



## Questions Asked

Democracy has no monuments. It strikes no medals. It bears the head of no man on a coin.

—*John Quincy Adams*

To enter into any serious historical criticism of these stories [regarding George Washington's childhood] would be to break a butterfly.

—*Henry Cabot Lodge*

### *Harding and the Log Cabin Myth*

Warren G. Harding's story is an American myth gone wrong. As our twenty-ninth president, Harding occupied the office that stands at the symbolic center of American national identity.<sup>1</sup> Harding's biography should have easily slipped into American history and mythology when he died in office, on August 2, 1923. Having been born to a humble midwestern farm family, what better ending could there be to his story than death in the service of his nation? What stronger image could stand as a lasting tribute than grieving citizens lining the railroad tracks, as they had for Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley, to view Harding's body? The public grief that accompanied the passing of Harding's burial train would seem to have foreshadowed a positive place in the national memory. Warren and Florence Harding were laid to rest in a classically designed marble mausoleum in their hometown of Marion, Ohio, a mausoleum that was the last great memorial in the older style popular before the rise of presidential libraries. However, the near perfection

of his political biography and his contemporary popularity did not follow him into history. Today Harding is one of our least respected historical figures and is considered the worst president in American history.

Harding's legacy derives from the contradiction between the symbolic role of the presidency and the scandals that define his life and presidency. The core of the role of the presidency in America's national civic religion is the character of the individuals who occupy the office. Further complicating any discussion of presidential legacy is that the office is both lofty and of the common people. Long before Americans had rags-to-riches Horatio Alger stories, they embraced the idea that boys born of humble origins could grow up to become presidents. So powerful was this belief that influential men living in plantations and mansions fabricated humble origins and fictive log cabins to further their political ambitions. Evan Cornog has written that "humble origins proved a valuable resource even to politicians without them."<sup>2</sup>

Warren G. Harding did not have to make up his humble origins. Harding was a midwestern farm boy who became president; he was living proof of this potent American myth of democracy and opportunity. So well does his life fit the expectations of the presidency that historian Edward Pessen uses Harding to begin his study of the log cabin myth and the social origins of the presidents: "In one respect, certainly, Phoebe Elizabeth Dickerson Harding of Blooming Grove, Ohio, seemed like mothers everywhere in the United States. Her great dream was that one day her son would grow up to become the president of the United States. In this enduring American legend, the rise to the presidency of so ordinary a boy as Warren Gamaliel Harding is yet one more proof that the greatest office in this nation is accessible to, and has in fact been occupied by, men born to modest circumstances."<sup>3</sup>

Scholars have long given Harding a poor rank among U.S. presidents, one that is matched by his poor reputation with the public. This provides us with an opportunity to study the role of myth and scandal in the making of memory and history. What does Warren Harding's reputation mean for the American civic religion and our understanding of the role of the presidency in it? This question has been asked of presidents we consider great, but what of a president considered a failure? Harding's image, and his later legacy, spanned the full range of patriotic iconography, from his electoral triumph in 1920 to his death, his disgrace, and his role as an icon of presidential failure. Harding was not considered a failure, or a poor president, until after his death. Given his poor reputation, it is

ironic that Harding's contemporary supporters and partisans were pioneers in the art of crafting political images.<sup>4</sup> Beginning with the 1920 election and continuing after his death, those associated with Harding and the Republican Party paid careful attention to how the public perceived Harding. The story of the creation and use of Harding's image illustrates the role of reputational entrepreneurs in shaping the national civic religion.

Harding did not enter the national consciousness until he became a presidential candidate in 1920. In death his reputation underwent such an enormous and rapid degradation that much of the complexity and nuance of Harding's life evaporated. This simplifying of his story—first to fit the log cabin myth that permeated the 1920 campaign and then to condemn—is one of the components separating public memory from history. While academic history tends to offer complex, multicausal explanations, public memory is often a narrative that teaches a lesson while flattening out the complexities of the past. In contrast to his earlier image, Harding's legacy, by virtue of the scandals associated with him, became that of empty Babbitry or personal tragedy.

Despite the popular tendency to discuss history as a force of nature or to personify it (as in *history's judgment*), various individuals and constituencies have constructed Harding's image and reputation. Harding himself started this process by consciously cultivating an image of a newspaper publisher and booster. Harding's early success came from his ability to promote his town. On the national stage, the Republican Party carefully crafted Harding's image during the election of 1920. Because of the use of the log cabin myth during his front porch campaign for the presidency, Harding's hometown of Marion, Ohio, plays a prominent role in the story of Harding's rise and the subsequent fall of his reputation. In 1920, Marion looked like an all-American town, characterized by nice homes, pleasant streets, and tidy schools. Today, as with many towns, Marion has tourist attractions and a place in history that helps define its identity. As a presidential hometown, Marion's stake in our national history is more substantial than that of most other small towns. The Harding name and image are common throughout the town. Each year thousands of people visit the Harding Home and the Harding Memorial. However, the Harding Memorial commemorates a man many Americans consider unworthy of commemoration or celebration. Those visiting Marion's most famous memorial might find irony in Alexander Hamilton's words that the American people "build lasting monuments of their gratitude." They might well ask, if Harding was so bad, how did he end up with such a grand monument?

