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The Making of the “First Dog”:
President Warren G. Harding and Laddie Boy

ABSTRACT
This paper traces the history of the cultural icon of the “First Dog” of the United States back to the administration of President Warren G. Harding (1921-1923). It briefly explores technological and socio-cultural factors—including the early-twentieth-century cult of human and nonhuman celebrities—that laid a basis for the acceptance of Laddie Boy, Harding’s Airedale terrier, as the third member of the First Family and a celebrity in his own right. Following Laddie Boy, First Dogs would greet and entertain visitors to the White House, pose for the press, make public appearances, and “talk.” While recognizing that Laddie Boy’s personality was essential to his success at the White House, the paper also documents the steps taken by President Harding, his wife Florence Kling Harding, and the American press to establish Laddie Boy as the First Dog of the land. The paper argues that the construction of the cultural icon of the First Dog was not simply a political ploy to humanize the President but more a calculated attempt by President Harding to further animal welfare.

Although show rings in the United States produce nonhuman animals labeled as best of their breed, there is one major way for a dog or cat to rise to the top rung of his/her specie—that is, to be adopted by an American President. “First Dogs” and “First Cats” share the private and public spaces occupied by their keepers. They live with, serve, and
entertain the presidential family and the American public primarily in the White House, at Camp David, and at private presidential retreats. As members of the First Families, First Dogs and First Cats carry with them the aura and power of the White House. They greet foreign dignitaries and school-children, pose for photographs, visit nursing homes and hospitals, correspond with the public, dictate books, and conduct tours of the White House in person and on camera.

Although American presidents have lived with nonhuman animals since the beginning of the American republic, the “First Dog” is a cultural construct that dates back to the administration of President Warren G. Harding (1921-1923). As this paper argues, Harding’s Laddie Boy was the first of the modern First Dogs. In private, he was a family dog who offered the Hardings companionship and emotional support. In public, he was a celebrity dog who enhanced the First Family’s image as a kind and nurturing unit, sharing the spotlight and burdens of performance that came with the White House and helping to further one of the Hardings’ special causes—animal welfare.

**Historical Context for the Emergence of the “First Dog”**

A confluence of cultural, technological, and personal factors led to the emergence of Laddie Boy as the “First Dog of the land.” The early twentieth century saw the rise of what Parrish (1992) has called the “cult of personalities.” Americans—for whom “politicians, military leaders, captains of industry, inventors, and explorers had long been icons”—became fascinated with “a new array of social heroes” (Parrish, pp. 158, 159), ranging from such silent screen stars as Charlie Chaplin to Babe Ruth and other sports figures. By the 1920s, the American public gaze readily focused on nonhuman as well as human celebrities. Remarkable fanfare surrounded a select group of canine celebrities of the early 1920s, including Stubby the war dog, Strongheart the “first canine screen star of significant consequence” (Silverman, 2001, p. 16), and Laddie Boy. Although a certain degree of “modern . . . canine celebrity” traces back to the nineteenth century (Craske, 2000, p. 45), it took the mass media of the twentieth century to market celebrity dogs so that some would not only receive an abundance of fan letters but also be expected to respond to them.
By the 1920s, photoengraving, the radio, motion picture camera, and other major technological advances had provided essential underpinnings for the cult of celebrities and, more specifically, intensified the spotlight cast on the American Presidents and their families. An increasingly competitive press eagerly interviewed, photographed, and filmed American Presidents from the presidential campaign stage through their lives in and after the White House. “Even President Coolidge [Harding’s successor], otherwise a traditionalist, was forced to recognize the new ground rules of cultural influence, by which the creation of a suitable public image had become a major component of social and political life” (Parrish, 1992, p. 159).

Presidents, moreover, were not the sole targets of White House news coverage. Anthony (2000) has argued that keen public interest in the Presidents’ families extends back to George Washington’s administration (p. 14). Certainly, by the second half of the nineteenth century, some American journalists had come to see the entire First Family, their private and public lives, as fair game. Events following President Grover Cleveland’s marriage in 1886 to Frances Folsom portended the modern, intensified struggle between First Families and the press over privacy rights. Journalists followed the Clevelands on their honeymoon and filed stories covering their first day together—from their early morning appearance through their evening stroll. Although some American editors condemned this coverage as intrusive, the New York World “insist[ed] that the President is public property; that it is perfectly legitimate to send correspondents and reporters to follow him when he goes on a journey, and to keep watch over him and his family” (cited in Nelson, 1998, pp. 8, 9).

The First Family, 1921-1923: President Harding, Florence Kling Harding, and Laddie Boy

The early-twentieth-century cult of celebrities, which extended fame to select dogs and made scrutiny of First Families even more defensible, set the stage for the emergence of the First Dog. Still, the bulk of the credit for engineering Laddie Boy’s rise to fame must go to President Harding, his wife Florence Kling Harding, and the White House reporters who became important chroniclers and arbiters of the First Dog. Harding—a former newspaper editor—
publisher and an intellectually modest man known for his ability to compromise—came to the White House in 1921 with a substantial victory over his Democratic opponent, James Cox. The American public saw Harding as an attractive successor to President Woodrow Wilson, the intellectual and formal president who had led the United States through World War I and then tried, unsuccessfully, to push the country into the League of Nations.

The public accepted the new President, First Lady, and Laddie Boy as a loving and folksy First Family. Supporting this favorable image were idealized accounts of the Hardings’ marriage, which kept the President’s extramarital affairs out of the public eye and obscured Florence Harding’s first “marriage.” Implicitly accepted in these accounts was the inclusion of a dog, rather than a child or grandchild, as the third member of the First Family.

By 1921, Harding was in his late 50s; his wife was in her early 60s; and their 30-year marriage was childless. Florence Harding had a son from an earlier relationship, Marshall De Wolfe. He had died in 1915 after fathering two children. The Hardings, however, avoided publicly embracing their grandson and granddaughter as members of the First Family. As Anthony (1998, pp. 23-30, 223-227, 276-277) has explained, neither child visited the White House during the Harding administration. The circumstances surrounding the birth and life of Marshall De Wolfe were painful for Florence Harding to remember and, in her opinion, her private business. After conceiving Marshall in 1880, she had eloped with Henry De Wolfe and apparently lived two years as his common-law wife. Abandoned by De Wolfe and finding it difficult to support herself and son as a piano teacher, she had turned over the care of Marshall to her father.

