

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2514
July 1, 2009

This Fourth of July, Keep Cool with Coolidge

Julia Shaw

America's birthday is also that of Calvin Coolidge, the only President to be born on the Fourth of July. This is altogether fitting, as the man remembered as "Silent Cal" is one of the most eloquent voices for the great and enduring principles expressed in our Declaration of Independence.

There are many half-truths about Coolidge. His official White House biography characterizes him as almost blindly preserving the past in the face of changed circumstances, "determined to preserve old moral and economic precepts amid the material prosperity Americans were enjoying. He refused to use the Federal economic power to check the growing boom or ameliorate the depressed condition of agriculture and certain industries," and he "pledged to maintain the status quo."¹

To be sure, economic prosperity flourished under Coolidge, but it was a consequence of tax cuts and smart financial policy rather than mere inattentiveness.² Despite his nickname, Coolidge was far from silent in his biweekly press conferences and (years before FDR's fireside chats) regular radio addresses to the American people.³

Many also remember Coolidge for saying that "the business of America is business." This is also misunderstood. When he said "after all, the chief business of the American people is business," Coolidge did not mean that Americans consider wealth to be the highest accomplishment. Rather, he argued that "the accumulation of wealth can not be justified as the chief end of existence.... And there never was a time when wealth was so generally regarded as a means, or so little regarded as an end, as today."⁴

An experienced public servant, Coolidge served as a city councilman, city solicitor, mayor of Northampton, state senator, lieutenant governor, and governor of Massachusetts before joining presidential candidate Warren G. Harding's quest to return the country to "normalcy." Calvin Coolidge took the presidential oath in the early morning on August 3, 1923, following Harding's death. Under Coolidge, normalcy would not simply mean the absence of a world war; it would mean a return to the principles of America's Founding.

How did Coolidge understand the Founders and the principles they articulated? Were America's principles good because they were old? Would these principles serve as placeholders until newer, better principles could be discovered?

Coolidge saw the Founders and their principles as simultaneously conservative and revolutionary. They were conservative insofar as many of their ideas were expressed earlier in Western political philosophy and the religious writings of the American colonists.⁵ They were revolutionary insofar as they established a nation based on principles of individual rights, liberty, equality, and self-government.

Coolidge understood that the Founders did not invent the principles contained within the Declara-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Thought/wm2514.cfm

Produced by the B. Kenneth Simon
Center for American Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

tion of Independence: “Great ideas do not burst upon the world unannounced. They are reached by a gradual development over a length of time usually proportionate to their importance. This is especially true of the principles laid down in the Declaration of Independence.”⁶ The Declaration of Independence did not emerge simply from a revolution of “the oppressed and downtrodden. It brought no scum to the surface, for the reason that colonial society had developed no scum.”⁷ Far from being a document to benefit solely the landed elite or the oppressed, the Declaration of Independence was a document for a self-governing people.

Coolidge argued that the principles of equality, liberty, and consent were related. If there were no natural rulers, then all men were free to govern themselves. Since no rights can “be bartered away nor taken from them by any earthly power, it follows as a matter of course that the practical authority of the Government has to rest on the consent of the governed.”⁸ Coolidge adhered to these principles consistently: It was Coolidge, for instance, who ended the practice of segregation in federal employment, a practice instituted by Progressive icon Woodrow Wilson.⁹

Coolidge saw the Declaration of Independence as “the product of the spiritual insight of the people.” Americans were idealistic. While Americans were “profoundly concerned with producing, buy-

ing, selling, investing and prospering in the world,” their highest aim was not material success. Americans, he said, “make no concealment of the fact that we want wealth, but there are many other things that we want very much more. We want peace and honor, and that charity which is so strong an element of all civilization.”¹⁰

In order to prioritize the spiritual things over material goods, Coolidge encouraged Americans to “cultivate the reverence which they had for the things that are holy. We must follow the spiritual and moral leadership which [our Founders] showed. We must keep replenished, that they may glow with a more compelling flame, the altar fires before which they worshipped.”¹¹ Americans could not take the principles of the Declaration for granted and still maintain material success.

