

## Warren Remembrance

by Roger Fontaine and Peter Hannaford

At 2 o'clock on the afternoon of June 20, 1923, President Warren Gamaliel Harding, his wife, and a traveling party of sixty-three guests, officials, aides, and reporters boarded the train that would take them across the continent on a "Voyage of Understanding." Harding saw the two-month trip as a way to demonstrate his leadership, to give energy to the Republican party, and to mix with ordinary Americans far from his troubles in Washington.

He stood on the rear platform of *The Superb*, his private car, and waved smilingly at the crowd, but his heart must have been heavy. Before leaving the White House, he told his private secretary, Judson Welliver, that he had been betrayed by people he thought were his friends. Despite restlessness within his own party and a group of businessmen promoting Henry Ford for the presidency, Harding told Welliver he would run for a second term in 1924 and would tell the people how his administration had been betrayed. "The people will believe me when they hear that story," he said.

They never heard it from his lips, for forty-three days later Harding died in the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. Hundreds of thousands turned out to pay their respects as the train bearing his body made its way back to Washington, and even more lined the route. Yet today one of those things that everyone knows is that Warren Harding was the worst President in the nation's history.

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Why does "everyone know" this to be true? When his record in office—not quite twenty-eight months' worth—is considered calmly, Harding turns out to have been one of our better Presidents. True, already there were men in the Harding Administration (such as Jesse Smith and Charles Forbes) whose betrayal of trust was weighing heavily on Harding when *The Superb* pulled out of Union Station. As we come to the end of this century, however, it should be obvious that all Presidents have this problem and are equally reluctant to confront it.

A trio of hostile journalists was responsible for the myth of a Harding failure. All of them revered Harding's predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, and resented Harding as a vulgar usurper. They saw Big Business, Wall Street, and the military as the crowning ills of free-rein capitalism, and government—lots of it—as the antidote.

As for Harding, their received wisdom came to this: the twenty-ninth President was a small-town pol content to play poker and swill bourbon while the country skated heedlessly into self-indulgence at home and isolationism in foreign affairs.

Harding's reputation began to erode during the Teapot Dome investigation and trials (1923-30), although there is no evidence that Harding was aware of the infamous loan from oilman Edward Doheny to Harding's Interior Secretary Albert Fall.

Soon after Fall was sentenced in 1929, a book appeared that had the effect of blackening Harding's reputation. *The Strange Death of President Harding* purported to be from the diaries of one Gaston Means, a notorious scoundrel who had briefly worked as an investigator for William J. Burns, head of the Bureau of Investigation (predecessor to the FBI). On leaving the bureau, Means engaged in

extortion, fraud, and bootlegging. (This is not to mention the suspicious death of a rich woman he had befriended.) Although he was widely known in Washington as an out-and-out liar, his book hit the best-seller lists with its wild assertions, including the claim that Florence Harding had poisoned her husband.

The picture of a machine-tainted, small-town cards-and-whiskey politico could equally describe Harry S Truman, but Truman had the advantage of living long after leaving office and thus was able to participate in his rehabilitation. But if any President can be said to have grown in office, it was Harding, despite his brief tenure (shorter even than John F. Kennedy's Thousand Days). Harding, alas, had no court historians to gild his presidency.

Now, enter the trio: Frederick Lewis Allen, whose book *Only Yesterday*, first published in 1931, is still in print; Samuel Hopkins Adams, whose initial fame was won by muckraking the patent medicine business (Adams believed in carpet-bombing soft targets); and William Allen White, editor of the *Emporia, Kansas Gazette*. White embodied the liberal notion of what a small-town editor should be like, principally because he embraced the liberal views of the day but put them in the *Gazette* rather than the *New Republic*.

Allen, Adams, and White were not professional historians, but their work went unchallenged until Francis Russell's 1968 biography *The Shadow of Blooming Grove*, by which time the damage had been done. Is it any surprise that there have been few challenges to the legend that years of Republican complacency, insensitivity, and greed (Harding through Hoover) brought on an economic depression that was nearly the ruin of the nation?

