

A Conversation with Sheriff Richard D. Hongisto

San Francisco's "radical sheriff" talks about law enforcement, public demonology, world politics, higher education, multinational corporations, and why he's going to evict the tenants of the International Hotel

Art Silverman

A few months ago more than four hundred activists gathered in Austin for the "Second Annual National Conference on Alternative State and Local Public Policies." It was like a class reunion for the sixties: former SDS'ers, anti-war heavies and civil rights marchers reunited around such esoteric new themes as "building and environmental health policies."

According to media accounts of the conference, one of the most popular speakers to address the crowd was Richard Hongisto, the Radical Sheriff of San Francisco. Hongisto talked about the need for jail reform, for taking "fascism" out of law enforcement, and for stopping the trend toward "Vietnamization at home" through heavily-armed, military-style police TAC squads. He also stressed the importance of alternative politicians building strong bases of

support in their communities to ensure long-term survival.

And everybody listened, because Richard Hongisto knows whereof he speaks.

In 1971 Hongisto put together a loose coalition of students, liberals, a few unions and much of San Francisco's substantial gay community. It was enough to put him in the sheriff's office with a margin of 21,554 votes over incumbent Matthew Carberry.

But the shit hit the fan quickly, almost from the day he took the oath of office, pledging to administer the law "with brains instead of brawn."



Sheriff Richard Hongisto

Photo: Marian Beth Goldman

First it was the gay chaplain fiasco. Hongisto gave the Rev. Robert Richards, a gay minister, access to the jail as a chaplain. The *Examiner* and *Chronicle*, eager for the opportunity, drummed up public outrage at this perversity. The Board of Supervisors was aghast. Conservative deputies rebelled. Hongisto finally backed down.

Then came the issue of food in the jail. Hongisto, who before being sheriff worked a year on KQED's *Newsroom*, approached the issue with an experienced eye for the media. He took reporters to the zoo and

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showed them that the animals got twice the 70 cents per day allocated for feeding each inmate at the jail. The food budget was raised.

By this time the revolt of the deputies was in full swing. They objected to Hongisto's emphasis on minority recruitment, humane treatment of inmates, and sensitivity to non-white cultures. Nor did they care for his advocacy of early-release programs, volunteer workers in the jails, and increased recreation and counseling for inmates. The Deputy Sheriff's Association denounced their new boss repeatedly. By their standards it was as if Che Guevara was running the Department.

Sheriff Hongisto, meanwhile, was busy with lawsuits against both the County Grand Jury and the Board of Supervisors, charging abuse of authority and insufficient funding, respectively. When then-Mayor Alioto criticized Hongisto's demeanor, the sheriff

Those (reactionary) forces are focusing now on Moscone, Freitas, and Charles Gain. I'm enjoying a vacation.

suggested to a press conference that the mayor "can kiss my ass." Likewise, when the Grand Jury issued a report criticizing Hongisto's administration, he responded by accusing the author of the report with having "the mentality of a 1930 prison guard."

Somehow, in the midst of all that, Hongisto managed to greatly upgrade the quality of the jail (administering the jails is the main function of the sheriff's department, along with court-related duties.) New showers, kitchens, clothing, daycare facilities, an ombudsman to handle inmate complaints, classrooms, a dental clinic, more bedding, expanded visiting hours, a post-release job training program, and so on.

As his four-year term drew to a close in 1975, Richard Hongisto could point to a solid record: San Francisco's jails were no longer the worst in the country; living conditions were dramatically improved; many innovative new programs had been established.

Hongisto's main opponent in the 1975 re-election campaign was Michael Nevin, a politically-connected police inspector and Mayor Alioto's personal chauffeur. In a straw poll before the election (which Hongisto disputed) sheriff's deputies picked Nevin over Hongisto three-to-one. But the public apparently felt differently, and Nevin's last minute indictment on voter fraud charges certainly didn't help (he allegedly voted in San Francisco while living in San Mateo). On election day last November, Richard Hongisto was returned to office with three times the margin of his first victory.

A radical is a person who, through thought and analysis and examination, tries to go beyond the surface to the heart of the matter.

Hongisto, now 40, is a fascinating and contradictory personality; for unlike most of the participants at the Austin conference, his own background is working class, military, and police-oriented. Raised here in the city, his father a machinist, Hongisto graduated from Washington High School to a number of odd jobs as a grocery clerk, auto mechanic, encyclopedia salesman, home remodeler, and manager of a vending machine company. In 1959 he spent six months on active duty in the Marine Corps, followed by 5½ years in the active reserves.

