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Alben W. Barkley: Harry S. Truman’s Unexpected Political Asset

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I am undergraduate senior majoring in both English and history. The work that I present here was done for my senior thesis for my honors history class. By making extensive use of Senator Alben W. Barkley’s archives located in the M.I. King Special Collections in the library, I was able to explore the role Senator Barkley had on the Democratic presidential ticket in 1948.

One of the greatest assets that I had while working on the project was my professor and mentor Dr. Kathi Kern of the history department. Dr. Kern constantly pushed me and the other students in the class to produce better work and probe deeper into our research. Her efforts were instrumental in making my thesis the work that it is today. I was incredibly fortunate to have her as a professor and will always be indebted to the direction and encouragement that she gave me while working on this project.

While attending UK, I was active in a number of student organizations including: Phi Alpha Theta, College Democrats, and UK Kentuckians for the Commonwealth.

Faculty Mentor:
Dr. Katherine Lee Kern, Department of History

I am writing to convey my endorsement of John Ghalien’s paper: “Alben W. Barkley: Harry S. Truman’s Unexpected Political Asset.” John wrote this paper, his senior thesis, in my history 471 class. Therefore, I am quite familiar with the research and the resulting paper. It was very exciting to work with John because he really wanted to engage in original research. So, although his course work had led him to study Ancient history, the excellent source material housed in UK’s Special Collections and Archives beckoned John into the twentieth century. Because he is deeply engaged in the current Presidential election, John was drawn to the controversies surrounding an earlier Presidential election, Truman’s victory in 1948. John was particularly curious about the historical amnesia that has crept up around this election. Alben Barkley, the vice-presidential nominee from Kentucky, has largely been forgotten in the national narratives. But, as John argues, this oversight needs to be corrected. Truman’s presidency has experienced a renaissance, thanks in part to a popular biography by David McCullough. But, what about Barkley? As John demonstrates in his paper, Barkley helped to deliver the South to Truman and to keep the South an important player in the Democratic Party. When we consider the political landscape of the decades that followed, and particularly the success of the Republican Party in capturing Southern voters on cultural issues, Barkley’s unique genius seems particularly significant.

I. Introduction

On April 30, 1956 the great orator and Senator Alben Barkley loudly proclaimed, “I’m glad to sit in the back row, for I would rather be a servant in the house of the Lord than sit in the seats of the mighty.” He than took a step back to accept the thunderous applause of the audience. Suddenly, he collapsed to the ground. His wife Jane hurried to the stage; but it was too late, he had died of a heart attack. Since this death, Barkley has largely been forgotten by history. Despite this historical amnesia, Barkley had a long and distinguished career of public service that has been ignored. He served in a variety of elected offices and played major roles in the political debates of his times. The few scholars who have written about Barkley have focused mainly on his early career and his time as Senate Majority leader. Few Americans know of his rousing keynote address in 1948, his “prop-stop” campaign, or that he served as Truman’s vice-president and was given the nickname the “VEEP.” In particular, little attention has been given to Barkley’s pivotal role in the 1948 election.

While Barkley has faded from view, the man he propelled into the presidency has gained in historical stature. Harry Truman’s upset victory over Thomas Dewey has been closely examined by historians, e.g., Donaldson, Truman Defeats Dewey; Karabell, The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election; and McCullough, Truman. All are major works that focus on
Truman and his reelection efforts, but none of these give Barkley any serious attention. The picture of Truman holding the Chicago Daily Tribune with the headline “Dewey defeats Truman” and the memory of his whistle stop campaign have become icons of American political history. While Truman’s role in the campaign has been examined, Barkley’s contributions to the race have been overlooked. Barkley’s popularity — both in the country and in the Democratic Party — political skills, and remarkable speaking ability bolstered Truman’s reelection efforts significantly by keeping most of the South in the Democratic column and by picking up traditionally Republican states in the Midwest.

II. Early Career
Barkley was born on November 24, 1877, in a small log cabin in Graves county Kentucky. While attending Marvin College, a small Methodist University, Barkley joined Marvin’s Periclean Debating Society where he learned to hone his speaking and debate skills. His first elected position was county attorney in 1905, but it was not long before Barkley ran for federal office. (Libbey, 1979) In 1912, Barkley was elected to the House of Representatives where he earned a reputation as a progressive Democrat by working closely with President Woodrow Wilson on enacting a number of reforms. This work led to his political maturity. Barkley “assumed Wilson’s vision of America as a nation where individual enterprise and competition should not be jeopardized by monopoly capitalism.” (Libbey, 1979, p. 67) The young Kentucky Congressman worked with the Chief Executive to lower tariffs and to pass both the Federal Reserve Act and the Clayton Anti Trust Act. Working with Wilson prepared him for his partnership with Roosevelt, with whom he would work closely on several pieces of New Deal legislation.

The United States Senate gained a new member in 1926 after Barkley managed to win a close primary and general election. (Hatfield, 1997, p. 424) During the campaign, Barkley had been forced to unite the different factions of the Democratic Party in Kentucky. This would prove to be important in his Senate career. Historian James K. Libbey writes, “The knack he possessed to conciliate factions and ingratiate himself among potential opponents would serve him well as a distinguished representative from Kentucky to the United States Senate.” (Libbey, 1979, p. 48) Barkley’s time in the Senate would introduce him to the national stage and earn him a reputation as a strong proponent and defender of the New Deal and the Democratic Party.

