***Alben Barkley: A Life in Politics*. By James K. Libbey (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016). Pp. 360. $39.95 cloth).**

Review by George Humphreys

The latest volume in the Topics in Kentucky History series from the University Press of Kentucky may prove to be the definitive biography of the Jackson Purchase's most distinguished political figure, Alben W. Barkley (1877-1956). James K. Libbey, the author of *Alben Barkley: A Life in Politics,* has spent more than three decades in presidential libraries and digging out material on his subject since his first biography, *Dear Alben: Mr. Barkley of Kentucky*, of the former Kentucky U.S. Senator and vice president was published in the Kentucky bicentennial bookshelf series. That series' format, relying on relatively brief texts to attract a general audience, did not allow Libbey to do justice to the political life of Barkley. Libbey, obviously a sympathetic biographer, ably manages in this new volume to present to his readers a more complete Barkley by filling in the details of his long political career without sacrificing the sense of his humor that he was so deservedly known.

There is much to commend in Libbey's sympathetic treatment of Barkley. He clearly lays out the influences of rural Graves and Hickman counties in his early development. Barkley was the oldest child of a tenant farmer forced to move often from farm to farm in rural Graves County to improve the family's prospects; the family relocated, after

failing to make a go on the small farm purchased near Lowes to Clinton, the county seat of Hickman County. Despite the Barkley's economic struggles, Young Alben was doted upon by his parents who projected him to be a Presbyterian minister. However, Grandmother Barkley, who was a childhood playmate of her kinsman Adlai Stevenson, Sr. in Christian County who later was governor of Illinois and Vice President (1893-7), may have kindled a spark in the young boy that a career in politics could take him all the way to the White House. In fact, Barkley honed his speaking skills essential to both callings to the point that he was judged the best debater at Marvin College in Clinton where he completed his bachelor's degree through a janitorial scholarship. There, he came under the influence of college administrators who steered him to the law. Barkley borrowed enough money for one year at Emory College (now Emory University) before returning home to read for the law in Kentucky where his family had recently moved.

The story of Barkley's rise from a young lawyer in McCracken County politics to a series of county and a series of federal offices, including vice president, has been covered in Barkley's autobiography and Libbey's previous biography. It is retold here, but Libbey's new biography has new twists such as early campaign episode that had the potential of ending Barkley's political career prematurely which he leaves out in his autobiography. Barkley, who cast himself as a progressive politician from the outset, when as McCracken county attorney he had not hesitated

to bring corrupt politicians and public officials to justice. As it turns out, the practice of public officials dipping their fingers into the public till was so widespread in McCracken County that when Barkley ran for county judge, Republicans prepared to use the resulting scandal to sweep out the dominant Democrat courthouse ring. Though he was not part of the Democratic machine or part of the scandal, he drew a very tough opponent Thomas N. Hazelip, who would go on to a fine career as mayor of Paducah, who used the scandal, which would give the GOP five magistrate seats, to his advantage. Barkley defended himself against attempt s to connect him to the scandal would be as unfair as blaming Hazelip for the assassination of Democratic Kentucky Governor William Goebel.

The first congressional district seat opened up in 1912. He was the youngest of the four candidates in the Democratic primary and the only progressive, but Barkley, whose intense campaign style and prodigious appetite that came in handy in attending events where food was served earned him the reputation as the Iron Man, won fairly easily and did not face a Republican opponent in the heavily Democratic western Kentucky electorate of that time. He arrived in Washington at the same time as President Woodrow Wilson who Barkley greatly admired. He gained a reputation for his strong supporter of the president's New Freedom program with its aim to improve the economic status of farmers and workers back in Kentucky. The same concern would lead Barkley to support Franklin D.

Roosevelt's New Deal and Harry S. Truman's Fair Deal programs.

The reader follows Barkley rise in the Congress where he served seven terms in the House and four terms in the Senate from 1912 to 1948. His one campaign "setback" was a 1923 gubernatorial campaign in which, despite losing in a close primary race, Barkley's progressive campaign aimed at overturning the railroad, coal, and horse racing interests of the bipartisan combine which good government reformers believed held a corrupting influence over the Commonwealth's politics; however, his decision not to accept the party nomination after the death of his opponent won him substantial goodwill for his 1926 senatorial campaign. The decision to unite behind him for that race certainly was made easier by the calculation of combine leaders that Barkley in Washington was preferable to the ruling interests than fighting Barkley again in a 1927 gubernatorial campaign.