*Judging Failure*

The ranking of presidents and their legacies can be reduced to a parlor game that has little bearing on either politics or scholarship.<sup>5</sup> However, at its best it can be an important exercise in evaluating policies and politics. Legacy debates are not only about the past but also about the present and the future, as well.<sup>6</sup> The process of ranking presidents is a subjective one, and while scholars debate the qualities necessary for greatness there is no similar set of criteria for failure. Part of the process of defining failure and success is the selective use of public memory and the success of commemoration. Presidents who followed Harding would not be held to the standard of his successes but rather measured against the excesses of his scandals.

The story of Harding's image demonstrates that the strands of history and memory intertwine. To understand public memory, we also need to understand how academic historians rank presidents. Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. conducted the first poll of experts, mostly historians, in 1948 and presented the findings in *Life* magazine. He repeated this poll in 1962, and the results appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*. In both polls, the top-rated presidents were Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Franklin Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Thomas Jefferson. Ulysses S. Grant and Warren G. Harding vied for worst president. Critics charged that the rankings were elitist, relying heavily on professors with ties to research and to Ivy League universities. Similarly, critics pointed out that a preponderance of the experts had ties to the Northeast and did not represent the nation as a whole. Given that the topic was the presidency, partisanship entered into the debate, and critics noted that the experts were overwhelmingly liberal Democrats. Despite these charges, the ranking of presidents was popular and was repeated periodically. Although the polls varied somewhat in the categories, questions, and experts consulted, later polls showed little variation from Schlesinger's initial findings.<sup>7</sup> Harding is in a special category in these polls; as Tim Blessing writes, "The Republican Dynasty of the 1920's has its own dynamic." He continues, "Harding's ranking is at the very bottom of all presidential rankings (37), Coolidge's is only marginally improved (31) and Hoover's (21), through quite a bit better than Coolidge's, still mires the entire Republican Dynasty among the bottom half of the presidents."<sup>8</sup>

Throughout this book you will find references to these polls and to the historical debate among academics regarding Harding and the presidency,

especially as that debate bleeds into the public image and political uses of Harding's memory and image. These rankings appeared in popular news magazines and as such could be considered a form of popular history. However, my primary focus is on the public memory of Harding and so encompasses much more than a handful of academic rankings. The totality of Harding's image comes through the use of his legacy in partisan debate, popular culture, literature (both good and bad), and, of course, acts of commemoration.

Another place where we find academic judgments regarding Harding as part of a public discourse is in textbooks. In a typical treatment, historian Alan Brinkley describes Harding as an "undistinguished senator from Ohio" who as president "recognized his own unfitness."<sup>9</sup> The distinguished historian Eric Foner summarizes the Harding administration:

Warren G. Harding took office as president in 1921 promising a return to "normalcy" after an era of Progressive reform and world war. Reflecting the prevailing get-rich-quick ethos, his administration quickly became one of the most corrupt in American history. A likeable, somewhat ineffectual individual—he called himself "a man of limited talents from a small town"—Harding seemed to have little regard for either governmental issues or the dignity of the presidency. Prohibition did not cause him to curb his appetite for liquor. He continued a previous illicit affair with a young Ohio woman, Nan Britton. The relationship did not become known until 1927, when Britton published *The President's Daughter*, about her child to whom Harding had left nothing in his will.

Although his cabinet included men of integrity and talent, like Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, Harding also surrounded himself with cronies who used their offices for private gain. Attorney General Harry Daugherty accepted payments not to prosecute accused criminals. The head of the Veterans' Bureau, Charles Forbes, received kickbacks from the sale of government supplies. The most notorious scandal involved Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall, who accepted nearly \$500,000 from private businessmen to whom he leased government oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming. Fall became the first cabinet member in history to be convicted of a felony.<sup>10</sup>

Foner emphasizes the corruption within the Harding administration, shows Harding's small-town background to be a liability, and catalogues the failures of Harding's weak but likeable character. Foner's characterization of Harding is well within the mainstream of both academic and popular history. Rather than becoming the subject of an inspirational story told on President's Day, Harding is best known for both a scandalous life and a failed administration.