For the next ten years Hongisto was a city cop. Four of those years he spent as a uniformed patrolman, one as a plain clothes investigator, three years in the community relations unit and the rest in various departments including the city jail.

At the same time he became a college student, earning a BA from San Francisco State in philosophy and the social science, followed by a MA from the School of Criminology at UC Berkeley. He has now completed all course work towards a PhD in criminology, and has only to write a dissertation.

After leaving the police department, and the one-year stint as a commentator on "Newsroom," Hongisto decided to run for sheriff. He's been there ever since.

The following conversation took place recently in Hongisto's crowded office on the third floor of City Hall. I began by asking the sheriff to account for the fact that his second term is progressing in relative quiet, without constant and heated opposition from his own deputies or the rest of the city power structure:

"On one hand, the main source of opposition to my administration comes from groups that are extremely reactionary; extreme right wingers, people who are against things like minority recruitment, civil rights and jail reform.

"Also a source of resistance, and sometimes associated with the first group, is a group of very conservative people who have long been in power in San Francisco, and on the fringes of power. Their favorite political pastime is currying favor with people who hold power, in the hopes of having the opportunity to share some of the leftover crumbs. Oftentimes they're called city hall hacks, things like that.

"I think the philosophical group as well as the fringe group sort of decided that I'm not going anywhere—so instead of working actively to interfere with my administration, as they did for the first four years, I think they've decided it's a lost cause and they might as well spend their energies elsewhere. Those kinds of forces are focusing now on (Mayor) Moscone, (District Attorney) Freitas, and (Police Chief) Charles Gain. I'm enjoying a vacation."

How about internal relationships in the sheriff's department? Are you better terms with the deputies?

"I think that's good, and improving.

"When I started out, I inherited a department full of people who had ideas very different than mine, and they really didn't wish to change. I think over the last 4½ years some have changed, some left the department, and some have decided to comply with my administration's direction.

"Some small number, still lurking in the corners, are looking for the opportunity to interfere. But the number of people who would like, consciously and aggressively, to interfere with my administration is constantly shrinking; and the support they have from the other deputies is down to just about zero."

Has there been a lot of turnover?

"Part of the posturing that I did early in my administration was an effort to recruit people, to put signals into the community that if you're interested in an alternative effort in corrections, a humanistic effort, a constructive effort, here is an administrator who wants to do that. Why don't you call him up and ask for a job?

"As a result, I have boxes of resumes from good people. One reason the internal employee opposition is being melted down is because the kind of people who are interested in opposing my philosophy are tending not to join the department any more."

So you don't feel you've changed your message any. You're putting forward the same program, and what's changed is the response.

"That's right. Basically put, we're winning. Politically, in terms of the fact that we've demonstrated a substantial acceptance on the part of the general public; and we're winning in that the programs we've attempted to institute in our jail system have been instituted, successfully, without major problems.

"The sum and substance of it, in the end, is that we've won a lot of people over, we've neutralized some people, and our political base is much larger."

Let's talk about the jail. How have things improved there?

"Dramatically. Every facet of the operation of the jail has improved significantly: food, clothing, bedding, medical care, dental care, recreation, exercise. Now we have programs for people with drug problems; post-release employment programs; we have ten classes in the jail where we used to have one; we have 32 VISTA caseworkers, where there used to be one person doing that; we have a person heading up a recreational program; we put in a printing shop; just a lot of things like that make it a totally different place.

"We have showers on every cellblock now, where when I took office they were just in the basement, so the inmates could only shower once a week. Now they can shower several times a day, all day long.

"It's just a cleaner, neater, quieter, more constructive and positive institution than it was before. Right down to the attitudes of the staff."

Some critics of the Austin conference have suggested that many people who got into establishment politics from a radical perspective have been co-opted, or assimilated by the system, and now they're hardly different from much more traditional politicians. How do you respond to that?

"I think that's absurd. It's the kind of thing that sets me off a bit, saying I'm more radical than you, because I wear it on my forehead and you don't wear it on yours."

"I don't think that they really understand the limits of working in a system; they also don't understand how much you can get done."

Then what's the difference between a radical and a liberal? Do those words have meaning for you?

"Clearly, they have meaning. A liberal is a person who believes in civil liberties. That's very nice, very well and good, and I appreciate that very much. I

think radical means something else.

"The word 'radical' comes from the Greek word 'radic,' which means that part which lies under the ground. That's where the word radish comes from. It refers to the root of the matter, or the heart of the matter.

