An Oral History Interview

with

Henry S. Reuss (part 1)

Belvedere, California
July 10, 2001

conducted by
Julie Ferdon

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JF: This is Tape 50 of the Morris K. Udall Oral History Project. Today is Tuesday, July 10, 2001, and we’re in beautiful Belvedere, California, at the home of former Wisconsin Congressman Henry S. Reuss. I’m Julie Ferdon, and I’d like to thank you, Congressman Reuss, for participating in this project.

HR: Thank you for coming.

JF: If I may, I would like to start at the beginning, with some biographical information. We’ll start at the very beginning: Where and when were you born?

HR: February 22, 1912, Milwaukee.

JF: And you attended Cornell University (HR: Yes.) graduating in 1936?

HR: In ’33—Harvard Law School 1936.

JF: And at Harvard Law School you became the legislative editor of *The Law Review*?

HR: Legislation editor.

JF: Is that where you first got an interest in public policy?

HR: Pretty close to it, in that we had long notes about lots of New Deal legislation, including the…. What act of 1935? Would it have been either the Securities Exchange Act, or—no, the public utility break-up act, whatever it’s official name was.

JF: Was that part of the New Deal?

HR: Yes.

JF: After law school, you returned to Milwaukee and practiced with the law firm of Quarles, Spence, and Quarles. You had some very impressive people there, like Arthur Larson.

HR: Yes, he was a great buddy of mine. I presume he’s still living, at Duke.

JF: He was secretary of Labor under Eisenhower, wasn’t he?

HR: Yes.

JF: And then he became dean of Duke.

HR: And left, and sort of, to his great credit—sort of left the Republican Party. He did a Jim Jeffords, in effect.
JF: I’m assuming he’s the same Arthur Larsen who wrote the huge workers’ compensation treatise?

HR: Yes.

JF: Okay.

HR: Actually, at our law firm, he did a lot of workmen’s compensation work, so he turned out a potboiler later on.

JF: Okay. Well, that’s my field.

HR: Representing which?

JF: Claimants, primarily.

HR: Did you read the little story in my memoirs about my representation of a workman’s comp claimant? (chuckles)

JF: Yes.

HR: My first case.

JF: Yes, it’s quite a field. I’m not sure if he’s passed away, but his son, Lex Larsen, is keeping the treatise going.

HR: Good!

JF: What field of law did you practice?

HR: Well, during the three years in which I spent, ’36-’39, at Quarles, Spence, and Quarles, it was corporate insurance, a bit of family law, whatever a junior associate does. And then after three years, the law business was undergoing the ill effects of Federal Reserve tightening the year before, and the Depression was accelerated. So my future there was very precarious, so I took an exam for a then opening job as assistant corporation counsel for Milwaukee County—that’s the civil side of county business—and enjoyed two years there before I went to Washington.

JF: And you went to Washington to join the Office of Price Administration [OPA]?

HR: Yes.

JF: When was that?

HR: I arrived in January 1941.
JF: What was the purpose of the Office of Price Administration?

HR: To control prices, which we did at the start by picking out various sectors: lumber, oil, and so on, and putting price controls on them. But we soon found out that it didn’t work, that the rest of the economy tilted upwards. And so we put, at the end of 1941, or in early 1942, general maximum price control, which covered everything. Then there were exceptions as need be.

JF: Sounds like maybe you weren’t very popular among business [people].

HR: Among those whose prices were being controlled, that is an understatement. But we were quite popular among the consumer, who alone in our wartime experience, did not suffer from inflation. In fact, he never had it so good—or she.

JF: Was John Kenneth Galbraith working there then?

HR: Yes. I worked very closely with him and remain his staunch friend today.

JF: Had you met him before then?

HR: No.

JF: What were your impressions of him then?

HR: Very favorable: a tall, lanky, fellow who was mainly an agricultural economist from Berkeley. And early in my career at OPA, he and I flew out from Washington to San Francisco, which was then a big trip, to meet with the indignant independent oil producers on whom we had just put a ceiling. So it was Galbraith and me against a hostile army. Meanwhile, he had had a bad night on the plane, which then took like a dozen hours. So I had to bear most of the brunt of this. Our paths have crossed frequently since then—most recently a year ago when my wife and I and Mr. And Mrs. Ken Galbraith were the guests of his son Jamie, who teaches at the LBJ school in Austin, for a reunion.

