

Burns, James M

Elected in 2003 as a fellow into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, presidential biographer and historian James MacGregor Burns (1918–) is distinguished for his biographies of the Roosevelts and Kennedys. Most noted, however, for scholarship in political leadership, Burns changed the direction and conversation in leadership studies from leaders who possess a certain set of political and character traits to the consideration of political leadership as the opportunity to transform, and introduced the notion of *transformational leadership* into the lexicon of leadership theory. His 1978 scholarly work *Leadership* is widely considered the seminal work in establishing leadership studies as an academic discipline and the watershed work for research in transformational leadership.

Senior scholar at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond and Woodrow Wilson Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Williams College, Burns graduated from Williams College in 1939 and then worked in Washington as an intern in the office of Utah Democrat Abe Murdock. In World War II, he served as an Army combat historian, serving in the Pacific Theater from 1943 to 1946. Burns was awarded the Bronze Star and four Battle Stars for his part in the invasions of Saipan, Guam, the Philippines, and Okinawa. Upon returning to the United States, he earned a master's degree and doctorate in political science from Harvard University and later attended the London School of Economics. Burns published his first book, *Congress on Trial*, in 1949, and since then has authored or coauthored more than two dozen books, including the first biography of John F. Kennedy as well as a college textbook that is still widely used today. In 1970, he won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his biography *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom*.

With *Leadership*, Burns provided the first interdisciplinary examination of leadership, thus playing an integral role in the development of "leadership studies" as an academic field of study. Professor Burns was one of the first to study leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers rather than simply as an assessment of the traits that set leaders apart. He also transformed the view of leadership by insisting upon the moral dimensions of great leadership.

In his central thesis, Burns notes that while leadership is an aspect of power, it must be exercised in a special relationship with the followers one leads. That relationship, that process, according to Burns, must be transformational. Thus, transformational leaders engage with others in such a way that both leaders and followers are raised to higher levels of motivation and morality; that is, each brings out the best in the other. Through a teaching role, leaders help followers understand, adopt, and unite toward the pursuit of "higher" goals rather than immediate needs and wants. Most interested in end values of liberty, justice, and equality, transformational leaders should be evaluated by three criteria: (1) by the modal values (values of means) of honesty and integrity, by the extent to which they advanced or thwarted fundamental standards of good conduct in humankind, (2) by the end values of equality and justice, and (3) by their legacy, their impact on the well-being of the persons whose lives they touched. Burns's notions of leadership have had a profound impact on leadership studies. Georgia Sorenson indicated that by the year 2000 more than 570 dissertations had been written on the concept of transformational leadership.

—JoAnn Danelo Barbour

Further Readings and References

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