

California State Archives
State Government Oral History Program

Oral History Interview

with

ERNEST E. DEBS

California State Assemblyman, 1943 - 1947
Member, Los Angeles City Council, 1947 - 1958
Member, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, 1958 - 1974

August 14 and October 9, 1987
Los Angeles, California

By Carlos Vasquez
Oral History Program
University of California, Los Angeles

RESTRICTIONS ON THIS INTERVIEW

None.

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PREFACE

On September 25, 1985, Governor George Deukmejian signed into law A.B. 2104 (Chapter 965 of the Statutes of 1985). This legislation established, under the administration of the California State Archives, a State Government Oral History Program "to provide through the use of oral history a continuing documentation of state policy development as reflected in California's legislative and executive history."

The following interview is one of a series of oral histories undertaken for inclusion in the state program. These interviews offer insights into the actual workings of both the legislative and executive processes and policy mechanisms. They also offer an increased understanding of the men and women who create legislation and implement state policy. Further, they provide an overview of issue development in California state government and of how both the legislative and executive branches of government deal with issues and problems facing the state.

Interviewees are chosen primarily on the basis of their contributions to and influence on the policy process of the state of California. They include members of the legislative and executive branches of the state government as well as legislative staff, advocates, members of the media, and other people who played significant roles in specific issue areas of major and continuing importance to California.

By authorizing the California State Archives to work cooperatively with oral history units at California colleges and universities to conduct interviews, this program is structured to take advantage of the resources and expertise in oral history available through California's several institutionally based programs.

Participating as cooperating institutions in the State Government Oral History Program are:

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California State University, Fullerton

Oral History Program
Center for California Studies
California State University, Sacramento

Oral History Program
Claremont Graduate School

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Oral History Program
University of California, Los Angeles

The establishment of the California State Archives State Government Oral History Program marks one of the most significant commitments made by any state toward the preservation and documentation of its governmental history. It supplements the often fragmentary historical written record by adding an organized primary source, enriching the historical information available on given topics and allowing for more thorough historical analysis. As such, the program, through the preservation and publication of interviews such as the one which follows, will be of lasting value to current and future generations of scholars, citizens, and leaders.

John F. Burns
State Archivist

July 27, 1988

This interview is printed on acid-free paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTERVIEW HISTORY	i
BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY	ii
I LIFE HISTORY	
[Session 1, August 14, 1987, Tape 1, Side A]	
Family History	1
Formal Education	3
Coming to California	4
Acting Career	7
Living Through the Depression	14
II EARLY POLITICAL CAREER	
Silver Lake Young Democrats	16
Assistant Sergeant at Arms	17
Running for the State Assembly	19
The Fifty-sixth Assembly District	22
Aimee Semple McPherson's Endorsement	23
Labor Endorsement	26
Politics and Service Organizations	27
[Tape 1, Side B]	
Personal Contact with Voters	30
First-Term Assemblyman	34
Partisanship in State Politics	36
III WORLD WAR II AND CALIFORNIA POLITICS	
Impact of World War II on Political Career	40
Public Relations for Harvey Aluminum Company	43
Impact of World War II on Los Angeles	50
The Japanese-Americans Interned	53
The Zoot-Suit Riots	56
The Debs Campaigns and the Press	58
Race for the Los Angeles City Council	59
[Tape 2, Side A]	
More on the City Council Race	60
IV POSTWAR POLITICS IN CALIFORNIA	
[Session 2, October 9, 1987, Tape 3, Side A]	
Postwar Economic and Social Needs	68
Keeping the "War Babies"	71
Airfields to Airports	72
Building Highways	74
Cross-filing and Patronage	75

	The Assembly Leadership	78
	Opposing Governor Warren's Medical Plan	80
	Why Warren was a Great Governor	82
	Powerful Figures in the Assembly	85
	Relations Between Assembly and Senate	90
	Los Angeles County's Lone Senator	92
V	LEGISLATIVE EXPERIENCES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS	
	Public Housing Legislation	94
	[Tape 3, Side B]	
	Founding California State University, Los Angeles	99
	Urban versus Rural Interests	103
	Creating the UCLA Medical School	105
	Compromise and Successful Legislation	109
	Amateur versus Professional Lawmakers	111
VI	OBSERVATIONS ON CALIFORNIA POLITICS	
	The Power of Lobbyists	112
	Jesse Unruh's Contributions to the California Legislature	114
	Comparing Public Service at Three Levels of Government	116
	Transportation in Los Angeles County	119
	Summarizing the Debs Philosophy of Politics	122
	The Decline of Education in California	125
	[Tape 4, Side A]	
	The United States Constitution in Contemporary America	129
	The "Pendulum" of Politics	132
	The Future of California	133
	"What I Tried to Accomplish"	137

INTERVIEW HISTORY

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Interview Time and Place:

August 14, 1987
Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel in Los Angeles, California
Session of one and three-quarter hours

October 9, 1987
The Jonathan Club in Los Angeles, California
Session of one and three-quarter hours

Editing

Vásquez checked the verbatim manuscript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Insertions by the editor are bracketed. The interviewer also prepared the introductory materials.

Debs reviewed the transcript and returned the transcript to the UCLA Oral History Program with only minor corrections.

Papers

Although there exists an impressive collection of Mr. Debs's papers and memorabilia as a special collection of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library at the California State University, Los Angeles, the materials include only the years Mr. Debs served on the Los Angeles City Council and on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. The interviewer was, therefore, not able to consult personal papers relating to Mr. Debs's assembly career.

Tapes and Interview Records

The original tape recordings of the interviews are in the university archives at UCLA along with the records relating to the interview. Master tapes are preserved at the California State Archives.

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Ernest E. Debs was born on a farm near Toledo, Ohio, in 1904. He was educated in Ohio public schools and came to California in 1923, where he worked at many different jobs, including a short career as an actor. In 1944 he married Lorene Marsh Robertson.

During the 1939 and 1941 legislative sessions, Debs served as assistant sergeant at arms in the California State Assembly. In 1942 he was elected and in 1944 re-elected to represent the Fifty-sixth Assembly District. Unable to serve in the armed forces for reasons of health, he worked in war-related industries during World War II and helped organize temporary housing and entertainment for American soldiers in transit to active duty.

A Democrat, Debs served in the assembly from 1943 to 1947, was chairman of the Assembly Interim Committee on Postwar Airport Projects and Aviation, and vice chairman of the Committee on Health. He also served on the Ways and Means Committee, the Education Committee and the Committee on Government Efficiency and Economy. His legislative interests were mainly in the areas of health and education. He sponsored legislation that created the UCLA Medical School and the Los Angeles campus of the California State University.

In 1947 Debs was elected to the Los Angeles City Council. He served there until 1958, when he was elected to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. Since leaving the board of supervisors in 1974, he has been an active lobbyist on both the state and national levels of government.

I. LIFE HISTORY

[Session 1, August 14, 1987]

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

Family History

VASQUEZ: Mr. Debs, could you tell me something about your origins, your background, where you were born, what part of the country you come from?

DEBS: Well, I was born on a small, five-acre truck farm, that grew produce, outside of Toledo, Ohio, in 1904. My father was English; my mother was Pennsylvania Dutch. We don't go much back in history more than that, because my mother died when I was six months old of typhoid fever. I was supposed to die along with her. For some reason, Providence saved me, along with the help of a neighbor across the street who had a son about the same age as I. And she nursed both of us, me, back to health. For this, I have, of course, been grateful all my life.

VASQUEZ: What were your parents' names?

DEBS: My father's name was Samuel; my mother's name was Mary.

VASQUEZ: Do you have brothers and sisters?

DEBS: I have five brothers and one sister. My sister is still alive. She is two years older than I, at the age of eighty-five. One of my brothers died when he was four years old. The others are already deceased.

VASQUEZ: Tell me something about your childhood and your family life. Were you raised there on the farm?

DEBS: Oh, yes, on this small, five-acre farm. I attended a grade school, from first to eighth grade, in the same schoolhouse. We were very poor. I may say very poor. When I say very poor, there was many a day when I went to school hungry. This was especially in the winter months when all of our canned fruit and vegetables ran out. I was the janitor of the school and so I had to walk a mile and a half to get there an hour before the school kids to get the school ready to be opened, for which I was paid a sum of, I think, four dollars a month. I was also the janitor at the church which was close to our home on Bay Front Road, facing Lake Erie. And I

can recall not having any shoes, having to wear half boots stuffed with newspaper in the winter. So, I guess you could say that we were very poor, poor people.

Formal Education

VASQUEZ: What was the name of the school? Do you remember?

DEBS: Bayshore Elementary School. It's no longer there. It's now long since gone. And they now bus them to school, and so on and so forth. In my day, we walked to school or our parents took us in horse and buggies, or something. Unfortunately, I walked.

VASQUEZ: Where did you go to high school?

DEBS: Well, that's a great question. We moved to Toledo, Ohio, from the farm. I attended Waite High School for half a year, and Scott High School for a half a year. And that is my total education.

VASQUEZ: Were you a good student?

DEBS: I was a fairly good student, but at the age of fourteen, I had to know where my next meal was coming from and where I was going to sleep that night. In other words, I was on my own at the age of fourteen.

VASQUEZ: Living by yourself?

DEBS: I dropped out of school because I just couldn't make it. I washed dishes, I worked in the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] for my room rent and washed dishes for food. But after one year of high school, I dropped out and never reentered.

VASQUEZ: What occasioned you to leave Ohio?

DEBS: Well, there was not much there for me and I was continuously bothered by colds, especially in the wintertime. And so, I decided. . . . I had a cousin in Long Beach, California. And having corresponded with him to tell me how wonderful it was in dear old California, I hopped a freight train from Toledo, Ohio, and came to California. And the funniest thing in--well, not so funny, at that--was where I got off the freight train, at San Fernando Road and Fletcher Drive. For thirty-two years that I was in politics, in elected public office, I represented that area.

Coming to California

VASQUEZ: How old were you when you came out to California? Do you remember what year it was?

DEBS: It was 1923, I think it was. After getting off

the freight train--I had kept myself neat and fairly clean, and so on--I hitchhiked to Long Beach. I had fifty cents in my pocket.

VASQUEZ: You were about nineteen years old, weren't you?

DEBS: Yes. [With] fifty cents in my pocket. There was a man that picked me up who was driving along and he was looking me over. And about half way to Long Beach, he said, "Son, what are you going to do in Long Beach?" I said, "Get a job." Nothing more was said for about ten minutes, and all of a sudden he said, "Son, have you ever jerked sodas?" Immediately in my head popped, "This man is looking for a soda jerker." So, I said, "Yes, sir." And he hired me and told me to report at Seventh [Street] and Pine Street in Long Beach.

That drugstore is no longer there and he, of course, has long since departed. But he dropped me off in front of the YMCA on American Avenue in Long Beach, I went in and showed them my YMCA card from Toledo, Ohio. And they trusted me for a week's room, having told them I had a job I was going to go to the next morning. The job was a mile and a half from the YMCA, so I hiked myself out there at 8:00 A.M. in the morning. And about

9:30 A.M. he came over to me and said, "Son, I don't think you told me the truth about being a soda jerker." I said, "No, sir, I didn't. But I needed a job, and if you'll just give me a few lessons, I'll be the best soda jerker you've ever had." And that was my advent into Long Beach, California. [Laughter]

VASQUEZ: What. . . . You didn't stay with your cousin, then?

DEBS: Well, my cousin had moved, and he forgot to give the forwarding address, I presume. Later on, we met. But later on, I think he had some financial problems and he. . . . It was just as well, because for several years, I lived at the YMCA in Long Beach.

VASQUEZ: That was going to be my next question, how long did you live there. And how long did you work as a soda jerker?

DEBS: I guess I worked at the soda jerking possibly a year and a half, two years. Then I became a messenger for the Marine Trust and Savings Bank of Long Beach. And I held that job for a couple years. And then I became a bookkeeper. I used Burroughs adding machines. The old type, where

you could almost punch them and make them talk. And so I held that job for, I think, two or three years. And then I moved to Los Angeles. And I worked for a bank in Los Angeles on Sunset Boulevard, California Bank, as a bookkeeper. And went to school, the Major theatrical school.

Acting Career

VASQUEZ: What school was it? Do you remember the name?

DEBS: Major [School of Acting]. It is no longer in existence, but it was near Westlake Park. Right close to Westlake Park, it used to be. Now, it's the headquarters for the California Medical Association. But I went to school there at nights after work. And I think it was about two years that I went to school there, school of acting.

VASQUEZ: Why acting?

DEBS: That's a good question. I really don't know how I got into it. Like everybody, I guess, that comes to California, they think they're an actor or an actress. And at that time, I was blonde, a fairly good-looking young man, and somebody that was going to school touted me on coming out, and I did. And I took acting lessons for a couple years.

VASQUEZ: Did you have aspirations to be an actor, being in the movies?

DEBS: I later became [an actor] in the movies. And on the stage.

VASQUEZ: Oh, really?

DEBS: Oh, yes.

VASQUEZ: Why don't you tell me about that.

DEBS: Well, my first break came when MGM [Metro Goldwyn Mayer] was casting for The Student Prince [in old Heidelberg]. That's based on Heidelberg University in Germany. Ramón Novarro and Norma Shearer were the co-stars. In those days, there were no unions and they would work us anywhere from twelve hours to eighteen hours, whatever.

VASQUEZ: What year would this be?

DEBS: It was in the late twenties. I don't exactly remember. It was in the late twenties. And one I will never forget was on location in the Santa Monica Mountains. We used to get home about midnight. If you've never been in the Santa Monica Mountains and know the cold that is there. . . . They had a great, big fire burning. But Miss Shearer and Ramón Novarro and all of us were half froze to death. Without. . . . They had no

necessities like they have today. It was a very difficult situation. I was under contract with them for that picture and some other pictures for about six months. And then. . . . Did you ever see Morris Gest's and Max Reinhardt's presentation of The Miracle?

VASQUEZ: No, I'm afraid I haven't.

DEBS: It occurred here in Los Angeles, and other places, but here in Los Angeles at the Shrine Auditorium, with a cast of approximately, maybe a hundred fifty, maybe two hundred people. It was quite a spectacle. I think if you read back in your history, you'd see that it was quite a spectacle. I played in that. I had several different changes of costume.

VASQUEZ: What role did you have in it?

DEBS: Kind of a jester. Wearing these long tights, and yellow tights and black tights and wigs. I shall never forget this. I knew nothing about the gays. But up until that moment, I had never been in contact with the gays. In that show, I would venture to say that 50 to 70 percent of them were gays. And the man that helped me in my change of costume was a gay. And when he put my wig on, he

would pat it just like a woman. And I would say, "Get away from me, you such-and-such!" And because I was under Actor's Equity, I could not quit that show until the show closed. So we went from here to San Francisco. And, eventually, I got out of the show. And I was never so happy in my life to get out of a show. That was my first start. Then I played stock. Kokomo, Indiana, was one of the famous, favorite places for the big stars, traveling from east to west. Practically every big star of that day hit Kokomo, Indiana. We had a stock company there where we learned the lines one week and did the show at night, which we learned one week next week's show. And that was very difficult. But I guess I was there close to a year.

VASQUEZ: How old would you have been then?

DEBS: I think in my late twenties or early thirties.

VASQUEZ: And why Kokomo?

DEBS: Well, the funny part of it is I had some friends close to Kokomo, Indiana, and I went back to visit them. And I heard about a vacancy there close to Kokomo. It was in another town that I was staying, and I heard about it. They needed

an actor, so I went over and I got the job. They folded because the lead man hit the bottle and stumbled around on his lines. . . . He didn't learn the lines correctly for the next week's show. After two or three weeks of that, the show folded. They lost the audience.

