Theory and practice: James MacGregor Burns

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1 INTRODUCTION

Jim Burns believed passionately that theory should be married to practice, for the benefit of theory as well as practice and for the benefit of practitioners as well as scholars. Real leadership matched ends to means, ideas to methods. And true scholarship was deeply informed by experience in the field; in fact Burns typically described himself, modestly, as a ‘student of leadership.’

This essay will look at Burns as a scholar who made use of his own experience and of the knowledge he gleaned from his study of and interactions with presidents and other leaders. He learned from presidents like Carter and Clinton¹ even as his ideas about leadership influenced their administrations. His work was invoked in the Nixon White House,² and, even before his presidency began, Barack Obama was assessed in terms of Burns’s theory of transformational leadership.³

But, for this piece, we will focus on the trio of presidents who had the greatest impact on Burns’s understanding of leadership, on the crucial link between theory and practice: FDR, JFK, and LBJ.

Burns’s political education began early, at the family dinner table as a teenager in Lexington, Massachusetts, where he strenuously defended FDR’s agenda against relatives with strong Republican moorings. His formal political education began as a young protégé of Max Lerner, a radical writer and his mentor and teacher at Williams College. And in 1939, freshly graduated from Williams, Burns secured the necessary Washington, DC internship with Congressman Abe Murdock, Democrat from Utah.

* The author wishes to thank Susan Dunn and Milton Djuric for their reviews of earlier drafts of this work.

1. See Burns and Sorenson’s (1999) interviews and interactions with Bill and Hillary Clinton in *Dead Center: Clinton–Gore Leadership and the Perils of Moderation* and Robert Eisinger’s (2003) *The Evolution of Presidential Polling* for discussion of Pat Caddell’s use of Burns’s theory in his memos to the president.

2. The discussion was noted on the official Nixon White House log, but the contents were deleted.

3. Despite record lows in presidential approval ratings, there are 563,000 Google hits for ‘Obama Transformational President,’ accessed October 11, 2014.

2 FRANKLIN AND ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

The internship on the Hill had an added benefit: First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt invited Burns and a small group of fellow interns to tea at the White House to discuss their ideas and experience in Washington. Burns recalled:

I was with a group of interns. This was still in the Depression period. We were all rather poor and I actually lived with a couple of interns around the corner from the White House on 8th Street. And she invited [us] over for tea at the White House. Well you can imagine all of us coming in from the boondocks being invited to the White House!

So we went to the White House and there was Mrs. Roosevelt. FDR was upstairs being president. We didn't see him. She was just as we all remember her. Gracious, interested in people, unostentatious ... and so a wonderful moment for us.⁴

Eleanor Roosevelt would remain one of Jim's most esteemed leaders. He particularly admired her work developing the UN Declaration of Human Rights and creating an important activist role for the First Lady.

She is my true heroine of the 20th century. And the fact that she was in there so long and then she had this very important public career after her husband died. She ... made it possible for later First Ladies to do almost anything they wanted because she did about everything that she wanted to do.⁵

Although he wrote brilliantly insightful books about Roosevelt, Jim only saw him in person once, when he was 22, at the Boston Gardens. As a new world war raged and just a few days before his 1940 re-election in November, Roosevelt gave an impassioned speech that climaxed with his memorable pledge, 'I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.'⁶ These words were greeted with thunderous applause, and though it was a promise FDR could not keep, young Burns was electrified.⁷

As Roosevelt's biographer, Jim's keen observations and insights provided a rich vein to explore and craft his own ideas about presidential leadership. In FDR, Jim discovered the roots of his leadership theory; Roosevelt was a model of what Burns would later call transactional leadership. In his 1956 biography, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, he described FDR as a deeply complex man whose political genius was to 'keep open alternative lines of action, to shift from one line to another as conditions demanded, to protect his route to the rear in case he wanted to make a sudden retreat, and, fox-like, to cross and snarl his trail in order to hide his real intentions.'⁸

'I was very interested in how Machiavellian he was,' Burns said later. But that was only part of the story. FDR was also a great transformational leader. 'He was a manipulator, and at the same time, he had to be a lion. To what extent did he use the tactics of a fox in order to advance the wishes of a lion? To what extent did he have to be a transactional leader to be able to become a transforming leader?'⁹

4. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4503753/james-macgregor-burns-hell-remembered>.

5. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4503753/james-macgregor-burns-hell-remembered>.

