

CHAPTER 4

THE SENIOR STATESMAN: IN HIS ELEMENT

After losing his position as Speaker pro tempore in the early 1970s, Al Burruss worked hard to come back to a strong position in the House. He was determined to prove that he was “not a quitter.” Tom Scott describes how unusual Burruss’s comeback was: “He lost all of his power for several years as a result. He was punished for having challenged the Speaker. Everybody that challenges knows that there is going to be a price to be paid. And yet I think maybe one of the most remarkable things about him was that he was able to work his way back to the leadership again and smooth it all over.”¹ Fleischmann and Pierannunzi attribute Murphy’s hold on the Speaker position and Burruss’s loss to him as the result of “old-boy politicians.”² In their book, *Politics in Georgia*, they remind readers that after Burruss’s attempt to unseat Murphy, no one else made such a move until 1992, when DuBose Porter tried to do so, but also lost in his attempt.³ Paul Shields attributed part of Burruss’s comeback to his skills as a businessman, noting that Burruss “didn’t take long to work himself back into the inner circle. After all, here was a man who had started with just a few truckloads of refrigeration equipment and transformed them into a multimillion dollar poultry processing business. Although he referred to himself as just another chicken plucker, most everyone else came to know him as Mr. Budget.”⁴ His friend Chet Austin also recalls Burruss’s business acumen: “He was as

good a businessman as I've ever known. He could grasp a situation and he could negotiate from that situation. We started with nothing to negotiate with. We were able to grow and stay in business and for a small business to stay in business is something on its own.”⁵ It is not surprising then that Burruss was able to reinstitute himself as one of the most powerful players in the House though it would take him several years to do so. To show that he had what it took to be a serious legislator, one who could work with the old-boy network that had kept Tom Murphy in power as Speaker, Burruss concentrated on learning as much as he could about the legislative process. He focused especially on the budget, continuing to help stall or derail legislation he did not think should be passed, and working closely with all legislators, ignoring to which political party they belonged.

According to Austin, Burruss's greatest impact was on the budget, “How far his influence reached and how valuable his input was [influenced] the budget—he probably knew it better than anybody down there.” Robin Burruss gives a similar assessment of his father's application of business knowledge to the state's budget process. “What made him so effective as a legislator is he knew what it means to have to make a payroll every week and he knew what it is to have to manage a business and to manage people that make that business go. And he knew what it is to court a customer. All the skills he had to learn in business made him an effective legislator.” Though Burruss lost to Murphy, he retained the respect of his colleagues in the legislature, and one in particular, Marcus Collins, stood by him after his fall from favor.

When he lost his position, Burruss also lost his office space, but Marcus Collins, who chaired the House Ways and Means Committee, of which Burruss was a member, offered him space to work in his own office, telling him “you don't have an office anymore, so you can just make my office your office.”⁶ Collins had a table brought in for Burruss; this was very special treatment considering there were thirty other members on the Ways and Means Committee who did not enjoy such close proximity to the chair. But Collins thought this “healing” was what was needed.⁷ Moreover, Collins was Tom Murphy's best friend—the two of them hunted and fished together and were very close, so Collins's actions could only have helped Burruss in regaining Murphy's trust.⁸ Burruss and Collins also made a formidable pair

on the Ways and Means Committee, for, as a long-time legislative aide said, “if Marcus and Al came on the floor with anything, they got their way. So they were very powerful. I mean it was incredible.”⁹ However, this aide is also careful to point out that the two men did not “mandate anything. They simply expressed it in a manner that all of the people could understand.”¹⁰

Pete Phillips, later vice chairman of Ways and Means, when nominating Burruss for majority whip at the Democratic caucus in November of 1980, argued that Burruss deserved the position partly for his commendable work on the committee:

Al could have sulked his way through four years of House service, but he chose instead to pick himself up to not only represent his people in an excellent manner, but took the flack by killing countless bills in Ways and Means that would have caused the defeat of many House members if they had had to vote on the bills on the floor.¹¹

After Burruss’s death, Marcus Collins recalled that:

Al paid his way; he worked his way. Nothing was ever given to him. And he worked hard to get back. After being defeated, he was out. He finally came back and ran for majority whip for the Democrat party and was elected and then later he ran for the majority leader. And that put him on the Conference Committee on the Budget.¹²

Joe Mack Wilson, another long-serving and powerful legislator who served with Burruss in the House, argues that Murphy’s eventual embracing of Burruss was a smart move, and worked favorably for both men because Murphy “got all Al’s people and became the most powerful speaker in the House. And Al won influence too.”¹³

