A Companion to Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover

Katherine A.S. Sibley

The three presidents of the Republican era of 1921–1933—Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover—have frequently been caricatured, defamed, or dismissed in popular history. This Companion provides a historiographical approach to these administrations and the country they governed. Top experts on this era provide 27 essays that fully demonstrate how scholars have addressed and debated the political, economic, diplomatic, cultural, ethnic, and social history of this period, and how historians have wrestled with the controversial figures and issues of this age. The text includes chapters on popular culture, technology, eugenics, nativism, and the biographical treatment of the presidents and first ladies of the era.

Katherine A.S. Sibley

Katherine A.S. Sibley is Professor of History at Saint Joseph’s University, USA. She is the author of four books, most recently First Lady Florence Harding: Behind the Tragedy and Controversy (2009) and Red Spies in America: Stolen Secrets and the Dawn of the Cold War (2004). Professor Sibley is also editing a forthcoming Companion on first ladies, and serves on the editorial board of American Communist History as well as on the Historical Advisory Committee for the US State Department.

“Anyone interested in the Harding-Coolidge-Hoover era will find this volume an indispensable resource. Impressively thorough, and panoramic in scope, it is a model of historiographical scholarship.”

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K.A.S.S.
Los Gatos, California
Introduction

Katherine A.S. Sibley

This volume explores the dynamic, dramatic, often divisive, and at times debilitating era of three presidents, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. Situated in the deep valleys cast by the twin peaks of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, these three men and their eras have often been cast in shadow. For much of the twentieth century, historians caricatured or dismissed their lives and legacies, when they remembered them at all. The era’s three presidents and even their first ladies faced intense vilification; we need only look at the way Warren G. Harding and his wife, Florence, have been besmirched by rumors and outright fabrications about his affairs, his boozing bacchanals with his “Ohio gang” of political cronies, and her shrewish and murderous inclinations.

Much of this “evidence” came from shady scribes such as Gaston Means (1930) or gossips like Francis B. Russell (1968). Yet a troika of prominent and highly respected postwar historians who themselves dismissed the Republican era as an unfortunate aberration between the Progressive Era and the New Deal, Richard Hofstadter (1948, 1955), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1957), and William Leuchtenberg (1958), also helped keep such images alive. By the early 1960s, however, heartened by Hoover’s distaste for a powerful, centralized government, New Left historian William A. Williams (1961), for one, took a fresh look at this era. By the mid-1970s, it was perfectly respectable to discuss Hoover as a “Forgotten Progressive” (Hoff Wilson 1975). The reassessments have continued ever since, and especially in the last twenty years, a spate of new works has bubbled up on this period. They include a number of the authors in this volume, like Justus Doenecke (2002), Ruth Clifford Engs (2005), John Fliter and Derek Hoff (2012), Richard G. Frederick (1992), Alex Goodall (2013), Glen Jeansonne (2012), Christopher McKnight Nichols (2011), Phillip Payne (2009), Daniel Schiffman (2003), Mary Stockwell (2008), and Nancy Beck Young (2004). Their books and articles show not only the vibrant and multi-textured developments
of this period on the cultural front but also offer a more nuanced portrait of its presidents, policies, personalities, and trends.

