

# **Interview with Professor Rod Sievers**

**Interviewers: Eric Hall and Andrew Cabello**

**April 10, 2004**

**Transcription by Eric Hall**

Eric: When and where were you born?

Rod: I was born in Kansas in 1943.

Eric: And did you grow up in Kansas?

Rod: Yeah, I lived there until I was sixteen and my folks moved to Albuquerque, and I finished high school and went to undergraduate school in Albuquerque, then I got a Woodrow Wilson fellowship and went to the University of Virginia for the M.A. and the PhD, taught in New York for a year and then came to Humboldt in '71.

Eric: So, you only taught in New York for one year before you came to Humboldt and you have been at Humboldt ever since?

Rod: Ever since, except for, I took a year off to do some post-doc work at the University of Michigan in 1975-76.

Andrew: What kind of post-doctoral work?

Rod: It was a program designed to bring people who teach at small institutions like this, to a big institution to work with a couple of renowned scholars, to do some research and have kind of a different change of scenery.

Eric: Sounds good.

Rod: Yeah, it was a good year.

Eric: What brought you to HSU anyway?

Rod: Desperation (laughing). I was unemployed and this was the only job in the whole goddamn country in my field and I was lucky to get it, real lucky.

Eric: Why did you get into education in general?

Rod: Because I didn't want to have to work hard for a living.

Eric: All right.

Rod: How's that sound?

Eric: I like that.

Rod: Yeah. No, seriously, I...I enjoyed history even when I was a kid. History and Lit were my favorite subjects and my father was in business and I saw the pressure he lived with to sell, sell, sell and I didn't want to do that, so I figured I'd become either a professor or a lawyer and my senior year, for various reasons, I decided to go to graduate school instead of law school, so that's the way it turned out. I never, never regretted it, never. I don't think I would have been a very good lawyer. I think I wound up doing what I was probably destined to do.

Eric: Did you ever get married, or do you have any kids?

Rod: Nah. Zero, zero.

Andrew: So you said that, that 1972 is when you started here?

Rod: '71

Andrew: '71 excuse me. So you were hired when Siemens was president.

Rod: Yeah, my first year here would have been his last year.

Andrew: Yeah and just to clarify I guess we were reading in the book, there was actually a really huge increase in the number of faculty Siemens brought on

board, and you had previously stated that you were lucky to get the job, I was wondering how that was that you were so lucky to get the job.

Rod: Well, because, because by the early seventies, the graduate schools across the country had turned out way too many PhDs, way too many, especially in U.S. history, so they flood the market. So beginning about 1969, the market for academic positions in American history just collapsed, and really, when I got the job here, I hadn't been able to find anything else in my field anyplace in the country. In fact the day Humboldt State called me about the job, to interview me on the phone, I was getting ready to leave my parents' house, I moved back in with my folks because I was broke, and I was getting ready to go on down to the Tucson, Arizona public school office to apply for a job as a substitute teacher, and the phone rang about half an hour before I left the house. It was Humboldt State calling. And they interviewed me on the phone, and they said, well, we have some other applicants, we'll get back to you, and they called back the next day and hired me, without ever seeing me. I had never heard of this place, I had no idea where it was.

Andrew: Do you suppose there was a deciding factor from where they were coming from as far as hiring you?

Rod: Yeah, because I had finished my degree for one thing, had the PhD finished, and I had a book manuscript at a publishers, and I had, apparently, I never saw them, but I guess I had strong recommendations from some of the faculty at the University of Virginia, who had big names, and that made an impression when

those people called out here and told them about me. I owe those guys to this day, big time.

Andrew: Well, I'm sure they were glad to help. I know there was also, right about that time, you were hired, there was, I don't want to say a shift, but definitely more emphasis was placed on forestry and the environmental sciences as opposed to the social sciences.

Eric: Yeah, it became more of a green school in a way.

Rod: Yeah I think that's true.

Andrew: Do you feel like that stunted your desire to fully engage your profession here at HSU?

Rod: No.

Andrew: Not at all. So you feel like you had all the means to do what you had hoped to do at HSU?

Rod: Yeah, the main problem here wouldn't be nearly so much the case now with computer technology accessible, but for most of my time here, the main obstacle to professional development was the geographical isolation of this joint. That was a major frustration. You know if you were teaching, for example, let's just say for example San Francisco State, just for example, and you wanted to do some research, well hell, all you had to do was go down to Berkeley, Stanford, but this place is so isolated that it was very difficult to get away to do much. And that's not an excuse; it's just a fact.

Andrew: How did you get along with your fellow history professors?

Rod: Just fine, because practically the whole department, except for a couple of men, had been hired since 1968, so we were all relatively young and relatively new, so we were all more or less in the same boat.

Eric: Ok, so it was just an insurgence of new blood into the whole system.

Rod: Oh yeah, big time.

Andrew: And were they as varied, as your background was, as far as you going to the University of Virginia and associating yourself with these big names, so they were along the same lines.

