

An Oral History Interview

with

RICHARD OLSON (part 4)

conducted by
Julie Ferdon

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Richard C. Olson

Dick Olson was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 13, 1922. He attended the University of North Dakota and the North Dakota Agricultural College before enlisting in the U.S. Naval Reserve in 1942. After being discharged in 1946, he returned to North Dakota and worked for the *Fargo Forum*.

In 1948 Dick moved to Tucson to attend the University of Arizona. After receiving his degree in 1950, he began working for the *Tucson Citizen* as a reporter and eventually editor. He left the *Citizen* in 1955 to begin a public relations business and to work part-time for then Congressman Stewart Udall. When Stewart Udall became Secretary of the Interior in 1961, Dick moved to Washington, D.C. to become legislative Assistant, and eventually Executive Assistant for Congressman Morris K. Udall, who had replaced his brother in a special election.

Dick left Udall's employment in 1971 to become editor of *Living Wilderness* and Director of Information for the Wilderness Society. He returned to Congress in 1976 to serve as Special Assistant to House Majority Leader Jim Wright. In 1982 he left Capital Hill to work for DynCorp as Director of Corporate Government Relations and, eventually, Vice President for Public Affairs.

JF: Okay, we're back. At some point--I honestly don't know the date--Mo was one of the few public officials who received a letter--or a copy of a letter--from the soldier who witnessed the My Lai incident.

RO: Ron Ridenhour.

JF: Thank you, I couldn't think of the name right off the top of my head. Do you recall when that was, and what Mo did when he got that letter?

RO: I can't recall exactly when that was, but I remember the letter very well. Roger opened that piece of mail, and read it over. It was the sort of thing that Roger would normally handle, it was kind of a case: somebody was asking for an investigation. Roger took it to me and said, "Dick, I wonder if you'd take this home with you tonight and read it, and tell me tomorrow what you think we ought to do with it." So I did that, and I was absolutely convinced that something terrible had happened. Ridenhour I think ultimately became a newspaperman or something, so he did have some writing ability. He wrote the letter in a way that was quite persuasive, because he said he'd been in this Company "C," he was transferred out, but sometime later he ran into one of his friends in Saigon who told him about this incident, which he described as taking place at Pinkville. Sometime later, he ran into another friend from Company "C," who told him a similar story. And then perhaps a third one corroborated what he had been told by these others. He had then been discharged from the Army and had returned to the States, and was living in California, as I recall. But he was so disturbed by what he had been told, that he felt somebody ought to look into it. Incidentally, he referred to the villainous character in this as a Lieutenant Calley, C-A-L-L-E-Y--or no! Kally. He had the spelling wrong. And so I told Roger, "We absolutely have got to insist upon an investigation. There's no question in my mind, this warrants an investigation." So he drafted a letter for Mo. That's the point at which Mo saw it.

We did two things: We wrote to the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, asking that he also request an investigation, and we wrote directly to [General Robert] Macnamara. And then I think Mendal Rivers, who was then the chairman of the Armed Services Committee also formally requested an investigation. So that's how it came about. A General Peers ended up being in charge of the investigation. Once or twice he came by to see Mo. At this point, Roger and I were out of it. We were not in the inner circle, so we were never told what was going on. Mo was, but Mo couldn't tell us.

Several months went by, and I became very nervous about it, that this whole thing was just going to be covered up, swept under a rug. So one day, Ben Cole was in the office. Ben was a reporter for the Pulliam papers in Phoenix and Indianapolis. I said, "Ben, I can't be your source for this, I can't give you this story, but I wish you'd just look at the file, basically read the Ridenhour letter, and see if you want to work on this." He brought it back, he said, "Yeah, that really sounds serious. But I don't have time to do anything like this." Sometime later, Seymour Hirsch saw a little paragraph saying that a Lieutenant Calley had been charged with something. It was just a minor little item--you know, appeared back next to the legals or something in the newspaper--just an

insignificant little item. It aroused his curiosity, and he began looking into it, and ultimately got a Pulitzer Prize for the story that he wrote. Later, I spoke to Ben. I said, "Ben, do you realize you could have had that Pulitzer Prize?" He said, "Yeah, I know." (laughter)

JF: Now, how many congressional representatives received a copy of that letter? And how many ever did anything about it? Do you have any idea?

