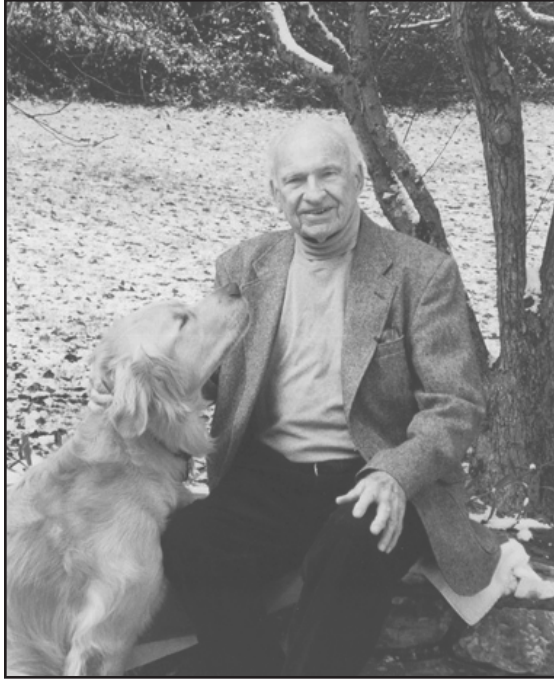


---

JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS



3 AUGUST 1918 · 15 JULY 2014

JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS, one of America's preeminent political historians, published the last of his books, *Fire and Light: How the Enlightenment Transformed Our World*, in his ninety-fifth year. He also grew his own blueberries, tended a garden, skied at first snowfall, and went for an afternoon run through the Berkshires well into his 80s. He lived quietly in a restored eighteenth century barn on his family's property, up a steep hill in the small town of Williamstown, Massachusetts, where he lived all his adult life. He answered his phone himself—and since he didn't like good-byes—always closed with “Bye for now.”

Despite phone calls from the outside world from leadership scholars, presidents, senators, high schoolers, and doctoral students, he made time to write most every day for more than 60 years. He was a beautiful writer; no, an extraordinarily beautiful one.

I recall my first trip to Williamstown to visit him, sitting on the right side of the train on Amtrak's Empire line that followed the Hudson River north through Roosevelt country, reading Burns' biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Lion and The Fox*, and being overcome with the beauty of his prose and the brilliance of his insights. A cliché, but like diamonds, really.

His intellectual output was prodigious as well as methodical—he understood American government as an intricate system, one constructed with the foresight of the founders, with internal and external checks and balances constantly adjusting to the muddle of human drives and hidden motivations. To understand such complexity, he looked at people, parties, movements, leaders, presidents, would-be presidents, Congress, and the Supreme Court, as well as economic, social, and cultural forces—every element in what he called the American Experiment. *Fire and Light*, his last book, looked at the roots of that experiment in the thinking of a small group of native philosophers who boldly put Enlightenment ideals into practice. All who cherish democracy owe these founders so much.

\* \* \*

James MacGregor Burns was born 3 August 1918, in Melrose, Massachusetts. His divorced mother raised him and his brothers out in the country, and he adored the woods and streams and mountains. He graduated from Williams College in 1939 and then worked on Capitol Hill. During World War II, he served as an Army combat historian in the Pacific theatre and was awarded the Bronze star. He loved the Army and always noted he learned so much about leadership while serving. He received his doctorate in government from Harvard University in 1947 and that year joined the faculty of his beloved alma mater,

Williams College, later doing postdoctoral work at the London School of Economics.

#### STUDYING LEADERSHIP

His first book, *Congress on Trial: The Legislative Process and the Administrative State* (1949), is a critical appraisal of American lawmaking and the legislative branch. He later returned to some of these themes in *Deadlock of Democracy*, published in the last year of the Kennedy administration. In *Deadlock*, he examined the impact of political parties on American government. His thesis was that the two-party system in the United States consisted of, in effect, four parties, with Democrats and Republicans each having both a conservative wing that dominated Congress—especially in major committees—and a more liberal, activist wing that dominated presidential nominating conventions.<sup>1</sup> The result was a rudderless, deadlocked government, as the tensions among the four parties compounded the checks and balances the founders had erected between the executive and legislative branches. In the jockeying for power, which would have the upper hand? Where could the country turn for leadership that would address its most pressing concerns?