JF: In 1943, you joined the army and eventually worked with General Eisenhower’s Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces (HR: Yes.) in London and Paris. Is that, do you think, where your prime interest in foreign policy matters began?

HR: Undoubtedly, yes.

JF: In 1946, you returned to Milwaukee and to the law firm. Around that time, you became interested in politics. As I understand it, you ran for mayor and lost.

HR: In 1948, yes.

JF: What spurred you into politics?
HR: Well, I came back from the war, like so many others—including, I think, various Udalls—imbued with the idea of public service in general, and the avoidance of future wars in particular—wars and depressions. And so it was very natural that I should become interested, and took the first opportunity that presented itself—to wit, running for mayor—in which I came in second.

JF: A tradition, also, of the Udalls—well, of Mo. He was “Second Place Mo” in all the primaries, when he ran for president.

HR: Oh, yeah. We’ll get to that.

JF: Yes, we’ll get to that. In 1948, I believe it was—I may be wrong—you helped to organize the Democratic Organizing Committee in Wisconsin. Reading about that made me think of Mo, who when he would see things that needed changing, he would get to work and start doing what needed to be done. My impression is that’s what you were doing in forming the DOC, along with other new Wisconsin Democrats like Patrick Lucey and Gaylord Nelson.

HR: John Reynolds, Jim Doyle, Horace Wilkie.

JF: What was the purpose of that?

HR: The Democratic organization in Wisconsin was held by petty patronage types who didn’t really approve of the New Deal, but held in there. The old progressive organization of the LaFolletts had collapsed, and they, including young Bob [Robert LaFollett, Jr.], had rejoined the Republicans. And young Bob was beaten by McCarthy in ’46.

JF: This was Joe McCarthy?

HR: Joe McCarthy. So that there was a need, particularly in a state like Wisconsin, which had a progressive tradition for a party that represented that tradition. And we obviously weren’t going to join the Republican Party, and so we decided to take over the Democratic—so-called—Party, which in a couple of years we did.

JF: So it wasn’t established as another party.

HR: No, Democratic Organizing Committee.

JF: So it was set up purely to eventually take over the older line Democratic Party?

HR: Yes.

JF: Senator Joe McCarthy was pretty entrenched at that time. I’m just personally curious, what was Senator McCarthy doing in a traditionally liberal state like Wisconsin?
HR: He was a hail fellow well met, graduate of Marquette and it’s law school, and became a circuit judge up in central Wisconsin, his home, where, while I never practiced before him, he had the reputation of being a nice, hard-drinking, down-to-earth, country judge. That’s only after he, in about 1950, that he glommed onto his idea of exposing General Marshall and others as Communists, that he became a menace.

JF: In 1950, you ran unsuccessfully for attorney general, and in 1952….

HR: Yes, in 1950 I won a tough primary, but like all the other Democrats, this was Korea time, and I got creamed in the finals.

JF: Oh. Okay, yeah. So you waited a couple more years, and you ran, I believe, again in another primary, a Democratic primary, to run against McCarthy?

HR: Right. After sounding out various Democratic colleagues, as to whether they wanted to take on McCarthy, and finding that nobody really did, I announced in November 1951, a year before the election, and campaigned very vigorously. There was some antipathy to my candidacy, particularly in Madison, which was the center of the new Democratic Party; and the nice, but not terribly effective Tom Fairchild, who was then the U.S. attorney for the Western District of Wisconsin, entered the race against me in July. The primary was in September. And he won that 95,000 to 93,000 or 94,000. It was very close, but I lost, and I promptly supported him. But he didn’t do very well against McCarthy—I probably wouldn’t have either, but I didn’t enjoy not being in on the final.

JF: Yes, not being able to try, at least.

HR: Yeah.

JF: Now, 1954, two years later, you ran successfully.