Also guaranteed to raise eyebrows in the 1920s was the often-obscured fact that the Hardings had married three years before Henry De Wolfe’s death (Anthony, 1998, p. 226). Given a choice between realizing the political capital of two grandchildren frolicking at the White House and a spotlight deflected from her first “marriage,” Florence Harding chose the latter. Part—but only a part—of Laddie Boy’s story, then, is that he frolicked at the White House in place of the De Wolfe grandchildren. As he did so, he helped to satisfy the Hardings’ emotional needs and testified publicly to the First Couple’s much-touted loving kindness.
The public acclaim that had surrounded the Hardings through August 1923, when the President died on a trip to Alaska, dissipated quickly as more light fell on Harding’s marital infidelities and the corruption within his administration that had produced the Teapot Dome and Veterans’ Bureau scandals. Many historians subsequently dismissed Harding as a presidential failure, minimized the accomplishments of Florence Harding, and seemed to forget Laddie Boy as the pioneering First Dog. Recent historical scholarship, however, has been more favorable to President Harding, with Ferrell (1996) concluding that “the Harding [political] scandals did not touch Harding in any serious way” and that Harding enjoyed “considerable success” in his public policy (pp. 130, vii, viii). A late-twentieth-century biography rediscovered Florence Harding as a woman of great achievement who enjoyed a “superb partnership” with her husband and used her influence as First Lady to promote the welfare of veterans as well as women, children, and animals (Anthony, 1998, pp. xi, xii, 41, 325-336).

Advancing this revisionist history, the present paper studies Laddie Boy as the first of the major First Dogs and the Hardings as the first presidential couple to appreciate the extent to which sharing the White House spotlight with a dog could help to satisfy the demands that the American press imposed on the First Family, enhance a President’s image, and foster animal welfare.

As the longtime editor of the Marion Star, Harding sympathized with the media’s need for presidential news stories and photographs. He also understood the power of the press and, as Truman (1969, p. 44) and Rowan and Janis (1997, p. 9) have pointed out, used Laddie Boy as a symbol of the “return to normalcy,” defined on the domestic level as the simple and homey life, the image of which readily included a family dog.

Harding, a product of the humane education movement of the nineteenth century, also used Laddie Boy to promote animal welfare. As a child, Harding avidly had read animal stories and wept over descriptions of abuse of non-humans. He was part of a generation that taught that a boy was “almost incomplete” without a “canine companion” (Beard, 1882/1983, p. 223). Harding not only imbibed these pro-dog and pro-animal sentiments but also expressed them publicly. In 1913, he mourned the death of Hub, his Boston terrier, in...
an editorial he wrote for the Marion Star. He “voiced” his palpable grief over “broken companionship” and argued for the possibility that a dog has a soul or at least “the essence of soul” (Harding, 1913).

As a national leader, Harding contributed to the animal welfare movement by using his public standing to inspire the kind of respect for nonhuman animals captured in the “Hub” editorial. On Inauguration Day, he talked to President Wilson about the feelings of a dying elephant (Pollio, 1921); in 1923, he confessed to long-lasting remorse over his failure to save an “innocent” family gobbler from the block (“Harding, 8, Caused Death,” 1923); and, during 1921-1923, he and Laddie Boy continually witnessed to the strength and benefits of the human-dog bond.

Because the Hardings never claimed that Laddie Boy was a dog unlike any other or that the President’s close bond with Laddie Boy was unique, appreciation for America’s First Dog was appreciation for dogs in general. Indeed, when Harding learned of Dick, a resident alien’s dog condemned to death under a Pennsylvania state law requiring that “dog-owners” be citizens, the President successfully argued for Dick’s life, writing that he understood the situation because he too shared the love of a good dog (“Harding Appealed,” 1922).

Promotion of Laddie Boy would have meant little had nature and nurture not combined to fit the dog for survival in the frenetic environment of the White House. Although present-day Americans commemorate such First Dogs as Fala, Him and Her, and Millie, the stories—and even names of the dogs who did not make it in the White House—largely have been forgotten. These include dogs sent as unwelcome gifts to Presidents and immediately returned as well as untrained or excitable dogs whose brief stays at the White House resulted in placement in less stressful environments.

Caswell Laddie Boy—a pedigreed Airedale whose father was Champion Tintern Tip Top—had the kind of personality and early training that seem to have been key ingredients in the making of many of America’s premier First Dogs. All evidence suggests that he was an intelligent, healthy, and confident terrier who had a strong presence and enjoyed the attention of media and public alike. Born on July 28, 1920, he came to the White House with about seven months of training. A published letter to Laddie Boy—written osten-
ibly by Tintern Tip Top on his son's second birthday—made the claim that this training helped to explain his success. Applauding Laddie Boy's "unaffected, simple dignity," his father told him: "your behavior . . . rewards us for the many months we gave to your youthful training" ("Father of Laddie Boy," 1922).

**The Hardings’ Love for Animals: The Presidential Campaign of 1920**

The myth-making surrounding President Harding, which eventually would extend to Laddie Boy, began to solidify during the presidential campaign of 1920. Harding was one of the first presidential candidates to benefit from careful manipulation of the modern media. As Morello (2001) observed, the year 1920 “look[ed] like the dawn of the first modern information age” (p. 4), from whence major advertising campaigns could—and would—be mounted to “sell” presidential candidates. Between 1910 and 1930, a roughly 75% increase in the circulation rates of American daily newspapers took the number of copies of papers published from 22.4 to 39.6 million a day (Emery & Emery, 1996, p. 293). By August 1920, women had the right to vote in federal elections.

To reach an electorate that had grown increasingly more informed and diverse, the Republican Party hired a professional advertiser, Albert D. Lasker of Chicago’s Lord & Thomas advertising agency. Lasker “packaged Harding in such a way as to help humanize him, magnifying those assets the strategists thought most appealing” (Morello, 2001, p. 50).

