An Oral History Interview

with

David Obey

Washington, D.C.

conducted by
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JF: This is another interview in the Morris K. Udall Oral History Project. Today is Thursday, March 4, 1999, and we're in the office of Congressman David Obey of the Seventh District of Wisconsin. Congressman Obey, I'd like to thank you for participating in this project, especially given that you have a cold and it's been a busy day. I'd like to start, I'm just going to be expedient here and just get a little background information. You were born on October 3, 1938, and got your bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin, followed by a master's degree in Russian government?

DO: Right.

JF: And foreign policy. Then from 1962 to 1969 you were a member of the Wisconsin Assembly, and were assistant minority leader for two of those years?

DO: Right.

JF: All right. You were first elected to Congress in a special election in 1969?


JF: (laughs) Thirty-one years old or something?

DO: I was thirty.

JF: Thirty! You were a pretty young guy.

DO: I was the youngest person in the House at that time. Four years later, Tom Downey put me to shame--he got elected at age twenty-five from New York.

JF: Is that right?!

DO: Yes.

JF: The year before you were elected, Mo Udall had made an unprecedented challenge against Speaker John McCormack for the Speakership of the House, and was of course beaten resoundingly. You came in, in 1969, and I noticed a quote in David Broder's book The Changing of the Guard, of you having come into the seniority system and not liking it, quote, unquote, "one damned bit!"

DO: Well, I never had a problem with the seniority system. I always thought that that was as good a way as any to prevent money and ego from determining who was going to be a committee chairman. The problem when we got here is that there was no safety valve in the system, and the committee chairs were unaccountable. So the guts of the reform movement that we participated in spun around the idea of making the unaccountable power centers in this place more accountable, by making the committee chairs stand for election. The steering committee, we changed the nominating process so that the nominating process was by a new steering
committee, rather than by the Ways and Means Committee, which had been controlled by Wilbur Mills because the Ways and Means Committee used to do it, and instead the idea was, have the speaker be the head of the Steering and Policy Committee, have the Steering Committee nominate the chairs. Normally it would be by seniority, but if somebody had an objection, then you could have a vote on that chairman as a safety valve, and if they lost, then you'd have a new election. So we were not trying to overturn the seniority system, we were trying to build some safety valves into it.

JF: Were you and Mo working together on this?

DO: Yes. I mean, this was generally a Democratic study group issue. Dick Conlin was the driving force as the staffer for the DSG, and Tom Foley, myself, Jack Bingham, Dick Boling. Dick Boling was really one of the engineers. He wrote two books, one Power in the House, and the other House Out of Order, suggesting that if the Democrats wanted to make the party work, they ought to make their caucus work, because there progressives were in the majority in the caucus. Mo, at the same time, was the person who had most visibly challenged the rigidity of the old system, by running against McCormack who had been a fine leader in his day, but was well past his prime by that point.

JF: So Mo, by virtue of that, sort of became the leader of the movement in a sense?

DO: There were a lot of leaders in the movement. I don't think you can say there was any one leader, but it was a collective of Mo and Dick Boling and Jim O'Hara and Don Frazier, Phil Burton--later on, myself--Tom Foley, Frank Thompson. Mo sort of became everybody's favorite figure because he had guts enough to take it on at the leadership level when nobody else did.

JF: Well, the following year and the year after your election, he ran for majority leader against Hale Boggs (DO: Hale Boggs, right.), and lost in the Democratic caucus, I guess, 140 to 88, according to the figures I have. (DO: Right.) Do you remember that race?

DO: Sure do! I mean, I was involved in it. I was supporting Mo, campaigned for him. Sam Gibbons was sort of the campaign chair for Mo. And Mo lost for one simple reason: Hale Boggs was regarded as an insider. He had a leadership office already. Members that would be called in to talk to Hale Boggs needed to be in the ornate leadership offices, which conveyed the message "power." Mo was a rank and file member on the Interior Committee, he didn't have any visible perks or evidences of power. So Mo started out a yard behind, because people knew that the odds were that Boggs would win it.

JF: Now, I had heard that McCormick, still smarting from Mo running against him, had made some calls campaigning against him. Were you aware of that?

DO: I do not have any personal knowledge of that, but I'd be very surprised if that wasn't the case.

JF: Do you think the system, the way it was, has been fatally injured? Have the reforms that
needed to be undergone....

DO: Well, I mean, the reforms that we needed to pass were reforms that essentially gave the caucus an opportunity to overturn an arbitrary chairman if they needed to, and that's in place now. But that will never happen, unless the leadership exercises its power. They have been very reluctant to through the years. They did the first year the reforms passed--three committee chairs were dumped, and it was not really because of their philosophy, it was because of their arrogance.

