Vice Presidents of the United States Alben W. Barkley (1949-1953)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



Barkley, as Vice President, was in a class by himself. He had the complete confidence of both the President and the Senate.

—Harry S. Truman

Alben W. Barkley, who served as vice president of the United States from 1949 to 1953, was popularly known as the "Veep." His young grandson had suggested this abbreviated alternative to the cumbersome "Mr. Vice President." When Barkley told the story at a press conference, the newspapers printed it, and the title stuck. Barkley's successor as vice president, Richard Nixon, declined to continue the nickname, saying that it had been bestowed on Barkley affectionately and belonged to him. While commentators may occasionally use "veep" as a generic term for vice presidents, historically the term is Barkley's alone. ¹

A storyteller of great repute, Alben Barkley frequently poked fun at himself and his office. He was especially fond of telling about the mother who had two sons. One went to sea; the other became vice president; and neither was heard from again. In Barkley's case, the story was not at all true. He made sure that the public heard from him, and about him, as often as possible. And what the public heard, they liked, for Alben Barkley performed admirably as vice president of the United States.

Seventy years old when he was sworn in as vice president, Alben Barkley was a genial grandfatherly figure—but with enough life left in him to court and marry a widow half his age and to captivate national attention with their May-December romance. In many ways, Barkley was the last of the old-time vice presidents, the last to preside regularly over the Senate, the last not to have an office in or near the White House, the last to identify more with the legislative than the executive branch. He was an old warhorse, the veteran of many political battles, the perpetual keynote speaker of his party who could rouse delegates from their lethargy to shout and cheer for the party's leaders and platform. His stump-speaker's lungs enabled him to bellow out a speech without need for a microphone. He was

partisan to the marrow, but with a sense of humor and a gift of storytelling that defused partisan and personal animosities.²

Campaigning on Horseback

Ever the politician, Alben Barkley loved to point out that he had been born in a log house, in Graves County, Kentucky, on November 24, 1877. The baby was named Willie Alben, a name that always embarrassed him, and as soon as he was old enough to have a say about it, he reversed the order and formalized the name to Alben William. "Just imagine the tribulations I would have had," he later commented, "a robust, active boy, going through a Kentucky childhood with the name of 'Willie,' and later trying to get into politics!" ³

Barkley worked his way through Marvin College, a Methodist institution in Clinton, Kentucky. He also briefly attended Emory College and the University of Virginia law school. As did most lawyers in those days, he learned his trade mainly by "reading" law, in a Paducah law office, before hanging out his own shingle. In 1903 he married and began to raise a family. Two years later, Alben Barkley ran for prosecuting attorney of McCracken County. Later he would deny the stories that he campaigned on a mule. "This story is a base canard, and, here and now, I wish to spike it for all time," he wrote in his memoirs, *That Reminds Me*. "It was not a mule—it was a horse."

From prosecuting attorney, Barkley ran for county judge, and in 1912, at the age of thirty-five, he won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. His victory began a forty-two-year career in national politics that would take him from the House to the Senate to the vice-presidency. Barkley entered politics as a Democrat in the mold of Jefferson, Jackson, and William Jennings Bryan, but in Congress he came under the powerful influence of President Woodrow Wilson. As a Wilsonian, Barkley came to define flexibility of government and a willingness to experiment with social and economic programs as the policies of "a true Liberal." Although he was later closely identified with the New Deal, Barkley asserted: "I was a liberal and a progressive long before I ever heard of Franklin D. Roosevelt." In 1923, Representative Barkley made an unsuccessful run for the Democratic nomination as governor of Kentucky. That sole electoral defeat actually helped propel him into the Senate, because the race gave him name recognition throughout Kentucky and won him the title "iron man," for his ability to give as many as sixteen speeches a day on the campaign trail. In 1926 Barkley won the nomination for the United States Senate and defeated an incumbent Republican to win the seat. By the 1930s he had moved into the Senate Democratic leadership as an assistant to Majority Leader Joseph T. Robinson. He also received national attention as the keynote speaker at the 1932 Democratic convention that first nominated Franklin D. Roosevelt for president.

