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NOT "SILENT CAL" - "THINKING CAL"

Correcting the Historical Image of Calvin Coolidge

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FOREWORD

Paul Kengor, Ph.D.

They called him "Silent Cal" Coolidge, an apt description of not only his taciturn demeanor but, later, his rankings in modern presidential surveys. The latest such survey, done by C-SPAN this most recent Presidents' Day, placed President Calvin Coolidge at a dismal 26, just behind Jimmy Carter, four worse than Gerald Ford, and barely edging out Richard Nixon, who resigned the presidency in disgrace. Even then, that was considerably better than how Coolidge has polled in the past.

Why the lack of respect for Coolidge? Perhaps because he believed that America needed a president who worked to limit rather than to expand power. Liberal historians celebrate our greatest government planners, with FDR always atop their list of 20th century presidents. Coolidge was not their kind of chief executive. Besides, there was all that talk by Silent Cal—when he did talk—about antiquated things like man and Providence, servant-hood, the Declaration of Independence, Civil Government, a noble State, the Constitution, the Bible, and the American Founders. Silent Cal was a thinker.

To that end, one scholar who has not neglected President Coolidge is our own L. John Van Til. Dr. Van Til has studied Coolidge more than anyone I know, and has done so dutifully, and silently, for many years now. He presents some of his thoughts on this fascinating, unappreciated man and president in this Center for Vision & Values white paper. Like Coolidge's presidency, it is well worth some time for reflection—and thinking.

Dr. Paul Kengor, a presidential scholar who was among the 65 scholars surveyed in the 2009 C-SPAN presidential ranking, is executive director of The Center for Vision & Values at Grove City College.

graduations around the country, that Coolidge won. When notified, Coolidge characteristically said nothing, placing the medal on his desk in the law office where he had begun to study law. Days later, a senior partner, and fellow Amherst graduate, walked in and saw the medal, congratulating Coolidge. Coolidge, who, later as a seasoned politician, said of speech, "Be brief. Above all, be brief," responded merely, "Thank you." His quiet pride in winning the national contest is evident in his book *Foundations of the Republic*. In it, he included the prize essay as the last item in the collection. The prestige associated with this prize in 1895 would be similar to, if not greater than, Rhodes Scholarships awarded today. An obvious point to be made here, too, is the fact that this prize essay is powerful evidence of the fact that Coolidge was already a gifted and thoughtful person at an early age — reinforced by the fact that he also graduated magna cum laude from a top school, such as Amherst.

And so we conclude by asking: Was Coolidge an anti-intellectual simpleton and dullard, as New Deal historians suggest? Winning the top collegiate oratorical contest in the nation and being graduated magna cum laude from a first-rate school, Amherst, do not support such a view. Further, a sustained examination of his life and writings does not support such a claim either. As a matter of fact, such an examination of the record strongly suggests the opposite. Students and politicians today would be better off studying his life and ideas rather than those of recent presidents. For, unlike them, he shows much wisdom about how to live a successful life as a public servant, based on Christian principles and a sound understanding of the Founding Fathers and their work.

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Correcting the Historical Image of Calvin Coolidge

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> We do not need more material development, we need more spiritual development. We do not need more intellectual power, we need more moral power. We do not need more knowledge, we need more character. We do not need more government, we need more culture. We do not need more law, we need more religion. We do not need more of the things that are seen, we need more of the things that are unseen.
>
> — Calvin Coolidge

Consult almost any history or political science textbook of the past 50 years, and very likely it will portray Calvin Coolidge negatively, frequently referring to him as a dumb, indolent, anti-intellectual pawn of Big Business. In this view, Coolidge was a political accident who, upon becoming president of the United States on August 2, 1923, slept through his five-and-a-half-year presidency. While he slept, say his critics, the nation drifted towards disaster — which came in the form of a gigantic stock-market crash and Great Depression.