JF: Approximately what year was that?

DO: That was in--I think it was when the Watergate class came in, in 1974. So it was in December 1974, January 1975, whenever the caucus was.

JF: And do you recall the three chairmen?

DO: Yes. They dumped [Charlie] Pogue as chairman of the Agriculture Committee. They dumped Wright Patman as chairman of Banking. And they dumped Eddie Hebert as chairman of the Armed Service Committee. They also tried to dump Wayne Hayes as chairman of the House Administration Committee, but he managed to beat that back.

JF: This is before you began Congress, but harkening back a little bit, Mo took on Adam Clayton Powell in a chairmanship role, in I believe it was 1967. Was that sort of the beginning of the ball rolling a little bit?

DO: Well, I mean, Mo was trying to demonstrate that if you did not clean up your own house, that then somebody else would do it for you. And because Powell was not disciplined, the Republicans and others in the House, other conservatives, led the effort to simply remove Powell from the House, period. Mo didn't believe in that--Mo felt that the seat was the power of the constituents to give, and the chairmanship was the power of the caucus to give, and that if the caucus met its responsibility, then the House would not get into the dangerous position of removing individuals from office. But Powell screwed that one up himself by choosing to make it a much more personal and nasty fight than need be. So he wound up being bounced until the Supreme Court said, "No, no, you can't do that."

JF: So almost exactly thirty years after you came to Congress, Mo's son Mark, and nephew Tom Udall, have just been elected. Do you think they will see a much better and different system than you and Mo did when you came?

DO: The place is better in that it's not run by a few arrogant old reactionary bulls. It is worse because the way politics is practiced in this country is worse today. So the House institutionally, in terms of its rules, is better. But you have to understand when Newt Gingrich came to this Congress eighteen years ago, he started from Day One with the idea that he was willing to destroy the place in order to change it. He was busy sending out lists of nasty, negative, pejorative terms that should be used to describe Democrats--words like "traitorous" and
"corrupt," "decaying." And so for eighteen years, he and his cohorts poisoned the well. I said when Mo retired that it was ironic that he retired about the time Lee Atwater died, because Lee Atwater practiced the politics of personal assassination, of character assassination, personal destruction--slash and burn. And Mo practiced a very different kind of politics. So the politics has become very much nastier and meaner, even though the House's rules are less out of touch than they were years ago.

JF: I should note that we are both coming from Mo's memorial service held today in Washington, D.C. I appreciated your comments that Mo would be horrified, were he to see what was happening in Congress today. And I have to think, as you mentioned, it wouldn't be happening if he were here.

DO: Well, you never know. I don't think any one man could have prevented it. The Gingrich Speakership really made inevitable a lot of things that happened in this place. But Newt's gone now, and we have a chance to see whether there will be a new style.

JF: Moving ahead a couple of years here, in 1976 Mo ran for president. However, four years before that, on May 17, 1972, a number of members of Congress signed a petition urging him to run, supporting his presidential bid. Do you recall who started the petition, who passed it?

DO: Well, the only petition I remember is the one that Reuss and I started.

JF: It was you and who else?

DO: Henry Reuss. We got forty-four signatures on that. I think I have copies of that stuff here. (looks through papers) These are the initial people who signed it--that's not the entire list. But it wasn't four years earlier.

JF: It wasn't?

DO: No, no, no, it was for the 1976 election.

JF: What I have is 1972, but I'm incorrect here. It was 1974?

DO: Right.

JF: And the paper you've handed me says "as of November 27, 1974."

DO: Right. I thought I had....

JF: There's about thirty-four members on this one.

DO: *The New York Times* ran a story listing twenty-seven people we'd gotten. We released the story after we hit twenty-seven, but we gathered more signatures after that.
JF: I'd like to get a copy of this.


JF: Okay. What led you to do this?

DO: Well, I mean frankly, a lot of us knew that Mo was at least thinking about running for president, and we talked to Terry Bracy and suggested that--we concluded that it would be good if we just circulated a letter to see how much.... You know, Mo wanted to know whether the idea of a House member running for president could pass the laugh test, and so we set about trying to find out. We just looked at the field and figured "what the hell?! Mo is better than anybody else in the race." And he was.

JF: Was forty-four the final signature count, pretty much?

DO: Yes.

JF: What had changed where.... I mean, it was fairly unprecedented for someone to run from the House. Had anything changed, or was this a personality thing.

