1

BEGINNINGS

When you grow up, if you can look at yourself in the mirror and smile, you're doing okay.

DR. THOMAS BURTON
Phillip Burton's father

Phillip was always running for something. He always wanted to succeed. He was going to be as good as his father. That was the bottom line.

ROBERT BURTON
Phillip Burton's younger brother

PHILLIP BURTON RARELY spoke of his parents. Friends from early adulthood knew he loved his mother, a gentle, deeply religious woman, and admired his father, a distant, self-absorbed man who could also be gracious and kind. He passed on to Burton and his two younger brothers his ardent liberalism, sense of justice, and concern for the common man. Burton did not analyze his past or talk about it. A friend said it was as though Burton wanted his life to begin anew in law school. Such a reaction is not surprising in a young man whose father was absent during most of his early years. His mother was busy holding the family together during the Depression. She had little time to control her strong-willed eldest son or provide the secure haven and personal affection he craved.

Mildred, Burton's mother, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1903, the fifth of six children of a second-generation Irish bricklayer named Barney Leonard and his wife Kathleen. Leonard's father—Phillip's maternal great-grandfather—emigrated to the United States during the Great Hunger, the potato blight and famine of the late 1840s. He worked on the canals, according to family tradition, settling in Cincinnati, where his son helped lay

its cobblestone sidewalks. A gregarious man, Barney was a sinner in the eyes of his devout wife because he smoked a pipe and drank alcohol. Neither of Phillip's brothers recalled seeing Barney drunk, but Phillip and his brothers all developed substance abuse problems.

Phillip's father Thomas was originally named Berger, but he changed his name to Burton while in his early twenties. He was born of German parentage in Marion, Indiana, in 1900, one of three boys. He was reared in Chicago but at seventeen left home after a dispute with his father. Thomas Burton's sons never met their paternal grandparents or even heard their father talk about them.

By the time he married Mildred Leonard in 1924, Thomas Burton had sold vacuum cleaners in South Dakota, had worked in a Michigan steel mill, had been a drummer in a band, and had played second base in the 3-I League, a Class B baseball league for teams in Iowa, Indiana, and Illinois. As a traveling salesman after his marriage, he became a district manager for the Omaha-based RealSilk Hosiery firm. Later, he sold medical textbooks to hospitals. For a short time, the young couple owned a Pierce Arrow. But these moments of affluence were followed by long periods of poverty.

Phillip Burton was born in 1926 in Cincinnati. Two years later Robert arrived, and John came in 1932. By then, the Depression had hit hard. When John was born, Thomas later told his sons, he was so poor he had to walk several miles to the hospital. Soon thereafter, Thomas moved to Chicago, leaving the family behind to attend a YMCA adult school. He had decided to become a doctor. None of the sons knew why, but Robert recalled years later that a salesman friend convinced Thomas he could do it. A doctor's income could better provide for his family.

The family moved to Detroit in 1934, and two years later, when Phillip was ten, they moved to Milwaukee. The Depression was a grim experience for the Burtons, made more so by Thomas Burton's unusual decision to begin medical school in 1936 in Chicago when he was thirty-six. Again, he chose to live apart from his family, where he could focus on his studies free of the clamor of children. For three young boys already struggling with economic adversity, it meant four more years without their father. His absence placed a great financial and emotional burden on the household.

Enrolled at the University of Illinois, Tom Burton visited on weekends when he could. His studies were demanding. While supporting himself by selling medical texts, he lived at the Garfield Park Hotel. For six dollars a week, he got room and twelve meals. It was there that Thomas got interested in politics, Robert recalled. Franklin Roosevelt was different from the "pho-

nies" he had been brought up to distrust. FDR cared about the common people. Young Phillip also found FDR captivating. When Roosevelt campaigned in Milwaukee in 1936, Phillip heard him speak and traced his interest in politics to that moment. "I do remember this as a touchstone," he said many years later. "Our family were great Roosevelt supporters. My father was a New Dealer."[1]

There were other early political influences. Under socialist Mayor Dan Hoan, Milwaukee was a model for civic welfare programs. The son of an Irish blacksmith, Hoan was mayor from 1916 to 1940. He believed in activist government, and his school recreation and summer parks programs were the envy of the nation. He instituted a merit system, cleaned up city hall, and kept down the price of gas, electricity, and streetcar fares.[2] Phillip saw firsthand that government could make life better for people.