HR: Yes. I had meanwhile run for the Milwaukee School Board, and done very well in vote-getting. And so when 1954 came around, and my longtime friend, Congressman Andrew Biemiller, a very liberal Democrat, had, over the past six or eight years, been defeated every second time, then come back—he decided he wasn’t going to run again. So I announced my candidacy, and after brushing off a primary challenge by one of these old-line patronage Democrats, I won the primary, and then beat the McCarthy lieutenant, Charlie Kersten, in November, and arrived in Washington to be sworn in, in January ’55—same as Stewart [Udall].

JF: And where you remained until 1983.

HR: 1983

JF: I was wondering if you were in the same freshman class as Stewart was.
HR: Yes.

JF: When, and under what circumstances, did you first meet Stewart?

HR: Well, I think I met him immediately. We were, and are, kindred spirits. He bought a home in Washington just across the Potomac from our home. We had several exchanges of dinners or other social events, but mainly we were great pals, and I viewed with admiration his pulling the rug out from [under] LBJ in the Arizona Primary, and tossing it to Kennedy, which assured him of what he wanted to be, secretary of Interior, where he did a great job. His book, which he sent me a while ago, with which you must be familiar—Stewart Udall’s book….

JF: Which one is that?

HR: Mainly it had to do with his post-Washington service for the Navajos and so on—mostly unsuccessful, though valiantly attempted. But in that book he revealed that he was violently opposed to the Vietnam War. So he hung on, but only with plenty of internal opposition. I didn’t really know that, but that was interesting.

JF: Do you recall the name of that book? Because I cannot think of the name of it right now.

HR: It’s quite recent, and it ostensibly has to do with his ultimately practically unsuccessful fight to get the Navajos some kind of a large sum from the federal government.

JF: Was this for the radiation [case]?

HR: It’s mainly about that, but it gave enough of his post-Washington career, so you ought to look at it.

JF: I will. I was aware of it. I frankly was not aware it was already out.

HR: Just look under Stewart Udall in the bibliography, and….

JF: I wasn’t aware it was already out, so I definitely will look it up.

HR: I must have it someplace, because he sent it to me, but I don’t know where it is. I couldn’t read it now anyway.

JF: That’s too bad. Now, in 1955, the following year after you were elected, you organized the freshman debates. (HR: Yes, with Stewart.) What were they?

HR: Stewart was heard from very eloquently, as well as at least a dozen of my pals in the new 84th Congress. In general, our pitch was, “Look, we really don’t want a nuclear war.
We ought to try to find some accommodation with the Soviet Union, which would involve the Soviet Union giving up its empire in return for us drawing back in Europe a bit.” Which, incidentally, is precisely what happened in ’89.

Secondly, we oughtn’t to make our Far Eastern policy one of supporting Chiang Kai-shek’s reinvasion of the Chinese mainland. That’s a very poor idea. We ought to give that up. Well, that finally was done in ’73. But it was quite radical stuff at the time. We also were for more foreign aid, and more respect for the U.N. [United Nations]. But it was a debate from which I do not now shrink (laughs) unlike possibly some others.

JF: Some others, especially now, perhaps. And Stewart was quite an active member of this?

HR: Yes, you might look at The Congressional Record, for I think March 14, 1955, to see what he said. But basically, I remember his talking mainly about, “Look, we may be freshmen, but we have a right to be heard. And who better than us freshmen can throw a little new light on old problems?”

JF: That’s so true, too. How often did you meet?

HR: This later developed into the DSG, Democratic Study Group.

JF: Oh, so the freshman debates were the forerunner of the Democratic Study Group?

HR: Yes. The debaters were largely people who later formed and led the DSG, plus a couple or few of non Class of ’84 mildly senior guys, like Gene McCarthy, Metcalfe of Montana—and that’s about it.

JF: And you and Stewart were….

HR: Yes. Also active were Frank Thompson, who later was betrayed by his alcoholism into that disgraceful episode with the FBI bribers, for which he served time and ended his career. Who else were? John Blatnick of Minnesota.

JF: Did the Democratic Study Group basically start where the freshman seminars left off, and meet on a regular basis, or what was its purpose?

HR: We started because of the so-called Southern Manifesto signed by all the Dixie-crat Democrats—all the Southern Democrats, except one or two, in…. You’ll have to supply the date. I believe it was ’56 or ’57 [editors note: 1956]. Their pitch was “Segregation Forever!” And we decided there needed to be some opposition to that, within the party. That really was the genesis of our movement. We also wanted to overthrow the reactionary rule of people like Judge Smith, on the Rules Committee, which was finally achieved in the early 1960s. Stewart was not there at the kill, because he moved to the Interior Department, but he was a very active member.
JF: So it moved from initially sort of a foreign policy focus to a civil rights focus?

