

*The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge.* By Robert H. Ferrell. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. Pp. xi, 244. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$29.95.)

The Calvin Coolidge who emerges from these crisp, thoughtful pages is a man of parts, not all of them flawless. Son of a farmer storekeeper in Plymouth Notch, Vermont, he was shy, secretive, and terse to the point of rudeness. His mind was good, but his reserves were so slight that concentration made him irritable and, at times, mean to his exceptionally gracious wife, though he was not mean in spirit. At root, he was a modest, moral man, of ambition and compassion. In college, his careful preparation and drollery earned him recognition as a speaker, and H. L. Mencken came in time to perceive his "natural talent" for writing. Meanwhile it was said in political circles that Coolidge could empty any hall. Following graduation from Amherst in 1895, he read law in Northampton, Massachusetts, then became city solicitor. Subsidized by his father for some years, he served as state representative, mayor, president of the state senate, lieutenant governor, and governor. To all these offices he brought a strong feeling for social progressivism, if not for the grand designs of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. "I have been in sympathy with virtually all legislation to improve living conditions," he wrote in 1915, "[but] I do not make so loud a noise as some others." In fact, writes Robert H. Ferrell, Coolidge made politics his life work in considerable part because he believed it to be "subsumed in the word 'service'"

Coolidge's conception of public service embodied more than humane social legislation. From the beginning he had been committed to efficiency and the rule of law, and as he moved from legislative to administrative office those commitments became preeminent. As mayor of Northampton in 1910, he reduced city taxes and debt while raising the salaries of teachers and municipal workers. As governor of Massachusetts a decade later, he consolidated 118 separate departments into 18. He also vetoed a bill for the sale of beer and wine in violation of the Eighteenth Amendment with a declaration that "there can be no constitutional instruction of an unconstitutional act." Meanwhile his reluctant intervention in the Boston police strike of 1919 became the scaffolding for his nomination for vice-president on the Harding ticket in 1920.

Ferrell's evaluation of Coolidge's presidency leans toward the underconsumption theory of Keynesians and against the assumptions of the proponents of laissez-faire. He ascribes Coolidge's failure to offer a comprehensive legislative program partly to the president's belief that he should leave the apparently thriving economy alone. In agriculture, where too many farmers were poorly farming too few productive acres, inaction may have been wise economic policy. Other than in the South and Northeast, prices were down because resump-

tion of production in Europe put American crops in surplus. Correctly, Ferrell contends that Congress's solution, the McNary-Haugen export debenture plan, would have stimulated further surpluses and that Coolidge acted sensibly in twice vetoing the bill. As for the increasing disparity between the growth of profits and of wages, there was not much that any administration could have done to close it. Mass unionism might have raised purchasing power, but it took the Great Depression and the prospect of large defense profits to raise wages. The notion that further reductions in income tax rates would have enabled middle-class and blue-collar workers to buy more automobiles is similarly fanciful. As Ferrell's statistics indicate, the disproportionate tax decreases of the era simply favored the super rich over the very rich and the just plain rich; most middle-class workers paid nominal taxes, when they paid any at all. By Coolidge's last full year in office, 98 percent of the American people were exempt from income taxes.

Coolidge might have tried to marshal the moral and political authority of his office behind regulation of the stock market. His failure to do so, Ferrell suggests, may partly have reflected his prolonged depression over the death of his son Calvin, Jr., in 1924; day-to-day routines, not new challenges, became his refuge. Undoubtedly, too, the failure of economic analysts to accompany their diagnoses with viable prescriptions reinforced Coolidge's predisposition to do nothing. Most important of all, probably, was Coolidge's commitment to states' rights and strict construction of the Constitution. He seemed not to see that the revolution in communications that brought New York closer to San Francisco in 1920 than it had been to Virginia when the Constitution was adopted made state regulation of nationwide corporations inadequate. Yet even as Coolidge refused to face the new political-economic reality, he sought to make existing federal agencies serve his own ideology. Thus, Ferrell concludes, he treated the ICC with indifference, turned the FTC into a "shell of a regulatory body," and moved "firmly to create a protectionist majority on the Tariff Commission."

Calvin Coolidge, Elihu Root once remarked, "did not have an international hair on his head." Neither did the American people: their main concerns, like those of their president, were domestic. "That didn't mean they forgot about foreign policy," Ferrell adds with tongue in some part in cheek, "only that they did not think much about it." Besides, they already knew what they wanted: no more immigrants (except of their own kind); no cancellation of war debts regardless of the enormous disparity between Allied and American contributions of blood and treasure in the war "to make the world safe for democracy"; no membership in the World Court, let alone the League of Nations, without ultra-nationalist reservations. Nevertheless, by giving reasonable rein to his abler foreign policy officials and intervening more in decision-making than is commonly realized, Coolidge did grow a few internationalist hairs.

In the Caribbean, the long-established policy of protecting the Panama Canal area by supporting seemingly stable governments won a messy, temporary success in Nicaragua. In Mexico, which was threatening in 1927 to confiscate the \$1.5 billion American investment in land, oil, and mineral rights, Coolidge appointed Dwight Morrow ambassador with instructions to "keep us out of war." Morrow won the affection of many Mexicans along with a nonconfiscatory interpretation of the constitutional clause at issue. Toward China the United States pursued a relatively conciliatory policy designed both to maintain the Far Eastern balance of power and to help missionaries convert the Chinese people. One consequence, Ferrell argues, was further strain in American relations with Japan.

The final passage of this informed and informing work asks whether "failure to remedy something that might have involved going beyond the possibilities of the times may not be a proper measure for the presidency of Coolidge." Perhaps. Certainly it is doubtful that Coolidge or "the best minds" could have averted the stock market crash with last minute exhortations or regulations. Clearly, Coolidge's efficiency, good intentions, and modest attainments were no substitute for national leadership. The self-contained New Englander so convincingly portrayed herein was a well-meaning man of personal and public virtue whose temperament and parochial vision prevented him from pushing himself and his administration to reasonable limits.

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*Truman Defeats Dewey.* By Gary A. Donaldson. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. Pp. 270. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$27.50.)

Before the ink dried on the headlines announcing its outcome, the 1948 presidential election entered folklore as an upset victory; straight-shooting President Harry S. Truman, the "square root of America," had defeated his formidable opponent, two party rivals, and every gambler's odds. This book's title runs playfully across the dust jacket's famous photo of a grinning Truman flaunting the Chicago *Tribune's* front page, which wrongly announced the contrary result.

Gary A. Donaldson shows that the election had less to do with folklore than with conventional political maneuvering, appeals to the normal components of the Democratic coalition assembled by Franklin D. Roosevelt, bruising battles over the shape of the post-New Deal, postwar political economy, and rising Cold War tensions. Many of these trends operated against Democratic prospects. Inflation and consumer shortages aroused public rancor at the Truman administration's reconversion policies, and massive strikes stirred antiunion sentiment. These events handed Republicans a smashing