

# An Oral History Interview

with

## **John J. Rhodes (part 4)**

Mesa, Arizona

*conducted by*  
Peter Steere

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PS: When we left off, Mr. Rhodes, we had sort of talked a little bit about President Carter. I'd asked you about just some of your summary thoughts about the two terms of President Reagan's eight years as president, in terms of his abilities, accomplishments, sort of along the same line we've been talking--some of your thoughts about summarizing his performance as president.

JR: In many ways, Bill Clinton reminds me of Ronald Reagan. I'm trying to remember who it was who coined the phrase, "Teflon Ron," because things might be not doing so well, but nobody blamed Ron, and it's sort of like Bill Clinton. But nevertheless I think I've already mentioned that he certainly ran up the national debt. But the fact that one of the things that happened because of that was that the "evil empire" which he called, went belly up, was an important factor. And I imagine that history will judge Reagan not because of the national debt, but because of the demise of the evil empire [the Soviet Union]. So I think he will go down in history as a very successful president. Again, he had the capability of getting people around him who could do the job. Very smart. Some of them went a little haywire, but that happens. If you go to bat enough times, you're gonna have some bloopers. He had his share, but all in all, I think he'll go down in history, he'll have a good reputation.

PS: How about George Bush?

JR: George won election because his opponent really was not very capable of putting himself across to the country. And he lost another one because he wasn't very capable of putting himself across to the country. I don't have any problems with the things that George Bush did. I think more I have wondered as to why he didn't do some of the things he didn't do. But I would give him a "C" minus, I guess.

PS: We've sort of brought ourselves up to Bill Clinton. I thought your comment a few minutes ago was extremely interesting about similarities you sort of see between Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan in terms of I guess, from what I heard you say, two people very adept at public relations.

JR: Absolutely. And I don't think Reagan thought he was. He thought himself as being a great communicator, and he was. And of course Clinton is a fine speaker too, but I think that Clinton really--as they say, with malice of forethought--plans his moves in order to have the success which he really wants to have. He's an egotist, but I don't know how you can be president of the United States if you're not. So that's not by way of criticism, it's just by way of explanation, of some of the things which he does. I wish him the best. I do feel that he has committed himself to getting the budget in balance, and committed himself to doing what is necessary to preserve Social Security and things like that. I am in hopes that the Republican Congress and the Democratic president will realize that the people elected them in order to do things and not to snipe at each other. And I think I see it happening. I think that Trent Lott, who'll be an entirely different type of leader than Bob Dole was--and I don't say that as anything not praiseworthy of Bob Dole, who's one of my best personal friends. But Trent has a way of doing things and getting things done that I admire. I've known him for a long time. I knew him when he was a Democrat.

PS: In 1994, the Republicans took control of Congress for the first time since you were there--and you'll have to give me the year. Was it 1956?

JR: [It was] 1952. Well, 1953 was when we were sworn in.

PS: From 1994 to 1996 there was a lot of controversy. Speaker of the House Gingrich was involved with a lot of controversy. There was a lot of sniping and real animosity at each other. That seems to have changed a little bit, and I want to sort of tie this in, because it reminds me of a comment you just made--Senator Lott's leadership skills seem to me to be very different than Speaker Gingrich.

JR: Although they're very good friends.

PS: Oh, yes.

JR: And they served in the House together.

PS: Lott doesn't necessarily need the public eye as much as Mr. Gingrich seemed to be at certain times. He works behind the scenes, he meets with President Clinton. There seems to be an ability there to come together on certain things. The Democratic Party and President Clinton certainly has, in terms of some of the Democratic platform, has come closer to issues that have been at the heart and soul of the Republican Party for many years.

JR: Well, he's stolen the issues of the Republicans, again, with malice of forethought. And I think he's very wise to do it. He recognized that the tide was running in that direction, and so he just got on his surf board and rode with the tide.

PS: I'm assuming, Mr. Rhodes, you, I think, would judge that to be very smart politically.

