

An Oral History Interview

with

PRESIDENT GERALD R. FORD

Rancho Mirage, California

conducted by

Julie Ferdon

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The Morris K. Udall Oral History Project
University of Arizona Library, Special Collections

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JF: This is Tape number one of the Morris K. Udall Oral History Project. Good afternoon, it's Thursday, March 25, 1999, and I'm at the home of former President Gerald Ford in Rancho Mirage, California. My name is Julie Ferdon, and I would like to thank President Ford for participating.

All right, we're about to begin here. Thank you, Mr. President, for this opportunity to interview you. You were first elected in 1948 from Michigan. Was there any kind of orientation for freshman congressmen at that time?

GF: None whatsoever. You were sworn in, early in January of 1949, and after Sam Rayburn administered the oath, as Speaker, you had to fend for yourself. There were no preorganized orientation periods, period.

JF: So you sort of learned by hard knocks?

GF: Well, I learned primarily because the Michigan Republican delegation was very strong. It had five committee chairmen in the previous 80th Congress. They had been there a long time, they knew the ropes, and they took me under their wing--particularly a congressman from Ann Arbor, Michigan, Earl Mischner. He sort of was my mentor, and I was very grateful. But we had no planned orientation instruction group in 1949.

JF: Okay. I say it partly in the context of one of the things Mo did when he got to Congress was write *The Job of the Congressman*, and start the freshman seminars.

By 1949, you were fortunate enough, a year after being elected, to get on the Appropriations Committee. And then by 1956, as I understand it, you had a fairly safe seat. And from your autobiography, my impression is that you were at that time sort of looking forward to possibly being Speaker.

GF: My whole political ambition--particularly after I was sworn in as a House member, was to be Speaker of the House. I was lucky to get on the Committee on Appropriations in the last week or two of my first term. So I had great training in the whole House of Representatives activities, and it just stimulated my ambition to be Speaker.

JF: By 1960, John F. Kennedy had defeated Richard Nixon. And the following year several things happened: First, John McCormack replaced Sam Rayburn as Speaker. What were your impressions of John McCormack, both the man and the Speaker?

GF: Well, John McCormack and I had become reasonably good friends shortly after I was sworn in my first or second term. I admired John McCormack as the Democrat majority leader under Sam Rayburn. He was a very combative Democratic floor leader. I admired his ability as a debater. I liked him as a person. He was a typical liberal Democrat, and of course that was a period when that element in the House was dominant.

JF: The same year, 1961, Kennedy appointed Stewart Udall as secretary of interior. He served

in the House with you. What were your impressions of him in Congress? Did you know him at all?

GF: I barely knew him. I had no overlapping committee situations. He was a bit younger than I. I just never developed a close or warm friendship. I liked him, but I didn't know him.

JF: Morris King Udall replaced his brother in Congress in a special election in 1961. Do you recall when you first met him, or your first impressions of him?

GF: I don't remember precisely when I first met Mo. It must have been during his first term. And because we had somewhat similar athletic backgrounds, I probably got to know him more quickly than I would other freshmen. He was an attractive, effective person, even as a freshman, so I naturally noticed him. Someone like that, you made an effort to get acquainted with.

JF: I hadn't really thought of the sports connection, but of course, you were probably rare in both being professional players then, for the most part.

GF: Well, he was a professional basketball player, I was a Michigan football player that played in several all-star games. And I think the fact that we had had these two athletic sports drew us together more quickly than otherwise.

JF: In 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon Johnson became president. In 1965, after Johnson fairly soundly defeated Barry Goldwater, a number of younger Republican members approached you to see if you were interested in running for minority leader. Was it a reflection of the seniority system at that point in time, that after seventeen years in Congress you were considered a young leader?

GF: I started in Congress at the age of thirty-five, so I was, seventeen years later, relatively young compared to many of the members of the House. I was chosen by the younger Republicans in January of 1965 to challenge the Republican leader Charles Hallick of Indiana, who was much older, and had been in the Congress, I would say, twenty-five or more years. We had a vigorous competition, and I, in early January, defeated him in the Republican caucus by a vote of 73 to 67, so it wasn't overwhelming, it wasn't a landslide victory, but I did become the Republican leader, and I was chosen four other times thereafter.

JF: What did you think then, after you'd been in Congress seventeen years and had attained leadership in a seniority system that was very rigid at that time, when in 1967 Morris Udall decided to take on the seniority system, having been in Congress only six years at that time, by spearheading an effort to strip Adam Clayton Powell from his committee chairmanship? Was that unprecedented then? Was that a surprise?

GF: It certainly was not usual--to a degree, unprecedented. It was, however, the beginning of the erosion of the strict, arbitrary seniority system.

JF: The beginning of it.

GF: Very outset.

JF: It sounds like perhaps your election was also part of the beginning of it on the Republican side.

GF: On the Republican side, that was exactly true, back in January of 1965. Although, four years earlier, the Republicans had thrown out Joe Martin and elected Charlie Hallick, so I would suggest that maybe the Hallick-Martin fight was the beginning, and the Ford-Hallick fight was another step in the same direction.

