

ANXIOUS DECADES

AMERICA IN PROSPERITY AND DEPRESSION, 1920-194



MICHAEL E. PARRISH

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Introduction

From historians to poets, opinions abound concerning when to date the beginning of the modern era, that moment in time when many of the institutions, ideas, preoccupations, and problems of our own age first took shape. For American historians, it is possible to point to the Civil War and Reconstruction years that saw the destruction of slavery, propelled the country toward a future of industrialization and large cities, and forced it to confront seriously its heritage of racial oppression. Others single out the war with Spain in 1898 or the days of World War I, when America's destiny became indissolubly linked to events happening far away in Europe and Asia.

The novelist Virginia Woolf said that “in or about December 1910, human character changed.” She picked the date of the famous Postimpressionist exhibition in London. According to Willa Cather, “the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts,” the year which saw the publication of T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*, James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*, and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical masterwork *the Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*. Gertrude Stein also opted for a date following World War I. After that catastrophic event, she declared, “we had the twentieth century.”

While persuasive arguments can be made for any of these choices, there are also good reasons to focus upon the years covered by this volume when looking back from the last decade of the twentieth century for the sources of our contemporary world. Hardly a dimension of that world, from the institutions of popular culture to those of government, does not trace its roots to this era of talking motion pictures, nation-wide radio networks, the mass ownership of automobiles, the spread of chain stores, the first battle for an equal rights amendment, and the dominating political influence of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was called by more than one American “the commander in chief of my generation.”

In these years, Americans had to cope both with unprecedented economic prosperity and the worst depression in their history. Which condition produced the greater collective anxiety remains an open question. The decades between our two great wars saw the maturation and temporary collapse of a full-blown, consumer-oriented economy that profoundly affected the physical welfare and moral sensibilities of men, women, and children from all walks of life in every region of the United States. Both the new affluence of the 1920s and the deprivations of the 1930s left no facet of American society—productive relations, race relations, or gender relations—untouched.

We began to experience in these years the virtues and vices of a consumer society, in which the production, marketing, and individual accumulation of a seemingly endless stream of goods and services threatened to become for many the chief preoccupation of daily life, a virtual secular religion. And although the roots of consumerism reached back to the creation of a continental market and the rise of big business in the last third of the nineteenth century, the years after World War I witnessed its ultimate triumph with wide ownership of automobiles and other consumer durable goods, the spread of installment credit plans, extensive use of national advertising, and the persuasive powers of radio and motion pictures.

In their first sustained experience with consumer culture, Americans learned the truth of the ancient poet Juvenal’s observation that “luxury is more ruthless than war.” A consumer society that sanctioned perpetual technological change, the generation of new fashions and desires, and the ultimate sovereignty of the market did not respect inherited values or the social status quo. It produced as much social conflict as consensus. Traditional American cultures, anchored to particular ethnic communities, religious traditions, and geographic places, faced absorption or dilution in a sea

of standardized products and homogenized attitudes spread by manufacturers, advertisers, the airwaves, and the silver screen. The nationalizing influence of the Civil War or World War I seemed insignificant when compared to the cultural integration (some said degeneration) produced by the Model T Ford, A&P grocery stores, Twentieth Century–Fox, and WXYZ’s weekly *Lone Ranger*.

A consumer culture that condoned hedonism and challenged even the primacy of the work ethic heightened for many the old questions about personal identity and spiritual integrity in a society where the market appeared to structure and dominate human relationships. Did individual consumption constitute both the means and ends of existence? A consumer culture that daily put affluence on display in magazines, radio, and motion pictures also raised to a new level of intensity old questions about economic equality and fairness, both staples of American political debate since the eighteenth century.

The American people had to decide during these years what would be the relationship of the state particularly the federal government in Washington, to their new consumer-oriented economy. Would the state remain a mere umpire of private bargains struck in the marketplace? Should it seek to foment greater economic activity by providing incentives such as tax breaks, easy credit, and subsidies? Did it have both a moral and practical interest in the ultimate distribution of economic rewards and final responsibility for guaranteeing a minimum level of consumption to all citizens? Under Harding and Coolidge, the nation opted for a minimalist state that monitored the economic game with a light hand and largely ignored issues of distribution. The collapse of prosperity forced Hoover, Roosevelt, and the nation to rethink these fundamental questions and conceive new solutions.

A consumer-oriented economy, staffed increasingly by blue-collar and white-collar employees, transformed decisively the meaning of opportunity and success in American society, which for generations had stressed the importance of independent proprietorship. Most late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reformers from the Populists to Woodrow Wilson had put the fight against monopoly and the restoration of competition at the top of their political agendas. They envisioned America as basically a nation of producers, each battling for a share of the market. Between the wars and especially when prosperity collapsed after 1929, the debate about opportunity in America shifted to questions of consumption and the restoration of purchasing power. FDR’s New Deal was the first American reform movement shaped largely by the consumer culture.

Try as they might during these years, Americans could not escape from the problems of a larger world they increasingly influenced by their economic power and example. In the wake of the most devastating general war in a century, a war in which American intervention had tipped the military balance decisively against Germany, how should the United States now relate to other nations, especially those in Europe, Latin America, and Asia?

Memories of the European bloodbath shadowed virtually every decision made by American leaders abroad after 1920. Had World War I been simply a horrible diplomatic blunder, a gigantic aberration of human nature unlikely to be repeated? Or, on the contrary, was that conflict the ghastly opening act of a much longer and even more violent drama about the restructuring of international relations throughout the world? Americans reached no consensus on this issue even as bombs fell at Pearl Harbor. If the first, then perhaps intervention in 1917 had been a terrible error and the United States Senate had been correct to reject the Versailles Treaty and American membership in the League of Nations, which threatened to involve the country perpetually in foreign conflicts. If the second, the sooner or later one of the largest and richest nations on earth could not escape from the world’s turmoil while it profited from its trade and resources.

Many of the political and moral dilemmas that Americans faced in these years resemble ones they still confront today. How does one find personal meaning in a consumer society? What is the nature of community? Can government both promote economic growth and guarantee economic justice? What

should be our role in the world? What follows is an effort to understand how Americans of an earlier generation answered these fundamental questions and why they answered them the way they did.

Republican Restoration

Of the vaguer assumptions, liberty and the love of humanity remain in the cocked hat where they landed between 1914 and 1919. No one believes that these apotheoses are final, or even important. They are convenient and melodramatic excuses for not bothering anymore about knowledge, politics, economics, and good works.

—Gilbert Seldes in the *New Republic*

The only man, woman or child who wrote a simple declarative sentence with seven grammatical errors.