Burns had an enduring, even passionate, bias for presidential leadership, with its unifying, transformational potential. Franklin Roosevelt, the hero of his youth, was the model of a president whose combination of vision and strategic genius enabled him to overcome the constraints on leadership built into the American system. Burns published an exhaustive study of FDR in two groundbreaking volumes, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (1956) and *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom* (1970), which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

As Roosevelt's biographer, Burns' keen observations and insights provided a rich vein to explore and craft his own ideas about presidential leadership. He found in FDR 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."

"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, one who brought profound and enduring change to the benefit of common American citizens. "He was a manipulator," Burns wrote, "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?"<sup>2</sup>

Burns would develop these insights into a theory contrasting transforming leaders, who motivate others through an appeal to conscience and morality, and transactional leaders, who move incrementally, through political give-and-take. Transactional leaders were the more conventional politicians—horse traders—who drew followers by offering jobs for votes, or support of important legislation in exchange for campaign contributions.

Transforming leadership, Burns wrote later, was radically different; it created "a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents." A transformational leader "looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower."

Real transformational leadership was, Burns knew, rare, especially in the thickets of the American political system, and as 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.

And so his first subject, Franklin Roosevelt, coupled with his own political experience and education, helped Burns hone a style and a point of view that would become 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 insight and analysis grounded in ideas about leadership. Newsweek pronounced *The Lion and the Fox* "A case study unmatched in American political writings."<sup>3</sup>

Roosevelt was Burns' touchstone for presidential leadership, the template he brought to his studies of both FDR's great predecessors, such as George Washington and his cousin Theodore Roosevelt, and successors, presidents who Burns knew personally, studied, and influenced, such as JFK and Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton. *Deadlock of Democracy* in particular with its calls for assertive presidential leadership, impressed Kennedy and Johnson. As Burns' student, presidential historian Michael Beschloss remarked, "Both JFK and LBJ read [*Deadlock*] closely and talked to him about what they might do to break the gridlock on Capitol Hill. In important ways, it's a book that is current today."

#### LEADERSHIP STUDIES

Jim Burns' intensive study of presidents led him, in the 1970s, into the study of leadership itself. At the time, that was a rather moribund

enterprise, dominated by anecdotes and clichés about Great Men. With his now classic 1978 book, *Leadership*, Burns re-founded leadership studies. And although his book gave the new field intellectual direction, Burns knew that to thrive, leadership studies also needed professional infrastructure, including an association, some core texts and surveys, academic standing, and a strong commitment from a publisher—so he generated all of these. He was the co-founder (with Lorraine Matusak and Georgia Sorenson) of the International Leadership Association, now with 2,600 members from 70 countries; he co-edited the four-volume, award-winning *Encyclopedia of Leadership* (with George Goethals and Georgia Sorenson); and he led a seminal study group on leadership theory whose findings were published later in *The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership* (2007) and *Government by the People*,<sup>4</sup> still a standard undergraduate text. He was a founding scholar at both the Jepson School of Leadership at the University of Richmond and the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland.

#### THE SCHOLAR AS ACTIVIST

Jim Burns, though, was never a prisoner of the ivory tower. He was convinced that theory must be married to practice, for the benefit of theory as well as of practice. Failed leaders, he thought, were those who did not match ideas to means, who could not connect means to ends. His scholarship and writing were deeply informed by his own learning from the field; in fact, he typically described himself not as a biographer or scholar but as a “student of leadership.”

