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## George Murphy: A Celebrity Politician

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# GEORGE MURPHY

## A Celebrity Politician

*By Richard T. Longoria*

**ABSTRACT:** There is a growing literature on celebrity involvement in American politics. Celebrities have advantages that are beneficial when they seek elected office, but they can also lose elections despite these advantages. Because George Murphy was a Hollywood actor who both won and lost electoral contests, his case can provide insights about why celebrities win and lose elections. Having appeared in over forty movies, Murphy was a nationally recognized figure when he ran successfully for the U.S. Senate in 1964. He demonstrated that celebrities have the talents, fame, and resources to succeed in the electoral arena. These attributes alone, however, were not enough to win re-election. An unfavorable political environment was the reason for his loss six years later. This suggests that despite having advantages, the normal laws of politics still apply to celebrity politicians.

*Key Words:* celebrity politicians; movie stars in politics; California Senatorial races, 1964–1970

### INTRODUCTION

Many authors have argued that we are experiencing a melding of entertainment and politics leading to the “celebrification” of our political system.<sup>1</sup> Politics and entertainment become interchangeable. Celebrities

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<sup>1</sup> P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); John Street, *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Darrell M. West and John Orman, *Celebrity Politics* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003); John Corner and Dick Pels, eds., *Media and the Restyling of Politics: Consumerism, Celebrity, and Cynicism* (London: Sage, 2003); Philip Drake and Michael Higgins, “‘I’m a celebrity, get me into politics’: The Political Celebrity and the Celebrity Politician,” in Su (continued)

like Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood, Fred Grandy, Sonny Bono, Jesse Ventura, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Al Franken, and Donald Trump were elected to public office. Politicians like Fred Thompson, Sarah Palin, and Jerry Springer became the stars of TV programs. Lauren Wright argues that celebrities have seven characteristics that help them win electoral contests.<sup>2</sup> We can reduce these to three major advantages. They have the talents, fame, and resources to succeed. They are skilled in front of television cameras and are good at developing a personal brand that resonates with voters. They have high levels of name recognition and get free earned media to express their political views. They are wealthy people with wealthy friends, and this helps them with fundraising.

Wright argues that 58 percent of celebrity politicians win elected office when they seek it.<sup>3</sup> However, many of the winners have also lost elections. This means they belong on both sides of the win-lose ledger. Wright does not count celebrities who drop out of races but dropping out should be considered a loss because it demonstrates that the candidate did not have a viable path to victory. Wright includes Jerry Springer as a celebrity winner, but Springer was freshly out of law school when he was elected to the Cincinnati city council and would not be a famous talk show host until later in life; celebrity advantage had nothing to do with his victory. Wright's research focuses on general election contests, yet Shirley Temple, Sonny Bono, Fred Thompson, and Cynthia Nixon all lost primary battles. Additionally, many of the winners won with less than 50 percent of the vote. This does not suggest that they had tremendous advantages; it suggests that they got lucky because of a plurality

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Holmes and Sean Redmond, eds., *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 87–100; John Street, "Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?" *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14, no. 3 (2012): 346–56; Mark Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics: Image and Identity in Contemporary Political Communications* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), Google Play Books; Timothy Stanley, *Citizen Hollywood: How the Collaboration between LA and DC Revolutionized American Politics* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2014), Google Play Books; Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2014); Samantha Majic, Daniel O'Neill, and Michael Bernhard, "Celebrity and Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 1 (2020): 1–8.

2 Lauren A. Wright, *Star Power: American Democracy in the Age of the Celebrity Candidate* (New York: Routledge, 2019), Google Play Books. The author's larger book project: Richard T. Longoria, *Celebrities in American Elections: Case Studies in Celebrity Politics*, which comparatively analyzes a number of celebrities in politics, is under contract with Lexington Books.

3 Wright, *Star Power*, Google Play Books. Wright's list contains mistakes that produce an overcount of the number of winning celebrity candidates and an undercount of losing celebrity candidates.

<i>Winning Candidate</i>	<i>Vote Percentage</i>	<i>Losing Candidate</i>	<i>Vote Percentage</i>
Ronald Reagan (Gov)	57%	Sonny Bono (Senate)	17%
Clint Eastwood	72%	Ben Jones (1986)	47%
Fred Grandy	51%	Fred Thompson (Pres)	Dropped Out
Sonny Bono (Mayor)	44%	Shirley Temple	22%
Ben Jones (1988)	61%	Gary Coleman	0.2%
Jesse Ventura (Gov)	37%	Linda McMahon	43%
Fred Thompson (Senate)	60%	Roseanne Barr	0.05%
Arnold Schwarzenegger	49%	Cynthia Nixon	34%
Al Franken	42%	Stacey Dash	Dropped Out
Donald Trump	46%	Ralph Waite	45%
		Nancy Kulp	34%
		Kanye West	0.04%
		Caitlyn Jenner	1%

rule or electoral college system that allowed them to win without overwhelming support. Lastly, even those with majority support faced unique circumstances that would lead us to question their celebrity advantage.

Though this is not a comprehensive list of every celebrity who has ever sought elected office, there are more losers than winners when candidates count on both sides of the ledger and dropouts are added. Bono, Ventura, Schwarzenegger, Franken, and Trump won with less than 50 percent of the vote. Jones won only after the incumbent was indicted for money laundering; he lost the previous election when the incumbent

was not charged with crimes.<sup>4</sup> Grandy won by a very narrow 51 percent after the incumbent dropped out because he was bitten by a tick and contracted Lyme disease, leaving an open seat. Grandy admitted that it was unlikely he could have beaten the popular incumbent if it hadn't been for the wood tick.<sup>5</sup> Eastwood won big, but the town had only 4,000 voters and Eastwood spent \$40,000 while the incumbent spent \$3,000.<sup>6</sup> Such a disproportionate spending advantage would be unlikely if there were a larger constituency, such as in a statewide election.

Wright's hypothesis that celebrities have many advantages is correct, but we should not overstate their importance. Other factors, such as the electoral rules, mistakes by the opponent, and the unique circumstances of the election, are part of a political environment that can be favorable or unfavorable to a celebrity candidate. There is too much happenstance in the victories of celebrities who do manage to win and in the many celebrity losses. A deep exploration of the career of George Murphy can provide some insight into why celebrities win and lose elections.

