

*Oral History: John Lowell Burton  
Part One*

*Interviewed by Jerry Roberts*

*San Francisco, California  
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*For more than 5 decades, John Burton has been a central figure in California public life, playing a pivotal role in shaping its politics and formation of policy.*

*Now 86, Mr. Burton has served in the state Assembly, the House of Representatives and the state Senate, and also done two stints as chairman of the California Democratic Party.*

*During his political career, seven different men have served as governor, and John Burton has dealt with them all, while also working in alliance or opposition with countless prominent figures in modern California history, including Ronald Reagan, both as governor and as president.*

*Although proud to be identified as a San Francisco liberal, Burton's personal political history is more layered, nuanced and complex than any label can convey.*

*This oral history of John Lowell Burton is supported by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the California State Library and was conducted in San Francisco on July 19, 2018.*

**JERRY ROBERTS:** What words would you use to describe the basic values and political principles that have guided your career and animated you in your actions?

**JOHN BURTON:** I think government's there to help the people who can't help themselves. And there's a lot of people that can't help themselves.

**ROBERTS:** And so, in action, that value you've taken care of welfare issues, environmental issues, women's healthcare issues...

**BURTON:** Labor. Yeah, everything.

**ROBERTS:** But today, now we see President Trump and the Republicans are just stomping on all of that. Do you feel like your whole legacy is being erased?

**BURTON:** I worry about the future of the country. I don't care about, you know, well, jeez, I passed this bill or not, doesn't do anything. I'm worried about my

grandchildren, and I'm worried about... I'm just worried about the country and that's... And we ought to be worried.

**ROBERTS:** Because those values are off the table?

**BURTON:** A value is like this watch is something of value, except I don't have a watch. I mean, those are just basic things to, I mean, care for people and just do the right thing. I just never thought it was that big... It was just the right thing. I'm not a student of the Bible, blessed are the poor, but there's lot of people that need the help and government... The purpose of government is to help people, I think.

**ROBERTS:** Trump is attacking California in innumerable fronts, on the immigration issue, on healthcare, on environmental stuff. What should the state do? I mean what should the state's leaders be doing?

**BURTON:** Well I think they are doing it. I think the Attorney General, Xavier Becerra, I think he's doing good. I mean we're fighting back. The guy is the president of the United States. I think we're facing incipient fascism. The man couldn't tell the truth if it hit him in the face.

Someday, enough Republicans maybe, will say, my political seat isn't this important as the country is, and say what's in their hearts, 'cause allegedly ...did people in Washington, you know insiders, reporters, all that crapola, talk to these people, they're saying one thing there, but they're afraid to cross him. Well, I've been in Congress, I've been the head of state Senate. The biggest thing, it ain't that important to give up your soul, which is not, it's an honor, but nothing's worth selling your soul to.

They don't have the goddamn guts to just say, "Man, enough's enough." What do they have to lose? Unless they think somebody's going to shoot 'em. And I'm waiting for all of this. The one good thing that came out of Helsinki, is that it's going to be pretty hard, in all these indictments, hard for Mueller to get fired by Trump, or Rosenstein. It's the right-wing radio talk that I accidentally got into. But it's going to be awful tough to do that, because the witch hunt found a whole bunch of witches, and there's more stuff. And then you've got a paid spy who was trying to or did infiltrate the NRA, which is about as American a group as you could get. How they react to getting played as dupes by the Russians will be something to watch. So...

**ROBERTS:** It's beyond politics. Are you worried about...

**BURTON:** I'm worried about the country.

**ROBERTS:** How things are going to be for your grandkid?

**BURTON:** Yeah, I'm worried about the country. Christ, I'm an old man, but I've got a daughter, I've got grandkids. People ought to start worrying about this country,

because this guy is a bad human being, he's a liar, he's probably a thief. He used to stiff a lot of the people that worked for him, and he's a great salesman. That's what he did.

*The youngest of three brothers, Burton migrated with his family from the Midwest to the West Coast, growing up in the San Francisco of the 1940s and 50s.*

*John idolized Philip, the oldest, who was focused and fascinated by politics from an early age, but John was far more interested in basketball, as a high school star, a college standout.*

**ROBERTS:** You were born December 15th, 1932 in Cincinnati, the third of..

**BURTON:** Ohio.

**ROBERTS:** The third of three brothers after Phillip and Bob. Your dad was a physician.

**BURTON:** He was a traveling salesman and he went to medical school when he was 36 years old, with three kids.

**ROBERTS:** And did he, he went away to do that, did he?

**BURTON:** We lived in Detroit for a time period. It was the time when they won the World Series when I was about two or three years old. And I don't know what my dad was doing then, probably traveling salesman. I was too young to know anything except they won the Series. But we moved to Milwaukee and he went to the University of Chicago medical school.

He came out here, became a doctor and we traveled, we took a trip, started in Milwaukee and took the western route, the northern route, Fargo and blah blah blah, Montana, Yellowstone, coming down, and he was scouting out where he was going to go. And it came down to a choice between San Francisco and Santa Barbara, and he chose San Francisco.

He was a doctor, and he used to take... Everybody took house calls then. Not everybody, but... And he took house calls, he would take them into Fillmore, which was a black district, and half the time he would come home without the fee because the family didn't have any money, or buy a pair of shoes for the kid and do this. And it just kind of fell onto us I guess, but political stuff was never my deal. My brother, Phillip, from high school was into political stuff and I just wasn't.

**ROBERTS:** Where'd you go to high school?

**BURTON:** I went to Lincoln High School, played basketball,

**ROBERTS:** And then you went to San Francisco State?

**BURTON:** Right.

**ROBERTS:** And did you play basketball there?

**BURTON:** Yeah I played basketball. I lettered all four year. Volunteered for the draft because you had to go. It was Korea. And...

