

David W. Burke, Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 4/17/1979
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Biographical Note

Burke was Executive Secretary for President's Advisory Committee on Labor-Management Policy, as well as assistant to the Secretary of Commerce and to the Secretary of Labor from 1961-1965; and legislative assistant (1965) and administrative assistant from 1966-1971 to Senator Edward M. Kennedy. In this interview he discusses the members and staff of the President's Advisory Committee on Labor-Management Policy, the key issues that the Committee addressed, and differences in the Committee during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, among other issues.

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Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Origins of the Labor-Management Committee
3	Relationship between the Labor-Management Relations Committee and the Council of Economic Advisors
4	Labor-Management Committee members and staff
8	Subcommittees of the Labor-Management Committee
9	Wage-price policy and trade imbalance issues
10	Committee report on automation
11	Conflict between George Meany and Henry Ford II over wages versus global competitiveness
12	1962 steel crisis
13	Pension plan portability
15	Amending the Taft-Hartley Act
16	John F. Kennedy socializing with the Committee
18	Lack of representation for unorganized labor
19	Comparing the Committee during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations

Oral History Interview

with

David W. Burke

April 17, 1979
Washington, D.C.

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Why don't we begin with your recollection of how you got into the Commerce Department and how your responsibility with the Labor-Management Committee evolved.

BURKE: I had been a student at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, and my mentor there was George Schultz [George P. Schultz] who later was the Secretary of Labor, Director of the Budget, and Secretary of the Treasury in the Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] years. I also did my graduate work at the university. He asked me to stay on to work on a project for the Committee for Economic Development, the CED, a privately financed research organization. They asked me to work on the national interest, you know, the public interest and the national labor policy or something like that, associated with the CED study the people on the committee that was formed by the CED to form the basis of that work and that was followed by George Taylor [George William Taylor], David Cole [David L. Cole]. They were arbitrators or mediators at the time.

STERN: These people were both on the committee too, ultimately.

BURKE: Yes, and they.... When John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] was elected

president of the United States,

[-1-]

then Arthur Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] formed this committee. These people went to the committee and because they were on the committee and were working for them on the CED thing, when I applied for a job as a civil servant, leaving Chicago—I was very young at the time—it seemed very appropriate that I apply for a job on the staff of the President's Advisory Committee on Labor-Management Policy.

STERN: Did you go through the Commerce Department in some way?

BURKE: Yes. I was appointed by the Commerce Department because the President's Advisory Committee had a revolving chairmanship. One year it was the Secretary of Commerce, the next year would be the Secretary of Labor and back around again. The first year it was chaired by Luther Hodges [Luther H. Hodges], who was the Secretary of Commerce. He had an assistant, Hyman Bookbinder, and it was to Bookbinder that I applied. I believe at first I joined the staff of the office of the Secretary of Commerce to be assigned to assist Hyman Bookbinder in his function as running the committee for the Secretary of Commerce.

STERN: What about Gudeman? Edward Gudeman?

BURKE: Edward Gudeman was the Undersecretary of Commerce at the time, and he was very active.... Well, I don't know if Gudeman sat in on all the meetings of the President's Advisory Committee. He had a major responsibility for the Secretary as Undersecretary, made sure that the thing kept on the track, and Bookbinder and I reported with Ed Gudeman and to Luther Hodges.

STERN: I see. Now, when you were assigned to this committee, particularly in the initial stages, what precisely were you.... What were your expectations? What did you expect to be doing? What role did you see for the committee and for yourself on the committee?

BURKE: I didn't have any grandiose plans for myself. That has to be understood. I had just completed my graduate education; I was young. I knew that, I believed that the idea of the committee came from Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg, and it came out of his experience in 1959 in the steel strike of 1959, which I believe lasted something like 119 days. He had advised both the candidate John Kennedy and then the new president, John Kennedy, that there was no need to experience those kinds of labor disputes of a Taft-Hartley level. He had a belief out of his long years as counsel to the steel workers union that if representatives of management and labor met at the highest level bunkered by representatives of the public in general that the kind of national emergency dispute could be ameliorated. I mean, there was no need to have those kinds of disputes that grew out of antagonisms and rigidities that perhaps could be softened by communications back and forth.

Not only communication back and forth but some realization of a higher national policy, instituting or establishing the tripartite form: labor, business and the public for that very purpose. We used to make, not light of it, but we used to remark lightly, that it's important that Henry Ford [Henry Ford, II] see that Walter Reuther [Walter P. Reuther] doesn't have fangs;

[-2-]

it's important for Walter Reuther to see that Henry Ford can be a reasonable man, etc. So my belief was that the main purpose of the committee was to forestall future labor disputes that had a serious economic impact upon the country and called in the Taft-Hartley provision all the time. There was a rash of them at that time. The committee did not long remain in that posture. It became very clear very soon that Goldberg, who I think was very keen on the committee as opposed to Hodges. Goldberg and the influence of the Secretary of the Treasury, Douglas Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], and the influence from the head of the Council of Economic Advisors...

STERN: Walter Heller [Walter Wolfgang Heller].

BURKE: ...Walter Heller was going to slowly shift the committee away from consideration simply of national labor disputes and the disruption of the economic ____ clause into, the term of ours in those days was and still is, I suppose, consideration of an income policy. What today we call wage-price guideposts, wage-price standards, wage-price something of other. In those days guideposts was the word, wage-price, income policy, it went into that direction and the key to the time it really went into that direction was when the committee hired as a consultant Arthur Okin.

STERN: Right. Now in the initial, in the very early period....

BURKE: How I remember all this....

STERN: The memory is an extraordinary thing.

BURKE: It certainly is.