The Struggle for the Majority Leadership

During the early New Deal, Barkley served shoulder to shoulder with Majority Leader Robinson. Rarely were two leaders so starkly different in nature, which perhaps explains the effectiveness of their combined efforts. Joe Robinson of Arkansas, who had led the Democratic minority in the 1920s and became majority leader in 1933, gave the impression "of brute, animal strength, and a willingness to use it." He ran the Senate by a mix of threats, favors, and parliamentary skill. Robinson had no patience to cajole, and left such tasks to trusted aides like Barkley, South Carolina's James F. Byrnes, and Mississippi's Pat Harrison. "Scrappy Joe" could annihilate an opponent in debate, but for the most part he preferred to leave the oratory to Barkley, who could talk on any subject for any amount of time. Unlike Robinson, Barkley had no ability when it came to threatening and domineering. He succeeded through the art of compromise, and through his convivial personality and gift of storytelling.⁷

When Robinson died during the fierce legislative battle to enact President Roosevelt's "Court packing" plan in 1937, a contest developed between Senators Barkley and Harrison to become majority leader. Pat Harrison was chairman of the influential Finance Committee, and a beloved figure in the Senate who held the loyalty of many members. It appeared that Harrison would win the race—much to President Roosevelt's dismay. Although Harrison had worked for enactment of much New Deal legislation, he was too conservative and too independent for Roosevelt's taste. Moreover, most of the opponents of Roosevelt's Court plan stood with Harrison, who had refrained from speaking out on that controversial issue. Although professing neutrality, Roosevelt privately threw his support behind Barkley, pressing state Democratic leaders to lobby their senators in Barkley's behalf. Roosevelt also addressed a

public letter to "My dear Alben," implying his endorsement of the Kentucky senator. When Barkley won the majority leadership by a single vote, many senators—including his own supporters—interpreted his election as a victory for the president rather than for Barkley. For many years thereafter his colleagues assumed that he spoke primarily for the White House to the Senate, rather than for the Senate to the White House.

After the forceful leadership of Joe Robinson, any successor would suffer by comparison, and the press soon began to taunt "bumbling Barkley." On paper he led an enormous majority of 76 Democrats against 16 Republicans and a handful of independents. But in fact the Democratic party was seriously divided between its liberal and conservative wings, and Barkley could not guarantee a majority behind any of the administration's domestic programs. Not until World War II forged a new cohesiveness in the Senate did Barkley truly have a majority behind him. Without question, he grew in office, gaining respect from both senators and journalists for his dogged hard work and persistent good nature.

The Majority Leader Resigns

Senator Barkley was part of the "Big Four" that included Vice President Henry Wallace, House Speaker Sam Rayburn, and House Majority Leader John McCormack. The Big Four met regularly with President Roosevelt to map the administration's legislative strategy. Barkley saw himself as the leader of the president's forces, out to enact the president's program. But in 1944 even Barkley's loyalty was stretched to the breaking point. Relations between the administration and Congress had grown strained during the war, as the chief executive was preoccupied by military and diplomatic affairs. In February 1944, Roosevelt became the first president to veto a revenue bill, rejecting a two-billion-dollar tax increase as insufficient and declaring it a relief measure "not for the needy but for the greedy." Senator Barkley, who had worked out the compromises within the Senate Finance Committee, of which he was a member, and who believed it was the best bill he could get passed, felt incensed over the president's accusations. He rose in the Senate to urge his colleagues to override the president's veto. Then he resigned as majority leader. 9

The next day, the Senate Democrats unanimously reelected Barkley as their leader, and from then on it was clear that Barkley spoke *for* the Senate *to* the White House. The dramatic resignation and reelection elevated Barkley's respect and standing as a leader but also dampened his relations with President Roosevelt. That summer, when the Democratic convention met and it became clear that the unpopular Henry Wallace would need to be replaced as vice president, the mood of the convention favored Barkley for the job, but Roosevelt would not tolerate one who had so recently rebelled against him. Instead he chose the less-known Missouri Senator Harry Truman. The Roosevelt-Truman ticket won election in the fall, and in April 1945 it was Vice President Truman, not Alben Barkley, who inherited the presidency upon Roosevelt's death.¹⁰

Whatever bitterness Barkley might have felt he put aside, transferring his loyalty completely to Truman. During Truman's short vice-presidency, they enjoyed what Barkley called a "catcher-pitcher" relationship, with the majority leader calling the signals. They continued to work together closely after Truman moved to the White House. These were rough years for the Democrats. In the 1946 elections voters sent Republican majorities to the Senate and House for the first time since the Great Depression. Barkley became minority leader during the Eightieth Congress in 1947 and 1948. It was a foregone conclusion that the Republicans would also win the presidency in 1948, and the smart money was on New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey to become the next president.