So I went to Chicago. I went into an agent's office in Chicago about four o'clock in the afternoon. And he was on the phone. And when he came out, he said, "Yes, what can I do for you?" And I said, "Well, I'm just closing Kokomo, Indiana, and I'm looking for a job." And I gave him my name, and so on and so forth. He looked at me and he said, "Oh, you've been doing stock." I said, "Yes, that's true." Well, he said, "You must be a fast learner." I said, "I'm pretty good." And he said, "I just got off the phone. And one of the principal players to play Chicago has just had an operation for appendix [appendicitis]. They're in South Bend; they're going to open tomorrow night." I think it was tomorrow night, or it was the next night or after. I can't remember which. And he says, "Can you go?" I says, "I'll be on the next

train." I went down. They gave me the script, which was not a big part, but it was a fairly decent part.

VASQUEZ: What was the name of the show, do you remember?

DEBS: The name was Chicago.

VASQUEZ: Oh.

DEBS: Oh, it was a big hit in its day. Oh, yeah. Big, big, big hit. And so we played two nights. . . . Well, I'm getting ahead of myself. I took the script, and I studied it all night. And I thought I had it pretty well learned. I was confident I could go on, even with one night. Because I stayed up all night and half the next day and we put into the theater for the rehearsals. Went through rehearsals pretty good, and on that night we opened. Walked out onto the stage--and this has happened to so many actors--went completely blank! And they had somebody in the wings cuing me, so as soon as they cued me then I picked it up and I was all right. But I'll never forget that. The perspiration was just pouring off me. I said, "I've blown it!" Anyway, that was, to a large extent, my theatrical [career]. But about that time, as you

will remember, the stock market crashed in late . . .

VASQUEZ: Nineteen twenty-nine. October.

DEBS: 'Twenty-nine. I guess it was the early thirties, I can't remember. I should remember these dates, but you really can't. . . . Talking pictures came in. You can check on when they did. [Inaudible] But talking pictures came in. And I was in New York then, having played in the off-Broadway shows at small theaters off Broadway.

VASQUEZ: That was your principal activity at the time?

DEBS: Yeah, that was how I wanted to make a living.

VASQUEZ: Okay.

DEBS: And when I took a look, theater after theater went to talking pictures from stage performances. I said to myself, looking around, "One heck of a lot better actors than I am, are sitting around here starving to death. I'm not going to do that." So I hightailed it back to California. I wasn't going to stay in New York and freeze to death.

VASQUEZ: Not on a freighter this time?

DEBS: No, I came back on a coach. Not first class, but a coach. I wanted to save all the money I could. And that's when I arrived back in California.

VASQUEZ: Approximately mid-thirties, early thirties?

DEBS: I think it was '31 . . .

Living Through the Depression

VASQUEZ: What did you do then?

DEBS: Well, I did a lot of things then. Things were tough. They were selling apples on the street corners. You remember. That was before [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt. And so I sold subscriptions to the Los Angeles Examiner. I sold subscriptions to Cosmopolitan magazine, Harper's Bazaar, anything. I sold newspaper subscriptions. And, as I say, I made a living at it. It was hard work, going door to door making a living. But it was better than selling apples or starving. So, that's where we are, and it brings us to 1932. Now, from 1932, I can tell you right to the . . . Everything. You want it? My family were all Republicans. My sister who still lives, ardent Republican to this day. I became a Democrat. Franklin Delano Roosevelt made me a Democrat. I joined the Silver Lake Young Democrats.

VASQUEZ: Were you living in Silver Lake at that time?

DEBS: Yeah. Close to there. And Silver Lake

Democrats, we were part and parcel of the 1932 campaign. The older Democrats were fighting among themselves. Those that called themselves the Jeffersonian Democrats, and the other wing, the liberal Democrats. Roosevelt. . . . Whoever it was running the show was very smart. And he proceeded to give the job of running. . . . The Young Democrats took over his campaign in Los Angeles. My first time I met him, I was on this committee. It was at Union Station and he was in a wheelchair. And charming, he was charming. We put on a parade. And this you'll get a kick out of. Frank Shaw was then mayor of Los Angeles. I need not tell you that his administration left a lot to be desired for its honesty and integrity. We tried our darnedest to keep him from riding down Broadway with FDR, but I'm sorry to say we failed on that one. But we did keep him off the stage at the Hollywood Bowl where Roosevelt made his speech. We packed the Bowl, and turned thousands away. That was my introduction into politics. I was bitten, and bitten hard.

II. EARLY POLITICAL CAREER

Silver Lake Young Democrats

VASQUEZ: How did you join the Young Democrats in Silver Lake? How did you first get motivated to join?

DEBS: I just heard somebody, and "Come on in and join." I joined a very, very active Young Democrats club. Oh, I could tell you, many of them went to high offices.

VASQUEZ: Can you remember some of them?

DEBS: Well, the reason why--if I'm not getting too far ahead of my story--I got into being assistant sergeant at arms, [David V.] Dave Gill was president of the Young Democrats of California. And he became the sergeant at arms for the state legislature. That's when we had a Democratic administration. That was under [Governor] Culbert [L.] Olson. But in the meantime, I had some other. . . . I worked for the Los Angeles City Board of Education.

VASQUEZ: In what capacity?

DEBS: In the storeroom. I started out as a receiving clerk and became assistant storekeeper. And then I became the storekeeper. And then a new administration took place and I got fired.

[Laughter] That's when you lived by the sword and you died by the sword. There was no civil service then. And I supported, of course, the people who were defeated. But I would think that experience with Roosevelt, and my experience with the Young Democrats. . . . Now, I never intended to run for public office. I was always supporting candidates for public office, from the Fifty-sixth [Assembly] District.

Assistant Sergeant at Arms

VASQUEZ: Before we get to that, your running for office, tell me how you became assistant sergeant at arms in the '39, '41 sessions.

DEBS: Well, really, it was 1938. It was a special session. And [Delwin W.] Del Smith was then the sergeant at arms. He was a friend and he invited me to become assistant sergeant at arms. There were several of them, three or four of us. And then next year he did not run for office. The assistant. . . . The assembly elects you sergeant at arms. They elect all their officers. But Dave Gill did. As I say, he was president of the Young Democrats of California. And I was on the state committee. So, I got to

be assistant sergeant at arms. I knew. . . . Learned all how bills were passed, how you got things done, by watching other people. So, when the time came to run for office, everybody knew me, the members. We had a Democratic assembly at that time. But along came. . . . In 1942, [Governor] Earl Warren defeated Olson. Ellis [E.] Patterson was lieutenant governor, and he was defeated. Robert [W.] Kenny ran for attorney general, and he was elected. But he lived in my Fifty-sixth District, and he did not carry the Fifty-sixth District. Congressman [Charles] Kramer, who had been a congressman for ten years, he was defeated by Norris Poulson. Assemblyman Norris Poulson was a very good friend of mine. Even though he was a Republican, and I was a Democrat, we were neighbors and we got to be good friends. So when Norrie Poulson didn't run for reelection and ran for congress, I decided I would run for the assembly. I guess there were five Democrats, maybe six. I don't remember. Anyway, I got the Democratic nomination. And I ran against a Republican.

Running for the State Assembly

- VASQUEZ: Did you cross-file?
- DEBS: You could have cross-filed at that time, but . . .
- VASQUEZ: Yeah, but did you?
- DEBS: Oh, yes. Oh, of course. You had to cross-file. But I didn't get the Republican nomination. I ran against a Republican. In spite of Olson losing the Fifty-sixth District by eight thousand votes, I won it by little less than a thousand. People say, "How did you do it?" Let me say plain and simple, I didn't have much money. Very little, in fact. I punched doorbells. I took the heavy Democratic districts and I punched doorbells from 9:00 A.M. in the morning till 12:00 P.M., took an hour off for lunch, and from 1:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. I punched them again. And in the evenings, I went to all of the supermarkets and passed out my literature until midnight, or 11:00 P.M., whatever, until I got too tired. And that was what I did, day after day, month after month.
- VASQUEZ: How many people worked with you?
- DEBS: Me. Some of the Young Democrats helped.
- VASQUEZ: They did?

DEBS: Nothing, but. . . . Election day, they were all out helping. And, I guess, maybe the day before election. But mostly election day. But I had no organization. Here, again, the liberals. . . . I've always considered myself a liberal. I think my record proves that I have been a liberal. But the party machinery was in the hands of the ultra-liberals.

VASQUEZ: Like who?

DEBS: Oh, I can't even name them now. I'm talking about in my district. So they had a headquarters at Vermont [Avenue] and Hollywood Boulevard. And, of course, my name was on there. But they weren't pushing me. I wasn't liberal enough. They wanted me to take positions on foreign affairs. . . . Only congress or the senate of the United States could do it. I said, "My god, I'm running for the assembly. I have nothing to say about foreign affairs." They were all. . . . Lots of them were pro-USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics]. Oh, I don't say they were communists; I would say they were fellow travelers.

VASQUEZ: Would people like [Samuel W.] Sam Yorty or Jack

[B.] Tenney be . . .

DEBS: Ho, ho, ho, ho.

VASQUEZ: . . . at that time, I'm talking about, would they have been considered liberals, ultraliberals?

DEBS: Ultraliberals! Jack Tenney and Sam Yorty were so far to the left that I and a lot of Democrats wouldn't have anything to do with them. If they weren't fellow travelers. . . . Neither one of them belonged to the Communist party. But, my god, they might as well have been. They were the heroes of the ultra left-wingers when I was in the legislature. Jack Tenney, of course, was in the senate. And therein lies another story.

VASQUEZ: How did they survive in politics as well as they did, being ultraliberals?

DEBS: There were lots of liberals then in those days. Lots of liberals. When I was reelected in 1944, I had none of the support of the liberals, the ultraliberals. The moderates and the liberals--real liberals, what I call real liberals--weren't interested in the USSR.

VASQUEZ: What were their main concerns, the liberals? What were their main concerns, the liberals with whom you could see eye to eye with? What were your

main concerns at the time?

DEBS: See eye to eye with Sam Yorty? At that time, on labor, things sponsored by organized labor? Fine. I was always one of the first ten of the board of organized labor when they compiled their list of their friends. And remember now that I'm a Democrat, the first Democrat--unless they go way, way farther back than I know--to be elected from the Fifty-sixth District. And I'm voting so much, a hundred eighty degrees different than Norris Poulson, who had just been elected to congress who was the assemblyman I replaced. I was pro-labor; he was antilabor. And not really far right. He was a nice guy. I can't say anything mean about the guy because he was a nice guy. But he was conservative, which was his right. But the Fifty-sixth District . . .

The Fifty-sixth Assembly District

VASQUEZ: Tell me about the Fifty-sixth District . . .

DEBS: Well . . .

VASQUEZ: . . . at the time, and how's it changed over time, perhaps. But at the time, how was it?

DEBS: It was the richest of the rich in the Los Feliz area where all the rich lived, and 99 percent

Republican, I think. And then there was a moderate area. And then there was the poor area, the Echo Park around the Angelus Temple and the Mayberry area. And it was a workingman's district, but they never voted that way. The Atwater area was registered Democrat, but they always voted Republican. That's where I punched doorbells and changed the thing around. I carried that Atwater district. I stayed away from the Los Feliz hills where the Republicans were. I didn't want to wake them up. But I have to tell you a cute story, true story. The Sunday before election, I was invited by an attorney named [Joseph] Fainer, a very prominent attorney who represented Aimee Semple McPherson. . . . A friend of mine had told him about me and he said, "Ask him if he'd like to be at the Angelus Temple on the Sunday before Tuesday's election and have . . . "

Aimee Semple McPherson's Endorsement

VASQUEZ: For your first campaign?

DEBS: Yeah. " . . . to have Sister McPherson to introduce him." I said, "My god, yes. Yes. Tell them yes. I'll be there." Well, if you've

never been to the Angelus Temple, there's a long stairway coming down. And she came down in her white robes, looking like an angel and carrying two dozen red roses. Now, she had never met me before in her life. I had never met her before. And then there's five thousand people. She turned them away. There's five thousand people in the audience. A lot of them lived near there. And all the radio audience. She had a big radio audience. So, as the program went along, she said, "Now, I want to introduce you to a very dear friend of mine, a young man who's running for the State Assembly from the Fifty-sixth District--that's this district here--next Tuesday. I want you to remember his name, because he's a very dear friend of mine." She turned around. She didn't even know where the hell I was sitting. She turned around like that. I stood up. Five thousand people practically tore the roof off the Angelus Temple in applause. I think that was the difference between my election.

VASQUEZ: Is that right?

DEBS: I think it was.

VASQUEZ: You had never met her before?

DEBS: Never met her before.

VASQUEZ: She knew nothing about you other than . . .

DEBS: Never met her before; never met her since after that. I sent a letter, of course, thanking her. But I never met her. Until the day she died, I never met her. But I was her "very dear friend," because Joe Fainer told her to do it. It was a fantastic. . . . She was a fantastic. . . . Of course, I sat there and listened to her. She had those people in the palm of her hand. And I'm going to say something about her.

VASQUEZ: Go ahead.

DEBS: During the Depression, she fed everybody. Not whether they just came to her to church, whether they were part of her parishioners or not; she fed everybody from the Angelus Temple that came there for food. I found out from Mr. Fainer that she borrowed heavily in debt of her own funds to feed the people. You can't be anything but a very. . . . What preacher today would do it? I don't know of any. I know these people around on the radio now, getting millions and millions of dollars worth of funds, but I don't see them

feeding the poor. So, I have a very warm spot in my heart for that lady. Not just because she helped me, but because of all the good that she did.

VASQUEZ: During the time you were in the assembly, did you ever have the occasion to help her, or her organization, the congregation, at all?

DEBS: They never asked. Funny. . . . It was never asked. I would have, if I had ever been asked. But I was never asked.

Labor Endorsement

VASQUEZ: Hmm. Interesting. Back to the first campaign, to the discussion on the first campaign. Who were your main endorsers? What groups did you go to? What kind of groups did you go speak to?

DEBS: Well, I had labor. Labor endorsed me.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember what unions, specifically . . .

DEBS: Oh, yes.

VASQUEZ: . . . like affiliates of the American Federation of Labor?

DEBS: Oh, yes. I would never have been elected without the help of the [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters union. The Teamsters union supplied me with more money than I ever got from anyone,

which was not much. I think the Teamsters union possibly gave me in the neighborhood of a thousand, twelve hundred dollars to get my mail out. I had a lot of mail ready to go, but I had no postage. I didn't have any money to put it out. I was broke. I had hocked my life insurance. I was broke.

VASQUEZ: You weren't working? You were doing this full time?

DEBS: Yes. And the [Los Angeles] Central Labor Council, but they didn't give me any money. The Teamsters were the ones that. . . . The Teamsters put sixty men on election day in the field to get out the vote in a heavy Democratic area. And at that time, the Teamsters union in Los Angeles was not controlled by the Mafia. I don't know whether it is today or not. But I can tell you this, as you well know, too many of the Teamsters unions are today controlled by the Mafia. I would hope that Los Angeles is not. It didn't used to be and, perhaps, it is still not. That's my introduction to the Fifty-sixth campaign.

Politics and Service Organizations

VASQUEZ: Were you an Elk, a Lion's Club member at the time?

DEBS: I later became a Lion. I later became an Elk. I later became a Mason. I later became a Shriner. I joined a lot of things after I was elected. You want me to continue about the '42 campaign?

VASQUEZ: I wanted to ask you something, before we go on to that, about what you just said. A lot of the notices I read through, the biographies of many of the assemblymen and senators of the time, many of them were members of those organizations. Were those organizations influential or useful in making contacts and establishing relationships among one another?

DEBS: No.

VASQUEZ: No?

DEBS: No. No, they're not political. You've got Democrats and Republicans and mugwumps in all of them. They're not political, except when you meet. . . . Like the Lion's Club, you form friends and they're bound to help you. It can't hurt you. It's bound to help you. The Elks. . . The more friends you get, [Inaudible] more. Because it's word of mouth, to a large extent, from those people that can help you. But as far

as endorsing you or anything like that, or campaigning for you or raising money for you, no.

VASQUEZ: I guess I was speaking more at the, quote, "informal" level of politics, that being brothers in the same lodge, or being brothers from the same . . .

