

James A. Burke, Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 4/13/1976
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Biographical Note

Burke, a U.S. Representative from Massachusetts from 1959-1979, discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) congressional and presidential campaigns, and JFK's time in Congress, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

James A. Burke

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James A. Burke—JFK#1

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First of Two Oral History Interviews

with

James A. Burke

April 13, 1976
Washington, D.C.

By Bill Hartigan

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HARTIGAN: I think we'll just commence with asking you just when you first met President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], Congressman?

BURKE: Well, I first met President Kennedy in his early days before he ran for Congress, at the Hotel Bellevue where he used to meet with his grandfather, John F. Fitzgerald [John Francis "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald], and of course old John F. was very proud of John F. Kennedy and was always introducing him around as one of the future presidents of the country. At that time we thought he was a little bit premature but he seemed to have a farsighted view of things and he certainly predicted the future of this great young man.

HARTIGAN: That was when you were the state representative?

BURKE: That's right.

HARTIGAN: That was fairly early in the....

BURKE: Yes, it was early, back in the late—'47, '48, '49.

HARTIGAN: Do you recollect any opinions you might have had of this young man who was being escorted around by his famous grandfather?

BURKE: Well, he was very lean and thin at that time and he had just returned from the service, and he seemed to be quite a bashful type of young man and he wasn't pushy; he was a rather modest young fellow. But he impressed me quite a bit because he seemed to have a good grasp of things even at that time.

HARTIGAN: So the impression on you was impressionable, favorably so?

BURKE: Oh, yes, he made an impression because of his sincerity and the fact he was something new to the political winds of Massachusetts at that time.

HARTIGAN: Then in 1947—'46, '47—he started campaigning for the congressional district held by his grandfather. Do you recall anything with reference to that campaign?

BURKE: Well, yes. He was a candidate for Congress in that district and there was a good friend of mine who was also seeking the seat. I was torn between two loves at the time. Of course, it was out of my district so I didn't interfere, but I was greatly impressed by the organization work that was done by the people supporting him and how hard he had worked during that campaign, from early morning till late in the night, and the great impression he made upon the people throughout the entire congressional district. That was in the teeming tenement districts and also in the affluent parts of the congressional area. He seemed to draw support from all sides.

HARTIGAN: And that is the district that is now held by Congressman O'Neill [Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Jr.], the majority leader?

BURKE: Yes, that's right.

HARTIGAN: At that time that he was elected to the Congress as a member of the General Court of Massachusetts, were you familiar or did you have any experience with his activities as a congressman as it related to the State of Massachusetts?

BURKE: Yes, he seemed to be very active down there, and he was making a name for himself in the national picture. It was quite indicative at the time he had a great future.

HARTIGAN: You were familiar with the Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] group and the older Democrats—you were sort of a pretty good bridge

between the two groups. There was quite a bit of concern about his reluctance and ultimately the refusal to sign the petition for former Mayor James Michael Curley. Do you recall any incidents related to that?

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BURKE: I recall that he did not sign it, I did not know why. I never delved into it, to be honest with you. And it apparently didn't hurt him politically because he went on to higher office.

HARTIGAN: In his second term, anything standing out in your mind? Because you were still at that time in the position of responsibility in the General Court; at that time you were the chairman of committees.

BURKE: Well, he got in touch with me prior to his being a candidate for the United States Senate, and that was when he was living just close to the State House [of Massachusetts] there.

HARTIGAN: Over on Bowdoin Street, 22 Bowdoin Street.

BURKE: Over on Bowdoin Street. And he asked me if I would set up some luncheons for him at the Bellevue Hotel with a group of the legislators, which I agreed to do, and we set up about five or six luncheons, five or six days in a row. But I kept picking up the check and at the end of the sixth day I figured I had exhausted my funds.

HARTIGAN: That put you in the company of a great number of people. That seems to be par for the course?

BURKE: Well, for some reason, John F. Kennedy was a little slow on the draw, but I don't think it indicated anything. I think that he just failed to carry loose change around with him.

HARTIGAN: That particular campaign was sort of an on-and-off thing for awhile, I believe because of the situation that Governor Dever [Paul A. Dever] was not quite sure whether he was going to run for reelection or run for the Senate. Do you have any recollections on that situation?