"So the point is that a radical is a person who, through analysis and examination and thought, tries to go beyond the surface to the heart of the matter. That is why there are radicals on the left, radicals on the right, and I suppose there could be radicals in the middle, if someone thought hard enough."

So what is the root issue?

"People who are trying to be radicals are trying to talk about issues beyond civil liberties: usually that means to discuss the economic implications of our government, and what ought to be done in terms of economic issues to lead to the best possible life for all of us.

"But just because someone who holds office can't go out and change the economic system of the U.S. and has to be content with talking about the problems, doesn't make them any less a radical.

"The only other question, perhaps, is resort to violence or other extreme tactics. Obviously, the people at the (Austin) conference were not the type to do that. They are interested in pursuing a better life through conventional political means, or at least political means, albeit perhaps unconventional."

But one way the system manages to maintain itself is by its tremendous elasticity. It absorbs dissent by channeling it into socially acceptable activities that don't threaten the root structure. People with good ideas think they will change things, and they might superficially, but there will be no fundamental change.

"I don't see it that way. I think that's the garden variety analysis, and I think it's wrong.

"When you examine what is the greatest source of resistance to social change, particularly in a country like the United States, you'll often find that it's the demonology of the average citizen. It's the demonology of the person who believes that marijuana leads to heroin, for example.

"We have all kinds of demonology. In the earliest part of 1900's, people who advocated unemployment insurance, health clinics and social security were most

...inexorable changes will occur regardless of what anyone does to stop them...

decidedly thought of as communists. They weren't, but that was the the demonology of the times, as promulgated by people in government. Now today we have those things. It's changed. It's taken nearly a century to do it through conventional political means, but the change is very, very clear.

"I think that change will continue. If you read some of the greatest social philosophers of German origin and so on, and you watch the way they talk about the inexorable changes that will occur in history, regardless of what anyone does to stop them, I'd say you'd end up concluding that they might have been wrong about just when or how or where things would change, but those changes will take place."

Do you consider yourself a socialist?

"I'm not sure that I'd agree with that, but I'd rather stick with the issue than the name of it."

Do you support Carter for President (Hongisto was a Brown delegate at the Democratic Convention)?

"Oh yes."

I find that a little surprising.

"I certainly prefer him to Ford."

Is there a substantial difference? Do you buy the lesser of two evils approach to politics?

"If Carter advocates a national health plan, that alone would be a bold, major move. And when, year after year, these things keep getting done, something happens. Peoples' consciousness increases.

So I would argue that if you're trying to convince people they ought to have a socialist democracy—of the Scandinavian type, for example—we'll already be so close to it that, intellectually and conceptually, in terms of demonology, it will only be a small jump."

But if, as you say, the root issue is economic—who holds power and how society is organized—then how does that part change? The people in charge aren't going to just give it up.

"I don't think it's an issue of who holds power, exactly. Someone is always going to hold power. The real question is what they do with it, what they're able to do with the power, what options they're allowed to have.

"The question is this: If we talk about it intelligently, democratically, exchange ideas and work out plans, then we can make our evolution, as it takes place, happen in a smoother, more intelligent and reasonable fashion. Rather than letting it happen the hard way."

You believe we have that choice?

"Sure. I think if people work at government and make government good, then government will be a

little bit better for the doing of it."

Let's bring this issue down to a local level and talk about the situation at the International Hotel. Will you evict the tenants if ordered to do so?

"I have to do the eviction or face removal from office. The decision for me is do I want to stay here and do the jail reform, and reform other things, including other eviction processes over the years—or do I forfeit the office and give it back to some redneck turkey who is going to do everything the way it used to be done?"

How would you lose your job?

"Well, the mayor could file charges and they'd be upheld by the Board of Supervisors. That's one way.

Is there a point somewhere where you draw the line? It sounds like you're using the old German argument about just following orders.

"Look. If something was ugly enough—if someone said go execute the Jews—I'd say go take a hike, in a lot less polite language than that. I don't even like the concept of duty. I think philosophically, it's kind of a shallow, misused, and superficial thing."

...do I forfeit the office and give it back to some redneck turkey?

So what is the distinction?

"The distinction is that the International Hotel is not a big enough deal in the balance of things. I'm not going to forfeit what I can get done to save that fleabag, 'cause it's a crummy old place, probably some kind of firetrap, and one good earthquake would probably knock it all to the ground.

