



Yvonne Brathwaite Burke

1932-

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1973-1979
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

Yvonne Brathwaite Burke was a rising star in California and national politics years before she won a seat in the U.S. House. In 1966, she became the first African-American woman elected to the California assembly. At the 1972 Democratic National Convention she served as vice chair of the platform committee, gaining national television exposure. That same year she became the first black woman from California (and one of only three black women ever) elected to the House. Her meteoric career continued with a prime appointment to the Appropriations Committee and her election as the first woman chair of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). But Burke's most notable distinction in the eyes of much of the public occurred in 1973, when she became the first Congresswoman to give birth and be granted maternity leave while serving in Congress.

Perle Yvonne Watson was born on October 5, 1932, in Los Angeles, California, the only child of James Watson, a custodian at the MGM film studios, and Lola (Moore) Watson, a real estate agent in East Los Angeles. Yvonne (she rejected the name Perle) grew up in modest circumstances and at first was enrolled in a public school.¹ At age four she was transferred to a model school for exceptional children. Watson became the vice president of her class at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles. She enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley in 1949 but transferred to the University of California at Los Angeles, where she earned a B.A. in political science in 1953. She became only the second black woman to be admitted to the University of California School of Law, earning her J.D. and passing the California bar in 1956. After graduating, she found that no law firms would hire an African-American woman and, consequently, entered into her own private practice, specializing in civil, probate, and real estate law. In addition to her private practice,

she served as the state's deputy corporation commissioner and as a hearing officer for the Los Angeles Police Commission. In 1957, Yvonne Watson wed mathematician Louis Brathwaite. The marriage ended in divorce in 1964. Yvonne Brathwaite organized a legal defense team for Watts rioters in 1965 and was named by Governor Edmond Brown to the McCone Commission, which investigated the conditions that led to the riot. A year later she won election to the California assembly. She eventually chaired the assembly's committee on urban development and won re-election in 1968 and 1970.²

Brathwaite ultimately grew impatient with the pace of social legislation in the California assembly and, when court-mandated reapportionment created a new congressional district, decided to enter the race for the seat. The district encompassed much of southwest Los Angeles, was nearly 75 percent registered Democrats, and had a large African-American constituency. In the Democratic primary, Brathwaite faced Billy Mills, a popular African-American Los Angeles city councilman. She amassed 54 percent of the vote to defeat Mills and three other challengers. Just days after the primary, on June 14, 1972, Yvonne Brathwaite married businessman William Burke, who had been an aide to Mills. Less than a month later, Yvonne Brathwaite Burke garnered national media attention as the vice chair of the Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach that nominated George McGovern. She spent much of the convention controlling the gavel during the long and sometimes-raucous platform deliberations, eventually helping to pass revised rules that gave minorities and young voters a greater voice in shaping party policy.³

The convention exposure only added to Burke's luster, though it was hardly a factor in the general election that November in the heavily Democratic district. Burke faced 31-year-old Gregg Tria, a recent law school graduate, who





ran on an anti-busing and anti-abortion platform. Burke defeated Tria easily, winning 73 percent of the vote. In Burke's subsequent re-election bids in 1974 and 1976, she won 80 percent of the vote against Republicans Tom Neddy and Edward Skinner, respectively.⁴

In Burke's first term during the 93rd Congress (1973–1975), she received assignments on two committees: Public Works and Interior and Insular Affairs. She gave up both of those panels in December 1974 to accept a seat on the powerful Appropriations Committee, where she served for the duration of her House career. Burke's appointment to the panel occurred at a time when African Americans began to serve simultaneously on the most influential House committees: Appropriations (Burke and Louis Stokes of Ohio), Ways and Means (Charles Rangel of New York and Harold E. Ford of Tennessee), and Rules (Andrew Young of Georgia).⁵ In the 94th Congress (1975–1977), Burke was appointed chair of the Select Committee on the House Beauty Shop, an honorific position that rotated among the women Members.

Burke made national headlines again as a freshman Member when she revealed in the spring of 1973 that she was expecting a child. When Autumn Roxanne Burke was born on November 23, 1973, Yvonne Burke became the first Member to give birth while serving in Congress, "a dubious honor," she observed.⁶ The House subsequently granted Burke maternity leave, another first in congressional history.⁷ The Burkes also had a daughter, Christine, from William Burke's previous marriage.