Another significant element of Burruss’s comeback was that he did so on his own terms. As the legislative aide on the Ways and Means Committee explains, Burruss took his own counsel and would oppose the other 179 members of the House if he thought it was the right thing to do.¹⁴ Moreover, Burruss kept his thoughts and plans to himself until he was ready to act on them, as he did when he cast his vote for the ERA when the rest of the House

voted against it. This willingness to oppose legislation he felt was wrong happened often enough that some House staffers came to think of Burruss as being the “fly in the ointment,” enough so that they presented him with a jar of ointment into which they had inserted a fly.¹⁵ Certainly Tom Murphy found him intractable at times, though he nevertheless appreciated him. Former Governor Roy Barnes also describes Burruss as “stubborn. If he ever made up his mind, it was near impossible to change it. Now he was very open before he made up his mind, but if he ever made up his mind, boy, that was it.”¹⁶

Even though he was considered incredibly articulate and persuasive in putting his views across, Burruss sometimes thought of his abilities as inadequate because he lacked a college education.¹⁷ But no one who knew him ever thought of him as anything but highly capable. Judge Harris Hines once said of Burruss’s ability to understand legislation: “I have seen him read legislation—he not only was a quick read, but he could understand it in depth; he could look at legislation real quick and he could go right to the heart of it.”¹⁸ Barnes also speaks highly of Burruss’s capabilities, “Al was very good, he probably knew more about taxation than anybody at the Capitol.”¹⁹

However, the qualities of Burruss that really served to reinstate him in a position of power in the House were the ones cited by Phillips in his nomination speech for Burruss to become majority whip:

- Al would assist any member by telling him what was in a bill without telling him how to vote for it.
- He never denied his skills to any member even when he disagreed with them [*sic*] on the issue.
- Al was familiar with losing perhaps better than anyone in the House.
- The members owed Al a formal position of leadership; he had earned it and was capable, and it was time he took his rightful place in the order of things.²⁰

Burruss could be very persuasive, changing his approach depending on what was at stake. At times, he was what one person described as “calm and soft spoken and humble and benevolent.... He was very quiet and moved

around the House helping with their business.”²¹ His son Robin says of his father’s manner in dealing with others that “He told people things they didn’t want to hear a lot of times politically, but he always told them the truth and he always told them what he felt was best. They always respected him knowing that what you see is what you get, and what he says is what he means.”²² Roy Barnes concurs with this assessment, that “in Al’s life, it’s whether a fellow sticks to his word—in legislative give and take, what’s most important is that you stick to your word.”²³ Burruss’s rhetoric could be fiery, as noted by Hal Straus, a political writer for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He referred to Burruss as the “five-star general in Murphy’s war” to strip \$40 million from the Department of Transportation’s budget in 1985. Straus wrote that “It was Burruss, 57, who made the angry speeches to fire up the troops and quietly convinced reluctant warriors to get to the front line.”²⁴ Another political writer for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Frederick Allen, saw Burruss in a slightly different political role—as Tom Murphy’s “prime minister.”²⁵ As Tom Scott says, Burruss made a “remarkable comeback”—from losing his position as Speaker pro tempore to becoming majority whip, then majority leader, to becoming Murphy’s right-hand man—his “five-star general,” his “prime minister.”

The two decades in which Burruss served in the House marked an important time because Cobb County’s General Assembly delegates held sway in the legislature, unlike any time before or since. Cobb County’s delegation, like the county itself, moved from being primarily composed of legislators who were Democrats in the early 1970s to becoming an increasingly bipartisan delegation in the 1980s. In his history of Cobb County politics, Tom Scott examines the changes that brought the Republicans to power in Cobb County—“a well-educated and affluent population, an important defense industry, a dramatic increase in the non-Georgia born population, and a relatively small, but affluent, minority population.”²⁶ In his political career, Burruss only faced opposition twice from a Republican and in both instances, he defeated them. In 1970, Burruss faced opposition for his House seat from Republican Ken Nix; in the election polls from Cobb County, Burruss got 23,834 votes to Nix’s 15,011 votes.²⁷ Burruss and Nix congratulated each other on running clean-cut campaigns. Burruss also predicted that Nix would eventually become a factor in Cobb politics,²⁸

a prediction that came true as Nix was elected to a seat in the House in the next election.²⁹ Burruss was especially pleased with the outcome of the election because of the personal endorsement he felt he received: “The people of Cobb County have convinced me that they vote for the man and not the party. If they weren’t splitting tickets, Nix would be elected based on Suit.”³⁰

Burruss didn’t face opposition again for fourteen years; in 1984, Republican Doug Howard ran against him. Unlike the earlier race against Nix, this race was ugly, with Howard running a smear campaign to undo what he called the “good old boy” network in the legislature, to which he tried to link Burruss. As Tom Sharp reported, Howard “accused Burruss of being an integral part of a ‘bad government,’” rocked by scandal.³¹ In an interview Burruss gave Sharp, he stressed that the committee memberships he held were based on seniority, and that “the influence he has managed to accumulate in the House holds far more potential for benefit to Cobb than anything an untried freshman could do.”³² Burruss wasn’t the lone Democrat facing Republican opposition—Joe Mack Wilson and Terry Lawler were also up against Republican opponents. The editors of *The Marietta Daily Journal* recommended its readers vote for Al Burruss and Joe Mack Wilson because “the Cobb delegation has developed into the strongest and most able unit of any county in the state. We need to keep this team together.”³³ Lawler was probably not included because he was seeking his second term in office and did not yet have the clout of the older legislators. Four Cobb seats in the House were in contest; the fourth was the challenge to Republican Tom Wilder by Democrat Juanelle Edwards.³⁴

