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## **Electronic Green Journal**

### **Title**

Mo: The Life and Times of Morris K. Udal

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3bf5p3vd>

### **Journal**

Electronic Green Journal, 1(17)

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### **Publication Date**

2002

### **DOI**

10.5070/G311710503

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## **Review: Mo: The Life and Times of Morris K. Udall**

By Donald W. Carson and James W. Johnson

Reviewed by [Natalie D. Reaves](#)  
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Donald W. Carson, & James W. Johnson. *Mo: The Life and Times of Morris K. Udall*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2001. 331 pp. ISBN 0-81645-2049-6 (hardcover). US\$29.95. Acid-free paper.

Reading political biographies can often be an onerous task. However, *Mo: The Life and Times of Morris K. Udall* tells an inspiring story of an Arizona congressman who for 30 years effected real change in America. There is something here for everyone from political junkies, environmentalists, social activists, and in particular, "the disillusioned." This book gives inspiration to those who believe that justice and fairness can still operate within the political domain. A great asset of this book is that, unlike most biographies, it is not arranged chronologically. Each chapter is organized around themes such as "Reformer," "Saving the Environment," "The Humorous Mo," and so forth.

Mo was an overachiever, which some attribute to his losing an eye as a child. He grew up in rural Arizona in a hardworking Mormon culture. He excelled academically, played basketball in college and during the 1940s he became a military officer. While in the military, he had his first significant contact with Jews and blacks. He was appalled at the treatment of Jewish officers and black servicemen. He was vocal in calling for the integration of U.S. troops, an ideal that would not be fully implemented until 1951.

Mo's legislative achievements were impressive and highlight how little we expect from politicians today. In 1961, he went to Washington, D.C., as Arizona's congressman and a staunch Democrat. Mo took on the heavyweights of his own ruling party in Congress by, among other things, challenging the seniority system. Naturally he paid a political price, but he took the hard knocks and was always ready for the next battle. The book gives behind the scenes detail of how Congress operated, such as loyalties, battles, retributions, and so forth.

As head of the Interior Department and the Public Lands Law Review Committee, he created strip-mining laws, and "became the leader in the largest conservation success in the nation's history with the preservation of 104.3 million acres ... known as Alaska's 'crown jewels'. ... The Alaska Lands Act of 1980" (p. 193). It took Mo and conservationists nine years of wrangling against oil, timber, and mineral interests to get this legislation

passed. The battle for Alaska coincided with the 1970s oil crises, and Mo was often compared to the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Mo also was a political risk taker. In 1967 with President Johnson, a Democrat, in office and most Americans still supporting the war in Vietnam, he gave a very public speech withdrawing his support for the war and "urged complete withdrawal" (p. 86). Furthermore, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 actually affected his home county in Arizona, which required a literacy test. Navajos outnumbered whites by 2.5 to 1 in his county and local politicians pressured Mo to vote against this bill. He didn't. Moreover, he used his position on the Interior Committee to help Native Americans and helped to pass the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, The Indian Gaming Act, Indian Child Welfare Act, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

A testament to his fairness and integrity was evident in 1987; the Nuclear Energy Industry and the Sierra Club both named him Legislator of the Year. The book also chronicles his 1976 campaign for the Democratic Presidential Nomination, which was eventually won by Jimmy Carter. It is an interesting read as one gets an insider's view of the campaign trail. It was a tough battle that took a financial and psychological toll on Mo.

Like most great men he had a major flaw. Mo tried to save the world but neglected his own family. His relationship with his six children, by their own admission, lacked intimacy and they described him as a "private person." He was married three times. The first ended in divorce and the second ended in suicide. The book addresses this paradox, but in the end makes no excuses for the inexcusable. On a somber note, Mo had to battle Parkinson's disease later in life and the book discusses his downhill battle with this illness until his death in 1998.

An important consequence for me as someone who came of age during the Reagan years, was reading about an era when the word "liberal" wasn't a slur! Also, now that money has so polluted our political process, I wonder whether a politician today would challenge the oil and timber interests for nine years to protect Alaska? Take a stand against a popular war and against a president of the same party? Fight for the disenfranchised?

I highly recommend this book to anyone who has lost faith in the political process. For anyone interested in reading an intelligent and historical biography of a liberal's liberal, who was without apologies, it is an exhilarating ride.

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