STERN: In the very first month, from some of the documentation that I was able to check at the library, it was clear that Heller represented the CEA [Council of Economic Advisors] and Dillon, of course, as Secretary of the Treasury were somewhat concerned or skeptical about the committee and tried to diminish its function in terms of what they conceived as a possible overlap with their roles, and indeed at the beginning both Dillon and Heller asked the President specifically that they be excluded from the committee. The Secretary of the Treasury, who was originally proposed to be a member, was then not a member and neither was Heller. Can you recall any specific tensions between this committee and the Council of Economic Advisors?

BURKE: No, I really can't. That observation doesn't surprise me at all. It was a new government, the balance of payments was the most extraordinary problem of the moment.

STERN: Kennedy was very concerned about that?

BURKE: Kennedy was terribly concerned about that. I remember that the person who was

[-3-]

in charge of the balance of payment problems of that day was—I have a mental block. Christian Herter [Christian A. Herter] came to the committee on one or two occasions. It's totally understandable to me as I look back on it that the Secretary of the Treasury and the Council of Economic Advisors would have been unsure about this new thing where business and labor were sitting down with the public members, and I suppose if the original function was supposed to stop those national emergency disputes that's what it should be, but economic policy should be left in the hands of those of us who have responsibility for government, and there's no need for those fellows trying to get.... If we're ever going to get to the point where we can put down and exempt a guy, make them comply with some standards or some guideposts that we see, that if this thing isn't done right and it may turn out the other way and that they would bring about as a group pressure upon the administration that we would be forced to modify our point of view. So in the early days there was a real test case of whether the committee would function.

STERN: What about the President himself? What sense did you get of his involvement? How often did he come to meetings? How often....

BURKE: He came to meetings quite often. The meetings, as I recall, were either in the Labor Department or in the Commerce Department, and then at the end of the day in ceremonial fashion they would go to the White House.

STERN: To the Fish Room.

BURKE: And go to the Fish Room and meet with the President for twenty-five or thirty minutes and sometimes he invited them to stay on for a little social occasion thereafter. I always felt his involvement was that, I think he saw a group here that could be very beneficial if it worked. I might be reading too much into it, but I really didn't get the feeling that he thought that this was terribly successful. But there was nothing wrong with constant communication with these fellows, and the steel price increase of a year or two later proved that to be the case.

STERN: Right. One thing that always intrigues me about things of this sort, if you look at a list of this kind and you see the big names, Goldberg and Ford and

Hodges and Wirtz [Willard Wirtz] and Reynolds [Richard S. Reynolds] of Reynolds Metals and Joe Block [Joseph L. Block] of Inland Steel. Inevitably I wonder how much work did these people actually do? And to what degree was it done by second level staff people.

BURKE: Who were privately employed by them.

STERN: That's right.

BURKE: The staff of the committee was very small for the committee involved. In the early days besides Bookbinder there was myself and the people in the government we would draw upon in order to prepare papers....

[-4-]

STERN: I wonder if I could interpret one point. In looking at a lot of the papers which the committee produced, it was never entirely clear to me what the differences were between certain designations such as an executive director, executive secretary, a staff director, Jack Stieber...

BURKE: Oh, yes, he came on later, yes.

STERN: ...I wonder if you could, in discussing that element, perhaps try to give some sense of what these various roles were.

BURKE: In the early days of the committee there was Hy Bookbinder and myself. Bookbinders's responsibilities took him elsewhere and so forth. And that's when Jack Stieber came. Then it was Jack Stieber and myself. Is it Stieber?

STERN: Yeah, right.

BURKE: Stieber only stayed a year, I believe. Then a fellow came, another fellow came by the name of Macaluso [Vincent Macaluso] and then it was Vincent Macaluso and myself. And then finally there was me as assistant secretary, executive secretary of it. There was never really a heavy formal staff surrounding the committee itself, but because those people who were on the staff.... Oh, there was Tom Powers [N. Thompson Powers] in the Labor Department.

STERN: Worked for Wirtz, didn't he?

BURKE: That's right. So as it shifted back and forth it was always the case of the staff people associated with it were people who worked directly in the offices of the cabinet officer involved, the chairman that year, Labor or Commerce.

STERN: Right.

BURKE: As a result we had called upon everybody in the government that we wanted. And so therefore we had a floating staff depending upon the issue under discussion, if we were discussing pensions, public policy towards pensions, investigating the affordability of pensions and so on and so forth, the entire team in the Labor Department would work on that. In concert with CEA and the Commerce Department and so and so forth. If it was balance of payment, then a team from the Treasury would work on that. And so therefore the staff, whether it was X and me or finally me, had a coordinating function to bring together the expertise needed for the question under consideration.

STERN: I expected that.

BURKE: That's sort of one half of it. As to the members themselves, there were significant

[-5 -]

differences among members as to their participation and the kind of private staff work that they had done back in the corporations or back at their unions or wherever they were. I'll be pleased to tell you who I thought were the best contributors and so on and so forth if you have a list of members. Joseph Block of Inland Steel was not a man who you felt came to the meetings with any great private preparation but who was clearly a guiding light when he was there, just by his ability and his stature and his intelligence, and he was an extraordinary participant. Elliot Bell [Elliot V. Bell] of McGraw Hill was quite a _____. And I never felt he added anything special as a neutralist and again I never had a sense that he brought any private preparation toward it. And Arthur Burns [Arthur F. Burns] brought a very strong point of view and always buttressed all of his arguments in any deliberations we had with what seemed to me to be some preparation at the National Bureau or wherever. David Cole just brought his expertise when he brought himself, and I don't say that in a pejorative sense. He is a wonderful man and had great wisdom on some things. David Dubinsky [International Ladies Garment Workers Union], John Franklin [John M. Franklin], George Harrison [Brotherhood of Railway Clerks], the head of the Mine Workers, in this case Kennedy [Thomas Kennedy], but also Tony Boyle, David McDonald [David J. McDonald; United Steelworkers]; those people brought very little. They brought their presence and they brought their influence and they brought a constituency to bear, but there was very little that they contributed to what work we did, I always thought. Henry Ford always came prepared.

