
Looking Back

The Nation's Worst President?

Warren G. Harding and Woodrow Wilson

Compared

Robert H. Ferrell*

Florence Harding: The First Lady, the Jazz Age, and the Death of America's Most Scandalous President. By Carl Sferrazza Anthony. (New York: Morrow, 1998. Pp. xxii, 645. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Clothbound, \$29.95.)

As the years pass, and historians make their judgments, large errors can occur, and such surely has happened in the calculation of the place in history of President Warren G. Harding. Historians ought to look more closely at the Harding administration, which presided over the country from March 4, 1921, until the president's death in San Francisco on August 2, 1923. By the usual measure, employed by all recent writers except Robert K. Murray in a book published nearly thirty years ago, Harding appears as the worst president in American history.¹ In the polls of historical scholars that began with Arthur M. Schlesinger in 1948, of which there now are perhaps a dozen, Harding inevitably comes in last.² The enormous biography of Florence Harding by Carl Sferrazza Anthony breaks no new ground in its consideration of the nation's twenty-ninth president, and indeed if it were possible to place Harding lower in the presidential pantheon, Anthony would do so. Dozens of pages describe Harding's public errors and dozens more delve into what the author believes were his manifold private inadequacies. But one must wonder if these evaluations are correct. In recent years there has been a reconsideration of the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose place in history at the time of his death in 1969 was not high in the judgment of historians. The presidency of Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, has received much criticism of late, and Kennedy's reputation may be going down. Harry S. Truman was considered a very poor president during most of the years of his presidency and those of his retire-

*Robert H. Ferrell is Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus, Indiana University, Bloomington.

¹ Robert K. Murray, *The Harding Era: Warren G. Harding and His Administration* (Minneapolis, 1969).

² The most recent poll conducted by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* on December 15, 1996.

ment, too, until shortly before his death in 1972; he now is considered one of the best presidents.

If one compares Harding with his immediate predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, the result is surprisingly favorable to Harding. Wilson triumphed in 1912 only because Theodore Roosevelt divided the Republican vote by seeking a third term, which created a three-way race among Wilson, himself, and the completely overshadowed incumbent William H. Taft, who came in last. Roosevelt accumulated a considerable popular vote, and Wilson took the presidency with a plurality. Thereafter he managed a notable surge of legislative acts by combining his New Freedom program with his principal opponent's New Nationalism. Wilson's stress on antitrust legislation followed out of his contentions during the campaign, but the result of the new legislation was to increase the power of government, which was Roosevelt's agenda. Moreover, the legislation proved deficient in succeeding years. The capstone of Wilson's program, the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, did not prevent the stock market speculation that began in 1927 and rose to its climactic month in 1929. In its early years the Federal Reserve System did not function in the way expected. During the war it served as the bond-selling affiliate of the treasury and only began operation in a serious way in 1919. It acted so crudely in 1920 that its deflationary moves precipitated a major recession. For a while its board labored under the impression that the \$25 billion of government bonds injected into the economy by the war and relief measures thereafter did not constitute the equivalent of currency and only in 1924 began open market operations in government securities. Between 1927 and 1929 the board was divided over the obvious market speculation and ended by doing nothing. Another ornament of Wilson's New Freedom was the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which had as its purpose the prevention of monopoly. Like the Federal Reserve, the FTC languished during the war, and in the 1920s aroused the ire of businessmen to such an extent that President Calvin Coolidge reduced it to impotence by naming to its board the enemies of its purpose.

Wilson's great address to Congress on April 2, 1917, in which he asked for a declaration of war against Germany, was the high point of his presidency and is quite possibly the finest speech of the present century. It brought cheering, with rebel yells from Chief Justice Edward D. White. It was an extraordinary production. Mobilization of the country's resources against the tragically wrong policies of Wilhelminian Germany was the right thing to do in 1917-1918. The German nation had rallied behind its emperor and his military masters enthusiastically, if with little understanding of how German policy for a generation had wrongheadedly urged upon its allies and enemies alike the notion that might went before right. With the belief that power could justify everything, especially if it partook of German right, the statesmen of Germany in the years before 1914 put their

nation behind an engine of destruction never seen before in human annals and unloosed such horrors as the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 and gas warfare. Unexpectedly the initial war of movement on the western front turned into a war of position, trench war, where the life of a British second lieutenant (and one presumes lieutenants in any army) was three weeks. Wilson galvanized the American people to break the stalemate, and that was exactly what happened in the summer and early autumn of 1918 when two million American troops entered the lines in northern France and the weight of this reinforcement broke the German will to continue.