—e. e. cummings on Warren G. Harding

WILSON AND THE PROGRESSIVE LEGACY

Americans have elected a new president every four years since 1789. In this quadrennial ritual of national politics, they make a statement about themselves—define who they think they are and what they hope to become. In the fall of 1920, sixteen million Americans, slightly more than 60 percent of those who went to the polls, voted for Warren Gamaliel Harding, a dapper, silver-haired United States senator from Ohio. In terms of the popular vote, Harding’s margin of victory over his Democratic opponent, his fellow Ohioan Governor James N. Cox, was the most decisive since Theodore Roosevelt’s in 1904. In choosing Harding, however, millions of Americans rejected both the tone and substance of the political movement Roosevelt had galvanized two decades earlier. They declared themselves weary of crusades and of charismatic leaders who constantly demanded that they live a political life of great deeds and heroic sacrifice at home and abroad.

Harding’s election rang down the curtain on the progressive movement. That extraordinary burst of late-nineteenth-century Protestant evangelism saw millions of middle-class citizens take up the cause of social regeneration under the leadership of Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Robert La Follette, Hiram Johnson, Jane Addams, Frances Willard, and others. These progressives stood often, as TR declared in 1912, “at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord.” Infusing each campaign against the political, economic, and social disruptions of post-Civil War America with a moral stridency, they laced their speeches and writings with words such as “sinful,” “wicked,” “obligation,” and “duty.” As their predecessors had summoned the nation to eradicate the curse of slavery, so turn-of-the-century progressives urged all right-thinking citizens to fight against predatory monopolies, foul tenements, corrupt political organizations, intemperance, and child labor. Wilson, called the Protestant Pope, Archangel Woodrow, and a “bombastic pedagogue” by those who disliked his political sermonizing, roused the progressives to their final and most idealistic crusade—to fight “the war to end all wars,” one that would create “a universal dominion of right . . . as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.”

Given the perfectionist rhetoric employed during most progressive campaigns, it is not surprising that what these reformers actually achieved proved ambiguous, contradictory, often disappointing. A few trusts were busted, but a smaller number of giant companies continued to dominate the principal sectors of the American economy in 1917. The war accelerated this trend toward economic concentration. By statute and the pressure of organized labor, the hours of daily toil were reduced for many workers, but legal barriers continued to block the right to unionize, minimum wage legislation,

and attempts to abolish child labor. Progressive political innovations—the referendum, initiative, and primary election—were intended to curb the power of party bosses and machines but increased the influence of wealth and the mass media in campaigns. Progressives fashioned the modern regulatory state, designed through administrative agencies to protect the public from tainted food and drugs, unfair utility rates, and the sharp practices of businessmen. So doing, they endowed a new class of bureaucrats and highly organized interest groups with unusual control over the nation's economic welfare, while diminishing the participation and influence of average citizens.

Abroad, progressives also left a mixed legacy of high ideals, opportunism, and exploitation. Isolationism, long the rhetorical cornerstone of the nation's foreign relations, gained new recruits in the face of Europe's carnage, while for a smaller number the war confirmed the futility of such a policy. Even before 1914, many progressives who encouraged the use of the state to ameliorate domestic social conditions seldom hesitated to project American power abroad, especially when confronting weaker adversaries. As he helped to dismember the Colombian nation in order to build a canal in Central America, Roosevelt invoked honor, patriotism, and progress. President Taft claimed to be defending property rights and restoring order when he sent a "legation guard" of Marines to Nicaragua in 1912 to secure the regime of Adolfo Díaz. Wilson, appalled by the murderous course of the revolution south of the Rio Grande, announced that he would "teach the Mexicans to elect good men" as he dispatched troops to Veracruz. But changing the course of history in Cuba, Colombia, or Nicaragua proved somewhat easier than in Mexico or, a few years later, Western Europe.

America's experience during the Great War continued to reflect these contradictions by both fulfilling and defeating progressive goals. War temporarily brought government protection to union members in key industries. For women it hastened the right to vote. From Wilson came a perfect progressive blueprint for reconstructing the postwar world. As the Federal Reserve Board or the Federal Trade Commission managed the conflicts of domestic economic competition, so would the League of Nations adjust competition among the nations of the earth.

But nineteen months of frantic economic and ideological mobilization during the war also generated a steep rise in the cost of living, new income tax burdens on the middle class and corporations, and a far-reaching campaign by the federal government to forge a patriotic consensus through propaganda, censorship, and prison terms for dissenters. "Woe be to the man or group of men that seeks to stand in our way in this day of high resolution," declared the president. A draconian Sedition Act, passed by Congress in 1918, made it a crime to speak or print "any disloyal, profane, scurrilous or abusive language" about America's form of government, Constitution, or flag. In the struggle to make the world itself at last free, Wilson's Justice Department secured indictments against antiwar protesters who declared that "I am for the people and the government is for the profiteers" or who dared to suggest that "men conscripted to Europe are virtually condemned to death and everyone knows it."

There followed a strange interlude, two years of "peace" and "readjustment" between the Armistice of 1918 and Harding's election. The country suffered unusual political turmoil, economic disruption, and social disorder. Once again, the blame fell on Wilson and the Democrats, and by implication on anything or anyone associated with progressivism or the war. The president was now a pale shadow of the vibrant leader who had entered the White House in 1913. Felled politically by the off-year elections that returned Republican majorities to Congress, he had also been weakened both physically and mentally by two strokes. Declaring at one moment that the Russian people should decide their own destiny, at the next he dispatched fourteen thousand American soldiers to Siberia, where they kept an eye on the Japanese and ultimately fought against the Bolsheviks. Bedridden and irascible, Wilson in 1919–20 all but abdicated control of the executive branch to subordinates who were either too ambitious or too timid. Unfortunately, he continued to direct personally the struggle t

ratify the Versailles Treaty, and with it American membership in the League of Nations.

For many Americans and their political representatives in Congress, both that treaty and the League had become potent symbols of all the country's woes, especially its enthrallment to distant, alien forces. "Shall we entangle and embarrass the efforts of a powerful and independent people," asked Senator William Borah of Idaho, ". . . or shall we yoke our deliberations to forces we cannot control and leave our people to the mercy of powers which may be wholly at variance with our conception of duty?" Those political leaders who supported the treaty or the League of Nations nonetheless despised the architect of both. Wilson's opponents, noted former secretary of state Robert Lansing, "are simply saturated with hatred of the man rather than the treaty. It is something like the feeling against Andrew Jackson." Wilson lacked the votes to push the treaty through the Senate unmodified. Yet he remained stubborn enough to kill his own progeny when opponents refused to ratify without concessions. And while president and Congress remained tied in knots over this issue, other important postwar policies unraveled. The Army released soldiers indiscriminately into a slack labor market. Government controls came off business, labor, and agriculture. Prices shot up briefly, then plummeted along with wages into a deep recession that stirred social conflict.

