



## LEADING THE WAY: YVONNE BRATHWAITE BURKE

On October 5, 1932, Yvonne Brathwaite Burke was born Peele Yvonne Watson in Los Angeles, California. She was a gifted student and attended the Manual Arts High School, where she participated in extracurricular activities and was elected vice president of the girls' senior class. Her academic high school performance and her role as an active student leader qualified her to be admitted to the University of California at Berkeley in 1949. After two years, she transferred to the University

of California at Los Angeles, earning a bachelor's degree in political science in 1953. Subsequently, she matriculated at the University of Southern California law school—earning her juris doctor degree in 1956. As one of the first Black women admitted to the school, she encountered racism from her white classmates. Prohibited from joining the women's law society, she began an alternative organization with two Jewish students.

Upon graduating from law school and passing the bar exam,

she encountered further racism. She could not find any law firm to hire her, so she commenced private practice focusing on civil and fundamental estate law. Furthermore, she worked as a commissioner for the state regarding corporations and as a hearing officer for the Los Angeles Police Commission.

In 1957, P. Yvonne Watson married Louis Brathwaite, a mathematician. After seven years, the couple divorced.

When the Watts riots occurred in the summer of 1965, Yvonne Brathwaite was appointed by

Governor Edmund Brown to the McCone Commission, an organization to explore the root causes of the disturbance. Her political career began the following year with her election to the California assembly. She served as chair of the assembly's urban development committee, upon which she remained until 1972.

A bit disillusioned by the gradualism of change, Brathwaite jumped at the chance to run for the establishment of a new congressional district. She beat out a popular Black city councilman. Ironically, on June 14, 1972, she married William Burke, a businessman who had been an assistant of the councilman she had bested! Soon thereafter, at the Democratic National Convention in Miami, Brathwaite Burke became the vice chair and even had control of the gavel as chair for several hours! Being on center stage won her national attention.

For most of Burke's tenure as a U.S. House of Representatives member, she served on the influential Appropriations Committee. She also worked on other committees: Public Works, Interior and Insular Affairs, Ways and Means, and Rules. She also had the honor of being the first to give birth while in Congress and being granted maternity leave.

Having experienced racism both personally and vicariously, she was well equipped to address the white backlash that followed on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement that culminated with the Civil Rights, Voting Rights, and Fair Housing Acts—as well as the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Burke defended these

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legislative measures in Congress as support for them began to wane under the presidency of Richard Nixon. She also adopted the maneuver characterized as the Powell Amendment, named after Congressman Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., who attached an amendment regarding affirmative action whenever federal dollars were appropriated for a project.

In addition, Burke demonstrated her political acumen on feminist issues—serving early on the Women's Congressional Caucus, which was formed in 1977. Burke supported the Equal Rights Amendment, a woman's right to choose what to do with her own body, the use of Medicaid funds for abortions, assistance to homemakers transitioning to the labor force, and a woman's right to maintain her job during pregnancy and childbirth.

Burke conducted herself

with gentleness and courtesy. However, she did not allow her physical attractiveness and refined demeanor to distract others from her staunch commitment to social justice issues.

In 1978, Burke decided not to run for reelection to the U.S. Congress. The following year, she unsuccessfully ran for the attorney general of California. Governor Jerry Brown subsequently appointed her to the California Board of Regents. She did not serve a year before Brown appointed her to fill a vacancy on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. Burke sought election to a full term in 1980, but was defeated. Once again, Brown returned her to a seat on the Board of Regents in 1982. Ten years later, Burke won an election in another district for the County Board of Supervisors—a position she held until her retirement in 2008! In the final year of his first term, President Barack Obama appointed her to the board of directors of Amtrak. She remained in that position until 2024.

What a marvelous example Burke gave to generations after hers! She exemplified the adage that “service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this Earth.” From childhood, she acquitted herself well to achieve great things professionally. She was a scholar-activist and a servant leader throughout her life! We can all emulate her.

I am Dr. Michael Blackwell, the Social Ethicist for The Soultown Magazine. I want to thank Yvonne Brathwaite Burke for having SOUL! ☺