While Wilson rose to war leadership, his domestic program was of questionable long-term value, and he did not manage mobilization well. For nearly a year, until early in 1918, the American military stalled in indecision, with leadership in the army's top post of chief of staff passing from one incompetent to another, all presided over by a near incompetent secretary of war, Newton D. Baker, who had been one of Wilson's students at Johns Hopkins University. Only with the chance arrival in Washington of an extraordinarily able chief of staff, Peyton C. March, did the divisions begin going overseas in earnest. Forty-two huge divisions (four four-thousand-man regiments and supporting troops) crossed the Atlantic, most of them within six months, and won the war with the assistance of John J. Pershing's doughty generalship. Meanwhile, economic mobilization failed. Under Wilson the production of merchant ships and military equipment was as slow as was the coming of leadership in the army. When finally a real administrator, Bernard M. Baruch, took over, about the same time as General March assumed control of the military, it was too late—ships and military equipment required more time than did the raising and transport of divisions. In France the American divisions used French artillery and planes.

At the Paris conference, Wilson failed to produce a lasting peace with either Germany or its allies. His imperious self assurance, behavior already exhibited at Princeton where his presidency was marred by fights with the faculty, asserted itself during the treaty negotiations. The president could not delegate responsibilities. He virtually ignored his fellow delegates, notably Secretary of State Robert Lansing, whose irritations boiled over and later caused his dismissal. Wilson failed to understand the requirement of the moment, which was a quick peace. His heart's desire was the League of Nations, and he sacrificed everything to the attainment of that goal at the peace conference. He arranged its twenty-six articles in a way that ensured their defeat in the Senate and prevented American participation in world affairs for a generation. He could have opted either for a covenant (he chose the Presbyterian word for the league's constitution) that looked forward to gradual growth of international law and extension of conciliation and arbitration, which had been the American way in international affairs since the founding of the republic, or he could have

gone in the other direction and proposed an outright alliance with the victorious allied powers to enforce peace for perhaps half a dozen years. Instead he went down the middle with a covenant that obscurely mentioned force but did not ensure it. The center of his design lay in the ambitious Article X. It is of interest that when he returned to Washington and welcomed the Senate foreign relations committee to the White House to explain his new construction, the most effective critic was Senator Harding, who put his finger on the weakness of Article X.³

Wilson's presidency ended in collapse, for after his effort to rally the American people against Senate opposition a stroke on October 2, 1919, turned him into a shell of a man. He probably would have refused compromise with the Senate in any case, but in his physical weakness, combined with the diminution of his mental powers occasioned by the stroke, he refused to offer his Senate opponents the slightest compromise. For a year and a half he clung to office instead of turning it over to Vice President Thomas R. Marshall. It is indicative of Wilson's incompetence that from the time of his stroke until he left office on March 4, 1921, he did not see nor speak with his vice president.

Against the one great triumph of Wilson's presidency and the extraordinary number of ineffective moves or downright failures, the presidency of Harding should have appeared at the least to be better, to have occupied a more honorable place in the history of the presidency. Harding won election in 1920 by a landslide, a victory larger than any obtained by a president until the second election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936. In subsequent months he signed a long overdue treaty of peace with Germany, bringing the war formally to an end. Congress created the Bureau of the Budget, an organization hitherto unheard-of, pulling the national budget out of its perennial log-rolling confusions. The first director of the budget was the irascible Brigadier General Charles G. Dawes, a Chicago banker who whipped the cabinet departments and independent agencies into financial order. Harding allowed Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes to arrange the Washington Naval Conference in 1921-1922, which not merely limited battleships and aircraft carriers of the world's major powers but arranged a nine-power guarantee of China and an end to the Anglo Japanese Alliance of 1902, all worthwhile efforts in support of peace.

The new president had observed the remoteness of the presidency under Wilson, especially the almost shuttered White House

³ The president told the senators that Article X was not a political or legal but a moral pledge. When Harding asked the difference, Wilson said a moral pledge was more binding than mere legality. If he spoke of legal obligation, he meant an individual bound to a particular thing under certain sanctions. A moral obligation was of course superior, had great binding force, and carried the right to judgment "as to whether it is indeed incumbent upon one in those circumstances to do that thing." Every moral obligation demanded judgment; legal obligations did not.