DEBS: Oh, yes. That was very helpful to me in one of my campaigns for supervisor. We won't go into that now. But I have never. . . . The person's religion, the color of their skin . . .

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

VASQUEZ: Well, when we turned off the machine, we were talking about your 1942 campaign for assemblyman. What else do you want to say about it?

DEBS: Well, let me say, nobody thought I could win. So, the Third House of the lobbyists, I received practically no help from them--financially. None. None. But I determined that I was going to give it my best shot. And if I won, I won; if I didn't, I didn't. But I was not going to be the Democratic nominee and just be a token candidate, which had been what. . . . All the

years that I was active in the Young Democrats, we put up token candidates that we thought couldn't win, but we had to have a candidate. We had to have a Democrat running in the hopes that a miracle would strike. Well, I was determined that I was going to help the miracle a little bit, and that's why I went out and worked as hard as I did. I had calluses on that finger there [points]. And then I got them on this [points], ringing doorbells. And I wore out a couple pairs of shoes. But, it was a tough campaign. Nobody expected me to win, nobody. And I didn't have a lot of endorsements, really. Who is going to endorse a guy that is a Democrat in a Republican area?

Personal Contact with Voters

VASQUEZ: To what do you attribute your victory?

DEBS: Punching doorbells.

VASQUEZ: Face-to-face contact with people?

DEBS: And I was. . . . Well, I'll be boastful. I was nice-looking blonde--not as fat as I am today, of course--and I had a certain amount of charisma that I had learned from my days in the acting field. I'm telling you about this acting

business I never alluded to [that] after I ran for office. Because everyone would say, "Is he sincere, or is he acting?" So I'm giving you history here that I never, never have used, period. But '42 was not an easy year. Warren dominated the scene. I sometimes wonder how the heck I won, myself. But I attribute it to the fact. . . . Because where I punched doorbells, that's where I won.

VASQUEZ: Was the population, apart from socioeconomic differences, pretty homogeneous in the district at that time?

DEBS: No, we . . .

VASQUEZ: Were there a lot of different minorities there yet?

DEBS: No, we had a Jewish community. Small. We had a black community. Small. Most of them were, I would say, average run of. . . . It was a mixture. Practically all of the nationalities known to man were in that area. Because this was. . . . Remember, this is close to old Los Angeles, downtown Los Angeles where they settled. And, of course, I was reared, brought up by my father who never would let anybody speak

ill of anybody's religion, race.

I knew nothing about racial prejudice or religious intolerance until I moved to Toledo, Ohio, as a kid. I played with a large family of Catholic kids up the road from us. Across the street, the woman that nursed me when I was so desperately ill happened to be Jewish. How could I have any hatred of any race because I was brought. . . . We had a black man who was a helper on all the farms around. He told wonderful stories to we kids. We all loved him. And in the summertime, we would bring fruit and apples and whatever we had, to bring to him. He had a little. . . . On the way to school, he had a little hut that he lived in, maybe twice as big as this room. That's about it. And we kids all loved him, because he told us wonderful stories. So, I didn't know the meaning of racial. . . . And today, I don't. I know it's here horribly, horribly. But it's not ever been for me. I'll give you an illustration.

Where I lived, in east Toledo, when we moved from the farm, I had to go through two large communities. One was Italian, and one was

Hungarian. And the Hungarians hated the Italians; and the Italians hated the Hungarians. And I mean with hate. I was 125, 130 pounds, dripping wet at that time. And these kids are beating up on each other. I learned how to be a diplomat. I didn't take sides. I made friends with both of them. To this day, I love my Italian food and I love my Hungarian goulash. I used to be invited to those kids' homes on many, many a time. But that's when I first knew that there was religious intolerance and racial prejudice.

VASQUEZ: Do you think that this attitude of conciliation helped you in politics, in your personal life?

DEBS: Oh, of course it did. Of course it did. I take people for what they are. Not for the color of their skin, race, or religion, or anything. They're either decent human beings or they're not. And if they. . . . I want to say something here before I forget it. No man or woman should ever run for public office unless they like people and they have compassion. These are the two most essential things. "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Having been a poor boy, I spent my time helping the poor. I was in the

assembly. I was chairman of one of the most important committees--and this is a Republican assembly, remember--health committee [Committee on Public Health]. That's still one of the big committees of the state legislature. And I was on education [Committee on Education]. I got on education because I wanted to be on education, because I didn't have that education and I wanted to be sure that every kid had an opportunity to get an education that I didn't get. Those two, to this day, are two of the things that I still am very, very desirous of seeing that kids have an opportunity to get an education, and that the poor shall get health care.

VASQUEZ: I think your career has shown that. Let's get back to 1942. You won the election by a little over a thousand votes.

DEBS: No, a little less.

First-Term Assemblyman

VASQUEZ: A little less than a thousand votes. You're on your way to Sacramento. What was your mission at that time? What were you going there to do, to accomplish?

DEBS: Well, having been in an assembly as a sergeant at

arms, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be on the health committee and I wanted to be on the education committee. And I got a committee that I never wanted to be on. At that time, it was the policy of the legislature to have one layman on the Judiciary Committee. [Charles W.] Charlie Lyon was Speaker of the Assembly, and he put me on that as the only layman on the Judiciary Committee. After that one year of serving up there, I went up to Charlie Lyon and I said, "Charlie, I want to tell you something. I think you're a great speaker and I'm going to vote for you for reelection." Because he was going to be reelected, anyway. They were all Republicans. We only had thirty-two Democrats in. Anyway, so, like what I said, "If you don't take me off that Judiciary Committee, I'm going to tell you now, I will not serve. I will not go." I said, "Charlie, those lawyers up there. . . . We argue until two or one o'clock in the morning." I said, "They couldn't agree on a Mother's Day resolution." [Laughter] "Well," he said, "I agree. I'll take you off that committee." [Laughter]

VASQUEZ: And so you never had to serve on the Judiciary Committee?

DEBS: Oh, never. [Laughter]

Partisanship in State Politics

VASQUEZ: What was the relationship in those days in that session. . . . Because you got a Republican administration. In the assembly, you've got forty-four Republicans and thirty-six Democrats.

DEBS: Was it thirty-six?

VASQUEZ: It's pretty much a Republican sweep. How did you get your programs or your bills across?

DEBS: Well, that was very funny. You know, I carried some good bills. The fact is, later on in the 1945 session and the 1947 session, I carried some of Warren's bills. We didn't have the partisanship in 1942 that you have now. You had liberal Republicans--believe it or not--and you had liberal Democrats. You had moderate Republicans and you had moderate Democrats. And you had conservative Republicans and you had conservative Democrats.

So we fought mostly on the basis of the bill itself. If it was a conservative bill, lots would be against it. If it was a moderate bill Anyway, you never had the partisanship you

have today. Remember, when I served up there we were only getting \$1,200 a year. We got that \$1,200 while we were up there. We introduced the bills in January and February was a recess and you came back in March and you're supposed to know about all the bills that were introduced. Well, hell, the printing press barely got them By the time you got back, up into March, you barely got the bills. Well, they sent them to us about, a little while ahead of time, but not very for long. But we would fight. . . . Regardless of what would. . . . We would fight on bills. Then we'd go over to the Senator Hotel and belly up to the bar and have a drink and laugh about it. There was no animosity is what I'm trying to say. It isn't like today when the guys. . . . They'd just as soon have fist fights.

VASQUEZ: Why do you think there is so much difference in that?

DEBS: I've asked myself that question so many, many times.

VASQUEZ: California doesn't seem to have become more of a partisan state . . .

DEBS: No.

VASQUEZ: . . . since that period. Why are the politicians today more partisan?

DEBS: I don't know. I have never figured it out. As the salary increased and the expense accounts got higher, the job got more lucrative. After all, what the hell, \$1,200 a year isn't much. You can't live on \$1,200. At least I can't. You couldn't even in those days. So, we considered it an honor to be serving. It was an honor, a darned good honor. We were serving, we were all sincere.

Out of the eighty assemblymen, there was about seven or eight I kind of suspected were on the take. When they would introduce a When they'd get up to explain a bill, you could see all the hands at that time reaching for their billboards to be sure to follow the bill to see what the guy was selling was the truth about the bill. This is true. Oh, it. . . . There were only about seven or eight of them, really.

VASQUEZ: Would you care to name any of them?

DEBS: No, I wouldn't. I wouldn't even. . . . Because I can't prove. . . . If I don't know for sure, I am never, never going to name anybody and say this

is what I believe.

VASQUEZ: Were they Republicans or Democrats predominantly?

DEBS: Both. Both. No party has a monopoly upon honesty and integrity. No more than. . . . I would say members of the legislature of California, public officials, because of the close scrutiny that you have, are perhaps as honest, if not more so, than the doctors, the lawyers, or the merchants, or any other profession. Because the spotlight is always on you. You never. . . . It's never off you.

VASQUEZ: Was that the case when you were in office?

DEBS: Of course. But we never had the bickering and the vicious fights in those days. Never.

VASQUEZ: What did you do during the time you were an assemblyman as a way of making a living?

DEBS: Oh, after my first term. Now, I had to come back to reality. Now, I had to get a job, right? A young Democrat by the name of Lawrence Harvey, whose father owned Harvey Machine Company--now, these are war years--I went to him and I said, "Lawrence, I need a job. I can't live on \$1,200 a year. I need a job. Have you got a job for me?" "Yeah, sure. We got a job for you." Now,

he knew that I had been, worked for the board of education. So he put me out in the receiving area, but receiving materials and checking in and all that sort. Which was a nice job, but it wasn't. . . . I was really qualified for much better than that, which they later found out. And. . . . Now, with the name of Debs. . . . You had a union. And the union was affiliated with the [International Union of] Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union out of Colorado, which was a Trotskyite organization.

[Interruption]

III. WORLD WAR II AND CALIFORNIA POLITICS

Impact of World War II on Political Career

VASQUEZ: Before we stopped the tape because of the phone, we were talking about your first term as an assemblyman. And one of the things that's interesting about that period, of course, is there is was major war going on. How did that, the Second World War, affect California, Los Angeles, your district, and politics at the state level?

DEBS: Well, let me tell you now, I'm an elected public

official. As such, all elected public officials were placed in a category--I think it was 4-H, or something like that. In other words, not draftable. I went down to my board and I said, "I do not want to claim exemption." Well, they tried to talk me out of it. I said, "No, I'm not going to. It will only be three or four months I'll be up there, the legislature will have adjourned and that will be it." They only had it every two years then. So I said, "I don't want the exemption." So I went down to Sixth [Street] and Main Street, took the physical and one guy was standing maybe fifty, sixty feet away. Here you are naked, and so on. . . . He says, "Put your clothes on. Go over and report to that man." So I went. Put my clothes on, go over and report to the man, and he says, "Take your clothes off." [Laughter] So silly! Anyway, when it was all said and done, he says, "You've been deferred." I says, "On what grounds?" Now, I'm blind in this eye, practically blind. I can see you there, but I wouldn't know who the hell you were. You're a faint outline and I can see the light there, and that light over there. But this

eye is excellent, in particular. So I figured they rejected me on account of my eyes. He says, "You have flat feet." I said, "Well, I've always had flat feet." I said, "But, my God, I was able to walk, walk, walk, walk, walk." He says, "You know what? You're rejected. Go get yourself a job in the defense industry. Help the war cause there."

VASQUEZ: You're working at Harvey's at this time, right?

DEBS: Well, I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself. That was right after I was elected; Harvey's came a little later. I forgot about this. So I went down--I lived in Silver Lake at that time--I drove to Terminal Island and I bucked rivets on the Liberty ships. It took me an hour in the morning, and it was dark when I left home and it was dark when I got back and lying way down on my back in the belly of those Liberty ships bucking rivets. And I think I was. . . . Oh, god, months and months I did that. Finally, I said to myself, "My god, there must be some other industry less taxing and just as important." You know, I was a wreck. Hell, that bucking rivets is as tough as. . . . You ever bucked rivets?

VASQUEZ: No, I haven't.

DEBS: Oh, you're lucky. Because you just lie on your back, and here's a guy above you and here's a-- what do you call it?--you got to hold that rivet. And it just knocks the hell out of you, it just tears you to pieces. Oh, when I got home I just fell into bed and I could hardly get out in the morning. It was hard to make the damned drive down there I was so tired. So I finally quit there and went to Lawrence Harvey. He got a job for me. I forgot about the Liberty ships. See, you forget a lot of things. But that's the hardest job I ever did in my life, I think, is bucking those damned rivets. And . . .

Public Relations for Harvey Aluminum Company

VASQUEZ: Now, you were going to tell me about the union, the Trotskyite-controlled union.

DEBS: Well, the Trotskyists, though, after the Harveys hired me. . . . They had a fight between the union and these officials or something, and they couldn't figure out how I, an assemblyman, had been hired by Harvey. They figured I was in there to break the union. And so. . . . No, they were the communists. They were the communists,

the Trotskyite. . . . They were not Trotskyites. They were the communists and the Trotskyites were in Denver. They ran the big union, Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. So, they couldn't figure me out. And I heard rumbles. Lawrence finally came to me and he said, "Ernie, they don't know what the hell you're here for. They think you're a spy." And I said, "Well, why would they say that?" "Your name is Debs. They figured you were a socialist." I said, "Well, tell them I'm not any relation to Eugene V. Debs. I'm not a socialist; I'm a Democrat." Well, anyway, we got into a fight. Harvey had a contract with them that if the membership expelled a person from the union, that Harvey had to lay them off. Well, they expelled three people from the union. So we had to lay them off. Go over, rush to these people and say, "Don't, put them back to work." These Colorado people had reinstated them. He says, "We're going to have another meeting tonight and we're going to expel them again."

[Laughter]

VASQUEZ: Who was this?

DEBS: So, Harvey's got caught in the middle. Then

Lawrence said, "Ah, Ernie you're wasting your time out here."

VASQUEZ: Were you a member of the union?

DEBS: Oh, no, no. I was an honorary member of many unions, later on, but never. . . . Anyway. So Lawrence took me in the office. I became a kind of a guy working with the Army Corps of Engineers. They had some beefs. I was trained to smooth out the beefs. And later on, they put me on PR [public relations], and I spent a lot of time in Washington, helped negotiate the contract for Harvey to take over Harvey Aluminum. It became Harvey Aluminum. That's a long story, but you don't want to hear that. Anyway, it's a We did. . . . That place turned out to be a gold mine for the Harveys. Anything Mr. Leo Harvey touched turned to gold. . . . Every time there was a problem, I'd find out something else they owned. [Laughter]

VASQUEZ: Is that right?

DEBS: My god. "Why", I said, "My god, I couldn't believe it." They even owned a hotel on Melrose Avenue. It was called the Harveys' Hotel. I couldn't believe it. Oh, they owned everything.

VASQUEZ: So you became their public relations person. You went to Washington to--what?--lobby for contracts?

DEBS: Lobby. Lobby the senators and the congressman.

VASQUEZ: While you were an assemblyman here in California?

DEBS: Yeah. And what. . . . Oh, yeah. I'll tell you what we did. After the war, all of the big companies in the East didn't want these "war babies" [plants built in California to meet war needs] that had come up in the West, especially the railroads. It was very lucrative for them to ship stuff west. To have it built out West. . . . So they were trying to get rid of all these "war babies" and dismantle them, get the hell out of here. The plant that [Leo] Harvey eventually bought was in the works to be shipped, sold and shipped to the Soviet Union, believe it or not. So, I went back with Lawrence Harvey and what we thought would be a rather short stay. It was in the fall when the snow was falling, we were still back there. I had to buy an overcoat.

And we organized eleven Western states to save these industries, Kaiser Aluminum, Kaiser Steel, all the plants up north, all the "war

babies." We organized the congressmen from these various states and the senators from these various states and fought to save all of these "war babies" for the West. And we were successful in most cases. But if we hadn't done this, the Harveys wouldn't have ever got that plant. Kaiser wouldn't have ever got Fontana. I sometimes think that was a blessing that we never got the damned Fontana. But the plant in Utah. . . . He had a plant in Utah. So, it was my job to ride herd and then I went from round to round to round, negotiating with these various branches of government to get. . . . We wanted to lease a plant with an option to purchase.