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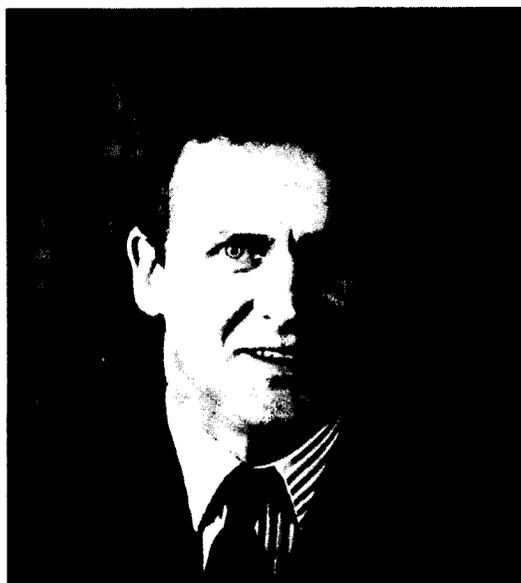
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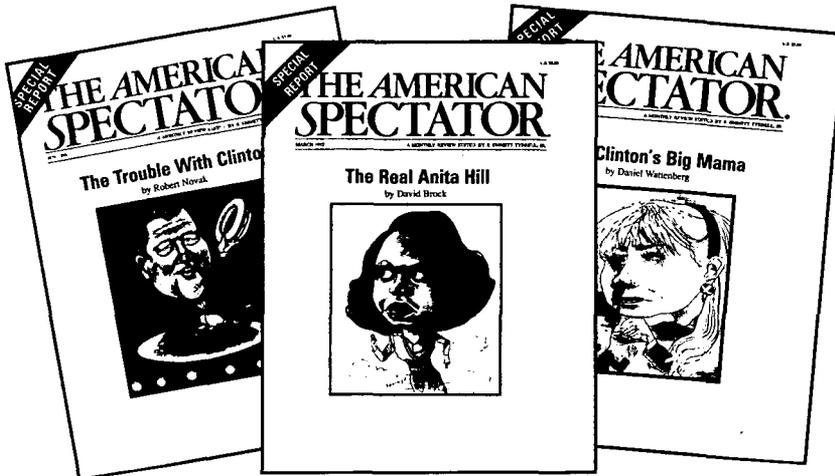
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It is virtually unknown today that Harding had at least a half-dozen accomplishments to his credit, each of which belied the picture of a passive glad-hander. He also recruited a strong cabinet because, like Lincoln, he did not fear being surrounded by able men. Sycophants they were not. Charles Evans Hughes as Secretary of State, Herbert Hoover at Commerce, and Andrew Mellon at Treasury were leaders of substance and achievement, as was Albert Lasker, who cleaned up the previous administration's Shipping Board scandal.

**W**hat are Harding's forgotten accomplishments? Consider the following:

- What had been a closed and secretive White House, Harding threw wide open to the press and public. He stopped work every weekday at noon to have an impromptu handshaking reception with ordinary citizens visiting the presidential mansion. In contrast to the last mournful years of the Wilson Administration, which left the fate of the country in the hands of the invalid President's wife, Harding ran a transparent and accessible presidency.

- Harding created the Bureau of the Budget (today the Office of Management and Budget), which established an orderly means of collecting, analyzing, and adjusting spending requests from the various units of government, then presenting them to Capitol Hill in one package. Harding persuaded financial wizard Charles Dawes to head the new bureau. Dawes promptly saved the nation \$2 billion by trimming swollen budget requests.

- The Washington Naval Conference of 1922, the first genuinely successful arms reduction conference in history (although several of the parties fudged on its formula later), was initiated by and presided over by Harding. These talks were propelled by Harding's own sense of the tragedy and futility of "The Great War," which he expressed eloquently at the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

- Harding took a genuine interest in improved race relations and civil rights. He gave a courageous speech in Birmingham, Alabama, before a black and white audience, something no other President had dared do since the Civil War. The President told his audience that American democracy would be a sham until blacks were granted political and economic equality. That came as a shock

to his white listeners, but it was wildly received by the blacks. In Washington, Harding hired blacks for government duty, replacing Wilson's policy of firing them solely on the basis of race. His progressive detractors were not above bigotry of their own: recurrent rumors that Harding himself was part black followed him all his life. He refused to deny them.

