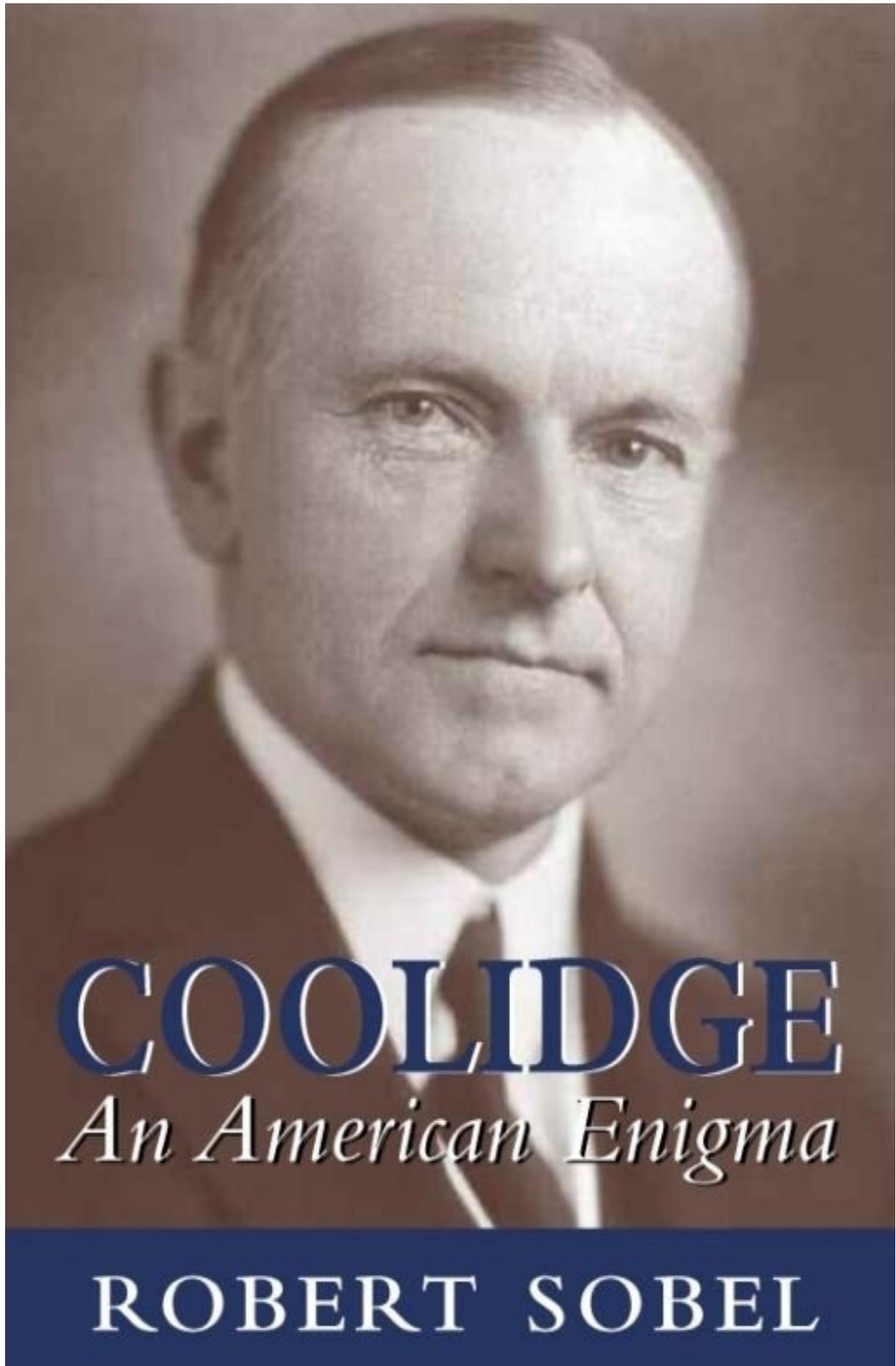


COOLIDGE

An American Enigma

ROBERT SOBEL



Coolidge

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An American Enigma

Robert Sobel



Regnery Publishing, Inc.
Washington, D.C.

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For

Elizabeth Rose Sobel and Lauren Michelle Sobel

Had he been simply mediocre and commonplace, one would have gained no clearer impression of him at all. But just as a man may be so picturesquely ugly as to attract attention, so Coolidge's personality was apparently so negative that it at once challenged human interest. In appearance he was splendidly null, apparently deficient in red corpuscles, with a peaked, wire-drawn expression. You felt he was always about to turn up his coat collar against a challenging east wind. As he walked there was no motion of the body above the waist. The arms hung immobile, with the torso as inflexible as the effigy of a lay figure.

