

IS IT A BUM RAP?

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Tomorrow is Election Day, don't we know it! Every four years we elect a President. Seven Presidents were born in the Buckeye State, more than any other state except Virginia.

In fact, one of Ohio's nick names is "birthplace of Presidents". The Presidents born in Ohio are Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, William Mc Kinley, William Howard Taft and Warren G. Harding.

I don't believe that any of our Ohio born Presidents has been rated as one of the best to hold that office. However, one of our Ohio Presidents has been ranked as the worst ever. Harvard Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. conducted a 1948 survey of "scholars" opinions of U. S. Presidents. According to these "scholars" the worst President was Ohio native Warren G. Harding.

It has now been over 90 years since Harding's death and almost 70 years since Schlesinger's survey.

What I'd like to discuss this evening is whether Harding's abysmal ranking is justified.

Before judging the man, we need to review the life and times of Warren G. Harding.

Harding was born November 2, 1865 on a farm in Morrow County, Ohio. George Tyron Harding, his father, served as a Union soldier in the Civil War and shook Lincoln's hand in the White House. His mother, Phoebe Harding, wanted to name the baby Winfield but his father preferred Warren. (In those long gone days husbands ruled the roost. Those were The Golden Years!)

By the time he was 4 his mother Phoebe taught Warren to read using printed letters and word cards from her Sunday school class.

Warren's father became a physician and the family moved to Caledonia, Ohio. By 1876 Tyron owned the Caledonia Argus newspaper. Warren apprenticed there as a part time "printer's devil". He attended a one room schoolhouse and learned from McGuffey's Readers.

At 14 Warren enrolled at Ohio Central College in Iberia, Ohio. He worked his way through - - painting houses and barns. During summers he did heavy construction labor on railroad gradings. He plowed and threshed grain on farms. Warren's favorite college subjects were literature and philosophy.

While in college Harding and a friend launched a newspaper, the Iberia Spectator.

Warren was 6' tall with blue eyes and wavy black hair. He liked the ladies. A college roommate said that Warren knew every pretty girl within 5 miles of Caledonia.

During Warren's senior year the family moved to Marion, Ohio. Dr. Harding, Warren's father, was earning \$6,000 a year as a physician, big money for 1882 small town Ohio.

After college Warren taught school for a while. He tried law. He read Blackstone but found it slow going. I understand!

In 1884 Harding learned that the Marion Star newspaper was to be auctioned off at a sheriff's sale. With his own savings, loans from friends and co-signing by his father 19 year old Warren was able to acquire the paper. The Star assets included an unlimited railroad pass that enabled him to travel free anywhere on any railroad in the United States. Wow!

Using the railroad pass Warren travelled to Chicago in June, 1884 to cover the Republican National Convention where James G. Blaine was nominated for President on the fourth ballot.

The Marion Star attacked the rent gouging, real estate grabbing, hard-nosed and heartless, money lending Amos H. Kling, Marion's wealthiest

citizen ...AND... Harding's future father-in-law! Kling made a fortune selling building supplies to the Union army during the Civil War. Afterwards, he went into hardware, banking and real estate.

Kling's daughter Florence, the future Mrs. Warren G. Harding, was 5 years older than Warren. Amos Kling was a hard man to endure as a parent so Florence wanted to escape from him and go to New York City to study music. Amos nixed the New York plan but did permit 17 year old Florence to attend the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, then described as a "finishing school in downtown Cincinnati".

When Florence returned to Marion after graduation, there was lots of conflict between her and her father. Amos saw her as still a child while Florence considered herself as a worldly woman. If Florence didn't return home by evening curfew, Amos Kling locked her out of the house for the night. For a while Florence used a ladder to sneak into her bedroom - - - -until Amos nailed her bedroom windows shut!

Florence got involved with "Pete" DeWolfe, a boy from one of Marion's oldest families. He was also Marion's youngest drunk.

Unmarried Florence got pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. Amos Kling refused to support Florence or her son so she made a living giving piano lessons. Amos made an offer to Florence - - - -Amos would take the boy and raise him as his own. Poverty forced Florence to accept this deal.

