

Interview with George Houser

"It was George Houser who introduced me to people who supported the African anti-colonial struggle. ... All of us who came to the United Nations or the United States during our campaigning for independence received help and encouragement from the ACOA." — Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, in the foreword to George M. Houser, *No One Can Stop the Rain*[1]

"We always conceived our work as part and parcel of the civil rights struggle. ... The struggle in Africa was to us, as Americans, an extension of the battle on the home front." — George M. Houser, "The Struggle Never Ends," October 2003[2]

Introduction

For three decades, from the early 1950s through the 1970s, George Houser was the American name most familiar to leaders of African liberation movements seeking sympathetic contacts in the unfamiliar and generally unsympathetic context of Cold War America. This was not because the American Committee on Africa (ACOA, pronounced A-C-O- A), the organization he headed for those years, was large, powerful, or well known, or because it had access to the corridors of power. Nor was Houser himself a public figure attracting media attention. It was simply because they could count on Houser being there, and doing what he could.

Born in 1916 in Ohio, Houser grew up first in the Philippines, where his parents were Methodist missionaries, and then in New York state, California, and Colorado, where his father was a Methodist pastor. As a student active in the National Council of Methodist Youth in the 1930s, he absorbed the activist message of the Social Gospel, with its strands of pacifism, socialism, support for organized labor, and, above all, opposition to racial discrimination.

Houser spent a year in prison for refusing to register for the draft in 1940. He became involved in the Fellowship of Reconciliation and was one of the founders of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942 in Chicago, where he also helped organize a committee in support of India's independence. Along with colleagues such as Bayard Rustin, he organized the first "freedom ride" to the South in 1947. The involvement with Africa, he says, came as a natural extension.[3]

Houser, like his colleagues in CORE and the activists who were to come together with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), was part of a strand of American radicalism that was activist, internationalist, and open to socialist ideas, but little influenced by Marxist thinking. In this respect, the ACOA marked a break with the earlier tradition of the Communist Party-linked Council on African Affairs, which was succumbing to

government persecution just as ACOA's formation was sparked by the call to support the African National Congress (ANC) in its Defiance Campaign in 1952.[4]

During that period, organizations such as the NAACP [5] not only purged communists from their membership but also backed off from previous public advocacy of support for African liberation struggles. The ACOA, while reluctant to collaborate with the Council on African Affairs when it existed[6] and seeking to pitch its appeal to elicit broad non-ideological support for anti-colonialism, still argued that support for the African struggles took priority over Cold War competition. Houser was adamant on the core principles of support for liberation struggles, independence from the U.S. government, and disengagement from economic and other ties that might support the apartheid regime and the colonial powers. [7]

It was this consensus on major issues, held in common with younger activists and new forces that emerged on the U.S. left in the 1960s and 1970s, that enabled the ACOA to continue to serve as a key link for the liberation movements in the United States even in the midst of multiple divisions over racial and ideological issues around the country. Whether or not other groups felt comfortable working with the ACOA, for the most part their positions converged in support of a common cause.

For example, despite Houser's personal commitment to nonviolence and pacifist principles, he was clear from the start that the ACOA was not a pacifist organization, and convinced that the African movements themselves had the right to decide whether armed struggle was necessary or not. That was already defined for ACOA in the 1950s when the organization lent its support to representatives of the Algerian National Liberation Front at the United Nations. After the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 demonstrated South Africa's willingness to meet peaceful protest with state violence, ACOA also defended the legitimacy of the turn to arms by the liberation movements in Southern Africa. the course.

The ACOA strongly condemned U.S. covert intervention in Africa, such as in the Congo and Angola. Still, Houser was personally reluctant to criticize African nationalist leaders he knew or to go beyond the Organization of African Unity consensus on what movements were to be considered legitimate. In the most controversial case within the organization, in 1969 the ACOA decided, with Houser's consent, to give primary support to the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), despite Houser's early contacts with Holden Roberto's National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA).[8]

After the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the ACOA organized an Emergency Action Conference against Apartheid, which fully endorsed African demands for a boycott against South Africa. The ACOA, later joined by other groups, pioneered in exposing U.S. corporate ties that reinforced apartheid. By the late 1960s, the twin themes of direct support for liberation movements and targeting of U.S. companies were common currency among activists. In the

1970s and 1980s, the ACOA continued as one of the key nodes in an evolving coalition of forces, ranging from the House Africa Affairs Subcommittee headed by Representative Charles Diggs of Detroit to local groups of activists around the country. After Houser retired as director in 1981, the ACOA and its companion organization the Africa Fund were prominent in mobilizing state and local action to divest from apartheid.

Houser's 1989 book *No One Can Stop the Rain* is primarily devoted to descriptions of his visits to Africa and encounters with African liberation leaders, with relatively little attention to the work done by Houser and the ACOA in the United States. That story, from the 1950s through 1975, is told briefly in *The Story of the American Committee on Africa: Meeting Africa's Challenge*, a 12-page pamphlet published in 1976.

The extensive archives of the American Committee on Africa are housed at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University (see <http://www.africanactivist.msu.edu> for more details, including a short description of the material contained there). Part of the collection is available on microfilm (51 reels). The collection also has some 1,600 slides and eight hours of video material from Houser's visits to Africa. While some scholars have visited the collection, there are as yet no historical studies that have made substantial use of the material available there.

The following interview, focused primarily on the 1950s and early 1960s, was conducted by Lisa Brock at George Houser's home in Skyview Acres Cooperative in Rockland County, New York, on July 19, 2004. Nigel Scotland videotaped the interview.

William Minter
October 2004

Transcript

Interviewee: George M. Houser

Interviewer: Lisa Brock

Location: Rockland County, New York, USA

Date: July 19, 2004

Q: Mr. Houser, could you state your full name, age, and place of birth, and the date of your birth?

HOUSER: Well, I'm George Mills Houser. I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 2, 1916. So I've just turned 88 years old. I had my first year in Cleveland and then two years in Lisbon, Ohio, and I don't know how far you want me to go right now.

Q: Well, we'll come back to that in a little bit. Who were your parents—what were their names and where were they born?

HOUSER: My father was Otto Henry Houser—O. H. Houser. He was a Methodist clergyman. He was born in Meadville, Pennsylvania. And my mother was Ethel Mills. They got married in 1910. She came from western New York state, and they met at Allegheny College where they both went to school in Meadville, Pennsylvania.

Q: Where did they live most of their lives and what did they do, work-wise?

HOUSER: Well I had two older sisters, and I was the third child who came along in 1916. My father was a clergyman at Woodlawn Methodist Church in Cleveland and then in a church in Lisbon, Ohio for two years. I remember not really anything of this. Then my folks made a long move, from there to the Philippine Islands, 1919 to 1924, located in Manila. This is when I started remembering, because we left there just when I was to become eight. We left in March, I think, and I became eight en route home. I had my eighth birthday, I remember, in London. And then we were located for a year or so in western New York state. My father traveled for the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church—it was the Methodist Episcopal Church at that time. And we lived and I started school in Chautauqua, New York, in the very western part of the state—50 miles west of Buffalo. We have just been there, again, on a visit. And, from there to Buffalo briefly, and then to Troy, New York where we spent six years. My father was the minister of what was called the Fifth Avenue-State Street Methodist Episcopal Church—a unification of two churches, the Fifth Avenue church and the State Street church.