In his enigmatic character he has been compared to the Sphinx. From the enigma standpoint the comparison is inexact; but like the Sphinx, he seemed to look out with unseeing eyes upon a world which held no glow, no surprises. Desert sand blown by the wind—endless, tantalizing dust.

—Alfred Pierce Dennis, 1931

1

Meet Calvin Coolidge

It was my desire to maintain about the White House as far as possible an attitude of simplicity and not engage in anything that had an air of pretentious display. This was my conception of the great office. It carries sufficient power within itself, so that it does not require any of the outward trappings of pomp and splendor for the purpose of creating an impression. Of course there should be proper formality, and personal relations should be conducted at all times with the best traditions of polite society. But there is no need for theatrics.

The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge

AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS DO NOT so much harbor a negative opinion of Calvin Coolidge as they trivialize him. He often is dismissed as a political naif, simpleton, and lazy misfit, a relic from the nineteenth century, whose administration set the stage for the Great Depression. Most of the time, however, he simply isn't taken very seriously. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Irwin Unger recently wrote, "Coolidge slept away most of his five years in office. During his term, the watchword of government was do nothing." This is the image of Coolidge passed on to students and others. They have come to perceive Coolidge as an accidental president who lacked an agenda, did not call for sacrifices and crusades, and did none of those things that mark presidents usually considered great.

Do historians who hold this view have a point? They might observe there was no shortage of issues Coolidge might have addressed from 1923 to 1929, had he wanted to assert presidential leadership. The coal industry was a disaster area. In foreign policy there were America's relations to the League of Nations and war debts. A response might have been mounted to the Japanese arms buildup. Harding had programs or recommendations to deal with most of these matters, and even before the Great Depression, his successor, Herbert Hoover, was a whirlwind of activity.

A major national debate centered around Prohibition. Coolidge disliked Prohibition, since he felt it could never work, but also because he generally opposed federal interferences with the ways people conducted themselves. He abhorred the Ku Klux Klan, and often spoke out for civil rights and against racism, but couldn't

bring himself to condemn the Klan's philosophy and actions directly or take any actions to create more harmonious race relations. The same was true for a bill that included a ban on immigration from Japan. He opposed this part of the measure, but signed it anyway.

For the most part, however, historians are silent on these matters. Indeed, a reading of many texts discloses most are scanted or not even discussed. Rather, there seems to be three reasons for his poor reputation, one being the perception that he took no steps to prevent the Great Depression, which is to say, he lacked the ability to foresee the future—a failure he shared with all presidents, and indeed, all humans. This one doesn't merit serious consideration, and in any case, Coolidge's words and actions regarding the economy will be discussed in detail later in this book, and the reader can decide for himself or herself on the matter.

Another is the view of him as being indolent, and the business of sleeping away his time and doing nothing. Writing in 1926, Walter Lippmann touched upon this in an ironic but perceptive fashion.

Mr. Coolidge's genius for inactivity is developed to a very high point. It is far from being an indolent activity. It is a grim, determined, alert inactivity which keeps Mr. Coolidge occupied constantly. Nobody has ever worked harder at inactivity, with such force of character, with such unremitting attention to detail, with such conscientious devotion to the task. Inactivity is a political philosophy and a party program with Mr. Coolidge, and nobody should mistake his unflinching adherence to it for a soft and easy desire to let things slide. Mr. Coolidge's inactivity is not merely the absence of activity. It is, on the contrary, a steady application to the task of neutralizing and thwarting political activity wherever there are signs of life.

This is quite different from sleeping away five years in office.

C. Bascom Slemph, formerly Coolidge's private secretary, gathered together the president's thoughts on various subjects in 1926, in a work entitled *The Mind of the President*. In words that Coolidge must have approved (though he denied having anything to do with the book), Slemph wrote:

He had reversed a recent tradition of the presidential office. For a quarter of a century our presidents have professed democracy but have practiced benevolent autocracy. They believed that they could advance the welfare of the nation better than the people could advance it. They announced what they declared to be progressive policies and tried to convert the people to these policies. They have tried to improve government from the top.