Bill Kinney, associate editor of *The Marietta Daily Journal*, called the race “exciting.” “Never before in Cobb’s political history have so many races been contested in a general election.”³⁵ Kinney accurately predicted Wilson, Burruss, and Lawler would be reelected. Of Burruss, he said: “Like Wilson, Democrat Al Burruss is a tower of strength in the Georgia House, being majority leader. He too serves on several powerful committees and can make things happen when Cobb County needs a project. A new legislator would take years to achieve the status of Wilson and Burruss.”³⁶ Following the election, the paper reported that the three Democratic incumbents—Wilson, Burruss, and Lawler—had faced “much stronger competition than

they had expected.” In the end, five Democratic incumbents were defeated by Republicans, effectively keeping the Democrats from gaining new strength in the House.³⁷ The Cobb delegation in the House had already been split evenly, with four Democrats and four Republicans in the 1980 election, so the 1984 election didn’t change things for Cobb.³⁸ Partly the success of the Republican challenge was the result of gaining office on incumbent Ronald Reagan’s coattails. With the advent of Ronald Reagan to the US presidency, as Scott explains, “Cobb Republicans surged ahead of their rivals, becoming in the 1980s virtually as powerful as the Democrats had been a few years earlier.”³⁹ Burruss won 56.8 percent of the Cobb County vote in the 1984 election.⁴⁰

While working to regain his standing in the House during the mid- to late-1970s, Burruss also supported Jimmy Carter in his run for the US presidency—he and his wife Bobbi and his brother Gerald were part of the Peanut Brigade and actively campaigned for Carter in New Hampshire for the first primary held in February, 1976. They were among the ninety Georgians who showed up to walk the streets, handing out literature and telling people about Jimmy Carter.⁴¹ The next January, the Burruss family found themselves at the Carter inauguration, standing in the snow as Carter was sworn in as the thirty-ninth US president.⁴² Burruss and his wife Bobbi were often guests of the Carters at the White House during Carter’s term in office. Al Burruss worked behind the scenes to support Carter’s work as well. For example, when the Panama Canal treaties were being decided upon in Congress, Burruss was among a group of twenty-two Georgians who traveled to Washington, DC, for state briefings on the Panama Canal Treaty at the White House on August 30, 1977.⁴³ Although exactly what Burruss’s role was in supporting Carter is unclear, beyond attending functions, there are letters sent from the White House, thanking him for his support and enlisting his aid in supporting the treaties.

Three letters sent to Burruss specifically mention the Panama Canal Treaties; the first was sent by Hamilton Jordan, assistant to the president, dated October 6, 1977, which thanks Burruss “for joining us here at the White House for the briefing” and requesting Burruss’s “full and public support of them”; also enclosed were the texts of the two treaties on the Panama Canal, signed in Washington, September 7, 1977.⁴⁴ The second letter

was sent by Betty Rainwater, deputy assistant to the president for research, dated November 17, 1977, explaining that “President Carter asked me to pass on to you, because of your interest in the Panama Canal Treaties, the enclosed material”; enclosed were recent news articles and public opinion survey results related to the Panama Canal Treaties.⁴⁵ A final letter was sent by Jimmy Carter himself, though it appears to be a form letter, not a personal letter, signed with a large “J” that thanks Burruss for the “active interest that you and many other Americans took in this vital issue,” and ending with the injunction from the president, “I hope you will continue to let your voice be heard on other issues in the future.”⁴⁶ Whether or not Burruss did participate again in public issues is unclear. Yet, he was considered a warm friend and often invited to stay at the White House with Bobbi and attend functions such as a barbecue on the South Lawn.⁴⁷ One question that comes up is why Burruss didn’t accompany Carter to Washington—was he not asked or did he not want to go? According to Rachel Fowler, Burruss’s secretary, “He could have gone very definitely to Washington. He considered running for Congress but he didn’t want to raise his children in Washington.” His family also agree that Burruss had only to say the word and he could have been in Washington, but he provided a humorous explanation when asked about why he didn’t go: “Chickens don’t like cold weather.”