Rod: Simon Green had gone to Berkeley, Bill Tanner had gone to the University of Kansas, Frank Mahar had gone to the University of Oregon, Steve Fox had gone to the University of Cincinnati. Yeah, we had a wide spectrum, geographically and educationally, of background, for sure.

Andrew: Have you done any comparison between that reality and the present state and the present state of the history faculty in terms of that variety of background?

Rod: Well, I don't know much about the background of the current faculty since I retired, and I'm not real acquainted with the people who have been hired lately, but I imagine it's probably similar.

Andrew: That would be my assumption.

Rod: I believe Jason went to, I think, Washington State, I believe and Sterling Evans went to Kansas. I'm not sure about the others.

Eric: I know Paulet went to Rutgers.

Rod: That's right. Yeah, right.

Andrew: So Alistair McCrone, he was the president for the...

Rod: He came on, I think he was hired, I believe in '73 or '74. About my second or third year here.

Andrew: What kind of relationship did you have with him if any?

Rod: None.

Andrew: None.

Rod: None

Andrew: I noticed he's also from Kansas.

Rod: Well not really. He's a Canadian.

Andrew: Ok.

Rod: He got a PhD in geology from K.U. but he's a Canadian, and he had been an administrator at the University of the Pacific before he came up here, so his connection with Kansas is pretty marginal.

Andrew: So you didn't have a relationship at all?

Rod: Oh no.

Eric: He's just your boss.

Rod: Yeah, I hardly ever saw the man.

Andrew: To just stand in line with Mr. McCrone's hiring, did his, excuse me, not Mr. McCrone, President Siemens, I guess in the book his personal crusade is defined as being, or as trying to get Humboldt State College a university distinction. Did that do anything to you, did it change the way you went about teaching?

Rod: No.

Andrew: Nothing at all.

Rod: No, all it was, was a change in names.

Andrew: That's what we assumed.

Eric: Yeah.

Rod: It didn't really change this place at all. I guess his thinking was it would give the institution a bit more prestige in recruiting students. Maybe it did, I don't know. But you know about that same time almost all the state colleges were going through the same name change, but it didn't affect me.

Eric: You still had your office; you still had your desk.

Rod: Yeah, yeah (chuckles).

Eric: Your mug just changed different logos, that's about it.

Rod: That's right, that's right. Department stationary had to be changed. (Laughter)

Eric: They sent a whole task force to do that.

Rod: Really!

Andrew: Was your post-graduate interaction with those professors in Virginia, was that in stride or in line with the Ryan Act of 1970? Have you heard of that at all? It was this shift from an elementary or secondary teaching credential as a prerequisite for hiring to a multiple or single subject credential as a prerequisite for hiring, did that ring a bell at all?

Rod: Un ah (shakes head).

Andrew: Nothing, ok.

Rod: That only applied to California Public School.

Andrew: Ok, my mistake.

Rod: Didn't have anything to do with the universities at all.

Eric: Just got people to stick around longer to work on their credentials.

Rod: Well it did have a big impact on the history department.

Andrew: How so?

Rod: Because we lost a lot of history majors, because, see now they weren't going to major in a single subject anymore, see. Now they were going to have to diversify themselves and take subjects in different fields, and so that kicked a lot of history majors, I shouldn't say kicked, that removed a lot of potential history majors. So it did impact us in that respect.

Andrew: That's interesting. Yeah we were looking, there was a steep decline there in history majors.

Rod: Yes.

Eric: There was a cliff edge. (All nod in agreement)

Rod: And I think that's the main reason. That is the reason why.

Andrew: That's interesting, and uh...I guess...with respect to Vietnam, and the ending of the draft and the withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam, what sort of feelings, generally speaking, did you have or do you have?

Rod: Well...at that time, I had become very opposed to the war in Vietnam. I had decided by about 1968 that it was a mistake, that we either would not or could not win, and I thought we should get out, and now looking back at it, I still feel the same way. I won't change my mind; I think that it was a tragedy.

Eric: How was the view on campus at the time?

Rod: Extremely anti-war. Big time.

Eric: So we're talking total radical liberals running around staging protests.

Rod: Oh yeah, OH YEAH! Protesting all kinds of things, but the core issue was Vietnam, absolutely.

Eric: Did you feel the student body was growing some way by doing that or did you feel it was separating itself from the rest of the faculty, like was there a split between the students and the faculty?

Rod: No, but there was a hell of a split between the students and the faculty on one hand and this community on the other. That was the split. Town and gown.

Andrew: Do you think that split coincided with the emotions that had to do with the environment, the protection of the environment?

Rod: That came later.

Andrew: That came later?

Rod: This was primarily on the issue of patriotism, the flag and all that, versus the feeling it could be perfectly patriotic to oppose the war in Vietnam, and still be a good American. That was kind of the core of it.

Andrew: That's interesting.

Rod: You see now, if you take away Humboldt State, this is a pretty conservative area, and it was even more so then.

Andrew: That's interesting.