HR: Well, not really. It just happened that the same people who joined in the freshman debate, having gotten to know each other better, also joined in forming, a year or two later, the DSG, over a specifically domestic issue.

JF: And that has continued, has it not?

HR: The DSG continued, but it’s lost most of its oomph. For one thing, the Southerners, all Democrats, either were beaten or deserted the party, became Republicans. So today, the Democratic Party in the House, except for a few finks, like Mr. Condage [phonetic], is quite liberal, so that you really don’t need the DSG. And I don’t know what it amounts to nowadays.

JF: That’s interesting.

HR: I think the Democrats, under the current leadership, are abundantly liberal. They include the powerful Black Caucus.

JF: So it just simply may not be needed anymore, for the purposes for which it was found.

HR: Yes. I shouldn’t write them off, because I really don’t know what they’re doing. Just like the March of Dimes finally conquered polio, but that didn’t stop them, they kept right on marching for many years.

JF: And still do.

HR: And still do.

JF: In 1957, only a few years after becoming a member of Congress, you came up with an idea that has surely changed the world for the good. You came up with the idea of an overseas service corps, which eventually became the Peace Corps. What sparked this idea?

HR: I set this forth in my book at some length, but it was mainly my round-the-world trip or junket, the first I took with the Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs of the Government Operations Committee, headed by the excellent Porter Hardy of Virginia, in which in many countries, but particularly in Cambodia, I observed the wrong things we were doing: big superhighways and steel mills; and the right things which a few volunteers were doing, i.e., Peace Corps type village work.

JF: I should mention that your book is called *When Government Was Good*, published in 1999, is that correct? (HR: Yes.) I remember reading in there that the *Chicago Tribune* wrote an editorial on your idea, denouncing it as, quote unquote, “another silly idea from Congressman Reuss.”

HR: One of my favorites! (laughter)
JF: That’s just amazing.

HR: They, too, have become more relaxed in recent years.

JF: Good! I doubt that many people know that the Peace Corps idea originated with you—it’s so long been associated with President Kennedy.

HR: In my book, again, I quote from a letter that Tris [Tristram] Coffin, who was a well-known Washington columnist in those days, wrote quite recently, 1990, explaining how he had sat down with Kennedy in June 1960, right at the start of the campaign, saying, “Look, Congressman Reuss has had a great idea. You ought to adopt it and make a speech about it,” which Kennedy then did at Ann Arbor, [Michigan], in August 1960.

JF: And did you write the original legislation for the Peace Corps?

HR: I wrote and got passed the legislation setting up a study funded by the U.S. government, to be done by a private organization. In fact, it was Harvard and Colorado State which did it, to explore exactly the format of a proposed volunteer service group. And after some tribulations, I got that passed in September 1960, and Eisenhower signed it. So then a study was made which really followed what I’ve been saying and writing, and had put in the bill: Should it be the occasion for a draft exemption? Leave it to the local draft boards, I said. Should people be paid? Just a bare subsistence. How long should it be? Two years. Etc., etc. I tried, at a series of conferences, to answer all the problems that I foresaw.

JF: Did you work directly with President Kennedy on this at any point?

HR: Well, immediately he won the election, he appointed Sergent Shriver, his brother-in-law, to start the Peace Corps on an executive order basis, without any legislation, which was perfectly feasible. And I saw a lot of Shriver, Bill Moyers, and others. And Kennedy, in sending his message to the Congress, credited me and Hubert Humphrey. Now, Hubert was a considerable cowbird legislatively, in that he loved to take somebody else’s idea and make it his own—or at least his staff did. That was easier than thinking something up themselves. And Hubert got aboard the bill—which I’d introduced in January—in late June. So while I don’t begrudge him part of the credit, he’s gotten most of the credit as the inventor of the Peace Corps. What the hell. (chuckles)

JF: Well, nice to set the record straight, though.