His own political education began early, at the dinner table as a teenager strenuously defending FDR’s agenda against his father’s family with strong Republican moorings. His formal political training began as a young protégée of Max Lerner, a radical writer who was his teacher and mentor at Williams. Burns campaigned for FDR’s 1936 re-election in what was often hostile terrain in western Massachusetts, riding through deserted main streets blaring appeals to re-elect the president through a foghorn. After Williams, he secured a Washington internship with a congressman that gave him a firsthand view of American politics in all its glory and shame. A passionate Democrat, he later served as party leader in Williamstown, as a reformer of the state party and as a delegate to four national conventions.

Burns’ personal credo was always, “Be bold!” So, true to his teachings, he took a leave of absence from Williams in 1958 and threw his hat into the race for a western Massachusetts congressional seat in a traditionally Republican district. He was propelled by both intellectual

curiosity and a commitment to the revival of a region that had been devastated by the loss of manufacturing jobs.

It was an intense campaign, but also fun, involving his young family, full of unexpected ups and downs. He won a tough Democratic primary but lost the general election to a Republican who would hold on to the seat for decades.

Running for office was a transformational experience for Burns. 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 cross-currents within the Democratic Party tempered that optimism. He experienced firsthand the underside of American politics—McCarthyism and bigotry toward Catholics—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 to achieve their ends.

#### LEADERSHIP FOR WHAT?

In his last decade especially, Burns devoted himself with a passion to that question, “Leadership for what?” One of the tests he had set for leaders was dedication to the transforming values of life and liberty, and equality and happiness. But billions of people struggled to secure even the most basic of rights, the fundamentals of life—water and food and shelter and health. As he met with world leaders concerned with global poverty, he argued that the poor lacked not only material resources but also the political resources to empower them to fight for what they needed. They lacked, above all, leadership.

Burns realized that the dynamic between leaders and followers was one of mutual empowerment. Leaders would empower followers by motivating and organizing them into an effective force to achieve shared goals. But leaders were also empowered by their followers, who would in turn become leaders.

In one of his last books, titled *Transforming Leadership: A New Pursuit of Happiness* (2003), Burns turned his theory about leaders and followers into a rallying cry for activism:

In millennia past, the most potent act of the rulers of nations has been the recruitment and deployment into battle of great armies of their people. Can we, in coming decades, mobilize throughout the world a new, militant, but peaceful army—tens of thousands of leaders who would in turn recruit fresh leaders at the grass roots,

in villages and neighborhoods, from among the poor themselves, to fight and win a worldwide war against desperation?

James MacGregor Burns died quietly in his sleep at the home of his longtime companion, Susan Dunn, on 15 July 2014. A few days later, Jim Yung Kim, president of the World Bank Group, posted “Transformational leadership: A Tribute to James MacGregor Burns.” He closed with these words:

Can we virtually end extreme poverty? I believe it’s entirely possible. We now need to foster much higher economic growth rates, and many more evidence-based strategies for inclusive economic growth. But we also need many more leaders to help catalyze a global movement to end extreme poverty. I can think of no greater calling for a leader than to follow Burns’ vision.<sup>5</sup>

Bye for now, Jim Burns, and thank you.

Elected 1971

GEORGIA SORENSON

Founder, James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership  
Møller By Fellow, Churchill College, University of Cambridge

### *Author’s Note*

The author wishes to thank Susan Dunn and Milt Djuric for their review of an earlier draft. Parts of this piece are from “Theory and Practice: James MacGregor Burns,” by Georgia Sorenson, in *Leadership and the Humanities* (March 2015).

### ENDNOTES

1. Savage, Sean J., *JFK, LBJ, and the Democratic Party*, SUNY Press, 2006.
2. Read more: <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/07/james-macgregor-burns-historian-dies-at-95-108937.html#ixzz3FjrIYeVh>
3. <http://www.amazon.com/Roosevelt-The-Lion-Vol-1882-1940/dp/0156027623>
4. Burns, J., Peltason, J., Cronin, T. et al., *Government by the People*, Prentice Hall, 1952.
5. “Transformational Leadership: A Tribute to James MacGregor Burns,” 23 July 2014. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140723194637-32702694-transformational-leadership-a-tribute-to-james-macgregor-burns>