RO: I don't know about anybody else. I know about the Armed Services Committee, I know about Mo--that's all I know. I think there were others. As I recall, he sent that letter to like ten or twenty Members, and it could be that some others did do something with it. A couple of years ago, several years ago, a book, a novel, appeared, with that as one of the subjects, the My Lai episode. I forget the novel, but it was about an officer from Minnesota who was part of Company "C." So the author of that book was on a local radio show here called "The Diane Reams Show." I was listening to it, and I called in to see if I could speak with him. I said, "You obviously have done a lot of research on the My Lai episode. Does the name Mo Udall mean anything to you?" He said, "It certainly does!" (laughs) So he definitely saw Mo as the man who triggered that investigation.

JF: Completely off of Vietnam, though the same year that Mo delivered that speech, 1967, Mo spearheaded efforts to strip Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell of the chairmanship of the House Education and Labor Committee. (RO: Yes.) That was a pretty unprecedented move. What prompted Mo to get involved in that?

RO: Well.... (sigh) It was pretty clear to him that Powell--there was so much embarrassment over these indiscretions that Powell had committed, and widely publicized. There was so much reaction to that, that the House was likely to prevent him from swearing in, to reject him. And so for that reason, he felt that he had to do something. (tape paused) In answer to that question, I'd like to read to you from a letter that I wrote to a political scientist at the University of Utah back in 1969. I just happened to come across this. I was asked for examples of Mo's courage, and I said (reading from letter):

This quality was never more evident, in my judgement, than on the day before the Ninetieth Congress convened in January 1967. Along with most of his colleagues, and I think most Americans, Mr. Udall had known for many months that some punitive action had to be taken against Representative Adam Clayton Powell if the Congress of the United States was going to retain any honor and any public confidence. Not only had Powell misused public funds, and his authority as chairman of the Committee on Education and Labor, but he had asserted repeatedly that this was his right. Allowing this shocking behavior to continue and to go unpunished would be an open invitation to rob the public treasury at will.

Yet as the days of congressional organization approached,

Congressman Udall was shocked to discover that the House leadership had made no plans to do anything about Powell. Business was expected to proceed as usual. The House establishment, dedicated to the principle that seniority, and seniority alone, shall determine who is to hold power in the Democratic Party and the House of Representatives, evidently thought that the air ultimately would clear and that Mr. Powell's misbehavior could be dealt with in a quiet talk sometime. He was to retain his chairmanship and all his prerogatives.

Taking note of this lack of concern on the part of the leadership, Congressman Udall had a long session with his conscience. It was his strong conviction not only that Powell had to be stripped of his misused power, but that without such action, Powell could not possibly retain his seat in Congress and represent the 500,000 people who elected him. After a sleepless night, Mr. Udall made his decision. He would move in caucus to strip Powell of his chairmanship and seniority. He would move on the House floor to seat him. When word of this plan got to Speaker McCormack, he was shaken by this attack on the workings of the seniority system. In caucus he argued against the action, but Congressman Udall's arguments prevailed and Powell lost his chairmanship.

From our district in Arizona came angry telegrams, especially to those most sensitive to the civil rights implications of a move against the most prominent Negro in the House. Even a month later, when I visited Tucson, I received an icy reception from an old political ally, a Negro member of the Arizona Legislature, who had been offended by Mr. Udall's actions. At the same time, our office received many telegrams from anti-Negro types who were delighted to see Powell reprimanded in this way. But when Mr. Udall then moved to seat Powell, many of these same people wired again withdrawing their previous approval. This was one of those situations in which it was hard to find anyone who fully agreed with what had been done. A distinction between Powell as misuser of the powers of committee chairmen, and Powell as the legally-elected representative of 500,000 Americans living in Harlem, was one that most people missed. Later, when Powell was reelected, having been refused his seat in spite of Mr. Udall's efforts, the Arizona congressman led an effort to have him seated, but this, too, failed. Not even his colleagues in the House could understand, or publicly acknowledge, at any rate, this important distinction.