Although Morello did not discuss Harding’s love for dogs as a theme in the campaign of 1920, supporters used the theme here and—even more so—during the Harding presidency. In the biography he published to boost Harding during the presidential campaign, Chapple (1920) stressed Harding’s love for dogs. Chapple noted that the public was interested in “the personality of the candidate” and that “anecdotal bits day by day [had] added to favorable impressions upon which his [Harding’s] popularity continued to gain” (p. 107). In a chapter of the biography entitled “Anecdotal Close-Ups,” there was a section on Harding’s love for dogs.
Echoing a major theme of the humane movement, Chapple (1920) emphasized that Harding “in fact . . . loves all animals, and his kindness to animals was the same as to people.” The supporting anecdote presented by Chapple came from Harding’s above-mentioned editorial on Hub. Withholding from readers the disturbing facts that Hub had died of poisoning and that Harding’s editorial had attacked callous humans for killing an innocent dog, Chapple sketched a humanizing portrait of Harding with Hub as his “inseparable companion.” Readers were told that Harding always had had a dog and that his editorial tribute to Hub was “worthy of a place in literature” (p. 110).

By the presidential race of 1920, the humane movement, which stressed trans-species kindness, had moved into the American mainstream. Chapple’s sketch of Harding’s editorial on Hub may have helped to convince American animal advocates, especially the large contingent of women among them who would be voting for the first time in a presidential election, that “whatever else may be said of Warren G. Harding, he is truly one of us” (Chapple, 1920, p. 110). During the campaign, moreover, Florence Harding touted her sincere interest in animal welfare. Interviewed for an article on her husband’s love for baseball, the politically astute and liberated Harding stated that among her lifetime aspirations were managing a pennant-winning baseball team and heading “a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals and children with enough money to rigorously enforce the law” (Barry, 1920, p. 43).

**Laddie Boy Becomes “First Dog of the Land”**

When, at the beginning of his administration, Harding adopted Laddie Boy, he found an American press eager to document the dog’s life at the White House and willing to continue to see Harding’s bond with dogs as key evidence of his kind and homey nature. The *New York Times* quickly took the lead: An editorial analyzed the uses and symbolism of the First Dog; news articles reported Laddie Boy’s antics. Writing under the title, “Human Mr. Harding” (1921) just a week into the President’s term of office, the *Times* editors noted that, although the Hardings brought no children to the White House, news correspondents could “weave stories around” Laddie Boy. “Laddie Boy’s pranks will all be chronicled. He is much pictured.” Describing Harding as a “dog-loving President,” the *Times* concluded that dog-keepers
now stood solidly behind him and speculated that Harding “must be a sturdy friend of the S. P. C. A.”

Linking Harding with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Times thus astutely cast the new phenomenon of a First Dog in the context of the American animal welfare movement—a movement that inspired empathy for Harding and his dog and would use Laddie Boy for its own purposes. The Times, following the main message of the humane movement, integrated Harding’s love for dogs into the image of a president who “cannot help being kindly, simple, neighborly and genuine.” Harding was not a president who worried about formalities, the White House shrubbery, or even a rug tattered by Laddie Boy. Rather he was a president who welcomed the public to the White House grounds, went out on the portico at midnight to talk to reporters, and would reprimand an errant Laddie Boy no more harshly than with a shake of his finger and a genial “bad dog!” This was a president whom “dog lovers have already put . . . on a pedestal,” the “human Mr. Harding.”

In article after article published during the early months of the Harding presidency, American newspapers recounted and interpreted Laddie Boy’s activities. A page-one story in the New York Times (“Harding Begins Work,” 1921), which reported on Harding’s first full day in the White House, included the capitalized subtitle, “Gets Airedale as Mascot.” According to the story, the President and his dog took up tenure in the White House on the same day, and Laddie Boy became an instant celebrity.

The Airedale, a gift from Marshall Sheppey of Toledo, Ohio, arrived at the White House as the President was conferring with his cabinet secretaries. The dog was immediately brought to Harding, who “with many manifestations of pleasure . . . led his new pet into his office, where he made himself at home.” But Laddie Boy clearly was being cast in a more complicated role than that of a President’s “pet.” On that very first day the dog made contact with the White House press, photographers, and sightseers. Harding himself “brought . . . Laddie Boy out and exhibited him to a group of newspaper correspondents. ‘You see,’ he said laughingly, ‘I am going to have near me at least one friend who won’t talk.’” That same day, Laddie Boy took a tour of the White House offices and grounds, during which he “posed for dozens of
President Harding with Pet Dog Laddie, 1922.
cameras." The Times account related that the dog was “already a great favorite with Mr. and Mrs. Harding” and with the American public touring the White House grounds. Sightseers were reported as hoping to catch, first, a glimpse of the Hardings and, second, a glimpse of Laddie Boy (“Harding Begins Work”).

Contributing to the instantaneousness and depth of Laddie Boy’s acceptance as the third member of the presidential family were his careful introduction to the American public, his breed, and his very name. As the account in the Times made clear, although Laddie Boy entered the White House as a gift, Harding was not only expecting him but also looking forward to his arrival.

Too, Harding and the White House reporters knew how to introduce the dog to the American public without offending its more anthrocentric segment and without trivializing the human-dog bond. Harding, after all, laughed as he described Laddie Boy as a close-mouthed friend.

In this post-World War I period, it perhaps was just as important that Laddie Boy the Airedale conjured up visions of recent war heroes, human and nonhuman alike. The name “Laddie Boy” recalled the many soldiers who had fought in the war and who, more specifically, had been honored in the song, “Good Bye and Luck Be With You Laddie Boy,” released by the Gus Edwards Music House in 1917 (Cobb, 1917). That Americans made this connection was suggested in a letter of June 1921 that the Woman’s Press Club of New York City sent to Florence Harding on behalf of the wounded veterans of World War I or, as the women described them, “the First Laddies in the Land.”

