

Calvin Coolidge

By David Greenberg

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The austere president who presided over the Roaring Twenties and whose conservatism masked an innovative approach to national leadership

He was known as "Silent Cal." Buttoned up and tight-lipped, Calvin Coolidge seemed out of place as the leader of a nation plunging headlong into the modern era. His six years in office were a time of flappers, speakeasies, and a stock market boom, but his focus was on cutting taxes, balancing the federal budget, and promoting corporate productivity. "The chief business of the American people is business," he famously said.

But there is more to Coolidge than the stern capitalist scold. He was the progenitor of a conservatism that would flourish later in the century and a true innovator in the use of public relations and media. Coolidge worked with the top PR men of his day and seized on the rising technologies of newsreels and radio to bring the presidency into the lives of ordinary Americans?a path that led directly to FDR's "fireside chats" and the expert use of television by Kennedy and Reagan. At a time of great upheaval, Coolidge embodied the ambivalence that many of his countrymen felt. America kept "cool with Coolidge," and he returned the favor.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
As America's 30th president, Calvin Coolidge, popularly known as "Silent Cal," had a record that "was neither substantial nor enduring"; still, Ronald Reagan considered him "one of our most underrated presidents," and historian and author Greenberg (Nixon's Shadow) sets to find out why in a precise and objective record of Coolidge's long political career. If Coolidge's commitment to minimalist government in turn minimized his contributions to the nation, he was regarded well during his two terms, probably because of "robust economic productivity" and his prescient use of growing public relations infrastructure, utilizing radio, film and photography to run a front-porch campaign "long before the term 'photo op' was coined." Coolidge's personal commitment to austerity allowed him to"pare spending in almost every government department" and cut taxes four times; by the "end of his second term, most Americans paid no federal income tax at all." Though Black Thursday devastated the stock market on his watch in 1929, at the end of his presidency "standard accounts affix some blame to his policies," but "even Coolidge's harshest critics agree that the roots of the Depression lie deeper than any policies of one man." Greenberg's history takes readers ably but unsurprisingly from rustic, post-Civil War Vermont to, in Coolidge's words, "a new era to which I do not belong," showing along the way how his personality and politics helped him regain relevancy in political struggles yet to come.
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From Booklist
The famously taciturn thirtieth president, affectionately dubbed Silent Cal, had been an award-winning student orator and delivered effective if unexciting speeches throughout his political career (must have: he lost only one election in 30 years). He conducted more presidential press conferences (his immediate predecessor, Harding, invented them) than any other president. He embraced radio and the movies, the modern media of his day, and provided photo ops at the drop, or replacement--he once donned an Indian ceremonial headdress--of a hat. He really was reserved, but he cultivated his relative silence to suggest humility and perspicacity; fortunately, he also had a ready, dry wit. Intellectuals and pundits groaned about him, but the general public, including, then and later, Ronald Reagan, adored him. Greenberg argues that while his management of his image was ahead of his time, his conception of presidential power--limited, hands-off, better delegated--was utterly of it. Coolidge was, Greenberg implies, a true progressive conservative, genially fatalistic about change, indulging its benefits while deploring the altered morals it facilitated. *Ray Olson*
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Review
"Greenberg's brisk, engaging volume is the latest in a series of short biographies of the presidents edited by Arthur Schlesinger Jr." - H.W. Brands, *The Washington Post*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Markus Walker:

Do you have favorite book? Should you have, what is your favorite's book? Guide is very important thing for us to know everything in the world. Each reserve has different aim or maybe goal; it means that publication

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Stephen Hancock:

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