

Randolph Roth__When You're a ... See the Civil War Everywhere_

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SPEAKERS

David Staley, Eva Dale, Randolph Roth

R Randolph Roth 00:04

When you're a historian, you see the Civil War everywhere. I see it everywhere around me - I see reconstruction, I see the failures, I see the hatred, I see the political instability, I see the contempt for fellow Americans, I see the the anger and frustration. You see it everywhere. So, you're a historian and you see all this, and the people around you can't see anything.

E Eva Dale 00:29

From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences, with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

D David Staley 01:04

I am so pleased to be joined today in the ASC Tech Studios by Randolph Roth, Professor of History and Sociology and College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor at The Ohio State University. He specializes in the history of the United States from colonial times to the present, with an emphasis on social and cultural history, the history of crime and violence, environmental history, history of religion, the history of democracies, global history, quantitative methods, and social theory. Dr. Roth, welcome to Voices.

R Randolph Roth 01:37

Well, thank you Dave.

D David Staley 01:38

I'd like to begin with this idea of quantitative methods. So, I know that, as an historian, your work looks in some ways like social science, you use statistics, quantitative methods; tell us more about the approach you take to studying the past.

R Randolph Roth 01:52

Well, I think, you know, when I was an undergraduate, I was definitely inspired by my teachers, particularly Carl Degler, my mentor.

D David Staley 02:00

Famous historian.

R Randolph Roth 02:01

You know, Carl and I really shared a vision of a history that was humanistic, social scientific, scientific, and mathematical. And if you look at Carl's work, it's exactly that; he is fascinated by biology and genetics, he's fascinated by the social sciences, he's a humanist to the core. And he was actually an undergraduate economist, he loves numbers.

D David Staley 02:29

I don't think I knew that.

R Randolph Roth 02:29

And so, you know, and one of his first books was about the economy, was economic history. And so... and at that time, you know, we really felt... and I know there was that wave of people going to graduate school, and my cohort, say, from the, from the mid 60s into the mid 70s, who really were upset by the fact that the social sciences were ahistorical. And what that meant was, is if you really wanted to understand the deep patterns of human behavior, you couldn't do it by just studying, you know, doing surveys of undergraduates today; you have to really go back and look at across time and space to see what's very important, because we can't perform really controlled experiments, right? So, what we have to do, we're doing not experimental, empirical research. We're a lot more like astronomers or like geographers or paleontologists - the things that we study happen once. And so, I would love to perform experiments, I mean, one experiment I would perform was to just invent modern firearms and have everybody have to have a single loading, single shot, muzzleloading firearm; that would change the equation dramatically, I'm sure.

D

David Staley 03:48

They call that counterfactual history.

R

Randolph Roth 03:49

Counterfactual history, but we can't do that. So, what you do is you look over broad stretches of time and space to see what patterns you can find. And again, yes, I always loved math and science, and so my approach as someone who was in math and science but I wanted to study human problems, was to use the mathematical skills and scientific skills I had learned to try to study these problems. Now, what's happened since, of course, is that the social sciences have become more historical, and so people who have the interest that, say, Carl and I have, are tending to go into... and love math, tend to be going into the social sciences now and not into history. So, we become an extremely humanist profession, but at the time I signed on to do this, we were the wave of the future, Dave. We were gonna set the tone, we were going to reimagine and rethink the field to history, and now we're history.

D

David Staley 04:51

So what happened?