DO: I think it was a testimony simply to his personal excellence. Nobody else in the House could have done it. He was the only person with the personality. He was the House's version of Hubert Humphrey, but he was a more modern version, and without all of the scars of Johnson's war and all of that. And I think it was a combination of the fact that he was--people couldn't help but comment that he looked rough-hewn like Lincoln, he had a great record in terms of the environment, and these were the days of Earth Day and things like that, that Gaylord Nelson had just started. The environmental movement was in its heyday, and Mo having led on the war as well, and being one of the leaders in campaign finance reform after the Nixon scandals. So he was a natural.

JF: Did you follow the campaign itself?

DO: Oh, yes. I went to a lot of states for Mo.

JF: Did you? On the lecture circuit or . . . .

DO: Just on a stump, standing-in for him. I remember I stood in for Mo in Maine at a forum that Ed Muskie moderated. Rosalyn Carter stood-in for Jimmy Carter. [I] stood-in in Iowa, Ed Mezvinsky’s district. First time I ever heard Jimmy Carter speak, and I came back home doubly convinced he should never be president after I heard him speak, because his speech was so loaded with anti-institutional malarkey that I thought, "My God, this guy will never be able to convince anybody he knows how to run a railroad."

JF: As I recall, he also started in Iowa by being--I'll put it this way--not terribly specific on the issues.
DO: Oh, yes, there's no question he was vague on the issues. And I campaigned in Massachusetts, campaigned in Pennsylvania, a number of other states--Michigan, Wisconsin.

JF: What do you think went wrong with the campaign that Mo didn't win a single [primary] or caucus?

DO: Well, I think he went a lot further than people had a right to expect. First of all, as a House member, he had no fund-raising base; he had no experience running even statewide, much less nationally, and it's a very different breed of cat to put on that kind of a campaign. And I think it was largely just the inexperience of a team showing that it had never put together a national effort before. In spite of that fact, they came within 1% in a number of states. And if they'd had more money, I have no doubt that they would have won Wisconsin and won Michigan and won Ohio. I think if Mo had had an extra million dollars, he'd have won those three states, I'm convinced of it.

JF: So it was inexperience combined with lack of money, basically.

DO: Yes.

JF: How do you think he would have been as president?

DO: I think he would have been terrific. He was not a detail person when it came to politics, but he was very much--he and Carter were the antithesis. I remember in Maine, Roslyn said that they should support Jimmy because he was a nuclear engineer, he had an engineer's training, and therefore knew how to build things. And I said, "Look, Washington doesn't need a tinkering engineer, it needs a leader. It doesn't need somebody who knows how to deal with a screwdriver, it needs somebody who knows how to feel it in his fingertips." He would have charmed the country just like Kennedy did.

JF: Yes, I couldn't agree with you more. He returned to Congress after his presidential race and became extremely productive (DO: Yes.), just produced a huge amount of legislation (DO: Yes.) after that. When did you first notice the effects of Parkinsons?

DO: Well, I remember after he fell.... We used to go to the same New Year's Eve party every year at Bob Kastenmeyer's house: Dave Broder, my wife and I, Mo and Ella, and Bob Eckhardt, Phil Burton, and Rosenthal--people like that--Don Edwards. And I remember being stunned the year after he fell at how poorly Mo looked. I don't really remember when I first realized that....

JF: When he fell and broke his arms?

DO: Yes. This was after that, and I thought, "God, he just isn't lookin' good at all." I really think he had it in the 1976 campaign. And I think the first time that Mo started to wonder was in Milwaukee. He was supposed to be shooting baskets for a campaign event with one of the members of the Milwaukee Bucks for a media shot. And there he was in his gym shorts and
shirt, and he was missing basket after basket after basket, and he was upset as hell about it. And he said, "I just don't understand this. My God, I've never done this badly in my life! It's not that the press is here. God, I've just never had a streak like this." And I'm convinced even then that it had bitten him in subtle ways that didn't become apparent until later.

JF: I remember during the 1976 campaign he was having real problems with just keeping up with his schedule--not to say that wouldn't be unusual, it was a very tough schedule. But I personally remember having to pare down schedules for him. I also think that it was showing up by then. Did there ever come a time when you thought maybe he needed to step down?

DO: Yes. I had a talk with Foley about it, and George Miller about it, because in conferences people were getting concerned that the staff was starting to make decisions that Mo wouldn't have made. And I didn't know enough about what was going on to know that or not. But I knew that Mo was slipping fast, and I didn't think that Mo should ever have to face what had happened to other committee chairmen around here. And I remember having a conversation with George Miller, and a conversation with Tom Foley. At one point I thought I might be the guy stuck with the job of telling Mo that he ought to think about retiring. But Foley decided to do it himself, which is the right way to do it.

JF: Was appropriate.

DO: Yes.

JF: How did he take it?