BURKE: Yes. In fact, I was handling the campaign for the Democratic Party in Ward Eighteen, Hyde Park [area of Boston, Mass.] that year. And one of my close friends was Eddie McLaughlin [Edward F. McLaughlin, Jr.], who was very friendly with Jack Kennedy. He was working for Jack at the time, and I was working for the whole ticket, and we worked together in the district and combined the forces together, and both Jack—John F. Kennedy—and Paul Dever carried the ward with overwhelming majorities.

HARTIGAN: Checking back on some of the previous interviews that were done, there seemed to have been some schisms in certain areas of Boston, but you didn't find that in your area evidently, is that right? Between the...

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BURKE: No. Well, there was always some petty politics engaged in by some small people, but the people that were really working in the top level in the campaign didn't indulge in that, not to my knowledge, at least in my district. We worked for the entire ticket and once in awhile you might hear some remark made by somebody that wasn't thinking. But it didn't reach over to our district because both candidates had increased their vote over the Democratic vote that had been received by previous candidates for the same office in years gone by.

HARTIGAN: So in your particular area that you were responsible for, the rumors of friction between McCormack's [John William McCormack], Dever's and the Kennedy people and whatever combination anybody feels like mentioning at the time, wasn't noticeable to any extent in your district?

BURKE: It wasn't noticeable in our district.... We're in the suburbs of Boston, and Hyde Park at that time, Ward Eighteen, wasn't as tied in with some of the political infighting that took place in some of the in town wards. But the people in our district took a much broader view of politics, and there was no real division as far as I could see. We tried to support all the candidates together and political.... We tried to quiet down any division that might develop on either side. I've always felt that a united party was more successful and I think it always proves to be that way: that once you have division, that doesn't help either candidate.

HARTIGAN: Were you satisfied with John F. Kennedy, either as a congressman or senator, in terms of his help to the Democratic Party in Massachusetts?

BURKE: Oh, yes. I was very satisfied. I realized that he had an appeal to many of the people that a regular Democrat like myself did not have. But I was glad to ride in on the coat tails of that support that he had. But he was helpful to me in every way that he could be all the time that he was in the United States Senate, and we collaborated in every way we could to help Massachusetts out. And at the White House he was always very affable, and I found no difficulty in going down to see him at times when we had problems in the shipyard and other problems that had to do with employment in the area. In fact, I know Ken O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] often says that one of the congressmen of Massachusetts that never came in with a personal request was Jim Burke. It was usually something for the economy of the district, and I found the President to be very sympathetic and he did everything he could to be of help.

HARTIGAN: Then as far as your observations are concerned, the point as to whether or not he did actively participate in the betterment of the part in the state—you found it to be the case that he did.

BURKE: I'd say he not only did, but he was a great influence on attracting people to the Democratic party that we formerly didn't have, and this was of particular assistance to me in the 1958 fight, because when I traveled throughout the congressional district with him on a Saturday, and we traveled from

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early morning till late at night, I picked up tremendous support that day, just enough to carry me over. I won that election by eleven thousand votes and I'll say that a great deal of that credit should go to John F. Kennedy, because he was running for re-election for the United States Senate and had tremendous support.

HARTIGAN: Congressman, you arrive in Washington as a freshman congressman and very close to a freshman senator—or he didn't have that much seniority—but did you renew relationships after you got here to Washington?

BURKE: Yes. I was in touch with the Senator on some mutual problems that we had in the congressional district, and I always found him to be very cooperative, and he tried to help out in every way he could.

HARTIGAN: You recollect any particular issues that...

BURKE: Oh, yes. He was helpful in the shipyard, and down there along Route 128, some of the problems we had getting work up there on.... He always lent his good offices in every way that he could. He was very much interested in the economy up there. He tried to do what he could in every way.

HARTIGAN: His record indicates a great concern for New England as an area, in addition to the concern for Massachusetts as a state. Were you familiar with that at the time it was happening?

BURKE: Well, I think that he realized that New England had some real problems, as many of us recognize—and we recognize it now more than ever, as the years have gone by—that some of the problems that the older firms are having up there, on the need of modernizing industry up there, and bringing in new industry and everything, and I think that this bothered him quite a bit.

HARTIGAN: There have been some pros and cons—I'm going back now—at the present time, now, I'm sure most of it's been solved, but at the time that the St. Lawrence Seaway issue was up, there was....

