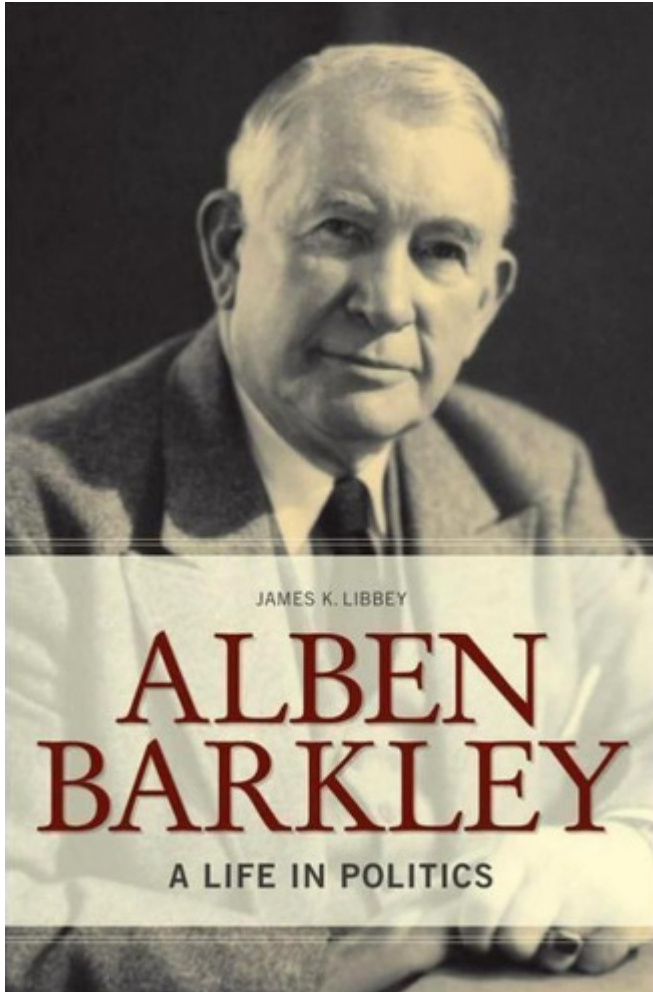


## 'Barkley' looks at influential Kentuckian's life

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*Alben Barkley: A Life in Politics* by James K. Libbey. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016, 360 pages, \$39.95 (hardbound).



“I would rather be a servant in the house of the Lord than to sit in the seats of the mighty.”

Those of you who are familiar with Kentucky history probably recognize this well-known line by Alben Barkley, the long-serving and influential senator from Kentucky who eventually became the 35th vice president of the United States. He made the statement at his final public appearance at Washington and Lee University in 1956. What makes the quote so memorable was the fact that he suffered a massive heart attack and died shortly after making the proclamation.

Barkley began his distinguished political career when he was elected as county attorney for McCracken County in 1905. He was eventually elected to the U.S. Senate in 1927, a position he held until becoming Harry Truman's vice president in 1949. Known for his rousing and passionate speeches, his keynote addresses at the 1932 and 1936 Democratic National Conventions helped him become Senate majority leader in 1937. Several Democrats wanted Barkley to be President Franklin D. Roosevelt's running mate in 1944, but FDR considered him “too old” for the job. (Barkley

had also disagreed with FDR's veto of a tax relief bill earlier in the year). And although he was not Truman's first choice to be his running mate, Barkley's passionate address at the 1948 convention helped propel Truman to a second term, despite the fact Thomas E. Dewey, his Republican opponent, was predicted to win the election. Barkley is also one of very few senators who was able to regain his seat after serving as vice president; he defeated incumbent Republican Sen. John Sherman Cooper in 1954 to give the Democrats a one-vote majority.

“Alben Barkley: A Life in Politics,” prolific author James K. Libbey's most recent book, is extensively researched, with 50 pages of source notes and an eight-page bibliography at the conclusion of the prologue and 16 chapters comprising the main narrative. Libbey leaves no stone unturned as he paints a detailed and vivid portrait of a man few in the modern era know much about. As is usually the case with biographies, it is the insights into his personal life and character outside the public spotlight that I found most fascinating.

Like many readers, I am intrigued by the “rise to power” of influential politicians. We all know what they were able to accomplish once they achieved their goal. What I find more revealing is how

they got there and what effect it had on the other important areas of their lives. Witness the following scene from “Congressman Barkley and the New Freedom,” the fifth chapter and one of my personal favorites.

“The same day (President Woodrow) Wilson delivered his inaugural address and took the presidential oath of office, Barkley was sworn in to Congress,” Libbey writes. “To save money, Dorothy (his wife) and the children remained in Paducah at their home on Jefferson Street. It was John Barkley who accompanied his son to Washington and witnessed his swearing-in ceremony. The pair stayed in the Congress Hotel. With Speaker (James Beauchamp “Champ”) Clark’s help, Alben arranged to have his father appointed as the official doorkeeper of the U.S. House of Representatives.”

“The father was good company for the son, but Alben missed his wife and children,” the author continues a little later. “He was horrified to discover that his daughter Laura Louise, just a toddler, did not seem to recognize him when he returned to Paducah after the first congressional session. As a result, Alben and Dorothy felt that they had to make an adjustment in their living arrangements. Fortunately, Barkley earned a congressional salary of \$7,500 a year. It was, for 1913, a handsome sum of money and gave the family the option of moving to Washington.”

Libbey, who is professor emeritus at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, has graduate degrees in history from Eastern Kentucky University and the University of Kentucky. His previous books include “Alexander P. de Seversky and the Quest for Air Power” and “Alexander Gumberg and Soviet-American Relations: 1917-1933.”

In addition to being an in-depth chronicle of the life of a relatively ordinary citizen who lived an extraordinary life, “Alben Barkley” also provides a behind-the-scenes look at how the American political system often works. Moreover, the writer sheds some light on how one individual’s frustration and resolve often serves as a catalyst for change that affects the personal and career trajectory of those with whom they interact. For example, it was interesting to see how Truman’s reaction to the duties and responsibilities he was asked to fulfill when he was second in command evolved his conceptualization of, and expectation for, his previous role.

“Barkley’s national reputation and Truman’s unfortunate experience as vice president led to a change in the role of that office,” Libbey observes in “The Iron Man Becomes a Veep,” the 15th chapter. “In the brief time that Truman served in the second spot under President Roosevelt, the vice president was virtually excluded from the workings of the executive branch of government. Small wonder that Truman deprecated his ability to fill FDR’s shoes after he had been left in the dark about presidential problems and procedures before Roosevelt died. Logically, he did everything to counter FDR’s mistake by making Barkley an integral part of the administration. In the process, Barkley became the first working vice president in American history.” And, as Libbey makes abundantly clear, he made the most of his newfound status as a key player in the executive branch.

Admittedly, I did not know a lot about the numerous contributions of Barkley before I agreed to review this exquisitely-written account of his life and times. The impact of our former senator on both Kentucky as well as the entire United States was significant and lasting; his legacy still resonates today. So if you are looking for a biography that will both stir your imagination as well as renew your faith in the ability of one person to truly make a difference, this is probably one you’ll want to put by your nightstand. I recommend it highly.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*