

**James A. Burke, Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 4/14/1976**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** James A. Burke  
**Interviewer:** Bill Hartigan  
**Date of Interview:** April 14, 1976  
**Location:** Washington, D.C.  
**Length:** 4 pages

**Biographical Note**

Burke, a U.S. Representative from Massachusetts from 1959-1979, discusses John F. Kennedy's personality and political skill, among other issues.

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James A. Burke, recorded interview by Sheldon Stern, April 14, 1976, (page number),  
John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

James A. Burke

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Second of Two Oral History Interviews

with

James Burke

April 14, 1976  
Washington, D.C.

By Bill Hartigan

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HARTIGAN: Congressman, I want to thank you for coming back a second day. We're now April 14, 1976 and you were interrupted with a heavy legislative schedule. And I appreciate your coming back a second day to finish up this interview. With reference to President Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] activities in the Congress, how would you evaluate it, being an experienced legislator yourself and looking back on it?

BURKE: Well, of course, John F. Kennedy was a pioneer on the legislation he was advocating, and he more likely was ahead of his time on some of the legislation. And Congress hasn't caught up to some of the ideas that he was putting forward at the time, and possibly they weren't ready for it. But as the years went on, Congress did put through many of the proposals that he had originally advocated, and history has proven that many of the things that he was concerned about at that time were of prime importance. I'd just say he was a little bit ahead of his time, but that he was able to spotlight and get attention to some of these areas that, had he not done so, maybe some of the corrective legislation that was passed in the later years would never have been passed.

HARTIGAN: Congressman, doing a little research—and particularly this one incident is highlighted in Ken O'Donnell's [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]

book [*Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*], who is a mutual friend of ours—he mentions a visit you made to the White House, on an occasion when the crew from the canoe that delivered the coconut with the message on it—when President Kennedy and the PT crew [Patrol Boat: 109] was stranded on the

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island. The fellow's name was Ben Kevu [Benjamin Kevu] that was a native. Now would you like to relate that?

BURKE: Well, I remember that day very vividly. I believe I was down there trying to get some work at the Fore River shipyard and Ken O'Donnell had been very cooperative in trying to arrange for an appointment, and he did squeeze me in rather a busy schedule that day, which I was very appreciative of, but I did get a chance to meet some of these people.

HARTIGAN: Including the Prime Minister Menzies [Robert Gordon Menzies] from Australia.

BURKE: From Australia, that's correct. I think I had a picture taken with him, although I don't know where the picture disappeared too. Maybe one of my staff has got it back on his mantelpiece someplace.

HARTIGAN: That was listed by Ken O'Donnell as one of the busiest days in the White House that he's ever witnessed all the time he was there.

BURKE: And I would be bothering the President on a busy day.

HARTIGAN: Well, evidently he thought enough of you to want to see you anyway.

BURKE: Well, the President was very cooperative in that area, and I never tried to bother the President unless it was something about the economy of the district. I believe President Kennedy understood that, and he was a very sympathetic man and he listened to you, and would always do what he could.

HARTIGAN: Before we close the interview, Congressman, is there anything you'd like to just recap in generalities in terms of your personal observation of John F. Kennedy as a man that you knew, and then helped him become the President?

BURKE: I first started in politics in the state legislature in 1937, and John F. Kennedy came along right after World War II. He was a very young man and he was a different type of a public figure. There was something about him, I don't know how to describe it, but he had a tremendous appeal to

everyone: older people, young people, youngsters, children, everybody seemed to want to grasp his hand, and he had a tremendous effect on the body politic during those years.

He was an idealist, and yet at the same time he was a realist in many ways. While he practiced his idealism to a great extent, he was a realist who recognized the dangers that the country faced, and he tried to call those facts to the attention of the people. I think his Inaugural address was one of the greatest pieces of political statements that I've ever had the privilege of listening to. He had the knack of getting right at the nub of the problem.

It's too bad that his life was snuffed out so early in his term, because he had created the

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foundation for great years ahead, and I believe that the people of the country were beginning to know him better just about: the time of his assassination. I think his accomplishments would have been tremendous had he been able to continue on. It's just a tragedy, and something that the country could ill afford at that time.

HARTIGAN:               Congressman, do you recall where you were the day of the assassination? Would you like to comment on that?

