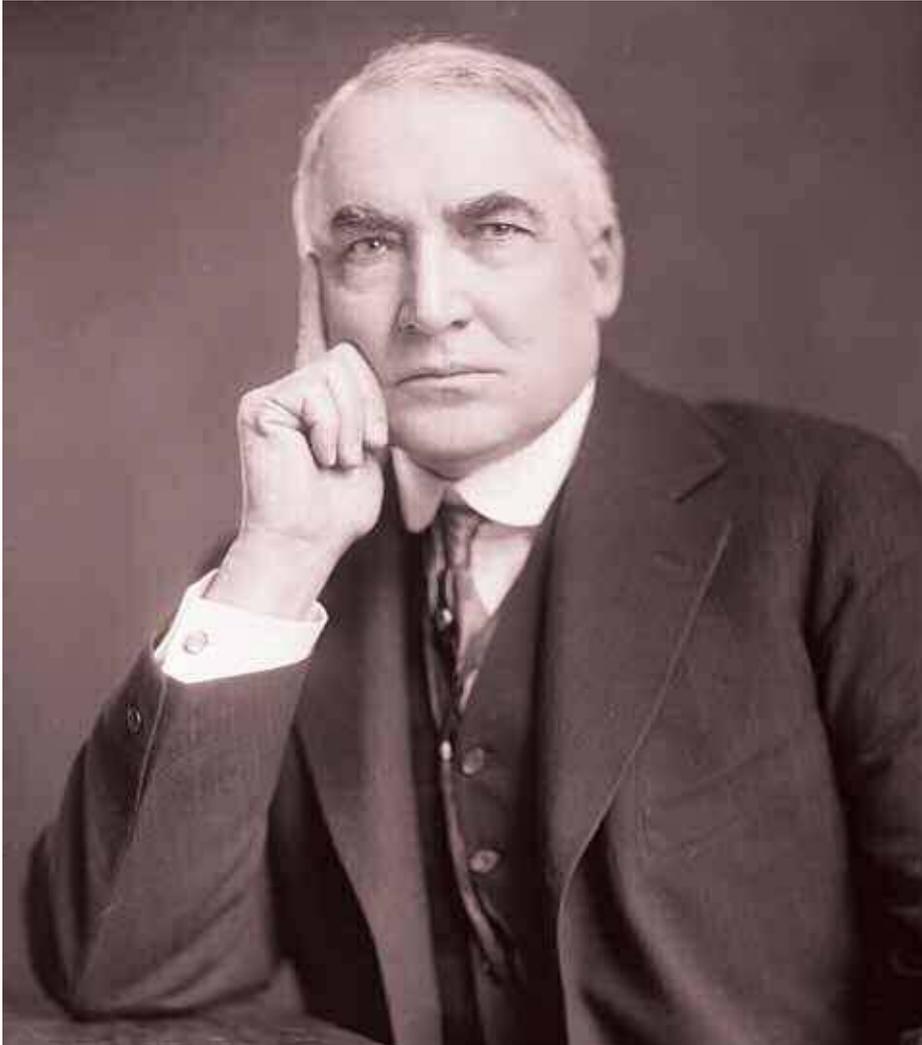


Libel: Warren Harding Was Our Worst President

President Warren Harding is often condemned by historians as a corrupt, incompetent president — odd for a man who was respected and praised for honesty while alive.



by Steve Byas

“All human ills are not curable by legislation.”

With those words, Warren G. Harding bluntly rejected the progressive era, which his election as president in 1920 brought to an abrupt end.

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Perhaps that in and of itself can explain the tendency by many professional historians to rank Harding, as if not our worst president, certainly among the worst of American presidents.

The progressive era was, at its core, a rejection of the vision of the Founding Fathers, who saw government as necessary in order to protect our natural, God-given rights, but something to be held in check, lest it become tyrannical. George Washington reputedly described government as a “dangerous servant and a fearful master.”

