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There is obviously no way to whitewash Harding's administration. As the twenty-ninth President declared himself, "I am not fit for this office and should never have been here." More shocking, according to Sidney Warren, than the corruption that prevailed during Harding's term "was the apathy of the public or its perverted attitude towards the scandals." ". . . The harshest condemnation was not for the men who had dragged the nation down into the nadir of perfidy, but for those who had exposed them."

Harding's Abdication from Leadership

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COMMENTING on the election results of 1920, Mark Sullivan hardly exaggerated when he wrote that Woodrow Wilson had become "the symbol of the exaltation that turned sour, personification of the rapture that had now become gall, and sacrificial whipping boy to the present bitterness." It was obvious to those who knew how to take a barometric reading of the nation's climate of opinion that the American people had grown weary of Wilsonianism. The Republicans were confident that it was once again their turn at the helm; the question was whom could they select to do the apparent steering.

As early as February—four months before

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the Republican convention—Harry Daugherty of Ohio had predicted a deadlock on the selection of a candidate, and he named the man whom the inner circle would choose as a compromise. He was right on both counts. Governor Frank O. Lowden and General Leonard Wood battled to a stalemate. That night about 15 or 20 of the Old Guard met in a hotel room to resolve the issue. Shortly after 2:00 A.M., weary, bleary-eyed, and by then almost indifferent, they decided on Warren G. Harding, Senator from Ohio. The next day, on the tenth ballot, the convention ratified their selection.

The story of the smoke-filled room at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago with its gathering of Senators and party bigwigs playing the role of king-makers soon became a political legend. This, however, was less a conspiracy or plot to seduce the American public than the selection of a man embodying the personal qualities and conservative mentality which they believed would appeal to the people, while at the same time serving their own purposes. Harding reflected to perfection the conservatism of the delegates. The convention was dominated by men representing financial and industrial interests who were prepared to pay for whatever they wanted the government to do.

On the other side of the fence, the Democratic convention held in San Francisco late in June was an untidy, limping affair. Party solidarity had been badly frayed by the League fight and the organization was fall-

ing apart. Wilson, physically and emotionally ill, was not only incapable of providing leadership, but complicated the situation for would-be aspirants by his desire for a third-term nomination. The contest finally was fought between William G. McAdoo, the President's son-in-law and former Secretary of the Treasury (who, however, did not have Wilson's backing) and James M. Cox of Ohio, favorite of the bosses because he was against prohibition and was not associated with the unpopular incumbent administration. Cox won on the forty-fourth ballot.

The 1920 Campaign

Wilson had hoped that the election would be a "solemn referendum" on the League, and Cox promised that if he were elected the United States would join the organization as soon as possible after his inauguration. Both misread the public mind. During the campaign Cox battered valiantly but futilely against the wall of indifference the people had erected about themselves on the question of the League. The Republican platform straddled the issue, criticizing the Covenant but pledging to work for "an international association of nations."

Harding was nicely vague and equivocal. He never attempted to clear up the ambiguity of a party divided between isolationists and internationalists: leading Republicans such as Hoover, Hughes, and Root argued that his election was the surest way to bring the United States into the League with safeguards; isolationists such as Borah and Johnson stated with equal vigor that his election was the surest way of keeping us out of the League.

The Senator from Ohio was an impeccable candidate. From his front porch Harding made dignified, conciliatory and pointless speeches. Even the friendly *The World's Work*, a leading journal of opinion of the day, declared in its November, 1920, issue that "The Senator's speeches may be properly criticized for their vagueness, for their lack of original thought, for their occasionally conflicting character. . . ." However, it went on, "The front porch is a far safer campaign forum than the tail end of a Pullman car" and the presidential candidates who had remained quietly at home won out over those who went barnstorming over the country.

Cox, who wore himself out traveling up and down the land, must at least partially have agreed as to the virtue of front porch campaigns when the election returns came in. The nation turned to Harding to the tune of 16 million votes to Cox's 9 million. The man of the hour won the electoral votes in 37 out of the 48 states, and for the first time in history Tennessee went Republican, as did every county along the entire West coast.

A number of other factors contributed to the defeat of the Democrats. On the domestic front wheat farmers denounced Wilson for removing the price supports and for discriminating in favor of the Southern cotton farmers. Labor was critical because of runaway prices; management flayed him for his alleged coddling of labor. On the international front his policies were completely repudiated. There were those who felt that the peace was too harsh; others criticized it as too lenient. Some attacked Wilson for betraying internationalism at Versailles, while others upbraided him for surrendering the national interest. In the final analysis, however, the nation wanted, as Harding so aptly put it, "not heroics but healing, not nostrums but normalcy, not revolutions but restoration, not surgery but serenity."