#### GEORGE MURPHY

George Murphy was a Hollywood actor in the 1930s and 40s. He was the president of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) from 1944 to 1946, where he learned about politics as a labor leader. He served one term in the U.S. Senate from 1965 to 1971. He is one of the many celebrities who has sought elected office in California. That state has a preponderance of celebrity politicians because Hollywood is the epicenter of America's entertainment industry. The industry, of course, influences the politics of the state.

Murphy appeared in forty-four movies between 1934 and 1952. Of notable importance was his role in *This Is the Army* (1943), where he played the part of Jerry Jones. The part of his son, Johnny Jones, was played by

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4 Amy Wallace and Cynthia Ducanin, "Jones Defeats Swindall in Bitter 4th District Race," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 9, 1988, Newspapers.com.

5 "Grandy, Nagle Stress Their Iowa Roots," *The Des Moines Register*, November 6, 1986, Newspapers.com.

6 "'Feeling Good,' Eastwood Cites Need to Avoid Dewey Image," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1986, Newspapers.com.

Ronald Reagan.<sup>7</sup> Reagan and Murphy became good friends and served together on the Screen Actors Guild executive board.<sup>8</sup> About Murphy, Reagan said, “I owe a great deal to this cool, dapper guy who had to deal with me in my early white-eyed liberal daze.”<sup>9</sup> Reagan would rely on Murphy’s political advice in his bid for California governor in 1966. The pair would harness their star power for political ends.

Like many Irish families of the time, Murphy’s was full of politically active Democrats. His grandfather on his mother’s side served in the Michigan legislature. His father, who was well known as the coach of the U.S. Olympic track and field team in 1912,<sup>10</sup> was friends with Theodore Roosevelt and John “Honey Fritz” Fitzgerald.<sup>11</sup> Before today’s era of hyper-partisanship those with differing political views could remain friends. As a boy, George was a talented dancer, and his parents would request that he perform for the guests at dinner parties they hosted. His future wife, Julie Henkel, was herself a dancer and he pursued professional dancing to be more involved in her life. This led to a career in Hollywood musicals as a “song-and-dance man.”<sup>12</sup>

Murphy was successful in politics because Hollywood actors have the talents, fame, and resources to win electoral contests. They are skilled in front of cameras and audiences. They are experienced at developing a personal brand that resonates with audiences and voters. They are famous and have high levels of name recognition. They receive more media attention than traditional candidates and this makes it easier for them to distribute their message. Successful actors are wealthy with wealthy friends, and this makes fundraising easier. All together these advantages make celebrities formidable political candidates.

7 “George Murphy,” Internet Movie Database (IMDb), accessed August 14, 2020, [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0614278/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_srsq\\_o](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0614278/?ref_=nv_sr_srsq_o).

8 George L. Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't You Used to Be George Murphy?* (New York: Bartholomew House, 1970), 224, 279.

9 Stephen Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 155. [Editor’s Note: This oral quote may have been intended as “in my early wild-eyed liberal days,” mistakenly transcribed by reporters, a wording more consistent with Reagan’s speech patterns.]

10 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 10.

11 Bill Henry, “Ev Has Hopes of Lighting a Fuse,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1964, Newspapers.com.

12 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 3.

The political environment, of course, also plays an important role. There are many celebrities who have both won and lost elections. Sonny Bono was elected mayor of Palm Springs, California in 1988 and to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994. He lost a bid for the U.S. Senate in 1992 because he was too liberal for a statewide Republican primary.<sup>13</sup> Ben Jones, a Democrat, ran for the U.S. House of Representatives in Republican-dominated districts on six occasions in 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2002. He lost most of those races but was able to win in 1988 after the incumbent was indicted on perjury and money laundering charges.<sup>14</sup> Donald Trump was elected president in 2016 despite earning only 46 percent of the popular vote. He managed to narrowly defeat Hillary Clinton in key swing states to secure an electoral college victory. He lost re-election in 2020 when he narrowly lost key swing states. He won in 2016 only because the U.S. has an unusual system that doesn't rely on the national popular vote to decide the winner.<sup>15</sup> The advantages that celebrity political candidates have is often insufficient to secure an electoral victory without other factors also contributing. Like other celebrity politicians, Murphy both won and lost elections. This calls for a closer look at celebrity candidates' advantages.

#### TALENTS

Murphy dropped out of Yale to become a dancer.<sup>16</sup> His childhood talent as a dancer led to his successful career. He and Julie performed "tea dances" for New York audiences. At Michael's Dancing School, Murphy improved his skills under the tutelage of James Cagney, before Cagney made it big in Hollywood. Murphy learned not just dancing but wardrobing, vocals, and the many aspects of showmanship that are part of stage performances. Murphy and Julie Johnson, his wife's stage name, became regular performers in the New York night club circuit,

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13 Gerry Braun, "Campbell Done In by His Own Negative TV Ads, Bono Candidacy," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, June 14, 1992, [sandiegouniontribune.newsbank.com](http://sandiegouniontribune.newsbank.com).

14 Wallace and Ducanin, "Jones Defeats Swindall," *Newspapers.com*.

15 Nate Cohn, "Why Trump Had an Edge in the Electoral College; The 2016 Race," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2016, Lexis-Nexus Academic Universe.

16 Internet Movie Database (IMDb), "George Murphy."

performing with the likes of Bing Crosby, Morton Downey, Helen Kane, and Ethel Merman.<sup>17</sup>

Murphy's best-known theatrical performance was in the Broadway hit *Of Thee I Sing* in 1931. In it he played, coincidentally, a political press agent. Like celebrity politicians who would come after him, he incorporated his theatrical roles into his political campaign. Years later, Arnold Schwarzenegger would blend his famous Terminator character with his bid for governor to become the "Governator." Murphy states, "Thirty-three years later, when I was running against Pierre Salinger for the Senate seat I now occupy, I jokingly pointed out that I had been a White House press secretary long before my distinguished opponent."<sup>18</sup> Audiences do not draw a sharp distinction between fantasy and reality. Therefore, portraying an admirable politician in theater, movies, or television allows audiences to envision the actor as a real politician. Actors who portray politicians take on an air of credibility with voters.

