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After President Harding died on August 2, 1923, Calvin Coolidge was sworn in as the nation's 30th president in the house where he was born 51 years earlier in Plymouth Notch, Vermont.

Calvin Coolidge: The “Wise Old Bird” in the White House

Though he is one of the forgotten presidents, Calvin Coolidge put together a string of political successes that not only helped him but helped his constituents in a very real way.

by Jack Kenny

Calvin Coolidge has often been judged a success in his time, but a failure in history. That, said Peter Hannaford, may say more about the historians than it does about Coolidge.

“It is as true in politics as in war that the victors get to write the history,” wrote Hannaford, the editor of *The Quotable Calvin Coolidge*. “Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal supporters had a political interest in consigning what they called the ‘Harding-Coolidge-Hoover Era’ to political purgatory. They naturally wanted to keep their hold on political power, so they lumped FDR’s three predecessors together

and discredited them all for the ills of the Depression in order to achieve that aim.”

But a growing number of historians and biographers have of late been rediscovering for their readers the positive contributions of Coolidge to the “Coolidge prosperity” of the 1920s and the limited but important role a wise and frugal government can play in encouraging economic growth. As one who generally respected the constitutional limits of his offices, “Coolidge is our great refrainer,” wrote Amity Shlaes in her new biography entitled simply *Coolidge*. Coolidge observed early in his career what he believed to the end: “It is much more important to kill bad bills than pass good ones.” His devotion

to thrift in government was rivaled only by his economy of words. “I am for economy,” he said. “After that I am for more economy.”

Born on the Fourth of July

He came by that naturally, having been born into a family of modest means and little tolerance for debt. He came into the world on July 4, 1872 on his parents’ farm in Plymouth Notch, Vermont. His father, John Calvin Coolidge, ran both the small farm and a general store next to the house. His mother, Victoria, died when Calvin was 12, and he remained devoted to her memory, with her picture on his desk throughout his life. His father was a man



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While Democrats John W. Davis and Charles Bryan opposed him on the campaign trail, President Coolidge spent the summer of 1924 pitching hay on his father's farm in Plymouth Notch, Vermont.

of few words and rare displays of emotion. “The Coolidges never slop over,” his famous son would later say in explaining his own quiet reserve.

Calvin was more than a little shy. “In politics we must meet people and that’s not easy for me,” he explained years later to his close friend and political booster, Frank Stearns. “When I was a little fellow, as long ago as I can remember, I would go into a panic if I heard stranger voices in the house. I felt I just couldn’t meet the people and shake hands with them.” Yet in a political career spanning three decades of running for and winning offices from city councilman to president, he shook an incalculable number of hands. As president, he would often greet 400 visitors a day to the White House and once set a personal record of 2,360 handshakes in an hour and five minutes. It must have pained more than his hand.

His formal education began at age five in the one-room Plymouth Notch School. At age 14, he was enrolled in Black River Academy in Ludlow. He studied English grammar, algebra, and Greek and Latin, and learned about the U.S. Constitution from a course on government. He also studied French, ancient history, geometry, and American literature. He worked after school in the town’s carriage shop, and his summers were spent working on the family farm back in Plymouth Notch. His only sibling, a younger sister named

Abigail, joined him at the academy in his junior year in the fall of 1888. She took ill in March of 1890, however, and died soon after, with Calvin at her deathbed. In a letter to his father, he expressed his grief, but did not “slop over.” “It is lonesome here without Abbie,” he wrote.

At prestigious Amherst College in Massachusetts, he came under the influence of Anson Morse, a teacher of some renown, who instilled in his students a sense of civic duty. Coolidge later wrote that from Morse’s teaching students “came to a clearer comprehension of not only their rights and liberties, but of their duties and responsibilities.” From philosophy professor Charles Garman, they learned to “weigh the evidence” and “carry all questions back to fundamental principles.” The professor’s approach to philosophy and reverence for Christianity of the Congregational persuasion obviously made a deep and lasting impression. “We looked upon Garman as a man who walked with God,” Coolidge would write in his autobiography. As an adult he kept a book of Garman’s letters, essays, and addresses at his bedside.

