

# An Oral History Interview

with

**JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH**

*conducted by*  
Julie Ferdon

Cambridge, Massachusetts  
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John Kenneth Galbraith

John Kenneth Galbraith was born in Ontario Canada. In 1934 he received a Ph.D. in economics from the University of California, and taught at Harvard University from 1934 until his retirement.

In addition to teaching, Galbraith ran the Office of Price Control during WW II and, during the Kennedy administration, served as Ambassador to India. He has written at least 33 books, including *The Great Crash* (1955), *The Affluent Society* (1958), *The Liberal Hour* (1960), *Made to Last* (1964), and *The New Industrial State* (1967).

JF: This is Tape 38 of the Morris K. Udall Oral History Project. Good afternoon, it's Monday, October 18, 1999, and we're in the Cambridge, Massachusetts home of Professor John Kenneth Galbraith. My name is Julie Ferdon, and I would like to welcome you, Professor Galbraith, and thank you for your participation in this project.

JKG: I'm delighted.

JF: For the most part, I'll ask questions in chronological order.

JKG: Surely.

JF: Let me just begin with some very, very brief sketches of biographical background. You were born, as I understand, on October 15, 1908?

JKG: That is right, a long time ago.

JF: So let's see, belated happy birthday, I guess.

JKG: Thank you very much.

JF: That makes you ninety-one now?

JKG: I've just turned ninety-one.

JF: Congratulations. You were born in Canada, weren't you?

JKG: I was born in Southern Ontario.

JF: And where were you educated?

JKG: Well, I was educated in Canada. I had my first degree in agriculture. I'm, I think, the only long-term member of the Harvard faculty with a preliminary education in animal husbandry. Then I did further work at Berkeley, took my Ph.D. there, and in later times studied at Cambridge, England, as well as the constant study and indoctrination here at Harvard.

JF: You were at Berkeley in the thirties, is that correct?

JKG: I was at Berkeley from 1931 to 1934.

JF: Berkeley now--I just have to ask--Berkeley now has the reputation of being a hotbed of liberalism. Was it, in the thirties?

JKG: Oh, absolutely! Berkeley, the students, I mean, graduate students at Berkeley--not the undergraduates, but the graduate students in the social sciences--were either socialists or communists. Nobody was so erratic as to suppose that the current system in the depths of the Great

Depression, had any future. Being from Canada, I stood slightly apart from the more doctrinaire students, which probably helped me in later McCarthy days. But I shared the general view that there was no hope for capitalism.

JF: And did you go directly into teaching from there?

JKG: I taught for a year at Berkeley--or more precisely, at Davis, which was then part of Berkeley. That was my third year there. I was handsomely paid at \$1,800 a year. Then one day [I] got a telegram from Harvard offering me an instructorship at \$2,600--wonderful pay in those times--and I took it into the dean, because I intended to stay at Berkeley, but I thought that might get me an even greater increase in pay. And he looked at the telegram, reflected for a moment, and said, "You're not worth that to us, Galbraith--take it!" So my time at Berkeley came to an end.

JF: Well, since then, in addition to teaching, you have published at least thirty-three books.

JKG: I do a little writing every afternoon. I feel nervously disoriented unless I do.

JF: Good! You've even written a novel.

JKG: Mostly I don't think of matters until I'm forced to do so for the purpose of writing.

JF: In addition to being probably the most widely-read and best-known economist in America, you also served as ambassador to India, and as advisor to a number of presidents, beginning with Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

JKG: I wasn't an advisor to Roosevelt, particularly, but I was in charge of wartime price control. I was deputy administrator of the Office of Price Administration, in charge of price control. That, I might say parenthetically, was my major job of my lifetime. You could lower a price in the Great Republic without my permission, but you couldn't raise the price. I started with a staff of seven, and ended with some 15,000--I don't know exactly how many. (JF: My!) My life in terms of power, has been downhill ever since! (Ferdon chuckles)

JF: I don't think a lot of people would agree with you on that. Your most recent book, published just this year, 1999, and entitled *Name Dropping*, a wonderful title--in that book you recount your impressions of a number of influential and great people that you've had the pleasure of meeting and working firsthand with. We're here today to record your memories of someone who was not included in that book, Congressman Morris K. Udall, and to a lesser extent, his brother Stewart Udall. In 1954, while you were, I believe, teaching at Harvard, Stewart Udall was elected to Congress from Arizona. Did you know Stewart at all when he was in Congress?