In testimony to Harding's poor reputation, John Dean's popular biography of Harding begins, "Warren G. Harding is best known as America's worst president." Dean is not the first biographer, nor will he be the last, to write such a statement about Harding. Although Dean argues later in his book that Harding's poor reputation might not be justified, nevertheless this is the first thing he writes about our twenty-ninth president.<sup>11</sup> On the surface it might seem appropriate for a man famous for his involvement in the Watergate scandal to write about Harding. However, Dean claims that it was not a shared experience in scandal that inspired his curiosity but rather it was "while living in Harding's hometown of Marion, Ohio, that Harding first came to my attention." In Marion the young Dean was fascinated by the "old gossip that was still being whispered decades after the fact, picked up by young ears from adults and passed from generation to generation" (1-2). Dean went on to write a traditional biography, albeit a more positive one than is generally the case with Harding.

In September 1999, C-Span visited Marion as part of its series *American Presidents: Life Portraits*, which included visits to presidential sites throughout the country.<sup>12</sup> The programs featured tours of homes, gravesites, and memorials. In doing so, C-Span offered viewers public history that combined public reputations, academic analysis, and commemoration. In addition, curators and historians answered questions from both the host and the viewers. The C-Span visit to Marion points to the difficulties of commemorating Harding and to the role that his legacy plays in the national memory.

As the program begins, viewers see black-and-white silent-film footage of Harding with a narrator explaining that Harding was "Mr. Nice Guy," a man fond of people and dogs. However, the narrator continues, "some might say he liked people too much" because his "good-natured trust" was exploited by friends to scandalous ends. Next, viewers learn that Harding was a "reputed womanizer" who had at least two extramarital affairs, "one of which may have resulted in the birth of a daughter." Harding "poked fun" at his own image, once publicly repeating the words of his father: "Warren, it's a good thing you wasn't born a gal, because you would be in the family

way all the time. You can't say no." As a first impression, the program's opening minute conveys a definitive, but negative, image of Harding.

The harsh indictment of Harding's character is followed by a description of Harding's life in Ohio, complete with a picture of his modest childhood home, his early career as a newspaper publisher, and his marriage to divorcée Florence Kling. Harding entered politics when "his good looks and easy manner captured the attention" of Harry M. Daugherty, a well-connected political operative. Daugherty would oversee Harding's election to the U.S. Senate and the presidency. Once in the presidency, Harding admitted his limitations: "I don't know what to do or where to turn. Somewhere there must be a book that tells all about it. My God! But this is a hell of a place for a man like me to be in."

However, the narration goes on to explain that the public loved Harding and forgave his shortcomings. Florence and Warren Harding enjoyed greeting the public. Harding played golf and hosted twice-weekly poker games with a group dubbed the poker cabinet. The narration does not dwell on the love of the people but transitions to a different type of love. Harding liked stepping out with other women. Nan Britton "scandalized the nation" with her tell-all book in which she said Harding had fathered her child (notice that this is the second mention of the child). Awkwardly, the narration transitions to explain that Harding was not all bad, as we learn that he brought "a measure of honor" to the office, speaking on civil rights in Alabama, creating the Bureau of the Budget, and hosting an international arms talk. However, these accomplishments were "overshadowed by graft and fraud" as scandals emerged after his death at age fifty-seven, the most famous being Teapot Dome.

Following this less-than-flattering prologue the host introduces guests Robert Ferrell and Eugene Trani, both respected historians who have published books about Harding.<sup>13</sup> Their job this day would be to answer questions about the life and times of the twenty-ninth president, providing an intersection between Harding's academic and public reputations. Theirs was not an easy job. Many of the questions demonstrate that Harding's reputation involves both innuendo and fact. The first caller, from Pensacola, Florida, asks if Harding was murdered because of his philanthropy. The second caller asks the historians about the mysteries of Harding's death. The host then enters with questions about the Harding Home and the election of 1920. Later callers mention a manuscript by Gaston Means (who alleged that Florence murdered Warren Harding) and ask about Harding being a Negro. Another asks if Harding could be compared

to President Bill Clinton (this in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal) and if it is possible that Clinton will replace Harding as the worst president in the ranking polls. Another viewer asks about Harding's African American ancestry. As Ferrell and Trani debate the validity of the presidential polls and Harding's poor ranking and the callers ask questions ranging from the substantial to the trivial, the substance of Harding's place in our national memory emerges.