JR: Yes.

PS: And helped reelect him.

JR: No doubt.

PS: Now we find ourselves in a situation where there's....

JR: Actually, what he did was to leave Bob Dole without the issues which any Republican would think he would have. And so Bob had to do some things, or thought he had to do some things which were not like Bob Dole, and not really like the mainstream Republicans. This business of "I'm going to cut your taxes 15% and I'm going to balance the budget," that was just like the old story, "There ain't no way to get to the post office from here." (laughter) I really think that that cost Dole the credibility, which really allowed Clinton to come in, in spite of some of his personal problems, and win that election.

PS: Right now we're looking at a situation that we sort of experience daily on the news, whether it's the television or the radio--there seems to be one scandal after another emerging, and one day

it's something relating to the president and the campaign, the next day it may be something relating to some aspect of the Republican campaign. Are we going to be able to move past this?

JR: Oh, I hope so.

PS: And how much of this is motivated by partisanship now, and how, Mr. Rhodes, would you advise people if you were asked, how do we move beyond this to.... In other words, to the Democrats, to the Republicans, to Trent Lott, to President Clinton working together for a balanced budget in the next year. To get a balanced budget, how can we move in that direction when people are continuing to snipe at each other on every little issue, it seems like.

JR: Well, some issues are not little--like the campaign contributions from foreign nations and things like that. I think if I were President Clinton, I would just make a bald statement, "This was ridiculous. It shouldn't have been done. If I had known it was being done, I would have stopped it." He might have a little problem with that, but anyway.... And just to say, "It isn't gonna happen again on my watch." That would have a lot to do. And then go to the Republicans and say, "Now, let's get this behind us. I've said this. Now what else do you want me to do?" And go with that, because I think it's up to him to clear the air and to take away the desire of the Republicans. And it's very natural to make political hay out of some of these mistakes that people have made in his name. I don't know of any other way.

PS: I think at this point I'm going to shut the tape off for a sec. (tape turned off and on) I think we're running again now okay, after our technological problem is solved. When we left off, Mr. Rhodes, and while were taking a break there, in the late 1960s, Mo made a very startling challenge by running against John McCormack, then speaker of the House. Can we have some of your thoughts and memories about Mo's challenge of Speaker McCormack? I realize that the Democrats controlled Congress and you were sort of, I suspect, an interested bystander to some degree.

JR: That's correct. Of course, the Speaker of the House is elected by the caucus or a conference of the majority party. In other words, the House actually elects the speaker. The Democrats vote for the Democratic candidate, and the Republicans vote for the Republican candidate. The one who loses becomes the minority leader, and the other one becomes the Speaker of the House. John McCormack had been the Speaker for quite some time, and even those of us on the Republican side realized that there was a pretty good-sized segment of younger Democrats who were not pleased with John McCormack, and probably wanted to replace him. And the person who finally decided that he would take the plunge and try to replace John McCormack was Mo Udall. I don't really know how many votes he got, but he lost overwhelmingly. The sequel to that story is interesting because some years later, of course, Mo was cranked up to run for the presidency. And his hardest hard-core support really was in those same liberal Democrats on the House side who had been those who importuned him and supported him when he made his obviously ill-fated run against John McCormack. I don't think Mo ever intended to win. I think he was looking ahead and realized that there was a segment of potentially powerful people who felt as he did about the issues, and that by doing this, he would become the leader of the group--and he was. It was a very interesting decision which he made.

PS: When that election took place for the speaker, when Mo made that challenge, everything was done strictly along party lines?

JR: Oh, yes, completely.

PS: So you could not have voted for Mo if you wanted to--or could you have?

JR: Oh, yes, I could have, but it would have been unthinkable. I would have been castigated and exiled and all those terrible things, by my party, had I done that.

PS: So basically when those kind of votes took place, it was strictly along party lines?

JR: Absolutely straight party.

