

# An Oral History Interview

with

## **RICHARD OLSON (part 5)**

*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 starting Tape 24, which is the third tape in the Dick Olson series. Go ahead, Dick.

RO: Okay. Now, we were just talking about the idea of Mo Udall being perceived as a presidential possibility. And I was saying that the Vietnam speech of 1967 was one thing that added to his national reputation. There were many things, many reasons that he could be considered a candidate for president. Anyway, that was one of them. And then I was also saying that I think that that speech, and the effect that it had upon Democrats in Congress and so on, did contribute to Johnson's decision not to run for reelection. And as I was saying, I truly believe that he escalated the war in Vietnam to win the election of 1964. He was not going to be out-hawked by Barry Goldwater, or even by Cabot Lodge, for goodness sakes! I mean, he was even worried about Cabot Lodge being more hawkish than he! But anyway, because of it, I think that Mo speaking out as he did, did contribute to Johnson's decision not to run again. So for that reason, along with other things, I think Mo began to be seen as a national figure.

JF: Did Roger, back in the 1968 era, did Roger share your view of seeing Mo ultimately as a presidential candidate?

RO: Oh, I don't think so. I mean, he didn't argue with it, but I don't think he had that same view. For one thing, Roger is such an ingrained pessimist that he could never hope for anything so advanced as that. (chuckles)

JF: Somewhere in the vicinity of 1968--and I admit again I don't know the exact date of this--Mo sponsored congressional pay raise legislation (RO: Yes.), that would have essentially, I gather, doubled the salaries of members over a period of approximately four years. Do you remember the date of that at all?

RO: Well, I remember the bill quite well, and I remember the [feature?] of it, which made it possible to enact it.

JF: And what was that?

RO: And that was the provision that would allow Congress to veto.... No, wait a minute: it would allow Congress thirty days to veto what was otherwise an automatic increase. Once the president acted, then there could be thirty days in which Congress could veto it. But it was also part of the plan that those thirty days would be days when Congress is not in session (laughs) or not yet organized or something.

JF: Besides that, was the idea of that, if there was some public outcry, an enormous public outcry against it, it would give them a chance to....

RO: Well, I think it was assumed that there would always be a public outcry. The fact is that the pay of members of Congress and members of the cabinet, high-level government employees, had lagged way behind the rest of the economy for a long, long time. And people like Ralph Nader--I hate that son of a bitch (laughter)--will, in a knee-jerk fashion,

oppose every, every, EVERY, pay raise that is ever proposed. I mean, when I came to Washington, congressmen were paid \$22,500 a year, and cabinet members were making \$25,000. If Ralph Nader had his way, they'd still be making that! He's never favored a single cent of increase. It's as though we want the government to be run by millionaires, or total incompetents. I feel strongly about the particular stand he's taken on that issue. But there are many other people that are just ignorant on the whole subject. So it's always a touchy one. I think that compensation has caught up quite a bit in recent years. I'm not so concerned about \$135,000 a year as I was \$22,500. But there have been a lot of changes in the value of the dollar since then, too.

JF: Did he take much heat from constituents for his sponsorship of that?

RO: Remarkably, we didn't get a lot of hate from our constituents. We did get some of course, and I got some really funny, funny letters, like one addressed to "The Hongry Morris K. Udall." (laughter) H-O-N-G-R-Y (laughs) But within our own district, it wasn't such a difficult issue. But for members in general, it was.

JF: Still in 1968, Mo ran against the somewhat entrenched or institutionalized House Speaker, John McCormack. What are your recollections of that race?

RO: (chuckles) Well, I have a lot of recollections. Well, you say it was 1968. It was late 1968, and of course the election was in January of 1969, as I recall. But Mo and I wrote a letter to all of his Democratic colleagues, informing them that he was going to be running for the Speaker. And of course he personally told McCormack that he was doing that. In fact, I think McCormack got wind that he was going to do it, and he called him to say what a fine congressman he was (chuckles), and he wanted to help him all he could (laughs), trying to head it off. This is peripheral--I mean, I don't have direct knowledge of that, I'm just sort of remembering that. But I do have direct knowledge of the letter that we sent. And it was four single-spaced pages. I punched it out on a machine called a Dura [phonetic spelling]. We had an automatic typewriter at that time that used a thin, punched tape, and when you pressed a key, you were punching in a code in that tape. And so we sent out whatever number it was, like 285 original letters.