Washington and others of the founding generation had no illusions about the potential dangers of government. That is why they created a Constitution with a variety of checks on government. Among the many checks and balances were federalism, which divided powers between the states and a federal government; a system of separation of powers into three logical branches of government; and a system in which each branch held powers to “check” the power of the other two branches.

The progressives, on the other hand, saw government as a “positive” force, not to be feared, but rather to be used to correct alleged evils in society. By giving the right to vote to more individuals, government can be controlled at the ballot box, they believed. And, since the people have such control over government, they can use it to improve society. The progressives were optimistic, believing that if a problem existed in society, it could simply be solved by passing a law.

Thus, Harding’s admonition that not every societal ill can be cured by a law is a slap in the face to most of the professional historians who tend to favor the progressive viewpoint of greater government power to check alleged social evils. Whereas Harding warned, “Our most dangerous tendency is to expect too much of government,” these progressive-loving historians think government should do more, not less.

In his book *A History of the American People*, Paul Johnson, a professional historian who is *not* a progressive, offered his opinion of the maltreatment of Harding by the professional historians: “The deconstruction of the real Harding and his reconstruction as a crook, philanderer, and sleazy no-good was an exemplary exercise in false historiography.”

Harding Takes Over — Lightly

In reality, both from a constitutional and a performance standpoint, Harding’s record as president was quite good, despite the fact that he inherited a mess from the pres-

Harding, however, opted to let the free market correct the downturn, rejecting the government interventionist philosophy pushed by Hoover. “Here at home we have had too much encouragement given to the idea that a government is a something-for-nothing institution.”

idency of progressive Democrat Woodrow Wilson. There was a reason that Harding, a Republican, took every state outside the then-solidly Democratic Party South, garnering over 60 percent of the popular vote. The 1920 Democrat presidential candidate, Governor James Cox of Ohio, was cursed with defending the Wilson record, and the voters chose Senator Warren Harding, also of Ohio, to reverse the nation’s course of progressivism.

President Woodrow Wilson, a former college history professor himself, declared the 1920 presidential election a “solemn referendum” on U.S. participation in the League of Nations. The U.S. Senate had twice rejected U.S. membership, and Wilson hoped the American people would send a pro-League message in the presidential race. Senator Harding, like many at the time, was concerned that the League of Nations could evolve into a world government and infringe on American national sovereignty and the individual liberty long enjoyed by its citizens. If the election were indeed about the League of Nations, then it was clear the American people did not want it.

Harding inherited a growing national depression, and a national debt that had grown from \$1 billion to \$24 billion. Inflation had eaten away at the value of the American dollar, resulting in its depreciation by at least 50 percent from the beginning of the Wilson administration. The Gross Domestic Product had contracted one-fourth, wages had fallen 20 percent, and 100,000 businesses had gone under.

In such difficult circumstances, it must have been tempting for Harding to follow the activist course advocated by his secretary of commerce, Herbert Hoover. Harding, however, opted to let the free market correct the downturn, rejecting the government interventionist philosophy pushed by Hoover. “Here

at home we have had too much encouragement given to the idea that a government is a something-for-nothing institution.”

Instead of taking the advice of Hoover, a known “progressive Republican,” Harding rolled up his sleeves and went to work, doing what a public official should do in times of depression. Instead

of tampering with the free market economy (as Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt did during the Great Depression), he allowed wages to fall to their natural level. Within a short few months, recovery had begun, and America was off into the “Roaring Twenties.” Harding concentrated on modernizing the government’s budget process, pushing through Congress the creation of the Bureau of the Budget (now the Office of Management and Budget).

From 1920-22, federal spending fell by one-half, from \$6.3 billion to \$3.2 billion. He signed legislation cutting the top tax rates almost in half.

President Wilson had jailed thousands of dissenters during World War I, including a man who had simply made a movie, *The Spirit of '76*, an historical film version of the American Revolution. Federal prosecutors contended the motion picture was far too negative toward our wartime British allies. Harding began the process

of pardoning many of these jailed individuals, including Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist Party candidate for president in 1920. Harding detested the Socialist Party philosophy, but did not believe it was right for Debs to be jailed simply for opposing the war. He even had Debs over as a guest at the White House.