BURKE: That was before my time.

HARTIGAN: Before your time. You were in the state legislature at the time...

BURKE: I was in the state legislature.

HARTIGAN: ...and there was a great deal of concern even in the legislature and among state officials as to whether or not this was an advantage or a disadvantage to the New England area as a whole. Are you familiar with that problem?

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BURKE: Well, I know of his wealth and everything, and it's a question of whether he was voting in the best interests of the nation, or whether he was going to be provincial minded; and I think that he tried to do what he felt was best for the nation. I might have voted differently, to be honest with you, but I'm more provincial minded than John F. Kennedy was.

HARTIGAN: But he was accused of voting in the best interests of his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], in terms of the Merchandise Mart in Chicago, which in fact did benefit by it.

BURKE: Well, I would say that that would be a very shallow statement to make about John F. Kennedy. I don't think that this guided him in his voting at all.

HARTIGAN: You were convinced he was nation-minded when he made this....

BURKE: Yes, he always acted in a nation-minded.... It's a lot different when you're in the United States Senate and when you're in the Congress. When you're in the Congress and the House, you have to be more provincial minded. When you're in the Senate of course you get a _____ view of things, and John F. Kennedy, I believe, always voted in the best interests of the nation first. I always tried to do that, but sometimes in order to save my political skin I can't do it.

HARTIGAN: I think your point is well taken. It's the first time it's been brought up so far, that the difference between....

BURKE: It showed great courage on his part to cast the vote that he did, and very few of us could survive, which indicated that he had the confidence and faith of the people he represented.

HARTIGAN: Are you familiar with the activities that took place when he was in the

Congress and it had to do with veterans? I know you were very, very active in the veterans' affairs both as a congressman and as an individual, but if you recall there was a great deal of animosity stirred up when he took the position on the veterans' housing. Are you familiar with that?

BURKE: I know that he took a stand that was contrary to the view, I believe, of one of the veteran organizations, and I believe he felt strongly about it, and it took courage for him to take that stand at the time.

HARTIGAN: And I think that—I won't go into it now, but just for the record—I think that history proved that his position was right, because it's the one that's in effect and acceptable now.

BURKE: That's the trouble with...

HARTIGAN: He was just a little bit ahead of his time on that....

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BURKE: That was the trouble with John F. Kennedy. He always proved he was right.

HARTIGAN: But he's a little bit ahead of himself, I guess, on too many things.

BURKE: That's right. But it was a great tribute to his courage because it takes a lot of courage in public office to stand up on some of these things that you sincerely believe in, and you can only set up so many blocks of opposition before you're retired from public office.

HARTIGAN: Well, of course, only a congressman can appreciate the courage that's needed in some of these things, like yourself...

BURKE: Oh, yes.

HARTIGAN: ...because they come up, I suppose, daily.

BURKE: That's right.

HARTIGAN: He became interested in running for president at a later date, but during the 1956 Chicago convention, were you a delegate to that convention, Congressman?

BURKE: At '56? No.

HARTIGAN: When his name was put in nomination for vice president?

BURKE: No, I was not a delegate that year. I was a delegate in '60 and I voted for him in '60.

HARTIGAN: You weren't at the convention either in Chicago?

BURKE: I was out there for a couple days.

HARTIGAN: Do you recall any of the activities that took place when his name was...?

BURKE: Oh, I watched it with great interest.

HARTIGAN: Do you have any personal observations you'd like to make with reference to it?

BURKE: Well, I think if he pressed a little farther, he might have been able to get the nomination. I think he pressed as far as he thought he should press, and let it go at that. But more likely he felt it mightn't have been his time.

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HARTIGAN: That's an interesting point. You think that finally when it came down to the extra effort, that he might have sensed a.... Because in fact....

BURKE: He was a very young man at the time, and it was quite a step for him to be making.

HARTIGAN: In fact, it worked out better anyway.

BURKE: It did.

HARTIGAN: And you had the feeling that he might have sensed this?

BURKE: Well, I don't know. I'm merely...

HARTIGAN: I mean, your opinion.

BURKE: ...speculating that he might have felt that, you know, rushing him ahead too fast. And it might have been true and time has proved that he was right if he didn't feel that way. Of course I'm only speculating; I don't know.