Harding's Background

The twenty-ninth President of the United States has been called by one writer "Fate's tragic mannikin" and most of his life he was manipulated by people who used him for their own ends. Warren G. Harding's strongest qualification—and his personal misfortune—was that he looked like a President. He was handsome, gray-haired and dignified; Daugherty is said to have remarked when he saw him for the first time, "Gee, what a President he'd make." And he proceeded to make one of the man who could have contentedly lived out his life in the tree-shaded little town of Marion, in the comfortable routine of the Saturday night poker game, church the next morning, playing bridge on some well-tended lawn, or the tuba in the town band. Good-natured, easy going, with an indiscriminate trust in people and a compulsive need for their affection, his father had once told him, "It's a good thing you weren't born a girl because you'd be in a family way all the time. You can't say no."

Harding's formal education consisted of three years in high school. Although he served as a state senator, lieutenant-governor, and United States Senator, he was never troubled by ideas. With an unshakable belief that the Republican party was the only one fit to rule and in the infallible political wisdom of the Old Guard, he had been a strict party man and had always voted as directed.

His view of the presidency was more applicable to a small-town mayor: he thought the Chief Executive should be the guest of honor at conferences, cornerstone layings, and ceremonies opening public buildings. He considered the cabinet members executive heads of departments with the President in the role of presiding officer.

Harding's cabinet was a conglomeration of the wise, the inept, the self-seeking. Charles Evans Hughes, Secretary of State, Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, J. W. Weeks, Secretary of War, and Henry C. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, were to serve with distinction or competence. The scheming and unscrupulous oil man, Albert B. Fall, was appointed Secretary of the Interior, and the President's Svengali, Harry M. Daugherty, his Attorney General. Andrew W. Mellon, the multi-millionaire aluminum king, was made Secretary of the Treasury.

An administration brought to power by business interests was naturally subservient to them and carried out their policies. Mellon persuaded Harding to support the proposal to reduce income and inheritance taxes. In 1921, he maneuvered Congress into repealing the excess profits tax, but a band of Senate progressives blocked his efforts to cut taxes on high incomes. On the positive side there was considerable reform in fiscal policy, including a national budget which up until that time had not existed, and the appointment of the first Director of the Budget.

Pro-Business and Anti-Union

For labor the record was bleak. A determined campaign was launched in the post-war years to smash whatever unions existed and maintain the open shop. In 1920, the president of Bethlehem Steel announced that he would refuse to recognize a union even if 95 per cent of the workers belonged to it.

When 400,000 railroad shopmen struck after a wage slash ordered by the Railroad Labor Board, Attorney General Daugherty obtained a sweeping injunction which broke the strike.

Following the lead of the administration the Supreme Court in a series of decisions upheld the yellow-dog contract, permitted a union to be sued under the anti-trust laws, drastically limited picketing, and declared boycotts illegal. It also strangled every effort at social reform in other decisions such as the one declaring the Child Labor Act of 1916 unconstitutional, nullified the minimum wage law for women and a new law levying a tax on products manufactured by children. Beamed the *Wall Street Journal*, "Never before, here or anywhere else has a government been so completely fused with business."

Harding's Foreign Policy

In foreign affairs the administration made strenuous efforts to resist entanglements with the rest of the world. On August 25, 1921, Congress by joint resolution declared an end to the state of war between the United States and Germany, and in October the Senate ratified separate treaties of peace with Germany and Austria-Hungary. The joint resolution reserved for the nation any rights secured by the war, the armistice, or the Treaty of Versailles, but assumed none of the obligations under the Paris peace settlement. This, it was hoped, would tidy up things and the country could then quietly retire behind its oceans.

Harding's overwhelming victory at the polls was taken as a mandate against the League, and in a speech after he became President, he declared that the League issue was as dead as slavery. The administration attitude was underscored by the action of a State Department official who for months refused even to open mail from the League secretariat. But the world was even then too small and the nations too dependent on one another for strict isolationism to be either feasible or possible.

No sooner had World War I ended than the leading powers began plans for rearmament. Relations between the United States and Japan had become strained during the Peace Conference, and a number of factors made the situation worse during the next

few years. War talk became alarmingly prevalent on both sides of the Pacific. Americans also saw a serious threat in the Anglo-Japanese alliance. Most ominous of all for peace, a naval race among the United States, Great Britain, and Japan loomed. Something had to be done and quickly.

The answer was the Washington Naval Conference, probably the most notable achievement of the Harding administration, though it was initiated by the isolationist Senator Borah as a means of bringing about disarmament outside the League. Harding had opposed the idea at first, but under pressure at home and abroad he capitulated and invited nine European and Asiatic powers to discuss disarmament and Far Eastern problems. On November 12, 1921, the first plenary session convened, and after Secretary of State Hughes, who was also chairman, delivered the conventional introduction, it became his show entirely.