R

Randolph Roth 04:52

Well, you know, a part of it is... part of it is pay. I mean, you know, social scientists make more than humanists, they just do. And, you know, if you have the mathematical ability and you want to be a professor, you want to be a scholar, but if you could be a sociologist or you could be an economist, why would you be a historian? Because they can work on the same problems now. They can work on violent as I do, they can work on crime, they can do these things, and they can do it historically. So, I think that there's that, and people do that in law schools where they're paid a huge amount of money. So, I think, you know, some of it has to do with that, and, of course, I think the more history slides away from being open to those ways of looking at the world - and not all historians are closed to that, and our colleagues at Ohio State, we know are very open to that, that's why I'm so happy here and why you're happy here - but many, many departments are really aggressively, you know, humanistic, and that's great. And what they don't understand is that very often our work supports theirs. You know, I was trying to look at, you know, these great histories of patriotism, you know, that fellow feeling, and how do you measure that? Well, I started to measure it out, find various different sort of things like, you know, how many new counties in a given decade are named after national heroes, right? Sort of an unconscious way of saying, you know, we're part of the British Empire in the colonial period, we're part of, you know, we believe in America. And the murder rate goes up and down with it, murder rate among unrelated adults. But it fits the great work on patriotism that historians have done. And so, I'm not, I'm not at all condemning my colleagues, I'm praising them. And the thing that's, I think, the hostility or the indifference goes just one way. I don't know if any of us who are sort of science historians who don't love reading humanistic history, that don't have a humanistic side to us. But, you hear these, you hear these astonishing things, like I was able to show that, over the long run, the rates at which children are cared by parents

and caregivers, it's always had been the inverse of the birth rate, from the mid 16th century right on through into the late 19th century. And I was talking about how, you know, this is about having a world welcoming to young parents and children, and that it fits with, you know, when children aren't killed, they grow to be taller, their mortality rate is lower, parents can start families at a younger age - illegitimacy rates go up because people don't have to be terrified of the consequence of an unwanted pregnancy because the world's going to support them. And I talked about all these important things that I saw, and one historian in the audience said, well, don't you think this could benefit from more humane approach? And I thought, I'm trying to say that for, you know, hundreds of years, we need... it's about being welcoming to parents and children, and it's about - it's also about ambitions too, ambitions rise, children become more expensive. And I was, you know, and I was just shocked. I didn't know what to say. I mean, I've spent how many hours in all of these records trying to reconstruct this, because violence against children really makes me furious. And so you know, you just find this attitude. I was just.... I didn't know what to say, I still don't know what to say, except something obscene.

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David Staley 08:31

Well, and I'd like to talk more about that. Before we get there, I'd like to talk about your book, it came out in 2009, award-winning "American Homicide". And I'd like... just give us sort of an overview, what were the conclusions that you reached?

R

Randolph Roth 08:45

Well, what I found is, you know, I've discovered over time that homicides of children by parents or caregivers follow very different patterns from intimate partner homicides, family homicides, follow very different patterns than homicides among unrelated adults. And most of the book is really about... and most of the public concern is about homicides among unrelated adults, friends, acquaintances, strangers, and we really stand out as a nation in that as that today, which is why I was really concerned. We are by far the most violent, affluent society in the world, and really, even when you include societies that aren't affluent, we are still, you know, we're... we're in the upper, well, we're somewhere between the 60th and 70th percentile when every other, you know, affluent nation is down 20th percentile or lower. So, it's, it's really shocking to me, so I wanted to figure that out. But, because I did all of this work, I was looking at every kind of homicide, and I think the thing that really surprised me is, you know, we don't... what we see today has not always been the case. For instance, it's hard for people to imagine today that African Americans, for most of our history, were the least violent of all Americans, right from, you know, the mid 18th century right on through Reconstruction. And they killed one another at a far lower rate than European Americans did, although the rate at which they were killed was high, the rate at which they killed, particularly killed one another, was extremely low. So, what we see out there is the disaster that was created from the 1890s to the 1930s with disfranchisement, the murder of African American leadership, landownership, the destruction of the right to vote, legalized segregation, lynching, and the effect that that had on the young men who grew up in freedom. It was, you know, they were the first generation that grew up thinking that they were free, and then they weren't. And you know, they armed themselves to protect themselves, and when you have a gun and you're angry, you kill the people closest to you, that's what we'll talk about in a little bit. So, I think that, you know, I was fascinated by that. The other thing that people don't understand is that, looking at it today, is that North in the mountain South, after our revolution, we had perhaps the lowest rate of

