

Death Opens Way to New Leadership

Warren G. Harding Would Have Been Renominated Even Against His Will.

Coolidge Can Set Record

By MARK SULLIVAN.
Washington, Aug. 11.—We have now arrived at a sufficient distance from the somber memories of the death of Warren G. Harding to be able to discuss the effect of his death on the fortunes of the republican party in the near future and on the whole political outlook for next year.

If Harding had lived he would have been the next republican nominee. Not that he particularly wished it. On the contrary, his temperament and personal taste wished otherwise. Repeatedly, in the confidence of personal intimacies, he expressed lack of any eagerness of appetite for another term of power. Sometimes he went further and expressed actual reluctance to be again the nominee. On one occasion, in the course of writing a paper intended to be made public, he included a sentence to the effect that, in his belief, the president should serve but one term, and that he would be glad to have the custom begin with himself. He did not say whether he thought the single presidential term should be four years or six years. His mind was not intent on that. It was wholly focused on making public what he meant to be a practically formal abdication, so far as a second term for himself was concerned. He wrote this with his own hand and meant it to reach the public. But before it did so it came to the attention of persons close to him who convinced him that he ought not at that time to make a final commitment of purpose in a field in which other individuals besides himself and other interests had a legitimate stake—his party, his friends and intimates, the good of the party and the possible arising of unforeseen events. And so Harding permitted those few sentences to be eliminated from the paper. They are still in existence in his own handwriting, in the possession of one of his intimates.

No Lust for Power.

Harding did not care for renomination. He did not care for office as such. He had no lust for power. He was more from that trait of character which luxuriates in high office than any other man within the writer's rather large acquaintance with men who have held high positions.

Not only did Harding have no appetite for the enjoyment of power or office as such, he was equally free from another trait which frequently leads men to hold on, to think their continuance in office is indispensable. Harding had no pet theories about the country or the universe. He had no great causes that he wanted to put through. The ship subsidy as a means of creating a great American merchant marine came as close to that sort of thing as anything else that was in Harding's mind, and the ship subsidy had become impossible. Harding had no notion that there was something he must do to save the world. That was not his conception of the presidency or his relation to it. He rather thought of himself as an engineer who mounts the cab at one station, pilots it safely and on schedule time to the next, and then steps down. He never had the faintest notion that he was any better man than the next who would step into the cab. He had a serene confidence that the country was full of Marions and of men from Marion who could lead the country as well as he could.

Would Take Renomination.

Nevertheless, although Harding did not care for renomination, he was going to take it. When the subject was discussed with his intimates last February he said that time certainly was too early for him to make an announcement. That was the only basis for the statement widely circulated then that he had definitely decided to be a candidate for re-election. What he actually said was that he would not then make any formal announcement and that he would wait before taking a formal public position one way or the other until about the time that congress should come into session again next December. Actually, however, the thing was settled in his own mind, in the minds of his friends and in the minds of most of the party leaders. The consensus of their discussion was that Harding must take the renomination, even though personally that course should not coincide with his individual taste. It was felt that the needs of the party made it imperative. For him to step aside could not fail to be interpreted by his political enemies and by much more of the public as being in the nature of a confession, both as to his own administration and as to the party generally—a confession which would amount to saying that the party had not done very well these four years, but would ask the public to give them another four years under a different leader. Such an attitude, the party leaders knew, would in itself make for failure in the election.

There was an additional reason why the older party leaders held the program of renomination. If he had stepped aside there would have been a scramble for the nomination. And there is too much danger—as the older party leaders looked at it—of such a scramble having an unfortunate outcome. They thought that in the event of such a free-for-all contest the nomination, together with the control of the party machinery, might fall into the hands of some of the newer and more radical elements. They felt it was better that the party should stand by Harding and Harding's policies, even though in doing so they might be compelled to expect to "take a licking." To "take a licking" occasionally is part of the accepted discipline of the more stable party leaders. They thought of the republican party as essentially conservative; they knew that the conservative party cannot possibly win every election, and they were entirely willing to accept defeat in 1924 as one of the ordinary incidents of destiny rather than let the party fall into the control of other elements.