Laddie Boy, moreover, benefited from the respect and gratitude earned by the dogs who had served in World War I, many of whom had come from the terrier breeds, including Airedales. Prompted by humane leaders, the Hardings assured that both nonhuman and human war heroes were honored in post-war America. In October 1921, the couple planted an elm tree on the White House grounds in “memory of all the animals who perished during the world war” (“President Plants Tree,” 1921). Representatives of major animal welfare groups participated in this ceremony. The American Red Star Animal Relief—organized in 1916 as a department of the American Humane Association to help the United States Veterinary Corps with the care of war animals (Shultz, 1924, pp. 60-63)—promised to donate a copper star to mark the tree as a memorial.
As noted, some canine war heroes were accorded individual celebrity status. In 1921-1922, the New York Times carried stories on Laddie Boy and Stubby, the bulldog mix who had served with distinction in France (“Pershing Honors Dog,” 1921; “Hero Dog,” 1922). Originally, the mascot of the 102nd Connecticut Infantry, Stubby had evolved into an unofficial war dog, serving as a sentry, comforting the wounded, and even helping to capture a German spy. In the postwar period, the dog became a life member of the American Legion, American Red Cross, and Y.M.C.A. (Lemish, 1996, pp. 24-26). General John Pershing and President Harding decorated him; veterans groups across the United States celebrated his war service (“Hero Dog”). Stubby was “an honored warrior, a fascinating example of how soldiers valued their dogs” (Lemish, p. 25). At the same time, Stubby was a tool of the American animal welfare movement, a powerful example of the strength and benefits of the human-dog bond. As the New York Times explained, the gold, engraved medal that Pershing bestowed upon Stubby in July 1921 came not from the U.S. army but from the American Humane Education Society, of which (the Times noted) Pershing and Florence Harding were members (“Pershing Honors Dog”).

It was at this propitious moment in the history of American dogs—as Stubby, other war dogs, and the early film dogs were realizing canine celebrity status and the American humane movement was capitalizing on that status—that the Hardings groomed the popular Laddie Boy as the first of America’s “First Dogs.” As one of his earliest presidential acts, Harding created the unofficial post of “Master of Hounds.” William X. Jackson, an African American who had served as a White House messenger since the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt, was “deputized to the job” (“Master,” 1921).

Jackson brought to his new position prior experience as an unofficial animal caretaker (of Quentin Roosevelt’s pony, President Howard Taft’s cow, and President Wilson’s sheep). Although as of March 11 Jackson was in charge of Laddie Boy alone, an English bulldog was expected to join the “pack” when “old enough to begin its public career” (“Master”). Jackson primarily worked behind the scenes to train, feed, and walk Laddie Boy, and later he cared for the dog when Laddie Boy remained at the White House during lengthy presidential trips. Always ready to step aside to let dog and President bask in the limelight, Jackson, nevertheless, found that his opinions on Laddie Boy mattered to reporters, and he diplomatically contributed to the Laddie
Boy lore. Even before his appointment as Master of the Hounds, Jackson had put into his own words what would become a requirement for a First Dog—that the dog recognize presidential leadership. “An Airedale knows only one master,” Jackson had told reporters, “and in the President Laddie Boy recognizes his master” (“Harding Spends Sunday,” 1921).

On the day following announcement of Jackson’s elevation to Master of the Hounds, newspapers reported on Laddie Boy’s performance of his first major trick: The dog had fetched the morning newspapers for Harding. Although this was not an unusual canine accomplishment, coverage of the event revealed how difficult it was for the American press to see Laddie Boy as an ordinary dog. Reporters would not or could not write simply that Laddie Boy had learned a new trick. The New York Times described Laddie Boy’s carrying the newspapers to the President as a “stunt” and reported that the Airedale had worked on the stunt for several days and now that he had perfected it, he was “the proudest dog in Washington.” Other aspects of the coverage of this event suggested that Laddie Boy rapidly had become the first of the major presidential dogs. The Times’s article on the stunt bore the title “‘Laddie Boy’ a Newsboy” (1921), from which Harding’s name was absent. Thus, the Times assumed that Laddie Boy already was a household name and the dog, a celebrity in his own right. From Laddie Boy on, the White House dogs had very public names, and the most prominent of them went by those names, often devoid of any reference to the Presidents to whom they were attached.

The description of Laddie Boy as a “newsboy” spoke to the socio-cultural complexities of the drive of the American press to enhance the dog’s standing by attaching to him practical value. Laddie Boy was described as the President’s bodyguard (“Human Mr. Harding,” 1921), mascot, a newsboy, and a White House messenger. Thus “‘Laddie Boy’ a Newsboy” (1921) proclaimed that “‘Laddie Boy’ qualified as White House messenger as well as mascot today.” The reference to Laddie Boy as a newsboy is understandable given the Hardings’ background in publishing. They may have viewed Laddie Boy as in some ways similar to the newsboys who had worked under them at the Marion Star. According to Anthony (1998, pp. 49-51), Florence Harding was known for strictness with the newsboys as well as respect for those with promise.
Still, descriptions of Laddie Boy as a newsboy, a position dominated by boys and men of the lower social classes, and as a White House messenger, a position then open to African-American men, invite social analysis. Was the message that, in some respects, a First Dog enjoyed the same standing as the marginalized men of his time? Indeed, Laddie Boy—greater than an ordinary dog but less than a fully privileged human—seems to have been assigned his place in a hierarchy based on species, race, class, and gender (Laddie Boy was never compared to girls or women).

From April through September 1921, American newspapers covered a second White House dog. This was Oh Boy, the dog mentioned at the time of Jackson’s appointment as Master of the Hounds. Oh Boy was a pedigreed, white, English bulldog who was born on Harding’s Inauguration Day and presented as a gift to the President (“Laddie Boy Gets Playmate,” 1921).

Delivered to Harding in mid-April, Oh Boy lived originally in the White House garage. Only in August 1921 did the press (“Oh Boy Graduates,” 1921) announce that the bulldog had finished his “apprenticeship” and “graduate[d]... from garage to berth in [the] White House kennels.” As the New York Times (“Colleague,” 1921) put it, Oh Boy had finally “completed his novitiate” and been “formally accepted as a privileged White House pet.” A key distinction between a “White House pet” and a dog just living on the White House grounds was the ability to fulfill public responsibilities, which for First Dogs from the administrations of Harding through George W. Bush would include greeting Presidents upon their return from trips outside Washington. Thus, the Times (“Colleague”) announced that Oh Boy, having “come into his own,” would be on hand to welcome Harding home from his vacation in New England.

