

He was called Silent Cal, and the nation laughed at his taciturnity, his frugality, and his dry wit. But the Great Stone Face hid a sweet smile and a terrible anguish. January 5, 1933 was a crisp mid-winter Thursday in [Northampton](#), Massachusetts. In the redbrick Masonic Block, the city's most famous resident put in a short morning at the second-floor law office marked Coolidge and Hemenway. It was part of the comfortable routine Calvin Coolidge had adopted since leaving the [White House](#) nearly four years earlier. The 30th president of the United States made no pretense of being a practicing lawyer. Coolidge and Hemenway was a place to kick off one's shoes, lean back with a freshly clipped cigar, and pour over the morning's papers and ever-present mail.

The latter presented challenges of its own, reflecting the severe hardship that had fastened its grip upon the American economy like winter descending upon the Connecticut River valley. One day a package containing a diamond bracelet arrived at Masonic Block, sent by an admirer convinced that only the parsimonious Coolidge could safeguard her valuables in these uncertain times. "He treated that diamond bracelet as if it were a scorpion," recalled Coolidge's secretary, Herman Beatty. The unsolicited package was hastily returned, but only after the former president filed a post office receipt in front of several reliable witnesses.

Coolidge had always been careful with his money, his ideas, and his health. Now he remarked to no one in particular that he was getting to be an old man. Perhaps he would confine his future labors to the Beeches, the handsome 12-room estate into which he and his wife, Grace, had moved in the spring of 1930, seeking a privacy irretrievably sacrificed to the harsh glare of the presidency. Finishing his office work by 10 o'clock, Coolidge headed home in the Pierce-Arrow driven by the chauffeur he impishly called Johnny-Jump-Up. Inside the Beeches he teased a jigsaw puzzle of George Washington for a few minutes and chatted briefly with the hired man. Then he went upstairs to shave before lunch. When Grace returned from a shopping trip shortly after noon, she found her husband's lifeless form sprawled on the floor of his dressing room. Calvin Coolidge had died alone, the victim of a massive heart attack.

That night the dead man lay upon his bed, his sharp Yankee features outlined by a single lightbulb. Eulogies took shape. *The London Times* used the occasion to bid farewell to rugged individualism. "The old American belief so cherished by New Englanders like Mr. Coolidge, that the honest man should depend on himself and earn the bread he eats, is now challenged by millions of decent citizens who must...eat by charity because there is no work for them."

More than a life had ended in Northampton, the *Times* seemed to be saying. A way of life would be buried with "this lonely, inarticulate, simple, shrewd man."

Coolidge was "not of today," it concluded with British understatement.

Calvin Coolidge was a creature of habit. Habit guided the shy, shrewd Vermonter up the political ladder and set the well-regulated tone of his presidency. Force of habit prohibited 13 at the president's dinner table, just as it forbade cabinet meetings after four in the afternoon. "I don't work at night," said the president, whose name was synonymous with the Puritan ethic. "If a man can't finish his job in the daytime, he's not smart."

Above all else, habit dictated thrift. As president, Coolidge halted the 21-gun salutes customarily fired as the presidential yacht drew up alongside George Washington's Mount Vernon, explaining, "It costs money to fire so many guns. So have the band play 'The Star Spangled Banner.'"

There was more to the gesture than Yankee parsimony: all those guns made the president's white collie, Prudence Prim, howl. However peevish he might seem to the White House doormen and butlers on whom he loved to play practical jokes, Coolidge never outgrew his country boy's affection for animals. The Coolidge White House boasted six dogs, two cats and a raccoon named Rebecca, all of them treated with more kindness than Congress.

Between 1921 and 1929 Coolidge endured the strut and boast of Washington; emotionally he never left the Green Mountains of his youth. Deflating pomposity in all its forms was one of Coolidge's most ingrained habits, part of his democratic inheritance as a storekeeper's son with scant use for those who put on airs.

Confronted at a White House reception by a large, obviously self-satisfied Beacon Hill matron, Coolidge allowed his visitor to pump his arm mechanically while she gushed "Oh Mr. President, I'm from Boston." "Yep," he shot back. "And you'll never get over it."