homicide in the affluent world, in fact, I think we did. And it's very hard for Americans to imagine that today, that we were a tremendously non-violent society outside of the slave South. And what you really see there is that, yes, the revolution was violent, and it wasn't just political violence. Well, you know, when you have a revolution, Civil War, hostile frontier, you know, contested frontier, hostile military occupation, homicide rates go up all around, you know, robbery, murders, you know, feud murders, property murders, they all go up; but what you can see is when you have a democratic revolution and you really carry it out, the homicide rate can get really low. And I think, as we talked about it before the interview started, this is really successful nation building. What you see after the revolution in the North is that slavery is abolished - very slowly, very painstakingly. When we look at it today, the extent of discrimination against African Americans who were freed was tremendous, but how did they view it? And that's what matters. They saw a future that was getting better. You see the enfranchisement of adult white men, even if they lack property, they are empowered to vote. You have a situation in which the most important thing for a young couple to be, to gain honor in the society's eyes and in their neighbours eyes and in their own, is to be self-employed, to have their own shop or farm. And by their mid 30s, over 80% of Americans owned their own shop or farm.

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David Staley 12:50

80%, eight zero?

R

Randolph Roth 12:52

Yeah, yeah. And so, you know, it's really what you see here, and then you start to see in places like Vermont and New Hampshire, the right to divorce on the grounds of cruelty - mental or physical in Vermont. Trying to say, you know, this isn't... tyranny doesn't apply to marriage, you know, you can't be a tyrant within marriage. And so, all of these changes are happening and people are feeling empowered. And so, you'll see the peak in counties named after American heroes in the 1820s and 30s, you'll see that self employment, you'll see this society, really, people are able to achieve the place in life that they hoped for, or they feel they will be able to earn it. You see this tremendous fellow feeling, and patriotism, the way that they celebrated patriotic occasions is way beyond us. Of course, they got terribly drunk, too.

D

David Staley 13:47

Right, yes.

R

Randolph Roth 13:48

It was known as the "Alcoholic Republic" by my friend, my late friend, Bill Rorabaugh, and it was the highest level of alcohol consumption in our nation's history. So, maybe they were too drunk... actually, can you get too drunk to be violent? I mean, you know, we know there's a certain level that alcohol does cause violence, but maybe they were too drunk to be violent. You could get to that state, right? Six gallons of ethanol a year where we're just drinking two, and we've got a problem. So, but I do think that, you know, these are surprising things. These

are not inevitable. So, when you look at what's gone wrong, it's we had the most massive failure of a nation in the mid 19th century of any failure of nation building, Civil War Reconstruction. And, you know, when you're a historian, and you know this, Dave, when you're a historian, you see the Civil War everywhere. I see it everywhere around me - I see reconstruction, I see the failures, I see the hatred, I see the political instability, I see the contempt for fellow Americans, I see the the anger and frustration. You see it everywhere. So, you're a historian and you see all this, and the people around you can't see anything. I told my students I've never watched that show "Grimm", called "Grimm", but the hero, he can see all the evil spirits around and nobody else can see them. Well, that's what like being a historian is, you can see these things. And that's when our homicide rate just went boom, and it's higher than it was is today, but we're still living with that aftershock.

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David Staley 15:21

Higher between 1890 and 1930?

R

Randolph Roth 15:24

I think what we're seeing is it's higher between 18... It's, the Mexican War is the breakpoint.

D

David Staley 15:30

So, 1850?

R

Randolph Roth 15:30

So, it's 18... breakpoint is 1846-7, really down to 1876- 77, end of Reconstruction, and then it starts to go back up again in the 1890s, it has a little lull there, goes back up, and it's been very high. You know, certainly 1934 to 1959 it went down - that... that's a whole other interview as to why that happened. But, certainly we had another disaster during the Second Reconstruction of the 1960s and 70s, and we're still in... still living with that. So yeah, these things are really... are there. And so, when you commit yourself to democratic ideals and you don't live by them, it creates a disaster. As I said, you know, throwing democratic ideals into a society that's caste and class bound, it's like throwing a match on a can of gas. We saw this in Iraq, right? Oh, you're gonna be a democracy tomorrow - well, no. You can see this in the slave South after the Revolution. After the American Revolution, the homicide rate went up in the slave South as opposed to down, because nothing changed; in fact, the inequality and things got worse. So, you can see that, you know, once you commit yourself to these very high ideals and once you encourage your children to be the most ambitious people on Earth - which we're proud of, right - you better deliver, and if you don't, it's going to be a disaster. And so, this is what we're talking about, about nation building, when you have these ideals. We do, we set a very high standard for success, and it means that the level of frustration when you don't carry it out is tremendous. And I can talk about that in relation to our current homicide crisis the last three years.