How did this apparent political naif, this so-called simpleton, this relic of the 19th century, become president? That is a question frequently pondered by conventional historians and political scientists in their best-selling texts. After penning a few lines of ridicule, most historians push aside any serious consideration of President Coolidge and continue their speculation about what, in their opinion, "should have been" in the 1920s — that "lost" decade between Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Let's find the real Coolidge and see what difference it makes for the historical record. Sadly, decades of hostile historical comment about

Coolidge in hundreds of texts has left a large percentage of the American public with a decidedly negative image. It is the contention of this essay that Calvin Coolidge certainly should be appreciated, and for several reasons. First, the textbook image of him believed by most who have matriculated in the nation's schools is simply dead wrong. The prevailing view of him is not merely a matter of interpretation, it is a question of facts, and the texts have the facts wrong in most instances. Second, as I found in my years of study of his writings, Coolidge was a very thoughtful man with a comprehensive view of the world. Indeed, the nation would be much better served if more of its presidents had a worldview as consistent as Coolidge's. We should strongly suggest that his writings be read today because they have a deep wisdom in them that was born of the man's basic common sense. Besides, he was a man of great humor, and we all can use more of that.

Fortunately, a more balanced view of him may emerge as a result of a modest Coolidge renaissance that is now under way. Evidence of this appears in several new scholarly biographies of him by leading historians, numerous conferences devoted to a further exploration of Coolidge and his era, and not least of all, in a quirky political endorsement of him by a recent, very popular president. The last reference, of course, is to the now-famous White House scene in which Ronald Reagan, upon assuming office, ordered Coolidge's portrait to be hung in the Cabinet Room. Reporters snickered, and when their inquiries about it reached Reagan, he emphatically said that Coolidge was his kind of president because he cut government spending and lowered taxes — two things Reagan hoped to do.

British historian Paul Johnson also contributed to the Coolidge revival, especially in his thoughtful evaluation of Coolidge in his bestselling *Modern Times*. In fact, it was Johnson's view that encouraged me to find Coolidge's works and read them for myself. It was soon clear that they were not easily available, and had been out of print since the 1920s. It occurred to me that a new edition of his main works would be valuable for the emerging Coolidge revival and for others interested in him and his era. I resolved to study and prepare a new edition of

> In its main features the Declaration of Independence is a great spiritual document. It is a declaration not of material but of spiritual concepts. Equality, liberty, popular sovereignty, the rights of man — these are not elements which we can see and touch. These are ideals. They have their source and their roots in religious convictions. They belong to the unseen world. Unless the faith of the American people in these religious convictions [endures], the principles of our Declaration will perish. We can not continue to enjoy the result if we neglect and abandon the cause.

In this we see the close tie in his mind between the faith of the Founders and the principles of the Declaration. The large audience before him at Independence Hall that day in July 1926 would have felt perfectly comfortable with his view of the Founder's faith and the Declaration.

Before concluding this essay, a point or two more should be clearly emphasized. First, it is good to emphasize that Coolidge's considerable thought-life had two principal features, two pillars as it were: One was a comprehensive worldview rooted in the Christian philosophy of his beloved Amherst mentor, Charles Garman. Mrs. Coolidge noted that throughout their married life, Coolidge always had two books on his bedside stand — Garman's *Letters, Lectures and Addresses* and the Bible. The second pillar of Coolidge's thinking was, as pointed out here, a deep devotion to the Founding Fathers and their achievements in creating the American system; its substance being on display in the Declaration and the Constitution.

And, one more point. Being a quiet and modest man, Coolidge seldom referred to an achievement of which he was most proud. During his senior year at Amherst — he subsequently graduated magna cum laude — Coolidge entered a national essay contest which was open to all seniors of America's colleges and universities. The topic was the causes of the American Revolution. The prize was a $150 gold piece — worth a lot of money at that time. The judges decided, weeks after

sense. He pushed developments in transportation, for example, both on water and on land. Moreover, he was among the first to see the bright future of air transportation.

And where did Coolidge get his view of limited government ultimately? In addition to what he found in the Constitution itself, he learned much from the Founders. It is evident in his essays and speeches that he was an accomplished student of the Founders' lives and writings. He spoke and wrote about many of them, noting the unique contribution each made to the American system. It may be said with confidence, based upon his own writing and the contents of his library, that Coolidge was very likely as knowledgeable as any president about American history, and especially so when it came to the Founding Fathers. Significantly, he not only quotes them, but often he also refers to them as he did to Theodore Roosevelt, as "ambassadors of Providence."

