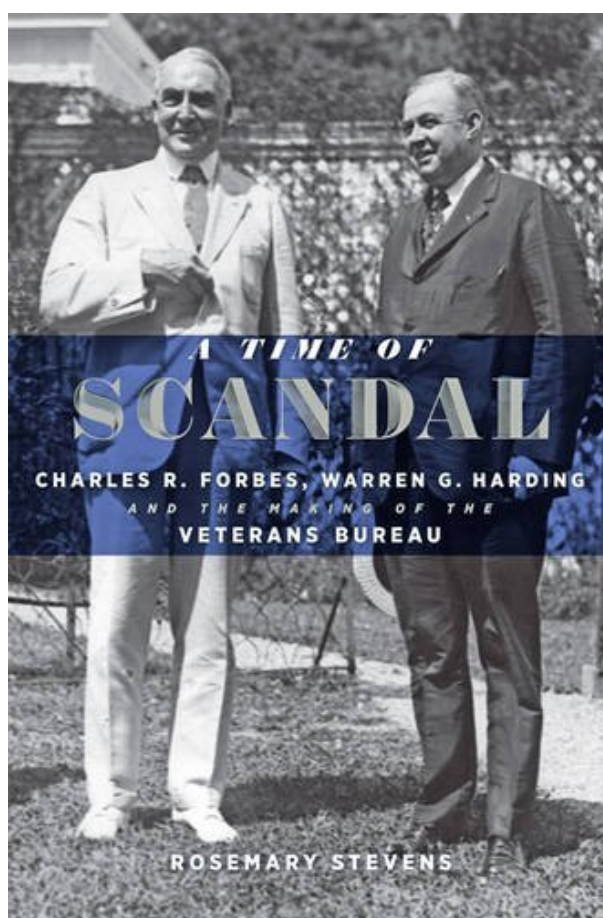
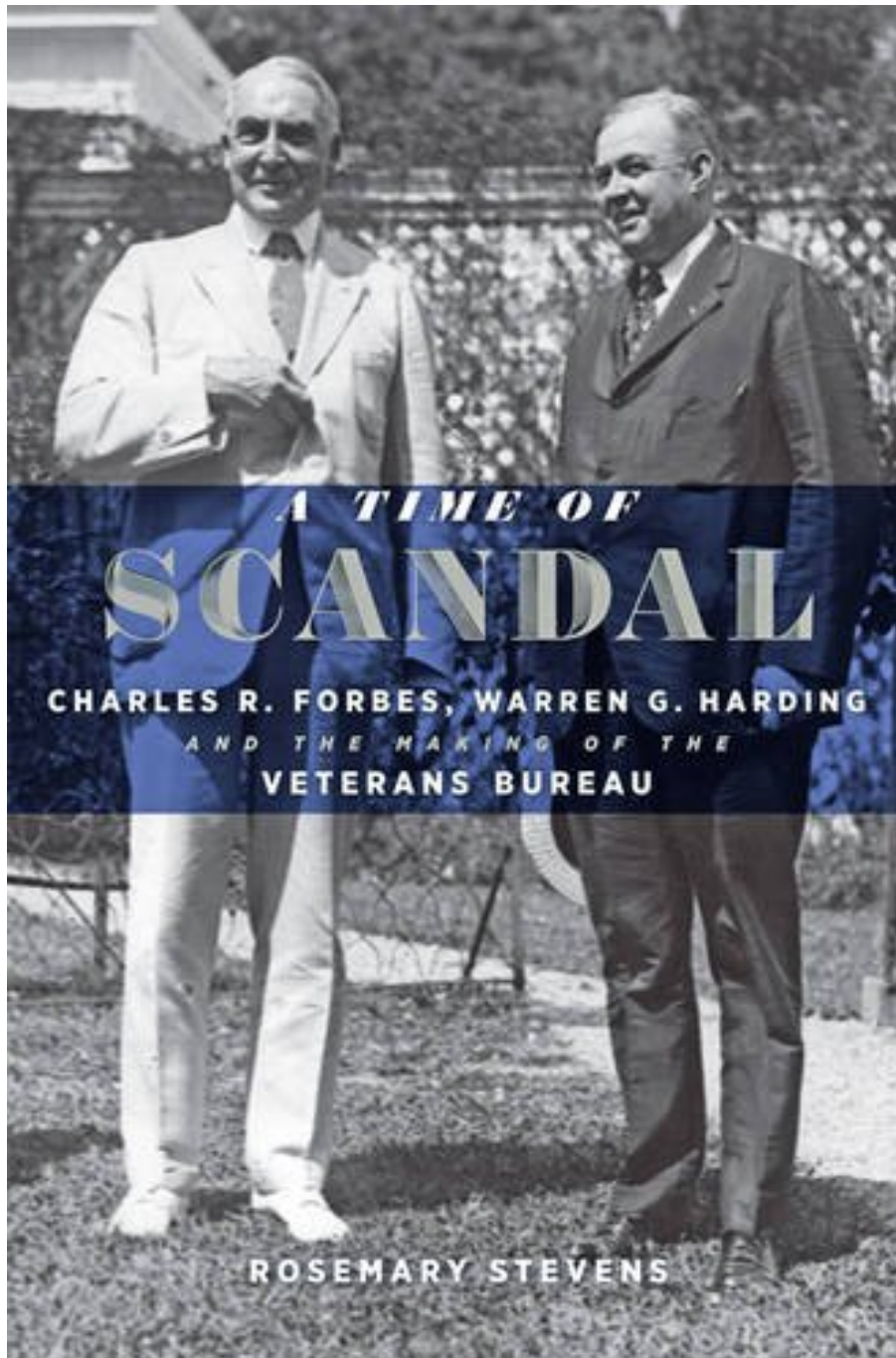


