Udall's humor transcends frustrations

David S. Broder

CLEVELAND — It has been a long, long campaign for Morris K. Udall. The weariness of the effort that began almost two years ago with those first exploratory trips to New Hampshire and Wisconsin is etched deep in his craggy face as he slogs through these final days in the wards of Cleveland.

Unfolding his long body from a cramped seat on his campaign bus, he rallies himself for another effort by calling on his one resource not limited by the federal campaign act — his humor. "Come on, you stop-Carter people," he tells the reporters, who are as tired as he is. "It's gonna be a grand rally of the faithful. Hubert Humphrey will be there — in spirit. Jerry Brown will deliver the invocation. Frank Church will read the minutes of the last meeting. And I will give the message."

The Udall-for-President campaign is not one that will rank among the classics. Unless there is a miracle here in Ohio on Tuesday, Udall will go back to Tucson and Washington empty-handed — having failed to win a single primary of the score he entered.

As the candidate would concede, it has been a botched up campaign in many respects. There were dozens of tactical and strategic errors, small and large, that diluted his efforts and diminished his returns.

Udall himself bears direct responsibility for the failure to fit his brother, Stewart, into a stable, non-abrasive role in the campaign. A procession of campaign managers testifies to his inability to put his own campaign house in order.

The frustrating series of second-place finishes, studded with examples of what-might-have-been, confirmed the critical judgment of some House colleagues. They said in advance that Udall was a man of uncommon ability who lacks the steely determination and quick instincts that spell the difference between victory and defeat.

But if frustration was predictable for a man whose efforts in Congress have often been stymied, it was equally predictable that Udall would acquit himself with honor, dignity and good humor in his quest for worthy goals.

He communicated to a broad national audience the convictions he has voiced for 15 years in the House and in his home district: a respect for the human and physical environment; a commitment to social justice; and a belief in institutional reform and a strict standard of personal political accountability.

All this he conveyed without condescending or pandering to the prejudices of a particular audience. No one but Mo Udall would have reminded the prideful voters in New Hampshire, on the eve of their primary, that "a week from tonight, you won't get a presidential candidate to come within 100 miles of this state." And no one but Udall would have made them laugh at themselves and their inflated self-importance.

Humor is his trademark, and it offended some people to have a presidential candidate try to be entertaining. But the humor was directed at himself and the foibles of politics. It was his way of maintaining his own sense of proportion. Long before he became a candidate himself, he warned against the power-seekers who pursue the presidence with a grim, relentless, all-consuming determination. Their exercise of power will reflect their pursuit of power, he said.

By staying funny, Udall stayed true to his own nature and convictions. But he was also honest in more important ways. He did not back off from his support of school desegregation in Boston or the Detroit suburbs, and he did not disown 40 years of Democratic programs in an effort to become "anti-establishment."

So Udall can live with his memories of this campaign. A more interesting question concerns the conscience of what used to be called the liberal community.

Udall did not assert an inherent claim to liberal support, even though he was early in the contest. "There was no obvious choice" among the many liberal aspirants, he said the other day. "But after Massachusetts and surely after Wisconsin and New York, it was clear" that he had defeated the other liberal contenders and emerged as Jimmy Carter's real rival.

But those he had defeated and who shared his positions — Birch Bayh, Fred Harris, Milton Shapp, Sargent Shriver, among others — either remained silent or endorsed other candidates. So did many other liberals.

Had the votes that went to a single one of those candidates, Fred Harris, been shifted to Udall, he would have beaten Carter in New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Michigan. It takes no genuis to calculate how different the Democratic picture would appear today.

But Udall is not given to recriminations, even about Michigan, where the leaders of the United Auto Workers, the most liberal union in the country, worked actively to defeat the surviving liberal candidate because he was "a loser." All Udall will say about Michigan is that "it was kind of poignant to read in that post-primary poll that one out of ten Carter voters said they really preferred me, but thought I had no chance to win."

Udall lost Michigan by two-tenths of one percent of the vote. He lost Wisconsin and a lot of other states by small margins. The political histories will show that record. One hopes they will also record the respect Mo Udall won from those who have watched his campaign.