He was as frugal with intimacy as with the Vermont cheese he grudgingly sliced for Colonel Edmond Starling, his chief Secret Service agent. One morning Frank Stearns, the wealthy Boston merchant ("Lord Lingerie") who had done more than anyone else to promote Coolidge as a latter-day Lincoln, was heard pacing the hallway outside the president's door. "That's just ol' man Stearns," Coolidge told Colonel Starling. "He wants to come in and have some of our supper, but I'm not going to let him. He's eaten enough of my food already." (Calling every meal supper was another of the Yankee president's eccentricities.)

Coolidge's thrift was matched by his possessiveness. The president was not above ordering the Secret Servicemen to retrieve trout taken by an uninvited angler who made the mistake of testing the waters within two miles of the summer White House. "They are my fish," he insisted, with the same petulant resolve displayed in terminating official receptions at 10:45 P.M. or supervising provisions for the executive mansion from the nearest Piggly Wiggly store. Grace Coolidge, as tolerant as the nation was bemused, humored her husband into abandoning white kid gloves at the fish pond. "What's the matter, Poppa?" she inquired sweetly on hearing him blow a whistle to summon the White House dog pack. "Don't your teeth fit tonight?"

H. L. Mencken mocked Coolidge as "the greatest man ever to come out of Plymouth, Vermont." Few of his countryman shared Mencken's disdain. After the disillusionment of Woodrow Wilson's wartime crusading and Warren Harding's scandal-plagued administration, most voters welcomed Coolidge's granite integrity, his evident regard for the taxpayer, and his skepticism of Utopian solutions. Beginning with his lamplit inaugural in his father's Plymouth homestead, this seemingly prosaic Yankee captured the imagination of countless Americans who might not themselves wish to live in a rustic house without electricity or indoor plumbing, but who felt vicarious virtue in supporting a president so clearly identified with the old virtues.

Coolidge more than lived up to his image. The president replaced his predecessor's boozy card parties with sober six o'clock suppers. Warren Harding had promised normalcy; Coolidge delivered it, profitably defined as spectacular economic growth and tax cuts to match. Between 1925 and 1929, the New York Stock Exchange rose 250 percent. Before the decade was over, the federal government had retired nearly half its \$26 billion war debt. Americans built 800,000 new homes annually during the postwar decade, bought 20 million automobiles, and made heroes out of radio

stars and barnstorming pilots. The cult of celebrity, the modern women's movement, the decline of rural America's traditional dominance - all had their genesis in the Age of Coolidge, when his countrymen moved forward even while gazing back with longing at a more innocent society, Plymouth Notch writ large. Sophisticates scratched their heads and Democrats raged against the original Teflon president, who somehow managed to escape association with the Teapot Dome scandals spawned by Harding's Ohio Gang simply by being himself. More conventional politicians failed to grasp Coolidge's popularity. They couldn't fathom how anyone so natural wasn't, in fact, being artificial. Most statesmen sought power through their words. Coolidge gained it through his silence. Over the living-room mantel in his \$36-a-month Northampton duplex - a house Grace Coolidge said would easily fit into the State Dining Room at the White House - hung a bit of doggerel that explained better than any pundit both the mysticism and the calculation interwoven in the president's character:

*A wise old owl lived in an oak;
The more he saw the less he spoke.
The less he spoke the more he heard,
Why can't we be like that wise old bird.*

Coolidge himself said as much in describing a style of executive management that seemed unorthodox even in the laissez-faire twenties. "The president shouldn't do too much," he told a friend after leaving the White House. "And he shouldn't *know* too much." Pressed to explain, Coolidge went on: "The president can't resign...So I constantly said to my cabinet: There are many things you gentlemen must not tell me. If you blunder, you can leave, or I can invite you to leave. But if you draw me into all our departmental decisions and something goes wrong, I must stay here, and by involving me, you have lowered the faith of the people in their government."

Like Harry Truman, another plainspoken rustic with an exalted view of the presidency, The man from Plymouth Notch never allowed personal modesty to detract from his lofty status as the people's chosen representative. Thus he upbraided his eldest son, John, for appearing at the White House dinner table in anything less than formal dress. In Coolidge's eyes such a breach of etiquette was a gross affront to presidential dignity.

The public thought him taciturn. They didn't know the man who held three press conferences a week - never allowing himself to be directly quoted - or raised vehement objections after one newspaperman asserted that the president of the United States owned but two pair of shoes. The Great Stone Face of legend possessed a smile one correspondent thought "as sweet as a wild strawberry you find unexpectedly in a Vermont pasture."