In the 1980 elections, House majority whip Nathan Knight was defeated by Republican Neal Shepard; this opened up the position and Burruss announced early on that he intended to run for it.⁴⁸ Elected by the Democratic caucus in November of 1980 to the post of majority whip, Burruss became, if possible, even more visible in the power structure of the House. The majority whip “assist[s] the majority leader by keeping members advised of floor and committee votes,” “deliver[s] the necessary amount of votes needed on particular pieces of legislation favored by the majority party,” and “manages the legislative agenda of the party.”⁴⁹ During 1981’s General Assembly session, Burruss was named to the House committee overseeing the revision of Georgia’s constitution, was vice chairman of the Rules Committee, and served on the State Regulatory Agency, Ways and Means, and Appropriations Committees.⁵⁰ He was constantly moving about the House, talking with its representatives, lining up votes, persuading, cajoling, and when necessary, using stronger measures. He was especially

good at persuading people to accept his views, as demonstrated by Carter's recollection of how Burruss could influence people:

When somebody would have a very negative comment to make or made a speech that was highly damaging to what we were trying to do, Al had a way to put out fires and to calm a difficult situation down, whereas someone with less sensitivity to human beings, with less confidence in himself would have probably aggravated an already bad situation and made more enemies. But he knew how to turn an enemy into a friend. He learned how to turn an antagonist into a supporter.⁵¹

A legislative aide remembers watching Burruss work the floor of the House: "Al was just such an incredible leader, and he did it not just by leading the body but by leading them one by one, helping them, showing them, taking their legislation and proving it; that's how he did it. It was a sight to behold."⁵² As in everything he did, Burruss took his job to heart and spent many hours supporting the goals of his party and of his constituents, using his committee memberships to get legislation through the House.

The real work of the House takes place in the committees, where members decide on the value of the legislation under consideration—whether it needs more study, should go forward, or not be acted on further.⁵³ Thus, Burruss's committee memberships indicate both his stature in the House, as well as his ability to influence legislation. In 1982, another opportunity opened up for Burruss and he ran for majority leader, which he easily won. As majority leader, Burruss was "responsible for leading the floor debate on majority-party issues and for insuring that Democratic votes fall where leaders want them to."⁵⁴ By being elected majority leader, Burruss automatically gained seats on the three most powerful House committees: Ways and Means, Rules, and Appropriations.⁵⁵

These three committees were, and continue to be, powerful because they largely determine the way legislation moves through the House. As Fleishmann and Pierannunzi explain, the Rules Committee meets daily during the last twenty days of the session to determine which bills will be discussed on the floor that day, with the consequence that: "the Rules

Committee may decide that a particular piece of legislation is never acted upon by the House, even if the standing committee favors it. Members of the Rules Committee therefore hold substantial power over all legislation.”⁵⁶ Moreover, the chairs of this committee in both chambers “are strong political forces in the General Assembly, as little legislation that does not meet their approval is likely to be passed.”⁵⁷ The Appropriations Committee holds hearings on the governor’s Amended General Budget Report proposal the week before the General Assembly session convenes and reviews the budget (within its subcommittees) for policy areas such as education, higher education, public safety, and so on.⁵⁸ So, this, too, was a powerful committee that Burruss served on. According to Roy Barnes, Burruss used his power, when necessary, to get legislation passed. “Al had a tough streak in him, too. If needed to be, Al could be tough to get his point across. I’ve seen him punish legislators that voted against him—punished them hard, took everything they had out of the budget and wouldn’t let their bill out of the committee.”

Former State Representative Tom Kilgore describes what Burruss was like as majority leader: “The job of the majority leader is to explain the budget. He had to know that budget, every figure, everything had to be just so. He would come in before he was to explain it to a committee, to the full House, or to anybody, and we’d sit down and we’d go over that thing for hours on end, me picking him and asking questions that anyone might ask him. His greatest fear in politics was that somebody would ask him a question and he could not answer it.”⁵⁹ Kilgore also remembered the way in which Burruss helped other legislators.

If you got in trouble, didn’t matter whether you were friend or foe, didn’t make any difference whether he agreed or disagreed on a piece of legislation, whether he was going to vote for or against it, didn’t matter. If you got in trouble, he rescued you. You knew he was like a life preserver sitting here. And he would throw out a question or he would clear his throat or do something to give you time to develop an answer and get yourself out of that problem.⁶⁰

Joe Mack Wilson also stressed Burruss's trait of helpfulness as a major difference between him and other majority leaders.

Al was not your typical majority leader; first of all he was more than a majority leader, he was a father figure to some of those youngsters. They sought him out and formed lines to get into his office, seeking advice on everything from the price of chicken to how we gonna handle this next bill. And so he was not an ordinary majority leader.⁶¹

At a time when the legislature was slowly being integrated, and many in the House were not very progressive in their thinking, Burruss knew no color limits—he was as helpful to the Congressional Black Caucus and the black representatives as to any others. A legislative aide claimed that “He treated them just like he did the white members as far as working with their legislation and helping them with their legislation in every way he could. He treated them no differently than the white members of the House, that’s for sure. His professional attitude [was] ‘they’re a member of the House representing a state the same as I do.’”⁶² Representative Eleanor Richardson also remembered how Burruss showed great “concern for women and children and health issues. In his position of handling the money and being on rules and being on all these important committees, he really helped me tremendously.”⁶³ In 1985, for example, Burruss and Wilson saw to it that \$73,000 were earmarked in the budget for the Open Gate shelter for abused children in Cobb County.⁶⁴ The two representatives also sponsored a bill to increase the exemption of retirement benefits from state income taxes, for, as Burruss said, “This is one of my priorities. I feel we have to do something for people on fixed incomes to offset the increased cost of living.”⁶⁵ Roy Barnes later said of his friend, “Al had a philosophy that was really born out of rural Forsyth County. Hard work, always make sure that you treat your fellow man with equality, make sure that you are never called into question on anything that you do publicly or that you do privately. And upon his death I could truly say that I look back at Al Burruss’s life and it was one that was unblemished. All of us have skeletons but he had very, very few.”