VASQUEZ: Was there an association or a grouping involved?

DEBS: No, this was Harvey alone.

VASQUEZ: Harvey . . .

DEBS: Harvey alone now to save this plant out here. And, of course, bucking it were some of the others. Kaiser and his, when they got what they wanted, they didn't give a damn about anyone. So I would go from office to office. It was the goddamnedest thing. It's a bureaucracy back there. They can fire a million people in

Washington and never miss them. I really believe that! I really believe it! I'd go in these offices, here'd be four girls sitting there and only one of them doing any work and the rest of them talking about where they'd been last night, or where they were going tonight. And I'd have an appointment at 9:00 in the morning, 10:00, nobody's going in or out. Ten o'clock, one hour sitting there, cooling my heels, the door would open and I would be ushered in. He's in there drinking his coffee and reading a paper. Then he'd send me to somebody else. Well, I finally got Congressman [James] Roosevelt to help us a lot and [Congressman] Chet Holifield and some of the others. That's what helped us more than anything else, is the friendships we made. Jimmy Roosevelt and I became very, very good friends. Jimmy's not in very good health right now, incidentally.

VASQUEZ: How did you become friends? In politics?

DEBS: Yeah. Yeah, in Washington.

VASQUEZ: In Washington?

DEBS: Yeah. Anyway, we finally buttoned the thing up. Now, just about the time we buttoned the

thing up, to lease it. . . . Very, very little Hell, we don't know whether we can do anything with aluminum because in the first place, you have to have something to extrude. Who the hell had it? Reynolds? The big ones. So, we got very low rental. The dust must have been that thick on that floor. It was a blackout plant. Air-conditioning where you couldn't afford the air-conditioning because those big air conditioners cost thousands of dollars. You couldn't afford to run the damned air-conditioning. We got it on very favorable terms and here, again, Leo Harvey. I'll tell you, he was a genius. At the end of a year we have the plant in full production with two shifts. Well, you'd never believe we could have. . . . It was six lines. We thought if we got two or three lines in operation. . . . We had six lines. As I say, he was a genius.

VASQUEZ: And this is after the war?

DEBS: After the war.

VASQUEZ: How long did you work for Harvey?

DEBS: Until I became a city councilman.

VASQUEZ: Until 1947?

DEBS: Yeah. I spent a lot of time in Washington on other matters. And I used to fly out of. . . . I always tried to make my roll calls. I'd make my roll calls on Friday, have the sergeant at arms drive me to the airport to catch a plane to San Francisco, nonstop to Washington. I would be only gone a couple of days, Monday and Tuesday. I'd be back, he'd pick me up and make the roll call. So I didn't miss very many roll calls. But those were tough, tough, tough trips.

Impact of World War II on Los Angeles

VASQUEZ: You were talking earlier about how the Second World War changed the economy and the social terrain of Los Angeles.

DEBS: Well, see, I was active in the Young Democrats when the war was going on. We had what was known as the Griffith Park Young Democrats. I left the Silver Lake Young Democrats and I formed the Griffith Park Young Democrats. And the old Breakfast Club on Riverside Drive. I mean, Griffith Park Young Democrats, the soldiers were sleeping in the tents of soldiers. Remember during the war?

DEBS: In Griffith Park?

VASQUEZ: Right.

DEBS: So, we got a lot of the various church organizations and we staged a dance. I got a guy that ran dances there, and he donated that particular night, on a Saturday night. Now, we made them have. . . . All these groups, they had to bring chaperones. I mean, for every five girls, we had a chaperone. And nobody, no girl could leave the hall once the thing was started. No girl could leave that hall. That was it. She had to leave it with a chaperone, or if she left the hall she was gone for the night.

Strictly worked my ass off, the Young Democrats, to stage those things. We did it, oh, god, I guess a year, a year and a half. This gave the kids something to do, you know. These poor guys sleeping out in those goddamned tents. So we quite. . . . Victor McLaglen. . . . Remember Victor McLaglen, the motion picture star?

VASQUEZ: I never knew of him.

DEBS: Oh, he was a big star. He had a place right close there. That's where we Young Democrats of Griffith Park, Young Democrats met him. For free

he'd let us have the place. But those war years, we were very, very active. All those kids that went through Los Angeles on the way to the Far East, when the war was over with, they came back to California to live. That's what built our great state . . . Migration of people. They loved what they saw in California and they came back. Now, those were not easy years. Those were hard years. Everybody was working, though. They had the air raid wardens. Remember the air raid wardens? We had them. . . . I was an air raid warden, too. We kept damned busy in those years. But it paid off. It paid off in many ways. People liked what they saw. These kids, particularly these kids, they came back by the thousands. They came through Union Station by the thousands. And wherever they built and put them up, somebody was there. The motion pictures and Hollywood, all the stars, they entertained, too. I think what really impressed them was that the people of Los Angeles, especially--I'm sure it happened in San Francisco and other places--cared. We wanted to do our part, even though we weren't going to war, we wanted to do our part to

make everything as nice while they were here as possible, humanly possible.

VASQUEZ: My father was in the service, in the army at that time. My mother was traveling with him. And all my childhood--I'm from New Mexico--all my childhood I heard about the hospitality that she experienced in California with her serviceman husband, staying sometimes at movie stars' homes.

DEBS: People opened their hearts, homes and their hearts. They did a fantastic job. I've never seen anything like it since. Really, I've never seen anything like it since. The homeless today, nobody seems to give a damn about them, and the poor. It's not the same. But those boys going overseas, you couldn't do enough for them. Dinners, weekends, everything. . . . They opened their homes and their hearts and everything to these kids. They were so impressed, they said, "If California's going to be like that, we're going back to California." That's what built this state up to where it's now the number one state in the nation.

The Japanese-Americans Interned

VASQUEZ: And, at the same time, you had a hundred and

twelve thousand Japanese being interned. As a liberal Democrat, that must have been difficult for you. Or was it? Tell me about it.

DEBS: I was opposed to it. I said it was at the time, it's unconstitutional. It was unconstitutional. We're fighting the Germans. We have a lot of Germans here. Why don't we incarcerate them?

VASQUEZ: Did it cost you politically to take that position?

DEBS: Yeah . . .

VASQUEZ: How?

DEBS: . . . to some degree.

VASQUEZ: How?

DEBS: Well, I did. . . . I expressed myself, but. . . . It never really, it never really, I don't think, hurt me to any great extent at all. But my Japanese friends knew that I was one of the few. . . . One of my very good friends is Senator [Daniel K.] Inouye.

VASQUEZ: Is that right?

DEBS: Well, my last fund-raiser, when I ran for public office, my last fund-raiser at the Century Plaza Hotel, he was the main speaker. He was here for the annual Japanese. . . . It's in August, I

guess it is. Is it August or September? Anyway, the parade that they have down in Little Tokyo?

VASQUEZ: Uh-huh.

DEBS: He and I rode in the same car together.

VASQUEZ: He was in the public eye in the Watergate hearings at that time, wasn't he? So it would have been '74, '73 . . .

DEBS: Oh, no.

VASQUEZ: Or was it before that?

DEBS: Yes, it was in the seventies, before I left office. And when he was coming back from Washington, he always stopped over one night on his way to Hawaii because his doctors told him to. So, he'd call me from Washington and I'd have my driver go out and pick him up at the airport and take him to the hotel, and the next morning take him from the hotel back to the airport and send him on his way to Hawaii. But he was the main speaker at my last fund-raiser. We had about two thousand people at the Century Plaza Hotel.

VASQUEZ: How did you and Senator Inouye become friends?

DEBS: That's interesting. In Washington, just making the rounds. I mean, I met a lot of senators and

a lot of congressman. And here he's from Hawaii. And I really can't tell you the first time I ever met him. Had to be in his office. Then I met him in Hawaii and I took him to [Edwin S.] Ed Pauley's Coconut Island he had right off the shores of Hawaii, on the windward side. And, oh, I have lots of friends in Hawaii, lots of friends. Almost all my friends are Japanese. The fact is, I'd say 90 percent of my friends in Hawaii are Japanese. I just came back from Hawaii. My wife and I spent ten days over there a month ago.

The Zoot-Suit Riots

VASQUEZ: That's 1942. Then the following year, you had the Zoot-Suit riots. Tell me about that.

DEBS: Well, uh, I thought the police handled it very badly. I think they could have done a much better job. But they took a look at these kids and they. . . . There's prejudice there. You know it and I know there is prejudice there. And if they had handled it differently, it would have never gotten out of hand. But because of the prejudice, that's what started the Zoot-Suit riots.

VASQUEZ: What do you think brought that prejudice out at that particular time?

DEBS: Well, the way they dressed, the way they acted. What brings out racial prejudice. . . . It's been there. Racial prejudice starts in the home as kids. They hear their fathers and mothers denouncing a race or some religion or something like that. That's where it starts, right in the home.

VASQUEZ: Do you think the war had anything to do with it?

DEBS: I can't quite fathom it, because there were lots of the Mexicans in the army. I never could fathom that one out. Really, I blame it on the police, and I still do.

VASQUEZ: What role do you think the press played in it?

DEBS: Huh?

VASQUEZ: What role do you think the press played in it?

DEBS: Oh, well, they built it up. What the hell. The [recent] shootings on the freeways. How many millions of cars are there on the freeways? So, we've got ten or twelve nuts on the freeways shooting. That brings out ten or twelve or fifteen more when they hear it. All the nuts come out from underneath the rocks.

VASQUEZ: Do you think that's what happened then?

DEBS: I think the press always overplays everything. I really do. They want to sell papers. That's what they're in business for, to sell papers. Unfortunately, there's lots of people who have been hurt by the press, by irresponsible reporting.

The Debs Campaigns and the Press

VASQUEZ: Your first campaign, how did you use the newspapers? Or what role did newspapers or the press play in your campaign?

DEBS: [Laughter] I think that's a good question. I didn't have any. . . . I had one little newspaper for me, the Griffith Park News. The [Los Angeles Times], which was the bible in much of my district, was opposed to me, of course, because I was Democrat. It was a Republican newspaper then. Now, it's a different kind of a newspaper. Now it's a moderate, if anything pro-Democratic. But at that time, it was very pro-Republican. I had no support. Oh, yes. I take it back.

VASQUEZ: Did they endorse you?

DEBS: I take one back. I shouldn't have forgot that. The old [Los Angeles Daily News] supported me.

VASQUEZ: How?

DEBS: Endorsed me.

VASQUEZ: Did the L.A. Times endorse your opponent?

DEBS: Oh, yes. Whoah, yes, yes, yes. Daily News endorsed me. The [Los Angeles] Examiner didn't. The [Los Angeles] Herald didn't. Daily News and the Griffith Park News were the only two papers I had, the Griffith Park News circulated in the Atwater District and part of the Los Feliz area, but mostly in Atwater.

VASQUEZ: So the L.A. Times didn't endorse you either time?

DEBS: Oh, yes.

VASQUEZ: The second time they did endorse you?

DEBS: Oh, no, no, no, no. The second time, or third . . .
Race for the Los Angeles City Council

VASQUEZ: But they did endorse you when you ran for city council in 1947.

DEBS: That's right.

VASQUEZ: Why do you think that was?

DEBS: Well, I had a young fellow [on the Los Angeles City Council] who was a lieutenant in the air force--his name was [John R.] Roden and he decided he was going to replace all the city councilmen with veterans of World War II. The

only reason I ran against him was I had helped him get elected. I had raised money, I had supported him with many of my friends. He had a meeting one night, and he was discussing how they were going to run veterans for all these different offices of city council. And he ended up saying, "And we've got to find somebody to run against Debs."

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

More on the City Council Race

VASQUEZ: When we stopped the tape, we were talking about Roden . . .

DEBS: His first name was John.

VASQUEZ: John Roden, saying that they had to run somebody against Debs, because they wanted veterans.

DEBS: So, I had a friend at the meeting and he called me up at about midnight in Sacramento. And he says, "Ernie," he says, "What happened between you and John Roden?" I said, "I don't know. I've never. . . ." I said, "I just helped him get elected. Why? Why do you ask?" And he told me about this meeting. "Well," I said, "Well, I'll be darned. Why would he be mad at me? I

just helped him to get elected."

We had a recall campaign, as you remember. It was [against Meade] McClanahan, who was a Nazi of the first order, [like] Gerald L. K. Smith, right? Well, we recalled him from the Thirteenth [Los Angeles City Council] District and put in Roden. So I was flabbergasted. I don't know what happened. So the more I thought of it, the madder I got. I loved the assembly. I had a good job with Harvey. I wasn't. . . . No problems. I loved the assembly. Still do.

I mean, I've loved all three jobs I've held in public office. And if I could afford it, I would work for free because I loved them. I loved what I did. So the more I thought about John Roden, the madder I got. So now he's just been elected in a recall election. He's got to come up next year to be reelected. I'm not. . . . I've just been reelected to the assembly. So I got two years. So I said to myself, the madder I got, I said, "I'm going to try him out for size and run against him." Should never have done it. Never do anything in anger. I should never have done it. I would have been happy in the

assembly and a hell of a lot more prosperous, let's put it, if I had stayed with Harvey.

VASQUEZ: Really?

DEBS: Well, I ran in a field of four candidates, me and three others. Roden and two others. I led in the primary over the incumbent. Uh, the other two candidates, you would have thought they were running against Roden. They ended up running against me and endorsed Roden against me. He had lots of money behind him. He put out a newspaper, one of these throwaways, four sheets?

VASQUEZ: Uh-huh.

DEBS: He depicted me as a tool of the special interests, a socialist, and I'm not so sure if he didn't say a communist. I don't know how the hell I could be the tool of special interests, a socialist and a communist. He had a cartoon of me with money running out of all my pockets. I wish to hell I'd had that money. All I could see. . . . Anyway, it was a kind of a nasty campaign. Now, I never ran a nasty campaign. I don't mention my opponent's name, never mentioned my opponent's name. Why should I advertise him? Why should I, once I'm in office, why

should I give him a platform? So I never debated him. Let him get his own crowd. I never. . . . But I never ran a dirty campaign. Never. I ran on issues. Once I was elected, I ran on my record. And I said right on there, "On his record, reelect" And then I said what I stood for. Sometimes I went by what my accomplishments were, so on and so forth. Never mentioned my opponent. So many people make that mistake. I never made that mistake and I think it's wrong. Now, it's nice in politics to debate, and so on and so forth. Which is fine, that's. . . . Maybe you should debate. But from a practical standpoint, if you're the incumbent, you're nuts to debate. Because you can only lose; you can't win. So I was elected. Defeated an incumbent.

Now remember, I have five days I've got to be in Sacramento. We're in session. I'm up there on all the roll calls. On Friday they used to adjourn about noon. Well, I'd answer the roll call on Friday. And then the sergeant at arms rushed me out. The airport was right close then. I'd get the plane and I'd get down here to

campaign Friday afternoon, Friday night, Saturday. Sunday night, I'd get on the airplane, in Burbank, and I'd go to sleep until the plane hit the ground in Sacramento. Because I just was exhausted, absolutely. But campaigning that far away with an incumbent right on the spot, campaigning every day, is not easy. But I defeated him very handily. I'll never forget the day. It started to rain. And I thought, "Oh, Christ." All his votes were the. . . . A lot of them were the ultraliberals that had never supported me, even though I had a damned good record as a liberal. Don't ask me why they don't support me. I've never been able to figure it out. And which was a blessing, too, actually. For my district, it was a blessing. So it rained. Poured. And I said, "Oh, my god. My people stay home; his people will go out in a snowstorm. They'll be voting." About 2:00, the sun came out. And I visited the areas. Lincoln Heights, which I considered to be my stronghold, which was a large Italian population, they were standing in line when the polls closed, seven, ten, fifteen deep. Of course, as long as they

were standing in line, they got to let them vote. So I said to whoever it was with me-- [Richard] Dick Waite I think it was--I said, "Dick, we're okay. With this kind of a turnout, we're okay." So I beat him, oh, very, very, very handily. I can't remember now, but, oh, very handily. Many thousands of votes.

