

ESSAY

Presidential Hush Money, Circa 1920

Warren G. Harding got elected partly by women exercising voting rights for the first time. They didn't know about the affair that his party paid to cover up—or about his second mistress



Portrait of President Warren Harding while in office PHOTO: EVERETT COLLECTION

By Elaine Weiss

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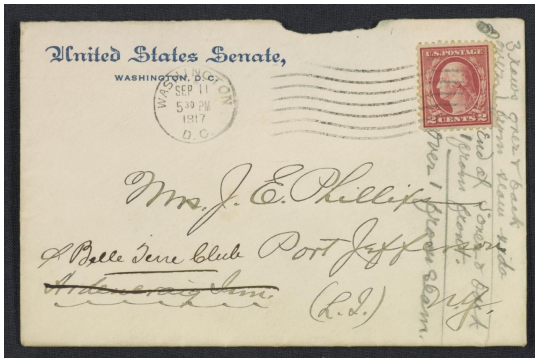
The Republican presidential candidate had a problem: a looming sex scandal that could derail his White House campaign. One of his mistresses was blackmailing him, threatening to tell all about their extra-marital affair. She was going to sell her story—with documentary evidence—to the press. Something had to be done.

A team of political fixers was dispatched to negotiate a hush-money agreement with the mistress, and they succeeded: She kept mum. The candidate won the election and, with the help of millions of women voters, rode to victory under the campaign slogan “America First.”

The president paying his way out of trouble is not the one you’re probably thinking of: It was Warren G. Harding, winner of the White House in the 1920 election. But there are remarkable parallels to today’s unfolding revelations about presidential fixers and payments to talkative former sex partners.

Harding had a “woman problem” that needed to disappear. Actually, there were several Harding affairs to keep under wraps during the campaign. The assiduous application of money, intimidation and non-disclosure contracts kept the candidate’s troublesome lovers squelched.

Harding was the bland—but randy—Ohio Senator who became the surprise compromise candidate of a deadlocked Republican convention in the summer of 1920. In the days before party primary contests, he was the empty suit chosen by party honchos in the famous “smoke-filled rooms” of the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago. Harding was a weak-willed and pliable bloviator—the perfect candidate for a weary nation’s “return to normalcy” (Harding’s other campaign slogan) ushering in a new era of corporate avarice.



The envelope for a letter from Warren G. Harding to Carrie Fulton Phillips in September 1917, one of 240 items from their correspondence unsealed in 2014 and released by the Library of Congress. PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Harding had been a small-town newspaper publisher and parlayed his civic boosterism into a successful political career; his wife Florence was the brains and ambition in the family. With her help, Warren progressed from the local Kiwanis to the Ohio statehouse to the U.S. Senate, where he waffled on issues, skipped tough votes and made little impression—but few enemies, according to Harding biographer John Dean.

All through his political ascent, for more than a decade, he’d been carrying on with a family friend and neighbor, Carrie Fulton Phillips, wife of a prominent department store owner in Marion, Ohio. When they were apart, the pair exchanged steamy love letters, and Warren’s florid odes to their erotic exploits became the ammunition that Carrie was aiming at his presidential ambitions.

Warren had long promised to leave Florence and marry Carrie, but by early 1920, when Harding’s name began to pop up in chatter about a possible presidential race, Carrie realized that once her lover threw his hat in the ring, divorce and re-marriage would be out of the question, according to historian David Pietrusza’s account of the presidential race.

‘Harding had a “woman problem” that needed to disappear.’

Even more aggravating, Carrie had discovered that Warren was two-timing her, indulging in an affair with a

woman less than half his age. As a teenager, Nan Britton had developed an inexplicable crush on Harding, who took her as his “bride” in a seedy New York City hotel room when she was 20 years old, as she wrote in her memoir. When the Republican convention gathered in June 1920, their nine-month-old baby daughter was tucked safely away in a Chicago apartment.

