

An Oral History Interview

with

DAVID BRODER (part 2)

Washington, D.C.

conducted by
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JF: All right, we're back on Side B. We were just talking about not getting the mailing out to Wisconsin, and the failure to buy media time and all. Around that time there was apparently a fair amount of bickering in the Udall campaign headquarters about how to spend money. The leadership of the campaign had changed....

DB: Several times (chuckles).

JF: Were you and the press aware of that?

DB: Yes. In fact, that piece that I read from yesterday had a section which would have been totally inappropriate to read, about how screwed up the campaign was, and particularly about how disruptive Stewart Udall was as somebody who kept zooming in from the outside to countermand other people and so on. And it would have been totally inappropriate to read it [at the memorial service].

JF: What was that from, if people want to look that up? What was the date on that?

DB: I'll give you a copy of it.

JF: That would be wonderful, we can put that in the archives. So the press was aware of it?

DB: Oh, yes. I mean, one of the things about the Udall campaign was that there weren't a hell of a lot of secrets, because (chuckles) he was not big into security and secrecy and tight control and all the rest of that, so it was very much of a free-form kind of an argument. People on the staff would go to reporters that they were housed with and say, "You wouldn't believe what So-and-So has just told us to do!" And a lot of it was aimed at Stew.

JF: That would never have happened in the Carter campaign, I get the feeling.

DB: There was some of that in the Carter campaign, but not a lot, because the Georgians kept pretty tight control for quite a while. That happened more in the general election when they had to bring in a lot of people who were not part of their own group.

JF: Do you think this is something that affected Mo's campaign?

DB: Oh, of course, yes. I mean, Carter won that nomination fair and square. He put on a better, much more disciplined campaign. Put aside anything you may think about the qualities of the two men--Carter ran the better campaign.

JF: I was going to say, is that a matter of inexperience or experience (DB: No.), but Carter's people were pretty inexperienced, too, weren't they?

DB: Absolutely.

JF: At this point in time, I mean, we're getting to where the campaign was pretty much decided. I might back up a bit. In Wisconsin, Harris did finally back out of the campaign a few days after Wisconsin--refused to do so beforehand. Do you think had he backed out and endorsed Mo earlier.... It's anybody's guess....

DB: Yes. You'll see in this same column--I mean, again, it would have been very inappropriate, particularly with Birch Bayh sitting there yesterday--but one of the points I made in the column was that when the other liberals knew that they were out of the race, they either stayed in or if they pulled out, they stayed neutral and did not endorse him--or in a couple of cases, endorsed Carter. And yes, that would have made a great difference.

JF: Why do you think they did that?

DB: You'd have to ask them. I can't....

JF: Pure speculation. So at this point in the campaign, when it was pretty well decided, had your opinions of the men, of Carter and of Udall, changed?

DB: Yes.

JF: How had they changed?

DB: Well, in sort of diametrically opposite directions. I mean, I began to see Carter as somebody who was a good deal less sympathetic a personality than I had thought at the beginning of the year, whose claims to moral superiority often bordered on contempt of politicians and of political process. Also, remember that during this time after he emerged, we were beginning to learn a lot more about what he had and had not accomplished in Georgia. And it had turned out that he had substantially hyped his own record in Georgia. I mean, he talked endlessly about how he had taken--I won't get the numbers right--but 330 departments and agencies and pulled them together into eight agencies and saved hundreds of millions of dollars. Well, the reorganization of the Georgia state government had produced, you know, in the eyes of the Georgia press, at least as many problems as it had solved. People had begun to do those stories, saying, "Let's see how much reality there is in this guy's hype." But the clearest thing to me that emerged about Carter was that he really thought that he was on a different plane from most of the people in the political world. And there was a kind of a contempt there, which I found bothersome, because presidents have to work with other politicians, or they can't possibly be very effective. With Udall--I mean, I'd known him and liked him as most reporters had, but we had never seen him under this kind of pressure, and the grace and the good humor and--I mean, he was very good fun to be around, even when he was losing.

JF: In 1980.... Well, let me back up a little bit. Did you ever notice at that time or at the convention itself, any animosity between Mo and Carter?

DB: Oh, of course!

JF: Personally?

DB: Both, yes--both ways.

JF: Do you recall any examples?

DB: Well, there was a great deal of anticipation and even some tension among the Carter people, and certainly anticipation among the press as to what Mo would say in the speech at the convention there. Because the lines that I quoted, which he'd actually uttered, about "beware of somebody who is so relentless in the pursuit of the presidency that all things else become unimportant." He first framed that, obviously, in a reference to Richard Nixon, but he would apply it regularly on the bus to Carter. "What's going on with that guy? How bad does he want this? Is there anything he wouldn't say or do to get this thing?" Oh, yes! And the Carter people, on their side, I don't know that it was personal, but they were angry that he wouldn't give up. They said, "We beat this guy! What the hell? How many times do we have to beat him for him to go away?!" And he didn't give up, as you know. He went right to--he said, "My delegates want to be able to vote for me right at the convention."

JF: Which was very true.

DB: Which is the kind of thing that's guaranteed to piss off the guy who says, "I won! Don't you understand what the numbers mean?! That's why we have these contests. Somebody wins and somebody loses, and the loser's supposed to be a good guy and get out!" (chuckles)

JF: And he didn't.