VASQUEZ: Yes, it was a respectable majority. Yes it was. So you left the assembly . . .

DEBS: Fifty plus one. But I had thousands of more votes than he had, I think it was now. So I had three terms in the state legislature, and I had resigned. . . . This is humorous. They gave me the job as speaker when my own resignation came across the desk.

VASQUEZ: Is that right?

DEBS: I said, "Refer it to the Secretary of State." I resigned from the assembly to become a city councilman.

VASQUEZ: So you think you would have been the assembly speaker?

DEBS: I was acting assembly speaker at the time.

VASQUEZ: You were.

DEBS: I was the speaker running the assembly. And my

own resignation came across the desk, which said, "Resignation of Assemblyman Debs." It said, "Refer to the Secretary of State."

VASQUEZ: So you left the assembly and ran for the city council, primarily as a response to the attacks of John Roden?

DEBS: Yeah. And then. . . . And for that reason. . . . And then, now I'm running for a nonpartisan office. The Los Angeles Times, who had crucified me before, supported me. [Laughter] And the Daily News supported me. The Herald supported me. The Examiner supported me. I had the support of all four papers. But that didn't really mean much, and I'll tell you why. When I ran for. . . . You remember [William G.] Bill Bonelli?

VASQUEZ: Yes.

DEBS: Well, I ran against Bill Bonelli. I was on the city council. I ran. . . . He had told me-- personally told me--he was not going to run again. The mistake he made was running. So I went out and campaigned for two years, building up to run. . . . What? All of southern California, the eight southern counties. When he

decided to run again, I knew I couldn't beat him.

VASQUEZ: You're talking now for the

DEBS: If I pulled out, then I'd lose face with a lot of people. So I had to run. Well, he put seven Democrats in the race, me and six other Democrats. The six Democrats far exceeded his total that he got. There is cross-filing then. I got over 100,000 votes. He got a 150,000. But the other Democrats. . . . Christ, it was about. . . . Possibly maybe 300,000, at least, Democratic votes cast against Bonelli. But, because he had split them up, I couldn't get the nomination. But I knew that was. . . . As soon as he announced. . . . He was going to run again after telling me he wasn't. I knew it, but I said "I've got to go. I've got to go."

VASQUEZ: We're talking about county supervisor?

DEBS: No. That's for the Board of Equalization, for the eight counties of southern California. That's when he. . . . After he got reelected, that's when he got indicted. So, as I say, he should never have run again.

[End Tape 2, Side A]

IV. POSTWAR POLITICS IN CALIFORNIA

[Session 2, October 9, 1987]

[Begin Tape 3, Side A]

Postwar Economic and Social Needs

VASQUEZ: The last time we talked we touched on your tenure in the state assembly. Today, I'd like to have you make some comments on what it was like being in the state legislature in the period immediately after the Second World War.

The population rose by a million in California, in a two-year period between 1945 and 1947. Something like 300,000 servicemen who had been stationed here decided to stay in California. There were approximately 275,000 workers in the shipping industry, which was dedicated to making materiel for war; approximately 238,000 in the aircraft industry, which also was geared for war. All in all, in 1947 there were on the order of 3,500,000 workers employed in California and in 1947, over two hundred plants, new plants, were built here in Los Angeles.

In short, it was a period of growth, there were a lot of expectations, there were incredible needs for reconverting a war economy to a

peacetime economy: Transportation systems, housing, education, public health. You served, on committees which affected those issues. Can you give me some sense of the problems, and perhaps, some of the more salient issues that arose at that time?

DEBS: Well, immediately after World War II, the great influx that we had caused great problems. One of the problems was the fact that during the war, we had what was known as the Lanham Act, which was what we now call day-care centers. During the war, we needed women to work in our factories to help the war effort. And with the expiration of the war, so did the Lanham Act vanish. I introduced a bill which was adopted to set up child-care centers and the continuation of those child-care centers throughout California.¹ I consider that bill one of my good bills that I was instrumental in. Today, we have child-care centers in a broader scale than we had in those days, but we have a bigger population today than we had then.

1. A.B. 274, 56th Leg. Sess., Cal. Stat. 710 (1945).

But [as for] the boys that came through here on their way to the Pacific, especially, I was very much a part of that because I helped in entertaining the boys in Los Angeles. [They] liked what they saw in California, and when the war was over, they came back by the thousands to settle here. This created new jobs, new industry. We recognized at that time--at least I did--that there would be great growth in California for many, many years to come. And the need for us to attract industry here, was quite obvious to all of us.

As a member of the assembly immediately after World War II, I was employed because the assembly at that time was only a part-time job. We got a hundred dollars a month! Today, what do they get? Fifty-some thousand? Well, for a hundred dollars a month, it was an honorary thing more than anything else, at that particular time. My company, Harvey Machine--but then it became Harvey Aluminum--for which I was [head of] public relations, I spent a great deal of time in Washington, D.C.. There was a movement on. All the "war babies" that had been born during World

War II in the West were to be dismantled, gotten rid of.

Keeping the "War Babies"

VASQUEZ: These are industries that were born out here?

DEBS: Oh, yes, during World War II.

VASQUEZ: They were called "war babies?"

DEBS: "War babies." Harvey was interested in acquiring an aluminum plant in the Torrance [California] area. I succeeded in getting the eleven Western states--which all had benefitted by these "war babies"--senators and the congressmen to organize and save these industries. We were able to save the Kaiser [plant] in Utah and the plants up in Oregon and Washington that were "war babies" which later became Reynolds and Kaiser. And many, many other industries were saved. The plant the Harveys acquired was to be dismantled and shipped to Russia, believe it or not. And, of course, after long negotiations, we were able to lease that plant with an option to purchase, similar to other "war babies" throughout the West.

Other things were in the aircraft industry. During the war, the United States government spent millions and millions of dollars building airstrips

throughout the West. I was the chairman of the Joint Interim Committee on Aviation and, as such, I went to Washington and, actually, I flew my committee all over California.

Airfields to Airports

VASQUEZ: Is this the Interim Committee on Post-War Airports Projects?

DEBS: The Committee on Aviation, we called it.

VASQUEZ: Is that what it was called? All right.

DEBS: And I was chairman. Seven senators and seven assemblymen, with myself as chairman. I introduced that motion to create that committee. Because many of these airstrips were in areas where no city would be able to support them, tax-wise.

VASQUEZ: For example? Palmdale, is that one?

DEBS: That would be one, yeah. But all of them up and down [the state]. I can't remember them all.

VASQUEZ: Was Travis another?

DEBS: Chico, I think, was one.

VASQUEZ: These were military fields for training?

DEBS: All military fields and built near small cities whose tax base was absolutely impossible for them to continue. They'd grow up into weeds. And, as

such, we were able, with state help and with some federal help, to save many of them which are now airports used throughout California by various airlines. Santa Barbara was one. I can't remember some of them. There was not even a city near some of them. They were just airstrips that [planes] flew off and on as training. I think by our efforts we saved many of those airports which today are used by all of the airlines.

Housing. One of the big problems of that particular time was housing. Coming as they did, so many thousands upon thousands of people, it was a very difficult situation. One of the problems that I fought so hard for was better housing for our agricultural workers. Some of them--and perhaps still today--[were] not as adequate as they should be. But in those days they were just hovels. You wouldn't keep pigs in such a condition. [It was] not particularly a great amount of improvement, but it was a groundwork for later improvement. Because at that time we were so busy trying to fight to put out the fires by this vast infiltration of people coming to California, with so many problems that we weren't able, as a part-

time legislature, to solve them. It was impossible. That's just a few of the things that come to my mind.

Building Highways

VASQUEZ: In 1947, there was a \$3,000,000 highway expenditure, also passed by the legislature. What was the thinking at that time?

DEBS: That was a bitterly fought bill, incidentally. The governor wanted a cent-and-a-half gas tax increase. We were locked up in the assembly over that bill for a couple days.

VASQUEZ: Why was it so controversial?

DEBS: The oil industry didn't want any [taxes]. They bitterly fought the bill. The big companies, as well as the small, independent companies, were all against the bill. As I recall, we spent two nights --two days, rather--locked up in the assembly. Our food was sent in from a cafeteria. Some of the older members slept on the floor, and so on and so forth. It was a very, very difficult battle. We finally resolved it by instead of a cent and a half, a cent of gas tax. That was the first gas tax bill passed by the California legislature. Looking back on it, I was a young

man then, but [for] some of the older assemblymen, this took a toll on them, really. That was one of the big bills of the day.

VASQUEZ: How did the sides break down? Oil companies and the rest? Or did it break down by party affiliation?

DEBS: No, no.

Cross-filing and Patronage

VASQUEZ: By section of the state?

DEBS: No. Let me say at the time I served in the legislature, we had cross-filing. The Democrats and Republicans, you had liberal Democrats and moderate Democrats and conservative Democrats. And you had the same in the Republican party, so-called liberal, moderate. So party lines didn't mean much in those days, really. You'd have Republicans voting with you on one bill and opposing you the next bill. And Democrats the same way. It was a matter of where they came from and their own political philosophy. Nobody was going to die for a hundred dollars a month. So you voted your conscience.

We all recognized that it was a kind of an honorary [thing] to be a member of the legislature.

You were elected. Nobody could live on a hundred dollars a month, even in those days. It wasn't a matter of money or fear of getting beat. What are you getting beat for? A hundred dollars a month? It was pride. You took pride in what you did and you fought for what you believed in. I was recognized as a liberal--but not a way-out liberal--a liberal Democrat. I'll give you an illustration.

In our Democratic party at that particular time, we had thirty-two members. We had a fight over who was going to be the minority floor leader. I got fourteen votes to be floor leader and another person that ran got twelve votes. The rest of the Democrats didn't come to the caucus. So, having gotten fourteen votes, I was urged to become the minority floor leader. I said, "I will not be a minority floor leader with a minority of the Democrats." I said, "You've got to get somebody that they'll all get behind. How can I be of any use to the Democratic party with a party split?" So we elected an admiral from Ventura County, Admiral [John B.] Cook. He was a very conservative Democrat, but everyone picked him on

the basis of what the hell difference does it make.

VASQUEZ: A minority leader?

DEBS: Minority leader, yeah. After that, I remember Ralph [C.] Dills was still up there, saying, "Ernie, you damned fool, take it!" I said, "Ralph, I will not be a minority floor leader with a minority of the Democrats voting for me."

VASQUEZ: Were there groupings at the time, groupings or affinity groups, according to political philosophies? Who were the people that you had the most in common with, philosophically?

DEBS: Moderate to liberal. Remember, I was the first Democrat to come out of the Fifty-sixth Assembly District [which] always had been Republican. Even so, I voted to abolish cross-filing, even though I won two terms as a Democrat on the Republican ticket, cross-filing. But you had quite a few liberal Republicans, some from San Francisco at that particular time.

VASQUEZ: Anybody in particular stick out in your mind?

DEBS: I remember a couple of them, but it just was so long ago. If I looked at the roster I could pick them out. It was a matter of your philosophy.

You didn't have a strong party. Republicans were much stronger than the Democrats. I mean, as a party. They would vote together more often than the Democrats would vote together.

VASQUEZ: Why do you think that was?

DEBS: I think, perhaps, it was because the Republican party then was controlled more by the conservatives. There were liberal Republicans, as I remember very well. We used to fight like hell over certain bills and then go over to the Senator [Hotel] bar at lunch time or dinner, belly up to the bar, have a drink, laugh and joke about it, and there was no hard feelings. Today, that's not true. Today, they are mad at each other or, if you oppose or vote for a bill, either way, why there's a different feeling today, and has been for the last quite a few years. At that time, you had a different feeling among the members. You did not have the animosity that exists today in the legislature.

The Assembly Leadership

VASQUEZ: While you were in the assembly, there were two [different] assembly speakers: one was Gordon [H.] Garland, who was a Democrat; and Charles [W.]

Lyon who was a Republican. Can you give me an assessment of the two as leaders?

DEBS: Charlie Lyon [was a] delightful gentleman. He appointed me to [be] vice chairman of the health committee [Committee on Public Health] in my first term up there, which is a plum for a Democrat in a Republican-controlled house. The reason I was appointed, he explained the following year when I became chairman of the health committee. The Republicans, of course, were mad as hell because he had appointed a Democrat to head one of the more important committees of the legislature. Health, as now, today, is a very important committee. I had, at that time, Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital, Children's Hospital, Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, those three and some other, smaller [hospitals in my district]. I had, perhaps, more doctors living in my district than any other district in California. The Los Feliz area was known as "pill hill" where there were more doctors per square block than any place else. Well, these people lobbied him so hard to make me chairman. I didn't lobby myself.

VASQUEZ: This is as a freshman assemblyman now?

DEBS: The first time, I was only vice-chairman, but two years later, I became chairman.

VASQUEZ: I see.

DEBS: Because the chairman had left the assembly and so they moved me up from vice-chairman to chairman. The fact that I was vice-chairman as a freshman was very unusual, too. Because at that time, you didn't have a Republican and a Democrat. The Republicans took everything they could get. But the doctors lobbied Charlie Lyon. Now Charlie, if you didn't know him, he was a horse bettor. He lost two fortunes. I mean two fortunes playing the horses.

VASQUEZ: Oh, really?

DEBS: As I say, he was a delightful person. He said, "Ernie, I had to appoint you chairman to get those goddamned doctors off my back."

Opposing Governor Warren's Medical Plan

VASQUEZ: Were those doctors instrumental in your elections?

DEBS: Oh, yes.

VASQUEZ: Were they supportive?

DEBS: Oh, yes. Yes. The doctors supported me, and I had a lot of Republicans supporting me in my first election. Without the help of the Republicans and

the doctors, I would have been down the drain, I couldn't have won.

VASQUEZ: Tell me something, when Earl Warren proposed a medical plan in California, were you opposed to that?

DEBS: Yes.

VASQUEZ: As a result of?

DEBS: The governor called me down, and I said, "Governor, you must realize my circumstances." I said, "I was elected by the doctors in my district. They're all opposed to your socialized medicine." I said, "If I'm to come back here next year," I said, "I have to oppose you, even though I feel that there is some need for help, to help our poor" and so on and so forth. But I said, "As a matter of fact, you know that I cannot support it." And I didn't. We were good friends. Earl Warren was a good friend of mine. May I tell you another?

VASQUEZ: Please.

DEBS: How good a friend he was. My last year, before my election to the city council, I carried three of his bills in the legislature. So I said to the governor, "But, Governor, why are you giving me

these bills?"

VASQUEZ: Do you remember which they were?

DEBS: I can't remember, no. But they were important bills. I said, "You know I'm a Democrat in a Republican-controlled legislature." He said, "Ernie," I still remember, he said, "Ernie, you take care of the Democrats; I'll take care of the Republicans. That's why I'm giving you these bills." And I got them passed. One was on aviation. I forget what the hell it was now. No, it was an aviation bill. And I liken Earl Warren to the three great governors that California has ever had . . .

Why Warren was a Great Governor

VASQUEZ: What made him a great governor?

DEBS: Hiram [W.] Johnson, who drove the Southern Pacific out of the legislature, [Edmund G.] Pat Brown [Sr.], and Earl Warren.

VASQUEZ: What made Warren such a great governor in your eyes?

DEBS: Well, you see, when he was district attorney, he was recognized as a tough guy, a very conservative Republican. All the Republicans considered him very conservative. When he became governor of

California, he changed considerably and became much more liberal. A lot of the conservative Republicans didn't like Earl Warren as governor, but they couldn't do much about it because he was governor and they damned well had to stay in line. And he kept them in line and he got his legislation passed, in the main. Socialized medicine was one that went down to defeat, but other than that he got his legislation through.

VASQUEZ: Some analysts say that it was his ability to stay away from extremes and to stay away from partisan politics that allowed him to put together coalitions to get things done. Is that your assessment?

