

SML *Newsletter*



The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature

The Center for the Study of
Midwestern Literature and Culture

Founded 1971

Volume Sixteen
Number Three
Fall, 1986

Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature
Newsletter

Volume Sixteen, Number Three

Fall, 1986

Published at Michigan State University with the support of the Department of
American Thought and Language

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Published in Spring, Summer, Fall.

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Contents

Page

The Carrie Phillips Letters and The Presidency of Warren G. Harding	David D. Anderson	1
A Review Essay: James M. Marshall, <u>Land Fewer: Dispossession and the Frontier Myth</u>	Roger J. Bresnahan	15

The Carrie Phillips Letters and the Presidency of

Warren G. Harding

David D. Anderson

At about 2:00 AM on Saturday, June 12, 1920, a New York publisher and quintessential political journalist requested an immediate meeting in a Chicago hotel room with the obscure first-term senior senator from Ohio. The senator complied promptly, meeting alone with the publisher in the latter's suite in Chicago's Blackstone Hotel, and the course of American history was changed, the greatest American political scandals were insured, and the most durable and cynical American political myth was born. Not incidentally, the meeting produced some of the most curious and fruitless speculation in American political journalism, history, and biography.

The publisher was Colonel George Brinton McClellan Harvey, former political correspondent of the New York World, editor and publisher of the North American Review and of Harper's Weekly, and founder in 1918 and owner of Harvey's Weekly. Within the year he was to become American ambassador to the Court of St. James. Since 1912 he regarded himself not only as the first supporter of Woodrow Wilson for the Presidency but as a maker of presidents.

The senator was Warren Gamaliel Harding, successful small-town editor and publisher, state-level Republican office holder, and Party loyalist who had placed in nomination the name of William Howard Taft in 1912. In 1914 he was among the first senators elected through direct ballot following the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment; his senatorial record was mediocre,

and he was Ohio's reluctant favorite son candidate for the Republican nomination for the Presidency in 1920.

The occasion of the meeting between the president maker and the reluctant candidate was the Republican national convention of 1920, which had begun on Tuesday, June 8, 1920, and by Friday had deadlocked between the leading candidates, General Leonard Wood, Roosevelt Republican and TR's political heir, and Governor Frank Lowden of Illinois. The occasion, too, was the origin of the durable cynical myth of the "smoke-filled room", first articulated and predicted by Harry Micaiah Daugherty, Harding's campaign manager, a few weeks earlier. On the evening of June 11, Harvey, Senator Charles W. Curtis of Kansas, later Vice President, Senator Frank Brandegee of Connecticut, and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts had met at dinner in the Blackstone to discuss the situation and perhaps find a solution. They carried on the discussion in Harvey's suite, and, close enough to the 2:11 a.m. predicted by Daugherty, the group, the four - rather than the "fifteen or so" predicted by Daugherty -, supported by others who came and went during the evening, determined to send for Harding, a potential nominee selected, in Mark Sullivan's words, as the result of "a negation of other candidates." Harvey met him alone in the bedroom and spoke solemnly:

"We think you may be nominated tomorrow; before acting finally, we think you should tell us, on your conscience and before God, whether there is anything that might be brought up against you that would embarrass the party, any impediment that might

disqualify you or make you inexpedient, either as candidate or as President?"

Harding, stunned, as recounted by Harvey to Mark Sullivan a few days later, asked for a few minutes to think it over. After ten minutes alone in an adjoining room, Harding returned and said there was no such impediment.

What went through Harding's mind during those fateful moments we can only guess, as the consummate politician and the reluctant candidate, the man sometimes painfully aware of his inadequacies, yet happily a member of the "most exclusive club on earth" is faced with the opportunity to seize the greatest of political brass rings, the nomination for the Presidency at a time and in a set of circumstances that virtually guaranteed election. Perhaps under the circumstances the wonder is that Harding hesitated for as long as ten minutes.