His stage performances caught the attention of Sam Goldwyn, one of the co-founders of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) studios, who invited him to Hollywood to appear in movies.<sup>19</sup> His singing and dancing skills proved valuable assets as musicals were a popular genre for the movie audiences of the era. He went on to star in many pictures in his career, working with the most prominent names in showbusiness.

Louis B. Mayer, one of the other co-founders of MGM, was chairman of the California Republican Party and was responsible for turning presidential nominating conventions into pre-scripted events designed to sell radio and, later, television audiences on their candidates. Using the techniques of Hollywood entertainment, Mayer produced campaign events. Mayer asked the actors under contract with MGM to make appearances at Republican campaign rallies.<sup>20</sup>

In 1935 Murphy attended a dinner party with Mayer, who was proselytizing for the GOP cause. Murphy described himself as a "dormant Democrat" who inherited his partisanship from his family but who

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<sup>17</sup> Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 70–71.

<sup>18</sup> Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 139.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 72.

<sup>20</sup> Steven J. Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 66, Google Play Books.



identified with that party in only a “perfunctory way.”<sup>21</sup> By 1939 Murphy “had become disenchanted with some of the excesses of the New Deal following the re-election of President Roosevelt.”<sup>22</sup> He noted being especially troubled by FDR’s court packing plan. Having been persuaded by Mayer and others, Murphy switched parties and became involved in Republican politics. In 1940 he organized the Hollywood Republican Committee because several other Hollywood stars had organized the Hollywood Democratic Committee and he believed there should be two-party competition. Murphy said he wanted to “combat the general belief that all Hollywood actors and writers belonged to the left wing.”<sup>23</sup> He also believed that FDR’s policies were leading the country towards socialism and he was wary of the Democrats’ and the country’s new direction. He organized Hollywood luminaries like Ginger Rogers, Walt Disney, Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, and others to counter the idea that Hollywood was full of leftists. He organized rallies for Eisenhower and other Republican candidates, coaching them on stage techniques to help them connect with audiences. Following in Mayer’s footsteps, Murphy served as chairman of the California Republican Party and as the director of entertainment for the presidential nominating conventions of 1952, 1956, and 1960, effectively mixing entertainment and politics.<sup>24</sup>

It was Murphy who took credit for inventing the soundbite. He writes, “a political broadcast in those days involved a long-winded orator who would frequently force the listener to change stations.”<sup>25</sup> Celebrities are highly skilled at gaining attention for themselves.<sup>26</sup> Because being long-winded was a sure way to lose the audience’s attention, Murphy believed that political comments should be less than one minute in length. The quick statement should be pithy and memorable.<sup>27</sup> His years of practice as an entertainer meant he knew keenly how short attention spans required performers to keep the audience engaged with the performance. Keeping the audience’s attention was just as important as gaining it.

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21 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 259.

22 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 259.

23 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 264.

24 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 326, 336, 339, 351, 367. Internet Movie Database (IMDb), “George Murphy.”

25 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 318.

26 Robert van Krieken, *Celebrity Society* (New York: Routledge, 2012), Google Play Books.

27 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 318.



Among his talents, George Murphy was good at image management. He had played many “nice guy” roles in the movies and worked at appearing energetic. Here, in January 1964, Murphy spoke to a crowd of over 300 at the Laurel Oaks Republican Women’s Club about his candidacy for the U.S. Senate. *George Brich, Photographer. Valley Times Collection/Los Angeles Public Library, 00085856.*

Image management was another of Murphy's talents. Hollywood stars depend on what is today called "branding." They need to develop and maintain a positive image with audiences.<sup>28</sup> Murphy knew this would help him in his bid for elected office. He said, "After all, people remembered me from all those old movies, many of which were playing on late, late television. And I had never played a bad guy. I had always been a good guy—that was my so-called 'image.'"<sup>29</sup> The good guy image was instrumental in his success.

An energetic image was also important. Murphy made sure to take a break in the late afternoon so that he would not appear tired at evening campaign events. He wanted energy for his campaign performances. Murphy had spoken to Richard Nixon after Nixon's poor performance in the 1960 presidential debate with John F. Kennedy. Nixon admitted that he had been campaigning the entire day and was visibly exhausted when he appeared on television next to the young and sprightly JFK. To ensure better results, Murphy rested for two days before his televised debate with Democratic candidate Pierre Salinger.<sup>30</sup>

Like many polished politicians, Murphy capitalized on his opponent's missteps: "When I saw news photos of Pierre leaving the San Francisco airport in a Rolls Royce, smoking a big cigar, I felt better about the whole thing. This was not good "image-making."<sup>31</sup> The Hollywood celebrity would make his Democratic opponent appear elitist.

Murphy had been active in politics through the labor movement. He first joined a labor union when on summer vacation from Yale. He spent that summer as a coal loader and became a member of the United Mine Workers of America. After becoming an actor, he was active in the American Federation of Radio Artists and the American Federation of Television Artists which merged in 1952.<sup>32</sup> In 2012, SAG merged with the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) to become SAG-AFTRA. From 1937 to 1939, Murphy was a member of the

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28 Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), Google Play Books; Alison Hearn, "'Meat, Mask, Burden': Probing the Contours of the Branded 'Self,'" *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8, no. 2 (2008): 197–217; van Krieken, *Celebrity Society*.

29 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 373.

30 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 382, 394.

31 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 380.

32 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 43.

executive board for the Screen Actors Guild; he was SAG's vice-president from 1940 to 1943; and served as its president from 1944 to 1946. Ronald Reagan also served on the executive board during those years and would himself be elected president of SAG in 1947.

SAG developed a reputation as a conservative union. It represented actors, the elites of the Hollywood workforce, and often sided with the studios against stagehands and other lower-tier workers that made the production work possible.<sup>33</sup> Murphy was involved with the union's efforts to secure a basic minimum contract for the actors with the studios. The union sought to franchise the talent agents to eliminate the disreputable hucksters then common in the industry. Too many agents had been swindling inexperienced and aspiring entertainers.<sup>34</sup> He also sought to limit the influence of organized criminals and communists within the labor movement.