Law and Politics

Having chosen law as his profession, Coolidge decided to forgo law school in favor of “reading law” at an established law firm, a common practice at the time. He studied law at the Northampton, Mas-

sachusetts, offices of attorneys Hammond and Field, two Amherst alumni, starting in 1895. Two and a half years later, he opened his own law office in town.

“He was the kind of attorney who would go out late at night to draw up a dying Irish lady’s will and charge her only five dollars instead of the usual twelve or fifteen,” wrote Donald McCoy in *Calvin Coolidge: The Quiet President*. When a client tried to reward him for a generous settlement that covered legal as well as medical expenses, Coolidge handed the check back to him.

“You got most of the evidence,” he said. “Here’s something for you.”

Such acts of kindness were no doubt remembered when Coolidge was out asking for votes, as he would be often in his long and remarkably successful career. While some men soar to the ranks of presidential contenders, Coolidge’s steady advancement was more like the milk train, missing no stop along the way. He went from city councilman to city solicitor to state representative to mayor to state senator to state senate president to lieutenant governor, and then to the governor’s office, where he gained the national fame that propelled him onto the national Republican ticket as vice presidential candidate in 1920. The only race he ever lost was for a seat on the local school board quite early in his career. One constituent told him she didn’t vote for him because she didn’t want to put someone in authority over the education of

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the school children who had no children of his own. Coolidge replied with characteristic brevity, “Might give me time.”

The woman who would give him time was Grace Goodhue, a University of Vermont graduate who had come to Northampton to teach at the Clarke School for the Deaf, never knowing she would meet and marry a future president of the United States. The couple rented a duplex apartment, where over a mantelpiece hung a few lines of verse that might be taken as an apt description of the man who would become known to millions as “Silent Cal.”

A wise old owl sat on an oak,
The more he saw, the less he spoke;
The less he spoke, the more he heard,
Why can't we be like that old bird?

The young “old bird” who was mayor of

Northampton in 1910-11 was obviously more a doer than talker. Achievements during his two years in office included expansion and improvements at the city fire and police departments, sidewalk and street improvements, and an increase in teachers' pay. He was able to stop the city council from

approving an electric lighting contract that would have lost the city money. He sold the Smith's Ferry area owned by the city to Holyoke and invested the money for Northampton. He managed to achieve all that while lowering the tax rate and reducing the city's debt by nearly half. “His municipal improvements were appreciated by many Democrats and yet his fiscal administrations appealed to the instincts of most Republicans,” McCoy noted.

The highlight of Coolidge's first year as a state senator was his work as chairman of the special committee on conciliation, formed to deal with the textile strike in Lawrence. Most of the 30,000 workers walked off the job over a cut in wages. The socialist Industrial Workers of the World moved in to organize and guide the efforts of the mill hands and were met with police force, and in some instances, violence.

Coolidge's committee was able to broker an agreement that provided wage increases ranging from five to 25 percent, time and a quarter for overtime work, and a rehiring of the striking workers without discrimination. Peace was restored in Lawrence, and the settlement enhanced the reputation of Coolidge as one who could mediate between labor and management in a fair and dispassionate manner.

Above All, Be Brief

His election as Senate president was made memorable by what must have been for Coolidge an exceptionally long acceptance speech, describing his political creed as one grounded in a moral belief in natural law. “Men do not make laws. They do but discover them,” he said.