DEBS: That's right. Exactly, exactly right. He put Democrats and Republicans together, the moderates, and that's why he was so liked. That's why he was three times elected governor of California.

VASQUEZ: Others say that his personal leadership style had much to do with it in the sense that he stuck to his word.

DEBS: Oh, his word was absolute, absolute. Another thing he did, on any important bill that you had pass through the legislature, before he would sign

it, he would call you and you'd [go] down when he signed it to get a picture with him signing the bill.

VASQUEZ: This is something that he initiated?

DEBS: I don't know [of] anybody before that, and I'm not sure how many do it since. But he did it. This made Democrats and Republicans like him, except the extreme conservative Republicans. They hated him. Later on, when he got to the Supreme Court and became even more liberal, then they hated him even worse.

VASQUEZ: Yes.

DEBS: I consider him an excellent governor. And I'll tell you another thing, he never forgot his friends. Even after he was no longer governor of California, [but] was on the Supreme Court. [For] the Rose Parade, which I never missed for thirty-some years. . . I've missed the last few years as I've been down, but I always went to the Rose Parade. We would meet under the stands before going up to our seats. And it was cold in the mornings, you know. January 1, it was cold about 7:00 or 6:30 in the morning. The place under the stands had coffee and orange juice. You'd go up

to the bar which they had--it wasn't a bar, it was a table--you would order a coffee with a stick in it. The stick was a shot of brandy. [Laughter] I would meet Justice Warren, Governor Warren--I always called him "governor"--almost always underneath those stands. And he would greet me as a long-lost [friend]. He never forgot his friends. Never, never. He was a wonderful person. Should have been a Democrat.

Powerful Figures in the Assembly

VASQUEZ: [Laughter] Who were the powers in the assembly at the time that you served, both in terms of elected powers, individuals and groups, and lobbyists?

Who were the powers? Who made things happen?

DEBS: Well, when I served, Charlie Lyon was a very powerful speaker.

VASQUEZ: Why was he powerful?

DEBS: His ability to appoint to various committees. He was a conservative from Beverly Hills. He had all the lobbyists behind him. I would say 90 percent of the lobbyists in Sacramento were behind him. In those days, that was power, plenty of power.

I remember so well one particular battle we had and [Alfred W.] Robertson of Santa Barbara,

who was then the Democratic floor leader rose to speak. He rose to a point of order and quoted Robert's Rules of Order, objecting to what the speaker had decided. And he said, "Where do you find that in the rules?" Charlie Lyon replied, "It's in the 'Lyon's Rules of Order'!"

[Laughter] Everbody burst out laughing.

VASQUEZ: And he got his way?

DEBS: The power in the lobby then was [Arthur H.] Artie Samish, of course. He controlled all the liquor, beer, wine--no, not wine--beer and liquor. And put out money very liberally, very liberally to those who were on the committee. I think it was the Committee on Public Morals, or something like that. He was the most powerful.

VASQUEZ: You served on that committee, right? You served on the Public Morals Committee . . .

DEBS: No, no, no, no. I never did. No. I couldn't. . . . No, I was not a Samish boy. [Lester A.] McMillan, my seatmate, was a Samish boy. He was chairman of the committee. But no, not me. I was not privileged. I may have gotten a contribution from Samish, but if it was it was a damned small contribution.

VASQUEZ: But you never served on the Public Morals Committee?

DEBS: No, no.

VASQUEZ: That committee served as what? As a conduit for the . . .

DEBS: All of the bills on liquor went to that committee. [If] Artie Samish wanted [a bill] killed, [it] went to that committee. And I mean that committee killed the bills. If Samish said, "Kill the bill" that bill was dead. It's a matter of fact.

VASQUEZ: Well, we were talking about who the powers were, Any particular assemblymen you remember, or group of assemblymen?

DEBS: Well, there was. . . . Don [C.] Field of Glendale was quite vocal. He's dead now, has been dead a long while. But he was quite powerful. There was a fellow from San Francisco who was pretty powerful, but I can't remember his name. He later became a judge.

VASQUEZ: I can find that. That shouldn't be any problem.

DEBS: A lot of these people I think will be dead by now.

VASQUEZ: How about in the senate? Who were the big guns over in the senate?

DEBS: Oh . . .

VASQUEZ: Jack Tenney, I would imagine.

DEBS: Jack Tenney, oh yeah.

VASQUEZ: Was he in the senate yet?

DEBS: Yeah, he was in the senate when I helped to kill his god-damned bill on . . .

VASQUEZ: Loyalty?

DEBS: His red-baiting bill.¹ What the hell did they call it? Anyway, there used to be a joint committee of the assembly and the senate.

VASQUEZ: Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California.

DEBS: And he put out a book with a red cover on it and took a lot of names of prominent people that I knew, respected, and he put them in that damned book. They were no more communists than I am or anyone else. He tarred and feathered a lot of decent human beings. So when he came, with a continuing resolution, came to the floor of the assembly, I took it on. Jack Tenney was standing in the back part of the assembly chamber. And I had a lot of support. If it had gone to a roll

1. S.B. 589, 55th Leg. Sess., (1943).

call, I think I could have won. But after the debate, or sometime on during the debate, Tenney sent word up to the speaker that he was withdrawing from the joint committee and to send it back to the senate, because he was going to have a senate-only Un-American Activities Committee. I had some help, and other Democrats took it on. But I took it on very, very strongly.

VASQUEZ: Who were some of the other Democrats that supported you on this, do you remember?

DEBS: I imagine Julian Beck would have been one of them. He'd certainly remember that battle. Lester McMillan would remember it.

VASQUEZ: Tell me, Jack Tenney's committee lasted quite a long time. Then, Hugh [M.] Burns took it over. Is that right?

DEBS: Yeah.

VASQUEZ: But if there was so much opposition to it, why did it last so long? Was it because it was the tenor of what was happening in the country at the time?

DEBS: Yeah, the senate was afraid of Jack Tenney.

VASQUEZ: Why?

DEBS: Well, because they didn't want to be branded as "un-American." That son of a bitch would do

anything. Well, he'd pick any name out, accuse anybody. Jack Tenney, when he was first elected to the legislature, we all thought he was a communist.

VASQUEZ: He had, in fact, been accused of being a communist, hadn't he? He and Sam Yorty?

DEBS: Well, I don't know whether they were ever members of the party. If they weren't communists, they sure as hell should have been paying dues. They took on everybody and accused everybody.

And Sam Yorty, we used to call him "Shit House Sam" because two of the guys in the assembly--and this was before my [tenure]. There were two guys went into the john and Sam was sitting on the stool. When they went in there, he put his feet up and listened to the conversation of two of the assemblymen talking about a bribe. And then he went over to the district attorney and had them both indicted.

VASQUEZ: [Laughter] That's a great story.

DEBS: It's true!

Relations Between Assembly and Senate

VASQUEZ: What was the relationship between the senate and the assembly, both as institutions and the

individuals who served in both houses, when you were there?

DEBS: [Laughter] The senate was an old man's club.

VASQUEZ: The senate?

DEBS: The senate. They didn't give a damn about the assembly. If you didn't get along with the senators, you didn't get a bill passed. It was pretty bad, really pretty bad. They were mostly all conservatives coming from the rural areas of California. That was before reapportionment. They were able to kill any decent legislation. Now, that was why Warren, as a governor, was fantastic, getting bills through that damned senate. If he wanted to get through, he got them through, mostly.

But the contempt of the senators for the assembly was obvious to all of us. They didn't give a damn about us. If you had to go through there, you had to be damned sure you didn't take on one of their bills when it came over to the assembly. The only way we had of responding, was when their bills came over to the assembly, we could kill the goddamned bills. And so we did have a little respect and a little leverage, but

not that much. In those days, the senate ran the legislature.

VASQUEZ: So that made Warren's ability to bridge ideological extremes, or to stay away from them, that much more important, didn't it?

DEBS: I don't understand how the hell he did it, but I'll tell you he got some bills through the senate that I never thought he could get through. But just remember, those people all came from "cow counties." We used to call them "cow county senators." That's how we referred to them. They represented cows and horses, they didn't represent people to any great extent at all.

Los Angeles County's Lone Senator

VASQUEZ: And Los Angeles had only one senator.

DEBS: We had one senator.

VASQUEZ: And that was Jack Tenney.

DEBS: And it was Jack Tenney.

VASQUEZ: How much do you think that hurt Los Angeles County?

DEBS: Oh, it hurt us tremendously.

VASQUEZ: In what way?

DEBS: It hurt us tremendously, especially the fact that San Francisco had one senator, too. Tenney

represented all of Los Angeles County. San Francisco and the northern county senators if something would favor Los Angeles, they'd kill that goddamned bill, really.

VASQUEZ: I imagine this made all of those projects after the Second World War: to expand transportation, housing, education, public health, out of these things, that much more difficult didn't it?

DEBS: Yeah. You know, when I got the bill through, the continuation of the Lanham Act for the child-care centers that had been born in World War II, I had to work like hell. Now, remember that I had served as assistant sergeant at arms up there and I had made a lot of friends [on] both sides, the senate and the assembly. And I was a young man and they. . . . I don't know, usually, I didn't take on the senators. In other words, when Tenney brought up his goddamned Un-American [Activities] committee, that teed me off when I saw all those names in that book. It teed me off, so I took him on. But, usually, I didn't take. I had a saying, "What helps northern California or what helps any portion of California, helps all of California. We're in all of this together. Agriculture is

very important to California. I want to do what I can to help agriculture." But the only time I ever did anything was--and this didn't take on the small farmers, this took on the big farmers--on the housing for the agriculture worker. Usually, I went along with the voice on reasonable bills. I'd vote against some of them if they were not reasonable bills. Because what helped agriculture at that time was damned important to California. So, I didn't make many enemies in the senate, but I had a hell of a time getting that child-care bill through. They didn't know about child care. What the hell, they had no child-care centers in any of their areas. They didn't know what the hell they were talking about. You had to explain it to them. I worked that child-care center bill, I think, a month to get it passed.

V. LEGISLATIVE EXPERIENCES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Public Housing Legislation

VASQUEZ: You also were involved, weren't you, in legislation that culminated in some of the housing projects, public housing projects, in Los Angeles?

DEBS: Oh, yes. Yes.

VASQUEZ: Can you tell me a little about that?

DEBS: I was always for public housing because at that time, you had so many shortages of housing, you had to do something. We're paying in our federal taxes to build housing in New York and Baltimore and Timbuktu. And I went back and saw what was happening, the redevelopment in those areas. So, I was for public housing. Later on, I have to tell you--I'm not for public housing now, today--the bitter experiences we've had with public housing.

[End Tape 3, Side A]

[Begin Tape 3, Side B]

VASQUEZ: You were telling me about public housing; why you are against it now.

DEBS: I've changed my position on it because of the fact that the people that move into public housing just create a slum after a short period of time that they're there. I favor, or have favored for the last twenty, twenty-five years, the federal government doing what is done in New Zealand. All married couples, when they get married, get a home. They may never live long enough to pay it off to the government, but it's their home and

they'll take care of it. Where [with] public housing, they just make a slum out of it.

In my [supervisory] district, off North Main Street, public housing was in there. Six months later you went in there and it was like a pigpen. Now they do have rules and they can kick you out. But think of the mayor of Chicago living in that public housing project. Remember that lady who was mayor of Chicago?

VASQUEZ: Uh-huh.

DEBS: Where they had all the crime, and so on and so forth, in that big housing project?

VASQUEZ: [Jane] Byrne.

DEBS: She understands now about public housing. It is not the way to go. It is to make available housing on a long-term basis, long payments.

VASQUEZ: Private ownership?

DEBS: Private ownership. Let the government go that way. Those people as I say, may never live long enough to pay the thing off, but it's their home, they're paying on that home as they go along, and they're going to take care of it. And that's been proven.

VASQUEZ: The real estate and banking industry would call

that socialism.

DEBS: I know. I know. But I don't give a damned what they call it, it's better than with public housing.

VASQUEZ: You think public housing gives no incentive to people to advance themselves and to take care of it?

DEBS: You got it. No, that's right. But if you have a home, you're going to take care of that home. You're going to have pride in that home. I learned a lesson of being a champion of public housing to being a champion of the government going at it a different way and making housing available to the people on long-term interest rates, low down payment--maybe no payment at all, if they can't afford it--but make them pay as they go along. And it's proven. In New Zealand, it's worked fine. Have you ever studied New Zealand?

VASQUEZ: I know the case and, I think, I tend to agree with you. But it's just that in this country, and this state and especially in this county, the powers on the other side of the argument are formidable.

DEBS: What?

VASQUEZ: The powers on the other side of the question are

formidable. Trying to buy a home, even with the down payment, as you know, is prohibitive.

DEBS: Well, that's why I say the government has to go in and subsidize it, right from the beginning. Look at all these houses. They could build a good house on a large-scale development, let the private industry make a buck off of it.

VASQUEZ: It would seem to generate the economy in the surrounding counties, as well.

DEBS: Well, of course it would.

VASQUEZ: It did in the forties, the housing that was built.

DEBS: It provides housing for those that can't afford [it]. Now, this is the way to go, not public housing. Now, if you're going to go for public housing, then you're going to have to have strong tenants' organizations to police it. Not the city or the county or the state, but a tenants' organization that lives right there. That does work.

VASQUEZ: Those proved successful in Chicago, and in New Jersey.

DEBS: It's proven successful here.

VASQUEZ: Is that right?

DEBS: In the East Los Angeles area.

VASQUEZ: The Maravilla projects?

DEBS: That's right. I'm the guy that got fifteen million dollars from the federal government when I was supervisor to build that project. But I said, under no circumstances, unless we have a strong tenant organization. And they still have it today. You go out there and see it now. They police it. If you don't live up, you're out of there.

VASQUEZ: That's right.

DEBS: That's the way to do it.

VASQUEZ: It is the best-kept project in the city.

DEBS: If you're going to have public housing, the only way to do it is monitor the people.

VASQUEZ: And it is if not the best, one of the best-kept projects in the city.

DEBS: I think it's one of the best. At the time I was supervisor, it was one of the best in the United States. That's why I insisted on the tenants having a say [as to] who moves in, who doesn't, and who doesn't stay.

Founding California State University, Los Angeles

VASQUEZ: Another area of interest to you, when you were an assemblyman, was the field of education. You, in fact, were responsible for legislation that

created the California State University at Los Angeles. Is that correct?

DEBS: That's one of my pride and joys, Cal State Los Angeles. That's the first new state . . .

VASQUEZ: University.

DEBS: Well, it was a college, state college, the first one that was newly created in forty years. I had one hell of a battle to get that through, but we got it through.

VASQUEZ: Was there competition between that campus and what became Cal State Northridge [California State University, Northridge]?

DEBS: No. Never was any. . . . I had all members of the assembly as coauthors of my bill to create Cal State. All thirty-two members were coauthors.¹

VASQUEZ: Why the opposition? Why was it such a hard fight to bring Cal State to Los Angeles?

DEBS: The senate! Getting over the senate. I had no problem getting it through the assembly. I had thirty-two votes to start with.

VASQUEZ: They didn't want it in Los Angeles, or they didn't

1. A.B. 586, 57th Leg. Sess., Cal. Stat. 1082 (1947). According to the 1947 Assembly Final History, there were twenty-five coauthors, p.315.

want one at all, a new college?

DEBS: Let me tell you about how I got it through. I got it through because Earl [D.] Desmond, Senator Desmond from Sacramento, came to me, and he said, "Ernie, I'm going to introduce a bill to create a new state college in Sacramento." I said, "Earl, if the need is there, fine." He said, "Will you support it?" I said, "Will you support a Los Angeles state college?" He said, "I'll support a Los Angeles state college if you'll support Sacramento." And this is when I knew my thirty-two votes solid in the assembly meant something. That was my first indication that if I got thirty-two assemblymen all to support--Democrats and Republicans--together, I had leverage in the senate.

