An Excerpt from Walking Alone and Marching Together, a history of the organized blind movement, 1940-1990. This selection is taken from Chapter 3: titled “Civil War: Disunity and the Road to Recovery”.

The hopes of the vast majority of Federation members for an end to the factional plotting and disruption which had led to the decisive actions of the Georgia Compromise at the 1959 convention were dashed, however, as the disgruntled losers continued to maneuver for power at the next National Convention the twentieth anniversary convention to be held in Miami in 1960. On the other side the Federation's elected officers, led by President tenBroek and First Vice President Kenneth Jernigan, had become determined both to settle the internal conflict once and for all and to restore the convention to its normal agenda of positive programs, undertakings, and accomplishments.

The first sign of this deepened determination on the part of the leadership came with startling surprise on the opening day of the Miami convention. What the President was to term a severe blow to the National Federation and all its members occurred with the unexpected withdrawal of Kenneth Jernigan as First Vice President and member of the Board of Directors. In a dramatic address to the convention, Jernigan announced his refusal to permit his name to be placed in nomination for any future office. He attributed his decision to two principal factors: the mounting responsibilities of his job as director of the Iowa Commission for the Blind, and, of course, of more compelling importance, the factional warfare within the Federation which had recently come to concentrate its campaign of character assassination in large part upon him.

Jernigan provided in his address the most complete and detailed account yet available to Federationists of the origins and ambitions of the dissident faction within their midst, as well as an assessment of the destructive effects of the continuing civil war.

The text of his speech follows:

For the past eight years I have been a member of the Board of Directors of the National Federation of the Blind. For the past year and a half I have been First Vice President of the organization. With this convention my membership on the Board comes to an end. Under present circumstances I feel that I cannot be a candidate for re-election to the Vice Presidency or any other Board position. In short, I will be unable to permit my name to be placed in nomination for any elective office in the Federation this year.

When I reached this decision several months ago, I quite naturally discussed the matter at some length with Dr. tenBroek. It was his opinion and also mine that the reasons involved in my withdrawal from office were of such a nature that they should be discussed with the convention. Accordingly, I am now on the platform for that purpose.

To summarize my first reason for withdrawing from Federation office this year, let me say that the time needed to make the program of the Iowa Commission for the Blind a complete success makes it difficult for me to carry the full responsibilities of Federation First Vice President. It is as important for the Federation as for the blind of Iowa that the program succeed. The withdrawal from office does not mean that I intend to become in any way inactive in the movement, and it certainly does not mean that I feel that there is any conflict of interest involved. I would be a strange Federationist, indeed, if such were the case.

The second reason for not allowing my name to be placed in nomination for Federation office this year admittedly in some ways more compelling than the first has to do with the present internal situation which faces us. In order to explain I must talk a bit about history and background.

My first Federation convention was at Nashville in 1952. That convention is still talked about and remembered by many as one of the best we have ever had. In more ways than one it was a milestone and a turning point in my life. I found a united, dedicated, aggressive organization working toward the achievement of goals which I could believe in wholeheartedly and support without reservation. Merely to be in the meeting hall and listen was an inspiration and a challenge. Many of you will remember that I was president of the Tennessee affiliate in 1952 and that I had charge of arrangements and planning. I made up my mind at that convention that the Federation was the greatest and most promising force in existence for the betterment of the blind and that I would give to it all that I possessed in the way of effort, ability, and talent. I have never regretted the decision. It was in 1952 that I was elected to membership on the Board.

Nineteen-fifty-two was a good year for the Federation, as were '53, '54, and '55. The greeting card program was launched and made successful. Whereas in 1952 the national office of the Federation had less than $30,000 to work with, our income was five times as much by 1955. For the first time in the history of the organization money was also being pumped into the state affiliates. New members were coming in. New growth was being achieved. Everywhere there was expansion. And above all there was unity the kind of unity and devotion to purpose which made the Federation unique. There was virtually no politics in the Federation and comparatively little striving for position. Leadership was based not on influence peddling or the holding of office, but upon the ability to work and the willingness to work. The conventions at Milwaukee, Louisville, and Omaha were climaxes for successive years of growth. They were not political battlefields where contending majorities and minorities monopolized the sessions with charge and countercharge and little else. Instead, they were meetings of inspiration and substantial program items, of friends and comrades gathered to exchange ideas, of organizational renewal and preparation for the year to come. They were not like Boston or Santa Fe.

By 1956 at San Francisco the progress was phenomenal. The first state surveys had been made. Nine new affiliates had come into the Federation in a single year. The Monitor was a going concern with a regular staff and a monthly publication.