From there to Berkeley, California. I was 15. Then my freshman year of high school in Troy and then started all over again at 10th grade, which was the first, freshman year at Berkeley High School. And we were there from 1931 until 1936. I went to China for a year as an exchange student. My folks moved from Berkeley to Denver. My father was the minister of the Trinity Methodist Church—Methodist Episcopal Church—in downtown, in the middle of Denver. They lived there and then subsequently—because your question had to do with my parents—they were back across the river here in Westchester in retirement teaching at a college, and then moved to California, and they were in San Luis Obispo and then went to a retirement home in Boulder, Colorado where they both died.

Q: So travel was in your blood for your parents?

HOUSER: We traveled. We traveled. We always have traveled.

Q: And your mother, was she a homemaker or did she do anything outside of the home?

HOUSER: She was very active, did a lot of speaking, but she was a minister's wife and a mother and a grandmother. She was very active in church affairs, so she had many positions within the church set-up and women's activities and so forth.

Q: And where have you lived, not necessarily traveled, but where are the main places you've lived in the United States?

HOUSER: I've just been rehearsing all of that: Cleveland, Lisbon, Manila, Chautauqua, New York, Buffalo, Troy, New York, Berkeley, California and then a year in China at Lingnan University as an exchange student, 1935-36. Then Denver—two years in Denver. From there, I graduated from the University of Denver to New York. I entered Union Theological Seminary in 1938. A year in jail—prison—in a federal correctional institution in Danbury, Connecticut, 1940 into '41. Chicago—1941 to 1944—finishing my graduate work at Chicago Theological Seminary. Got married in Chicago. Then back to Cleveland for two years with the Fellowship of Reconciliation Office of Action Projects. And 1946 to the Bronx. And we were in the Bronx for three years before moving out here to Skyview Acres Cooperative in Rockland County, New York, 1949—September 1, 1949—I remember the date very well, because it was quite a move. And this is it.

Q: So you've lived here for 54 years?

HOUSER: That's right. Based here. My office was in New York with the Fellowship of Reconciliation and then with the American Committee on Africa. Based here.

Q: I had the opportunity to read your book, and it's very, very interesting and very powerful. You have such a broad insight, because you've been so many places and you seem to have started so young and so early as an activist, first in fighting racism and fighting for racial equality in the United States. Can you remember the very first political activity that you engaged in as a young person and what motivated you to get involved, and what age were you?

HOUSER: You see, it was something developed, you might say gradually. But it came primarily out of my activity in the Methodist youth movement. In a sense, there was never a moment. It was sort of, I guess kind of a gradual, natural thing. As a high school student there was an active youth group in our church in Berkeley, California. I went to summer institutes where—we're talking about the '30s. I am a child of the '30s, which was kind of an activist period. It was between the two world wars. I had a background—I was born in 1916. As a background, it was that world war and all the anti-war information and material which came—my anti-war consciousness began at that time. It continued into the '30s, as did my whole race consciousness. Now I had been in the Philippines. My first memories of being with Filipino people, I didn't have much race consciousness, because that wasn't the way we were living. I became very conscious later on that we had a race problem in this country, but I was in an environment where racism

was not a fact of life as we understood it at that time. No doubt there were effects which were just part of the environment, you might say.

So my first political consciousness has to do with anti-war, anti-race activities. That developed through high school and then a year in China. I had a Chinese roommate. And that was the year that Japan started its invasion of Manchuria. Chiang Kai-Shek was in power, so my political consciousness began to rise.

Q: Can you remember any specific incident in the '30s when you were in high school that made you realize that this was something that you wanted to do? Or a series of things? Can you remember anything like that?

HOUSER: There was not one event during that period that springs to mind. It was a general development that came. As far as my vocational pursuits were concerned, I was like most young people at that time. I had no idea what I was going into. My father was very interested in my becoming a clergyman and minister. He had gone to Boston University School of Theology and he talked a lot about that. While I was at the University of Denver, I was very active in the University Christian Movement, which prodded these same elements in my thinking and my activities.

I became chair of the Cosmopolitan Club which was an interracial body on the campus of the University of Denver. I made the decision to come to New York to Union Theological Seminary because I wanted to be in that environment. Professors like Reinhold Niebuhr and Harry Ward were there and they were social actionists and this is what I wanted.

When I came to New York, I made the decision—because you have to do fieldwork — that I did not want to go to a suburb and be an associate or assistant minister, or whatever you were, as a theological student at some suburban community. And what I did was to make the decision to go down to the Lower East Side, working in the community down around First Street and Houston down on the Lower East Side, working with gangs on the street in what was called the Church of All Nations. And I moved out of the seminary down to First Street, just off of Second Avenue in New York City, where I could be in an environment where they were fighting slum conditions. That was a definite decision on my part. At the seminary I was head of the Social Action Committee, dealing with people like Willard Uphaus of the Religion and Labor Foundation. And then the war came along —or it was just about coming along. And a whole new chapter entered at that point.

Q: So from that moment on, what other organizations did you get involved in after you were involved in seminary?

HOUSER: You see what happened—again this progression—eight of us at the seminary refused to register under the draft, so we got year-and-a-day sentences, which made us felons. We were sent to Danbury, Connecticut, which was a new federal prison at that time. We were very active in the prison community on race issues and all of the issues that arise in prison between the prisoners on the one hand, and the guards and the administration on the other. That's a whole story of its own, because we ran into difficulties within the prison set-up. We—and when I say we, there were five of the eight of us who decided that we would not return to Union Theological Seminary because they were putting conditions on our return, such as that we would have to obey conditions that they gave to us. They did not want the kind of publicity which we had given the seminary, because they got big publicity. Theological students refused to register in the first draft and this sort of thing.

So five of us decided to go to Chicago Theological Seminary, and thus began a whole new fact of life as far as I'm concerned. I had been invited by A. J. Muste, who was the newly appointed executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, to do youth work in the Chicago area as my fieldwork while at seminary. And I accepted that appointment in 1941 when we went to Chicago. Then we started CORE—the Chicago Committee of Racial Equality.

Q: Can you go back a little, say a little bit about the Fellowship of Reconciliation and what it was?

HOUSER: I joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) in 1938 when I went from Denver to Union Theological Seminary. The FOR headquarters at that time was 2929 Broadway, which was just at 114th Street. The Seminary was at 120th Street. I can remember walking down five blocks to the FOR and signing the Statement of Purpose in October of 1938. It was a religious, pacifist organization, and I had grown up in a religious, pacifist environment. My first picket line was in New York with A. Phillip Randolph, who was then the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. And I remember they had a grievance going with Pullman and I joined the picket line. I think that's the first picket line I was ever in.

Q: How long had the Fellowship of Reconciliation been around in New York?

HOUSER: It was founded in Britain in 1915—I guess 1914—in this country in 1915. So it was an international religious, peace, pacifist organization.

Q: Does it still exist today?

HOUSER: It does indeed. It's celebrating its ninetieth birthday. I'll be there in Los Angeles at Occidental College. I have to make one of the speeches. I'll be there in August just a few weeks from now.

Q: So you remember the Fellowship of Reconciliation and then you ...

HOUSER: I was taken on as youth secretary of the Chicago Fellowship of Reconciliation, and—this was late 1941—and my task was to organize. The war started that year; Pearl Harbor came December 7, 1941. I can remember the morning it came through. I had already been in prison for a year at that time, and I wasn't carrying a draft card. I got picked up on that on occasion by the police. I was organizing mostly among college students—Naperville, Elmhurst, Evanston and Chicago. We organized about 17 cell groups in the Chicago area, and I was the organizer. As a matter of fact—an interesting project that I'm involved in right now—the FOR has obtained about 70 volumes under the Freedom of Information Act of FBI files, and in my lobby right out here you see those cartons which have these volumes. And I've been one of the five people around the country who are indexing these files, and I come across some of my stuff from the Chicago area back in the early '40s.