With her husband away, Mildred Burton supported the family by working ten to twelve hours a day for the Catholic diocese, selling ads over the phone for church publications. Unlike Tom, who was not religious, she attended Mass faithfully every day. Robert was an altar boy, but Phillip refused to rise before dawn to kneel on the cold marble floor of the church. Her job paid eighty dollars a month, out of which thirty dollars went for rent on a nine-room upstairs flat. Fern Brown, one of twenty children of a fundamentalist minister, lived with the family and took care of John and the older boys when they were not in school. As the Depression deepened, the boys often saw tramps riding the rails and hungry people raiding garbage cans. Despite their poverty, the Burtons never went hungry. They lived on High Mount and Washington Boulevard, then moved twelve blocks to Forty-eighth and Chambers. It meant leaving a Catholic-Protestant neighborhood for a predominantly Jewish one. But the rent was cheaper and they had a house and garden to themselves.

Burton returned to his old neighborhood with his new playmates one day to play a game. His old friends asked why he was now playing with "kikes." "What are kikes?" Phillip asked. Told they were Jews, he said, "What are Jews?" Many years later he said he could not fathom that his old friends were calling his new ones names. But the Burton family felt at home among their new neighbors. While others in Milwaukee were sympathetic to the new German state, the Burtons worried about Hitler and the rise of fascism. One night in 1938 when Phillip was twelve, they gathered around the radio to hear reports of the faraway Crystal Night, when Nazi storm troopers destroyed Jewish homes, synagogues, and shops all over Germany. Hitler's rabid anti-Semitism and totalitarian tactics and his father's sympathy for the un-

derdog made it easy to divide the world into good guys and bad guys. The Loyalists in Spain were good. The Nazis and Italian Fascists were bad.

Burton worked hard at school, earning A's and getting elected to various class offices. Striving constantly, Phillip wanted to prove, said Robert, that he was as good as his father. Even then, he was domineering and intense, Robert said. The Jewish community's high premium on education and study made the Burton boys proud of their father for bettering himself, training to become a doctor. But if Phillip felt angry or resentful of his father's extended absences, he kept it to himself. Who could be mad at a man who started a medical career so late, worked so hard, and still emerged with decent values?

From the same Milwaukee neighborhood came three other boys who, like Phillip and John Burton, went into politics: liberal Democrats Abner Mikva and Fortney Stark, who went to Congress, and John Schmitz, a conservative Republican elected to the California Senate. They did not know each other. The neighborhood along Center Street between Forty-eighth and Fifty-first Streets consisted of row upon row of solid, two-story frame houses with large, neatly kept yards. Typically, the owners lived downstairs and rented out the upper floor. Activities centered on a shack on a vacant lot at Fiftieth and Center Streets, where the kids pitched pennies and chose sides for games.[3] Phillip, tall and skinny, usually picked sides for his team, which ensured that little brother Bobby would also get picked. On Sundays, the boys sold water for a penny at softball games. Phillip lugged buckets of ice to the field so he could charge two cents.

On a visit home in 1938, Thomas Burton took his boys to the local ballpark to see the Minneapolis Millers and their new hitting sensation, Ted Williams. "If I had his swing," he told them, "I'd have stayed in baseball." But he usually steered the conversation back to Roosevelt and how important it was for the government to help people. His folk wisdom profoundly shaped their social values. "He wears a clean shirt but dirty underwear," Thomas Burton would say, or "them that has, gets" and "the poor always get the short end of the stick."

Mildred Burton had little time for mothering. Between working long hours for the diocese, cooking, cleaning, running the household with Fern's help and attending church, it was an accomplishment simply to survive week to week. A strong proponent of the work ethic, she made sure Phillip always had a paper route or a way to earn extra money. She instilled in the boys a sense of helping the less fortunate and hoped the boys would be doctors or priests.