Organized crime's infiltration of American labor unions began in the 1910s and would continue for the next seventy years. Mafia members would replace existing labor officials through fraudulent elections, physical violence, or threats of violence. Once in control of a union, they would extort employers by threatening them with a work stoppage and they would embezzle pension funds from union members. Unions such as the International Longshoremen's Association and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters were closely tied to organized crime.<sup>35</sup> In the late 1950s the U.S. Senate created the Select Committee on Improper Activities in Labor and Management, commonly known as the McClellan Committee, to investigate the Mafia's control of organized labor. The salacious hearings made headlines and damaged the reputation of the U.S. labor movement.<sup>36</sup>

While he was serving on the SAG executive board Murphy fought to keep organized crime out of his union. Willie Bioff and George Brown, members of Al Capone's gang, were convicted of extorting over half a

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33 H.W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2015), 76, Google Play Books; Stanley, *Citizen Hollywood*, 178.

34 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 239.

35 James B. Jacobs, "The Rise and Fall of Organized Crime in the United States," *Crime and Justice* 49, no. 1 (2020): 17–67.

36 Clayton Sinyai, *Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement* (Ithica: ILR Press, 2006), 192–96.

million dollars from Hollywood studios.<sup>37</sup> George Brown was president of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), and Willie Bioff was his West Coast representative who oversaw the union's daily business. Bioff was wanted in connection with the murder of Louis "Two Gun" Alterie in Chicago. The crime occurred over a dispute about who would control the movie operators' union.<sup>38</sup> Brown and Bioff were indicted for extorting \$550,000 dollars from Loew's, 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, and Warner Brothers.<sup>39</sup> According to prosecutors, Bioff had agreed to call off a planned strike in 1937 in exchange for a \$100,000 payment.<sup>40</sup> Observers were shocked when Bioff admitted to collecting over \$1 million from the movie studios.<sup>41</sup>

The IATSE, which represented projectionists and stagehands, had also been seeking to represent the actors who were affiliated with SAG. Murphy recounts that another member of the SAG executive board, Ken Thomson, during a meeting with Bioff, had noticed that he had a gun in his desk drawer. Murphy organized a media campaign of Hollywood's biggest stars to expose the gangsters' plot to control the actors' union.<sup>42</sup> Murphy stated, "I began to receive veiled threats. The worst concerned my children. I was warned that if I took them out on the street they would have acid hurled in their faces."<sup>43</sup> Murphy and other SAG board members met with Bioff in his San Fernando Valley home. They threatened Bioff with a strike of their own. In their presence, Bioff called Brown in Chicago and the issue was resolved; they would not seek control over the actors' union. The publicity and planned strike were enough to compel the mafiosos to give up their designs and Murphy learned that public opinion could be a powerful ally.<sup>44</sup>

Communists were also gaining influence in the American labor movement and there was a division between the communist and

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37 "Seven Guilty of Extortion: Motion Picture Case Concluded," *Reno Gazette Journal*, December 24, 1943, Newspapers.com.

38 "Union Battle Seen behind Alterie Case," *The Nebraska State Journal*, July 20, 1935, Newspapers.com.

39 "Pay-off to Bioff Told by Schenk," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1941, Newspapers.com.

40 "Jos. M. Schenck Indicted for Tax Frauds," *The San Francisco Examiner*, June 4, 1940, Newspapers.com.

41 "Brown and Bioff Are Convicted of Movie Shake-Downs," *Visalia Times-Delta*, November 7, 1941, Newspapers.com.

42 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 219.

43 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 221.

44 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 222.

anti-communist unions.<sup>45</sup> Organizations such as the Socialist Trades and Labor Alliance, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Trade Union Unity League were attempting to replace the American Federation of Labor (AFL) with socialist and communist unions. Many within the labor movement viewed communism as a threat to democracy. It also undermined their objectives. Business owners would often link striking workers with communists to turn public sentiment against the workers. Thus, appearing staunchly anti-communist would increase public support and make it easier to secure favorable labor policies from the government. In contrast to the Soviet labor unions, which they viewed as instruments of the Russian government, many union leaders wanted voluntary associations of workers in line with pro-democracy ideals of free association.<sup>46</sup>

Murphy, for both strategic and ideological reasons, led the efforts to root out communist infiltration of the movie business. Murphy claimed he was responsible for convincing Ronald Reagan that the communist threat was real. Together, Reagan and Murphy sided with the pro-democracy unions and worked with political leaders in Washington to ensure that communist propaganda would not make its way into Hollywood films.<sup>47</sup>

During his campaign for the U.S. Senate, Murphy touted his experience as a labor leader. The Bracero Program, due to end on December 31, 1964, was a major political issue at the time and Murphy said that the farm laborers were much like movie extras. They were a temporary contingent workforce. Murphy said:

The over-all problem is how to get agriculture the temporary workers it needs during the harvest season and what to do about farm workers who have casual work only during harvest time. It reminds me much of the problem we had in the Screen Actors Guild when extras wanted to join the union thinking that would mean permanent work. The union helps extras only when they have supplemental work in addition to their movie extra work. Farm workers have much the same problem.<sup>48</sup>

45 Judith Stepan-Norris, and Maurice Zeitlin, "‘Who Gets the Bird?’ or, How the Communists Won Power and Trust in America’s Unions: The Relative Autonomy of Intra-class Political Struggles," *American Sociological Review* (1989): 503–23; Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, "‘Red’ Unions and ‘Bourgeois’ Contracts?," *American Journal of Sociology* 96, no. 5 (1991): 1151–1200.

46 Sinyai, *Schools of Democracy*, 167.

47 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn’t*, 279–80; Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan*, 146–56.

48 Ruben Salazar, "New Approach on Farm Labor," *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 1964, Newspapers.com.

