

Warren Harding

One of our most effective Presidents ?

Book Review by Wayne Lutton

On any list of American Presidents, Warren G. Harding is almost always listed among the failures, and often rated the worst of those who served in the 20th century. Yet, at the time of his untimely death on August 2, 1923 – barely mid-way through his first term – Harding was highly popular and admired both here and abroad. And for good reason: during his two-and-half years in office, the Harding Administration slashed federal spending, sharply cut income taxes, and ended the stagflation ignited by President Wilson's policies. Unemployment was reduced from 12 percent to 3 percent. Bold diplomatic initiatives led to peace with former enemies and the most successful disarmament treaty of the century.

An Envidable Record

A few months after Harding's death, former Interior Secretary Albert B. Fall was indicted for allegedly accepting bribes for the leasing of federal oil deposits at the Teapot Dome field, Salt Creek, Wyoming. Harding's courageous attorney general, Harry Daugherty, was subjected to highly publicized attacks by Sen. Burton K. Wheeler (D-Mont.) and other liberals who had long opposed his national security policies. Sensational public hearings aired a flurry of charges against other Harding Administration officials. There were few actual convictions. None of the investigations implicated Harding in any corrupt activity or knowledge of wrongdoing. But his reputation suffered almost immediately. All of his administration's successes were attributed to his Cabinet officers and the other able people he surrounded himself with.

John Dean, yes, the same John Dean who was President Richard Nixon's White House counsel, has written the latest entry in the American Presidents

Series, *Warren G. Harding*. Dean was born in Harding's hometown of Marion, Ohio, and came to know many of Harding's former neighbors and associates. From them he heard that there was more to his presidency than the scandalous stories. After collecting material on Harding for nearly 50 years, Dean here makes the case that Harding has suffered as few others have from a hostile press and that his actual record in office is one of considerable accomplishment.

Educator and Editor

Warren Gamaliel Harding was born on November 2, 1865, to George and Phoebe Harding. Both of his parents studied medicine and developed a practice in Caledonia, Ohio, later moving to Marion. Warren entered Ohio Central College at the age of 24, where he was a successful student of literature and philosophy.

Upon graduation, Harding taught grade school in a one-room schoolhouse for a year. He then studied law before turning to journalism. As a rookie editor and reporter, he attended the 1884 Republican National Convention, held in Chicago, and got hooked on politics.

In November of that year, with the help of his father, Warren Harding was able to acquire the small local newspaper, the *Marion Star*. Warren did all the hard work, including buying the newsprint and ink, setting the type, running the presses, writing articles, and selling the advertising. Over the three decades that Warren Harding published the *Star*, the paper grew into a powerful voice for Republican views in a Democratic part of the state.

The Making of a President

Ohio Republican leaders soon took notice of the articulate young editor and tapped him to run for the state Senate in 1899. He served there until 1904, when he was elected lieutenant governor of Ohio. Out of office for four years, he gave a highly regarded nominating speech for President William Howard Taft

Warren G. Harding
(The American Presidents Series)

by John Dean
New York: Time Books
224 pages, \$20.00



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at the 1912 GOP convention. Two years later he was elected to the U.S. Senate.

One of the persistent myths about Harding that Dean lays to rest is that he was *surprised* to be picked as the 1920 Republican presidential nominee by a cabal of GOP operators working out of a “smoke-filled room at the Blackstone hotel” when the lead candidates, Gen. Leonard Wood and Illinois Gov. Frank Lowden, were unable to win the required convention majority.

Directing Harding’s campaign was veteran Ohio Republican lawyer Harry Daugherty, who personally met with over three-quarters of the GOP delegates. When it became clear that neither Wood nor Lowden could secure the necessary votes, the convention turned to Harding, an excellent speaker with great personal charm who was seen as a traditional conservative Republican.

The Democrats nominated Ohio Gov. James Cox, who ran a campaign defending Wilson’s internationalism, including participation in the League of Nations. The American majority was heartily sick of war and foreign intervention. Harding focused on the need to rebuild the American economy and not overextend ourselves in extraneous conflicts. In Boston, he delivered a speech that resonated throughout the 1920 campaign and became a trademark of his presidency. He told his audience:

America’s present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy; not revolution, but restoration; not agitation, but adjustment; not surgery, but serenity; not the dramatic, but the dispassionate; not experiment, but equipoise; not submergence in internationality but sustainment in triumphant nationality.

As Dean confirms, Harding “was reading the nation’s pulse correctly.” He was elected by the biggest majority any President had received up to that time.

Accomplishments Ignored

Harding was inaugurated on March 4, 1921. Republicans controlled the executive branch and both houses of Congress for the first time in a decade. The new 67th Congress was not due to convene until the first Monday in December 1921. With the approval of the House and Senate leadership, Harding called a special session of the new Congress nine months early to deal with pressing national issues.

In what he calls “An Unfinished Presidency,” the

author highlights the accomplishments of Harding’s 28 months in office. It is noteworthy that the first legislation passed was the Immigration Act of May 19, 1921, an emergency measure designed to stem the tide of mass immigration that threatened to swamp American labor markets.

Immigration was sharply curtailed during the World War. In 1920, over 800,000 arrived and millions more were preparing to depart from their native lands. Both business and labor came to see that restricting immigration was not only important for sound economic reasons, but for national security. Little of the radical left and Communist agitation that emerged after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was homegrown. Instead, it was largely fueled by unregulated immigration. Temporary quotas, extended to July 1, 1924, cut immigration to less than 350,000 per annum and included additional security provisions.

The second act passed was an emergency tariff on selected foreign imports. Other achievements included: the Budget & Accounting Act, enabling better management of federal spending; a new internal revenue law reduced taxes by hundreds of millions of dollars annually; wartime controls of shipping and railroad administration ended; the Veteran’s Bureau was established; violent strikes in the coal mining industry and railways were defused; peace treaties were signed with Germany, Austria, and Hungary; along with the Washington Naval Agreement, the outstanding diplomatic success of the inter-war period.

Untimely Demise

Harding, a workaholic, caught a virulent strain of the flu in early 1923. He returned to work too soon. In the summer he went west to Alaska for what was supposed to be a vacation. He made 85 public speeches – an average of more than two a day through the hottest days of one of the hottest summers on record. Just short of his 58th birthday, he died quietly while his wife was reading to him at the their hotel in San Francisco.

John Dean has written a needed corrective of the career of one American President who surely deserves our sympathy and respect. Was Harding really a failure? Upon reflection, perhaps readers will agree that he deserves to be recognized as one of our finest conservative chief executives.