were inclined to disbelieve in the war, were eager to hear an older person who was opposed. I was fantastically popular as a speaker for about eight years. That is to say, for half the year--when I wasn't sailing--I was speaking at six universities per week. Six a week, that would be at least twenty-four universities per month, six months of the year. So I would call that working within the system. And I was very active supporting any political candidate who was against [the war].

One of the things that you might be interested in was that in either the fall of 1965 or 1966 I wrote to Robert Kennedy, who was, in a gingerly way, questioning the war. I said, and I think it was a very well-taken point, that he was the only American who could lead us out of it, wrest the presidency away from Lyndon Johnson, because

Spock -- I -- 11

nobody's going to call a Kennedy a communist, and [he was] obviously a bold leader in whom the people have a lot of confidence. He wrote back a short note saying that he thought he was doing all that he could, gradually became a little more open in his opposition, but not much. And a year later approximately I wrote to him again and said everything that I said the year before: "You're the only person who could lead us out of it. And furthermore, if you don't take this opportunity, the Republicans are going to take over the country because the war is going to become progressively less popular." This time he said he would like me to have lunch with--it's a name like Russell, somebody who was in the Johnson Administration--had been in the Kennedy Administration, kept over as a White House aide into the Johnson Administration.

G: Would it have been [Theodore] Sorensen?

S: No, no. Less prominent than that. Anyway, he was doing jobs of various kinds for Bobby Kennedy at this time. His name may pop into my head. So I had lunch with this guy and we sat there for about three hours. He told me some interesting things, like though he was working for Kennedy and doing errands like taking people to lunch, he said Kennedy would never remember to pay for the lunch--and it was a good restaurant we were at, too. (Laughter)

Anyway, obviously he was sounding me out and seeing how sensible I was, and I found it interesting to talk to somebody like this. Among other things I was telling him about my astonishment that Hubert Humphrey didn't dare indicate in any way that he was opposed to the

Spock -- I -- 12

war, because in a mild way Hubert Humphrey had been a hero of mine, especially back before I became radicalized as much as I was during the war in Vietnam. He told me how Lyndon Johnson had great respect for anybody, even if they differed with him a great deal, as long as this person respected himself. But he said if it was a person who was submissive, that Lyndon Johnson was just like a shark in going after him. He told me that Lyndon Johnson, in front of the press, would humiliate Hubert Humphrey and make remarks like "I've got his prick right in my pocket." This was astonishing to me to hear, and if I can jump ahead, I thought it was an amazing thing that Johnson had to retire from the presidency and bestow the succession on Hubert Humphrey and still tells Hubert Humphrey, "You've got to go ahead with the policy that destroyed me." I thought, I can understand that while Humphrey is waiting to be anointed that he might not want to antagonize Johnson, but after he's got the nomination and is out campaigning, why does he still have to obey this guy? This seemed to me absolutely incredible.

G: Do you remember the Salt Lake City speech that Humphrey made where he departed somewhat from the Johnson line?

S: No.

G: Did Humphrey ever talk to you about this?

S: Twice. One, when I found I couldn't make a dent on Lyndon Johnson in that spring of 1965, I wrote to Humphrey. Though I knew that as vice president he couldn't openly come out and disagree too much with the President, I felt the need of getting the word through to somebody,

Spock -- I -- 13

that I and thousands of other people like me were horrified. So I wrote this long sort of a semi-confessional letter to Humphrey. I got back a total justification for the war using the same silly justifications that Johnson and the others used for it. This was a terrible blow to me. I thought somehow or other there would be a hint in his letter that he'd gotten the distress in my letter.

At that time I was still invited by the Johnson Administration to be in the White House Conference on World Cooperation and a conference on education. I was invited to be in two conferences after I parted company with him.

G: Another was on the Office of Economic Opportunity I think.

S: Yes. I found that a very interesting job and I also saw Humphrey at work there and was impressed with how Humphrey knew everything that was going on in the government. I mean, each time this advisory committee would be called, [Sargent] Shriver would first tell what the staff was working on and then Humphrey would come in and talk about the relationship of this to other government functions. Very impressive. And this wasn't just a prepared statement by him, because there were some pretty wise people on that advisory council and they would ask searching questions, "But what are you doing about the Indians?" and so on, and Humphrey always had the answer. It was the other side, the really admirable side of Humphrey.