Back in Marion, Carrie Phillips was not coy about her intentions: She demanded money from Harding or else she would out him as a philanderer. On a sheet of U.S. Senate stationery now kept in the Library of Congress, he pleaded with her: “I can pay with life or reputation, but I can’t command such a sum.”

But if she kept quiet and he won the White House, he tried to persuade her, he would be in a better position to meet her demands: “If you think I can be more helpful by having a public position and influence...I will pay you \$5,000 per year, in March each year, so long as I am in that public service.”

No deal, said Carrie. Finally, with his presidential campaign about to launch, Harding had to fess-up to the Republican National Committee about his predicament. RNC Chairman Will Hays was furious but had to quickly defuse the situation. He met with Carrie Phillips in Ohio to propose a generous financial arrangement, according to Mr. Pietrusza’s account.



Carrie Phillips, seen holding puppies, around 1920 when Harding was nominated and elected. PHOTO: THE GRANGER COLLECTION

Days later, Carrie's husband (she'd told him everything) was brought to Washington to meet with Harding campaign officials. They struck a bargain: The Phillipses would be paid \$25,000 (equivalent to more than \$300,000 today) to travel to the other side of the world—Japan, China, Korea—remaining out of sight and out of reach of the press. They would also receive a \$2,000 monthly stipend (about \$25,000 today) to keep their silence for as long as necessary.

How the money was raised is not known, but by the time Harding kicked off his campaign in mid-July 1920, the Phillipses were far away and would not return until Harding was safely ensconced in the White House. Nan Britton was also being paid to hush herself and her baby. Knowing nothing of Harding's sexual escapades, American women—newly enfranchised by the 19th Amendment—helped to give him a landslide victory.

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As president, Harding surrounded himself with an unsavory batch of cabinet secretaries and advisors who gleefully enriched themselves and their corporate allies at public expense. His presidency has become synonymous with the Teapot Dome scandals, which involved his secretary of the interior accepting bribes from oil companies for sweetheart leasing deals on federal land in

Wyoming. The secretary went to prison.

Collecting her payments, Carrie Phillips kept her silence and her distance from the White House, but Harding invited Nan Britton in for frequent romps in an Oval Office closet, as she described their liaison.

Harding did not complete his term, dying of a heart attack in 1923. Though his administration's corruption scandals were well reported, nothing of his sexual shenanigans and hush payments was revealed at the time, though there were insistent rumors whispered among the press corps. It was a time when the personal affairs of candidates were not considered fair game in quite the same way as they are today, and mass media didn't exist quite yet.

How did the Harding secrets and payments finally emerge? After Harding died, Nan Britton lost the child support payments that he had promised and, desperate for income, wrote an X-rated memoir of their relationship. The book was a best-seller, but Harding's friends and the Republican establishment denounced it as fiction and attacked Britton viciously, calling her a degenerate home-wrecker. She withdrew from public view but until her death in 1991 maintained that her story was true. In 2015, genetic testing proved her right: Warren Harding was the father of her daughter.

Meanwhile, in 1964, a shoe-box filled with 250 of Warren Harding's love letters to Carrie Phillips was discovered in a locked closet of her home in Marion, Ohio, according to news reports. The letters were given to the Ohio Historical Society but put under lock for another fifty years. In 2014, the Library of Congress released digital copies of Harding's purple-prosed testimonials to his lover's charms; they are available online for all to see.



Nan Britton (left) shown with her daughter Elizabeth Ann, sometime after she exposed her affair with Harding and his alleged paternity of her daughter in 1927. In 2015, genetic testing confirmed her claim. PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

“It may prove to be the most talked about secret payment in American political history” declares one recent newspaper column, referring to the current hubbub surrounding news of hush payments made by candidate Trump’s fixers to the actress known as Stormy Daniels. But that distinction might have belonged to Warren Harding’s dollars-for-silence scheme—if only the public had known at the time.

—Ms. Weiss’s latest book, *“The Woman’s Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote,”* was published in March by Viking.