

An Oral History Interview

with

Alan K. Simpson (part 2)

Cambridge, Massachusetts

conducted by
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AKS: Well, I was on a plane trip or something, and he was really--you know, this is a corkscrew and all the things that go with it.

JF: This was Mo?

AKS: Yes. It's a terrible disease. And the hand. But it was long before that.... He didn't tell anybody, he wasn't going to tell anyone, but if you knew Parkinson's like I had, watching Dad for fifteen years.... But I figured if he didn't want to say anything about it, I wouldn't, although there came a time when I said, "Now, Mo, my old man had that stuff, still has it, and he's eighty now"--or however old he was. And I said, "Don't forget, he'd want me to tell you this story--in fact, he told me to tell you this story. He said, 'When you get up and people look at your hand and they're seein' it bobbin' around, crawlin' up that invisible rope, you just say, "Now, see, you're all lookin' at

my hand there, and I don't want you to feel sorry for me, because I'm feelin' sorry enough for myself. That's my drinkin' hand, and I'm spillin' more than I drink.'" "Well, hell," Mo said, "Jesus, I'm gonna use that!" And he used it a lot! (laughs) He really put it to work.

JF: That's his kind of joke.

AKS: Oh, sure! And when Janet Reno, I found out Janet Reno, I called her, I said, "I got one for ya', Janet." She said, "Oh, God, I like that!" But she's not the same as Mo Udall. She's a woman who's guarded herself, and I think a great person, I like her very much. Anyway, Parkinson's is a sonofabitch, 'cause you look like you're out of it, you get the mask expression, your jaw drops, your mobility, your rigidity, the stagger steps, and your mind is just as sharp as it was when you were forty-five. Dad says, "It's a goddamn prison. I'm locked in a prison, and my mind is just as agile, I feel like I could go throw a football. And I'm just in here."

JF: He could communicate that to you?

AKS: Oh, yes! Speak and.... Even when he was feeding himself, peas flying all over the place, and the whole works--a little fork tied to his arm. And of course that was the hard part for Mo, because people who don't know people with Parkinson's, they see a guy they care about, with a head just bobbing and going around, and when you get excited, it's seven times worse. And talking. And they're embarrassed to go up and say "How are you?" or "What are you doin'?" because they're flopping all over the place. And Mo said, "Boy, your dad was right, this is a prison," because people don't know how to handle it. So that was the tough part for him, the decline. But Norma was right there--she was there, and the kids. As I say, I don't know about all the domestic stuff that goes with it.

JF: Did there come a time where you thought that Mo should retire?

AKS: No, because I never ever told my dad. My dad was in the Senate and decided to retire. (someone enters the room) Oh, my God! that's the woman I've been living with!

Mrs. Ann Simpson: Are you doing an interview?

AKS: We're doing an interview about Mo Udall. (introduces his wife, Ann; tape paused)

JF: Okay, we were talking about whether Mo should have retired earlier.

AKS: No, you have to.... The biggest thing for a Parkinsonian victim is their self-esteem. And if he thought that he should stay, I would never have advised him, because I knew that his mental acumen would be the same. But I also knew that his leadership ability would never be the same, because they [i.e., other people (Tr.)] can't handle that. They can't handle the startling effects of it. But Dad was beginning to.... You know, he had arthritis plus Parkinson's. So he retired in 1966, and it was good, because he lived another twenty-five years. So I could see, knowing how congresspeople are, and politicians, the young Turks and the young wolves lay in the rushes to eat the old and the disabled as they fall--like any society. So even though they loved Mo, those guys down underneath [were] saying, "Geez, I think, you know, Mo's not effective." They'd go around, "I think I should be chairman," and "We love Mo now, of course," "Oh, he's a wonder, but you know, he's kinda sick."

JF: Was there much of that going on?

AKS: I don't know, but I hunch it was, because it went on with my dad. The young Turks, waiting to replace the old boars, B-O-A-R-S.

JF: (chuckles) Did you keep in touch with Mo at all after he did retire in 1991?

AKS: In the sense of going.... When he was retired and settled in his life, to whatever degree that was, I didn't see a lot of him where he must have just been--before he went to the Veterans' Home. I don't know how long that was.