A Remarkable Upset

A dispirited Democratic convention met in Philadelphia in 1948. Yet, once again, Alben Barkley was able to lift his party's spirits and get the delegates cheering with an old-fashioned, rip-roaring, Republican-bashing keynote address. The demonstration that followed his speech was so long and so enthusiastic that Barkley became the obvious choice for vice president. President Truman, suspicious that Barkley, who had mentioned him only once in the hour-long speech, was trying to replace him at the top of the ticket, was not eager to have the senator as his running mate. "Old man Barkley," as Truman called him, was seventy years old, and their neighboring states were too similar to balance the ticket regionally. But since others—like Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas—had

turned him down, Truman agreed to accept Barkley for his running mate if the delegates wanted him. "It will have to come quick," Barkley said of his selection. "I don't want it passed along so long it is like a cold biscuit." When offered the second place on the ticket, Barkley, so often the bridesmaid in the past, accepted with pleasure and set out on a grueling speaking tour that showed he was still an "iron man" at age seventy.¹¹

While the president whistle-stopped by train, Barkley made the first "prop stop" campaign by air. He had come a long way since the days when he first campaigned for office on horseback. In six weeks he toured thirty-six states and gave more than 250 speeches. He spoke to so many small audiences that the press dubbed him "the poor man's candidate." But his strength and stamina refuted the charges that he had been too old to run.¹²

The election of 1948 proved to be the most dramatic upset of all time. It is doubtful whether there is a single American history textbook in the schools today that fails to include the famous picture of a smiling Harry Tru man holding up the *Chicago Tribune*'s erroneous headline: "Dewey Defeats Truman." So in January 1949 Alben Barkley stepped down again as Senate Democratic leader, this time to become president of the Senate. As vice president, Barkley buried whatever differences he had with Truman and the two men got along well, although some mutual suspicions lingered on. For years in the Senate it had been Truman who called Barkley "boss." And Barkley must surely have thought of President Truman: "There but for the spite of Franklin Roosevelt, go I." Yet in every respect, politically, ideologically, and socially, the two men were remarkably alike and worked together harmoniously.

The Delicate Nature of the Vice-Presidency

Having served in the job, even if briefly, Harry Truman understood the delicate nature of the vice-presidency, which he noted fell between the legislative and executive branches without being responsible to either. "The Vice-President cannot become completely acquainted with the policies of the President, while the senators, for their part, look on him as a presiding officer only, who is outside the pale as far as the senatorial club is concerned." Despite being presiding officer, the vice president was "hardly ever" consulted about legislative matters. Although he could lobby for the president's legislation, he had nothing to trade for votes. Truman noted that the status of John Nance Garner had rested more on his position within the Democratic party than on the vice-presidency, while Henry Wallace was a party outsider who had little influence within the Senate. Alben Barkley, by contrast, "was in a class by himself," declared Truman. "He had the complete confidence of both the President and the Senate."

Although new in the job, Barkley had long experience in dealing with vice presidents. He recalled how as a freshman senator in 1927 he had gone to the rostrum in the Senate chamber to chat with Vice President Charles Dawes, who said, "Barkley, this is a helluva job I have as Vice-President." "What is the matter with it?" Barkley asked, to which Dawes replied: "I can do only two things here. One of them is to sit up here on this rostrum and listen to you birds talk without the ability to reply. The other is to look at the newspapers every morning to see how the President's health is." ¹⁴

As party leader in the Senate, Alben Barkley had assessed the influence of several vice presidents over legislation and decided that the degree of influence depended on the person who held the office. Vice presidents with experience in the House or Senate could occasionally exercise some leverage on legislation. As an example, Barkley cited former House Speaker John Nance Garner as the vice president who "exercised larger influence in the passage of legislation than any other occupant of the Office." Garner assisted the passage of early New Deal legislation "in an informal and entirely proper way," helping to speed emergency bills through the Senate. Barkley therefore declared that "a Vice-President who is well liked by members of the Senate and by the corresponding members of the House in charge of legislation can exercise considerable power in the shaping of the program of legislation which every administration seeks to enact."