JF: Now, was this the forerunner of the Robo, or was it the Robo machine?

RO: This came after the Robo, it was a successor to the Robo. It was called the Dura. It had a brief period of life on Capitol Hill, and then it was gone. But I remember we'd agreed on the language, and Mo had signed off on it, and I was typing it onto the tape, and I got to the last paragraph. Well, it happened that at that particular time, Frank Borman and his crew were flying around the moon, in orbit around the moon. And so I had an inspiration, and I wrote a final paragraph. And I wrote, "Let me hear from you. It's lonely out here in orbit." (laughter) And I finished it out, I took it in, and I said, "Mo, what do you think of this?" He said, "Oh, great!" (laughs)

JF: So apropos on many levels!

RO: (laughs) So then we sent the letter out the next day. Wow! I mean, everybody wanted.... I mean, the press was calling. And we agreed, I'd handle all the press calls. I remember talking to the *L.A. Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine--I mean, everybody. They were asking, "Is he serious?!" I said, "Yes, he's serious. He wouldn't do it if he wasn't serious." And he did have this little group of Democrats who were sort of part of his team. But in the end, of course, he didn't have the votes. The remarkable thing is, it did not hurt him in any way--with McCormack or anybody else. I mean, he continued to do well among his colleagues.

JF: Now, Tip O'Neill would have disagreed with you. He mentioned in his autobiography, *Man of the House*, he said that "running against McCormack was the biggest mistake that Mo ever made," indicating, basically, that McCormack would annihilate him, did annihilate him, when Mo later ran for majority leader; and indicated, as I recall, that McCormack made a number of phone calls when Mo then later ran for majority leader, telling people, "Don't vote for that SOB."

RO: Keep in mind that they both come from Massachusetts. Keep in mind that O'Neill nominated Boggs in the race for majority leader. It could be that it was a mistake. In fact, when you consider that he didn't win, I guess it was a mistake. But it was absolutely not a crucial mistake.

JF: And it didn't destroy his relationship with McCormack. (RO: No.) Well, that's an interesting perspective.

RO: And it certainly didn't destroy his relationship with Tip O'Neill, because Tip O'Neill became a great fan of Mo's in later years. At the time that I was working for Jim Wright, somebody did a poll and indicated the two most popular members in the House were Mo Udall and Jim Wright.

JF: Was that a poll conducted of other members, or outside?

RO: It was a poll, yes, of other members--the responses of other members to a question, "Who do you hold in highest respect?" or something. And of course when Mo ran for president, he had very enthusiastic support among his fellow Democrats.

JF: Do you remember the principal backers of Mo when he ran for the Speaker position?

RO: I was on my way out. This was after I'd made the decision to leave. I was there during that time, but I wasn't playing too much of a part.

JF: This being 1968?

RO: Later part of 1968--oh! wait a minute! I beg your pardon--no, in 1968 I was very much involved. I can't really remember how much of a part I played in Mo's decision to run. I do know that I was involved in some of the strategy, and then certainly in writing that announcement letter, handling the press, and so on.

JF: I noticed that in his book, *Education of a Congressman*, Mo voiced disappointment over the amount of commitments that had apparently been made to him by members that then, as he said, quote, unquote, "faded away." (RO: Yes.) What happened, do you know?

RO: Well, for one thing, I think George Meany was a factor. He continued to be resentful that Mo had opposed repeal of the right to work. Johnson, I suspect, was a factor. He had just dropped out of the re-election race--in 1968 he was not a candidate, Nixon had just been elected. But Johnson still had lots of friends. I don't have anything to go on there, except just a hunch that he might have played a part both in the Speaker race and in the majority leader race.

JF: In 1970, John McCormack retired, and Mo challenged Hale Boggs for the majority leader position. One question I've always had is, if McCormack retired, why didn't Mo run for Speaker again?

