stitutional doctrine, rejecting the bad-tendency tests it had relied
upon earlier in favor of the clear-and-present-danger standard so
familiar to modern jurists.

This book marks a valuable contribution both to constitu-
tional history and to the history of ideas. Rabban helps us understand
the transition from judicial hostility to free speech, a late-nineteenth-
century phenomenon, to the judicial activism of our time. He also
helps us see how social thought influenced positions on free speech.
Our contemporary cultural commitment to personal autonomy trans-
lates into a strong defense of free speech as an individual right beyond
state control. But earlier in this century the politics of reform required
a different calculus, one that linked speech and democracy. The story
of how this transition occurred is a complex one, especially for the
uninitiated, but Rabban makes the effort worthwhile. For anyone
interested in current controversies over speech or in the meaning of
rights talk in modern American society, this book is essential.

DAVID J. BODENHAMER is professor of history and director of the Polis Center at Indi-
ana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis.


"The following pages," the historian Robert Sobel writes, "repre-
sent an attempt to introduce or reintroduce Coolidge to those to
whom he is a cartoon caricature and a figure of derision" (p. 14).
Sobel has written a modest study of a modest president. It is "not
based on original research" nor does it "present a complete picture
of the Coolidge presidency" (p. 15). The author promises "some fresh
interpretations" but "no major revelations" (p. 14). Nevertheless,
as the first scholarly biography of Calvin Coolidge in more than thirty
years, Coolidge: An American Enigma merits attention from stu-
dents of the American presidency.

Two themes, the president's simplicity and his complexity, run
through Coolidge. These contradictions make Coolidge an enigma,
something more than the silent, do-nothing, tool-of-big business car-
icature of liberal historiography and something less than the kind
of jovial, backslapping, activist president those scholars usually label
"great" or "near great." Sobel's revisionism is not fresh. Donald R.
McCoy expressed similar ideas in greater detail and with more lit-
ery flair in Calvin Coolidge: The Quiet President (1967, reprinted

Coolidge was a curious figure. The thirtieth president's youth
was uncluttered by the trappings of modern life. His Plymouth Notch,
Vermont, home lacked indoor plumbing, electricity, and a telephone.
Coolidge did not visit Boston until his college days. He was thirty
years old when he rode in his first automobile and was the last president not to travel by airplane. Clinging to traditional values of hard work, fiscal responsibility, and service to town and country, Coolidge “remained a product of rural Vermont” (p. 29).

But there was another Coolidge, ambitious, cagey, practical, doctrinaire, and lucky. He became a machine politician, reached out to Democrats, and climbed the ladder of Massachusetts politics. During the Progressive era, State Senator Coolidge backed women’s suffrage, workman’s compensation, a minimum wage for women, legalized picketing, and direct election of U.S. senators. During the more conservative 1920s, President Coolidge stressed lower taxes, business prosperity, and diminished application of federal power. Taciturn, self-assured, dignified, and principled, Coolidge the politician emerged as a workhorse, not a show horse. He had a knack for being in the right place at the right time, and he projected stability, something the electorate preferred during the “Aspirin Age.” What Coolidge lacked in boldness, Sobel asserts, he made up for in character.

Sobel does well to puncture the myths surrounding “Silent Cal.” Coolidge cultivated his self-made, homespun, “wise-old-owl” persona (p. 235). He used radio to good effect, and he mastered the press. Interestingly, his most famous axiom, “the chief business of the American people is business,” made no headlines and remained buried in a speech extolling freedom of the press.

Sobel’s biography proves disappointing in several respects. The myths the author demolishes may surprise the general reader: they will not surprise the specialist. Excessive block quotations and tangential discussions slow down an otherwise brisk narrative. Although Sobel wants the reader to reconsider the established formula, in which activism plus accomplishment equal presidential greatness, he fails to frame his thesis clearly and address it fully. The author at times waxes overly polemical, defending Coolidge’s silence on the consequences of speculation in the stock market. This reviewer was left to wonder how and under what circumstances Sobel believes presidents should exercise leadership.

Sobel provides an enigmatic study of an enigmatic president. Lay readers may want to know more about Coolidge’s personal life, religion, health, and place in history. Specialists will demand greater analysis of the president’s decision-making, administrative procedures, and actual policies. But both camps will find this introduction or reintroduction provocative. It may even reopen debate on a much-overlooked presidency.