Representative Burke recognized that the civil rights struggle had shifted to a phase in which less overt discrimination must be confronted. "The kinds of things we faced in my generation were easy to understand," she explained. "Your parents said, 'They don't let you sit down here, they don't let you go to that place.' Everybody knew. But now it is so complex, so frustrating to young people when they are led to believe that everything is fine, yet at the same time it is not fine."⁸ Minority interests were always at the forefront of Burke's legislative agenda. During her first term in office she fought the Richard

M. Nixon administration's efforts to unravel some of the programs established under Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society, particularly the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which Nixon stripped of many of its programs. One of Burke's earliest House Floor speeches defended the OEO.⁹

Burke also fought for equal opportunities for minority-owned businesses in the construction of the Trans-Alaskan Pipeline by adding two amendments to the bill that provided the framework for the nearly 800-mile-long project. One amendment required that affirmative action programs be created to award some pipeline contracts to minority businesses. A later version of that amendment would require that any project funded with federal dollars must provide affirmative action incentives, reminiscent of the legislative technique used by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of New York, which involved the attachment of antidiscrimination riders to legislation involving federal funding. "The construction of the Alaskan Pipeline will create substantial employment opportunities, and it therefore seems desirable and appropriate to extend the existing programs for non-discrimination and equal employment opportunity" to that project, Burke told colleagues on the House Floor.¹⁰ Burke's second amendment to the bill, the Buy America Act, required that the materials to construct the pipeline be manufactured in the United States "to the maximum extent feasible."¹¹ Despite voicing strong concerns about potential environmental problems, Burke continued to back the Alaska pipeline project, believing it would help the impending energy crisis in the United States.¹²

In the House, Burke earned a reputation as a legislator who avoided confrontation and controversy yet worked determinedly behind the scenes to effect changes she believed were important. "I don't believe in grand-standing but in the poverty areas, if there is something we need, then I'll go after it," she explained.¹³ Using her experience as a former state legislator in the California assembly, Burke chose her positions carefully and usually refrained from partisan rhetoric in debates. She also seemed to take



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to heart the advice of former President Johnson, who had counseled her as a freshman Member, “Don’t talk so much on the House Floor.”¹⁴

With quiet determination, Representative Burke supported most major feminist issues and joined the Congressional Women’s Caucus when it was founded in 1977, serving as the group’s first treasurer.¹⁵ She was part of a successful effort to extend the time limit for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment by an additional three years.¹⁶ That same year, the California Representative introduced the Displaced Homemakers Act, which authorized the creation of job training centers for women entering the labor market, particularly middle-aged, self-supporting women who were re-entering the job market after an absence of many years. The purpose of the bill, which also provided health and financial counseling, was “to help displaced homemakers make it through a readjustment period so that they may have the opportunity to become productive, self-sufficient members of society,” Burke explained.¹⁷ In 1977, she vigorously criticized the Hyde Amendment, which prohibited the use of federal Medicaid funds for abortions. “The basic premise which we cannot overlook is that if the Government will not pay for an indigent woman’s abortion, she cannot afford to go elsewhere,” Burke wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece.¹⁸ In 1978, Burke introduced a bill to prohibit pregnancy-related discrimination in the workplace, particularly employer policies that kept women out of their jobs for long periods before and after childbirth.¹⁹

Despite her prominent committee assignments and her role as chair of the CBC, which she assumed in 1976, Representative Burke never seemed completely at home on Capitol Hill. Publicly, she expressed her desire to have a more direct and administrative effect on policy than the demands of her job allowed her. However, associates believed that by 1977 the distance from her husband and her 4-year-old daughter in Los Angeles and the 3,000-mile biweekly commute had left her exhausted and unhappy.²⁰