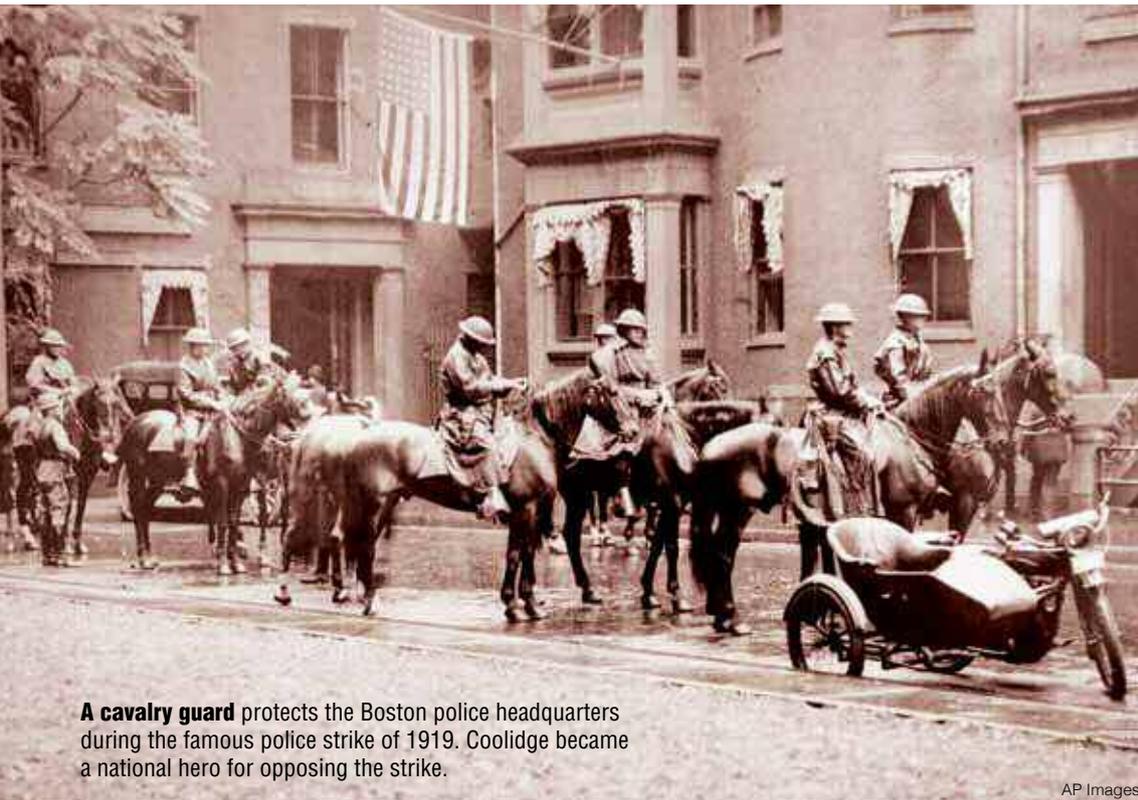
Laws must be justified by something more than the will of the majority. They must rest on the eternal foundation of righteousness....

The people cannot look to legislation generally for success. Industry, thrift, character, are not conferred by act or resolve. Government cannot relieve from toil. It can provide no substitute for the rewards of service.