As important as any of these things, our enemies had taken alarm and were desperately trying to crush us a sure token of growing prestige. It seemed that the achievement of our goals was near at hand.

But such was not to be the case. By the 1957 convention at New Orleans still a tremendous success a subtle change was beginning to come over the organization. A small group of people from within our own midst began, for reasons best known to themselves, to sow dissension and to foment civil war. They began to write letters and to go from state to state systematically destroying the unity and feeling of oneness which had always been the principal asset and distinguishing feature of the Federation. They began to say that the Federation, where any blind person had always been able to make his voice heard, was not truly democratic that we had simply believed that it was that in reality it was controlled by a sinister dictator and his small clique of followers who had somehow hoodwinked the gullible, unsuspecting members into thinking the Federation was representative and democratic. In short, the blind were told that there had been a colossal fix and that they had, for eighteen years, been too stupid to see it a fix which this enlightened minority had just discovered and was bent upon exposing. There were half-truths, innuendoes, twisted facts, and outright falsifications.

By the time of the Boston convention the Federation that we all had known and loved, the old Federation of unity and oneness, of constructive achievement, and substantive, inspiring conventions was dead killed by the very people who had said they had come to save it. In the year between New Orleans and Boston the Federation was transformed from a dedicated crusade to a bickering, political movement.

During that year many things changed. Perhaps the most important of these changes occurred in the activities and direction of effort which took place. My own personal role was altered substantially. Before New Orleans virtually none of my time or attention was given to internal political matters. Between 1952 and 1957 I traveled more than 530,000 miles organizing and building chapters in state affiliates; wrote What Is The National Federation of the Blind and Who Are the Blind Who Lead the Blind, and Local Organizations of the Blind How to Build and Strengthen Them; conducted a study for the Federation concerning the employment of the blind in the teaching profession; and took part in three state surveys of programs affecting the blind. These were happy years. The work was challenging and rewarding. Even the hostility and opposition of the agency administrators in Arkansas and the bitter accusations of having ruined the lives of some of the rehabilitation officials dismissed in Colorado and Nevada did not diminish the keen pleasure. The brotherhood and mutual support which characterized our movement were at the heart of the joy of accomplishment. It was a time of unparalleled growth and progress.

After New Orleans all of this changed. For the first time in Federation history a group from within our own ranks organized itself and pounded away at the very foundations of our movement with sledge-hammer blows. It coordinated its efforts and embarked upon a systematic campaign of vindictive destruction and sabotage of the elected officers and leaders. If the majority was to survive, if indeed the very structure of the organization was to be preserved, speedy action and counter-measures had to be taken.

The situation can, perhaps, best be summarized in the words of Edmund Burke, the English political philosopher, who championed the fight of the American colonies for independence. Burke said, When bad men combine, the good must associate. If the good do not associate, then they fall one by one, useless sacrifices in a contemptible struggle. To paraphrase these words, we might say, When a minority of disgruntled dissenters combine to achieve destruction and to subvert the will of the majority, then the members of that majority must associate and bestir themselves to militant action. If the majority does not so associate and bestir itself, then its members will fall one by one, useless sacrifices in a contemptible struggle not to mention which the minority dominates and controls the society.

This sort of thing was new to us. We had long been accustomed to fighting our external enemies, but never before had we been forced to repel slander and false charges from those who had been our comrades-in-arms and still proclaim themselves to be Federationists. With sorrow and reluctance and, perhaps, too slowly and with too much kindness the great overwhelming majority of Federation members, officers, and leaders organized for battle and took up the challenge of the civil war.

The majority was at a disadvantage, however, in defending itself because it could not devote its full time to the struggle. It had the responsibility of carrying on the constructive work and programs of the Federation, of repelling our external enemies, and of keeping the organization afloat, while the minority, on the other hand, could and did divorce itself completely from such responsibility, spending virtually all of its time and energy in subversive attack and destruction. The minority would be hard put to point to a single legislative or other constructive proposition which it has advanced or been responsible for since the New Orleans convention. In the interest of promoting the basic objectives of our movement the external work of the Federation could not be allowed to come to a standstill.

Therefore, between New Orleans and Boston the effort of the officers and leaders had to be divided and redoubled. Legislative and other program work had to be continued and at the same time the affiliates had to be alerted to what was happening internally. This had to be done in such a way as not to give our external enemies aid and comfort or knowledge of our growing problems. State and local leaders all over the country had to be shown the documentary evidence of what was occurring and warned of what was to come at Boston. They needed indisputable and provable facts as ammunition against the propaganda of half-truths being spread.