Q: And these are files of the Fellowship of Reconciliation?

HOUSER: One is written on my typewriter at 4257 Cottage Grove with my name crossed out but the address, 4257 Cottage Grove, right there. And it's a seven- or eight-page memorandum which I wrote on organizing cell groups. There it is. And then there's a lot on what we call the Journey of Reconciliation, our first Freedom Ride, but maybe you want to get into that—that came in 1947.

Q: I want to get to the 1950s and African liberation, and maybe if we have time we can go back to some of this earlier work. But can you talk about how you made the transition from doing anti-racist work and reconciliation work within the context of your senses of pacifist and Christian, into work around African solidarity. When did that happen and why do you think you were prepared to make that shift?

HOUSER: Well, my real decision—again a gradual one—was, was I going to take a church someplace? I had been ordained in Denver in 1943 as an elder in the Methodist Church, and the natural thing to do at that point is to be assigned within the Methodist set-up, be assigned by the bishop to a church. I had served during summer periods in western Colorado—Norwood, Colorado in 1940, 1943 in Eagle, Colorado. The natural thing would have been for me to have accepted an assignment. But I was doing work in Chicago with the FOR and I found this stimulating and exciting and I said, well I'll put off this business of accepting a church and try this out for a year or so. That was really the way it developed.

In the meantime, we organized CORE in Chicago. We put on campaigns at restaurants. The sit-in—we inaugurated the sit-ins—Jack Sprat's restaurant on the South Side, Stoner's down in the Loop, swimming pools, the beach out on the lake, 55th Street promontory. There I can remember that we made that very interracial. And we got arrested a few times. We set up campaigns against

the restrictive covenants on the South Side of Chicago. We set up two interracial houses—one for men, one for women. So we had a record going and in the meantime CORE groups had started organizing around the country through our efforts and through the efforts of Jim Farmer and Bayard Rustin, who were my comrades at that time in this movement.

And we held a national conference in Chicago in 1943. That's when we organized the national group, which we called at first the National Federation of Committees of Racial Equality, and we changed that in 1944 to the Congress of Racial Equality which was much easier, I think taking a lead from the CIO, the Congress of Industrial Organizations. It was from that ... that I became the executive secretary of this national CORE group in 1945, I guess it was. I had to make a decision: What am I going to do? In the meantime I was asked to open up an office in Cleveland. And then in two years there I had the office called the Office of Action Projects in Cleveland, carrying on with CORE work and other work, and then to New York City.

All of this was very natural development and pretty soon I realized, well, I am not just looking around for a church. I've got a vocation going here. Still in the back of my mind was the thought, maybe sometime I will take a church, but I never did. The American Committee on Africa grew out of this very naturally—I was on the national staff of the FOR working with Bayard Rustin and others. Bill Sutherland was a good friend of ours. I don't know if you know Bill. We had been on many projects together—anti-war, anti-race, what have you—in the New York area. Bill came back from London saying he had met a representative of a South African publication who was connected with the African National Congress of South Africa, that there was a big campaign coming up. This was 1950—late '51, probably.

When I got in touch then as executive secretary of CORE, I wrote to Walter Sisulu, then the secretary general of the African National Congress. I then corresponded with quite a few different people: Manilal Gandhi, one of the sons of Mahatma Gandhi; with Luthuli, Albert J. Luthuli, then the president of the ANC; with Z. K. Mathews, professor at Fort Hare, who later—the next year, '52-'53—came to Union Seminary as the visiting professor of world Christianity. I became very well acquainted with him and worked closely with him in New York. Sisulu wrote to us and said we would like your help in supporting our campaign. I said to myself, maybe to them—I don't know what's in print—that the campaign, the Defiance Campaign, defiance against unjust laws, was very much like some of the CORE activities—civil disobedience against Jim Crow laws here, against apartheid laws there.

Malan had become the prime minister under the apartheid rule in '48. The ANC Youth League took over the ANC in 1949. A new figure—Mandela, Sisulu, Tambo, these were people that I was working with. And we organized what was called Americans for South African Resistance in 1952 to work with the campaign in South Africa. We had our first demonstration on Palm Sunday, April the 6th that year it was, 1952, from the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem where Adam Clayton Powell was then the pastor. He cooperated well with us. We had a

motorcade from Harlem down to the South African consulate, which I think at that time was located on Park Avenue at about 58th or 59th Street, along in there, and we had this motorcade—lights on, blocks of cars that circled around. It was a Sunday—Palm Sunday—but a lot of people were on the streets, and we had signs up. That was the first picket line we had in front of the South African consulate, of which there were many subsequently.

Q: About how many cars were in the motorcade, can you remember?

HOUSER: Oh, I can't, but it was many blocks long. Let's say 50. I know that at the meeting itself—because I checked it in my book—there were 800 who were in the Abyssinian Baptist Church for that Sunday Mass meeting preceding the motorcade. Canada Lee, who had played the leading role in *Cry the Beloved Country* when it was filmed, was one of the speakers on that occasion, I remember.

Q: And who else participated in the motorcade that you can remember?

HOUSER: I don't remember. The chairman of our Americans for South African Resistance—we had co-chairmen of AFSAR, as we called it—Charles Y. Trigg, he was minister of the Salem Methodist Church in Harlem—he and Donald Harrington. Don Harrington was the minister of the Community Church in New York, 35th and Park Avenue. So we set up an organization. They were the co-chairs, but we had other people like Roger Baldwin [and] Norman Thomas, the socialist leader. Conrad Lynn was one of my neighbors here, well-known civil rights lawyer, came into Skyview partly from my influence. We had somebody from the NAACP and so forth forming an executive committee for Americans for South African Resistance, and we carried on as long as the Defiance Campaign went on in South Africa. Our task was to publicize what we could of what was happening in South Africa, because very little was in the papers here, and to raise funds, which we sent for legal defense and to families of those that needed assistance because the breadwinner was spending a period of time in prison. So that was the task that our committee had at that time.

Q: What was the response of the people in New York, or the American people, to what you were trying to do? Could you gauge whether or not you were having an impact in your work domestically, and how would you gauge that?

HOUSER: Well, it depends on how one wants to describe impact. We grew. We started putting out a bulletin called the AFSAR Bulletin. We had a growing mailing list. We started with a few hundred and ended up with a few thousand. We raised several thousand dollars which we sent to South Africa, primarily through Z. K. Mathews, who by this time had come to the United States and had been the president of the Cape branch of the ANC in South Africa, so he was a natural ally. He had communications coming from his son Joe, who was one of the leaders of the Youth League of the ANC. So he would be getting these reports and we would use them as information

for our AFSAR Bulletin. That grew and we had people sending us funds. We had one woman from Arizona, I recall, who sent us her diamond ring and said, " Use this to raise funds for the cause."

Q: Did you have any idea how the woman in Arizona knew about you? Do you remember any of that?

HOUSER: Not exactly. We had people scattered around the country who heard about us and who we put on the mailing list. We sent the AFSAR Bulletin to them and asked for contributions. She undoubtedly got ahold of one of these and sent it to us. It was that sort of thing. We had, I don't know, 2,000 to 3,000 people who were on the mailing list by the time, towards the end of 1952 and early in 1953, when the campaign in South Africa was called off. We were not sure what to do, because we were fearful that if we sent funds openly to people in South Africa it would run them into difficulty under the new laws that the apartheid government was passing to stop this campaign from going on —there were almost 9,000 arrested. That period of time—I talked many times with Walter Sisulu subsequently about it—was a period of great growth. The ANC grew from maybe 10,000 to 100,000 during the Defiance Campaign.

