

About James MacGregor Burns  
by Susan Dunn (October 16, 2014)

In 1973 or 1974, at one of the first Williams College faculty meetings I attended as a young assistant professor, the discussion was about whether the college should sell the lovely Mount Hope estate. I remember that a tall, well-spoken professor stood up and said that he hoped that the college would not sell this extraordinarily beautiful property -- and that in fact, he had recently escorted Lady Bird Johnson up there; and he mentioned how impressed she had been. I was sitting next to my friend Jay Pasachoff and I asked Jay, "Who is that?" And he said, "That's James MacGregor Burns."

Two decades later, Jim and I became a couple. We were too old to have children, so instead we wrote books together, op-eds and articles. We did research in the FDR Library in Hyde Park, we vacationed in Honolulu, Paris, Florence, and London, and we had small dinner parties that were like seminars -- with Jim the master of the lively political discussion.

There were some stories that Jim loved to tell -- and now I have inherited them. And, I'm going to tell you two of his favorites.

Jim graduated from Williams in 1939. During the next year, 1939-1940, he worked as an intern for a congressman in Washington and lived in a town house near the White House with some fellow interns.

In June 1940 Eleanor Roosevelt invited all the interns to dinner at the White House. But -- now here's a history question for you-- what happened in June 1940? Well, France fell to the Nazi planes and tanks and the country surrendered to Hitler.

Jim liked to say that he was very upset - not that France fell to the Nazis -- but that Eleanor Roosevelt might cancel the dinner!! But she didn't cancel it -- and the dinner went on. The evening of the famous dinner, Jim and his friend Arista left their house and started their walk to the White House, but Arista suddenly hailed a cab. And Jim said, "Arista, what are you doing? We're only three blocks from the White House and a cab is 25 cents plus a nickel tip!" And Arista said, "No matter, Jim, all my life I've wanted to hail a cab and say "The White House, please!"

The Second Story is what Jim's beloved student Michael Beschloss calls "Jim's Short Career in the Senate."

In 1958 Jim ran for Congress from Berkshire County, Massachusetts - and since JFK was also running for his second term in the Senate, Jim and JFK often campaigned together and they became friends. Jim lost the election to Silvio Conte (who would serve in Congress until 1991) but JFK of course won -- and that meant that his Senate seat was open!! The governor, a Democrat named Foster Furcolo, would appoint someone to the seat, but everyone knew that the governor would choose the person whom JFK wanted.

So when JFK was President Elect, Jim decided to go down to Washington to let JFK know that he had fought the good fight for the Democrats in 1958 and that now he was interested in that Senate seat -- and Jim underscored that he didn't want JFK to say to him later, "Oh Jim, I didn't know that you were interested in that seat!"

So in November 1960 Jim flew down to DC and knocked at the door of JFK's Georgetown house. Jim was surprised that there was no evidence of Secret Service men; JFK came to the door himself, greeted Jim and took him upstairs to what Jim described as a little sewing room. They chatted -- and then Jim came to the point. He said that he was very interested in the Senate seat. "But I know," Jim said, "that I am probably Number 93 or 94 on your list." JFK interrupted him. "Oh no, Jim," JFK said, "You're not 93 on my list! I would say that you are number 2 or number 3 on my list!" Their meeting was over, they went downstairs and said good-bye. Back on the sidewalk, Jim was elated at his promotion from 93 to number 2 or 3 on the list --- but then he realized that even that promotion to number 2 or 3 wasn't good enough. You had to be Number 1. And that was Jim's short career in the Senate.

In case you're curious, JFK picked for the seat his former college friend Benjamin Smith, the mayor of Gloucester, Massachusetts, because he could count on him to give up the seat in 1962 for none other than Teddy Kennedy. And JFK apparently wasn't sure that Jim Burns would do the same.

A few years ago, David Shipley, Williams class of 1985 and then the op-ed page editor of the New York Times, asked Jim to write a short piece

on advice for first-year students, and I thought I'd close by reading what Jim wrote:\*

*“Try to read a good newspaper every day — (actually Jim had written “read the New York Times every day, but David changed it to “a good newspaper”) at bedtime or at breakfast or when you take a break in the afternoon. If you are interested in art, literature or music, widen your horizons by poring over the science section. In the mood for spicy scandals? Read the business pages. Want to impress your poli sci prof? Read columnists.*

*The newspaper will be your path to the world at large. At Williams College, where I was a student in the 1930s, we read the alarming reports in The Times about Germany's brutal onslaught against peaceful nations. In the spring of 1938, we burned Hitler in effigy — and made Page 11 of The Times!*

*In addition, a great newspaper will teach you how to write: most articles are models of clarity and substance — with no academic jargon! Pay attention to the writer's vocabulary, see how many active verbs are used, file away striking new words for future use. Study how articles are structured — how the first two paragraphs tell the reader simply and clearly the subject and main points. Take a look at the last paragraph; it will often show you how to conclude an essay with a pithy phrase or a telling quotation.*

*A great newspaper will help you in the classroom — and it will be your conduit to the real world outside the classroom. Become addicted.*

*Another way to stay connected with the real world: get to know your teachers outside of class. On the walk away from class, chat with them not only about the coursework but also about their own intellectual interests. Equally important to maintaining that lifeline to the universe beyond college is getting to know the janitors and housekeepers in your dorm, the security staff on the campus, the people who work in the cafeteria. Talk to them, ask them questions and **thank** them.*

That brief article mirrors who Jim was: a brilliant writer with a phenomenal vocabulary and style; always active and deeply engaged in the world; always considerate, interested in and respectful to other people. When I went to Jim for advice, which I often did, that advice was precious:

it was always wise, kind, generous, and inclusive. I had the best twenty-two years of my life with Jim --and I still like to walk up to Mount Hope and think of his walk there with Lady Bird Johnson and our many walks up there together on lovely fall days.

\* James MacGregor Burns, [Off Campus Life](#), NY Times, September 6, 2009