Unlike some of his predecessors, Barkley was determined not to enter into a "four-year period of silence." He accepted hundreds of invitations to speak at meetings, conventions, banquets, and other partisan and nonpartisan programs. "I like to do it," he explained. "I like people and I enjoy the thrill of crowds. I have always believed it to be the duty of those who are elected to high office by the people to take government to them whenever and by whatever legitimate means possible." Traveling almost exclusively by air, Barkley claimed to have spent more time

in the air than all his predecessors combined. Having served twenty-two years as a member of the House and Senate, and the past twelve as Democratic leader, he missed taking an active part in the debates and piloting legislation through to passage. He found that the office did not consume all his energies. Barkley constantly sought other activities to occupy his time, attending meetings of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee, legislative conferences with the president, and cabinet meetings. He was the first vice president to become a member of the National Security Council, as provided by the National Security Act of 1947. "All these conferences I attend regularly," he said in 1952, noting that he enjoyed them and engaged freely in the discussions.¹⁵

Proud to be the Presiding Officer

Nevertheless, Alben Barkley was also the last vice president to preside regularly over the Senate. Senate Parliamentarian Floyd Riddick estimated that Barkley presided between 50 and 75 percent of the time, a figure that seems incredibly high today, but which reflected the traditional concept of the vice president's constitutional responsibility. As one who presided routinely, Barkley also used the Vice President's Room, outside the chamber, as his working office. He was proud to occupy that historic room, and liked to keep a wood fire burning in its fireplace, the smell of wood smoke reminding him of the open hearth in his childhood home. He also took pleasure in the furnishings and art works of the room that were associated with famo us names from the past. ¹⁶

In the Eighty-first Congress, which began in January 1949, the Democrats enjoyed a 54-to-42 majority in the Senate. By the Eighty-second Congress, their margin had shrunk to 49 to 47. But in both of those congresses the real majority belonged to a coalition of conservative Democrats and Republicans. This conservative coalition had emerged out of the opposition to FDR's Court packing plan in 1937 and predominated in the Senate at least until the liberal Democratic sweep of Senate elections in 1958. During the Second World War and throughout the Truman administration, this conservative coalition frequently frustrated administration efforts to enact domestic reform legislation.¹⁷

President Truman had proposed an ambitious Fair Deal program to deal with national health insurance, farm supports, labor-management relations, and civil rights, but the conservative coalition repeatedly derailed his legislative initiatives, often through the use of filibusters. In the field of civil rights, for instance, the president desegregated the armed forces through executive order but had no luck in winning congressional approval of bills to outlaw the poll tax, make lynching a federal crime, or prohibit segregation and discrimination in interstate commerce. More typical of congressional attitudes at the time was the passage of a bill to authorize segregated schools on federal property—a bill which President Truman vetoed. "Step by step we are discarding old discriminations;" he declared, "we must not adopt new ones." ¹⁸

The Senate overturned some of Vice President Barkley's rulings. Charles Watkins, who served as parliamentarian during Barkley's vice-presidency, observed that, while Barkley was well acquainted with the Senate's rules, he would sometimes get them mixed up or become obstinate about how a rule should be applied. On a few occasions, Barkley persisted in his own interpretations of the rules in spite of Watkins' advice, only to have the Senate reverse his rulings—which dealt with efforts to enact civil rights legislation. Early in 1949, Barkley's successor as majority leader, Senator Scott Lucas of Illinois, attempted to amend the rules to make cloture easier to obtain as a way of ending a filibuster. Georgia Senator Richard Russell led the opposition to any rules changes that might favor civil rights legislation. In a procedural move—and against the parliamentarian's advice—Barkley ruled against Russell's point of order, but the Senate, by a vote of 41 yeas to 46 nays, failed to sustain the chair's ruling. Barkley was apparently willing to take the risk of defeat both because of his support for the administration's civil rights program and because of his own frustration at the Senate's inability to invoke cloture and end debate during his years as majority leader. ¹⁹

