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“Muckfests and Revelries”: President Warren G. Harding in Fact and Fiction

This article will assess the development of the posthumous reputation of President Warren Gamaliel Harding (1921-23) through an examination of key historical and literary texts in Harding historiography. The article will argue that the president’s image has been influenced by an unusual confluence of factors which have both warped history’s assessment of his administration and retarded efforts at revisionism. As a direct consequence, the stereotypical, deeply negative, portrait of Harding remains rooted in the nation’s consciousness and the “rehabilitation” afforded to many presidents by revisionist writers continues to be denied to the man still widely-regarded as the worst president of the twentieth century.

“Historians,” Eugene Trani and David Wilson observed in 1977, “have not been gentle with Warren G. Harding.”¹ In successive surveys of American political scientists, historians and journalists, undertaken to rank presidents by achievement, vision and leadership skills, the twenty-ninth president consistently comes last.

Presidents.³ A 1996 *New York Times* poll branded Harding an outright “failure,” alongside two presidents who presided over the pre-Civil War crisis, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan. The academic merit and methodological underpinnings of such surveys are inevitably flawed. Nonetheless, in most cases, presidential status assessments are fluid, reflecting the fluctuations of contemporary opinion and occasional waves of academic revisionism. The Carter Administration, reevaluated by writers such as John Dumbrell and Douglas Brinkley, has now escaped the “below average” categories to which it was assigned after 1981 and attained an “average” ranking, above that of Ronald Reagan, in the 1994 Murray-Blessing poll.⁴

The Harding presidency, however, is the exception to this trend. Despite efforts by a few authors in the late twentieth century, the resoundingly negative portrayals of the Harding period that first developed in the 1920s and 1930s remain deeply rooted in the public mind. This is at least partly due to the position which the 1921-23 administration occupies in twentieth-century history. Its sheer brevity makes it hard to assign to the era of “normalcy” anything more than a passing influence upon American and world affairs. William Allen White, a newspaper editor and one-time Harding confidante, termed it “a sort of intermezzo between President Wilson...and President Coolidge.”⁵ Sandwiched between World War I and the New Deal era, the Harding presidency is usually represented as a vulgar and reactionary stopgap.

The apparent historical irrelevance of the Harding presidency can also be attributed to shifting academic and popular expectations of presidential performance in the interwar period. Even during the 1920s, the executive styles of Harding and Calvin Coolidge, were regarded as outmoded – more suited to the previous century than to the

silence over the Great Bull Market. Nor was he recast, with Hoover, as a well-intentioned humanitarian. Historians and political scientists had long since abandoned Harding's reputation to the tender mercies of sensation-seeking writers and discredited public officials and it was generally considered irretrievable.

The customary and stereotypical portrait of the twenty-ninth president is devoid of either objectivity or political detail. Harding administration policies, if recalled at all, are normally described in shorthand, permitting writers to move swiftly on to more engrossing tales of scandal, adultery and murder. To contemporary audiences, Harding has become an almost complete caricature – a bumbling oaf or lecherous slob; the tool of corrupt party bosses and a tyrannical wife. Harding's story is told only for its

establishment and press. The prevailing suspicion was that Harding's selection resulted from a "conspiracy" between a "cabal" of conservative Republican leaders and oil barons seeking a president whom they could manipulate. This *coup* was alleged to have been perpetrated in a "smoke-filled room" in Chicago's Blackstone Hotel. These rumours damaged the nominee's public image from the outset. The verdict of *The Outlook*, a

twentieth century. The “Best Minds” reflected less Harding’s sense of inadequacy than his self-confidence, in selecting men regarded as intellectually superior to himself. Adopting the “chairman of the board” management style later employed by Eisenhower, Harding deliberately avoided the style of his predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, who would probably have dispensed with a cabinet altogether had decency permitted.