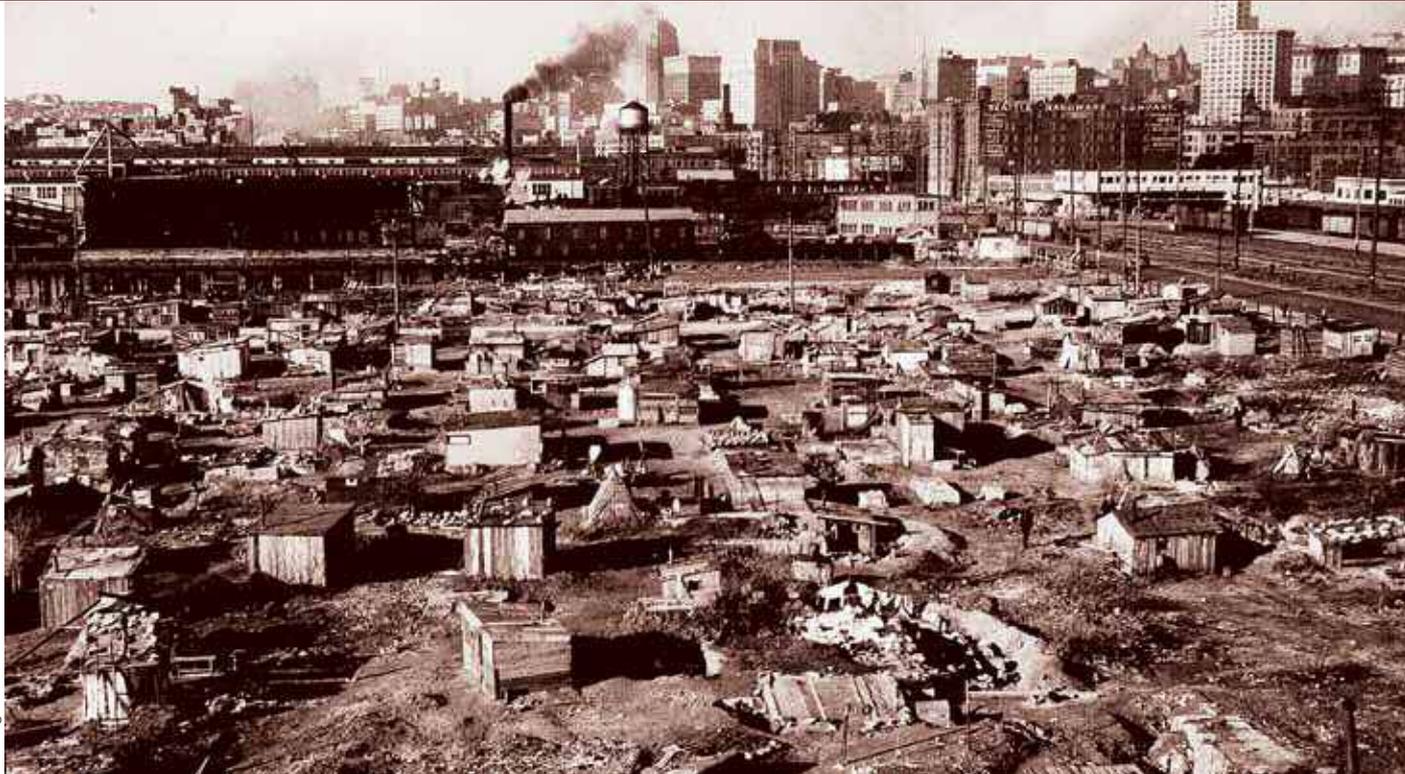
It can, of course, care for the defective and recognize distinguished merit. The normal must care for themselves. Self-government means self-support.

In words that no doubt rankled the state's “progressive” Republicans, whose hero was the trust-busting Teddy Roosevelt, Coolidge allowed that “it may be that the fostering and protection of large aggregations of wealth are the only foundation on which to build the prosperity of the whole people. Large profits mean large payrolls. But profits must be the result of service performed.”

He urged his colleagues to be “as revolutionary as science” and “as reactionary as the multiplication table.” And he cautioned against an avalanche of new legis-



A cavalry guard protects the Boston police headquarters during the famous police strike of 1919. Coolidge became a national hero for opposing the strike.



“Coolidge prosperity” ended with the stock market crash in 1929, followed by the Great Depression. Shacks of the unemployed and desperate are seen here on the waterfront in Seattle, Washington.

lation. “Give administration a chance to catch up with legislation.”

Frank Stearns, the Northampton merchant who had become Coolidge’s close personal friend and leading political booster, had printed copies of the speech made and distributed them in book form. “Have Faith in Massachusetts” became the centerpiece of the campaign literature used in the successful Coolidge campaign for governor.

When reelected the following year, the senate president was more economical in his use of words, perhaps because he had said it all the year before. His acceptance speech bore the Coolidge trademark of brevity. The “wise old owl” spoke just 42 words, beginning with “My sincerest thanks” and ending with: “And be brief; above all things, be brief.”

Notwithstanding his strong conservative leanings, Coolidge was, in his years as legislator and governor, “considered a ‘progressive’ on a number of issues,” wrote Hannaford.