Traveling to Birmingham, Alabama, Harding urged the nation to move away from the racial divisions in the country, calling for the states to provide for civil rights protections for Black citizens. He argued that unless what Americans taught about our system of government was “a lie, you must stand for that equality.” While Wilson had purged Blacks from government jobs, Harding appointed over 100 African-Americans to government positions in his administration.

“The recorded progress of our Republic, materially and spiritually, in itself proves the wisdom of the inherited policy of non-involvement in Old World affairs,” Harding said, rejecting the interventionist attitudes of the progressive presidents, Democrat Wilson and fellow progressive Republican Theodore Roosevelt. “We seek no part in directing the destinies of the Old World. We do not mean to be entangled,” Harding said, aligning himself with the non-interventionist viewpoint of the Founding Fathers, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. In fact, it was Harding who coined the term, “the Founding Fathers.”



Saving money: President Harding came to office determined to slash federal spending, including spending on the military. But he also wanted to make sure that these cuts did not damage the nation’s defensive capabilities. To accomplish these twin goals, he persuaded other great powers, seen here at the Washington Naval Conference in 1922, to also lower their spending on their navies.

But Harding was no “isolationist,” as he favored trade relations and armament reductions with foreign nations. He hosted the Washington Naval Conference of 1921, which reduced the size of the navies of the Great Powers. With that done, Harding was able to cut more federal spending, and push for more cuts in tax rates. While Harding certainly favored a strong national defense, he desired a return to a more normal and modest peacetime force.

Harding’s conservative politics were not new to the 1920 presidential bid. He had taken the conservative side in intra-party struggles with progressives years earlier. After two terms of progressivism under Teddy Roosevelt, Republicans nominated William Howard Taft in 1908. While Taft was not as strongly conservative as his son, Senator Robert A. Taft, he was certainly more conservative than Roosevelt. Taft rejected the creation of the Federal

Reserve System, which brought down on him the opposition of powerful American bankers, including J.P. Morgan. Roosevelt came out of retirement to oppose Taft in 1912 for the Republican Party nomination, with financial backing from Morgan and other supporters of creating a central banking system.

In this contest, Harding publicly supported the more conservative Taft, even placing his name in nomination at the 1912 Republican convention. Taft won the nomination, and Harding won the sneers of Roosevelt’s daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, who later dismissed the dignified Harding as “a slob.” Harding’s detractors love to quote T.R.’s sharp-tongued daughter’s comments about Harding, but usually neglect to put her acidic comments into their proper context.

Where He Came From

Harding’s rise to the White House should be considered an American success story. From a simple, middle-class background,



Dominant diction: A newspaper publisher, Harding used his ability to use the language to great effect in the 1920 presidential election, in which he crushed his Democrat opponent. Besides that, it was said that he just looked like a president.

Harding began his working career as a school teacher, a job he held for one year. He later called that job the toughest job he ever had. He read *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, thinking of a career in the law, but gave that up, too. He sold casualty insurance before buying the *Marion Star* newspaper at a sheriff’s auction for only \$300. And part of that money was borrowed. He turned the *Star* into a successful business.

Eventually, Harding entered politics, serving in the Ohio state Senate and as lieutenant governor. In 1914 he was elected to the U.S. Senate, and six years later he successfully ran for U.S. president.

Among the charges leveled at Harding is that his 1920 presidential nomination was “a fluke.” According to this scenario, Harding’s selection was made by an elite group of power brokers in a “smoke-filled room,” and “forced” upon the Republican National Convention. Actually, Harding’s nomination was the result of a planned strategy, worked out with his campaign manager, Harry Daugherty. After expect-

ed nominee Teddy Roosevelt died unexpectedly in 1919, the Republican field was wide open. Several candidates emerged, including General Leonard Wood, Governor Frank Lowden of Illinois, Senator Hiram Johnson of California, Herbert Hoover of California, Nicholas Murray Butler of New York, and Governor Calvin Coolidge of Massachusetts.