STERN: I was about to ask you about Ford in meetings. I found a good deal of evidence of conflict between Ford and Meany [George Meany].

BURKE: Henry Ford always came prepared, and you would pick up the sense that his staff at the Ford Motor Company set him up with talking papers so on and so forth depending on the issue under consideration. I always felt that Henry Ford came so prepared that he knew what the bottom line was that he was supposed to

maintain but not knowing entirely how he got there. He didn't know how to back off it by degrees. And in any negotiation, to the extent that the committee negotiated public policy—negotiate is the wrong word, try and reach a common consensus or whatever word you want to use—Henry Ford was always very brittle in that situation because if you don't know how you got to your position, then you don't know how to come off it by issue, to accommodate a resolution. He was always well-prepared. He worked hard, and he wanted to be a real contributor. Clark Kerr, president of the University of California, was a man who was always prepared. He didn't need any special preparation, he was just a prepared person.

STERN: What about the public? The so-called public sector in general. How did their role.... Obviously they were in a somewhat anomalous position between labor and business.

BURKE: They differed, certain members, certain public representatives viewed their functions to be that of buffer between the self-interest blocs that were there, from employers and employees, business and labor. Others had strong positions and didn't care to be buffers. For example, Arthur Burns felt he had a point of view to represent,

[-6-]

resulting from his past government service and his strong views on economic policy and he didn't care in any way to be a buffer. David Cole and George Taylor, especially George Taylor, viewed himself.... People keep doing in life what they do best, and George Taylor and David Cole were mediators, and they became the mediators for the committee, soothing one side, then soothing the other, re-explaining positions back and forth to disagreeing parties in an attempt to reach a consensus. These are the kind of people who love to reach agreement. And George Taylor was the leader of that and David Cole was also a leader, if not second to Taylor. They viewed that to be their....

STERN: Do you feel the public representatives then did serve a very special purpose?

BURKE: They played a very special purpose, mediation purpose, educational purpose. Burns on the one hand, Clark Kerr on the other. They are representing two distinct economic point of view. So they were mediators, they were educators, and they were people who handled a strong position. I thought it was.... If the committee had strictly been labor and management, to the extent that the committee was successful at all, it would have been a constant confrontation, the concerns would have been about loss of face. They would have viewed it as just an extension of their private lives. But I think the influence of the public members was terribly beneficial in that this committee became very important nationally, a national public policy to assist the President, to assist the government, whether you agree with that government or not. And when you walked into that meeting, it was different from your private life. As a management person you didn't have to worry about giving up something to labor or a labor person didn't have to worry about conceding something to management because you were in the presence of these other eminent outsiders

who brought a certain gloss to the rest of the committee. Therefore it is to be recommended that anytime that an organization is like this that there always be public members.

STERN: What about Meany on the committee? I found a good deal of evidence of conflict which seemed to be fairly close to the surface between Meany and Ford in particular.

BURKE: Yes, strangely enough Meany and Ford and not Reuther and Ford.

STERN: I found evidence of a conflict between Reuther and Meany as well.

BURKE: Yes. The conflict was strictly between Reuther and Meany. I always felt that Meany took on Ford more than Reuther did to make some kind of point that I'm not willing to speculate about.

STERN: I think I see what you mean.

BURKE: It was sort of, "I'll show you, Walter, how to deal with this fellow." And he'd go and do that. Walter Reuther, as you know, used to be a bother to many other

[-7 -]

leaders of organized labor in those days. Because Walter Reuther was terribly thoughtful, he was innovative, he was looking for new ways to do things and did not feel he had to be responsive to George Meany. He was trying to prove something to Henry Ford that... He didn't have to prove that he was more intelligent, but he also had to prove that he had a lot of other interests in mind other than just the union that he represented, which is a hallmark of the United Auto Workers even today. I would not categorize Meany as I have been categorizing the others in terms of well-prepared and not well-prepared and so forth or interested, because Meany, of all the people on that committee, he was the most powerful. He was eminently more powerful. He had a great influence at meetings, I don't know about other times, but at least when he decided to be very grumpy or not so grumpy. There was always a tension between him and Walter Reuther, there was not doubt about that, and I think everybody else noted that.

STERN: There were a number of subcommittees. I wonder if you had any recollections specifically of the work of the subcommittees. I can name them for you. There was free and responsible collective bargaining, industrial peace, economic growth and unemployment, automation and technological change, policy to make American products competitive in the world market, and sound wage and price policy.

BURKE: Yes. There were three of those that were important. Policy to make American products competitive in the world market was not one. It was not viewed by

anyone as important, even though the White House viewed the balance of payments as key. The peaceful collective bargaining, we've already discussed, was originally what everyone thought they were serving on the committee for. That seemed to be very important and because of the nature of the people on the committee, everyone had all sorts of ideas about how to create a peaceful collective bargaining thing, but I must tell you the truth that as time went along, that faded in importance. Maybe it faded in importance because people knew that with the expertise around that table, that one could be handled. I mean everyone was just so.... That's where the public members really shone, the David Coles, the George Taylors and the Clark Kerrs. They knew backwards and forwards everything about that. They had just come out of the CED study. So everyone was really up to steam on that one. So it was important and it wasn't important, who knows. There was never any great change in public policy as a result of their work. The one that seemed extraordinarily important, but in retrospect turned out to be most transient, was the one on automation.

