

Interview with Bill Sutherland

"I'm a person who believes in nonviolence on principle. And true nonviolence is a spiritual force that the people can have, which can be the most powerful thing going. But I respect the revolutionist who adopts a violent method, because I think that the most important thing is the revolution." —Bill Sutherland

"I know Bill Sutherland for a long, long time. An early and persistent builder of organizational links between Americans and South Africans, Bill has distinguished himself as a vital ally to our cause, and as a friend. In his capacity as an expatriate, living all these years on the frontlines in Tanzania, Bill has provided hospitality, support and encouragement for untold numbers of people the world over, demonstrating the truest of African spirits." —The Most Reverend Desmond Mpilo Tutu[1]

Introduction

For more than 50 years, African American pacifist and Pan African activist Bill Sutherland served as an "unofficial ambassador," making links between Americans and African liberation struggles. He was sentenced to four years in prison as a conscientious objector during World War II and maintained close ties over the years with fellow radical pacifists who were his colleagues in that era, such as antiwar leader David Dellinger, civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, and George Houser, the director of the American Committee on Africa from the 1950s through the 1970s. Sutherland was a colleague of Pan Africanists such as George Padmore and C. L. R. James, and kept in close touch with African leaders including Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania.

Sutherland lived in Ghana from 1953 to 1961. From the 1960s through the 1990s he was based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. In both places, his house was always a point of call for African American visitors making contact with struggles on the African continent. Before the anti-apartheid cause attracted wide public attention in the 1980s, Ghana and then Tanzania were the African countries that most inspired Africa activists in the United States. In each case, Sutherland was there, to open doors and make introductions.

Sutherland's contacts crossed a wide range of racial, ideological, and national lines. He was instrumental in sparking the formation of Americans for South African Resistance in 1952, which became the American Committee on Africa the following year. But his most consistent organizational link in the United States was with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), beginning with a summer stint in its student peace service after graduation from Bates College in 1940.

Sutherland's informal contacts with the AFSC stretched over the entire period. Between 1975 and 1982, he served formally as Southern Africa representative for the organization, based out of Dar es Salaam, and traveled each year to the United States for extended national speaking tours. In this period, and also later in the 1980s when Sutherland also

occasionally returned for speaking engagements, the AFSC was one of a handful of organizations that served as national contact points for anti-apartheid activists around the country.

Although the AFSC as an organization was not specifically focused on Africa, as were other groups such as the American Committee on Africa, the Washington Office on Africa, and TransAfrica, it had the unique advantage of having offices located not only on the east coast but around the country. Sutherland's speaking tours were one of the catalytic factors in linking diverse sectors of activists across racial and ideological lines, and increasing participation by minority activists within the AFSC itself.

Sutherland also put the AFSC in touch with Desmond Tutu. The AFSC used its position as 1947 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize to repeatedly nominate Tutu for the prize, which he eventually received in 1984.

The historical strands of connections between Africa and the United States in which Sutherland participated, including both the links to Ghana and Tanzania and the organizational history of the AFSC in particular, have not yet attracted the systematic attention they deserve from historians. The sources are scattered and fragmentary, whether for Sutherland's role in particular or for the wider networks he was involved in. There are, however, several possible entry points for future researchers.

Sutherland published a book, *Guns and Gandhi in Africa: Pan-African Insights on Nonviolence, Armed Struggle, and Liberation*, co-authored with Matt Meyer, in 2000. The book includes reflections on Sutherland's life and perspectives, as well as conversations by Sutherland and his co-author with African leaders and activists. Additional published sources are mentioned in the endnotes below. In terms of archives, as of 2004 no one has yet made systematic use of the AFSC archives in Philadelphia to explore this set of African solidarity links. Sutherland reports that some of his own papers are with family members in Ghana, and others possibly still in his house in Dar es Salaam.

The transcript below, which gives an overview of Sutherland's life and views, is of a 30-minute video presentation prepared for the launch on June 23, 2004 of the AFSC's Bill Sutherland Institute for Africa Advocates. The video was produced by Mimi Edmunds from an interview with Bill Sutherland by Prexy Nesbitt and Mimi Edmunds on July 19, 2003. Italicized text in the transcript is narrative text provided by the video producer.

Also included as supplementary material are three short excerpts from *Guns and Gandhi*, and two short documents from the American Friends Service Committee archives in Philadelphia.