Rod: You take the city of Arcata; it's a hell of a lot more liberal now—I'm not sure if that's the right word, but for want of a better one—than it was then, much more so.

Andrew: How did you get along with the community?

Rod: Fine.

Andrew: You got along with them fine?

Rod: Oh yeah. Generally speaking, with some significant exceptions, I've always enjoyed some of my friendships and so forth in the community more than with most of the faculty. As a matter of fact, not that I haven't had some good faculty friends, but I've always been, oh I don't know. I kind of have, over the years increasingly kind of isolated myself from faculty affairs. It's not my cup of tea.

Andrew: It's not your cup of tea?

Eric: Administration not what you're here for, you're here for, just teaching?

Rod: Right, that's right. But not just administration, I just ...

Eric: You're not a paper pusher?

Rod: No, I know, but besides that I just, over the last, I'd say, about the last 15 years before I retired, I just had as little to do with faculty affairs as possible. Some faculty enjoy being involved in faculty politics, some don't. I was one who did not.

Andrew: So was there some real internal dissention before you sort of withdrew from faculty affairs?

Rod: No.

Andrew: Not at all?

Rod: No, just me.

Andrew: I guess what I'm getting at, was there a split as far as approach to teaching?

Rod: No.

Andrew: Yeah I actually got here, just for your interest, I wanted to talk about this earlier, by 1971-72, there were 355 full time professors that were listed in the

catalog whereas 10 years later there were only 75. So, I mean we're talking a huge decrease in the number of faculty members.

Rod: Well that can't be, no, no. That's not possible, that can't be.

Andrew: Can't be?

Rod: Oh no, you must have misread something. Honestly that's just, no.

Andrew: Ok, I'm sure you're right

Rod: There may be a printing error in that book<sup>1</sup>, but the number of faculty has steadily increased ever since I came here.

Eric: Then the budget with it at the same time, because we noticed that with Siemens, with his introduction, like when he first came here the budget was only like \$500,000 and over the time he was here was here it jumped to sixteen million, and so the influx of teachers was there also.

Rod: Yeah, the big growth spurt of Humboldt State took place in the late 60's. That's when this place more than doubled in size, and they hired accordingly and then it leveled off in the early 70's and hasn't changed much since then.

Eric: So it's always been around...

Rod: About seven thousand, seventy two hundred.

Andrew: So we'll start talking about, first of all would you say it's fair to state that you're passionate about what you taught.

Rod: Yeah, yeah I would.

Andrew: When would you say, is there any moment where that passion was galvanized early on?

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to *A View From the Hill*, Dr. William Tanner's history of Humboldt State University.

Rod: No, I think I just acquired it partly because of my temperament, and partly because I had some damn good teachers myself, in public school, in college and in graduate school, and I think that you're really impressed by your mentors, you know.

Eric: I had teacher like that in junior high.

Rod: Sure. I can name every one of them to this day.

Eric: Yeah, I can too. So it's just kind of, more like, something you just fell into, and that you enjoyed a lot.

Rod: No, I wouldn't say I fell into it. I made up my mind along about my junior year in college that I wanted to be a history professor at a four-year university, and I busted my ass to do it, so I wouldn't say I fell into it, but I was lucky to get this job.

Andrew: U.S. History, that's your forte, your interest.

Rod: Yeah.

Andrew: Why U.S. history besides the influence you received from your mentors?

Rod: Well I think that's it right there, that's just it. I was just always more interested in it. I had some interest in European history but, when I got to graduate school and you have to specialize I chose three fields in U.S. history and one field in British history.

Eric: What were those three fields?

Rod: Colonial America, 20<sup>th</sup> century America, American social and intellectual history.

Eric: And just basic history of Britain?

Rod: No, Tudor-Stuart.

Eric: Alright.

Rod: But I never taught that here because Dr. Sundstrom taught it.

Andrew: What were you most passionate about in those particular areas of study? Any particular presidency or movement?

Rod: I enjoy the period from the Great Depression to Nixon, that's my most, to me that's the most interesting period, say from about 1930 to about 1975, from the Depression to Watergate.

Andrew: What do you think of Franklin Delano Roosevelt?

Rod: Oh I think he was the greatest president we ever had.

Andrew: That's interesting.

Rod: I make him number one on my list. I'd put him ahead of Lincoln. I'd put him number one, Lincoln two, Washington three.

Andrew: Just as far as he handled the whole war effort?

Rod: Well the Depression and the war, the man carried, I mean, my god, he carried responsibilities that most of us couldn't even conceive of, and he was an invalid.

Andrew: What's your impression of the Truman administration? Do you think things would have gone differently had Franklin Delano Roosevelt lived?

Rod: I don't think it would have been too different, because when the war ended a more conservative congress got elected that blocked some of the things Truman tried to do, like with civil rights, and I think they would have blocked Roosevelt also. So I don't think it would have been too different. I think the cold war would have still happened, I think the cold war transcended personalities, although Truman may have brought it on more quickly because he took a more confrontational

approach to the Russians than Roosevelt did, but I think it still would have happened, because it wasn't so much about personalities, it was about a great power conflict.