More pertinent and more subject to the speculation that followed by journalists and biographers, Mark Sullivan in Our Times IV (1935), a witness to the events of 1920, speculated on a "woman story," the result of the publication of Nan Britton's The President's Daughter in 1927; Samuel Hopkins Adams, author of Incredible Era (1939) and also author of Revelry (1926), a novel based on the Harding Administration, sees two possibilities, that of Nan Britton and her daughter in the background and also that of the perennial Central Ohio rumor, sometimes surfacing in Marion to Harding's discomfiture, about Negro blood in Harding's ancestry. Both Nan and Professor William Esterbrook Chancellor of the College of Wooster, chronicler of a purported Harding genealogy, were in Chicago at the time,

and the Republican National Committee was later to release thousands of copies of the "real" Harding genealogy. William Allen White, also a witness of the events of 1920 and a delegate to the convention, overlooks the incident in Masks in a Pageant (1928), although he later finds evidence of "a primrose detour from Main Street" in Marion during the campaign; Harry Daugherty, in his ghosted apology, The Inside Story of the Harding Administration (1932), denies that such a question ever was posed to Harding.

Harding's more recent biographers, with the benefit not only of hindsight but of increased access to more of the Harding papers and those of his contemporaries, are equally confused and confusing in their interpretations of the event: Andrew Sinclair in The Available Man (1965) accepts the incident but suggests that, more likely than rumors of love affairs or mixed ancestry, Harding considered his weak heart and/or his inadequacy; Harvey, he insists had asked the question simply to humiliate Harding and he dismisses the scene as "ridiculous;" Robert K. Murray in The Harding Era (1969) doubts that the incident took place at all, questioning Harvey's word and quoting both Daugherty and Senator Watson to the contrary. However, Sinclair accepts the Nan Britton relationship as well as that of White's "primrose detour," while Murray refuses to commit himself on the former but is forced by more recently discovered evidence to accept, however reluctantly, the latter.

Only in the controversial The Shadow of Blooming Grove (1968) by Francis Russell, suspect as unscholarly by professional academic historians

and denounced as fiction by the Harding descendents and the Harding Memorial Association, are both the incident and the possible reasons behind Harvey's question accepted. But in spite of the fact that Russell was largely responsible for making public evidence about the "primrose detour" and while he accepts the incident without question, he does not speculate either on the reason behind Harvey's question or the subject of Harding's pondering, thus suggesting by omission that the continued rumors about Harding's ancestry, the shadow of the book's title, and of Harding's character, according to Russell, is the cause of both the question and Harding's presumed ten minutes of soul-searching.

On balance, it appears that the meeting did take place, if for no other reason than that Harvey, as self-styled President-maker, was determined to make his presence felt, and he had no reason to lie to Sullivan; he was, in fact, more important than such a lie could possibly make him. Both the Associated Press and the New York Times report the all-night session and its conclusion that Harding was the most suitable of the Dark Horses. Further, if Harding was not well known nationally, he was perhaps too well-known among his senatorial colleagues who made up the bulk of those in attendance that night. Harding could be "counted upon to 'go along'," as Alice Roosevelt Longworth recounts in her memoir, Crowded Hours (1933), and that regularity more than offset Harding's known penchants for poker, for bourbon, for golf, and undoubtedly for the detours-plural- that had caused comment and gossip in Marion, sudden disappearances from Washington, even, almost undoubtedly, the self-conscious smirks and masculine joshing that accompanied the evenings with

his cronies that Harding enjoyed so much. The implication is clear: the meeting between Harding and Harvey did take place; it was neither ridiculous nor self-seeking, but serious business, and it was an attempt by Harvey, to defuse if not to lay the persistent rumors that circulated about Harding well before the confused drama of the convention. Although both Nan Britton and Professor Chancellor were in Chicago, the former the soul of girlish discretion and the latter surreptitiously distributing a pamphlet decrying Harding's ancestry, there is no suggestion that either had come to Harvey's attention or that anyone at the convention took Chancellor seriously, although the Republican National Committee was later to do so, particularly in Ohio and in connection with the uncertainties involved in capturing the new women's vote.

The possible impediment that Harvey had in mind was a relationship that had begun almost a decade before and was, as Harding approached the nomination, threatening to explode in public acrimony. It was a relationship too that had become common knowledge in Marion, although, perhaps predictably, the husband involved, a close friend of Harding's, together with Florence Kling Harding, were the last to know, certainly no later than the Spring of 1920. By the Fall of 1920, however, it was a matter of common gossip among the reporters covering Harding's Front Porch Campaign, although, unlike the Chancellor accusation, the reporters filed no copy on it even after the Republican National Committee was forced to take action.