The audience, which had settled back comfortably to listen to the customary opening day platitudes, was suddenly jolted upright by a statement unique and startling in the extreme to a body that had convened to talk about disarmament—that the only way to disarm was to disarm. Hughes then calmly proceeded to junk almost all the existing navies. With completely undiplomatic audacity he proposed that the United States, Great Britain and Japan scrap a total of 66 ships amounting to 1.87 million tons. One British expert commented that “Secretary Hughes sank in thirty-five minutes more ships than all the admirals of the world have sunk in a cycle of centuries.”

After interminable haggling, the Conference the following year adopted a five-power naval treaty establishing a ratio in capital ships of 5:5:3:1.7:1.7 for the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France, and Italy. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, a member of the United States delegation, nullified the Anglo-Japanese alliance with his four-power treaty guaranteeing the status quo in the Pacific. A nine-power treaty pledged the signatories to guarantee the territorial, administrative and political integrity of China; in other words, to prevent Japanese expansion in the Far East.

In retrospect, the United States bartered away a good deal, notably fortification of

our island bases. And we transferred the burden of maintaining the open door policy to others who, when the chips were down within a decade, proved unreliable. More important, we surrendered, or more accurately, abdicated our position of naval superiority for the sake of a system of collective security in the Pacific which broke down at the first major challenge. But these are post hoc observations.

At the time, substantial concessions were wrested from Japan. Shantung was returned to China, Japan promised to withdraw her troops from Siberia, return North Sakhaland to Russia, abandon the most extreme of the 15 demands upon China, annul the Lansing-Ishi agreement, and concede to the United States cable rights upon the island of Yap. The results of the Conference were almost unanimously approved in the United States; only a few die-hard isolationist and chauvinist newspapers protested. By overwhelming vote of both parties, the Senate approved the batch of treaties.

Harding—and the nation—had been fortunate in the choice of a man like Hughes, but in other areas of the administration his selection of department heads proved to be disastrous. William Allen White, a frequent visitor to the White House, felt that the President’s “heart was right and his courage fairly good, but his confusion lay in his lack of moral perceptions. He did not know where to place his loyalty.” The Chief Executive had placed in offices of great trust two depraved, petty politicians. Harry Daugherty, his attorney general, presided over an ill-assorted coterie of plunderers who operated from his apartment in the Wardman Park Hotel which he shared with his housekeeper and confidant, Jesse Smith. In turn, Smith presided over the headquarters of the Ohio gang in a little green house on K Street, which was part brothel, part speakeasy. Here a bonanza business went on in selling immunities from government prosecution of various kinds, handing out government appointments, pardons and paroles for criminals, with Smith acting as liaison to Daugherty’s Justice Department.

Of Albert B. Fall, Secretary of the Interior, White commented that he looked like a patent medicine vendor—“a cheap, obvious faker.” Fall, however, did not operate on a

beggarly scale. In 1921, he induced the Secretary of the Navy to transfer the invaluable naval oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming, and Elk Hills, California, to the Interior Department, and persuaded Harding to sign the secret order for the transfer. Then he proceeded to lease the reserves to oil promoters after receiving bribes amounting to \$125,000.

Scandal and Corruption

By the spring of 1923, some details of the tricky transaction had leaked out and ugly rumors of corruption and worse had begun to spread around Washington. Charles R. Forbes, head of the Veterans Bureau, suddenly resigned his post. It was later revealed that he had embezzled some \$250 million from the government in connection with sites and buildings for veterans' hospitals. Then in May Jesse Smith was found dead of a gunshot wound in the apartment he shared with Daugherty, and the verdict was suicide.

The abyss had begun to open for Harding. When he left that summer for a trip to Alaska he remarked to an intimate, "This White House is a prison. I can't get away from the men who dog my footsteps." Throughout the journey the President was restless, compulsively playing bridge from breakfast to midnight. Shortly after leaving Alaska he received a long message from Washington. After that he kept asking Herbert Hoover, whom he had invited along as a bridge companion, what a President should do if he discovered scandals in his administration.

When the party reached the Pacific Northwest, Harding looked worn and exhausted. He became ill while on board ship, from bad crabmeat it was said, though no fish was found on the menu, and within two days he was dead. Later, when the scandals were exposed, it was rumored that he had committed suicide, a not unnatural surmise about a weak, kindly man in a vital position who was the center of a nest of pirates disguised as friends.

The full disclosures of the sordid and shameful web of corruption, with which the phrase, "the Ohio gang," was an ignominious simile, became public property after Harding's death. By the end of the decade the toll of the leading figures in the administration

was two suicides (Charles Kramer, Forbes' legal adviser also took his own life), the conviction and sentencing of Charles Forbes, Thomas W. Miller, the Alien Property Custodian, and Albert Fall, the only cabinet member in history to be sent to jail. Harry Daugherty, the king maker, was forced by Coolidge to resign.

