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Why Calvin Coolidge Is the Model
for Conservative Leadership Today

By Cal Thomas



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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
202/546-4400
<http://www.heritage.org>

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By Cal Thomas

The Republican National Convention of 1924 nominated Calvin Coolidge as its candidate for a full four-year term as President. You'll recall that Coolidge had assumed the presidency following the death of Warren Harding.

As one who has covered and commented on several political conventions, that 1924 convention in Cleveland did not yield many good stories.

It is generally remembered as the most uninteresting convention in Republican history. Delegates didn't bother showing up at many of the sessions. The most popular drink was a keep-cool-with-Coolidge highball, composed of raw eggs and fruit juice. Will Rogers suggested that the city of Cleveland "open up the churches to liven things up a bit."

But this is a reminder that politics, in the end, is not about drama but about principle, not about charisma but about character. I doubt Republicans will get a nominee out of San Diego with so many wise and principled things to say about the deficit, about tax cuts, and about welfare dependence as they had in 1924. And I very much doubt he will beat this opponent by a landslide of 54 percent to 28 percent.

A CERTAIN STYLE

I have always had a particular respect for the 30th President, not entirely explained by the ties of family.

Calvin Coolidge had a certain style and attitude toward public service. He seemed immune to the pretensions of politics. When asked his goals as Governor of Massachusetts, he explained, "to walk humbly and discharge my obligations." It is hard to imagine a better definition of public service. When one woman admirer asked if the burdens of the presidency were more than a man could endure, Coolidge replied, "Oh, I don't know. There are only so many hours in the day, and one can do the best he can in the time he's got. When I was mayor of Northampton I was pretty busy most of the time, and I don't seem to be much busier here." There is something profoundly refreshing about a leader with that kind of perspective on life and politics. When Coolidge left the presidency he told reporters, "Perhaps one of the most important accomplishments of my administration has been minding my own business."

I have always admired Coolidge's political courage. He came to national prominence, of course, by breaking the 1919 police strike. Some people don't understand that this was controversial even in his own party. When he was about to sign the order calling out the National Guard, some colleagues warned him that it might destroy the Republican Party in Massachu-

Cal Thomas is a syndicated columnist and radio host.

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sets and end his political career. Governor Coolidge took the pen and said quietly, "Perhaps you are right," then signed the document. No grandstanding. Just quiet strength.

Coolidge also showed real humanity beneath his inflexible exterior. I've always been moved by the story of how Coolidge, in the summer of 1924, crawled on his hands and knees to catch a rabbit to show his dying son. He later said, "When he was suffering he begged me to help him. I could not." In that tragedy, he provided a model of dignified grief.

And Coolidge, of course, was always a source of great stories. Everyone has his favorites. Once a man, riding with Coolidge through Vermont, commented, "See how closely they have shaved those sheep?" "At least on this side," said the President.

At another point, a rude, combative man came up to Coolidge and said, "I didn't vote for you." The President immediately replied: "Someone did."

In some ways, I think that Calvin Coolidge misled people into thinking he was less thoughtful and astute than he actually was. He never set out to impress—a quality of character almost unique in politics. He would have liked the praise of one country shopkeeper, "That young chap Coolidge certainly has more stuff on the shelves and outs less in the show-window than any fellow I've ever seen."

You would think that a President with this kind of character and personality would be widely respected and fondly remembered. In fact, in his own time, he was one of the most popular men ever to occupy the White House.

But the attempts to malign Coolidge—the historical slander—began early. H. L. Menken called him "petty and dull." Franklin Roosevelt never tired of attacking the "Coolidge Prosperity," as though it were false and empty.

The history books quickly took up the cause. Historian Henry Steele Commager wrote:

The idealism of the Wilson era was in the past; the Rooseveltian passion for humanitarian reform was in the future. The decade of the twenties was dull, bourgeois and ruthless. "The business of America is business," said President Coolidge succinctly, and the observation was apt if not profound...never before, not even in the McKinley era, had American society been so materialistic.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote in *The Crisis of the Old Order*, "But, for Coolidge, business was more than business; it was a religion; and to it he committed all the passion of his arid nature...as he worshipped business, so he detested government. Economy was his self-confessed obsession."

None of this venom can be explained by the real-world results of the Coolidge Administration. The federal budget shrank. The national debt was cut almost in half. Unemployment stood at 3.6 percent. Consumer prices rose at just 0.4 percent. During his term, there was a remarkable 17.5 percent increase in the nation's wealth. Total education spending in the United States rose fourfold. In the 1920s, illiteracy fell nearly in half. This was a golden age, by any standard.

There must be some other reason that Coolidge is controversial. He has not been forgotten—like Chester Arthur or Millard Fillmore—he has been actively vilified by certain historians. In my view, this is not because he was "dull" or "arid," but because his ideas were important—and

even threatening to some. He is attacked precisely because he is a figure who speaks beyond his time.