The Senator’s rise in importance caused him to be selected to give the Democratic keynote address to his party’s convention in 1932. His success there would lead to him giving the keynote address again in 1936, 1940, and 1948. Barkley reached an even larger audience when his party selected him to defend the New Deal against Henry Fletcher, the chairman of the Republican Party, in a radio address. He was so successful that his party selected him to, “confute the Republicans in 1934 congressional elections, when he launched a twenty-state blitzkrieg to defend the New Deal and its candidates.” (Libbey, 1979, p. 67) The radio address that Barkley gave led to higher name recognition with the general public; which in turn caused FDR to use him in his legislative efforts more.

President Roosevelt relied on Barkley to help pass many of his reforms including: the AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Act), NIRA (National Industrial Recovery Act), and FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Act). (Libbey, 1979, p. 66) On May 27, 1935, the Supreme Court declared several pieces of New Deal legislation unconstitutional, including the NIRA. Roosevelt was infuriated by the Court’s actions. He called a special session of Congress and unveiled the second New Deal which included the Banking Act, Social Security Act, and the Wagner Relations Act. Roosevelt would not forget or forgive the Court’s decision.

The Democrats headed to their convention in 1936, with FDR’s second New Deal in mind. Barkley gave the keynote address and used it to defend the New Deal, attack the Hoover administration, and praise the accomplishments of the president. Barkley also attacked the Supreme Court. He asked the audience “Is the court beyond criticism? May it be regarded as too sacred to be disagreed with?” By striking down the NIRA, the Supreme Court had infuriated Barkley, because he felt the legislation to be vital for improving America’s economic woes. Barkley did not comprehend, “that within his keynote address lay the seeds of future Democratic discord, nationwide controversy, and a tragic event that, nonetheless, would elevate Barkley to new heights of leadership and responsibility.” (Libbey, 199, p. 71) Roosevelt and Barkley collaborated to ensure that the Supreme Court would not strike down any more New Deal legislation.

On February 5, 1937 the president gave Congress legislation to reorganize the Federal Judiciary. He did so without giving his allies in Congress any warning. This action was quickly labeled as Roosevelt’s “court-packing” plan. The bill allowed the president to appoint a new federal judge for every member of the bench above the age of seventy. If Congress had enacted the measure, FDR would have had the power to appoint six new justices. Americans were outraged by the president’s attempt to reorganize the Supreme Court with political allies who would support his legislative agenda. The conservative wing of the Democratic Party was equally outraged and revolted against the plan. Senate Majority Leader Joseph Robinson and Barkley both supported the bill,
and attempted to convince other Democrats of its merits. In the midst of the legislative battle Robinson died of a heart attack leaving Barkley acting Majority Leader. With Robinson’s death any hope for FDR’s court packing plan ended. (Hatfield, 1977, p. 424)

III. Barkley as Majority Leader

Barkley’s loyalty to Roosevelt during his court packing scheme led to the president backing him for Senate Majority Leader. FDR leaned on state Democratic leaders to pressure their Senators to back Barkley. Also, on July 15, 1937, he addressed a public letter to “My dear Alben” signifying his support. (Barkley Papers, Box 61, Folder 1) The conservative wing of the party largely backed Pat Harrison of Mississippi who had argued vehemently against the “court-packing” plan. (Krock, 1937, p. 16) During the leadership contest, Barkley had his first intimate contact with Truman. Initially, Truman supported Barkley, but changed his support to Harrison for reasons that are largely unknown. Before switching, he told Barkley, “The pressure on me is so great that I am going to ask you to relieve me of my promise.” (Barkley, 1954, p. 155) The vote was close, 38 to 37 with Barkley triumphant. (Gullan, 1998, pp. 117-8) After the vote was tallied, Harrison stepped forward and moved that the vote be made unanimous.

The newly elected Majority Leader quickly realized the difficulties of his position. Early into his term, several
Republican senators unexpectedly introduced an anti-lynching bill. (Davis, 1979) This angered the southern Democrats who quickly threatened to filibuster. Barkley was surprised by the Republican bill and attempted to adjourn the Senate, which would have cleared the agenda for the day. His efforts were blocked by a coalition of both Republicans and liberal Democrats. Republicans finally agreed to withdraw the bill when Barkley assured them that anti-lynching legislation would take top priority in the next session. This battle over civil rights legislation showed a major rift in the Democratic majority. “As long as the party’s agenda remained essentially economic, its diverse elements held together. When confronted with racial issues, however, the complex fabric began to unravel.” (Ritchie, 1991, p. 134) The tension between the two factions would frustrate Barkley frequently in his role as Majority Leader.

Barkley carried out his word and supported the bill in the next session, but despite his best efforts he was unable to overcome Southern filibusters. The Kentucky Senator supported civil rights legislation throughout his tenure as Majority Leader, earning him the admiration of liberals. He was always willing to listen to conservative views and work toward compromise, thus also earning the respect of Southerners. His popularity among Southerners despite his stance on civil rights would prove to be vital later in his career.

Barkley became a member of the “Big Four” which included Vice President Henry Wallace, House Speaker Sam Rayburn, and House Majority Leader John McCormack. (Hatfield, 1997, p. 425) The four met regularly with FDR to discuss the administration’s legislative priorities and strategies. Barkley generally led the president’s efforts, but in 1944 he broke with him over a controversial tax bill. The president vetoed a two billion dollar tax increase calling it relief “not for the needy, but for the greedy.” Barkley was shocked by the president’s actions. The tax bill had been the result of hard work and compromise and the Majority Leader felt it was the best he could do. The president knew his feelings, but chose to ignore them.