Perhaps even more odious than the corruption was the apathy of the public or its perverted attitude towards the scandals. Senator Walsh who led the investigation of the infamous oil deals and Senator Wheeler who investigated the Department of Justice were attacked by leading newspapers as "scandal mongers," "mud gunners," "assassins of character." The next administration, with the aid of the press, so adroitly belittled the venalities that the harshest condemnation was not for the men who had dragged the nation down into the nadir of perfidy, but for those who had exposed them.

For its depressing record of graft and corruption, for the low tone of public morals, the Harding administration even surpassed that of Grant. The two Presidents were also alike in being unwitting tools in the hands of unscrupulous friends. Harding had estimated himself correctly when he told Nicholas Murray Butler, "I am not fit for this office and should never have been here." Before the election a contemporary publication wrote that

The first impression gained is that Senator Harding, whatever may be his defects as a world statesman, is an exceedingly courteous gentleman. If he is elected, good nature, both to political friends and to political enemies, will once more become the prevailing note in the White House.

"Good nature" and good cheer and conviviality, too, did indeed prevail. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, wife of the Speaker of the House, describes a typical scene in the study of the White House—the President surrounded by cronies, cards and poker chips on the table, whiskey and tall glasses on the trays, the air thick with cigar smoke. While Harding gambled and drank and played the stock market (he died owing a brokerage house \$180,000), the affairs of the nation were in the hands of other men. His abdication of leadership was almost complete. The

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to employ American forces against Japanese aggrandizement in China.

Toward communism in any guise or disguise, he was hostile. While he was relief administrator after World War I, he diverted part of his relief funds to help overthrow Bela Kun's Communist regime in Hungary. During the Civil War in Russia between the Red and White forces, from 1918 to 1920, he again diverted relief funds to help finance the "White" cause. When he became President he refused recognition of the Soviet Union, and when his successor, in 1933, extended recognition to Moscow, Hoover still thought it was a calamitous mistake.

Good Neighbor Policy

He reversed the "Dollar Diplomacy" of Harding and Coolidge toward Latin America by inaugurating the Good Neighbor Policy. Following the election of 1928, and before his assumption of presidential duties, he took a six weeks tour of Latin America where he soothed past injuries and pledged a more sympathetic attitude. He lived up to his promises, for he withdrew American marines from Nicaragua, liquidated American claims against Haiti, and maintained strict neutrality during a revolution in Panama. He did not exploit the Monroe Doctrine for intervention purposes, but used it for mutual understanding and cooperation.

In 1931, President Hoover inaugurated "summitry." In that year Ramsay Mac-

Donald, Prime Minister of Great Britain, arrived in Washington to resolve misunderstandings between the two countries. The President took him to Rapidan Creek Lodge and there the two re-established agreeable relations. MacDonald was the first British Prime Minister to visit the United States (excluding Lloyd George who came after retirement). Subsequently the stream of world dignitaries converging upon Washington has grown to a flood.

A Dividing Point

Hoover's presidency placed him at the dividing point in American history. He was the last of the old-type chief executive, and the first of the new. Emotionally he could not abandon the past nor yet embrace or ignore the future. His adherence to that which was, and his reluctant acceptance of the imminent prevented him from performing well in either capacity.

Upon his defeat for re-election he felt disowned and forsaken, somewhat as Churchill did after his party's defeat in July, 1945. Churchill's gloom was dense. His wife tried to console him: "Well, after all, perhaps your defeat was a blessing in disguise." To which he replied: "At the moment the blessing seems very heavily disguised." After President Hoover's electoral defeat in 1932 he was no less inconsolable than Churchill; the thwarted ex-President remarked: "Democracy is not a polite employer."

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President neither led with respect to his party, nor with Congress, nor with the public; in foreign affairs it was Hughes who spoke for the United States.

Harding lacked not only the training for the high office, but even an adequate comprehension of its constitutional and philosophical implications. It may be suggested that there is an atmosphere and a quality about the president that imbues even a mediocre occupant with at least a tolerable capacity for leadership. No such transformation took place with Harding.

The life of Warren G. Harding in the White House is more than the story of a per-

sonal tragedy. It is an indictment of a people whose complacency and self-interest, after 20 years of an awakened national conscience, made their expectation of the presidency pitifully inadequate and distorted. In a sense, the Harding administration can be viewed as part of an interregnum period in presidential leadership, a hiatus between eras of vigorous articulation of national goals and purposes. Yet it is a measure of the power and dignity and uniqueness of the presidency in our constitutional system that despite the low condition to which it had sunk, later chief executives would be able to restore it to its former greatness and add new dimensions to presidential power.