From Seattle to Boston, four million Americans marched on picket lines in 1919. Even Boston's policemen, symbols of law and order, joined shipyard workers, meat-packers, and steelworkers from across the country to protest wage cuts, discrimination against union members, and layoffs. Many confrontations turned violent once employers secured court injunctions, hired strikebreakers, and demanded protection from state or federal troops. Rejecting the recommendation of a citizen's committee that favored arbitration, Governor Calvin Coolidge of Massachusetts endorsed the firing of striking policemen and backed up his decision with the state guard. Declaring that "there is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, anytime," Coolidge became an instant hero to millions of frightened citizens. Even President Wilson sent congratulations "to the man who defied Bolshevism and won."

On Wall Street, an anarchist's bomb killed thirty-eight people. Swollen with discharged veterans and unemployed workers both black and white, cities such as Chicago and St. Louis erupted into violence between the races, struggles there left hundreds dead or injured and thousands without shelter. In Chicago alone the reign of terror against black residents and their property lasted thirteen days, despite the presence of state militia. Attempts at controlling these disturbances and explaining their causes were led by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and J. Edgar Hoover, the aggressive new chief of the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation. They fueled a hysterical press by blaming the disorders on communist agents and propaganda from Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The federal government arrested thousands of alleged subversives in 1919–20 and eventually deported more than five hundred of them. "Wherein do the police of the New England metropolis differ from the mad minority which overthrew Kerensky and ruined Russia?" asked the Philadelphia *Evening Public Ledger*. To the misery Americans inflicted upon each other in 1919–20, nature added more: an outbreak of Spanish influenza left several hundred thousand dead, a figure greater than the nation's battlefield losses in the Great War.

HARDING AND "NORMALCY"

By the fall of 1920, a huge bloc of American voters, many of whom had supported Wilson in 1912 and 1916, had had enough—they longed for stability and order. They were tired of war and wrangling about peace; weary of sacrifice; fearful of radicalism and frightened by class and racial strife. Above all, they wanted to be left alone—by their own government, by foreign nations, by striking workers.

For a generation, they had been urged by the prophets of reform to change the world and help others. In 1920 they were terrified of more change and most eager to help themselves.

These feelings ran deep among members of the educated professional classes, a key part of the progressive coalition, who now resented wartime taxes and feared the violence associated with striking workers and political radicals. Union members, courted by progressives during the war, felt betrayed by their former patrons, who greeted strikes not with sympathy but with injunctions and soldiers. Ethnic Americans, especially the Irish, Germans, Italians, and Eastern Europeans, nursed assorted grievances against Wilson and the peace settlement he had helped to negotiate. They regarded it as too pro-British, too anti-German, or not sufficiently favorable to the interests of Serbs, Poles, or Italians. While it is probably true that virtually any Republican (save perhaps a military leader identified with the war) could have defeated the Democratic ticket in 1920, Harding proved especially strong precisely because he was not identified with any of the grand progressive designs to make over America or the world.

Warren Harding was a joiner, not a prophet or a crusader. During his long career in public life, first as a newspaper editor in Marion, Ohio, and later in the state legislature and United States Senate, he rarely staked his reputation or future on the promotion of a controversial issue. He bore a striking resemblance to Sinclair Lewis's fictional real estate salesman of 1922, George Babbitt. Like Babbitt, Warren Harding always tried to fit in. He was a swell guy. At the Elks Lodge or Rotary Club in Marion, the state capitol in Columbus, or the Senate cloakroom in Washington, Harding spent his time cultivating friendships, not making enemies. He had slapped many a back, played innumerable games of stud poker, and hoisted his share of cocktails. Along the way, he had not written a single piece of important legislation, been hanged in effigy, or been raked by opponents on either the left or right of the political spectrum. He was handsome, charming, convivial, and given to the type of florid oratory—he called it “bloviating”—heard throughout the Midwest on the Fourth of July.

Unlike other potential Republican presidential candidates in 1920—Hiram Johnson, General Leonard Wood, Governor Frank Lowden of Illinois, or Senator Robert La Follette—Harding had not committed himself on the issue of reviving the defeated Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations; his views on this were as hazily defined as on most public controversies. Aware of the candidate's garrulousness, Senator Boise Penrose of Pennsylvania advised Harding's managers: “Keep Warren at home. Don't let him make any speeches. If he goes out on a tour, somebody's sure to ask him questions, and Warren's just the sort of damn fool to try to answer them.” Since both members of the Democratic ticket, Cox and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt, clearly supported American membership in the League, Harding stood to gain votes simply by remaining mute. In fact, he made more than a dozen pronouncements about the League from his front porch in Marion during the campaign, but these only darkened the mystery. Finally, savoring his victory on election night, he told a crowd of supporters that American membership in the League was a dead issue. In a rare appearance outside Marion, he forever entered the nation's political folklore when he told a Boston audience that “America's present need is not heroics but healing; not nostrums but normalcy.” By “normalcy,” he told reporters later, he did not mean reaction or the old order, “but a regular steady order of things. I mean normal procedures, the natural way, without excess.”

President Warren G. Harding (left) and Vice President Calvin Coolidge.

Most Americans, like the new president, regarded the ordeal of war and reconversion through which the country had passed as unnatural, a terrible aberration. But maintaining “a regular steady order of things” in a dynamic, market-oriented society such as the United States seemed almost a contradiction in terms. Women now voted, while others practiced law or flew airplanes. The vast experiment of prohibition had begun to modify people's drinking habits. The automobile transformed

the nation's physical and social landscape. Advertising, radio, and motion pictures were likewise rearranging the landscape of the mind by creating a new world of fantasy and desires to be satisfied through consumption and self-indulgence. While some American values remained fixed or moved at glacierlike pace after 1920, others, especially those shaped by new technology and the economy, surged forward without much respect for tradition or a presidential candidate's aphorisms.

