

The Coolidge Presidency



Historians have rated Calvin Coolidge poorly among our nation's chief executives for being a "do-nothing president," but he should be rated highly for the very same reason.

by *Michael Telzrow*

Most Americans reserve their greatest praise for past presidents who were noted for their activity while in office. Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt immediately come to mind — the former for his aggressive extra-executive actions in putting down a “rebellion,” and the latter for equally aggressive measures in reshaping American politics and culture during the Great Depression. Rarely do Americans

praise those presidents who exercised their duties with restraint and in accordance with the U.S. Constitution.

For contemporary Americans weaned on activist presidents who seem to wield more power with each subsequent administration, the idea of a minimalist presidency is positively alien. But between 1923 and 1929, America enjoyed an administration that governed little and, in doing so, restored confidence in our republic, which had been soiled by the scandals of the Harding administration.

Calvin Coolidge's tenure as president is typically characterized as a “do nothing” administration. His well-known taciturn demeanor symbolized his political approach so much so that the great American historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, wrote that Coolidge “exalted inactivity to a fine art.” Others like H. L. Mencken remarked that had Coolidge been in office during the Great Depression he would have handled the crisis by “snoozing away the lazy afternoons.” But despite those who were fond of mocking Coolidge's inactivity, the facts remain that his presidential performance was closer to what the Founding Fathers envisioned than many of the “great” presidents who came before and after him.

Early Years

Calvin Coolidge was born on July 4, 1872 in the family home in Plymouth, Vermont. His father, John Calvin Coolidge, was a prosperous farmer and shopkeeper who had served in the Vermont House of Representatives and Senate. Calvin inherited his father's thrifty nature as well as his interest in politics.

Like most farmers' sons, Calvin pitched in with the daily and seasonal chores common to late 19th-century farming: plowing, planting, and picking fruit. An industrious young man, Coolidge earned money by making and selling toys while a student at St. Johnsbury Academy in Ludlow, Vermont. He entered Amherst College in 1891 and after graduation studied law at a Northampton, Massachusetts, law office. He was admitted to the bar in 1897.

Coolidge became active in politics while living in Northampton. In 1900, he was appointed solicitor by the city council, and subsequently served in various minor posts until being elected to the state legislature in 1907. There, he championed such progressive causes as the direct election of senators, child labor laws, and the six-day work week. Following a stint in the legislature, Coolidge ran successfully for the mayoral office in Northampton, where he cut taxes while expanding police and fire protection.

He followed up his successful stint as mayor with four successful terms in the state senate, where he supported a minimum wage for women, women's suffrage, and worker's compensation.

In 1916, he began a term as lieutenant governor of Massachusetts before being elected governor in 1919. In the state's highest office, Coolidge continued his progressive policies by supporting legislation to limit the work week to 48 hours for women and children. Coolidge was not a staunch progressive, however. During the Boston Police strike of 1919, he called out state forces to help assist Boston Mayor Andrew J. Peters in bringing order to the crime-wracked city. Coolidge supported Andrew's decision not to rehire striking policeman, remarking, "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time." His firm stand against the strikers, whom he considered influenced by anarchists, captured the support of the people of Boston, and he was easily reelected to a second term.

Coolidge's popularity translated to a first-ballot vice-presidential victory at the 1920 Republican national convention in Chicago. Coolidge's vice-presidential performance was unremarkable, and he remained mostly invisible, taking little part in cabinet meetings. He gave little direction while presiding over the Senate, and true to his "Silent Cal" moniker remained silent on most issues.

Thrust Into the Presidency

The death of beleaguered President Warren G. Harding on August 2, 1923, thrust the reluctant Coolidge into the nation's highest office. Upon hearing of Harding's death in the middle of the night, Coolidge, along with his father and wife, knelt down to say a prayer before immediately taking the oath of office administered by his father, John Coolidge, at 2:47 a.m. on August 3, 1923. He then promptly went back to bed. Coolidge's seemingly charmed existence continued to favor him.

Although brought into office under less than satisfactory circumstances, Coolidge brought to the office a public image of solid integrity and Pilgrim simplicity. It was just what the country needed in the wake of Harding administration scandals. He also brought a pre-WWI belief in a

passive presidential relationship with Congress.

By the time of the Republican National Party Convention in June 1924, Coolidge was all but assured of gaining the nomination. As expected he was nominated on the first ballot, defeating Wisconsin Senator Robert M. LaFollette and California Senator Hiram Johnson. The Republican platform was largely moderately conservative in scope — it favored Prohibition-enforcement, the collection of foreign debts, tax reduction, and non-participation in former president Wilson's doomed League of Nations; but it also called for establishing a federal organ to market farm products, and the establishment of a cabinet-level department of education.

