

## **Kenneth Burke, Oral History Interview**

### Administrative Information

**Creator:** Kenneth Burke

**Interviewer:** Nancy Tuckerman

**Length:** 8 pages

#### **Biographical Note**

Burke, a White House policeman, discusses the tours he would conduct through the White House, as well as John F. Kennedy's assassination and wake, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Kenneth Burke,  
Inspector for the White House Police Force

By Miss Nancy Tuckerman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TUCKERMAN: This interview is with Inspector Kenneth Burke of the White House police force. Could you tell me, Inspector Burke, how long you have been at the White House?

BURKE: I've worked at the White House for 27 years.

TUCKERMAN: That is how many administrations then?

BURKE: Five administrations.

TUCKERMAN: Five First Families—and can you tell me a little bit about the Kennedy family? Do you remember, by chance, when you first met the President [John F. Kennedy]?

BURKE: I was on the north portico the day of the Inauguration when President-elect and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] arrived at the north portico, and I was there as President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] walked out to greet them and invited them into the Red Room for coffee before going to the Capitol.

TUCKERMAN: Were you introduced to the President?

BURKE: Not at that time. I don't remember the exact time when I was introduced to the President and Mrs. Kennedy. One of the big thrills of my life was to have Mrs. Kennedy introduce me to Mrs. Pierre Salinger [Nancy Salinger] and Mrs. Adzhubei [Rada Nikitovna Adzhubei] in the Green Room of the White House and ask me to give them a conducted tour of the White House and describe the changes that had been made in the beautiful State Rooms on the first floor of the White House. I spent about a half-hour with those two ladies in the White House.

TUCKERMAN: With Mrs. Salinger—and who was the other lady?

BURKE: Mrs. Salinger and Mrs. Adzhubei, Mr. Krushchev's [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev] daughter-in-law, when she was here on an official visit.

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And I thought it was nice of Mrs. Kennedy to introduce me to those ladies and ask me to conduct the tour. Her time was so taken that she didn't have time to conduct them through herself and she knew that I was familiar with the changes that had been made in the rooms and was in charge of conducting the VIP tours, and so she asked me if I would do that for her.

TUCKERMAN: Were they very interested?

BURKE: Very, very interested in all the changes—the portraits, the paintings and the antique furniture placed in each room.

TUCKERMAN: Before we go any further, could you tell exactly what your job is in the White House?

BURKE: Well, as Inspector of the White House police, I am in charge of all phases of training and supply and equipment of the force, and I am also in charge of conducting the VIP tours through the White House, or the congressional tours, and have trained about 25 other officers to conduct these.

As White House policemen, our principle duty is the protection of the President and his family in their home. The word "protection" covers a broad field really. We protect the First Family's privacy and we protect them from any criticism or unseemly thing. We protect them from anything happening that they wouldn't want to happen. We try to see that their stay at the White House is as pleasant as possible. We are supposed to anticipate their needs or their wishes. It's a fascinating job—years ago I traveled considerably with President Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt]—when we would go away from the White House with the President—supplementing the Secret Service special agent detail. We traveled in civilian clothes. Here at the White House police uniform.

TUCKERMAN: I see—and there were many changes in the White House when Mrs.

Kennedy was there?

BURKE: Entirely changed—and it was quite a challenge to keep up with the changes because each day I was conducting a special tour I had to be careful to explain things that had been changed since the day before in many instances.

TUCKERMAN: And then you would have to, in turn, tell the other men who were conducting such a tour so that they would...

BURKE: That's right—and the First Lady's press secretary kept us informed as to just what changes were being made each day; in the history of the furnishings and fixtures that were being placed in each room, that were replacing things that in

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many cases had been there for many years.

TUCKERMAN: Did you see much of Mrs. Kennedy or was she mainly in the State Rooms in the afternoon when tours were not being conducted?

BURKE: I saw her quite often, actually, because I was on duty when her invited guests would come to the White House. One of my duties was to check the guests in—taking their admit cards and seeing that no unauthorized person entered, and on a number of occasions I have been in the same room with the First Lady. I was in each room with Mrs. Kennedy the day that she made her wonderful television program when she gave a personally conducted tour to the nation of the rooms in the White House.

TUCKERMAN: I remember that—and you were there that day?

BURKE: I was in each room with her that day, and it helped me so much because I can refer so often to the remarks that Mrs. Kennedy made about specific things in each room.

TUCKERMAN: Now, the President. Would you see much of him?