STERN: Right. Didn't it produce this very report....

BURKE: Very ____ Report on automation and I must say in retrospect, now seventeen or eighteen years later, that was a very transient issue, this wave of automation and the computers or whatever they are. The pace of change of production on assembly lines so on and so forth, it was going to dis-employ everybody. If ever a group of people were caught in the dismal science in the late '50s and early '60s, it was automation. It was going to ruin everything. There was very little doubt that it would fall hardest upon certain segments of society, so on and so forth. And there would be a permanent unemployment as a result of

[-8-]

automation. I always felt as a young fellow that there was an enormous lack of faith in the productivity side of automation and hence the enriching of our economy resulting in greater unemployment. I mean there was a great fear about automation. So that became very important, but in the long run it wasn't important. The most important was the attempt to establish wage-price guideposts. I don't know the title of that committee. That was the most important because that is never-ending. That committee still meets. They're just different human beings. And Jimmy Carter is in the middle of that right now. The basic question is: how does a society structured like our society, how does an economy structured like our economy, how does a democracy handle the problem of the government trying to establish certain standards by which private people will conduct their affairs as governments seek not to have to rely solely upon fiscal and monetary policy and the like? I think if this committee is earmarked by anything, and I'm not sure anyone even remembers it, if it's evidently marked by anything, it will be marked by the first real structured attempt to arrive at some kind of public consensus about what wages and prices should do in the short run, given the economic condition of the time, and whether or not it is possible in the long run for that kind of a mechanism to continue to work. I think the answer has proven to be there is no long runway to get the public to do that, that can be accommodated by a democratic society. In the short run you can. Ever since those days, they've tried. Even by the Nixon administration and

now to be tried again by Carter. But if it worked in the short run or not, I think there is general agreement that in the short run it is a tool to be used. But I don't think anyone would say that in the long run our society, our economy would stand, or could stand the continuous imposition of some kind of a guideline or guidepost by fiat.

STERN: It's a very interesting point though to note that the committee or the segment of concern which at that time did not seem to be the major one had emerged as a major one, while some of the others have not.

BURKE: But more and more as that committee went on until the death of President Kennedy, more and more that held the key. I think it was, it was perceived by me and I have to assume that therefore it was perceived by these others who had much broader experience and so on and so forth That the wage-price policy, aspects of that we have learned were by far going to be most important and were the most important, and that concerns about automation, concerns about balance of payments, concerns about labor peace and all those things were more and more transient than they thought. They had a higher calling.

STERN: It's interesting now that you see various commentators referring back to the Kennedy years and saying, "how could they keep a 1% inflation rate and what did they do right?" The situation was very, very different.

BURKE: It was very different. There's no question.

STERN: On the automation report, which turned out to be, I think, the most important, in the larger reports the committee produced, can you recall any in-fighting, any tension between the various group members?

[-9-]

BURKE: I can't recall very much. There were very.... The tensions that were created were classical tensions between, as I described earlier, those who believed automation was a boon and those who believed that it was a total threat. The union fellows believed it was a total threat because they didn't.... They thought more productivity was going to be wrung out of their members, and they weren't sure they were going to get the benefits of, especially if they were also talking about wage-price guideposts. But the management fellows knew it wasn't a matter of inflation to them or the control of the economy. The capital investments they made to bring this automation about, they had to have returns on it. So there were classical confrontations all the time about new devices by which products were made and are we in labor sharing in the productivity benefits or are you siphoning some of those off the top. The management guys are saying, "depends on automating and becoming far more productive if we have to give it to all you guys," and the labor guy saying, "because we are spenders and we consume, you know our tendency to save is only 4% and our consumption is only 96%, so therefore," and back and forth it went and it was all ____ or Talmudic or something. But that became the biggest and most worked on

report to me because everyone was seized by that problem of automation. They were just totally seized by it, it was a big “ah ha” experience, what on earth’s happened, and there was very little, I must say, historical perspective was brought to the debate, but it was on deaf ears. And the fears that existed around the table, especially the fears were always, I thought, exaggerated. The management’s claims as to the golden area they were going to lead us to were exaggerated. You’d think they’d just discovered something new. The industrial revolution had been a long time ago, but every generation thinks it’s got a new problem, and automation was the baby.

STERN: Was the report formally presented to the President? Do you recall his response to the committee?

BURKE: I don’t. I guess I don’t because I don’t think the President ever, except for the discussions that he had with the committee, he never put an imprimatur on, he himself never put an imprimatur, but the fact that it was published, there was this discussion, the committee never was thought by President Kennedy to be a committee that would come out with an answer agreed upon that he would then endorse . . .

STERN: Sure, I understand.

BURKE: . . .and accept as his guiding light. And Goldberg, that was not Goldberg’s way, anyway. And it certainly was not John Kennedy’s way. The beauty of the committee was communication, thoughts thrown out, laying down some carpets of understanding that you may want to walk down if you can get interest in the government, that you may not want to do and so on and so forth, which is a proper, useful function. I mean government is going to have to make some decisions, but to have a tripartite representative group, laying down the possible avenues of, here’s one way which public policy was created. Whether you have to go to Congress or whether by executive power you are going to take certain steps so on and so forth you would like to have his support or a representative group of people. That was

[-10-]

the function of it, and yeah, I’d say it should have been the function of the people. Who were these people, they weren’t elected to anything, to come down and lay down guideposts or lay down rules on automation.

STERN: In one of the other areas, to make American products competitive in the world markets, there was apparently a good deal of conflict especially between Ford and Meany. I found a shorter report....