And then I put in parentheses:

The Constitution provides only three requirements for service in the House: age, citizenship, and residency. The pendulum finally swung the other way in 1969, however. Powell, still stripped of his seniority, was seated, after the people of Harlem had reelected him once more.

JF: That's excellent! That is very good. Pretty much answers the questions I had, too. Didn't Adam Clayton Powell have an office just down from Mo's, like a couple of doors?

RO: Yes, he did.

JF: Had you met him?

RO: Oh, yes.

JF: What were your impressions of him?

RO: Well, a very, very good-looking man--tall, handsome. And could easily pass for white.

JF: Is that right?

RO: Yes, very fair-skinned, very debonair, very much the ladies' man, and very much one who kept to himself in that his office door was always closed and locked. If you wanted to visit Congressman Powell's office, you knocked on the door. (laughs)

JF: Interesting. Well, I think we're going to break at the moment. (tape turned off and on) All right, we're back after a longer break. We had just finished talking about Adam Clayton Powell. That brings us to 1968 or so, which was, again, an election year, and again Mo was reelected, defeating Alfred McGinnis for a second time--this time by a 70% margin, which is a pretty good margin, and pretty big jump from the election before. Why do you think the margin had gone up so much?

RO: CAP.

JF: Oh, really?!

RO: Absolutely. We passed the Central Arizona Project that year. In fact, it came to the House floor the day that that guy (indicating photo) was born, my youngest son. It was a big problem, because I was running a whip system for the CAP. Here my wife was at home, I had to take her to the hospital, and we had a child born that day. So I will always remember when it was that we passed the Central Arizona Project. (laughter)

JF: Always imbedded on your mind.

RO: When Jeff was born. (laughs) But anyway, I always developed the themes for all of our campaigns--Mo always let me do that. So the theme that year was "Mo Udall Gets the Job Done for Arizona." And we implied that he did it all by himself. Of course we had Senator Hayden and John Rhodes and others that were involved in it, but anyway, nobody objected, and we just sort of implied that that was the case. And in fact, he did play a very, very important role--in fact, the important role as far as the House was

concerned. So it was proper that people see him as having achieved that for Arizona.

JF: How was his role different from John Rhodes'?

RO: Well, for one thing, he was a member of the majority party.

JF: Makes a big difference.

RO: Right. Secondly, he was on the Interior Committee--John Rhodes was not, he was on the Appropriations Committee. Thirdly, it was in the Interior Committee that all of the maneuvering had to be done. How do you make peace with California? How do you satisfy California so they'll not oppose this? How do you satisfy Colorado so that Wayne Aspinall, the chairman, will allow it to go forward? And he had an iron grip on that committee. In fact, nothing happened for the first couple of years, because he wasn't willing to move it. So you had to make peace with this center of power. Then you had to make peace with Senator Anderson of New Mexico, who was a key man in the Senate. Finally, you had to make peace with the Pacific Northwest. There are eleven states in the Colorado River Basin, and many of them have things that they wanted. And so it was a tremendous negotiating job that had to be done, and Mo was absolutely central to it. Without a doubt, it would have taken a much longer time for that project to be enacted, if ever, if it hadn't been for Mo.

JF: So his good margin in 1968 was due to CAP. It would look to me that the Vietnam War speech didn't hurt him.