By the end of September, however, Oh Boy had joined the ranks of the would-be First Dogs whose failure to adjust to the White House resulted in displacement to less public environments and near historical invisibility. Providing a metaphorical account of the dog’s banishment, the New York Tribune (“Mrs. Harding’s Bull Pup,” 1921) wrote of his having “failed to make a hit in [the] White House league in six weeks’ try-out” and of his having been “sent back to the minors.” This sketchy account, which did not implicate the Hardings or the bulldog breed, offered little explanation of Oh Boy’s failure beyond the statements that he was immature and “didn’t snap into it...
quickly enough.” The Tribune concluded that Oh Boy needed “further seasoning” and that if he “makes good he will come back and be reinstated as Mrs. Harding’s pet.”

Oh Boy’s banishment, which proved permanent, helps to elucidate the factors that underlay Laddie Boy’s success and to deepen analysis of the cultural meaning of the “First Dog.” Oh Boy’s entry into the busy lives of the Hardings as a month-old, untrained, male puppy certainly worked against his adjustment to his new home. In addition, newspaper accounts of the bulldog’s brief tenure at the White House suggest that, once Laddie Boy was established as the First Dog, strong public engagement with him complicated Oh Boy’s reception. The implicit assumption seems to have been that, although multiple dogs could live in the White House, there could be but one “First Dog,” and the First Dog’s interests had to be protected.

News stories of Oh Boy’s quest for a place at the White House typically centered on Laddie Boy, his needs, and the prospect of competition between him and Oh Boy. Oh Boy originally was billed as a “playmate” (“Laddie Boy Gets Playmate,” 1921) and “colleague” for Laddie Boy. Still, as the New York Times (“Colleague,” 1921) noted, despite the newcomer’s fine canine lineage, he initially was put on “probation” and housed in the White House garage “because it was feared he might not get along with Laddie Boy.” Elaborating on what it meant for Oh Boy to have completed his “novitiate” by early August 1921, the Times explained that he had finally “proved himself a dog worthy to associate with Laddie Boy.”

Moreover, even as the New York World (“White House Pets,” 1921) announced Oh Boy’s formal adoption by Florence Harding, the paper described the two White House dogs as “rivals” and, in the subtitle of its article, reported that “Oh Boy Has Stronger Teeth than Laddie Boy and Shows Them.” On several “play” occasions, readers were told, Oh Boy had gripped the hair around Laddie Boy’s neck so tightly that the Airedale had “winced.”

Florence Harding’s adoption of Oh Boy spoke to a strategy by which the bulldog could have shared the White House with Laddie Boy while the latter remained the uncontested First Dog. As the New York World (“Oh Boy Graduates,” 1921) put it, “It was generally understood that Oh Boy was to become Mrs. Harding’s dog, while Laddie Boy would remain the pet and companion of the Chief Executive.” A day earlier, the World (“White House
Pets”) had reassured the public that the President’s continued attention to Laddie Boy, which included frequent feedings and play, matched Florence Harding’s “enthusiasm” for Oh Boy.

A central theme of the New York Tribune’s later article on Oh Boy’s failure (“Mrs. Harding’s Bull Pup,” 1921) was Laddie Boy’s special standing at the White House. “It was at first feared,” according to the Tribune, “that the newcomer would supplant Laddie Boy in the President’s affections.” But with Oh Boy’s dismissal, the paper announced, “Laddie Boy reigns supreme at the White House.” Speaking directly to the well-recognized role that Laddie Boy filled on the American political scene, the article’s final sentence declared that Oh Boy “must go out and get a reputation before he again may compete with Laddie Boy, the first dog of the land.”

**Laddie Boy Helps to Define the First Dog’s Public Responsibilities**

Laddie Boy, recognized specifically as the “First Dog,” set high standards for the dogs who, into the twenty-first century, would live in the White House. Besides fulfilling his responsibilities as a White House greeter and performing a few select “stunts,” Laddie Boy eagerly posed for White House photographers and artists; he made dignified appearances with the Hardings—and even in their place. Although in the nineteenth century other White House animals had been photographed and in the early twentieth century, filmed, photographic posing as performance became a mainstay with Laddie Boy in the “bag of tricks” of White House dogs.

By the 1920s, photographs, photoengraving, and motion pictures increasingly were vying with traditional print coverage as ways for the press to describe a President to the American public. According to Cornwell (1966), June 1921 marked the first official recognition of the photographers covering the White House. The photographers organized into the White House News Photographers’ Association, and the White House gave members of the association identification cards entitling them to admission to the President’s public events. Harding, moreover, agreed to be photographed regularly out of a sense of public “duty” (p. 68). In a mock interview (Tee, 1921), Laddie Boy “spoke” of sharing this duty: “we of the White House . . . must be pho-
tographed in company with this or that delegation of distinguished individuals. . . . It really becomes tiresome after a while, but if the public demands the pictures I suppose I will have to be patient.” As the large bank of photographs taken of him during 1921-1923 attests, a very patient Laddie Boy admirably performed his duty to be photographed. There were many candid shots of the dog, such as those capturing an excited Airedale as he jumped up on the President to welcome him home after trips. There were also posed shots and at least one widely circulated formal portrait of the dog. A photograph by the National Photo Company, in fact, caught Harding and Laddie Boy in the act of posing in front of the White House (“President Harding with Pet Dog,” 1922).

As part of Laddie Boy’s legacy, the American public also would look forward to seeing the First Dog in person. Besides greeting White House sightseers, Laddie Boy took part in White House functions, appeared in a public parade, and (as some of the press reported) hosted a White House social function on his own. Sometimes Harding simply brought the dog along as he fulfilled a social engagement. One Saturday afternoon both the President and the dog showed up for a United States Marine Band concert on the White House lawn. They arrived late for the concert, with the President still dressed in his golf togs. Once in attendance, however, Laddie Boy comported himself admirably. He rested his paws on the rail of the portico as he “listened to the music” and, when Harding rose for the playing of the national anthem, Laddie Boy “stood, close beside the President” (“President and Mrs. Harding,” 1921).