To come back to this White House Conference on International Cooperation, it was astounding from several points of view. It was a big conference; I think there were something like two thousand people

Spock -- I -- 14

there. We found out that there were workshops, two dozen workshops at least: international cooperation on television; international cooperation in exploration of space; international cooperation in the coding of literature; every conceivable subject. [There were] three workshops that might well include Vietnam: one on keeping the peace, another one is something else. We were given something that had all been worked out ahead of time to guide us in our deliberations, sort of a rough outline of what the area might well be. No mention of Vietnam. We suspected right away that they were going to keep it out of bounds and that if anybody tried to bring it up in one of those three workshops that the chairman of the workshop would say, "Well, I'm terribly sorry, but that is not on the agenda here, you know."

So several of us, including--oh, I always block on his name, the man who had been co-chairman of SANE before me, editor and publisher of the Saturday Review of Literature--Norman Cousins. Norman Cousins was there at this two thousand-person conference, and several other peace people, including the executives of SANE. We decided that it would have to be brought up at the first plenary session, when there were greetings from the Mayor of Washington, greetings brought to us by Humphrey from the President. [Joseph] Sisco up in the State Department was going to be then taking over as the presiding person, who called on the others. So we decided we must bring it before that first plenary session. I collared Sisco just before the session began and said, "We've been looking over the agenda to see where Vietnam fits in, and we don't see any indication," and he said, "No, that's

Spock -- I -- 15

correct. There's no place for that in this conference." And I said, "Well, I would think then it would be well for myself and others who feel the same way to bring it up at this plenary session." And he said, "That would be most unfortunate." (Laughter)

Well, I wasn't a bold person then at all. The idea of trying to break into a two thousand distinguished citizen plenary session was terrifying to me, and my heart was pounding. Just as soon as Humphrey had given his talk of welcome, I sprang to my feet and tried to bellow. You know, in a huge ballroom in a hotel, a voice out in the audience halfway back is not at all well heard. I yelled at the top of my lungs, "Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman!" Got no recognition. So the next person was introduced and I subsided. And then came a second opportunity, so I leaped up again. This time Sisco said--there were floodlights on the platform--"Somebody seems to be trying to say something. I think it's Dr. Spock." (Laughter) So above my pounding heart I raised my voice to the top of my lungs and said, "Mr. Chairman, we want to ask whether it is not proper for us to bring up any topic that we want to, like Vietnam, in some of these sections." And he said, "Why of course you can bring up anything you want." Well, all my palpitation, all my shouting were worthwhile. (Laughter)

So in three of these sessions it was brought up and discussed very thoroughly. Not that it amounted to very much, but it seemed like a victory at the moment. We used to have little rump sessions.

Spock -- I -- 16

About twenty people got together each evening to discuss strategy and whether we were getting anywhere.

G: I ran across a memo from Hubert Humphrey to the President describing a meeting that he had with you, Norman Cousins, Sanford Gottleib, and Homer Jack. Do you remember this?

S: Right, at this same [conference]. After the plenary session was over, Norman Cousins said, "I'm having a little chat with Humphrey. Would you like to come along?" and I said, "I certainly would." So we went up to Humphrey's room in the hotel, or Cousins' room, I don't remember which. It was a shocking experience because Humphrey, giving us greetings from the President [upon] opening the conference, had been his usual cheery, bouncy, rambling self. And we got up to this room, and here was this man, ashen white, looking very distraught, and he made a statement like "this job is no bed of roses," meaning to be vice president under Johnson. He didn't confess anything substantive that could have ever been used against him, but he was certainly saying that he was a tense and half-shattered man. I'm interested that he spoke of this to the President.

G: Do you remember what was discussed at this particular meeting?

S: Well--

G: I can summarize what he said. I have a note here, he asked you to come to the government with your protest rather than take it--

S: To the streets.

G: --to the streets. And he asked if you hadn't problems preventing communists and left extremists from taking over the antiwar movement.



Spock -- I -- 17

And he said, and I quote, "They agreed this was a problem," unquote.

Do you remember anything like that?