Like Lincoln, Coolidge thought that the Declaration of Independence was in a way more important than the Constitution. At least, the latter was not possible without the former. This fascination with the Declaration is not only evident throughout his writings but especially clear in his address delivered on its 125th anniversary. Interestingly, at that time in American history, when July 4 fell on a Sunday, the celebration took place on the next day. So it was that Coolidge presented his remarks about the Declaration on July 5, 1926, in Philadelphia, under the title "The Inspiration of the Declaration." Among other things, Coolidge stated that the annual celebration of the Declaration was not so much a time to "proclaim new theories and principles as it was a time to reaffirm and reestablish those old theories and principles which time and the unerring logic of events have demonstrated to be sound."

Something of Coolidge's power with the pen is evident in this address. He noted that people from other lands, as well as Americans, viewed Independence Hall as hallowed ground. Indeed, to him it seemed to be as important to many as the Holy Land — a sacred place. He went on to say:

Coolidge's published works and then write an account of his intellectual development. Both of these projects are now complete.

Two main things emerged from my study of his writings, one expected and the other not. Naturally, a better understanding of Coolidge flowed from this study. On the other hand, to my surprise, it became evident that Calvin Coolidge was a very thoughtful man, a quality never implied or suggested by text writers and critics. After reviewing several notebooks full of quotations gleaned from my study of his speeches and addresses, it was also evident that Coolidge's writings displayed a rather well-thought-out set of ideas about society, government, business, the nature of man, and related topics. Was it possible that the proverbial "Silent Cal" was also "Thinking Cal?" And, since Coolidge wrote all of his own speeches and addresses, they reflect his thought, not the thinking of speechwriters, as was often the case with subsequent presidents.

Concluding that Coolidge was exceptionally thoughtful raised the question: How did he get that way? Did he read his way to a comprehensive worldview? His personal library, preserved in the Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts, suggests that he was, indeed, very widely read. The same message, in the form of copious literary quotations and paraphrases, jumps out of the pages of his dozens of essays and speeches. And, his extensive knowledge of history is ever-present in his writings. Coolidge himself, however, tells us very clearly in his *Autobiography* from whence it was that he obtained his interest in the way the world works—that is, how he developed a coherent worldview. It was, he says, his professors at Amherst who opened the door to a comprehensive view of life. A crucial passage from his *Autobiography* sums up his intellectual development very succinctly in his own words. After noting that he studied history and literature in his first years at Amherst, Coolidge focused on what to him was the critical point in his education:

> It always seemed to me that all our other studies were in the nature of preparation for the course in philosophy. The head of the department was Charles E. Garman, who was one of the

most remarkable men with whom I ever came in contact.… Beginning in the spring of the junior year, his course extended through four terms. The first part was devoted to psychology, in order to find out the capacity and the limits of the human mind.… We were not only learning about the human mind but learning how to use it, learning how to think.… *The human mind has the power to weigh evidence, to distinguish between right and wrong and to know the truth* (emphasis mine). I should call this the central theme of his philosophy.… We looked upon Garman as a man who walked with God. His course was a demonstration of the existence of a personal God, of our power to know Him.… The conclusions which followed from this position were logical and inescapable. It sets man off in a separate kingdom from all other creatures in the universe, and makes him a true son of God and a partaker of the Divine nature.... He believed in the Bible and constantly quoted it to illustrate his position.… To Garman was given a power which took his class up into a high mountain of spiritual life and left them alone with God.… What he revealed to us of the nature of God and man will stand. Against it 'the gates of hell shall not prevail.'

It seems remarkable, indeed, that all of this was still so clear in Coolidge's mind 35 years distant from the classroom at Amherst. No doubt, it is evidence of the strength of Garman's influence on the shaping of Coolidge's mind. The power of Garman's influence is evident throughout Coolidge's two major works, *The Price of Freedom* and *Foundations of the Republic*, first published in 1924 and 1926 respectively.[1] We turn now to a consideration of two principal characteristics of Coolidge's life and thought.