One of Florence's piano pupils was Warren's sister Charity. The Hardings owned a piano so the lessons were at the Harding home. That is where Warren and Florence met.

Amos Kling was infuriated that his daughter was seeing the owner of the newspaper that frequently criticized him. Amos spread the rumor that Warren had black ancestors, a claim that would dog Harding during his Ohio political career and his 1920 run for the White House.

On July 8, 1891 Warren and Florence were married.

Warren called Florence "The Duchess".

In 1895 Harding made his first run for elective office, seeking to be elected Marion County Auditor. Marion County was Democratic at that time so Republican Harding lost, but by a smaller margin than expected.

During William McKinley's 1896 presidential campaign the Ohio Republican Speakers Bureau asked Harding to campaign for McKinley and he did so, travelling around the state, becoming known and making contacts.

Then, in 1899, at age 33, Harding was elected to the Ohio Senate from a district that had voted almost solidly Democratic for the past 5 years.

Harding was a gifted politician, honing his skills in the so-called "Darwinian School of Ohio Politics". Warren became very popular with other politicians and the public who liked his modest, self-effacing mien. He never forgot names or faces, was an excellent poker player and "not at all averse to putting his foot on the brass rail" of saloons. Sounds like a clubbable guy!

Despite not being the favorite of political boss Mark Hanna, in 1904 Harding was nominated and elected Ohio Lieutenant Governor, an office that gave Harding statewide exposure.

Due to Florence's serious health problems, Harding decided not to seek reelection as Lieutenant Governor, to withdrawn from politics, return to Marion and operate his newspaper. In Marion Warren began an affair with Carrie Phillips, the wife of a friend. The affair continued for 15 years and was not publicly known until after Harding's death.

Florence's health improved so in 1910 Warren ran to be elected Ohio's governor. However, the gubernatorial campaign was unsuccessful because of a split in the Ohio Republican party between progressives and conservatives. Despite support from President William Howard Taft and former President Teddy Roosevelt, Harding lost by 100,000 votes.

President Taft asked Harding to nominate Taft for President at the 1912 Republican National Convention. Then, Teddy Roosevelt split

from Taft and formed the Bull Moose Party. As the Republicans were split, Democrat Woodrow Wilson was elected President.

In 1914 Harding was nominated to run for Senate from Ohio after a three way Republican primary race. He defeated Democratic candidate Timothy Hogan.

In the U.S. Senate Harding was often absent for roll call votes on controversial issues. If he didn't have to spend his political capital, he didn't do so.

Although only a junior Senator (6 months in office), Harding was asked to be the keynote speaker at the 1916 Republican National Convention. The party elders wanted to heal the split between the progressive and conservative factions and Harding was respected by both groups.

In this keynote speech Harding proclaimed:

“I choose the economic policy that sends American workingmen to savings banks rather than the soup kitchen.”

While in the Senate Harding became acquainted with and was befriended by construction magnate Charles R. Forbes who was overseeing construction of the Pearl Harbor Naval Base. Later, Forbes became Harding's appointee to head the Veterans Bureau. Forbes caused the Harding Administration one of its most serious scandals.

Harding also became friendly with New Mexico Senator Albert B. Fall who would, unfortunately, become part of Harding's presidential administration.

Harry Daugherty, an Ohio political operator, who had managed Harding's Ohio gubernatorial campaign, wanted Harding to run for President in 1920 and managed to get Ohio's election laws changed so that Harding could run for the Senate if he did not secure the Republican Presidential nomination.

The other men (and in those days it was only men) seeking the 1920 Republican Presidential nomination included, among others, Herbert Hoover, Calvin Coolidge, and former Army Chief of Staff General

Leonard Wood, a formidable group! Wood's campaign was managed and financed by Colonel William C. Proctor, a local Cincinnati soap magnate some of you may have heard of. Wood always campaigned in his army uniform.

As an aside I mention that my army basic training was endured at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. However, I must confess that while I was at that fort I was pretty busy so I didn't have much time to wonder who Leonard Wood was!