While Phillip began his first year of high school, his father was finishing his studies. He piled the family into an old Dodge and drove west in 1940 to look at medical internship programs in Seattle, San Francisco, and San Diego. Heading down the coast, they drove through tall redwood forests and later visited the 267-foot General Grant Tree, a sight Phillip never forgot. Franklin Hospital in San Francisco, now the Ralph K. Davies Medical Center, paid thirty dollars a month to its interns, the best offer Tom got. They drove home for his last year of school—stopping in Springfield, Illinois, to borrow money from a classmate to finish the trip—and got ready for a new life in San Francisco.

The Burtons moved into a house on Kirkham Street in the Sunset District, a sleepy, working-class neighborhood on the city's west side in the summer of 1941. Phillip attended George Washington high school, across Golden Gate Park in the Richmond District. He began at Washington in Milwaukee and said he wanted to attend a school with the same name. He was fifteen years old, over six feet tall, skinny, always in a hurry, almost hyperactive. He had an impressive memory. Schoolmates remembered that when he ran into a girl he had not seen for several years, he could recall her phone number instantly.

Young Burton studied hard and set a record for selling more new subscriptions of the *San Francisco News*—eight in one month—than any other paper carrier. He and Bobby also sold papers on street corners. On December 7, 1941, the night every newspaper extra screamed "WAR!" they sold papers until 2 A.M. Motorists coming home from Marin County saw the headlines, stopped their cars, thrust quarters and dollar bills at them, and then drove off without waiting for the change. The boys made $180 that night, more than their father—still an intern—earned in six months.

Tom Burton's internship kept him at the hospital during the week, even to sleep. This put new strains on a marriage already stretched by his frequent absences. The children recalled little intimacy or personal empathy in their household. But Mildred's devout faith made divorce unthinkable. The boys were growing up bright but unbridled. Mildred could not control them, and Tom was often distant even when he was around. When Tom finished his training and began a more normal work schedule, their relationship did not improve. Mildred was used to running things in his absence. Even though they now had more money, he refused her request for a car. She became a legal secretary, saved her money, and bought her own. Later, she coveted a mink coat. Tom thought such things were frivolous. Again, she saved and bought it herself. Eventually, they moved to St. Francis Wood, one of the

city's costlier neighborhoods. But when John, the youngest, was old enough to move out, they separated. Dr. Burton confided to his receptionist that he probably never should have married.

Phillip's principal diversion was basketball. As a junior, his basketball ability and leadership captured the attention of some elite seniors, who invited him to join a club called the Falcons. They held most of the important student offices and wore reversible black satin jackets embroidered with the club name. The Falcons met in the basement of one of the members' homes, where they played penny poker and talked about sports and girls. They paid weekly dues of twenty-five cents and went to movies or ice skating rinks together. Burton became especially close to three Falcons—Jack Hanley, Matt Gately, and Doug Brown. Hanley, the center on the varsity squad, remembers that Burton was on his own, answerable to no one. He would arrive home when he felt like it. It was a rule at the Hanley household that everyone had to be home for dinner at 6 P.M.

"What if you're late?" Burton would tease. "I don't want to be late," Hanley would reply, irritated. "Yeah, but what if you are?" Coming from a family that barely lived together, let alone ate dinner together, it was impossible for Burton to conceive that Hanley *wanted* to be home at six, that he desired the family intimacy Burton hardly knew. But Burton loved eating at his friend's house, where he talked about local politics with Hanley's father, a policeman. He was like an adopted son to Doug Brown's mother and always accepted her frequent dinner invitations.

Burton charmed his friends' parents. He was reaching out to families for the affection and comfort he was not getting at home. In the summer, Burton and his friends stacked beer cases at the Acme brewery. After work, he often spent the night at their homes. When they hopped in Matt Gately's 1933 Ford and headed to the Russian River or hitchhiked to Santa Cruz for a weekend, he informed his mother that he was going. He did not ask permission.