RO: Well, I suppose that the speech that he made in the fall of 1967 enhanced his reputation as a major national figure. That speech was reported all over the country. I mean, that Monday morning on October 23, it was front page in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Three or four days later, Tip O'Neill announced that's his position, too. We started getting letters from all over the country. We had a whole battery of Nobel Prize winners from Harvard and MIT and so on, who were coming out in support of Mo and wanting to help. It just had an electric response. And so I think it enhanced his reputation, and probably contributed somewhat to his election success.

Now, in addition to that, there were some other things--environmental things that he'd done, that perhaps offset the concern about.... Well, for one thing, we didn't have any dams in the project anymore, so that was out. But he played a part in passing Redwoods legislation, and legislation on the Cascades National Park in Washington. So he had environmental achievements as well.

The amazing thing, absolutely amazing thing about that election, was that we carried every single Republican stronghold in the entire district. And of course we carried all the Democratic strongholds in the entire congressional district of, at that time, five counties. We lost four rural precincts by votes of eighteen to sixteen, things like that. I mean, it was a true landslide.

JF: Was there an anti-McGinnis factor in that, too, do you think?

RO: I don't think that he was that much of a factor. I don't think people really knew anything about it. I mean, the fact that he was such a weak candidate certainly helped. I mean, there were Republicans who couldn't stomach him, so there's no doubt that helped. (chuckles)

JF: Yes. In 1968, Mo married Ella Royston. Do you have any idea how they met, or when?

RO: Ella? Oh, well, she worked on Capitol Hill. She worked for another congressman. I just can't remember who it was. It seems to me it was a New York member. It may not have been. Anyway, she worked for another member. She socialized a lot on the Hill. Jean Jones of our staff knew her quite well. They would see each other at parties and so on.

JF: Now, who was Jean Jones?

RO: Jean Jones was a caseworker on our staff.

JF: And is that Jean, J-E-A-N?

RO: J-E-A-N. We had hired Jean after the defeat of a certain Texas congressman for whom Larry King had been A.A. So as I say, Jean knew Ella socially, and I remember seeing Ella once or twice at the Democratic Club, when I'd wander through there.

JF: What was the Democratic Club?

RO: The Democratic Club at that time was located in the old Congressional Hotel, which is now Annex 1 of the House. At that time it was a hotel, and part of it, on the ground floor there was the Democratic Club. The Democratic Club has moved since then--it's elsewhere. Anyway, it was a place where members would go in the evening or late afternoon and so on. I think Mo probably met her there. It could be that she was introduced by Larry King, for example, or somebody else--I'm not sure. I do know that Larry was acquainted with both of them, so it's possible that Larry might have introduced them.

JF: And do you think they had met in 1968, or do you think they'd met before that?

RO: They met several years before that.

JF: Oh, did they? Do you have any idea about when?

RO: Well, yes, I do have an idea. I think it was 1964.

JF: And do you have any idea when they started dating in that period?

RO: I don't really have a personal knowledge. I don't want to speculate about that.

JF: Okay. As I understand, [Ella] worked for a while, wasn't it in the Postal Service Subcommittee Office?

RO: Oh, yes, that's true. I think that that happened sometime later--maybe 1965 or 1966 or 1967, or something. But yes, that's true, she did work for the Post Office and Civil Service Committee for a time before they were married. I guess when they were married, she must have resigned, but I'm not sure whether it happened immediately or not.

JF: Okay. What was the subcommittee then that Mo had? He was chair of one of the subcommittees?

RO: I've forgotten that.

JF: I can't think of it right now, either. That can be looked up easy enough.

RO: Yes. I don't know. Roger and I hired, you know, John Gabusi, who became the staff director of that subcommittee. But whether Ella was working there before John came on board, I don't know--could be that she was.

JF: Do you remember when John was hired?

RO: I think it was probably sometime in 1967.

JF: Where did you meet John?

RO: We employed him as a pollster in the 1966 campaign.

JF: Was he working then for Behavior Research, I think is what it was called, the polling firm in....?

