

# Smooth as a Flat Rock

The Kentucky senator has seen Bluegrass politics from the statehouse to the governor's mansion and back again.



BY LOWELL REESE

**W**hen Kentucky Governor William Goebel was shot to death in 1900—the only American governor ever assassinated while in office—he was succeeded by Lieutenant Governor J.C.W. Beckham. As lieutenant governor, Beckham was also president of the Senate, and a month earlier he had been speaker of the House.

Since then, only one other person has held

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Kentucky's top two jobs in the legislative branch and the top two jobs in the executive branch: Julian Carroll. He became speaker at age 37, lieutenant governor and Senate president at 40, governor at 43. Now at 79, he's halfway through a second term in the Kentucky Senate. And unlike Beckham, no one had to die for him to achieve the milestone.

When Carroll, a Democrat, ran for lieutenant governor and governor in the 1970s, Kentucky's diversity was a challenge for statewide candidates. There was coal in the east and cotton in the west. Cocktails were served before political rallies in the north, prayers were offered before rallies in the

south. Old-fashioned stump speaking and wooing of local courthouse officials were the tools of the trade. In all of those dimensions, Carroll—attorney, orator and lay preacher—was capable and smooth as a flat rock.

Always a leader, Carroll was also often lucky. He was born in western Kentucky, called the “Rock of Gibraltar” in political circles because the region was the state's largest enclave of Democrats.

#### DESTINED FOR POLITICS

In 1949, Carroll was elected governor of Kentucky Boys State, a mock-government program for high school students. When Car-

roll and the other Boys State governors met in Washington, D.C., Vice President Alben Barkley spoke to them. They also met President Harry Truman, who asked the 18-year-old Carroll where he was from. When Carroll replied, "Paducah," Truman quipped, "Seems like I've heard of that town." It was Barkley's hometown.

Carroll's public life reads like the fulfillment of a destiny. After earning a B.A. and then a law degree at the University of Kentucky, he entered the Air Force in 1956. He spent three years in uniform, most of it at Carswell Air Force Base in Fort Worth, Texas, where he was the attorney for the base commander, Brigadier General Nils Olman.

The general was so impressed with Lieutenant Carroll that he held a going-away party for him when he left the service. Generals don't usually do that. It became a tipping point in Carroll's career.

When he returned to Paducah in December 1959 to practice law, the local newspaper ran a large article about the general's party for Carroll. Soon afterward, a delegation of local

business leaders came to his law office and asked if he would lead a community effort to pass a referendum to allow the city to buy the Kentucky Utilities facility in town and convert to low-cost electricity from the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Carroll agreed and voters approved the referendum by almost 3-to-1. His name became a household word. He was on his way to a long career in politics with a statewide base of support in the electric utility industry.

Carroll was elected to the Kentucky House of Representatives in 1961. When he arrived at the Capitol in January 1962, Democrats outnumbered Republicans in both chambers, and Democratic Governor Bert T. Combs, like other governors of the period, dominated the legislature. He named the leaders, including committee chairs, and told legislators how to vote, and they complied.

"I remember Governor [Edward T. "Ned"] Breathitt coming to the floor of the House in his first legislative session in 1964," Carroll says. "Breathitt spoke. The floor leader introduced the governor's budget. We recessed

the House. The budget bill was referred to the Statutes 1 Committee. ... which met in the corner of the chamber and reported the bill out while the governor was still on the floor shaking hands. The next day, the bill was voted on and passed out of the House."

#### **CHANGE COMES**

In 1967, Republican Louie B. Nunn won the governor's office and brought a major change to Carroll's political fortunes. The House Democrats, still a majority, were now free from gubernatorial control.

Carroll saw it coming. A group of House Democrats called the "Young Turks"—which included now Lexington attorney W. Terry McBrayer—backed him for speaker, a position he held during Nunn's four-year term.

"We rallied around Julian. He was just a hair older and ahead of us politically," says McBrayer, who was Carroll's speaker pro tem in the 1968 session and majority floor leader in the 1970 session. "He was clean, articulate, extremely bright, and he came

*Former Kentucky governor and current Senator Julian Carroll.*



from the far west where the most Democrat votes were at the time.”

Speaker Carroll made significant changes in the House structure and procedures. Previously, out of 47 standing committees, only two really counted. Bills the governor wanted passed went to Statutes 1, and bills the governor wanted killed went to Statutes 2. There was no danger of reporting a bill out of Statute 2, Carroll says. “It never met.”

Carroll reduced the number of standing committees in the House to 18 and did away with the statutes committees. Most of the standing committees he established are still operating. And he wrote the House and Senate rules that are used today.

**THE PLANETS ALIGN**

The Republican governor’s term was up in 1971, and former Governor Combs announced he would seek the office again.



**REPRESENTATIVE**  
**JODY RICHARDS**  
**KENTUCKY**

Carroll’s friend J.R. Miller, whom he knew from their effort to form the Big Rivers Electric Corporation, told Carroll he was

going fishing with Combs in Canada. While they were together, Miller said he planned to ask him to choose Carroll as his running mate for lieutenant governor. Combs agreed, though in those days the governor and lieutenant governor were elected independently.

