

# FIRST PRINCIPLES

FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS TO GUIDE POLITICS AND POLICY

## MAKERS OF AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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### Calvin Coolidge: Forefather of Our Conservatism

*Joseph Postell, PhD*



Calvin Coolidge is the only President in American history born on the Fourth of July. It is appropriate that he bears this distinction, since Coolidge—more so than any other President of the 20th century—embodied a dedication to the principles that the Founders fought to establish in the American Revolution. In addition, he lived at a time when these principles came under radical assault, and Coolidge, a fierce critic of Progressivism, offered one of the greatest defense of these principles. He is an intellectual and political forefather of modern American conservatism.

#### Early Life

John Calvin Coolidge was born in Plymouth Notch, Vermont, in 1874. Most of what we know of Coolidge's early life comes directly from his autobiography. His father was a relatively prominent public official who served in the Vermont state Senate.

The time spent with his father as a young boy had a profound effect on Coolidge's political views. From his father's experience, Coolidge later wrote, "I came to have a good working knowledge of the practical side of government. I understood that it consisted of restraints which the people had imposed upon themselves in order to promote the common welfare."<sup>1</sup> He learned that "when taxes were laid some one had to work to earn the money to pay them. I saw that a public debt was a burden on all the people in a community."<sup>2</sup>

Coolidge therefore learned at an early age the importance of fiscal restraint and the evils of excessive government debt. These lessons stuck with him throughout his political career, and aside from his eloquent defense of the Founders and his thoughtful critique of

Progressivism, his greatest legacy as President is his incredible reduction in spending and taxes and the economic prosperity that resulted from his policies.

Sadly, Coolidge's mother died from wounds suffered in a carriage accident when Coolidge was 12. "Life was never to seem the same again," Coolidge wrote of the feeling of losing his mother.<sup>3</sup> Just a few years later, he lost his sister, Abigail, to what was likely appendicitis. These tragic events surely had some effect on Coolidge, who was to experience a far more traumatic loss when his youngest son died at the age of 16.

The stories that survive from Coolidge's upbringing paint a picture of a spry and clever lad with a core of profound seriousness.<sup>4</sup> He attended the Black River Academy, where he was trained in the classics. He excelled in Latin and read a lot of Cicero (he was particularly fond of the orations against Cataline).

Every graduate from the academy gave a speech at the graduation ceremony; Coolidge's speech, revealingly, was called "Oratory in History." The speech addressed "the effect

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## Calvin Coolidge

### Born

July 4, 1872, in Plymouth Notch, Vermont, to John Calvin Coolidge Sr. and Victoria Josephine Moor (Coolidge).

### Education

Attended Black River Academy and Amherst College. Apprenticed with the Hammond & Field law firm.

### Religion

Congregationalism

### Family

Married Grace Anna Goodhue in 1905, with whom he had two sons, John (born 1906) and Calvin Jr. (born 1908).

### Highlights

- Massachusetts House of Representatives (1907–1908).
- Mayor of Northampton, Massachusetts (1910–1911).
- Massachusetts State Senate (1912–1915); President from 1914–1915.
- Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts (1916–1918).
- Governor of Massachusetts (1919–1920).
- Vice President of the United States (1921–1923).
- President of the United States (1923–1929).
- Author of *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* (1929) and three volumes of his greatest speeches: *Have Faith in Massachusetts* (1919), *The Price of Freedom* (1924), and *Foundations of the Republic* (1926).

### Died

January 5, 1933, of a heart attack in Northampton, Massachusetts.

### Notable Quote

“American ideals do not require to be changed so much as they require to be understood and applied.”

of the spoken word in determining human action.”<sup>5</sup> Little did he know as a young graduate that generations later, Americans would study his spoken words to determine their actions in politics.

Yet Coolidge’s impishness also shone through on several occasions. When he enrolled at Amherst College in 1891, he impressed his

fellow residents most with his sense of humor. During one meal in which he and his boardmates were served hash, Coolidge took one look at the hash and asked the server to “Bring me the cat.”