BURKE: It was a very short skinny little report

STERN: Right.

BURKE: It didn't mean a hell of a lot.

STERN: The thrust of it however was that the basic cause, the problem of American competitors in the world market was high wages. American wages were too high and, of course, Meany went right through the roof and wrote a dissent. You could feel the tension in the papers very, very clearly. Do you have any recollection of that at all?

BURKE: Very little recollection, I'm sure. I mean I do recall that kind of a sense back and forth and fighting back and forth. There was Henry Ford who was going to build all sorts of factories over in Europe which he has since. Meany, the exportation of jobs is a classical standard that the unions always carry. Saying that it shouldn't be done, that American labor.... But I must tell you that in the whole context of that group, on that one everybody else just sort of sat around, put out that thin little document and it doesn't mean anything anyway because what real effect is that going to have on the balance of payments. The balance of payments has more to do with the stability of the dollar, the import levels and export levels in this country and also some other things and not whether George was fighting with Henry.

STERN: As a matter of fact Meany was also angry at the President about that, arguing that the President was using the balance of payments as a tool...

BURKE: Against back to wage-price.

STERN: ...that's right, for keeping wages down.

BURKE: Always, everything comes back to wage-price. Automation went back to wage-price, the balance of payments went back to wage-price, everything went back to the wage-price policy. Even though the committee wasn't set up for that purpose or even though an announcement was never made that everything in this room is circling around the wage-price guidepost, indeed it was because the President was really trying to get some understanding, some agreement on the admissibility of wage-price guideposts as a way in which government decides federal monetary and fiscal policy, sort of a third kind of tool for controlling

[-11-]

inflation.

STERN: I think we can turn for a bit to some of the other major disputes that came before the committee. I know that the railroad dispute came before it in July of '63.

BURKE: Yeah, that was a special little assignment of the committee and again it showed the versatility of the committee. The committee could be used for

special things as it was with the steel price increase. Or in a national emergency dispute that broke out at the time. Because apparently the people who you would call up anyway were sitting there.

STERN: Can you elaborate on the role of the committee during the steel crisis in '62? Exactly what did the committee do?

BURKE: The way I recall it is the important participants in that were Ed Gudeman and Joe Block. And when the price increase was announced, Block was abroad. I believe he was in Canada. And Gudeman was on the telephone to him. In many cases I was talking to him, too. The net result was that Inland Steel refused to go along and that broke the back of the price increase. And again the versatility of the committee was shown because of the camaraderie or collegiality that had been established by this group and so on and so forth and back and forth that instead of a Secretary of Labor or a Secretary of Commerce or the Secretary of the Treasury or the head of the CEA calling out of the blue to tell the steel industry to hold the line, the communications were right there because they met a couple of weeks ago and they were going to meet again in a couple of weeks. In that one I had the sense that the collegiality of that group, to the extent that it existed at all, in general or otherwise, they would have left, so it paid off. Block understood from the many discussions in that committee what the government was about. There had been many discussions about again, wage-price and it was a price movement, and so he was not new to the discussion. Earlier I said rather flippantly one of the things was for Reuther to see that Ford didn't have fangs and vice versa. Well, here the steel industry could see that this government was not just lying on the matter. The relationships, I think, developed in that committee were essential to Block's decision. Because he knew he had to meet again with that committee and how the hell was he going to justify that, or he had disagreed with his colleagues in the steel industry and the committee gave him sufficient rationale to break it, or whoever knows what the role of the committee was, it was very positive.

STERN: I think that's a very important point. Some of the other issues that came before the committee, there was a report on youth unemployment in 1963. Any recollection on how that was handled?

BURKE: I don't have much recollection on how that was handled. I would say in retrospect that, I think that kind of a matter, it was a matter of great consideration within the administration, and I think it was the kind of matter that was very appealing to someone like Clark Kerr, and I think there was some early seeds of civil rights problems in that.

[-12-]

STERN: That was an important point.

BURKE: Yes. It was black unemployment, that's what it was. No one was concerned about white youth unemployed.

STERN: Do you see a connection ultimately between these kinds of concerns and the Manpower Act that would follow pretty soon?

BURKE: Yes, I do. And the entire sociological fire that was burning, it was there below the ground. It was like a peat bog. It was as hot as hell underneath the ground and, I think, this committee sort of sensed that and the government did. The government sort of directed...

STERN: It was very much Wirtz's issue.

BURKE: ...yes, and the administration sort of directed us into that. The Labor Department was very concerned about these figures. And the heads lacked Allies, like on this one it would be Clark Kerr as opposed to George Taylor, who was more a labor peace expert. This was a sociological problem that clearly detracts from their, and offends, and you know that this problem was coming at you one way or another. That's what I can recall. But I think it was a precursor.

STERN: How about on the issue of welfare and pension plans, that was still another report. That was apparently one of the more major ones.

BURKE: It was a major one, and we... There was an awful lot of work, an awful lot of staff work and that was a heavy piece of business and if you want to talk about that, the fellow who should talk about that is—I think, he's still with the Labor Department—Peter Henle.

STERN: Could you spell that?

BURKE: H-e-n-l-e. He was the lead government staff guide, as I recall, on that one. That was a matter again of great concern. That was initiated by the Department of Labor, Willard Wirtz. Tom Powers in Washington worked heavily on that. I worked very heavily on that but Peter Henle was sort of the expert in that in the Labor Department, and that was relied upon.

STERN: Can you recall any of the details? I mean, what was the real nugget of the issue?