The Majority Leader’s surprise quickly gave way to anger; he discussed the matter with his wife and both came to the conclusion that he would have to break with the president. Barkley stayed up late into the night pacing the floor of his room wondering how he would respond. (Barkley, 1954, p. 175) The next day he entered the Senate chamber determined to give a speech responding to the president’s veto. The Kentuckian spoke with anger that was rare for him. He saved special vehemence for the President’s statement that the tax bill was for the greedy, declaring in a speech in Washington on February 22, 1944, “That statement is a calculated and deliberate assault upon the legislative integrity of every member of the Congress of the United States.” He ended his speech by resigning as Majority Leader to the shock of his colleagues. His speech was highly regarded by his colleagues who showered it with applause. The next day he was unanimously reelected to his position, and Congress overrode the president’s veto.

The controversy over the tax bill seriously strained Barkley’s and Roosevelt’s relationship, but because of Barkley’s popularity the president moved to make public amends with him. He sent the Kentuckian another “Dear Alben” letter on February 23, 1944. The president declared, “Certainly, your differing with me does not affect my confidence in your leadership nor in any degree lessen my respect and affection for you personally.” (Barkley papers, Box 16, Folder 10) Barkley accepted the president’s gesture. He graciously replied the next day, “If we cannot trust one another in this tragic period of our nation and of the world, how can the people trust us?” (Barkley Papers, Box 16, Folder 10) Despite the exchange of letters between the two, their partnership would never be the same.

IV. Barkley and Truman

During the convention of 1944, FDR set out to find a new vice president. The majority of the delegates favored Barkley but, “Roosevelt would not tolerate one who had so recently rebelled against him.” (Hatfield, 1997, p. 425) Roosevelt ultimately decided to pick Truman over Barkley. Barkley later recalled that his
relationship with Roosevelt improved after he campaigned vigorously for the Roosevelt-Truman ticket. (Barkley, 1954, p.191) When FDR died in 1945 it was Truman who became president and not Barkley. Barkley continued to serve as Majority Leader under President Truman. The two men managed to work reasonably well together, but their relationship was not as smooth as Barkley’s and Roosevelt’s had been. This unevenness was largely due to Truman’s difficulties coordinating his office with the legislative branch. The Senator often felt that Truman would launch a major legislative effort without consulting the members of his party beforehand. Still Barkley continued to work with Truman on several pieces of legislation including the European Recovery Program. Dean Acheson, Truman’s secretary of state, described Barkley as the president’s “field commander.” (Acheson, 1961, p. 140)

Truman had numerous challenges awaiting him after he took the oval office. With the end of World War II, America had entered a new era in which a Cold War with the Soviet Union was looming; and America’s economy needed to be converted from wartime to peacetime. Americans turned to the new president to guide them through these challenges, but quickly found his leadership lacking. The new president, “suffered from inexperience, a poor image, and bad advice.” (Donaldson, 1999, p. 7) Truman’s difficulties can be seen with the conversion of America’s economy. In order to hold

*Leaving Blair House for the inauguration with President Truman, their wives, and the Trumans’ daughter Margaret. Year 1948. Photo by John Adams*
down inflation, Truman retained wage and price controls that had been created during the war. Organized labor was infuriated by the wage freeze and labor strikes occurred all across the country. Union strikes created even more economic difficulty. Consumers who believed that economic prosperity had returned were frustrated by Truman who was, “telling them that the products they had been denied for so long would remain unobtainable for a just a while longer.” (Donaldson, 1999, p. 14) Republicans were quick to use this dissatisfaction to their electoral advantage.

Americans vented their frustrations with the Truman administration in 1946 by giving Republicans control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1930. Republicans used messages such as, “Had enough?” and, “To err is Truman” to recapture Congress. The New Deal coalition that Roosevelt had worked so hard to foster and maintain had seemingly fallen apart in the 1946 elections. Liberals, conservatives, farmers, unions, African Americans all had complaints, and Truman, unlike his predecessor, was unable to walk the tight balancing act required to satisfy one element of the coalition without offending another. (Donaldson, 1999, pp. 6-7) This break up had caused the Democrats historic losses, which caused the Democrats to turn their frustration on Truman.

Barkley became minority leader after the Democrats lost their majority. His first major decision as minority leader would have implications that would affect the 1948 presidential election. The matter involved Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, a segregationist who had been accused of fraud. Barkley worked out a compromise with the new Majority Leader Robert Taft that allowed him to be seated. Bilbo died shortly after this, but Barkley’s actions confirmed in “the mind of many southerners that Barkley was a man whose word they
could trust.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 118) The Kentuckian was unique because he was popular with all segments of the Democratic Party.

Many of the actions of the Republican Congress infuriated Barkley. He was especially angered by the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, which allowed government injunctions in labor disputes to weaken organized labor’s strength. The Minority Leader encouraged Truman to veto the bill and was dismayed when Congress overrode the veto. After the passage of Taft-Hartley, Barkley could be seen wearing a tie that stated, “Repeal Taft-Hartley Act.” (Libbey, 1979, p. 93) The law was particularly frustrating because it seemed, “Americans had tired of reformist crusades, and the slide toward conservatism allowed Republicans to throw damaging punches at New Deal ideas.” (Libbey, 1979, p. 93) To a Senator from Kentucky who had dedicated his life to many different reforms, this trend was particularly disheartening.