During the almost three and a half years of his presidency, Warren Harding enjoyed the affection of the American people. And when he died suddenly in San Francisco on August 2, 1923, their shock and grief were genuine. Harding has fared less well, however, in the hands of historians, especially those who equate excellence in presidential leadership with a certain degree of intellectual sophistication, vigorous administration of the affairs of the executive branch, and a commitment to government policies that help the weak and restrain the powerful. On such criteria, Harding does not measure up to Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson, or either Roosevelt. In the opinion of these critics, his presidency constituted a flat repudiation of the nation's best political ideals as those were embodied in the prewar progressive tradition. Some have suggested that he ranks at or near the bottom of all our presidents in that special purgatory reserved for the likes of Fillmore, Grant, and Arthur. "Save for the Washington arms conference and the creation of the Bureau of the Budget," declare the authors of one textbook, "Harding's administration was barren of accomplishment and tarnished by scandal." Others conclude that the president had "only average talents, no will power, and a striking inability to discriminate between right and wrong. . . . There is also strong evidence that [he] was adulterous." Considerable evidence supports these negative assessments, yet it should be noted that Harding had not secured the White House because his party or the electorate expected him to extend or perpetuate the progressive tradition. Even had he been so inclined, the Ohioan had no mandate to be a president in the mold of Roosevelt or Wilson or to complete their unfinished agenda of social reforms. Lacking TR's vision, Taft's tenacity, and Wilson's rhetorical skills, Harding earned a failing grade on the progressive report card. But even the most inspired and talented reformer would have faced daunting obstacles in the climate of disillusionment and apathy that spread over the country in the early twenties.

Harding had few intellectual pretensions. His chief diversions outside of politics consisted of poker, golf, highballs, and other men's wives. His speeches often lacked substance. William McAdoo, the former Treasury secretary and leader of the Democratic Party, once described a Harding speech as "an army of pompous phrases moving over the landscape in search of an idea." The poet e. e. cummings observed that Harding was "The only man, woman or child / who wrote a simple declarative sentence / with seven grammatical errors." During the heated debate over tax reform in 1921 the president admitted, "I can't make a damn thing out of this tax problem. I listen to one side and they seem right, and then—God!—I talk to the other side, and they seem just as right." According to the influential journalist William Allen White, Harding confided to another friend, "My God, this a hell of a place for a man like me to be!" Even so, Harding's historical reputation might have survived intellectual mediocrity, but not faithless subordinates.

"MY DAMN FRIENDS"

Four years after Harding's death, a half-dozen members of the administration, including two cabinet officers, had been forced to resign and indicted for crimes ranging from defrauding the government to bribery and conspiracy. Charles Forbes, for example, director of the Veterans' Bureau, went to prison for accepting "loans" from a construction firm bidding on government contracts and for selling medical supplies to another friendly purchaser at ridiculously low prices. Forbes's chief legal

adviser in the bureau, Charles Cramer, committed suicide before he could be charged with similar improprieties. Jess Smith, personal secretary to Attorney General Harry Daugherty, conspired with Thomas W. Miller, the custodian of alien property, to uphold the dubious claims of a German banking family to recover \$7 billion in securities confiscated during the war. From the grateful Germans, Miller received \$50,000 and Smith over \$224,000 “for expediting the claim through [an] acquaintance in Washington.” Smith killed himself when it was discovered that he had deposited \$50,000 of the money in an Ohio bank account used jointly with Attorney General Daugherty. A jury convicted Miller, who served over a year in prison. The attorney general, fired by Coolidge after Harding’s death, twice went to trial, but was found not guilty on both occasions.

The biggest scandal of all brought down the secretary of the interior, Albert Fall, whose lavish expenditures on his New Mexico ranch began to stir the curiosity of reporters and United States senators. They wanted to know how it was possible for a cabinet officer earning \$12,000 a year to finance such improvements. They also wanted to know about Fall’s relationship with two buccaneers of the oil industry, Edward L. Doheney of the Pan American Petroleum Company and Harry F. Sinclair of the Continental Trading Company. Their companies had received valuable leases from Fall’s department to drill for oil at Elk Hills in California and Teapot Dome in Wyoming, both federal petroleum reserves held in trust for the Navy. Through the tenacious investigation of Senator Thomas J. Walsh of Montana, the curious finally learned that Fall had placed extraordinary pressure on the Navy Department to transfer administration of the reserves to the Interior Department. Following execution of the leases, Doheney “loaned” Fall \$100,000 in cash, delivered by the oilman’s son to the secretary in a little black bag; Fall and his son-in-law had also received in excess of \$200,000 in Liberty Bonds from the Continental Trading Company. In court, Fall claimed that he had always acted in the public interest to promote oil conservation and to safeguard the national interest by reducing the amount of petroleum drained from the reserves by adjacent operators. The jury believed otherwise. Convicted of taking a bribe, the former secretary was fined \$100,000 and sentenced to a year in jail. Voiding the leases in a later civil case, the Supreme Court of the United States found them to be tainted with “fraud and corruption.” A few months before his death, a harried Harding complained, “I have no trouble with my enemies. I can take care of my enemies all right. But my damn friends . . . my God-damn friends . . . they’re the ones that keep me walking the floor nights.”

Not since the years of Ulysses S. Grant had Washington been rocked by so many examples of ease and virtue in the executive branch. Not until the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan would high officials, including cabinet members, again face indictment and trial for breaking the nation’s laws. Unlike President Nixon, named by a federal grand jury as an unindicted co-conspirator in the Watergate scandal, Harding did not encourage or condone these violations of public trust. Unlike the presidential advisers in Watergate or the Iran-Contra affair of the Reagan era, Harding’s subordinates were motivated by simple greed, not a desire to destroy their political opponents or subvert the Constitution. At worst, Harding can be convicted of lax administration and of incredible naivete in selecting people like Daugherty and Fall to run key departments. He was not the last occupant of the White House to suffer from the financial misdeeds of close friends. Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, and Jimmy Carter made similar blunders and endured like political embarrassment as a result of misplaced personal loyalty. Combined with Harding’s intellectual limitations and his sexual peccadilloes, however, the scandals have cast a long historical shadow by encouraging scholars to dismiss the administration as simply corrupt, mediocre, and reactionary. In truth, its record was somewhat more mixed.

“THE BEST MINDS” ABROAD: CHARLES EVANS HUGHES

Harding did not name to high office only crooks, political hacks, and intellectual lightweights. The president said that he would appoint “the best minds” to his regime. If those called to duty did not measure up to the standards of the first Washington administration, they were on the whole much superior to Woodrow Wilson’s. As secretary of state, Harding tapped Charles Evans Hughes, the former governor of New York and associate justice of the Supreme Court. Hughes had built a lucrative legal practice servicing giant corporations, and his appointment dismayed many old progressives, but his record as New York’s chief executive and on the bench had displayed much sympathy for social reform. No enemy of capitalism, Hughes did insist that business function with a modicum of social compassion and honesty. Utility companies and insurance firms had both benefited from his legal advice and suffered from his wrath when they ignored the interests of consumers and shareholders. On the nation’s highest court, Hughes had voted to uphold maximum-hours laws, to curb the use of labor injunctions, to prohibit debt peonage, and to extend the reviewing authority of federal courts over state criminal trials. As Harding’s expert on foreign affairs, he displayed boldness and tenacity in promoting the reorganization of the foreign service through the Rogers Act and in the immediate postwar negotiations to reduce naval armaments.