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David Staley 17:26

Well, I was about ready to raise that, so please.

R

Randolph Roth 17:28

Yeah, well I think the thing is, is the strongest correlate of high homicide rates over the past 40 or 50 years is political instability, and you as a historian of Europe know that exactly. I mean, what happened during and right after World War I, what happened during and after World War II? You know, you can see this, the French Revolution. And what we mean by political instability in a big sense is revolutions, civil wars, hostile military occupations, contested frontiers. And when people don't feel that there is a stable government, that their lives and property are secure, the homicide rates can soar to, you know, 100 per 100,000 per year - we're at like, seven, I think right now, which is unconscionable. It can go up to 100, even more than that, in these in these terrible situations. And it's not just political violence, it's every kind of violence, and somehow it triggers certain things in us. We know it triggers this in primate groups; when they have a political upheaval, they start whooping on one another.

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David Staley 18:30

Like chimpanzees, or something like that?

R

Randolph Roth 18:31

Yeah, chimpanzees and orangutans. And they're even whooping on their friends, they're.... you know, it just turns to chaos. And so, you know, when I looked at the past, you know, how do you... but political instability could be more subtle than that, right? And when I look back at history, if I look at the colonial period, I was trying to say, how can I measure political stability to see if my theory is right, if it goes up and down with the homicide rates? And I thought, what about, number one, executions for sedition or treason? So, political instability, execution for witchcraft or heresy, you know, tensions within the community. I thought about banishment for religious reasons, political reasons, but I also thought about protests and riots that lead to deaths. It turns out that, you know, rioting and protesting is as American as apple pie, and so is destroying people's property and beating people up. It's when you cross that line into killing people that it correlates with the murder rate among unrelated adults, and it spreads out into that interpersonal sort of thing. And you can see that right through the 19th century, the great work of my colleague, Paul Gilje, who really created this wonderful database of riots, and he coded whether people died. So, you know, you map that out, and oh, my goodness, it's the murder rate among unrelated adults at the national level. So I said to myself, Okay, what's going on here? I remember in 2015, we had not had a real... deadly riots, serious deadly riots since 1992.

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David Staley 20:11

Right. Rodney King, right?

R

Randolph Roth 20:13

Rodney King of Los Angeles, and our homicide rate went down, and I thought, well, that's one for the argument. But then I thought 2015, Michael Brown, and I went, uh oh, and then 2016 - though they are white supremacists, but they are also the grassroots, you know, they want the land returned to private ownership - in the West, we saw that death there, Charlottesville 2017, and of course, we saw what happened on January 6th, and I was thinking... 2015, I already thought to myself, uh oh, and that's what we're seeing. And I think, too, we're seeing deliberate efforts to destabilize our polity, by certain of our political leaders who are behaving, I think, very cynically. You know, when we see the deliberate effort to rig elections through gerrymandering, when we see the Supreme Court overturning the Voting Rights Act, when we see the Supreme Court and Citizens United ending campaign finance reform, so our system is flooded with dark, dirty, dishonest money; when we see these things happening to our democracy... and so this has been going on. So, in other words, we're seeing the consequences of that effort to destabilize our democracy, and it's really getting to the point of being really, really dangerous. And again, we saw and what was essentially as we see now, an attempted coup. And so this is... when that happens, people don't feel - and you look at the way people feel right now - they don't feel that their lives and property are safe. Do you see that? And they're not aware of the fact that it's this political instability, that we pick up the signals the same way that chimps do in a troop, it's kind of unconscious, it changes our hormone levels - I've written on that - it changes our bodies, it prepares us for aggression, it makes more aggression, it makes us more depressed. And so, all of these things are filtering through our bodies in ways that we're not aware of, and so we start to become more violent. And so, that's what I'm really thinking about right now. Secondly, we have what is the weak force - and this is the second part of the theory in "American Homicide" - the weakest force is do you believe, is a fancy word, the social hierarchy is stable. And again, this is sort of from primatology, but, you know, in other words, we were primates, we have a social hierarchy, there are people on the top people on the bottom people in the middle. And the question is, is do I think that this is fair? Do I think that I can achieve... I have achieved what I deserve to do or have that opportunity? And do my children have that opportunity? And we see that the legitimacy of these social hierarchies usually gets undermined in a long, slow way. We can see it happen in the late 16th, early 17th century in Europe, most of Europe, when the real incomes of the poorest 40% dropped by a third. I mean, it just is that slow grinding, you can't see it every day, but it's happening. We see it in the backdrop of the Civil War and Reconstruction because self employment declined, so, you know, by 1876, only a minority of Americans in the north and the mountain south were self employed, you know, and that's economic change, and so even though people were getting more prosperous on average, they were losing that... what they saw as their birthright, owning their own shop or farm. And we've been seeing it with deindustrialization and other sorts of things, and we're seeing it with a tremendous rise in inequality in our society since 1980, which has left us the most unequal affluent society in the world. And I was just looking at the homicide rates 1999 to 2015, and I was looking at the wonderful work by Chetty, et al., he and his group - it's Opportunity Insights if people want to look at their website - but what he has found, and we can see these patterns in intergenerational mobility, if you look at a millennial whose parents were at the 25th percentile, sort of half... in the middle of the bottom 50%, that's the first generation in nearly 100 years that was not more successful than their parents. Upward mobility has died in America. And what I did was I said, let's look at their index, because across counties, that's not random. In some counties, kids are on average less well off than their parents, in some they've been better off in their parents. So I looked at that and I looked at their little index which goes from one, a lot of upward mobility, to negative one, a lot of downward mobility, and I plotted the homicide rates, the adult homicide rates age 15 and older for European Americans, Hispanic Americans,