Situation Changed.

Let us now see to what extent the situation has been changed through the removal of Harding, not by his own action but by a somber fate. Immediately after Harding's death it was a common assumption, in such discussion as took place within the limits of decent sentiment, that his death, politically speaking, was equivalent to his abdication. That is to say, that on Harding's death the situation became a free-for-all race, just as it would have become if Harding, still living, had stepped aside. It was the assumption that just as soon as a sufficient time should elapse to escape doing violence to sentiment some half a dozen hats would be thrown into the ring from such men—as Hiram Johnson, ex-Governor of Illinois, Gen. Leonard Wood, Senator James Watson, ex-Senator Albert Beveridge, Senator Borah, Governor Pinchot of Pennsylvania, Senator Wadsworth of New York, Senator Medill McCormick of Illinois and some others.

It may be that this is the correct assumption. It may be that as things stand a week after Harding's death the republican presidential situation for next year is a free-for-all race. It may be that one or some of all these men, or other men, or the friends of some of them may shortly make formal announcement of candidacies for the republican nomination.

Coolidge and Roosevelt.

It is worth while, however, to consider an entirely different alternative, centering wholly about the personality of President Coolidge and his immediate future. This possibility is that President Coolidge may achieve toward the party that same inevitability which the dead president had. Those who follow this theory base it largely on the analogy to Roosevelt in 1904.

But it must be remembered that the time when Roosevelt stepped into the presidency as the successor of McKinley was only six months after the administration of McKinley had begun; whereas Coolidge makes his entry under similar circumstances two years and five months after the administration had begun. To put it in other words, Roosevelt, when he ascended to the presidency in 1901, had two years and nine months before the following presidential nomination—two years and nine months in which to entrench himself and to let his acts so commend him that his renomination to a second term became inevitable. Coolidge, on the other hand, has but 10 months in which to achieve this sort of entrenchment in party organization and in public favor. Coolidge took office on the 3d of August. The republican nominating convention will take place during the first 10 days of next June, which gives Coolidge but 10 months to accomplish what Roosevelt had two years and nine months to accomplish in.

Everything depends on whether Coolidge by his own efforts, or by the course of events, shall accom-

plish this elevation in popular favor. In a sense, the death of Harding does what many republican party leaders would have been willing or even glad to do, if it had been possible, with Harding still living. In this sense Harding's death has the effect of taking him out of the situation without at the same time carrying the liabilities which would have been inherent in any stepping aside by Harding of his own will. Such a stepping aside by Harding would, uncapably have carried implications of weakness. It would have implied on the part of Harding and the party an attitude which would have seemed to say: "We confess that we are not now in high favor; we confess that we fear defeat; but we are changing horses and we ask the country to give us a trial with the new leader."

Such an attitude of the republican leaders were unwilling to take and would not have taken. They had discussed it and had decided to avoid it. But by the death of Harding this change of leadership is accomplished without any implications in the nature of confession as to the past or fear of failure in the future. The party now has a new leader without any liabilities. He has all the assets of the party, while on the liability side the sheet is perfectly clean. Coolidge, if it is possible within so short a space as ten months, can make an entirely new record for the administration and for the party. Not only are the president and the party now free from all the weight of criticism that has grown up in two and a half years, but in addition to that, if President Coolidge has the genius to do it, and if the course of events is reasonably favorable, it is a possibility for Coolidge and the party to make a record which, instead of being the subject of criticism and disfavor proceeding from the present state of mind of the country, may give satisfaction to that state of mind.

Time Is Short.

Of course, the time is very short. The party record and the whole body of facts upon which the public will pass next year consists of the individual acts of the president coupled with the acts of the administration generally, and in addition it consists of the actions of the republican senate and house. Not only that, but Coolidge will only be able to make the maximum of favorable impression by asserting a leadership of his party in congress and the country. Coolidge's individual acts as president, no matter how well conceived or how happy the circumstances, alone can hardly make up a record sufficient to be the basis of an appeal to the country for the election of a republican president, senate and house next year. To his individual

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