There are few better examples of the persistence of progressive thinking in the Harding era than the Rogers Act of 1924, regarded as the “basic charter of the modern diplomatic service.” That law owed its existence to Hughes’s belief that appointment and promotion in the foreign service should not be monopolized by what he called “young men of wealthy families who are willing and able to . . . pay their own way.” Through the use of standardized written examinations, the Rogers Act sought to temper social class with a meritocracy. Himself an example of how far a bright young man from a modestly endowed family might travel, Hughes argued that brains, not wealth, should determine the distribution of diplomatic posts. “The notion that a wide-awake, average American can do anything is flattering to the American pride,” he said, “but costs the Government dearly. . . . You cannot obtain the necessary technical equipment through mere general experience or by reading instructions. . . . It is a very shortsighted and foolish view which would confuse routine and expert knowledge.”

The full impact of the Rogers Act on State Department personnel procedures would not be felt for several years, but under Hughes’s masterful direction the Washington Conference of 1921–22 brought immediate benefits. One was the Five-Power Treaty, which froze the battleship and carrier strength of England, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy at immediate postwar levels. In his greatest feat of diplomacy, assisted by American code-breakers, Hughes persuaded the Japanese to accept less tonnage than the British or Americans over a twenty-year period and the French to accept the same ratios as the Italians. In addition to limiting naval armaments, the delegates at the Washington Conference signed a series of agreements in which they pledged to respect one another’s interests in East Asia and to uphold the principles of the Open Door in China. The Japanese also vowed to remove their troops from Shantung, to give the United States cable rights on the island of Yap, and to cease their occupation of Soviet territory in Siberia and the island of Sakhalin. The Americans agreed in turn not to reinforce Guam.

At the Washington Conference Hughes clearly provided the energy and brains in the American delegation, but Harding made two important contributions to the success of the meeting: first, he named both Republicans and Democrats to the delegation; and second, he delivered a thoughtful speech before the Senate urging ratification. His bipartisan approach contrasted sharply with Wilson’s handling of the Paris Peace Conference and made ratification of the naval treaty much easier in the Senate.

Some critics have condemned the Washington Conference as another instance of American naivete, similar to the Kellogg-Briand Treaty that outlawed war five years later. The naval treaty, they note, contained many loopholes that were not closed until too late in the 1930s. A general reduction of

land forces did not follow. The Far Eastern agreements rested largely on the sufferance of the Japanese, who ignored them when it became expedient to do so. Hindsight is always superior to foresight, however. The Five-Power Treaty marked the first time in modern history that great nations agreed to curb their military arsenals. Harding and Hughes can hardly be blamed for the failed efforts of their successors or for not predicting how a worldwide economic collapse might influence geopolitical developments after 1929. America's sphere of influence in Asia, principally the Philippines, had always rested on Japan's acceptance of a U.S. presence. The agreements reached at the Washington Conference cannot be regarded as the greatest diplomatic victories in American history, but they rested on a careful calculation of the balance of power and largely ratified it. This was not a trifling achievement in the wake of the more grandiose and failed ambitions of the Wilson era.

The Harding-Hughes approach to foreign relations spurned internationalism in the Wilsonian sense of full-fledged membership in the League of Nations or support for collective security. But neither did it endorse isolationism. The American minister in Switzerland took pains to avoid the building in Geneva where the League met regularly, and the Department of State often ignored official communications from the international assembly, but on the eve of Harding's death U.S. representatives had begun to cooperate informally with the League's efforts to stem the trade in opium and arms. And to the chagrin of strict isolationists, Harding called on the Senate to endorse American membership on the League's World Court, also known as the Permanent Court of International Justice. Although the court's charter sharply limited its jurisdiction over all sovereign nations, a fearful Senate refused to ratify the protocol without embarrassing reservations that blocked American membership.

The Harding administration supported efforts to defend American shores from an anticipated flood of foreign people and goods with immigration quotas and high tariffs, but it made little effort to curb the flow of U.S. capital and products into the four corners of the globe. Every Singer sewing machine sold in Argentina, every dollar invested by New York banks in German chemical plants or Peruvian railroads, however, spread American values and interests abroad, with the result of deepening the influence of the United States in foreign nations and linking its economic destiny to the fate of other regimes.

Perhaps the sharpest contrast between the behavior of the Harding administration and its progressive predecessors abroad came in the Western Hemisphere. When the Ohioan entered the White House in 1921, American troops remained stationed in Nicaragua, where Taft had sent them a decade earlier. The United States Navy ran affairs in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Having failed through bluster and military force to stop the course of the Mexican Revolution, the United States still had not officially recognized the government in Mexico City. During the 1920 campaign, the Democrat's vice presidential candidate boasted that the United States could control the votes of over half-dozen Central American and Caribbean nations in the League of Nations. "Until last week, I had two of these votes in my pocket," Franklin Roosevelt told one audience. "One of them was Haiti. I know, for I wrote Haiti's Constitution myself, and if I do say it, I think it was a pretty good little Constitution." Candidate Harding pointed out that Roosevelt's exercise in constitution-writing had cost the loss of Haitian and American lives "to establish laws drafted by the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, to secure a vote in the League."

Although U.S. troops did not depart from other countries in the hemisphere until after his death, President Harding began slowly to dismantle the crude interventionist policies that had clouded American relations in Latin America from Theodore Roosevelt to Wilson. The United States recognized the government of General Alvaro Obregón in return for Mexico's pledge to compensate Americans whose property had been seized during the revolution. They established a joint American-

Mexican commission to arbitrate these claims. And in a gesture that would have made Teddy Roosevelt furious, the administration persuaded the Senate to ratify a new treaty with Colombia that included \$25 million to indemnify that country for our participation in the Panamanian revolt of 1903.

“THE BEST MINDS” AT HOME: MELLON, WALLACE, AND HOOVER

For the Treasury Department, Harding chose one of America’s richest men, Andrew William Mellon, whose fortune rested on control of the Pittsburgh National Bank, the Alcoa Aluminum Company, and the Gulf Oil Corporation. Dark-suited, frail of body, and pale in complexion, Mellon resembled the village undertaker. His fondness for cheroots and French Impressionist paintings constituted the extent of his enthusiasm for social experiments, artistic or otherwise. Like most men of his social background and economic influence, Mellon believed devoutly that the health and security of the republic reposed in those who managed the institutions of commerce, industry, and finance and in the capacity of public officials to meet their needs. Low tax rates, low interest rates, sound money, a balanced federal budget, and a minimum of government regulation—these were Mellon’s definition of good government.