Besides facing difficulties in the public arena, Barkley also had personal problems to deal with at the same time, the most serious of which was the deteriorating health of his wife Dorothy. The expensive costs of medical treatment and nursing care had forced the couple to sell their Washington home and move into an apartment. Barkley began accepting speaking engagements all across the country, “to provide the treatment and the special nursing care that she needed.” (Barkley, 1954, p. 71) On March 10, 1947, Dorothy passed away. (Louisville Courier Journal. March 13, 1947) Her death was a crushing blow to Barkley, but did not stop him from continuing to serve as Minority Leader.

V. Barkley and the 1948 Election

With the Republicans firmly in control of Congress many people were predicting that the Republicans would capture the White House in 1948. Barkley was not optimistic going into the election. In a May 19th letter to his friend Claude Bowers, Barkley expressed his feelings about the circumstances: “I deplore the situation in which our party has been placed with regard to the coming contest.” (Barkley Papers, Box 65, Folder 11) He disagreed with Bowers’ suggestion that he challenge Truman for the nomination writing that, “In many ways, he has not done a bad job of administering the government.” (ibid.) Barkley believed that most of the mistakes Truman had made had been of a political nature. He agreed with the president on most issues, but felt that his poor communications with Congress had created unnecessary difficulties.

He offered the example of civil rights. Barkley had always favored equal rights for all Americans; in Congress he had consistently voted against the poll tax and in favor of anti-lynching laws, but he believed that compromise was necessary. Truman, he argued, had tried to do too much at one time. In the same letter to Bowers, he stated that the administration, “threw a whole basket full of matters in the lap of Congress at one swing and the result has been that it has injured him… in the South and it is doubtful whether it has helped much in the North.” (ibid.) Barkley believed that the situation had calmed somewhat, but that it was still tenuous.

Barkley’s frustrations with Truman did not make him look upon the other political party favorably. The Senator believed that the Republicans had nothing to run on in 1948. He bluntly wrote to Bowers, “I realize that after 16 years the people make up their minds to change party control of their government, but the Republicans really have nothing constructive to offer.” (ibid.) Barkley further argued that the New Deal coalition of Roosevelt had accomplished a great deal in the sixteen years that it had controlled the government. Barkley thought that Senator Taft was the best of all the Republican candidates calling him, “honest and courageous.” (ibid.) He still thought that the Democrats could beat him and any other Republican candidate, despite the mood of the party.

Many Democrats were convinced that the 1948 election was going to be a disaster for the party, unless they found somebody to replace Truman. People began to approach Barkley to convince him to challenge Truman for the nomination. They feared that, not only would Truman cost them the election, but that his civil rights platform would split the party irreversibly. Barkley refused to accept any of these overtures. With the party’s national convention approaching, the solicitations became more fervent. Earle Clements, the Democratic National Convention – Ed Halsey presents gavel to Senator Alben Barkley (Left to Right) Ken Romney, Ed Halsey, Pat Haltigin, Alben Barkley, Clarence Cannon, Joe Sennnot. Year 1932
Governor of Kentucky at the time and the leader of the Kentucky Democratic Party, was one of the people who approached Barkley about running for president. Barkley refused to go along. Writing to a friend about the matter, Clements explained, “The entire Kentucky delegation did everything within its power to bring this about, but at the expressed wish of the Senator himself, it was necessary that we limit our sight to the Vice Presidential nomination.” (Clements Papers, Box 228, Folder 2) Despite all the attempts to make it otherwise, Barkley remained loyal to Truman.

J. Howard McGrath, the national chairman of the Democratic Party, selected Barkley to give the keynote address at the convention. Historian Neil E. Claussen argues that Barkley was selected again for several reasons, but the most important one stemmed from his popularity in the South. Claussen explains that Southern frustration over civil rights had increased the likelihood of Southern democrats leaving the party, causing the national committee to name “two Southerners to the top convention offices, Barkley as temporary chairman and Sam Rayburn as permanent chairman.” (Claussen, 1979, p. 82) Barkley went to the convention determined to make the most of the opportunity to give one last keynote address.

The Democratic convention began on July 10, 1948. The delegates who attended the convention were a forlorn group, convinced that the party had no chance of victory in November. The New York Times noted, “It is a simple statement of fact, not an editorial judgment, to report that the majority of delegates assembled here have no enthusiasm whatever over naming him [Truman] as their standard-bearer for 1948 against Gov. Thomas E. Dewey.” (Lawrence, 1948a, p. E7) The mood of the Democratic delegates was in stark contrast with the Republican convention that had been held in Philadelphia two weeks before. According to the article, “The Republicans were certain of victory, no matter whom they nominated.” (ibid.) The mood of his party’s convention did not go unnoticed by Barkley who later remarked, “When I got over there on Saturday before the convention, you could cut gloom with a corn knife.” (Shalett, 1953) Barkley entered Philadelphia determined to rouse his party out of the stupor into which they had fallen.