It was small news here. There was not very much interest in Africa; it was a new thing. It was only a cause for a few of us, because we were interested in campaigns for freedom, any place. This combined, not only the campaign against a kind of colonial domination, but it was a racial campaign as well, so it fit right into the ideology of a few of us.

Q: What was also beginning to happen here.

HOUSER: Just beginning to happen here. The only other organization at that time that really was in existence was the Council on African Affairs.

Q: I was going to ask you about that. What can you tell me about the Council on African Affairs in terms of your relationship with them and your emerging organization's work?

HOUSER: Well, this was, as you may remember, it was the McCarthy period in this country too. If one thinks that there's a terror psychology that exists at the present time, there was a communist, a fear of communists psychology at that time. And there was a struggle within the movements too, between those that tended to be communist- dominated and those that might be socialist-dominated, and our group was more on the socialist side than the communist side, with people like Norman Thomas and A. J. Muste and Roger Baldwin and so forth. It was also during this period that the Council on African Affairs was driven out of business.

Q: That was what I was going to ask you. They existed largely from the '30s, '40s, and by the early '50s they were sort of ...

HOUSER: They were going out of existence at that time.

Q: Why do you think that happened? Because of the period?

HOUSER: I think partly because of the fear of communism. Paul Robeson, Alphaeus Hunton were key figures in the Council on African Affairs. I had met Paul Robeson — in fact I spoke on a program once with him in Pittsburgh, I remember, years ago. I was just added on, but he was the principal speaker. Hunton I'd had just a little contact with. I met him later when he moved to Ghana and had more contact and more discussions with him at that time, but at this time we were working in different circles.

Q: From your point of view, what was the difference between what would be considered at that time socialist and communist, because for many today ...

HOUSER: The Soviet Union was primarily the difference. Policy around the preservation and the advancement and the development of the Soviet Union was key to the communist policy and practical programs. And that was not true for the socialist groups.

Q: And socialists, how did they see the struggle in terms of socialism?

HOUSER: It was never a overwhelming factor. There was socialist influence in some of the trade unions, certainly. A. Phillip Randolph had been an ally of Norman Thomas, and there was certainly a socialist influence within the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. There was some of this in the organization of the United Autoworkers perhaps, in the Detroit area. Norman Thomas of course was running for president, and he would get a few votes, not to equal the votes that Eugene Debs had gotten many years before, but he was a factor on the national scene at least. But the socialists and the communists were not working together. I remember when I was on the socialist side there was the Youth Committee Against War—YCAW. And on the communist side, there was the American Congress, or whatever it was called. They didn't really work together, although there would be similar campaigns.

Q: Probably occasionally you'd find yourself on similar panels or in similar places at the same time.

HOUSER: That's right. Certain cases that came along would be important to both wings of the movement, you might say. Now in South Africa it was different, of course. The ANC had a good many of its leadership coming from Communist Party members. This is a different subject.

Q: You said in your book that you look upon your concern with Africa as a matter of divine guidance and a sort of valid extension of your vows as a Christian minister. I'm interested for

you to talk a little about that, and if you still see your work in Africa as an extension of your Christianity and divine guidance for your life.

HOUSER: Well, I'm not sure exactly what divine guidance is, but I very naturally moved in that direction. And I did it not because of the fact that I joined the Socialist Party at a given point. That was not the basis of my action, nor of my conviction. Instead, it came out of my religious background, my activities in the Methodist Youth Movement, the National Council of Methodist Youth and then the University Christian movement, the Student Christian movement of which I was a part at the University of Denver. I went into the ministry because I believed that this was a way in which one could deal with some of these problems in our society. So my base was always a Christian conviction growing out of my religious conviction, which added social meanings to me, and I guess that's still true.

Q: You know it's so interesting because any belief system—it can move in various directions. Whereas George Bush says that he's a Christian and does things out of his Christian conviction, there are others like yourself that come from a different trajectory in Christianity.

HOUSER: So different. But he is one of those who's a fundamentalist and accepts every word of scripture, presumably, which must run him into a good many contradictions. I believe "thou must love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind and strength and thy neighbor as thyself." This is a key to the motivation which I grew up with and which has been at the base of my own outlook on life. I believe in equality and in justice and in peace and they come out of a religious conviction. And I still hold that in general.

Q: You touched a little bit on the McCarthy period and the tension between socialists and pacifists and then the Communist Party folks on the other side. If you could set a scene for me in the 1950s, what it was like in terms of who was in the movement— organizations and individuals?

HOUSER: The 1950s were an exciting period. They certainly were a great, exciting time as far as Africa. So many of the things got started, and we were in a sense at the beginning of the things. As far as this country is concerned, if we wanted to look for our allies, say in organizing the American Committee on Africa, we found our allies in the church circles—some church circles—[and] in race circles, both in the church and out of the church. After all, Martin Luther King came along at that time. We worked with CORE and that put us in touch with the NAACP and with the Urban League to a lesser extent, but nevertheless always we had contacts with the Urban League ... the trade union movement, the student movement, which covered all of these elements also. And it was in these kinds of circles that we found our allies in organizing any campaign that we might be involved in, and in the limited pacifist circles—the peace workers.

Q: You say limited. Why were they limited?

HOUSER: They were limited because they were pretty small. It was hardly a mass movement. But nevertheless there were important individuals out there. When I think of the people who participated in our first Freedom Ride, the Journey of Reconciliation, there was Wally Nelson, who was black, who had been in prison as a war resister, and we had been involved in a good many different things together. He had campaigned while he was in prison against segregation. He was a natural ally. There was a fellow, Igal Roodenko, who was Jewish and primarily grew up in the War Resisters League. Joe Felmet was white, from North Carolina, and he had been active with the Workers Defense League. Of course Bayard Rustin and Jim Farmer were key persons who I had met through the FOR primarily, and there were others.

In the academic world there were people that we were in touch with, particularly later on as we developed. Although I had not started in the academic field or as an academician interested in Africa or in African history, I was interested in the movements and that then put you into these other circles so that we were involved when the African Studies Association was born. I think I attended the first meeting which was ever held, and I met people like Gwen Carter and others who ...

Q: Herskovits?

HOUSER: Herskovits. And then you get into government circles willy-nilly, when Kennedy became president. There was the Eisenhower administration during which nothing much was happening. The Bureau on African Affairs was not founded until 1958, and I can still remember a meeting which we had with the first assistant secretary of state for Africa, fellow by the name of Satterthwaite, and he had been ambassador to someplace or other. And Tom Mboya was here from Kenya as a young trade union leader. I think it was his second visit in 1959 that we went down to Washington and had a session with Satterthwaite in the State Department, and Satterthwaite had two or three other members of the Department of State with him. Well, he read a statement as if he was in some kind of a diplomatic conference with just me and Tom sitting there. Tom was of course excellent in dealing with situations, and he talked very easily and very freely. It was such a stilted performance on the part of the administration.

Kennedy came in and set up a Council on African Affairs with Soapy Williams, who had been the governor of Michigan, as the new assistant secretary, and they organized a Council. And I remember that Herskovits had maybe 30 people drawn from the [National] Council of Churches, from the NAACP, from business organizations. They invited me, as the American Committee on Africa, to be on that and I attended a number of sessions, got to know some of these people because they had gathered together from the academic world, from the business world, from the NAACP—there must have been someone from the Urban League on there as well. Quite a group.