In a close battle Harding won the 1920 Ohio presidential primary but lost Indiana and Montana. Harding was discouraged and wanted to quit but Florence Harding the "duchess" said "we're in this fight until Hell freezes over." That settled that!

During a speech in Boston Harding used the phrase "return to normalcy" which resonated well with the post-World War American public and became the motto of Harding's presidential campaign.

Madam Marcia, a Washington, D.C. clairvoyant, told Florence that Warren would win the general election but die in office. Florence never told Warren of this prediction because "he didn't believe in such nonsense".

Operating on the theory that the other candidates would self-destruct, Harding and Daugherty asked delegates committed to other candidates to make Harding their second choice.

The 1920 Republican National Convention was deadlocked. The outcome was probably determined in the politicians' proverbial smoke filled hotel rooms.

Warren G. Harding finally secured the nomination on the 10th ballot.

Massachusetts Governor Calvin Coolidge was selected as the Vice Presidential nominee. Coolidge's claim to fame was the quelling of a 1919 Boston Police strike stating "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time."

The Democrats nominated Ohio Governor James M. Cox as their presidential candidate. (Think of it - - -2 Ohioans battling for the

presidency!) Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt was the Democratic nominee for Vice President.

Like William McKinley, Harding ran a “front porch” campaign, not travelling much, conducting most of his campaign from the front porch of his Marion, Ohio, home. A contingent from Hollywood came to Marion to support Harding. (Can you imagine - -Hollywood stars supporting a Republican!). Al Jolson serenaded Harding on the porch with a song he wrote for the occasion.

My son and I visited Harding’s Marion home, now a museum. Although the porch is good sized, it is not huge. It is hard to imagine running a presidential campaign from this location.

However, Harding was not content to rely solely on his front porch campaigning. He engaged Albert D. Lasker, a top Chicago advertising man who promoted Harding using radio, newspapers, magazines, movie clips, sound recordings and billboards.

Democrats Cox and Roosevelt were committed to making the 1920 election a referendum on the League of Nations, a Woodrow Wilson backed precursor to the United Nations. But the war was over and the economy was weak. Harding sort of straddled the issue, not supporting the League but not turning his back on the rest of the world.

Being a newspaperman Harding clicked well with reporters. Most newspapers were owned by Republicans THEN so Harding got lots of endorsements.

Harding did not sling mud, didn’t attack his opponents personally, only their policies. Can you imagine such a world?

A racist professor at the College of Wooster wrote articles claiming two of Harding’s great-grandparents were black. This “research” started appearing in Democratic campaign literature.

November 2, 1920 Election Day was also Warren’s 55th birthday. With women’s suffrage Florence Harding was the first woman to vote for her husband for president!

Harding won the election by the largest, up til then, landslide in Republican history. Warren Harding carried 37 states to Cox's 11. Approximately 16 million voted for Harding, 9 million voted for Cox and 1 million voted for socialist Eugene Debs who was still in prison for speaking out against World War I.

In selecting his cabinet Harding choose some good apples and a few corrupt apples.

He appointed Charles Evans Hughes as Secretary of State. Hughes, the 1916 Republican presidential nominee, had served as Governor of New York and was a former Supreme Court Justice - -an excellent choice.

Andrew Mellon, the second wealthiest man in the United States (after John D. Rockefeller) was selected as Secretary of the Treasury and, as it turned out, did an excellent job in that post.

Herbert Hoover was chosen to be Secretary of Commerce although some of the more conservative Republicans complained that Hoover, as chief of the American Relief Administration, aided communism by extending food aid to famine stricken Russia.

Unfortunately, Harding appointed his friend Albert B. Fall Secretary of the Interior. More on this later.

To lead the Department of Justice Harding appointed his friend Harry Daugherty to serve as Attorney General, a controversial choice that turned out badly.

When Harding presented his list of cabinet nominees to the Senate, the entire cabinet was approved in under 10 minutes

When the cabinet was formed, the New York Times used descriptive terms such as "high caliber" and "guarantee of success".

Harding's cabinet contained a future president (Hoover), a future Chief Justice (Hughes) and a future felon (Fall).