My bill passed the assembly and went to the senate. It was doing nothing but laying in committee. Desmond's bill came over to the assembly, and I said to the chairman--who the hell was it then, I don't remember--I said, "Put that bill in the bottom of the box until our bill passes." He was from Los Angeles, I think. I said, "If our bill passes for a California state

college in Los Angeles, then we'll pass Desmond's bill." Desmond said to me, several weeks [later], "Hey, how come my bill is not moving over on your side? I thought we agreed." I said, "Earl, we did." I said, "But I don't see any movement on my on your side. Until you move my bill--which came over first--through the senate, your bill is going to stay on the bottom of the box." My bill moved very fast then.

VASQUEZ: So it was a direct quid pro quo?

DEBS: That's right. That's how that bill became a law. Northridge came after that. It was in 1947 I passed that bill. I was no longer in the assembly, but Northridge [people] came to me [when I was] a city councilman. They said, "Will you help us get a college in the [San Fernando] Valley?" I said, "Of course, [with] the great growth of the Valley?" I said, "Hell, you're going to have a million, two million people out there." I was conservative. I thought that we'd be a million people, but now, hell, I don't know how many millions are out there. I said, "Of course, I'll help you." And I did. I went to Sacramento and lobbied to help get the Northridge

college through.

VASQUEZ: Julian Beck, I think, was active in that.

DEBS: Oh, yeah, Julian Beck was. Yeah, yeah.

VASQUEZ: And then Allen Miller.

DEBS: Yeah, Allen Miller too. Yes. And so, hell's bells in Baltimore. Without those state colleges --one, two, three, four--I don't know how many of these [state colleges] have been since [established]. I mean, what would you do to educate these youngsters? What was wrong at the time I was in the legislature [was that] people had no vision. I don't say all people, but especially the senators from the cow counties. They had no vision that California was destined to be a fantastically big state.

Urban versus Rural Interests

VASQUEZ: Was it because the dramatic changes were taking place mainly in the urban centers that they weren't familiar with?

DEBS: They didn't know, you see. They were only interested in their little senatorial districts in the cow counties. They had not much growth there. The only growth they had, was people leaving the urban areas to get away and retire.

So they had very little growth in those days, in the rural areas. The growth was in the big areas, in the cities. So they didn't know.

VASQUEZ: And between 1940 and 1950, California became the third largest state in the union.

DEBS: But in 1943, '45 and '47 of the legislature, you had control by the so-called cow county senators, and they didn't know what the hell was happening in the rest of the state. They had no vision of what was going to happen. All of us knew, with the influx of the population, industry was going to come. The aircraft was in its infancy then. Later, it became what it is today. What the hell would we do today if we didn't have the aircraft industry here and these other industries?

VASQUEZ: What loosened up the state legislature to come to grips with this? Was it the fifties? Was it the rise of the Democrats, do you think?

DEBS: Yeah, yeah. With the Democrats taking over, especially in the assembly, coming from a minority party to a majority party. And more senators elected from the urban areas. And then came reapportionment.

VASQUEZ: Right.

DEBS: Then California took off.

Creating the UCLA Medical School

VASQUEZ: What do you consider your most important accomplishments as an assemblyman?

DEBS: Cal State. Well, where are you from? UCLA. I was the author, along with M. Philip Davis--he was a Republican representing Westwood at that time-- of the bill that created UCLA Medical Center.¹ And that was a bad, bad fight. Real vicious fight.

VASQUEZ: Why?

DEBS: We got the bill through the assembly fairly easy, but when it got to the senate, Robert Gordon Sproul, head of the University of California at Berkeley, behind the scenes was knifing the bill. We didn't get a chance to move the damned bill. It just wouldn't move and I smelled a rat. I said to Davis, I said, "Phil, I think we're being had." Then we went to work on Dr. Robert Gordon Sproul, who denied, of course, opposing the bill. But when Phil Davis, I, and thirty-two other assemblymen said, "We're going to cut the hell out of the [University of] California

1. A.B. 1831, 56th Leg. Sess. (1947).

budget unless that bill moves, for a medical school at UCLA," our bill moved. Their lobbyists came to me and said, "You've got it all wrong. Chancellor Sproul is not opposing your bill." I said, "When the bill moves, then I'll know that he's not opposing the bill."

VASQUEZ: Was it through those lobbyists that Sproul had been able to hold up that bill?

DEBS: Well, they had their own lobbyists.

VASQUEZ: That's what I'm saying, university lobbyists.

DEBS: Oh, yeah, he was behind the scenes opposing it. It wasn't even moving out of committee. Three days after he got the word that we were going to cut the hell out of--the thirty-two assemblymen--his budget unless that bill was passed, our bill moved.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember who the lobbyist for the UC system then was?

DEBS: Oh, god, I guess it was James [H.] Corley. I don't know whether he's still alive or not. A nice guy, but he was a lobbyist, and he was under instructions from Sproul to kill the bill. He did not want anything other than [for] the Berkeley campus.

VASQUEZ: Do you think it was lack of vision, as well?

DEBS: Of course, it was a lack of vision. He couldn't foresee the growth of the university as it exists today. I first got my lesson when [Alfred W.] Bobby Robertson wanted to create the University of California at Santa Barbara. Sproul opposed that bill, too. The reason I happen to know, I was Robertson's good friend. He was the minority floor leader and a good friend. I liked him, Bobby Robertson. Everyone liked him, even the Republicans. He said, "Ernie, would you take a ride with me?" I said, "Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going to drive over to the University of California and I'm going to confront that son of a bitch Sproul." Exactly his words. I said, "Well, I haven't anything to do." He said, "I've got an appointment with him." I think it was 7:00 P.M. that evening or something.

So we got in his car and we drove over to the university. I didn't go in with him because I was not a part of the [meeting]. He came out and he said, "I told him off. I told him what I was going to do if I didn't get that bill passed, that I knew he was opposing it. He denied everything,

but he doesn't want any other campuses to be built." If we didn't have Santa Barbara, where my son graduated from, if we didn't have Redlands, Irvine, where would we be?

VASQUEZ: Or UC San Diego, which is fast becoming . . .

DEBS: Yeah, San Diego. Yeah, the whole thing.

VASQUEZ: . . . a world-class university.

DEBS: But he was a man of no vision. I can't explain it any better than to say that in that day and age, there weren't too damned many California legislators who had the vision to see that we were going to be a big, big state, that nothing could stop us. I had a favorite saying, "I might not live to see the day, but along the coast where water's available, there would be [development] from Santa Barbara to San Diego."

VASQUEZ: Not too far from it. [Laughter]

DEBS: It will come. It's gradually growing. Can't miss. It can't miss. But I foresaw that after World War II, when I saw [the servicemen] coming back. And, hell, they were sending word back to the East, "Come on, this is great!" But you didn't have that [kind of] vision in those days. I don't see myself as a visionary, but I knew that

California was going to be a growing, growing, growing state. And I still say--but I don't think I'll live that long--but I'm getting pretty close to seeing what I said was going to happen with the growth.

Compromise and Successful Legislation

VASQUEZ: What were your greatest disappointments as an assemblyman?

DEBS: Oh, I had lots of disappointments, I guess, along the line. But I don't remember which was any great disappointment. I got a lot of my legislation [passed] that I really was interested in. I didn't take on too many bills. I'm not like any "somebody." I had to believe in a bill and the need for the bill, so I didn't have too many bills. Some guys would [up signing on to] every goddarned bill and put in fifty or a hundred bills. I didn't do that. I would put in maybe twelve, fifteen, at the most, and then I'd ride herd on those bills.

VASQUEZ: That's more or less the number of bills you passed each session.

DEBS: I passed most of my legislation because I worked at it. And it's hard work. Imagine those cow

county senators. You'd practically have to kiss their fanny in those days. They treated me better than most people because. . . . I don't. . . . Maybe I. . . . I was a public relations guy for a company. Maybe I knew how to get along, to get things through.

VASQUEZ: Last time we talked, you told me some stories about when you were a young man. It seems that your ability to reconcile differences and ameliorate conflict worked very well for you, both in business and in public life.

DEBS: That's right. Politics is the art of compromise. Nobody is ever going to get everything they want. But if you get your foot in the door, then later on, maybe the door will swing a little wider. It's an area of give and take; all of us are not philosophically the same. Each of us has our own ideas. If you antagonize a guy with his ideas, how the hell are you going to talk to him later on? You've got to listen. You've got to be a good listener. That's important in politics, to be a good listener. Try to understand the other guy's viewpoint, then try to get him to understand your viewpoint.

Somewhere along the line there will be a meeting and you'll get something accomplished. But if you're just a bull in a china closet, you ain't going to get anything accomplished. Never have; never will. So I enjoyed all my thirty-two years of public life. I really did. I always used to say, "If I could afford it, I'd work for free." I really believe that.

Amateur versus Professional Lawmakers

VASQUEZ: In terms of the legislator's role, you've seen it grow from a part-time, amateur lawmaker, to a professional, full-time politician who lives from it, depends on it for his livelihood, for his career advancement. What is your assessment of these two methods of making laws?

DEBS: Well, you could not have a part-time legislature today. It's impossible. At the time, we were young, the state in the forties was entirely different from what you have today. I advocated, when I got out of the assembly, strongly advocated that there be a full-time legislature and they ought to be paid enough so that lobbyists didn't influence them. And I still believe that. I don't even believe that they're being paid enough

today, for running a big corporation. That's what California is: a big, big corporation. I don't think they're being paid anywhere near the amount. I'd like to see them have their salary way up above what it is today, so that they would not have to listen to the lobbyists. They could vote their own convictions and be responsible to the people who elected them.

VI. OBSERVATIONS ON CALIFORNIA POLITICS

The Power of Lobbyists

VASQUEZ: Do you think lobbyists have become too powerful again?

DEBS: The lobbyists have always been too powerful. They're too powerful in the state legislature; they're too powerful in the congress of the United States. How do you really believe that a person running for public office [can spend that] amount of money. I was elected on fifteen hundred dollars! They're spending three hundred and five hundred thousand, a million dollars to get elected today! Who the hell is paying the bills?

VASQUEZ: Do you see that as one of the drawbacks in politics today, the cost of running for office?

DEBS: Oh, yes, yes, yes. You've got to pay your legislators more and make them more responsible to the people so they don't have to worry about the lobbyists.

VASQUEZ: A master at handling lobbyists with money to get elected was Jesse Unruh. You and Jesse Unruh came to the position that public campaign financing was necessary. How do you feel about that?

DEBS: Absolutely. Jesse and I were very much in accord with that. Jesse and I were very, very good friends. I saw him about six months before he died. I didn't know at that time he was a dying man, but he knew he was dying. Not many people knew that he was. I blamed the doctors for this after I found out what happened. They delayed too long and according to what I've been able to find out, they didn't do the right thing. Others have had the same problem with their prostate, and I think that somewhere along the line some doctors just made a wrong decision. Maybe Jesse made a wrong decision, too, or something.

Jesse was absolutely right. Take the lobbyists out. Let the campaigns be financed.

This is a drop in the bucket compared to what is [currently] involved in financing a legislator. You take the incentive away from the lobbyists by public financing of campaigns. I strongly believe that both the legislature, and the congress, should be.

VASQUEZ: Both at the state and the national level, eh?

DEBS: Yes.

Jesse Unruh's Contributions to the California Legislature

VASQUEZ: Tell me, since we've brought up Jesse Unruh, what do you see as his contributions to the legislative process in the state of California?

DEBS: I think he increased the stature of the legislatures all over the United States by what he did in California as Speaker of the Assembly, and later on, as [State] Treasurer. I think he was one of the smartest politicians that California has ever had, and one of the more dedicated. He knew the evils of the lobbyists. He was subject to the same thing that all of us were. But at the time I served, in a part-time job you really didn't have that pressure, because what were you going to lose? You didn't lose [a lot of money] in the

legislature. It was only a hundred dollars a month, twelve hundred dollars a year, twenty-four hundred dollars for two years. Nobody could live on that kind of money.

VASQUEZ: The stakes weren't high enough, you're saying?

DEBS: No. So that's why, in the forties, the early forties, you had a different situation. Jesse took that part-time legislature and made it a full-time legislature, and got great respect. I'll always say, Jesse Unruh was one of the smartest politicians California has ever had.

VASQUEZ: Why do you think Jesse never became governor?

DEBS: [Lack of] charisma, I guess, would be it. He developed the image of the big, fat guy, and even though he reduced and got away from that, he never got rid of the . . .

VASQUEZ: The image.

DEBS: "Big Daddy," that's what they called him, "Big Daddy."

VASQUEZ: And even, his own Democrats. For example, CDC [California Democratic Council] people.

DEBS: He was a very independent guy. CDC didn't own him, so they didn't control him, so they didn't like him. But he got things through and did

things to improve the image of the legislature. He said the same thing I'm telling you, you've got to finance campaigns with the government.

Comparing Public Service at Three Levels of Government

VASQUEZ: Now, you served at three levels of government in California. In the future, we hope to get more into your years as a city councilman in Los Angeles and member of the board of supervisors in Los Angeles County. Which of those three gave you greatest satisfaction? In which of those positions were you able to affect change as you saw it needed to be made?

DEBS: As [county] supervisor. There's only five [supervisors]. That means with two other votes, you could get most anything through the county board. Don't get me wrong, I loved all three of them. I loved being in the legislature. I have fond memories of being able to do something, leaving something for the future. So I liked the legislature. I ran for the city council and I liked the city council. I became--I'm not saying this bragging or anything like that--but I think I was one of two or three members that was recognized

as a leader of the city council.

I was chairman of the planning committee, which was a powerful committee. I didn't want the chairmanship. When I came back from the legislature, I said, "What the hell do I know about planning?" Harold A. Henry was president of the council, he said, "You're going to be chairman of the Planning Committee because I've decided you're going to be chair." I said, "What the hell do I know about it?" So I had to learn.

I used to go to the [San Fernando] Valley. That's where the great growth in the city council of my days was, the Valley. Any cases involving a dispute of planning [between] the developer and the people, I would go out personally and with my own eyes, see it [the project in question] before I would vote on it as chairman of the planning [committee]. My two colleagues, Henry and [L. E.] Timberlake, respected my judgment in almost all cases; not all, but most of the them. My eyes could tell me more in five minutes than five hours of debate, what was right and what was wrong.

I knew growth was going to come to that great valley. Where the hell else was it going to go?

I foresaw what was going to happen to the [San Fernando] Valley in those days. I zoned along the railroad tracks for industry, to keep houses from backing up to the railroad tracks and [making it necessary to] get rid of the railroad. Like Burbank is trying to get rid of the airport. The airport was there a hell of a long while before those houses were there. There was nothing out there. I can remember that. I can remember when the San Fernando Valley was nothing. Chickens and corn and . . .

VASQUEZ: Orange groves.

DEBS: Orange groves. Everything. I loved them all. But [as a] supervisor, I could get things done. Now, that doesn't mean we didn't have our arguments and I'd have to persuade, to get two other votes. But usually, you can get two other votes if it's a reasonable thing. I loved being a supervisor for the sixteen years I served there.

I spent a lot of money in East Los Angeles. That's where the poor people were. They didn't have swimming pools in their parks. I put a swimming pool in every park. I said, "These kids can't go to the beach; they have no transportation.

They don't have wheels to get to the beach. Beverly Hills has got a swimming pool in every backyard." When I was a city councilman, I put a swimming pool in every city park in my district. When I was a supervisor I put a swimming pool in every county park in my district. These are things that you remember. I had to fight sometimes to get them through. But, you know, if I drive around and I see things I say, "Hey, I was a part of that," it makes you feel good. I did this. I did that.

Transportation in Los Angeles County

VASQUEZ: In the area of transportation. You were a city or county official in the period in which developed our transportation system, such as it is, to the point that it can be said to be in crisis.