He supported legislation to stop price-fixing. He was for women’s suffrage and the direct election of U.S. senators. He favored adequate

funding for welfare and for the state’s hospitals for the mentally ill. He supported measures to improve workplace safety, to increase the number of playgrounds for children, and to provide special, low railway fares for workers and their children.

As governor, he signed into law a bill to limit the work week for women and children to 48 hours. He enacted bills to increase worker’s compensation and to include workers with partial disabilities. He worked on passing laws to restrict the size of rent increases and appointed a commission to investigate and report recommendations concerning maternity leave. Clearly Coolidge was in no danger of being endorsed by the International Workers of the World, but his record on legislative matters was far from “reactionary.”

The Police Strike

But whatever else he did as governor was eclipsed by his response to the Boston Police Strike in 1919. In fact, Coolidge did nothing to avert the strike and did not become involved in dealing with the chaos it created until it was nearly over. He believed he had no authority to intervene and could

only stand behind Boston Police Commissioner Edwin Curtis, who insisted he was ready to deal with any crisis that might occur. But when Coolidge sent, albeit belatedly, the complete State Guard into the city and issued an executive order putting both the police and police commissioner under his authority, he received national plaudits for standing against a strike that President Wilson called “a crime against civilization.” Coolidge helped the strikers find jobs in other fields, but he backed the commissioner’s stand against taking them back on the force. In response to AFL president Samuel Gompers, who had asked for their reinstatement, Coolidge telegraphed to the labor leader the words that would make the Massachusetts governor a national hero: “There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time.”

Those words, and the governor’s picture, were published in newspapers throughout the land. His telephone was jammed with calls of congratulations, and wires and telegrams commending him for his stand piled up in his office. There was serious talk of higher office for the stern Yankee defending law and order in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

When a client tried to reward him for a generous settlement that covered legal as well as medical expenses, Coolidge handed the check back to him. “You got most of the evidence,” he said. “Here’s something for you.”

Coolidge did not attend, but Frank Stearns and a legion of Coolidge supporters were at the 1920 Republican National Convention in Chicago to promote the candidacy of Calvin Coolidge for president of the United States. When no candidate had prevailed after several ballots, the party bosses in the proverbial “smoke-filled room” settled on the affable Sen. Warren G. Harding as the compromise candidate. They then chose Sen. Irvine L. Lenroot of California for the second spot on the ticket, but by that time the delegates were tired of being bossed. Senator Medill McCormack of Illinois had barely begun his speech nomi-

nating Lenroot when he was interrupted by a cry from the back of the hall. “Coolidge! Coolidge! Coolidge!”

Others took up the cry and it continued after McCormack had finished his speech and throughout a brief demonstration for Lenroot. Before long the telephone rang in a duplex apartment in Northampton, Massachusetts. It was a brief

call to a man of few words.

“Nominated for vice president,” the governor explained to his wife.

“You aren’t going to take it, are you?” she asked.

“I suppose I’ll have to,” he said.

“I Think I Can Swing It.”

Harding and Coolidge won decisively over their Democratic rivals, Ohio newspaperman James Cox and former assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt. Though he enjoyed a cordial relationship with the president and was privileged to sit in on Cabinet meetings, Coolidge was less than thrilled with the office of vice presi-

dent. The insignificance of the office was impressed upon him one day when the hotel where he and Grace rented a suite had caught on fire, and the residents were evacuated. When it appeared the danger had passed, Coolidge tried to return. A fire marshal stopped him. “Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m the vice president,” Coolidge replied. Whereupon he was allowed to proceed but a few steps before the official wanted to know: “What are you vice president of?”

“I am vice president of the United States.” At that point he was ordered back.

“I thought you were vice president of the hotel,” the fire marshal said.

The Coolidges were in Plymouth Notch, staying with Calvin’s father on August 2, 1923, when word arrived that President Harding had died of a heart attack in a hotel in San Francisco. By the light of an oil lamp on the sitting room table, John Coolidge administered the oath of office to his son, the new president. Calvin Coolidge was headed back to Washington, this time to assume all the duties and powers of president of the United States. He began the trip with a quiet confidence. “I think I can swing it,” he said.

