

America's Horniest President

Warren G. Harding might have been a useless leader, but he sure could craft a sex scandal.

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As a young Ohio teenager, Nan Britton became infatuated with the state's married Republican candidate for Senate, Warren G. Harding. Passing by his house one day, she told Harding—then nearing his 50s—that she had decorated her room with his campaign posters. Surely, the future president helpfully told her while his wife looked on in stony silence, she would like to have a real photograph to go with the poster collection. Historians have said that during the campaign, Harding would take Britton into his office and sit her on his lap. That was before he took her virginity in a hotel room and later brought her to the White House for regular rendezvous. “The fact that I was so ignorant seemed to add to his cherishment of me for some reason,” Britton [later recalled](#).

Of course, sex has always been part of the presidency, both because presidents are human males (so far) and because power has its attractions. The year before he died, George Washington [wrote to](#) his longtime love Sally Fairfax that nothing could “eradicate from my mind the recollection of those happy moments, the happiest in my life, which I have enjoyed in your company.” And then there were the more public dalliances of Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton, of course.

But Warren G. Harding is really in a category of his own. No other philandering chief executive had the 29th president's way with words (he termed the vagina of one of his mistresses “Mrs. Pouterson”) or his sense of scenery (he and Nan regularly had sex in a White House closet). And, as was underscored this week, when [news broke](#) that Harding did in fact father a child with Britton as she had claimed, no other was quite as reckless with his libido.

Historians have long disliked Harding for reasons other than his sexcapades. He presided over an administration unprecedented in its corruption, he rolled back Progressive-era reforms and he enacted racist immigration laws. In the rankings academics conduct every few years, Harding has [averaged out](#) as the worst president in American history. “After his death,” wrote [a biographer](#), “his reputation plummeted so quickly that only with the greatest reluctance could a Republican successor be persuaded to dedicate his tomb.”

But all that is aside from the difficulties he got into when he had trouble controlling “Jerry,” as he was wont to call his penis.

Last year the Library of Congress released a batch of letters Harding wrote to his longtime mistress, Carrie Fulton Phillips. The correspondence [revealed](#) that he and the Republican National Committee paid the woman \$5,000 per month to stay silent about their affair while he was president. The letters weren't mere declarations of love gone wrong—they were, as John

Oliver memorably [put it](#), “smutty f**k notes.” They contained such poetic gems as. “I love your poise/Of perfect thighs/When they hold me in paradise ... /I love the rose/Your garden grows/Love seashell pink/That over it glows.” Phillips repeatedly admonished Harding for his lewd talk, but he couldn’t help himself: “I like to dream in loose, flowing garb, because I can dream more intently. And I did—to alarming release. I called your name aloud thrice, begging you to come,” he wrote the lady.

There was much more: “Jerry came and will not go, says he loves you, that you are the only, only love worthwhile in all this world, and I must tell you so and a score or more of other fond things he suggests, but I spare you. You must not be annoyed. He is so utterly devoted that he only exists to give you all.”

Phillips was a worldly woman—she hung the threat of exposure over Harding’s head to great profit, receiving from the RNC a gift somewhere between \$20,000 and \$25,000 (more than \$297,000 today), in addition to her monthly hush money.

Britton was more innocent. In a book she wrote in 1927, a few years after Harding’s death—the first tell-all of presidential sex—she described losing her virginity to then-Senator Harding when she was 20 and he was over 50 in a New York hotel. “I remember so well I wore a pink linen dress which was rather short and enhanced the little-girl look,” Britton later wrote. Harding liked that sort of thing. He registered in the hotel under a false name, and he and Britton then rode in silence in the elevator to a room.

According to Britton’s book, the New York Police Vice Squad burst down the door soon after their lovemaking concluded, knowing the affair was illicit. The cops began to arrest the couple, despite Harding’s entreaty to “Let this poor little girl go!” It wasn’t until they realized they had stumbled upon *the* Warren Harding that they apologized. Britton recalled: “Upon seeing that name they became calm immediately. Not only calm but strangely respectful, withdrawing very soon. We completed our dressing.” The perks of being a U.S. Senator have always been considerable.

The tryst between Harding and Britton lasted six years, into Harding’s presidency. In her book Britton described the classy locations Harding secured for their encounters, from Harding’s Senate office couch (where Britton said the baby was conceived) to one particularly romantic spot in the White House: “This was a closet in the anteroom, evidently a place for hats and coats. ... We repaired there many times in the course of my visits to the White House, and in the darkness of a space no more than five feet square the President and his adoring sweetheart made love.” A [trusted](#) Secret Service agent would knock on the door to let them know when Harding’s wife, Florence, was approaching.

But once Harding died, Britton found herself without financial support for the baby, and so she decided to write a book about her affair with the president. For the most part, no one believed her tales—or that the child was Harding’s—and Britton was denounced as a deranged pervert, a gold-digging liar, a slut and worse. One congressman introduced a bill into the House attempting to ban the sale of the book, stating that it was “a blast from Hell.” Even recent biographers have portrayed her as a money-hungry succubus. Wrote John Dean in [his book](#) on Harding: “Britton’s

sense of timing to cash in could not have been better ... all that her papers show is a lifetime fixation with Harding and her unending effort to have him as the father of her child.”

Harding knew better, though. He secretly [made child support payments](#) hand delivered by the Secret Service for the daughter he never met until he died in 1923. Britton was [in love](#) with Harding “until the day she died” in 1991, her grandson told the *New York Times*.

However “special” those closet assignations might have been though, Britton was just one of many women that Harding bedded throughout his career. “ *It’s a good thing I’m not a woman. I would always be pregnant. I can’t say no,*” he [told reporters](#) when he was president. An affidavit [exists](#) saying Harding had an affair with his Senate staff secretary. And Harding [may have](#) fathered another daughter, Marion Louise Hodder, with one of his wife Florence’s childhood friends. But DNA evidence has yet to confirm that one.

There is one woman he didn’t bed, however: his *wife Florence, about whom he said,* “there isn’t one iota of affection in my home relationship. ... It is merely existence, necessary for appearance’s sake.”

But if Harding was really so worried about appearances, he didn’t do very well. The only historical ranking he’ll ever top is the one about how much hush money presidents paid their mistresses. But hey, say what you will, because the man really did know how to pick a good nickname. Long after the Teapot Dome Scandal has faded from the American consciousness, “Jerry” is still very much a part of it.