RO: Oh, well, because there are many more senior Democrats who would challenge him. Incidentally, I just remembered something about the speaker race. I devised a little strategy that Mo did adapt, and which later was mentioned in the press as being a brilliant stratagem. (chuckles) And that was that Mo would present himself as the challenger to McCormack, not for the purpose of electing himself Speaker, but in order to replace McCormack with somebody else. And once that vote was done, Mo would then withdraw and call for further nominations. And there would be a second vote when the real election would occur. And it might then be any one of these senior Democrats who, like Carl Albert, who would consider themselves more in line for it. And yet I also told Mo in my memo on that subject--which I probably still have somewhere in my files--that if that happens, and you then open the nominations for other candidates, you're going to have Candidate "A," "B," "C," and this lion-killer, Mo Udall. Now, who's going to win? So anyway, that was the strategy.

JF: And the other, the senior congressional members, knew about this?

RO: Yes. I mean, he did say that if he had a majority of the votes, that he would then call for additional nominations.

JF: Okay. That is a brilliant strategy. (laughter) What do you think was Mo's primary motivation in running for both Speaker and majority leader?

RO: Oh, I think in the case of the Speaker, it was frustration at the lack of leadership, the indirection of the House. It seems kind of funny, looking back on it. I mean, after all, we passed the Civil Rights Bill, the Voting Rights Bill, Medicare and so on--Highway Bill, Aid to Education--I mean, we passed all kinds of things. But nevertheless, there was a feeling that McCormack was a weak leader, and that we needed more vigorous leadership.

JF: And how about for the majority leader race? Same thing?

RO: Majority leader race I think ... was probably just more conventional ambition.

JF: And what happened in the majority race? Why do you think he lost?

RO: Well, I think he did have the active opposition of some powerful people, maybe including McCormack, maybe including Johnson, maybe including George Meany. I think those are all possible factors. Beyond that, he was junior to other candidates who were running, like Hale Boggs and Jim O'Hara, and therefore didn't have any particular reason to expect to win in such a race. And Boggs had already been the whip, so it was perceived as moving one step up the ladder. So it wasn't illogical that he would be elected. It would have been less logical for Mo to be elected, actually.

JF: Now, is that race where when he lost, he turned the lapel button upside down to read "Ow!"?

RO: I think so. He also put out that great quote, which is a little bit shocking, but anyway, he said, in comparing the caucus to a cactus.

JF: I'm not sure I remember that one.

RO: Well, since it's appeared in print and so on, I guess I can repeat it. He said, "The difference between a caucus and a cactus, is that the cactus has the pricks on the outside."

JF: I have heard that one! (laughter)

Congressman John Rhodes, in his oral history for the Udall Oral History Project, stated his belief that Mo, in running for the Speakership, that Mo was already setting himself up to be president. What are your comments on that?

RO: I think Mo did perceive himself as having leadership potential. I think he liked the idea of holding high office. I can't say that I know that he was specifically thinking about the presidency at that time. I know positively that I was, and that the staff and so on, we talked about it. And I'm sure that we talked about it with him, too. But whether he ever specifically indicated an interest in the presidency at that early date, I don't recall.

JF: Several years later, when Mo announced his candidacy for president, a number of congressmen signed a petition, urging him to run--which was kind of an unprecedented thing, to my knowledge, at least. Do you happen to know if any of the signers of that petition were the same people who supported him for Speakership or for the majority leader? I realize the petition came out after you had left the staff, so....

RO: Oh, I'm sure that there are quite a number that would be in both groups. Unless I saw that list, I wouldn't be able to say. I could name people that I would think were in both groups. For example, take somebody like Frank Thompson of New Jersey. I'm sure

he would have been in both groups.

JF: Maybe Dave Obey?

RO: Dave Obey, probably, yes. I can't think of his name, the congressman from Tampa, Florida, is one of the Southern Democrats who Mo had in his group from the beginning. So there would be people like that who would certainly be in both groups.