Coolidge's Democrat opponent in the 1924 election was West Virginia's John W. Davis, a corporation lawyer by trade and a die-hard progressive. Among other things, Davis favored federal regulation of the coal industry and a national referendum on participation in the League of Nations. He was in no position to defeat "Silent Cal" Coolidge, who had gained the favor of Americans through his steady and unpretentious nature. Coolidge won

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54 per cent of the popular vote and 382 in the electoral college; Davis garnered only 136 in the electoral college.

"Four-fifths of our troubles," Coolidge remarked, "would disappear if we would sit down and keep still." Coolidge lived by his own dictum, sleeping at least 12 hours per day along with an afternoon nap.

His taciturn nature created a public image that became the subject of humorists around the world. One story that seemed to reinforce his "Silent Cal" persona involved a dinner guest who bet Coolidge that she could elicit at least three words from him, whereupon he looked at her and simply said, "You lose."

Though Coolidge was a man of few words, he was not without conviction. He was a man of thoughtful introspection and once remarked, "I have never been

On Inauguration Day, March 4, 1925, Calvin Coolidge and his wife Grace ride to the Capitol in an open carriage with Sen. Charles Curtis.



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hurt by what I have not said.” Despite his occasional progressive leanings, Calvin Coolidge was a committed constitutionalist who not only held a cynical distrust of progressive government but understood that the federal government — including his own office when he was president — must not overstep its constitutional boundaries.

Although Coolidge was Harding’s moral superior, he followed his predecessor’s approach to governing, favoring high tariffs, tax reductions, and active support of business and industry. “The chief business of the American people is business,” he declared, and Coolidge made efforts to help the free-enterprise system by curbing government regulations.

As a result, business boomed during Coolidge’s administration. The GNP grew to \$104.4 billion by 1929, up from \$74 billion in 1922. More importantly to the average American, per-capita income increased from \$672 in 1922 to \$857 in 1929. New moderately priced goods, fueled by installment buying and aggressive advertising, turned citizens into consumers. Americans were enjoying a level of prosperity unknown to their forefathers. Through it all, however, Calvin Coolidge maintained a frugal, if not dour, public persona, that many Americans admired even while they accumulated more earthly goods.

Naturally, Coolidge rejected the notion of class warfare so popular with today’s left-leaning politicians. During his inaugural address he remarked, “This country believes in prosperity. It is absurd to suppose that it is envious of those who are already prosperous. The wise and correct course to follow in taxation and all other economic legislation is not to destroy those who have already secured success but to cre-

ate conditions under which every one will have a better chance to be successful.”

Coolidge’s approach to governing would be considered unusual today. He governed within his constitutional power and admonished lawmakers not to “hurry to legislate.” His major “accomplishments” while he held office were few but important — the

most notable being the Farm Relief Vetoes of 1927-1928, tax reductions of 1924 and 1926, and the Immigration Act of 1924. The vetoes were directed against the McNary-Haugen Bill, which would have bolstered farm prices by setting up a government entity to buy surplus crops for resale overseas. The plan involved holding the surplus crops until prices rose again, or dumping them at a loss. Harding’s conservative nature would have none of government price fixing, and he vetoed it twice. The Immigration Act of 1924 cut immigration quotas, giving the United States time to absorb and assimilate the millions of immigrants who had arrived in the first decade of the 20th century. It was a brilliant move that served the country well until the Johnson administration destroyed the system with its Immigration Act of 1964.

Coolidge Legacy

Calvin Coolidge is generally not given much praise by presidential historians who focus on grand sweeping movements and events. But they miss the point. Coolidge governed least not because he was incapable of more, but because he understood the true nature of the presidency. Even his one-time political opponent Al Smith spoke highly of Coolidge in 1933 when he said, “Mr. Coolidge belongs rather in the class of Presidents who were distinguished for character more than for heroic achievement. His great task was to restore the dignity and prestige of the Presidency when it had reached the lowest ebb in our history, and to afford, in a time of extravagance and waste, a shining public example of the simple and homely virtues which came down to him from his New England ancestors.”

There is no doubt that Coolidge served the country well and that his traditional low ranking among U.S. presidents is unjustified. Perhaps President Ronald Reagan summed it up best when he remarked, “You hear a lot of jokes every once and a while about ‘Silent Cal Coolidge.’ The joke is on the people who make the jokes. Look at his record. He cut the taxes four times. We had probably the greatest growth and prosperity that we’ve ever known. I have taken heed of that because if he did that by doing nothing, maybe that’s the answer.” ■



Coolidge presidency: Calvin Coolidge, shown at the far left with his cabinet, did not attempt to usurp powers properly belonging to the other branches of government. Nor did he attempt to interject our nation into foreign quarrels. The Coolidge presidency was perhaps the opposite of an imperial presidency. While Coolidge was president, the nation enjoyed peace and prosperity.

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