"And at this point, I'm not so sure that the majority of people living there are the original tenants, or even really people who are that old or that poor. Some of the information I get, for example, suggests that a lot of people are moving into the hotel just to get in on the eviction fight.

"I don't feel sorry for them—they're not old, not poor, and not being displaced. In fact, they're going out of the way to get in the way."

Where do you get information like that? The tenants have charged that you have an intelligence operation going against them.

"Well, they don't need to charge that; I'll just say very candidly and forthright that obviously, since there is a potential for difficulty there, we're attempting to assess the situation and determine what's going on. If I didn't I'd be a big jackass, and doing a hell of a poor job.

"However, I would say that 'intelligence operation' is actually a funny characterization. I don't even have an intelligence division—I'm so shortstaffed I couldn't if I wanted to. We have taken the trouble, using various means, and not particularly outside agencies, just to gather information. See, what most people don't realize is that I can just send a friend of mine down there to walk in the place, and come out and tell me all kinds of stuff. It doesn't have to be a deputy sheriff."

You could go down and talk to the people yourself.

"I could. But I won't bother, simply because I've heard that some of the folks down there are nervous and hostile, and I don't see any point in particularly doing that."

You don't sound very sympathetic to the plight of the tenants.

"I think you want to distinguish between two things: the philosophical issue, and the people there."

I'm not going to forfeit what I can get done to save that fleabag.

"I think it's unfortunate that people are displaced out of their housing, especially when they have limited incomes, jostled around, having their community broken up just so as a corporation can make more profit. I don't find any virtue in that kind of policy at all.

"But on the other hand, there's not much I can do about it right now. I can't provide the housing. I can, and I have, asked all the rehabilitative staff, and our caseworkers, to help people relocate and get reorganized and so on. That's something other sheriffs don't do.

"In many ways, I agree with substantial portions of their viewpoint. I agree that there is a political issue. But some of the people making it a political issue are so extremist in their point of view that I don't want to be identified with them. And I think some of them are a little bit neurotic. It's one thing to have a certain point of view politically, whether it's left or right, and it's another thing to be neurotic about it.

So what do you say to the original tenants of the hotel? That they should have fought through legal

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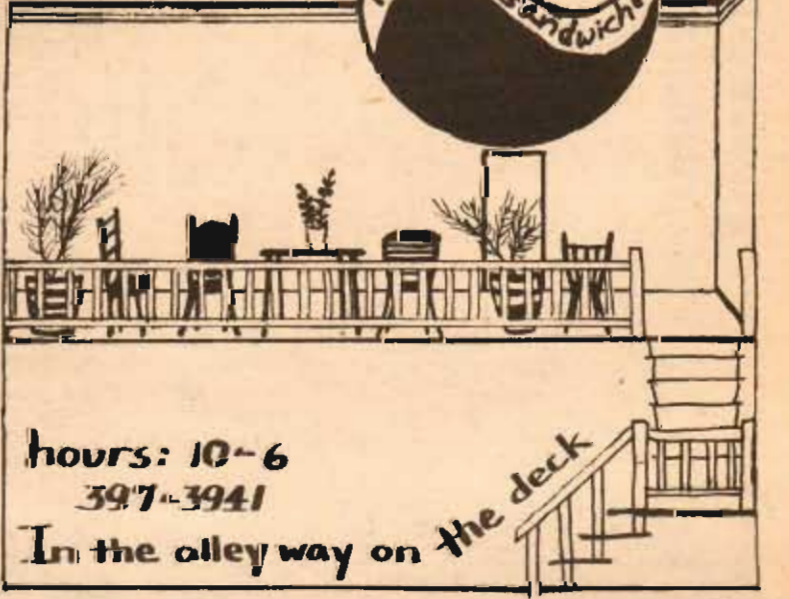
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continued from the previous page

channels, as they did, and when the judge screwed them over they should have accepted it? Do you endorse the notion of civil disobedience?

"Yes, but I think you have to put limits on it. If they want to passively resist, we'll be as reasonable and accomodating as possible. We'll guarantee that, practically, no one's hair will be ruffled.

"The problem is that I'm going to have to do that eviction, unless the city finds some other alternative in the meantime.

"And if they get in the way, then we're just going to have to deal with that."