Q: Was King invited to participate?

HOUSER: Nope. Not then. Nope. I met King at a later time. I think we always ... one of things we did after we organized the American Committee on Africa out of AFSAR was that we sponsored visits to this country of African leaders. We had Nyerere here, Julius Nyerere. This was before Tanganyika became independent, became Tanzania, but he was a petitioner on behalf of his organization, the Tanganyika African National Union, TANU. We had a lot of contact with Julius Nyerere and with Sylvanus Olympio who was the first president of Togo when they became independent. So we had those kinds of contacts initially. That was while the Eisenhower administration was still on.

But we used to bring over African leaders, and one of the first that we brought over was Tom Mboya. He came first in 1956. He was 26 years old, I think, at that time, but he was the president of the Kenya Federation of Labor, and he was such a skilled speaker and he knew what he was doing. He was a well-organized person. Through him, because he had this position with the Kenya Federation of Labor, we met with people like George Meany, Walter Reuther—other leaders in the trade union movement—also with people like King and others who were in the field of fighting for racial equality. And that was very important.

Q: Did this begin a pattern of when African leaders would come you might meet someone like King or A. Phillip Randolph?

HOUSER: It became a very great organizing tool for us, because we had Tom over —of course we had had the background of Julius Nyerere and Olympio. Then we brought Kenneth Kaunda over in 1960, he had just gotten out of prison as a matter of fact. He and Banda, who at that time was [saying] "Down with Federation," the Central African Federation. And Nkomo came over, Joshua Nkomo from Southern Rhodesia —ANC at that time—along with Kanyama Chiume from what was then Nyasaland and which was to become Malawi. They came over in 1959.

Each time one of these leaders came over, it gave us the opportunity of organizing meetings. We had large meetings, in Town Hall in New York and at various auditoriums —Hunter College auditorium and so forth. But we also toured them around the country, so they would meet with trade union leaders and always ... Martin Luther King was on the program, but also Roy Wilkins and leaders of the Urban League at that time ... so always meetings were organized with both individuals and meetings were held around the country. This introduced the African issue to those elements in American life who could possibly be interested in the struggle against colonialism. It also expanded the contacts of the American Committee on Africa, so that we became known as one of the few organizations at that time dealing with African affairs.

Q: You started talking about the ACOA, when it was started, what you see as its main role in solidarity, American solidarity with Africa, especially in the 1950s. Can you talk a bit more

about its successes, but also some of its failures, some of the things you wanted it to do and it didn't, or some of the contradictions it might have found itself in.

HOUSER: You're asking a lot of questions.

Q: I know.

HOUSER: Well, let's start first with just organizing it, because all the experience we had, generally, that group of us, was Americans for South African Resistance and the Defiance Campaign, and the question was, when the Defiance Campaign was coming towards an end, what were we going to do? We had a meeting—we had several meetings, but I remember a couple of key meetings we had at breakfast at Hotel 10 Park Avenue, which was owned by the Community Church—Don Harrington was still the co-chair—to decide what are we now going to do? Should we disband? Should we organize something related to the coming struggle, which was just beginning in South Africa? Or should we organize something that could deal with all of Africa, because things were just going to begin, we felt?

We decided the third course, that we should organize something that had the potential of dealing with the problem of colonialism as well as the whole apartheid problem in South Africa. And we decided on the name of the American Committee on Africa, which could do anything. We played around I guess with some other names. At that time that the question was—I had a personal problem: What was I going to do? AFSAR had always been—I was still on the staff of the FOR, I was still executive secretary of CORE, and this was just another project that I took on, so there was no budget, no salary for any staff people or anything like that. So if we were going to make an organization, we had to have something more substantial, and it was a real question as to what we would do.

This was when George Shepherd, who was one of our early comrades on this, had come back from Uganda and his passport had been lifted by the State Department because he had, I think, gone to Kenya when the Mau Mau was just arising in the early '50s. George was here in the New York area and was available, and he became the volunteer executive. I was then going to Africa, 1954, so George Shepherd kind of held things together at that time. We started the magazine Africa Today; it was started as a mimeograph sheet. There was work to be done around the U.N., there was work with Julius Nyerere and other petitioners, very few at that point who were coming from Africa. I came back from some six months on a barnstorming trip around Africa and decided that I would rather do this.

And so I remember consulting with various people: Could we make something out of the American Committee on Africa? I had family and two children at that time. And I decided that, well, I'm going to take a chance on it. So I became the executive of an almost nonexistent organization in 1955. And we had the same executive committee which then became the board of

the American Committee on Africa—that was the beginning of ACOA. We had office space that was given to us by the Community Church in John Haynes Holmes House, which was next door to the church area there.

That was where we started to work and organize and then take on projects which developed into a program for the American Committee on Africa, and it gradually grew from two of us on the staff—me and a young woman by the name of Lydia Zemba, who took a chance too. She had been working with Doubleday, and she left there, and we became a two-person staff with a nonexistent budget. From there it grew as we developed projects of one kind or another. That was the beginning of the American Committee on Africa.

Q: And what kind of projects did you ...

HOUSER: We had a couple of things right at the beginning. One was what we called Africa Project or something like that, which was to raise money for Huddleston, Trevor Huddleston. The Bantu Education Act had just gone into effect in South Africa, which affected St. Peters school, which was a non-segregated project of Father Huddleston, who was very well known of course in Africa circles and anti-apartheid circles. I had met Huddleston in South Africa when I was there in '54. He wrote to me and said—I may have written him first, I don't know—but he asked us if we could help raise funds to keep St. Peters school alive, because it was going to refuse to go along with the Bantu Education Act. So one of our projects right off the bat was to publicize the Bantu Education Act and the necessity of keeping schools going that were refusing to cooperate with the Bantu Education Act.

The other was built around Bill Sutherland, our old friend who was still in Ghana at that time. Ghana became independent in 1957. Bill had some projects going, particularly related to some school developments. So two projects were there.

Then Huddleston came to New York. We held a dinner meeting for him, and that was one of our ... it was projects. Mboya came in 1956. We were brand new. I remember I had a letter from Michael Scott in London, who was with the Africa Bureau there. I had gotten well acquainted with Michael, and he said, "There's a young fellow here by the name of Tom Mboya, and it would be good for him to come to the United States. Can you sponsor him?" Well, we had no money to go on, but we decided, let's go. So we raised some funds to bring Tom over, primarily through trade union contacts—Phil Randolph and probably some through the UAW and Walter Reuther. And Tom came over and of course he made a big hit in his getting around. It was projects of this sort, the Projects Fund ... then we had educational meetings going. We had a lot of things around the U.N.

Q: Can you say a little bit about the U.N., what you all did with the U.N.?

HOUSER: Yes. The Eisenhower administration was still working—I remember when Z. K. Matthews was here, 1952-53, he wanted to appear as a petitioner at the United Nations. Having African petitioners at that time was very much new and the U.S. was against it. In fact, I tell the incident in my book here, *No One Can Stop the Rain*, that I went to visit Matthews in his apartment near Union Seminary, on one occasion. As I went in two men came out, and when I went into his apartment Matthews said, "Do you know who those men are?" I said, "No." He said, "They were from the FBI. They told me that if I agreed to appear as a petitioner, the U.S. would vote against this." Well, he did try to appear; the U.S. did vote against it. He did not appear. But we had quite a campaign going on that at that time. We were dealing with Julius Nyerere. We had a conference—U.S., Africa and the U.N. We had several such conferences. I think the first one was built around Julius Nyerere and probably Olympio as well.