JKG: Oh, I knew them both. There's a certain distance between Washington and Cambridge, but I was then associated with fairly active Democratic politics, including ADA, Americans for Democratic Action, and that brought me into touch with both of the Udalls. I remember them in more or less equal terms. Mo, I suppose I knew better than Stewart, but my recollection is virtually the same of both of them: two men that I admire very much, and with whom I became, I think it's

fair to say, a good friend.

JF: Do you recall when you first met Stewart?

JKG: Not in the least.

JF: How about in 1960, when John Fitzgerald Kennedy ran for president, you were very much involved in his campaign, and Stewart led the Arizona delegation. He worked on the campaign, but also led the Arizona delegation at the convention. Do you remember ever crossing paths during the campaign?

JKG: We certainly crossed paths during that time. But this was an intense time for me, because I was not only active in the campaign, but with carrying on my teaching at Harvard. So I encountered, at one time or another, the whole election community. But I have no strong recollection of any particular meeting with Stewart.

JF: Backing up just a little bit, am I correct that you did some speech writing for Roosevelt during the 1940 campaign?

JKG: I tell about that in the book, yes. And how relaxed we were in those days: I was on the public payroll of the National Defense Advisory Commission. We did the speech writing in a suite of rooms in the Commerce Department, and it never occurred to us that there was anything improper about it! (Ferdon chuckles)

JF: Things have changed, haven't they?

JKG: The moral tone has become better in some few matters.

JF: Yes. In 1961, John Kennedy moved into the White House, and you left for India to become ambassador. Stewart Udall became secretary of Interior, and that same year, 1961, Mo was elected to take his brother's place in the U.S. Congress. Do you recall what the economic and political climate was in 1961, when Mo was elected?

JKG: Well, this is an important matter. In 1960, as late as 1960, we were still in the aftermath of the Roosevelt Era and the Great Depression, and with a much stronger liberal commitment than the pre-Roosevelt times, of course, or since. And so there was a large community of liberals--of which the two brothers were very much a part--all of whom were in constant communication. I saw a good deal of the Udalls in those days as, and I use the word advisedly, part of a larger family group.

JF: Do you recall what your first impressions of Morris and/or Stewart were?

JKG: Perfectly, yeah. Good-looking, articulate, intelligent, liberal, from the West.

JF: Which one are you describing, Stewart or Morris?

JKG: Both of them. I think in those days probably, my recollection is, that I came to know Mo better than Stewart. But on the other hand, Stewart and I were both in the Kennedy administration.

JF: In 1963, after the assassination of President Kennedy, you returned to this country, and I believe returned to Harvard.

JKG: No, I was back before then. I came back in the summer of 1963.

JF: Okay, and you returned to Harvard to teach?

JKG: Well, I worked for a few weeks in the White House on some special matters for Kennedy, and then returned that autumn to teaching.

JF: Later in the sixties, you openly broke from President Johnson on the issue of the Vietnam War and became an active supporter of his rival, Eugene McCarthy. In 1967, Mo Udall became one of the first in Congress to speak out against the Vietnam War, which was, one, early in the game, and two, a little more difficult because his brother was in the cabinet then. Do you recall when he did that at all? Were you aware of it?

JKG: Oh, very much. This was a very sad time. I regard Lyndon Johnson--and I'm, as we talk, about to give a lecture at the LBJ Library on this--as one of the great and perhaps underestimated presidents of the century. No president had a stronger commitment to the American underclass, and along with that, did more about it. So as we look back at our consciousness of the poor, and our consciousness of civil rights, it turns predominantly on Lyndon Johnson. These were his great initiatives. But his orientation was to domestic matters and not to foreign policy. He was subject to the advice of people who presumed to have a closer knowledge of foreign policy and military policy, and thus the Vietnam disaster. Eventually that became, for many of us, a dominant consideration. Thousands of young people were getting killed, it was an involvement that had no chance of success, an involvement that was irrelevant. The difference between a Communist jungle and a Communist village economy and a democratic or capitalist jungle and village economy is irrelevant. Along with others, I made that a major issue, and came to the support of Gene McCarthy, who, I might tell you, announced his candidacy here in the very room we're talking.

JF: Oh, is that right?!

JKG: That brought, of course, a break, with LBJ, which I enormously regretted, because as a conscientious, effective liberal, he had very few equals in this century.

JF: Before Mo announced his opposition to the war, did he ask your advice, or tell you that he was going to?

JKG: We certainly talked about it. I never kept a diary, except for the years that I was in India, and I have no recollection of specific meetings, but I do recall talking with Mo and finding him a very sympathetic ally.

JF: How would you imagine Lyndon Johnson took the news when Mo came out against the war when his brother was still in the cabinet?