The volume begins with three overview chapters. The first provides background exploring Woodrow Wilson’s imprint on the 1920s and on the larger context of American history generally, with a discussion of both his domestic agenda and his efforts at promoting a more expansive view of the United States in the world. Wilson’s administration created a legacy of regulation, taxation, and diplomacy that has shaped US policy for a century, even under presidents firmly opposed to “Wilsonianism.” Warren G. Harding’s election, and his call for “normalcy,” were supposed to repudiate Wilson’s policies, and in many ways, they did. On the other hand, progressivism was never entirely abandoned even in those years. The links between the Wilson era and the Republican one extended from international peace conferences to maternalist healthcare policies, and the second overview chapter underscores these connections, as it explores such developments and issues as women’s political activism, child labor, veterans’ benefits, and civil service reform. The third overview essay focuses on international relations, so crucial to this era between two major world wars. The United States’ limited world power in the 1920s and 1930s contrasts with its booming economy and active pursuit of international trade and agreements – and suggests that this era cannot be pigeonholed as either “isolationist” or “internationalist.” Yet, as later chapters detail up through the onset of the Great Depression, this expansion of global economic involvement without an enhancement of political and military power could not be sustained in an increasingly threatening world. Historians continue to debate the way in which this era’s policies set the stage for World War II. As Jonathan Zasloff (2003) and, earlier, E.H. Carr (1939) have pointed out, Americans harbored an overly idealistic faith in legal solutions for international problems, epitomized by unenforceable pronouncements like 1932’s Stimson Doctrine, which could “not admit the legality” of Japan’s expansion into Manchuria. This stance made meaningful negotiations with the Japanese well-nigh impossible later (as examined in Chapter 25), further damaging a relationship that was already complicated by the racist immigration policies of the era (profiled in Chapter 8). Following the three-part overview, the book’s remaining chapters are divided into an additional three sections, exploring the trio of presidential administrations from 1921 to 1933. A concluding chapter (27) shows the continuities between the policies of Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt.

This era has generated a body of historiography that is illuminating on many fronts, not only for understanding the 1920s and early 1930s but also for getting a sense of the scholarly concerns and questions that animated later decades, when historians variously found the period oppressive, fascinating, retrograde, contradictory, amusing, or exasperating. We have seen intense debates and conflict over the presumptive religious and scientific divide of that era (the Scopes trial is featured in Chapter 12), its immigration policies (Chapter 16), its race relations and treatment of women (Chapters 15, 26), and its economic policies (Chapters 11, 21). Historians have reckoned with the period’s embrace of big business, tax cuts, and tariffs (as discussed in Chapters 11, 21, 22, and 23); Prohibition (Chapter 7), nativism (Chapter 8), and eugenics (Chapter 16).

At the same time, technology (Chapter 9), mass marketing, consumer credit, and celebrity culture (especially in entertainment and sports: Chapters. 17, 18) made
American life easier and also more enjoyable, with ramifications that continue to be teased out in the literature. Workers benefited less than owners from the growing prosperity (Chapter 7), and they also saw their activism frequently undermined by company unions, but their free time increased all the same. Leisure was available to more Americans than ever, fostering interest in baseball, boxing, dance, and other pastimes (see Chapter 18). But not all Americans could enjoy these pleasures, especially farmers, whose incomes remained severely depressed throughout this period (as Chapter 22 details).

Scholars now recognize that the 1920s introduced deep and lasting cultural change that influenced the rest of the twentieth century and beyond on many levels. Despite its frequent portrayal as a reactionary time in science and politics, historians increasingly see evidence of new thinking. For instance, earlier unquestioned, arrogant attitudes of superiority on the part of whites to non-whites grew less tenable, and despite immigration restrictions that penalized southern and eastern Europeans and solidified the exclusion of Asians, initiatives taken toward Latin Americans and Native Americans were increasingly less interventionist and assimilationist, as Chapters 13, 14, and 24 show.

Warren G. Harding is often remembered for his efforts to stem the tide of change, campaigning on a formulaic binarism that, in 1920, called for “not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy; not revolution, but restoration; not agitation, but adjustment; not surgery, but serenity; not the dramatic, but the dispassionate; not experiment, but équipoise; not submergence in internationality, but sustenance in triumphant nationality.” Faced with such a string of polar opposites, it is no wonder that scholars like William Leuchtenberg saw that “progressivism was apparently dead as a doornail” (1958: 120). But this view was mistaken. As Lynn Dumenil writes, in progressive fashion the US became “more organized, more bureaucratic, more complex” (1995: 6). Indeed, she notes, it became “modern”: given the explosion of movies, the birth of the Book of the Month Club, and technological advances like the automobile and electric appliances, as well as a growing urban population, how could it not?

