

# An Oral History Interview

With

**FRED HARRIS (part 3)**

*conducted by*  
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### Fred Harris

Fred Harris represented Oklahoma in the United States Senate from 1964-73. In 1976 he sought the Democratic presidential nomination as a populist candidate. Like Morris K. Udall, he was unsuccessful.

Following the 1976 campaign Harris joined the faculty of the University of New Mexico where he teaches political science. He is the author of several books, including two mystery novels.

JF: We're now on Tape 43 with Senator Fred Harris. You've now had experience in two presidential campaigns. How have things changed in the presidential races? How do you think they should change?

FH: The major changes in the amount of money involved, soft money, and independent expenditures. Bill Clinton, in 1996, prior to the convention, raised some \$30 million in soft money, and spent it in attacks on Dole, who was going to be the Republican nominee, but did it within the law, so that.... Soft money is money that is used for, in that case, so-called issues--advertising where you don't say "vote for somebody" or "vote against somebody," by the party. And it is unlimited as to source, you can get it from corporate money or whatever; and unlimited as to amount. He got it in huge chunks, \$250,000, \$100,000. That is, I think, a very alarming development in presidential politics. And independent expenditures, which . . . The first one, soft money is allowed by ruling earlier by the Federal Election Commission. *Buckley versus Vallejo* was a decision in which the Supreme Court said that you can't limit expenditures--they're different from contributions, because of freedom of speech in political campaigns. And you can't limit, therefore, what a rich person spends on his or her own campaign, and you can't limit what a noncollusive independent source spends for or against a candidate. All those things have caused us a lot of problem with the increased influence of money. So that's the main thing. Still, however, with federal campaign public financing for president, it would be easier for me to run for president today, than it would be to run for the United States Senate.

JF: Is that right?

FH: And also, very fortuitously, it's still true that you can run for president sort of one state at a time. It's kind of like running for governor a county at a time, and if you do well in the first county, then you raise a little money and run in the next county. That's still true, running for president. So I like all that, but the soft money and independent expenditures, and the rich candidate who doesn't take public money, like [H.] Ross Perot or like George W. Bush, can spend unlimited amounts too. So those are a great problem, but otherwise things are about like they were.

JF: You removed yourself from the race not long, a couple of days, I think, after Wisconsin. How long after withdrawing did you move to New Mexico?

FH: Almost at once. I had always assumed that when I could live anywhere I wanted to, I'd move to New Mexico. I started coming here in the fifties, vacationing. I came at least once a year, every year thereafter. I'd lived in Oklahoma because that's where I grew up, and I lived in Washington because that's where the Senate met. But I'd always assumed that at some point, when I could live wherever I wanted to, I'd move to New Mexico. So when that race was over, I decided this was the time to "get out of Dodge." Others in my campaign did the same thing. Jim Hightower, who's from Texas, thought it was time to go back home, go back to the grass roots. And he went back to Texas. So I moved out here in 1976. While I was still in Washington, I had an offer from the University of New Mexico to join the Political Science Department, and that fit exactly what I wanted to do. I was writing a book, too. So I came on out here. I liked this place better than anywhere I've been in the world, and I still do. The first year I came here, I borrowed a guy's cabin up on the Pecos River east of Santa Fe, on the Sangre de Christo Mountains, and made that headquarters. I went up to Taos

Pueblo for the first time. When I was in the second grade, we made Taos Pueblo. We went to an opera, Carmen, at Santa Fe. We went to the green corn dance at Santa Domingo Pueblo, which must have had 700 dancers. We camped at Bandelier National Monument with those cave dwellings and so forth. And I thought, "This is the most exotic place I've ever been." And it still is.

JF: I would have to agree.

FH: I like the mountain hiking, and I like the long-distance biking, and the cross-country skiing and all that. So I came right on out here as soon as I was free to do so after being out of the presidential campaign.

JF: What classes do you teach here?

FH: I always teach two courses. One is an introduction to American government, which is a large introductory course. Now we let it go to 160. I used to let it get bigger than that, up to 250 students. And then I teach a course on Congress, which we're letting go to about 80, so rather large courses.

JF: Have you remained politically active?

FH: Yes. I lately was the state chair of the Democratic Party here in New Mexico in 19[98] and part of 19[99]. I was trying to help get a young guy I liked a lot, a former mayor here in Albuquerque, Martin Chavez, elected governor. We didn't make it, we couldn't beat the incumbent Republican. But we did get Tom Udall elected to Congress, which was a good thing. We elected all Democratic statewide officers, and reelected a majority to the state house of representatives. Now I'm the state chair of Common Cause.

JF: You are state chair now?

FH: Yes.

JF: And as we discussed earlier, you're running for national board.

FH: Well, I'm a nominee. The committee nominated me.

JF: What are your impressions of Tom Udall, who is Stewart Udall's son, who just was elected in 1998.

