



Iron Man Barkley

By FRANK GERVASI

A free-swinging, old-school orator, and a wise politician of the Kentucky variety, Alben William Barkley was born in a log cabin and has always wanted to be Vice-President. Here are the answers to some questions people are asking about him

WHEN Alben William Barkley recently swore to uphold the Constitution so help him God he became the oldest Vice-President in the history of the United States. He was seventy-two. This fact would, ordinarily, be cause for concern. If anything should happen to President Truman, who is nearly seven years younger than Barkley, the most exacting job in the world would fall to a man who must be reckoned "old" by all ordinary standards.

But those who know Alben Barkley aren't worried. If an act of God were to make him President there is little doubt in their minds that he would survive the job and have a good many years left in which to prune the fruit trees on his 300-acre farm near Paducah, help feed the hogs, polish his antiques and play with his antique china.

Barkley still owns all his natural teeth, which he brushes meticulously three times a day. He has the vigor, enthusiasm and optimism of a man of thirty-eight or forty. About five feet ten inches tall, weighing a well-muscled 198 pounds, he looks like a close-coupled stallion and eats like one.

He likes hearty ham-and-egg breakfasts, light lunches and husky dinners. He hates spinach. His favorite food is string beans cooked with hog jowl, and he is fond of steak. A quart of ice cream is a normal ration and he complains to Mrs. Max Truitt, his daughter and official hostess, if she serves less.

He is, nevertheless, a moderate man about stimulants. He is strictly a "one-cupper" with coffee and never drinks cocktails but likes bourbon with water. He has never smoked. He can relax and go to sleep anywhere at any time.

Barkley comes by his excellent metabolism naturally. He was born in a log cabin on a Graves County, Kentucky, tobacco farm and he and his woodsman father counted the year lost "when we didn't clear another twelve acres or so of stumps." By the time he was twelve he handled a plow with the skill of a full-grown man and down at Lowes Crossroads they still talk about the phenomenal strength and endurance of Iron Man Barkley.

Barkley's achievement of the Vice-Presidency is, in fact, no less an American Story than Truman's rise from county road inspector to the Presidency. It is, if anything, more nearly in the poor-boy-to-President tradition. The Ohio Valley acres which sustained John Barkley, his wife, Electra, and their eight children were among the poorest in southwestern Kentucky.

When he was thirteen years old, Alben, eldest of the hungry Barkley brood, accompanied his father to town. That, he recalls now, was when life began for him. He saw a store clerk dressed in weekday clothes that were better than farm boys wore to church on Sunday.

"I resolved then and there," he says, "that I would move to town, one day, and wear Sunday clothes all week long."

From Grandma Barkley, Alben heard tales about

her cousin, Adlai Stevenson, who was Vice-President of the United States under Grover Cleveland, and about another cousin, "Quinine Jim" McKenzie. The latter, a congressman, was responsible for removal of the tariff on quinine imports and indirectly a benefactor to millions of malaria sufferers.

By the time he was fifteen Barkley had determined to educate himself and go as far in public life as his two distinguished relatives. He put on his best suit, left the farm and enrolled at Marvin College, a Methodist institution at Clinton, Kentucky. He paid for his tuition by working as a janitor, sweeping out the classrooms and keeping its heating system going.

It was while he was a student at Marvin that he betrayed his secret ambition. He was wooing the pert and pretty Susan Vaughan at the time.

"Marry me," he begged her, "and become the wife of a President of the United States."

But Susan had another suitor. His name was Will Clayton.

"Marry me," Will promised, "and you will be the wife of a millionaire."

Will won both Susan and the millions and, later, high places in government as Secretary of Commerce in 1942 and Assistant Secretary of State in 1945. Alben finally achieved the Senate in 1926 but was to know 22 years of disillusionment and disappointment before he received, in 1948, the nomination for the Vice-Presidency.

Much hard work went into Barkley's preparation for a political career. After Marvin, he learned shorthand, became a court reporter and sporadically studied law at Emory University, Georgia, and the University of Virginia.

In 1905, at the age of twenty-seven, he saddled up a mule and stumped McCracken County for prosecuting attorney. He won and his political life began. In 1909, he was elected county judge, and in 1913 he went to Congress, where he remained until elected to the Senate in 1926.

Both as congressman and senator he fought for social welfare. He was a liberal while the New Deal was still a gleam in the political eye of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Warning from a Vice-President

Barkley never made a secret of his aspiration to the Vice-Presidency. He was openly or covertly a candidate for his party's nomination for the job in every election from 1928 to 1944, inclusive. Herbert Hoover's Vice-President, Charles (Hell and Maria) Dawes knew of Barkley's ambition and kidded him about it back in 1928.

"It's a dull job," Dawes warned. "Every morning you read the papers to ascertain the state of the President's health. Then you go to the Senate to preside over hours of oratorical bilge, fondle your gavel and watch the clock."

But, although often a suitor, Barkley never received the nomination. None had worked harder

or more loyally for the New Deal and its ringmaster, F.D.R., than Barkley. But in 1944 his often capricious friend F.D.R. shelved him as "too old for the job." Barkley was then sixty-seven. Roosevelt picked Truman, who didn't want the job at all and said so. If Barkley was bitter, he held his tongue.

By 1948, Barkley had begun to agree with Dawes about the ignominy of the Vice-Presidency. Last June, a month before the Democratic national convention met at Philadelphia, a friend asked Barkley whether he would accept his party's nomination for second place on a Truman ticket. The senator smiled and snatched off his tycoon-style eyeglasses, a gesture which invariably precedes a Barkley anecdote.

"Long ago," he said, "there was a man who had two sons. One of them went to sea and the other became Vice-President of the United States. Neither was ever heard of again. No, I don't want the job. Besides, nobody has offered it to me."

Keynote Speech Turned the Tide

And until he rose on the hot, humid night of July 13, 1948, to deliver his keynote speech to dispirited Democratic party delegates, Barkley had not been offered the post. Truman had several other candidates in mind, including Justice Douglas and Senator O'Mahoney. Barkley who was the party's pinion gear in the Senate and had waited longest for political reward was not one of them.

When Barkley finished talking at Philadelphia the question was not would he be the Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee but would there be a stampede for him for President. Barkley's speech, a long and detailed exposition of the accomplishments of the New Deal, blew through the convention like a life-giving wind through a gas chamber. It turned a wake into a resurrection.

Barkley, probably the best party orator since William Jennings Bryan, mentioned Truman only once. When he finished it was for Barkley and the Democratic party and not for Truman that some 10,000 delegates, alternates and spectators cheered. The Kentucky delegation raised placards demanding "Barkley for Vice-President." Almost immediately the word "Vice" was crayoned out and a "Barkley for President" parade was in full cry.

Down in Washington, sitting in front of a television set, Truman saw and heard what was happening. Two things were suddenly clear to him: that the Democratic party had had a rebirth, with Barkley as its obstetrician, and that the big, blue-eyed Kentuckian was the only possible candidate for the Vice-Presidency. Truman's phone rang almost before the roar of the Barkley ovation in the convention hall was over. It was Les Biddle, the efficient liaison officer between White House and Senate and close friend of both Barkley and Truman.

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