As vice president, Barkley did what he could to help his successors as majority leader, Scott Lucas (who served from 1949 to 1951) and Ernest McFarland (who held the leadership from 1951 to 1953). Barkley continued to interpret the relationship between the vice president and the floor leader as that of catcher and pitcher. With the divisions inside the ranks of the Democratic party, however, as well as the rapidly diminishing popularity of the Truman administration, Barkley often watched his successors' pitches go wild. Lucas and McFarland were more

legislative mechanics than floor leaders, and neither achieved Barkley's status or prestige in the post. As one journalist observed, they made the job of majority leader "misery without splendor." Despite their leadership roles, Lucas and McFarland were each in turn defeated when they ran for reelection. Perhaps the sight of their increasing discomfort and distress may have added to Barkley's own comfort and pleasure in his position as presiding officer rather than floor leader. ²⁰

An Activist Vice President

As vice president, Alben Barkley tried to be as much of an activist as his office would allow. He was assisted by a sympathetic president, who not only had held the job, but was a student of American government and history and thought seriously about how to enhance the vice-presidency. By executive order, President Truman proclaimed a new coat of arms, seal, and flag for the vice president. "You can make 'em step aside now," Truman assured Barkley when the new symbols of office were unveiled. Truman also supported a raise in the vice president's salary and expenses. When Barkley celebrated his thirty-eighth anniversary of service in the legislative branch, President Truman paid a surprise visit to the Senate chamber to present to the vice president a gavel made from timber taken from the White House during its reconstruction. Barkley was deeply touched by the gesture. In accepting the gift, Barkley noted that President Truman frequently said that no president and vice president got along together as well as they did. "The reason for this," Barkley told the Senate, "is that I have let him have his way about everything." "22"

During the 1950 congressional campaign, which occurred after the United States had entered the Korean War, President Truman left the job of campaigning for Democratic candidates to Vice President Barkley, who barnstormed the nation. Although Barkley's party suffered losses, the Democrats retained their majorities in both houses of Congress.²³ Yet, despite his vigorous campaigning, it became evident that age was beginning to catch up with Alben Barkley. In 1950, the columnist Drew Pearson attended a dinner for the vice president, at which the president, chief justice, and Speaker of the House were present. Barkley gave a brief speech and "seemed a little old and tired," Pearson recorded in his private diary. "It was about the first time that his speech wasn't all it usually is." 24 Even though he was exempted from the Twenty-second Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1951, that limited future presidents to two terms, Truman announced his decision not to seek a third term. Vice President Barkley then sought the Democratic nomination for president, but his age and failing eyesight defeated his candidacy. Organized labor, which exerted great influence within the Democratic party organization, openly opposed his nomination because he was too old. Although deeply hurt, Barkley accepted the decision and withdrew from the race. He was invited to deliver a farewell address to the convention and did so with characteristic grace and style, celebrating the Democratic "crusade" that he had helped to lead to ensure a "happier and fuller life to all mankind in the years that lie before us." When he bid the convention good-by, the delegates awarded him a fortyfive-minute ovation, demonstrating the enormous affection that the party felt for him, even as they denied him his heart's desire.²⁵

Return from Retirement

Alben Barkley retired to Kentucky but could not stay retired for long. In 1954 he ran once again for a seat in the Senate against the incumbent Republican Senator John Sherman Cooper. Campaigning always seemed to invigorate him, and he swept back into office by a comfortable margin. His victory helped return the Senate Democrats to a one-vote majority and made Lyndon Johnson majority leader. Two years later, in 1956, students at Washington and Lee University invited Senator Alben Barkley to deliver the keynote address at their mock convention. He accepted and gave one of his classic rip-snorting, Republican-bashing, Democratic-praising orations. At its conclusion he reminded his audience that after all of his years in national politics he had become a freshman once again, but that he had declined an offer of a front row seat with other senior senators. "I'm glad to sit on the back row," he declared, "for I would rather be a servant in the House of the Lord than to sit in the seats of the mighty." Then, with the applause of the crowd in his ears, Alben Barkley collapsed and died from a massive heart attack. For an old-fashioned orator, there could have been no more appropriate final exit from the stage. ²⁶