While this statement appears to place Warren Harding in the

progressive tradition, the concept certainly can be easily defended. Slemp went on to say that Coolidge believed progress comes from the people, and that a national leader should not try to “go ahead of this majestic army of human thought and aspiration, blazing new and strange paths.” Lippmann went still further. “Mr. Coolidge, though a Republican, is no Hamiltonian Federalist,” and so he extended the time line to the first secretary of the treasury at least through Woodrow Wilson, during which the tendency of Hamiltonians and Republicans was toward centralization. This matter will be discussed on several levels in the pages that follow.

Finally, Coolidge is portrayed as one whose major concern while in office was to assist business, especially big business. It is upon this issue more than any other, and Coolidge’s supposed rhetoric rather than his actions, that they base their conclusions. One of the objects of this book is to demonstrate that his words and actions were more complicated on the matter than is commonly thought, and also to examine and defuse other myths that have gathered around him.

Upon examination the case for Coolidge being a servant of big business is weak, at least when he is compared with those presidents who preceded him. Virtually all presidents, Democrat as well as Republican, believed that without a strong business sector all would suffer—labor, farmers, consumers. This was true from Abraham Lincoln onward, and under Republicans took the forms of high tariffs, aid to internal improvements, legislation to press for strong banks, lax regulation, and the promotion of education. Even Theodore Roosevelt, generally considered highly critical of big business, was on generally good terms with Wall Street and the tycoons of his time, receiving financial contributions from the likes of J.P. Morgan and E.H. Harriman during his successful 1904 presidential campaign. There were two Democratic presidents in this period, Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson. Wilson indeed was a reformer and an activist, but Cleveland considered the role of the president to be that of executing legislation passed by Congress and vetoing those measures of which he did not approve, which is what he did. Cleveland also brought a large measure of honesty to a Washington that had undergone a long period of corruption. Of all the presidents, an argument might be made that Coolidge resembled Cleveland more than any other. Yet Cleveland has generally received high grades from historians.

Businessmen certainly approved of much of what Coolidge said, stood for, and did. Coolidge asked for and got tax cuts, balanced budgets, lower government spending, and high tariffs. He supported the highway program, wanted a strong merchant marine, and advocated railroad consolidation. His intervention in alleviating distress during the Mississippi floods was a precedent-breaker, but

he grudgingly used federal muscle to assist Americans in this time of trouble. It would be a stretch to consider this pro-business; in fact he initially opposed flood aid because he feared most of it would go to business interests. Coolidge fought against direct federal assistance to farmers, and a later generation assumed he was therefore prepared to see their suffering continue. But he was also in favor of high tariffs on imports of farm goods and low ones on equipment farmers purchased. Moreover, his reasoning regarding such aid was vindicated when the policies he opposed were put into place and created a clumsy and unsatisfactory situation.

Certainly Coolidge favored high tariffs, all but abandoned antitrust prosecutions, and did not name activist commissioners to the regulatory agencies. The Commerce and State Departments vigorously assisted American businesses expanding overseas. All of this was known and generally approved at the time, and for good reason: rarely had businessmen's reputations been so high as in the 1920s. The men who had been called "robber barons" during the progressive era were then dubbed "captains of industry." Bruce Barton, who had written glowingly of Coolidge, was also the author of a 1924 best-seller, still quite popular in 1929, *The Man Nobody Knows*, who was Jesus Christ. Barton was repelled by interpretations of Jesus as a dreamer, a person uninterested in worldly matters. Instead, said Barton, he was a hail-fellow-well-met, popular with his friends, able to tell a good story. He was a man who "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world." "Some day," wrote Barton, "someone will write a book about Jesus. Every businessman will read it and send it to his partners and his salesmen. For it will tell the story of the founder of modern business." In Barton's reading of the Bible, business was moral, selling was akin to prayer, and God meant us to enjoy ourselves. This was not considered blasphemy by approving readers. Indeed, Barton was elected to Congress in 1936, the year of the Franklin D. Roosevelt landslide.

Others thought the same. Fred French, one of the decade's major real estate operators, said, "The best example of a sales talk is the life of Jesus Christ. He was the best salesman of his time. He said, 'Knock and it shall be opened to you.' What he meant was 'Keep knocking until the door is opened and if it isn't opened pretty soon kick down the door!' That's my philosophy, too."

In this book I contend that the reason for current treatments of Coolidge is a generalized ignorance on the part of those who hold such views. Like most people, Coolidge was quite complicated; although he possessed a strong and clear intellectual core, he was capable of holding dissonant views on some subjects. Moreover,

again like most people, his ideas evolved as he aged and the issues changed. Coolidge, the state politician in Massachusetts, was a strong force in the Republican Party, a progressive leader, and an activist. As vice president he was a cipher, as were most who held that office before him. Moreover, he came to that position against the wishes of the national party's leader, and doubtless would have been dropped from the ticket had President Warren Harding lived to run again in 1924.