At Amherst Coolidge discovered his passion for great books, great ideas, and great deeds. He also developed his liking for modern

languages, Italian and French in particular. Years later, a foreign diplomat quipped that Coolidge, a.k.a. “Silent Cal,” could be “silent in five languages.”

During his junior and senior years, Coolidge gained a reputation on campus as a talented orator. He was heavily influenced by two of his professors: Anson D. Morse, whose courses

1. Calvin Coolidge, *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*, paperback ed. (Plymouth, Vt.: Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation, 1989), p. 25.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

4. For my description of many of these early events, I rely heavily on Robert H. Ferrell, *The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), pp. 1–21, and Coolidge’s *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*.

in history taught Coolidge (among other things) to value the American party system for its contributions to a well-functioning democracy, and Charles E. Garman, a philosophy and psychology professor who was very close to the Pragmatist thinker William James. Perhaps as a result of Garman's influence, Coolidge was drawn to Progressive political philosophy and policies during the early years of his political career, before he rejected Progressivism and gained prominence as a conservative.

Upon his graduation from Amherst in 1895, Coolidge became apprenticed to John C. Hammond and Henry P. Field, two prominent lawyers in Northampton, Massachusetts. (Most American lawyers received their training through apprenticeship prior to 1900, when states began to limit admission to the bar to graduates of law schools.) During the day, he prepared legal documents, and in the evenings, he continued to study the classics: the speeches of Daniel Webster, the literary works of John Milton and Shakespeare. Drawing on his classical education, he translated speeches of Cicero on the worth of reading literature.

The deepening of his reading and appreciation for the classics would serve him well during his political career. He also received an award from the Sons of the American Revolution for an essay on "The Principles Fought for in the American Revolution."

### Entry into Politics and Rise to National Prominence

Shortly after passing the bar in Massachusetts at the age of 25,

Coolidge launched himself into politics. His first elected office was a one-year term in the Northampton common council. The only election he lost was in 1905, when he ran for the school board.

That same year, he married a young teacher named Grace Goodhue. His devotion to her was so great that he translated Dante's *Inferno* into English during their courtship. In 1906, he returned to politics and won consecutive terms in the Massachusetts state legislature.

Coolidge emerged as a leader of the Republican ranks in Massachusetts after he unseated the president of the state Senate in 1913. His unique political demeanor immediately attracted attention. In an age where politicians were increasingly gregarious and ostentatious, the serious and taciturn Coolidge stood out.

As president of the state Senate, he had his first of many encounters with Frank W. Stearns, a prominent Boston businessman. As Stearns related the event, he met Coolidge in an office with a single desk and chair, in which Coolidge sat. Stearns was forced to stand while he asked for a legislative favor from Coolidge. As Coolidge became more interested in Stearns's proposal, he walked over to a closet, unlocked the door, and grabbed a chair for his guest. When the meeting concluded, Coolidge put the chair back in the closet and locked the door. Though Stearns initially found the encounter off-putting, when Coolidge followed up with a note that the favor had been completed, he recognized Coolidge's political virtues.

Coolidge was elected Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts in 1915 and Governor of Massachusetts in 1918. He rose to prominence the following year, when the Boston Police Department went on strike in response to suspension of its union leaders by Boston Police Commissioner Edwin Curtis. Coolidge acted decisively, calling up the National Guard and taking control of the police force. When challenged by Samuel Gompers, the head of the American Federation of Labor, Coolidge asserted: "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anyone, anywhere, any time."<sup>6</sup> Coolidge's forceful treatment of the public employee union reverberated throughout the nation and brought him national notoriety.

