

## Warren Harding, a fine president from Ohio

By: Tom Jackson – April 1, 2013

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My blog headline refers to Warren Harding, U.S. president from 1921 to 1923 and the publisher of an Ohio newspaper, the Marion Star, before he moved into the White House. Two of my colleagues here at the Register have been Marion Star alums.

My headline may seem counterintuitive because many small-minded Americans, e.g. historians and biographers, have ranked Harding as one of America's worst presidents. Harding's rather long Wikipedia biography mentions that several polls of American scholars of the presidency have ranked Harding as the worst president ever. Harding's secretary of the Interior went to prison for taking bribes from oil companies, a corruption scandal known as Teapot Dome.

Finally, however, a scholar has stepped forward who is willing to go to bat for Harding. Gene Healy, vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., has written books about the presidency and says it's time for Harding's good points to be recognized.

In this interview, Healy says, "It usually goes unrecognized, but Warren Harding, the Rodney Dangerfield of U.S. presidents, and his taciturn successor, Calvin Coolidge, both had decent civil-liberties legacies."

Harding, Healy notes, released Socialist Eugene Debs from jail and pardoned 24 other nonviolent political dissenters. Healy finds less to admire in Harding's predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, citing "the pointless carnage of WWI, conscription, Espionage Act prosecutions on a scale much greater than the Alien and Sedition Acts, military surveillance, racial segregation of federal employees, and the Palmer Raids."

The low ranking Harding gets from many historians have less to do with Harding's qualities than the flawed values of many historians, Healy argues.

"Sure, Teapot Dome -- but are kickbacks for oil leases really worse than 117,000 dead doughboys?" he asks.