•Harding made a major commitment to increasing mixed use (recreation and development) of federal lands in the West, virtually creating the model that prudent Presidents have followed ever since. The Western itinerary of the "Voyage of Understanding" was crafted to demonstrate this commitment (including a first-ever presidential visit to Alaska).

•With his Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon, Harding sponsored tax-cuts that fueled a national economic recovery and expansion that lasted nearly a decade, a decade known by its detractors as the Roaring Twenties. That prosperity ended with the exorbitant Smoot-Hawley Tariff hike and the grossly deflationary liquidity squeeze dictated by an inept Federal Reserve Board after the 1929 stock market crash.

•Then there are the things Harding didn't do. Unlike Wilson, Harding did not violate the Constitution by touching off a Red Scare. Harding, in fact, was so leery of that kind of government abuse that he pointedly pardoned the Socialist Eugene Debs, whom Wilson had thrown into prison as a dangerous pacifist.

**F**ew of these accomplishments are mentioned by the myth-makers, but Harding was a popular President, virtually assured of re-election had he lived. A journalist himself, he enjoyed a good press. One reason: he never lied to his fellow journalists, unlike his notoriously devious and sanctimonious predecessor.

Despite the erosion that began shortly after his death, Harding's reputation remained more or less intact for almost a decade. That was to change with the Gaston Means book and then Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday*. Allen's book was styled "an informal history." That part, at least, was accurate. A sample:

Harding looked back with longing eyes to the good old days when the government didn't bother businessmen with unnecessary regulations, but provided

them with fat tariffs and instructed the Department of Justice not to have them on its mind.

That Harding was a lifelong anti-high-tariff man could not be expected to get in the way of Allen's stereotype.

Harding's achievement at the Naval Conference also escaped notice. Allen was too busy, among other things, flaying Harding's rhetorical style (a favorite target of all the man's detractors). The easy arrows directed at Harding's admittedly overstuffed rhetoric were meant to suggest that he wasn't very bright.

H.L. Mencken, always on the lookout for a straw man, aimed his own undisciplined prose at the President after his 1921 inaugural:

It reminds me of a string of wet sponges; it reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale-bean soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It drags itself out of the dark abyss of pish, and crawls insanely up the topmost pinnacles of posh. It is rumble and bumble. It is flap and doodle. It is balder and dash.

And consider the oft-told tax story in which Harding supposedly delivered this dictum on fiscal policy: "I know somewhere there is a book that will give me the truth, but, hell, I couldn't read the book."

Allen, who was no stranger to that book, also attacked Harding for his sexual liaison with Nan Britton, calling it a series of "cheap sex episodes" and "clandestine meetings in disreputable hotels." It's hard to say if Allen's opinion of Harding would have improved if the President had taken his mistress to the Waldorf. And, no one ever said Nan fooled around with gangsters.

But Allen dealt Harding only a glancing blow, compared to Samuel Hopkins Adams, whose *The Incredible Era* came out in 1939. With Harding long dead, Adams could use real names, and he was out for blood:

We the sovereign people had chosen for leader by an unprecedented majority . . . [a] third-rate Babbitt with the equipment of a small-town, semi-educated journalist, the standards of a handshaking joiner and all-around good guy, the instincts and habits of a corner sport, and the traditions of a party hack; an expert on partisan

mechanics, a sophomore in legislation, a tyro in economics and government, an ignoramus in world movements and trends.

Adams recycles, for example, White's second-hand story with never a doubt about its authenticity. He also cites Bruce Bliven's nonsensical quote ascribed to Harding, namely, that the President wished to raise American tariffs "to protect the struggling industries of Europe." He even uses William Estabrook Chancellor, an academic racist at Wooster College whose particular mania was proving Harding's African ancestry. Adams used the professor's genealogical "research" to affect amusement that Harding had African blood. "Negroes," in Adams's account are invariably "bug-eyed," and the author gratuitously quotes a "darkie" joke approvingly (at Harding's expense). Not surprisingly, Harding's bold speech in Birmingham goes without notice.