Harding’s political personality appeared to undergo a transformation in his transition from the legislature to the executive. Harding always preferred compromise but could be firm and even wily when the situation demanded.¹⁰ Harding often found himself accused of “Wilsonian” high-handedness as he attempted to push the administration’s programme for economic recovery through the Republican-controlled Congress.¹¹ Harding’s administration was, as already noted, far from progressive, particularly in its attitude to striking workers and labour unions, but the president often showed signs of a more natural active-interventionist political personality than his successor, Calvin Coolidge. He alarmed conservatives by speeding up the release and pardon of antiwar activists jailed under the Wilson administration, with his vigorous pursuit of the eight-hour industrial working day, and with a 1921 speech on civil rights in Birmingham, Alabama, which stirred a hornets’ nest of controversy for its suggestion that it was hypocritical that America’s freedoms were proclaimed, but not applied to blacks. The Republicans had been carried to power on a tide of isolationist sentiment in 1920 but he battled with Congressional Republicans over his ambition to lead the US into the newly-established World Court, which most isolationists regarded as a ‘back-door’ for US participation in the League of Nations, which had recently been rejected.¹²

Through the two and a half years of his presidency, Harding's popularity remained high and ran consistently ahead of that of his party in Congress. The economic recession inherited from Wilson had dissipated by the midpoint of 1923 and the stage seemed set for Harding's re-election. The president's misfortune was that a few of his erstwhile "cronies," who constituted what became known as the "Ohio Gang," had been engaged in large-scale fraud and profiteering and were incompetent enough to be found out. The president may have turned a blind eye to some of the minor-scale corruption within his administration, accepting it, due to his Ohio background, as a fact of political life. The sheer scale of the frauds connected with Forbes' Veterans Bureau and Fall's Interior Department, however, was unprecedented. The May 1923 suicide of Daugherty's close friend, Jess Smith (known to the Hardings through Daugherty) provoked Harding's last crisis, in which his deeply-rooted loyalty to his friends clashed with his new-found sense of duty as the nation's leader. As he became increasingly aware of the potentially catastrophic implications of the scandals, Harding struggled with the dilemma of whether to reveal the scandals himself or attempt a traditional Ohio cover-up operation. The strain moved him to violence. A visitor, shown into the Red Room of the White House by mistake, found the president holding Forbes against a wall and shaking him by the throat, shouting "You yellow rat! You double-crossing bastard!"¹³

To escape the sense of impending doom, Harding embarked on a tour of the western United States and Alaska in June 1923. His stress, combined with the physical exertion of the ill-fated "Voyage of Understanding," pushed his weakened heart beyond its limits. The president collapsed and doctors announced as possible causes of the illness fatigue, pneumonia and a bout of ptomaine poisoning from eating tainted crabmeat.

Harding was expected to make a slow recovery, but on August 2 1923, he died suddenly, still a generally popular president.¹⁴

The Decline of Harding's Reputation

At the time of his death, Harding was a well-liked president, as yet untouched by scandal. However, his standing rapidly declined as the Teapot Dome scandals began to emerge. His former colleagues scrambled to avoid the taint of corruption and any association with their erstwhile leader. President Calvin Coolidge, who had entered the White House with solemn promises to carry out his predecessor's programme, could not bring himself even to dedicate the Harding tomb in Marion. Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover also quietly dropped all mention of Harding's name from his public pronouncements. The scandals failed to damage the perennially lucky Coolidge, who romped home against Democrat John W. Davis in the November 1924 elections and assumed office in his own right in March 1925, as the boom fostered by Harding's economic policies began to gather steam. Instead, Harding's presidency was subject to vicious attack. Harding's reputation was vulnerable on two fronts. As soon became clear, his personal life was not safe from prurient stories. In addition, Harding, with his small-town background and apparently traditional values, was tailor-made to be a personification of the bland small-town values that were subject to fierce attack by intellectuals of the time, most notably the journalists H. L. Mencken and William Allen White, and novelist Sinclair Lewis.

By 1923, it had become fashionable for writers such as H. L. Mencken to lampoon Middle America's narrow horizons, "hail fellow, well-met" politicians and suffocating conformity; to snipe at its social organisations and at the dress, speech and

social codes of its inhabitants. This latter group were Mencken's "booboisie," the corporeal embodiment of the rising tide of conservative mediocrity which both he and William Allen White so despised.