In the eyes of those who decry the influence of “big money” in presidential politics, Harding should be viewed as a hero. He actually *turned down* offers of money to run his campaign, preferring to be free of any restraints that would place on him. The strategy of Harding and Daugherty was that none of the several strong candidates so widely mentioned would be able to obtain the nomination, and the convention would then turn to someone else. Harding, a U.S. senator from the key “swing state” of Ohio, would be a logical

“second choice” of the supporters of the leading candidates.

Harding chose to enter only two of the 16 presidential preference primaries. These primaries were not taken very seriously at the time, and Harding actually despised them. He did not like the “loathsome nature” of the new primary system, which forced Republicans to campaign openly against fellow Republicans, dividing the party.

Considered the most serious candidate by many was Leonard Wood, who campaigned in his Army uniform, proudly carrying the banner of progressivism and Teddy Roosevelt. Harding’s “favorite son” candidacy in Ohio was challenged by Wood. Harding ran on a platform of unashamed Americanism, saying Americans “must make sure our own house is in perfect order before we attempt the miracle of Old World stabilization. Call it selfishness or nationality if you will, I think it an inspiration to patriotic devotion — to safeguard America first, to stabilize America



So soon forgotten: The nation grieved when Harding died. But soon the Teapot Dome Scandal erupted, which would mark the beginning of the rapid decline of his historical reputation.

first, to prosper America first, to think of America first, to exalt America first, to live for and revere America first.”

Harding managed to defeat Wood in Ohio, but was trounced in both Indiana and Montana. He considered pulling out, and concentrating on getting reelected to the Senate, but his wife, Florence, insisted that he stay in the fight, so he did.

The convention outcome developed just as Harding had hoped. No single candidate could gain enough support to win the nomination, so delegates began to consider alternatives. It is no surprise that Harding, a senator from Ohio (then, as now, an important “swing state”), would come to their minds. Calling the meeting of some party leaders that took place on the 13th floor suite of the Blackstone Hotel a “smoke-filled room” is like saying the sky is blue. All political gatherings of the day, regardless of party, had their share of cigar and pipe smokers.

While it seems obvious in retrospect that the Republican nominee would easily win, one must remember that the Democrats had taken the last two presidential

elections, and Republicans were anxious to win in 1920. Ohio’s governor, James Cox, was expected to be the Democrat nominee, and in a close election, whichever candidate who won Ohio could be expected to carry the Electoral College’s majority. Some thought the selection of another Ohioan, the Republican Senator Warren Harding, was perhaps necessary to edge out the Democrats.

Senator Reed Smoot of Utah left the meeting, which had no authority over the rest of the delegates at the convention. A reporter asked him whom he expected to be the nominee, and Smoot responded: “We decided on Harding.” Of course, the group had made no such decision, but the reporting of Smoot’s prediction gave the impression of momentum for Harding, and it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Although Harding eventually did win the nomination, the convention chairman, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, was actually pushing another candidate for the “smoke-filled room” to get behind.

After winning the nomination, Harding’s manager, Harry Daugherty, wanted to rush him out of the hotel, and onto a train bound for Ohio, but Harding insisted on speaking *personally* with over 100 reporters wishing to meet him. It is not surprising that the genuinely kind and personable Harding received good press coverage during the campaign, and throughout most of his presidency.

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In an effort to unite the party, Harding appointed a Cabinet of both conservatives and progressives. Among those whom Harding won over to serving as secretary of the treasury was Andrew Mellon, the second-richest man in the country. Mellon conceived of the tax rate cuts that contributed greatly to the economic boom of the twenties.

Where History Went Wrong

During his term of office, Harding was one of the most popular of presidents, and it was only after his sudden death in 1923 that public opinion began to shift. For several years, Harding had suffered from hypertension, and nothing really could be done about the condition under the medical knowledge of the day. This high-blood-pressure problem eventually led to his death, almost certainly from a heart attack, in the summer of 1923. Harding was on a vacation, returning from Alaska to California, when he succumbed. As his body was transported back to Washington, D.C. by train, *nine million people* appeared along the railroad tracks as he passed by.