Andrew: Oh yeah for sure, the whole Lavender Scare period and whatnot.

Eric: Knowing who's the big kid on the block ... Growing up in Kansas, how did the civil rights affect you at all?

Rod: It didn't. You gotta realize that when I left Kansas I was only 16 years old, so...

Eric: By that time you had moved back in with your parents in New Mexico.

Rod: Yeah and then Arizona.

Andrew: I'm sorry, I got that statistic backwards.<sup>2</sup>

Rod: Yeah, it's the other way.

Andrew: Exactly, so...so...

Rod: I thought maybe the whole faculty had gotten the Black Death or something.

(laughter). Yeah, see the school more than doubled in size so they had to hire a bunch of faculty.

Andrew: Yeah, sorry about that.

Eric: We'll edit that out later.

Rod: Yeah, you better delete that.

Andrew: What is interesting is that you came on right at that apex of that increase.

Rod: That's right, and then about 1973 it dried up, and the hiring here really fell off.

And like in the history department, once you get into the 1980's as faculty began to retire, and early 90's, and we could never get budgetary authorization to

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to Andrew's earlier statement that the size of the faculty had shrunk between the late 1960s and late 1970s.

replace people, so the size of the history faculty just steadily shrank. Yeah that was kinda demoralizing.

Eric: Yeah we noticed that, that just the whole history class sizes dropped off too.

Andrew: You said demoralizing. Wow, so later on in your career, in the middle years, you did actually feel hindered?

Rod: Well sure, I mean just because we couldn't offer as many courses. We didn't have as much to offer to history majors as we had. At one time this department had, I'm not sure exactly, but I think we maxed-out at 13 full time history professors, and what is it now, nine, something like that, eight?<sup>3</sup>

Andrew: I didn't even realize it was that low.

Rod: Yeah. And you know that's frustrating. And obviously the less you can offer curriculum-wise, the more difficult it becomes to attract new majors.

Andrew: Sure, and the quality of students anyways.

Rod: Yeah the whole thing. Sure, it's kind of like a chain reaction.

Eric: Kind of like things are happening now with all the budget cuts and whatnot.

Rod: Yeah, if you work here long enough, you see these cycles. Boom and bust, boom and bust, boom and bust, now they are in a real trough. Yeah, it will come back, but I don't know when.

Eric: Also we wanted to ask you how the tenure program worked too, if that ever involved you at all?

Rod: Well yeah, I mean I got tenure, I got promoted.

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<sup>3</sup> Actually, at the time of the interview (Spring 2004), the number of full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty in the Department of History was five.

Andrew: Was there a big controversy, because we've been reading that there was actually, there was a big dispute, I guess there was a couple unions, union groups, University Professors of California, I guess was a more liberal union, as opposed to the California Faculty Association which is more conservative. Were you a member of either one of those?

Rod: No, I don't believe in unions for faculty. I believe in unions for coal miners, not for the white collar class. I think it's a bunch of bullshit.

Andrew: Ok, so you weren't really associated with the conflict these groups actually had.

Rod: No. Nope

Eric: How did that affect the school though in general, did it seem like a giant split between ...

Rod: It had one real bad effect. I don't remember exactly when this was, I guess sometime in the 80's. See it used to be, everybody who worked here, whether you were a truck driver at plant ops or a professor, a secretary, anybody that worked on this campus, was a member of the same state employees union. Then when the separate ... and that was good because, in my opinion, because at the end of the year everybody, well not everybody, but a lot of people no matter what their job was on campus would get together, out here by Blue Lake at Camp Bower for a big salmon bake and a day long party, and it was a great chance for people who would never meet each otherwise to get together socially. It was a lot of fun. But when the UPC and the separate faculty union developed, then the employees had their own, I'm sorry not the employees, when the staff had. It split see, a staff union and a faculty union and that was the end of those year-end get-

together, and it had the affect of dividing the whole campus more into separate camps. Now you were staff or you were faculty, see, instead of everybody being under the same umbrella, and I always kind of regretted that.

Andrew: How did that come about?

Rod: It had to do with politics in Sacramento, and politics on campus. I was not involved with it, but I just hated to see it happen.

Eric: And then you lost the salmon bake.

Rod: That's right. The salmon bake was real fun

Eric: That's terrible.

Rod: It was a real kick in the ass.

Andrew: That was a real travesty.

Rod: It was. Lots of fun.

Eric: So Professor Sievers was affected by the salmon bake.

Rod: That's right, that's right.

Andrew: What are you working on now, Professor Sievers?

Rod: What am I working on now? I'm working now with Professor McBroome on this Teaching American History three-year federal grant that we got to work with the county public school teachers.

Andrew: How's that going?

Rod: Real kick in the butt. I really like it

Andrew: That's good. Are you writing any books, or any essays, or anything like that?

