

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FRED SONDERMANN¹

by **Robert D. Loevy**

Editor's Note: Fred Sonderrmann taught Political Science at Colorado College from 1953 to 1978. He served both as a teacher and an administrator. He was regarded as one of the most colorful and entertaining professors at the College in the post-World War II era. This description of his impact on Colorado College is excerpted from a history of the Political Science Department written in 2004.

In 1953, Political Science Professor Douglas Mertz hired Fred Sonderrmann to teach International Relations at Colorado College. For the first time in its history, the Political Science Department had two tenure-track professors. Also for the first time, the Department really could be called a fully functioning Political Science department.

Fred Sonderrmann was born to a Jewish family in Horn, Germany, in 1923.² He and his family escaped to the United States in 1939 to avoid Nazi persecution. A military veteran of the Pacific theater in World War Two, Sonderrmann received his B.A. from Butler University in 1949 and his Ph.D. in International Relations from Yale University in 1953.

At the time he was finishing his graduate studies at Yale, Fred Sonderrmann stopped by the office of his mentor, Samuel Flagg Bemis, a renowned scholar of Diplomatic History at Yale. In the office with Professor Bemis was James Phinney Baxter, the President of Williams College in Massachusetts. Sonderrmann asked Professor Bemis if he should accept a job

¹ Robert D. Loevy, "A History of the Teaching of Political Science at Colorado College – 1881 to 2004," Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, 27-34.

² A video (DVD) is available in Tutt Library at Colorado College on Fred Sonderrmann's escape from Nazi Germany and his return visit to that country with his wife and children many years after World War II was over.

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offer from Colorado College. “I just want to know what kind of a place it is,” Sonderrmann said. “Is it a dead-end place, or what?” Fred Sonderrmann was concerned he would never get a better job if he began his professorial career at Colorado College.

After he asked his question, Fred Sonderrmann later recounted, Samuel Flagg Bemis and Phinney Baxter “were absolutely convulsed with laughter.” Sonderrmann was left standing there wondering what was going on. “After they had calmed down a little bit,” Sonderrmann said, “it turned out that both of them had started their teaching careers at Colorado College. In fact, that’s where their friendship and their acquaintance came from. And they strongly urged me to [go] to Colorado College.”³

Upon joining the faculty at Colorado College, Fred Sonderrmann quickly gained a reputation as a great classroom teacher and a veritable font of new ideas for exciting new academic programs at the College. Sonderrmann moved in and out of administrative tasks but never relinquished his primary role as a teaching professor. He served a while as an assistant in the Dean’s office at the College, mainly working on special projects. From 1962 to 1965, he was Director of the College’s Summer Session.

One of Sonderrmann’s most enduring contributions was to conceive, plan, and direct the week long “Symposium,” which was held for a number of years in the 1960s in January prior to the beginning of second semester. This seven-day intellectual feast, the only academic event taking place at the College that week, included lectures, panel discussions, films, and dramatic presentations, all centered on a single topic. Professor Sonderrmann revealed the great depth of his intellectual interests by directing symposiums on such varied subjects as the *American Presidency*, *Urban America*, and *World War II*.

Years later, Fred Sonderrmann recalled that the symposiums he directed were filled with major intellectual events that caught the temper of the times. A particular highlight was the *Symposium on the American Presidency* held in January of 1968, when the Vietnam War was raging and Lyndon B. Johnson was President of the United States. Sonderrmann said:

“Rowland Evans, Jr., the [syndicated newspaper] columnist, spoke on the presidency in Armstrong Hall. I remember it. And he spoke about what

³ Sonderrmann Oral History, February 7, 1978, Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College. 2-3.

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was called ‘the credibility gap’ and then he paused, rather dramatically, I thought, and said, ‘What that means is the President lies.’ And I remember it was almost like a shock wave. I don’t think I ever heard anyone say anything quite as bluntly about anyone else.”