On other occasions, Harding seems to have used Laddie Boy for direct, political purposes, allowing the dog—who shared the President’s reputation for affability—to join in White House events to maximize the homey environment for which the First Family was so distinguished. As reported by Eliot (1921), Laddie Boy—early in Harding’s administration—helped to set the right tone for a quickly put together reception for a large women’s group that was meeting at the Willard Hotel in Washington, DC. Initially, Florence Harding greeted the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW) at the White House. A few days later, a rumor circulated that the President, who had come to the Willard to attend a gathering of postmasters, would speak at the women’s conference in the late evening. Due to a misunderstanding, some NCCW delegates were left waiting in vain for the President until midnight.
To allay the “great disappointment and . . . grumbling,” Harding invited all three hundred NCCW delegates to call upon him in the Executive Office the next day. At this reception, both President and First Dog showcased the political talents that helped Harding remain one of the most popular American Presidents of all time. Harding insisted on shaking the hand of every woman in attendance, and Laddie Boy shook many of the delegates’ hands as well. “Laddie Boy,” Eliot (1921) concluded, “added much to the informality of the occasion by pouncing in and out of the President’s office and offering his paw to many of the enthusiastic women.”

Some White House visitors asked specifically to meet the First Dog. Their wish granted, they left with an enhanced appreciation of the Hardings’ homeliness. One of the classic stories here is of Horace Williamson of the Baldwin Piano Company who, after making a delivery to the White House, found himself and his wife invited to lunch with the Hardings. As the Cleveland Plain Dealer (“Finds Democracy,” 1921) reported, Williamson requested at lunch to see Laddie Boy, “the renowned White House dog.” Laddie Boy appeared and, for his efforts, was given table scraps. Laddie Boy’s inclusion at lunch certainly played some part in Williamson’s favorable and well-publicized impression of the Hardings. Describing lunch at the White House as “like any luncheon in any American home,” Williamson quipped that, although Harding’s administration was “supposed to be a Republican one, . . . it’s as democratic as we have had.”

Attesting to the depth of Laddie Boy’s acceptance as a personality in his own right and the special bond between the First Dog and children, which became a key facet of the cultural icon of the First Dog, Laddie Boy was reported to have hosted a children’s event on his own. This was the Easter Egg Roll of April 2, 1923, held at the White House while the Hardings vacationed in Florida. Newspapers reported variously that Laddie Boy was the major attraction or actually the host of the event. According to the Washington Post (“5,000 Kiddies,” 1923), the “biggest feature of the whole day for the kiddies” was Laddie Boy’s appearance on the White House lawn in the company of William Jackson. It was the New York Times (“Laddie Boy Is Host,” 1923), however, that elevated Laddie Boy to the role of host of the Egg Roll, who had “entertained for his mistress.”
Among Laddie Boy’s public appearances were those designed to advance animal welfare. Animal welfare groups found the First Family willing to assist their fundraising campaigns with signed photographs of themselves as well as public letters of endorsement from Florence Harding (“First Lady Is Dumb Brutes’ Friend,” 1921). The First Lady made other public gestures indicating concern for nonhuman animals, such as mandating protection of the birds and squirrels of the White House grounds (“‘First Lady’ Enlists,” 1921). She personally supported animal welfare groups across the spectrum, including the New York Women’s League for Animals, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the National Society for the Humane Regulation of Vivisection.\footnote{15}

Some groups benefited specifically from the name and person of Laddie Boy. Responding to a request for support for the humane activities of the women of Sioux City, Iowa, Florence Harding mailed a photograph of the First Dog, together with a letter intended for publication stating that both she and the First Dog took great interest in the celebration of “Humane Week.”\footnote{16} She arranged for Laddie Boy to attend a bridge party sponsored by the Washington Animal Rescue League.\footnote{17}

The decision that Laddie Boy would participate in a parade that the Humane Education Society held in Washington, DC, to celebrate “Be Kind to Animals Week,” however, came from the President. Writing directly to President Harding in April 1921, Marjory Carrington Vitale, the chair of the finance committee of the Washington Humane Society, asked that Laddie Boy be permitted to lead the parade. Vitale promised a “special float” for Laddie Boy and asked that he be accompanied by a White House attendant. Sketching his official reply on the top of Vitale’s letter, the President agreed to let Laddie Boy join the parade under William Jackson’s care.\footnote{18} Within a week, newspapers (“Laddie Boy to Head Animal Parade,” 1921) carried the White House’s announcement that Laddie Boy had “accepted” the society’s invitation to lead the parade. In mid-May there was news coverage (“Harding’s Pet,” 1921) of Laddie Boy’s role in the parade as well as the Hardings’ review of the event.
Laddie Boy “Talks”

The First Dog’s straddling of the real and the fantastic was captured further by Laddie Boy’s positioning in the “Be Kind to Animals” parade as well as his emergence as a talking dog. Parade day found him riding “an elaborately decorated float of his own,” near the head of a column of floats featuring such animal “favorites” as Black Beauty and Mary’s Little Lamb (“Harding’s Pet,” 1921). Unlike the latter animals, Laddie Boy was not a product of fiction. Yet, he soon became a figure in a kind of fantasy literature: a “talking dog,” given a voice by ghostwriters, primarily the President. During private moments of marital tension, the Hardings spoke to each other through Laddie Boy (Anthony, 1998, p. 276). In addition, the President allowed Laddie Boy a public voice and thus established talking as a major part of the First Dog’s repertoire of performance. Laddie Boy gave interviews to reporters (Tee, 1921) and wrote letters. His successor First Dogs also would speak on the silver screen and dictate books.

In the letters he wrote as Laddie Boy, President Harding found a genre that provided him with an unofficial and safe voice to air his emotions as well as to exhort Americans to higher moral standards, including kindness to non-human animals. This genre straddled fiction and non-fiction: Laddie Boy’s letters purported to reflect on his life as it really was. The public was free to embrace the pretense of a talking dog principally as a form of entertainment or to deconstruct the letters as expressions of Harding’s opinions and deep concerns. For some, the letters—witty, revolving around a dog, and yet reflective—were more accessible than formal presidential speeches and more revealing of Harding the person.

The letters, moreover, offered a safe outlet for animal advocacy by a President who preferred compromise and mediation to pushing his views on his political colleagues or the American public. Indeed, Harding generally seems to have tried to minimize the political risks of his animal advocacy, as in his letter to Governor William Sproul of Pennsylvania on behalf of the dog Dick who (as mentioned above) had been sentenced to death because his keeper was not an American citizen. Here, Harding explained that his wife had suggested he write to Sproul (“though I am happy to do so”) and asked the gov-
ernor to consider his letter, “a personal one, rather than an official communication” (“Harding Appealed,” 1922).