THE HARDINGS ABOUT TO ENTER
THE WHITE HOUSE, INAUGURATION DAY, 1921

Courtesy Craig Schermer Collection, Cleveland, Ohio;
reproduced from Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *Florence
Harding: The First Lady, the Jazz Age, and the Death
of America's Most Scandalous President* (New York,
1998), following 298.

during Wilson's illness, and in an act that brought much popular appreciation he opened the gates of the president's house. Again people could visit the public rooms of the mansion, and hundreds, occasionally thousands, did so daily. The White House took on its erstwhile name as the People's House. Harding reestablished a practice of his predecessors by opening the doors of the executive office each day at noon and shaking hands with three or four hundred visitors, a practice continued by his successor Coolidge and discontinued by Herbert Hoover in 1929.

But what of the Harding scandals, that is, the administrative scandals and those stories of the president's behavior in funneling a succession of mistresses through the private rooms of the People's House and the executive offices? It is the scandals that have besmirched Harding's reputation. They, no doubt, account for the subtitle of Anthony's book and for the way in which he, his countless reviewers, and a long series of writers have treated Harding.

It is an interesting point that much of the talk about administrative scandals during the Harding administration occurred just prior to the presidential election of 1924. That election was no large contest, as Coolidge won handily against his virtually unknown Democratic opponent John W. Davis, a Wall Street lawyer who had been born, his backers liked to say, in West Virginia. But scandal was in the air that year, and the Democrats had good reason to bring it out of the air and affix it to a Republican. The party's convention in Madison Square Garden turned into a donnybrook of 103 ballots between the forces of two strong candidates, the secretary of the treasury in the Wilson administration, William G. McAdoo, and Governor Alfred E. Smith of New York. Only after this grueling contest was it possible to nominate Davis. McAdoo was Wilson's son-in-law, and at the very time of the former president's death in February, 1924, the wealthy oilman Edward L. Doheny told a Senate committee that McAdoo was in his employ. It was true: McAdoo, a lawyer, had taken an annual retainer that Doheny said was \$50,000 and McAdoo somewhat weakly told the committee was only \$25,000. Fortunately, the committee did not then discover that Al Smith was taking \$400,000 from a New York City lawyer who owned a large bloc of subway stock—the New York subways then were privately owned—and wanted an increase in the nickel fare. Smith's action was not discovered until the 1980s.

In 1924 the Democrats' accusations of Republican administrative improprieties became convenient grist for the presidential campaign. One of them concerned the speculations of the director of the Veterans' Bureau, Colonel Charles R. Forbes. The colonel was guilty of taking money, although he does not seem to have acquired enormous amounts; he let hospital contracts at a profit to himself and presumably for the same reason declared perfectly good hospital supplies at a Maryland depot to be surplus and sold at a fraction of their value. What little Harding could have known about his operations, the president dealt with forthrightly by dismissing the wayward colonel.

The second and most notorious administrative scandal was the bribery of Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall by Doheny and his fellow oilman Harry F. Sinclair to secure leases of naval oil reserves in Teapot Dome in Wyoming and Elk Hills in California. Fall took \$404,000. But Harding had no way of discovering Fall's malfeasance, which came out months after the president's death and vastly surprised everyone save the principals. Fall had appeared to be an honest man. Secretary of Commerce Hoover wrote him upon his retirement from the cabinet early in 1923 that the department "never had so constructive and legal a headship as you gave it."

The third of the administrative scandals was a series of unsupported allegations against Harding's (and for a while Coolidge's) attorney general, Harry M. Daugherty, an Ohio politician who had

been Harding's campaign manager. Daugherty was tried twice in federal court in New York City, with hung juries both times. In the second trial he was saved by a single juror who was the hat-check concessionaire at the Hotel Astor. Years later the judge of the second trial wrote in his memoirs, which attracted little attention, that had he been on the jury he would have voted with the concessionaire.

But where President Harding's reputation has seemingly come to grief has been not so much the administrative scandals but in allegations of sexual impropriety. In this respect the new biography of Florence Harding is beyond question a triumph of the accuser's art. A reader of the book has recently contended that Anthony has "out-Russelled" the late Francis Russell, the author of a salacious Harding biography entitled *The Shadow of Blooming Grove*.⁴ For example, Anthony retails the story of Grace Cross, a woman who worked in Harding's senatorial office and allegedly was an old Harding flame. According to Harding hater William C. Chancellor in his biography of the president, during an argument with Harding in 1918 Cross (apparently it was Cross; Chancellor was unsure) cut him with a knife, a fracas that became known to the Washington police.⁵ Anthony also credits the belief that Harding fathered a child by a Marion, Ohio, woman, Susan Hodder. Finally, he asserts that everything appearing in the book by Nan Britton, *The President's Daughter* (1927), was true, including Britton's claim that she and the president spent some time in a coat closet.