6. Franklin D. Roosevelt: 'Campaign Address at Boston, Massachusetts.' October 30, 1940. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project.

7. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?300041-7/james-macgregor-burns-michael-beschloss>.

8. Quote from a conversation with Susan Dunn, October 2014.

9. See <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/07/james-macgregor-burns-historian-dies-at-95-108937.html#ixzz3FJrIYeVh>.

And so Burns's intensive study of Franklin Roosevelt, coupled with his own political experience and education, helped hone a point of view that became his trademark as a scholar. That was exactly what was so unusual about all of his books – they were not just history, not just narratives; they offered sharp political analysis and insight grounded in ideas about leadership. *Newsweek* pronounced *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* a 'case study unmatched in American political writings.'¹⁰

It was just the beginning.

3 JOHN F. KENNEDY

The first president Burns would study personally and intimately was John Kennedy.

Burns and Kennedy were Massachusetts born and bred. After his undergraduate work at Williams and his internship stint in Washington, DC, Burns began a graduate program at Harvard, then enlisted and served as a soldier and combat historian during World War II. He returned home and finished his PhD.

In the early 1950s he settled in as a young political science professor at his alma mater, Williams College. But the professor was also an activist, a fighting, reformist member of the Democratic Party in Massachusetts, a delegate at Democratic National Conventions, and a cross-country campaigner for his party's presidential candidates. Taking a leave of absence from Williams in 1958, Burns threw his hat into a race for a western Massachusetts congressional seat. It was a fun campaign involving his young family, full of unexpected ups and downs, and he won the Democratic primary, but lost the general election in a traditionally Republican district.

Running for office was a transformational experience for Jim. The exposure to grassroots party politics, with so many volunteers working on his behalf, impressed him and gave him a vivid sense of the mobilization power of political parties, even as exposure to bitter crosscurrents within the Democratic Party tempered that optimism. He experienced first-hand the underside of American politics – McCarthyism and Catholic bigotry – and endured attacks as an ivory tower elitist, an atheist, a communist. Out in the field, Burns tested his theories against practice. The student of leadership gained a deeper understanding of what practicing politicians – would-be leaders – needed to surmount in order to achieve their ends.

It was while running for the House in 1958 that Burns grew closer to the young John Kennedy, who was seeking re-election to the US Senate from Massachusetts. They campaigned together often and Burns found Kennedy charming but cool and cautious. The Democratic Party's rising star had his own statewide organization separate from the party, an impressive, well-funded personal machine. As Burns and others recognized, JFK was not as helpful as he could have been to him and other Democratic candidates because he had his eye on a greater prize.¹¹

Nevertheless, Jim would soon throw himself wholeheartedly into Kennedy's presidential campaign. He loved working with people like Ted Sorensen and other brain trusters in a tiny office, as the others were 'mapping out that whole brilliant campaign of Jack Kennedy in 1960.'¹²

10. <http://www.amazon.com/Roosevelt-The-Lion-Vol-1882-1940/dp/0156027623>, accessed October 1, 2014.

11. Silvio Conte, recorded interview by William J. Hartigan, October 18, 1977, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

12. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4503753/james-macgregor-burns-hell-remembered>.

Figure 1 JFK and JMB in Palm Springs, Florida, 1960, by Stewart Burns

While Burns acquired first-hand experience of a national campaign, he was researching and writing the first serious biography of JFK, *John Kennedy: A Political Profile*, which would be published in January 1960, not long before the beginning of the Democratic presidential primaries.

It was no simple task to write a political biography as a friend, a fellow Democrat, and a man obsessed with winning the presidency – but Jim handled it adeptly. The key was his freedom to present his ideas and conclusions about Kennedy without interference from the Kennedy team. The senator's campaign wanted the candidate's story told, but not as the typical hack hagiography. They finally decided that Burns would be the best bet – he was a respected scholar who supported Kennedy – but they recognized the risk, that he would require independence.¹³

In the archives of the JFK presidential library in Boston, letters reveal the conflict between Jim on the one hand, and Sorensen and Kennedy on the other. In minor narrative matters and some incidental family concerns, Burns was willing to give way. But he would not surrender his freedom to interpret the JFK story as he saw it, especially his conclusion asking whether Kennedy, described by Jim as 'casual as a cash-register,' would bring the needed 'passion and power' to the challenges of the presidency. Would he make a commitment 'not only of mind, but of heart' to a cause greater than his own ambition?¹⁴