Clearly, Alben Barkley enjoyed being vice president of the United States. Although he missed the opportunity to speak out, maneuver, and vote on bills as he had as senator and majority leader, he enjoyed promoting the

president's legislative program. He also savored the thrill of the crowds that a vice president can attract, relished performing the ceremonial duties, and delighted in the prestige of national office. "I hope the Vice-Presidency continues to hold the respect of the American people," he said. "The qualifications for it are the same as for the Presidency itself. They have to be; for he may become the President in case of a death or disability." The best way for vice presidents to retain respect, he concluded, was to deserve it. "I have always felt that public officers should lean backwards in the performance of their official duties because, to a larger extent than many people realize, they are looked upon as exa mples of probity and propriety in dealing with public matters. It will be a sad day for this country and its institutions if and when the people lose confidence in their public servants." For his part, Alben Barkley retained public confidence—even public affection—throughout his long career in the legislative branch and for four years cast the vice presidency in a highly positive light.

Notes:

- 1. Alben W. Barkley, *That Reminds Me* (Garden City, NY, 1954), pp. 21-22.
- 2. For Barkley's life and career, see James K. Libbey, *Dear Alben: Mr. Barkley of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY, 1976), and Polly Ann Davis, *Alben Barkley: Senate Majority Leader and Vice President* (New York, 1979).
- 3. Barkley, *That Reminds Me*, p. 27.
- 4. Ibid., p. 77.
- 5. Donald A. Ritchie, "Alben W. Barkley: The President's Man," in Richard A. Baker and Roger H. Davidson, eds., *First Among Equals: Outstanding Senate Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Washington, 1991), pp. 130, 146. 6. Ibid., pp. 129-31.
- 7. Donald C. Bacon, "Joseph Taylor Robinson: The Good Soldier," in Baker and Davidson, eds., *First Among Equals*, pp. 63-66.
- 8. Ritchie, pp. 127-29.
- 9. The events surrounding Barkley's resignation are dramatically recounted in Allen Drury's *A Senate Journal*, 1943-1945 (New York, 1963), pp. 85-97.
- 10. Barkley, *That Reminds Me*, pp. 169-94.
- 11. Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York, 1995), pp. 448-51; robert J. Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman*, 1945-1948 (New York, 1977), pp. 405-6; Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York, 1973), pp. 9-11; David McCullough, *Truman* (New York, 1992), pp. 637-38.
- 12. Barkley, *That Reminds Me*, pp. 195-204.
- 13. Harry S. Truman, Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, vol. 1, Year of Decisions (Garden City, NY, 1955), p. 57.
- 14. Alben W. Barkley, "The Vice-Presidency," May 1952, pp. 7-8, Alben W. Barkley Papers, University of Kentucky.
- 15. Ibid., pp. 12-14.
- 16. *Floyd M. Riddick: Senate Parliamentarian*, Oral History Interviews, June 26, 1978 to February 15, 1979 (U.S. Senate Historical Office, Washington, DC), p. 66; Barkley, *That Reminds Me*, p. 210.
- 17. See James T. Patterson, Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939 (Lexington, KY, 1967).
- 18. Harold F. Gosnell, *Truman's Crises: A Political Biography of Harry S. Truman* (Westport, CT, 1980), pp. 439-49, 481-90.
- 19. Floyd M. Riddick, pp. 67, 126-28, 144-46; U.S., Congress, Senate, Congressional Record, 81st Cong, 1st sess., p. 2274; Gilbert C. Fite, Richard Russell, Jr.: Senator from Georgia (Chapel HIII, NC, 1991), pp. 245-46.
- 20. Ritchie, pp. 156-57.
- 21. Davis, pp. 280-81.
- 22. Congressional Record, 82d Cong., 1st sess, p. 1710.
- 23. Gosnell, pp. 453-54.
- 24. Tyler Abell, ed., *Drew Pearson, Diaries*, 1949-1959 (New York, 1974), pp. 128-29.
- 25. Barkley, *That Reminds Me*, pp. 231-51.
- 26. Ibid., pp. 312-14.