He wanted to strike a balance between growers' needs for temporary workers and workers' needs for employment protections. He saw the need for foreign workers and supported the extension of the Bracero Program, but he also wanted domestic workers involved in crop harvesting.<sup>49</sup> The AFL-CIO viewed Murphy as an adversary, although Murphy supported collective bargaining rights for farm workers, something the growers were against.<sup>50</sup> While serving in the Senate, Murphy supported a bill allowing farm workers to unionize. However, that bill would have prohibited those workers from striking during the harvest season. Because the entirety of growers' revenue depends on harvesting their crop in the crucial few weeks when the product is salable and because such a strike could jeopardize the nation's food supply, Murphy supported the strike limitations. The AFL-CIO opposed the limitations, while growers demanded it. This suggests that Murphy was attempting to find a middle ground between growers and farm workers.<sup>51</sup> Murphy wrote, "That's why I am so amused when some of those who would find reason to criticize me try to pin an 'antilabor' label on me. Not that I always agree with the unions. But I have always sought to defend the interests of the rank-and-file worker."<sup>52</sup> His experience as a labor leader in the business of entertainment guided his political thinking.

### FAME

The dozens of movies Murphy appeared in contributed to his political success. He was able to develop a "nice-guy" persona and portrayed likeable characters that resonated with audiences. His characters were friendly and trustworthy. He was a precursor to the wholesome television dads of the 1950s. His characters were an "ideal type" that conformed to conventional norms and mores. He portrayed the kind of characters a person might want to vote for if they ran for office in real life.

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49 Salazar, "New Approach."

50 Harry Bernstein, "Big Changes Loom in Farm Labor Economy," *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 1966, Newspapers.com.

51 Harry Bernstein, "Murphy Will Offer Bill on Farm Worker Union," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1969, Newspapers.com.

52 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 43.



He appeared with Jimmy Durante and Shirley Temple in *Little Miss Broadway* (1938). Temple herself would later run for Congress and become a U.S. Ambassador.<sup>53</sup> Murphy credits *Little Miss Broadway* with helping him get elected. He says, "It won me a lot of votes during my 1964 campaign."<sup>54</sup> In the movie he helps a talented orphan stage a musical revue to save her from being evicted and concludes with him adopting the girl. The movie, and others he starred in, were airing on late night television in the 1960s when he was running for office. In his 1970 memoir, he says, "I had the most intimate approach to my constituents of any candidate who ever ran for office," because he believed most of the people watching his movies at that time of night were watching from their beds.<sup>55</sup> A review of *Los Angeles Times* television listings in 1964 show that Murphy's movies aired a total of thirty-three times that year in the L.A. media market.<sup>56</sup> The movies functioned like a campaign advertisement. Though devoid of political messaging, they created rapport with voters. They bolstered his "nice-guy" image. He said, "I was always nice to Shirley Temple," referring to his character in the movie.<sup>57</sup> Murphy wished, "I hope they dust it off and run it a few times in 1970, because I can assure you it would help in my campaign for re-election."<sup>58</sup> If viewers conflated the real George Murphy with his character (a man with a heart of gold who helps orphaned children), they would have a very positive view of him.

This contrasts with celebrity office-seekers whose image was a detriment to their political aspirations. Murphy's 1930s co-star, Shirley Temple [Black], ran for Congress in 1967. Despite declaring that "Little Shirley Temple is not running" when she announced her candidacy, Temple could not obscure her childhood image. She finished in second place with 22 percent of the vote in a primary election.<sup>59</sup> Her cute little

53 Anne Edwards, *Shirley Temple: American Princess* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Paperback, 1988), Google Play Books.

54 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 124.

55 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 124.

56 The author searched for the term "George Murphy" in the *Los Angeles Times* in the year 1964. In addition to Murphy's run for office, Murphy's name appeared in the TV listings for movies he starred in.

57 Richard Bergholz, "Actor Background Asset for Murphy: GOP Senatorial Candidate Sure It Helps Him in Vote-Getting," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1964, Newspapers.com.

58 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 214.

59 Edwards, *Shirley Temple*; Daryl E. Lembke, "Shirley Temple Black Loses to McCloskey in Race for Congress," *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 1967, Newspapers.com.





Fame was one of George Murphy's advantages. Here he sign autographs for guests at a dinner-rally at John Wayne's home in 1964. *Bob Martin, Photographer. Valley Times Collection/ Los Angeles Public Library, 00085866.*

girl persona that made her a film icon in the 1930s did not elicit confidence when the issues of nuclear proliferation and the Vietnam War were the major issues of the day. Fred Thompson was another actor who could not escape his image. In movies and television, he portrayed establishment-type figures including a U.S. senator, a Navy admiral, and the head of the CIA.<sup>60</sup> He lost his bid for the presidency in 2008 when anti-establishment candidates Barack Obama and John "Maverick" McCain secured their party nominations. Due to the financial crisis of that year, the electorate was not in the mood for a candidate that exuded

60 "Just an Act?: Thespian-Politicians Deserve the Benefit of the Doubt," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 15, 1994, Lexis-Nexus Academic Universe.

a Mr. Establishment persona. Murphy's image was helpful, but this is not the case for every celebrity candidate.

Strangers who recognized Murphy would stop him at airports, train stations, and sidewalks to talk to him. He learned to take it in stride as part of the price of fame. He was agreeable but skilled at keeping the interactions short. A smile and a handshake contented most of his fans. At campaign events Murphy not only gave the obligatory campaign speeches, he also signed autographs for fans who still admired him from his days as a successful actor. Murphy said, "I've put on the most vigorous campaign for the Senate of anyone in the Republican Party for the last 20 years. I've talked to 225,000 people. I don't see how anyone who hadn't been in show business could do it but I seem to thrive on it."<sup>61</sup> With other stars appearing at his events as friends and supporters, the crowds were keen on attending in the hopes of seeing celebrities live and in person. His very high level of name recognition and his image as a good guy would be useful assets in politics.

#### RESOURCES

Many celebrities were involved in Los Angeles County GOP efforts to get Republicans elected. These included "Mrs. Clark Gable, Joanne Dru, Rory Calhoun, John Wayne, Cesar Romero, Buddy Ebsen, and other celebrities."<sup>62</sup> When the local Republican Women's Club held its tenth anniversary celebration, the local press wrote, "Hollywood personalities are expected to attend, adding a touch of glamour to the event. They will include Gale Storm, movie and television actress; George Murphy, candidate for the U.S. Senate; Mark Anthony, singer; and Vivian Duncan, one of the Duncan Sisters."<sup>63</sup> At a campaign rally in San Francisco, celebrities Jimmy Stewart, Andy Devine, and Alan Jones all called for the voters of California to elect Murphy and derided his opponent for not being a resident of the state.<sup>64</sup>

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61 Daryl E. Lembke, "Murphy Raps Spending of Cranston, Salinger: Demands Senatorial Candidates Issue Documented Report of Campaign Costs," *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1964, Newspapers.com.