Are you writing books?

Rod: Oh no.

Andrew: Nothing like that?

Rod: No, no. God no. I don't have the energy to do that. No.

Andrew: Have you ever written any books?

Rod: Yeah I wrote a book.

Andrew: What was it called?

Rod: It's an intellectual biography of Adlai Stephenson...

Andrew: Oh wow.

Eric: Interesting.

Rod: ...who ran for president against Eisenhower, got his ass kicked. It's in the library  
if you want to look it up sometime.

Eric: Was it ever published and sold in bookstores, anything like that?

Rod: Oh yeah.

Andrew: We'll have to check that out.

Eric: Yeah.

Andrew: So no family?

Rod: My mom is still alive, and I have three brothers.

Andrew: No wife, no children?

Rod: No.

Andrew: Any regrets, if you don't mind me asking?

Rod: None.

Andrew: None.

Rod: None.

Eric: What do your brothers do now?

Rod: Well one of them is retired, he worked in Orange County for the city of San Juan Capistrano. One of them rehabs old properties, houses and apartment buildings. He lives in Albuquerque, and the one is a district sales manager for Caterpillar, out of Phoenix. I'm the only one in the family that went the academic route.

Andrew: How's your mother's health?

Rod: She's hanging in there. She has, she has arthritis pretty badly. Other than that she's doing fine.

Andrew: Is she back in Kansas?

Rod: No, she's in Oregon.

Andrew: Whereabouts in Oregon?

Rod: In Bend.

Andrew: Oh wow. Yeah, I went to high school in Ashland.

Rod: Oh is that right?

Andrew: Yeah.

Rod: When my brother in Southern California retired, he and his wife moved to Bend, like lots of other Californians. And when Mom got to where the arthritis was making it hard to get around, mobility wise, we thought, we had to do something about that, so we moved her from Albuquerque to Bend.

Eric: Let's stop here so I can flip the tape.

## **Interview with Professor Sievers (cntd.)**

**As Transcribed by Andrew Cabello**

**Andrew:** While we've been changing the tape I've just asked the professor what sort of legacy he'd like to leave behind for people to maybe be inspired by. The professor was about to answer that question, as imprecise as it is.

**Professor Sievers:** Well look, the older you get the more you realize that you don't leave much of a legacy, at least not unless you do something that is so important, so dramatic, that they put up a statue or name a building after you, you know, like a president or a senator. Uh...if I have a legacy I would hope it's just that a fair number of students I've had over the years will remember that I did a good job and made them enjoy history more. Um...but you never really know. I can tell you a funny story about that...

**Andrew:** Please do.

**Eric:** Go for it.

**Professor Sievers:** A few years ago I was over...over in Redding, and um...I was having breakfast over there in a restaurant and a guy's behind me...we were paying our bill...and he goes: "Excuse me, aren't you professor Sievers from Humboldt—weren't you? I had a class with you years ago. It was the best class I ever had at Humboldt!" I said that's great. [So] I said what was it? He couldn't remember!! [laughter] O.K., so ya know, there ya go. [laughter]

**Eric:** Yeah but I like it! [laughter]

**Professor Sievers:** Liked it, but he had no clue what it was!!! [laughter]

**Andrew:** But that's significant influence.

**Professor Sievers:** Once in a while you'll bump into somebody and they'll happen to mention, it happened to me just last week. I was pumpin' gas here at... "Hey Doctor Sievers, had a couple of classes from you back in the 90s." I said oh that's great. You bump into people, it's nice to hear from former students, but it doesn't happen too often. People go on with their lives and that's just the way it is. Um...so...I don't worry about stuff like legacies. I just hope a sufficient number of people who took classes from me learned something and came out of it feeling better about American history.

**Andrew:** Were there any students that you mentored to the extent that, uh, those professors back in Virginia mentored you? Are there any students in particular that you...?

**Professor Sievers:** Well we've had people here go on to graduate school, go on to law school. I guess you could look at it that way. But you've gotta realize that we don't give

masters degrees here. So it's not the same kind of one on one relationship with undergraduates that you would have if you were working with graduate students, O.K.? That's a big difference.

**Andrew:** Yeah, I didn't realize.

**Professor Sievers:** When you're in graduate school you work very closely with usually two professors, on your thesis, and your exams, and everything—I mean your comprehensives I mean. Well we don't have that type of thing here because we only give the BA degree. So it's not the same kind of relationship. But we've had a lot of Humboldt State history majors go on to advanced learning in one field or another. I wish more of them would stay in touch so that we would know what became of them.

**Andrew:** That was my next question, are you in touch with any of them?

**Professor Sievers:** Very few. One guy I know of, um, finished up here, oh I don't know, maybe 10 years ago, and up until just recently he was working for the governor of Virginia—I happen to know that. He moved back east and, hooked up with this guy Allen. I can't think of his first name, he was the governor of Virginia, now he's a senator from Virginia. And this guy—I can't remember his name now—it wouldn't surprise me if he's on Allen's senatorial staff now, I suspect, but I don't know that for sure.