FH: I like Tom Udall. I've known him a long time. My son-in-law, Manuel Tijerina, who's now a Democratic candidate for the statewide office of Court of Appeals, was his chief deputy for eight years as attorney general. And so I've seen Tom a lot and know a great deal about him. I think he's like Stewart, he really feels very deeply about the issues. He's a good progressive. He's honest. And I think he's just like a duck who's found the water, in going to Washington, D.C. I think he's just found a fit for him.

JF: Yes. And with Mark Udall there as well.

FH: And his cousin Mark also is there, of course.

JF: Do you see Stewart Udall at all? Do you ever socialize with him?

FH: Yes, I see him fairly frequently at Democratic functions, primarily.

JF: As a final question I always ask the same thing. In a lot of these interviews we tend to speak about Mo's strengths. I wonder if we could flip the tables, and if there are any weaknesses of Mo that you are aware of?

FH: No, none occur to me. I don't think of them. One thing that I think would have been a really helpful thing to Mo, would have been if his family history had been more highlighted while he was in public office. I only learned it later, from Stewart, about how they grew up in that little town that was half Mormon and half Hispanic, just about, I guess. That whole background. Stewart, for example--and I've talked several times about this--he actually worked horses, as I did, as a kid, and grew up like that, in that rural area and small-town background. I think all of that would have been very good for people to know more about Mo. It would have made him, I think, more understandable and human. I think there was, perhaps, a kind of slight remoteness about him--not nearly so much, say, as with a guy like Walter Mondale. Mondale was--and is--the funniest and the most personable person when you see him, but he could never bring himself to reveal much about himself or his history personally. Most politicians can't avoid putting almost any issue they discuss in a personal context. "I remember when my father was ill and he couldn't pay his bills," or whatever. Mondale was just almost rigidly opposed to your knowing that much about him personally. Mo wasn't like that, but I think that he would have profited more had we known more, had the public known more about his background, and his family, and the way he was raised, and where he was raised and so forth.

JF: That's an interesting observation. So what's next for you?

FH: I'm just doing the (laughs) same old thing, I don't know?. I really like teaching, and I've been doing this a long time now, since 1976. I started in the fall of 1976. And I continue to be very much involved in politics. I'm always on somebody's steering committee, running for governor or whatever. And then lately I've gotten into fiction writing. I had always thought that at this stage of my life I'd write fiction. I've written a bunch of other books, but now I'm into writing fiction.

JF: Well, I hope you stick to mystery writing; I'm really enjoying it!

FH: My publisher's Harper Collins, and I've got a great editor there, a wonderful person. After this first book, *Coyote Revenge*, they wanted me to write next a political novel like *All the King's Men*, which they said you can set, if you want to, in 1930s Oklahoma. What I'd done, back before I started writing fiction, I did a lot of research about the thirties in Oklahoma, and had intended to write a nonfiction book, which I was thinking about calling *Before the World Changed*, because things changed so; families scattered, everything changed at the end of World War II. Well, when I finally turned my hand to fiction, I used that sort of stuff in this first novel. They said, "We'll get

back to Okie Dunn," who's the protagonist in this *Coyote Revenge*, "but write the political novel first." So I said, "Well, no, let me write one more mystery next," so I did. It's called *Easy Pickin's*, comes out in November, as I told you, and then they said, "Well, okay, now write the political novel. So I talked them into this kind of a compromise. I'd write one more next of the Okie Dunn mysteries. It's called *Early Returns*, because he's running for sheriff--he's appointed first--and then I'll turn my hand to the political novel, which we're now calling *Bedfellows*, so I'm on another two-book deal with Harper Collins.

JF: That's exciting. Does Tony Hillerman, who's also here at UNM . . . .

FH: Hillerman I see all the time, of course.

JF: Did he give you some pointers?

FH: Yes, and he's just a wonderful person. He's from Oklahoma, too, originally.

JF: I didn't realize that. That sounds wonderful.

FH: Here's a funny story for you about this blurb--you know, he wrote a blurb--authors write blurbs for each other. One time there was a bunch of us having lunch, all writers, and I said to them--Tony was sitting next to me and this other author by the name of Norm Zollinger, very famous here in New Mexico--sitting next to him--he just died lately. And I said to some of these others, "Tony Hillerman wrote a really nice blurb for me on my book *Coyote Revenge*." Norm Zollinger, teasing Tony, spoke up and said, "Tony Hillerman is a blurb whore. He would write a blurb for the Albuquerque phone book! (laughter) But," he said, "Tony, Fred, has got just one rule: He will either read your book, or he'll write a blurb, but he will not do both." (laughter) So Tony wrote a great blurb for me, but I'm not sure if he ever read the book! (laughter)

JF: Well, thank you so much for participating in this project.

FH: Well, yes! I couldn't imagine that you had that many questions, because I wasn't thinking about talking about anything other than Mo.

JF: This has been excellent. Thank you.

FH: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]