The allegations about Harding and Cross are baseless. It is Anthony's duty to support them, and his evidence is of the flimsiest sort. It is true that on the day Harding died, the Washington reporter Mark Sullivan informed his diary that when Harding was in the Senate he suffered a heart attack going up a flight of stairs to Cross's apartment.⁶ Wilson's private secretary, Joseph P. Tumulty, told Sullivan that Cross was hustled out of Washington just before Harding's inauguration in 1921. But these tales cannot be substantiated. The District of Columbia police records long since have disappeared, probably destroyed. Tumulty's claim that Cross was persuaded to leave Washington was very probably just banter between the two men. The reporter also reminded Tumulty of the gossip that Wilson had been friendly with Mary Peck, an acquaintance when he was

⁴The book's subtitle was *Warren G. Harding and His Times* (New York, 1968). Blooming Grove is the Ohio crossroads near which Harding was born. The shadow was a local rumor that the Hardings possessed African-American blood.

⁵Chancellor's book was entitled *Warren Gamaliel Harding: President of the United States* (Dayton, Ohio, 1922). Published by the Sentinel Press, it is available only in a few libraries such as the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and the library of the Ohio Historical Society. A story has it that the Bureau of Investigation, the predecessor of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, destroyed copies.

⁶The Sullivan diary is in the Hoover Institution at Stanford, California, and a copy is in the Herbert Hoover Library at West Branch, Iowa.

president of Princeton. Rumor had it that Wilson was "Peck's bad boy." He had written effusive letters that Peck kept and enemies thought too friendly; Wilson's principal biographer, Arthur Walworth, has properly dismissed the letters as of no account. There has not been a scintilla of proof for the allegations against either Cross or Peck.

The Hodder story rests on an article by Russell, which maintained that Harding had an affair with a woman "long rumored to be" Hodder, and a later book review where Russell reiterated this contention (but called Hodder Louise rather than Susan). Besides the Russell story, Anthony relies on the belief of Hodder's granddaughter that her mother was Harding's daughter. Recently, Hugh Brogan and Charles Mosley have perpetuated the saga in their weighty book *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage: American Presidential Families*.⁷

As for the Britton book, nothing has emerged to support it over the years and there is much circumstantial evidence against it. Britton indeed knew Harding. She was born in Claridon, Ohio, a village close to Marion, and grew up in Marion where she graduated from high school in 1914. Her English teacher was the president's sister Abigail. After working in Cleveland and Chicago she went to New York and eventually was employed in the offices of the Bible Corporation of America where she was secretary to its head, Richard Wightman. Her employer was a former Presbyterian (and before that Methodist) minister who was removed from his church in 1903, apparently for sending lewd poetry to members of his congregation. Thereafter he engaged in a variety of enterprises, selling insurance, mining stock, and Bibles, as well as writing advertising copy. He was contemplating publication of an illustrated Bible that would eliminate all competitors when his secretary informed him that her illegitimate daughter was Harding's daughter. Wightman, the author of three inspirational books brought out by the New York firm of Century, advised Britton to publish her story. Installed in Wightman's vacation house in Connecticut, she wrote the account, she said, in a few weeks. The carefully written volume of four hundred pages appeared six months after she began it, an unlikely accomplishment for an amateur author. Within months of the publication, Wightman's wife sued him for separation, naming Britton as correspondent, and avowed that her husband wrote the book. The two, Wightman and Britton, divided the royalties. One of the book's backers—it was published privately by a partnership that took the name of the Eliz-

⁷ See Francis Russell, "The Shadow of Warren Harding," *Antioch Review*, XXXVI (Spring, 1978), 57-76; "A Naughty President," *New York Review of Books*, XXIX (June 24, 1982), 30-34, a review of Charles L. Mee, *The Ohio Gang: The World of Warren G. Harding, An Historical Entertainment* (New York, 1981); Hugh Brogan and Charles Mosley, *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage: American Presidential Families* (Toronto, 1993).

abeth Ann Guild, after the president's alleged daughter—was recently out of Sing Sing. The book sold 115,000 copies at the then high price of five dollars. It was sold from the guild's New York office, the address of which was printed on the book's title page, and hence did not need to be discounted to booksellers. It needed no advertising because of its salacious reputation.