JF: He was in the Veteran' Home at the time he retired.

AKS: Oh, really? I'd forgotten.

JF: He fell down the stairs in his home.

AKS: While he was in the Congress?

JF: While he was in the Congress (AKS: That's right.) and was forced to go to a nursing home and basically just never came out again--submitted a letter of resignation.

AKS: Okay. See, I'd forgotten.

JF: In fact, Norma took the letter of resignation over in 1991.

AKS: Who took it over?

JF: Norma Udall did.

AKS: From the hospital. Oh, well, that answers that question. I thought there was an interim. Well, then, if that was the case, then I suppose I went over once every few months. I had a car, big deal. Assistant leader, you know, drive over and see Mo and read the paper. I'd go creeping in the back door--I knew how to get in there. Those were times when he would respond. He would be saying something that you knew he was saying, and because of Pop's Parkinson's, I could pick up pieces of it, but I could see the twinkle in his eye. So I suppose, I don't know.... McCain was amazing. John would go in there a lot. I think John probably went once a month. I don't know who else went in. One or two times Norma was there. I mean, she was there all the time, but one or two times when I was there, she was there, so she must have been there most of the time, or tried to. But then of course it became disabling for her, because they're just laying there. But the last time was, I don't know, several months before he died. (chuckles) He was laying there, eyes shut, television going. That's typical, the nurses all turn it on. I walked up and I said, "I want to tell you somethin', Udall. I'm gonna turn that television set off and I'm gonna tell you the shittiest story you've heard in a year." And that was (laughs) a little twinkle. I grabbed his hand and held his hand and told him this outrageous story, and he slobbered, which is the way the Old Man used to respond. When there was something to respond to, that was a gland that worked, and there was this great trickle, and the eye kind of welled up. I could feel his hand, you know. I said, "You got that one, didn't ya'?! Udall, you got that?" And this little pump. But wow, that's a tough disease, and I couldn't have handled it if I hadn't had a dad that had gone through it, too--because I wouldn't have gone by. I wouldn't have gone by, because I would have thought, "Jesus, this

guy's gone." But that was the last years of Parkinson's--the last two or three years when you've gone to the bed. It was terrible. So I didn't go again. It must not have been much longer.

JF: Do we have time for two more questions?

AKS: Yes, then I'd better get on my way, too.

JF: What is the seniority system? You chaired your own committee within two years of coming to the Senate, and then were Senate majority leader or whip within six years. Mo, in the generation before, had tried for Speaker of the House when he'd been there seven years, and he was practically a laughing stock for having done so. Did you and he ever compare notes on the seniority system?

AKS: Well, yes, anybody who'd been there used to laugh. I mean, here I was, two years there, and the Republicans take over, and suddenly I'm the chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, replacing Al Cranston! Mo came by and said, "How the hell did you get that?!" I said, "Just [inaudible] at the right time, the right place." And then when I was elected assistant majority leader of the Senate the same day that Tom Foley was elected assistant majority leader of the House, somebody took our picture--the press got us together--and Mo wandered up and he said, "The country's in deep trouble!" (laughter) Well, Ann can remember many times, too. Oh, yes, [Mo] used to kid me, he'd say, "Jesus! What the hell? What is this?!" I'd say, "Well, it's just brilliance and skill rising like cream to the surface. That's what it is! Don't you understand this? This is justifiable. This is eloquence justified and rewarded." And he'd say, "Oh, bullshit!" (laughter) He was good, because he could blow all the highfalutin stuff out of your sails. His charm was an earthiness. I can only imagine him campaigning, just squeezing hands and telling stories. Like my dad.

I remember my dad told him a great one, or maybe I did. Dad was shaking hands at the plant gate, and some guy said, "Get out of here, Simpson! I wouldn't vote for you if you were Jesus Christ!" And Dad said, "If I were Jesus Christ, you wouldn't be in my precinct!" and just went and shook the next guy's hand. And that was Mo! That's just the way he was.

JF: We talk a lot about Mo's strengths. What were his weaknesses?