William Minter
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Transcript

Interviewee: Bill Sutherland

Interviewers: Prexy Nesbitt and Mimi Edmunds

Location: Brooklyn, New York, USA

Date: July 19, 2003

Producer and writer: Mimi Edmunds

Videographer: Joe Brunette

Video editor: Tony Quintero

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BILL SUTHERLAND: Nonviolent Warrior for Peace

Reflects on Half a Century of His Life and Experience in Africa

SUTHERLAND: 50 years.

For half a century Bill Sutherland lived and worked in Africa, becoming a critical link between the freedom struggles on both continents as well as a kind of people's ambassador.

SUTHERLAND: My life, living it has helped some people. You know, by actually going and living in Africa, I have very often been a bridge between the African American movements and the African movements.

Author of Guns and Gandhi in Africa, Bill Sutherland remains a strong supporter of nonviolence.

SUTHERLAND: I'm a person who believes in nonviolence on principle. True nonviolence is a spiritual force that the people can have, which can be the most powerful thing going.

I lived in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, which was an all-white community. And we received a bit of ostracism during that time, my sister and I. But the Congregational Young People's Society and the Congregational church had a director who was a young white southerner who was also a pacifist, who invited me in and—that was part of the reason. But then the other thing—it's all here, of course, but the other thing was that in Montclair, New Jersey, there was an African American church that my father used to go to. It had at one time a speaker from the Gandhian movement, one of these fiery Indians. And so those things influenced me.

Bill Sutherland's pacifism during World War II meant a four-year sentence in Lewisburg prison as a conscientious objector. Through his belief in nonviolence, he made lifelong friends who shared his views, Dave Dellinger and Don Benedict among them. He was released in 1945.[2]

SUTHERLAND: I knew Dave Dellinger much earlier. I knew him when I was at Bates and he was at Yale and we were in the Student Christian Movement.

[Later] Dave and Don and some of the other people from Union Seminary had set up this community center in Newark, which was called the Newark Ashram, because they were all interested in the Gandhian way. And I came out of college—I graduated from college in '40, and after working with the American Friends Service Committee[3] and the Student Peace Service Program during that summer of '40, in the fall I joined the Newark Ashram. But Dave and Don and Joe Bevilacqua and all of these other people who had been at Union were in prison. They were in Danbury Prison. I joined the Newark Ashram at that time. And was also secretary of the Youth Committee Against War.

NESBITT: There are a lot of questions young people have about how AFSC first got involved in Africa.

SUTHERLAND: I was in England on a speaking tour, and I met this man who was the editor of the *Bantu World*. And he was the one who told me that there was going to be the Defiance Against Unjust Laws Campaign. That was '53, I guess, or so.[4] And I came back and told George [Houser] and Bayard Rustin about it, and they were the CORE executives.[5] But they were busy with that, so I just took the CORE literature and sent it to the South Africans who then wrote to CORE and to George and Bayard, and that got them interested. And that was the beginning of Americans for South African Resistance.[6]

Americans for South African Resistance was the first organization. Then George and Bayard and this fellow who was a minister for the community church in New York had a meeting, and they decided to broaden the prospects to the whole of Africa, you see.

NESBITT: That's when they formed, then, the American Committee on Africa?

SUTHERLAND: That's right.

NESBITT: How did you get interested, Bill? How did you, the individual?

SUTHERLAND: I got interested because Dave Dellinger and Ralph DiGia and Arthur Emory and I were on this peacemaker project in Europe, where we were going to go—we were going to bicycle from Paris to Moscow and speak against war. And when that project was over, I went to England to talk about it. But during the time that we were preparing for it and so on, in Paris and in London, I met these African students who were so gung-ho about African liberation and the freedom of their countries.

I thought that America, in the height of the McCarthy period—I didn't foresee Martin Luther King, I didn't foresee the women's movement or all these other—I thought things were going to just go down, down, down in America. And I decided that I wanted to put my lot in with the African liberation movement.

Bill wasn't the first member of his family to take a deep interest in Africa.

NESBITT: Was your father and family interested in Africa?