One legislator, former State Representative Terry Lawler, tells how Burruss mentored him during his early legislative career. Burruss met Lawler

when he was working for the General Assembly in the House chamber. Burruss encouraged him to run for representative, saying that even though he might not win the first time, he should keep running. Lawler did run, unsuccessfully at first in 1978, but then he gained a seat in 1980. For his first year in the House, Burruss told Lawler to listen, not speak, and he would hear others ask the questions he was thinking. Lawler took Burruss's advice and from him learned the ins and outs of how to get legislation passed in the House, primarily by getting an amendment attached to someone else's bill. Lawler points out that even though Burruss's name appears on many bills, a lot of what he accomplished was in amendments to someone else's bill.⁶⁶

Burruss was the newly elected majority leader in the House when Governor Joe Frank Harris took office in 1983. Roy Barnes, Governor Harris's floor leader in the Senate, introduced the newly established Education Review Commission and Al Burruss was appointed to the commission as well. The commission came up with the concept of Quality Basic Education (QBE), the funding mechanism Georgia still operates under today. Improving education was an idea that Burruss could wholly support. In an interview with Bill Carbine, a political writer for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Burruss brought up his own educational background stated that, "One thing my Dad did... is that he said that his children could not get a basic education in Forsyth County so he brought us to Smyrna when I was 7. If it had not been for that move I would be a textile worker or something today."⁶⁷ One of the primary issues facing the General Assembly in 1984 was financing public education, and Burruss saw education as the key to solving a lot of social problems. He said "If we can solve that one thing [a way to finance minimal basic education] we can solve a lot of other problems, unemployment, prison problems, crime problems, and we can bring new industry to Georgia."⁶⁸ But, he was not in favor of issuing bonds to pay for it; as he said, "I've never been able to get out of debt by borrowing."⁶⁹

When the Education Review Commission published its report, in November of 1984, one of its more controversial features was opposed by Burruss. The commission had proposed a formula by which the state would steer more of the new money toward poor school districts; at that time, school districts were funded by property taxes, which favored wealthier counties. But Burruss expressed skepticism of the commission's recommendation

for equalizing school finance, “It appears to me it will penalize the good systems where taxpayers have been willing to pay the necessary cost of a quality education.”⁷⁰ On the other hand, he favored the recommendation of teacher accountability and the establishment of a career ladder for teachers with steps to improve their pay and performance.⁷¹ Burruss pushed hard to get the education reform bill through the House though it would take two years to do so. In 1985, the House approved the state budget, leaving education reform intact, and the school reform bill finally passed in the House on February 23, 1985. The bill established a mandatory full-day kindergarten,⁷² something Burruss had fought for when George Busbee was governor, but they could not get it through the legislature ten years earlier.⁷³ Political writer Frederick Allen called the education reform bill “the most revolutionary reform of the public schools in Georgia history.”⁷⁴

Another important piece of legislation that Burruss and Barnes worked on together, along with Joe Mack Wilson, was the 1 percent local option sales tax that could be used for road improvements and other such projects by the counties. This bill was the product of a brainstorming session that Burruss and Wilson had with Roy Barnes and is an example of how legislation sometimes works. Barnes related the story about how this bill came about:

Al and I went to the First United Methodist Church together and after services, I would go over and work a few hours at my office up the street. Al and Joe Mack came over and said Earl Smith had come to them and needed money for county roads and bridges. [Smith] was the first Republican chair of the Cobb County Commission, which shows cooperation across party lines. So Joe Mack and Al said they wanted to know how to do a local option sales tax.⁷⁵

So Barnes pulled his code and, working over the next three hours, they wrote the bill out in longhand. The next morning, “Al took it to Legislative Council. Al and Joe Mack introduced the bill in the House and it was tough but it passed. [Barnes] had an easier time in the Senate but there were some amendments placed on the bill. When it came back to the House for agreement to the Senate amendments, Al asked [Barnes] to come over and help him work the floor and [he] did. It passed the House with only one

vote to spare. It was a monumental achievement and only Al could have pulled it off.” As Barnes recalls:

It was close. Historically we had said no local government could impose a local sales tax because the sales tax was solely the state’s. This went back to the time when Herman Talmadge was Governor and the first sales tax was put into effect in 1951 [...], so a lot of the older legislators who remembered this... thought it was going back on what had been done 30 years before. And the argument was that the state schools are going to need expanding and when they need that taxing capacity if you give it up now, you’re not going to be able to use it. That was the big argument with them.⁷⁶

But Republican State Representative Johnny Isakson helped them and they got it passed in Cobb. Barnes noted that, “We all went to the highway board and went to Tom Moreland, who was Highway Commissioner at the time, and he said if you pass this, I’ll match every dollar that y’all raise so you can get transportation money. And we did and we used it very effectively.” Tom Scott, speaking about the 1 percent sales tax, said that: “In that interview that I did with Joe Mack Wilson, he talks a lot about the 1 percent sales tax. It’s really important, and it’s really kind of a new idea in Georgia to have that local option to build roads. And so [Wilson and Burruss] did push that through; it’s a big achievement... it’s what we call SPLOST [special purpose local option sales tax] nowadays.”⁷⁷

Paul Shields remarked, in the video *A Remembrance of Al Burruss*, that “Burruss had left his mark on our state constitution, our tax laws, and our educational system. But his lasting legacy is the choice that Georgians now have to tax themselves to build needed libraries, schools, and roads.”⁷⁸ Barnes, too, extolled Burruss’s actions in state government:

The special option sales tax was right at the top of the list as one of Al Burruss’s greatest achievements. But one of the other things that not many people know about is that Al had a driving hand in creating the funding mechanism, the funding formula for the university system, which we

still use, and to make sure that there was an equality of funds through all of the university system and to make sure that universities and colleges didn't get funded just by who happened to be the local politician in the General Assembly at the time.⁷⁹

Not only was the 1 percent sales tax bill highly regarded by legislators, but it was entered into the competition sponsored by the Ford Foundation and Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, a high honor.⁸⁰ Political writer Bill Shipp noted that,

Not only in the Cobb County delegation but also in the suburbs around Atlanta, [Burruss] marked the bridge between the rural and the suburban legislator. [...] It was Al who was one of the founding members of the special tax districts that allowed certain urban areas to work on their infrastructure, to relieve traffic problems, that kind of thing. And that turned into a major way suburban Atlanta is coping with its growth.⁸¹

During the 1985 and 1986 legislative sessions, Burruss and Wilson saw to it that funds were kept in the state budgets for Kennesaw State College and Southern Tech, including "\$1.2 million for land acquisition at Kennesaw... and \$9 million for a new business school at Kennesaw."⁸² The Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University is now housed in the Burruss Building, named for the legislator that secured its funding. This period of the early-to mid-1980s marked a time in the Georgia General Assembly when the Cobb delegation was at its strongest and most powerful—Burruss was the House majority leader, Joe Mack Wilson was chair of the Ways and Means Committee, Roy Barnes was Governor Harris's floor leader in the Senate, and Republicans dominated the Cobb legislative delegation, holding eight of the fourteen seats, led by House minority leader Johnny Isakson.⁸³ According to *The Marietta Daily Journal*, old-time Georgia political observers often called the Cobb delegation "the most powerful delegation in state history."⁸⁴ Of this time, Barnes says, "I've never seen a delegation like it before or since and it was just that one period of time when if we

all got together there was just nothing that couldn't be done.... We had different politics but we worked well together and we had a common love and concern for the people of Cobb County.”⁸⁵ Terry Lawler expresses a similar point of view:

Al was in the Cobb delegation at a time when it held sway in Georgia politics. It was a unique moment in Georgia history and lasted over the decade of the 1980s. Powerful men from Cobb County and its neighbors Paulding and Bartow Counties could get just about any legislation they wanted through the legislature: Joe Frank Harris from Cartersville, who would be governor during much of this decade; Joe Mack Wilson, Al Burruss, state representatives from Cobb County; Roy Barnes (whom Al referred to as the “smartest man I know”), senator from Cobb; and many others.⁸⁶

One thing that not many know about Al Burruss was that he was a Certified Lay Speaker of the Methodist Church and regularly spoke in churches and conducted services on Laity Sunday. His faith is also reflected in another aspect of his character that not many know of—his generosity to those who were poor. One of many examples of this is related by a legislative aide in the House who remembers a day when a group of legislators and aides were eating at the Stadium Hotel and Burruss left a \$200 tip for a waitress who limped while serving them. Another time, the group had eaten one night, and as they left to head for their cars, they noticed that Burruss had stopped to talk to a homeless man on the street to whom he gave a “wad of money.” He was also very generous to those who worked at the House; an aide noted that “On Easter he would bring a potted flower of some sort to every female in the Capitol. There were probably 30.” But he did so even when the staff increased to sixty people. He also brought chickens for all the staff at Christmas. Of his generosity, the aide said that with Burruss, “It was a constant giveaway, whether it be money or food,” and for many of the women who worked at the House and made very little money doing so, his gift of chicken was often the only food they had over the holidays.⁸⁷

Just as he was generous with what he could give people in terms of money, he was generous of his time, especially to the people of Cobb county.