Since the late nineteenth century, the federal income tax had been a litmus test of political identification that often separated progressives from conservatives. But only the unprecedented fiscal demands of World War I made it a major instrument of government policy and brought its implications home to most Americans. In the landmark revenue laws of 1917 and 1918, the Democratic-controlled Congress attempted to finance about one-third of the war or \$10 billion directly through taxation rather than borrowing. These laws cut the exemption for both married and single taxpayers and increased the normal income tax to 6 percent on all incomes up to \$4,000 and to 12 percent on those above that figure. On the highest incomes, the maximum surtax hit 65 percent. Congress imposed an excess profits tax on corporations in an effort to recover some of the windfall from cost-plus government contracts. Congress also raised the estate tax to a maximum of 25 percent. The principal architect of these revenue laws, Congressman Claude Kitchen of North Carolina, was the son of a Populist and a devout believer in progressive taxation. By war’s end, “Kitchenism” and high federal taxes had turned many middle-class voters against Wilson and the Democrats.

Andrew Mellon, secretary of the treasury.

If Harding’s pledge to restore “normalcy” meant anything, therefore, it meant relief from what most Americans regarded as the unprecedented and burdensome taxes of the war years. In Andrew Mellon the president had a cabinet member quite friendly to such a policy. Mellon loathed progressive taxes generally. He regarded high surcharges as a moral and economic abomination, because they penalized those who were rich, discouraged enterprise, and held back economic growth. When the wealthy kept a larger portion of what they produced, Mellon argued, the average worker and consumer would benefit through reinvestment, higher productivity, more jobs, and lower prices. His critics called it the “trickle-down” theory or feeding the sparrows by stuffing the horses.

In 1921 the secretary presented to the House Ways and Means Committee a package of tax reductions that totaled \$800 million, including abolition of wartime luxury taxes and the excess profits tax, and a sharp cut in the maximum surtax on personal incomes to 33 percent. To sweeten the offer and secure the votes of Western and Southern congressmen, Mellon recommended a modest increase in the standard exemption for families, a new federal tax on luxury automobiles, and a 2 percent hike in the corporate income tax. Much to his chagrin, Congress ratified these suggestions, but deferred action on the excess profits tax, and trimmed the maximum surtax only to 50 percent.

Undaunted, Mellon returned to the attack in 1923, several months after Harding's death. He now asked Congress to slash the maximum surtax to 25 percent and to abolish entirely the federal estate tax, a source of great unhappiness among the wealthy. Even the Republican majority in Congress found these ideas too radical. They trimmed the maximum surtax to 40 percent, but kept the estate tax intact and added a new federal gift tax. The ideal of progressive taxation remained, but Mellon had established an important beachhead for later reductions by a more compliant legislature.

By 1920, farmers who raised staple crops such as wheat and cotton formed a vociferous and well-organized interest group demanding government intervention to protect their living standards and way of life from the gouging of railroads, commodity brokers, and bankers. Because of the expansion of federal programs to assist agriculture during the Wilson years, the secretary of agriculture had become a powerful symbol of agrarian interests and an important broker of the farmers' political fate. To fill this key cabinet post, Harding tapped the thinking man's farmer, Henry C. Wallace, who had graduated from the state agricultural college in Iowa and later taught there as an assistant professor of dairy farming.

As a spokesman for the rural producers, the publisher of *Wallace's Farmer* remained generally in the progressive mold. Three decades of agricultural expansion, consolidation, and periodic collapse had left the American countryside stratified between large-scale commercial operators at the very top and armies of tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and landless laborers at the bottom. Wallace eloquently and persistently represented those farmers who were more interested in crop rotation than in social revolution, those who hoped to emulate big business by harnessing the plow to the miracles of science and technology.

Harding's most controversial cabinet selection proved to be Herbert Hoover as secretary of commerce. A figure straight out of American folklore, Hoover had been orphaned and left almost penniless by his parents only to become a world-famous mining engineer and multi-millionaire before the age of forty. The Wilson administration had called him to public service, first as director of relief efforts for war-ravaged Belgium and later as chief of the domestic Food Administration. Against the hostility of the belligerent nations, he distributed food and medical supplies to the victims of war. Hoover's passion for efficiency guaranteed that almost every dime of the millions raised for relief found its way to the needy, not into the pockets of administrators. Without the authority to impose domestic rationing, he kept food prices in the U.S. reasonably stable by persuading consumers to eat less wheat and meat and spurring farmers to produce more food and fiber for the American and Allied armies. A member of Wilson's official entourage at the peace conference, he spoke out against a punitive treaty and the reparations inflicted on Germany. John Maynard Keynes, the youthful British economist whose scathing critique of the Versailles settlement made him a hero to American progressives, called Hoover "the biggest man" in the American delegation. Justice Louis Brandeis and Franklin Roosevelt both thought Hoover a superb candidate for president on the Democratic ticket, until the latter announced his preference for the GOP.

Henry Wallace, secretary of agriculture, demonstrates his technique with a Holstein.

The very qualities that made Hoover attractive to Keynes, Brandeis, and FDR—his humanitarianism, internationalism, and penchant for scientific management—made him highly suspect among professional politicians in the Republican Party and among the traditional business and financial elites who usually supported it. Party professionals, hungry for patronage after eight years of Democratic rule, wanted a free hand in appointments without interference from a Boy Scout of clean government such as Hoover. Businessmen, eager to dismantle many government regulations of the progressive era, remained uncertain where Hoover stood on these matters. He did not hide the fact that he idolized Wilson, supported American membership in the League, and believed government to be

more than a necessary evil. He praised free enterprise, but also urged businessmen to pursue their goals through “voluntary cooperation” or “associative individualism,” both of which sounded—dangerous to orthodox conservatives.

When the brief postwar recession of 1921 threw five million people out of work, Hoover urged an accelerated program of federal public works to combat the problem. Harding rejected the idea, but it confirmed for many Republican leaders Hoover’s subversive tendencies. As commerce secretary during the next eight years, Hoover expended enormous energy attempting to persuade manufacturers and distributors to form trade associations. By promoting the standardization of products and sharing other information, Hoover believed, these voluntary organizations would eliminate waste, reduce costs, and improve the competitiveness of American capitalism. Many businessmen saw them as a wonderful tool for fixing prices, allocating markets, and engaging in other practices forbidden by the antitrust laws—all with the official imprimatur of Hoover’s department. When the secretary turned thumbs down on such illegal collusion and gave businessmen a sermon on the benefits of free competition and voluntary cooperation, they again shook their heads in disbelief.

Herbert Hoover, center, headed the Commerce Department.