Suffice to say of *The President's Daughter* that Britton claimed she received many letters from Harding between 1917 and 1923 but destroyed them because "Mr. Harding" told her to. The last of these putative letters she read and reread on board a liner bound for France in 1923 and finally tore it to shreds and threw the pieces into the billowing waves. If she had kept one letter, a single letter, it would have constituted an insurance policy, giving a foundation to her claims. She sued the distributor of a book (the author had died) that questioned her story, and the case *Britton v. Klunk* went to federal court in Toledo in 1931.⁸ Her sole proof of the relationship was her book. Before the jury went out her Cleveland lawyer reduced her asked-for award of remuneration from \$50,000, the sum she believed she should have had from President Harding's estate, to one cent. Deliberating an hour, with three ballots, the jury refused her the cent.

It is true that amidst all the smoke of adultery there was fire, but the single proven instance of an affair involving Harding was a liaison with a Marion neighbor, Carrie Phillips, that began in 1905 and ended well before the presidency. Phillips blackmailed the presidential candidate in 1920 and was somehow satisfied.

The new Harding book proposes a tantalizing (the author must have hoped) final scandal of a personal nature, this concerning the president's death. A convicted criminal, Gaston B. Means, published a book in 1930 entitled *The Strange Death of President Harding* in which he claimed that Florence Harding poisoned her husband. Means did not write the book; he engaged a writer and presented her with various alleged proofs. Gullibly, she composed the book on the basis of his assertions. In 1931 she revealed her error in *Liberty* magazine, pathetically admitting that she had been duped.⁹ The accusation nonetheless embedded itself in the public memory and has been repeated down to the present by journalists, free-lance writers, and some historians.

Anthony has a new twist to the story. He argues that during the president's last days his personal physician, Charles E. Sawyer, a homeopath, treated Harding with "purgatives" of an unidentified

⁸ The book was by Joseph De Barthe, *The Answer* (Marion, Ohio, 1928).

⁹ May Dixon Thacker, "Debunking 'The Strange Death of President Harding': A Complete Repudiation of a Sensational Book by Its Author," *Liberty*, VIII (November 7, 1931), 8-12. See also Robert H. Ferrell, *The Strange Deaths of President Harding* (Columbia, Mo., 1996); "The Death of President Harding," *Timeline*, XV (October, 1998), 2-17.

sort and that they, together with a final syringe of "stimulants" when the president was in extremis in his San Francisco hotel room, pushed him over "the last rapids on his way to Eternity," to use Sawyer's words. This act (if it occurred) the author describes as "negligent homicide." He credits Mrs. Harding and the assistant White House physician, a navy doctor, Joel T. Boone, present at the scene, as accomplices. His support for this scenario lies in a confused and confusing minute-by-minute analysis of who was in the room when the president died. Boone was out of the room at the moment of death but presumably had agreed to the administration of the unknown purgatives.

Anthony claims one remarkable manuscript "find" of historic value, a diary of the president's wife discovered in an Ohio barn. Other than having been written in circular fashion on a calendar for 1891, the dozen or so pages of the diary bear no dates. Its comments quote or invent apothegms, which have no comprehensible references to anything and hence are of no historical value.¹⁰

But to return to the point made at the beginning of this essay, that for historical figures, and notably twentieth-century presidents, the rating of historians is hardly infallible. In appraisals of Harding there has been much error. If one looks closely at the presidency of his predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, and compares it with Harding's presidency, it is clear that accomplishment lay mostly in Harding's administration. A series of misfortunes nonetheless befell Harding's reputation shortly after he died. There had been scandals in the Veterans' Bureau and with Teapot Dome, no large affairs that in any way touched Harding, but the presidential election of 1924 made it convenient for the Democrats to invest the scandals with monumental proportions. Thereafter the talk of scandal turned in a different direction. Journalists such as Mark Sullivan listened to stories about Cross, Russell wrote about Hodder, and everyone believed Britton. All this was colored by the invention of Means. Now, seventy-five years after Harding's death, a book has appeared that brings the critical accounts together for the convenience of gullible readers.

¹⁰ Another find is the "sealed papers" of Dr. Boone. Anthony believes the Library of Congress opened the "sealed papers" of Dr. Boone at his urging and special arrangement. The papers were opened, however, through the intervention of Dwight M. Miller, chief archivist at the Herbert Hoover Library in West Branch, Iowa. Miller knew that the Boone papers, due to open twenty years after their donor's death in 1994, had remained closed because the Library of Congress had lost the address of Boone's nearest relative. He supplied it.