Coolidge was a tangled fishnet of contradictions. As a boy in Plymouth, the sound of visitors from outside the kitchen door caused him to hesitate before going inside. Even now he was occasionally seized by paralyzing shyness. At such times he felt as if he were back in the Notch, forcing himself through sheer willpower to walk through the kitchen door and greet a stranger for the first time. Yet this same introvert in an extrovert's profession also claimed to enjoy the daily ritual whereby average citizens could line up before lunch and shake the chief magistrate's hand (Coolidge's personal record: 2,096 hands in an hour).

In private Silent Cal could be as garrulous as a filibustering senator. Financier Bernard Baruch was not alone in expressing astonishment at a host so unlike his

public image.

"Everybody said you never say anything," Baruch observed.

"Well, Baruch," Coolidge replied, "many times I say only 'yes' or 'no' to people.

Even that is too much. It winds them up for 20 minutes more."

His impassive face masked turbulent emotions. Only a handful knew of Coolidge's inner anguish as he struggled to accept the loss of his 16-year-old son and name sake. Friends thought Calvin Jr. the image of the president's mother, who had died on her 39th birthday, flanked by 12-year-old Calvin and his younger sister, Abby. Coolidge carried his mother's picture with him to the end of his life. He carried as well fond recollections of Abby, whose death from appendicitis left the Coolidge household temporarily bereft of a woman's touch.

The motherless youth's social awkwardness did not prevent him from cutting a modest academic swath at Amherst College or, much later, from conducting an unlikely courtship of Miss Grace Goodhue, a dark-haired beauty engaged as a teacher at Northampton's Clark School for the Deaf. (Long afterward, wags claimed that having taught the deaf, Grace was prepared to live with the dumb.) In October 1905 the sphinxlike suitor and his vivacious bride exchanged vows under the Burlington, Vermont, roof of Grace's disapproving mother. A year later their first son, John, was born. Calvin Jr. arrived in April 1908. Both boys enjoyed a conventional upbringing, notwithstanding their father's increasing prominence in Massachusetts politics. Young Calvin in particular emulated his father's reserve and prankish humor. At the age of 11 he got his first job, working 12 hours a day in a Western Massachusetts tobacco field.

On the morning of August 3, 1923, the boy's employer greeted him with him with the news of president Harding's death and his own father's predawn inauguration.

"Which shed do you want me to work in this morning?" Calvin responded.

Before the day was over, one of Calvin's coworkers blurted out enviously, "If my father were president, I would not be working in a tobacco field."

Calvin's reply was instantaneous. "If my father were your father, you would!"

In the White House the boy remained unspoiled, his only complaint the excessive number of guests at mealtime. The president took his sons window-shopping on F Street and to the Washington press corps' annual Gridiron Dinner. At the Pennsylvania boarding school he attended, Calvin devoured the romantic stories of Robin Hood, King Arthur, and Sir Walter Scott. He contributed to the school newspaper and literary magazine, excelled at debating, and took a leading part in the campus YMCA. In June, 1924, Calvin returned to Washington to spend his summer vacation at the White House. On the last day of the month he played a long, strenuous tennis match with his brother. When it was over, he noticed a blister on his right foot. The next day Calvin's leg stiffened; within 24 hours the teenager was diagnosed with septic poisoning.

A desperate struggle ensued, unaided by modern drugs such as penicillin. Thanks to radio, millions of Americans sat at the invalid's bedside. In New York, delegates to the Democratic National Convention interrupted their proceedings to convey prayerful wishes for the boy's recovery. On July 5 Calvin was taken to Walter Reed Hospital for an operation to halt the poisons spreading through his body. It was not a success. In his last hours, perhaps remembering the knights jousting across the pages of his favorite books, the delirious patient imagined himself at the head of phantom armies. Charge and countercharge gave way to final, fatal retreat. "I surrender," Calvin moaned, early on the evening of July 7. Four hours later he died.

"In his suffering he asked me to make him well. I could not," Calvin's father wrote in the otherwise reticent pages of his autobiography. "When he went, the power and glory of the presidency went with him....The ways of Providence are often beyond our understanding," he added poignantly. "It seemed to me that the world had need of the work that it was probable he could do. I do not know why such a price was exacted for occupying the White House."