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**"WE DRAW OUR PRESIDENTS FROM THE PEOPLE. IT IS A WHOLESOME THING FOR THEM TO RETURN TO THE PEOPLE. I CAME FROM THEM. I WISH TO BE ONE OF THEM AGAIN."**

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Though not among the front-runners when the Republican National Convention opened in Chicago in 1920, Coolidge eventually emerged as Warren G. Harding's running mate in the critical presidential election of 1920. Harding and Coolidge won a landslide victory against James Cox and Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Their margin of victory in the popular vote was unmatched in any election before or since. As Vice President, Coolidge gave many of his most eloquent speeches, cultivating the speech craft that would flourish during

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5. *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*, p. 48.

6. "A Telegram to Samuel Gompers, September 14, 1919," in Calvin Coolidge, *Have Faith in Massachusetts: A Collection of Speeches* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), p. 223.

his own presidency.<sup>7</sup> Following Harding's sudden death in August 1923, Coolidge was sworn in (by his father at their family home in Vermont) as President of the United States, and he was re-elected to his own term in 1924.

During the summer of 1924, Coolidge suddenly lost his son, Calvin Jr., to blood poisoning from a blister caused while playing tennis on the White House lawn. Many scholars claim that this incredible personal tragedy fundamentally altered Coolidge's decision-making as President, but Coolidge's personal philosophy, as articulated in his speeches and actions, was constant both before and after the loss of his son.<sup>8</sup> Yet while his political philosophy remained constant, the loss exacted a heavy emotional cost. In his autobiography, Coolidge wondered, "if I had not been President he would not have raised a blister on his toe.... I do not know why such a price was exacted for occupying the White House."<sup>9</sup>

Despite his great popularity, Coolidge declined to run for an additional term in 1928 and was succeeded by Herbert Hoover. He explained in his autobiography: "The Presidential office takes a heavy toll of those who occupy it and those who are dear to them. While we should

not refuse to spend and be spent in the service of our country, it is hazardous to attempt what we feel is beyond our strength to accomplish."<sup>10</sup> With his typical humility, Coolidge stated, "We draw our Presidents from the people. It is a wholesome thing for them to return to the people. I came from them. I wish to be one of them again."<sup>11</sup>

### Defense of Founding Principles

Throughout his political career, Coolidge was a staunch defender of the principles of the American Founding. These principles formed the basis of his conservative philosophy.

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#### COOLIDGE CALLED UPON AMERICANS TO CONSERVE THEIR TRADITIONS AND THEIR PRINCIPLES AND TO REAPPLY THEM: "AMERICAN IDEALS DO NOT REQUIRE TO BE CHANGED SO MUCH AS THEY REQUIRE TO BE UNDERSTOOD AND APPLIED."

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When Coolidge rose to the presidency, the country was slowly emerging from the doldrums of the post-World War I economy. Economic growth was sluggish, and the government's debt from the war

was staggering. Coolidge maintained that America would flourish again only if its citizens remembered the principles that made the country great in the first place. He called upon Americans to conserve their traditions and their principles and to reapply them. The wisdom of the past ought to guide the present, he argued: "American ideals do not require to be changed so much as they require to be understood and applied."<sup>12</sup>

The core of the American Founding, Coolidge argued in many of his speeches, was the set of permanent truths articulated in the Declaration of Independence. These principles were permanent because human nature was permanent. "We must realize that human nature is about the most constant thing in the universe and that the essentials of the human relationship do not change."<sup>13</sup> Since human nature is unchanging, the principles of human relationships, including the principles of government, do not change. The Founders got it right when they set forth these principles in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

The first principle the Founders set forth was the principle of natural human equality. This, Coolidge said, is "the natural and inalienable

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7. These speeches are collected in *The Price of Freedom* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1924). The speech for which the book is named closely resembles Coolidge's most famous address, "The Inspiration of the Declaration," July 5, 1926. See Heritage Foundation *Primary Sources*, <http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/calvin-coolidge-challenges-progress-in-the-name-of-the-declaration-of-independence>.