HARTIGAN: It's a very logical speculation, though. Well, we move ahead, and he

came back to the Senate, and then you joined him two years afterwards, you in the House. During 1958, '59, '60, in your opinion—and of course that was in the aftermath of the Chicago 1956 situation—did you have the feeling that he was running then?

BURKE: In 1960?

HARTIGAN: After he came back from the convention in Chicago in '56, he was in the Senate then from '58....

BURKE: Well, I felt then that he was moving towards being a candidate, and he was maturing. Four more years, and it certainly gave him greater stature, and he just moved at the right time.

HARTIGAN: Let me ask you, did he ever at any time prior to his announcement mention to you anything about his desire to be president of the United States?

BURKE: No. Ted Kennedy [Edward Moore Kennedy] hasn't either. [Laughter]

HARTIGAN: During the presidential primaries in 1960, were you active in any way?

BURKE: Yes, I was active out at the convention. I went around to the various delegations and talked with those members of Congress that I knew, tried to line up some votes for John F. Kennedy where I could, and I got the word

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around as best I could. Of course, I was only a freshman congressman at the time, and I was wondering what influence I could have; but I did have a little influence—not too much, but I think I was able to be a little help. But what help I could give I did, because I was greatly enthused over his candidacy. I certainly wanted him to win. I even had a selfish motive: I was a candidate for re-election, and I was the first Democrat in a hundred years in my district, with the exception of _____. I knew that in John F. Kennedy at the head of the ticket, there would be no question about the outcome of my congressional district, and I also knew he would be a great president. But I did have a little bit of selfishness in the rivalry.

HARTIGAN: But, of course, you were involved with him long before that, so I don't know that it was all selfishness, though.

BURKE: No, no, it wasn't all selfishness, but I did feel very good about the fact that he was nominated. You could see the tremendous enthusiasm back

in the district when I returned home from the convention at Los Angeles. People, every place was all.... Everybody wanted to know what they could do. The troops were all out. You didn't have to ask any help. Everybody was out there working.

HARTIGAN: So in that respect he certainly was an adrenaline for the Democratic party in Massachusetts.

BURKE: He was a tremendous help for the Democratic party, because he brought into the party people we had difficulty getting the support of in years gone by. He was able to bring the ultraliberal and the ultraconservative. He had an amazing attraction for people of all beliefs. In fact, I recall in the '58 caucus when he was out in Canton, Massachusetts, and somebody asked him the question, "Why are you in the Democratic party? Why aren't you in the Republican party?" His answer was that it offered a great wide spectrum of support, that you could reach from the ultraconservative to the ultraliberal and the middle-of-the-road, and cover all the bases.

HARTIGAN: Were you able to participate in any of the primaries, like Wisconsin, the West Virginia, prior to the convention in 1960? I know you were a congressman, very busy, and I...

BURKE: I've always been limited in my finances, so I wasn't in the position to do much traveling. I did go down to New York, and I also went down to West Virginia, and it was only a short time.

HARTIGAN: While you were in the Congress though, when you were present in Washington on the Hill, were you able to observe the attitudes of your colleagues in the House, with reference to his candidacy?

BURKE: Well, I think that they were all watching him very carefully, and I believe a lot of them were amazed at the way he attracted the people, the thousands of people that flocked to hear him and see him, and charisma that he had about

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him. The fact that he was able to attract the very young and the very old and middle-aged, and he could attract the rich and the poor, the black and the white, and he seemed to have an attraction for almost every segment of the population.

HARTIGAN: You at that time were serving with colleagues who actually came to the Congress with President Kennedy and former President Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon]. Were there any interesting conversations or observations you'd like to make about being in that position?

BURKE: Well, I think some of them were quietly rooting for John F. Kennedy

although they weren't saying too much about it. I believe that in the House—that John F. Kennedy had made some real friends, and some of them were new but cautious back in their districts, because to be frank about it, I believe that they didn't know just how a candidate like John F. Kennedy with his religious background, being a Catholic....

[INTERRUPTION]

HARTIGAN: In other words, you felt a sensitivity about the religious issue?

BURKE: Well, some, of them didn't know just how much of that whole thinking—the 1928 fight—was carrying over into their districts, and how the country had changed, and they were a little bit cautious at the time, although I think secretly they were rooting for John F. Kennedy. But I think some of them moved along rather cautiously at the time.

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