DB: And he didn't.

JF: At the convention itself, I recall that there's a VIP booth that all the former candidates and all are invited to, to sit and watch the convention, and Mo was specifically excluded.

DB: Because he hadn't withdrawn.

JF: I'm assuming that's it. Yes, he was specifically excluded.

DB: Yes.

JF: Which sort of, I guess, goes back to your point that Carter wasn't quite what he projected to be sometimes. Was there an arrogance there?

DB: Yes. I mean, Carter knew, correctly, that he was a lot smarter than most of the people that he was--I don't think he applied this to Udall--but his general view of the political world was that it was made up of people of marginal competence and marginal ethics. I mean, first it poisoned his relationship with the Georgia Legislature, and then it poisoned his relationship with the Congress up here.

JF: In 1980, Mo considered running for president again. Were you aware of that at all then?

DB: I probably was. That [strikes] a vaguely correct chord. But of course when Kennedy took it on, I don't think he ever did anything with it.

JF: I don't think he would have run under those circumstances. At what point did you personally or the press generally become aware of Mo's Parkinson's disease?

DB: That's really hard to remember. I remember noting it at some point. My father had had Parkinson's, but a less virulent form. I mean, he lived into his nineties, but he was a dentist, and so it affected his ability to practice his profession, because obviously if your hand is jiggling even a little bit, it can cause real problems in his profession. Well, he was in his seventies when he retired, but most of the time that he practiced dentistry, people didn't have much money. It was during the recession and so on. He was not eager to give up earning money to support himself and my mother, but Parkinson's forced that on him. So I was aware of it, and I remember at some point having the conversation with Mo after he had put a name to what it was bothering him, and telling him about my dad. My father was living then, and I said, "You know, they're very happy folks in California. [He] walks and enjoys life and has a good time with his grandchildren, so you've got a lot to look forward to." But of course his kind of Parkinson's turned out to be much more disabling.

JF: Did there come a time when again you specifically or the press generally thought that he should step down from Congress?

DB: I don't remember feeling that. What I remember, and it's quite a vivid memory, was he retired, what, in 1990, 1991?

JF: In 1991, after the incident where he fell down the stairs.

DB: Yes. It would then probably have been sometime in the late eighties, I was up on the Hill in the press gallery, and watched him come onto the floor when they were in debate. It wasn't the time when everybody runs in to vote. The bells hadn't rung for a vote. He just came in from

the cloakroom. By that point, it had affected his gate, and he sort of, as he had to do by that point, kind of turned his whole body to look around the floor, and it was clear, I thought, from the gallery, that he looked around and realized, "God, there's none of my old buddies here," and sort of turned and went back into the cloak room. I remember thinking--I may even have said to my wife, "He's really feeling that his generation is past." It was quite a poignant moment. Now, I may have totally misinterpreted what was going on. He may have been looking for a specific person to do some business, but it was just that sense that he was looking for somebody to sit down next to and have a conversation, and he didn't find a single person.

JF: Yes. Hm. Just a last general question that I ask everyone, and that is we tend to speak a lot about Mo's qualities and strengths. What did you observe as his biggest weaknesses?

DB: His weaknesses? I think there were two things. One, like a lot of members of Congress--senators and representatives--he ultimately tended to do things by himself, on his own. He had good staff over the years, and enormously loyal staff, as you know. I mean, the story that Al Simpson told [at the memorial service], which was such a wonderful story, was characteristic of that generation of legislators, and probably for generations before that, where ultimately they didn't trust the staff, they didn't delegate the stuff that was really important to the staff--they did the deals themselves. I mean, Bob Dole was that kind of senator. And when people like that get into presidential campaigns, their tendency is not to clearly delegate authority and be real sons of bitches if they have to, with anybody else who tries to go around the thing. And so the sloppiness in the campaign structure, in the lack of discipline, in the lack of that hard, sort of decision-making edge, which, as it turned out, was probably critical enough a failure, given the narrow margins. It was certainly a weakness.

The other thing was--and again you'll see a reference to it in the column, which would have been inappropriate yesterday--is that Udall's reputation coming off of his House experiences was [that he was a] wonderful human being, absolutely sincere in his causes, but maybe does not have that final sort of hard steel edge that takes people to the absolute top of the thing. I mean, to take it out of the presi.... I mean, Carter obviously had that in the presidential thing, but in the congressional thing, somebody like Phil Burton, who was in a way a rival, although they agreed a lot on policy stuff. I mean, Phil Burton was prepared to break your neck there. Mo wasn't particularly ready to break your neck. That made him a much more attractive human being, but when you were playing at the level that he was playing, when you run against a speaker, when you decide that you're going to be, as a member of the House, a serious presidential candidate, you probably have to have some of that ruthlessness there. And ruthless was never a word that you heard applied to Udall.

JF: It's interesting in the interviews that I've gotten so far, when I ask that question, mostly what I do get is "he was too nice a guy." What everybody quotes is that he was *Too Funny to Be President*, but I feel like what I've been getting as a response more was "he was too nice."

DB: Yes.

JF: Well, with that, I think we can end and let you get back to business.

DB: Okay.

JF: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]