As a Companion to the Republican New Era presidents, this volume also includes profiles of all three residents of the White House, their elections, and their historical legacies (Chapters 4–6, 10, 19, 20, 23, 27). The work begins with the often highly critical scholarship noted earlier, but also underlines crucial interpretive transitions that have, for instance, begun to divorce Harding from responsibility for scandals such as Teapot Dome; find that Coolidge actively promoted domestic trade and an international role for the United States; and point out that while Hoover may not have succeeded in stopping the Depression, he did not cause it and in fact tried meaningfully (if ineffectually) to stop it. By comparison, though Roosevelt did far more, even he could not fully halt the ravages of the Depression before World War II broke out. Warren G. Harding is now appreciated for his budgetary instincts, his critique of racism, and his embrace of current trends, such as Hollywood films and women’s activism; Calvin Coolidge, it turns out, fostered a federal government that used its funds to enhance transportation networks, aviation, and trade. Herbert Hoover’s voluntary associationalism, too, attempted to expand American business internationally. This was true while he was at the Commerce Department in the 1920s, and carried over into his presidency.
Owing to these major shifts in interpretation, the historiographical approach lends itself particularly well to the era of 1920–1932. Along with many new biographical treatments that draw on previously unexploited archives, enhanced understandings of this period have also benefited from new approaches to social, political, economic, and cultural history (as profiled in Chapters 21, 22, and 26) as well as the history of science (Chapter 16) and technology (Chapter 9). That does not mean, of course, that popular understanding has kept up with the new scholarship. As a result, caricatures of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover remain very popular on television and in the popular imagination – as HBO’s *Boardwalk Empire* series attests – rooted in an older literature that remains influential despite new and subtler treatments.

Herbert Hoover’s presidency forms the bulk of this collection because he was in power at a portentous moment, during the first years of the Great Depression. This topic has generated voluminous scholarship and fostered multiple, shifting interpretations of Hoover’s attempts to combat this worst economic crisis in US history. Chapters 11, 19, 22, 23, and 27 touch on these themes. As noted above, it was New Left historians and intellectuals who pulled him from the depths he had reached in the 1950s. Even as Hoover’s reputation was being rehabilitated, however, other, libertarian, historians attacked him in the early 1960s for expanding the state, and for offering merely a prefiguring of Rooseveltian big government (Rothbard 1963). Fifty years later, Amity Shlaes (2013) echoed such attacks on the excesses of Hoover’s vision and praised Coolidge for shrinking government during his time in office. Some of Hoover’s initiatives indeed anticipated FDR’s response to the Depression, such as his expanded public works programs and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and are thus also helpful for showing the transition to the New Deal, as seen in Chapters 21–23 and 27.

The Depression itself remains a topic of wide debate among both historians and economists. As Chapter 21 suggests, it has produced an expansive and still-unfolding body of literature, that draws on both older narrative treatments and newer, complex cliometric models. This chapter also provides a helpful appendix of the signal events of that troubled time, while noting that even today, with all our sophisticated approaches, another Depression could not be predicted with any more certainty than the last one! If nothing else, this should give us some sympathy for these often maligned presidents.

Long-held explanations of important events and trends of this era, including Prohibition, the Ku Klux Klan’s renewal, eugenics, and the role of religion in the 1928 election, are now being recast in light of new findings. This volume, too, offers readers a more nuanced and complex understanding of the period based on these reassessments. As we see in Chapter 7, for instance, Prohibition is not just an aberration or quaint curiosity, but provides a window on American culture at the time and later; and as we read in Chapter 8, nativists and extreme racists like those in the resurgent KKK were not so very different in their exclusionary beliefs from a large number of their fellow-Americans. Such views were echoed nationally in the era’s immigration restrictions, its eugenics craze, and Congress’s inability to pass an anti-lynching bill. Racial covenants in housing were perfectly legal in the 1920s, as the Supreme Court took pains to affirm. In part because of this disappointing turn of events, after World War I African American activism expanded in both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Marcus Garvey’s United Negro
Improvement Association (UNIA); the Great Migration, meanwhile, made for a flourishing black culture in Harlem and other cities, as Chapters 15 and 17 show.

