



# COOLIDGE

*An American Enigma*

with whom he was having lunch. Glancing at Coolidge, who was munching away in a corner by himself, facing the wall, Sinclair asked, "Is this how you treat your presiding officer?" "Nobody has anything to do with him," replied Ladd. "After this, of course, he is through."

Ladd held the by-then general belief that Coolidge would be dropped from the ticket. One of Harding's close advisors, advertising man Albert Lasker, said he would support the reelection bid only if the president pledged to support Hiram Johnson for the presidential nomination in 1928. A Harding biographer, Francis Russell, asserted that in 1923, shortly before Harding's death, Kansas Senator Charles Curtis lobbied the president to replace Coolidge. According to Russell, the president responded, "We are not worried about that little fellow in Massachusetts. Charlie Dawes is the man!"

It didn't happen. Ladd died in 1925, by which time Calvin Coolidge was not only still around, but was president, and Charles Dawes was his vice president.

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## President

When I became president it was perfectly apparent that the key by which the way could be opened to national progress was constructive economy. Only by the use of that policy could the high rates of taxation, which were retarding our development and prosperity, be diminished, and the enormous burden of our public debt be reduced.

*The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*

THE COOLIDGES WERE NO LONGER in Washington when the Harding party left Washington's Union Station on June 20 for St. Louis, the first destination on what was planned as a two-month speaking and fact-finding tour. After Congress recessed on March 3, the Coolidges set out for a few days' vacation in Virginia, and then went to their Northampton home, where Coolidge read, attended to correspondence, visited old friends, and delivered some speeches. Toward the end of the month they packed for a stay with John Coolidge, who had indicated he could use the vice president's help with some household repairs. The Coolidge boys found work in the area, and so in late July Coolidge was in Plymouth Notch, at his father's home, taking care of chores, while the president was in Alaska, making speeches, seeing the sights, and doubtless considering what to do about the unraveling scandals that threatened his administration. Harding was asleep when his ship, heading to Washington State, struck another in the fog. One of his aides ran to

the presidential cabin and found Harding there, his head in his hands. The president asked what had happened and was told of the collision. "I hope the boat sinks," he replied.

Harding and his party reached Seattle on July 27. The president was weary and troubled, and reporters wrote of how tired he appeared. His voice was hoarse, his face pallid. There was some thought he might be suffering from ptomaine poisoning. When he arrived in San Francisco two days later, he was met by a heart specialist and a wheelchair. Harding disdained the wheelchair, walking instead to the waiting limousine, which took him to the Palace Hotel. He developed a fever the next day, but soon recovered. Then his situation worsened. He died there on Friday, August 2, at 7:32 P.M. While there was some disagreement as to the cause of death, it was given as apoplexy.

What happened next in Plymouth Notch turned out to be the most dramatic moment of the forthcoming Coolidge administration, a near-perfect way for the nation to be introduced to its new president.

August 2 was to have been Coolidge's last day vacationing in Plymouth Notch. On August 1, Coolidge was photographed attending to a diseased maple. He climbed a bench, hatchet in hand, and chipped away at a cavity in the tree so it could be cemented. The vice president was in a three-piece business suit, minus the jacket. Grace Coolidge was raking some leaves. The picture appeared in the next day's newspapers.

Only a small detail of newspapermen had been sent to cover the vice president, taking photos of Coolidge in his shirt sleeves, pitching hay, and performing other tasks. Coolidge obligingly permitted photographers to take as many pictures as they wanted; they particularly enjoyed taking pictures of Coolidge wearing a blue woolen frock his father and grandfather had worn when doing chores. He wrote of this in his *Autobiography*:

When I went to visit the old home in later years I liked to wear the one he [his grandfather] left, with some fine calfskin boots about two inches too large for me, which were made for him when he went to the Vermont legislature about 1858. When news pictures began to be

taken of me there, I found that among the public this was generally supposed to be a makeup costume, which it was not, so I have been obliged to forego the comfort of wearing it. In public life it is sometimes necessary in order to appear really natural to be actually artificial.

That night the Coolidges retired early, so as to be fresh the next morning.

A Harding secretary sent a telegram to Washington to inform officials of the death. It took several hours to get through. The message was relayed to White River Junction, Vermont, then to Bridgewater, eight miles from Plymouth. In Coolidge's hometown there was no telegraph station and only one telephone, at the general store.