On July, 12 Barkley delivered his address. The speech was a call to arms to all the Democrats who heard it. Barkley attacked the record of the 80th Congress and tied the Democrats to the New Deal and FDR. Claussen writes, “Barkley knew that Democrats had little to cheer about since 1946 and realized defeatism could be surmounted by arousing a sense of pride.” (Claussen, 1979, p. 85) By using the accomplishments of the New Deal, Barkley turned the focus to the previous and more popular president Roosevelt. In his address, the Kentuckian proudly declared, “In the first place, it was recovery. The new administration breathed into the nostrils of every enterprise, large or small, a breath of new life and new hope and determination.” The Senator made the argument that Democrats who had created the New Deal had helped people in their time of need; while the Republican Party had fought it “as if it were some blight or plague that had poisoned the lives and consumed the liberties of the people and kept them chained and helpless.”

The New Deal had helped all segments of society Barkley argued. Farmers benefited from programs that had brought electricity to a large swath of rural areas for the first time, price controls had given them a stable market, and soil conservation had led to better crops. The elderly found financial protection with Social Security. Laborers had profited under a federal government that supported a worker’s right to organize, demand better working conditions, and receive a minimum wage. The upper classes were not left out of Barkley’s speech. He mentioned several programs such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Export-Import Bank, the Reciprocal Trade Agreement, and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Barkley argued that these programs had created higher employment levels, increased production, and prosperity for all.

Barkley attacked the Republicans in his Keynote address for doing nothing to help people during the Great
Depression and for having no accomplishments since recapturing Congress. Barkley challenged the convention audience: “Let us ask, and let the American people ask, those who spray this forest of superb accomplishment with the froth of their vindictive lips, which tree will they cut down with their mighty ax or puny hatchet?” With this question Barkley implied that Republicans would dismantle the New Deal if they regained the White House. He used his famous sense of humor to dismiss Republican promises to eradicate bearcats by defining one, “as a Democrat who holds some office that a Republican wants.” The Republicans’ record, Barkley declared, “is one of things promised and not consummated.” Barkley historian James K. Libbey argues that Barkley’s attacks on Republicans for inaction established the Eightieth Congress’ “do-nothing” reputation that both he and Truman would use during the campaign. (Libbey, 1979, p. 95) Barkley avoided the civil rights issues and ended the speech with a prayer.

The crowd’s spirit had been buoyed by the Kentuckians’ magnificent oratory. Cheering had erupted throughout the speech. A journalist who covered the event observed that Barkley had been encouraged before the speech to give a short address “but the interpolations and the applause his remarks brought made it at least 68 minutes.” (Lawrence, 1948b, p.1) The cheering after Barkley finished continued for half an hour as the orchestra played “My Old Kentucky Home.” (Davis, 1979, p. 359) Barkley’s speech lifted the gloom from the convention hall in Philadelphia. Clark N. Clifford, Truman’s political strategist, wrote to Barkley a few days later, on July 19, “Your keynote address was the turning point in the convention. It gave life to the meeting and hope and inspiration to the delegates. It was a masterful job and all good Democrats are grateful to you.” (Barkley Papers, Box 27, Folder 13) Talk began again about replacing Truman on the ticket, but Barkley ended it, saying to anyone who proposed it to him, “If anybody puts my name in nomination before this convention for President of the United States, I will arise and renounce it, because I will not come here as a candidate.” (Schantz, 1953) Barkley was much more open to the idea of running with Truman.

The delegates at the convention wanted Barkley to be selected as the president’s running mate. Truman was not thrilled by the prospect. His first pick had been Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. The president wanted Douglas because “the liberal Democrats were about to bolt the party with Henry Wallace, the naming of such a popular liberal as Douglas could be conceived as an act of party unification.” (Claussen, 1979, p. 898) Henry Wallace had served as Roosevelt’s third vice president and served as Truman’s Secretary of Commerce. He and many other liberals in the Democratic Party thought the administration was too conservative on issues such as civil rights and too hawkish in foreign policy. These disenfranchised progressives were encouraging Wallace to run for president with the Progressive Party. Truman hoped to counteract them by nominating Douglas as his vice president. During the convention, Clifford was in contact with Douglas encouraging him to run, but he was unsuccessful. Douglas decided to remain on the Supreme Court. (Heiss, 1971).

After his keynote address, the delegates at the convention were firmly behind Barkley for vice president. In support of their “Mr. Democrat” the delegates launched
a 28 minute demonstration to pressure Truman to select him. (Lawrence, 1948b, p. 1) The President did not want Barkley because he was seventy years old and because he brought no regional balance to the ticket. Truman’s lack of enthusiasm frustrated Barkley who remarked to several reporters in Philadelphia, “I never cared for cold biscuits.” (Barkley, 1954, p. 198) Truman’s lack of support for Barkley did not matter after the speech because, “The convention made up the President’s mind for him.” (ibid.) McGrath phoned the Chief Executive to inform him that the delegates were demanding Barkley. Truman gave in to the pressure and telephoned Barkley and asked him to be the nominee. Barkley replied, “Well, I suppose I will accept it if I’m nominated, but I’m not going to lift a finger to get the nomination.” (Shalett, 1953) The delegates would do all the work for their beloved Senator.

On July 13, William Wyatt of the Kentucky delegation nominated the minority leader. In his speech he described Barkley as man “to be counted on.” Wyatt declared, “He has the heart for the struggle, the courage for the fight, and all that it takes to carry our banner to victory on November 2.” Barkley was selected by acclamation. (Lawrence, 1948c) After his selection, Barkley gave a brief speech in which he promised to follow Truman’s leadership, the party’s platform, and to work toward victory. (ibid.) Truman then gave his acceptance speech in which he promised victory and attacked the Republicans declaring “the country cannot afford another Republican Congress.” (ibid.) During his acceptance speech the president announced he was calling a special session of Congress to give the Republicans the opportunity to enact their convention’s platform into law. (ibid.) Truman hoped the Republicans would fail to do so, cementing public opinion against them. The Democrats left the convention hall with a ticket, but few expected the pair to be victorious in November.