Daugherty recalled the scene at Cheyenne, in his 1932 book, *The Inside Story of the Harding Tragedy*. “As the train came to a stop, a terrific storm burst, lightning flashed, thunder pealed, and the rain fell in torrents. I looked through the windows in amazement. Not a man, woman, or child sought shelter. They stood in their tracks while a band of school children sang ‘Nearer My God to Thee.’”

Within a matter of months, his great popularity would be replaced with the widespread belief that Harding’s administration was shot through with scandal, that he was a failure as a president, and that he was a man of low morals.

To understand the transformation of Harding from a beloved president to the modern, intensely negative perception of his term in office, one must first examine the role of the Teapot Dome Scandal, which over time came to define his presidency. In short, the scandal involved the eventual conviction of Harding’s Secretary of the Interior, Albert B. Fall, for taking bribes from oil tycoons Harry Sinclair and Edward Doheny in exchange for leasing some oil reserves under his control at the Teapot Dome reserve in Wyoming and the Elk Hills reserve in California.

The oil reserves had been set aside for

future use by the Navy during the Taft and Wilson administrations. Oil was a critical resource for the fighting of World War One, and so-called experts at the time believed there was such a limited amount of oil in the ground that could be retrieved, that it would all be gone within a few years. But with the coming of peace, oil was greatly needed to drive the engine of the economy. As Daugherty explained, it was *Democrat* Senator Thomas J. Walsh of Montana who was the original sponsor of changes in law to allow the transfer of the oil reserves to private oil companies. Ironically, it was Walsh who later prosecuted Fall before the Senate committee investigating possible bribery in the transactions.

Daugherty said that Walsh “argued in favor of leasing the naval oil reserves to private parties for development, on the ground that it was unwise for the government to undertake it.” The Federal Leasing Act was passed in February 1920, and was signed by President Woodrow Wilson into law. The law was later amended to give the secretary of the Navy complete control of all naval reserves. Environmentalists, led by progressive Senator Robert LaFollette, opposed the measure.

Generally, the leasing of public land was under the control of the secretary of the interior, which post Harding appointed Fall to fill. Fall was a U.S. senator from New Mexico, and was planning to return

to private business when asked by fellow senator and President-elect Harding to take the post. According to *Tempest Over Teapot Dome: The Story of Albert B. Fall*, Harding wanted Fall because “there is more opportunity for graft and scandal connected with the disposition of public lands” than was the case in other departments, and Harding wanted “a man who is thoroughly honest.”

Fall finally relented to accept the appointment. He wrote his wife, “I am now trying to look upon the bright side and see the compensations which may offer themselves in that position.” While it is doubtful that Fall meant the acceptance of bribes as among those “compensations,” he eventually did lease the Teapot Dome reserves to two oil men and received “loans” of about \$100,000. Fall maintained the loans had nothing to do with the decision to lease the reserves to Doheny and Sinclair, but a jury eventually thought otherwise, sending Fall to prison. Oddly, while Fall was convicted of *taking* bribes, Doheny and Sinclair were acquitted of *offering* bribes.

Harding had no reason to know Fall had taken what a jury would later decide were bribes. As Daugherty explained, “The President received from Fall a report on the leases made under him. This report contained nothing of an illegal or suspicious nature. And the Secretary of the Interior, concealing from the Presi-

dent the fact that he had secured no competitive bids and had received a “loan” of \$100,000 from Doheny before these leases were made, allowed his chief to send to the Committee a letter of endorsement.”

If Harding is to be held responsible for Fall’s corruption, then perhaps the entire U.S. Senate that confirmed Fall as secretary of the interior in less than one minute, with no hearings, without a dissenting vote, should also be held to account.

