In this volume, Eugene P. Trani and David L. Wilson evaluate the presidency of Warren G. Harding by surveying scholarship on the Harding years. Harding—generally considered one of the weakest American presidents—was elected chief executive in 1920, during a time of uncertainty and frustration for many of the American people. The authors assess the critics and defenders of Harding in light of the administrations accomplishments and failures. Both the strengths and weaknesses of the Harding administration came from the people President Harding selected for high office. Charles G. Dawes accomplished much by implementing sound budgetary practices in the federal government for the first time in history. Herbert Hoover became the dominant figure in the Harding administration, using his influence to advance both domestic and foreign policies. And Charles Evans Hughes proved to be an able, if conservative, secretary of state. Yet the accomplishments of these and other capable men tended to be short-term in nature. Trani and Wilson describe the widespread corruption and malfeasance in the Harding administration, pointing out the Hardings erratic judgment of character caused many of his problems as president. His personal habits—philandering, playing poker, and drinking liquor during national prohibition—tainted his reputation and appeared to connect him to the activities of his associates. Tragically, Harding sought to avoid controversy, even if it meant ignoring real problems or evading justice, and thus failed to provide moral leadership for the nation. Harding and his advisers demonstrated little understanding of the social and economic forces at work in the country and abroad. In the early 1920s, the United States continued the transition from a rural society to an urbanized and industrialized society. Rather than adjusting the government to meet the needs of all segments of an industrialized society, Harding instituted normalcy, an attempt to maintain the values of a rural society rapidly disintegrating under the impact of social and economic change. The few real accomplishments of the Harding administration were
buried under scandal. and in the end, Harding must be rated as an ineffective leader at a time when the nation would have been better served by a different, more imaginative approach to government. This book is part of the American Presidency Series.

My Personal Review:
The authors present a very fair and balanced view of our most scandalous president. It is well-written from original primary source materials. It is better organized, researched, unlike those tomes written by other academic entrepreneurs, who continue to rehabilitation of his tainted reputation. You simply cannot raise the reputation of one who continually committed adultery, fathered two children out of wedlock, and had very little positive influence in governing our country. The widespread corruption and malfeasance in the Harding administration, primary came from Harding's erratic judgment of character which caused many of his problems as president. Of course, his personal habits—philandering, playing poker, and drinking liquor during national prohibition—tainted his reputation and appeared to connect him to the activities of his associates. Unfortunately, Harding did not have the leadership qualities necessary to be the Chief Executive and, as Harding sought to avoid controversy, even if it meant ignoring real problems or evading justice, he failed to provide moral leadership for the nation.

Harding got elected partly because, as one woman said, "He looked like a president." Sadly, he never grasped the fact that he WAS President until he realized he would be remembered as worse than Grant. Humorist Will Rogers joked that he asked Mr. Harding, "Would you like me to tell you the latest political jokes?" He said the President told him, "You don't have to, Will - I've already appointed them." Much too late, Harding reportedly realized, "When I became President, I thought my job was to appoint my friends to public office. But, you know, you can't do that. You have to appoint the best men." Also late in his brief presidency, he supposedly lamented, "It's not my enemies that I'm worried about. It's my friends that keep me pacing the floors at night." Harding mysteriously died in 1923 before the public ever found out what he was so concerned about.

The cronies Harding put in office were in league with Big Business and used their positions solely to make money for themselves and their benefactors. Harding's attorney general had a house on K Street where he sold influence (remember Jack Abramoff's recent K Street lobbying schemes that were almost exclusively with Bush-Cheney's Republican Congress). Harding's director of the Veterans' Bureau went to jail for receiving kickbacks for construction bids on hospitals and retirement homes. His Secretary of Interior was sentenced for receiving bribes from big oil corporations to sell federal oil reserves at Teapot Dome, WY, and Elk Hills, CA.