RESHAPING THE COURT

While his cabinet had a progressive tinge that alarmed many hard-boiled Republicans, they could not complain about the president’s judicial appointments. In 1920 the Supreme Court’s writ ran less far and wide than even a decade later, but the decisions of its nine justices had enormous consequences for individual litigants and the whole community, because they drew the boundary between personal liberty and government authority. For many conservatives and progressives, the Court under Chief Justice Edward White had tilted the balance too far in favor of the state during the wartime emergency. To the chagrin of businessmen, the White Court upheld the power of Congress to impose an eight-hour day on the nation’s railroads and rent controls in the District of Columbia. The justices also let stand an Oregon law that required employers to pay time and a half for all labor in excess of ten hours. These rulings, grumbled conservatives, trampled on economic liberty and property rights by restricting freedom of contract. Supporters of civil liberties denounced the Court when it upheld conscription, censorship, and long jail terms for all the antiwar protesters convicted under the Espionage or Sedition Act. These decisions, they cried, made a mockery of the Bill of Rights, especially freedom of speech and press.

Because the justices had been divided on many of these cases, more than ordinary interest surrounded each death and resignation that gave Harding four appointments to the Supreme Court—including a new chief justice—between 1921 and 1923. No president since Taft had a greater opportunity to reshape the nation’s jurisprudence by selecting “the best minds” for its highest court. Harding’s choices—William Howard Taft, George Sutherland, Pierce Butler, and Edward Sanford—were not greeted with acclaim by most progressives. The corpulent Taft, chosen to replace White as chief justice, seemed likely to replicate the conservatism of the man he had placed in the center chair a decade earlier. The former president had long harbored ambitions to lead the Court, and cynical observers believed that Taft picked White for the job in 1911 rather than the more youthful Charles Evans Hughes with these thoughts in mind. Without a trace of irony, Taft once observed that judges “typify on earth what we shall meet hereafter in heaven under a just God.” He had vehemently opposed Brandeis’s appointment to the Court in 1916 and regarded Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes as wholly unreliable on issues of government regulation of business.

Sutherland, a former congressman and United States senator from Utah, studied law at the University of Michigan under Thomas M. Cooley, the famous theoretician of constitutional limitations. Cooley had preached that most forms of government regulation were unwise and illegal. At the American Bar Association convention in 1917 Sutherland expressed total sympathy for businessmen “beset and bedeviled with vexatious statutes, prying commissions, and government intermeddling of all sorts.” He denounced the Wilson administration for creating “an army of official agents . . . to smell out our shortcomings and tell us what we may and what we may not do.”

Butler had practiced law briefly in Minnesota with the son of the Populist intellectual Ignatius Donnelly, but he was certainly no radical. As the senior partner in a prosperous St. Paul law firm, the Minnesotan normally represented railroads against state regulatory agencies. A millionaire’s son and a graduate of the Harvard Law School, Sanford owed his appointment to Chief Justice Taft’s influence and seldom failed to follow the latter’s views.

The Harding-Taft Court pleased those who believed that government economic regulation had gone too far during the progressive era. But while sanctioning entrepreneurial liberty, the justices let stand a variety of laws designed to repress political subversives whose ideas threatened the status quo. Over biting dissents by Brandeis and Holmes, for instance, the justices told the federal government and the states that they could not fix minimum wages or standard weights for bread, limit the fees charged by employment agencies, or control the resale price of theater tickets. If government did the things, the majority declared, economic freedom would perish. Yet the justices permitted New York and California to imprison political radicals who advocated revolution or joined organizations that preached such notions. The federal government, the Taft majority ruled, could employ wiretapping without violating the search and seizure provisions of the Fourth Amendment. And Congress might bar from citizenship an alien pacifist who refused to bear arms for the country, although the alien in this particular case was female and unlikely to be called to military service.

Although the Harding-Taft Court seldom resisted government encroachments on civil liberties and civil rights, there were a few notable exceptions to this trend. With Holmes writing for the majority, the justices in 1923 overturned the convictions and death sentences of five Arkansas Negroes whose trial had been disrupted by an armed mob of white vigilantes. Where a state criminal proceeding became a mere sham and local courts failed to protect the accused, Holmes declared, the federal judiciary must guarantee due process of law. For the first time in history, the justices reversed a state criminal conviction on these grounds. At about the same time, the Taft Court also struck down as unconstitutional an Iowa law that sought to prevent the teaching of languages other than English in the public schools and an Oregon statute, backed by the Ku Klux Klan, that attempted to shut down all parochial schools. These measures trampled on economic liberty by restricting freedom of contract, the majority ruled, and also violated other fundamental rights, such as a parent’s right to have choice about where and how to educate a child.

Harding’s judicial appointments, like his cabinet selections, did not produce a complete purge of progressive ideals from the federal government. Except for cronies such as Fall and Daugherty, the Ohioan opted for well-known Republicans who could lend an aura of competence and stability to his regime. This formula favored conservatives such as Taft and Sutherland, but it also dictated the elevation of Hughes and Hoover, too. Political pragmatism and expediency drove Harding’s choices, not ideological purity. A similar pattern came to characterize the important public policies of his short administration. “Normalcy,” in other words, did not mean a bold expansion of the progressive tradition, but neither did it repudiate that tradition entirely.

As shaped by Teddy Roosevelt and Wilson, the progressive movement emphasized strong presidential leadership to mold the country's domestic and foreign policies. In style and substance, Harding proved to be closer to this new ideal of the presidency than to its pre-Roosevelt alternative. Two decades of reform and energy in the White House had transformed everybody's expectations about the office, including Warren Harding's. Candidate Harding had vowed to restore balance between the executive and Congress, which in his view had been twisted out of shape by the war and years of presidential aggrandizement under his predecessors. The pledge proved easier to make than to implement. The landmark Budget Act of 1921, for example, required the president to submit an estimate of receipts and expenditures for all departments of the government to each regular session of Congress. This law automatically thrust the White House ever more deeply into the legislative process and the fixing of domestic priorities. A provision of the Fordney-McCumber Act gave to the president upon the recommendation of the Tariff Commission, authority to reduce or lower duties by as much as 50 percent. It too enhanced presidential power at the expense of the legislature. Wilson had often broken precedent by addressing a joint session of Congress on important legislative items. Harding carried this a step further during a special session of the 67th Congress in 1921, when the Senate voted on a veterans' bonus that he opposed. The president came in person to the chamber and delivered a stinging rebuke to its members. Before his death, Harding addressed Congress five more times, behavior which generated cries of executive tyranny for opposing the bonus and supporting other pet measures, such as federal subsidies for the nation's merchant fleet.