On the basketball court, Phillip was known as "Pop-off Burton" because he liked to joke around. He was a great practice shooter, his friends recalled, but the coach never let him start because he wanted to shoot as soon as he got the ball. When Burton was a junior, the coach broke a promise to start Doug Brown in the next game. Brown was so angry he skipped practice, for which the coach told him to turn in his uniform. Burton quit the team in protest. For Brown, this was a supreme act of loyalty. Throughout his political career, loyalty and his word were the qualities Burton valued most.[4]

On the playground he challenged close calls and often got into shoving

matches, Hanley recalled. But if an unskilled player or a new kid was hanging around waiting to be picked, Burton would choose him out of compassion. It drove Hanley crazy. As kindhearted as Burton could be, he also had a fierce stare. He was not a physical bully; to get what he wanted he raised his voice or, more effectively, he focused his intense brown eyes. But mostly, Burton was fun to be around, in perpetual motion, a fast talker, full of ideas on everything and eager to voice them.

Hanley thought he was unusually deep. Burton would analyze his friends or talk politics and debate the existence of God with Gately, like him a lapsed Catholic. Gately agreed with Burton that the church could not answer the big questions and had been hypocritical in supporting the Fascists over the Loyalists in Spain—likely an insight derived from his father. Hanley said he thought Burton was more perceptive than most. On their way to a movie one night, a friend came by in a car and offered them a ride. Halfway through the movie, he said, "I gotta go. I phoned home. My aunt is sick." Burton turned to Hanley. "You don't believe him, do you? He probably met some dolly in the lobby." Later that night as they walked home, they saw the boy drive by with a girl in the front seat. "You see that, Hanley!" Burton cried, triumphant. "You're too naive."

Falconers did not think much about the war. The manpower shortage allowed them to compete for dollar-an-hour jobs on the wharf during the summer. But there were few signs of war, other than all the men in uniform moving in and out of the city. Most teachers were women. ROTC classes were large. Gym teachers spent extra time getting the boys in fighting shape, or as the yearbook put it, "Preparing Youth for War." But no one talked about college. That was for later, once their military obligations were fulfilled. Burton wrote in the yearbook that he hoped to become an "aviation cadet."

Going into his senior year, Burton was elected class president and was invited to join the Eagles, a service club for boys who proudly wore caps of alternating scarlet and gray, the school colors. The 1943 yearbook noted that Burton "not only helped his class select their senior sweaters," but as a member of the Executive Council, he was "well known for his powers of persuasion." Most of his friends were six months ahead of him. They were graduating in June 1943. He had to wait until the following February. Even so, they urged him to run for student body president. Burton did not need much prompting. He gave a stirring speech, promising students a bigger voice in running the school.

Two Falconers, Gerard Rhine, a yell leader and ROTC officer, and Stan Perkins, vice president of the Eagles, were ballot counters. When Rhine and

Perkins heard rumors that a teacher was stuffing ballots for Burton's opponent, they decided to do the same for Burton. As they sat by the ballot box erasing names and writing in Burton's, a teacher walked in and caught them. Burton was elected but not allowed to serve. Rhine and Perkins swore he knew nothing about it, unlikely as that may seem to those who later watched him bend the rules of procedure in Sacramento and Washington. Burton said nothing publicly. "Just for the hell of it," he told Hanley, "I'm going to canvass each registry and see how they voted." He had won easily. The ballot stuffing had not been necessary.[5]

Home life was not entirely lacking during Burton's last year of high school. Dr. Burton was around more often. He liked to make spaghetti sauce on Saturday nights and fudge on Sunday. But family activities always seemed to be on his terms, and his stern example was often hard. As a doctor, Tom Burton was permitted two gas ration coupons, a C-sticker for unlimited gasoline, and an A-sticker, good for three gallons a week. He burned the A-stickers, saying he did not want to hinder the war effort. Robert remembers begging him not to. "For Christ's sake, Pop," he would implore, "we want to go to the Russian River." If nothing else, the boys could sell the coupons on the black market for a dollar apiece. But to Dr. Burton, who was setting an exacting standard for his sons, this was not negotiable. Dr. Burton also sent money to the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, which was challenging the order by which Japanese-Americans were sent to internment camps. At a time of acute anti-Japanese feeling, this was another example of his commitment to civil liberties.