JF: Yes, okay. In 1970 also, *The Phoenix Gazette* published an article concerning Mo in which they stated that in 1970.... Actually, I should restate this. *The Phoenix Gazette* article did not come out in 1970, it was a much later article about Mo. In fact, it may have been an article when he retired or something, giving a synopsis of his life in Congress and all. Anyway, *The Phoenix Gazette* stated in this article that in 1970 Mo had considered returning to private practice. Is that true? Or do you recall any discussions of that sort with him?

RO: No, I don't think it's true.

JF: Did Mo ever express a desire to you to return to private practice?

RO: No. No, absolutely not. The only thing was what I mentioned earlier. He did consider accepting a judgeship, but there was never, ever any discussion, in my years, of his returning to private practice.

JF: What year did the judgeship question come up, do you know?

RO: I think it came up in 1963.

JF: Okay. I was curious what they were talking about, because I had certainly never heard that.

RO: No.

JF: Okay. Now, the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970. Is that something you were involved in at all?

RO: I was, to some extent, but I can't remember much about it now. I guess that was an outgrowth of the joint committee on reorganization, where, for example, Mo had proposed four-year terms and so on.

JF: That's what I wondered. Mo had, I gathered, introduced a bill which established this Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress to revise rules and procedures and practices of the House. And I wondered if this Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 was the result of that joint committee.

RO: I don't recall the joint committee ever yielding much. There was a lot of need for

improving the way things were done. And ultimately, one of the results of this effort was to create more subcommittees, more subcommittee chairmen--greatly expand congressional staffing, as a result, and diminish the power of most committees, by dividing the power up among subcommittees. I guess a lot of that came about because of that 1971 act--kind of set the stage for the big Democratic class that came in after Watergate in 1974. Suddenly there were lots of subcommittee chairmen's positions open, a lot of staffing possibilities. (chuckles) Big explosion of personnel on Capitol Hill. I'm sorry I don't remember too much about that, but I do know that both in the Post Office Committee and in the Interior Committee, Mo initially was very frustrated by the undemocratic procedures, and the concentrated power of the chairman--the lack of any budget or any authority on the part of subcommittees and individual members. Now he led a revolt in the Post Office Committee, as early as 1963 or 1964, something like that, which resulted in stripping the chairman of much of his power, and creating more subcommittees and all that. And he kind of led that revolt, and he got a number of other members of the committee to go along with this revolt. He had a majority, so he was able to do it. (chuckles) So that was his first experience in reorganizing congressional committees and procedures.

And then he still had the same kind of undemocratic situation in the Interior Committee, where, for example, Wayne Aspinall sat on the Central Arizona Project for a couple of years. And other things the same way. I mean, he had an iron hand over that committee. So Mo was anxious to improve the way Congress operates in that regard, so that's the reason he would be sponsoring such legislation. But I don't remember very much about that particular bill anymore.

JF: I'm interested [in] you mentioning that one aspect of that might have been increasing congressional staffs, because later on, Mo would say that one of the things that he really didn't like was how the congressional staffs had become so large, that he felt that it seemed to allow the proliferation of issues.... (laughter)

RO: I think that is the pursuit of the law of unintended consequences.

JF: (laughs) Yes, it's funny how that works. And as he said, he liked the seniority system a lot better the longer he was there.

RO: Yes, that's right! (laughter)

JF: Let me ask you some questions about the changes in the congressional office, from the time you began, which is about 1960 or 1961 to 1970. One, had the number of staff changed over that almost ten-year period?

RO: Well, initially we were always eager to get one more slot or a few more dollars. Now, initially, the staff that we started with in 1961 consisted basically of five full-time people in Mo's office: Roger Lewis and myself; Mo's secretary, Louise Greenfield; caseworker Jean Jones; and a receptionist, Terry Nash. Initially, we had a different receptionist. Oh, yes! Judy O'Neill. But anyway, there were five of us. And then we

would have a night man to whom we would pay a few dollars of Basic--probably five dollars a year Basic, which came out to about seventy-eight dollars a month, or something. The night man would come in and run the Robo machine.

