

An Oral History Interview

with

**MARK TRAUTWEIN (part 6)**

San Anselmo, California

*conducted by*  
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MT: (in mid-sentence) ... working for Congress. They think about, you know, oh, power and politics and money and who's doing what to whom--and there's a great deal of that. There's no question. It's going on there. But it's also a very human drama. I mean, these are real people leading real lives--they just happen to be there. They just happen to be in the national legislature. And as we know, your office is a national monument. You're doing the people's business; you're operating on what I think is the greatest stage of human theater we have in this country. And there's all these people. To see Mo in that setting.... It's one thing to be a great guy, to be a man of dignity and humor and grace and accomplishment and intellect the way Mo was, in other arenas. It's still a great accomplishment--I don't diminish it in any way--but to do that in that shark tank, and to do it so consistently, to do it without fail, day in, day out, year after year, for thirty years! Well, I don't think anybody failed to learn a lesson from that. You'd have to be without a pulse not to learn from that. It made us all better people. When I saw the way Mo dealt with Parkinson's, it couldn't help but say something to me about the way I dealt with my own health. So, you know, I mean, there's a lot of learning and a lot of teaching going on all the time in a place like that on a very human level. Mo was one of the great teachers in that sense. I've been very touched, for example, by some of the things I've read John McCain write and say about the kinds of things that Mo taught him about just decency, just simple decency to people. It's very touching. And to remember that.... I get a little mad sometimes when people talk about Mo and all there is, is this sort of "decent man" kind of thing, and they forget that he was also a man of great principle and great fire and great passion, with a desire to accomplish and achieve things. And he did those things. He wasn't just some mooshy, nice.... He wasn't Will Rogers, just sort of yuckin' it up with people. He was making people do things, good things, that they otherwise did not want to do, and would not have done. They did it because he was there, and he wanted them done.

JF: I have . . . actually my final question. We've talked a lot about Mo's strengths. What do you think his weaknesses were?

MT: Oh.... Someone once told me a long time ago--and I've found this to be a great truth--that most people's vices are the excess of their virtues. You could say that about Mo. The same kind of sort of quiet strength that got him through so much also made him kind of a denier of a lot of reality--a denier of pain, when you shouldn't deny it. He was certainly in a lot of denial about his health, no question about that. I don't know if I would call this a weakness, but I found it sad about Mo, and I sort of consider this to be--sometimes I call it "great liberal's disease"--that a lot of great liberals are really wonderful at doing good for people in a general sense, but have a great deal of difficulty relating to individuals on a really direct, human level. That was true, in my case. I think I said earlier that in twelve years that I worked for Mo, he never once asked me a single personal question about my life, of any kind. He had no interest whatsoever in Mark Trautwein as a human being. And I think that the result of that--not me, personally--there's no reason why he should have been a great friend of mine--I think Mo, as a human being, was a fairly isolated and lonely man, which is ironic when you think about it. He was so beloved by so many people, yet really had very few people that were really close to him on an elemental human level.

JF: Who was close to him on that level?

MT: Ella certainly. People like Ed Coyle. Some of Ella's female friends. I'm not really sure. I didn't go over to Mo's house for dinner. The closest I ever got to dinner at Mo's house was (JF: The block of cheese?) the block of cheese with a knife [on] his chest. When Mo was bored, during recesses and stuff, he always wanted to have people to go to lunch with and stuff. So you'd go to lunch. You might sort of chit-chat about stuff--personal stuff a little bit--but you'd kind of talk business and stuff over lunch with Mo, which was always an experience. I think that Mo got so totally invested in his persona, in the public man, that there just wasn't a lot left--a lot of room left for Mo the private man. I could speculate about all kinds of reasons for that. I think he was a genuinely shy man, and I think he grew up feeling like kind of an awkward, geeky kind of guy. It's true of most human beings, you sort of have trouble--and most people never do grow out of the kind of self-image you have of yourself as a child, as a teenager. You kind of always had the impression that in some sense he was always overcoming that. That was part of what all the humor was--it was a way of making people love you, and a way of disarming them. How could you not love this?! It was wonderful. He loved to entertain people. You could see, there was an entertainer at work here, as well as.... As I said before, he used humor most definitely as a weapon--defensive as well as offensive weapon.

You could get mad at Mo sometimes for not "sticking it to" people sometimes when they deserved to have it stuck to them. You know, sometimes you felt like he was allowing himself to be taken advantage of. But its also true that in the final analysis, for everything he lost by being that way, he gained ten times over, because of the credit he got for that kind of thing.

As a boss, his weaknesses were.... I couldn't have imagined a better boss. Oh, sometimes you wished he'd been a little more involved in the detail. You wished that when you're in that meeting with all the other members and some member starts spouting off bad information about Eagle Tail Mountains or something like that, that Mo could say, "Now, now, Joe, that mining claim was extinguished in 1963. That doesn't matter anymore." Mo couldn't do that. But this is small potatoes. (chuckles) This is totally small potatoes.

You know, the hardest thing about working for him was his health, without question. It's one of the sad ironies, and one of sort of endless speculation about "what if?" What if he hadn't had that bull's eye painted on him? What more could he have accomplished? Certainly he has nothing to apologize for in terms of what he did accomplish. He has an absolutely, a career record that any politician would die for, and few will equal. But you're left with this gnawing sense of.... Well, the politician that dies too young, the Kennedy that gets assassinated, the Bobby Kennedy that gets assassinated. (sigh) They got taken off the stage before their time.

JF: Well, I am done with questions. Shall we end it here?

MT: Let's do it.

JF: All right. Thank you very much, Mark.

MT: My pleasure. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW] [13:07]