An internist, Dr. Burton had a small office downtown and ran a clinic at Franklin Hospital, often treating poor patients for no charge. While on rounds one night, he met David Jenkins, a radical labor organizer for the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, the fiery ILWU of Harry Bridges. Jenkins was laid up with a bad knee. At night, when things were quiet, Burton would visit Jenkins and talk. Burton was pro-labor, but not a joiner. He had no use for the Communist Party, Jenkins recalled, and was passionately antifascist. He believed in social justice and in a person's capacity to change—as his own decision to enter medicine late in life testified. Jenkins was so impressed that he recommended Burton be put on a CIO-approved list of physicians.[6] One patient was Mike Quinn, a well-known party member and *Daily People's World* columnist who became a good friend.

The elder Burton was an avid reader who subscribed to *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, and to a left-wing book club. He wrote a novel about race relations but never found a publisher. He was one of the few white

doctors in town willing to make house calls to black homes. He treated a poor black family and refused the fee, Robert recalled, telling the father, "Use the money to buy your kids some shoes." Phillip absorbed the lesson well. As a young lawyer, he represented black clients and often charged little or nothing.

Tom Burton also became friendly with Seymour Farber, a young Harvard-trained physician in the same medical building. He struck Farber as an appealing yet vulnerable man, tall, thin, tastefully dressed. Farber recalled that Burton always had a quiet but politically charged one-liner handy. If a headline said, "Interest rates going up," he would say, "Oh, the bastards are raising the interest rates again and the poor will suffer." When Farber mentioned that his practice was booming, Burton said, "Yes, but in Detroit in the thirties, hundreds of doctors were in dole lines because they had no patients and no incomes."

Farber later became the personal physician to Jesse Unruh, the powerful California Assembly speaker and Phillip Burton's rival in the state legislature. Having known the father so well—Tom confided to Farber about his marital difficulties and subsequent girlfriends after he and Mildred separated—Farber paid special attention to the sons. Tom's sense of injustice, imparted through "those quiet one-liners," Farber said, had "a tremendous impact on his eldest son. I would say it was the most definitive thing that molded Phil."

But as Phillip got older, Farber noticed, some aspects of his personality became the mirror opposite of his father's. Tom was dignified and spoke in a quiet voice. Phillip was always shouting. Tom was meticulous and polite and sat upright. Phillip sprawled. He seemed deliberately boorish, rude, sloppy, and abusive. As an adult, Phillip was often consumed with rage. Angry at injustice—but perhaps also unconsciously furious at a father who abandoned him and failed to provide unconditional love—he learned to channel this rage productively through politics, which became his life's work.[7]

Before Burton graduated from high school in January 1944, army and navy recruiters came to Washington High, as they did to hundreds of high schools, looking for top students interested in becoming officers. Those who passed the exams were admitted into the A-12 or V-12 programs on university campuses. They pursued course work in pre-med or engineering studies, their university expenses paid by the government. Like his father, Phillip wanted to be a doctor. He chose the V-12 program and on March 1, 1944, enlisted as a future navy ensign and enrolled at the University of Southern California.

An apprentice seaman, Burton was assigned to a large barracks on the Los

Angeles campus. He was one of 500 V-12 students. They wore navy uniforms and were subject to military law and discipline, required to stand guard duty and maintain good grades. They drilled and paraded before the captain, a demoted admiral who ran the V-12 program at USC. Flunk-outs were sent off to the fleet. For the first time in his life, Burton, three months shy of his eighteenth birthday, had strict rules to obey, with harsh consequences if he failed. He was up at 5 A.M. every day for calisthenics. His uniforms had to be laundered and neat, his room immaculate. He was paid thirty dollars a month, plus room, board, college fees and tuition. At first, the new students were assigned thirty or forty to a large open room. But after a semester, they shared suites.

USC, a private university with high tuition and origins in the Methodist Church, was known as a haven for the rich, conservative, and well-stationed. Parents may have hoped their children would avoid the radical elements found at the state universities—and make the connections that would serve them later in life. Fraternities and athletics dominated campus life and politics. Even during the war, 50,000 people or more would stream into the Los Angeles Coliseum to watch the USC Trojans play football.