With the same energy which I had always tried to give to promoting the welfare of the Federation, I along with other leaders and members of the movement entered into this grim, new task. As I went from state to state late in 1957 and early 1958 collecting evidence and writing testimony for the right to organize bill, I also talked to the members about what was happening to us internally. For the first time in my life I found myself working for the Federation without pleasure or zest. I knew beforehand that I would earn the hatred and bitter attack of the dissenters in exact proportion to the effectiveness of my work. Dr. tenBroek and the other leaders were, of course, in the same situation.

In this connection the minority showed how badly it had misassessed matters when at the Santa Fe convention last year several of its members said from the platform (as if they thought it was an accusation, and one which I would feel called upon to deny) that I had gone from state to state organizing the majority and showing the documentary evidence of what the dissenters were doing. They should have known than I have never yet apologized for or been ashamed of any work that I have ever done in behalf of the Federation. They should also have known that I would not have denied but rather would have insisted that I had done all that I could to expose their tactics and subversion.

At the Boston convention in 1958 the Federation became acquainted for the first time with political hauling and maneuvering. The minority came organized as a bloc, and the majority found itself forced to close ranks and counter-organize in self-defense. Votes were taken not on the merit of issues but along party lines. Slates of candidates were selected, and the spirit of crusade and dedication died a painful death.

After Boston a new vocabulary came into being in the Federation. The minority taught us that when they attacked any of the rest of us or made charges, it was democracy in action or the right of free speech. When these attacks were answered, however, it was character assassination or defamation and slander. If they won an issue (a rare occurrence) it was the will of the people or democracy. When they lost on an issue, it was dictatorship and tyranny. When they combined to try to elect candidates or to defeat or pass motions, it was freedom of association and the democratic process. When the majority combined for the same purposes, it was dirty politics and tyrannical dictatorship.

Despite the fact that the will of the convention was made clear at Boston, the civil war continued. By the time of Santa Fe the days of unity and dedication were only a memory, and even the memory was beginning to fade. Again, the convention made clear its will and by a majority even larger than the one at Boston.

By Santa Fe, however, the real beginnings of chaos were commencing to set in. The political alliances and arrangements which had been made during the preceding two years were bearing their inevitable fruit. It had become accepted practice that the way to achieve recognition was not by the difficult method of doing hard work for the Federation and forwarding programs. There was a quicker and an easier way. Form alliances. Circulate resolutions, make personal attacks, rise in defense of a popular leader, and, above all yes, above all! come up with suggestions for change any change, so long as it would bring notoriety and publicity.

Another year has now gone by, and we are at Miami. The civil war has continued and, if possible, has even further degenerated. There is now scarcely a person in our movement who is not under attack by someone or disliked by this or that group. Our legislative and other programs have largely become secondary to internal politics. Witness, for example, last year at Santa Fe when even the right-to-organize bills were publicly attacked on the floor of the convention by the minority faction.

Or consider the fact that letters which I now have in my possession were written into Iowa by the dissenters attempting to destroy the expanding work of rehabilitation and job placement being put into effect by the Commission for the Blind. In order to hurt me personally as administrator of the Commission, certain members of the dissenting faction were willing to destroy the program of rehabilitation and job placement for the entire blind population of the state. The same thing occurred in California when Dr. tenBroek came up for reappointment to another term on the Social Welfare Board. Regardless of the effect on the blind of the state, letters of vindictive, personal attack were sent to the Governor. As you know, Dr. tenBroek was reappointed anyway and made chairman of the board into the bargain. Again the dissenters were defeated in their efforts at destruction, but the next Federationist anywhere in the country who comes up for appointment to an advisory or policy-making board and who has not capitulated to the minority may expect to be treated to the same type of vicious and unprincipled attack.

Also consider the letters opposing Federation legislation recently sent by the dissenters to Congressman Baring and others. Is this the so-called constructive activity to which the dissenters point with pride? Is this their positive new program? Is this the brave new democracy they would bring us?

Our fund-raising programs have been endangered, and the very existence of the Federation as a continuing organizational entity is now threatened. Yet, there are those who at this present convention and even at this late date in our civil war will tell us that the past three years of destruction and strife have been a wonderful thing for the Federation, that we are now stronger than ever. I doubt that many of us will be taken in by that line. Certainly our external enemies are not taken in by it. If what we have had for the past three years has been success and progress, I would to God we had been less successful and less progressive.

The attacks on me personally have increased steadily since the New Orleans convention. For the reasons I have already given it was inevitable that this would be so. I knew what the cost would be when the civil war began and accepted it as an unpleasant but necessary by-product of the work which had to be done. During the past three years, especially since Santa Fe, I have been accused of every possible vice of being unscrupulous and ruthless, without principle, morally dishonest, and above all of being desperately and wildly ambitious. These charges have been made not only by the recognized members of the minority faction, but also by some whose principal claim to recognition is the fact that they have previously held themselves out to the general membership as friends and supporters of the administration.