HR: So his son, Hubert “Skip” Humphrey, whom I like very much, once told me that he thought it was kind of a discreditable act by his father to become a ganef of the Peace Corps.

JF: That’s interesting, that he would (HR: Volunteer.) volunteer that information, exactly. When Kennedy took over office, was elected in 1960—and we touched on this earlier—he
selected Stewart Udall as his secretary of interior. Mo Udall, his brother, ran in a special
election in Arizona to take over his brother’s seat, and was elected. Had you met Morris
Udall before then?

HR: No, I met him only on his arrival when I think either he or Stewart gave him and his
wife a welcoming party with drinks. It must have been Mo’s office—I’m not sure.

JF: But it was in one of their offices?

HR: Yeah.

JF: Okay. And that was for just….

HR: Get acquainted.

JF: Get acquainted with friends of Stewart’s?

HR: Uh-huh. And I became a good friend of Mo’s. He was on a different track. He was
an interior, western man; and I was an economic—and to a minor degree, foreign policy—
type; so our paths weren’t very close. Our friendship was good. We had a great debate, he
and I, arranged by somebody, in the huge and well-attended Caucus Room in the Cannon
Building, sometime in the mid-sixties, in which he espoused the Central Arizona Project,
and I indignantly opposed it. It was good-humored, and I recall Mo’s saying, in effect….
(phone rings, tape paused) I started to tell you about our great debate in the packed Caucus
Room, in which [Mo], holding his hand about a foot from the floor, and gazing up at the
thirty-foot-high ceiling said, “Look, all that this dam will do is cover this little bit of the
Colorado River.” My answer was, “That’s a little bit too much!” The debate was friendly
and inconclusive, but heated.

Incidentally, a conservation writer named Michael Frome—does the name mean
anything to you?

JF: Yes, it does. I’ve heard his name.

HR: [He] wrote me recently—he’s an old friend of mine—that Mo Udall had since publicly
recanted on his Central Arizona Project, and said it was all a great mistake on his part. I
presume Frome wouldn’t have said so if that weren’t true.

JF: I think, from my interviews, and just talking with people, there’s a tremendous amount
of regret about the Central Arizona Project.

HR: The guy was from Arizona. I’m for beer, you know. I represent Wisconsin—so it
never bothered me. (laughter) I’d as soon have him elected, and abortively try to flood out
the Grand Canyon.
JF: Well, the Central Arizona Project went through Congress, and only recently Tucson is now getting water from the Colorado River. (HR: Oh, really?) They began it a couple of years ago, and because of the different chemistry of it, it took all the rust out of pipes, so people were getting orange water. So they stopped it, but they’ve just started again this year, mixing it. So it’s a reality.

HR: Oh, we passed this dreadful ting? Mo won.

JF: No, he won. And it wasn’t just Mo, it was the entire Arizona delegation: Barry Goldwater was strongly behind it, John Rhodes.…

HR: What, in fact, has it done to the Colorado?

JF: They built a canal across Arizona. I think the worst part was flooding some really beautiful, beautiful canyons, and with them, some major archaeological sites.

HR: Doesn’t it also reduce the Colorado to a trickle downstream?

JF: There’s not much left of it downstream, when it gets to Mexico.

HR: Those were my objections. (JF: Exactly.) I trust I voted against it.

JF: Well, I think I’m correct in saying that Barry Goldwater regretted it. I know Mo regretted it. Stewart regretted it. And I believe John Rhodes has also, but I’m not sure in his case.

HR: John who?

JF: John Rhodes, former minority leader of the House, who was also from Arizona.

HR: (laughs) That takes care of all the protagonists!

JF: I interviewed Representative Sam Steiger of Arizona a week or two ago, and he said the same thing. They did believe it was the best thing at the time. It’s one of those 20-20 hindsights, and it went on much longer and cost much more than anybody expected. You had a great deal of foresight.

HR: I remember Congressman Sam Steiger.

JF: What were your impressions of Congressman Steiger?