Harding's 1921 inaugural address was the first to be broadcast on the radio. Harding indicated that the weak post World War I economy was at the top of his administration's agenda.

He went on to say "Our most dangerous tendency is to expect too much of government, and, at the same time, do so little for it."

President John F. Kennedy echoed this theme in his inaugural address 40 years later on January 20, 1961 when he famously exhorted Americans "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country".

In an address to a joint session of Congress in April, 1921 Harding urged Congress to control government spending by creating a Bureau of the Budget.

He also recommended the establishment of a department of public welfare to deal with education, public health, sanitation, conditions of workers in industry and child welfare. This request surprised many of Harding's more conservative colleagues.

Harding also stated "Congress ought to wipe out the stain of barbaric lynching from the banners of a free and orderly representative democracy". The House of Representatives then passed an anti-lynching bill but it was filibustered to death in the Senate.

Congress did create a Bureau of the Budget and, to aid Congressional oversight of federal spending, the General Accounting Office. Very important legislation.

Like President Kennedy four decades later, Harding, Secretary of the Treasury Mellon, and Secretary of Commerce Hoover thought that tax cuts would stimulate the economy. Congress passed tax cuts.

Regarding labor, a Harding biographer wrote that Harding's views "were essentially conservative and paternalistic". However, although Marion was a non-union town, Harding's newspaper was organized. Harding encouraged the union and even supplied the Marion Typographical Union with office space.

President Harding's most pro-labor move was using his bully pulpit to end the steel industry's 12 hour days. He also attempted to reduce unemployment by encouraging federal and state agencies to jump start public works projects.

Harding appointed our fellow Literarian William Howard Taft as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Hmm...I wonder whether Hillary or Donald will appoint one of our lawyer members. Oh well...

While a candidate for President and after the election Harding met with James Weldon Johnson, Executive Director of the NAACP. Harding appointed blacks to high positions in Labor, Interior and other departments. However, Harding's efforts in this regard were stymied because his predecessor Wilson fired blacks and Republicans from federal jobs to which Wilson appointed white Democrats to whom he gave civil service protection.

In 1921 Harding travelled to Birmingham, Alabama and delivered perhaps the most daring speech of his political life to a large, although racially segregated, audience of blacks and whites. He spoke in favor of political equality "I would say let the black man vote when he is fit to vote; prohibit the white man from voting when he is unfit to vote".

Harding unambiguously proclaimed "Whether you like it or not, unless our democracy is a lie, you must stand for equality."

Very bold words for 1921!

Perhaps even more surprising than the Birmingham speech, Harding granted clemency to the socialist leader Eugene Debs who had been convicted of sedition by the Wilson administration because Debs spoke out in opposition to World War I. This clemency action was extremely controversial - - -even the New York Times opposed it.

Harding even requested that Debs come to the White House to meet privately after Debs' release from prison. Afterwards, Debs stated "Mr. Harding appears to be a kind gentleman, one whom I believe possesses humane impulses."

Harding and Secretary of State Hughes organized a 1921 international naval disarmament conference, the result of which was a 10 year naval holiday. No battleships were to be built by the leading naval powers. Also, agreements were reached limiting armaments including poison gas. Harding was able to obtain Senate approval of the disarmament treaties.

Florence Harding suffered kidney failure in September, 1922. She ran a 105 degree fever and was near death. One of her physicians was Dr. Charles Mayo of the Mayo Clinic. Reportedly, after telling herself repeatedly “I must not die. Warren needs me”, she recovered.

On December 8, 1922 Harding delivered his second and last State of the Union address. By then the economy had recovered. He called for the end of child labor - - -even if a constitutional amendment was required.

Harding’s own health issues became noticeable. Harding told Charles Evans Hughes that his blood pressure was always over 175, prompting Hughes to write to his wife “We have been worrying about Mrs. Harding but I think that it is the President that we should be more concerned about.”

The first whiff of scandal occurred when Harding learned that Veterans Bureau head Charles Forbes appeared to be abusing his position. Forbes sold government owned warehouses full of hospital supplies at ridiculously low prices and was suspected of receiving kickbacks. Harding demanded Forbes’ resignation.