Calvin Coolidge, known for his reticence, was actually the most articulate conservative who ever served as President. He was, as British historian Paul Johnson comments, “internally consistent and single-minded.” If his views are right, much of modern political thinking—from FDR to Bill Clinton—is profoundly wrong. This is why he continues to be relevant.

Coolidge was sometimes criticized for stating and restating the obvious. It was he who said, “When a great many people are unable to find work, unemployment results.” Actually Calvin Coolidge was in a constant search for foundational principles—the bedrock convictions that explain everything else. His points were not simply obvious, they were fundamental. Johnson concludes, “No public man carried into modern times more comprehensively the founding principles of Americanism: hard work, frugality, freedom of conscience, freedom from government, respect for serious culture.”

“They criticize me,” Coolidge said, “for harping on the obvious. Perhaps someday I’ll write *On the Importance of the Obvious*. If all the folks in the United States would do the few simple things they know they ought to do, most of our big problems would take care of themselves.”

PROVEN PRINCIPLES

Our nation is constantly in search of new ideas and new solutions. It is desperate for answers and obsessed with innovation. But Coolidge’s message was very different. He urged his fellow citizens to examine the basics of their beliefs. He called their attention to the proven principles of our political tradition. This is the reason his views, opinions, and advice seem so current. Those who set out to be “new” and “modern” are quickly outdated. Those who call attention to the permanent things are always fresh.

The 1990s would be wise to listen to this voice for the 1920s, speaking about principles that never age.

- **Coolidge talked honestly about the nature of wealth and of individual responsibility.**

He told the Massachusetts Senate in 1914, “Government cannot relieve from toil. The normal must take care of themselves. Self-government means self-support.... Ultimately property rights and personal rights are the same thing.... History reveals no civilized people among whom there was not a highly educated class and large aggregations of wealth. Large profits mean large payrolls.”

The goal of public policy, in Coolidge’s view, was not to redistribute wealth, but to create it. “After all,” he said, “there is but a fixed quantity of wealth in this country at any fixed time. The only way that we can all secure more of it is to create more.”

Coolidge also saw that there is a tie between wealth, individual character, and social progress. “Wealth is the product of industry, ambition, character and untiring effort. In all experience, the accumulation of wealth means the multiplication of schools, the increase of knowledge, the dissemination of intelligence, the encouragement of science, the broadening of outlook, the expansion of liberty, the widening of culture.”

- **Coolidge spoke to a society struggling under the weight of federal debt.**

“I favor the policy of economy,” he said, “not because I wish to save money, but because I wish to save people. The men and women of this country who toil are the ones who bear the cost of the government. Every dollar we carelessly waste means that their life will be so much the more meager. Every dollar that we prudently save means that their life will be so much the more abundant. Economy is idealism in its most practical form.”

- **President Coolidge was opposed to the easy, false promise that we can pay for larger government by taxing “the rich”—the temptation of class warfare we still see today.**

He argued,

The fallacy of the claim that the costs of government are borne by the rich cannot be too often exposed. No system has been devised, I do not think any system could be devised, under which any person living in this country could escape being affected by the cost of our government. It has a direct effect both upon the rate and the purchasing power of wages. It is felt in the price of those prime necessities of existence, food, clothing, fuel and shelter...the continuing costs of public administration can be met in only one way—by the work of the people. The higher they become, the more the people must work for the government. The less they are, the more the people can work for themselves.

In some ways, President Coolidge was a supply-sider before his time. He understood that high tax rates do not always mean higher tax revenues. Taxes can constrict economic activity, leaving less profit and income to tax. “The method of raising revenue,” he argued,

ought not to impede the transition of business; it ought to encourage it. I am opposed to extremely high rates, because they produce little or no revenue, because they are bad for the country, and, finally, because they are wrong. We cannot finance the country, we cannot improve social conditions, through any system of injustice, even if we attempt to influence it upon the rich.... The wise and correct course to follow in taxation and in all other economic legislation is not to destroy those who have already secured success but to create conditions under which every one will have a better chance to be successful.

That is sound, practical, principled advice for any time. In his own time, it was dramatically effective. The Revenue Act of 1926—engineered along with Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon—was a stunning success. In 1922, the effective tax rate on the wealthy was 50 percent, who paid a total of \$77 million into the Treasury. By 1927, Coolidge had cut their tax rate to 20 percent—but the same group paid \$230 million in taxes. Meanwhile, the total tax burden on people making less than \$10,000 fell from \$130 million in 1923 to less than \$20 million in 1929.

- **Calvin Coolidge talked with eloquence about human nature and limits on social engineering.**

He believed it was impossible to change the world suddenly because it was impossible to suddenly change human behavior. In his inaugural address, he said, “We must realize that human nature is about the most constant thing in the universe and that the essentials of human relationship do not change. We must frequently take our bearings from these fixed stars of our political firmament if we expect to hold a true course.”