SUTHERLAND: In some ways, because the family is unusual in terms of this roots business. We had—on my father's side, there was an old patriarch named Scipio Vaughan. And he had been a slave, but he was a skilled carpenter, and his master, who was a rather sickly person, told him that if he would use the proceeds of his carpentry to help to educate the master's children, because the master was dying, he would free him. So Scipio married this American Indian woman. And they had 11 children. But two of the sons he told, on his deathbed, to go back to Africa, to where he came from. And he told them where he came from, which was Nigeria. And these two sons went back to Nigeria, but they always kept up a correspondence with the family. So we had this direct connection. And that family meets, I guess—I think it was—I think they're supposed to meet sometime this month. But I've been to several of these reunions of this family. All of this is in the February 1975 *Ebony Magazine*.^[7]

When I was young, it didn't make too much of an impression on me. I knew that we would see our African cousins every now and then, and one of them gave me a palm fan and all. But that wasn't what made me go to Africa. It was much more the influence of the meeting of these students.

Bill wanted to go first to Nigeria but his history preceded him, making him suspect. Nigeria was still under British colonial rule.

SUTHERLAND: I was supposed to go first to Nigeria, not to Ghana, but the English must have had a dossier on me, because I stayed in England for over nine months trying to get into Nigeria and I couldn't do it. But Ghana had internal self-government, and that meant that they had charge of immigration

EDMUNDS: If the Nigerians had a dossier on you—or the British had a dossier on you, it was because of your work?

SUTHERLAND: I'd been in prison, yes. And then I was an activist on the side of race relations and all that sort of stuff. But I think it was mainly because of my activities in the antiwar movements and things of that sort.

EDMUNDS: So the English had the dossier on you, given them by the Americans.

SUTHERLAND: Yes.

And so in 1953, Ghana became home for Bill Sutherland.

SUTHERLAND: George Padmore and an MP in the Parliament wrote letters to Nkrumah on my behalf, and I got my permission to go to Ghana, and that's why I ended up there.

March 6, 1957: Ghana becomes Sub-Saharan Africa's first nation to break free from colonial rule and become independent, pushing it to the front of the continental struggle for freedom. Bill Sutherland became an unofficial ambassador for Americans coming through, especially African Americans.

SUTHERLAND: I have very often been a bridge between the African American movements and the African movements. People like Martin Luther King, for example, I was instrumental in getting him invited to the independence of Ghana in 1957.[8]

At that time I was a private secretary to the finance minister of Ghana, and I put his name in as one of the invitees to the independence. And then when independence came, there was another African American, Dr. Lee, who was a dentist who had also come to Ghana.[9] He had Martin Luther King and his wife to dinner with Julius Nyerere, who was there at the time.

At this historical event of Ghanaian independence, Bill Sutherland introduced Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere to Dr. Martin Luther King. The relationship went both ways across the Atlantic.

SUTHERLAND: I got the African liberation movements to sign on to the March on Washington.

NESBITT: You hosted Malcolm X, too, right?

SUTHERLAND: Yes. It was just after he had come back from Mecca. He had passed through. When you say I hosted him, I met him at a party at the Algerian embassy, and we got along well, and then I chauffeured him around to his various appointments, and so on, and got to know him fairly well.

NESBITT: You really were the kind of people's host for all the African Americans who came through in all those—everybody always said—and I drove your car for a while. And I know that when I drove your car when you were gone, people were always hailing your car, because they thought you were in the car. And then I'd have to explain, no, I'm just borrowing Bill's Peugeot.

SUTHERLAND: Well, I had my house, I had people there once they had come in and had no place to stay. I had them stay at my house. I guess you could call me an unofficial ambassador.

It was the 1960s. The African and African American struggles were moving away from nonviolence as a way of achieving liberation and taking a more militant stance. Despite his belief in nonviolence, Bill Sutherland saw the need for the contributions of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

SUTHERLAND: But I would say that their roles were complementary. At that time that Malcolm came, he was much more interested in a worldview. He had just come from Mecca, and he had broadened his vision of Islam to include all. Then he went back and he establishes—was in the process of establishing this Organization of African-American Unity.

Martin had been so involved with the American scene that he hadn't done too much about this relationship with Africa. In fact, I saw him in England a few months before he died, and he was saying he wanted to get his organization to come and be more active.

In Africa the taking up of arms challenged the concept of nonviolence. In the quest for liberation, Bill Sutherland recognized the contradiction and accepted the necessity of armed struggle.

SUTHERLAND: I don't think there's any reconciliation. It just is. Facts. But I think that in Africa, that the Sharpeville Massacre was a key turning point for a decision to engage in armed struggle rather than carry on the nonviolent approach. I think I've said in the book that I had talked to this young South African who was active, Philip Kgosana,[10] who said that they were never—he would never go into South Africa again without a rifle in his hands because of what happened there.