HR: I rather liked him, oaf though he was. He once shot a burro, which gave him some bad publicity. And also, at a time when the Democrats—well, Congress particularly—was sensitive to charges of corruption and do-nothing-ism, particularly after some of these scandals: Wilbur Mills and the reflecting pool and so on. Sam made a public statement to the effect that congressmen were a bunch of no-gooders. And I happened to be in the
elevator, answering a roll call, with about a dozen colleagues, and Sam among them. And one of my colleagues said, “Steiger, you’re an utter asshole for denigrating us colleagues of yours!” And Steiger said, “Well, I’ve since issued a statement taking it all back.” And I then put my hands on his shoulders and said, “I hereby bestow upon you the title of Anus Emeritus.” (laughter) That was an opportunity not to be missed.

JF: That’s excellent! Well, he was quite a character.

HR: Weird though he was, I got along fine with him.

So that’s the Central Arizona debate. Then…. I shall try to pick up all contact points with Mo.

JF: Please do.

HR: Other than being friends, and always with Mo’s various wives, always my wife and I would enjoy his hospitality when he lived in Cleveland Park, and later when he lived in Virginia. But it was mainly social, because while we worked closely together in the DSG, that was about it. Then came the time….

JF: So you met Mo and his first wife, Pat, on a social basis—you and your wife?

HR: Yeah, several times. I remember visiting, or having a meal at their home. I can still recall in Cleveland Park, right opposite Grover Cleveland’s charming old home.

JF: What were your impressions of Pat Udall?

HR: Very favorable. She seemed like a handsome and nice person. I didn’t know her very well.

JF: What were your first impressions of Mo, especially having known his brother first?

HR: A worthy brother; politically about the same—perhaps with a better collection of stories. That wasn’t Stewart’s shtick. But otherwise, very similar. Mo deservedly has a great reputation as a Mark Twain-like character. So does Stewart, as far as that goes.

JF: Mo worked on it quite a bit.

HR: He worked on it. He kept little cards with old and good jokes on them.

JF: And had very good delivery.

HR: And a very good delivery—many self-deprecating, like he introduces himself and says he’s running for president, and the guy says, “Yeah, we were laughing about that only this morning.” (laughter)
JF: That’s probably his most famous one.

HR: So anyway, just to hit these points, then came the time in the late sixties, I believe—you can supply the date—when he said, “Henry, can you help me on announcing my candidacy for Speaker against John McCormack?” Do you recall the date on that?

JF: Yes, I do, I think it was ’68.

HR: That sounds plausible.

JF: Yeah, he had preceded it in 1967. He sort of took on the seniority system very early, and in 1967 he led an effort to unseat Adam Clayton Powell from his committee seat.

HR: Oh, did he? I didn’t help him in that, because I thought Adam was simply following the white folks’ larceny, and was one hell of a speaker and a good fighter. So I just can’t remember Mo taking the lead in displacing the schwartze, but it wasn’t a very good idea.

JF: He led the move to remove him as committee chair, but not to remove him from the House, which he actually disagreed with removing him from the House. In 1968, Mo led this unprecedented….

HR: Now, one, I admire John McCormack. Secondly, he was awfully good to me. Thirdly, when my son Mike was falsely accused in Mississippi—he was a freedom fighter—in 1965, and I flew over from England where I then was, down to Mississippi to see that he wasn’t harmed. When I got back, McCormack, who was presiding, beckoned me over and handed me the gavel, which was a nice solidarity thing to do. So I told Mo, “Look, I can’t support you in this.” I didn’t do anything in the election, other than vote for McCormack.

JF: You didn’t actively campaign against him.

HR: Mo didn’t get many votes, I don’t think.

JF: Was this entirely his own decision?

HR: As far as I know. It certainly wasn’t mine.

JF: Two years later, he ran in 1974 for majority leader against Hale Boggs.

HR: I must have voted for him then, because Hale Boggs, who had been very friendly and supportive of me, from the day I arrived, and being on the Ways and Means Committee, his support was helpful among things like I saved Harley-Davidson—you know, the motorcycle—in my district, from early death, through a bill which Hale got through for me. And after I voted for Mo—it must have been an open vote, because Hale knew how I voted—or maybe I just had to tell him—Hale reproached me, saying, “Look, I’ve done a lot for you. You might have voted for me.” Which was embarrassing to me. It’s one of those
things you have to do. But I’m sure I must have voted for Mo, because otherwise Hale would not have reproached me.

JF: Was the Democratic Study Group….