Libbey's major contribution lies in his efforts to round out Barkley's political activities to include not only domestic politics, but also foreign affairs. His initial foray in foreign affairs were driven by constituent interests at the start of World War I when he pressured the Wilson administration to pressure Great Britain to revise its economic quarantine policy to allow the sale of cotton and tobacco to all belligerents. However, by the end of the war, Barkley evolves into what Libbey terms to be a "moderate internationalist." The congressman broke with his political hero William Jennings Bryan, who resigned as Wilson's secretary of state rather

than support American entry into the war, by strongly supporting the declaration of war on Germany. Barkley also believed that the United States should have joined the League of Nations. Though that effort failed, he actively participated in the Inter-Parliamentary Union between the wars where legislators from many countries met to discuss matters of that crossed national borders. This commitment also led to a leadership role in the years before the country entered World War II when Barkley worked closely with the Roosevelt administration as the country reluctantly took steps to prepare for war as very strong isolationist voices so fought against American participation.

Barkley's political ambitions grew over time. In 1928, Barkley hoped that the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, Al Smith whose Catholic, eastern and "wet" background would cost him votes in the American heartland, might offer the vice presidential slot to the Kentuckian in order to balance the ticket. It was not offered, but Barkley coordinated the Democratic campaign in Kentucky and worked futilely in a campaign almost sure to fail. Greater opportunities for political advancement would arise when the American people blamed the GOP for the Great Depression. For his early support of Franklin D. Roosevelt's nomination in 1932, Barkley was rewarded with the keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention, the first of three such addresses. FDR was not disappointed as delegates heard a rousing, though long, attack on Republican policies that were responsible for the economic collapse. Humorist Will Rogers defended

Barkley the next day in the New York *Times* "when you start enumerating the ills that the Republicans have got away with in the last twelve years you have cut yourself out a job."

Over his four terms in the White House, FDR relied heavily on Barkley first as Senate assistant majority leader and then majority leader, after the 1937 tragic death of Majority Leader Joe Robinson's in the midst of the president's effort to pack the Supreme Court in order to control it. Libbey correctly portrays his subject as the most prominent supporter of the New Deal in the Congress. He also correctly defends Barkley against the charge that he was a bit of "bumbler" in the administration of his leadership duties. This charge came early in his tenure as majority leader as some, with good reason, dismiss his one-vote victory over Pat Harrison of Mississippi achieved only with the intervention of FDR's "Dear Alben" letter after Robinson's indicated who the president preferred. That was soon followed by Barkley mishandling the floor proceedings that allowed an anti-lynching bill to get to the Senate floor leading to a filibuster at the end of the 1937 session. Libbey's defense might have been bolstered by a clearer explanation of the limitations of the majority leader's position at the time. Barkley explained it well in his autobiography as much like a catcher in baseball forced to react to whatever the pitcher (president) chooses to deliver. Moreover, real power in the Senate in those days resided not with the majority leader, but with committee chairs, many of whom were southerners

increasingly disenchanted with FDR and the New Deal.

Barkley's political ambitions remained, and his status within the Democratic Party grew. Another outstanding performance in the delivery of the 1940 keynote speech might have provided a launch for the 1944 campaign, even though a great deal of uncertainty existed as to FDR's intentions for a third term. In any case, Democratic Party leaders were eager to dump Henry Wallace, the incumbent vice president, from the ticket. Once again, a border state politician would have strong consideration from Roosevelt advisors, and who better than Barkley? As Libbey notes, Barkley took himself out of the running by an unexpected rupture between the senator and FDR over a proposed tax increase the president wanted to help pay some of the costs of the war. When the Congress sent up a much smaller increase than he wanted, Barkley and other leaders argued that it was the best they could do and FDR should sign it. Instead, he vetoed it with a caustic veto message that Barkley believed deserved a response in kind. To a packed Senate gallery, Barkley blasted Roosevelt for his treatment of the Congress and stepped down as majority leader. An emotional Democratic Caucus met the next day and unanimously reinstated Barkley to his leadership post, but now as their representative to the president. And, in what may be the only event of its kind, both chambers mustered the two-thirds majority to override the veto of a tax increase. Libbey calls this dispute history changing, and it certainly was for Barkley. With his relationship with

the president damaged, FDR picked for his running mate the border state U.S. Senator Harry S. Truman who, not Barkley, assumed the occupancy of the oval office after Roosevelt's death the next year.