We have always believed that the structural violence that apartheid was and certain capitalistic countries have, and so on, that nobody can equate the violence that people use when they're oppressed and down and then that kind of violence and say that they're both the same. This is ridiculous. As far as I was concerned, I always received a lot of criticism from people in America, ultra-leftists, on my pacifist or nonviolent activist approach. But with the revolutionists in Africa, even those who were engaged in armed struggle, they always looked upon me as a comrade and said, you do what you do in terms of your own philosophy, and we're in the same struggle. But they were not the same armchair revolutionists that some of the ultras were in America.

The standard thing that I always said was that if somebody's got the heel of the oppressor on their necks, I'm not going to say wait until I get the proper nonviolent way to take it off. You have to take it off however you can. But I think that as far as the American scene is concerned, the nonviolent revolutionary approach, I think, has been the only way to go.

EDMUNDS: What about Nkrumah?

SUTHERLAND: Well, Nkrumah never pretended or had any pacifist tendency or nonviolence on principle. He was a very pragmatic person. He wrote his book on positive action, having observed what happened in India, and thought that it could be applied in the Gold Coast. But it wasn't—he at no time was a person who was, in any sense, a Gandhian on principle. I think, when we had the Positive Action Conference in Ghana at the time of the Sharpeville incident, and right after the French exploded the nuclear bomb in the Sahara, he had asked the people who believed in nonviolence to set up the

conference. [11] He believed in what was the most practical thing to do in any particular case.

EDMUNDS: Are you a pragmatist?

SUTHERLAND: I'm a person who believes in nonviolence on principle. True nonviolence is a spiritual force that the people can have, which can be the most powerful thing going. But I respect the revolutionist who adopts a violent method, because I think that the most important thing is the revolution.

Bill Sutherland's friendships with Africa's first leaders reached far and wide.

EDMUNDS: What did Lumumba[12] mean to you?

SUTHERLAND: Well, I think that he was cut off before he could show what he could do, and that's all.

SUTHERLAND: Kaunda?[13] I think that—I feel close to Kaunda on principle.

In the early 1960s Bill moved to Tanzania where he lived for more than 30 years, earning the friendship of President Julius Nyerere, for whom he worked.[14] Bill also came to know the young Mozambican leaders in their struggle for liberation from Portugal.[15]

NESBITT: You knew Samora?

SUTHERLAND: Yes.

NESBITT You knew people like Marcelino dos Santos?

SUTHERLAND: I knew Marcelino very well. And it was—Marcelino would have been—he would have put me right in the line with Eduardo. Eduardo, at one time, this was—

EDMUNDS: Eduardo Mondlane?

SUTHERLAND: Mondlane. He told me one time, he says, I know they're going to try to push me aside as this thing goes on. I don't represent the true Marxist position, he said. And I'm ready for that. I know it.

NESBITT: Eduardo said that to you?

SUTHERLAND: Oh, yes. He said it to me right on my own porch, that he realized that they would probably do that to him.

NESBITT: "They" would be? Meaning the rest of FRELIMO?

SUTHERLAND: Well, the Marxists, the Marxist element there. And that they thought he was useful at the stage that the revolution was, but they would not consider him the most reliable person to be head of the state.

NESBITT: I often think Eduardo must be rolling over in his grave about what is happening in today's Mozambique.

SUTHERLAND: Well, I think Eduardo would. I think a lot of people would. I think Nyerere would be very disappointed. Oh, a lot of people would be, because the whole continent has not meant a change for the ordinary people. The ordinary people have not benefited. You know it's an unfinished revolution, that's what it is, throughout. But I have the faith that the revolution will continue.

EDMUNDS: If you could say who you think has been the longest-lasting or most impressive leaders of the continent today, who would you give that to?

SUTHERLAND: I think that Nyerere and, of course, Nkrumah had his vision of a united Africa. But I think Nyerere and Mandela probably to me are the two outstanding people.

For Americans today, Bill Sutherland has some cautionary thoughts.

SUTHERLAND: To not simply judge Africa by the negative images that are coming out today in terms of AIDS and wars and that sort of thing. And to realize that a good part of what's happening today in Africa was caused and is caused by the influences of the outside world—the Cold War, the support of dictators. Although we can't say exactly what the future is, not to forget that just as in Eastern Europe we discovered suddenly that there was an undercurrent of things happening that we don't know about, that within the African continent, too, there may be a trend that is hopeful.