BURKE: I saw the President almost every day and many times several times a day. I was frequently called by his secretary to his office in the West Executive Office Building and introduced to people he wanted shown through the White House on special tours. On one particular occasion I had the pleasure of being introduced by the President as he put his left hand on my shoulder and introduced me to a group of young ladies from Minnesota. He asked me to take them over to the White House and give them a conducted tour—I felt so wonderful when the President said to these

young ladies, “Inspector Burke is a real veteran of the White House, having been here more than 25 years, and if anyone knows more about the White House than Jackie, it’s Inspector Burke.” The ladies enjoyed that, and I thought it was mighty nice of him to make such a nice remark.

TUCKERMAN: Did he remember people’s names—would the President call you...

BURKE: He had a remarkable memory and referred to me as Inspector Burke on a number of occasions. Just three days before the tragedy in Texas, I was in the west Rose Garden with a group of men, and the President was addressing this

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group from the National Education Association and after finishing his remarks to the group, he asked if there were any in the group who hadn’t seen the White House and said that Inspector Burke would be very glad to take them through and show them the rooms—that he could show them the rooms on the ground floor and first floor and tell them all about the changes that Jackie had made. He seemed so proud of the great changes Mrs. Kennedy had made and so anxious, actually, for important people to see firsthand the wonderful changes—because while many people had seen it on television, the fact that it was not in color kept it from being as impressive as it actually is when you can see the rooms in color and appreciate the wonderful changes that Mrs. Kennedy did make in each of the State Rooms.

TUCKERMAN: Was the President interested in the number of people that would come through the White House? Would he ever ask you?

BURKE: He did on many occasions. Over in the colonnade in the East End by the moving picture theater, I would explain the sketches on the wall that Mrs. Kennedy had placed there and tell the President how much the public seemed to enjoy these and how much they had added to the interest for the general public as they came through. On a number of occasion the President—almost every time he’d see me—would say, “How are the crowds holding up? Did we have any special tours today? How many of the public went through today?” The President was so thoughtful and considerate of everyone. In his opinion, everyone was a very important person, and he was so thoughtful and he didn’t want any of his very important functions to interfere with the public getting a look at the White House. He was so fond of the White House, himself, and so fond of people that he wanted everyone to have an even break as they went through the White House and get every opportunity to view all they possibly could.

TUCKERMAN: Tell me, Inspector Burke, did you see the children [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy; John F. Kennedy, Jr.] very often?

BURKE: Yes, quite often. While I’m the security officer during public visiting hours and I’m very busy when the White House is open to the public,

keeping surveillance over the crowd and posting men where I feel they are most needed, and the children usually were in the south grounds playing in the morning during the hours when the public was visiting, and as a result, I

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didn't see the children close by—I saw them at a distance. I didn't get a chance to talk to them on very many occasions, but on one particular occasion I happened to be in the Diplomatic Reception Room one day as the children were coming back from the playground and as they came through, little John grabbed me by the coattail and tugged on my coattail to attract my attention. He had something he wanted to tell me. He opened his mouth and pointed and said, "tooth gone" and I learned from him in a few minutes that a swing had hit him in the mouth the day before and had knocked one of his baby teeth out. But instead of being distressed about it, he was proud of it and wanted to show everyone that his tooth was gone. I thought that was quite funny.

TUCKERMAN: He was a real boy!

BURKE: He certainly was. And little Caroline was a darling child. She had such a nice disposition, so pleasant and unspoiled, and she seemed to like us and we liked her very much. While she didn't know us by name, she seemed to treat each one of us just like she had known us all her life. She used to love to have people tell her stories. I was so touched by the fact that the President was so fond of those children and no matter whom he was talking to or what he was doing, if one of the children would walk by or something, he'd reach over and rub them on the head or pat them on the head. He didn't seem to let it interfere with his train of thought, but he just never ignored the fact that they were within reach.

TUCKERMAN: Would you say then the atmosphere in the White House during those years was a happy one?

BURKE: Yes, I certainly would. It was a wonderful atmosphere and it was a delightful place to work and a wonderful family to have known and be associated with.

TUCKERMAN: Could you tell me where you were at the time of the assassination when you heard the news?

BURKE: Yes. I was in my office, which is on the first floor of the Executive Office Building in the southeast corner of the building. I was at my desk working on a training program I was implementing for some of the new men that had only been at the White House for a short time, when the phone rang—it was a call from Major Stover, and he was at his desk, which is across the room from mine and when he said that—he was so stunned when he got the message it seemed he had trouble speaking—



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but he said, "The President has been shot in Texas." I couldn't believe it, of course. I had seen President Kennedy just the day before as he left the south entrance of the White House and as he turned—as he climbed the steps of the helicopter—he turned and waved to us as he always did. He seemed so pleasant and so well, and I couldn't believe that anyone would ever shoot at him. He seemed to have more friends than anybody in the world and seemed to have no fear whatever—and so confident of himself—and here I was the next day in my office getting a message from Texas that the President had been shot. Of course, instantly we hoped that it was just a minor injury at the worst, but we had direct lines from Texas to the White House and instantly our office became kind of a headquarters for messages. The Chief of the Secret Service and other administrative assistants and executive assistants were there in a minute, and we were getting direct calls from Texas and it wasn't but a few minutes...