The power of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt*, published in 1922, (and, to some extent, its 1920 predecessor, *Main Street*) in influencing journalists' and academics' assessments of Harding cannot be overestimated. There is no evidence that these novels were direct lampoons of Harding and his small-town Ohio origins, but Harding's detractors routinely drew upon them for inspiration. As late as 1992, historian Michael Parrish identified the Lewis novel's eponymous figure directly with Warren Harding.¹⁵

Lamponing everything from Harding's oratory to his passion for golf, White described Harding as "Main Street in perfect flower."¹⁶ Lewis emphasised the cut and colour of George Babbitt's suit and his quasi-religious attachment to BVDs as a way of further underlining the *gaucheries* of Middle American males. White was similarly preoccupied with Warren Harding's sartorial tastes in his account of the Ohio Senator's keynote address to the 1916 Republican Convention:

His robust frame was encased in well-tailored clothes, creased and pressed for the high moment. His eyeglasses were pinned elegantly to his coat....His statesman's long-tailed coat, of the cutaway variety, and his dark trousers were of the latest New York mode.¹⁷

One of the most fascinating aspects of Harding literature is the influence brought to bear upon the ebbs and flows of the President's reputation by works of fiction. Harding's profile, perhaps more than that of any other President bar Washington or Lincoln, has been shaped as much by *novelists* as by political scientists. Of the handful of major Harding biographers, only Sinclair grasped this fact, observing that Harding had been

most effectively “blasted” by authors of fiction.¹⁸

which Harding was also renowned. White and many later writers were unable to resist substituting Babbitt's Zenith for Harding's Marion, and converting the entire Harding presidency into a comedy of manners and morals. The borrowed style was entertaining, the targets were soft, and sales figures responded positively.

Babbitt remains one of the most memorable and iconoclastic works of early twentieth-century American literature. Its impact on Harding's image has come from writers' tendencies to copy Lewis's narrative style and to link the fictional character of George Babbitt with that of the president. Since Babbitt himself was never intended to be an object of admiration, the comparison is habitually employed to demean or poke fun at Harding. The citizen of Zenith and the president from Marion appear destined to be

hand man to whom Markham owes his meteoric rise. Lurcock and Markham first meet, as did Harding and Daugherty, in a hotel yard while the future president was having his shoes shined. Lurcock has an emotionally unstable sidekick, Jeff Sims. Sims is clearly Jess Smith, the ill-fated Harding-Daugherty intimate, and he shares Smith's habit of showering bystanders with saliva whilst talking.²⁶ All the familiar Harding myths are present. Markham wins his party's nomination after Lurcock sells his candidate to party bosses in a smoke-filled room as "a more...ductile personality."²⁷ Once in the White House, Markham displays the same awe for the "highbrows" of his cabinet as Harding allegedly had for his "Best Minds," particularly for Treasury Secretary Maxson (Mellon), the "frail high priest of high finance."²⁸ Markham is a lazy, compliant, good-natured dunderhead with no head for policy detail and no aptitude for international affairs: "What the hell did he, Bill Markham, know about the debt of Juggo-Slobbia or whatever it was?"²⁹

As the net of congressional investigators begins to tighten around the Crow's Nest, panic and a search for scapegoats ensues. Sims "commits suicide" in suspicious circumstances and President Markham throttles Charley Madrigal (Charlie Forbes) against the wall of the Red Room, shrieking "You yellow dog! You grafting crook!"³⁰

Terrified at the thought of the humiliation the scandals would bring down upon him, the president accidentally swallows a handful of bichloride of mercury tablets, instead of stomach pills, before going to bed. It is a genuine mistake, but when Markham realises its potentially fatal consequences, he mulls over his murky future and decides against calling a doctor. This "suicide" is subsequently covered up by an old Senate colleague, a Justice Department agent.

Andrew Sinclair denounced *Revelry* in 1965 as an “inferior and notorious” work, but the novel added a reinforcing layer to the murky sediments accumulating over Warren Harding’s grave.³¹

Adams’s recapitulation of the Harding story was a colourful, if soon-forgotten, melodrama. Its factual basis, however, was shaky, but many were all too willing to take the novel at face value. *The Nation*’s columnist, Heywood Broun, illustrated the growing mood that *Revelry* helped to foster, when he wrote,

No service is done to the national welfare by saying “Let Warren Gamaliel Harding sleep deep”... We are supposed to wink while monuments are reared to the great and good man because he happened to die before he was found out.³²

Broun was prepared to accept Adams’s blurring of the lines between fact and rumour in order to hasten the cleansing of Washington’s Augean stables; “The parable,” he wrote, “is still the silver bullet of the reformer.”³³ Claiming that Adams had, in fact, gone out of his way to be kind to Markham / Harding by making him a slob rather than a crook, Broun suggested Harding himself may actually have been *both*. As Downes later observed, the timing of *Revelry* could not have been worse. As the Congressional hearings revealed the corruption of Fall and Forbes, the late President was already slipping into disrepute, and scandal-hungry reporters avidly devoured anything directly or indirectly implicating him in the Teapot Dome affair. No evidence ever linked the President directly to the scandals, but this fact had become an irrelevance as early as 1926. *Revelry* served to seal a link in people’s minds of Harding with scandal as well as with the much-mocked values of the small-town, and as Downes observed, “made a shambles of Harding’s reputation.”³⁴