Despite such qualifications, the appeal generated a sarcastic letter from a Tennessee woman suggesting that since the President had intervened to save Dick’s life he now should commute the sentences of some human criminals. As Harding seems to have realized, the First Dog—in some matters—had a better chance of educating without alienating than did the President.

The most telling and widely circulated of Laddie Boy’s public statements was a letter of January 23, 1922 (Harding, 1922), in which he reflected on his role as the First Dog, and Harding thereby offered an elaborate justification of the First Dog as a witness to the human-dog bond rather than a mere political trapping. Laddie Boy “wrote” the letter in response to a letter from Tiger, a dog who was appearing in a play in Boston to which he had invited the First Dog. Discussing life in the White House, Laddie Boy revealed such ambivalence for the presidency that, if expressed under Harding’s name, it might have been thought unbecoming of his office.

As Laddie Boy admitted, there were many attractive features of the White House, not the least of which was the “White House yard . . . a large and ample playground” across which the First Dog could “run to his heart’s content.” On the negative side, the White House threatened its residents with loss of their personal identities and stripped them of any chance at real levity in their daily lives. “Every dog plays his part well when he is merely his natural self,” Laddie Boy began, “but unhappily many a dog is more or less spoiled by his environment and associations.” Even he, Laddie Boy confessed, was spoiled by the many people who requested to see him and to shake his “hands.” Then there was the danger of misinterpretation of the First Dog’s intentions: Some suspected him of “political inclinations,” which he rapidly dismissed. “From what I see of politics,” he mused, “I am sure I have no such aspirations.” Indeed, such “an air of earnestness and responsibility” surrounded the President that Laddie Boy yearned for “the good old days back home.” Explaining why he was declining Tiger’s invitation, Laddie Boy stated that he could travel only with “difficulty” and pined for the way “it used to be, when I could go at my own sweet will.”
A major point of the letter was that a special human-canine relationship helped the President and his First Dog to deal with the burdens of the White House. Noting how much presidential work there was, Laddie Boy wrote of “sharing the responsibility.” Second, but perhaps more important, both President and First Dog benefited from mutual emotional support and loyal friendship. Laddie Boy reported that sometimes all Harding wanted to do was to sit down with his dog alone and exchange gazes, with Laddie Boy’s eyes showing sympathy for the President and Harding’s eyes communicating gratitude, “as much as to say, ‘Well, Laddie Boy, you and I are real friends, and we will never cheat each other.’” Laddie Boy also found in Harding’s gaze recognition that the dog would “never find fault with him, no matter what he does, and . . . [would] never be ungrateful nor [sic] unfaithful.” At the very minimum, then, Harding seemed genuinely to draw strength from his belief that Laddie Boy, unlike many of the humans who circled the President for offices and favors, could be trusted to be faithful, grateful, nonjudgmental, and sympathetic.

In what perhaps was Harding’s only published explanation of why he and Florence Harding had collaborated with the American press in elevating Laddie Boy to the status of First Dog of the land, the letter stressed the important roles of celebrity dogs in instructing the public in the finer canine qualities and promoting animal welfare. As Laddie Boy wrote to Tiger, “we [dogs] leave our impress on our human associates [and] so I can well imagine you are having a fine influence on the throngs which witness and applaud your performance.” Tiger was supposed specifically to teach human audiences the trans-species lesson, “that sincerity and naturalness and fidelity are among the most lovable traits in any life.” In one of the letter’s final paragraphs, Harding—still writing as Laddie Boy to Tiger—elaborated his justification for coaxing Laddie Boy into the burdensome role of First Dog:

I have no doubt that you will do a lot of good. If you can only have the realization that you are helping to establish a more kindly consideration of the animal life . . ., and you can impress your audiences with the beauty of the friendship of dogs for human associates who treat them becomingly, and instill in human lives some of the honesty and fidelity which characterizes the lives . . . dogs live, you will find a compensation in the good you have done which will surpass any other experience in your life.
Laddie Boy as First Dog was thus an icon of honesty and fidelity. As Harding’s relationship with his dog moved beyond the private sphere, it became a public model of a mutually beneficial human-canine friendship. This witnessing to the human-dog bond, with its potential to advance animal welfare, was the major point of a First Dog, at least according to President Harding. As Beers (1998/1999, pp. 284-285) has argued, during the interwar period “animal advocacy had moved next door.” It had now moved into the White House as well.

Western culture has long extolled the faithful dog but Laddie Boy’s emphasis on “honesty and fidelity” was telling and ironic, as it came from the dog of a President whom historians remember for extraordinary loyalty to his friends, including those who betrayed him in the Teapot Dome and Veterans’ Bureau scandals. Indeed, some of Harding’s biographers have seen the kind of enduring loyalty that Harding found so attractive in dogs as a major flaw in his own character. According to Murray (1969), “when combined with kindliness and generosity, [Harding’s] loyalty became a dangerous trait . . .” (p. 116). From this perspective, Laddie Boy’s letter to Tiger, apparently written before the President knew about major scandals within his administration, provides a glimpse of the ethical code—centered on “dog-like” loyalty—that contributed to Harding’s political downfall. Comforted and inspired by the fidelity and honesty of dogs, the President seems to have clung too long to the hope that his human associates could rise to the same ideals.

**Laddie Boy’s Post-White House Years**

Less than two years after publication of Laddie Boy’s letter to Tiger, the dog lost his “master” and close companion. Harding died unexpectedly on August 2, 1923. Florence Harding suffered from a chronic kidney condition that had brought her close to death just a year earlier and would claim her life in late 1924. Forced to vacate the White House quickly to make room for the new First Family, she decided to take up temporary residence in a friend’s home. Like so many First Family members who assumed comparatively modest post-presidential lifestyles, she turned the care of her nonhuman animals over to former members of her staff. Her canary, Bob, went to Maggie Rogers, a
White House maid (Parks & Leighton, 1961, pp. 172-173). Laddie Boy went to Harry Barker, the Secret Service agent who had been assigned to her at the White House and with whom she had seemed to develop a mother-son relationship. Early press accounts (“Mrs. Harding Lets Laddie Boy Go,” 1923) reassured the public that Laddie Boy’s residence with Barker was temporary, but later accounts (“Laddie Boy Dies,” 1929) would explain that Florence Harding had made a gift of Laddie Boy to Barker “in return for his kindness and as a remembrance of the President.”