8. See, in particular, Robert E. Gilbert, *The Tormented President: Calvin Coolidge, Death, and Clinical Depression* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), and "Personal Tragedy and Presidential Leadership: Calvin Coolidge as Legislative Leader," *Congress and the Presidency*, Vol. 33 (2006), pp. 47-68. The "personal tragedy" thesis, however, does not correspond with the evidence. Coolidge's speeches and actions were consistent both before and after the tragic death of his son. Thus, whatever effect the death of his son had on Coolidge's *personal* temperament, it is difficult to discern a transformation in Coolidge's *political* philosophy following the tragedy.

9. Coolidge, *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*, p. 190.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

12. Calvin Coolidge, "Education: The Cornerstone of Self-Government," in *Foundations of the Republic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 53.

13. Coolidge, "Inaugural Address," in *ibid.*, p. 194.

condition of beings who were created ‘a little lower than the angels.’” Equality is “not an equality of possessions, not an equality of degree, but an equality in the attributes of humanity, an equality of kind.”<sup>14</sup>

We are all equal, Coolidge (and the Founders) argued, because we are all equally human: because we possess the same human nature and share the same “attributes of humanity.” And because we are equal—because no person has a natural or divine title to rule the rest of us without our consent—we are also equally free. Regardless of our differences, all human beings possess the same equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Deeply intertwined with our liberty is the right to property. Each man, Coolidge wrote, has the right “to possess, enjoy, and control the dollar which he earns” and be assured that “it shall not be taken away without due process of law.” Our rights to property follow from our right to liberty: Without property rights, liberty could not be preserved. “This necessarily goes with any theory of independence or of liberty, which would be only a mockery unless it secured to the individual the rewards of his own effort and industry.”<sup>15</sup> Without property rights, liberty can never be secure.

In the political realm, our liberty translates into self-government. “Our country was conceived in the theory of local self-government,” Coolidge argued. “It is the foundation principle of our system of liberty.”<sup>16</sup>

This American conservative philosophy of equality of rights to life, liberty, and property, with government by the consent of the governed, was concisely set forth in the Declaration of Independence, Coolidge observed:

Three very definite propositions were set out in its preamble regarding the nature of mankind and therefore of government. These were the doctrine that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with certain inalienable rights, and that therefore the source of the just powers of government must be derived from the consent of the governed.<sup>17</sup>

These doctrines, he argued, “are the ideals which supply the foundation of American institutions.”<sup>18</sup>

These principles rested on the wisdom of centuries of thoughtful peoples. They were not unique to America, in Coolidge’s view. The American Founders did not set forth new principles in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; they applied long-established political theories to their own practical circumstances. “The American Constitution was not a new theory. But...it was the practical application of an old theory which is very new,” Coolidge said.<sup>19</sup>

The wisdom of America’s first principles, in other words, was derived from the wisdom of the ages. In this sense, Coolidge’s philosophy

was deeply conservative, dedicated to preserving the wisdom of the past.

## Critique of Progressivism

Coolidge’s eloquent defense of the principles of the Founding was matched only by his insightful criticisms of Progressivism. In his day, the basic principles of equality, natural rights, and consent of the governed were being attacked by a new philosophy of government that claimed to be “progressive.” Coolidge’s anchoring in the permanent principles of the Founding allowed him to counter the purported claim to progress of this new worldview. In a memorable Fourth of July oration, he stated the issue with absolute clarity:

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. If anyone wishes to deny their truth or their soundness, the only

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14. Coolidge, “The Price of Freedom,” in *The Price of Freedom*, p. 233.