The woman involved was Carrie Fulton Phillips, wife of James

Phillips, successful young Marion dry goods merchant and partner in the Uhler - Phillips Department Store, the largest in town. They had married in 1896, when Phillips, like Harding, was thirty, and Carrie was twenty-one; the marriage was to endure, at least nominally, until it was lost in the general record of the Depression, Jim Phillips dying broke and alone in 1939, Carrie living on until 1960, an eccentric and recluse, the last four years of her life spent as a ward of the court in a home for the aged.

In 1905, however, at the time that Carrie and Harding discovered each other, Carrie by all accounts was a beauty, tall, with golden-red hair and classical features, and an urbane sophistication; Harding, not yet forty, was leaving the lieutenant-governorship of Ohio to return to his successful newspaper, The Star. Yet he knew he was leaving public office only temporarily.

During the spring of 1905 Jim Phillips, ailing, went to the sanitarium at Battle Creek, Michigan, at Harding's suggestion; in February, Florence Kling Harding had had a kidney removed, and her recuperation, much of it in the hospital in Columbus, was slow. The Phillips and the Hardings had been family friends; perhaps it was inevitable that the two would be drawn together, would become lovers, would apparently find in each other what they could not find in their mates.

The affair was marked by a particularly intensity for the first five years, during which Harding, it later became evident, had discovered the love of his life, the love he had not found with his wife and had apparently not expected to find in his lifetime. During those years the

families became close, taking long Sunday rides together, sometimes to Bucyrus, Carrie's home town, some twenty miles north of Marion. A fourteen-year-old schoolgirl named Nan Britton remembered watching enviously as they drove by. Somehow Carrie and Harding managed to meet, sometimes in another town when Harding travelled on political business, and sometimes in the Phillips home on South Main Street. In 1907 the Hardings first travelled to Europe, and two years later, on February 4, 1909, the Marion Star noted that the Hardings and Phillipses had left for New York, to sail on a Mediterranean tour on February 6th and then on to Germany, where Carrie determined that she wanted someday to live. But they returned in April to Marion, to the opening of the next year's political campaign in which Harding would become a candidate for governor, and to Carrie's increasing unrest. Neither Harding nor Jim Phillips took seriously her insistence that she would return to Germany to live.

In November 1910 Harding was defeated for the governorship; it was during this campaign that a fourteen-year-old Nan Britton covered the walls of her bedroom with Harding's pictures, including one inscribed to her, and it is from these weeks of the campaign that the first documentary evidence of the relationship between Harding and Carrie remains - a campaign photo passionately inscribed to Carrie by Harding and what are apparently fragments of letters by Carrie but never sent in which she tried to explain the complexity of her feelings to Harding and perhaps to herself. But a discussion of the evidence - the "Carrie Phillips Letters" - is premature at this point, as it was to remain for more than half a

century. In the summer of 1910 the Hardings and Phillipses took an extended motor trip through the East, and the following March, after Harding's defeat, they went together to Bermuda. That summer the Hardings returned to Europe without the Phillipses - Carrie had completed her plans to live in Germany for a year, enrolling her fifteen-year-old daughter in school in Berlin. Apparently she agreed vaguely to return to Jim and Marion in a year - and she and Harding worked out a vague code for their correspondence.

While Carrie remained in Germany beyond her vague deadline, touring in the summers, and letters passed regularly between them, Harding's political star resumed its ascendancy; in 1912 he placed William Howard Taft's name in nomination for re-election to the Presidency at the Republican National Convention in Chicago. Although Taft was defeated, in 1914 Harding became Ohio's first Republican candidate for the Senate since the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment, that Fall defeating both Democratic and Progressive candidates after a nasty campaign that overlooked the new European war that drove Carrie bitterly and reluctantly back to Marion.