This was cemented by two works, which unlike *Revelry* were presented as factual revelations. They proved crucial in the development of the President's posthumous reputation, establishing the template for treatments of Harding which stood for decades thereafter. Based upon the personal "recollections" of two highly controversial figures, they focused entirely upon Harding's private life and were seized upon by fascinated readers, who sent both books to the top of the bestsellers lists.

The President's Daughter (1927) was the first memoir to be published by a presidential mistress. Nan Britton, a woman less than half Harding's age, from his home town of Marion, Ohio, claimed to have had a daughter, Elizabeth Ann, by the President.³⁵ Britton's book, which was dedicated to all unmarried mothers and their children, purported to reveal her secret assignations with the president in a White House closet and detailed the collusion of Secret Service agents in concealing their relationship from Mrs Harding

It is unlikely that *The President's Daughter* was a complete work of fiction, despite vociferous denials from the Harding estate. Carl Sferrazza Anthony has pointed out that Britton's recollections were replete with details which only an insider could have known and, further, that Britton's story conformed to a clearly identifiable pattern of philandering displayed by Harding since the earliest days of his married life.³⁶

fidelity. Readers instead learned of Harding's cavalier disregard for his marriage vows, as Britton's story unfolded:

In low tones Mr Harding told me again how he dreamed of having me all night with him, which prompted my usual query, "How is Mrs Harding now?" He lifted his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders and replied in the usual way, "Oh, all right!"³⁷

Britton lived on into the 1990s, a half-forgotten historical figure, but her lurid tales of sex in closets set the tone for future treatments of Harding and his times as vulgar and morally reprehensible.

Whereas much of Britton's story rang true, the second of the key early works constituted one of the greatest works of fiction masquerading as fact ever to have afflicted an administration. Gaston Means' *The Strange Death of President Harding* (1930) was read, according to Anthony, with "gasping gullibility" by a fascinated nation.³⁸ A former Justice Department investigator, twice imprisoned for conspiracy and larceny, Means claimed that Florence Harding hired him to spy on her husband and Nan Britton. Shortly thereafter, he alleges, she confronted the president with the evidence. Means recounted the ensuing scene between President and First Lady, as she had apparently described it to him:

I had never seen Warren Harding like this. He went on: "If they impeach – then – then do you know what I'll do? Do you want to know?...The world is a big place...I'll take my child and go away. No one shall keep me from my child. You shall not. You hear me."³⁹

Means claimed Mrs Harding had all but confessed to murdering her husband by administering a fatal overdose of medication during his illness at the Palace Hotel in San

Francisco. The author portrayed an emotionally unstable First Lady consumed with a desire for revenge but also anxious to save her husband the humiliation of impeachment.

“I was alone with the President...only about ten minutes. It

The result was White's *Masks in a Pageant*, published in 1928, which gave a colourful account of American politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It did not centre exclusively upon Harding but nonetheless equalled

raucous in debauch; the high-tensioned giggle of women pursued; the voices of men whispering in the greedy lechery of political intrigue; cynical voices crackling like the flames of the pit...⁴⁴

Lacing his account with copious references to Shakespeare, Dickens, the Old Testament and Greek mythology, White finally has Harding “shorn by the Delilah of his own moral indolence” before despatching him to the presidential hereafter and shedding crocodile tears for the ruin that the President’s posthumous reputation had suffered.⁴⁵

Unsurprisingly, *Masks* was an instant best-seller and the artistic licence taken within its pages was accepted at face value.

Frederick Lewis Allen’s *Only Yesterday*

escaped impeachment by his sudden death.⁵⁰ In common with most authors, Adams did not even try to suggest that Harding had been *personally* involved in the Teapot Dome scandals but blamed him for fostering a climate of corruption through his own laziness and lack of political backbone. Adams described the President as having “not an iota” of

along” with Congress and the desire to strike out on his own.⁵³ White, Adams and Allen, however, too often appeared to lose all sense of proportion in their efforts to enlarge what were fairly unremarkable weaknesses into unified and damning caricatures. Rarely mentioning Harding’s political skills or policies, they focussed instead upon accounts of poker parties, tobacco-chewing, bourbon and bootlegging. This tactic undoubtedly enlivened histories of the era but did nothing to assist readers to a clearer understanding of the legacy of the Harding administration. However, what had become the orthodox approach persisted, as subsequent writers, rather than investigating the Harding presidency afresh, would crib one or two stock quotations from the second-tier literature in developing what amounted to shorthand personal portraits of the twenty-ninth president.