The discovery in 2002 of the files of the “Secret Court of 1920” – a long-buried tale of the investigation, trial, and expulsion of ten suspected homosexual students and faculty members at Harvard – confirms that this era still offers hidden depths to unearth (Wright 2005). Indeed, we have undoubtedly much more to learn about these dozen years that were once called a “passive interlude” between World War I and the New Deal (Brinkley 1997, 5). By introducing a wealth of interpretations, old and new, to consider about an era that has long deserved just the kind of thoughtful deliberation it receives in these pages, it is hoped that this work will spur scholars and students alike to begin their own explorations.

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Part I

THE BACKGROUND OF PROGRESSIVISM
Chapter One

THE WILSON LEGACY, DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL

Christopher McKnight Nichols

In the one hundred years since Woodrow Wilson took office, his ideas and actions have cast a long shadow over American domestic and international politics. His successes and failures as governor of New Jersey and as a two-term President of the United States (as well as president of Princeton University) were vigorously debated in his day and have been almost continually thereafter. Throughout the presidencies of Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover and the Republican-dominated Congresses that followed Wilson’s time in the White House, Wilson’s achievements, failures, and grand visions hovered over the politics of this so-called “New Era.”

Discussions over the meanings and outcomes of Wilson’s ideas and actions have led to him becoming a standard bearer for several hotly contested – and often vaguely defined – sets of political positions. The one point of consensus amongst scholars, politicians, and citizens from the 1920s through the present has been that Wilsonian progressivism and internationalism decisively shaped American domestic and international politics and history. In domestic affairs, Wilson helped to bring about significant new economic reforms, such as the establishment of a federal income tax and the Federal Reserve. In international affairs, Wilson brought the US into World War I, idealistically campaigned for a global effort to “make the world safe for democracy,” and championed the League of Nations.

So wide-ranging was Wilson’s influence that his name has become both an adjective and a noun (an “ian” and an “ism”), with each word refining two distinct schools of thought. “Wilsonianism” may be the more influential, if slightly less used noun form of his name; it usually refers to an idealistic liberal internationalist foreign relations stance premised on such notions as self-determination, economic globalization, and collective security. Lloyd Ambrosius has defined Wilsonianism as “epitomiz[ing] the liberal tradition in American foreign relations” (Ambrosius 2002: 1). Wilson’s efforts
to achieve a “peace without victory,” to proclaim terms to resolve the war and to establish a new global order in his Fourteen Points in January 1918, and to promote the League of Nations are fundamental to the meaning and ramifications of Wilsonianism and thus to its legacy. Indeed, Wilsonianism has had such national and international traction that Frank Ninkovich (1999) has deployed the adjective form “Wilsonian” to make the bold case that the dominant paradigm for the US role in the world after 1921 generated a “Wilsonian century.” As Ninkovich astutely notes, “a study of the Wilsonian century points beyond Wilsonianism to a concern for understanding a process in which a world full of strangers has become a global society” (Ninkovich 1999: 291). Such views have not been the province of admirers alone. Wilson’s influence was so profound that even arch-critic Henry Kissinger ruefully noted in 1994 that, “Wilsonianism has survived while history has bypassed the reservations of his contemporaries” (Kissinger 1994: 30).

Despite the use of “Wilsonian” in terms of foreign relations as Ninkovich and others have applied it, in adjective form “Wilsonian” is exceedingly common in historical scholarship and has been used just as often, or more so, to refer to Wilson’s style and school of politics in the domestic arena. In such usage the term “Wilsonian” operates as a label for a constellation of particular views about reform politics and progressivism intertwined with the successes and failures of the Wilson years in government. Nevertheless, domestic Wilsonian views were knotted together with Wilsonianism as an international vision, as this chapter will explore.