After three years they resumed their affair, but Carrie, resentful of the surreptitious meetings, of the demands of Harding's rising career, of his unwillingness to rock either marital boat, and outspokenly pro-German, became aloof; Harding's devotion was abject. Scheduled to take office in December, 1915, Harding travelled the Chatauqua circuit, he travelled to Texas to speak on the Mexican question, to Hawaii on a tour of inspection. Apparently Harding sought to achieve a measure of independence from her, but

it was an independence he could not achieve. Nevertheless she continued to resent the life he was beginning, a life she became determined to share. In Washington Harding found a role he enjoyed, but he was torn with wanting for Carrie and the frustration of enforced if shorter separations. But they surreptitiously met, they corresponded, and as the nation moved closer to war with Germany, she became increasingly and bitterly outspoken and secretly more demanding.

While Wilson was re-elected on the anti-war sentiments of late 1916, to Carrie's delight, even before his second inaugural the nation moved more closely to war, responding to the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1 by breaking diplomatic relations with Germany on February 3, and Carrie in Marion became publicly more strident and privately more demanding of Harding. In return Harding cautioned her about her pro-German declarations; her reply was blunt: if Harding voted for war with Germany, she would expose him, drive him ignominiously from office, shame him at home.

Curiously, at about the time that the relationship between Carrie and Harding was approaching a breaking point, a twenty-one-year old young lady from Marion, Nan Britton, wrote and rewrote a letter on YWCA stationery to her hero, Warren G. Harding, Senator from Ohio. Harding would receive it on May 8, 1917, and reply immediately on senate stationery, while debate on the draft bill went on around him; he arranged a meeting in New York in little more than a week.

As a new romance slowly began to take root it is clear that Harding had no intention of breaking off or surrendering the old; Carrie was to

remain the love of his life. But the nature of their relationship had permanently changed; Harding wrote again and again to Carrie and then to Jim to warn her about her statements. But not until the Secret Service began to take notice did Carrie temper her tongue and finally take refuge in Red Cross work. Only once more, as the war wound down and then ended was there a brief resurrection of what once had been as Harding visited Marion briefly to vote, and Harding commemorated the event in the fluid verse he was fond of sending her at such times.

But early in the new year of 1919 Nan became pregnant and Harding became the reluctant father-to-be after Nan rejected his suggestions - "Dr. Humphrey's No. 21 Tablets," or even an abortionist. On October 22, 1919, as Harding began to be considered a dark horse - or at least a favorite son - candidate for the presidency, Nan gave birth to the daughter Harding was never to see.

In the Spring and Summer, Harding, at Harry Daugherty's insistence, toured widely and spoke frequently. But he found moments for Nan in New York and Washington, and he found time, too, to write to Carrie, who was once again threatening, demanding, accusing him of other affairs. Finally, in April of 1920 Carrie apparently told Jim; she wrote again, again demanding. Finally, as a dark horse candidate for the Presidency, Harding wrote what he made clear was his last letter.

Carrie's threats did not materialize and Harding went on to the Convention, the fateful meeting with Harvey, and the nomination. But two chapters remain to the story of Carrie, the Presidential candidate, and ultimately, more than forty years later, the almost totally discredited late President.

The next chapter was that of the campaign, the celebrated Front Porch campaign emulating that of William McKinley a quarter-century earlier. Delegations, supporters, journalists came in droves to Marion, to debark at the Union Depot and proceed up Center Street along Marion's Victory Way of waving flags and bunting-bedecked business blocks on their way to hear the Presidential candidate at his home on Mount Vernon Avenue. But one building stood nakedly unadorned among the others: the Uhler-Phillips Department Store building, leading William Allen White and others to speculate on a possible "primrose detour" - or perhaps more.

Nan Britton, the soul of discretion, visited her Marion home - and visited Harding both publicly and privately, but Carrie took to parading past the house, approaching the porch and then, to Mrs. Harding's abuse, withdrawing. The scandal had become open.

According to Marion tradition, "Hoke" Donithen, Harding's Marion lawyer, approached Will Hays, chairman of the Republican National Committee and insisted that something be done. Hays sent Albert Lasker to solve the problem. Bluntly he offered Carrie a \$20,000 cash payment and a monthly retainer if Harding were elected. In return both Phillipses were to leave town until after the election - on an all-expense-paid trip around the world. They were in Japan on election day, and the Harding - Carrie Phillips tale was almost--almost at an end.

A footnote to the story appeared just a decade later: perhaps in a final gesture of triumph but more likely in envy Jim Phillips purchased space

in the program for the dedication of the Harding Memorial; it read, simply, "In Memory of Our Esteemed Friend and Neighbor."