BURKE:                    I recall it very well. I was sitting over at the House restaurant, and we had just got word back of the assassination attempt, and in fact it was a garbled message and they said that not only the President had been shot but also the Vice President [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. I knew that Speaker McCormack [John William McCormack] was in the dining room and I went over to him. He had got the message, and I told him that he should get out of the House restaurant forthwith. In fact, I and some other legislators went up to the Speaker's office and demanded that they make arrangements to get as much security around the area as possible, because we didn't know what parts were underway at the time, and we were all in shock because of the information.

In fact, for about two weeks I don't think any of us really fully understood the implication of what had happened. I was one of the most trying times, I think, in the history of the country; just hard to go through that period. We were fortunate that we had some people around that were able to keep the country together. I know Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] held up very well, and the Kennedy family, and they all seemed to pull together to keep the country on an even course. And I believe that the Kennedy family deserved the everlasting thanks of the nation for their attempts, and the work that they did after the assassination.

HARTIGAN:                Recently there have been several questions raised by various freelance writers calling attention to the United States public to whether or not the Warren Commission was accurate or not. What would be your opinion on the Warren Commission's decision?

BURKE:                    Well, I'm somewhat reluctant to give any opinion. I more or less step aside for what the Kennedy family would want at this time, and I

wouldn't want to make any statements along those lines. I'd rather....

HARTIGAN: You're satisfied if the family's satisfied. You see no reason why anybody else shouldn't be satisfied, basically.

BURKE: Well, there are some areas that are open to question, as there always will be, but I'm willing to go along with what the Kennedy family wants.

HARTIGAN: One question I probably should have asked earlier, but it's not too late to go back to it: during the convention in Los Angeles, in 1960, after President Kennedy was nominated, and the order of business was nominating a vice president, were you active in that situation at all?

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BURKE: Well, we were, of course, so thrilled about the nomination of John F. Kennedy that we weren't paying too much attention on who the Vice President was going to be, to be honest with you. I think we did a lot of celebrating, but apparently John F. Kennedy and the rest of those people up on the top echelon kept their nose to the grindstone. When Lyndon Johnson was nominated with him, I felt it was a good move that could weld together factions of the party that needed to be together in order to make a victory.

HARTIGAN: Were you aware of any activity on the part of the Speaker of the House in an effort to pick a vice president?

BURKE: I wasn't close to the Speaker at the time on what he was doing in that area, though. We did have pictures taken with both President Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson the day afterwards, and that's one of my treasured possessions, shaking hands with both of them.

HARTIGAN: In other words, your mission in life was to get Kennedy nominated?

BURKE: Well, of course that was natural coming from Massachusetts, and having followed his career. Nobody looks upon the Vice President as being very important at the time, but this has proven that the Vice President is very important.

HARTIGAN: We've had two occasions in just recent history to have a vice president take over. Congressman, are there any final observations you'd like to make before we close our interview?

BURKE: Well, I feel that I was privileged to be part of the history of the Kennedy administration, that I was in the Congress, I was on the

House Ways and Means Committee, I supported legislation that he recommended at the time before that committee. I felt he was a great president, it was an honor to serve under him, that's something I'll always treasure.

HARTIGAN: Thank you very much, Congressman, and if and when you find time to go through your papers and memorabilia, if you should come across anything that you feel as though it would be of value to the library and for posterity, we would appreciate if you would consider donating it to them, and if you'd want the assistance of an archivist to come down and evaluate, we can make those arrangements. So I know that at the moment you can't do it, you're quite busy, but when time permits, I'd appreciate it if you'd let us know if you come across anything.

BURKE: Some day I should go through the files, because I had several letters from the President over the years when he was in the Senate and in the White House. I think I'll hold on to those, though, if you don't mind.

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HARTIGAN: Well, I can understand that. I'm sure though when the time comes the library would give it a very appropriate place in its files, so that everybody can appreciate them, because this will be for students doing research and study.

BURKE: I'll see eventually that they will be turned over to the library.

HARTIGAN: I appreciate it. Thank you very much, Congressman.

BURKE: I think in my lifetime I might like to hold on to them.

HARTIGAN: I can understand that. Thank you very much for your time.

BURKE: Thank you very much. It's certainly a privilege to have the interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW# 2]

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