Harding may have wanted simply to assure Laddie Boy the kind of caring, permanent home that she believed she now was unable to provide. Still, her quick disassociation from Laddie Boy may have been a way of stripping her life of a poignant reminder of her husband. After all, in a conversation with a minister shortly after her husband’s death she had singled out Harding’s love for all human and non-human as one of his most attractive features (West, n.d., p. 9).

Laddie Boy—who two months before Harding’s death had been honored by the District of Columbia with a special dog license tag bearing the number “one” (“Laddie Boy Given First Tag,” 1923; “First 1923 License,” 1923)—now moved with Barker’s family to Boston, Massachusetts. Attesting to the celebrity status that the dog enjoyed in his own right, the American press followed Laddie Boy in his post-White House years through January 22, 1929, when he died—reportedly in Mrs. Barker’s arms. In the notice of his death that appeared in the New York Times (“Laddie Boy Dies,” 1929), he was remembered fondly as “the magnificent airedale which as the ‘first dog of the land’ once roamed at will about the White House grounds.” The memory of Laddie Boy, moreover, survived in a statue of the dog sculpted by Bashka Paeff in 1923-1924 as a “memorial to President Harding” with funding from American newsboys (“Transfer Laddie Boy Gift,” 1924).

The Laddie Boy statue, which now stands in the Smithsonian Institution, was a fitting tribute to the dog and President who played such key roles in the construction of the cultural icon of “First Dog” of the United States. It was not the case, as in the 1990s, that President and First Dog (Franklin D. Roosevelt and Fala) would be memorialized together in one grand monument (Peduzzi, 1997). Rather, in the 1920s, Laddie Boy—linked so closely both privately and publicly with Harding but untouched by the scandals
haunting his memory—stood alone in a memorial to his President. In life, Laddie Boy completed the First Family in the absence of children, comforted the Hardings, enhanced the President’s image, entertained the American public, and served the animal welfare movement. In death, Laddie Boy remained a symbol of a high ethical code, centered on dog-like fidelity and honesty, which (as some historians now argue) matched President Harding’s political ideals—if not the actions of his cronies.

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Notes

1 Correspondence should be addressed to Helena Pycior, Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201. Email: helena@uwm.edu. This paper is dedicated to my caring and wonderfully athletic, miniature Schnauzer Augustus (d. 11/01/04).

2 Earlier studies of Laddie Boy include the pioneering work of Truman (1969, pp. 44-53) and the brief but very insightful reflections of Anthony (1998, p. 276).

3 Parrish (1992) writes of the mass media’s “helping to market a new product: celebrities” (p. 159).

4 For a perceptive analysis of the evolution of dogs in film, see Fudge (2002, pp. 78-85).


6 One of Harding’s sisters discusses his early reading habits in Charity M. Remsberg to Cyril Clemens, March 17, 1936. In Warren G. Harding Papers, roll 254, frames 750-755.

7 Harding’s grandfather condemned the gobbler to death for killing a prized gander. Although Harding had accidentally killed the gander, he failed to confess his guilt.

8 “A Shaggy Dog Story” (1985) offers a brief introduction to dogs who did not thrive in the White House.

9 For a history of post-World War I American animal advocacy, including women’s representation, see Beers (1998/1999, pp. 10-12, 246-295).

10 Although Florence Harding joined the S.P.C.A. in 1922 (“Mrs. Harding Joins,” 1922), I have found no evidence that the President was a member.

11 Lillian Paschal Day and Mrs. Julian Heath to Florence Harding (1921, June 9). In Warren G. Harding Papers, roll 242, frame number unreadable.
Titles of other articles using Laddie Boy’s name alone include “Laddie Boy Gets Playmate” (1921) and “Colleague for Laddie Boy” (1921).

Although Harding (1922) refers to many of the Hardings’ dogs, there is no mention of Oh Boy.

Oh Boy was chosen as a gift to Harding based on the coincidence of his birth and Harding’s presidential inauguration rather than the dog’s potential for blending with Laddie Boy.


Florence Harding to Mrs. M. W. Baldwin (1922, April 24). In Warren G. Harding Papers, roll 242, frame 583.


Marjory Carrington Vitale to Warren G. Harding (1921, April 14). In Warren G. Harding Papers, roll 194, frames 536-537.

Besides a talking presidential dog, the 1920s produced Kafka’s “Investigations of a Dog,” a classic in what Ziolkowski (1983) describes as the “literary tradition” of talking dogs (pp. 86-122).

For the latter interpretation, see “Warren Harding and His Dog.” In Warren G. Harding Papers, roll 244, frame 258. This article bears no date and no publisher.

Hattie Fitzgerald to President and Mrs. Harding (1922, July 1). In Warren G. Harding Papers, roll 242, frames 644, 645.


Stubby the war dog also found a place in the Smithsonian. Upon his death, he was memorialized in a plaster mold of his body filled with his cremated remains and covered with his skin and hair. Displayed originally in the American Red Cross museum, the deteriorating reproduction of Stubby eventually was transferred to the Smithsonian, more for storage than display (Lemish, 1996, pp. 26, 27).

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Finds democracy at White House lunch. (1921, October 18). *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. In Warren G. Harding papers, roll 244, frame 702.


First Lady is dumb brutes’ friend. (1921, October 16). *Detroit Free Press*. In Warren G. Harding papers, roll 244, frame 695.


Mrs. Harding gives indorsment [sic] to the “Be Kind to Animals” week proposition. (1921, April 13). *San Jose Mercury Herald*. In Warren G. Harding papers, roll 244, frame 1202.


Mrs. Harding’s bull pup sent back to minors. (1921, September 23). *New York Tribune.*
In Warren G. Harding papers, roll 244, frame 566.


Oh Boy graduates from garage to berth in White House kennels. (1921, August 13). *New York World.* In Warren G. Harding papers, roll 244, frame 434.


President and Mrs. Harding spend Sunday afternoon motoring, after attending Calvary Baptist services. (1921, August 29). *The Evening Star.* In Warren G. Harding papers, roll 244, frame 448.


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