Any expectation that the Harding administration would actually roll back the Roosevelt-Wilson reforms was quickly dashed by a president who pardoned the socialist antiwar leader Eugene Debs (something a vindictive Wilson refused to do) and pressured the giant U.S. Steel Corporation into adopting the basic eight-hour day for many employees, an achievement that had eluded labor during the war. Sending his first legislative program to Congress, Harding called for the federal government to play a larger, not smaller, role in the country's social and economic life. He urged Congress to pass a host of new laws to aid farmers, raise tariffs, punish lynching, enforce prohibition, curb immigration, and reduce taxes. In the case of the tariff and taxes, it can be said that the Harding administration retreated from the progressive agenda. But in another area, federal grant-in-aid programs, it forged ahead dramatically.

These aid programs, requiring states to follow federal guidelines if they accepted funds for specific activities, traced their origin to the famous Morrill Act of 1862. Then Congress made federal land available to the states when they built agricultural colleges. Cash replaced land when a major expansion in this form of federal assistance and regulation occurred during the progressive era. By 1917, federal grant-in-aid programs provided money for fighting fires, vocational and agricultural education, building highways, and rehabilitating veterans. In 1921, Harding and the Republican-controlled Congress approved the last important federal grant-in-aid effort before the Great Depression. It touched off a fierce debate. The Sheppard-Towner Maternity Aid Act made federal money available to states that operated infant and maternity health care programs in local hospitals. Some militant feminists and birth control advocates denounced the measure for subsidizing procreation. Moral fundamentalists, Catholics as well as Protestants, criticized it as a dangerous intrusion by government into the affairs of the family. The state of Massachusetts and local taxpayers sought to have the law declared unconstitutional with claims that it exceeded the authority of Congress, coerced the states, and destroyed their sovereignty. Without dissent, the Supreme Court threw out the lawsuit on jurisdictional grounds, but the justices also indicated that they were unimpressed with these efforts to curb the spending powers of the national government.

It is difficult to imagine a clearer example of the persistence of progressivism than Sheppard-Towner. An often forgotten product of the Harding era, the law provided a notable precedent for the

even broader social welfare programs of the New Deal, including social security. Sheppard-Towner succumbed to the Republican budget ax later in the decade, but other grant-in-aid programs continue to flourish. Under Wilson, federal grants to the states for specific programs had totaled about \$11 million annually. By 1925, despite Andrew Mellon's efforts to cut federal expenditures, such grants had climbed to over \$93 million. They had become permanent fixtures of the American political landscape along with other innovations of the progressive era: the Federal Reserve System, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Federal Trade Commission.

PRESIDENT AND RACE

Harding did little to resist the nativist members of Congress who demanded strict curbs on foreign immigration, but he did make a token effort to revive his party's long-dormant commitment to civil rights for African-Americans. Theodore Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to the White House but never challenged the South's racial caste system. When black soldiers were charged with fomenting a riot in Brownsville, Texas, he cashiered them all from the Army without proof of individual guilt. Woodrow Wilson sanctioned racial segregation in the offices of the federal government. Warren Harding became the first president in this century to criticize it publicly before a white audience in the South. Invited to Birmingham, Alabama, in 1921 for that city's fiftieth birthday celebration, the president declared that "we cannot go on, as we have gone on for more than half a century, with one great section of our population . . . set off from real contributions to solving national issues, because of a division on race lines." Southern racists picked up his meaning. Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi called the speech "unfortunate indeed." Alabama's arch-segregationist, Tom Heflin, reminded the president that "God Almighty has fix'd limits and boundary lines between the races, and no Republican living can improve upon His handiwork."

Since Southern laws barred blacks from elections by various discriminatory methods, Harding's critics noted that the president hoped merely to gather in more black votes from that traditional Republican constituency in the North. But he soon followed the speech with a specific legislative proposal by urging passage of a law giving federal courts jurisdiction over the crime of lynching, an idea only slightly less revolting to the white South than ending segregation itself. The Harding-endorsed bill passed the House in 1922, but fell victim to a Southern filibuster in the Senate. Fearing that a long, angry debate would side-track other projects, the president and his legislative allies finally cast the bill adrift. Black leaders expressed bitterness at Harding's capitulation, which seemed to turn away from the sentiments of the Birmingham speech and to place ship subsidies above human rights. Until Harry Truman sat in the White House, however, no president took a stronger legislative stand against lynching.

A DEATH IN SAN FRANCISCO

Despite achievements that included a historic disarmament treaty, normalization of relations with Mexico, tax reduction, and aid to agriculture, Harding and the Republicans suffered a sharp rebuff at the polls in the 1922 congressional elections. With the economy still sluggish, the GOP lost seven seats in the Senate, including the leader of the protectionist forces, Porter McCumber, and seventy seats in the House. This gave the balance of power in the lower chamber to those who opposed the administration on taxation and ship subsidies, but wanted more federal aid to agriculture and veterans. It would be a mistake, however, to regard the 1922 elections as a repudiation of the Harding

administration or its works. Incumbent presidents had generally suffered setbacks in the midterm elections. Several of Harding's decisions, notably his veto of a veterans' bonus and intervention against striking railroad workers, prompted loud outcries from the injured groups, but the outcome of most Senate and House races in 1922 depended as ever on a host of local issues and personalities. In an attempt to mend his political fences and gain new momentum for the next two years, Harding embarked on a fatal political tour in the summer of 1923. Almost duplicating Wilson's strenuous journey on behalf of the League, Harding delivered fourteen speeches in two weeks. Near the end of the trip, traveling from Alaska to San Francisco, he suffered a heart attack. Three days later at the Palace Hotel, the president died from a cerebral hemorrhage. At the time of his death, the scandals that would soon rock the party remained hidden. Whether he could have regained the initiative in the wake of those exposures and against a more unruly Congress is very doubtful.

Warren Harding was not the political Neanderthal of historical legend. While no progressive, he did not dismantle institutions of the progressive era or turn his back entirely on its legacies. The regulatory apparatus created under Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, although weakened by new appointments, remained in place, even augmented by new programs for commercial farmers and an expansion of federal grant-in-aid efforts, especially Sheppard-Towner. If not all of his appointments were as good as Hughes or Hoover, neither were they as poor as Harry Daugherty or Pierce Butler. Clearly, Harding lacked the intellectual acumen of TR or Wilson, but he may have killed himself in an attempt to master the details of his job. The accusation that he abdicated executive leadership would have astonished most congressmen of the time, who complained about his vetoes and what they regarded as excessive meddling by the White House in legislative affairs. And by criticizing segregation and abandoning the policy of intervention in the hemisphere, Harding challenged traditions of the progressive era that were little credit to the nation or its leaders.

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