

## Presidential Relaxation, Friendly Poker, War in Europe (1939)

*John Q. Barrett\**

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In late June 1939, Solicitor General Robert H. Jackson, his wife Irene and their daughter Mary left Washington, D.C., on a driving trip. Their stops included Chillicothe, Ohio, where Jackson visited a reformatory for first offenders; Milwaukee, where he spoke at the Wisconsin State Bar Association's annual convention; and San Francisco, where he spoke multiple times at the American Bar Association's annual meeting, and also at the Commonwealth Club, and visited the federal penitentiary on Alcatraz Island.

From San Francisco, the Jacksons made a side trip by train to Sun Valley, Idaho. Robert and Mary, then eighteen, going into her sophomore year at Smith College, took part in a horseback expedition in the Sawtooth National Forest.

In early August, the Jacksons returned to Washington. Robert returned to his work at the Department of Justice. He also made trips to give political speeches in Pittsburgh and at the Illinois State Fair in Springfield.

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Near the end of August, despite the growing threat of war in Europe and the increasing significance of war-related issues in Jackson's work, he, Irene and Mary drove from Washington to their former hometown, Jamestown, New York. They planned to stay through the first week of September, visiting and relaxing with Jackson's mother and other family and friends.

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On Thursday, August 31st, General Edwin M. (“Pa”) Watson, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s appointments secretary, telephoned Jackson in Jamestown. Watson said that the President was in the mood for a social evening with a few friends, a chance to forget about the war, and that it was being arranged for Saturday night, September 2nd. Watson said the President wanted Jackson to attend.

Jackson left Jamestown on the next evening, Friday, September 1st. Driving alone and through the night, he reached Washington on Saturday morning, September 2nd. During that day, he met with his boss, Attorney General Frank Murphy. Around 6:45 p.m., Jackson went to the White House.

President Roosevelt greeted his guests in his second floor study.<sup>1</sup> (It then was called “the Oval Room;” today it is called “the Yellow Oval Room.”<sup>2</sup>) The other members of the group of six were, in addition to FDR, “Pa” Watson and Robert Jackson, Harold L. Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior; Stephen T. Early, the President’s press secretary; and Dr. Ross T. McIntire, M.D., a U.S. Navy admiral and the President’s physician.

The President mixed cocktails for the group. They enjoyed the drinks, talked and were able to have some laughs, including over a note that William O. Douglas, Roosevelt’s former Securities and Exchange Commission chairman and his Supreme Court appointee of a few months earlier, had sent. Justice Douglas, who also had been invited to attend that evening but was not able to be there, referred in his note to the Chief Justice of the United States, Charles Evans Hughes, as “Charles the Baptist.” This was a favorite FDR nickname for Hughes, a Baptist, who at earlier times had been something of an FDR antagonist ... and never was his guest at an informal White House gathering.

After cocktails, the group went to the White House family quarters for a simple dinner. Although the European situation was not discussed much, FDR did tell his guests that he was in constant telephone contact with the U.S. Ambassadors in Paris and London, William C. Bullitt and

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<sup>1</sup> The account that follows is based on Jackson’s writings, including notes that he made shortly in September 1939 and his later recollections. See ROBERT H. JACKSON, *THAT MAN: AN INSIDER’S PORTRAIT OF FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT* at 75-77 & 240-41 n.10 (John Q. Barrett, ed., 2003). See also HAROLD L. ICKES, *THE SECRET DIARY OF HAROLD L. ICKES: THE INSIDE STRUGGLE* at 712-13 (vol. II, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> See The White House Museum, *Yellow Oval Room*, at [www.whitehousemuseum.org/floor2/yellow-oval-room.htm](http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/floor2/yellow-oval-room.htm).

Joseph P. Kennedy, respectively, and that their reports indicated that prospects were ominous.

After dinner, the group returned to the President's study. They played poker. Admiral McIntire, watching out for the President's health, announced that the card playing would stop at 11:00 p.m. FDR objected and—being the President—he received permission for play to continue until 11:45.

In the heat and fun of the poker play, the group forgot, at times, the looming war. Jackson could see the President relax.

Roosevelt's usual good luck at cards was not with him that night. The big winner was Ickes. He announced that he now could afford to have a baby, which his wife did two days later.

Around 10:00 p.m., the State Department delivered to the President a message from Kennedy. After reading the cable, the President said sadly, "Gentlemen, by noon tomorrow, war will have been declared."

That was the case. On September 1st, Nazi Germany had invaded Poland. On September 3rd, its allies France and the United Kingdom declared war on Germany.

In between, and as they left the White House late on Saturday night, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, Jackson and his colleagues felt they had contributed to President Roosevelt's first relaxation in many days.