62 "Westsider to Lead County GOP Parley," *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 1964, Newspapers.com.

63 "GOP Club Will Mark Birthday," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1964, Newspapers.com.

64 "Murphy Says Administration Plays Politics," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1964, Newspapers.com.

Like celebrities who would seek office after him, Murphy used his contacts in the entertainment industry to bolster his political campaign. *Of Thee I Sing* writer Morrie Ryskind would be one of Murphy's loyal supporters.<sup>65</sup> A half-page ad in the *Los Angeles Times* prior to the election featured an endorsement from Samuel Goldwyn.<sup>66</sup> Jack Warner, founder of Warner Brothers, organized a fundraiser for Murphy.<sup>67</sup> When Al Franken ran for the U.S. Senate in Minnesota, he received donations from Hollywood elites. Franken said it was better to accept donations from "Big Comedy" than "Big Oil" and "Big Pharma."<sup>68</sup> It is common for celebrity politicians to tap into their professional networks for campaign contributions.

Murphy became one of Bob Hope's closest friends on account of his having introduced Hope to Dolores Reade. Bob Hope married Reade and the pair would be active supporters of Murphy's political campaigns. Murphy writes, "Thirty years later, when I challenged Pierre Salinger for the United States Senate seat he then occupied, Dolores Hope sent a fine contribution to my campaign fund, along with a note that moved me deeply. She said she had waited all these years to repay me, in some small measure, for introducing Bob to her."<sup>69</sup> Dolores Hope donated \$10,000.<sup>70</sup>

Walt Disney was a strong supporter of Murphy. Disney donated \$3,500 and hosted a fundraiser for him at a Disneyland hotel.<sup>71</sup> There was also a three-quarter-page ad in the *Los Angeles Times* that appeared on election day and on two prior days. The ad, using a photo of Walt Disney and his iconic company logo signature, stated, "I have known George Murphy for the past 25 years," before listing the reasons to vote for the candidate. Among them were Murphy's stand against communist infiltration of the movie business and President Eisenhower's endorsement of him. It concluded with, "Vote for Murphy for U.S. Senator

65 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 137.

66 Samuel Goldwyn Campaign Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1964, Newspapers.com.

67 "Murphy to Be Feted Tuesday," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1964, Newspapers.com.

68 Al Franken, *Al Franken: Giant of the Senate* (New York: Twelve, 2017), Google Play Books.

69 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 157.

70 "Salinger and Murphy Report on Finances," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1964, Newspapers.com.

71 "Salinger and Murphy," and "Fund Raiser Planned for Republicans," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1964, Newspapers.com.



A May 1964, news photograph of senatorial candidate George Murphy highlights his Hollywood connections with Jack Warner, left, president of Warner Brothers Pictures, and actor Jimmy Stewart, right. *Photographer George Brich. Valley Times Collection/Los Angeles Public Library, 00085857.*

and help defeat a man who can't even vote for himself" (referring to Salinger, as a non-resident of the state, being unable to register to vote in California).<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Walt Disney Campaign Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1964, Newspapers.com; Walt Disney Campaign Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1964, Newspapers.com; Walt Disney Campaign Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1964, Newspapers.com. Federal law does not have a residency requirement for congressmen or senators; therefore, Salinger could run for federal office. State law has a residency requirement for voter registration; therefore, Salinger could not vote in the state. There was a dispute about whether he met the 90-day threshold for California residency.

Murphy was also friends with Jimmy Stewart, whom he had met when they were both Broadway actors. Stewart contributed to Murphy's Senate campaign.<sup>73</sup> As is the case today, partisan donors support multiple candidates. Hope and Stewart also supported Ronald Reagan in his bids for governor of California and the presidency.<sup>74</sup> Former President Eisenhower attended a Hollywood fundraiser for Murphy that was organized by John Wayne and other celebrities who supported him.<sup>75</sup> Murphy would use his long list of political and entertainment elites who considered him a friend to outraise his opponent. Murphy raised \$624,155.76 (in 1964 dollars) and spent \$605,083.28. Salinger raised \$491,327.35 and spent \$491,018.65.<sup>76</sup>

#### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT, 1964

By the time Murphy decided to run for the U.S. Senate in the 1964 election he was already a prominent figure in the Republican Party. He had served as chairman of the California Republican Party, he had organized several Republican National Conventions, he had established relationships with President Eisenhower and Vice-President Nixon, he had written speeches, engaged in fundraising, and had a network of friends in the political and entertainment industries.

He was first encouraged to run for the Senate seat by a group of Republican women who had invited him to one of their events. Soon after, Walt Disney, former President Eisenhower, and Herbert Hoover Jr. indicated they would support his candidacy at a luncheon they had together. Entertainment and political elites joined forces to help Murphy succeed. Robert Finch, one of former Vice-President Nixon's top

<sup>73</sup> Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 187–88.

<sup>74</sup> Ivor Davis, "Queen May Be Hobnobbing with Clint, Bob and Frank," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), November 29, 1980, Lexis-Nexus Academic Universe; Alvin P. Sanoff, "It Takes More Than a Candidate to Win White House," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 28, 1980, Lexis-Nexus Academic Universe; Karen M. Magnuson, "Reagan Plays Peoria," *United Press International*, October 21, 1982, Lexis-Nexus Academic Universe; Kenneth T. Walsh, "When It's Citizen Reagan Again; California Dreamin'," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 16, 1987, Lexis-Nexus Academic Universe.

<sup>75</sup> "Eisenhower to Attend Fete," *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1964, Newspapers.com.