DEBS: Remember you were asking me a while ago about my big disappointments? One of my big disappointments was voting as a city councilman to take over a bunch of junk from the Fitzgeralds, a Chicago group, and buy that damned crap at an inflated price, which later proved to be not a decent, adequate transportation system for Los Angeles. I, along with Martin Pollard, fought for years and

years for a monorail system from the Valley to downtown Los Angeles, and we got nowhere. One of the votes I recast was to take over the L.A. transit, buy those Fitzgeralds out, with a bunch of rolling stock that wasn't any good. If we had it to do over again, we should have saved all of the right-of-ways . . .

VASQUEZ: For light rail?

DEBS: The PE [Pacific Electric Railway], the big red cars, all those right of ways should have been saved so today we could have a rail rapid-transit system that people would ride.

VASQUEZ: Do you think we'll ever get one in Los Angeles?

DEBS: Huh?

VASQUEZ: Do you think we'll ever get rail systems in Los Angeles?

DEBS: I doubt it.

VASQUEZ: Why?

DEBS: Let me ask you a question. In New York, their subway system--with that great density of population, they subsidize it to the tune of several hundred million dollars a year. We're so spread out, we don't have the density of population. How in the hell can we build a line from

here to the Valley without subsidizing it? It's not possible. If the people are willing to subsidize it, it can be done. But no one is ever going to convince me that what Mayor [Thomas] Bradley is doing today with this rail line out to the Valley is going to pay for itself. It isn't going to pay for itself.

The people ought to take a good look at what other places do. Toronto, for instance. I think they're subsidized, too. They have a great rail system there, but I'm sure it's subsidized, at least I was sure years ago when I was more active. Chicago. I lived in Chicago for a while as a youth. Those elevateds [railroads], they're great if you like riding "Els". It serves a purpose in Chicago, I guess. But you're not going to build those things in Los Angeles because who the hell is going to let you go down the street? You try to build an elevated [rail] along Wilshire Boulevard. No councilman, no supervisor, could ever survive in office advocating such a thing. It's impossible.

Any transportation system you do have is going to have to be subsidized. You might as well

understand that right now. We are subsidizing the [Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit District] RTD at the present time by a half-cent sales tax. Not enough. It won't do the job. Every time you raise the fares, you reduce the ridership. When I was a supervisor, I got the thing through for the senior citizens to ride during the off-peak hours at a reduced rate. I don't know what's happened since then, but I do know this, that you'll never have rapid transit in this city unless it's subsidized, because of the lack of density. If New York can't do it, how can we do it?

VASQUEZ: Do you think we're too much in love with our automobiles?

DEBS: Oh, yes. Yes. We won't even walk a block or two to the store. We've got to drive there.

Summarizing the Debs Philosophy of Politics

VASQUEZ: I wonder if you would summarize your political philosophy? Give me a sense of your political philosophy, both as it may have been shaped at the time you were in the state legislature and how it's changed over time. Some things come through. I think you believe in an activist government, government that gets involved in

social issues. I think you believe in the need for government to take up the cause of those less fortunate, a number of things like that.

DEBS: I haven't changed my basic philosophy. Somewhere --and I don't know who said it--there's a little thing that I believe, "Help for those that can't work, and the hell for those who won't work." Basically, I believe that everybody should have a job, an opportunity. And I think that gets back to the fact of education. We've got to train kids. We have too many school dropouts. They're never going to be in the labor market until we start training them. We're spending too much money on welfare and not training people to get off welfare.

I believe in welfare for those who can't work. Send them a check. Don't have the social worker calling on them all of the time. If they're in a [labor] market where they're never going to [succeed], you can't train them, you can't do a thing because of their physical handicaps or whatever, they're never going to be back in that labor market, then send them a monthly check, a decent monthly check so that they can afford to

live in decency. Save the money that we're paying the social workers and give it to the people who need it.

For those who can be employed, they ought to be employed. There's nothing as degrading to a person as sitting home doing nothing--maybe making more babies to be on welfare--those people should be trained. I advocated that when I was in the legislature. And just recently a bill was passed making it mandatory for those people that can be trained, without giving them welfare, to be put in a training [program]. Okay, that's a step in the right direction.

I advocated that [in] 1945. I saw the welfare. I went all over the state with a committee looking at welfare. I was on a committee when I was a supervisor, there were two supervisors from southern California and two from northern California. The congressman from San Francisco who died, [Philip A.] Phil Burton, was on the committee. We spent a half a million dollars with a study that thick. It's in the archives. Maybe they dusted it off and that's where this [recent] bill came from. We advocated then what I'm saying

now. We are not going to get out of this poverty circle until we get kids educated, reeducated, or trained.

The Decline of Education in California

And another thing. Our educational system somewhere along the line is not doing the job. We're trying to make lawyers and doctors out of people who aren't mentally qualified, and it's not their cup of tea. We've got to do a better job of finding out the capabilities of a person. Maybe he should be an engineer, not a doctor. Maybe he should be in computer systems. We're losing the battle in our educational system as far as Japan versus America is concerned. They're doing a better job of educating their youth over there than we're doing here.

VASQUEZ: Why?

DEBS: Because I don't think we're spending enough money on education. Our classrooms are too big. Thirty-four people in the classroom in Los Angeles city [schools]. Thirty-four. How the hell is it that teacher going to handle thirty-four kids? It's impossible. We used to be the best in the country.

VASQUEZ: Where did it go wrong?

DEBS: The reason the industry came to California, and all of our scientists came to California, was because of our educational system. It's gone to hell! Well, they'd say, "My wife and I are going to get--what?--two hundred some dollars back from stupid [Governor George] Duekmejian's . . .

VASQUEZ: Rebate.

DEBS: . . . sending them back to us." It's going to cost millions and millions of dollars to send it back, first. What am I going to do? I'm going to pay [most of it in] taxes to the federal government, right? So the two hundred and some. . . . Because I happen to be in [the] upper[-income] brackets. I'm still a consultant, still working. I need this like I need a hole in the head. The money should have gone to education.

[End Tape 3, Side B]

[Begin Tape 4, Side A]

We cannot ignore the fact that somewhere along the line our educational system is failing us when we have so many kids in the classrooms. We must do a better job in education. We must spend more money in education. God help the

United States of America, unless they do. We're in a competitive area now all over the world. Unless we educate our youth, we're going to be in serious problems. We won't be the number one nation in the world; we'll be an "also-ran" nation in the world. Education is the key to the whole thing. You and I, certainly, should know that. As I started to say, our industry, our scientists, came out here because of our educational system, now. . . . Who the hell can be proud of it?

VASQUEZ: What happened?

DEBS: We grew too fast and our educational system didn't grow fast enough. And that's a matter of dollars and cents. We must spend more on education, we must do a better job, and we must be more selective with our youth in trying to steer them in the right path of what they're going to study. Help them to not decide just, "Well, I want to read history and. . . ." My son [David M.] graduated with a degree in history from UC Santa Barbara. He works in the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles. He's getting his Ph.D.

VASQUEZ: He's at Claremont [Graduate School] now, isn't he?

DEBS: He's trying to get his [doctorate] from Claremont.

But that, on a part-time basis, it's a long pull. If he had to do it over again, I think he possibly would have picked a different subject. And maybe he should have picked a different subject. Maybe he should have been a scientist, whatever. He's a very studious young man and has always read good books. Not the whodunits, like I read. I do that for relaxation. He reads always good books, never junk.

VASQUEZ: Some people argue that the reaction to the sixties and the activities on the campuses here in California prepared the California voter for the cutbacks that came in the seventies, especially under the administration of [Governor] Ronald Reagan. Do you think it's that simple?

DEBS: No. But I think it's a part of it. It's so easy to [fix] blame [for] what's really responsible for the decline in our educational system. I happen to believe it's a lack, in some cases, of keeping good professors on our campuses of the University of California and the state colleges because other places pay them more money. We've lost some good professors to other universities and colleges. A building is concrete and steel in a school, a

university. What goes on inside that building is damned important and the professors make a college. A college is built, but it is not made until you have a competent group of professors, faculty. And you've got to pay them enough to keep them.

How many, do you think, of our teachers today are working in industries? Our best teachers have left us because we're paying such lousy salaries. They've gone to industry who'll pay them twice and three times more. Our good teachers are not remaining as teachers if they get an opportunity to better themselves. I don't blame them. We should pay more attention to our good teachers remaining with us, [they are] the stabilizing factor. Our mediocre teachers will maybe improve a little, when they see another teacher. . . . It works.

VASQUEZ: Emulation?

DEBS: You better believe it.

The United States Constitution in Contemporary America

VASQUEZ: In the area of civil and individual rights--it's part of this question on political philosophy--let

me ask you this as a background question. We've just had Robert [H.] Bork's nomination for the Supreme Court turned down by the [United States] Senate. Some of the issues that were most salient in that nomination failing were his views on individual rights, privacy, rights for women, minority voting rights. What was your feeling about the debate that went on?

DEBS: If I was a senator today, I'd vote against him. He's such an extremist. First, he was a socialist. I have nothing against being a socialist, but he was a socialist. Then he swung more towards of the middle. Now, he swung completely to the right. Which is the real Robert Bork? Our constitution is a document that has to be interpreted because it's not spelled out. Not definitely spelled out [as to] what our rights are. The Bill of Rights spells out some of them. The Constitution is a matter of interpretation. Now which [way] is he going to interpret it? As a liberal socialist? A moderate? Or a right fundamentalist?

VASQUEZ: So you don't hold the view, the originalist's point of view, that what the original founding

fathers meant is necessarily what we're trying to get at with the Constitution, it has to be interpreted by each generation? Is that what you're saying?

DEBS: I don't have any idea that our founding fathers ever envisioned the fifty states of this United States of America and all the problems we have today. No, it was impossible two hundred years ago for them to have visualized what we are today, as a nation. You have to interpret the Constitution by what we have today, not the constitution that was drafted. You have to be more moderate in your interpretation of the Constitution than Bork is with his writings today and with his swing to the right. I don't how Bork would be on the Supreme Court. If he's there for life, he might surprise us. You know that. He might surprise us. He might go back to being a socialist again. And that would be interpreting liberally the Constitution. I don't know, but I'm damned if I'd want to take a chance on making him a member of the Supreme Court on the basis of his philosophy over the years, and this radical change. He's what I'd call a radical.

The "Pendulum" of Politics

VASQUEZ: Some people see American politics as a process that has a pendulum movement, it goes to the left and gets only so far, and then swings back to the right. Under that theory, we would be on the pendulum swing to the right, about to go in the other direction. Do you see any value in that metaphor?

DEBS: I think '88 will prove whether it's swinging back to the more moderate. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected four times. But if you follow his history, he never went too far ahead of the people. He did his best to lead them, but once he got the feel of the people, he didn't proceed to pull his weight. The only time he did that was [by] trying pack the Supreme Court, right? And he got a lesson from that. But, no, the Constitution has to be more of a living document with basic constitutional rights and a Bill of Rights. I think the Bill of Rights was a great, important document. Without the Bill of Rights, you wouldn't have the Constitution. That Bill of Rights protects us to a degree. But, two hundred years ago, could those men envision what America would

be today?

The Future of California

VASQUEZ: Your vision of what California has become, I think, has been borne out in some of the actions that you've taken. I wonder if you might share with us now, the vision that you may have about the future of California? California is becoming increasingly an ethnically and racially diverse state. There is, as you mentioned, competition which perhaps California feels most, being on the Pacific Rim. What can we anticipate in the future? What do you see? Do you see California declining in its stature as one of the most important states in the country?

DEBS: I hope not. But I see California within the next twenty years being governed by what we now call minorities. I foresee the governor of California in the future being of Mexican descent, Spanish. So we go from a governor of California when we started as a Spaniard or a Mexican, back to an elected person.

VASQUEZ: Do you think that will represent the commensurate power that that community will have?

DEBS: It all depends upon this: we are going to be a

state of many ethnic groups. Can these ethnic groups get along with each other? I choose to believe they can. I think because of necessity, they'll have to. But there will also be some changes in our politics. About the Pacific Rim, I can't see where we're not going to be a very, very important state, more important as the years go on. Because for what's going on in Asia, for what's going on in that part of the world, we're the gateway, to a large extent, to America. I don't see any decline in California. I see a bigger role, if our government officials and our politicians, are able to adjust. Adjust they must.

VASQUEZ: There's one more change that's going to be significant in California. In the next twenty years, approximately--twenty or thirty years--we will become a much younger state demographically. However, those demographics indicate that the younger people will not be white people, that whites will basically be the older population. Do you think that's going to cause any kind of cleavage or conflict? Do you think it can be ameliorated?

DEBS: Well, being one of the older people, I tend to believe that California, because of our climate, is going to continue to be a state with a lot of older people. You're right. The next generation is going to be younger. And blacks are going to be more important, they're electing pretty decent people to office now. So are the Mexican-Americans. They've elected some very, very able people. When I served on the city council, [Edward R.] Roybal was the only person of Mexican descent. Now you have two, at long last: [Gloria] Molina and [Richard J.] Alatorre. Alatorre is a very able guy and Molina is a very able lady. So you have two important people now. I think that in the not too distant future there will be maybe three or four more of Mexican descent.

VASQUEZ: Do you expect there will be a backlash to that?

DEBS: Not really. It won't be done overnight and it will come in gradually. Who's going to argue that Alatorre and Molina are not highly responsible people who are doing a decent job? It's the unknown that happens fast that disturbs people; the actual assimilation doesn't. It happens, but it happens so gradually that people don't even

know it's happening until it's happened. If the minorities continue to elect good people to office, that won't be a factor.

Now, [let's] talk about the Asian community, which is growing so fast. But they're spread all over. Mike Woo, I helped to elect [Los Angeles City Councilman Michael] Mike Woo. His area is not an Asian area. They're spread all over, so I don't foresee the Asians ever becoming anything but a responsible group, helping to elect other people, may they be black, may they be Mexican-Americans.

Now the Chinese [in] Monterey Park, that's a different story. They're almost a majority out there now. When I represented the area, they were a very small minority. But they seem to have gravitated to Monterey Park. I think it all depends upon the wisdom of the minorities. If they put forth and elect good candidates, people will respond and respect them. If they elect bad candidates, then that's a different story, entirely. Art Torres is a state senator. Very able man, very able man. Very unfortunate, his recent drunk driving thing, but that happens.

He's very able. . . . I envision Art Torres someday being a hell of a lot higher than a state senator.

VASQUEZ: I think he does, too.

DEBS: Yeah, he does too. Yes. But you should take a cab home if you're going to drink. I drank when I was in office, when I was a supervisor. When I was a councilman, I had to drive myself; when I was a supervisor, I had a driver. I was out seven nights a week, from Bell Gardens to Van Nuys, at speaking engagements. While he was driving, I'd sleep. I drank, but I had someone driving me. [Los Angeles City Councilman Arthur K.] Art Snyder, he got arrested for drunk driving. Didn't affect his next election. So I don't think this will affect Torres. I hope it doesn't, because he's an able guy and I think he's learned a lesson.

VASQUEZ: At the end of each interview, we offer the interviewee an opportunity to say whatever he or she may want to put on the record.

"What I Tried to Accomplish"

DEBS: Well, let me say this, what I already put on the record, I think. I loved being in public life. I

feel that I accomplished many things. I'm fairly proud of all my record. I think I was a good assemblyman, a good city councilman, a good supervisor, and I have no regrets, or very few. I think [in] my thirty-two years in office, I accomplished many things for those less fortunate, especially. I would hope that the pendulum will turn, and we will correct our educational system, because the future of California, the future of America, depends on how well we educate our youth.

And I think [much depends on] how well we treat our senior citizens, who have contributed so much to the building of California. As a senior citizen myself, eighty-three years old, I'm very fortunate. My health is fairly good. I've had a good life, but I see so many of my fellow senior citizens who aren't in the position that I am, that are living in poverty, really. And this is unfortunate. The youth and the old, the youth to take over, because they will become old someday, too. I would hope that for the thirty-two years I have spent in public life, I can be remembered as a man who cared, who cared deeply about those less fortunate than I and contributed as I went along,

as best I could, to try to be good in whatever office I held and to keep the public trust of an honest, decent human being.

VASQUEZ: Thank you.

[End Tape 4, Side A]