13. Myer Feldman, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, March 6, 1966, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

14. Silvio Conte, recorded interview by William J. Hartigan, October 18, 1977, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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your stand on the communist affidavit requirement; have brought in the very good point about some Catholic leaders looking at your candidacy from a very narrow if not jealous point of view; have corrected the comment about "campaigning for the Vice Presidency" to campaigning for other Democratic candidates and for the Presidency; have taken out the reference to Averell Harriman; and have made changes in the health business along the lines Ted and I discussed. I am not mentioning here the various small slips or typographical errors, such as the extra "8" in the figure for Lodge's spending, etc. I might mention that in other cases, of course, my own version stood up; for example, the vote on Lee was January 1954, not March or April 1952, as was your impression. And on some matters where I gather you questioned my sources I have re-checked and feel that they are sound; for example, the Sarge Shriver talk with Stevenson is based on a detailed report he wrote shortly after the interview; your retrospective feeling about Algeria, which both you and Ted mention, I took from my interview with you, in which you clearly said that you were not sure that calling for independence was correct; and so on.

I have been glad to make these changes because in these cases you and/or Ted were justified in your point of view. This was why I sent the first two drafts--or as much of them as were not being voted on--down to the office, and again I appreciate all the work you both did on them, especially considering the lives you both are leading. Actually, your suggestions have helped to give the book balance in more general ways. For example, on the Mallan episode I have quoted another student who was there who feels, interestingly enough, that what you said was good shock treatment for the stereotyped liberal mind and that you were way ahead of your time. Also, while Ted did not raise this exact point, in thinking over our discussion I realized that I had not carried through to its logical conclusion the point that in each job you have taken you have moved into it and through it and grown bigger in it, and since the Presidency is notably an elevating office, I brought in this point toward the end. And so on--if I keep on I will be going over the whole book.

I should point out at the same time that on matters of balance, judgment, author's conclusions, etc., there has to be ultimately only one author of the book. I could go into a long description or defense of some of the conclusions reached in the book, but I think the book will have to stand on its own feet, and that it will. But needless to say, if there is any further question you or Ted have I'll be glad to discuss it with you.

As I said to Ted, the final test of the book, in terms of the immediate political situation, will be how it is received. The independent critiques received by the publisher have been uniformly good to excellent; I am attaching some excerpts in case you haven't seen the set I gave Ted (the omitted material consists largely of factual corrections, typos, etc.).

Figure 2 Copy of Burns's letter to John Kennedy (page 2)

It was inflammatory material. Should Burns show his manuscript to the Kennedy team? The professor was alive to the issue, as he told Brian Lamb:

This is something one should not do. Typically, you don't let the people you're writing about read your manuscript. But I had a feeling of ethical responsibility here. I was not writing about a dead person. I was writing about somebody who wanted to become president and I felt that I might learn from that person his reaction to this. I knew that in the end I would control what I would write.¹⁵

In the face of objections from JFK's camp, Burns wrote to Senator Kennedy (see also Figure 2):

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15. Brian Lamb, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4503753/james-macgregor-burns-hell-remembered>.

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Sorensen indeed had questions. He was fighting hard for a uniformly favorable interpretation of JFK and was angered by Jim's questioning of Kennedy's commitment and his loyalty to the liberal principles of the Democratic Party.¹⁷ The manuscript drafts flew back and forth, but in a messy world where Burns defended his scholarly integrity while Sorensen's sole task was to sell his candidate to the American people, it was complicated.

It became even more complicated and interesting when Burns sent his manuscript off to Jackie Kennedy and she responded on November 4, 1959, with a long handwritten letter on yellow legal paper mailed from Hyannis Port.

She began with a flattering appeal to the similarities between politician and professor: 'You are like him in many ways. You know the hard parts and the pitfalls. Can't you see that he is exceptional?'¹⁸

But, she continued, 'I think you underestimate him. Anyone sees he has the intelligence, the magnetism and the drive it takes to succeed in politics. I see every succeeding week I am married to him that he has what may be the single most important quality – an imperturbable self confidence and sureness of his powers.'¹⁹

Jim's political profile of JFK was an illuminating portrait of a man that in January 1960 Americans were only beginning to acknowledge as a potential president. Despite Burns's admiration for Jack Kennedy and despite the pleas from the Senator's wife and others, he didn't budge on the manuscript's tough conclusions about the senator.