Burton soon met two other V-12 freshman pre-med majors, Siegfried Hesse of Oakland and Robert Peck of Los Angeles, and they became roommates. Hesse and Peck considered themselves radicals and studied hard. Burton told them his father was a doctor with strong political concerns. Hesse knew Mike Quinn, a friend of his mother, was Dr. Burton's patient. But neither ever heard Burton say anything else about his family. Hesse found him intense, earnest, and gregarious, though a bit of the social butterfly.

Burton was less interested in studying than in joining a fraternity, going to parties, dating girls, and becoming a Big Man on Campus. Hesse despised fraternities as elitist and exclusionary. He concluded that Burton was a phony. If Burton wanted to run with the rich ne'er-do-wells, he reasoned, their values must be infecting him. For one who became feared and respected on Capitol Hill for his consuming and no-nonsense liberal politics, Burton's college immaturity may seem odd. But he was still a gawky teenager seeking social acceptance. Burton felt a strong need throughout his life to surround himself with people. Fraternity life provided a comfort and security he otherwise lacked and beat living in a dormitory. As a fraternity man he could walk into any sorority or activity on campus and be accepted immediately.

Burton studied but only in brief, concentrated bursts. After loading up with seventeen units a semester in the hard sciences, he tired of pre-med studies. A year later, he turned to political science and pre-law.[8] Although

Burton's grades were not outstanding, mostly B's, sprinkled with a few A's and C's, several professors recognized his intelligence and hired him to grade essays for their graduate courses.

With the end of World War II approaching, Burton and his roommates knew they would soon be released from duty. Eligible for call-up some time in the future, Burton left the V-12 program in October 1945, halfway through his three-year college career. He moved almost immediately into the Sigma Phi Epsilon house, where his social activities long had centered.

Soon after his discharge, Burton had a major falling out with his father over a trivial incident that revealed their inability to connect. Phillip was nineteen. While he was visiting on a break, Robert recalled, the family was together one Sunday in their book-lined living room. Dr. Burton asked Phillip to pick up some ice cream. It was a two-block walk. Perhaps it was a statement of independence. Perhaps Phillip was tired of his father's intermittent but demanding involvement in his life. Perhaps he just did not feel like going. In any event, he refused. Dr. Burton asked him again and again he refused. In an effort to mediate, Robert offered to go.

"No," Dr. Burton said. "I want Phillip to go."

"I'm not getting it," Phillip said. Mildred tried unsuccessfully to intervene.

"If you don't get the ice cream," his father threatened, "I'm cutting you off. I won't pay for any more of your college education."

"That's fine with me," replied the ever-stubborn son.

Dr. Burton made good his threat, and Phillip never again asked for money. Robert said the pair acted as though the incident had never happened and went to a San Francisco Seals baseball game the next Sunday.[9]

The sudden reversal of fortune had immediate consequences. Phillip returned to USC forced to take odd jobs and scrounge for money. He got help from the GI Bill and spent two years managing the varsity basketball team. But he never seemed to have clothes and was always borrowing from his fraternity brothers. On a campus as affluent as USC, the absence of a car or of spending money was an obstacle to the kind of social life he wanted to pursue.

It did not block his political ambitions, however. In his second year, he won the first of two terms in the student senate, acquiring the nickname "Filiburton." But he was not selected for Theta Nu Epsilon, a secret political fraternity that dominated student life. Nor was he picked for Trojan Knights, the men's honorary society that acted as rally committee and official student hosts. Walter "Buzz" Forward, president of Trojan Knights and member of

the secret fraternity, was critical of Burton for always "shooting his mouth off."

When Burton heard that Buzz Forward and his family would be driving to San Francisco, Burton hitched a ride. "I'm so goddam poor, I can't make it home. Can I bum a ride with you?" he asked. Forward's father, a conservative Republican, managed a large manufacturing firm. Mrs. Forward had worked as a volunteer for Governor Earl Warren and Senator William F. Knowland, both Republicans. But Burton spent the the first part of the 400-plus mile ride denouncing corporations and their exploitation of workers. Finally, Mr. Forward exploded.