The last chapter in the romance was not written, however, until the early 1960s, and it is not yet complete. This is the story of the discovery and suppression and attempted destruction of the Carrie Phillips Letters. (Properly speaking, only a few fragments of letters by Carrie Phillips have been found, none of them written during Harding's Presidency.)

On July 10, 1964, a startling and misleading as well as inexact heading and news item appeared on the front page of the New York Times as well as other papers across the country, and the next day it reached the foreign press, including the Times of London. The New York Times heading read, "250 Love Letters from Harding to Ohio Merchant's Wife Found," and the following paragraphs describe the fact of discovery in Marion, a brief summation of content including quotes of a poem by Harding and replies to alleged or real blackmail threats by Carrie in 1920, as Harding became a serious contender for the Presidency.

Although the news item exaggerates the number of letters--actually there are 98 by Harding to Carrie as well as fragments by both Harding and Mrs. Phillips, as well as the inscribed photo of 1910--what the news item does not include is any indication of the reason for announcement of the discovery: the attempt by Harding's nephew, Dr. George Harding, to get possession of the letters, thus insuring their immediate destruction. The ensuing legal battle had ramifications too detailed for discussion here, but the letters were saved and are now in the possession of the Ohio Historical Society, where they are closed to scholars until 2023, and court injunctions

prevent my quoting them. However, the following conclusions may be drawn from the existence of the letters, their nature, and their content.

1. Harding was sincerely if romantically in love with Carrie.
2. The formal contents and length - scrawled, ranging to 40 pages, including much sentimentality and eroticism - support Nan Britton's description of the letters she received from Harding and destroyed at his request.
3. Carrie clearly tried to influence Harding's attitude and vote before and during the war with Germany.
4. Carrie threatened Harding with exposure at least twice: in 1917 and again in early 1920.
5. Clearly, part of Harding's reluctance and uncertainty in 1920 may be attributed to Carrie's threats. In fact, he very nearly left public life at this point.
6. Without doubt, the rumors - and perhaps reported facts - about Carrie and Harding led to Colonel Harvey's peculiar question.
7. Harding must have had assurances at this point that Carrie no longer presented a threat.

Finally, it is clear that had Harding been less eager to become a Presidential candidate and ultimately President, or had he been less fearful of his wife, his colleagues, and Harry Daugherty - the history of the Presidency and of the nation in this century would have been significantly different.

REVIEW

James M. Marshall. Land Fever: Dispossession and the Frontier Myth. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986. p. viii, 188, plus three append., chapter notes, bibl., index.

Hamlin Garland's "Up the Coulee" in Main-Travelled Roads paints a tragic picture of the frontier settler. The dream of independence on the land in reality becomes a life of back-breaking toil just to keep up with the mortgage payments. There, as in Garland's seldom read Jason Edwards, Joseph Kirkland's Zury, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, we see the family farm stripped of patriotic glitter. We are, indeed, no longer an agricultural people. The degree of slippage in the myth is evident in the spectacle of actresses testifying before Congress and rock bands playing in the fields.

Far from glorifying frontier life, Garland's portraits in "Up the Coulee," "Under the Lion's Paw," "The Return of Private Smith," "The Branch Roads," and Jason Edwards call upon the grass-roots Populism of his youth to illustrate the reality of what Howells bitterly termed America's "vaunted conditions." In effect, the brutalized condition of Europe's peasants, as illustrated by Millet, was not significantly tempered by the levelling influence of democracy under the Northwest Ordinance or the prospect of open land a la Turner. Garland's generalized image of the unweeded garden is intensified in "Up the Coulee," where, as Marshall puts it, "the merciless

prairie sunlight on bountiful acres of wheat illuminates the stooped lives of a homestead family." (p. 165).

James M. Marshall's approach is deeply influenced by the literature of the countermyth--Garland, Faulkner, Joseph Kirkland, Ignatius Donnelly, Frank Norris, Edward Eggleston, Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner. Much of the book is devoted to an exposition of their complementary and intersecting views of the hardship of frontier life. But the book centers on the autobiographical narrative of one such homesteader, Omar H. Morse, son of dispossessed homesteaders in New York, himself a homesteader in Wisconsin and Minnesota who moved four times in his quest for a better life but always found worse--poorer land, smaller acreage, heavier debts. By placing Morse's autobiography first in the book, Marshall accords his source a rare dignity as he assures the centrality of the homesteader's experience in the analysis that follows.