Adams borrowed freely from other Harding floggers, such as Senator William McAdoo, who compared the President's rhetoric to "an army of pompous phrases moving over the landscape in search of an idea." Adams neglects to mention that McAdoo was a

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Democrat and son-in-law of Woodrow Wilson. Adams also forgets to mention that McAdoo, a wealthy lawyer, was in the pay of oilman Edward Doheny of Teapot Dome fame. But, instead of a Democratic scandal, Adams turned Teapot Dome into *l'affaire Harding*. Even now Adams's one-sided version of the issue has become the accepted one, although most people have no idea where the Teapot Dome canon originated.

“Teapot Dome” involved leases on oil-rich property owned by the U.S. Navy in Wyoming and California. These “reservoirs” were the strategic reserve of the day, thought to be essential to a navy converting from coal to faster oil-burning warships. Keeping these reserves locked up made little economic sense even in wartime; however, the stockpiling mentality prevailed among the Navy brass.

Private developers, among them Doheny and Harry Sinclair, wanted to pump oil from these and adjacent areas, and sought permission to do so from Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall who, in turn, got an okay from the Secretary of the Navy. Fall's mistake was in accept-

ing personal loans from Doheny and Sinclair, whom he had known for years. These looked like bribes, especially since bidding on the leases was not open (a procedure that was legal under the circumstances). Fall then denied, in a letter to Senate investigators, that he had ever received a cent from either Doheny or Sinclair. Harding was not informed of this arrangement, nor did he benefit from it.

Fall served a year in jail; Sinclair six months (for contempt of court and Congress); Doheny was found not guilty. But for Adams, it was a matter of guilt by association, a pattern that will be familiar to students of Iran-contra.

Adams knew little about oil, naval politics, or strategic misjudgments. Instead, he focused on “corporate greed” that led to the unforgivable sin of people making money developing oil resources on sacred “government” land. What he and other Teapot mavens overlooked was that the issue was, at bottom, a policy dispute, not a scandal. On one side were the “developmentalists” who wanted to exploit the nation's reserves at a time of perceived petroleum scarcity (the U.S. Bureau of Mines projected in 1919 that oil produc-

tion would decline in two to five years). On the other side were those who wanted as much land as possible locked up and left untouched forever. The policy dispute sailed right over Adams's head, or he chose to ignore it in his one-dimensional portrait of the Teapot Dome affair.

The scandal was no Watergate. It played no part in the 1924 election, which Calvin Coolidge won handily. Yet William Allen White also embraced the late-blooming orthodoxy, with one advantage over the other detractors: he had actually known Harding. White thought Harding was simply not in his class. And he was right. White had more money, which he inherited. So, while this Kansas patrician and his family took regular trips to Europe, the poltroon from Ohio was lucky to make it to Florida for a round of golf. Worse, Harding's favorite breakfast was chipped beef on toast.

By the time he wrote his *Autobiography* in the early forties (it would be completed posthumously, by his son in 1946), the *Gazette* editor had no use for Harding. To White, Harding's era was all “corruption, vulgarity, scandal, ineptitude in English and an addiction to trash.”

White was an ardent Bull Moose, and never forgave Harding's loyalty to Taft in the 1912 election. Even thirty years later, White failed to grasp what the supposedly simple-minded Harding was doing at the time. Harding understood well that the Republican party remained deeply split even after Roosevelt's death and Taft's appointment (by Harding) to the Supreme Court. As leader of his party, Harding saw he would have to carry out a balancing act if the GOP were to survive as an effective counterweight to the Democrats, who in some parts of the country (and not just in the South) were owned lock, stock, and cross by the Ku Klux Klan.