In that single, Job-like cry from the heart is to be found the tragedy of Calvin Coolidge, for whom public service--and personal ambition-- exacted a terrible cost. Only now, more than 70 years later, can we begin to appreciate the full extent of his grief. Scholars who have recently gained access to the Library of Congress papers of the White House physician Dr. Joel Boone confirm what has previously been mere speculation--that, far from the sleepwalking president enshrined in popular legend, Calvin Coolidge was profoundly and permanently depressed by the death of the son on whom he doted.

"I hope this is the last time that I shall ever have to be a candidate for office," Coolidge told his father in the closing weeks of 1924 reelection campaign. The old man shouldn't endanger his health by coming to Washington for the 1925 inaugural ceremonies. "You and John and I are all that is left," the president wrote. He didn't want to risk losing either. Nine months later the elder Coolidge received a New Year's Day 1926 lament. Outside the presidential office were thousands of citizens lined up to shake his son's hand. For Calvin Coolidge, though, it was like being back in the kitchen at Plymouth. "I suppose I am the most powerful man in the world, but great power does not mean much except great limitations, " he complained. "I cannot have any freedom to go and come. I am only in the clutch of forces that are greater than I am."

The president's melancholy grew with time, overflowing the narrow channels of New England repression. It lay behind his stunning, if ambiguous, declaration in August 1927: "I do not choose to run for president in 1928." Reporters searching for hidden meaning in Coolidge's words were quickly set straight by residents of the Notch. A mule with his heels dug in was the soul of agreeableness compared to a Vermonter who did not choose to do something. Inevitably the question arose: Why should a popular incumbent, riding the crest of national prosperity, walk away from certain reelection and the opportunity to serve longer than any man since George Washington?

"When a man begins to feel that he is the only one who can lead in this republic," Coolidge asserted, "he is guilty of treason to the spirit of institutions." Perhaps he knew he was no George Washington. To serve ten years in the White House would overturn a historical habit that Coolidge of all men was reluctant to challenge. Grace had her own explanation for their voluntary departure from Washington, remarking to a friend, "Poppa smells depression coming."

Coolidge lent credence to this prophecy in a conversation with Colonel Starling. "Well, they're going to elect that superman Hoover," he told Starling, "and he's going to have some trouble. He's going to have to spend money. But he won't spend enough. Then the Democrats will come in and spend money like water. But they won't know anything about money. Then they will want me to come back and save money for them. But I won't do it."

Speculations about Coolidge's future ranged from the predictable--a Supreme Court appointment or railroad presidency--to the whimsical--Flo Ziegfeld proposed his name as a Broadway censor, and Coolidge himself smiled at the suggestion that he

teach a course in thrift at Scotland's Aberdeen University. Appropriately enough, on his last night in Washington, Coolidge directed Colonel Starling's attention to a White House table all but groaning under the weight of jams and preserves favored by his employer.

"I'm not going to leave them here," said Coolidge. "I'm going to eat them in Northampton."

Presidents left office in 1929 without benefit of paid staff, pension, franking privileges, or Secret Service protection. Like Cinderella when the clock struck 12, their temporary splendor melted away. Yet their fame lingered on--that and the public's unrelenting curiosity. From his first days back on Massasoit Street, Coolidge was besieged by tourists. It became practically impossible for the former president to sit on his porch undisturbed. Admirers sought him out for a friendly handshake. Far worse were reporters who peeked in his windows at night and informed readers that the former president wore old-fashioned nightshirts to bed. In the spring of 1930 he pulled up stakes and retreated behind the iron gates of the Beeches. Coolidge paid \$40,000 for the place, perched high above the Connecticut River at the end of a cul-de-sac. To curious newsmen he explained his withdrawal behind iron gates as an act of altruism--now, he said, his "doggies" would have room to play. With its nine acres of clipped lawn and majestic trees, its handsome library and porch overlooking Mount Tom, the Beeches was more than a dignified retirement address. Never again, Coolidge gleefully noted, could a policeman order him to shovel off his sidewalk as on Massasoit Street.

About this time the ex-president was asked to fill out a card accompanying his annual dues to the National Press Club in Washington. After writing his name and address, he came to space marked, "Occupation."