There is no significant difference between Harding's popular reputation and his reputation in academia. Warren G. Harding's legacy has been dominated by scandals but there has been little explanation as to why Harding is regularly considered the worst president, other than an assumption that the scandals alone are proof enough. Francis Russell's *Shadow of Blooming Grove* (1968) is the reigning interpretation of Harding. Russell points out that the subject of his major biography was "neither a fool nor a tool, but an astute and able Ohio politician (not the highest breed of that animal) who knew how to get what he wanted." Even so, Russell explains, by "a twist or two of fate Harding has come to be regarded right, left, and center as the worst President this country has ever had." Russell proceeds with some familiar questions regarding Harding's private life, questions that drive his biography: "Was Harding a mulatto? Did he have a child by his mistress? Was he murdered? What were the papers his wife so hastily burned after his death?" Significantly, Russell does not ask about Teapot Dome, the Veterans' Bureau, or the Justice Department. Russell is defensive about having written a biography of Harding, arguing that he was the "most neglected" of presidents, but that even so he "deserves a biography, not so much for himself—though in many ways his life was more interesting than those of more notable Presidents—but because he came at a dividing point in history."<sup>14</sup>

Like so many students of Harding, Russell leaves it to the reader to implicitly understand what he will not explicitly write. Russell, like others, emphasizes the parochial nature of Harding's small-town background. Note, for instance, Russell's disputing of Harding as a fool and a tool. Rather than saying Harding was his own man, he delivers the backhanded compliment that Harding was an Ohio politician. Harding was not an incompetent, but he was an Ohio politician. This is a common theme in the various pronouncements on Harding and reflects the declining respect held for civic boosters and midwestern small towns. Historians of the Midwest point to the Progressive Era as the height of national respect for midwestern culture. After World War I, however, the Midwest's reputation

began to decline.<sup>15</sup> Harding was a spokesperson for the small-town heartland. To understand Harding's politics, we need to return to Marion. His was the ideology of a civic booster. The economic philosophy of civic boosters such as Harding tended to be more Hamiltonian than Jeffersonian. Although conservative, Harding was not a laissez-faire conservative. Harding's ideology has often been dismissed as inconsistent or incomprehensible, but his was the booster's impulse to foster cooperation between businesses and government for the greater good. Harding the booster saw a role for government in supporting business and promoting cooperation between factions, even as he praised the virtues of limited government.

One of the few academic defenses of Harding is Robert Ferrell's *Strange Deaths of President Harding*. Ferrell writes that Harding's "fate does not seem fair," noting that in every presidential ranking "Harding has been in the failure category, and not only there but at the bottom." To Ferrell, such a judgment is wrong: "Should he not stand at least above the three or four other holders of the presidency whom even the slightest student of the presidents can name as failures?"<sup>16</sup> Ferrell argues that Harding's poor reputation is undeserved because most of the Harding scandals do not stand up to close scrutiny. Ferrell claims that Harding's reputation was destroyed by attacks from people more interested in cash than in accuracy. Yet Ferrell's question is pertinent to this study. How did Harding beat out Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, or U. S. Grant for the dubious honor of worst president? The answer is, generally speaking, the combination of the political scandals, such as Teapot Dome, that damaged the reputation of the administration and the personal scandals that damaged the reputation of Harding's character. As many have noted, Harding was hardly alone as a president who sinned or had political scandals. Russell notes in his introduction that Franklin Roosevelt died with his mistress and Harry Truman also had his scandals.<sup>17</sup>

While Ferrell works to debunk many of the falsehoods that permeate Harding's biography, sociologist Gary Alan Fine, in *Difficult Reputations*, examines Harding's place in our collective memory. Although starting from a different place, Fine also points to the work of "reputational entrepreneurs" who destroyed Harding's reputation because they disagreed with his politics or because they were interested in turning a profit. Their work was made easier because it coincided with the decision of the Republican Party to abandon Harding. Furthermore, Fine offers alternative, positive, interpretations of Harding's presidency, including Harding as the first black president and Harding as a politician who ushered in an age of conservative

rule. Still, his treatment is brief: one chapter on Harding in a broader treatment of individuals with bad reputations. Overall, Fine's analysis suffers from the same lack of research in primary documents that has plagued so much of the scholarship on Harding.<sup>18</sup>

President Warren G. Harding, with all the discussion of his failures and his horrible reputation, resonates with those who wish to understand the American experience. As we have seen, Harding tops the list of those presidents considered failures. Harding's reputation rests not only on the troubles in his administration and his life but also on the work of those who have used or attacked Harding's reputation. What is the significance of Harding's reputation? First, we must realize that Harding's legacy is directly related to his image and reputation during the presidential election of 1920. Second, Harding's legacy and reputation are linked to his hometown. Third, Harding has a continued significance in our national public memory as an icon of failure.

### *Civic Religion*

The questions that help form Warren Harding's legacy come back to a central issue. Harding lived the log cabin myth, so his life should have neatly fit into our national narrative of progress, democracy, and opportunity. Contradictorily, Harding is significant not only because he lived the American dream but also because he failed to achieve the amorphous goal of presidential greatness.<sup>19</sup> The examination of this tension is central to this study.