Wilfred Perkins, the Bridgewater telegrapher, tried to telephone the store, but no one answered, presumably because the proprietor was sleeping. Perkins made two copies of the message, and rushed outside. He roused a stenographer, Erwin Geisser, the vice president's chauffeur Joseph McInerney, and newspaperman William Crawford, who was at a boardinghouse in Bridgewater. Together they set out in the vice presidential limousine to Plymouth Notch.

Other newspapermen at the Ludlow Hotel received the news, and all of them hastened to the Notch. The Crawford party arrived first, and McInerney knocked on the door. John Coolidge awoke, lit a kerosene lamp, and went to see who was there at that time of night. They told him the news, and John Coolidge called up to his son on the second floor. The vice president came to the top of the stairs. As he recalled in his *Autobiography*, he noticed that his father's voice trembled.

As the only times I had ever observed that before were when death had visited our family, I knew that something of the gravest nature had occurred. His emotion was partly due to the knowledge that a man whom he had met and liked was gone, partly to the feeling that must possess all of our citizens when the life of their president is taken from them. But he must have been moved also by the thought of the many sacrifices

he had made to place me where I was, the twenty-five mile drives in storms and in zero weather over our mountain roads to carry me to the academy and all the tenderness and care he had lavished upon me in the thirty-eight years since the death of my mother in the hope that I might sometime rise to a position of importance, which he now saw realized.

According to Senator George Pepper of Pennsylvania, whose source was presidential portrait artist Charles Hopkinson, Coolidge's first thought on learning of Harding's death was: "I believe I can swing it."

Coolidge and his wife returned to the bedroom. They washed, dressed, and knelt by the bed to pray. Then they went downstairs, where Coolidge dictated a message of sympathy to Mrs. Harding. The house was now crowded with reporters and others.

Coolidge received a telegram from Attorney General Daugherty urging him to take the oath of office immediately. He went across the street to the general store and telephoned Secretary of State Hughes, who informed him the oath could be administered by a notary. Coolidge told Hughes his father was a notary, and the secretary replied, "Fine." Coolidge returned home, and in the downstairs sitting room John Coolidge, using the family Bible, swore his son in as president. The time was 2:47 AM.

It was a small room, fourteen by seventeen feet, with an eight-foot ceiling. It held a worn carpet, a wood stove, a rocking chair, and was lit by an oil lamp. Paintings and drawings of the scene appeared in virtually all the nation's newspapers, and were replicated and sold in the hundreds of thousands. Some reporters noted that this was the only time a president had taken the oath in his home (or to be precise, his father's home). It still is. In addition to the Coolidges, there were their sons, Geisser, McInerney, Congressman Porter Dale, and his associate, L.L. Lane, and Crawford.\* It wasn't Abraham Lincoln's

\* Dale was campaigning for reelection, and heard the news of Harding's death from a newspaperman. He rushed to Plymouth Notch to inform Coolidge of what had happened, but arrived after the others.

log cabin, but nothing in John Coolidge's small home—with its faded furniture, and its lack of electricity, indoor plumbing, a telephone, and central heating—would have surprised Lincoln.

This dramatic ceremony was yet another instance of the uncanny good political fortune Coolidge experienced throughout his career. Had Harding died on August 3 rather than August 2, Coolidge would have been at the Currier mansion, and probably would have taken the oath from a judge in a huge ballroom. Newspapermen seeking symbols surely would have made a commotion about that. As it was, they played up the humble John Coolidge residence. Americans were deeply impressed by the way the transfer of power had occurred.

After the swearing in the Coolidges returned to their rooms and went back to sleep. They were up again at 6:00 AM. Before taking leave of his father, Coolidge noticed that a stone step to the front door had been knocked over. "Better have that fixed," he said, and went into the waiting limousine. It had not gone far when Coolidge ordered it stopped. He got out of the car, walked to the family cemetery, went to his mother's grave, and stood silently by it for a short time.

When I started for Washington that morning I turned aside from the main road to make a short devotional visit to the grave of my mother. It had been a comfort to me during my boyhood when I was troubled to be near her last resting place, even in the dead of night. Some way, that morning, she seemed very near to me.

Because Coolidge had such a close relationship with his family, this was undoubtedly a sincere and genuine gesture, but it did add greatly to the humble, devoted image the new president was presenting to the country. In this period virtually all Americans liked what they were learning about him. As the months that followed brought out more and more details of the Harding scandals, his successor remained untouched.

The funeral train arrived in Washington on August 7, and Harding lay in state in the Capitol. The name of Lincoln continued to be