**ROBERTS:** That was '54 right?

**BURTON:** '54 and you could wait 'til you get drafted, and so I volunteered for the draft to go and get it over. And the day I went down to take the oath was the day that I would have stood in line and got the diploma.

Yeah I played basketball. I lettered all four years. As a freshman I played... Freshmen played varsity, played a little bit. I mean not a little bit, I mean like garbage time. Sophomore, a little bit more. Then it started as a junior and senior.

**ROBERTS:** Scored 20 points against Bill Russell?

**BURTON:** No, I scored 20 points in a basketball game against USF when Bill Russell was on the team.

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, the Celtics star went to USF.

*John Burton's introduction to electoral politics came during two legislative races his brother Phil ran in the 1950s, one successful and one anything but.*

*John's experiences with his brother during this time not only exposed him, not only to the real world of street, level-local politics, but also forged close friendships with two other men with whom he would be allied in liberal campaigns and causes for decades to come.*

**ROBERTS:** And when you came out of the Army in '56, I think, by that time your brother who you mentioned, Phillip had kind of already started the family business in politics. But his first race in '54, he lost to a dead guy. Is that right? Clifford Berry. Were you involved with that?

**BURTON:** No, I just got out of the Army. Yeah, I was in the Army. I knew he was running. And he ran against a guy named Cliff Berry, who'd been veteran, Irish Catholic. And at that time, you would have... He's still on the ballot, Cliff Berry died, but he still was on the ballot. And he got the most votes because the ballots were at that time alphabetical, no, incumbent first. So if you're the first incumbent in a low-income district, they just vote. And Berry, Burton, people who the hell knew? And he lost that. But I'm in the Army, so don't know, don't care. I come home, 15th I think. I get out the 15th of May and I ask, "What's going on?" Phillip's running. I says, "Who's

he running against?" A guy named Tommy Maloney, who everybody knew. I mean I knew him and I didn't know anything.

**ROBERTS:** This is in '56?

**BURTON:** He was pro tem there and been in for 20 years... Old fashioned Republican pro-labor, all this, and I said, "Jesus, you lost to a dead man, what's he going to do with Tommy Maloney?" And then some of the old guard Democrats started, they had cross-filing then...

**ROBERTS:** So you could vote for...

**BURTON:** So people could get elected on both tickets. And in the primary, I mean I did a little bit, but didn't know what was going on, walked a precinct with Agar Jaicks, later the county chair, and Phillip forced it into a run-off, and then the old guard guys started red-baiting him and kind of picking on him, and we have ideas about Red China and un-American, and I figured, here's this guy...

**ROBERTS:** He wanted China admitted to the UN or something?

**BURTON:** Yeah, I guess so. I mean I didn't give a shit. But, as my mind, here this guy is an icon, and they're picking on my brother, ... and I kind of got involved as a family matter, and we won. He won.

**ROBERTS:** So had you met Willie Brown and George Moscone by that point?

**BURTON:** Yeah, I met Willie. We went to college together. We're both in that...

**ROBERTS:** At State...

**BURTON:** Both in the Air Force ROTC, and it was Barger, Burton, Brown, Willie Barger, tall black guy, and then Burton and Brown or however, and that's when we knew each other. And I hung out in the coffee shop with the student union. By and large, the blacks had their own section, not by segregation but that's where their friends were, and the basketball team was half black. So I'd be hanging there. We didn't hang together but we knew each other.

But I met Moscone in high school when he played at St. Ignatius when they won the championship, and I was just a freshman, Christ, it could have been tin he 8th grade. And we just met then, it was nothing then, played at the playground, Helen Wills Playground and just got to know each other and became...

**ROBERTS:** You were very close to Moscone.

**BURTON:** Closer. I mean I think one could say I was closer to him than I was with Phillip, only 'cause Philip and I didn't go out and play basketball and get drunk

together, or drink or have fun. But if Phillip... What happened with George... He was a playground director, a park called J.P. Murphy in the Sunset or Inner Sunset or whatever. And he's talking to me, says, "How do you become a judge?" And I said, "I have no idea. I could ask Phillip." So I said to Phillip, I says, "My buddy Moscone wants to know how you become a judge." And I don't think he wanted to become a judge, but I guess he... Some judge was an idiot, or something like... How could it... So we met at a Compton's Restaurant at Van Ness and Market, and I'm just there, and Phillip's talking to George and asking him like he's interviewing him to run for office. "What do you think about death penalty? What do you think about..." "

**ROBERTS:** Phillip's asking George?

**BURTON:** Yeah. What do you think about this and that? You know what I mean and I'm looking like this and that, and then Phillip says, "Well here's what you should do: Get active, and if you're running for state Assembly in a Republican district, but should get three votes on the State Central Committee, no, three on the Central Committee and one on the County Committee, and then that gives you road in." So George ran against Milton Marks.

**ROBERTS:** For the Senate?

**BURTON:** No, for the Assembly.

**ROBERTS:** For the Assembly. And how did you all get involved in politics together, through Phillip?

**BURTON:** Well I got involved... Got involved with the Young Democrats and became president of the Young Democrats, I guess. Willie, I think kind of got involved in that thing; George was not, in '50... That time in the '50s, enlightened people were looking for, at that time, a black, now an African-American, to run for office in what was a pretty strong African-American district, the Fillmore, and Phillip and Carlton Goodlett, black publisher of the newspaper, some Black ministers, F.D. Haynes, labor guys, they were looking, I think... They felt that a young sharp attorney, which was Willie Brown, that he'd be the guy and they backed Willie, and he lost the first time to an incumbent. In the meantime, my brother... The congressman, Jack Shelley, got elected mayor. My brother who had been shooting for that seat...