Through Morse's autobiography runs a theme of innocence and experience that is paralleled, Marshall tells us, in English and American popular literature. Morse himself displays an indomitable spirit in the face of his troubles: "A faint ray of Hope of better days still kept the breath of life in my already worn out System and I continued to grope my way onward but not very perceptibly upward." (p. 66) Mortgage and medical bills forced still another move, but nature failed to cooperate and Morse did no better: "I planted my corn--7 acres May 14. We had a frost some time in June which killed corn down to the ground--and another in August which damaged it badly and then in Sept--so the corn crop was a failure--I raised 200 acres of wheat and

cockle [burrs], pigeon grass & other foul stuff and with all in all the crop was worth but little!" (p. 67)

Land Fever offers us multiple perspectives "for the purpose of suggesting the values of a frontier community not fully understood" (p. 177). Omar Morse's narrative comprises the first half of the book. There follows a terse but comprehensive analysis of frontier conditions contemporary to Morse, and then a study of the theme of dispossession in folk song and popular literature. The book concludes with an essay on the values of frontier society, "which, with the notable exception of the economically secure few, had become a transient, often dispossessed culture by the 1890s, when Morse wrote his narrative, and which even yet remains shrouded in its own code of stoic, ethical silence." (p. 3) The appendices contain the Morse family genealogy, Omar Morse's surviving letters, and a remarkable essay entitled "My Opinion of Our War with the Philippines" that shows Morse's populist views concerning a war he considered "unjust unrighteous and unholy." (p. 208)

Marshall shows that for Omar Morse, as for other westering settlers, "pioneering became an economic trap." (p. 53) As times got harder, settlers moved on, but whether to cheaper land or poorer land, the necessity of borrowing against the new claim to pay off a mortgage on the old one made the enterprise perilous. Even at his final remove, Morse was obliged to borrow seed-wheat at 50 percent over four months! Added to that were sheer physical hardships. Morse's wife was sickly and "under the care of the would be medical fraternity, a set of regular money suckers. . . ." (p. 65)

Marshall debunks many of our cherished beliefs about the frontier--the cultural model of the one-room district schoolhouse, the egalitarianism of frontier democracy, the beneficial role of the railroads in deveoping the West, the "friendly village druggist and the kindly untiring country doctor," the abundance of opportunity for willing hands, and most of all, the "everlasting grainfield" metaphor that continued to captivate Morse even as he struggled under the weight of the everlasting mortgage.

"The garden myth," Marshall suggests, 'is an ironist's weapon. . . .' (p. 125) Mediating between the theories of Frederick Jackson Turner and Henry Nash Smith, he explores the "countermyth of the unweeded garden of dispossession" (p. 126), showing that as the boosterism of Thomas Hart Benton promoted the compelling Jeffersonian myth among elites, Filson Boone's narrative--not, as we have too long supposed, Crèvecoeur's Letters--"added a popular, if gamey, taste of the wild" and "fed the aspiring dreams of the pioneers. . . ." (p. 130)

Economic history, geography, land records, and populist theory are all brought to bear on the problems exposed by the homesteader Morse. Marshall shows that a phalanx of hostile forces were ranged against the hopes of the independent homesteader--banks, mortgage speculators, thoroughly corrupt state legislatures and a Congress that was no better. The implications for the family farm today, alluded to throughout the book, are sobering, as they are for the ten-acres-and-independence dream still fostered among us children of the '60s by such magazines as Mother Earth. Marshall explores these implications in Joyce Carol Oates's Garden of Earthly Delight, a novel

that "captures the legacy of the homestead frontier in its migrant farm laborer family, three generations removed from homestead grandparents." The irony is made plain in Oates's title, taken from Bosch's "painting of a post-lapsarian Eden." (p. 139) What we have, therefore, is a cultural failure. In effect, "the struggle to achieve permanence on the land is wasted effort. This is the bitter lesson that Americans could not fully accept yet were unable to deny." (p. 140)

Roger J. Bresnahan

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