African Americans, and it's straight up; it's three and a half to four times higher in those counties in the United States where the kids are downwardly mobile from their parents than it is where their upwardly mobile and successful. It's not rocket science. And the thing is, is why is this? Well, you know, it's because we've been tremendously successful as a society, we're the hardest working people on Earth, but the benefits have all gone to the upper 10% and within that mostly to the 1% and within that mostly to the 1/10 of a percent, and that has not happened in other affluent societies, most other affluent societies. It's not about deindustrialization, it's not about automation, because that hasn't happened in Japan. It hasn't happened in continental Europe. It's happened in Great Britain, Canada, Australia, the United States and I wonder New Zealand... is it the settler, Great Britain and its settler societies? There's something strange about what's going on. But of course, a lot of this is tax policy, and if you look at it, you know, we've seen this inequality rise, right straight through the democratic... whether the Democrats or Republicans are in charge, three of the 10 most regressive tax states are democratic. So it's not... I don't want people to jump and say, you know, this is an argument, but here in Ohio, we've seen a deliberate effort to shift the tax burden over the last 30 years from the wealthy to the poor and the middle class, and it's been tremendously successful, to the point where the poor in 19, what was it 2019, were paying 12 and a half percent of their income in state and local taxes and the wealthy were paying 6.5. And since then, you know, the latest thing is they eliminated the top income tax bracket, they've been cutting corporate tax income tax, estate tax, they've been raising property tax which renters pay - they don't realize they pay it, but they pay it, landlord isn't paying your taxes - gas tax, sales tax, they've all gone up. So the goal is to shift the tax burden, and of course, we're at a trillion dollars a year in tax fraud at the federal level, and the typical person committing tax fraud is a wealthy male ages, late 20s to the early 60s. And so when you have this kind of damage being done to your society, why it's happening here and it's not happening in other affluent societies, but the per share of national income of the poorest 50% of Americans has gone down from 22% in 1980 to 13% today. And so that's going to cause murder, what can you say? It's gonna cause murder, and it's going to kill children; it correlates with all forms of child mortality and nobody's looking at it.

D

David Staley 28:05

So that's an excellent segue to your recent project called "Child Murder in America". Tell us about... tell us about what you found here.

