

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Warren, We Hardly Knew Ye

“Reputational Entrepreneurs and the Memory of Incompetence: Melting Supporters, Partisan Warriors, and Images of President Harding” by Gary Alan Fine, in the *American Journal of Sociology* (Mar. 1996), 5835 S. Kimbark, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

No other president in this century, not even Richard M. Nixon, has had his reputation sink so low. In the contemptuous judgment of historians, Warren G. Harding—his name indelibly associated with the Teapot Dome scandal, the “Ohio Gang,” the “smoke-filled room,” and his avowed quest for national “normalcy”—was an unintelligent man who was too trusting of his cronies, too tolerant of corruption, and too passive a chief executive. He was, they say, quite possibly the worst president the United States has ever had.

But that’s just the way the reputational cookie happened to crumble, argues Fine, a sociologist at the University of Georgia. Other, more favorable interpretations are quite possible. Harding could be seen, for instance, as a principled conservative president, a martyred president betrayed, or even (because he was long rumored to have had black ancestors) as the first African American president.

Winning the White House in a landslide in 1920, after waging a “front-porch” campaign from his home in Marion, Ohio, Harding named some strong figures to his cabinet (including Charles Evans Hughes at the Department of State and Herbert Hoover at the Department of Commerce), and nominated the well-qualified William Howard Taft to the Supreme Court.

Harding himself, a former newspaper publisher, was honest, likeable, and sincere—the embodiment of small-town virtue (and a few small-town vices). His administration, Fine contends, “had a string of real accomplishments.” These included the creation of the Bureau of the Budget, reduction of the national debt, and tax cuts that fueled an economic recovery. Harding convened the 1922 Washington Naval Disarmament Conference, the first successful arms reduction talks in history. In contrast to his predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, he was sensitive to civil liberties: he pardoned the imprisoned socialist leader Eugene Debs and other dissidents. He also cared about race relations. He appointed some blacks to office and supported anti-

lynching legislation (which southern Democrats killed in the Senate). The black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey hailed one Harding speech on race as “one of the greatest statements of the present day.”

When Harding, at age 57, died of mysterious causes (from food poisoning, perhaps, or a heart attack; there were even implausible claims of suicide or murder) in San Francisco in the summer of 1923, he was greatly



The Teapot Dome scandal loomed very large indeed in this 1924 cartoon.

mourned. Millions of Americans lined the route to pay their respects as the train bearing his body back to Washington passed.

Months later, as details emerged of the Teapot Dome scandal (in which Harding’s secretary of the interior received nearly \$500,000 for leasing federal oil reserves to private firms), Harding was not around to defend his reputation, Fine points out. Democrats and Republican progressives such as Senator Robert LaFollette (R-Wisc.) attacked, aided by the tabloid newspapers and radio. President Calvin Coolidge and other mainstream Republicans tried to distance themselves from the Harding administration. The strategy worked: Coolidge won the election of 1924. But Harding lost.

Progressive journalists and historians soon cemented his reputation as a presidential failure and turned him into a symbol of a

greedy and self-indulgent age. That may not have been quite the way it—or Warren G. Harding—was.

Toward a New Patriotism

“Identity Politics and the Left” by Eric Hobsbawm, in *New Left Review* (May–June 1996), 6 Meard St., London W1V 3HR.

Even its adherents see the Left today as essentially a coalition of “identity groups”—feminists, gays, blacks, and others, each with its own self-interested agenda. Too often forgotten, argues Hobsbawm, the eminent British Marxist historian, are the Left’s grander aspirations to equality and social justice for all of humanity.

“The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for *all* human beings,” he writes. “However we interpret the words, it isn’t liberty for shareholders or blacks, but for everybody. It isn’t equality for all members of the Garrick Club or the handicapped, but for everybody. It is not fraternity only for old Etonians or gays, but for everybody. And identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only. This is perfectly evident in the case of ethnic or nationalist movements.”

The rise of identity politics has come about, in Hobsbawm’s view, as a result of profound social change that has weakened people’s traditional ties to nation and class and a “cultural revolution” that has eroded traditional standards and values, leaving many people feeling “orphaned and bereft.” Never, he says, has the word *community* been used so indiscriminately and emptily as in recent decades, “when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life.”

Although identity groups all claim to be “natural,” exclusive identity politics does not in fact come naturally to people, he contends. “No one has one and only one identity. Human beings cannot be described even for bureaucratic purposes, except by a combination of many characteristics.”

In the past, Hobsbawm argues, identity groups were not central to the Left. The mass social and political movements inspired by the American and French revolutions and by socialism “were indeed coalitions or group alliances, but [they were] held together not by aims that were specific to the group, but by great, universal causes through which each group believed its particular aims could be realized: democracy, the Republic, socialism, communism, or whatever.” Now, however, “the decline of the great universalist slogans of the Enlightenment” has deprived the Left of any obvious way of formulating a common interest.

Hobsbawm believes that the Left should look to “one form of identity politics which is actually comprehensive. . . : citizen nationalism. Seen in the global perspective this may be the opposite of a universal appeal, but seen in the perspective of the national state, which is where most of us still live, and are likely to go on living, it provides a common identity. . . ‘an imagined community’ not the less real for being imagined.”

At times in the past, Hobsbawm says, the Left not only has wanted to rouse the nation but “has been accepted as representing the national interest, even by those who had no special sympathy for its aspirations.” In Britain in 1945, for instance, the Labor Party was chosen “as the party best representing the nation against one-nation Toryism led by the most charismatic and victorious war-leader on the scene.” Yet today, he laments, “the words ‘the country,’ ‘Great Britain,’ ‘the nation,’ ‘patriotism,’ even ‘the people,’” are seldom spoken by leaders on the British left.

Was Brown’s Way Wrong?

“Coming Clean About *Brown*” by Richard E. Morgan, in *City Journal* (Summer 1996), Manhattan Institute, 52 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

Arguments against judicial activism soon run up against the almost sacrosanct example of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954),

the Supreme Court’s famous decision outlawing segregation in public schools as a violation of the 14th Amendment’s equal