Clouds Over the White House

Coolidge would continue Harding’s attack on the progressive income tax, which had reached a top rate of 77 percent by the end of World War I. Harding managed to get two tax cuts, reducing the top rate to 54 and then 46 percent, but Coolidge was determined to reduce it further. He found a fiscal soulmate in Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, an ardent champion of what he called “scientific taxation,” or what became known in the 1980s as “supply-side economics.” The theory holds that as you reduce taxes on upper-level income, it frees capital for investment and other economic activity that produces more profits and increases revenue. The theory was borne out during the five-and-a-half-year presidency of Calvin Coolidge, the last president to preside over both tax cuts and debt reduction.

Albert Fall, former secretary of the interior, leaves the District of Columbia courthouse, convicted of accepting a \$100,000 bribe in connection with the leasing of the Elk Hills oil reserve in California.





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Other inheritances from the Harding administration were less fortunate. Scandals that came to light during Coolidge's first year in office centered on the leasing of government oil fields, most notably the "Teapot Dome" in Wyoming. Congressional investigations revealed that Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall had received substantial loans from oil men to whom he had awarded leases. The attorney general came under Senate investigation for failure to prosecute corruption and resigned. Revelations concerning some \$250 million in graft in the Veterans Bureau further darkened the cloud over the White House.

A far greater cloud of a personal nature descended on the First Family, when Calvin, Jr., the younger of the Coolidges' two sons, developed a blister on his toe while playing tennis on the White House grounds. It became infected, and the teenager died on July 7, 1924. "When he went the power and the glory of the Presidency went with him," Coolidge wrote.

He would seek election to a full term in 1924, however, determined to continue cutting taxes and spending as the key to promoting freedom and prosperity. Judging by the way the election went, most Americans agreed. Coolidge and running mate Charles Dawes won handily over the Democratic ticket of John W. Davis and

Charles Bryan. The Progressive Party's Robert LaFollette and Burton Wheeler finished an unsurprising third.

Lower Taxes, More Prosperity

Given a full term of his own, Coolidge made hay while prosperity's sun shone. The top income tax rate came down again by half, to 25 percent. The federal budget was always in surplus, and the national debt was steadily reduced. Unemployment fell to five percent and even reached as low as three percent. Sales of everything from cars to radios to household appliances skyrocketed, while young and new industries, such as motion pictures and aviation, flourished. All of that in a seemingly peaceful world led the nation, and especially the Republicans, to believe that "Coolidge prosperity" was good for at least a second full term: The nation would once again "Keep Cool with Coolidge," and the Grand Old Party would rout the Democrats again.

But if the Democrats were to be routed again, it would not be with Coolidge at the helm. Reporters following the president in the Black Hills of South Dakota in the summer of 1927 had no idea what to expect when the president summoned them to his vacation home and handed each a slip of paper containing a single brief, declarative sentence: "I do not choose to run

The limited government associated with "Coolidge prosperity" gave way to a flood of regulatory legislation in President Roosevelt's New Deal.

for president in 1928." The statement hit a gusher. Coolidge's 10 words soon had 50,000 words moving over the wire. For weeks and months, there was speculation over the possibility he might be open to a draft. But he did not choose to run. It was his choice, and he had made it.

He and Grace moved back to Northampton, where he died of a heart attack in 1933 at the age of 60. Though his name would be forever linked with the prosperity of the "Roaring Twenties," he had often expressed the ideal that material prosperity was not an end, but a means, creating opportunities for "the multiplication of schools, the increase of knowledge, the dissemination of intelligence, the broadening of outlook, the expansion of liberties, the widening of culture."

All of that would happen, he believed, through the efforts of a free people, rather than by a government controlling and directing their resources and enterprise.

"I want the people of America to be able to work less for the Government and more for themselves," he said. "I want them to have the rewards of their own industry. This is the chief meaning of freedom." ■