Q: And so the struggle was to just get him heard at the United Nations.

HOUSER: Exactly. This was when the Fourth Committee dealing with colonial issues was just getting started. There were only four independent African states. This was well before the All African People's Conferences which came in '58, first in Accra. It was well before the Organization of African Unity. It was before Ghana was independent. Tunisia, Morocco and the Sudan became independent in '56, Ghana in '57. Guinea became independent in 1958 against France's wishes, and France just shut them off. I think at the time, during the '50s, there were either eight or nine African states and getting petitioners ... There were very few organizations in Africa at that time, because it wasn't until the All African People's Conference that a lot of these persons who later became the leaders of the liberation movements in Africa ever met each other.

The 1950s was really an exciting period, and I feel privileged to have lived through that period when these people, the leaders, didn't even know each other. Lumumba. I met Lumumba in Accra at the first All African People's Conference in 1958, December '58. [I] subsequently had contact with him in Leopoldville—then Leopoldville—and then when he came here after Congo independence in 1960 and just before he was kidnapped and killed. But these things were just beginning to happen. The ANC couldn't even send their delegation to the All African People's Conference, because they were not allowed to leave the country. It was only those who were outside who were able to form the delegation, which included people like Mary Louise Hooper, who had been with us, and Michael Scott. Alfred Hutchinson had just escaped, I remember, from South Africa. Ezekiel Mphahlele, later a well-known writer, was outside the country and was part of that delegation. It was just all forming, just getting started at that time.

Q: What can you tell me about people personally, like Lumumba? What was he like?

HOUSER: Well, I had one great handicap in that he spoke French and Swahili and I spoke very little French, so I got acquainted with him through interpreters. We had five people representing the American Committee on Africa at the All African People's Conference in December '58 in

Accra. We had a session with Lumumba about what his situation was at that time. That's where we first met. He was a very live person, very active with—he was a real activist. In the portrayals one gets of him, I find that's very right. Of course I have some things written about that in the book here. But he was a striking personality.

I remember when he came here in July of 1960, right after independence, which was June 30, that three of us met with him—Homer Jack and Peter Weiss, who was a key member of our committee as was Homer, and I. We met in his hotel room with him and had quite a long discussion with him. He was here for the meetings at the U.N., where he spoke.

This was where the Cold War really started entering into the African scene. The struggle between Kasavubu, who was president, and Lumumba, who was the prime minister, Lumumba backed by most of the African states and the Soviet Union, and Kasavubu backed by the United States and the more conservative African states that were able to vote at that time. It was in that context—it was a kind of a Cold War atmosphere which I think is where the Cold War really entered into African politics, primarily through the struggle in the Congo. That was when it first made itself felt.

Of course later on it became so very important in the Angola struggle particularly, the competition there which we got caught up into as well. The American Committee on Africa was learning as it went along, really, in dealing with the events that were happening. You had asked about working at the U.N. The U.N. was important because it was dealing with the non-self-governing territories, and then it dealt with apartheid later on. South West Africa, now Namibia, of course was on its agenda because of the relationship with South Africa and all that struggle. But these were centered at the U.N.

When Sam Nujoma, who has been the president of Namibia since independence, first came to the United States in 1959, one of the first places he came was to our office, because we were among the very few organizations that were really involved and would introduce these people to, not only delegations to the United Nations, but also to Washington, to possibly sympathetic Congress people and to the organizational life of the United States. But the U.N. was important because one of the first places that any African wanted to go was to the United Nations to make their case, and we helped them.

Q: Does the ACOA still exist today?

HOUSER: No.

Q: When did it finally end?

HOUSER: Of course there was a real decision for the ACOA after South Africa entered its new, free stage in 1994. We had many discussions. I retired as executive director in 1981, but I kept in touch, working with Jennifer Davis and those who followed after me. We had to decide: What were we going to be? What's happened now is that the American Committee on Africa has joined in a merger with its own creation, the Africa Fund, which was our tax-exempt companion, you might say, and the Africa Policy Information Center, APIC, which grew out of the Washington Office on Africa, which the American Committee on Africa originally set up back in the late '60s, early '70s. The new merged organization is called Africa Action, and it is located not in New York but in Washington. Salih Booker, who had been one of the trustees of the Africa Fund, is now the executive director of Africa Action. We had the 50th anniversary of the founding of ACOA last October in Washington—a well-attended dinner was held. But ACOA as such now is a merged organization with APIC and the Africa Fund. It's called Africa Action.

Q: We've talked about some of the successes. Can you tell me about some of the failures of the ACOA?

HOUSER: Do you have any hints about it?

Q: No, I'll leave it open to you. Were there things you had hoped to do and were unable to do, or internal contradictions? One of the things that comes out in your book is the fact that you yourself were a pacifist, but you had to deal with liberation movements that were engaged in armed struggle. How did the ACOA deal with that?

HOUSER: That was my problem and not the ACOA's problem, because I had come out of a pacifist background. That became a real struggle for me at the time of the Algerian war, because we as a Committee and me personally worked with the representatives of the FLN, who represented the basic movement for independence against the French and they were fighting a war for independence. Yet when Yazid and Chanderli came to New York and to the United Nations, one of the key organizations which backed them up was the American Committee on Africa, and we had specialists dealing with North Africa who became important advisers to the Committee in working with them.

It was a problem for me in justifying what I should do in relation to a struggle which was not nonviolent. But I faced that with other issues too. There was Guinea- Bissau, and the PAIGC. Cabral, who I thought was a great person—Amilcar Cabral —we sponsored his visits here, but they had a war going on. And in Mozambique, Eduardo Mondlane, an old friend of mine who had studied at Oberlin, had been at Northwestern and then with the U.N. and then left and went back, headed up FRELIMO, and I always maintained a close contact with Eduardo.

I remember riding on a plane from Cairo to Nairobi, sitting beside Eduardo on one occasion. He said, "Pay attention to what's going to happen in a few weeks." And it was the beginning of this

war as far as Mozambique and FRELIMO against Portuguese domination was concerned. And in the Angolan situation, that was very complicated by the Cold War in a unique way. I went in with the guerrillas, with Holden Roberto at that time, from northern Angola, walking in across the border from the Congo into northern Angola and spent a couple of weeks with guerrillas. And then I went across the desert with Polisario in 1979. I went all the way from western Algeria at Tindouf to the Atlantic Ocean, driving in these Spanish Land Rovers with Polisario militants with their weapons, and me accompanying them, sleeping on the sand. It was a fascinating period for me, but I was caught in these war situations in Africa.

But that was not a problem for the ACOA, because the ACOA was not a pacifist organization. My mission was not—wrongly, or rightly, whatever—my mission was not to make it what it was not. And we supported the liberation struggle. That was the purpose of ACOA. We supported the liberation struggle in Africa, and we worked with the Organization of African Unity, the OAU, and with elements in the United Nations and with the freedom movements in Africa.

Failures? You know it changed with the times. After Sharpeville, 1960, the picture changed because South Africa and the ANC had been nonviolent organizations, and they made a decision after the Sharpeville Massacre of March 1960—because the government banned the ANC and the Pan-Africanist Congress, and they had to go underground. Tambo—Oliver Tambo, whom I knew well and worked with, left South Africa. We invited him over; he came over in 1960 and toured around the U.S. The whole situation changed after the Sharpeville Massacre, and the ANC went underground and decided that the armed struggle was the way they should go.

I contend, however, that what really brought the change in South Africa was not the armed struggle, which was never equal to what the government had, but international pressure, sanctions and all that sort of thing which we helped work on here. And also the internal struggle in South Africa, the boycotts and the strikes and such that took place within South Africa while the ANC was banned and other movements arose.

