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HUM 104

February 16, 2026

Dear Davidson College Archives & Special Collections,

I am a first-year student of the humanities at Davidson College. This spring, I am researching the presence and significance of anti-Vietnam War demonstrations at Southern institutions of higher education. By conducting this research, I hope to come to a better understanding of how Southern students pursued justice in a time of turmoil and mistrust.

The United States first became directly involved in the Vietnam conflict in 1965. From that time until the departure of US troops in 1973, much of the American public grew increasingly disillusioned with government justifications for the war. Student protests at more than 1300 colleges and universities illustrated antiwar sentiment, with many remaining peaceful but others becoming violent. Davidson College experienced its own share of controversy and protests related to the Vietnam War within the specific context of its region, size, and liberal arts mission.

The Davidson College Archives' collection of oral history interviews would be an invaluable primary source in my research. Specifically, I am interested in the interviews conducted by senior John P. Scherer in 1989. Scherer talked to Davidson faculty members to learn more about the relationships between students, faculty, and the administration; on and off-campus protests; issues of religious worship; and the compulsory ROTC program. While these oral histories support the Archives' historical record, they also reflect faculty's personal views on campus culture during the war era. Importantly, these interviews are from over three decades ago; while Scherer does ask consistent and professional questions in all of the oral

histories, these recordings must also be analyzed within their own historical context. Visiting the Archives would allow me to understand how Davidson contributed to national backlash as well as how its contribution fit into unique regional trends. I look forward to visiting Davidson to conduct this research as I continue to learn about American students' opposition to the Vietnam War.

Sincerely,

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HUM 104

Dr. Bory

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Primary Source Analysis: Davidson Professors Recall the Vietnam Era

In 1989, John P. Scherer conducted an oral history interview with Davidson professor Max Polley as part of his senior thesis. Scherer wanted to learn more about antiwar dissent at Davidson between the years of 1964 and 1973. As a professor of religion, Dr. Polley was one of the faculty members with heavier involvement in ideological discussions and political activism throughout his career at the college (1956 to 1993). The interview with Polley is one of ten that Scherer conducted with various Davidson faculty members.

Scherer begins the interview by asking about Polley's upbringing, including his family's political beliefs. Polley responds that he "was raised in a more conservative background, but became liberal in college" (Polley 00:11). This part of Polley's response resembles the answers of most of the interviewees, who considered their childhoods conservative but not extremely so. With roots in Indiana and Michigan, Polley was the only interviewee who was not from the South. My research focuses on Southern institutions, so Polley's perspective on Southern experiences as a Midwesterner is especially valuable. By analyzing Polley's memories of the antiwar era, I hope to understand the Southern culture of the time from an outside point of view.

When asked about student-administrative relations during the war era, Polley confirms that they "never got confrontational [or] explosive" (Polley 01:13). Notably, many other US colleges could not say the same during that time. Davidson's relative cordiality could be attributed to several factors: Hansford Epes, another interviewee, suggests that college relations

at the time were characterized by the tradition of Southern courtesy (Epes 08:53); Samuel Spencer explains that with such a small student body, it was difficult to become “polarized” or view other people impersonally (Spencer 04:56); Ernest Finney Patterson mentions the politics of the town of Davidson as a discouragement to radical actors from the college (Patterson); Finally, Polley admits that politically liberal students who were “opposed to government policies” represented a minority of the student body (Polley 13:06). This demographic fact, along with Scherer’s choice to interview professors and administrators rather than students, reveals that faculty members were an influential part of the antiwar movement at Davidson. I plan to use the interviewees’ hypotheses as starting points for my analysis of Southern antiwar sentiment. Were small institutions less likely to oppose the war? What about liberal arts colleges, or schools with close ties to their surrounding communities? Were students at religiously-affiliated or conservative schools less incensed, as a rule? Finally, did uniquely Southern traditions like the one Epes mentions have widespread effects on Southern students’ involvement in antiwar demonstrations?

Polley’s interview provides insight into the motivations of antiwar protesters at the time. He mentions that opposition grew once Americans realized that the government was not telling the truth about the situation overseas (Polley 11:48). This points to both growing mistrust of the government and US citizens’ desire for honesty as key drivers of protest. Polley also explains that students’ political opinions “began to swing when more and more people were being drafted and sent off to Vietnam” (Polley 13:06). According to Polley, “self-interest” brought the war home, both for students and their teachers: “it always felt like if a student failed out of school, you were sending them to Vietnam” (Polley 14:45). Although historians commonly point to the expanded draft as a turning point in American antiwar protests, the format of this interview

highlights exactly why the 1966 change was so important. Polley's voice is clear and candid over the recording; even at small conservative institutions like Davidson, a sense of danger began to pervade students' everyday life, and professors recognized this.

Although protests at Davidson never made it into the national spotlight, they still managed to draw attention to the war within the college community. Polley recalls taking a trip to Washington, DC with other faculty and students to march against bombings in Cambodia. He also remembers an overnight vigil at the Davidson post office (Polley 07:08). Traditional demonstrations like these made up only part of the antiwar effort; Davidson professors hosted teach-ins against the war in 1965, participating in a broader national trend (PBS). Polley calls this an "educational" approach to Vietnam War politics. Scherer asks about many of Polley's memories in order to corroborate written records of campus goings-on at the time, many of these records coming from *The Davidsonian*. By asking Polley about his personal approach to the politics of the time, Scherer was able not only to chronicle and confirm actual events of the time, but clarify the attitudes surrounding demonstration. Notably, Scherer began this project less than two decades after the war ended; while interviewees' recollections were fresh, they may also have been influenced by broader ideas or cultural shifts in the US at the time. Thus, oral history interviews capture both historical happenings and the lenses through which people viewed and lived them, but they must be analyzed within the context of their times.

John P. Scherer's oral history interviews, and particularly that of Dr. Max Polley, provide valuable insight into the political attitudes and events overtaking Davidson's campus during the Vietnam era. These records offer a first glimpse of Southern colleges' participation in antiwar efforts. In order to further examine this issue, I would look for non-oral history sources from inside and outside college campuses. Scherer's interviews raise questions about the broader

regional trends of the period. I expect to follow these leads in my research of Southern colleges' contributions to national backlash against the Vietnam War.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others.

Works Cited

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