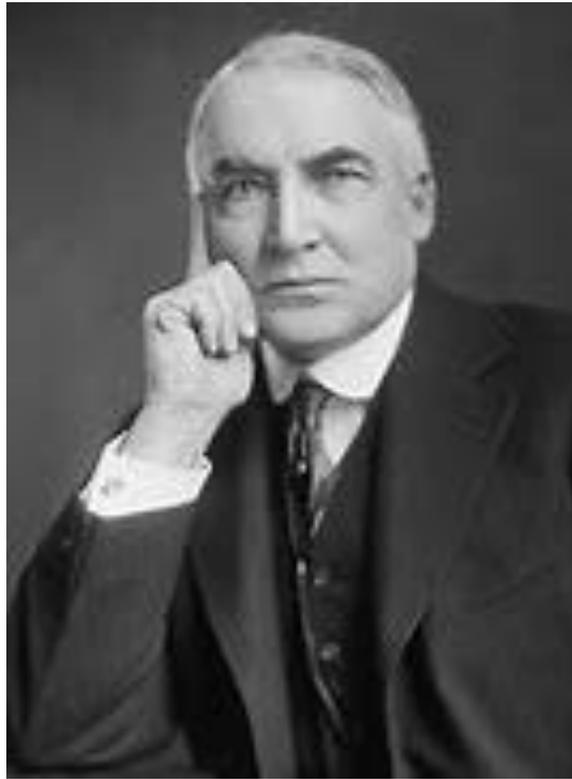


The Worst President Ever? You Be the Judge.



By R. Marc Kantrowitz and Matthew J. Kantrowitz¹

Infidelity in the White House. An administration packed with cronies. A new congressional investigation seemingly every day. Sound familiar? Of course it does. It's the administration of Warren G. Harding.

Harding was a handsome man who stood six feet tall and looked the part of a president. Perhaps a clue of things to come, President-Elect Harding left for vacation after winning the 1920 election, declaring that no appointments nor decisions would be made. Golf wasn't his game, but he fished in Texas and later traveled to Panama.

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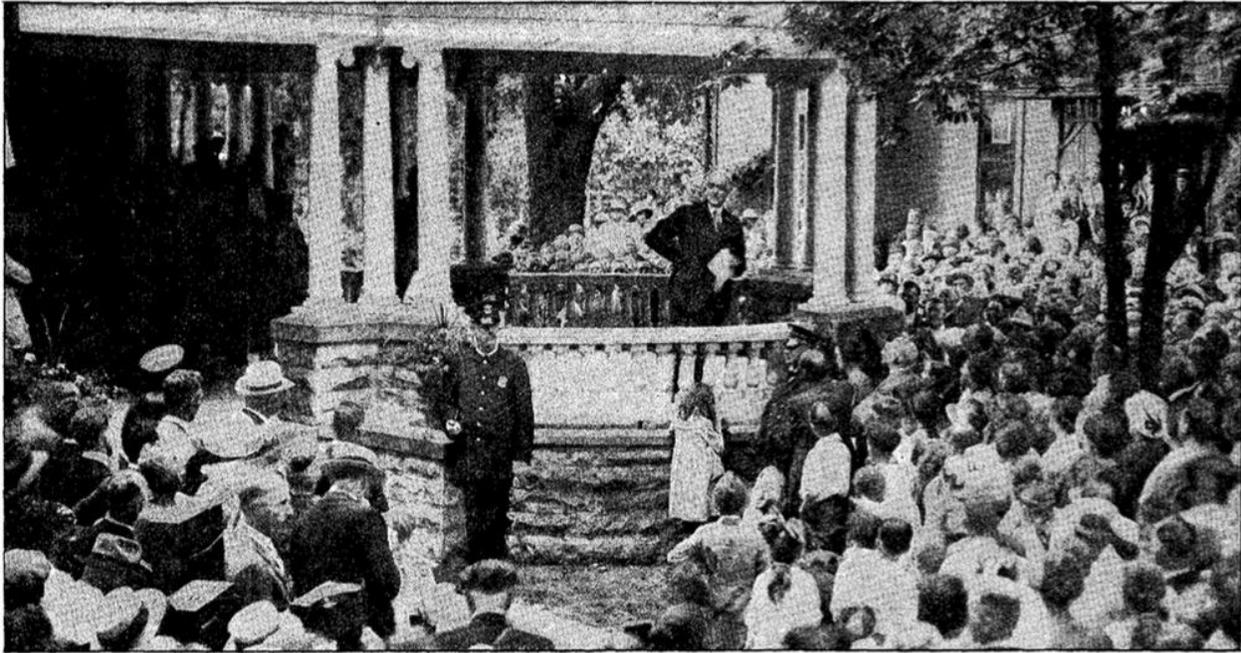


Harding carried on affairs for several years. He took up with Nan Britton (above right), with whom he fathered a child.

His notable appointments to the cabinet were quickly overshadowed by those whose motto might have been, "It's a government for the people, and we're the people." Surrounding himself with his Ohio friends, they engaged in a trifecta- gambling, smoking and drinking. That Prohibition forbade alcohol was unimportant. After all, he and his buddies were all high-ranking government officials who deserved the best, whether it be legal or not.

Charles Forbes was appointed head of the Veteran's Bureau. After the run on medical supplies during World War I, severe shortages called for replenishment. Instead of doing so, Forbes declared the few remaining supplies worthless, sold them off to his friends at bargain rates and later repurchased them at costs far in excess of their worth. The profits were split and all made out well. Except, of course, those injured soldiers who actually needed the provisions. Forbes also took bribes on hospital construction and land acquisition.

When Harding learned of Forbes' misfeasance, he summoned him to the White House. Rather than fire him, the president merely told him to cut it out. Forbes didn't. A second visit



Harding accepted the Republican nomination for president in 1920.

with the President resulted in a promise to resign but only after being allowed to flee the country to avoid prosecution. Eventually he was arrested, tried and sent to prison for a measly two years. When the Senate commenced hearings, his fellow Veteran's Bureau official, Charles Cramer, saw the walls closing in and killed himself.

Jesse Smith, an unofficial aide to Attorney General Harry Daugherty with whom he roomed, took a \$200,000 bribe in a stock scandal, allowing another quarter of a million dollars to be distributed to friends and associates. When that and other serious misdeeds bubbled to the surface, Smith followed Cramer's lead and put a bullet in his head. Daugherty himself would, along with another Harding appointee, Thomas W. Miller, be charged with receiving a half a million payoff on another shady deal, and destroying the evidence to boot.



Meanwhile, Secretary of the Interior Albert B Fall, another good friend of the President, took control of most of the navy's oil reserves and sold it off to his friends, who happily lined his pockets in return. The infamous Teapot Dome Scandal resulted in Fall's conviction and incarceration.

Perhaps President Harding was too trusting of his "friends". Or perhaps he was just too busy elsewhere. For fifteen years he, despite being married, carried on an affair with Carrie Fulton Phillips. It ended in 1920 when he became president. His philandering didn't however as he took up with Nan Britton, with whom he fathered a child. Allegedly their affair carried them to the confines, comfort and privacy of a White House closet.

When President Harding unexpectedly died in office in 1923, his passing was greatly mourned. His accomplishments, in time, were buried by the onslaught of the misdeeds of the many with whom he closely associated. Was he simply oblivious to the actions of his aides, which sharply came into focus after his demise? Was he simply too trusting and forgiving? Or was he, as has been said, a man with a good mind who made little use of it? Whatever the case, in any list of presidential failures, it will be tough to beat old Warren G. Harding.