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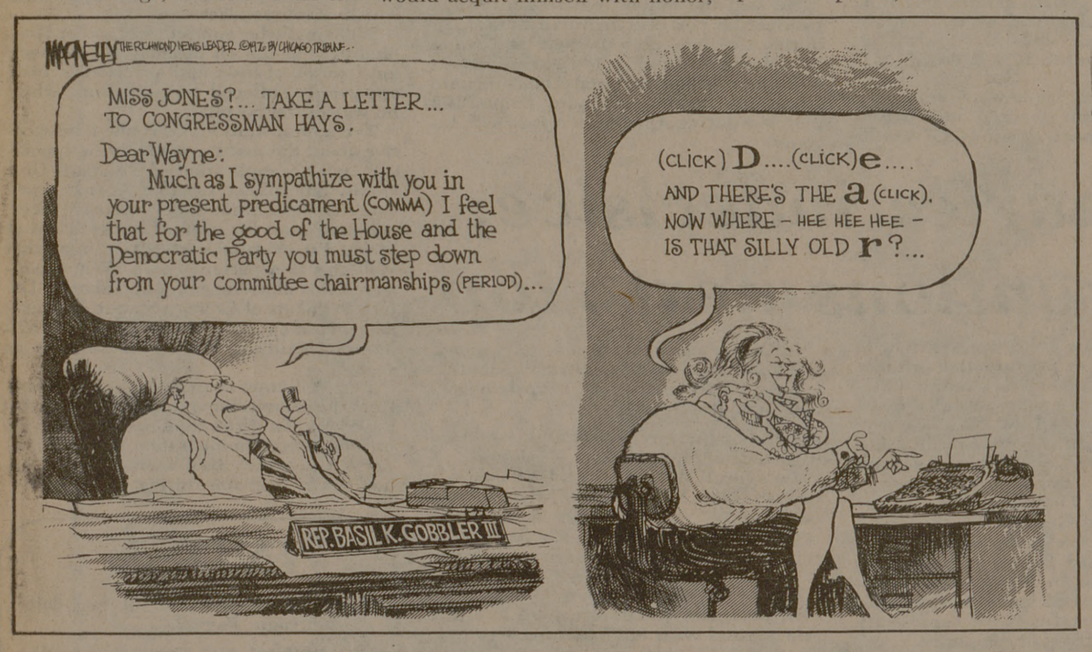

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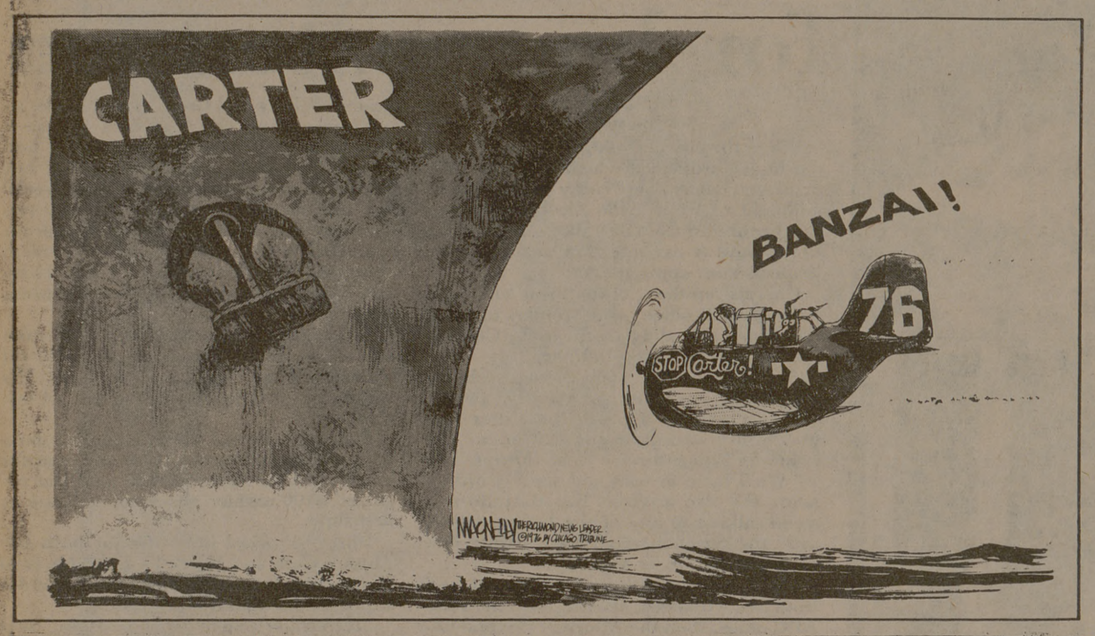

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