DO: Well, I wasn't there, I don't know. But I mean the minute Tom talked to him about it, Mo, within days said, "Okay." I cannot think of anybody else who would have done that. Most guys would have said, "To hell with you! I'm stickin'."

JF: In 1980, Mo did consider running for president again, briefly. Were you a part of that at all?

DO: Yes, I remember talking about it a little bit, but I frankly don't remember much about it. I know that everything was a possibility in 1980, but Kennedy jumped in early, and then people were looking at Mo as a possible alternative to Teddy. The two people they started looking at mostly were Muskie and Mondale. I remember having a conversation with Mondale after he'd come back from China. Fritz and I were good friends. After he'd had a meeting with a number of members, he called me aside. He said, "C'mon up, I want to talk to you about something." We sat down in his office and he started talking. He said, "You know, you just won't believe what these bastards are doing to me." I said, "What?" "Well," he said, "you know Teddy's out here runnin' against Carter. I'm tryin' to defend the president, and yet Carter's staff people are out cutting me up with the press. They don't think Teddy can win, but they're afraid Teddy will cut Carter up enough that people will start saying 'Well, Muskie or Mondale,' so they're trying to cut me up enough so that I'm not a viable alternative. So they're telling the press that I'm really not keyed-into the decisions that Jimmy has been saying I'm keyed-in on. 'He's just been saying that to be nice, blah, blah, blah.'" That's another occasion where I saw up close what I didn't like
about the Carter operation.

JF: Just a couple of last general questions: What lasting effect, if any, do you think that Mo had on the House of Representatives? What is his legacy?

DO: I don't know if anybody has a lasting effect. You know, I guess maybe even Joe Cannon, who was the most powerful of them all, what effect does he have today? Maybe it's buried in the precedent somewhere, but that's about it. I think the best you can do is to have an effect on your times and on the people who you mentor along the way, and hope that that filters down. And as someone said today, Mo was mentor to a lot of people in this place. This party has a big division between people who think that we should be focusing on equity issues, and people who think that we should be "shhhhh! don't talk about equity, just talk about macro-economic wonderfulness." And Mo would sure as hell be on the side of equity, and he would not let the Democratic.... You would not find Mo walking around here as a "new Democrat." He was a very new Democrat in those days, but new in the sense of energy, new in the sense of ideas, not new in the sense that you had to remake yourself in the Pat Cadell tradition, into something that you really weren't. Mo didn't believe in a new brand of Coke. He believed that the Democratic Party was the vehicle that fought for economic and social justice. He believed that the system ought to be set up so that money didn't rule. I think if Mo had stayed around and stayed healthy, we might have had a hell of a lot better opportunity to get rational changes in campaign financing, rather than the baloney that's passed for campaign finance reform the last eight or ten years--because Mo understood that the problems were far different than conventional wisdom was focused on at that point. And I think just generally he was in favor of on-the-level government. He didn't belong to the manipulative schools. I just think his open, straight-from-the-shoulder politics was his best legacy. And substantive legacy, you know, it's all around you in what he did for the environment.

JF: We talked a lot about Mo's strengths. What would you say was his greatest weakness?

DO: Somebody else asked me that, too. I always think that your strength is your weakness. Mo's strength was his good heartedness. His weakness was that people might sometimes try to take advantage of that. Mo tried to assume best motives from other people, because that's what he wanted assumed about himself. And he knew sometimes that would get him caught in a sucker trap, but it's like passing out dollars to the homeless. Sure you know that a good percentage of the time you're probably being taken, but that's still worth it if you're helping some poor bastard. I think that's the way Mo approached legislating. I think if you could have taken him and Dick Bolling and Jim O'Hara and wrapped them all together, you would have had a perfect legislator. Boling had a phenomenal sense of power and sense of how you knit together coalitions. And O'Hara was an incredible detail man, down to the last word, where the commas were placed. And Mo was the great concept, the great motivator, and the great moral force. Each of them had shortcomings: Boling's was that he had such a prickly personality; and O'Hara was that he was such a wonderful inside person, but had no real outside visibility, even though he was a great legislator. Even Michael Jordan couldn't be an all-star in more than one sport.

JF: Yes, that's a good analogy. Well, that's all I have. Do you have anything you'd like to add?
DO: I don't think so. It's just that I think he and Stew together were a remarkable contribution that one family made to this country and this party. I just wish to hell we had somebody anywhere near Mo's quality on the horizon today as standard bearer. We've got some good people, but I don't think they can move the country the way Mo could have, if he'd had the chance.

JF: Maybe there'll be some new folks coming the next time around.

DO: Maybe!

JF: Well, thank you very much for your time.

DO: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]