BURKE: The real nugget of the issue was vesting and the inequity of people being contributing to a pension plan and getting nothing out of them. An ever increasing transient society and how the people take the benefits with them. The portability

was the big question. There was a realization that the labor force in the '60s and '70s and off into the future was not going to be the traditional labor force of years ago where you were born in a town and you remained in the town and you worked in the mill and you retired from there. It was going to be a far more transient labor force. There were certain inequities in the pension systems to help relieve the burden of social security but also how people can carry their pension benefits with them and so on and so forth. That was of great concern.

STERN: Were there striking and evident differences on this between the labor and management sections of the committee?

BURKE: Yes, there were. The management folks could quite clearly see this as another increased cost that they would have to bear because part of the actuarial functions of any pension plan always was that you and I would leave our position at some time and hence the pool out of which the benefits would come would be fattened by the fact that we went away. And here the labor folks were trying to say, no, that part of the pool that you contributed to is yours for evermore. And even if you worked for five companies, at age 65 you should be getting five different checks for the time you put in at the various companies that you worked. The government.... There was a great concern of the day, as I remember some of the issues involved, the great concern of the day was actual unemployment. And the government's great concern at the time was inducing people to be more transient, to be more mobile. A far more mobile labor force would alleviate some of the problems of actual unemployment so that a person could actually be retrained, move out of city X to city Y and so on and so forth. And labor was insisting that only can be done.... One of the concerns, one of the factors that would grease the skids of mobility had to be the portability of the pension. So you could bring benefits with you so that at the end of a long working life it isn't just social security you have. Management viewed it as a cost increase and certainly unnecessary. Someone who's actually unemployed should get himself retrained and get a job someplace else. So again a classical difference, no doubt.

STERN: As yet unresolved.

BURKE: As yet unresolved, yes. However, there has been a pension act enacted since that committee was in existence and vesting is a right, and now I believe, I don't know too much, I know there are vesting provisions.

STERN: Some revisions have been made.

BURKE: There has to be vesting and portability is a fact of life now. Although some pension systems even though certainly ____ that premise.

STERN: How about the whole question of amending the Taft-Hartley Act? Apparently the committee had that thrown at them and made some very specific recommendations which they did not get through the Congress. I wonder what your recollections are. I can recall....

BURKE: Why don't you recall a few things.

STERN: Okay. The committee essentially made three recommendations. One, that the President appoint an emergency dispute board in any dispute that threatened the national health or safety. Two, that the board would study the dispute and recommend a settlement. And third, if unsuccessful, the negotiations would continue without a strike for eighty days and without a court injunction. And then, if that still didn't work, then the President would move to the...

BURKE: To the traditional option.

STERN: ...to the Taft-Hartley Act. It must have been very hard, I would assume, given those points, to have gotten that through the committee. That's a lot of very tough....

BURKE: It was all very tough and, as you can see, all very....

[END OF SIDE ONE]

BURKE: ...the significant point of that, only the kinds of people who had the expertise and the knowledge are the people this committee could advise. I do not recall why it didn't go through the Congress. I don't recall the congressional fight at the end of the line or even if there was one or even if there....

STERN: Apparently the President was very pleased with the report or pleased with these recommendations.

BURKE: I think it gave him something to recommend, to show that he was making some move on national emergency disputes. I have to tell you that if you look at the history of national emergency disputes and the number of times in which the Taft-Hartley Act was used in the late '50s and early '60s and today and you will see that it has shrunk quite a bit. That's a whole other subject, and I don't know why. The nature of collective bargaining and the structure of collective bargaining—what it is or other devices that have been found by the parties themselves—but at that time there was a rash of Taft-Hartley disputes. The injunction was especially obnoxious to some labor leaders. Certainly not obnoxious to the business people. They always viewed the injunction as an unfair use of governmental power on the freedom of the collective bargaining and so forth and so on. And hence, I think this was a way to push the injunction farther off into the distance and to see that the kind of intelligence that has been developed particularly at this committee level could have an impact, but it was intricate and it was, and it didn't have a hell of a lot of impact.

STERN: Do you recall whether there was any...

BURKE: It had nothing to do with wage-price, that's why it didn't have any impact. That was just the boys playing the game that they knew best.

STERN: ...whether there was any relationship between the committee, between the working staff of the committee and the congressional liaison people they had, Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and his staff, in translating some of the recommendations into legislation. Do you have any recollections?

BURKE: No, very little. No. Again, I never had the impression that the committee's assignment was to come out with such finality on anything. The Taft-Hartley stuff was pretty specific and pretty final.

STERN: Somewhat unusual in that sense.

BURKE: That's right. And forgetting the offside kind of things like the steel price increase and the railroad dispute, I think the President was just very wise or his administration was very wisely using this committee for what I discussed earlier, the airing of issues, getting it out so that steps the government may wish to take at least had been previewed, had been pre-discussed. It had appeared in the press, so forth and so on and the surprises weren't there and you could measure the demographics as it were of the interest groups by the use of this committee.

STERN: I wonder if you would comment on one other point. John Donovan [John C. Donovan] mentioned the fact that the President would sometimes, well, that he was very conscious of the fact that he wanted to use his own, let me put it, social role vis-à-vis the committee. And sometimes he would invite them on the presidential yacht. That sort of thing.

BURKE: Yes, yes, he would. Or he'd invite them back to meet his wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy].

STERN: That's exactly.... Do you have any recollection of that? It's very clear as to what he was doing with that.