"Phil, you are riding in a car built by a big corporation," he said. "I am an employee of a big corporation. My son is going to USC because of a big corporation. Shut up!" Burton quieted down, but north of Santa Barbara he started in again. It was dark outside, but Mr. Forward pulled the car to the side of U.S. Highway 101 and said, "Phil, get out."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Forward," Burton said, as he started to get out of the car. "I won't say anything more. I'm very sorry I upset you."

"Phil, I don't want to hear another word from you for the rest of the trip," replied Mr. Forward. "Now get back in and keep quiet." And he did.[10]

Denied membership in the most exclusive clubs on campus, Burton searched for another way to make his mark and put his political talent to work. This was the beginning of a lifelong pattern of sizing up power relationships and figuring out his own way to get where he wanted. Whether it was his personality or political beliefs or both, he recognized early that traditional routes to influence would be denied him. But Burton worked harder and thought more creatively than his peers in devising his alternative path to power.

The first instrument at hand was his fraternity, one of the largest on campus, but considered one of the less desirable houses because many of its brothers were comparatively poor. The president was Joe Holt, a wealthy exception to the rule. His father owned a large dairy and chain of grocery stores. Holt later was elected to Congress as a conservative Republican.

Holt and Burton, the other acknowledged house leader, were intensely competitive. They wanted to win as many student offices and athletic contests as possible. Stationing underclassmen in key spots, such as the bookstore, they would spot talent among the freshmen and then "hotbox" or surround them until they could not move, extolling the virtues of their fraternity. One of their recruits was Gil Ferguson, a Marine who served two years in the

South Pacific during the war. After college, Ferguson returned to the Marine Corps and later was elected to the state assembly as a far-right Republican.

The fraternity met every Monday night. Every month or so, Ferguson recalled, Burton would "rant and rave" about the need to admit Jews and blacks. "But Phil," his brothers typically responded, "the Jews have their own fraternity, ZBT. They don't want to join our house." To consider accepting any of the few blacks on campus was out of the question and, in any case, would have prompted the national fraternity to expel the chapter. But that did not stop Burton. Ferguson could not understand how someone as smart as Burton—he was considered the brightest in the house—could hold such strange views.

Burton also had some bizarre idiosyncrasies. Although handsome and popular, once freed of military discipline he did not much care what his clothes looked like. He never made it out of bed for breakfast and ordered the pledges to forcibly wake him. But one time he heard them coming up the stairs, got out of bed, and hid in the closet. When the pledges, including Ferguson, went into his room and saw the empty bed, they figured he was up and gone. Burton, who had never fully awakened, got back in bed, slept until noon, realized he had missed half a day and screamed at them to do a better job. The pledges learned to tiptoe up the stairs and then force him up.

Ferguson said Burton seemed "spacey," so intense that his eyes bulged. His brain must be pushing them out, Ferguson figured. It made him an easy target for pranks. While he was eating dinner at the fraternity one night, pledges snaked a hose through a window, aimed, and turned it on, drenching him.

Another prank was far more serious and may have reflected the pledges' resentment at Burton's high-handed behavior. Some, like Ferguson, were returning war veterans who had seen combat and who had little patience for upper classmen who were younger and more frivolous. Overpowering him one night, they dressed him in army fatigues and a shirt that said POW, drove him to a train yard, stuck him in a boxcar, and locked it. When the train pulled out, it did not stop until it reached Indio, some 100 miles to the east in the desert past Palm Springs. But it took two days locked inside the boxcar without food or water before Burton made enough noise to alert police. He could have died of heat stroke or dehydration. When they opened the boxcar and Burton climbed out wearing his POW shirt, he had no money or identification. The police called the fraternity house, asking if they knew anyone by the name of Phillip Burton. The pranksters, falling down with laughter, said they had never heard of him.