RO: Might have been. He had a partner, and we continued to work with that partner after John came on board, as I recall. In fact, I think that fellow might still be in business.

JF: I think he is, and I think it's Behavior Research something in Phoenix.

RO: In Phoenix, I think.

JF: Yes, okay. Getting back to Ella, can you tell us something about Ella, just your impressions of her as a person, when you met her, or over the years, getting to know her?

RO: Well, I think that people liked her. I think she had a kind of vivacious quality. I think that she probably was very good for Mo in some ways. I think he felt more at ease with her than he did with Pat. He could be less inhibited with her than with Pat. I never

thought about him as being particularly inhibited with her, but in comparison, I'd say that [he] probably was.

However, I can tell you a funny story about his maybe not being so inhibited. From time to time, I would stay in their house out on the Catalina Foothills when I was out there working on the campaign or a fund-raiser or something. I was out there one time--in fact, I arrived a couple of days before Mo did. When he arrived, he and Pat and I were living in his house, and he loved the swimming pool, and he always kept the swimming pool heated. In the middle of winter, you'd see the steam coming up out of the pool. Anyway, we picked him up at the airport, took him out to the house. Pat and I were sitting there in chairs by the pool, I guess, and Mo comes out, stark naked (laughter), jumping up on the diving board. (laughter) I thought, you know, it's okay for Mo to be naked in my presence, it's okay for him to be naked in his wife's presence, but our mutual presence.... (laughter) That was a little bit shocking.

JF: And were there fences, I hope?

RO: Yes, it was sufficiently remote that that was not any problem. (laughter) And then I think the next day I think I was getting him ready for a debate, and so I wanted to fire questions at him. Once again, he got in the swimming pool without any clothes on, he's swimming around, and I'm asking him these questions, and he's answering. (laughter)

JF: That's wonderful!

RO: In some respects, he was not inhibited. (laughter) Now, as far as Ella was concerned, I think he was more relaxed, he seemed to enjoy her. He had a funny nickname for her, "Tiger." They seemed to have a pretty good relationship much of the time, although I think it also became kind of tempestuous at times--I'm not sure about that.

Now, my personal relationship with her was not so great. And I think it stems from the fact that of all the people in Mo's life at that point, after Pat had been gone, the person who was closest to Mo, was me. The person who had the greatest influence over what he would do or not do, was me. And I think that she perceived that. She was not at all friendly to me. I remember once we were out in Tucson, staying in the same apartment or wherever, and the telephone rang early in the morning. Mo was still sleeping. She called, she wanted to speak to Mo. She didn't say, "Hi, Dick." It was just as though I was a telephone operator. I could tell that she was not very friendly to me. She was courteous, generally, but not at all warm. Ultimately, it was because of her that I left Mo's staff.

JF: Do you think there was a jealousy?

RO: Years later, at a political reception here in Washington, I ran into Mo and Ella, and she took me aside and talked to me for quite a long time. She apologized to me. She said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did. I was jealous of you." And she said--I don't

think this is necessarily true, but I accepted it as a compliment--she said, "Mo's staff has never been run as well since you left." So that was kind of an indication that she was very uneasy about my role.

JF: Now, when you say that you ultimately left Mo's employment because of Ella, was that just from not being comfortable under the conditions where she wasn't warm? Or was there a particular incident?

RO: It came to a certain point. In managing Mo's campaigns, I would go out early and talk to a lot of people, get a sense of what was on people's minds, get an idea what kind of approach we wanted to use in the campaign. And then maybe I'd go back a second time and I'd be there to get things produced--produce television commercials and ads and get volunteers recruited and so on. And then I'd go back to Washington for a while, and then I'd come out for the last push. Well, in 1970, I'd gone through Phase 1 and Phase 2, had produced all the television commercials, had gotten everything moving along in the campaign, and I'd gone home to be with my family for a week-and-a-half or so, when Mo told me he did not want me to go back to Arizona. I asked him why, and he said because (pause) I was not allowing Terry Bracy to be sufficiently creative. Well, I knew where that came from. I mean, I knew that was Ella's idea. So it was just a red flag. I didn't say anything, but I started the process of finding another job. Fortunately, I found a wonderful job. I was editor of the magazine of The Wilderness Society. So after some weeks, I announced I was leaving.

