

by Lou Cannon

Speaker of the future?

Editor's note: For the past two months, California Journal has presented excerpts from an important new biography on Phil Burton (see page 16). In that spirit, we present a column about Burton from our January 1975 issue, when Burton was at the height of his power.

Phil Burton was beaten by a dead man the first time he ran for public office. He has taken nothing for granted since.

When House Democrats elected the 48-year-old San Francisco congressman as chairman of their caucus, they defied the norms of rewarding political conviviality and instead gave power to a colleague who is considered one of the most abrasive and temperamental congressmen of modern times. He also is one of the smartest and best-informed. It is no wonder that key advisers to President Gerald Ford already are talking about the "Burton Democrats" and estimating that it is the usually more liberal Senate, rather than the House, that will become the dependable body for sustaining presidential vetoes in 1975.

The worry within the White House is shared in large measure by Tip O'Neill, the House majority leader. Until Burton was elected caucus chairman, O'Neill seemed the eventual successor to Speaker Carl Albert. Now, all bets are off. Since his first defeat, Burton rarely has needed more than a toehold to get what he wanted. And he has wanted for a long time to become speaker of the House.

Burton's 20-year odyssey from embarrassing defeat to the brink of national power is a study in the fabled American work ethic applied to the American political system. He is a 24-hour-a-day congressman who reads the bills, understands the departments and excels in the craft of political maneuver. In 1954 he was a young, bright-eyed San Francisco attorney with an obsession for politics and no taste for the law. Operating within the framework of the national Young Democratic organization, Burton considered many of the establishment Democratic leaders in California to be both backward and ineffectual. The old Democrats, those who knew of him, in turn regarded Burton as a vaguely dangerous "ultra-liberal" or worse. Burton decided to run against one of those old guardsmen in the 1954 Assembly Democratic primary in San Francisco's Mission district. The incumbent, a dependable Democratic labor hack in a district that was then a labor stronghold, died two months before the election. Under California law, however, his name remained on the ballot. Burton ignored suggestions from his wife that he send out postcards "reminding" voters of the incumbent's death. The dead man won, and the County Central Committee nominated John O'Connell, not Burton, for the safe Democratic seat.

Burton's response to that defeat was to move into an adjoining district and tackle a Republican considered so invulnerable he was known as "the unbeatable Tommy Maloney." But Burton had studied the emerging political trend in California, and he thought that a 1952 change in the law putting partisan designations on the ballot gave him a chance.

Maloney, the last of the old-time San Francisco labor Republicans, had been winning both parties' Assembly nominations for years under California's cross-filing law. Many voters thought he actually was a Democrat. Burton launched a precinct campaign aimed at convincing people that Maloney was a Republican. The effort barely succeeded.

The first bill Burton introduced as a state legislator demonstrated his ability to select issues of importance to his constituency. The measure legalized fireworks for Chinese New Year's, and Burton has run ahead of the Democratic ticket in Chinatown ever since. But Burton's central interest quickly became the social welfare issues relating to the needs of his poorest constituents. In his last term in the Assembly, he snuck through an innocuously worded amendment that turned out to have the dual effect of giving welfare payments to needy children in homes where the father was present but not working and of boosting county tax rates. By the time county supervisors learned what was happening, Burton was occupying a House seat won in a 1964 special election.

