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A TRIBUTE TO PHIL BURTON*

John Burton**

In times like these, it is difficult to express our sorrow. The words of Myron Struck¹ best capture our feelings and describe our loss.

“Phil Burton lived with an obsession.

For over thirty years in the public spotlight, he had the persistent, single-minded determination to consummate just one idea—that he could make a difference representing the disadvantaged.

His philosophy was liberal, but it was more likely that Phil Burton was the engineer of a consensus on an issue than a more moderate or conservative colleague in the House.

He was an environmentalist, and at national park subcommittee hearings he chaired, it was most likely to have short hearings. The coalition was formed; the Republicans had been accommodated in his bills. But he rarely compromised a position he held dear.

Long before it was in vogue, Phil Burton spoke out against the Indo-China war. He was one of the first and he worked tirelessly to bring the disaster to a close and to restrict the powers of Presidents.

It was Phil Burton, who more than anyone else, engineered the increased minimum wage. And it was Phil Burton, more than anyone else, who provided better supplemental security income benefits for all Americans.

His California district, crowded on a peninsula, cried out for recreation and for several years Burton chaired an interior subcommittee on national parks. Not long enough, in traditional terms, to build up the seniority and clout necessary to force is-

* 1927-1983. (Ed. note: Phil Burton was a member of the United States Congress, from 1964 until his death, as the representative for the 5th Congressional district (San Francisco, California). The community at Golden Gate University's School of Law is proud to count him as one of our most distinguished alumni.)

** Retired representative, 5th Congressional district (San Francisco, California).

1. M. Struck, *A Tribute to Phil Burton*, Roll Call—the Newspaper of Capitol Hill, April 14, 1983, at 3, col. 4.

sues. But with Phil Burton that wasn't necessary.

He quickly put together the most massive national parks expansion and creation bill in history; and passed it.

This is not to say that Phil Burton ever worked alone. Besides the moral support he had from Sala, his wife, Phil Burton had legions of Congressional admirers. He was abrasive, caustic. He was a chain-smoker and a heavy drinker of vodka, in a tall glass, straight. But he knew, and cherished, his friends.

He realized that to win in Congress, where you are but one of 435, you had to build coalitions. He was the master. Without peer.

. . . .

Like his San Francisco district, Burton's national constituency was the environmental community, the blacks, the women, the elderly, the Hispanics, the Filipinos, and the Chinese. He spent much of his career in the House that spanned two decades associated with labor. He was a unionist at heart.

. . . .

This champion of the underrepresented, of the impoverished, of the working man, had a larger impact on the lives of millions of Americans than they will ever realize; than they will ever understand.

He was as morally honest as any man or woman in politics. He talked straight, he played politics hard and he was a man of his word.

. . . .

[H]e symbolized the spirit of how a man can strive to make a difference and succeed."



Phil Burton