- **And Calvin Coolidge was also convinced that the ultimate strength of a government, an economy and a society depends on moral and religious values.**

In no way was Coolidge a materialist. In the same speech in which he famously said, “The chief business of the American people is business,” Coolidge also argued, “The accumulation of wealth cannot be justified as the chief end of existence.” Elsewhere he noted, “Industry, thrift and self-control are not sought because they create wealth, but because they create character.”

No society, he believed, can be prosperous or successful in the absence of moral conviction. In essence, the common good requires that goodness be common. “Mere intelligence,” he said, “is not enough. Enlightenment must be accompanied by that moral power which is the product of home and religion. Real education and true welfare for the people rest inevitably on this foundation, which the government can approve and command, but which the people themselves must create.”

Coolidge was committed to religious freedom, stating that the “fundamental precept of liberty is toleration.” But he also noted, “The foundations of our society and our government rest so much on the teachings of the Bible that it would be difficult to support them if faith in these teachings would cease to be practically universal in our country.”

American society is just now learning how difficult that task is.

CONSISTENT WORLD VIEW

These ideas represent more than a practical political approach. They are a coherent, consistent view of the world, rooted in a philosophy about God, man, and government. This is something rare in an American President—something we see only in figures like Jefferson and Lincoln.

I think it can be argued that the two seminal, symbolic figures in America during the early twentieth century were Calvin Coolidge and Franklin Roosevelt. They represented visions larger than their own lives—fundamentally different directions for our national experiment.

Roosevelt spoke of the need for “bold, persistent experimentation.” He established a tradition of liberal tinkering with American society that reaches through history to our current administration. A health care plan that attempted to nationalize one-seventh of the U.S. economy is a clear descendant of this approach.

Calvin Coolidge is the polar opposite. His philosophy of government and of life is summarized in an extraordinary speech, given in 1926 at the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. It may be the finest, richest speech given by an American President in this century. “Under a system of popular government,” he said,

there will always be those who will seek for political preferment by clamoring for reform. While there is very little of this which is not sincere, there is a large portion that is not well-informed. In my opinion very little of just criticism can attach to the theories and principles of our institutions. There is far more danger of harm than there is hope of good in any radical changes.

What we need instead, Coolidge contended, is a “better knowledge of the foundations of government in general.” Once again, he was talking about foundations—always the basics.

Those foundations, in the history of our country, were not material, but spiritual. Our nation’s founders “were a people who came under the influence of a great spiritual development and acquired a great moral power.”

“No other theory is adequate to explain or comprehend the Declaration of Independence,” he said.

It is the product of the spiritual insight of the people. We live in an age of science and of abounding accumulation of material things. These did not create our Declaration. Our Declaration created them. The things of the spirit come first. Unless we cling to that, all our material prosperity, overwhelming though it may appear, will turn to a barren scepter in our grasp. If we are to maintain the great heritage which has been bequeathed to us, we must be like-minded as the fathers who created it. We must not sink into pagan materialism. We must cultivate the reverence which they had for the things which are holy. We must follow the spiritual and moral leadership which they showed.

For Coolidge this was not empty patriotism. It was a continual challenge, reissued in every generation:

Equality, liberty, popular sovereignty, the rights of man—these are not elements which we can see and touch. They 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 is to endure, the principles of our Declaration will perish. We cannot continue to enjoy the result if we neglect and abandon the cause.

Coolidge concluded that our first, most important task as a nation is not to seek new ideas, but to return to old ideals:

It is often asserted that the world has made a great deal of progress since 1776, that we have had new thoughts and new experiences which have given us a great advance of the people of that day, and that we may therefore very well discard their conclusions for something more modern. But that reasoning cannot be applied to [the Declaration of Independence]. If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions. If anyone wishes to deny their truth and their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was not equality, not rights of the individual, no rule of the people. Those who wish to proceed in that direction cannot lay claim to progress. They are reactionary.

CONCLUSION

Our century has proven Coolidge to be exactly right. The greatest revolution of our time—defeating a totalitarian empire—was the ringing reaffirmation of ideas familiar in Philadelphia in 1776. It is socialism—which claimed history as its own—that now seems reactionary. It is American liberalism that seems old and tired.

In the 1940s, Arthur Schlesinger wrote, “There seems no inherent obstacle to the gradual advance of socialism in the United States through a series of New Deals.” But, with the perspective of history, they have advanced toward exhaustion—toward dependence and spiritual decay. We forgot about the nature of man and the limits of government. We neglected

that the “things of the spirit come first.” Calvin Coolidge would have found these things obvious. If only they had been obvious to us.

Let me conclude with a statement by Coolidge that has never been more current and relevant.

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. If the foundation be firm, the foundation will stand.

I would add only that we also need to be graced by leaders of Calvin Coolidge’s stature again.