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Randolph Roth 28:13

Well, again, I've talked about a little bit, you know, I've really finished the research through from, you know, the mid 16th century through the late 19th century. And, you know, I found that murders of children by unrelated adults go up with the murder rate among unrelated adults, it's a... it's a similar kind of thing, where children are getting killed in drive by shootings, children are getting killed in these deadly riots or indentured servitude. Children in the colonial era, indentured children are getting killed at the same time, same periods that indentured adults are getting killed. So, these murders of children by unrelated people, and also murders of children by children, follow that pattern of unrelated. But, you know, the murders by parents or caregivers are quite different, and we know that, you know, for ages zero through nine, even today, 96% of them are killed by parent or caregiver. And yeah, it's higher through age four, but really five to nine, it's still 83% are killed by a parent or caregiver. So, it's about that

relationship, and it's different. And so getting it getting it why - and it's intensely related to... the best correlates of it at the county level are accidental deaths in children and child mortality. So, everything that's putting stress on parents - and again, I'm not the only one who thinks this. I mean, my theories are very similar to what... child murder, I'm not trying to reimagine the world the way that I did in "American Homicide". I think my colleagues are right, it's about stress on parents, it's about disadvantage, but it's also about the consequences of disadvantage for adults, you know, the health behaviors become worse, riskier behavior, higher levels of parental negligence, all those things kind of go together with disadvantage. And so, I've been thinking about those issues, and what I found, though, is what really, again, what can limit this damage? Again, as I said, you know, those counties that don't provide welfare, you know, that have tried to cut it back with the reforms of the 1990s, where they haven't expanded health care, children get killed, children die of all forms of mortality, violence, accidents, natural causes. And we can see this... but what really can help, you know, I was looking at the State Index of Women's Status by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, a really great group, and I was using their data and looking at how does that deal with the welfare of children? Every single cause of child mortality goes down as women are empowered, as we have access to contraception, we have access to family planning, we have access to child care, preschool, elder care, paid family leave, and where women hold a higher percentage of the political offices, they turn out at higher levels for elections. And that's true for men, too, higher voter turnout, that sense of collective efficacy in the community, and a sense you have a strong community - all of those things deter violence against children and improve their lives. So, I think we have to think... we have to start to think about, you know, what are we going to do, given that we have the highest levels of child mortality, accidental deaths, and violent deaths of children in the affluent world, by far. I mean, you know, being pro-life - it's expensive, it's morally difficult, and it means that we have to make sacrifices, and that we have to move towards gender equality - period.

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David Staley 32:00


You're a historian and clearly what you're working on has contemporary relevance, but what I'm really struck by is how you take this, this long view to try to wrestle with these questions. Is that... is that a fair statement?


R


Randolph Roth 32:12

Well, that's the only way to understand it, because it is, you know, everything about it is what's the level of stress on parents, prospective parents, on young people particular? And, you know, is this a world welcoming to parents and children? But the other thing is ambition, you know, when our ambitions rise, that child becomes more expensive. I mean, it's... I joke with my students, you know, right now, as a middle class kid in America, you're a \$300,000 bundle of love. And, you know, that's expensive. I mean, I said, you know, I tell my students, you know, you know, at that cost, you know, you're lucky your parents didn't expose you on rocks. So I think that, you know... and, and we have competing ambitions, and what we see is children are not necessarily the most important people in our society. We claim it is, but as a historian, I don't see that. I see a lot of hypocrisy, and, you know, am I willing to pay taxes and am I willing, if I'm able bodied, I might take a chance, or am I going to get my health insurance so I can contribute to this system? Am I going to be a freeloader? Well, millions of Americans, young Americans prefer to be freeloaders, and they don't think about the fact that they're damaging

the healthcare system, making it not inclusive, and their behavior is killing kids. They don't want to make that connection. Historians make that connection, right? And so, it's just... you see these things, and again, it's the weakness of our nation. We're not really looking out for one another, the hatreds in our society. As Trevor Noah said, you know, he said, I'm South African, and I come in here, I couldn't believe how the anger, the hatred in America. And our colleague, Chris Otter, said to me - I hope Chris doesn't mind me saying - they say, you come to America, people hate the government with a passion. And he said, I don't get that. And I said, you know, and I, as I told my students, in a democracy, it's an elaborate form of self hatred - who put those people there, you did! So, it's... you just see this kind of thing going through the society, you see it doing all kinds of damage, you know, and I want to try to use our knowledge to try to help.

 David Staley 34:23
Randolph Roth. Thank you.

 Randolph Roth 34:24
Thank you.

 Eva Dale 34:26
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