It took another couple days in police custody before Burton finally found someone at USC to vouch for him. When he returned to the fraternity, Ferguson said, Burton looked forlorn, beaten down, humiliated. He stood under the shower for the longest time, trying to wash out the grime and what must have been the shame and terror of the experience. Then he went to bed and slept for twenty-four hours. He was quiet for days but gradually pulled out of it.[11]

Burton's other campus outlet was Blue Key, a small honor society of about thirty-five students, more important on other campuses than at USC, where Trojan Knights dominated. Burton was soon hard at work turning Blue Key into a group that could rival the Knights. Elected president by one vote, he ran meetings, directed social activities, and recruited new members. When he heard that a student named Chuck Brohammer had been elected president of the Trojan Squires, the junior version of Trojan Knights, Burton asked to meet him.

"If you drop out of the Knights," Burton told him, "I will see that you are made president of the student body and president of Blue Key. You are too good a guy to be involved with those jerks." Brohammer declined. But the offer typified the lengths to which Burton would go, and Brohammer's rejection further motivated Burton to turn Blue Key into a vehicle for his own ambition and ideology. Soon thereafter, Buzz Forward saw Burton and said, "For Christ's sake, Phil, relax. Leave us alone."

"Screw you, Forward," Burton said. "Who appointed you?"

His efforts paid off. Named Blue Key's "Outstanding Man" for 1946, he gave Blue Key the prestige it had lacked. But at a cost. People said Burton was "overpowering."[12]

During the summer of 1946, after he graduated, Burton got a job on a ship headed to Hawaii. The ship also stopped in Guam and Saipan, trust territories over which, decades later, as chairman of House Subcommittee on National Parks and Insular Affairs, he presided as their most forceful and effective advocate. It was during this trip—he had a menial job most likely as a mess man or kitchen assistant—that Burton had his first and most defining experiences with the American labor left. He mixed daily with members of the Marine Cooks and Stewards, the most militant union on the waterfront. MCS members sold subscriptions to Communist newspapers and carried left-wing literature. Four-hour arguments among rival left factions were not unusual.

Those two months at sea equaled a college degree in radicalism. Burton

was never a Communist, never would have submitted to party discipline, and believed the party's goals in many ways conflicted with his, even as he fought to protect its civil liberties. But to an impressionable college kid, many of those discussions about social and economic justice and the rights of workers would have had lasting impact. His experience at sea also provided a look at some of labor's most rugged individualists. Phillip grew up poor but there was little that was blue-collar about the way Phillip was reared or the value his family placed on education. Even so, he developed a commitment to working people and labor issues many labor leaders said was straight from the heart.[13]

While Burton was busy with Blue Key, another ambitious, politically astute student arrived at USC from the navy. Jesse Unruh was twenty-four, fat, uneducated, and interested in left-wing politics. Within a decade, Burton and Unruh became the two giants of California Democratic Party politics. Starting in the late 1950s, they began to dominate the political life of the state for the next generation. But they first confronted each other on the seemingly tranquil campus of USC.

The youngest of five children of illiterate Texas sharecroppers, Unruh once said he never wore socks until he was twelve, but his feet were so dirty no one knew the difference.[14] He was smart and liked to read. After Pearl Harbor, he talked his way into the navy, which, like the other services that had rejected him for flat feet, did not want him either. But Unruh persisted. He was assigned to the Aleutian Islands, where he spent the war, bored, cold, and lonely. He repaired airplanes on big carriers and read every book in the ship libraries. Before shipping out, he married Virginia Lemon, a physical education teacher who already had graduated from USC. After the war, they returned to Los Angeles. At Virginia's insistence, Unruh enrolled there on the GI Bill.

USC was transformed by the influx of ex-GIs like Unruh. They were more mature than the younger, less experienced boys, who wore school sweaters and gathered around the statue of Tommy Trojan. The vets had been through a war and some had seen combat. Social rank, water fights, and rah-rah activities did not interest them. Unruh discovered that people not affiliated with the Greek system, the so-called "non-orgs" did not count for much on campus, even though they outnumbered the "orgs" by six to one. The student senate did not want to hear about housing problems for vets or about difficulties with military discharges. Unruh helped form Trovets, a campus group for veterans.