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MAKING OF THE VETERANS BUREAU BY  
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In the early 1920s, with the nation still recovering from World War I, President Warren G. Harding founded a huge new organization to treat disabled veterans: the US Veterans Bureau, now known as the Department of Veterans Affairs. He appointed his friend, decorated veteran Colonel Charles R. Forbes, as founding director. Forbes lasted in the position for only eighteen months before stepping down under a cloud of criticism and suspicion. In 1926?after being convicted of conspiracy to defraud the federal government by rigging government contracts?he was sent to Leavenworth Penitentiary. Although he was known in his day as a drunken womanizer, and as a corrupt, betraying toady of a weak, blind-sided president, the question persists: was Forbes a criminal or a scapegoat?

Historian Rosemary Stevens tells Forbes's story anew, drawing on previously untapped records to reveal his role in America's initial and ongoing commitment to veterans. She explores how Forbes's rise and fall in Washington illuminates President Harding's efforts to bring business efficiency to government. She also examines the Veterans Bureau scandal in the context of class, professionalism, ethics, and etiquette in a rapidly changing world. Most significantly, Stevens proposes a fascinating revisionist view of both Forbes and Harding?and raises questions about not only the validity but the source of their respective reputations. They did not defraud the government of billions of dollars, Stevens convincingly documents, and do not deserve the reputation they have carried for a hundred years.

Packed with vibrant characters?conniving friends, FBI agents, and rival politicians split by sectional and ideological interests as well as gamblers, revelers, and wronged wives? A Time of Scandal will appeal to anyone interested in political gossip, presidential politics, the "Ohio Gang," and the 1920s.

- Sales Rank: #561014 in Books
- Brand: Stevens Rosemary
- Published on: 2016-11-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.23" w x 6.00" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 408 pages

## Features

- A Time of Scandal Charles R Forbes Warren G Harding and the Making of the Veterans Bureau

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By Wittgenstein

The story is interesting, if a bit complicated, and the author deserves credit for extensive research beyond what has been done before in understanding the scandals of the Harding Administration. But my oh my, where are the editors who are supposed to help turn well researched histories into readable histories? This book badly needed one or more.

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Engagingly written, enjoyable read. Timely.

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"A Time of Scandal" was written by Rosemary Stevens, professor emeritus of the history of sociology and science at the University of Pennsylvania, who specializes in the history of American health care, as a revision of the history of the Department of Veterans Affairs. In 1925, Col. Charles R. Forbes was found guilty, along with Midwestern construction contractor John W. Thompson, of conspiracy to defraud the federal government "by rigging government contracts to build hospitals for military veterans of World War I." Stevens believes that Forbes almost certainly did not commit this crime but was caught in the anti-corruption furor and personal ambitions that swept the nation, the Justice Department, and Capitol Hill following the death of Pres. Warren Harding in 1923.

The Veteran's Bureau scandal, Teapot Dome (Department of Interior) and the prosecution of former Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty informed the reputation of the Harding administration as corrupt and of Pres. Harding as ineffectual and naïve. These scandals have been the subject of reanalysis in recent years, and Stevens is perfectly positioned to take another look at Charles R. Forbes' 18 months at the Veteran's Bureau and his fall from grace. Senator Warren Harding met Forbes in Hawaii, where Forbes was superintendent of public works. The men became friends, and Harding offered Forbes two positions in his presidential administration, before he accepted the directorship of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, consolidated into the Veteran's Bureau in August 1921.

Forbes' task was to integrate the fiscal, medical, and educational cultures of disparate government agencies into a consolidated system that would serve as a "department of public welfare" for veterans. Forbes may not have possessed the ideal temperament for the job, though he was enthusiastic, tireless, and overworked. The scale of the undertaking was daunting, and Forbes regularly clashed with White House physician and Harding confidant Gen. Charles E. Sawyer over the role of the Veterans Bureau. Then Forbes foolishly became friendly with Washington bootlegger, swindler, and extortionist Elias Harvey Mortimer and his ill-treated wife Katherine, when Mortimer tried to set himself up as a middle man in some hospital construction contracts.

That sealed Forbes' fate, as Mortimer became an informant and witness-for-hire for the Justice Department in order to save himself from prosecution for bootlegging. As prosecuting corruption, real or imagined, in government became the fashion, Mortimer, a brazen sociopath and inveterate liar, was a convenient weapon to wield against Forbes –and in the promotion of certain politicians and public prosecutors. Senate hearings were convened, steered by Committee Counsel John F. O'Ryan. Then Forbes was prosecuted by Assistant Attorney General John W.H. Crim for allegedly taking a bribe from Mortimer in Chicago. Against all sense, the testimony of other witnesses, and without any other evidence of fraud, judge and jury believed Mortimer's accusations.

Stevens presents Charles Forbes as perhaps ill-suited to the job and foolish in his friends but a competent and dedicated man who was sacrificed for the betterment of the Veterans Bureau and victimized by the politics and personal ambitions of the day. She bases her analysis on official records, including contemporary investigations into Veterans Bureau affairs under Forbes, and on some personal papers preserved by Forbes' family and that of his third wife. Unfortunately, most of Pres. Warren Harding's personal papers, which might have exonerated both the president and Forbes of charges of incompetence, were destroyed after the president's death. But it is clear that the prosecution did not have evidence of fraud apart from Mortimer's discredited testimony.

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