JF: I was about to jump forward, but I won't quite yet. In 1968, you were asked by Richard Nixon to run as his vice-President. As I understand, you declined because you had still hoped to be Speaker, and it looked like the election might get you there.

GF: It's a bit of an exaggeration to say that Nixon "asked" me to be his running mate. I was one of three or four. John Lodge actually became his running mate. No, I'm sorry. Lodge was his running mate in 1960. (JF: That's right.) And Agnew was his running mate in 1968. I was one of two or three in 1968, along with Agnew, who was considered by Nixon as his running mate.

JF: Okay. You declined, still hoping to be Speaker and hoping the Republicans were going to take over the House. In fact, they didn't that year. In the same year, 1968, the younger Democratic congressmen were, just like the younger Republican congressmen earlier, looking for younger leaders. Mo Udall again stepped into the fray here and ran for Speaker of the House against John McCormack. Especially given your interest in being Speaker, and having been there considerably longer, what was your response to that?

GF: Of course I had no vote. (laughter) As a Republican I was not voting in the Democratic caucus, but I was an interested observer, because I had worked with John McCormack when I was the Republican leader and he was the Democratic leader. On the other hand, there was always the possibility that Mo Udall would, with the help of all the younger Democrats, upset the apple cart and beat McCormack. But the McCormack loyalists were too strong, and there wasn't the same atmosphere in the Democratic caucus that there was or had been in the Republican.

JF: Did you think it was a pretty audacious move of his?

GF: I thought he was showing a lot of courage, to challenge the leadership, when I didn't think the atmosphere was right for a turnover.

JF: In 1969, Mo ran unsuccessfully against Hale Boggs for majority leader, lost again. Did you have any thoughts about that race?

GF: I thought, of course, his chances against Hale Boggs would be better than his previous challenge to John McCormack. But again, with Hale Boggs winning, it was an indication that

there wasn't as much turmoil in the Democratic caucus as had existed back when I won my first contest against Charlie Hallick.

JF: Had your feelings about Mo Udall changed at all by this time?

GF: Yes, I had observed him in floor debate, I had observed him in other activities in the Congress, and over the years I had grown more and more impressed with him as an excellent legislator, and as a fine Member of the Congress as a whole.

JF: He never did attain a leadership position. How do you think he would have been as majority leader or Speaker?

GF: That's pure speculation. But if he had become a leader, I think, for the Democrats he would have been very formidable.

JF: In 1973 you were sworn in as vice president when Agnew was forced to leave, basically. In 1974, Mo Udall announced that he was going to be a candidate for the Democratic nomination for president. Did you ever feel like you were being followed by him? (laughter) Speaker, majority leader, and now president.

GF: I never thought of it in that context, but I couldn't help but observe that Mo was always challenging the establishment, and was always faced with an uphill battle. But of course in 1976, when I think he ran again, he was no more of an outsider than Jimmy Carter. By that time, there was a feeling in the Democratic party that they wanted a fresh face. So Jimmy Carter won, but Mo Udall would have been another relatively fresh face on the national scene.

JF: What were your thoughts at the time regarding a fellow Member of Congress--of course you weren't in Congress at that time--but running for president. That was fairly unprecedented at that time.

GF: It was not precedent for a House member to run for the Democratic nomination. History says there are many senators--Democrats as well as Republicans--who ran for President. But I don't recall any Democrat and/or Republican in recent years, other than Mo, who ran for the nomination for president. My memory could be wrong, but if there was one or two, their names don't come to mind.

JF: I think that's one of the reasons Mo decided to start the campaign two years early, because when he announced, I believe it was the earliest announcement ever, two years before the election. How did you feel about the prospect of Mo running against you for president?

GF: I would have enjoyed campaigning against Mo. I'm sure he would have enjoyed campaigning against me. It would have been a good, lively, aggressive campaign, but there wouldn't have been some of the bitterness, and I think lack of civility we see today.

JF: It would have been a campaign [between] two gentlemen.

GF: Well, we thought we were.

JF: Again, this is pure speculation, but what kind of President do you think Mo would have made?

GF: In speculation, Mo would have been, I think, a good president. He was certainly knowledgeable because of his experience in the House. He was an effective Speaker. He was, as far as I know, a person of high character and integrity. So Mo would have been a good president, if he had ever achieved that position.

JF: What did you think of Jimmy Carter when he got the nomination? He kind of came out of the blue for everybody a little bit, and I know the Democrats were a little flustered with him in some ways. What was your impression, looking at him as a candidate against you?

GF: Well, he certainly was not the one I expected would get the nomination. There was Senator Scoop Jackson, Mo Udall, others whose names slip me now. Jimmy Carter was certainly an outsider, as a governor of the State of Georgia. But he won the Iowa Primary, I think, and also the New Hampshire Primary, and those two victories really got the Jimmy Carter bandwagon rolling.

JF: When Mo obviously did not--and I think he lost twenty-two primaries or something--and returned to Congress in 1974.... Well, actually before that. I'm backing up a little bit before the 1976 race. In 1974 he worked very actively for campaign finance reform. And in that year you signed the amendments to the Campaign Finance Reform Act. Were you an active supporter of that bill?