While Harding saw the need to heal the 1912 wounds within the party, drawing from both elements, White never did. For him, Harding was a “poor dub,” a mediocrity. The dub nevertheless helped keep the party from self-destruction by naive and unforgiving factionalists such as White. For that his reputation became a punching bag for White, just as it did for the attention-seeking Adams and Allen, the scoundrel Means, and dozens of Democratic party orators and pseudo-intellectuals in the decades since. □

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Slow — if that were the shared vision of the citizens — would be a pretty disappointing outcome of this nation's grand experiment in democracy. We fought off the British and stared down the commies so we could do *what*?

It would be pretty out of character too, given the pride we take in America as a land of opportunity. Opportunity to be slow? No, it even sounds wrong.

And according to the democratic process in which we all believe, it *is* wrong. Americans vote daily with their dollars and slow is the loser, in every market from high-tech computers to low-tech fast food. The sky wouldn't be thick with jetliners if Americans wanted slow. And patrolmen wouldn't be handing out 25 million speeding tickets a year.

On the Interstates, the ordinary motorist's vote with his foot is a clearer democratic statement than any national election. A landslide two-to-one majority, according to NHTSA statistics, vote for a speed above 65 mph. And these votes are cast at great personal risk to driving records and insurance premiums. Americans definitely don't want slow.

A government that's truly of the people, by the people, and for the people would read the message on the radar gun and get cracking on the citizens' mandate for a faster pace. But the government we have takes the view that we citizens are suicidal maniacs. That we operate with wanton disregard for our fellows. That we don't know our own best interests and will kill ourselves if left to our own counsel.

This is plain old elitist thinking of the sort that democracy was meant to stop. By definition, a majority of *the people* determines the will of the nation. And back when speed limits were left to traffic engineers instead of politicians, they were set at the 85th percentile of free-flowing traffic speed in deference to the majority's assessment of self interest.

The majority turns out to be right about safe speeds, a fact confirmed by a very expensive engineering survey recently paid for with our tax dollars by

our Department of Transportation. *Driver Speed Behavior on U.S. Streets and Highways*, by Samuel C. Tignor, Ph.D., and Davey Warren, both of the Federal Highway Administration, found that: "The accident involvement rates on streets and highways in urban areas were *highest* for the *slowest* five percent of traffic, lowest for traffic in the 30-to-95-percentile range, and increased for the fastest five percent of traffic (emphasis added)."

The authors go on to say: "Many current speed limits coincide with 30-percentile speed which is near the lower bound of safe travel speed. Speed limits should be set in the 70-to-90-percentile range or roughly 5 to 10 mph above the average speed to correctly reflect maximum safe speed. Speed limits are set in multiples of 5 mph; the 70-to-90-

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**We, the people, are voting with our feet, and we have progress on our minds.**

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percentile range will almost always include a 5 mph multiple. Allowing a 5-mph tolerance, enforcement would then be targeted at the drivers who are clearly at risk."

Why don't we listen to the engineers instead of the public-policy elitists? Why don't we demand a new government attitude about speed, an attitude in sync with the will of the people? Instead of being scolded all the time — "Speed Kills!" — let's hear "Speed gets us there sooner, fresher, happier." Our government's job is to put the incentive in favor of speed instead of against it, then get out of the way and let Yankee ingenuity do its best. Let's open highway traffic up to the free market.

At first, speeds wouldn't change much. Tignor and Warren report: "Raising the speed limit by various amounts up to 15 mph has little or no effect on speeds over broad range of road types and speed levels." Speeds wouldn't change immediately because motorists' self interest wouldn't change — to reach

the destination quickly, safely, economically, and comfortably.

The "quickly" part would definitely happen over time though, if the new government attitude lets the market work. The government has only to promise regular traffic surveys and regular updating of speed limits to the new 85th-percentile. The people have proven they want speed and they'll vote with their dollars for new cars and trucks that deliver it safely, economically and comfortably. Auto makers will immediately begin competing among themselves to satisfy this perfectly predictable demand.

This new attitude toward speed would rebuild America faster and more thoroughly than any Congressional infrastructure program — at no cost to taxpayers. Crime would drop as the police chased criminals instead of speeders. There'd be jobs, jobs, jobs, as the domestic automakers, catering to the demand for safe, efficient speed, took over from the importers whose world-market cars were no longer good enough for us. Cold-war defense scientists, now unappreciated, would become vital again, pulled into private industry to invent speed for everyone instead of just a few fighter jocks. We'd all get to our destinations sooner too, which any economist would recognize as a productivity improvement.