**ROBERTS:** For the congressional?

**BURTON:** Got elected to Congress and...

**ROBERTS:** And that's when you went up to Sacramento?

**BURTON:** And he kind of pushed me, supported me into going to Sacramento. Everything that happened to me politically was serendipitous. The Assembly wasn't my idea. It was Phillip's. Passing over my big brother, which was Phillip's choice and

to this date it still kind of makes me shaky. Congress, I was never running for, didn't think of it, didn't want it.

**ROBERTS:** What was your relationship like with Phillip?

**BURTON:** "He's my big brother. Not the smartest, I think he's... Probably the two smartest political guys ever in the history of the country, were Lyndon Johnson and Phillip Burton. His problem was he could be a real pain in the ass. I can be a pain in the ass, but I'd get over it, they'd get over it, and Phillip would just... He just: "They have to take me on my policy, I don't care." Clausen being the majority leader of the thing, 'cause people that believed in his policy, but he was just... You know, too brusque, too this, and the difference in... He was a hard con, I was a soft sell.

I mean he's one of the few politicians, leaving aside being my brother, that, forget his charm, that I looked up to 'cause I knew he was smart. I knew that he cared about the right things and he knew how to get shit done, and to quote the old chairman of the Democratic National Committee, "He knew how to get two and two up to five." Which is something he told me and Willie when we got elected to the Assembly. He said, "You guys are worth five people... you got two votes, they got two votes, they've got to find another one to beat you."

**ROBERTS:** Just before you went up Sacramento, you reportedly were arrested for phoning in a bet.

**BURTON:** Not reportedly, I was arrested.

**ROBERTS:** Do you remember the name of the horse?

**BURTON:** Somebody else -- Legal Beagle.

**ROBERTS:** Legal Beagle, and you said, "It's doomsville on a flick." What did that mean? What does that mean?

**BURTON:** Well, I called Moscone, he was a lawyer, I says, "There's cameramen here, says they're going take a picture." He says, "Don't let 'em take a picture." And they're doing it so I said...

**ROBERTS:** The Hall of Justice?

**BURTON:** It's doomsville on a flick Georgie, It's already there.

**ROBERTS:** All right, so interesting time.

**BURTON :**Made me one of the people, you could not walk into a bar, or a smoke shop, or a creamery in parts of the district that I came to represent without being able to place a bet.

*In 1964, Burton was elected to his brother's old Assembly seat after Phil won a race for Congress.*

*Along with Willie Brown, who also triumphed in a campaign for the Legislature, John went to Sacramento, where the two insurgent backbenchers began to challenge the establishment, in the form of Speaker Jesse Unruh and Governor Ronald Reagan.*

**ROBERTS:** You mentioned that you and Willie went up to Sacramento and voted against Unruh.

**BURTON:** Yeah.

**ROBERTS:** So did he try to make life miserable for you then?

**BURTON:** Well he tried, he couldn't do it, he made me his seatmate and when it was all over, I kind of picked his pocket. He put me on the Agriculture Committee, as a punishment, and I got to work with members of the Assembly and I got to work with people that I never would have been able to talk to. And so I got to be friends with all of them and I could give them a vote on most of their shit 'cause nobody... We didn't care about it.

**ROBERTS:** In '67 you mentioned there was a special election for the Senate and you ran against Milton Marks. How did that...

**BURTON:** I lost by 5,011 votes.

**ROBERTS:** How many?

**BURTON:** Five-thousand-eleven.

**ROBERTS:** But who's counting?

**BURTON:** Nobody I know.

**ROBERTS:** And that's the only race you ever lost?

**BURTON:** Mm-hmm. He probably shouldn't have run, but should have won what they call the special in the middle of the summer, August like. And it was the first time in a local election like that there was like TV, and they spent a lot of money on TV accusing me of riot 'cause I voted against the anti-riot bill, which was stupid after Watts. Maybe rape 'cause there was some stupid penalty bill that went too far, and then treason because I voted against loyalty oaths, and they spent a ton of money on TV.

**ROBERTS:** You still had your seat?

**BURTON:** The Senate, it wasn't made for me at that time, you know? It was stodgy and it just, it wouldn't of been my cup of tea.

*In 1970, Jesse Unruh launched an ill-fated campaign for governor, opening the door to the speakership for Bob Moretti, who installed Burton and Willie Brown into key leadership positions.*

*Amid an atmosphere of closed-door deal making and behind-the-scenes maneuver, Burton also began to build a substantive record of liberal social welfare legislation, starting with a mental health bill to address a problem few even knew of at the time.*

**ROBERTS:** Bob Moretti became the speaker. He was in your freshman class in the Assembly.

**BURTON:** Well, Bobby was Jess guy and he was our friend, he really, everything with Bobby was almost, whatever, except civil rights. I mean for whatever reason he was like gung-ho on civil rights and was very close to, well we were all close. I mean, we took over, like the inmates took over the asylum and when Moretti ran, and he was considered too conservative so, I announced I'm running for speaker. And he goes, "What are you doing?" I says, "Well, I want to be able to vote for myself first and then I'll vote for you."

**ROBERTS:** You were chair of Rules right?

**BURTON:** I was chair of Rules, and Willie wanted to be majority leader and I was kind of a natural actually to chair Ways and Means because I had been on it but I liked Rules and I said, "You don't want to do that."

**ROBERTS:** Don't want to be a majority leader?

**BURTON:** I says, "Because everybody thinks you're a loud-mouth Black. You become the majority leader, you're a loud-mouth Black who's the majority leader. You become chair of Ways and Means and we'll all figure out how Goddamn smart you are," and it made sense to him, he did it.