Randolph Downes described the treatment of Harding up to 1963 as a “muckfest.”⁵⁴ Harding literature before then was almost uniformly negative in its assessments and unusually contemptuous in its tone. No serious historian and few of his political colleagues were prepared to defend Harding’s reputation in the crucial decade following his death. The Harding administration was not regarded as a serious subject for presidential historians and had become, instead, the preserve of sensationalist reporters

A Harding Revisionism?

The opening of the Harding papers began a long overdue process of reappraisal of the Harding image. The papers that remained after Florence's cull in 1923 were closed to researchers until October 1963. The opening of them to public scrutiny sparked a brief improvement in Harding's public profile. New studies were published, focusing less upon flaws in his personality and more upon his performance as a politician. Earlier works are almost entirely engrossed in Harding's private life and personal weaknesses, whereas now there was the possibility, should the author be so inclined, to focus upon his long-ignored political skills and achievements. In addition to the release of the Harding papers, this can be attributed to changes in literary styles and to the rise of a new generation of more detached and objective authors, with no partisan axes to grind and with a less positive perspective on the "imperial" presidencies which followed Harding's. After the release of the Harding papers, a small number of writers began to criticise both the style and content of those published works on Harding which had provided the foundation for almost all assessments of the 1921-23 administration since the president's death. Armed with fresh information and previously unavailable government documents, those authors brave enough to undertake work on such a distant and discredited president could begin to flesh out the Harding Administration as a *political entity* rather than as a tragi-comic soap opera.

Compared to the works of the second-tier authors, Andrew Sinclair's *The Available Man* constituted an unusually balanced and sober assessment of Harding's career, though the author sacrificed a considerable amount of detail and analysis in the

rush to publish the first post-1963 biography. Sinclair drew attention for the first time to Harding's controversial race-relations speech. He also punctured the Blackstone conspiracy theory by demonstrating that the party bosses at the 1920 convention were anything but united in their support for the dark horse from Ohio:

The moment that Harding was chosen, the bosses naturally claimed that Harding had always been their choice...Thus they spread the false story of the smoke-filled room in order to claim the power that they wished they had. And they were generally believed, because all the political world loves a conspiracy.⁵⁵

Sinclair does not divert from the by-then orthodox opinion that Harding was out of his depth in the presidential office, nor does he seriously challenge the notion that the president had been unimaginative and indecisive. Nevertheless, *Available Man* is notable simply because it represents the first serious historical treatment of the twenty-ninth president, forty years after his death. Sinclair criticises the earlier interpretations, noting for example that White's opinion on Harding had changed *twice* during his long career, rendering his opinions unreliable.⁵⁶ Through his examination of the newly-available presidential papers, Sinclair revealed, for the first time, Harding's deepening contempt for his old colleagues in the Senate, including Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Woodrow Wilson's nemesis in the League of Nations battle, and arguably the most powerful member of the Republican Party in Congress.⁵⁷ Harding refused to write an open letter endorsing Lodge for re-election in Massachusetts, and reprimanded him for proposing in the Senate an international economic conference, without first clearing the idea through the White House. Sinclair noted, "The fool that the Old Guard of the Senate thought was in the White House was learning every day to reproach his old masters for their folly."⁵⁸

That the orthodox approach to Harding was still beguiling was shown in Francis Russell's *The Shadow of Blooming Grove*, which though undeniably engrossing, was a disappointing contribution to the new generation of Harding works. Like so many earlier works, Russell's focus was personal. He filled in many of the gaps in Harding's private life, detailing in particular his affair with Nan Britton, but failed to throw significant new light on administration policy.⁵⁹ There are also distinct echoes of Sinclair Lewis in Russell's rather patronising portrayal of Florence Harding. Similarly, Elizabeth Stevenson's *Babbitts and Bohemians* (1967) also reproduced the orthodox list of damning characteristics, describing the President "playing golf in brand-new golf clothes, smoking his cigars, drinking his unhypercritical whiskey and soda, ducking out of the verbal range of a driving wife..."⁶⁰