GF: I certainly was. The old law that we had lived under for many years was totally inadequate. We needed a new fund-raising law. I was very active because I wanted legislation to authorize business PACs to run alongside of labor PACs. Under the old law, labor political action committees could exist, but not business political action committees. The 1974 law included a very important provision that equalized labor and management in the fund-raising field.

JF: Do you think that that bill has had a profound effect on things since, on elections since?

GF: Very much so, although all parties--labor, management, and independents--have found ways to raise significant amounts of money through what they call "soft" money. That particular provision was not thought of as an important one. Today, it's the source of most of the money that goes to the Democrat and Republican national committees and state committees. So some of the reform we thought we achieved in 1974 has been undercut by some new interpretations of that law. So today I think we have a bigger need than ever to get some fund-raising legislation that will tighten the fund-raising process.

JF: Need to get back to the drawing board on it more or less. Another piece of legislation very close to Mo's heart was his Strip Mining Control and Reclamation Act. As President, I believe

you vetoed that bill twice. Why? What was your concern regarding it?

GF: Well, that's twenty-five or more years ago, so my recollection in detail is not good. My general impression in 1999 is that the way the bill was drafted, it would penalize the development of some of our natural resources. I thought the legislation went too far, too fast. That's a general statement. I think if you go back and read my veto message, that'll be the theme that I use to justify the vetoes. Eventually, they corrected it, or changed it, so that it actually became law.

JF: There were economic concerns, as I recall, with it.

GF: That's correct.

JF: Another Udall bill--and this, again, you may not remember the details--is the National Land Use Policy Act, which I believe you also vetoed.

GF: I don't recall that one nearly as well as the previous one, so I can't give you offhand any detail as to why I vetoed it. You'd have to go back and read my veto message.

JF: Okay, we'll make sure there's a copy of that in the archives.

GF: That would be helpful.

JF: Did you stay in touch with Mo after you left Washington?

GF: After I left Washington? Not necessarily. Whenever I went back to Washington and went up to the House chamber, I would run into him, and it was always nice to renew our friendship.

JF: As you know, Mo died this last year in December 1998. What do you think his legacy will be?

GF: I was saddened to learn that he had been quite ill for some time previous to his passing. That lingering illness is never a pleasant time in one's life, so I felt badly about his passing, but I regretted that he had had this lingering illness previously. When I got word that Mo had passed away, yes, I recalled in my mind some of our good times together as adversaries. Some of our more relaxed times, both he and I played on our Democrat and Republican baseball teams--and he was a good athlete, and I played some. I recalled that relationship. We on occasion went to social gatherings with our wives, so when Mo passed away, I had some good recollections. He was a fine legislator, he was a highly-thought-of member of the House. He certainly had high moral and other standards of integrity, so the country lost a good man when Mo passed away.

JF: I have one last question....

GF: Let me ask, how old was Mo when he passed away?

JF: He was seventy-six.

GF: Young!

JF: Yes. And he was in the nursing home since 1991, unable to speak, for the most part.

GF: Yes. Your question?

JF: This is a question I ask everyone. We go over a lot of Mo's strengths. What do you think his greatest weakness was?

GF: As I look back over his career in the House, Mo was almost too idealistic. He didn't understand the hard-nosed, nitty-gritty of politics. He had great vision, great ambition to achieve fine goals, but he never really understood the day-to-day, hard-nosed practicality of how you got so you could do something about it. He was obviously well-thought-of in his district in Arizona, and his reelection was certainly justified. But that's different from getting to achieve something at the House level or the Senate level or at the national level. He was just too darned idealistic. Nothing wrong with that, but sometimes you do a little too much of that, and you never get a chance to really achieve those goals.

JF: Well, that's all I have.

GF: Well, it's nice talking to you.

JF: Thank you very much, again.

GF: Is this library connected with the University of Arizona?

JF: Yes, it is. This will go into the Archives of the University of Arizona where Mo's congressional papers are stored.

GF: Well, mine are all stored at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor. We split up my library and museum. My library is in Ann Arbor, on the Michigan campus. My museum is in Grand Rapids where both Mrs. Ford and I grew up.

JF: So it's split. Do you have an oral history program?

GF: Oh, yes. People are out in the field. I think we have three or four of the archivists who are doing what you're doing.

JF: Excellent. I'm glad to hear it. I think it's a very important thing.

GF: Well, they've convinced me that it's an important adjunct to the papers, *et cetera*.

JF: I think it is. I think it adds a little perspective to it (GF: Right.), and some humanness to it.

GF: Is Stewart Udall living?

JF: Yes, he's living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and he's been involved in a number of Native American claims sorts of things and things like that, and writing and lecturing.

GF: Well, he was younger than Mo, wasn't he?

JF: Older. He's the older brother. He never got back into elected politics after he left as secretary of interior.

GF: I didn't know him nearly as well as I knew Mo.

JF: Yes. Well, he wasn't in Congress very long, actually.

GF: No. Well, good luck.

JF: Thank you very much for your time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]