The Democratic National Convention ended dramatically. The adoption of a strong civil rights plank over their objections had infuriated much of the Southern delegation. New York Times reporter W. H. Lawrence noted, “For the first time in many years the Presidential nominee’s selection was not made unanimous.” (ibid.) Half of Alabama’s delegation and all of Mississippi’s walked out. Hubert Humphrey had pushed through the plank and had led the effort that ended Southern attempts to add a states’ rights plank. Shortly after the convention, the Democratic Party would have two schisms. The far left wing of the party led by Wallace formed the Progressive Party. (Hagerty, 1948, p. 36) The disillusioned Southerners formed the States Rights Party and nominated Strom Thurmond, the Governor of South Carolina, for president. (Popham, 1948, p. 1) Barkley was needed to limit the electoral damage of the southern bolt.

The special session of Congress worked exactly the way Truman hoped it would. The Republicans failed to enact any major initiative and Barkley led the Democrats’ efforts during the session. (ibid.) On the last day of the session, the Minority Leader attempted to pass a broad anti-inflation bill. Reporter William White noted, “The last main stand of the Democrats was made deliberately to highlight a single issue, that of high prices.” (ibid.) The Republicans defeated Barkley’s bill and passed their own much less encompassing version. (ibid.) The defeat frustrated Barkley so much that he shouted, “The theme song of the Republican Party between now and November should be ‘I’ve got plenty of nothing.’” (ibid.) Because Republicans failed to pass any major piece legislation, “Dewey was denied the ammunition he could have used to wage an aggressively unified campaign.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 110) Barkley’s efforts to pass major legislation while the Republicans blocked it created the image Truman hoped it would: Democrats lead and create prosperity while Republicans only make promises, but in actuality “do-nothing.” The Republicans had given the Democrats the major theme of their campaign.

During the special session, Barkley and Truman met to map out a strategy for victory. Barkley was expected...
to play a significant role in the campaign. Barkley commented on this:

Well of course, it was expected that I’d take an active part in this presidential campaign, as a matter of fact, more active than the President himself, because he had to remain in Washington a portion of the time. He couldn’t just start out and spend six weeks on the stump without going back to Washington, but I could because Congress was not in session, and I had no other task except to help win the election. (Shalett, 1953)

Some doubted that Barkley could maintain the vigorous campaign schedule necessary because of his age. He would prove them wrong. Early in his political career he had earned the nickname “Iron Man” because of the energy he had when he campaigned. This vitality was seen when he ran for county attorney, county judge, Congress, and Senate. It would not abandon him while he campaigned for the vice presidency. He was especially invigorated for the 1948 race. Barkley, who had recently lost his first wife, “found the campaign a tonic.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 119) To deal with his grief, Barkley campaigned harder than he had before.

President Roosevelt signing the Social Security Act, Congressman Robert L. Doughten, Senator Alben Barkley, Senator Robert F. Wagner, Frances C. Perkins (Secretary of Labor), Senator Pat Harrison, Congressman David J. Lewis, among others. August 14, 1935
In order to meet his obligations to the campaign, he suggested a “prop-stop,” meaning he could travel the country by plane. Eventually the Democratic National Committee agreed to his request and chartered a DC-3 plane named “The Bluegrass.” (Davis, 1979, p. 264) Barkley’s extensive use of the plane for campaigning was the first time this had ever been done in the United States. The plane included a bunk, and Barkley was accompanied by two-speech writers, a secretary, two journalists, two pilots, a campaign manager, and two stewardesses. (ibid.) Barkley would make the most of these resources and by the end of the campaign he had covered more ground than any of the other candidates.

Harold Gullan believes the two men determined that Truman would, “make major addresses in cities in such states as New York and Pennsylvania that he was unlikely to carry hoping his message would resonate widely.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 116) While Truman mainly focused on large states and on national issues, “Barkley was able to tailor his appeals to more localized issues. He focused his attention not only on the South and later on the Midwest, but also on states with key Senate races.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 117) Barkley was admired within all segments of the Democratic Party. With the party split three ways, this was extremely important. His popularity with the Southern wing of the party was needed to ensure that on Election Day the Dixiecrats would not expand from their “four-state base” of Alabama,

After a brief trip to Rome for a meeting of the Interparliamentary Union, the Senator returned to begin his campaign. In New Orleans on October 16, he used many of the themes that he would use throughout the South. Barkley declared, “It cannot be denied that a vote for any other ticket than the regular Democratic Party ticket is in its effect a vote for the Republican Party.” In the same speech, he argued that the Republican Party, “has not understood the South or its problems, and has permitted and even encouraged the exploitation of the South by those same plutocratic interests which have always dominated the Republican Party.” In his address, Barkley did not refer to Thurmond except by inference. (New York Times, 1948a) The crux of Barkley’s argument was that by voting for a third party, the South lost and the Republicans won. Republicans, according to Barkley, had never cared for or understood the South and they never would.