From his experiences as Kennedy's ticketmate in 1958 and his dual role as scholar and activist in 1960, Burns believed he was present at the birth of a new phenomenon in American politics: the candidate who won office by distancing himself from his political party, relying on his own organization and policy positions and his own sources of money, as well as on the effective exploitation of the modern media. Kennedy was perhaps not the first but no one had done it more comprehensively. 'Running alone,' as Jim would later call it, might bring electoral success, but what were the implications for governing? What leverage would a president disconnected from his party have on Congress? How could personalistic leadership mobilize followers to achieve significant and lasting change?

Kennedy was no FDR. As Burns told Brian Lamb on CSpan many years later, 'he was such a frustrated President. He thought he could master the political system. He felt and he told the American people he could make the political system work. He couldn't.' But Jim believed that in 1963, events – civil rights protests in the South, outrage over nuclear testing by the US and the Soviets – pushed President Kennedy into clearer moral commitments, commitments of the heart, with transformational potential; JFK might become a leader 'headed toward greatness in the presidency.' But that, Burns told Lamb, was 'the great poignant aspect, tragic aspect of his life ... the tragedy of that early death.'²⁰

16. JMB to JFK, November 1, 1959, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-129-011.aspx>.

17. Myer Feldman, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, March 6, 1966, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

18. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Personal Secretary's Files. Books: Correspondence re. *John F. Kennedy: A Political Profile*, by James MacGregor Burns.

19. Ibid.

20. Brian Lamb, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4503753/james-macgregor-burns-hell-remembered>.

4 LYNDON JOHNSON

Burns published *The Deadlock of Democracy* in 1963, the last year of the Kennedy administration. The book's thesis was that the American party system consisted of, in effect, four parties, with each of the two major parties split between a conservative wing that controlled Congress, especially its most powerful committees, and a more liberal, activist wing that dominated the presidential nomination process and so the presidency (see Savage 2004).

Deadlock was widely read and influential in its call for techniques of strong presidential leadership to overcome the hostility within Congress that was keeping important legislation stalled. As historian Michael Beschloss (and Jim's student at Williams) said recently, 'Both JFK and LBJ read it closely and talked to him about what they might do to break the gridlock on Capitol Hill.'²¹

Johnson and Burns had gotten to know each other over the years and developed an odd-couple relationship, the Massachusetts academic and the supremely wily politician from Texas.²² Burns thought that Johnson 'wanted to win over some of these, quote, intellectuals who were so critical of him; and so I would see him a fair amount in Texas and then in Washington again.'²³ LBJ loved to spar intellectually with Burns and tease him about their differences.

One issue on which they didn't see eye to eye was presidential power. Despite LBJ's remarkable feat of presidential leadership in pushing through his Great Society legislation, his roots were in Congress and he was protective of its powers and prerogatives.

In a telephone conversation on Thanksgiving Day 1963 with Senate Minority Leader Everett R. Dirksen and Republican Congressman Gerald R. Ford of Michigan, LBJ referred to Burns's theory of 'four party politics' (Savage 2004, p. 118). Talking to these Republican leaders, LBJ expressed annoyance at Burns's insistence that, in order for the American system to work effectively, the legislative branch must be subordinated to the executive. When the role of Congress was challenged, Democrats and Republicans united.

In a follow-up call later that day to Ford, President Johnson was pleased that the Congressman was still in Washington rather than back home in Michigan. 'I was getting ready to tell MacGregor Burns that he's right about Congress – they couldn't function.'²⁴

Burns was invited to the Johnson White House several times, a final time just before Johnson announced his plan not to run again.²⁵ The invitation came from Lady Bird, and Burns's memory of the evening is stark and poignant:

It's a vivid memory. I was staying at the Hay Adams Hotel, and I remember walking across Lafayette Park; and usually, when you look at the White House, it's a gleaming thing and this

21. Matt Schudel, James MacGregor Burns presidential historian and leadership scholar, dies at 95, July 15, 2014 Washington Post.

22. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Personal Secretary's Files. Books: Correspondence re. *John F. Kennedy: A Political Profile*, by James MacGregor Burns.

23. James MacGregor Burns, recorded interview by William H. Brubeck, May 14, 1965, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. JFK papers.