BURKE: I remember one of the trips on the yacht, and I remember that one day they were over there and they were.... His wife had been out riding and they brought her in and introduced her and they had some drinks in the family quarters and that sort of thing. To me that wasn't so much a planned piece of business as just the President of the United States in a political role encouraging these people by making them feel that they are part of the administration. He knew that there were many members of that committee who didn't think much of him. It was part of the nice glow that was around the White House during his presidency anyway in those days. No matter how partisan some

members of this committee were, being in the presence of President Kennedy and his wife or being in the White House at that time never failed to have an effect. He didn't use it to twist them into a position they didn't want to take, to my knowledge. But he knew that overall the more

[-16-]

genteel and hospitable you were to these people the more they stay with it and they'd be trying to do certain things.

STERN: Can you think of any anecdotes along that line? Donovan had a marvelous story, I think it was Watson [Thomas J. Watson, Jr.] of IBM [International Business Machines], was it Watson? I can't recall exactly, but the President offering him a lift to New York. He was flying down to New York that evening...

BURKE: Yes, that may have been. Of course he knew....

STERN: ...but he acted like an excited child. He got the President's autograph for his son or grandson, that sort of thing.

BURKE: I remember that. I remember one day a good hour of a meeting—we were meeting in the Labor Department—and one good hour was taken up. We were going to see the President that afternoon and I think it was about a boat trip. It was going to be that night, go out on the river and have some dinner and spend some time with the President. A great deal of time was taken that afternoon, everyone trying to work out their schedule, on the phones trying to find their wives, seeing if they were in town, could we all make it or couldn't we. It was changed two or three times. The leaving time of the yacht was changed. Everyone was just running around because they were so excited by that. And, as I said, even those who had never voted for this person or had no desire, they wanted to be caught up in the glamour and mystique and the romance of that old-fashioned Camelot world so on and so forth. Not a use of presidential power to be sneered at. Not an atmosphere that is not in the best interest to everyone who creates it. Something that has been sorely lacking ever since, I think.

STERN: I think he was particularly aware of his ability to use it.

BURKE: Absolutely. There's no question about that

STERN: And use it very well.

BURKE: And use it very well. He never used it in the crass sense that Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] did thereafter.

STERN: I agree with you. One last point....

BURKE: I remember Lyndon Johnson at one time bringing people in to that....

STERN: I want to get to that in a little while. Let me ask you one last point about the Kennedy years on the committee. I was looking through some mail which had come in to the committee and there was one letter in particular that I found very interesting. It was from a right-to-work group, somewhere in the Midwest. Essentially the thrust

[-17-]

of the letter was, what right do you have to organize a committee that supposedly stands for or represents labor when fifty million unorganized workers are not represented? I wonder if that kind of consideration ever entered in any way at all in the deliberations of the committee?

BURKE: No, no, it didn't.

STERN: The fact that there were millions upon millions of workers who were not organized and were not at all represented.

BURKE: That's right. I think labor's membership at that time may have been 14 or 15 or 16 million.

STERN: It was a small percentage strictly speaking.

BURKE: Whether it's little or it's big, societies are organized or they are not and the power groups were represented by the labor guys.

STERN: The classic progressives with a capital "P", or early 20th-century kind of model, represent the government business and labor.

BURKE: That's right.

STERN: Organized interests. Organized blocs.

BURKE: And the public.

STERN: And the public.

BURKE: That's exactly right. And it was blocs and the Kennedy administration. To some extent it was not a bad thing. They were linear. He had his way between point A and point B. Well, it isn't goofing around with unorganized right-to-life groups or something like that. Congress was influenced to a large extent not only by the public but clearly to a large extent by management interests and by organized labor interests. There was no question about it. But the rationale could be, on this committee was Arthur

Burns who knew certainly well that not everyone was organized. Elliot Bell, who certainly.... It was a well-balanced, in a responsible way, to any serious job, though this was not representative. The public members feel that, another role for the public members. Besides being mediators, educators, and position holders, they also represented the public.

STERN: Theoretically.

BURKE: Theoretically.

[-18-]

STERN: I wonder if you could at least briefly give me some sense of what the operational routine in an almost daily sense was on the committee? In other words if it's possible to describe pretty much what a day was like to work with this committee.

BURKE: It's hard to describe because the committee met, I think, on a monthly basis, not regularly. The staff work associated with it was sometimes very heavy and sometimes light depending on the issues on the.... It was mostly in Washington, the staff work was to get together the various position papers that had been promised for the future, working on reports that one hoped the committee would endorse. A lot of telephone communications. Sometimes working with one of the people who worked with committee members, Henry Ford's guy.

STERN: His staff people.

BURKE: Ted, whatever, was important. That name comes out of the past. Yntema [Theodore O. Yntema] was a vice president of Ford at the time and then he went off and became head of a business school. Working very closely with the staff of the AFL-CIO National [American Federation of Labor-Council of Industrial Organizations], working closely with Reuther's staff. A lot of the agreements that were reached in the committee meetings were naturally reached before and by mutual understanding and phone conversations and letters back and forth. That sort of thing. And those of us who worked for the committee also had other assignments, too, for their respective cabinet officers that we worked for. When I was responsible to the Secretary of Labor, I had other things that I did for the Department of Labor; certainly the Commerce Department, I had other things I did. The committee was my full-time job and while I was paid by the committee it was.... I covered a multitude of sins. I mean I did many other things, testimony to the Secretary....

STERN: I wonder if you could tell me how things changed with the change in administration? In terms of the role of the committee.

BURKE: The easiest way to do that is that I've tried to describe the Kennedy use of the committee was very sophisticated. Not looking for finality and not looking for

firm conclusions in any point and not looking for using the committee to hit anybody over the head with it but to use it for, paradoxically enough, more than Johnson. To use it for consensus, for the building of consensus, and Johnson used to talk about consensus and let us reason together but much more sophisticated rhetoric that was done with this committee during the Kennedy years. So that when he wanted to use it like in the steel thing or in the railroad thing or something like that you could, but really it was to lay the groundwork for future public policy that the administration may or may not want. Never force the committee into a corner.