**ROBERTS:** What are you proudest about? What was the greatest success?

**BURTON:** Well I passed the first bill in the country to require special education for autistic kids, and that's a story in and of itself. I'm running for Congress, but I'm in the Legislature. Barbara Boxer who worked in my campaign says, "You have to go to a Marin mental health thing at Agatha's Pub in Sausalito." So I go there and I'm just standing around drinking a beer and some woman says, "Mr. Burton?" I says, "It's John Burton." "Can I talk to you?" I said, "Sure." And she's telling me about her autistic kid. And she goes on for four or five minutes. And I says, "Ma'am, I'm sorry, I haven't got an idea what you're talking to me about." And she says, "Don't apologize,

doctors don't know what I'm talking about." So I talked to her a little bit more, gave her my phone number and said, "Call this number collect." In the meantime, I go back to Sacramento that night and I walk into this bar, Frank Fats. And there's this Uncle Frank Lanterman, Republican curmudgeon...

**ROBERTS:** Long time...

**BURTON:** But just a wonderful human being, and just a champion of mental health, and so I go in and I'm all... I says, "Uncle Frank, I just left this thing where there's an autistic woman and we have to do something." "No, no Johnny." I said, "No Frank..." He said, "Artistic you say, get some paint brushes and it's all going to be fine." I said, "Frank, you don't understand" I'm talking about this giant of mental... "You don't understand."

So, anyway, we put in a bill to require school districts to do this. And it gets out of our house with Frank's thing and goes over to the Senate. And I'm trying to remember whether or not the Republicans had the Senate then or not. But I'm talking to Republican senators and people to do it, big guy John Stull, Republican, former Navy guy. And I'm sending the women because I represented, not at that time, but Hamilton Field, Marin County, servicemen, there was a cluster of five or six people who had what's now known as autism spectrum. What's the odds? All right-wing Republicans who would take a bullet for me, because I did this thing and I sent them up to see Stull. I think he was a swing vote on Welfare and I get a phone... Senator Stull's on the phone. I said, "What do you want John?" He said, "I've got to vote for the bill. Get them out of here. I don't want these women crying, get them out of here."

And then the other guy was Jack Schrade. Another right wing guy who'd I'd do favors for on some stupid bills. What did he want... I think he was naming a freeway after himself and he came in and I said, "What do you want, Jack?" He said, "I got this figured." I says, "You're going to be in Welfare again?" "Whatever you want, kid, whatever you want, kid." He gave us the votes, got one, got out, went to Governor Reagan. And then, one, he doesn't like me, he doesn't like mental health and he doesn't like mandates. So I asked this woman, "Is there any big shot that's involved in this thing?" She said, "Well, Lloyd Nolan" who was an actor. She says, "Well, Lloyd Nolan is the honorary chair." I said, "What?" "Well he's got an autistic grandchild." I says, "You have him call Governor Reagan, and Governor Reagan will talk to him, and Governor Reagan will listen to him, and Governor Reagan, who is not empathetic but he's very sympathetic, and this guy will get him to sign the bill."

**ROBERTS:** And he did?

**BURTON:** And he says, "Well, do they know each other?" And I says, "Well if they don't, they do, they've been in movies since the Thirties." And Governor Reagan signed the bill.

*Amid the volatile anti-Vietnam war politics of the 1960s and 70s, Burton played a role in two presidential races, as national liberal Democrats vied for the backing of California leaders and voters. That experience included one of the most iconic moments of the 1972 campaign.*

**ROBERTS** Seventy-two, you and Willie and Delores Huerta were the delegation... California delegation chairs for McGovern, and that was, of course, a famous fight about whether the delegation could be seated or not.

**BURTON:** Well, you could jump back to '68.

**ROBERTS:** What was that?

**BURTON:** It was McCarthy.

**ROBERTS:** You were...

**BURTON:** I was for McCarthy before McCarthy and it was...

**ROBERTS:** Well, that was the year Bobby was assassinated the night of...

**BURTON:** The what?

**ROBERTS:** That Kennedy was assassinated.

**BURTON:** Yes.

**ROBERTS:** The night of the primary.

**BURTON:** And Phillip was for Bobby and I was for McCarthy and I remember Jess Unruh coming up to me when Bobby got in after McCarthy did the New Hampshire thing. And I said to Jess "I already got a horse." My brother then calls, goes "The junior Senator from New York's not happy with your comment..." I said, "What comment?" He said I just said, "I've got a horse what am I supposed..." and he runs I'm going to jump off McCarthy?

**ROBERTS:** How did you get on with McGovern in '72? How did that come about?

**BURTON:** George was anti-war. And I knew who McGovern was when the national Democratic Party used to put out Democratic Digest. And they'd be talking about either comers or whatever, and when McCarthy got elected, I believe, at first, maybe did the House from South Dakota then the Senate...

**ROBERTS:** McGovern. Not McCarthy.

**BURTON:** And learned about him and a guy from North Dakota, Quentin Burdick, but I mean we read about these guys and I mean George McGovern was a goddamn war hero. I mean, that's how he ran. He was a war hero. And then he came out for... And I was very early for him when he ran for president and I don't know whether I brought Willie along or what, but he was there. Billy Lockyer, who was just a kid, was there. And he was a natural inheritor, or whatever, of the peace guys from Bobby Kennedy and McCarthy. Of course, everybody felt that but Gene. And so we did that and then we went to the convention. And the rules at that time were winner take all.