AKS: A weakness that to others would be a weakness is a strength to Mo's people. Some would accuse that his weakness was his trust of others. That's not a weakness. That's a strength, that his weakness might be that he was too kind and never went for the jugular vein. That's not a weakness, that's a strength. That he was, instead of putting the boot on the neck when he had them down, he should have just put the squeeze. That's not a weakness, that's a strength. So every weakness you can define in Mo is a strength to the rest of us.

JF: What do you think his legacy will be?

AKS: Well, you saw it that day, if you were there in Washington--the people that came forward to speak, and the family, and the reception, and the packed room, and the love and affection. If we can all remember--and thank heaven there's an award that goes with it, and I won that award. It [has] a cherished place in my home. Something about how you're given the award for skill in legislative endeavors with use of humor. I don't remember quite the words. And it's the Mo Udall Award, it's given every year to the congressman or senator who exemplifies the best in legislative skill or ability with the use of humor. And

the legacy is always.... And now that son wanders around in there like a specter. I mean, he's a vision, it's spooky!

JF: It is, isn't it? (chuckles)

AKS: Yes. And so there he is, and it will always be in a tight situation, a nasty situation, somebody will say, "Maybe we ought to do it like Mo Udall used to do." That would be good to remember how Mo Udall used to do it. And that's a legacy that is known in the Congress. "Remember how Mo would have done that. Would he have been fair? Would he have been helpful, unselfish?"

JF: What do you think he would have thought about this Congress?

AKS: He would have been frustrated, but he would have made fun of it, too, like Will Rogers. Somebody would have had a press conference, and he'd have had some crazy tilt on Gingrich or Hastert or even one of his own people. You know, he took on his own, too, in the midst of stupidity and what he perceived as, not stupidity, but just overly partisan gimmickry--crap where you just waste man hours trying to figure out how to diddle Bill Clinton or diddle the other side. Those things never meant anything to me or to him. And I think he'd have stepped up to the podium and said, "Well...." He probably had some story about how somebody saw this, and it'd be absurd, and it would be right, and he'd portray it as absurd. Anyway.... But to me, it was a story for every occasion, a belly-buster to break up a tense situation, and a true affection, and a self-deprecating humor which was not only charming, but beautiful to perceive. And when I came back from that night in Arizona when Barry and I and Mark Russell--I brought back the text of my remarks and read it to him.

JF: That was at the "Tribute to a Giant" in Tucson?

AKS: That's right. And I had written those out, and that was all mine. I came back and read them to him. Shit, he loved it! (laughs) He was able to respond. "You could have done this...." or whatever. I was reading his responses through the filter of a father that had Parkinson's. So others would say, "I went to see Mo, and there was no response." Well, when I went to see Mo, there was response because I knew what a response is from a Parkinsonian. So anyway, he was a rich part of my legislative life.

JF: That sounds like a good note to end on.

AKS: And there's the great story of "What do you believe?" You've heard that one? You haven't heard that one?!

JF: I probably have.

AKS: Well, that was the one where he said, "You ever hear the story of the sect? They all had their white robes, and they're up there on the river bank, the elders, and they got this new young recruit, and they took him out into the water and grabbed him by the head and pushed him down in the water and said, 'Does you believe? What do you believe, son? What do you believe?' The kid came up, water streamin' out of his nose. Grabbed him again, some big burly elder with a white sheet, pushed him down in the water. He came up burbling. 'What do you believe, boy? What do you believe now?' And three or four of those, and the kid came up and said, 'I believe you sonsofbitches are tryin' to drown me!'" (laughter) And he had hundreds and hundreds of those. They were all classics of his time. And he loved the story about the governor, you know, the old boy going down the road with everything he owned in the back of this

pickup truck in the twenties. This guy, highway patrolman stopped him and said, "Hey, old fellah, you're goin' kinda fast there, aren't ya'?" He said, "No, I didn't think I was." He said, "Well, you were. In fact, you're speedin'." He said, "I can't believe it! Can't possibly be!" He said, "You were. Haven't you got a governor on that truck?" He said, "Nope, that's manure you smell." (laughter) And hundreds more of this rich kind like that. Enough!

JF: Well, thank you very much for participating.

AKS: You're very welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]