Calvin Coolidge did not believe that the principles of the Declaration would evolve with each new generation. His views differed from those of the Progressives who dominated politics before and after the 1920s and who “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 over the people of that day, and that we may therefore very well discard [the Founders’] conclusions for something more modern.”¹²

1. Biography of Calvin Coolidge, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/calvincoolidge> (June 30, 2009).
2. Robert Novak, “Coolidge’s Legacy,” presented at conference on “Calvin Coolidge: Examining the Evidence,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts, July 30–31, 1998, at http://www.calvin-coolidge.org/html/coolidge_s_legacy.html (June 30, 2009).
3. Peter Schramm, “Calvin Coolidge Is Back,” *On Principle*, Vol. 6, Issue 4 (August 1998).
4. Calvin Coolidge, “The Press Under a Free Government,” address before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Washington, D.C., January 17, 1925, at http://www.calvin-coolidge.org/html/the_press_under_a_free_governm.html (June 30, 2009).
5. Calvin Coolidge, “The Inspiration of the Declaration of Independence,” July 5, 1926, at http://www.calvin-coolidge.org/html/the_inspiration_of_the_declara.html (June 30, 2009).
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. See Alvin S. Felzenberg, “Calvin Coolidge and Race: His Record in Dealing with the Racial Tensions of the 1920s,” presented at conference on “Calvin Coolidge: Examining the Evidence,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts, July 30–31, 1998, at http://www.calvin-coolidge.org/html/calvin_coolidge_and_race.html (June 30, 2009).
10. Coolidge, “The Press Under a Free Government.”
11. Coolidge, “The Inspiration of the Declaration of Independence.”

Coolidge understood that there is a finality 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 powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions.”¹³ There could be no progress by moving away from the Declaration.

As we prepare to celebrate the Fourth of July, let us not only remember the principles of America, but also commemorate the birthday of the man who so eloquently articulated and defended America’s enduring principles and noble heritage of freedom.

—*Julia Shaw is Program Coordinator in the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation.*

Words from Calvin Coolidge

To live under the American Constitution is the greatest political privilege that was ever accorded to the human race.

—At the White House, December 12, 1924

Some principles are so constant and so obvious that we do not need to change them, but we need rather to observe them.

—At Convention of the National Education Association, Washington, D.C., July 4, 1924

Human nature is a very constant quality. While there is justification for hoping and believing that we are moving toward perfection, it would be idle and absurd to assume that we have already reached it.

—At Arlington National Cemetery, May 30, 1924

The rights which are so clearly asserted in the Declaration of Independence are the rights of the individual. The wrongs of which that instrument complains, and which it asserts it is the purpose of its signers to redress, are the wrongs of the individual.

—At Convention of the National Education Association, Washington, D.C., July 4, 1924

About the Declaration there is a finality that is exceedingly restful. 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 over the people of that day, and that we may therefore very well discard their conclusions for something more modern. But that reasoning can not be applied to this great charter. If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions.

—“The Inspiration of the Declaration of Independence,” July 5, 1926

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

12. *Ibid.* For a more in-depth discussion of the Progressive movement, see Thomas G. West and William A. Schambra, “The Progressive Movement and the Transformation of American Politics,” Heritage Foundation *First Principles* No. 12, July 18, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Thought/fp12.cfm>; Ronald J. Pestritto, “The Birth of the Administrative State: Where It Came From and What It Means for Limited Government,” Heritage Foundation *First Principles* No. 16, November 20, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Thought/fp16.cfm>; and Gary S. Lawson, “Limited Government, Unlimited Administration: Is It Possible to Restore Constitutionalism?” Heritage Foundation *First Principles* No. 23, January 27, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Thought/fp0023.cfm>.

13. Coolidge, “The Inspiration of the Declaration of Independence.”

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 a pagan materialism. We must cultivate the reverence which they had for the things that are holy. We must follow the spiritual and moral leadership which they showed. We must keep replenished, that they may glow with a more compelling flame, the altar fires before which they worshipped.

—“The Inspiration of the Declaration of Independence,” July 5, 1926