<sup>76</sup> "Goldwater Outspent Johnson, Report Shows," *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1964, Newspapers.com.

aides, would serve as Murphy's campaign manager.<sup>77</sup> Finch was Nixon's campaign manager in his unsuccessful 1960 presidential run. Robert Haldeman, also on the Murphy team, was Nixon's campaign manager for his failed 1962 gubernatorial run. Several other former Nixon staffers were also leading Murphy's campaign efforts.<sup>78</sup>

Infighting among Democrats proved beneficial for Murphy. Assembly Speaker Jesse Unruh wanted a Black state assemblyman, Byron Rumford, to fill the vacant Senate seat left by the death of Sen. Clair Engle in July of 1964.<sup>79</sup> However, Governor Pat Brown selected Pierre Salinger, making him the new Democratic incumbent. Democrats split into Unruh and Brown factions and were not unified during the campaign season.<sup>80</sup> Two years later, in 1966, Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California, in part because of Democratic missteps. Pat Brown was on vacation when the Watts riots occurred and was not able to deal with the situation. Brown also declared that an actor had killed President Abraham Lincoln, intending to arouse public distrust of actors, or perhaps as an ill-received joke, but in a state where entertainment is a major industry this comment did not fare well. Democratic blunders were helpful to Murphy and Reagan during their campaigns for office.<sup>81</sup>

As if to further highlight the connection between the political and entertainment industries, Salinger had hired Pat Newcomb, Marilyn Monroe's press agent, to help run his campaign.<sup>82</sup> After losing to Murphy, Salinger took a job at National General Corporation, a film distributor with 216 theaters.<sup>83</sup> Both candidates effectively moved between

77 Richard Bergholz, "GOP Lays Out-of-State Purchases to Salinger: But Senator's Aide Says All Campaign Matter Was Ordered through Local Firms," *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1964, Newspapers.com.

78 Richard Bergholz, "'Nixon Team' Lines Up behind George Murphy," *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 1964, Newspapers.com.

79 "Unruh Wanted Rumford as Interim Senator," *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1964, Newspapers.com.

80 Richard Bergholz, "Democratic Liberals Hit Vote Results: CDC Boosters Ask Brown for Unity; Take Slap at Unruh," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1964, Newspapers.com.

81 Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), Google Play Books; Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), Google Play Books.

82 Hedda Hopper, "Bob Hope to Star in 'I'll Take Sweden,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1964, Newspapers.com.

83 Richard Bergholz, "Salinger to Quit Senate in 3 Weeks: Plans to Give Murphy Edge on Seniority," *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1964, Newspapers.com.



the film industry and the political arena with ease, providing further evidence to support scholars' claims that entertainment and politics are interchangeable.

During the campaign, Salinger repeatedly argued that Murphy was not qualified for the position because he was a "song-and-dance man." Murphy would retort, "There's nothing wrong with being a song and dance man, as long as you're good at it," thus, blunting the criticism of his professional background.<sup>84</sup> Opinion writers also derided Murphy's candidacy, "Hollywood second guessers are complaining that the election of George Murphy is bad typecasting. They point out that Jimmy Stewart has had a lot more experience playing senator roles."<sup>85</sup>

Murphy effectively pinned Salinger as a carpetbagger, given that Salinger had not resided in California prior to his seeking office there. Though born in San Francisco, Salinger was a resident of Virginia while serving as White House press secretary.<sup>86</sup> Fortuitously for Murphy, Salinger made a critical mistake during the debate. Murphy had repeatedly said that Salinger had no other qualifications except being JFK's media spokesperson. Salinger closed the debate by talking about his close ties to JFK, effectively re-emphasizing Murphy's top line of attack against him. JFK was not overwhelmingly popular in the state. Richard Nixon had a very narrow victory in California against JFK in 1960, earning just 50.1 percent of the vote in the state. Salinger was likely overestimating JFK's coattails in California.

In 1962, Democrat Pat Brown was reelected governor with 52 percent of the vote. Because the state was competitive for both parties Murphy decided to court Democrats to cross party lines to help him win the Senate seat in 1964. He convinced Frank Freeman, the former head of Paramount Studios and a Democrat, to head the Democrats for Murphy committee and campaign for him.<sup>87</sup> Murphy got 17 percent of California Democrats to vote for him.<sup>88</sup> The ploy worked, and the

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84 Doug Mauldin, "Murphy Tells Aims at His Homecoming," *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1964, Newspapers.com.

85 John Grover, "Needlepoints-of-View," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1964, Newspapers.com.

86 "Murphy Will Continue Salinger Seat Fight," *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1964, Newspapers.com. (See also footnote 72.)

87 Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 393.

88 Richard Bergholz, "Murphy Sees Support by Democrats," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1964, Newspapers.com.



Murphy's opponent in 1964 was Democrat Pierre Salinger, the incumbent appointed a few months earlier to fill the vacant post. His image – overweight, cigar-smoking, with an eastern accent – compared poorly with that of Murphy, and he lost the election. *Photographer Gordon Dean. Valley Times Collection/Los Angeles Public Library, 00128673.*

California electorate split its vote, electing Republican George Murphy to the U.S. Senate and voting for Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson for president. George Murphy was the only Republican to defeat an incumbent Democrat in a year that saw LBJ win the presidency.<sup>89</sup>

Three reasons were credited for Murphy's victory in 1964. First, Salinger was perceived as a carpetbagger and could not vote for himself because of his Virginia residency. Second, Salinger was an incumbent, with an albeit brief record that put him on the defensive: he had taken a stand against Proposition 13. Proposition 13 would overrule the Rumford Fair Housing Act and allow homeowners the absolute right to select a

89 Vincent J. Burke, "State GOP Group Has Power Role: Californians to Get Top-Ranking Committee Posts in New Congress," *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 1964, Newspapers.com.