In addition to the Teapot Dome, another scandal that damaged Harding’s historical reputation was found in the Veteran’s Bureau. As a result of America’s participation in the First World War, the United States had to deal with thousands of veterans, and the Congress created the Veteran’s Bureau to deal with the situation. Harding appointed Charles Forbes, a highly decorated veteran of the war, to lead the new agency. Eventually Daugherty, who was by then attorney general, suspected Forbes was selling surplus supplies at absurdly low prices to private contractors and taking kickbacks.

Daugherty alerted Harding about his concerns. Harding demanded Forbes explain himself, and Forbes basically lied to the president, giving him phony information. Harding ordered Forbes to stop his sales, but Forbes did not stop. So in February 1923, Harding called Forbes in again and demanded his resignation for insubordination. The extent of Forbes’ extensive criminal activity was not discovered until after Harding’s death later that summer. If Harding is responsible for Forbes’ corruption, he should be given credit for appointing his replacement, who cleaned up the mess.

Writing in *The Growth of America, 1878-1928*, historian Clarence Carson wrote, “After all this furor, the worst that could be said about President Harding was that he used bad judgment in one or two (among numerous) appointments and in selecting one or more of his friends. That his reputation should be so badly tarnished by these wayward events does not speak well for historians who have generally downgraded his achievements.”

Whipping Harding’s Wife

While there is no evidence that Harding knew of Fall’s corruption, the sudden death of Harding, from an apparent heart attack, led to speculation that perhaps



Edward Doheny (seated at table, second from right) testifies to a Senate committee about questionable oil leases he obtained by the approval of Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall. Fall was later convicted of taking bribes from Doheny and oil tycoon Harry Sinclair, but they were never convicted of paying bribes to Fall.

Harding was actually poisoned by his own wife! This bizarre theory was expounded by Gaston Means, in his scandalous *The Strange Death of President Harding*.

What would be the possible motive for Florence Harding to murder her own husband?

One answer was provided by Nan Britton of Marion, Ohio, a woman about 30 years younger than Harding, who claimed she had carried on a long-term sexual affair with the late president. She claimed he was the father of her child, Elizabeth Ann Christian, in her book, *The President's Daughter*, published a few years after Harding's death.

Britton certainly had a "thing" for Harding. In her high-school English book, she wrote several references to Harding, then the local newspaper publisher in Marion. She even wrote on page one of the book that among the reasons George Washington should be honored was because "he looks like Harding."

While Britton named a soldier in Europe, Edmund M. Christian, on the birth certificate as her daughter's father, in the book she said that the girl was conceived in Harding's Senate office in 1919, and that they continued the affair even after he was president, even having sex in a White House closet!

The charge is without evidence. Frank Gibbs, who traveled with Harding during the presidential campaign of 1920, said he was with Harding "almost constantly," and yet he had "never heard of a woman by the name of Nan Britton." Patrick Kenrey, the doorkeeper at the executive offices for 35 years, said that not only had he "never" heard of Nan Britton, but furthermore he knew that "no strange woman ever came here to see President Warren G. Harding." Ike Hoover, who began working at the White House during the administration of President Benjamin Harrison in the 1880s, and left at the

start of the administration of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s, was blunt: "Nan Britton is a liar."

Daugherty was vehement in his denunciation of Nan Britton. "Without hesitation, therefore, I say that I never heard of her, nor heard her name spoken, until the appearance of the book, *The President's Daughter*."

Daugherty challenged Britton's account on multiple points. He noted that Richard Wightman, who helped Britton write the book, was sued for divorce for his association with Britton. He called attention to the fact that, despite the allegations that Harding saw Britton several times in the period before he was president, Harding never bothered to see their supposed child. "He loved children," Daugherty said. "He was never known to pass a child without a smile or a touch of his big, gentle hand."

Daugherty found it incredible that in a

book of 439 pages, "There is produced not a single letter of Harding's to Miss Britton. The writer says that he was an habitual writer of love letters and sent her hundreds — many of them forty to sixty pages long! The author of *The President's Daughter* could not produce one of these, for a simple reason. They were never written. They were never received by Miss Britton. One genuine love letter would have been enough to establish her case. But she never has and never can produce it."