Bill Sutherland's legacy and contribution to African and American relations during Africa's first half century of independence remain unique and invaluable. After 50 years of working in solidarity and friendship, Bill Sutherland has no regrets.

EDMUNDS: Are you glad that you had those 50 years that you saw?

SUTHERLAND: Oh, I think I was there at a really good period. Yes. I'm very happy that I was there when I was there. That was the up period.

[1] Desmond Tutu, foreword to *Guns and Gandhi in Africa: Pan-African Insights on Nonviolence, Armed Struggle, and Liberation*, by Bill Sutherland and Matt Meyer (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), xii.

[2] Bill Sutherland, as well as Dave Dellinger, George Houser and others, is among those featured in a Public Broadcasting Service documentary on World War II draft resisters, "The Good War and Those who Refused to Fight It" The transcript of the film, video clips, and additional references are available online at <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/thegoodwar>. Among other incidents, it recounts how Sutherland initiated a sit-down strike against segregation in his prison.

[3] The American Friends Service Committee, founded in 1917 as a Quaker service organization, has a long history of engagement not only in relief programs and support for conscientious objectors to war, but also in supporting domestic and international movements for social justice. It became involved in Southern Africa with a representative in Salisbury, Rhodesia in the late 1950s. But the period of most intense activity on African solidarity was in the late 1970s and 1980s. See <http://www.afsc.org/about/history.htm> for a short summary of the organization's history and contact information for the AFSC archives in Philadelphia.

[4] The Defiance Campaign against Unjust Laws was launched by the African National Congress in June 1952 and was suspended in April 1953. See <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/struggles/defiance.html>. Sutherland's encounter in Birmingham, England with Jacob Mhlapo, the editor of the *African World*, was probably in late 1951. See Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 140-42.

[5] The Congress of Racial Equality (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).

[6] George Houser also tells this story in his book *No One Can Stop the Rain: Glimpses of African Liberation Struggles* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 10-20. But no one has yet fully explored the archival sources for support for the Defiance Campaign by Americans for South African Resistance and other organizations, including the Council on Africa Affairs. The most recent of several books that deal with this topic briefly is James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 90-123.

[7] Era Bell Thompson, "The Vaughan Family: A Tale of Two Continents," *Ebony Magazine*, February 1975, 53. Other members of this extended family include Mrs. Jewel Lafontant of Chicago, who became deputy U.S. solicitor general, and Lady Kofo Ademola (wife of Nigerian chief justice Sir Adetokunbo Ademola), who was the first Nigerian woman to graduate from Oxford.

[8] In his book, Sutherland adds the following recollection: "Bill noticed that Martin and Coretta King were visibly impressed when, on that fateful night in 1957, the British flag was lowered, and the flag of Ghana was raised. Nkrumah, dressed in traditional kente

cloth, his fists waving in the air, tears streaming down his face, shouted over and over again: 'Free at Last, Free at Last, Free at Last!' Six years later, when Martin closed his own speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with a similar phrase, which he attributed to an old Negro spiritual, Bill couldn't help but wonder if those thunderous words in Washington DC had not come from King's memory of that historic evening in Ghana." Sutherland and Meyer, *Guns and Gandhi*, 34.

[9] Dr. Robert Lee had attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania with Kwame Nkrumah. He and his wife Sara, both dentists, moved to Ghana in the 1950s and stayed. They were leading figures in the African American community in Ghana.

[10] Philip Kgosana was a leader of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in Cape Town at the time of demonstrations that led up to the massacre in Sharpeville on March 21, 1960. As a young student he led a march on March 30 of thousands from the townships to the Caledon police station to protest the massacres. After agreeing to disperse the crowd, he was arrested by police.

[11] See Sutherland and Meyer, *Guns and Gandhi*, 36-41, for more on this campaign and conference.

[12] Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Congo, was assassinated on January 17, 1961.

[13] Chapter 4 of *Guns and Gandhi* (95-113) contains an interview with Kenneth Kaunda, the Zambian nationalist leader and first president of independent Zambia.

[14] Chapter 5 of *Guns and Gandhi* (61-93) contains an interview with Julius Nyerere, as well as some additional reflections by Bill Sutherland on his early years in Tanzania.

[15] The leaders mentioned in the following passage are Samora Machel, the first president of independent Mozambique under the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO); Marcelino dos Santos, one of FRELIMO's founders and its deputy president from 1969 to 1977; and Eduardo Mondlane, the first president of FRELIMO, who was killed by a letter bomb from the Portuguese secret police in 1969.