JF: I remember that was a job that Richard Kimble had, when I first worked for Mo. Now, this would have been a little after you left, too. He was a night Robo man, and ended up going back to Arizona and running for Senate against John McCain one year. (laughter) Anyway, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

RO: So that was the staff. And then we had two or three part-time people in the district office in Tucson. Then a couple of years later, we got one more slot and a few more dollars and so on. I think at the time that I left, we probably had a total staff--counting full-time and part-time--of fifteen or twenty, or something like that. However, the growth of the members' staffs, while it's been substantial, is not really what has added so much personnel to Capitol Hill--but rather the subcommittee staffs of the legislative committees--and appropriations committees, too. I mean, there's just been tremendous growth in that. I think everybody kind of complains about it. I mean, they like their own jurisdiction, but don't like all of the consequences of having so many people involved.

Now, when I was working for the majority leader, Jim Wright, I had to deal with a certain amount of rivalry between the committees. I handled a complicated bill that involved four House committees, and I called the staff directors of those four committees together, and discussed what we had to deal with, in a conference. And afterwards, I got a phone call from one of them. I said, "Dick, I hate to tell you this, but you're going to have to do this yourself," (laughs) because no one committee was willing to allow another committee to have the lead on this. So Dick Olson took the lead! (chuckles) Unprecedented.

JF: That's Washington! (laughter) How had the character of Mo's staff changed, if at all, over that nine or ten years?

RO: Well, during the years that I was there, the staff remained pretty much the same. We were able to add a couple, add another position. For example, we brought Terry Bracy in, and we gave him the title "legislative assistant," and I no longer used that title, then used the title "executive assistant." My job was still the same, but it changed titles. So we did have one more person there. We got another secretary, a couple more caseworkers and so on, but the staff was still relatively small and I think free of the kind of friction and backbiting and so on that oftentimes goes on in offices. I don't know anything much about the office after 1971, so I can't really address that.

JF: How often was Mo returning to the district then?

RO: Fairly often. It was governed somewhat by the allowance that Congress provided for trips. I don't remember what it was, but he went home about as often as he could.

JF: In 1971, the Campaign Finance Reform Act passed, but backing up a little bit, in

1967, about four years earlier--at least earlier than the introduction of the Campaign Finance Reform Act--Mo introduced legislation that would have limited the cost of campaigns and federally-financed some campaigns and shortened general elections. Were you involved with that legislation at all?

RO: Yes, I was, and Mo and I wrote an article for *Playboy* magazine about that.

JF: What happened to that bill?

RO: Got nowhere.

JF: Did it become sort of the 1971 bill? Did it end up being sort of rolled into that?

RO: Oh, it's kind of hard to say. I think any time that you propose government financing of political campaigns, you're going to have a pretty tough sell. So that feature of it certainly was not rolled-in. If there was anything that was, why, it was not that.

JF: In passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, to what extent would you say that Watergate was an impetus for that finally passing?

RO: In 1971?

JF: Yes.

RO: Couldn't have been. Watergate hadn't happened yet.

JF: I've got my dates wrong here.

RO: Watergate was 1972.

JF: I believe you're right. Well, you know, the law was signed by President Nixon on February 7, 1972. I think the break-in had already occurred by that time.

RO: No, that was in the spring of 1972.

JF: Is that right? Okay, I must have my facts messed up here. Then it couldn't have had much to do with it, huh?

We've already talked some about the presidential race, but let me just ask . . . I know you were gone from Mo's office by that time. Why do you think he ran, and why do you think he lost?

RO: (pause) Well.... (pause) I think Mo, like the rest of us, he was kind of frustrated, unhappy with the kind of government that we'd had under Nixon and Ford. And in fact, under Johnson, too. I think that he felt that he could run the country better than they had--certainly better than Johnson, certainly better than Nixon, in some respects--maybe

not others. And, of course, it's kind of hard to get excited about Ford one way or another. And so in that regard, because Ford was a weak candidate, [he] probably also saw an opportunity, and conceivably he had achieved enough stature and so on that he might do it. Of course, lots of people like myself had been trying to convince him for a long time that he did have presidential potential, so....