During his single term in office, Murphy continued to project his energetic, “nice-guy” charm. Here, he speaks at Senate hearings on farm labor in Delano, California, in 1966. However, for a number of reasons, he failed to win re-election in 1970. *Photographer Ernest Lowe. Ernest Lowe Photography Collection, 6880210. Courtesy University of California, Merced Library. Copyright owned by the Regents of the University of California.*

buyer or renter of their own choosing. The pro-discrimination constitutional amendment passed by a 2 to 1 margin, but was later declared unconstitutional. Murphy didn’t take sides on the Proposition 13 issue and repeatedly dodged questions on the matter. Salinger did poorly in areas where support for Proposition 13 was strong.<sup>90</sup> Third, was Salinger’s image. In its post-election analysis, the *Los Angeles Times* concluded, “Murphy is tallish and slim, experienced on camera. Salinger is short and pudgy. His cigars and his jowly, meaty appearance perhaps connoted to many the political boss who wheels and deals—and they didn’t like

90 Harry Trimborn, “Experts Split on Defeat of Salinger: ‘Carpetbagging,’ Prop. 13 Blamed by Professionals,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1964, Newspapers.com.

it.”<sup>91</sup> For these reasons, along with Democratic mistakes and Murphy’s substantial resources, the way was paved for his election. Murphy earned 3,538,215 votes (51.5 percent) while Salinger garnered 3,333,264 votes (48.5 percent).<sup>92</sup>

### MURPHY’S DEFEAT IN 1970

In 1966, Murphy had a portion of his larynx removed after he was diagnosed with throat cancer. After that he required the use of an amplifier to augment his voice because he was unable to speak at normal decibel levels. Supporters were worried that this would hamper his 1970 bid for re-election and it likely did play a role in his defeat.<sup>93</sup> In addition to his health were his unpopular policy positions. Public opinion on the Vietnam War had soured, but Murphy’s anti-communist sentiments caused him to favor the war effort. Murphy believed that civilian leaders were not allowing military leaders to effectively fight the enemy in Vietnam. He believed the war could be won in thirty days if military leaders were given a “free hand” to select bombing targets and disrupt enemy supply lines.<sup>94</sup> As casualties mounted, escalation of the war in Vietnam was not popular among American voters. Indeed, 1968 was the turning point at which most Americans no longer supported the war and believed it was a mistake.<sup>95</sup> John Tunney, Murphy’s opponent in 1970, called for the U.S. to withdraw from Vietnam.<sup>96</sup> Tunney also highlighted rising unemployment in the state and a \$20,000 consulting contract that Murphy got from Technicolor in 1965, during his term

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91 “Election: Johnson Si, Murphy Si; Salinger No,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1964, Newspapers.com.

92 Richard Bergholz, “Carpetbagger Tag Hurt, Salinger Says in Defeat,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1964, Newspapers.com.

93 “Murphy Cancer Cured, Doctors Believe; Illness Began in 1953,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1970, Newspapers.com.

94 “No-Win Policy Hit by Murphy,” *Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, January 12, 1968, Newspapers.com.

95 Tom Rosentiel, “Iraq and Vietnam: A Crucial Difference of Opinion,” Pew Research Center, March 22, 2007, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2007/03/22/iraq-and-vietnam-a-crucial-difference-in-opinion/>.

96 David Lamb, “Vietnam War Was ‘Sleeper’ Issue, Tunney Declares,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1970, Newspapers.com.

as Senator.<sup>97</sup> Murphy's diminished ability to campaign effectively, his pro-Vietnam stance, rising unemployment, and the conflict-of-interest consulting fees with Technicolor overwhelmed Murphy's incumbent advantage. Meanwhile, Tunney had been a Representative in the House since 1965 and thus also had a record, but his was more in tune with popular opinion in California. Murphy earned 2,828,127 votes (44 percent) while Tunney garnered 3,425,984 votes (54 percent).<sup>98</sup> Murphy raised \$1.9 million to Tunney's \$1.2 million.<sup>99</sup> When the political environment isn't favorable, celebrities can also lose elections.

Incumbents typically have a very high probability of being reelected.<sup>100</sup> This is because they have high levels of name recognition, increased fundraising capacity, professional campaign staff, and a good reputation with a base of supporters that are likely ready to vote for them again. Reagan, Grandy, Bono, Jones, Thompson, Schwarzenegger, and Franken were all reelected. Only Murphy and Trump were outliers among the list of celebrity candidates in my larger study.<sup>101</sup> This suggests that incumbent advantage works for celebrity incumbents as well but that the political environment can be insurmountable for some celebrity candidates. In the case of Murphy his combined celebrity advantage and presumed incumbent advantage were insufficient to get reelected in the political environment of 1970.

### CONCLUSIONS

The case of George Murphy provides further evidence to scholars who believe that entertainment and politics have become interchangeable. By the time Donald Trump was elected in 2016 the celebrification of our politics had been underway for at least half a century. Wright's hypothesis

97 Carl Greenberg, "Tunney Trying to Paint Him as Evil, Sen. Murphy Claims," *Los Angeles Times*, November 1, 1970, Newspapers.com; William J. Drummond, "Ex-Technicolor Head Defends Murphy Fee," *Los Angeles Times*, November 1, 1970, Newspapers.com.

98 "Final Returns—Statewide and From L.A. County," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1970, Newspapers.com.

99 "Campaign Costs Hit Millions," *Highland Park News-Herald and Journal*, December 17, 1970, Newspapers.com.

100 Paul S. Herrnson, *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2008), 53; Roger H. Davidson, Walter J. Oleszek, Frances E. Lee, *Congress and Its Members*, 13th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2012), 95.

101 Longoria, *Celebrities in American Elections*.

that celebrity candidates have many advantages over traditional candidates is correct, but it does not tell the full story. Celebrity candidates often lose and are not immune from the normal laws of politics.

Murphy succeeded in electoral politics because he had the talents, fame, and resources to win. He was comfortable in front of cameras. He was skilled at image management. His years in the trenches of union politics prepared him for national politics. He had tremendous name recognition and his movies were regularly on television during his 1964 bid for the U.S. Senate. The movies bolstered and reinforced his nice-guy image. Backed by powerful elites from the entertainment and political industries, Murphy had ample resources. The political environment in 1964 proved favorable as Democratic defectors backed the Republican Murphy. But when the U.S. political environment turned against the Vietnam War and local California issues escalated, Murphy's positions on these issues in 1970 would be a liability that neither fame nor incumbency could protect him from.

When asked if there were any similarities between Hollywood and Washington, D.C., Murphy would jokingly say, "It's pretty much the same. The only difference is that the sets are much larger in Washington and the budgets are far greater than Hollywood could ever afford – even on one of those spectacles."<sup>102</sup> The connection between Hollywood and Washington, D.C. has been strong for a century. Elites from the entertainment and political industries assist each other and sometimes trade places, moving between the two spheres of cultural and political influence. But a celebrity on the silver screen is not a guaranteed key to election victory in the political realm.

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<sup>102</sup> Murphy, *Say . . . Didn't*, 402.