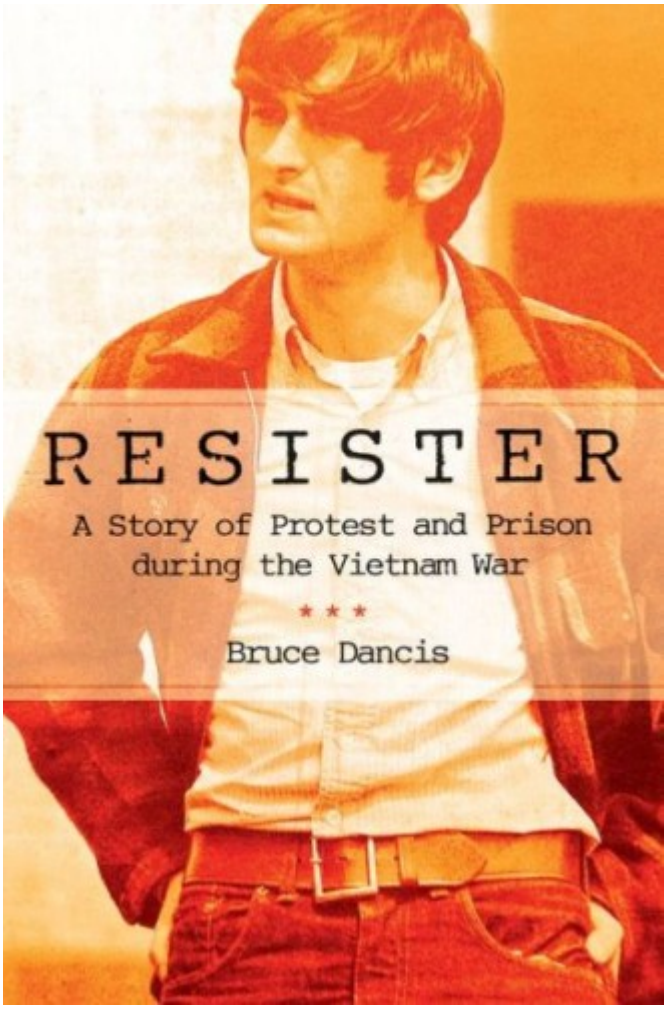
Saying no

by Robert Westbrook in the November 12, 2014 issue

In Review



Resister

By Bruce Dancis
Cornell University Press

Bruce Dancis and I were graduate students together at Stanford University in the mid-1970s. We were not particularly close, but we did play together on a pretty good intramural basketball team with others in the history department. Bruce initially had

some difficulty adapting to the team's offense. He joked that he was used to playing with other socialists in Berkeley, where everyone felt obligated to pass the ball and hence no one ever took a shot.

Bruce was self-effacing off the basketball court as well. I remember him as keenly intelligent, soft-spoken, and possessed of a quiet dignity. At the time I had no idea that before he arrived at Stanford, he had been an antiwar activist of the first rank at Cornell University and that he had spent 19 months in federal prison for draft resistance. *Resister* is Bruce's memoir of those years, and it too is keenly intelligent, soft-spoken, and possessed of a quiet dignity.

Dancis came by his defining moral and political convictions early in life. His parents were socialists and his father was a significant figure in the American Socialist Party and the War Resisters League in the 1930s and 1940s. He was a conscientious objector in World War II. By the time Bruce was born in 1948, his parents' political activism had waned considerably, and their anticommunism waxed as their anticapitalism waned. Yet they remained firmly on the left, and their support for their son never flagged, despite sometimes sharp political disagreements.

Raised in the Bronx, Dancis went regularly to the Sunday school of the Ethical Culture Society, the church of choice for secular humanists like his parents, and he spent his summers at Buck's Rock Work Camp in Connecticut and at Three Arrows Cooperative Society in Putnam County, north of New York City, at which longtime Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas was a regular visitor. During these summers he began a lifelong engagement with popular music that is an enlivening leitmotif of his memoir. "I can't overstate the importance of topical folk songs to my political development," he says, and like many of his generation he was learning from Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones long before he finally got around to reading Marx in prison.

The African-American civil rights movement was the seedbed of Dancis's activism, as it was for many young radicals. Galvanized by images of police brutality in Birmingham, he found his way at age 15 to the March on Washington in August 1963. In June 1965 he was again in Washington, this time to protest the escalating war in Vietnam. And like many high school seniors at the time, Dancis was beginning to contemplate the existential choices posed by the draft.