Harding's reputation as our worst president makes him an ideal candidate to study public memory as it relates to community and to national identity. What has Harding's legacy meant in our national memory? The commemoration of Harding speaks to the American civil religion. As David Blight defines it, public memory consists of the "ways in which groups, peoples, or nations remember, how they construct versions of the past and employ them for self-understanding and to win power and place in an ever-changing present."<sup>20</sup> Blight's observation that memory "is often treated as a sacred set of potentially absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community" is applicable to the commemoration of the presidency and Harding. Memory, he continues, "often coalesces in objects, sacred sites, and monuments; history seeks to understand contexts and the complexity of cause and effect" (2). Building on the work of sociologists, Benjamin Hufbauer identifies four elements to the American civil religion, elements similar to Blight's definition of public memory: saints,

sacred places, sacred objects, and ritual practices. The present study examines the efforts to turn the relics and places important to Harding into something sacred to our national civic religion.

Harding's initial commemoration, following his death in 1923, came at a time of transformation in the way in which presidents were remembered. The dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922 by President Harding marks the beginnings of that transition: the "presidential monuments of the past—the obelisks and classical temples built by and for posterity—have largely been replaced by presidential libraries built outside Washington, D.C."<sup>21</sup> Harding was the last president for whom a classical temple was built in his hometown. Memory and myth are not just about the dead. The nature of politics and usefulness of the civic religion to politicians gives it vibrancy for the living.

### *The Vernacular Presidency*

The log cabin myth, by its very nature, emphasizes place. The log cabin, of course, denotes a humble birth, but it also symbolizes social origins, being from a place that is more fundamentally American because it is neither urban, sophisticated, nor a seat of power. With its origins in the nineteenth century, the log cabin myth is decidedly Jacksonian in its emphasis on the common and humble. People built log cabins on frontiers and farms. As we saw with Eric Foner and C-Span, most commentators disparage Harding's small-town background; they certainly do not grant Marion, Ohio, the status of a sacred place or repository of relics important to our nation.<sup>22</sup> This was not always the case. In his 1923 hagiography of Harding, Willis Fletcher Johnson, a professor at New York University, emphasizes community and the log cabin myth: "Neighbor, I want to be helpful [was the] keynote of President Harding's life, and when the news of his sudden death in San Francisco was flashed across the country on the night of August 2, 1923, the people felt that they had not only lost a President but a great-hearted neighbor." All Americans, he writes, paid tribute to "one of the most loveable figures in American history."<sup>23</sup> Johnson's account of this man born on a "typical farm homestead" invokes the log cabin myth. "Deep rooted in American soil and fast fixed in the pioneer traditions of the new world was the family whose name Warren G. Harding brought to the highest eminence when it came to adorn the door-plate of the White House" (15–17). As a boy and a young man, Warren Harding worked in the fields and on the railroads. As is typical of presidential biographers, Johnson sees

in Harding's labors both a common experience and a potential for greatness: Harding "learned to fell trees and to split rails, even as Abraham Lincoln had learned before him and thousands of other American lads" (22).<sup>24</sup> In 1923, before the scandalous headlines Johnson's commemorative account struck familiar, even clichéd, notes.

Harding's reputation as a national figure always connected him to Marion. This is common enough, as birthplaces and homes of presidents are routinely celebrated for their historic significance. However, we rarely speak of the inverse, where they are not celebrated but denigrated. Marion's reputation rose and fell with Harding's reputation, especially because he was viewed as a representative of small-town America. Because public memory lacks chronological context but is often rich in local and regional context, place became increasingly important as Harding's legacy developed. Although Harding and those who shaped his memory could not have been clearer or more explicit in connecting Harding to his hometown, scholars have tended to dismiss Marion and Harding's identification with it without significant analysis. In doing so, scholars have missed the importance of the booster ideology in understanding Harding.

As a newspaper publisher, Harding was beyond all else a civic booster, a role that infused his political philosophy, and during the election of 1920, Harding ran as a civic booster. At the heart of the booster ethos was the belief in the virtue of a harmonious community, the importance of prosperity and progress, and the leadership of solid and moral businessmen. In 1920 Harding pointed to what was attractive, even romantic, about small towns as idealized villages; following his death the scandals confirmed the belief of those who thought of small towns as backward and parochial. In this sense Harding was a Babbitt. Intellectuals and journalists rejected Harding as being as empty as the Sinclair Lewis character. However, there is no reason to believe that the average American shared the intellectuals' contempt for the small-town booster. Similarly, Americans embraced Calvin Coolidge, the New England puritan complete with a farm, as their new icon of simplicity, one who offered a contrast to the moral ambiguity of modernity. Further, the negative attitude toward such boosters helps explain why Harding gets little credit for his political victory.