**Andrew:** And he was a history major...?

**Professor Sievers:** [Yes]

**Eric:** That gives me hope for the future.

**Andrew:** Um...is there any uh...um...we might as well go here...what are your thoughts on the present situation in Iraq in terms of its historical significance and how it may fall in line with the whole, you know, the pattern of history?

**Professor Sievers:** Oh lord.

**Andrew:** I know that's a real general question...

**Eric:** Yeah, as somebody who's seen quite a bit...

**Andrew:** An expert [opinion].

**Professor Sievers:** I don't think there's any, I'm not trying to avoid the question, but I don't think there's any way to know. It's going to depend on what happens. If we can gain a satisfactory resolution from that deal, if we can actually bring about a functioning, relatively stable, democratic government over there this will go down...you talk about legacies...it will go down big time as a legacy of Bush's—no question. I'm skeptical, I'm real skeptical, but I hope it works out. But who knows? Right now I'd have to say

I'm skeptical. I mean I've never really felt that democracy is necessarily a universal desire of all people. Bush claims that he thinks it is. Woodrow Wilson thought it was. We'll talk about Wilson on Tuesday night—he's in my mind these days.<sup>4</sup> I'm not so sure about that. If an area like the Middle East has no history, no culture, no tradition of democracy, I'm just a wee bit skeptical that it can be brought about. But I could be wrong you know...? I would say this, if it doesn't work out over there, if we were to retreat, I worry about what the consequences of that might be for that whole region. You can debate endlessly whether or not we should have gone in there—that's real debatable. But now that we're there, I think we've got to tough it out. That's just my personal opinion. I worry about what the consequences would be of pulling out prematurely. So I think Bush's historical reputation is right on the line. It will be determined, I think, by what happens. And we probably won't know for several years.

**Andrew:** Is there any other issues or happenings of historical significance that you see on the horizon?

**Professor Sievers:** Nuclear proliferation. I worry to death about that. I think in some ways, in some ways, things are more dangerous now than they were in the Cold War, because I worry about certain groups—certain parties—getting nuclear weapons who are nuts. One thing about the Cold War was that while the Soviet Union had all those weapons they were also rational. You've got a lot of, in my opinion, non-rational people running around the world now who are busily trying to buy up these weapons on the black market. And that scares the hell out of me.

**Eric:** At least the Soviets knew if they attacked us we would attack them.

**Professor Sievers:** Of course. A nuclear stalemate in a funny kind of a way made the world safe, in a weird kind of a way.

**Eric:** Mutually assured destruction.

**Professor Sievers:** Exactly.

**Eric:** But now with these new guys out there, they really have nothing to lose it seems like. They could care less.

**Professor Sievers:** Well you worry about fanaticism, and ideologies that profess to answer to a higher god or something. That's scary stuff all through history.

**Andrew:** Earlier you had said that you hold FDR in higher esteem than even Abraham Lincoln.

**Professor Sievers:** He's number one on my list.

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<sup>4</sup> A reference to an American history class of Dr. Sievers' in which interviewer Eric Hall was currently enrolled.

**Andrew:** Number one on your list...

**Professor Sievers:** [Yes]

**Andrew:** Having said that you believe that nuclear proliferation is the next maybe big historical obstacle that we all face, how do you rationalize FDR's willingness to use his nuclear capabilities in Japan and use that as a bargaining chip, so to speak, with Soviets?

**Professor Sievers:** Well, first of all, remember the sequence of events. Roosevelt dies in April, the bomb is used in August. So, I think that...I agree with the traditional interpretation that Truman used the bomb, and so would Roosevelt if he lived...

**Andrew:** That's why I was...

**Professor Sievers:** ...In my opinion. Because they really thought that the alternative was to invade Japan. And they were projecting god-awful casualties. So it came down to an invasion or the use of the bomb, and they chose the bomb and I think they did the right thing. That's my opinion.

**Andrew:** I may be wrong here, but I was under the impression that the Soviets were to be the primary...

**Professor Sievers:** No. No. Now they were concerned about the increasing Soviet intransigence in Eastern Europe and they may have hoped—they being Truman and the men who advised him—they may have hoped that using the bomb in Japan would send a signal to the Russians that we would like very much for them to loosen their grip on Eastern Europe. But if that was part of the idea it didn't work because they didn't. But that bomb was used primarily for the military purpose of avoiding an invasion of Japan.

**Eric:** And ending the war faster.

**Professor Sievers:** And ending the war faster. And a whole lot of guys lived to be old men, both Japanese and American, who wouldn't have if the invasion had had to be carried out.

**Andrew:** I myself have a tough time figuring out why we didn't just say firebomb Nagasaki or Hiroshima like we did in Tokyo which killed more people than ever died through the bomb. Was it just the awe-inspiring nature of that weapon?

