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Warren G. Harding by John W. Dean

Warren G. Harding is generally considered to be among the worst presidents of the United States. His two year term was fraught with scandals and accusations of wrongdoings. Even Harding's death provided the American public with titillating stories and rumors. The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks only mentions Harding in regards to the most famous of his scandals, the Teapot Dome Scandal. The American Vision textbook, used by Mashpee Public Schools, only mentions Harding in regards to his self-doubt, the Ohio Gang, and the Teapot Dome Scandal. The textbook supplies students with the following quote by Harding: "I have such a sure understanding of my own inefficiency that I should really be ashamed to presume myself fitted to reach out for a place of such responsibility." (American Vision 637)

John W. Dean set out to seek the truth about President Harding both as a person and as a president. On the back cover, John W. Dean writes, "He became a defenseless target of decades of false accusations and distortions." In his introduction, John W. Dean explains his interest in researching and presenting the truth of the Harding presidency. He claims that his interest stems from coming from the same home town as President Harding and "not because of Watergate." (Dean 2) While this may very likely be true, it is difficult for a reader not to be skeptical of an author who was convicted of felonies in the presidential scandal that would shadow the Teapot Dome Scandal. Dean certainly presents a compelling argument regarding the fairness of the popular portrayal of Warren

Harding; however he does not succeed in convincing the reader that Warren Harding was a strong president.

John W. Dean begins his account with the early adult life of Warren Harding. He discusses in the length the role of his wife Florence. It has often been reported that Florence pushed Warren Harding into politics. Without giving evidence, John Dean states that “Contrary to popular myth, Florence did not push her husband toward elective office on his own.” (Dean 23) He does however detail the role that Florence played in organizing his business, the newspaper *The Marion Star*, especially during the five times that Warren Harding checked into Dr. Kellogg’s Sanitarium. (Dean 22) The portrayal of the relationship between the Florence and Warren does little to dissuade the reader regarding rumored later affairs by the President. Dean writes, “The new pressure of married life, not to mention life with an extremely demanding woman, soon stirred in Warren his love of traveling - alone.” (Dean 21) Dean also writes of trip to the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in which he supposedly enjoyed the exotic dancing of Little Egypt. (Dean 22) It is hard for the reader to feel empathy for Warren Harding. Dean clearly portrays him as a disinterested husband despite his attempt to gloss over the problems when he writes, “Only Warren and Florence Harding know the dynamics of their relationship: the attraction that brought them together, and then held them together.” (Dean 23)

While the portrayal of Harding’s spousal relationship is not flattering, the discussion of his early political career certainly presents an ambition that is often lacking in popular accounts of his career. In his first office of the Ohio Senate, Harding quickly earned a strong reputation as a politician. Once newspaper wrote, “He was an excellent

‘mixer,’ he had the inestimable gift of never forgetting a man’s face or his name, and there was always a genuine warmth in his handshake, a real geniality in his smile.”

(Dean 24) He left the Ohio Senate to care for his ailing wife in 1904. After her recovery, Harding tried to revive his career by running for governor of Ohio. He lost the election by nearly 100,000 votes.

In 1914, Harding ran a successful campaign for the U.S. Senate. Dean does not describe his platform in detail but does write the following: “A Harding friend described his stump speeches during the 1914 Senate campaign ‘a rambling, high-sounding mixture of platitudes, patriotism, and pure nonsense.” (Dean 36) Dean portrays a politician that may not have been full of ideas but rather mastered the skills of befriending people and managing to tell people what they want to hear. It seems as though Dean sees these personality traits as indicative of a strong politician. Dean does not even attempt to persuade the reader that Harding was a great statesman. Dean writes, “In the Senate of this era, new senators were expected to keep a low profile while learning the rules of the club, and Harding dutifully kept his head down.” (Dean 38) However, Harding used his people skills to develop important friendships. Dean writes, “He made friends quickly, and the Harding home became a social mecca for his friends, and they were many.” (Dean 39) His senate career was not by any means extraordinary. He missed over 46 votes because he spent much of his time touring the country and speaking against U.S. involvement in the League in the Nations. According to Dean, this is evidence of a grander plan beyond the U.S. Senate.

Dean certainly brings new evidence to light regarding Harding’s run for the presidency as well as his shortened term. The description of the back room dealing and

political skill displayed by Harding's team at the 1920 convention contradict the textbook portrayal of lazy and reluctant president. Dean does an excellent job describing the scene at the convention and especially Harry Daugherty's assistance to Warren Harding. What is most revealing about Harding is the description of his selection of cabinet members. This account of the cabinet choices contradicts the conventional view of Harding choosing only friends for the cabinet. Dean writes, "It was a carefully crafted, well-built cabinet, composed of distinguished, self-made men of independent public standing." (Dean 93) In fact Harding's cabinet included a future president in Hoover, a future Supreme Court Justice in Hughes, and a titan of business in Mellon. This makes the reader at least question the portrayal of Harding and the Ohio Gang. Dean's strongest aspect of his book is in chapter as the reader clearly understands the level of thought that went into the choices.

The weakest aspect of Dean's book is his portrayal of the scandals that have forever destroyed Harding's reputation. He clearly describes both the Veterans Administration and the Teapot Dome scandal. One problem with his description is that he seems to gloss over the responsibility of the President in controlling the cabinet. He does offer a vivid description of the last meeting between Forbes and Harding when Harding reportedly choked Forbes while calling him a "double-crossing bastard." (Dean 141) On the Teapot Dome scandal, Dean claims there is little evidence of Harding's involvement. Of course, the scandal broke after Harding's death and the well-liked, deceased president was certainly not going to be attacked by an overly friendly media. Dean seems to give Harding a pass but the reader cannot help but wonder if his lack of oversight was the result of Harding's reported laziness.

John W. Dean's book certainly provides more detail into the Harding presidency. After reading the book, it seems important that teachers expand beyond the textbook in order to present an accurate portrait of the president. While this is an obvious statement, too often high school teachers get bogged down in the textbook version of history. Textbooks present Harding as a lazy president that surrounds himself only with his Ohio Gang. Dean presents Harding as a skilled politician. Teachers would benefit from reading the book and seeing Harding in a different light than is normally portrayed in the high school classroom. Students are often left with the impression that Harding was hard drinking, gambling, and reluctant president. Perhaps after reading John Dean's book, the reader can appreciate Harding's political skills but also recognize his weaknesses in managing those around him, especially his cabinet. After reading Dean's biography, teachers would be better informed and present a much more accurate portrayal of the Harding as a person and president. While the Harding presidency is difficult to look at positively, it is important that students get beyond the scandals and the Ohio Gang.