24. http://whitehousetapes.net/clips/1963_1129_ford/id ntro.swf and http://www.ila-net.org/LeadershipLegacy/Oral%20Histories/Burns_FINALPDF.pdf, accessed October 6, 2014.

25. December 1967.

was a dark night. It was dark, and I was so struck by that. So I go in and take the elevator up to the family floor, and it's just a dinner for me and a couple of his friends and the others are already there. He isn't there yet, and he comes in and he hardly greets his friends. He takes me ... and says hello, shakes hands, and then he sort of, being Johnson, takes me by the lapel ... over to a sofa and sits down. ...

And he starts really with his life story, and about his family, and about his father being very disappointed in him. He was very gloomy and the whole thing was very somber – I should say, not gloomy, somber. He goes on and on about his youth and then he tells me more, and I'm sitting there and you might think as a presidential historian, oh, what a great moment this is, the man is telling me ... but I was completely mortified. I had no idea what he wanted. I couldn't take notes – although he talked so fast I couldn't have taken them anyway. I think, 'think of the people in Washington who would like ten minutes with this guy,' and here I'm sitting with him.

But he's not learning anything, he's just telling a story. I'm not learning anything. I can't take notes. I have nothing even to take notes with. I didn't want to interrupt him. He was so intense, and this goes on for about an hour.

Finally,

Lady Bird has us go over to the supper table. She sits me on his left. I think, 'at last, we can have a general conversation.' No, he picks up exactly where he left off from the earlier talk. Talks all the way through supper. Does not eat, as I recall. Then supper ends, and I think, 'well, at last,' but no, back to that sofa. He goes on for another two hours. (Savage 2004)

Burns had been a first-hand observer of and occasional participant in a presidency that from its extraordinary heights of transformation in 1964–1965 would, in a few short years, collapse into tragedy and signal a long-term reversal in America's movement toward a Great Society.

Burns's experiences with LBJ helped to shape his ideas about the vicissitudes of leadership and the potentialities and limits of the American political system. How Johnson operated within that system when his power had slipped away, his followers had deserted, and creative conflict had turned destructive, was scarcely less fascinating and instructive than when his leadership was at its peak.

Years later Burns remained puzzled by that final encounter at Lyndon Johnson's White House, though he appreciated what a unique opportunity he had been granted – a scholar invited to listen to what may have been a president's 'swan song.'²⁶

As this is a journal that focuses on leadership education and the humanities, it is noteworthy that Burns's commitment to theory and practice extended to his notions of a well-rounded liberal education:

[T]he reading of the great theorists has to be combined with practical experience. And that's the genius of our framers. They were tremendous readers of these philosophers but in their daily lives they are out there running the states and revolting against Britain. So again it goes back to effective combination of theory and practice.²⁷

Few American presidents could match the framers' extraordinary standards of thought and action; real transformational leadership was, Burns knew, rare, and as

26. http://www.ila-net.org/LeadershipLegacy/Oral%20Histories/Burns_FINALPDF.pdf.

27. C-SPAN Booknotes: *James MacGregor Burns: The Crosswinds of Freedom*, Program Air Date: June 4, 1989.

he studied leaders and leadership, he came more and more to appreciate the role of transactional leadership – day-to-day practical politics – in achieving transformational change. The combination of lion and fox in one person was no paradox or flaw, but the essence of effective leadership.

That combination was the hallmark of FDR's presidency. John Kennedy began to match ends to means, rhetoric to action, only late in his presidency, while Lyndon Johnson did so brilliantly in bringing forth the Great Society – fleshing it out with a torrent of legislation – but was driven to collapse as the Vietnam War and his own temperament made him a frustrated, impotent leader.

Observer and activist, theorist and practitioner – no one explained leadership in the modern age as richly as Jim Burns.

In a televised interview on Booknotes, CSPAN's Brian Lamb asks Burns one final question:²⁸

Lamb: This is very elemental, but if you were a young person watching and interested in political science and writing and all that would you recommend the kind of life you've had?

Burns: Yes, I would. I'd recommend that they be activists as well as writers. I would urge them to join the party of their choice as I have with many of my students. I don't care which party. Work for a candidate, be active, run for office locally. I would urge them not just to be theorists and writers, but also to become part of public life. You learn a lot from it.

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28. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4503753/james-macgregor-burns-hell-remembered> and <http://www.c-span.org/video/?7854-1/book-discussion-crosswinds-freedom>.