**Eric:** Shock and awe.

**Professor Sievers:** I think that's right. They had been working on it since 1942. They had put a tremendous amount of time and money into the project. And from the very beginning of the project the underlying assumption was that if they could develop such a weapon it would be used. There was never any doubt about it—it would be used. And it just turned out that it was used against Japan. I think that if the sequence of events had

been different, if Japan had surrendered first, and Germany had still been fighting, they would have used it on Germany. I have no doubt. That bomb was built to be used and the only way it would not have been used would have been if Japan had surrendered prior to August.

**Andrew:** Wasn't Hirohito entertaining those thoughts before we dropped the bomb?

**Professor Sievers:** No.

**Andrew:** I heard that he had offered his surrender with the one condition...

**Professor Sievers:** No. He was surrounded by fanatics who were determined to fight to the bitter end, come what may.

**Eric:** A very Japanese kind of ideology right there.

**Professor Sievers:** Oh hard core. Hard core. I mean obviously the moral aspect of the use of the bomb is something that no one is ever going to feel comfortable with. I'm not comfortable with it but, as a historian, I'm satisfied with my understanding of why it was used. General Sherman, back in the Civil War, said war is hell.

**Andrew:** That was General Sherman who said that?

**Professor Sievers:** Yeah.

**Andrew:** He would know.

**Professor Sievers:** He'd know.

**Eric:** One thing I wanna ask you right now, I'm doing a paper on the whole Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs, what are your thoughts on Kennedy's administration from the beginning when he took over after Eisenhower to the day he was assassinated? Did you feel he was just keep going on with what Eisenhower was working on or do you think that he wanted to do something different with the whole Cuban situation?

**Professor Sievers:** Oh man. That's almost a whole hour's worth of...he inherited the CIA plan to invade Cuba. He inherited that from Ike. After it failed, he cursed himself for not having questioned the CIA more intensively about how this was going to work, what it would take for it to succeed, and so forth. But he also became more determined, after the failure of the Bay of Pigs, to get rid of Castro—one way or another. And so covert activities continued, in fact they increased under Kennedy.

**Eric:** Operation Mongoose.

**Professor Sievers:** Mongoose. All that. You know about that.

**Eric:** Love that name.

**Professor Sievers:** Yeah. And, had that clandestine stuff not been going on, it's possible that Khrushchev would not have sent the missiles into Cuba. Who knows? But it's possible because clearly those missiles were put in Cuba because Castro believed, and Khrushchev believed, that we were going to invade again. And you can't hardly blame Castro for thinking that, since he knew that Mongoose and these other covert operations were constantly going on trying to sabotage his factories, assassinate him, you know. On the day that Kennedy was cut, was shot, in Dallas, a meeting was scheduled in Paris between a CIA operative and a Cuban agent which was just the latest scheme to assassinate Castro. And when the news came of Kennedy's assassination that meeting was called off. So the Kennedys never gave up on the idea of eliminating Castro one way or another.

**Eric:** So Castro was to the Kennedys what Saddam was to the Bushes?

**Professor Sievers:** Absolutely. Yes, that's a good comparison. I think it's a real good comparison. It became an obsession with John and Bobby. Bobby handled all this clandestine stuff so there wouldn't be a paper trail leading back to Jack. Bobby was the guy who was basically handling it. And that's why, after Jack was killed, Bobby said he wondered if perhaps, in some way, shape or form, those clandestine attempts to bump off Castro had somehow led to his own brother's assassination. He was plagued by a sense of guilt after Dallas, if that's on the idea, on the premise that Oswald may have had some kind of Cuban connections.

**Andrew:** Just to fill in the gap here, what are your thoughts briefly on the Eisenhower administration? I mean I know he gave the famous, you know, speech dealing with, you know, the military industrial complex...

**Professor Sievers:** To me, and I'm basing this on Stephen Ambrose's biography of Ike, I think Eisenhower had two great accomplishments. One was he found a way to get an armistice in Korea and end that fight which was killing a lot of people needlessly. And the other was, we now know from some declassified documents, that he fended off 'super hawks,' I call them, within the defense establishment who wanted to launch a first nuclear strike against the Soviets on the idea that "we gotta hit them before they hit us."

**Andrew:** World War III?

**Professor Sievers:** Yeah. One of those evaluations reached Eisenhower outlining the case for a possible first strike, at least as a theory. Eisenhower penciled in the margin, "Are you guys nuts?" and sent it right back to them. And he had the prestige as WWII European theatre commander that he could fend them off. I think things become much more dangerous when Kennedy took over because he was young, he was inexperienced, and that made him not only vulnerable to the Soviets—Khrushchev in particular—but also to these extremist elements within the American defense establishment. I think Kennedy has his virtues and his strengths as a president in history, but there is no doubt

that he was a young kid learning on the job. I mean he was only 42 or 43 when he was elected for God's sake.

**Andrew:** He almost seems as though he was all too willing to please on some level [the rest of question is unintelligible].