S: No. I think that's baloney that Humphrey was feeding the President. You know, these are not simple-minded people. Norman Cousins, who was a friend of Kennedy, and Sandy Gottlieb and Homer Jack, who had been around the peace movement for a long while, I think they would have hooted Humphrey down even in this little private session if he'd talked like that. I really don't remember anything except how shattered and pale Humphrey looked and his saying "you don't know how tough this job is." To anybody as indignant as we were, the idea that we were not entitled to protest or that we were serving Moscow's needs, that would have been an insulting thing. If he had tried to get away with anything like that, I would have remembered it very well, because I think it would have been hooted down immediately. Yes.

G: Of course your trial got an awful lot of publicity, and many facets of it are well known. Jessica Mitford wrote a book I think on the trial [The Trial of Dr. Spock]. Are you familiar with that book?

S: Yes.

G: Did she get the story right from your viewpoint?

S: Yes. I had to hand it to her, she did a marvelous job of making a dull trial interesting. She's a good writer and a very sharp person, and she selected things that were relatively colorful. The trial as a whole was very dull because, in the first place, we weren't allowed really to defend ourselves. Our defense was that the war was illegal,

Spock -- I -- 18

immoral, a crime against the peace, crime against humanity, full of war crimes, and we were pointing this out to the country. And if the Nuremberg principle allowed the United States to try and put to death Germans and Japanese for these war crimes, certainly Americans would be covered by the Nuremberg principle. Of course Judge Francis Ford, [who] I'm sure had been selected by the administration, wouldn't allow any of this to be brought in; he said the legality or the illegality of the war was not judicable and there could be no mention of it.

So all of the trial consisted of, lasting a whole damn month, was newsreel films showing us haranguing crowds or being present when draft cards were being burned. They'd go through this rigamarole. The cameraman is put on the stand, "What is your name? What is your address? What is your occupation? How long have you been a cameraman? Who was your employer in 1966?" or whenever it was. "And were you present in New York City or thereabouts? Is the film we're about to see done by you?" This was a lot of the substance of the trial. It astounded me that I, who was brought up so guilty, on trial for a crime of conspiracy, went to sleep after lunch on occasion. They'd pull all the shades down in the courtroom in order to show the newsreel film.

In the beginning, to get back to civil disobedience, I was scared to death. In the first place, I felt embarrassed to be in a demonstration. My first two demonstrations were an Easter peace march and a picketing of the Board of Education in Cleveland, after I joined SANE in 1962. The third was the youths'--SDS?--demonstration in the early

Spock -- I -- 19

spring of 1965 in Washington, where we picketed the White House for hours. I felt very conspicuous in those early demonstrations. I mean, a person with the conservative dress that I wore and the kind of dignity that I'd always felt that I must maintain, to be walking around carrying a picket sign, gosh, it curdled my blood. But I knew that I was in the right so I had to go ahead with it.

Then when I heard about civil disobedience, that sent cold shivers up and down my spine. Eventually, seeing not only more and more of it being done, but also coming to the conclusion that it helped in spreading the word about the wrongness of the war, I dared to do it myself. The first time [was] in New York City at the induction center, which had its humorous side. With the terribly law-abiding upbringing that I had, I became proud after a while that I could get into civil disobedience without shivering all over. I remember laughing when later in the war, for the third time in a row within a couple of months being brought to the detention center there in Washington, one of the cops said, "Doctor, you again!" I felt terribly proud that I could be a habitue of Washington jails. (Laughter)

G: Let me ask you a somber question. In the midst of the trial, word arrived that Robert Kennedy had died.

S: Was it during the trial? I didn't realize that. Really?

G: Well, I came across one statement when the Judge announced that everyone would rise and there would be two minutes of silence in Kennedy's memory. How did that affect you? Would you have backed Robert Kennedy?

Spock -- I -- 20

S: Oh, sure, just as a practical matter. I never thought that he was a total hero and I certainly didn't like his strong-arm methods, for instance, against [James] Hoffa. He felt as long as he was right he could ignore other people's rights. But I was very practical about trying to get the war ended. I would have been wholeheartedly or nearly a hundred per cent behind him, sure. I thought he was the real hope.

G: Would you like to make any concluding statements? The reason I ask is not that we're finished or I've exhausted the questions, but because I don't want to intrude on these other gentlemen's time and we're running a little short. I hope I can persuade you to sit down with me again sometime.

S: Sure, I'd be glad to.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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