In the fall of 1965, Dancis entered Cornell, and the bulk of his memoir is devoted to his local activism there as a leader of the Students for a Democratic Society chapter. Dancis was on the radar of the FBI from the moment he attended his first SDS meeting in November 1965 and caught the eye of Cornell officials reporting to the bureau. With the help of his FBI file to jog his memory, he carefully and engagingly reconstructs his political journey through the spring of 1969.

Although he recounts his encounters with national New Left celebrities—Abbie Hoffman, David Dellinger, Joan Baez, and especially Daniel Berrigan—Dancis's focus is on local events. This is intentional because one of the things he hopes his memoir will do—and it does successfully—is drive home the decentralized character of New Left radicalism generally and SDS activism in particular. As he says:

> SDS, more than most groups on the left, was decentralized and often dysfunctional as a national organization. When an SDS national convention or one of the quarterly National Council meetings adopted a program, many local chapters didn't follow through on them. The history of SDS is actually the story of hundreds of different chapters.

The history of the Cornell SDS was a good deal more eventful than that of most SDS groups, and Dancis vividly narrates a series of confrontations between radical students and a university administration befuddled by their concerns and cursed with ineptitude. Race was often at the heart of things at Cornell, and racial conflict there culminated in the dramatic events of April 1969 when dozens of African-American students occupied one of the principal campus buildings and later armed themselves with guns.

Dancis was a leader among white students supporting the black militants, and he tries vigorously to put their resort to armed self-defense in a context that explains and justifies it. Here he strains my sympathies, but Dancis is offering an invitation to argument rather than trying to foreclose it. One just wishes he had been as hard on himself in this instance as he is in others in which he forthrightly takes his younger self to task. Armed self-defense in the face of murderous Klansmen is one thing; picking up a gun to ward off a belligerent band of frat brothers quite another.

But the centerpiece of Dancis's politics at the time was the battle with the draft and the war it sustained. The most fateful day of his life was December 14, 1966, when he tore up his draft card in front of a crowd on the Cornell campus, then mailed the

pieces to his draft board. Dancis was among the first to destroy his draft card and thereby move from antiwar protest to antiwar resistance and civil disobedience. “I knew I was forcing the issue,” he writes, “and would undoubtedly go to prison for my actions. But resistance had to start sometime, so why not now? And if it had to start with one person taking a stand and saying no, why shouldn’t that person be me?”

Dancis thought he might be arrested immediately, but it was not until May 1969 that he found himself in the federal prison in Ashland, Kentucky (of which one alumnus is Bayard Rustin). The concluding chapters of his book describe his nearly two years in prison. Most of his fellow inmates were white car thieves who had crossed state lines. For the most part he kept his head down, worked on his jump shot, and resumed his education. (The three volumes of Marx’s *Capital*, he tells us, doubled nicely for weightlifting.) These chapters are harrowing, all the more so because of Dancis’s refusal to make things sound worse than they were.

Upon his release from prison in December 1970, Dancis resumed his undergraduate education at the Santa Cruz campus of the University of California. Following graduate school at Stanford, he went on to a fine career as a journalist and editor in northern California. Now retired and still apparently in possession of a homestead at Three Arrows, he remains a democratic socialist and a “dreamer,” even though “the political goals of my life remain unmet, as was the case with my parents and my grandparents before them.”

In the late 1960s, whenever someone accused Dancis of draft dodging, he made it clear that far from dodging the draft, he confronted and resisted it openly. And though he is too diffident to say so himself, he did it with exceptional courage.

Dancis admits that his inordinate hope that draft resistance would become a mass movement that would clog the nation’s jails and bring a swift conclusion to the war fell far short of realization. On the other hand, he plausibly argues that the movement he led played a significant role in ending the draft. Ironically, though, the end of the draft removed a deterrent to launching subsequent wars, and if anything it enhanced the odds that those Americans who died in them would continue to hail disproportionately from certain communities.

Nonetheless, Bruce Dancis’s resistance did more than the efforts of most to bring the Vietnam War home and, all too eventually, to bring it to an end. It was a gift to his country. And so too, if far more modestly, is his memoir.