Harding's booster ethos stood in contrast to the sophisticated internationalism and intellectualism of Harding's predecessor, Woodrow Wilson. Progressive writers who favored the policies of Woodrow Wilson have had a great influence on the way we remember Harding. Given Harding's defeat of James Cox (who carried the banner of Wilson and the League of

Nations) in 1920 and his subsequent popularity, Wilson's supporters consoled themselves by attacking Harding. Those who attacked Harding also had to attack the results of the election of 1920 and so their attacks assumed an undemocratic flavor.<sup>25</sup> While this is significant, scholars have overemphasized the Progressive attack. We should ask how the partisan attack on Harding's legacy differed radically from any other president. Surely it is to be expected that partisan opponents will attack the reputation of an opposition leader. To note that Wilsonian Progressives disliked Harding is not particularly insightful. Like that of any other president, Harding's legacy became a part of partisan politics. This is readily apparent in the role of intellectuals and politicians in shaping Harding's legacy. But that is not all there is to the story. Memory is not shaped exclusively by intellectuals.

While many question the appropriateness of honoring Harding as a president, Marion and the Harding Memorial are places where the local speaks to the national historical narrative.<sup>26</sup> With Harding there was a contest, rather lopsided, between the local and the national, between the need to celebrate a fallen president and the need to condemn corruption. The debate was, almost literally, over whether Marion should become sacred ground in our national secular civic religion, one of the mystic chords of memory that bind us together, to paraphrase Lincoln. As the scandals emerged, most prominent Republicans distanced themselves from Harding's reputation and the official memory became that of tragic failure. The vernacular memory also shifted. At first, Harding's popularity helped push the national leaders toward honoring Harding, but as Harding became an embarrassment, it was in Marion that the vernacular asserted Harding's greatness against the prevailing national memory. In the end, not only did Marion contribute to the log cabin myth, but some of the most controversial and embarrassing aspects of Harding's reputation were linked to the local memory.

### *Whispers*

The whispers about Harding that John Dean described hearing as a young man growing up in Marion can still be heard there. Most of these rumors have made their way unquestioned into the national discourse. However, Harding's reputation was contested within his hometown. At one point during the C-Span visit, the host asks Melinda Gilpin, director and curator of the Harding Home, how the people of Marion felt about Harding. Gilpin says that Harding was a great civic leader and that the people of Marion

tried to strike a balance.<sup>27</sup> In Marion one might expect a certain amount of over-the-top boosteristic pride. However, Marion residents held a variety of opinions. One could envision a resident insisting, “Don’t believe those stories, Harding was a great man!” Alternately, one could imagine tired, embarrassed Marionites pleading with journalists to just move on and forget about the scandal-plagued Harding and his mistresses and cronies. A third alternative (to put these into simple categories) would be the community leader interested in Harding as part of that holy grail of town revitalization, historic tourism. Finally, there would be those who just do not care. Variations of all these categories coexist in Marion. As we saw with the questions C-Span viewers asked, the questions the public asks about Harding reveal the ongoing fascination with his private life and the extent to which the Harding scandals were part fact and part myth. Harding might not have been a great president, but he was interesting.

### *Harding in Context*

Given Harding’s prominence and the firm judgment of history as to his failure, it is amazing how much ambiguity exists about his life. As can be seen on C-Span, it is hard to give definitive answers to many of the questions about Harding’s life. This is because of a lack of historical documentation. Ironically, many of the extant documents that are easily available are of dubious value. Did Harding have an affair with Nan Britton? Maybe, but she left no direct proof. Did Harding have an affair with Carrie Phillips? Yes, but their letters are sealed. Why did First Lady Florence Harding destroy a large portion of the presidential papers? We are not certain, but she said it was to protect Warren’s memory. Did Florence murder her husband? No, but this is widely believed, and Harding’s death did leave some mysteries. Was Harding black? Probably not, but he would not deny it.

We are on firmer ground when it comes to the political scandals. There can be no doubt of the corruption in the Harding administration. Albert Fall and Charles Forbes did go to prison for their activities at the Department of the Interior and the Veterans’ Bureau, respectively. Attorney General Harry Daugherty was indicted and stood trial for corruption. The Harding scandals set the benchmark for corruption until surpassed by Watergate a half century later.

What sets the Harding scandals apart from other scandals? Why is it, as Francis Russell asks in his influential account that the scandals of other administrations have faded into history while Harding’s persist?<sup>28</sup> Russell is

correct in his supposition that the Harding scandals have outlived other scandals, but he leaves his question unexplored except for emphasizing those personal scandals of character that now seem iconic and timeless. The Harding scandals have transcended academic debates to become part of our national memory. Indeed, context is one of the crucial differences between memory and history. Public memory loses context as it becomes commemoration and mythology, while history is all about context. Harding's scandals reflected the tensions and the contradictions of the 1920s, but in our public memory of Harding that context often remains incomplete. The personal scandals can live on as gossip and so Harding's reputation has been remarkably resistant to change. Indeed, Russell demonstrates a proclivity to speculate about Harding's private life, from the state of his marriage to his race.