Q: What about Roberto and Mboya being seen as possibly taking money from the U.S. government. Did that come up in ACOA discussions?

HOUSER: Oh, the CIA was ... Yes.

Q: And was that true?

HOUSER: That was a problem. It still is for me, because I had—who knows how many CIA people I may have talked with in the course of history, I don't know, but [I] never identified with it. Holden, there's no doubt, got support from the CIA, but we met Holden when he was a young innocent. His uncle, Barros Necaca, was the head of the UPNA, the Union of the People of Northern Angola, and Holden was his younger nephew. I was a key to bringing to their attention

the fact that the All African People's Conference was taking place in Accra. I also alerted George Padmore, who was working with Nkrumah and who was really a key organizer of the All African People's Conference, that this Angola movement existed. Necaca could not come, so he appointed Holden Roberto to come, and that's when Holden was put into the, certainly the African spotlight, and internationally. We came into that.

Now the CIA came in at some point. I can remember—I don't know whether this is in the book or not—I can remember being in Leopoldville once and Holden came to see me, and they had an office which by this time was the UPA or the GRAE, the government in exile. He didn't trust a young fellow who was the head of the office, and so he brought an envelope to me and he said, "I wonder if you will take this back and see that it is spent correctly." And in it were two new, crisp—four, four new crisp one hundred dollar bills. And I wonder, where the heck is Holden getting these newly manufactured hundred dollar bills? Well, there's no doubt Holden at a later point ... but by this time ...

Q: What time are we talking about when this incident happened?

HOUSER: That would probably—it was in the '60s. Because the last time I saw Holden was in 1974. It was after the coup took place in Portugal, and the situation was changing, and it was safe for him to go back. And I remember being in Leopoldville—I guess it wasn't Kinshasa yet—and going to his office and I didn't see him, I think, or if I did I saw him very briefly. And he said he would get back to me and he never did, and I haven't tried to be in touch with him. He was on his way to Luanda at that time. I never saw him when I was in Angola, which was several times—I went with the MPLA at that time.

Now Mboya was a different picture, I think. He got his money, initially, from the United Autoworkers. They gave him I think it was \$35,000 or \$40,000 to build a trade union center. Now the international part of it was between the ICFTU and the WFTU—the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions with headquarters in Brussels and the WFTU which was the Soviet part of it. This was the Cold War par excellence. Tom was with the West, and he was in the ICFTU. What money he had gotten through the CIA, I have no idea. I don't know. He didn't really in a sense need to get it that way. Of course he was killed before there was a chance for anything to develop. He certainly got money through the trade union movement and through the faction of the trade union movement that was primarily affiliated with the ICFTU and the United Autoworkers. He was close to the Reuthers. Of course the Reuthers also—the UAW supported the American Committee on Africa. The first Washington office we set up was when Victor Reuther was the head of the international division of the UAW; it was in the UAW headquarters in Washington. That was before we started up on a full-time basis.

Q: I have one final question for you. Maybe two. This is the second to last. It's the issue of organizing solidarity movements or doing work in solidarity with Africa inside the United States, and how race and class impacted that work in your view. I want your analysis of that.

HOUSER: The situation changed in the United States of course. Black is beautiful. Black Power. I knew Carmichael. It was a combination of Sekou Toure and Kwame Nkrumah. I knew him.

Q: Kwame Toure.

HOUSER: Kwame Toure, thank you. We were in touch with the NAACP, with Martin Luther King, with A. Phillip Randolph. Our board in the ACOA was probably 50:50—I don't know that we ever counted it up, but it was black and white. It was an interracial organization. I always felt, and I brought it up to the board, I said, "A white person should not be the head of this organization." And there was some debate on that within the organization. They prevailed upon me, because I was prepared to resign, to do what I'm not sure, but they said, "Well, you know the liberation movement," and so forth.

Q: So this was the decision that you made some time after being executive director, as the racial situation changed in the United States.

HOUSER: Exactly. We're talking about the later '60s. At the beginning ... the situation changed in CORE, of which I had been the executive secretary for 10 years. I left that in 1955 to become the executive director of the American Committee on Africa. Then the Montgomery bus boycott came along. King rose into prominence. He was not a Black Power person. He made his first speech on Africa under our auspices in 1965 at Human Rights Day at Hunter College auditorium, December 10. I remember that well. No problem. But the situation began to change—Malcolm X and then within the black community organizations dealing with the race factor as such came into prominence, and how did we relate to that? Now we set up the first American civil rights movement with Africa, what was the name of it?

Q: The African Liberation Support Committee?

HOUSER: Nope. I mean the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, that was Phil Randolph and Jim Farmer, Roy Wilkins. This was a movement that was set up to join the organizations dealing with the race situation in the United States into a combined organization dealing with Africa. The first conference—we organized it. I, myself, got in touch with Wilkins, with the key civil rights leaders including King and Randolph, and they all agreed to set up this organization. And we held two preliminary meetings and decided to hold a national conference, which was held in a Columbia University retreat center not far from here, at Harriman, New York, and that's where it was held. I set it up, but I was white and it was obviously not something that a white person could take a real leadership position in. Ted Brown, who was working at that

time with Phil Randolph and with King and with the NAACP, was appointed as the executive secretary of this organization.

Q: Now why do you say a white person couldn't be in the leadership position?

HOUSER: Because the atmosphere in the country had changed. And just as white persons were not welcome in SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] at a later point working in the South, so to have a white person who was the head of an organization really dealing with the guts of the liberation struggle in Africa was not right; it wasn't in tune with the times. I recognized that. There was no way. For the first three weeks that Ted Brown worked with the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa—that was it, ANLCA—Ted Brown worked out of my office. And then he moved to AMSAC, which was later discovered to have CIA money.

Q: And what is AMSAC?

HOUSER: The American Society of African Culture. They were located a few blocks from us. I always wondered where their money came from, because they had such a nice office and I didn't know. Our money came from the 10 bucks, 15, 25 bucks people sent in. We got no foundation money at all in our organization. And they had this plush office. I wondered where the heck does it come from? Well, it came out they were receiving CIA money. But they were a black organization. We had a good relationship with them, worked closely with them on things. Ted then moved—headquartered the American Leadership Conference in their office, which was a logical move, no problem. But we in the American Committee on Africa, who had gotten the American Leadership Conference started, were not the kingpin in that organization at this point. Phil Randolph was given credit for organizing it, but I got in touch with Phil first. And then we had a meeting with representatives from the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the NAACP, the Urban League, CORE, the ... women's organization, Dorothy Height—the National Council of Negro Women. They all met together, and that's when, officially, the American Leadership Conference on Africa was set up. Well, the mood had changed in the United States. It was different.

Q: What was organizing in the white community like before that shift? One of the things you say in your book too is that Americans in general were anti-colonial, and I wondered what you mean by that. Who were the white Americans who were drawn to Africa solidarity movements?

HOUSER: There was in the American tradition, the anti-colonial past, our own revolutionary war against British domination. That's part of the American myth, if you want to call it that. It was in the background. I tell an incident, I think, in there about a trip to the Gold Coast, my first trip in 1954 when I was going past that big rally of the Convention People's Party, the CPP—on a side of a hill, I remember. There was a group of young kids going by the large gathering, of

girls and boys carrying wood on their heads, no hands. And I took a picture of it, and two young men dressed in Gold Coast finery, kente cloth and all, approached me and said, "What do you mean taking pictures of little children who are not too well dressed? Are you going back to Britain to show them that we're not ready for independence?" This was '54, [they] became independent in '57. I said, "No, I'm not going back to Britain, I'm going back to America." And they said, "That's different. You people in America are in favor of freedom for us."