While president for the remainder of the Harding term, he dedicated himself to carrying out the agenda his predecessor had put in place. He wanted the presidency in his own right, and maneuvered skillfully to win the nomination against the wishes of the party leaders but very much in line with the desires of the general population. And he managed to carry it off.

Then tragedy struck, in the form of the death of his son, and Coolidge fell into a depression. He was a different person after that. This is the Coolidge most nonspecialists know. But even then, there was more to his presidency than is generally known or considered.

What of the country during the Coolidge years? Coolidge presided over an America in which consumerism was filtering down to the masses, enriching their lives. The numbers of automobiles, radios, household appliances, and other amenities rose sharply. Electrification proceeded apace; indoor plumbing became standard. The arts flourished; in music there were Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Sigmund Romberg, George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, and Cole Porter. The Harlem Renaissance captured the attention of the world, and American blacks achieved high rates of economic growth and low rates of illegitimacy. This was the golden age of sports—Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Bill Tilden, and Red Grange, among others, were in the public spotlight. Charles Lindbergh flew the Atlantic.

What did Coolidge have to do with all of this? Not a thing. But then, he never indicated he was responsible for developments having little or nothing to do with his administration. Indeed, he would often go out of his way to disclaim credit for his supposed accomplishments. When Coolidge was vice president-elect and in New York to receive a medal for his efforts in the Boston police strike, he remarked:

If it had not been for the clear insight and the determination of Edwin U. Curtis, a former mayor and then police commissioner of the City of Boston, the question that came to me would never have come. It was because he decided that question right in the first instance that I had the opportunity of supporting him in the second.

The public nodded approval when they read Coolidge's last address to Congress in 1929, shortly before he left office. He began

this way:

No Congress of the United States ever assembled, on surveying the state of the Union, has met with a more pleasing prospect than that which appears at the present time. In the domestic field there is tranquility and contentment, harmonious relations between management and wage earner, freedom from industrial strife, and the highest record of years of prosperity. In the foreign field there is peace, the good will that comes from mutual understanding, and the knowledge that the problems which a short time ago appeared so ominous are yielding to the touch of mutual friendship.

But he did not claim this for his administration. The next day there were no protests of exaggeration in the nation's newspapers. Coolidge was stating a simple truth that most Americans realized.

Had he wanted another term in 1928, Coolidge would have had no trouble getting the nomination and being elected. On leaving office he noted that the country was in excellent shape, and most agreed. The market crash came half a year later. By then Coolidge was back in Massachusetts, in the half of a rented two-family house he had lived in while a Massachusetts legislator, engaged in a remarkable amount of writing on a wide variety of subjects.

Was Coolidge intelligent? This may be a criterion for assessing him, though some of our better presidents weren't particularly bright, and several of the brainiest presidents did not perform very well. Arguments will be presented here to indicate he was quite intelligent, but, perhaps more important for the presidency, was unusually astute politically. Coolidge appreciated the temperament required of a politician in his time, and had concluded he filled the bill. In 1915, when still fairly obscure, he reflected on the matter:

If an individual finds he has a liking and capacity for his work in politics, he will involuntarily find himself engaged in it. There is no catalogue of such capacity. One man gets results in his life in one way, another in another. But, in general, only the man of broad and deep understanding of his fellow men can meet with much success in politics.

A lawyer by training, Coolidge had been admitted to the bar in 1897, whereupon he opened a small practice in Northampton, Massachusetts. He handled just about anything that came across the trestle, but from the first, much of his practice was politically related or generated. Coolidge was elected to the city council as a Republican two years later, and there followed a series of other elective posts in the state that culminated with his election to the governorship. In all, Coolidge ran for political office nineteen times and held one appointive post, for positions ranging from city solicitor to president of the United States, and he won seventeen of

these contests. He served continually in office, with minor breaks between moving from one to the other, from 1898 to 1929. Once asked whether he had any hobbies, Coolidge replied, "Yes. Running for office."