I hope to restore a historical context to Harding and in so doing explore the meaning of the scandals. In writing about leaders, especially great men, historians are moving toward a more complete understanding of political ages and their leaders. No longer do historians see the relationship between leader and context as a one-way street, where a great man shaped an entire age; instead they see it as a two-way street where the age shaped the man and vice versa. There is emerging a blending of cultural, social, and political history through the study of image and public memory.<sup>29</sup> While Harding was the first Republican elected during the Republican Era, the 1920s were not the Age of Harding in the sense that he was not the dominating political figure. However, the decade was the Age of Harding in the sense that Americans saw in Harding something familiar and understood Harding's life as part and parcel of the times. Indeed, according to one scholar of the presidency, the "most significant variable that influences a president's ranking is date of service, in that the period in which a president serves is most likely to shape retrospective evaluations of the presidency."<sup>30</sup> Harding's failures are often used as examples of the perceived shortcomings of the period.

According to political scientist Stephen Skowronek, presidents such as John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Herbert Hoover, and Jimmy Carter have been "singled out as political incompetents" in part because they came to symbolize the nation's ailments and "systemic political failures." Yet despite Harding's consistently poor ratings, Skowronek does not mention Harding.<sup>31</sup> If the 1920s was the decade of paradox, then Harding was our president of paradox. Harding's private life presents a metaphor for the collapse of Victorian morality. Harding's

political career was a celebration of small-town America even as small-town America was overshadowed by the growth and dominance of large cities. Harding won the presidency the same year that the census announced that the United States was an urban nation. As Americans moved past their longing for a mythical simplicity, Harding's midwestern small-town image became a liability to his legacy.

As president, Harding served alcohol in the White House while enforcing Prohibition, a near perfect reflection of America's ambivalence toward the Prohibition experiment. He split the difference in what would later be called the urban-rural conflict by proudly being a small-town booster. He was a writer who had a reputation for garbled grammar and unclear sentences, although he was a newspaperman and a publisher who became a celebrity politician in part because he got along so well with the press. His political career merged politics and show business and he helped blur the lines between news, politics, and entertainment. Warren G. Harding enjoyed the emerging sexual revolution of the 1920s but took no notice of its social and political ramifications. For him, the Victorian double standard evolved into the sexual revolution with little reflection. The two women rumored to be Harding's extramarital sexual partners were Carrie Phillips, a dissatisfied small-town wife who longed for a more sophisticated life, and Nan Britton, a flapper. Both were from Marion. Britton achieved celebrity status with her claim to have been the president's mistress despite her inability to produce tangible evidence; the revelations of Harding's affair with Carrie Phillips brought her belated fame during the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Contrary to the public's general impression of his failure, Harding did accomplish some worthwhile goals. One of the difficulties with remembering them, however, is that they run counter to the narrative of Harding as a failure. Public memory often takes the form of stories lacking in complexity and context. Furthermore, Harding's accomplishments do not neatly fit into contemporary notions of what is liberal and what is conservative. Herbert Hoover wrote that Harding was a "kind of a dual personality"; he had a "real quality in geniality, in good will and in ability for pleasing address." Although Harding lacked the intellect or experience to be president, Hoover wrote, he "was neither a 'reactionary' nor a 'radical.'" Harding, according to Hoover, pursued solid policies for the good of the people.<sup>32</sup> Following Hoover's line of reasoning, Harding seems more progressive on women's issues than other presidents of the age with his refusal to fire women from government positions when they married and his sign-

ing of the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act, which provided funding to states to subsidize prenatal and child health clinics and medical care for pregnant women and new mothers. Again, such policies seem confusing from a president who is commonly depicted as a henpecked husband and womanizer. Harding also appointed prominent Progressive and internationalist Republicans to the cabinet, including Hoover and Charles Evans Hughes. More predictably, given his conservative reputation, Harding moved with the nativist climate of the times, signing the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 (restricting immigration for any nationality to 3 percent of its number living in the United States in 1910). He also supported the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 (creating the Bureau of the Budget), which brought businesslike efficiency to the federal government. He satisfied conservatives by appointing William Howard Taft as chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Harding's private scandals have lived on in part because they are easier to understand than are the scandals of his administration. The private scandals exhibit no complexities of leases, contracts, and national security. We know that Harding liked to eat, drink, smoke, and indulge himself. While we may argue about the specifics, these broad parameters are hard to dispute and, in the arena of public memory, perception can be as important as reality.