What a contrast with what happened later on. That's another story. But there was this anti-colonial tradition within the United States. And through Africa in my first trip, 1954, except in the Cameroon—I think I outline this something in my book here. The UPC in the Cameroon were very suspicious of an American, because [of] the Korean War, the Vietnam ... Dien Bien Phu fell at the time, in '54, at the time of my trip and this was a French-speaking area, so France was very much involved. They were suspicious of an American, but otherwise an American was anti-colonial.

Q: But that was in Africa. I guess I'm asking about white Americans that you were trying to mobilize.

HOUSER: Okay. Gunther's *Inside Africa* came out and got a lot of attention. Within liberal America, there was a role, we felt, for an anti-imperialist committee such as we wanted to be. And as I say in the book, the only one of my advisers whom I contacted about whether I should give up whatever I was giving up and work with the American Committee on Africa, the only person who said, "George, don't be foolish, you can never make a way for yourself, it can't work," was Roger Baldwin, who had formed the ACLU of course.

Well, I didn't take his advice. I took the advice of others and did it and at that time there was very little knowledge about Africa, or very little interest, even in the black community. I mean after all Liberia and Ethiopia were not something to look at that time. Ethiopia had been conquered by the Italians. Liberia was in such dire straits from the so-called Americo-Liberians who had gone over there as freed slaves. There was very little excitement in the black community except in certain limited circles, and whether a committee that was devoted to an anti-colonial agenda could make a place for itself was a very real question. We did not know.

But I felt in my gut—I was excited about it myself, and a few others ... Our Committee was composed of people who were excited, Peter Weiss particularly, who had an organization going that was placing people ... it was a pre-Peace Corps sort of thing. Peter and George Shepherd and we had a group of people—Bob Browne down in Teaneck now. A few of us said we've got a chance at making this into a significant organization on the American scene. I think we were right, but the Vietnam War was going on, the civil rights struggle was at its height, and Africa was in the future at that time.

We always felt, all right, after the Vietnam War, and we'll see how the civil rights struggle—because there should be a union of some sort between the civil rights struggle and the parallel struggle—it was very much of a parallel struggle. I have a chapter in a book on Martin Luther King ... I was invited to write something about King and Africa and there was very little to point to, but I pointed out in that, a kind of parallel development. The Black Power movement in the United States rose about the same time as the Black Consciousness movement arose in South Africa. They paralleled each other, and the struggle of the organizations in Africa, and particularly in southern Africa, paralleled the growth and the dynamics of the civil rights struggle in the United States—the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-56 and the organization of—the Zimbabwe organizations and the change that took place in the Namibian—SWAPO, Southwest African People's Organization, and the movements in Angola and Mozambique. They all date [from] the '50s. They were just getting started, and they kind of paralleled what was happening here in the United States so there was an international ... They didn't have any formal connection with one another, but they influenced one another in spirit. We were part of that in our way.

Q: Is there anything else that you want to share about the 1950s especially, or in general about your work in African solidarity?

HOUSER: All I can say is it was an exciting period in which we didn't have to look around to find things to do. I was fortunate in being able to meet the leaders of the movements, and I attended the All African People's Conference—the first one in Accra, the second in Tunis, the third in Cairo. I attended the foundation meeting of the Organization of African Unity. I knew the leaders of virtually all of these movements and worked with them. We saw them here in New York and the U.N. We introduced them to leaders on the American scene and in some cases to members of Congress.

Our contacts with the State Department were a little different because we were never ... The State Department was always suspicious of us as an organization, as over against, say, the African American Institute which was financed—they got CIA money again too. This was an exciting period for me, and I'm grateful for that important period of my life, which was my life for many years and even after I retired from the Committee. I retired in '81. I took trips to Africa in '81, '83, '84. Then of course we were invited by Walter Sisulu to work with him on his memoirs. And we put out a book, *I Will Go Singing*, Herb Shore and I, my good friend out in California.[9] We put out this book. I've had all of these, let's say privileges, of being part of a very exciting period of history. I'm grateful for that.

Q: Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

[1] George M. Houser, *No One Can Stop the Rain: Glimpses of Africa's Liberation Struggle* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989).

[2] "The Struggle Never Ends," comments by George M. Houser at the 50th anniversary of the American Committee on Africa, The Africa Fund, and the Africa Policy Information Center, Washington, DC, October 3, 2003, <http://www.africaaction.org/about/GeorgeHouser1003.htm>.

[3] CORE was one of the major U.S. civil rights organizations. Of the voluminous material available, see particularly James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New American Library, 1985), and August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[4] See George M. Houser, "American Supporters of the Defiance Campaign," statement at a meeting of the United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid, June 25, 1982, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/campaigns/houser.html>.

[5] National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1909, is the oldest and largest U.S. civil rights organization.

[6] In March 1952 the board of Americans for South African Resistance rejected a request for cooperation from W. A. Hunton of the Council on African Affairs. Houser was assigned the task of writing the letter, which declined to work with communist organizations. In an early draft of *No One Can Stop the Rain*, Houser made the following comment, which did not appear in the published volume due to editorial cuts for space:

I had the task of writing the letter saying in effect that we were not prepared to work with Communist organizations because they would use the S. A. issue "to bolster their own partisan interests in the internal power struggle." Hunton replied immediately to my note. I still feel a sense of shame about my part of the correspondence as I read it. "If you and the group for which you speak are afraid of association with any movement that has communist support, then it would seem that your support of the S.A. civil disobedience campaign is itself questionable, inasmuch as that campaign is supported by all sections of progressive S. Africans, including Communists. And that support has been welcomed by the African and Indian leaders. They have learned a lesson of unity in struggle; it is to be hoped that we in America will learn it too before it is too late."

... Alphaeus Hunton used to come to some ACOA events in later years. I never really had a lengthy talk with him until many years later when he was working in Ghana under Nkrumah on a

research project. I always respected Hunton and had deep admiration for Robeson although I have never been a CP sympathizer.

[7] In 1959, in what Houser says was " the only major internal struggle for control of the organization," a group associated with fundraiser Harold Oram tried to oust leading pacifist and socialist A. J. Muste from the board of the American Committee on Africa. This group also opposed the close working relationships that ACOA was developing with liberation movements, and argued instead for emphasizing public relations and gaining influence with Congress and the State Department. In an early draft of *No One Can Stop the Rain*, Houser made the following remarks, later cut for space:

The division on the board came to a head in March 1959 when [Eliot] Newcomb [associated with Harold Oram] was nominated for chairman against Don Harrington. Almost all of our board members were present for this crucial meeting. The key vote for chairman was won by Harrington 15 to 14. In the vote for board members following this five of the board members of his group were voted off the board including Newcomb. There is no doubt that if the election for chairman had gone the other way, the direction of ACOA would have been different and I think I would have been out of a job. There is no doubt that the leadership of the majority on the Board was held by Peter Weiss who over the years was not only one of my chief supporters but also a helpful critic.

[8] See the chapters on Angola in *No One Can Stop the Rain*, pages 76-80 and 150-176.

[9] Walter Sisulu, George M. Houser, and Herbert Shore, *I Will Go Singing: Walter Sisulu Speaks of His Life and the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Cape Town: Robben Island Museum, in association with The Africa Fund, New York, 2001). Herb Shore, a theater director, writer, university professor and activist, died in October 2004.