As Coolidge edged higher on the political ladder in Massachusetts, he made the proper contacts, won over the right sponsors, and learned swiftly and well the ways to please the powerful and retain the confidence of the electorate. He was an acclaimed politician, which is to say he was aware of the needs of constituents and of the consequences of his actions. Coolidge appealed not only to Republicans but also to voters who considered themselves Democrats. Three-quarters of a century before there were Reagan Democrats, there were Coolidge Democrats. His was hardly the record of a person who did not understand politics. One might easily argue that he was one of the most experienced and successful politicians ever to become president.

Coolidge was more loquacious than he is credited with being, and preferred short, simple, declarative sentences. A statistician with time on his hands once computed that Coolidge's sentences averaged 18 words, compared to Lincoln's 26.6, Wilson's 31.8, and Theodore Roosevelt's 41. This is a testament to Coolidge's ability to be concise.

Much (but certainly not all) of Coolidge's nonofficial prose is a pleasure to read. H.L. Mencken, who was scathing in his characterization of most politicians' writings, said of Coolidge, "He has a natural talent for the incomparable English language," which was high praise indeed from the author of *The American Language*. Yet Heywood Brown, who was not a Coolidge admirer, called his writings and use of the language "one hundred percent wooden," which was a common belief at the time. "He seems to me the least gifted author the White House has known in many generations."

How may one explain this sharp difference of opinion between two perceptive writers? One reason is that most presidents make so many speeches and do so much writing that one can find felicitous phrases amid dull stretches. After all, not all of Lincoln's state papers come up to the level of the Second Inaugural and the Gettysburg Address, and this holds true for Coolidge. Throughout this book are scores of Coolidge quotes, and the reader can decide for himself or herself. Take this one, for starters:

No man was ever meanly born. About his cradle is the wondrous miracle of life. He may descend into the depths, he may live in infamy and perish miserably, but he is born great. Men build monuments above the graves of their heroes to mark the end of a great life, but women seek out the birthplace and build their shrine, not where a great life had its end but where it had its beginning,

seeking with a truer instinct not the common source of things in that which is gone forever but in that which they know will again be manifest. Life may depart, but the source of life is constant.

Coolidge isn't very attractive to a generation raised on the constant din of motion pictures, stereos, and especially radio and TV. To them he must appear exotic, and a good deal of this can be ascribed to his upbringing compared to that of today's Americans. He was reared in an area barely reached by the railroad. His youth was relatively untouched by the "modern." His home didn't have indoor plumbing, electricity, or a telephone. Yet Coolidge had intellectual interests, and came alive in philosophy classes at Amherst. He was an avid reader, and some of his speeches are peppered with classical references. When he left for his honeymoon, he was in the midst of translating Dante's *Inferno* into English. After his death his wife wrote that he had a small, select library. Among his books were "his Bible, the *Life and Letters of Charles E. Garman*, the Amherst professor whose influence upon his students was so marked, and *Paradise Lost* in two paper-covered volumes. These two small books he frequently carried with him when traveling." But he didn't care to have this known. Those who think he was humorless will be surprised to learn that he was selected by his graduating class to deliver the Grove Oration, which by tradition had to be amusing.

His was a style that takes some getting used to by today's public, which hears empty promises from politicians, not straightforward prose. Not only would Coolidge have nothing to do with negative campaigning, but he refused even to utter the name of his opponents. The thought of Coolidge philandering, keeping an enemies list, lying, or flip-flopping on the issues would have amazed even his political enemies. The sleaze that characterizes much of American political life today, in both parties, was absent in his administration. Whatever one thinks of Coolidge, the possibility that he would sell access to the Lincoln bedroom or divert public funds for private uses, two of the many stories that bedevil politicians today, would have been dismissed out of hand. In 1920, when he was mentioned for the presidential nomination, one reporter wrote of him, "You just have confidence in Coolidge. He may not do what you want him to, he may not do what you think he ought to do, but you know he's done his best to do right."

Of all our presidents, Coolidge was the one who couldn't care less what we thought of him—while taking pains to make sure his reputation was safeguarded. He wasn't openly concerned much about the barbs thrown his way by intellectuals, who constantly belittled him. Once, an agitated Hoover asked whether he had seen influential columnist Frank Kent's article about him in the *American*

Mercury. Coolidge replied, "You mean that one in the magazine with the green cover? I started to read it, but it was against me, so I didn't finish it."

Historian Robert Ferrell, one of the most astute president-observers of our time, remarked in 1996 that only three presidents in the twentieth century did not contract "Potomac Fever," which is to say, become so enamored of high office as to be willing to sacrifice a great deal to obtain it. These, said Ferrell, were Truman, Harding, and Coolidge. Whether Coolidge really belongs in this short roster will be left for the reader to decide.

