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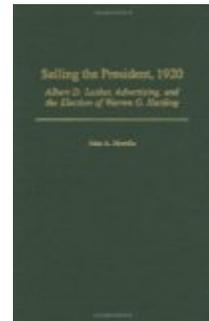
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John A. Morello. *Selling the President, 1920: Albert D. Lasker, Advertising, and the Election of Warren G. Harding.* Westport and London: Praeger, 2001. x + 112 pp. \$57.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97030-7.

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What Price Warren Harding?

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When considering the presidential election of 1920 most historians have tended to emphasize the losing Democratic party's structure, strategy and electoral performance. Of course, Warren Harding's nomination in the "smoke filled room," his muddled calls for "normalcy" and an "association of nations," and his landslide victory all feature in accounts of 1920, but often the story of Democratic collapse has been more alluring. Like the fascination of a train wreck, the spectacular unraveling of the Wilsonian coalition, of progressivism, and of postwar internationalism have captured historians' imaginations. The election of 1920, it seems, was first and foremost lost by the Democrats rather than won by the Republicans.[1]

John Morello's *Selling the President, 1920* is something of a corrective to this tendency, and represents a reversion towards the truism that electoral history usually favors winners over losers. Morello, from DeVry Institute of Technology, focuses upon Warren Harding's winning campaign in 1920 by examining the role of Albert Lasker within it. Lasker had made his fortune advertising Schlitz beer, Quaker Oats cereals and Van Camp's Pork and Beans before turning his hand to political advertising in 1918. By then he had become the sole owner of the Lord and Thomas advertising agency, and one of modern advertising's first millionaires. Later in the 1920s Lasker undertook his most famous (and pernicious) campaign to sell women cigarettes; his "reach for a Lucky instead

of a sweet" appealed directly to many women's anxieties about their body shapes and to their desire to join the new, athletic cult of female beauty.

Morello paints a small canvas (102 pages, including notes), but he fills it with a well-written mixture of overview and detail. His first chapter sets the scene of the United States that Warren Harding inherited from Woodrow Wilson, while chapter 2 introduces Lasker and the advertising industry of his day. Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 tell the story of Harding's campaign, and Lasker's role in it, while chapter 7 nods quickly in the Democrats' direction. A final chapter and an epilogue complete the story of Harding's election and Lasker's rapid disassociation from the new president. An introduction, eight chapters and an epilogue in 102 pages makes for rapid travel indeed, but Morello tells an interesting story with verve, an eye for detail and good humor. The result is a stimulating book that starts more hares than it can run down.

Morello's central argument is that Lasker in 1920 introduced new advertising strategies and techniques, borrowed from business, to the political arena. Lasker used to great effect what Morello describes as the three pillars of consumer goods advertising: "reason why" selling, which compared products directly; testimonial advertising, using endorsements; and "preemptive advertising," which rushed to claim common characteristics as unique features of the advertised commodity (p. 1). In addition, Lasker perfected the traditional front porch

campaign to shield his weak candidate from uncontrolled public scrutiny, and orchestrated a relentlessly negative campaign against Democratic policy failures. The result, Morello claims, was that 1920 was a triumph of modern advertising which propelled the Republicans back into the White House and furthered the commodification of candidates in modern electoral contests.

Morello's engaging style makes the most of his story. Although Harding's greatest asset was his "presidential" demeanor, he had enough inadequacies and skeletons in his closet to test all of Lasker's skills. The complexities of policy often seemed beyond the candidate's capacity, so Lasker designed a campaign strategy that largely avoided such discussions. Harding, protected on his front porch, waffled his way through such minefields as the League of Nations, prohibition and postwar reconstruction, all the while attacking James Cox's alleged "wobble and wobble."

Harding's skeletons posed much greater challenges to Lasker; the candidate's alleged African American ancestry was smoothly dealt with by preemptive advertising of pictures of Harding's grandparents (p. 71). Harding's taste for golf was thought to be a political liability, so Lasker arranged for the Chicago Cubs to visit Marion. Harding threw the first three pitches of a game between the Cubs and the Kerrigan Tailors, thus proving his popular sporting bona fides (p. 58). Most troublesome of all, however, was Jim Phillips who, alone among Marion's merchants, refused to decorate his shop window on Notification Day. The reason for this, as the press soon found out, was that for years his wife Carrie had been conducting an affair with Warren Harding. Lasker solved that problem by paying the Phillipses \$20,000 and sending them on an all-expenses-paid trip around the world for the rest of the campaign (p. 69). Morello tells these stories with gusto, and in the process brings the Republican campaign of 1920 to life.