A New York Times reporter saw Harding with his hands on Forbes’ neck, shaking him, yelling “You double crossing bastard”.

Forbes was later indicted and convicted of stealing at least \$2 million (over \$26 million today) from the Veterans Bureau.

Journalist William Allen White interviewed Harding after Forbes left. Harding said “I have no trouble with my enemies all right. But my damn friends. They’re the ones who keep me up walking the floors nights.”

The so called “Ohio Gang” consisting of Attorney General Daugherty, Jesse Smith and a few others were allegedly selling bonded government whiskey to bootleggers. Remember, this was during Prohibition. Daugherty stood trial but was never convicted. Jesse Smith committed suicide. Harding was never linked to any activities of the Ohio Gang.

In the summer of 1923 Harding embarked on a train and ship trip to Alaska, becoming the first President to visit there. During his many speeches while travelling Harding spoke of the need for the United States to join the World Court as a substitute for the League of Nations.

Harding’s health deteriorated during this strenuous journey and he died, while Florence was reading to him, in San Francisco on August 2, 1923. He was 57 years old and had served as President for less than 2 and a half years.

Harding’s body was returned to Washington by train. There was an outpouring of public sentiment, not seen since Lincoln’s death and not to be repeated until Franklin Roosevelt died in 1945.

A few months after Harding died a scandal unfolded that severely damaged Harding’s reputation. Teapot Dome was to Harding like Watergate was to Nixon, the difference being that while Nixon was at least involved in the Watergate cover-up, Harding was not involved in nor did he profit from Teapot Dome.

Teapot Dome was a government owned oil field in Wyoming upon which sat a teapot shaped rock. During 1921 and 1922 Harding’s Secretary of the Interior and friend Albert B. Fall granted Harry Sinclair of the Sinclair Oil Company exclusive rights to the Teapot Dome oil reserves. Fall granted similar rights involving the Elk Hills and Buena Vista Hills oil reserves in California to Edward Doheny of the Pan American Petroleum Company. Fall and his family received more than \$100,000 in bearer bonds from a firm controlled by Sinclair. Fall was also the recipient of \$100,000 cash from Doheny as a “loan” that was never repaid. All told, Fall received over \$5 million in today’s money.

Fall attempted to maintain secrecy but his lifestyle became so opulent that Congress investigated.

Eventually, Fall became the first former cabinet member to go to prison. Sinclair was sent to jail for jury tampering.

THE NAME WITHOUT THE GAME. Despite the fact that none of the Congressional or judicial investigations implicated Warren Harding in any corrupt activity or wrongdoing, Harding has been blamed for:

- 1. Charles Forbes' looting of the Veterans Bureau.**
- 2. Albert Fall's receipt of bribes for the Teapot Dome and California oil leases.**
- 3. Harry Daugherty's alleged acceptance of bribes relating to the disposition of alien property seized by the U.S. government during World War I although Daugherty was never convicted.**
- 4. Daugherty's involvement in an alleged scheme by the Ohio Gang to sell government owned whiskey to bootleggers.**

After his death Harding's reputation was damaged in another sphere of life. Nan Britton, a 23 year old Marion, Ohio woman, began an affair with Harding after he was elected to the U.S. Senate. Nan was 31 years younger than Warren. In 1927, four years after Harding's death, Britton wrote a book The President's Daughter which quickly became a best seller. Britton claimed that the affair continued until Harding's death with trysts in the White House. According to Britton she gave birth to Harding's child, a girl named Elizabeth Ann.

Some members of Harding's family and many friends and associates of the President denied Britton's allegations.

At last, in 2015 DNA tests on Harding's and Britton's families showed that Warren Harding *was* the father of Nan's baby. The DNA tests also showed the Hardings had no African ancestry as was claimed by Amos Kling and others.

In terms of judging a President how relevant are these extramarital affairs? Grover Cleveland, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy and Bill Clinton had, or were alleged to have engaged in such activities.

You decide.

You now have the facts. Instead of worrying about tomorrow's election, you can determine whether Harding was the worst President ever or whether it's a BUM RAP.