For example, he donated his time, as his legislative aide said, “to all the people who could not come forth and take care of their own business under the state organization. If someone needed something in the Department of Natural Resources, perhaps a creek was flooding their back yard, Al could step in as an elected person and help iron the problem out for the person that owned the home that was being flooded by the creek.”⁸⁸ He was not only a talented businessman, but he was also “talented in working with the general public and doing all the things that needed to be done that people could not get done for themselves. And that was one of the important things that he constantly did. While he was helping all of the members of the House with their legislation, he was helping individuals with problems they had with the state that needed someone who was elected because the elected voice has the strongest voice because the people have chosen him to speak for them.”⁸⁹

Most amazing of all was that he maintained his brisk schedule: working late into the night on legislation, then up early in the morning to get the kids off to school, then dealing with all the myriad things he had to do, suffering all the while from excruciating pain from arthritis. In fact, many of the pictures that appeared in newspapers show Burruss kneeling beside a representative to discuss legislation or with his chin on his desk because that was the only way he could get relief from the constant pain. Numerous people recall how at committee meetings, he would have to lie on the floor in an attempt to get relief. His wife Bobbi thinks that one reason he didn’t get much sleep was that it was too painful to be in one position. Representative Eleanor Richardson describes what it was like to witness Burruss’s pain: “Al’s arthritis pain—I will never forget that real courage and endurance of deep, deep pain. Because he didn’t want to take too much medication because then he wouldn’t be able to help the rest of us.”⁹⁰

Shortly after the General Assembly of 1986 ended, Al Burruss checked into Kennestone Hospital in Marietta for surgery to relieve what was believed to be an infected appendix. On March 9, 1986, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* announced in its Sunday paper that Burruss had been diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer.⁹¹ The legacy of a great man was about to come to a close.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 4

1. Tom Scott, interview by author, tape recording, Kennesaw, GA, 8 June 2006.
2. See Arnold Fleischmann and Carol Pierannunzi, *Politics in Georgia*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997, p. 173.
3. *ibid.*
4. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance*, prod. Peter Kolstad and Rick Westaway, 45 min., Georgia Public Television and Kennesaw State College, GPB-TV, Atlanta, 1992, videocassette.
5. Chet Austin, interview by author, tape recording, Marietta, GA, 27 June 2006.
6. Legislative aide, anonymous, interview by author, tape recording, Acworth, GA, 31 October 2006. She was a legislative aide and research analyst during her long career at the House and served on the Ways and Means Committee for twenty-seven years. She knew Marcus Collins and Al Burruss very well.
7. *ibid.*
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. Pete Phillips's speech at the Democratic caucus in November, 1980; read to author by legislative aide, anonymous, during her interview with the author, tape recording, Acworth, GA, 31 Oct. 2006.
12. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance*.
13. *ibid*
14. Legislative aide, anonymous, interview. She expressly asked not to be identified in the book's text, and therefore appears as the "long-time legislative aide on the Ways and Means Committee."
15. *ibid.* After Burruss's death, she was given this jar of ointment with the fly in it and still has it in her possession.
16. Governor Roy E. Barnes, interview by author, tape recording, Marietta, GA, 12 Dec. 2006.
17. Legislative aide, interview.
18. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance*.
19. Barnes, interview.
20. Pete Phillips's speech at the Democratic caucus in November, 1980.
21. Legislative aide, interview.
22. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance*.
23. Barnes, interview.
24. See Hal Straus, "Making the Big Plays: 10 Men to Watch: Little Fanfare, but a Lot of Clout," *AJC* 1 Jan.1985. p. 12.
25. See Frederick Allen, "What's a GOP Leader to Do?" *AJC* 13 Jan. 1985, p. 1.
26. See Thomas Allan Scott, *Cobb County, Georgia and the Origins of the Suburban South: A Twentieth-Century History*, Marietta, GA: Cobb Landmarks & Historical Society, 2003, p. 474.
27. See Beau Cutts, "Burruss, Nix Race Ends Courteously," *MDJ* 4 November 1970, p. 3C.