In 1978, Burke declined to run for re-election to the 96th Congress (1979–1981), in order to campaign for the office of California attorney general, the chief law enforcement position for the state (and a position no woman had ever held in any state government). She won the Democratic nomination but lost to Republican State Senator George Deukmejian in the general election. In June 1979, California Governor Jerry Brown appointed Burke to the Los Angeles County board of supervisors, making her the first black person ever to sit on the panel. In 1980, she lost her bid to a new four-year term and returned to private law practice. In 1984, Burke was the vice chair of the Los Angeles Olympics Organizing Committee. Burke became the first African American to win outright election as an L.A. County supervisor in 1992, defeating future Representative Diane Watson by a narrow margin.²¹ A year later, she became the first woman and the first member of a racial minority group to chair the board. Burke has been re-elected three times, chairing the board of supervisors in 2002–2003 and, most recently, in 2007–2008. She resides in her native Los Angeles.²²



FOR FURTHER READING

“Burke, Yvonne Brathwaite,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B001102>.

Gray, Pamela Lee. “Yvonne Brathwaite Burke: The Congressional Career of California’s First Black Congresswoman, 1972–1978.” Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1987.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

University of California (Berkeley, CA), The Bancroft Library. *Oral History*: 1982, 46 pages. The title of the interview is “New Arenas of Black Influence.” The interview includes a discussion of Representative Burke’s political offices, including her drive for social legislation, her entry into Democratic Party politics, and her tenure in the California assembly during Governor Ronald W. Reagan’s administration, as well as a discussion about minorities and women.

University of Southern California (Los Angeles, CA), Regional Cultural History Collection, Department of Special Collections, Doheny Memorial Library. *Papers*: 1966–1980, 452 feet. Correspondence, photographs, sound recordings, and memorabilia relating to Representative Burke’s years in the California assembly, U.S. Congress, and Los Angeles County board of supervisors. Also included are materials relating to her campaign for attorney general of California. Some restrictions pertain to the collection. A finding aid is available in the repository.

NOTES

- 1 Leroy F. Aarons, “Legislator With a Subtle Touch,” 22 October 1972, *Washington Post*: K1.
- 2 “Yvonne Brathwaite Burke,” *Notable Black American Women*, Book 1 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research: 1992).
- 3 Leroy F. Aarons, “That Woman in the Chair Aims for Hill,” 14 July 1972, *Washington Post*: A8.

- 4 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 5 “Committee Sizes Shift in the House,” 13 December 1974, *Washington Post*: A2.
- 6 “Rep. Burke: ‘A Dubious Honor,’” 5 July 1973, *Washington Post*: C7; “7-lb. 9-oz. Girl for Rep. Burke,” 24 November 1973, *New York Times*: 19.
- 7 “Congressional First,” 24 November 1973, *Washington Post*: D3.
- 8 Yvonne Burke, “‘The World I Want for My Child,’” 27 March 1974, *Christian Science Monitor*: 20. This is an op-ed piece based on excerpts of an *Ebony* article from March 1974 that Burke had authored.
- 9 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (31 January 1973): 2835–2836.
- 10 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (2 August 1973): 27655.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 27710; “Trade Proposals Causing Concern,” 3 September 1973, *New York Times*: 23.
- 12 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (2 August 1973): 27653–27655.
- 13 “2 Black Women Head for House,” 7 October 1972, *New York Times*: 18.
- 14 Dorothy Gilliam, “He’d Have Said, Go ‘Head,’” 25 January 1973, *Washington Post*: C1.
- 15 Irwin Gertzog, *Congressional Women: Their Recruitment, Integration, and Behavior* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995): 186.
- 16 *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 2nd sess. (15 August 1978): 26226–26232.
- 17 *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 2nd sess. (25 May 1976): 15449–15450; *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (21 October 1975): 33482–33483.
- 18 Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, “Again, ‘Back-Alley and Self-Induced Abortions,’” 22 August 1977, *New York Times*: 23.
- 19 *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 2nd sess. (18 July 1978): 21442.
- 20 Lacey Fosburgh, “Women’s Status a Key Factor in Race by Rep. Burke,” 13 May 1978, *New York Times*: 10.
- 21 “Ex-Lawmaker Seems Victor in Los Angeles,” 22 November 1992, *New York Times*: 29.
- 22 “Biography of the Honorable Yvonne B. Burke,” at <http://burke.lacounty.gov/bio.htm> (accessed 1 March 2008).



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