The limitations of Morello's canvas, however, ultimately restrict the usefulness of his book. He tends, perhaps in the interests of economy, to overstate his case and to deny his arguments vital context. Morello's description of Florence Harding pioneering new directions for women in general, and first ladies in particular, is muted by the example given of her choice in clothes (p. 7). Had Morello put Mrs. Harding in the context of her immediate predecessor, the powerful Edith Bolling Wilson, he may well have come to a radically different conclusion. Lasker's early publicity efforts during the 1918 Congressional elections were indeed significant, but readers should be skeptical about Morello's claim that

they "turned the tide" against Wilson's Democrats (p. 33). By November 1918 sufficiently large numbers of voters across the country had been alienated by wartime policies to have turned against the Democrats regardless of Lasker's salesmanship. When discussing the 1920 Republican convention, Morello also neglects to prove his case. Although his point that the Chicago convention may not have been as controlled by power brokers as legend has it is plausible—Democrats had identified Harding as a strong contender by the end of 1919[2]—Morello provides no evidence at all to sustain his argument (p. 45).

Greater attention to context would also have allowed Morello to pass more measured judgments about the 1920 campaign. By looking at 1920 in isolation from earlier (and later) elections, Morello robs his discussion of historical relevance. Harding's campaign—based on the front porch and sustained by hundreds of surrogate speakers and millions of posters, pamphlets and buttons—was in fact little different from William McKinley's in 1896. That more famous contest set the pattern for a generation of winning campaigns; Lasker's contribution to electoral advertising technique in 1920 was, in this context, incremental rather than revolutionary. 1920 was, in fact, the last of the "old" elections rather than a harbinger of the new, because it was the last of the pre-radio presidential campaigns. By 1924 the radio age had dawned, and campaigning would never be the same again. With more context Morello might have been more cautious than to describe 1920 as possibly "one of the most important selling jobs ever done" (p. 101).

Morello's most glaring omission concerns Harding's opposition. Although James Cox, Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic campaign appear in chapter 7 of *Selling the President, 1920*, Morello's book remains a very one-sided account. Consequently it cannot successfully confront the historiographical tradition of stressing Democratic defeat over Republican victory in 1920. The sheer ineptitude, penury and demoralization of the Democratic effort in 1920 required much more attention than Morello devotes to them. Although James Cox was in many ways a much stronger candidate than Harding, having amassed more impressive achievements in public and private life, his campaign finances, strategy and organization were pitifully weak. His campaign staff were even locked out of their headquarters on election day because they had defaulted on their rent.[3] Against such opposition, and in the context of the Democrats' deep unpopularity among millions of Northeastern, Midwestern and Western voters, Harding's victory—and Lasker's cleverness—were less surprising than Morello allows.

It is easy enough for a reviewer to bemoan the excessive brevity of a book; authors must do their best within publishers' word limits and deadlines. Within his allotted space John Morello tells his story with elegance, wit and intelligence. Yet for this reader, at least, *Selling the President, 1920* is too slight to rebut effectively the view that the 1920 presidential election is best viewed from the perspective of Democratic failures between 1916 and 1920 than as the fruits of Albert Lasker's advertising wizardry.

Notes

[1]. See David Burner, *The Politics of Provincialism: The Democratic Party in Transition, 1918-1932* (New York:

Alfred A. Knopf, 1970); Douglas Craig, *After Wilson: The Struggle for the Democratic Party, 1920-1934* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and Donald R. McCoy, "Election of 1920," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968*, vol. 3, pp. 2349-2456 (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971).

[2]. See the Papers of William Gibbs McAdoo, General Correspondence files, Containers 224 et seq., Library of Congress Manuscript Division.

[3]. For this and other examples see Craig, *After Wilson*, chapter 1.

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