“What happened to the students,” Sonderrmann went on, “and all the rest of us as well, was a questioning of American institutions.... I found it much more difficult, for my own part, to teach *American Government* or *American Foreign Policy*, etc., than I had before. And I think my students recognized this, and they also found it much more difficult. I think it was healthy. I think we had been much too uncritical and unquestioning of American institutions.”⁴

Fred Sonderrmann turned his unease with American institutions in January of 1968 into concrete political action. The following April, Sonderrmann became the head of the McCarthy for President campaign in the Colorado Springs area. Eugene McCarthy, a Democratic U.S. Senator from Minnesota, was running for the Democratic nomination for President on an anti-Vietnam War platform.⁵

Every four years, to correspond with US presidential elections, the Political Science Department at Colorado College sponsors the *Sonderrmann Memorial Symposium on the U.S. Presidency*, a set of speeches and panel discussions on presidential elections and the presidential office.

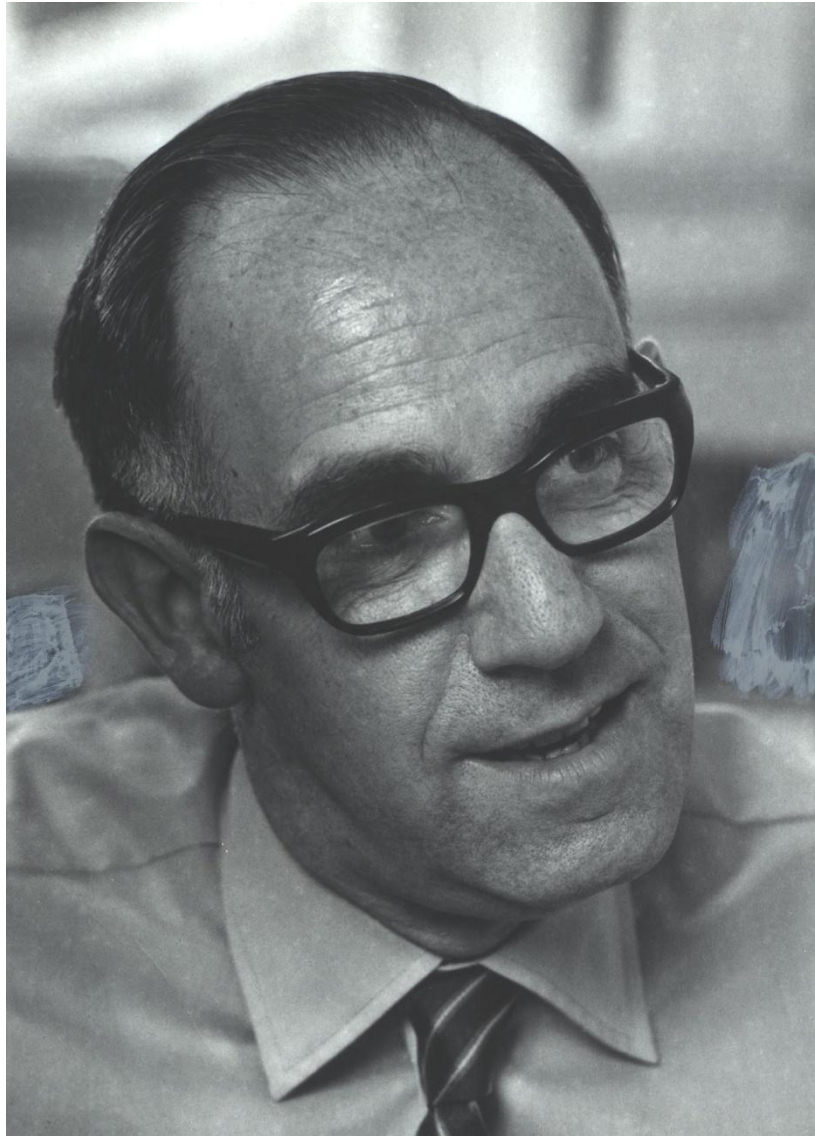
Fred Sonderrmann was a publishing scholar as well as a great teacher. He co-authored a well-known text book, *Theory And Practice Of International Relations*. He joined a number of other international relations scholars in organizing the International Studies Association. For a number of years, Sonderrmann edited the organization’s journal - *International Studies Quarterly*. He taught graduate students in Political Science at the Denver University Graduate School of International Studies.

