

Office Wall Décor

*John Q. Barrett**

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Robert H. Jackson became the Attorney General of the United States on January 18, 1940. He took the oath of office that morning at an elaborate White House ceremony in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's second floor study. The walls of that room were covered with items from FDR's large collection of naval prints and paintings.¹

Later that day, new Attorney General Jackson went to the Department of Justice building on Constitution Avenue. This was no new workplace for him. Jackson had joined the Department in 1936, when he was appointed Assistant Attorney General heading the Tax Division. He continued at Justice when he became Assistant Attorney General heading the Antitrust Division in 1937, and then as Solicitor General of the United States, the Department's number two position, from 1938 until he was appointed Attorney General.

When Robert Jackson went back to Justice that Thursday afternoon, he went to what was now his old office, the Solicitor General's office. He met briefly with reporters there, to be accessible and to announce some immediate Department personnel changes that he was making.

Jackson conducted this press conference while seated on the corner of his desk. He had, nearby and framed, a drawing from a 1919 magazine. It depicted a young man, seated at a desk, surrounded by books and deep darkness, working in the low light cast by an oil lamp. Over his head, a phantom hand held a laurel wreath. The caption was the gist of a line from a poem by Jackson's favorite writer, Rudyard Kipling: "He travels fastest who travels alone." Jackson had received this drawing years earlier from

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For a selected archive of Jackson List postings, see my homepage at www.law.stjohns.edu. To subscribe to the Jackson List, send a note to barrettj@stjohns.edu.

¹ A photograph of FDR and Jackson on this occasion, shaking hands in front of two paintings of ships, is one of the illustrations in ROBERT H. JACKSON, THAT MAN: AN INSIDER'S PORTRAIT OF FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT (John Q. Barrett, ed., 2003).

his distant relative and important mentor, Jamestown, New York, lawyer Frank Mott.²

In Washington and everywhere, people reveal themselves in their decorating choices—wall décor announces much, intentionally and sometimes not, about such things as who we are, where we have come from, what we have, who and what we admire and value, and how we see ourselves.

At the Department of Justice, senior officials get to choose, by rank, to furnish their offices and conference rooms with items from a special and varied art collection: the Department's portraits of each Attorney General.³ In recent years, these have been some officials' decorating choices:

- Attorney General Janet Reno (1993-2001) had, in her private office, the portrait of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy (1961-64);
- Solicitor General Seth P. Waxman (1997-2001) had, in his conference room, the portraits of the Attorneys General (including Jackson) who previously had served as Solicitors General;
- Deputy Attorney General Larry D. Thompson (2001-03) displayed in his front office the portrait of his fellow Georgian and friend, Attorney General Griffin B. Bell (1977-79);⁴
- Assistant Attorney General (Office of Legal Counsel) Jack L. Goldsmith III (2003-04) chose for his office the portrait of Attorney General Elliot Richardson (1973). (In his important new book, Goldsmith writes that when he joined the Department of Justice three years into President Bush's first term, "the most popular Attorney General portraits had

² See EUGENE C. GERHART, *AMERICA'S ADVOCATE: ROBERT H. JACKSON* 48 (1958).

³ Many of these portraits are reproduced in UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, *ATTORNEYS GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1980). Biographical information on the first eighty Attorneys General (Edmund Randolph through Alberto Gonzales) is available at www.usdoj.gov/jmd/lis/agbiographies.htm.

⁴ See Rebecca Carr, *Ashcroft's Atlantans*, ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONST., Sept. 29, 2002, at 1A.

been taken,” leaving the Richardson “painting [that] no one else wanted....”⁵);

- Deputy Attorney General James B. Comey (2003-05), arriving after Goldsmith but outranking him, chose for his office the RFK portrait;
- Acting Attorney General Peter D. Keisler (2007) today has, in the Attorney General’s large conference room, the portraits of four former Attorneys General: Edwards Pierrepont (1875-76), Harlan Fiske Stone (1924-25), William P. Rogers (1957-1961) and RFK; and
- Solicitor General Paul B. Clement (2005-present) has, in his immediate office, painter John C. Johansen’s 1942 portrait of Attorney General Robert H. Jackson (1940-41).⁶

When Michael B. Mukasey, President Bush’s nominee to serve as the next Attorney General, was a Federal District Judge in the Southern District of New York (1987-2006), he had at least two portrait photographs in his chambers. One was a favorite writer, George Orwell—Judge Mukasey told a reporter in 1989 that Orwell “is a particular idol of mine for his clear writing and complete disdain for cant.”⁷ The other was a photograph of Robert H. Jackson.⁸

Mr. Mukasey soon will, if he is confirmed and so inclined, be able to upgrade to an oil portrait of Jackson.

⁵ JACK GOLDSMITH, *THE TERROR PRESIDENCY: LAW & JUDGMENT INSIDE THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION* 9 (2007).

⁶ This portrait is reproduced in UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, ATTORNEYS GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES, *supra* note 3, at 115. This publication also contains biographical information about Jackson and Johansen. *See id.* at 114, 108.

In July 2002, I delivered a lecture on Robert Jackson’s participation in tribute and dedication events, his various portraits that are displayed in locations throughout the country, and the magnetic power of great people and their depictions. It later was published as John Q. Barrett, *A Jackson Portrait for Jamestown, “A Magnet in the Room,”* 50 BUFFALO L. REV. 809 (Fall 2002). It includes, on page 808, a color reproduction of painter Lurabel Long Colburn’s portrait of Jackson, which is on display at the Robert H. Jackson Center.

⁷ Roderick Oram, *Minorco’s Least Favorite Lawman*, FINANCIAL TIMES, May 12, 1989, at 26.

⁸ *See* Richard B. Schmitt & Richard A. Serrano, *Mukasey’s Independent Streak Could Mark a Turn for the White House*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, Sept. 23, 2007.