In his appeals to Southern voters, the Senator was always sure to mention the historic relationship between the South and his party. In Asheville, NC, on September 27, he stated, “It would be a tragic thing if the partnership between the Democratic Party and the South were to be destroyed.” Barkley mentioned the contribution of famous Southern Democrats like Thomas Jefferson in his address. While campaigning in Nashville, TN, on October 18, he offered the example of, “Woodrow Wilson who gave to the Democratic Party the world vision from which it has not departed.” In these addresses Barkley showed why he had been nicknamed “Mr. Democrat” with praises of the party, declaring in his Nashville speech, “The Democratic Party is the oldest, most experienced, and most representative political party in the nation.” With his oratory, Barkley built an image of the South and the Democratic Party united in their goals and in their history. He portrayed the candidacy of Thurmond as an assault on an almost holy union.

Barkley’s meetings with local politicians during his southern campaign swing were an important part of his efforts. According to Gullan, “Barkley’s most important exercises in persuasion were conducted off the podium, in private talks with Southern officeholders, many of whom were old acquaintances.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 125) This was a logical role for Barkley to fulfill. While he had supported civil rights legislation throughout his career, he believed strongly in compromise, making him more acceptable to Southerners. Also, his work as Minority Leader in 1946 to allow Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi to be seated, despite charges of corruption, had been appreciated. In large part, his popularity with Southerners stemmed from his personality. Dean Acheson, Truman’s Secretary of State, wrote of Barkley that he “was not only the most popular man in the Senate, but easily the most popular in Washington. He was warm because he had a deeply affectionate nature and really liked people.” (Acheson, 1961, p.140) People responded to Barkley’s warm personality, allowing him to connect with voters, gain important positions, pass legislation, and work out compromises. In his conversations with Southern politicians, Barkley would remind them that a, “Republican victory might cost them their influence, if not their jobs.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 125) Barkley was mostly successful in his talks with Southern leadership.

Due to the importance of keeping the majority of the South Democratic, Barkley’s speeches were methodically crafted. Gullan writes that Barkley’s Southern speeches, “were carefully prepared, tailored to his specific audience, and devoid of the humor he usually employed.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 124) This was the only leg of the campaign where Barkley relied heavily on his speechwriters. Once Barkley moved to other parts of the country, his natural and humorous speaking style returned. In Dover, DE, on September 22, Barkley made a rare mention of Dewey’s name when it began to rain, ending his speech early, he jokingly said, “I don’t want you to get wet. In fact I don’t even want you to get dewey.” Local issues were mentioned in his speeches. While
in Greeley, CO, on October 5, he focused on electrical issues, public water usage, and land development. In Greeley, the Senator stated, “of course, you know that in the Republican dialect socialization means anything the government does on behalf of a lot of people, while the American Way means anything the government does for an influential few.” Barkley’s humor made his attacks on the Republicans less mean and more effective.

An unexpected issue of the campaign was the farmer’s need for storage space for surplus crops like wheat and corn. 1948 had proven to be a good year for agriculture. In previous years the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) was allowed to lease extra facilities so farmers could store their surplus. In June, Congress revised the CCC’s charter so that the organization could only rent office space. (Gullan, 1998, p. 150) This change meant that farmers had to sell their surplus quickly, which in turn drove down prices. Historian Zachary Karabell explains:

“Though the Republican platform alleged a commitment to price supports, by stripping the CCC of its role in renting or constructing storage buildings, Congress essentially drove down agricultural prices. At the same time, the cost of manufactured goods was rising. With less income from their farms, farmers were being pushed to the brink. (Karabell, 2000, p. 210) The change was little noticed when it was first enacted, but toward the end of the campaign it would prove to be a deciding factor in the election.”

The Democrats were the first to realize the potential potency of this issue. Gullan asserts, “By September Clifford was fully alert to this almost providential new issue.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 151) Truman would first use the issue for partisan advantage during a campaign stop in Dexter, IA. Declaring that the GOP stands for “gluttons of privilege,” he accused Republicans in Congress of working to destroy the small farmer. (Lawrence, 1948d, p. 1) After attacking the Republicans for changing the CCC he loudly proclaimed:

“...You are free to make your decision today. There is only one way to stop the forces of reaction. Get every vote out on election day and make it count. I’m not asking you just to vote for me. Vote for yourselves, vote for your farms, vote for the standard of living that you have won under a Democratic Administration, get out there on election day, and vote for your future.” (ibid.)

The people who heard the president were, in the words of one observer, “an interested crowd, but not a very demonstrative one.” (ibid.) Truman’s speech at Dexter was a good example of the president’s “weakness of political positioning and rhetorical stridency.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 119) The president’s penchant for overusing drama in his speeches often weakened their impact. Despite the lack of an enthusiastic response in Dexter, “a seed had been planted.” (Gullan, 1998, p. 152)

The seed “would be cultivated by Alben Barkley, making his impact on the second critical region that determined the outcome of the election.” (ibid.) Barkley used the farm issue to the ticket’s advantage throughout his tour of the Midwest and far West. The issue was mentioned by the candidate in Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas, Idaho, Montana, and many other places. He accused the Republicans of having no farm policy, declaring in Kansas that the Republican policy “would neither protect the gains of the last sixteen years nor provide adequate growth in the future.” (New York Times, 1948b) In Mankato, MN, on October 3, Barkley mentioned the CCC issue specifically and asked, “If the Republicans are elected in November, what can we expect them to do next year?” Barkley was later criticized for the tactics he used when courting the farm vote. But despite these criticisms “his campaign methods... had certainly worked.” (Gullan, 1998, p.155)

The farm vote had traditionally gone Republican until Roosevelt, but in 1940 and 1944, it started to vote Republican overwhelmingly again. Barkley had always thought that victory was possible, but he had not been sure of it until he reached the Midwest. He later told an interviewer, “And when I got out into the...
called the Corn Belt out in the Middle West, the great agricultural states, I began to feel that the tide was in our direction.” (Shalett, 1953) By using the frustration of farmers to the Democrats’ advantage, Truman and Barkley had managed to capture a significant portion of the Republican base. In 1948, the Republicans’ mistakes on agriculture policy hurt them significantly with a normally reliable part of their base.