The chapter will examine these and related themes as part of the broader process of studying, evaluating, and invoking Wilson and the long shadow he cast over the presidencies and era profiled in this volume. We start with Wilson’s actions and efforts during his lifetime, briefly exploring the election of 1912 and his time as president, while also delving into the resulting reactions and responses of his day. Next we turn to the major strands of interpretation after Wilson left the White House as they developed in the Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover years. A focus here will be on the dramatic battles over the “lessons” of the Wilson years as prismsed through the lens of revisionist and counter-revisionist historical scholarship during the period from 1921 through 1933, and after. Throughout this chapter the central emphasis lies with changing interpretations of the legacy of Wilson in sections organized around the main historiographical themes of both Wilsonianism and Liberal Internationalism and the “New Freedom” program and Wilsonian Progressivism of that era that endure to the present.

This chapter illustrates but cannot exhaust the comprehensive body of scholarship on the subject of Wilson’s legacy. Ultimately, it is important to note that Wilson’s ideas and actions, along with the domestic and international historical developments during his presidency from 1913 through 1921, set the political parameters for liberal progressivism at home and abroad. In turn, his views and actions served as rhetorical and conceptual touch points – generally negative and easily attacked for political purposes – for the Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations. The major shift in American domestic and foreign relations enacted by Wilson was something that the Republican administrations of the 1920s into the 1930s rejected, at least rhetorically. In this way Wilson became a foil. Nevertheless, he had established the main operating features for federal government regulation and revenue generation and the US role in the world even for those staunchly opposed to all things “Wilsonian.”
Wilson, who had to deal with the rejection of his beloved League of Nations and the ensuing health problems he experienced from that time until his death, would no doubt be gratified by this legacy. As a historically oriented intellectual who published widely on Anglo-American political and legal history, he had sought to make a lasting mark on the world. From his childhood he was fascinated with oratory and debate. By college he was “absorbed in the study of politics” and often made out cards reading “Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Senator from Virginia” (Link 1947–65: 1:5–6). Wilson attended Law School at the University of Virginia and earned a PhD in political science at Johns Hopkins University, working as a professor at Cornell, Bryn Mawr, and Wesleyan before going to Princeton and eventually serving as its president. Yet a close look at his writing from his school years reveals an aim for more than a place in law or academia. Wilson noted in several private letters while he was in graduate school, for example, that the law was not for him, and thus he shifted to doctoral work; he wanted to “make myself an outside force in politics” and struggled with his own “terrible ambition, a longing to do immortal work” (Link 1966–94: 3:405; Blum 1956: 15).

Thus his early biographers and admiring friends tended to describe him as “always headed for politics” and perhaps for the presidency, but of course this path was far from certain (Blum 1956; Link 1947–65: vol. 1). Indeed, more recent scholarship has called this teleology into question (Heckscher 1991; Thompson 2002; Cooper 2009).

Research on the Wilsonian legacy and Wilson’s own views of his impact have depended in part on the availability of his private papers. Early scholars did not have access to his collections and later scholars had to travel to Princeton to view these voluminous files. The best early work was done by Ray Stannard Baker, Wilson’s official biographer, who produced the first multi-volume account of Wilson’s life and times during the 1920s and 1930s based on interviews and close contact with Wilson, his family, and friends, as well as unfettered access to his papers (during Wilson’s lifetime he only made the papers available en masse to Baker). Scholarship on Wilson significantly advanced after Arthur Link completed a magisterial multi-volume and extensively annotated compendium of Wilson’s writings and reciprocal correspondence entitled *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (1966–94). The volumes dealing with the World War I years did not appear until the 1980s and 1990s, and have made possible more fine-grained understandings of the most contested issues about Wilson’s vision of a “new world order” and more holistic understandings of Wilson’s developing thought.