28. *ibid.*
29. See Dee Bryant, "3 Key Assembly Posts Claimed by Local GOP," *MDJ* 8 Nov. 1972, p. 1.
30. *ibid.* Hal Suit had won the most votes in Cobb County in the gubernatorial campaign against Jimmy Carter, who would win the election to become governor of Georgia.
31. See Tom Sharp, "Burruss Handily Checks Challenge from Howard," *MDJ* 7 Nov. 1984, p. 5B.
32. *ibid.*
33. See "Election '84: Our Recommendations," *MDJ* 4 Nov. 1984, p. 10B.
34. See "Four House Posts Are Contested in Cobb," *MDJ* 4 Nov. 1984, p. 3B.
35. See Bill Kinney, "Tuesday Will Be Exciting Here," *MDJ* 4 Nov. 1984, p. 10B.
36. *ibid.*
37. See Maggie Willis, "Republicans to Gain Nine Offices," *MDJ* 7 Nov. 1984, p. 10B.
38. See Susan Miller, "Big Cobb Vote Good for GOP," *MDJ* 6 Nov. 1980, p. 1A.
39. *ibid.*
40. Sharp, p. 5B.
41. See Martin Schram, *Running for President: A Journal of the Carter Campaign*, NY: Pocket Books, 1976. p. 21.
42. Gerald Burruss, telephone conversation with author, 27 July 2007.
43. "State Briefings on Panama Canal Treaty. Tuesday, August 30, 1977; 3:45 P.M. (15 minutes); The State Dining Room." Obtained from the Jimmy Carter Library online web request; sent via email by Albert Nason, Archivist, Jimmy Carter Library. Zell Miller, then Georgia's Lieutenant Governor, was also one of the attendees.
44. The Jimmy Carter Library archives.
45. The Jimmy Carter Library archives.
46. The Jimmy Carter Library archives.
47. Gerald Burruss, interview.
48. See "Burruss Plans to Run for Majority Whip Job," *MDJ* 6 Nov. 1980, p. 8A.
49. "Political Roles in the Legislature." http://www.legis.state.ga.us/legis/2007_08/house/kids/whosWho.htm (accessed August 2, 1997).
50. See Brent Gilroy, "Burruss Named to Revision Panel," *MDJ* 14 May 1981, p. 3A.
51. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance.*
52. Legislative aide, interview.
53. Fleischmann and Pierannunzi, p. 161.
54. See Dick Pettys, "Things Happen in Assembly When Rep. Murphy Speaks," *Griffin Daily News* 8 Jan. 1985, n.p. (Article clip located in Burruss Scrapbook 1985-1986. The A. L. Burruss Institute for Public Service & Research, Kennesaw State University.)
55. "Political Roles in the Legislature."
56. Fleischmann and Pierannunzi, p. 162.
57. *ibid.*
58. Budget Office, Georgia House of Representatives "Georgia Budget Process." http://www.legis.state.ga.us/legis/2007_08/house/budget/budgetProcess.html (accessed August 2, 2007).
59. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance.*

60. *ibid.*
61. *ibid.*
62. Legislative aide, interview.
63. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance.*
64. *MDJ* 12 Jan. 1985, n.p. Burruss Scrapbook 1985–1986. The A. L. Burruss Institute for Public Service & Research, Kennesaw State University.
65. See Tom Sharp, “Cobb Democrats Are to Introduce Exemption Bill,” *MDJ* 15 Jan. 1985, p. 6A.
66. Terry Lawler, interview by author, tape recording, Atlanta, GA, 1 Dec. 2006.
67. See Bill Carbine, “Majority Leader Burruss Focuses on Improving Education,” *AJC* 31 Aug. 1983, n.p.
68. *ibid.*
69. *ibid.*
70. See Jane O. Hansen, “Harris Hails Education Report,” *AJC* 13 Nov. 1984, p. 1A.
71. *ibid.* See also Tom Sharp, “Legislator Says Teachers Must Be Accountable,” *MDJ* 20 Dec. 1984, p. 1A.
72. See Jane Hansen and Prentice Palmer, “What the Legislator Will Face: School Issue, Drinking Reforms Await Lawmakers Next Week,” *AJC* 6 Jan. 1985, p. 1A.
73. See Frederick Burger, “Cobb Delegates Get High Marks,” *MDJ* 30 Mar. 1975, p. 1A. Burruss was instrumental in getting a compromise for the kindergarten legislation but there was no money to fund it.
74. See Frederick Allen, “Political Sidestep Was Legislators’ Favorite Dance,” *AJC* 10 Mar. 1985, p. 6B.
75. Barnes, interview. This meeting probably took place in January 1985; Tom Sharp reported in the *MDJ*, “Local 1% tax for Roads to be Introduced Soon,” Jan. 16, 1985, p. 1A, that Burruss would be responsible for getting the 1 percent local sales tax option introduced.
76. Barnes, interview.
77. Scott, interview.
78. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance.*
79. Barnes, interview.
80. See “Local-Option Sales Tax Bill may Bring More \$\$ to Cobb,” *MDJ* 18 Jan. 1986, p. 4A.
81. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance.*
82. See “Building Projects Reduced,” *MDJ* 6 Feb. 1986, p. 1A.
83. See “Democratic House Members Build War-Chest,” *MDJ* 12 Sept. 1985, n.p.
84. *ibid.*
85. Barnes, interview.
86. Lawler, interview.
87. Legislative aide, interview.
88. *ibid.*
89. *ibid.*
90. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance.*
91. See Hal Straus, “House Raps Senate for Adjourning: Legislators See Need for Procedural Change,” *AJC* 9 Mar. 1986, p. 1A.