15. Coolidge, “The Price of Freedom,” in *ibid.*, p. 234.

16. Coolidge, “The Reign of Law,” in *Foundations of the Republic*, p. 230.

17. Coolidge, “The Inspiration of the Declaration,” in *ibid.*, pp. 445–446.

18. Coolidge, “The Price of Freedom,” in *The Price of Freedom*, p. 234.

19. Coolidge, “Religion and the Republic,” in *Foundations of the Republic*, p. 151.



direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people. Those who wish to proceed in that direction can not lay claim to progress. They are reactionary.<sup>20</sup>

Coolidge turned the argument of the Progressives on its head. What were Progressives trying to progress beyond? If the principles of our Declaration are permanent because human nature is unchanging, then there can be no progress, but only regression *away* from these principles of equality, inalienable rights, and consent of the governed. Progressives who seek to depart from our Founding principles, he argued, are reactionaries in disguise. They would depart from the ideas that made America the greatest and freest country in human history.

The Progressive rejection of our Founding principles led, in Coolidge's view, to disastrous consequences, including the erosion of self-reliance, the growth of government burden and dependence, and the vilification of business and industry. Coolidge fought vigorously against these trends.

One of the effects of Progressivism was the centralization of power in Washington and expansion of the role of government in Americans' lives. Coolidge believed that government had a legitimate role to play in securing the equal rights of Americans and ensuring equality of opportunity in the marketplace, but he firmly rejected the notion that the

government's new job would be to take care of its citizens. Self-reliance, rather than government assistance, is always the best means to happiness and prosperity, he believed.

Alas, he was forced to acknowledge that "the present tendency is not in this spirit." Progressivism had eroded the self-reliance and personal responsibility of the American people:

The individual, instead of working out his own salvation and securing his own freedom by establishing his own economic and moral independence by his own industry and his own self-mastery, tends to throw himself on some vague influence which he denominates society and to hold that in some way responsible for the sufficiency of his support.... This is not local self-government. It is not American. It is not the method which has made this country what it is. We can not maintain the western standard of civilization on that theory. If it is supported at all, it will have to be supported on the principle of individual responsibility.<sup>21</sup>

With the decline of individual responsibility comes the rise of dependence on government. Once citizens no longer care for themselves, they are beholden to the government, which they expect will care for them. Coolidge emphasized that the new Progressive philosophy of government entitlements was actually a philosophy of government dependence. "I do not want to see any

of the people cringing supplicants for the favor of the Government, when they should all be independent masters of their own destiny," he proclaimed.<sup>22</sup>

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**"I DO NOT WANT TO SEE ANY OF THE PEOPLE CRINGING SUPPLICANTS FOR THE FAVOR OF THE GOVERNMENT, WHEN THEY SHOULD ALL BE INDEPENDENT MASTERS OF THEIR OWN DESTINY."**

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Perhaps most alarming in Coolidge's view was the cynicism that Progressivism produced about the motivations of businessmen and corporations. In the past, Americans had always praised those who did well economically and understood that it is a good thing when businesses thrive, but Progressivism argued that it was evil to do things for profit and that inequalities of wealth were harmful to the country.

Coolidge constantly fought against these claims. Whenever he spoke to industry groups, chambers of commerce, banking organizations, or leaders of labor, he emphasized that business is based on the law of service: If someone does well in business, it is because he provided a valuable service to customers. Business "does not represent, as some have hastily concluded, a mere desire to minister to selfishness," he explained. "It is something far more important than a sordid desire for gain. It could not successfully succeed on that basis. It is dominated by a more worthy purpose; [it] rests on a higher law.... It rests squarely on the law of service."<sup>23</sup>

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20. Calvin Coolidge, "The Inspiration of the Declaration."

21. Coolidge, "The Reign of Law," in *Foundations of the Republic*, pp. 230–231.

22. Coolidge, "The High Place of Labor," in *ibid.*, p. 85.

In other words, it is through service to others, not selfishness, that businesses succeed in America. Successful entrepreneurs should therefore be praised, not condemned.

## A “Roaring” Economy

Coolidge put his actions behind his rhetoric. He followed his principles as President and was remarkably successful in achieving his policy goals. Harding and Coolidge inherited one of the worst economic disasters in American history. In 1921, the unemployment rate was 11.7 percent. The national debt had shot up from \$1.5 billion in 1916 to \$24 billion in 1919. Gross national product decreased from \$91.5 billion in 1920 to \$69.6 billion in 1921.