JKG: Well, he would certainly have been unhappy. He didn't leave me in any doubt that he was unhappy when I broke on the war. I was serving on a commission on poverty, and Johnson's reaction was to give me more time to teach at Harvard. (Ferdon chuckles)

JF: The following year, in 1968, Mo challenged the seniority system in Congress by running against Speaker of the House John McCormick. And then the following year he ran for majority leader against Hale Boggs. He lost, obviously, both times. Did you follow the leadership battles in the House at all then, were you aware of those races?

JKG: I followed it, sure, because after all, John McCormick was a local boy, native son.

JF: I'd forgotten about that.

JKG: But I was never involved. It was something that I read about, enjoyed, but did not participate in any way. It had no relevance to me.

JF: So you didn't have any particular opinions of a young whipper-snapper running for majority leader after only seven years in Congress?

JKG: These were matters to be decided in the United States Congress in all of its eccentricity.

JF: (chuckles) Well put! In 1971, you supported George McGovern. Did you actively work on his campaign?

JKG: Oh, sure, I campaigned for George. I had a slight interruption because in the early autumn, the early part of that campaign, I was then president of the American Economics Association, and went with a delegation--the first such delegation--to Communist China for several weeks, and that took me out of the campaign. But it was, needless to say, an interesting departure.

JF: I know Mo supported Edmund Muskie during that race, until the convention. In 1974, Mo announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination in New Hampshire. Do you remember at that time what your thoughts were about Mo's candidacy?

JKG: Oh, perfectly. I was, sometime that spring, or sometime that year--I'm not sure when it was--in Washington. Over my life I've been quite frequently in Washington. And Mo came to see me at the Hay-Adams Hotel; told me he was going to run, and what would be my reaction. And my reaction was that he would have my wholehearted support, which had helped some people in the past, and had been unquestionably damaging to others.

JF: Why Mo?

JKG: I was joking!

JF: (chuckles) I realize that. Why Mo? Why not some of the other liberal candidates like Birch Bayh or Frank Church or Fred Harris? There were a number of them running then.

JKG: I would gladly have accepted quite a few others, but Mo was the most articulate, committed, visible--the best prospect.

JF: Now, what was the--I can't think of a better person to ask--what was the economic climate around 1974, 1975, 1976, when Mo ran?

JKG: Well, it wasn't bad at that time, but Mo would continue the New Deal Keynesian tradition, which puts the government in a position of responsibility to stabilize the economy. And we saw eye-to-eye on such matters.

JF: Your colleague here at Harvard, Archibald Cox, also endorsed Mo. Did you have anything to do with that, were you involved in that?

JKG: I didn't have anything to do with that. Archie shares my good judgement. (Ferdon chuckles)

JF: He's been teaching here since 1946 or something, at least, hasn't he?

JKG: No, I joined the Harvard Faculty in 1934.

JF: Okay, and I think he joined in the forties sometime, so you've been colleagues a long time.

JKG: He's a relatively young man by my standards.

JF: Did you actively work on Mo's campaign?

JKG: No.

JF: Did you do any issue papers or anything like that?

JKG: I may have sent some letters of advice and counsel, which would be in the archives, but I was not an active figure.

JF: Your son, James K. Galbraith, is currently an economist with the LBJ School of Public Affairs in Texas. As I understand it, he wrote some economic programs or agendas for Mo for the 1976 campaign. Was that something you encouraged him to do?

JKG: I have three sons, all of whom function independently of my encouragement. That was James' own initiative, not mine.

JF: So he came by his good judgement naturally. (chuckles)

JKG: That's right, a matter of inheritance.

JF: Eventually Mo and the other liberal candidates lost the Massachusetts primary to the more conservative senator from Washington, Scoop Jackson. In fact, I believe it was Jackson and then Mo and then Wallace after him, and then Carter. How did that happen in a traditionally liberal state, in fact the only state that McGovern won?

JKG: I don't know. The details of that election are dim in my memory, but not very happy.

JF: You have a very unique perspective on campaigns and candidates, having been involved in so many presidential campaigns in one form or another, starting with Franklin Roosevelt and Adlai Stevenson, Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, Mo Udall. From that perspective, looking at Mo Udall, how would you compare and contrast the man, the candidate, the campaign? I realize that's sort of a compound question, if you want me to break it down.