### *Harding as Icon*

Much of this book deals with these efforts to create, control, and use Harding's reputation and the scandals that define his place in our national memory. As an American icon, Harding stands for what it means to fail as a president. Is this a fair assessment of Harding? No, it is not. Harding was not a good president and this book does not attempt to revise his reputation so that his place in the presidential pecking order will rise to the top ranks. Neither is it an attempt to discount the importance of the scandals at the Interior Department, Justice Department, and Veterans' Bureau. These scandals, however, are not the dominant part of Harding's narrative as a failure. Harding was not the worst president to ever occupy the White House. His was a short administration with successes and failures. Harding is our worst president not because of Teapot Dome but because he was judged as an example of what happens when a man falls short of the American myth of governance by the virtuous common man. Harding is seen as a failure because he personified the worst aspects of a place and a time.<sup>33</sup>

As Blessing writes, presidential success as partisan leaders rarely figures into presidential rankings to the extent that it is an “important function of the presidency.” He also argues that through “partisanship presidents create the paradigms—the myths—by which our political psychology is organized.”<sup>34</sup>

The various aspects of the public’s memory of Harding do not necessarily add up to a cohesive picture of the man. As with so many other presidential myths, from Washington’s cherry tree chopping to Lincoln’s rail splitting, the Harding scandals are grounded in reality but also should be taken with a grain of salt. A central point of my argument is that historical accuracy has not always been important to our assessment of Harding. As Cornog has written, in the “world of narrative, the boundaries of fact and fiction are permeable, and in politics the intermingling of fact and fiction is a common process.”<sup>35</sup> The shaping of Harding’s memory was often done out of political expediency, opportunism, or sloppiness. Ironically, Harding’s friends often inflicted the most damage to his reputation. Harding’s story also raises questions about sources and evidence, such as, how is history created in the absence of documentation? What if the remaining evidence has been heavily censored? The lack of information regarding Harding left room for the exploitation of the historical Harding. Depending on which source you consult, you could conclude either that Harding was our first black president or that he was the president who joined the Ku Klux Klan in a White House ceremony. To top things off, it was rumored that Florence was secretly Jewish. These are some of the Harding scandals that include a bizarre mixture of fact and fiction.

The literature on Harding is guided by the answers to unwritten questions. Much of the debate over Harding revolves around the issue of guilt. Was Harding an essentially naive and trusting man who was duped by his friends? Did Harding participate in the corruption of his political associates? These questions cannot be fully answered. Given the absence of evidence, most scholars and journalists have assumed that Harding played the patsy in a ring of corruption.

Most scholars and journalists have questioned Harding’s intelligence and ability, maligning him as a commoner whose story provides proof that in America we should not let just anybody grow up to be president. Harding’s commonness and popularity became proof of his lack of greatness. Rather than being a great man with a common touch, in death Harding has been condemned as a fluke of history, a man of the masses who was mistakenly elevated to prominence by the work of others. Every president seems to have at least one figure who is reputed to be a kingmaker. These

are familiar presidential tropes. As we shall see in a later chapter, biographers, novelists, pundits, and scandalmongers have not hesitated to twist these tropes for self-interest or to make a point about the nature of America. Harry Daugherty, in his memoir, claimed the title of kingmaker. His story of having discovered Harding is often repeated as part of the inverted logic of the log cabin myth as it applies to Harding. Nan Britton's story is disputed among scholars but is an iconic scandal for the presidency, ranking with Marilyn Monroe's rendition of "Happy Birthday" to John Kennedy as an eyebrow-raising moment in American history.

As we begin the twenty-first century, Warren Harding continues to rank as our worst president. This is a subjective standard. When I tell people I am writing on Harding, I have to explain a little about him. Invariably, someone will say that Harding will not be considered the worst president after the current president leaves office (as we saw with the C-Span caller's question about Clinton).<sup>36</sup> This reflects the partisan inclination of the person and a fair amount of cynicism, but it is equally clear that this is not going to happen. Reactions to my work on Harding are similar to the reactions that Annette Gordon-Reed describes in response to her significant book on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: "Not one of them launched into a discussion of the Kentucky Resolutions or the Louisiana Purchase. Almost instantly each of my friends asked, 'What's the story with Sally Hemings?' or 'Wasn't there something about him and a slave woman?' or 'Didn't he have mistress named Sally Hemings?'" While Harding's stature is nowhere near that of Jefferson, there is the same danger that "the American obsession with the personal lives of great figures will exceed their awareness of the contributions of those figures."<sup>37</sup> People, scholars and nonscholars alike, obsess about Harding's private life and, unlike Thomas Jefferson, the questions about his private life have come to dominate his legacy. People do not launch into a discussion of the Washington conference on naval disarmament, Prohibition, the Bureau of the Budget, or taxes when the topic of Harding as president comes up. It is now a custom, part of our collective historical experience, that Warren Harding is our worst president.