A watershed for Harding historiography was finally reached in 1969, with publication of *The Harding Era*, by Robert K. Murray, a history professor at Pennsylvania State University. Just as White, Adams and Allen's writings served as the central inspiration for the Harding orthodoxy, so Murray's weighty volume was to become the principle source for those attempting to "revise" history's portrayal. Murray also expressed strong reservations about the style of accepted second-tier works on Harding and about their factual reliability. He observed that White's account of Harding's last days "contained a considerable amount of fiction," and both *Masks* and *Only Yesterday* were journalism not history, with the latter "alarmingly defective" in its treatment of President Harding.⁶¹

limited but capable and well-meaning executive, who coped with surprising competence with the burdens of office during a challenging era of economic dislocation, congressional assertiveness, isolationist sentiment and party factionalism. Murray drew attention to issues like the president's 1921-22 clash with Senate Republicans over the soldiers' bonus bill, and documented his growing antipathy toward isolationists of both political parties and his increasing resolve to heighten American participation in world affairs through membership of the World Court. In his battle to persuade industrial leaders to accept an eight-hour working day, in Murray's account, Harding's status becomes almost heroic. The administration's decision to reform government finances by

was published in 1983. Plunkett relates the tale of a young history researcher seeking to ingratiate himself with the aged Nan Britton's granddaughter, in order to obtain secret letters from Harding, which his mistress still jealously guards. This novel, like Mee's work, contributed nothing of substance to Harding historiography, but the works of both writers emphasised the continuing attraction to writers of the scandalous / inept / humorous narrative of the Harding presidency.⁶⁵

Thus, Harding revisionism by the end of the 1980s had failed to permeate beyond a few scholars. Once more a novel paved the way in establishing Harding's standing, bringing popular attention where a serious scholarly study could not, and encouraging others to write from this changed perspective. In 1989, Gore Vidal published *Hollywood*, part of his lengthy narrative of American history. Vidal presented a wholly new Warren Harding to a general America readership, one that clearly bore the imprint of research on the president published since 1963. Just as *Revelry* signalled the free-fall of Harding's reputation, so *Hollywood* heralded its partial rehabilitation.

The Harding of *Hollywood* is not a Markham, nor does he elicit comparisons with Babbitt. While Babbitt was ultimately a futile, confused character and Markham a kind but narrow-minded slob, Vidal's Harding is represented as a broad-minded and guileful political animal, more adept than Willis Markham and displaying a growing aptitude for the demands of the presidency. As he rises inexorably to power over the literal and metaphorical corpses of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, Harding is relaxed, coolly ambitious and in control of his own political destiny. Vidal surrounds "W. G." with characters who believe they control him, but it is Harding who does the manipulating, harnessing the talents and energies of others to further his own career. Far

from being a small-town politician out of his depth, Vidal's Harding knows precisely what he is doing. The author is careful never to stray beyond the limits of the credible. Rather, he elevates Harding by diminishing the characters around him, especially TR and Wilson – the “giants” against whom Harding had suffered so much by comparison. TR is portrayed as the “fat, small, shrill Colonel.”⁶⁶ He is a blustering egomaniac who has become a parody of himself. Wilson is depicted as a cold autocrat, disdainful of his opponents and out of touch with political reality. These characterisations allow Harding to emerge as a model of sanity and balance. “W. G.” is noticeably more at ease with himself in *Hollywood* than Markham manages to be in *Revelry*. During the Chicago convention balloting, Harry Daugherty sweats heavily but the candidate himself appears serene. Vidal has Jess Smith observing that Harding is “oddly relaxed, as if he knew something others did not.”⁶⁷ What Harding knows is that the tide of convention balloting and the deadlock of the leading candidates is playing into his hands. He explains to Smith, “When the number-one and number-two candidates cancel each other out, number three is usually chosen. Well, I was number three. Simple as that.”⁶⁸

The author's deconstruction of this perennial myth permits Harding to achieve legitimacy as his own man, rather than as a party puppet. Vidal explores this theme further as two Senators visit the White House to discuss foreign policy with the new president. William Borah is ready to intimidate Harding on the subject of disarmament and the League of Nations but finds the President unexpectedly well-briefed. The latter explains that he favours a fifty per cent reduction in naval construction, but wants Congress to push him towards it: “I'll give you a signal to go and put the gun to my head with a Senate resolution, and then, gracefully, I'll give way.”⁶⁹ *Hollywood's* Harding

clearly relishes his new position and regards his contemporaries' low opinions of his intellect as a source of potential strength. As he explains to the departing Senators, "what I really have going for me is that since nobody has the slightest expectation of me, whatever I do that's any good at all will produce astonishment."⁷⁰