**ROBERTS:** Which McGovern had won California.

**BURTON:** Yeah. And then the fight was it should be proportional representation and...

**ROBERTS:** The delegates get divided up...

**BURTON:** And then they had a thing and Eli Siegel came up, he's talking, we're trying to think, you want to speak or should I speak? We'll let Willie speak, he likes to speak.

**ROBERTS:** And that was the give me back my delegation...

**BURTON:** And this one guy said, "I thought it was all of our delegation." I said that's him.

**ROBERTS:** Well, at least he didn't say give me back Willie Brown's delegation and speak it himself.

**BURTON:** Or give Willie Brown his delegation? Oh God. But yeah, that was a big thing.

**ROBERTS:** There's a famous picture of you all celebrating with him. There's a famous photograph of that.

**BURTON:** Yeah, and I said to him after, and I mean my throat was hurt, I says, "Can I at least announce the vote?"

*Despite his new-found influence in Sacramento, John followed the wishes of his older brother, running and winning an open House of Representatives seat in the Watergate election of 1974.*

*Selecting a woman who would make political history a generation later to organize his campaign and run his district office, John said he went to Washington to "help Phillip become whatever he wanted to become."*

**BURTON:** Congressman Bill Maillard has three tough elections and figures...

**ROBERTS:** He was representing Marin.

**BURTON:** Marin and part of the city. And...

**ROBERTS:** Republican.

**BURTON:** Yeah, a good guy. And figures, "I'm too old for this stuff." So I get a call from Phillip and said, "Maillard's going step down." I says, "Yeah." He says, "McGovern carried the district, 51-49." So I ran.

**ROBERTS:** And, so why did you decide to go, because Philip asked you to...

**BURTON:** Yep.

**ROBERTS:** Or told you to?

**BURTON:** I don't think he told me to.

**ROBERTS:** He strongly urged you or, I mean what was...

**BURTON:** Well he just said 51-49 and I went back there actually to help him become whatever shit he wanted to become.

I show up at a Marin meeting. Still haven't declared, Marin Alternative, and Lefty environmental And Roger Boas is there, who had run before. Or ran, didn't win.

**ROBERTS:** He was a Republican.

**BURTON:** And so I'm there and this little woman comes up to me, says, "You're John Burton?" I says "Yeah." "I'm Barbara Boxer." I says, "Well, I don't know who you are." She says, "You going to run for Congress?" "I don't know." "Yeah, you're going to run and I'm going to help you. Well, I can't really do too much 'cause I have this job, but I can't do the... Well, I could probably work a couple of days a week... Well, no, maybe I can do more than that... Well, actually I could probably work for you almost full-time." And so she put together, within 20 minutes, which was damned near the bulk of my Marin County campaign. 'Cause the only people I knew in Marin were the real anti-war peaceniks.

**ROBERTS:** But there's a famous quote, you said, "Everyone says I'll be in the Phillip's shadow, there are worse shadows to be in."

**BURTON:** Well, people would say, "How's it feel to be..." I've been his little brother all my life. When we were kids, there was three other brothers in Milwaukee, the Rogan brothers, and then Phillip would give them shit, and all of a sudden me and

Bobby would have to run away from them before we got beat up. It's just when I got... I said I'm going on the floor, and somebody would say, "Who's that guy?" And say, "I don't know, it might be a new page or something," and someone else would say, "Oh, it's Burton's kid brother," then people come over and talk to me. Never once... Never bothered me as a kid, which was running from people, but it never bothered me at all 'cause the guy was... He was a legislative genius and I mean, he was how he was.

**ROBERTS:** What was the difference in the atmosphere between the Legislature and the Congress and just the day-to-day process of...

**BURTON:** Well, in the Assembly and the state Legislature, you pass a bill, AB 1, goes all the way, so it's linear. In Congress, it's circular, 'cause you pass a bill authorizing something, and it doesn't do anything unless you appropriate the money for it. In authorization bills -- a bill that you pass a bill in the Legislature, and that's a law 'til it's changed. In Congress, you authorize a bill for five years, a program, you got to come back and renew it or it's gone.

**ROBERTS:** How about the personalities and the relationships, was that...

**BURTON:** They were all right then. Now, God knows what, but they were... And I was always gregarious, and after I was there for a while, I'd walk around the floor, talk to Democrats, talk to Republican guys that you were on committees with or whatever. Again, it just got the thing. Why let them... I don't want them looking to do something to my bills. Although we had such big majorities in Congress, they were semi-irrelevant.

*In 1978, San Francisco and the nation were shaken by twin episodes of unspeakable horror and deadly violence – the mass murder-suicides in Jonestown, Guyana, and the assassinations of Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk. For John Burton, both carried intensely personal repercussions.*

**ROBERTS:** '78, Leo Ryan is assassinated in Jonestown. What was... There were a lot of Democrats that were supportive of Jones – Willie was, George was, Rosalynn Carter, others. What was your reaction to that? I mean, that was such a strange...

**BURTON:** I was kind of glad that I didn't take the invitation to go, 'cause I got it too late.

**ROBERTS:** Ryan invited you to go to Jonestown?

**BURTON:** Yeah, I would have gone because I knew what Leo... but what he was up to, Leo was always, God bless his soul, was always looking for the press, looking for this, in the face, make something happen. So when he went up to Nova Scotia somewhere, confronted these guys that club baby seals, he's lucky he got away with them not clubbing him. And I just, if I had the notice, I would have gone, because at

that time I didn't know. Maybe Leo thought he knew... And what's her name? Jackie Speier...