PS: And the recent situation--not a parallel--but the recent situation with the problems Speaker Gingrich had with his close reelection because of some of his, I guess, for lack of a better word, tax problems. Again, is it still the same? Is this pretty much a partisan party vote?

JR: Oh, yes. The consequences of anybody who broke the line on that vote would be unthinkable. He would be forever out.

PS: That's not one where you exercise your independence.

JR: No indeed. What you do is exercise your independence in your own conference or your own caucus. Of course, that's where Mo lost, in the Democratic caucus, because when the actual election for Speaker took place on the floor of the House, the Democratic Caucus had nominated McCormack, and all the Democrats, including Mo Udall, voted for him--they had to.

PS: Did Mo talk to you at all about running?

JR: No.

PS: Even informally?

JR: No.

PS: He didn't talk with you about that at all?

JR: No. No, you don't do that. As good friends as we are, he's a Democrat, I'm a Republican, and there are times when we have to understand that. We never did campaign against each other, except one year, just before Mo was running for president, he told me, "John, I've gotta tell you something. I am going to make an appearance with your opponent. I think you know why, and I'm sure you understand." I said, "Mo, I know why, and I understand. Just to show you that I have no hard feelings, I'm going to make an appearance [with] your opponent!" And we did! So

anyhow, that didn't bother us.

PS: That reminded me of another anecdote you had earlier in your book, about being political opponents but also close friends. Wasn't there a similar situation with yourself and Senator Hayden was asked one time about who he was going to....

JR: Yes.

PS: I don't know if this was your second election or your third election....

JR: I think it was probably my third.

PS: Can you tell me that story?

JR: Well, he always went by train, and when he went back to Washington for a session, he didn't come home until the end of the session. And when he came home before that next election, he was met at the depot by people from the press. "Senator, there's an election for governor. Who do you support?" "Well, I'm a Democrat, I'm gonna support the Democratic candidate." "Well, what about the election in District 1?" He sort of walked away, "I don't have a comment about that."

PS: So that was as close to an endorsement.... (laughs)

JR: It absolutely was.

PS: After Mo lost the race for Speaker, about a year-and-a-half later, late 1970, early 1971, he tried again to run for majority leader, and I believe it was against Congressman Hale Boggs.

JR: Yes.

PS: My recollection--I'm interested in your thoughts on this--my recollection is that Mo thought he had a real chance to win that one. It was much more subtle than when he challenged Speaker McCormack. Do you recall?

JR: I don't recall, but I think that's true. It was a wide open seat. I think by that time Carl Albert had become speaker--John McCormack had retired and Carl had become speaker. On the Democratic side, it's a ladder. You just go up, up, up and that's it. We Republicans are rambunctious. We break in every now and then. In fact, when I was elected minority leader, I was elected over the whip, who had been a whip for twenty years, a good ol' boy, good friend and all that, but I'm the one who got elected. But Democrats don't do that.

PS: Mr. Rhodes, we talked earlier about some of your abilities to bring people together. I sort of wanted to talk a little bit about something I hadn't thought of before when we were talking earlier, so we'll go back in time a little bit. You chaired several Republican national conventions.

JR: That's correct.

PS: Were you the chair of the 1964 convention, when Goldwater was nominated?

JR: No.

PS: What years did you chair?

JR: I was the chair in 1976 and 1980.

PS: Difficult job?

JR: Seventy-six was a mess--just a mess, because that was the one where Ford finally was nominated over Reagan. The Arizona delegation was almost solidly for Reagan, and Ford was one of my close friends and I was solidly for Ford. I had some problems along those lines, but I guess they finally forgave me.

PS: That's a difficult job, though, chairing the convention.

JR: It can be.

PS: It can be.