Throughout the race, Barkley attacked the record of the Republicans and defended the accomplishments of Democrats. According to Barkley, in 1929, Hoover had brought the country to the brink of ruin, but the efforts of Roosevelt and the New Deal saved the nation. Remarks like this helped to give Democrats a sense of pride in belonging to their party. Barkley’s speeches instilled a sense of confidence in the party’s base about their chances in November. Speaking before a labor union, a major part of the Democratic base, in Wilkes-Barre, PA, on September 19, he declared that Republicans were scared because, “They know they deserve to be the minority party because they represent a majority of the people, whose spokesman are the Grundys, and the Pews, and the special interests.” The laborers loved the Senator’s remarks and interrupted with applause several times.

Barkley managed to convey a sense of hope to the Democratic Party that they could win despite the elites of political punditry predicting their efforts were useless. Take for example a widely circulated issue of U.S. News and World Report (October 15, 1948) that appeared weeks before the election with the cover declaring, “‘Popular vote close electoral vote heavy for Dewey’ says George Gallop.” Largely because of Barkley’s efforts, Democrats did not give up. Davis writes, “Probably the greatest contribution of the Democratic vice-presidential nominee was his ability to inspire party workers with his own optimistic outlook.” (Davis, 1979, p. 266) Republican overconfidence about their certainty of victory caused laziness in their presidential ticket, their political strategist, and their party workers.

Truman and Barkley continued their vigorous campaign until the eve of Election Day when the two men returned to their hometowns. Truman gave one last radio broadcast after Barkley introduced him. Speaking from Paducah, KY, on November 1, in his introduction Barkley recalled Roosevelt’s death and Truman’s ascension to the presidency. Barkley stated, “Now that his [FDR’s] great personality had merged with that of other great men in the eternity of the ages, all eyes and hearts turned to the man who under our Constitution grasps the pilot’s wheel of our ship of state.” Truman, according to Barkley, had been a magnificent leader. He declared that Truman “brought strength to our economy, expansion and per-

VI. Conclusion

On Election Day, Americans headed to the polls convinced they would have a new president. They were wrong. The popular vote was close with 24,104,836 going to the Truman- Barkley ticket and the Dewey-Warren ticket earning 21,969,500 votes. (Davis, 1979, p. 268) In the Electoral College the Democrats had won 303 to 189. (ibid.) Despite the predictions of the press, polls, and people, Truman and Barkley emerged from the hard fought campaign as victors. Barkley later bragged to his friend, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo L. Black, on November 19, that their victory “confounded the metropolitan press, the poll takers, the radio commentators, and the general assembly of pessimists who thought this election was over before the Convention met in Philadelphia.” (Barkley Papers, Box 65, Folder 12) To another acquaintance, Earle Clements, Then Governor of Kentucky, he wrote the Democrats won because “the people did their own thinking and their own victory.” (Clements Papers, Box 229, Folder 3)

Barkley’s efforts were a major contribution to the Democratic victory. With his plane, “The Bluegrass” Barkley campaigned in 36 of the 48 states, gave 250
speeches, and traveled 150,000 miles. (Shalett, 1953) Both Barkley and Truman worked hard for their victory. Once they were nominated, they met quickly to map out their election strategy. During the campaign, the communication between the two camps remained good, which allowed them to take advantage of unexpected issues like the CCC. Both men thought victory was possible, not inevitable. This attitude made them work hard because it gave them the hope that they could win, but it did not deceive them into thinking their task was easy. The Republican ticket had acted as if they had already won, causing Barkley to comment that Dewey acted like “the election was a formality; it would be just a confirmation of what the people had already made up their mind to do.” (Shalett, 1953) The American people responded positively to the energy of the president and his vice presidential nominee.

Barkley would serve as vice president under Truman for four years. He briefly attempted to gain his party’s nomination in 1952, but his efforts stalled when organized labor deemed him too old. The “Iron Man” refused to retire from the political scene and challenged John Sherman Cooper the incumbent Republican Senator from Kentucky. (Hatfield, 1997, p. 428) In 1954, he was victorious. (ibid.) Two years later he was invited to give a speech at Washington and Lee University; there he would give his final speech before his sudden death. (New York Times, 1956)

Since his death, Barkley has been largely forgotten. This is unfortunate because Barkley was a major force behind many of the political decisions made in the first half of the twentieth century that continue to shape American political discourse to this day. His efforts during the 1948 campaign have been largely overshadowed by President Truman. Barkley contained the Dixiecrats to their four states and kept the rest of the South in the Democratic column. His work in the Midwest led to the Democrats capturing states that had gone for Dewey only four years earlier such as Iowa and Minnesota. He convinced the party’s base not to give up despite all polls and pundits declaring their efforts worthless. These factors contributed greatly to Truman’s victory in 1948, but have received little attention from historians. Even though Barkley has passed from the memory of most Americans, his legacy still lives on.

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