TUCKERMAN:        You had a tie-line with Texas?

BURKE:                We had a tie-line with the President's car in Texas, by telephone, and it wasn't but a few minutes before we learned that it was a serious—a very serious injury—and we were distressed, of course, and disbelieving. We wandered around the rest of the afternoon without knowing what to do or how to do it. We just couldn't believe our ears that such a thing had happened.

TUCKERMAN:        I think everybody felt that way.

BURKE:                I've never seen the city or the White House—or the city as a whole for that matter—shut down so completely. My immediate job was to go to the northwest gate, which is the main entrance of the White House, and order the signs placed at each gate, "closed," of course, and I had to be there because there was a swarm of newspapermen and government officials coming to the White House to offer any assistance and to do anything they could and to find out firsthand information. I spent the next two or three hours at the northwest gate of the White House keeping people away and trying to tell them that everything was being done that could be done and if we needed their assistance, we would call them and, of course, many people came there that had business in the White House and they had to be cleared. We allowed them to come in, of course.

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TUCKERMAN:        It must have been very difficult to control the people because you couldn't stop them from coming...

BURKE:                That's right—and people had left their offices in the vicinity and just were wandering in the streets and through Lafayette Park. They were

lost—people just seemed to have a stunned feeling and no one had any heart to work the rest of the day. I've never seen anything stop the city so completely—stopped the operation of business and government and all. I became so emotionally upset over the thing and thinking about him and being as fond of the President as I was that I'm afraid I wasn't of much value to the White House the rest of the day myself. But I put in some long days of duty, of course, until after the funeral.

TUCKERMAN: What time did you get home that night—Friday night—do you remember?

BURKE: I'd been at work since about 7:30 in the morning, and I didn't get home until after midnight. Major Stover sent me home because he wanted me back there the next morning early, and I think he stayed until after 4:00 the next morning, and I came back at 8:00 the next morning to relieve him so that he could go home for a short time.

TUCKERMAN: So between Friday afternoon and—say Monday—Monday after the funeral, you were in the White House practically constantly?

BURKE: Almost all the time—yes, that's right. And I was at the door of the East Room the day that the President's body was there in the center of that room, and I was acting as somewhat of an usher because we had more than 4,000 dignitaries who had been invited to come to the White House that day and view the casket. These dignitaries were brought to the north entrance, usually in chauffeur-driven cars. They would enter the north entrance, proceed through the Blue Room and Green Room, into the south end of the East Room, then turn and walk the length of the East Room, and as they approached the catafalque and the casket in the center of the room, they would turn and bow their head and pause a few minutes and offer a short prayer and then move on through the room and down the steps to the level below and out through the Diplomatic Reception Room where their chauffeur would have their car waiting for them, by that time. We had a continuous procession through the White House that day, and late in the afternoon Members of Congress were

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invited with their wives. Of course, it made quite a crowd as they lined up to go through, and many of them asked me what to do. Many of them were not of the same faith as the President—and many who were asked me just what was expected of them as they went through, and having observed the procession all day, I was able to tell them that it was not necessary—in fact, it was impossible for everyone to kneel and offer a prayer, but they could just turn and bow their head and pause, and offer a short prayer, and they thanked me for the information.

TUCKERMAN: In closing, is there any other particular story that you remember?

BURKE: Well, I remember one day when the President and First Lady had a luncheon in the State Dining Room and among the guests were some members of the President's family, including a lady from England, who I'm quite sure was a relative by marriage. She had not been in the White House before. The President asked me to take this lady and some of his sisters on a conducted tour through the White House and tell them of the changes that had been made, and he asked me to take them upstairs to the second floor to the private living quarters and show them some of the rooms on that level: the Queen's Room, the Lincoln Room, Treaty Room, etc.—and then asked if I knew where in the White House the over-mantle was that was a goodwill gift from the late King George VI and was presented by Queen Elizabeth [Elizabeth II, Queen of Great Britain] in 1951, when she made an official visit here at the time she was the Princess, and I told him that I did know—that I had seen it—part of it was in the Queen's Room and part of it was in the First Family's Yellow Room or private living room, and he was happy that I knew where they were because he wanted me to show them to the lady from England especially, and tell her the history of them, and he was also happy to know because he said he wasn't sure himself of the history of them and just where the two pieces were. The still life that was used in Buckingham Palace by the Royal Family is over the mantel in the Queen's Room, and the beautiful gold candelabra with the rare blue john urns in the center are in the First Family's living room—the big Yellow Room.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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