JR: This one was, because the Reagan people were doing everything they could to make Ford look bad. I remember especially when the platform was up, they had lost their positions in the platform committee, so they were opposing the platform and offering amendments and so on and so forth. The hour got later. We were supposed to have had speakers who were pretty good speakers, but we lost prime time, in fact we just kept going and going. Finally it was one o'clock in the morning. I was told that the North Carolina delegation was going to offer an amendment which was the same amendment which was in a snide sort of way saying that Ford's foreign policy was not successful, and they were going to do it before adjournment, and going to recall a roll call vote on it. So I said, "Well, this is really stupid." So Jay Rhodes, my son, was my aide, and I said, "You go down and see if you can find Jesse Helms." Jesse was in the national committee with North Carolina, and I had known him from the Goldwater years, again. And so he brought Jesse up and I said, "Jesse, I understand that your chairman is going to offer this amendment and demand a roll call vote. Jesse, we're lookin' bad enough as it is, but if we have a roll call vote, we're going to have to send out the sergeant-at-arms to get people out of bed and get 'em to come back. We don't have a quorum here, there's no way. We can't adjourn without a quorum, if the point of order is made. I hope you can talk him out of this." He said, "John, how good is your eyesight?" "Jesse, I guess it's fairly good." He said, "Can you see a hundred yards pretty well?" I said, "Yes." He said, "What about 150?" I said, "Well, it's not all that good." He said, "I think that this podium is about 150 yards from that North Carolina delegation." So I said, "I think I understand you, Mr. Helms." So sure enough, when we finished debating on the amendment that was then on the floor, I called for the vote, "the ayes have it. Without objection,

the platfOrme is adopted and the motion reconsidered is laid on the table and without objection this session is adjourned." And they tell me--well, I knew it, the chairman of the North Carolina delegation was back there screamin' his [lungs] out and wavin' his banner and all that sort of stuff. Then I was asked, "Why didn't you recognize him?" I said, "I really didn't see him." (laughter) So Jesse Helms told me later, "John, in some parts of North Carolina, you're still known as 'Blind John.'" (laughter)

PS: That's a wonderful story! I sort of wanted to finish up, Mr. Rhodes, in the sixties, when you and Mo were in Congress, Mo had a reputation and had written a great deal about political reform--reform of some of the old rules in the House and stuff. There were changes that occurred in the sixties and into the early seventies that made things more open. I'm just curious about your thoughts about political reform back then, and some of the political reform that has been proposed today--such things as term limits. Any thoughts on some of the changes that occurred back then?

JR: Not really, except that the changes I think you have in mind were in the way the Democrats pick the delegates for a convention. That, frankly, is the reason McGovern was nominated and the Democrats lost the election. They just out-reformed their own party.

PS: But within the House itself, were there some important changes that came out of the sixties?

JR: No.

PS: Nothing changed that much then?

JR: No, not really, about the same.

PS: And what about the calls today for such things as term limits? What are your thoughts on term limits?

JR: I think that's the stupidest thing I ever heard of--particularly if you're from a small state. You could imagine what would have happened to the Central Arizona Project if we had had term limits and Carl Hayden hadn't been there, I hadn't been there. We never would have made it. And also, after all, the founding fathers gave us the mechanism for kicking people out every two years--just don't [re]elect 'em! And what people, with the term limits, and also the constitutional amendment to balance the budget, they're two gimmicks. They're using the Constitution to do something that they should have had the guts to do under the present situation--and they could have. They could and they should. So you just hit a nerve--I don't like either one of 'em, and I don't like the idea of using the Constitution for a weapon.

PS: And yet term limits have been an issue that has been brought up by members, some of the more conservative members of the Republican Party. Do you think it's just something that as an issue will fade away? Because there have been some state legislatures....

JR: I hope so, because it's a phony issue. They think it's a gimmick. They think, "Oh, boy, the

people will really like this," and unfortunately, they did! A lot of 'em did. I'm just not that kind of a politician. I don't like trying to do things by indirection that you can't do by directly.

PS: I think that's a good point to stop. We'll end then with our discussion of term limits.

JR: (laughs) Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]