STERN: To be tapped when needed.

BURKE: To be tapped when needed. And to start a public discourse on anything that the

[-19-]

administration thought was in its best interest and in the best interest of the country. Lyndon Johnson was just a totally different human being, person. He just wanted to get things done, God damn it. So therefore there was a labor dispute he was concerned about he'd want to put that committee right in there. Well, many of them resented that. Many of them resented that. They did not want to become.... After the railroad thing I always sort of etched in my memory that they did not want to become his agents. He wanted them to be his agents. "Hell, I got this whole collection of 21-odd powerful, tripartite people and God, if I can't use them for something, I'll lock them up in a room and get something out of them." He used to bring people wandering around the White House, he'd bring them in and show him "his" committee at work, and I'm not making a personal thing on Johnson. It's just two different people, and I always thought he just destroyed the effectiveness of the committee because of his desire to utilize it in a way that they found undignified. They felt like they were being used. They never felt with Kennedy that they were being used. Oh, they knew they were being used a little bit, but he, hell, he made it so nice. Here they were being used in a crass way. While I'm talking to you about it the only image I have in my head is Lyndon holding up the beagle by its ears, the dog by its ears. I think the committee sort of felt sooner or later he would hold them up. Who wants to be associated with that?

STERN: Can you recall a specific example of him doing that?

BURKE: Oh, yeah. There was some dispute, there was something they were working on, there was a labor dispute they were meeting about. It was not a labor dispute, there was some meeting going on in the Fish Room, and he brought in the famous photographer Strichen [Elmer Steichen]...

STERN: Steichen.

BURKE: ...and a couple of other people who happened to be guests at the White House that day, and I can't remember the details of it, but I can remember him

showing the committee off to those people in terms so crass that the committee was clearly shifting in their seats. They felt on display, they just didn't feel comfortable with him and what they saw as his use of them. At that point I didn't feel comfortable. I immediately decided to leave. It was not going to be this very sophisticated professional use of a rather unusual grouping of American power blocs at that moment to develop the ____ public policy

STERN: How long did you stay?

BURKE: The President died in November of '63, and I left in a year, or something like that. I mean my interest in the committee just went down, down, and down. I was looking for a job right away. Now part of that may have been the trauma everyone was going through, the President of the United States has been murdered. And part of my remarks even today may even be related to the fact that who the hell can replace, in a young man's mind, in those days, John F. Kennedy. But I think enough years have gone by,

[-20-]

enough evaluations have been made of those two fellows. And I can honestly say that the way Kennedy used that committee and the way people around Kennedy used that committee and the cleverness in which they used it, requiring all the dignity and sophistication and homage that these powerful men needed in order to come to consensus, was rapidly about to be destroyed by a much crasser, hard-nosed, short-run utilization of them by Johnson.

STERN: I think of course that, I think you made a very good point, there's an irony in terms of Johnson's reputation for consensus but the fact, of course, is that his was a much more personal style.

BURKE: But any man who runs around saying as much as he did that "we have to reason together," he was protesting a bit too much. He was not a reasoner together. He was a banger of heads. Kennedy was far more of a reasoner together, although you knew internally his administration was entirely within itself. He was as hard pressed to reach his goals as Johnson was. It was just the iron fist was clearly in the glove. Johnson was always out there. The committee had no future in that kind of situation because these weren't those kind of people. What Lyndon Johnson should have done was disband the committee if he thought it was not important at all and have his own one with the kind of people who would have responded to him. Tom Watson was not going to respond to Lyndon Johnson the way he responded to Jack Kennedy. Neither were any of the other business leaders or any of the labor leaders, they just weren't. There was a whole new game and a whole new bunch of rules and Lyndon Johnson was a different kind of person.

STERN: That's fascinating. Do you have any other observations about your whole period on the committee?

BURKE: It was just a great experience. I guess not.

STERN: Okay. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-21-]

David W. Burke Oral History Transcript
Name Index

B

Bell, Elliot V., 6, 18
Block, Joseph L., 4, 6, 12
Bookbinder, Hyman, 2, 4, 5
Boyle, Tony, 6
Burns, Arthur F., 6, 7, 18

C

Carter, Jimmy, 9
Cole, David L., 1, 6, 7, 8

D

Dillon, C. Douglas, 3, 4
Donovan, John C., 16, 17
Dubinsky, David,

F

Ford, Henry II, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 19
Franklin, John M., 6

G

Goldberg, Arthur J., 2, 3, 4, 10
Gudeman, Edward, 2, 12

H

Harrison, George, 6
Heller, Walter Wolfgang, 3
Henle, Peter, 13
Herter, Christian A., 4
Hodges, Luther H., 2, 3, 4

J

Johnson, Lyndon Baines, 17, 19, 20, 21

K

Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 16
Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11,
15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21
Kennedy, Thomas, 6
Kerr, Clark, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13

M

Macaluso, Vincent, 5
McDoanld, David J., 6
Meany, George, 6, 7, 8, 11

N

Nixon, Richard Milhous, 1, 9

O

O'Brien, Lawrence F., 16
Orkin, Arthur, 3

P

Powers, N. Thompson, 5, 13

R

Reuther, Walter P., 2, 3, 7, 8, 12, 19
Reynolds, Richard S., 4

S

Schultz, George P., 1
Steichen, Elmer, 20
Stieber, Jack, 5

T

Taylor, George William, 1, 7, 8, 13

W

Watson, Thomas J., Jr., 17, 21
Wirtz, Willard, 4, 5, 13

Y

Yntema, Theodore O., 19