After the fishing trip, however, Miller switched his support from Combs to Lieutenant Governor Wendell Ford, who was from Miller’s hometown. In the primary, Ford defeated Combs. Carroll won his race and became Ford’s running mate in the fall. “It was not a very friendly relationship,” Carroll says, “but we ran together, and we were both elected.”

Ford was term limited, and his people didn’t want Carroll to succeed him. So in 1973, they tried to talk Carroll into running for the U.S. Senate in 1974 against incumbent Republican Marlow Cook.

Instead, Carroll called Robert Strauss in Washington, D.C., the Democrats’ national chairman, and explained how Ford could beat Cook in the Senate race. Strauss agreed and Ford ended up running against Cook and winning. The move made Carroll Kentucky’s 54th governor.

Carroll ran for a full term as governor in 1975 as an incumbent and won.

**DEFINING EVENTS**

Carroll faced two momentous events a year and a half apart that helped define his governorship.

In the final weeks of the 1975 election, Louisvillians rioted over the racial issue of forced school busing.

Mayor Harvey Sloane, anticipating destruction of property and potential violence, called the governor, and Carroll sent in 500 state police and the Kentucky National Guard. That broke the riot.

Sloane, a physician and now director of public health for the Washington, D.C.-based Eurasian Medical Education Program, recalls how difficult the decision was for Carroll in context of the election.

“Had there been a poll, only about 10 percent would have favored it,” Sloane says.

Then on May 28, 1977, the Beverly Hills Supper Club fire in South-

gate, the third deadliest nightclub fire in U.S. history, killed 165 people. The fire broke out around 9 p.m. Carroll was at the governor’s mansion with Kentucky native and movie star Lee Majors, “The Six Million Dollar Man.”

Carroll left Majors at the mansion and rode up the interstate in a state police car at speeds exceeding 100 mph. Throughout the night, he went from the scene of the tragedy to the hospital to the morgue.

“I watched them carry body bag by body bag out,” Carroll says. “I went down to the gymnasium where they were all laid out.”

Carroll fired the state’s fire marshal and immediately launched an investigation, which led to various reforms.

Roy Stevens, one of Carroll’s top staff officers, helped organize the



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investigation. He said the fire “brought into clear focus Julian’s finest qualities”—calm in a crisis, compassion for the victims, committed to getting the facts and doing what was needed in making changes.

#### PLAYING EACH ROLE WELL

While Carroll may have done more for legislative independence than anyone, as governor he exercised the full traditional powers of that office.

“A cockroach couldn’t crawl across the Senate floor without an OK from the governor stamped on its back,” says one observer in the book “New History of Kentucky.”

Representative Jody Richards, former speaker of the House, says

Carroll knew how to hold the reins of power tightly.

“One quality that made him effective was he knew when to dispense authority and when to use it. He allowed certain members to take home largesse and exercise limited authority from time to time.”

Carroll was persuasive, too.

“I was known as ‘the blackboard governor,’ ” he says. On major legislation, he invited legislators to the basement of the mansion where he had set up a large blackboard. “I made my presentations in detail, they asked questions, and when they left, they would be for my bills.”

Carroll is regarded as Kentucky’s last powerful governor. His successor, Democratic Governor John Y. Brown Jr., in the 1980 session, yielded to a rebellious band of Senate Democrats called the “Black Sheep Squadron,” who chose their own leaders. Other reforms to follow would make the legislative and executive branches equal.

In July 1978, the FBI launched an investigation of Carroll and others associated with his administration over leases and contracts. He testified before a grand jury, but was never indicted. He was called as a witness at the trial of another individual and took the Fifth Amendment, which made big news.

“My lawyers wouldn’t let me testify,” Carroll says. “They felt the Justice Department was trying to get me to testify in hopes I would commit perjury, and then they would indict me for that.”

The governors of five other states were being investigated at the same time; four were convicted.

In part, to restore his reputation, Carroll ran for governor again in 1987. Although he lost in the primary in a five-man field, “The thing that race did for me ... it cleared my name,” Carroll says.

Eighteen years later, he ran for the state Senate and won.

#### DIFFERENT ERA

Carroll never returned to Paducah to live after serving as governor. Instead, he bought a 109-acre farm outside of Frankfort, and began practicing law in the capital. As a state senator, his district has some of Kentucky’s famed horse farms, but his constituents are primarily government employees.

His committee assignments line up well with his district. He serves on State and Local Government, Health and Welfare, and Banking and Insurance—committees with jurisdiction over most issues dealing with government employees. No other senator serves on as many working committees as Carroll. He is on eight committees, in part, because he lives close to the Capitol, he says.

In this final chapter of his political career, he is best known for his floor speeches on a wide range of subjects, especially education, health care and the budget.

The arena has changed strikingly, however, since Carroll began his political career. The governor no longer dominates the legislative process, nor does one party. Carroll is unaccustomed to being in the minority, in the Republican-controlled Senate, but he is nonetheless involved and persuasive.

“I think he’s effective because he is active,” says Robert Sherman, director of the Kentucky Legislative Research Commission, the staff arm of the legislature. “Julian likes to get into detail. He likes people. He’s an old-time politician in that way. You don’t see much of that now. He can talk. He’s a preacher.

“He has a blend of skills that make him a force, like a force of nature.”



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