JKG: No, it's a good question. Mo Udall was certainly fully on a par with the other candidates. The difference was that he came from a part of the country and a state with a much smaller base, and was in some sense less widely known through the country. I never quite understood why it was, but while somebody like Kennedy could pick up a national audience--or Adlai Stevenson--that was a major problem for Mo. He was great in Arizona and great in the Mountain States, no doubt, but for better or worse, that's an area where the population is very slim, and he didn't have an equality of opportunity with somebody who came from, for example, Massachusetts or New York.

JF: Do you think his being a congressman as opposed to a senator would have some effect on that?

JKG: Oh, no doubt, yes, I think somebody who was well-established in the Senate had a greater visibility. But I don't think that is the full explanation.

JF: You mentioned in your book that traditionally the leaders of our country have come from the East Coast or from New England, and it seems only in recent times that it's spread out more across the country. I wonder if that might have had something to do with it, but then the person who came on top was Jimmy Carter, governor of Georgia. He was even less known, or at least as poorly known.

JKG: Well, this is an interesting question. For a long time, the populous Northeast--including, of course, New York--had a dominant role in national and presidential politics. Somebody like Jimmy Carter, coming out of the then densely Democratic South, probably had a better chance than somebody from the Far West, from the Mountain States. But one shouldn't put too much emphasis on that. That could well be an oversimplification. A little later on, another great western statesman, so to speak, namely Barry Goldwater, briefly overcame that handicap.

JF: Yes, he did. What was your impression of Jimmy Carter, the man and the president?

JKG: Well, Jimmy Carter was, and is, a very good citizen, and a very committed figure in the

presidency. He suffered overwhelmingly from bad economic advice, which was orthodox in principle and disastrous in political effect. There was the deep notion that by high interest rates, and a rigorous budget, you could stop inflation--not realizing that that also meant unemployment and stagnant incomes, which was politically far worse. Ronald Reagan came along with no knowledge of economics of any kind, and improved on disastrous advice. I say this with some vigor, because I was involved with the people who were, to some extent, with the people who were advising Jimmy Carter, and I had a full feeling of the disaster of that advice--the disastrous character of that advice.

JF: Did you ever work in Jimmy Carter's campaigns?

JKG: No. Oh, I may have made a speech or two, but no, I was beyond the age of serious campaigning already then. I did have some discussion with Fritz Mondale and Stewart Eisenstat and may have made a speech or two, but I wasn't, in any sense, a major figure.

JF: What kind of president do you think Mo Udall would have made?

JKG: Oh, he would have been excellent. I would be absolutely unqualified on that. He was intelligent, compassionate, and effective. Those are three things that are very important.

JF: After losing at the Democratic Convention, Mo went on to become chairman of the House Interior Committee. Did you keep touch with him at all after the campaign?

JKG: Not on issues. We encountered each other politically from time to time, were certainly good friends, but like many other people in Massachusetts, I leave the urgent issues of the interior to the westerners. (Ferdon chuckles)

JF: Do you remember staying in touch with Stewart at all?

JKG: Not closely, but we met from time to time, but nothing close. As we talk, I saw Stewart just a few nights ago, and was surprised at how long it had been since I saw him. I shook hands warmly with him and said, "What a great thing it was to see you, Mo." (laughter)

JF: And he said?

JKG: I quickly corrected myself.

JF: Mo was officially diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1979, but a number of people around him felt that he started to show the symptoms of the disease maybe even as early as the campaign. Did you see anything of that sort? When did you become aware that he had Parkinson's?

JKG: I'm not at all sure, but I came, like everybody else, to be strongly and sadly aware that Mo was a sick man, and that this very disabling disease was a poorly arranged end to his career.

I'm going to have to excuse myself very soon.

JF: Okay, I have two more questions. We talk a lot about Mo's strengths--what were his greatest weaknesses?

JKG: I never thought of any--I didn't. He had, for me, all the strengths of a first-rate political leader. That was why the onset of Parkinson's was so sad, because it afflicted somebody who otherwise had a great round of strengths.

JF: What do you think in the final analysis will be Mo's legacy?

JKG: Oh, I wouldn't nail it down to any one. I would say that he was a first-rate public figure who came up through the system with intelligence, integrity, and a very strong reputation from the people who knew him best. I never, over all the years, heard a liberal make an adverse comment on Mo. I assume conservatives did, but I don't bother with them.

JF: I imagine they did. You've been quoted as saying, "Nothing is as admirable in politics as a short memory." And I'd have to say your long memory has been extremely admirable. Thank you very much for your time today.

JKG: Well, thank you for coming. It's been wonderful to recall all these matters, in the limited way a political figure--which I suppose I should call myself--in a limited way one recalls what one hopes not to remember. (Ferdon laughs)

JF: With that, we'll end. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]