First, Coolidge had a systematic and comprehensive view of the world, one that was obviously and distinctively Christian. Second, he had supreme confidence in the societal and governmental principles the Founding Fathers hammered out for the new nation in their own

[1] As noted, I have prepared a new edition of these works along with a 125-page essay which traces the development and structure of his thought.

Government, or Civil Government as Coolidge liked to call it, was that government created by the Constitution. It was limited in two ways: First, by the Constitution itself because it was a document that enumerated the powers of the government it created. This feature was strengthened by the Ninth and Tenth Amendments, worth quoting here:

> Amendment IX (1791) — The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.
>
> Amendment X (1791) — The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

In addition to the limitations on the Civil Government found in the Constitution and its Amendments, it was also limited, in Coolidge's view, by virtue of the fact that it was but one of many institutions in society. To emphasize, it stood among the others — business, family, churches, labor, etc., all of which together constituted a part of the natural order of things. From another angle, it may be said that Civil Government was not a superior or supreme institution in society, in Coolidge's view. How different this view is from that held by most in American society today! Today, most people expect and assume that the Civil Government is the first resort in solving problems, rather than the last one, as Coolidge and his contemporaries believed. With this view of government as limited, Coolidge constantly worked to reduce government — which had expanded greatly during World War I, as governments always do during wars. Harding had created the Bureau of the Budget just before his untimely death and Coolidge soon put teeth into it. He gave it life as a tool to help in the control and reduction of government expenditures.

We must note in passing that Coolidge was not opposed to new programs as many of his critics suggest, nor was he a mindless Dickens-like Scrooge, who delighted in destroying programs to save money. He favored many new projects over the years, when they made economic

Coolidge's view of societal structures and the need to keep them in balance illustrates the scope of his considerable thinking about how institutions should relate to one another in a civilization. Indeed, that view was the foundation of his policies while in government service. Significantly, he saw government as just another of society's institutions. To be sure, it had specific duties, as is evident in his view of Roosevelt's use of governmental power to correct an imbalance in the economic sphere. Stated another way, in his view government was limited in its role, just as religion and business were limited. We turn now to see how Coolidge developed his view of government.

A basic distinction for Coolidge was to be found between the terms government and state. Government for him and his generation meant the constitutional apparatus that provided for the ruling or governing of society. It included the separate branches of government, limitations on the powers and duties of each branch, an election process, amending powers, and the like. State, for Coolidge, and again for his generation, referred to the series of social relationships found among citizens — political parties, religious organizations (including churches), family, unions, business firms, fraternal organizations, and more.

Strange as it may seem to modern minds, each of these institutions in the minds of early 20th-century Americans also had its own government: Churches had ecclesiastical governments; families had paternal governments; and so on with all societal institutions. Stated another way, the government in each realm applied the rules (laws) which regulated its realm and its realm only. These distinctions have been largely lost today as the federal government has usurped power and authority previously held by each. To emphasize, when Coolidge talked about government and its powers, he thought of it as civil government, one not possessed with immediate authority over all societal realms. In short, he understood, as did his contemporaries, that civil government was but one kind of government, one with limited powers to be sure. In this, as in many other intellectual matters discussed here, he reflects the thinking of his beloved mentor, Charles Garman.

writings and in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. These features of Coolidge's thought are woven into virtually every speech he delivered and essay he wrote.

Turning to the first theme, we may observe that many of Coolidge's contemporaries, Americans who came to maturity in the last quarter of the 19th century, would not be surprised to hear someone refer to Coolidge as having a Christian worldview, because most of them thought of their own lives and world in the same way. Notwithstanding late 20th-century intellectuals' and Supreme Court Justices' views to the contrary, America into the 1920s was in many ways a Christian society — meaning that the prevailing flavor of culture assumed Christian principles. This congruence between Coolidge's view of America and many Americans' view of it was one of the reasons why Coolidge was the most popular public figure in America throughout the decade of the 1920s, even after he left office and was replaced by Hoover. Once out of office he was paid a small fortune for articles he wrote for magazines and newspapers because the public wanted to know what Coolidge thought about any and every thing.