There is a larger goal too. As we observe the close of the American Century, we must understand that we'll never make it two in a row if we don't get off the brakes. We are the first generation of Americans to drive slower than our fathers. We have begun our decline.

Sixty-five mph has never been the limit of American ambition. But it will be the limit of our achievement if we keep this go-slow attitude. ■



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## Lebanon: A Traveler's Confession *by Edward Norden*

Dual citizenship was not without advantages. For example, first as a journalist on his own with an American passport, then as an Israeli in army uniform escorting foreign journalists to the front, then as a Jerusalem-based journalist again, the ex-American was able to spend much of the second half of 1982 and not a little of the next two years making raids across the border into Lebanon.

There he was taught a few things at first hand which before he'd only heard spoken of, or read about.

He learned, somewhat late in life, that some people have trouble, while some are only under the impression. He learned that if, thanks to his dual citizenship, he could wear two hats, this wasn't the ultimate in options, because the professional war reporters and war photographers packed even more—they were voyeurs and journeymen, emissaries and crazy persons, careerists and saints, knaves, moralists, and daredevils in safari jackets. He himself was no daredevil. Traveling for days and nights at a time and going where he pleased in the Land of the Cedars, he learned that it's possible to fear every harmless window, every innocent wall, every driver of a beat-up Mercedes weaving in your direction. Compared with what could happen in Lebanon, the stone-bullet-and-tear gas routines at the Birzeit campus; over the Green Line half an hour north of Jerusalem in what the trade knew as the occupied West Bank, were farcical.

He was taught in the steaming port cities and cool, dry, picture-postcard villages glued to the

*Edward Norden is a regular contributor to The American Spectator.*

Lebanese mountainside that there were limits to what the Israel Defense Forces were capable of. The same went for the Shabak (more or less Israel's FBI) and the Mossad (its CIA), both of which were very much on the scene as well.

He learned in Lebanon too of the casual heroism and viciousness of ordinary Arabs, ordinary humans, ordinary civilians in a country where the front was everywhere and the nearest thing to consolation was revenge. He learned that all the tribes had justice on their side. Furthermore, all went in for atrocities, and all, including the Maronites who suffered from a bad press and the Palestinians who were in Lebanon in the first place only because they had lost to the Jews in the Galilee all the way back in 1948, fought like tigers when their turf was in question. Everyone was brave, and strangely enough everyone was likable. The ex-American was surprised to learn that likable people could behave atrociously—likable human beings could treat human

beings of other tribes and even of their own tribe worse than dogs and either think nothing of it or love it.

No saint himself, he learned that a taste of chaos can be sweet. Queasy as he often was in Lebanon, he'd find himself almost missing the lawlessness when back in quiet, boring Jerusalem.

And in Lebanon he learned more about what some called Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza District. He had stopped covering these parts of the Land of Israel four years before, and liked to believe that after eighteen intensive months over the Green Line, he knew everything there was to know about them. He was, it now emerged, very wrong.

No one, he now learned, should say that he knew Ramallah, Bethel, Hebron, Ophra, Nablus-Shechem, Gaza, and supposedly united Jerusalem until he had been in the ruins of Arafat's Kingdom and walked alone at dusk, heart thumping, across that other Green Line, the one which separated Beirut's Christian and Moslem halves and was nothing but sandbags, teen-aged gunmen, rats,

garbage, and block after block of buildings shot to Swiss cheese. Yes, Lebanon and Beirut were the West Bank and Jerusalem come into their own.

His eighteen months as a reporter in Ramallah, Bethel, Hebron, etc., the maudlin songs on his car radio of the Palestinian refugee Fayruz who resided in Beirut and all his reading about the Geopolitical Context, the Arab World, and the Palestinian Diaspora, had prepared him almost not at all for what he saw, smelled, heard, and felt when he got to Beirut. There was nothing like being there, they said, and in this case the cliché was on target.