JF: Some weeks after that?

RO: Yes, right. And I actually left the staff on February 1, 1971. If it hadn't been for the situation with Ella, I probably would never have left his staff.

JF: It sounds like you had a fabulous working relationship with Mo.

RO: I did.

JF: I noticed when I worked for Mo that Ella--well, especially in later years--Ella had a real reticence about going back and campaigning in the district. Was that true even back in those early years after their marriage?

RO: She didn't do any campaigning when I was there.

JF: She didn't come out to the district at all and campaign?

RO: Well, she did go out to the district, but she didn't participate, she wasn't a presence at campaign appearances, especially. I mean, she'd come along, but then so did Pat. She wasn't really part of the campaign, whereas obviously she was later.

JF: Do you think she was comfortable being a public figure's wife?

RO: I think she probably liked that.

JF: As you know, Ella, or Tiger, as we all knew her, died in 1988 in what was ruled a suicide, did that surprise you?

RO: Well, yes, I guess so. If you think back on the lives of people that you know, and you try to search for clues how something like that would come about, well then I'd say yes, looking at Ella, I could kind of imagine that happening. But I would never have predicted it. Terrible, terrible thing--terrible for Mo.

JF: Did you ever talk to Mo.... Did you keep in touch with Mo much after you left the staff?

RO: Yes, a fair amount. I'd drop by and see him from time to time. For example, I wrote a speech for him when he was running for president. I would drop in and just visit with him from time to time. And after he dropped out of the presidential race, he said, "You know, Dick, if I'd been elected, you'd be on the White House staff." It was also interesting to hear his observations on what happened in the primaries. I'm sure that you've heard this from others, but anyway, it was interesting to me to hear him say, "I have to...." He said, "You know, you can always second-guess these things, but I have to wonder what would have happened if I had entered the Florida primary." I said, "Florida primary?! What's that have to do with anything?!" He said, "Think about it. Who won the Florida primary? Jimmy Carter." Let me think. Yes. Who was his opponent? George Wallace. He said, "I wouldn't have won the Florida primary, but neither would Carter. We would have split the liberal vote" (laughter) "and Wallace would have won Florida, but he wouldn't have gotten the nomination." And it was the Florida victory that got Carter rolling. (laughs)

JF: Yes. And of course Iowa certainly got that rolling. Did Mo ever talk to you about running for president? Had the idea entered your head or Mo's head by, say, 1968 or so, of the thought of him running for president?

RO: Always had the idea.

JF: You? or he also?

RO: I don't know that he did--I always did. It concerns me a little bit, putting some of these things on the record, but an indication of how I was already thinking about the presidency was my reaction when Mo called to say that he and Ella were married. I congratulated him, and then later, after we hung up, I turned to Roger and I said, "Roger, Mo will never be elected president." And that was my view of Ella's prospects as a first lady. That might not have been an accurate statement. The point is that in 1968, I was already focused on the idea of his running for president, and had been.

There was a reporter for a New Mexico newspaper by the name of Paul Wieck, W-I-E-C-K, who became quite a fan of Mo's. And I think he had put the idea in print,

even before then. And I think the Vietnam speech kind of set Mo apart. He was perceived there as a molder of opinion, a leader, because shortly after that, as I mentioned, Tip O'Neill, many other politicians, said, "That's my position, too." And I think that contributed to Johnson's decision not to run for reelection. In fact, reading the transcript of Johnson's conversations in the first year of office, recently published, it's convincing to me that we escalated the war in Vietnam so that he could out-hawk Barry Goldwater. In 1968, he perceived that that position wasn't going to necessarily win for him. I mean, I think that....