**ROBERTS:** Jackie Speier was his aide.

**BURTON:** But nobody knew that Jim Jones had gone over the edge. I mean he might... Leo might've got some letters, but the only letters I ever got about Jim Jones was way back when I was in the Assembly then, were saying, and this is how smart he was, "Our pastor, Reverend Jim Jones tells us the good work you're doing on behalf of poor people." Now, if I get a letter from you saying something... Well, maybe you're kissing my butt... If he says that I heard from so-and-so that you're doing, well, shit, I go to Moscone and tell him this guy's all right, he's telling people how good we are. But he ended up... I think he just went... Started taking, probably uppers or something. "I couldn't sleep, so much to do, and blah blah." And Leo and the TV guy that went down were kind of in-your-face guys, and I think the TV guy, "And we're going to tell 'em when we get back what you're doing." Pardon me? Nobody would have thought it, but if you see that some guy's psychotic, first thing I'd be looking for is the first plane out, "Nice to meet you, I've got to go to a wedding."

**ROBERTS:** So you hadn't heard from constituents about crazy stuff that was going on?

**BURTON:** No, all I heard was some... I assume that Leo had to hear from people, otherwise he...

**ROBERTS:** Well there was a lot of press about it by that time.

**BURTON:** Well...

**ROBERTS:** New West Magazine, The Examiner...

**BURTON:** Oh yeah, I didn't read it. I mean, if there was... In other words, the press saying he was down there with the cult and all that shit?

**ROBERTS:** Yeah.

**BURTON:** I didn't see that. That would have given me more pause, that I would not have... I mean I might have gone to keep the engine running. But that's just a tragedy, Leo... Shit, Jackie damn near died.

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, she almost died.

**BURTON:** In fact, George asked me to go down to Leo's funeral with him, and I couldn't go that day, doctor's appointment, so...

**ROBERTS:** And then Moscone was assassinated.

**BURTON:** Yes, he was.

**ROBERTS:** What do you... Where were you? How did you find out?

**BURTON:** I was... I think I got a phone call. I was back east. Saw my brother on the floor, he'd just come back from a trip, and went up and hugged him and said, "George is dead."

*From the Burton brothers, Willie Brown, George Moscone and a host of other elected politicians, the influence of their alliance of labor, ethnic minorities and environmentalists became so widespread in the Bay Area that the newspapers began to refer to them as the "Burton Machine," a term John Burton views with contempt and scorn.*

**ROBERTS:** There wasn't a machine.

**BURTON:** There was no machine?

**BURTON:** What do you mean? No. Do you know what a machine means? You give the guy a job. He couldn't give a guy a job. And we had people who trusted us. And if I say, "I'd like you to vote for him." If Burton says it's good enough for him, it's good enough for me. I mean that's... The paper made up the machine...

**ROBERTS:** It became such a trope in the Exam...

**BURTON:** A what?

**ROBERTS:** A trope, a...

**BURTON:** Who?

**ROBERTS:** A narrative. It was just a...

**BURTON:** No, it was Leo McCarthy's people, putting the thing on like it's a machine so that's bad. Unfortunately, for people how that worked, is the people who were our supporters, who would vote for us just like Barbara Boxer carried every precinct in my district 'cause I said she was good even against Louise Renney 'cause they trusted me. There were people that knew us and trusted us. A machine is Dick Daley where you got 2,500 people working in the garbage union. If we would have had patronage... There's no patronage. Never been patronage in this town.

*But by whatever they were called in the 1970s and early '80s, John and Phillip Burton wielded great political power throughout California and the nation.*

*Through their legislative skills, they added millions of acres to the national park system. And they took control of the machinery of reapportionment – the redrawing of political district lines based on census data.*

*Then, in a political drama that John still remembers in detail, the Burtons lost a crucial intraparty election that marked a turning point in their saga.*

**ROBERTS:** One of the biggest impacts of Phillip and you, as well, the Golden Gate National Recreation and...

**BURTON:** That's him.

**ROBERTS:** But a lot of park stuff.

**BURTON:** Well, yeah, I did some... Shit, I tried to put, what was it? Bolinas one time. I put in a park bill that some enviros gave me, would put, I think, all of Bolinas in a park. Almost got shot. Bolinas – I accused them of having machine gun nests, not tearing down the road signs...

**ROBERTS:** Yeah.

**BURTON:** No, Phillip did all that stuff. If he was alive, it would have been parks from the... In fact, I told the guy who did the park thing, Ken Burns, I wrote him a letter, we talked about, I says, "Yeah, my brother created more parks than Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot combined." And he wrote back and said, "No, I acknowledge that. I just didn't have time to go in..." But Phillip, they used to pass a park bill... I would put in a bill to make this a park, and then you would pass a separate bill to make that a park. And Phillip was the guy, he put them all in one bill, and they were like... If you didn't have a park or designation there, you're in trouble. And he took the bill up on a rule suspension, which means a limited debate, but it takes two-thirds vote. And (President Jimmy) Carter's people were working the floor to kill the bill. So they did. So he came back and fixed it up even more. And then he said, "Let the peanut farmer take care of that." And it just went through naming parks after the former Republican National Committeeman to everybody. Everybody had a park in it.

**ROBERTS:** So '76, he famously lost the election to be majority leader by one vote. What's your recollection of how that went down?

**BURTON:** My recollection is, there was a guy who was a friend of mine who voted for Jim Wright.

**ROBERTS:** The Texas Congressman who later became speaker.

**BURTON:** If I would have gone up and said, "I need you to do this for me," he would have done it. I just didn't have the guts to do it, 'cause I was afraid he'd turn me down, and I know he wouldn't have.