Of course, Britton claimed that she destroyed all these supposed love letters, but Daugherty explained why the alleged affair never "came out." The reason it did not come out, was because "such a thing had never happened."

Despite his "love of children," Harding and his wife never had children. The reason that they never had children was that Harding was sterile. Dr. Joseph De Barthe, writing in *The Answer* in 1928, contended

Harding was physically unable to have children, and for that reason, Nan Britton's book was a lie. De Barthe asked in his book, "Would a normal flesh and blood mother cast the pestilence of a bawdy house upon her innocent offspring to gain her own financial independence?" Britton sued, but the jury took only one hour to return a verdict of "no cause for action."

When Gaston Means' scurrilous book appeared, Daugherty predicted "the good sense of the American people" would reject it. "The attack upon Mrs. Harding and President Harding, both of whom are dead, is a disgrace to America."

"The book will appeal to those envious souls who love to see men in high places befouled when they cannot be broken, and will put soiled money in the pockets of the author."



Much ado about nothing: While Nan Britton authored a scandalous book accusing the late president of fathering her daughter, she offered no credible evidence. Still, some intent on damaging Harding's presidential legacy give her charges more credit than is deserved.

Some Sense Needed

Some of the accusations made against Harding in the wake of his death were so absurd

that it is amazing that they are still repeated today. Charges were made that night after night at the White House, Harding and his cronies engaged in high-stake poker games, excessive drinking, and sexual orgies.

One must wonder why this image of an incompetent and corrupt Warren Harding was created so soon after his death, and why such a false picture of the man is still repeated from academia to the popular culture.

It is not surprising that liberal or progressive Democrats today would have a low opinion of a conservative Republican president like Warren Harding. But, probably a majority of conservatives who are aware of the Harding administration have a vague, negative viewpoint of him, thinking something like, "Wasn't he involved in some scandals?"

Speaking to a Republican who considers himself an admirer of the progressive Republican President Theodore Roosevelt, I called Harding perhaps the most under-rated president in U.S. history. He responded with a tirade of invective, concluding that Harding had visited every

whorehouse in Washington, D.C. When I challenged such slanderous comments, asking him, "How do you know that?" His response was instructive: "How do you know that he did not?"

The fact of the matter is that a fair assessment of the Harding administration would not lead one to the conclusion that he was a poor president, or a particularly immoral person. The evidence simply does not lead one to that conclusion.

The probable genesis of the libel that Warren Harding was a horrible person and a horrible president is that Harding's death occurred just before the 1924 presidential campaign. Faced with a roaring economy, and the general success of Harding, the Democrats desperately needed an issue, and the Teapot Dome Scandal provided that. Once the attacks began, they fed on themselves. Despite the onslaught of attacks upon a dead man, the Democrats basically got little electoral help from the assaults upon Harding. Harding's Vice President, Calvin Coolidge, won a huge victory the next year, basically untarnished by all the mud thrown on the memory of Warren Harding.

The Republican Party, determined to win the 1924 election, is at least partly to blame for the destruction of Harding's reputation. In an effort to deflect attention away from Coolidge and the rest of the Republican Party, they used Harding as a convenient person on whom to blame for all the scandals. The argument used was that Coolidge was a "Puritan in Babylon." While Harding might very well have been corrupt, the Republicans conceded, "We now have a president who is totally free from corruption." Hoping to avoid being dirtied by the load of mud being thrown at the late Warren Harding, Republicans more or less joined in burying the reputation of a man who had put them back into the White House in 1920, and laid the groundwork for landslide victories in 1924 and 1928.

For all their admiration for tradition, conservatives are lax in winning the "war" over the interpretation of history. If the real record of President Warren G. Harding were allowed to become the standard interpretation, he would be listed among our best presidents instead of one of our worst. And liberals cannot allow that. ■