Editor's note:

The San Francisco Supervisor of Building Inspectors stated last week, in reference to the condition of the International Hotel, "It's quite safe—there are only a few minor code violations." Jim Holland, a building contractor who has been involved with the hotel for a number of years, stated that between \$100,000 and \$150,000 have been spent on building improvements since 1969. Smoke detectors have been installed which have proven their effectiveness by picking up two recent potential fires—a cigarette burning a mattress and a piece of toast burning in a toaster. The entire building was re-wired several years ago and passed inspection at that time. Permanent exit corridors with rails to aid the elderly have been installed in the rear of the building; fire extinguishers have been installed and the fire escapes are checked regularly. In short, all hazardous conditions cited by the Four Seas Investment Corporation in 1973 have been removed, save one or two minor violations. Emil DeGuzman, who is associated with the International Hotel Tenant Association, states that the hotel clientele has stayed basically the same—some of the tenants are seamen who move in and out of the hotel according to the seasonal demands of their work.

Jim Holland also stated that Hongisto was not as supportive of the IHTA as he might have been—he could have proceeded with the eviction notices dictated by Judge Brown's decision more slowly, issuing them one at a time to each tenant of the hotel rather than all at once, and still have stayed within the letter of the law. □

Guardian Strike Update

The twenty-three Bay Guardian strikers continue steadfastly in their pursuit of an equitable contract settlement. The strike, now entering its twelfth week, doesn't show any real sign of settlement. The last negotiating session to date was held on August 16, at which time the Guardian management reportedly made its final offer. The proposal was rejected by the Guardian strikers, and no further talks are now scheduled.

Certain issues in focus at the start of the strike, and throughout the past year as well, have been agreed upon in the course of negotiation. The economic questions of wage increases and overtime pay (there was none) have been resolved for all employee classifications with a few small exceptions. The management has relented on the union's demand of a week's paid vacation, paid sick leave, and funeral leave (there were none of these either). In addition an employee grievance procedure suitable to both parties has been found.

The original, long-standing gap on other central non-economic issues has narrowed somewhat but remains significant nonetheless. Management refuses to give a week's notice prior to laying off employees while at the same time asking for a two-week notice of its employees prior to quitting. And if it doesn't get this notice, it won't give the unions three days in which to refer candidates for job openings. In addition, both sides are 60 days apart on the length of the probationary period for new employees, during which time the grievance procedure is not effective.

The use of free-lance material is an issue that's been given separate attention. Management's proposal insists on the right to solicit and assign free-lance material in any frequency or amount. The unions' counter proposal centers on job security and states that free-lancers may be used as in the past, meaning that they aren't on the Guardian payroll, and providing their use doesn't displace any union jobs.

Chavez Mediation Offer Unanswered

In a letter dated July 30, 1976, to Bruce Brugmann, Caesar Chavez, organizer of the United Farm



Photo: Ruth Man

Workers of America, offered to make available the services of a qualified UFW mediator to help reach a satisfactory settlement in the strike. Chavez' concern comes from the fact that both parties now opposing each other in the strike have in the past years been active supporters of the UFW. Said UFW Press Secretary Mark Grossman in Keene, "the Guardian has always given consistent and accurate coverage to the UFW, and the ITU has supported our efforts as well. Mr. Chavez wanted to try to bring the two sides back together." As of a month later, Chavez has received no response from the Guardian in the UFW Keene headquarters.

-Alston Beinhorn

...106, 107, 108

After chewing his way through 108 fiery jalapenos and winning the first annual Jalapeno Eating Contest held recently in Austin, Brad Arndt didn't have very much to say. The nearest contestant, who dropped out after downing 74 jalapenos, left with, "this has got to be pure insanity."

Contestants were allowed to lubricate their lips as frequently as they desired, but drinking liquid during the competition was definitely out.

We await a report on the particular brands of jalapenos eaten to discover just which pickle packs the hardest punch.

"Art & Politics"

"Art and Politics," a series of discussions and slide presentations sponsored by the San Francisco Art Workers' Coalition, continues with five events in September. The Wednesday evening events are held at Intersection, 756 Union Street, at 8 p.m. Admission is free and all events are open to the public.

On September 1 free-lance writer Irene Oppenheim and Bay Guardian strikers Jerry Roberts and Nancy Dunn discussed "Can the Alternative Press Survive and Serve the Community?"

September 8 El Pueblo Unido will perform Chilean protest music and discuss Latin American protest music and the role of the political musician.

September 15 Lee Marrs and other cartoonists will discuss cartoons and politics.

September 22 Zephyrus Image, a group of typesetters, printers, and designers, will talk about "communicating political ideas through printed images."

September 29 Joan Holden and Arthur Holden, writer and director of the San Francisco Mime Troupe's new play "False Promises/Nos Enganaron," will talk about "hard lessons well-learned in five years of working collectively."

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