"Retired," wrote Coolidge. Then, under the heading "Remarks," he put down, "Glad of it."

Beginning in June 1930 Coolidge employed his gift for pithy expression in a daily newspaper column, compared by unfriendly journalists to advertisements for Wanamaker's Department Store. Unfazed, the sage of Northampton vowed to publish a book entitled *The Importance of the Obvious*. If only his countrymen would fulfill their basic obligations to one another, he insisted, most of their problems would take care of themselves. To victims of the worst economic depression in American history, Coolidge offered exhortations to self reliance. "All that is needed," he told those doubtful that private charity alone could meet the needs of the unemployed, "is for us to give what we think America is worth to us." To Al Smith he confessed that the nation's economic collapse was beyond his comprehension. "The big men of the country have got to get together and do something about it," he told his barber. The big men could not prevent the Northampton Savings Bank from shutting its doors in 1932. Upon hearing the news, Coolidge silently placed a check for \$5,000 on the desk of his financially distressed partner. One morning Herman Beatty looked up to see a shiny, expensive new travel bag placed on his desk without a word. "For you," Coolidge finally said. "But I have one," protested Beatty. "Too small," replied his employer.

Coolidge's own comfort was assured, thanks to his \$3,000-a-week column, his successful autobiography, and the acquisition of 8,000 preferred shares of J.P. Morgan Securities priced below market value. Yet he was so insistent against capitalizing on his celebrity that he had Beatty remove tailor marks and name tags on old suits before reselling them. Hoping to travel in their retirement, in 1930 the

Coolidges spent several happy weeks in the Florida sunshine, only to be mobbed in New Orleans, where 5,000 people met them at the rail station, and a near riot ensued when the former president tossed aside a spent cigar. In California they lunched with Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford and watched movies being made at MGM. When a letter warning of a plot to assassinate him was delivered in Los Angeles, Coolidge blandly handed it to a nearby guard with the words, "Guess this belongs to you."

As the Depression worsened, Coolidge cut himself off from Republican politics. He vetoed out of hand a suggestion that he become president of Amherst. "Easier to control a Congress than a college faculty," he observed. In a world adrift, the former president clung all the tighter to the values of Plymouth. As for the Depression's causes, he professed bewilderment. "We may say that it was the result of greed and selfishness," he wrote. "But what body is to be specifically charged with that? Were the wage earners too greedy in getting all they could for their work? Were the managers of enterprise, big and little, too greedy in trying to operate at a profit? Were the farmers too greedy in their efforts to make more money by tilling more land and enlarging their production?"

"The most we can say is that there has been a general lack of judgment so widespread as to involve practically the whole country. We have learned that we were not so big as we thought we were. We shall have to keep nearer to the ground. We shall not feel so elated," Coolidge concluded, "but we shall be much safer."

It was a close to an apology as the proud father of Coolidge Prosperity ever came. In June 1931 he dropped his daily column, having no wish, he said, to serve as deputy president. Thereafter his routine became a gentle decrescendo. His daily office visits grew shorter, the mail lost its urgency, and the former president began spending more time in the old farmhouse in Plymouth. Not all visitors to the tiny hamlet were impressed by what they saw. One stranger paused outside the site of Coolidge's now legendary swearing-in and remarked audibly that he didn't think much of the place.

"Democrats!" muttered Coolidge.

Like many elderly men, he found refuge in the haunts of his youth. Here he might escape the hay fever that plagued him for much of the summer months, tramping his ancestral acres, hunting partridge, or checking up on adjoining lots of sugar maples. His participation in the 1932 campaign was limited to single radio broadcast from Madison Square Garden and an election eve appeal from the Beeches' library. "I hate making speeches," Coolidge grumbled. He admitted surprise at the dimensions of Franklin Roosevelt's landslide.

"I no longer fit in with these times," he commented to a friend a month after the election. "When I read of the newfangled that are now so popular, I realize that my time in public affairs is past....We are in a new era to which I do not belong, and it would not be possible for me to adjust myself to it." He told another acquaintance that he felt all burned out. He apologized for missing an Amherst alumni dinner. He had wanted to go, Coolidge said, but it was ruled out by all the attention invariably attending a former president.

"If I could only get rid of my past life!" he added plaintively. "But that always stays with one."

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