**Professor Sievers:** He just didn't bring to the office the same reputation Eisenhower had had. On the other hand, after the Cuban Missile Crisis, I think he came to a whole new realization of the dangers of nuclear war. And you know that last speech he gave...well not the last speech ...but one of his last major speeches at American University in June I think of '63, called for a relaxation of tensions and better communication between the US and the USSR. O.K., so I think the Cuban deal frightened Kennedy into rethinking a lot of the assumptions of the Cold War. Whether that would have made much difference had he lived—Vietnam, all of that—who knows?

**Andrew:** And your thoughts on the Ford and Carter Administrations?

**Professor Sievers:** Well Ford was almost a nullity, I mean I'm not sure if he'll hardly even be remembered, except he seemed to bring an image of geniality back to the White House after that whole Nixon crowd left and that was kind of nice. I'm hard pressed to name any specific achievement...

**Eric:** Just kind of a space filler?

**Professor Sievers:** Yeah really. I don't think he's going to have much of a historical reputation, he just wasn't in there long enough. Jimmy Carter, I don't know, what can you say about Jimmy Carter? I don't know. A man of great intelligence. Good will. But somehow I think was sort of overwhelmed by the presidency. I think he was lacking some intangible quality of leadership that the great Presidents have. I'd be hard pressed to say what that is. Some have it, some don't, you know?

**Andrew:** What were some of the other Presidents besides FDR, Lincoln...?

**Professor Sievers:** Oh, Teddy Roosevelt...

**Eric:** Teddy Roosevelt, hard nose...

**Professor Sievers:** ... comes to mind. Truman I guess. I give Truman credit for that. And I think Reagan as a matter of fact. Leadership is a...you know...political scientists try to quantify it...you can't quantify it for Christ's sake. Some people have it, some people don't! But when you meet somebody in any kind of workplace environment—whether you're in government, or university, or business—when you meet somebody who's got that quality, ya know it! You smell it. You can tell. Like here at Humboldt State, it was easy to know who the leaders were, on the faculty side and on the administrative side, and I think that's true at every level of human interaction. What is it? I don't know what it is because obviously there's enormous differences from one leader

to another, but particularly in a democratic system where you have to accommodate...because you can't use force like a dictator can...I think to emerge as a strong leader in a democratic system is a tremendous accomplishment.

**Andrew:** You think Reagan had that?

**Professor Sievers:** Yes I do. I do, and I think I see certain qualities in Reagan now that I did not fully appreciate at the time. I think history may judge him fairly well—higher than I would have ever thought then. It's funny how the passage of time alters your perception of things. I'm somewhat more critical of now of Kennedy now than I was at the time. Somewhat Reagan has gone up in my assessment, than he did at the time.

**Andrew:** What about LBJ? Has your opinion changed in hindsight?

**Professor Sievers:** No it hasn't. And I have to confess to a certain prejudice there. I blame him for 58,000 American deaths in Vietnam.

**Andrew:** Do you suppose he blamed himself?

**Professor Sievers:** Yes I do. Yes, I think his post-presidential years...what year did he die in? I think he died in '73 I believe...

**Eric:** Not long after.

**Professor Sievers:** I think he was haunted by it, he said as much. I think he was sincere—it's a tragic story—but he was so damned stubborn. He wouldn't retreat, nor would he give the military the permission to do what they would have to do to win the damn war...which might have entailed using a tactical use...I understand why he didn't want to do that...but the result is that he got trapped in Vietnam and 58,000 guys died. And God knows how many Vietnamese... I have no idea. Yeah, and that in turn set the stage for the Cambodian tragedy. If it hadn't been for Vietnam Johnson probably would have gone down as a great president because of his great views on civil rights...I mean there's no doubt about that...and he should always get credit for that...but in my own personal thinking, I can never disassociate him in history from Vietnam. And I don't ... I said a minute ago that things look different as time passes but I gotta tell you my thinking about Vietnam has not changed.

**Eric:** How do you feel about the current presidential candidates: Bush and Kerry? Do any of those guys have that quality—that "it"?

**Professor Sievers:** Well we don't know about Kerry do we, because he hasn't been in the job. Who knows? I thought Bush showed commendable leadership in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when the country was in shock and trauma. I thought his public speeches and his behavior in public in the first few weeks after that were commendable. But this Iraq thing could conceivably do to him what Vietnam did to Johnson—if it blows up—we'll have to wait and see. I did not support Bush for the presidency. I supported

John McCain. He was my guy. But of course he couldn't get past the primaries, so...we'll see. I haven't really focused on Kerry very much. I'll have to do some thinking about that between now and November. Don't you guys have the feeling that there is a lot of undecided voters?

**Eric:** Oh yeah! I think it's going to be one of those big fights, you know, something that you go to Vegas to see.

**Professor Sievers:** On the big screen. [laughter]

**Eric:** Yeah exactly on the jumbotron.

**Professor Sievers:** Well let's just hope and pray that the damn thing doesn't come down to Florida and hanging chads again-my God. The country doesn't need that.