A student of local politics as well as International Relations, Fred Sonderrmann ran for the Colorado Springs City Council in 1973 and was elected.

⁴ Sonderrmann Oral History, February 7, 1978, Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, 18.

⁵ “Sonderrmann Now Heading McCarthy Group,” *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, April 17, 1968.

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A Political Science professor at Colorado College for 25 years, Fred Sonderrmann conceived the idea of periodically holding a College-wide “Symposium” on a major subject of interest and controversy. He was a member of the Colorado Springs City Council. A city park – Sonderrmann Park – was named in his honor. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

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On the City Council, Sonderrmann pursued an environmentally sensitive course of action, but he also strongly supported public financing of community cultural facilities such as the symphony orchestra and the fine arts museum. In honor of Sonderrmann's many contributions to Colorado Springs, a new 77-acre city park was named Sonderrmann Park.⁶

Perhaps Fred Sonderrmann's greatest contribution was to chair the faculty committee that first suggested the major revision of the Colorado College curriculum that resulted in the Colorado College Block Plan. In the spring of 1968, Sonderrmann's committee discussed the Centennial of the College, which would occur six years later in 1974. The idea was expressed in the committee discussions that, instead of just holding a party to commemorate 100 years of existence, the College should undertake a major review of the entire academic and social program.

The task fell to Professor Sonderrmann to present this idea to Lloyd Worner, the President of the College at that time. Worner recalled Sonderrmann telling him: "Look. Wouldn't it be great at the Centennial, instead of having a bunch of distinguished speakers, and talking about the great things of the College, and its past, and the traditional thing, wouldn't it be good if we could be off and running about what we are doing as we go into the 21st Century."

President Worner acted quickly on Fred Sonderrmann's suggestion. The following day, Worner appointed a faculty member to work full-time at developing an appropriate future program for the College. Sonderrmann was impressed with the quickness with which President Worner acted on his somewhat radical idea. Sonderrmann later remarked: "You know, this is a great place. One of the things you learn around here is don't open your mouth and suggest something, because it may be acted on the next day."⁷

In 1970, the Danforth Foundation selected Fred Sonderrmann for the Harbison Award, a national prize recognizing outstanding college teaching. Sonderrmann repeatedly said receiving the Harbison was the high point of his

⁶ Robert D. Loevy, *Colorado College: A Place of Learning – 1874-1999* (Colorado Springs, CO: Colorado College, 1999), 263-265.

⁷ Robert D. Loevy, *Colorado College: A Place of Learning – 1874-1999* (Colorado Springs, CO: Colorado College, 1999), pp. 164-165. Worner Oral History, February 5, 1985, Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, 141.

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academic career. “I think teaching has given me the most intense satisfaction,” Sonderrmann recalled later, “and being at a teaching institution has therefore been very rewarding.”⁸

Professor Sonderrmann was famous for being a great raconteur. He possessed a seemingly inexhaustible supply of funny and interesting stories, and he loved telling jokes. He also enjoyed parlor games, such as charades, which he would organize and supervise with great delight at Political Science Department social events.

Fred Sonderrmann’s spouse, Marian Sonderrmann, shared his interest in local politics. She was elected to a local School Board in Colorado Springs. In her later years, she taught Political Science courses at Pike’s Peak Community College and the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS).

Early in 1978, Professor Sonderrmann was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The following fall, the Political Science faculty organized a combined reception and tribute in his honor. A crowd of more than 200 persons, many of them from the Colorado Springs community as well as the College, gathered in Gates Common Room atop Palmer Hall to laud Sonderrmann’s many accomplishments and contributions. Following a standing ovation, Professor Sonderrmann came to the podium and said: “Nothing at this College has ever equaled this moment. You have touched me deeply.”⁹

Fred Sonderrmann died in the late fall of 1978 after completing a quarter-century of teaching at Colorado College. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he joined with Doug Mertz in expanding and strengthening the Political Science Department at Colorado College.

⁸ Sonderrmann Oral History, February 7, 1978, Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, 25.

⁹ Robert D. Loevy, *Colorado College: A Place of Learning – 1874-1999* (Colorado Springs, CO: Colorado College, 1999), 264.