There was, however, something distinctive about Coolidge's Christian worldview, rooted as it was in the teaching of his beloved professor, Charles Garman. I can only touch a few of the highlights of this view here.[2] Beyond the usual Christian assumptions about life — that God was sovereign, that He made man in His image to rule over Creation, that man sinned and could be redeemed, that man had a duty as image-bearer to create civilizations, and more — Coolidge focused on societal structures and how they ought to work. He thought society had a natural balance among its several segments — family, business, religious institutions, labor, education and the like. Significantly, following Professor Garman, Coolidge believed that this balance had been disrupted by business practices during the Industrial Revolution, especially since the Civil War. Leaders of industry had obtained power a thousand times greater than any man had held in the days of craftsmen, Coolidge noted. The new Captains of Industry, as they

[2] More of them may be found in my essay referred to above.

were called, gained great wealth and power while others working as laborers lost almost all control over their own lives and labor. It was especially frightful, and immoral, to Coolidge, that such workers had no outlet for their creativity — an image-bearing quality each worker should exercise either on the job or in some other realm, Coolidge argued.

It should be noted in passing that this focus by Coolidge on creativity as part of life was but one dimension of his continuous emphasis on the spiritual, immaterial, and transcendent aspects of human nature. Indeed, he pondered this at length in another of what I have called his "big picture essays," this one entitled "The Things That Are Unseen." The concluding lines of that piece sum up very well the importance of the spiritual dimension of life that Coolidge believed was crucial in one's view of man. Said Coolidge:

> We do not need more material development, we need more spiritual development. We do not need more intellectual power, we need more moral power. We do not need more knowledge, we need more character. We do not need more government, we need more culture. We do not need more law, we need more religion. We do not need more of the things that are seen, we need more of the things that are unseen.

Elsewhere, Coolidge spoke and wrote at length about the need for character, moral power, and religion. In addition, he was adamant about his claim that we do not need "more laws." What was needed, he said, was a much better enforcement of existing laws.

To return to the main point here, an accumulation of great power by the Captains of Industry, Coolidge did not merely refer to it in the abstract in his speeches and essays. He put flesh and blood on this claim, especially in his essay "Theodore Roosevelt," delivered as an address in New York City, just weeks before he was inaugurated as Vice President. Though he thought the problem had been largely tamed by that time, 1920, he wanted to make his view clear about the imbalance that had developed after the Civil War, an imbalance that Roosevelt had largely corrected through his anti-trust efforts.

His remarks about Roosevelt provide an example of another of his "big picture" essays and addresses. Noteworthy, too, is the fact that a number of these essays were biographical. That was no accident, as the following quotation makes clear. He states here, as in many other biographical essays, that great men have been sent from time to time to aid civilizations' development in special ways. Stated Coolidge:

> Great men are the ambassadors of Providence sent to reveal to their fellow men their unknown selves. To them is granted the power to call forth the best there is in those who come under their influence. Sometimes they have come as great captains, commanders of men, who have hewed out empires, sometimes as statesmen, ministering to the well-being of their country, sometimes as painters and poets, showing new realms of beauty, sometimes as philosophers and preachers, revealing to the race "the way, the truth, and the life," but always as inspirers of noble action, translating high ideals into practical affairs of life. There is something about them better than anything they do or say.... They come and go, in part mystery, in part the simplest of all experience, the compelling influence of the truth. They leave no successor.

These remarks set the stage for the main point of his essay, that is, that Teddy Roosevelt was a God-given leader who corrected the economic imbalance that had developed in America since the Civil War. Of course, this is part of Coolidge's larger view of history, a view that may be termed "Augustinian," with elements of a devotion to "manifest destiny" in it. In short, history was a development through stages and now in America the last stage was unfolding. His view, in these respects, was much like that of many other Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though his focus on the "unseen" is more dramatic.