Coolidge's reputation underwent a renaissance of sorts among conservatives and moderates with the Reagan presidency, due in no small measure to Reagan himself, who admired Coolidge. Allowing for differences in time, place, and style, their ideas are similar. Consider a typical Coolidge statement on economics, from his 1920 inaugural address, following his reelection as governor:

The resources with which to meet taxation are dangerously near the point of exhaustion. There is a limit to the taxing power of a State beyond which increased rates produce decreased revenues. If that be exceeded intangible securities and other personal property become driven out of its jurisdiction, industry cannot meet its less burdened competitors, and no capital will be found for enlarging old or starting new enterprises. Such a condition means first stagnation, then decay and dissolution. There is before us a danger that our resources may be taxed out of existence and our prosperity destroyed.

Reagan spoke often of the need to return governmental functions to the states. So did Bush, and Clinton's welfare program did just that. Here are Coolidge's thoughts on the matter in 1926:

While we ought to glory in the Union and remember that it is the source from which the States derive their chief title to fame, we must also recognize that the national administration is not and cannot be adjusted to the needs of local government. It is too far away to be informed of local needs, too inaccessible to be responsive to local needs.

When he arrived in the White House, Reagan strolled into the Cabinet Room, where he saw portraits of Truman, Jefferson, and Lincoln. Knowing something about his new boss, White House curator Clement Conger remarked, "If you don't like Mr. Truman, you can move Mr. Truman out." So he did. Reagan ordered the Truman portrait down, and in its place came one of Coolidge. "It's a new era," Conger murmured.

Even so, Reagan was no more a reincarnation of Coolidge than FDR was the second coming of Woodrow Wilson. The 1980s were so

different from the 1920s, the problems the two men faced so disparate. In many ways, Coolidge was the last president of the nineteenth century. Reagan was the man who helped bring the twentieth century to its end with the conclusion of the Cold War.

Coolidge also was the last president who believed in a passive executive branch in times of peace and prosperity. Of those who occupied the White House in the twentieth century, Coolidge was the most Jeffersonian in philosophy and practice—a judgment those who admire Jefferson but have not delved deeply into his writings may find astonishing.

The following pages represent an attempt to introduce or reintroduce Coolidge to those to whom he is a cartoon caricature and figure of derision. Coolidge scholars will find some fresh interpretations in these pages but no major revelations. Coolidge destroyed his private papers, and scholars have pored over the public ones, to the point that what remains to be learned is the filling in of minor portions of the man and his times. This book is not based on original research. Moreover, I do not intend to present a complete picture of the Coolidge presidency, and certainly not that of his era. Rather, this book is about a man I have found to be extraordinary in his simplicity and notable in his complexity, which is to say, an unusual human being who merits serious consideration.

2

Growing Up

The town of Plymouth lies on the easterly slope of the Green Mountains, about twenty miles west of the Connecticut River and somewhat south of the central part of Vermont. This part of the state is made up of a series of narrow valleys and high hills, some of which rank as mountains that must reach an elevation of at least twenty-five hundred feet.

The first paragraph in *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*

MOST AMERICANS DURING the Coolidge era didn't know much more about him when he left the White House in 1929 than they did when he arrived there in 1923. Careful readers of the press could learn about his youth, education, and legal career, how he rose in politics, about his family, the workings of his presidency, and his ideas as expressed in speeches and interviews. And at least a dozen biographies of Coolidge—all of them idolatrous—were written before and while he was in office. Virtually all Americans had heard Coolidge jokes. The vast majority of Americans also knew they liked him, and he was considered an able if not a great president. But they weren't sure why and how they had come to this conclusion. Coolidge, to put it simply, was puzzling—which was the way he wanted it.

Many remarked on the enigmatic nature of our thirtieth president, who rose to the highest office in the land without the familiar attributes of the successful politician. Writing of him at the time, journalist Sherwin Cook, who called Coolidge one of the "two great enigmas of the first third of the twentieth century" (the other being the popularity of the play "Abie's Irish Rose"), commented:

If before he had become prominent in the public eye, the portrait of a man with the attributes of Coolidge had been sketched to any political leader and that leader had been asked what such a man's availability was, the answer would have invariably been, "A political impossibility." Coolidge's unimpressive physique, his reticence, his lack of florid speech, his utter want of social attributes, his entire aloofness, are proverbial. How could such a man ever been elected to a municipal council?

Michael Hennessy, the dean of Boston journalists and a veteran