**ROBERTS:** Who's that?

**BURTON:** Joe Early from Massachusetts.

**ROBERTS:** Well, a lot of Californian's who didn't...

**BURTON:** And Phillip, that's the difference between... I wouldn't have lost that by one vote, 'cause Phillip would be... He's helping reapportion a guy's district, and the guy wants his old hometown in the district which became Latino or Black. He says, "You've got to be happy with your work, you're in your mother's arms." Well, instead of sitting down and explaining it, he just...

**ROBERTS:** It was a personality thing?

**BURTON:** Oh, yeah. Oh, shit, yeah. Yeah. I don't know if he had any. This one guy said... He usually leaves you in mid-sentence, yours.

**ROBERTS:** But "You're in your mother's arms," that is a famous phrase among Democrats.

**BURTON:** Not only that, he got them Tip (O'Neioll) after the reapportion where we got five states and Tip.

**ROBERTS:** Was that '80? Or no, '70... That was...

**BURTON:** No, that's 80.

**ROBERTS:** '80.

**BURTON:** And Phillip and Tip didn't get along 'cause Tip kept looking over his shoulder. And he says, "Johnny, I could kiss your brother." I says, "Thomas, I'll stay in the chair. Why don't you go down and do that? Tell him," I said, "It would mean a lot more to him than you think it would."

**ROBERTS:** Did he do it?

**BURTON:** Maybe.

*One of Burton's most significant efforts in Congress centered around aviation safety, as he gained national attention with a high profile investigation of DC10 crashes. The issues he raised resonate years later, as Congress focuses on safety problems with the Boeing 737.*

**ROBERTS:** What are you proudest of in your years in Congress? What was the achievement that you feel the best about?

**BURTON:** I don't know, I mean, I, I... I got an amendment into an intelligence bill, that, the bill came out of committee saying that the CIA couldn't engage in covert action. That's what it said. I don't what the print was, unless they notified Congress. And for some reason I'm sitting on the floor reading that bill, which reading a congressional bill is like impossible, because they just start with the code... You have to go back to something, see where it fits in, like were in the state Legislature, you just look for the italics of the words that come.

And I've talked to both the author of the amendment, Leo Ryan, the chairman of the committee Doc Morgan, and the Republican Bill Brumfield, and I said, "Don't you guys mean 'unless and until they informed Congress' and they agreed and they did that and that was in the bill, and it stayed in the law for a while and then Tip put together a Select Committee on Intelligence under Eddie Boland and they took that language out.

What else was there, the aviation safety?

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, the aviation safety.

**BURTON:** Yeah, I found out stuff: that the airlines, when they built a plane, they had a designated... They paid the guy that said that the plane was safe, on their payroll.

**ROBERTS:** The inspectors.

**BURTON:** A little conflict. And the same thing with the engineers on the ground; it's paid for by the airlines, it says, yeah it's safe to take it back up. And I always thought that was semi-conflict of interest.

**ROBERTS:** There were problems with DC 10s.

**BURTON:** DC-10s were... Yeah. And what was weird is we would call a hearing, call a congressional hearing three weeks in advance, and a DC 10 would crash two days before a hearing, and people say, "Oh you're trying to exploit the crash." "What are you talking about? It was noticed in the hearing weeks ago, and shit happens, same with a mid-air collision, the near misses, as they call them."

*In 1982, John Burton chose not to seek re-election. He entered rehabilitation clinic to deal with his cocaine addiction. His political decision opened the way for his longtime ally, Barbara Boxer, then a Marin County supervisor, to fill the congressional seat.*

**ROBERTS:** 1980, Phil engineers another reapportionment and you got a famously gerrymandered district.

**BURTON:** I didn't get it 'cause I didn't run.

**ROBERTS:** In '82, you ran.

**BURTON:** I didn't run in that district.

**ROBERTS:** You didn't run in that...

**BURTON:** Right after...

**ROBERTS:** You left in '83.

**BURTON:** '82, Barbara ran in that district.

**ROBERTS:** When did you resign? You resigned... OK..

**BURTON:** I didn't resign, I didn't run.

**ROBERTS:** You didn't run. But you went into rehab in '82, and that's when you said that you were retiring from Congress on March 16...

**BURTON:** I didn't retire from Congress. I didn't run.

**ROBERTS:** OK...

**BURTON:** I chose not to run.

**ROBERTS:** So you didn't run in that district, she ran?

**BURTON:** Right.

**ROBERTS:** OK. All right. And how did she come to replace you? How did she come to be there?

**BURTON:** She worked for me as a volunteer and she said, "Now, who are you going to hire?" and I said, "I don't know, I know you don't want the job." And she says, "Who says I don't want the job?" I says, "You want it?" She says, "Yeah." I says, "You got it."

And then she ran for supervisor in Marin against Peter Arrigoni, a friend of mine, and beat him, so she stepped down from working for me, but she still was whatever. And then when I decided not to run, she called up and said she was running. I says, "Really?" And Phillip actually was pushing Nancy Pelosi, and Nancy's kids at that time, I think, were too young, at least for her, four kids, and I forget how... But they weren't old. And so...

**ROBERTS:** So she didn't want to run? Nancy didn't want to run?

**BURTON:** Well, she didn't want to run with four kids at that age. And so... Then Dianne Feinstein, the mayor, got Louise Renne's...

**ROBERTS:** Supervisor.

**BURTON:** She was seated as supervisor or city attorney...

**ROBERTS:** She became City Attorney later.

**BURTON:** One of the two. So she ran, and I remember Dianne saying, "How could you support somebody from Marin against somebody from the city?" And I said, "Dianne, that's how people used to say to Barbara, how could you be for a guy from the city against... ". And so, anyway, Barbara ran and we carried every precinct in the... I mean, she had Marin solid 'cause nobody knew Louise. I delivered, not delivered, but my support took care of San Francisco...