The archival richness accessible in these volumes helped to fuel post-Cold War work on Wilsonianism and has been central to a renewed interest in a wide array of topics – on missionaries, on pacifism, on economic theories and political philosophy, on human rights, and on nationalist movements around the world, among other topics – that can now more easily incorporate a deeper understanding of Wilson’s views and actions (Ambrosius 1991, 2003; Berg 2013; Cooper 2003, 2009; Heckscher 1991; Thompson 2002; Manela 2007; Throntveit 2011, forthcoming).

**Wilsonian Historiography**

The historical profile of Woodrow Wilson and the Wilsonian legacy cannot be characterized as sequential so much as it has been richly sedimented. At least three main layers of analysis have been most prominent in the development of accounts of
Wilson’s legacy since he left the White House in the spring of 1921. As with many historical cases, the highly charged present-day implications of the life, ideas, and actions of Wilson have continued to add urgency to archival research and interpretations, revitalizing Wilson’s ideas and making them relevant to contemporary concerns while at the same time often unmooring them from their own place and time in order to find Wilson, Wilsonian, or Wilsonianism applicable in the present.

The first main layer of Wilson historiography revolves around a deceptively simple related dual question: how “progressive” was Wilson and how “progressive” were his reform efforts? Critics in his own era and those thereafter – including scholars, thinkers, and politicians from both the political left and right – have noted the reforms enacted particularly between 1913 and 1916, hearkening to their essential “progressiveness” or, conversely, seeing them as a half-measure far from “authentic” progressivism. Much of this scholarship has explored the concept of a Wilsonian approach to politics and reform and has emphasized the limits of the progressive reforms and the president’s own reform impulses. Evidence here abounds and is premised either on a positive assessment of even the most modest changes made under the Wilson Administration (Berg 2013; Blum 1956; Cooper 2009; Heckscher 1991; Link 1957; Thompson 2002), as of historical significance despite the grander expectations for reform of many of the era’s progressives, or underscores several more critical lines of reproach. With respect to the latter, one argument highlights the corporatist and capitalist effects of Wilson’s mixed record on regulating the economy (Sklar 1988; Kolko 1977); another, complementary and widely shared criticism lies with Wilson’s relative lack of effort on social justice issues and retrograde perspectives on women’s suffrage and on race, as well as his willingness to severely curtail free speech during wartime (virtually all of Wilson’s best biographers suggest this to some degree: Link, Blum, Thompson, Heckscher, Cooper, Berg); another line of criticism, often building on those already laid out, places emphasis on Wilson’s lack of progressive bona fides until at least 1909, suggesting an exceedingly gradual process of coming to the progressive cause (Eisenach 1994).

A range of scholars rightly point out that much of the early 1913 legislation already was in the works before Wilson’s election, thanks to the legacy of Teddy Roosevelt and the struggles of progressives in and during the Taft Administration, and have shown that the most radical reform legislation of 1913–15 was pushed largely at the state and congressional levels, not from the White House (Kolko 1977; Sklar 1988; Eisenach 1994). Others disagree. They argue that Wilson should receive more credit for supporting reformist efforts as chief executive (Blum 1956; Link 1957; Cooper 2003). Further, historians have also wrestled with the question of what “happened” to progressivism after World War I. On this issue, emphases have varied. Progressivism during World War I and throughout the 1920s has been found to be “limited,” or a case of surprising “endurance”; its perceived “demise” has been rejected, and all the while there has been a “search for” progressivism during the era (Link 1959; Filene 1970; Rodgers 1982).

A second important theme in the historical scholarship addresses the question: how idealist and moralistic was Wilson? Admirers as well as detractors along with more neutral observers have attempted to determine how best to understand Wilson’s idealism and moralism. Waves of scholars and thinkers have sought to pin down the fundamental values at the core of Wilson’s politics and have emphasized not just the