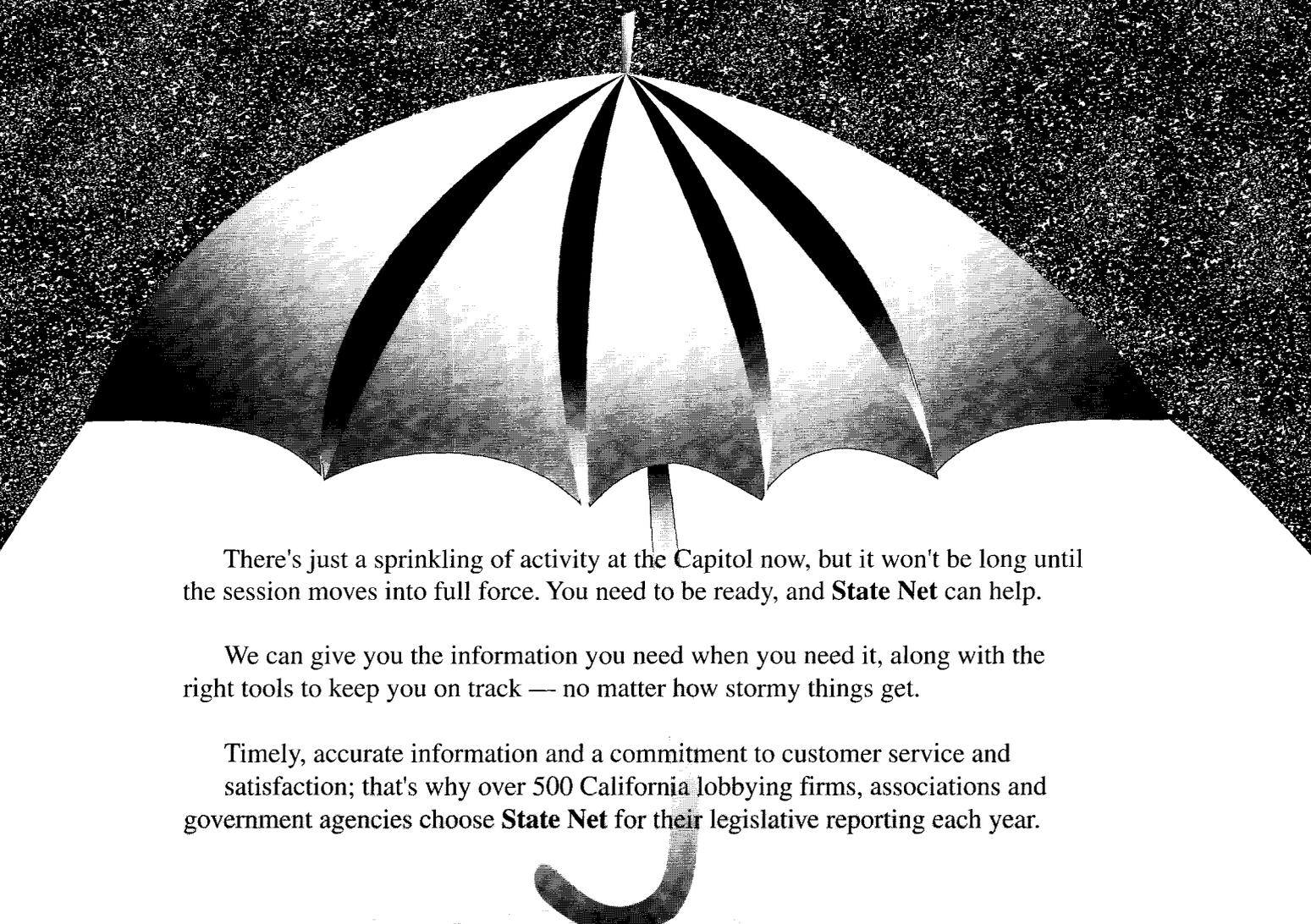
The House proved a natural stage for Burton's political talents and perseverance. He made himself valuable almost immediately by learning more about welfare legislation than anyone else and by focusing on a few key issues. With less than six years' seniority, he pushed through a bill compensating coal miners for black-lung disease — a measure he considers his most important legislative accomplishment.

Burton also subtly changed his political style. In California, he had been regarded as too far to the left for a leadership role; in Congress, he cultivated the middle leadership and stayed away from the overt challenges to House authority launched by such mavericks as Jerome Waldie. He also made peace with the San Francisco establishment, voting for a bill, for example, immunizing newspaper joint ventures from anti-trust action. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, which didn't mention Burton by name in his campaign against Maloney, approves of him now.

Except for the issues that kept the local establishment happy, Burton changed far less in substance than in style. He was against the Vietnam War from the beginning, and he has been resolutely pro-Israel since the founding of the Jewish state. He was one of only two congressmen who had the courage to vote against making the murder of a president a federal crime. (Burton said that a vote for the bill would be inconsistent with his opposition to capital punishment.)

On the whole, Burton is not especially popular in the House. He is considered to be something of a congressional grind, with no interests outside of politics. He lives three blocks away from the Capitol and does not even own a car. He eats and drinks and smokes voraciously, and has been known to explode into a rage at restaurants or on the floor. But even congressmen who can't stand him tend to admire Burton for the skill and information he brings to his job. He is symbolic of a Congress that is tired of going along to get along and of being pushed around by the presidency. It is a Congress in which a man like Phil Burton can someday become speaker of the House. 🏛️

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