*Having neglected local matters while playing the national game in Washington, Phil Burton in 1982 faced the first serious challenge of his congressional career. It was a draining campaign that his wife, Sala, later blamed for his premature death at 56 a few years later.*

*Sala Burton replaced Phil in the House but herself died a few years later – but not before anointing a successor who would go on to make political history.*

**ROBERTS:** In 1982, your brother Philip, for really the first time since he went to Congress, had a tough race. He really had to campaign. Milton Marks was running against him; the Republicans were doing well nationally. Were you involved with that? Were you helping him in that campaign a lot?

**BURTON:** No, because I just came out of rehab so that the last... I think he did phone banking the last 10 days.

**ROBERTS:** So he died what, the year after that?

**BURTON:** Something like that.

**ROBERTS:** Sala Burton, who took his seat...

**BURTON:** And then she died.

**ROBERTS:** She said that that killed him. Doing that. Do you think that's true?

**BURTON:** How the hell do I know? Well, I mean Philip drank, not really to excess, but he drank. He had terrible eating habits and he smoked like a fiend and wouldn't go to the doctors, and he died of an aneurysm, which isn't really important, but a guy who was in Congress with him, an old time tobacco Congressman, Walter Jones Sr., whose kid was a Republican and became very anti-war under Bush... And when I saw Walter, he was in a wheelchair, and he just had an operation to repair an aneurysm. And he says, ""You know, John, if your brother would have gone to see a doctor, he could have got that fixed and still be here." But who the hell knows?

**ROBERTS:** Yeah.

**BURTON:** Did the fact, did he out-exert himself to do something to campaign? And I don't know how hard he... I mean, he worked the campaign, but I mean, he... I don't think... He wasn't walking stairs up and down Potrero Hill like he did the first time he ran, but he could have done without the exertion, than he could have done without three packs of cigarettes a day and you know. And what did he drink? Stoli? Vodka? [chuckle] I used to go to his office sometimes and water his vodka. I mean, he wasn't a drunk. Bobby was.

**ROBERTS:** Your middle brother?

**BURTON:** Yeah, he was a drunk. I was an addict. Phillip didn't take care of himself.

**ROBERTS:** Yeah. So...

**BURTON:** He was 56 years old.

**ROBERTS:** Fifty six? Wow.

**BURTON:** A goddamn kid. I mean, he could have done so much. How dare he.

**ROBERTS:** So, Sala was elected to his seat in the special...

**BURTON:** Yeah.

**ROBERTS:** And then she died in '87, and February, I think, of '87...

**BURTON:** Yeah.

**ROBERTS:** There's a... There's been reports, I don't know if they're true or not, that Sala said that she wanted Nancy to replace her.

**BURTON:** It's not a report, it's a stone fact.

**ROBERTS:** Well, how did that... How did that go down?

**BURTON:** She called us back to the hospital. Us, meaning me, Nancy... Nancy Larson, I think it was who worked for Philip, Susie Kennedy, who worked... They both worked for Phillip and Sala, and Agar Jaicks, our county chair. And she brings us back there... And Sala was a big woman. She wasn't thin. She was thin, she's in the hospital and gritting her teeth in pain. I mean, she didn't tell me. I saw her gritting her teeth you know in pain. And she says, "I'm not going to run again." You know, *quelle surprise*, and I want you, talking to us, to support Nancy for my seat." Now, I'm waiting to hear, "Nancy was a friend of mine and a friend of Phillip's, Nancy's a friend of mine and a friend of Phillip's and blah, blah, blah..." And I'm hearing everything that anybody who has watched Nancy Pelosi in Congress, her rise to Speaker and that. Sala saw all this shit. I mean, saw it. I mean he's talking about, "She's operational, she's smart, she's right on the issues, she's this and that." And I'm going...

**ROBERTS:** She's saying this from her sickbed?

**BURTON:** Yeah. I mean, I'm just expecting she's... And I walk out, look at Agar and say, "Is she bullshitting or what?" She had her pegged. She had her pegged. And I remember when Nancy became the Speaker, I says, "Well, you're upstairs." Phillip's saying, "I'll be goddamned," and Sala's saying, "I told you. I told you." I mean she saw the greatness of Nancy Pelosi who's amazing. 'Cause I knew Nancy, but you know... In fact, Agar Jaicks said, "Sala wants to endorse Nancy." And I thought he meant Nancy Walker, a supervisor, who's her friend. I said, "Nancy Walker. That's great." It was Nancy Pelosi. I says, "What?" And then Nancy called me, and I says, "Well, I'm tired and I don't really want to do anything." And this is Nancy again and I'm a type of... She says "If you think that my running would be like an embarrassment to like Phillip and Sala and... to use your term, your legacy or something, and I said "I won't rise " And I said "No, no, I don't mean that". And then finally, I go home, and I see. Why do I give a shit this and what Sala wants.

But then we go back to Washington, and then I hear and it's just... Well, Sala was always, in many ways, smarter than Phillip, clearly always is nicer than Phillip. But I mean, Phillip was a genius, politically, but it's just the most amazing thing you've seen she's, in other words, the only thing she didn't say is some day she could be speaker of the House, I mean she just... The thing that a lot of people didn't know out here, she came from a political family, her father...

**BURTON:** Yeah. I mean, ran in Baltimore, grew up stuffing envelopes...

**ROBERTS:** Oh, and she was State Chair also for a while?

**BURTON:** Yes, she was State Chair out here, but again, that's like she's a fundraiser or something and was Leo McCarthy's person...

**ROBERTS:** Well, that was in the race, her slogan was "a voice that will be heard" which...

**ROBERTS:** Voice that will be heard, and the heard was like, we still joke big.