Again I say that such charges and attacks were inevitable in the climate of continuing civil war and political maneuvering. Such a climate encourages petty politicians and office seekers to attempt to bargain for position and to seek notoriety by slick maneuver and slanderous attack. Always as civil war continues, it degenerates into chaos and anarchy. Factions splinter and beget new factions, which in turn divide and further splinter. As dissolution and ruin approach, stability becomes harder and harder to maintain.

Leadership in the Federation does not depend upon the holding of office. It has never so depended. To the extent that the organization is worthwhile, leadership as always will continue to depend upon willingness to work and ability to work.

Very soon after the Santa Fe convention I told Dr. tenBroek that I felt I could serve the Federation and the administration better if I did not allow my name to be placed in nomination for office at Miami. Such a decision would certainly set the record straight with respect to the whispered charges of reckless ambition and desire for presidential succession. It would also rob the enemies of the administration of one of their principal issues an issue in fact upon which they have based more and more of their campaign in recent months. It would utterly destroy one of the main arguments upon which the case of the dissenters has been built and by which they have sought to justify their actions. Then, too, it must be admitted frankly that the continuing torrent of personal abuse and vilification made the prospect of Federation office seem somewhat less than attractive.

The decision was made, but not announced. Why? The answer is surely obvious. What now of the charges of reckless ambition and desire for office which the opponents of the administration have so laboriously put together? During the remainder of this convention the delegates will undoubtedly be subjected (from the platform, but principally in the corridors and bedrooms) to hurried and desperate verbal gymnastics in an attempt to explain away the utter deflation of what has been charged. It will be interesting, indeed, to see how the dissenters attempt to explain away their calumny and misrepresentation.

In leaving Federation office to become a rank-and-file member I would like to make these final remarks. By ceasing to be an Executive Committeeman I do not cease to be an active Federationist. Nor do I cease to be a part of the administration. I shall continue to defend and support it actively.

Moreover, I shall continue to give whatever organizational help I can to any local or state affiliate in the nation. When I am invited to do so (and as time permits), I shall attend state conventions, write articles and testimony for the Federation, attend meetings, or do anything else which I may be asked to do.

I have already said that the Federation has very nearly been destroyed by the past three years of political bickering and civil war. It may already be too late to reverse the trend and forestall the final descent into chaos and utter destruction. However, I believe that this is not necessarily the case. It is not on a note of despair but of hope that I should like to conclude. It is no game we play this business of organization. It is as serious and important as the lives and destinies of us all. The formula for solving our problems and saving our organization is simple. It is also painful and hard to face. It is this. One way or another, once and for all, now and forever, we absolutely must put a stop to the disgraceful internal strife and warfare which is destroying the Federation. It is as simple as that. We must make it unmistakably clear to all concerned that this organization will no longer tolerate the continued wrecking and destruction of its goals and purposes whether the wrecking and destruction be in the name of free speech, democratic procedures, rights of the minority, freedom of association, will of the people, or any other high-sounding and respectable phraseology used to cloak real purposes. We must refuse to be intimidated or bamboozled by pious words. We must have the courage to put down the demagogue, even if he makes his appeal in the name of the very virtues in our organization which he would destroy. If it requires taking stern action, then stern action must be taken. If it requires losing some of the dissenters, then they must be lost. Whatever the cost, it is cheaper than the alternative of absolute ruin which faces us. We cannot delay, and we cannot equivocate. By not choosing one course of action, we automatically take the other.

Perhaps the old Federation was too idealistic. If so, I can only say that I believe most of its members wanted it that way, and loved and respected it for what it was. The traditional goals and objectives of the Federation are still the most compelling reason for our existence as an organization. To open new fields of opportunity to the blind, to secure the passage of needed legislation, to exchange ideas and give encouragement to each other, to labor in a common cause against discrimination and denial of acceptance as normal people, to establish the right of the blind to compete for regular jobs in public or private employment these are the things for which the Federation was created. These are the things which continue to make it worthwhile. Surely the National Federation of the Blind means enough in the lives of the blind people of this nation that a way will be found to save it from destruction and, even more important, to save it from becoming merely a hollow shell and an empty mockery of the great crusade of former days.

With those solemn words, Kenneth Jernigan left the convention rostrum and gave up his elective office. But he continued, side by side with President tenBroek, to lead the fight on the convention floor in defense of the National Federation and its democracy.