Barkley's disappointment in being passed over for vice president in 1944 did not end his search for higher office, but time (Barkley would be 71 at the start of the next administration). Nevertheless, he took full advantage when he was offered his third, and last, chance to deliver the keynote address for the 1948 Democratic National Convention. It was given to a dispirited group of delegates convinced that the incumbent Truman could not defeat Thomas Dewey, the GOP candidate, particularly as the third party challenges of Henry Wallace's Progressive Party and Strom Thurmond's States Rights Democratic (Dixiecrat) Party threatened to take Democratic votes. Barkley once again electrified his audience and breathed life into the convention and his vice-presidential bid. Libbey perhaps understates the ease by which negotiations for the vice presidency were concluded. Truman's suspicions that Barkley's real aim was to seize the top spot had to be overcome; and he needed to believe that the vice presidency, when it did come, was more than, in the Kentuckian's words, "cold biscuits." He wanted to be assured that he would have a significant role in the campaign and in the White House, provided that they could pull off the upset. Barkley was offered a prop plane and a vigorous schedule appropriate for the Iron Man. He barnstormed in 36 states, travelling 150,000 miles, and gave 250 speeches. Although Libbey does not

assess Barkley's role in what has been viewed as one of the nation's biggest political upsets, others have judged him particularly effective in the farm belt where the Democrats performed much better than expected.

Barkley was an active and loved vice president. Some regarded him, next to Dwight D. Eisenhower, as the most respected political figure of his day. Once Truman decided not to run in 1952 and several potential candidates refused his support, Barkley decided to make the try in one last effort to capture the office has grandmother had said might be his one day. Truman gave Barkley his blessing even though Barkley's age and health were serious concerns and passed the buck to the delegates. Truman counseled that labor leaders should be consulted individually to deprive them the possibility to object to Barkley's candidacy as a group. However, he failed to follow that advice, and Truman's fears became reality. Barkley took his defeat hard, especially given all that he had done in the past for organized labor and the working man. Instead, time for a final speech was set before an appreciative audience. Libbey says that Barkley received more than one million telegrams and letters from that speech. In reality, it was unlikely that any Democrat could have defeated Eisenhower, the hero of the Second World War, but Libbey believes that Barkley would have run a better campaign than Adlai Stevenson II, a distant kinsman and son of the former vice president grandmother Barkley spoke about in his childhood.

One could have hoped that Libbey would have been more focused on Barkley's impact on Kentucky as his political influence increased. For example, Libbey misses an opportunity to discuss Barkley's influence over the federal response to the Ohio River flood of 1937 which resulted in significant flood controls on Kentucky's major rivers and the development of hydroelectric power in the Tennessee River, the most important of which was the dam on the Tennessee River at Gilbertsville in the Jackson Purchase. It and the nearby Barkley Dam on the Cumberland River became the basis for bringing electricity to Western Kentucky farms, homes, and work places. Without the cheap electricity in the region, the massive uranium enrichment plant at Paducah approved by the Truman administration during the Korean War and the thousands of jobs needed to provide even more electricity using coal from the Western Kentucky Coal Field would not have been created. Some presume that Barkley may have had a determining role in the location of that facility, but no historical proof that he did has surfaced.

Many might have thought that would be his last act on the political stage with his failed 1952 presidential bid, but there would a curtain call when Kentucky Democrats coaxed him back in 1954 to defeat incumbent Republican U.S. Senator John Sherman Cooper, a very popular figure in Kentucky politics. He enjoyed his return to the body where he had served so long, but his eyesight did not allow him to participate in the proceedings as he had in the past. This did not deter him from accepting

speaking engagements as he had for many years. Perhaps the one thing that will be remembered most in the annals of Kentucky political history was the 1956 speech at Washington and Lee University. There, in the course of his speech as he explained his comfort with his minor role in the United States Senate, he added, "'I'm glad to sit on the back row. For I would rather be a servant in the House of the Lord than to sit in the seats of the mighty.'" That said, he collapsed and died.

About the Reviewer:

Dr. Humphreys earned his BA and MA in History from Murray State University. He lives in Muhlenberg County KY where he retired recently as the campus director of Madisonville Community College. Dr. Humphreys is currently writing a book on the political history of Western Kentucky since the New Deal for the University Press of Kentucky.