

1818 Society Annual Meeting 2003

After Dinner Remarks Introducing Burke Knapp

by John Blaxall

This has been a marvelous evening for all of us, and especially for me, because my final, final duty as your retiring President is not really a duty at all – it is a privilege. When we look not just at the 25 year history of the Society, but at the history of the Bank as an institution, none of us can think of anyone who played a more central and constructive role over an extended period than Burke Knapp.

I dug out his c.v. from the Bank's archives. Nowadays a c.v. is a glossy multi-page brochure, full of exaggeration and words like "output oriented" and "team leader" and "added value". Burke's c.v. is very simple, just one sheet with a few dates and appointments that he held. It's short enough that I am going to skim through it here:

It starts with a fact that I hope Burke won't mind my sharing with all of you – that he was born in 1913, so he celebrated his 90th birthday last January.

1933 – Stanford: economics (and incidentally captain of the water polo team)
1933-36 – Rhodes Scholar at Oxford (PPE)
1936-40 – London, Brown Harriman & Co
1940-44 – Assistant Chief of the International Section, The Fed
1944-45 – State Dept Adviser on German Economic Affairs & US Military Government (during which period he attended the Bretton Woods Conference)
1945-49 – Director of the Office of Financial & Development Policy, The Fed
1949-50 – Assistant Director, Economic Department, World Bank
1950-52 – On leave, first as Economic Adviser to the US Delegation to NATO Council, London; then as Co-Chair of the Joint Brazilian-US Economic Development Commission, Rio

... and that's when he came back to the Bank in 1952, as Director of the Department of Operations for the Western Hemisphere – what I suppose we would today call LACVP. After that he stayed in the Bank another 26 years until he retired in 1978. During that period, and now I think the truth can finally be revealed, he was promoted only once.

That was in 1956, when he became the Vice President for Operations (and Chair of the Loan Committee). Eugene Black was President then. Burke's deft guidance of the Bank's operations continued through George Woods' tenure in the 1960s, and the first ten years of Bob McNamara's presidency. Those 26 years were a period of quite extraordinary expansion in the Bank's operations, in terms of scope as well as magnitude. This is when IDA began lending to a whole new group of countries, and when the Bank started operations in new sectors like

education, and population and health, and urban development, and began lending on a large scale for agriculture and rural development. This is when the Bank built its reputation, step-by-step, for quality and integrity and serious analysis. This is when the Bank acquired its lead role in the global development enterprise.

I am not going to claim that Burke was solely responsible for all this, although there is no doubt his guidance and his decisions played a huge role in making the Bank successful in a very complicated and constantly changing environment. And that picture of Burke skillfully presiding over a successful enterprise would be reason enough for our gratitude and our celebration on an occasion like this.

But it really misses the point. It misses the vital core, the reason why Burke was an icon for my generation in the Bank, and for others before and afterwards. He was not simply thoughtful and highly intelligent and well informed and good at making sound decisions. Over the years, the Bank has attracted plenty of people like that. The difference with Burke is that he was always, and remains today, to use a phrase you don't hear much nowadays, a gentleman.

He set a tone for the conduct of the Bank's business that was rigorous but never caustic, that was firm but never bullying, where debate could be heated but everyone felt respected. I was young in my career at the time, and did not think any of this unusual. In other times and other places and other circumstances, I came to realize how rare was the working environment that Burke created, how privileged I was to have that experience, and how much of a difference one man can make.

So I am an unabashed admirer of J Burke Knapp, I am delighted that he is here with us tonight, and it's my privilege to introduce him to you as our speaker on the Society's 25th anniversary.

7th October, 2003
Washington DC