



Governing by the Founder's Constitution: The Presidency of Warren G. Harding

By John Hendrickson

President Warren G. Harding, who served as the nation's 29th President, is usually remembered for the scandals of his administration, rather than his constitutionally-defined and limited government policies that he pursued. Historians normally do not give much attention to the Harding era, because it is considered to be the beginning of a decade of retrenchment of progressivism in American politics. Harding started a political era in 1921 that is commonly referred to as "Normalcy." Harding's call for a "return to normalcy" signaled a different policy direction compared to Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal or Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom. Normalcy was a charge to return toward constitutional government.

By 1921 the nation had clearly grown tired of progressive governmental activism and Wilsonian idealism both at home and abroad. Upon taking the oath of office, Harding demonstrated that his presidency would be a traditional presidency utilizing a strong cabinet rather than governing as a unitary executive like Wilson. Harding also inherited an economic recession, which was an economic aftershock from World War I.

The economic recession of 1920-1922 is argued to be "by far the most important business cycle development of the first three decades of the twentieth century."¹ The economic downturn resulted in double-digit unemployment: increasing from 11.7 percent to as high as 15 percent.² In addition to high unemployment, tax rates had increased, largely because of World War I, and reached as high as 77 percent.³

In response to these economic challenges the Harding Administration, led by Harding himself and Andrew Mellon, Secretary of Treasury, called for reform in taxes, budget and spending, and tariffs. Harding's approach to solving the economic recession of the early 1920s was to reduce the tax burden and reduce government spending. "Let us call to all the people for thrift and economy, for denial and sacrifice, if need be, for a nation-wide drive against extravagance....,"⁴ stated Harding.

The result was a quick economic recovery that was based on constitutionally limited government. In addition, Harding brought reform to immigration policy, tariff policy, and the federal budget process. Harding rejected the idea of progressive governmental reforms, such as Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal. As Harding stated, "We must uproot from our national government the yearning to undertake enterprises and experiments which were never intended as the work of our government..."⁵

President Harding demonstrated decisive leadership by opposing the Veteran's Bonus Bill. Veterans of World War I, supported by the American Legion and both political parties, pushed for bonus legislation to support veterans who served in the Great War. Harding, who sympathized with the veterans and honored their service, realized that such an entitlement at this time would break the budget, and he

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believed that the larger economic reforms that he had implemented in his Normalcy program would better serve the veterans than the bonus. The result was a confrontation between Harding and Congress. The President prevailed by demonstrating leadership while defending constitutional principle and sound policy versus caving in to public opinion.

Warren G. Harding may not have had the philosophical political understanding of Calvin Coolidge or Herbert Hoover, but he did recognize the importance of governing by the Constitution. Harding rejected the progressive view of the "Living" Constitution. Instead he believed in the principle of equality of opportunity, an idea that was soundly identified by Abraham Lincoln. Harding's presidency was founded on governing and advocating policies based upon constitutional government, something that should be remembered more often in presidential history.

Harding believed that every citizen had a responsibility to be a good steward of an American system that was created and handed down to us by the Founding Fathers. As Harding stated, "We have the duty to preserve the inherited covenant of the fathers; we have the obligation to hand on to succeeding generations the very republic which we inherited."⁶ For Harding the Constitution was the "very base of all Americanism" and the "ark of the covenant of American liberty."⁷

In his Farewell Address, President George Washington urged fidelity to the Constitution. Harding echoed Washington and asked an additional question to the nation, which, in light of the current political atmosphere, must be asked today: "I wonder what the great Washington would utter in warning, in his passionate love of the republic and his deep concern about the future welfare, if he could know the drift of today?"⁸ Harding's question is not only appropriate, but should be considered in great detail as the nation calls for a second New Deal while it continues to drift further away from the Constitution toward European-style socialism.

Patrick J. Buchanan in a recent column wrote: "What do conservatives, few of whom have opposed the Obama plans and fewer of whom have called for the repeal of Bush's big-spending social programs, believe is the alternative approach to ending the recession and creating a sustainable economy?"⁹ The approach should be constitutional and the Harding-Mellon approach to the recession of 1920-1922 should serve as the model.

Public Interest Institute's Policy Study, "Governing by the Founder's Constitution: The Presidency of Warren G. Harding," can be viewed at www.limitedgovernment.org.

Endnotes

¹Richard Vedder and Lowell Gallaway, *Out of Work: Unemployment and Government in Twentieth-Century America*, Holmes & Meier, New York, 1993, p. 61.

²Ibid.

³U.S. Department of the Treasury, Fact Sheets: Taxes, History of the U.S. Tax System, U.S. Department of the Treasury, Washington, D.C., <<http://www.treasury.gov/education/fact-sheets/taxes/ustax.shtml>> (December 10, 2008).

⁴Warren G. Harding, "Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination," June 12, 1920, The American Presidency Project, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>> (December 10, 2008).

⁵Warren G. Harding III (ed.), *Our Common Country: Mutual Good Will in America*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri, 2003, p. 17.

⁶Frederick E. Schortemeier (ed.), "Rededicating America: Life and Speeches of Warren G. Harding", The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1920, p. 139.

⁷Ibid., p. 104.

⁸Ibid., pp. 140-141.

⁹Patrick J. Buchanan, "In Earmarks Lies Salvation"? December 8, 2008, <<http://www.buchanan.org>> (December 10, 2008).

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