Gore Vidal's interpretation of this apparent alteration in Harding's political character comes closer than most historical studies to encapsulating the impression which

underestimated. He was totally misapprehended.”⁷³

in the presidential rankings to a point somewhere above James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses Grant, and Richard Nixon.⁷⁸

British journalist Paul Johnson wrote a still more aggressive dismissal of the president's detractors. Johnson's exhaustive *History of the American People* aroused controversy for its defence of the unique arts of Norman Rockwell and Richard Nixon, its often unorthodox interpretations of key events in United States history and its heavy-handed treatment of the 1960s, which, considering Johnson's broadly conservative views, was hardly a matter for surprise. Jonathan Yardley, the *Washington Post's* book critic, informed his readers that "the best advice is to stop reading...at Page 841."⁷⁹

portrayals seemed to suggest that a qualified reassessment of Harding was finally underway. In 2000, even a brief entry in American Heritage's *Illustrated History of the Presidents* observed that while President Harding had been regarded as "something of a national joke," he was, in fact, "a man of some ability and great political gifts."⁸²

Conclusion

Unfortunately for Harding, these qualities were either forgotten or dismissed as irrelevant before the release of the presidential papers permitted his previously obscured qualities to come to light but, by the 1960s, they were not, in themselves, enough to promote a radical reassessment of Harding's performance. The selectivity exercised by White, Adams, Allen and others had served its purpose.

This article has shown the shaping in such a derogatory form of Warren Harding's posthumous image was the result of a combination of factors – political environment, personal animosity, journalistic and artistic licence, and the delayed availability of presidential papers. This last factor, in particular, limited the availability of positive

purposes, a favourite target of liberal historians who were keen to contrast the virtues of the “imperial” presidential style, with its focus on battling social injustices at home and insidious communism abroad, with the “myopic” and “lazy” Republican administrations of the 1921-33 period. Harding was far from lazy (in fact, overwork was one of the major contributors to his sudden death), and certainly not myopic. He proposed diplomatic recognition of the Bolshevik regime in Russia far earlier than his party was prepared to countenance, and fought a three-year battle with isolationists in an effort to prevent America’s complete withdrawal from the international stage and the possible revival of international conflict.⁸³

A limited number of texts, mostly produced in the 1960s, went some way to correcting this imbalance, but only in the 1990s did writers dare to suggest the existence of a competent and shrewd politician beneath the mountain of gossip and invective which rapidly built up over Harding’s reputation after his death in 1923. Harding remains, however, something of an enigma amongst America’s Presidents. He still tends to be the butt of humour, and to be emblematic of certain values and approaches to presidential leadership that are anathema to many of the academics who write the historical survey texts of the USA and who vote in the presidential assessments. The small, qualified improvements in his image have not dispelled many of the rumours which have circulated since the 1920s, and are unlikely to progress further while Harding historiography continues to arouse so little interest amongst serious scholars of history and politics.

Notes

¹ Eugene P. Trani and David L. Wilson, *The Presidency of Warren G. Harding* (Laurence: University Press of Kansas, 1977), 189.

² For an in-depth analysis and review of recent presidential polls see Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988). Also see William Ridings, Jr., and Stuart McIver, “1990’s Presidential Poll”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 25, 1994-95, 375-77.

³ Steve Neal, “Putting Presidents in their Place”, *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 19, 1995, 30-31.

⁴ Influenced to some extent by Carter’s post-presidential career – another dubious measuring rod.

⁵ Williams Allen White, *A Puritan In Babylon: The Story of Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), vi.

⁶ Francis Russell, *The Shadow of Blooming Grove, Warren Harding In His Times* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 605-6.

⁷ *The Outlook*. 125, No.8, June 23 1920, 370.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 10.

³⁵ Members of the Harding family later denied Britton's allegations, claiming that the president was, in fact,

⁷² David H. Jennings, "President Harding and International Organisation", *Journal of Ohio History*, 74, 1966, 151.

⁷³ Mark Sullivan, "One Year of President Harding", *The World's Work*, 43, 1, November 1921, 29.

⁷⁴ Murray, *Harding Era*