In response, Harding and Coolidge did not blame their predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, for the disaster they inherited. They went about putting their principles into practice and turning the economy around, and they were extremely effective in doing so. They employed a three-step plan:

1. Cut spending dramatically.
2. Lower taxes.
3. Reduce the burden of regulation.

Due to the passage of the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, Coolidge had a newfound power to propose an annual budget, giving him some influence over spending issues. Coolidge used this power, in his words, in an “intensive campaign” that he “waged unrelentingly”

against federal spending.<sup>24</sup> Coolidge won his war on federal spending: From 1921 to 1924, federal expenditures were reduced from \$5.1 billion to \$2.9 billion—a *spending reduction of 43 percent*.

At the same time, Coolidge worked with Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon to pass three successive income tax reduction plans. The purpose of reducing spending, he noted, was to protect the property rights of citizens. “A government which lays taxes on the people not required by urgent necessity...is not a protector of liberty, but an instrument of tyranny. It condemns the citizen to servitude.”<sup>25</sup>

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**“A GOVERNMENT WHICH LAYS TAXES ON THE PEOPLE NOT REQUIRED BY URGENT NECESSITY...IS NOT A PROTECTOR OF LIBERTY, BUT AN INSTRUMENT OF TYRANNY. IT CONDEMNS THE CITIZEN TO SERVITUDE.”**

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Freeing the citizen from burdensome taxes was Coolidge’s top priority, and under the Revenue Acts of 1921, 1924, and 1926, the highest income tax rate fell from 73 percent in 1921 to 24 percent in 1929. By reducing spending, Coolidge was able to lower taxes *and* retire much of the government’s debt, which was reduced from \$24 billion to \$16.9 billion.

Combined with his program of regulatory relief, Coolidge’s economic policies produced a period of incredible prosperity. The

“Roaring Twenties” saw one of the most dynamic periods of economic growth in the nation’s history, and Coolidge left office having achieved great personal popularity and, more important, having shown that the principles of the Founding were still the best way to achieve freedom and prosperity.

Skeptics might respond that the prosperity of the Roaring Twenties was a mirage, since the economy went into a tailspin in 1929, causing the “Great Depression.” Economists have long disagreed, and will probably continue to disagree, about the causes of the Great Depression. Many blame faulty government policies (in particular, faulty monetary policy pursued by the Federal Reserve) for exacerbating a normal and temporary downturn.<sup>26</sup>

While this debate will never be fully settled, it is probably fair to say that the prosperity of the 1920s was bound to level off at some point. At the same time, however, the causes of the Great Depression were numerous, and Coolidge’s policies of reducing taxes, cutting spending, and paying off the national debt were probably not immediate causes of the crash of 1929.

## A Conservative Hero

When Ronald Reagan became President in 1981, he hung a portrait of Calvin Coolidge in the Cabinet Room of the White House. This act astonished many who merely thought of Coolidge as “Silent Cal,” the President of few words. But Reagan understood the real Coolidge, perhaps a man of few words, but also

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23. Coolidge, “Government and Business,” in *ibid.*, pp. 319-320.

24. Coolidge, “Economy in the Interest of All,” in *ibid.*, p. 43.

25. Coolidge, “Economy in the Interest of All,” in *ibid.*, p. 40.

26. Milton Friedman and Anna Schwartz advanced this thesis in their highly regarded book *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963).

a President who made those words count and meant what he said.

Coolidge was the most effective defender of America's Founding principles at a time when those principles were widely dismissed. Moreover, he was extraordinarily effective at putting those principles into practice. Surely, Reagan considered Calvin Coolidge a hero for these reasons, and it is for these reasons

that all conservatives should regard Coolidge as one of their greatest heroes.

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