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America Could Use a Good Dose of Calvin Coolidge

By RICHARD SINCERE

CHARLOTTESVILLE Most Americans know that two of our country's Founders -- John Adams and Thomas Jefferson -- died within hours of each other on the Fourth of July in 1826, the 50th anniversary of American independence. Fewer might be aware that, five years later, the fifth president, James Monroe, also passed away on the same date. Fewer still know that Calvin Coolidge, our 30th president, was born on the Fourth of July in 1872.

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The much-underrated Coolidge is a unique American success story.

First elected to public office as a member of the city council of Northampton, Mass., Coolidge climbed the ladder of government service to clerk of courts, state representative, mayor, state senator, lieutenant governor, governor, vice president, and president of the United States. No other president, before or since, has had such an extensive and varied career in elective office.

In his 2008 book, *The Cult of the Presidency*, the Cato Institute's Gene Healy wrote that Coolidge is remembered "mostly for his reticence and for fiscal policies that combined Yankee parsimony with generous tax cuts."

That "Yankee parsimony" is on display in a short film that is thought to be the first time a U.S. president appeared in a "talkie" -- a movie with sound.

In this four-minute clip (viewable on YouTube), Coolidge says that he wants to "cut down public

expense. I want the people of America to be able to work less for the government and more for themselves. I want them to have the rewards of their own industry. This is the chief meaning of freedom. Until we can re-establish a condition under which the earnings of the people can be kept by the people, we are bound to suffer a very severe and distinct curtailment of our liberty."

"Liberty" is a theme that appears again and again in Coolidge's speeches and essays. In 1924, Coolidge published a volume of his writings, called *The Price of Freedom*. For a man known as "Silent Cal," Coolidge was unexpectedly loquacious and sage.

In his short (437-word) inaugural address as vice president, Coolidge, referring to the responsibilities of the United States Senate, said that body's "greatest function of all, too little mentioned and too little understood . . . is the preservation of liberty. Not merely the rights of the majority, they little need protection, but the rights of the minority, from whatever source they may be assailed."

Coolidge took his oath of office seriously. He believed that, under the Constitution, the authority and reach of the federal government were severely limited and that the rights of the people were expansive. And he ran a tight ship: The entire White House staff under Coolidge consisted of fewer than 40 people; the Obama White House has more than 60 working in the press office alone.

Addressing the American Bar Association in 1922, Coolidge remarked:

"So long as the national government confined itself to providing those fundamentals of liberty, order, and justice for which it was primarily established, its course was reasonably clear and plain. No large amount of revenue was required. No great swarms of public employees were necessary. There was little clash of special interests or different sections, and what there was of this nature consisted not of petty details but of broad principlesWhat the government undertook to do it could perform with a fair degree of accuracy and precision."

Then came the big "but" -- as Coolidge lamented the growing size and scope of government in the previous two decades:

"But this has all been changed by embarking on a policy of a general exercise of police powers, by the public control of much private enterprise and private conduct, and of furnishing a public supply for much private need."

After 88 years, these words could have been written yesterday.

Perhaps being born on the Fourth of July imbued Coolidge with a predilection to take the Founders at their word when they said they were creating a republican government of limited and specified powers.

Perhaps his views simply reflected his sober, thrifty New England upbringing. Perhaps he was just unusually intelligent.

Whatever the case, we could use a solid dose of "Silent Cal" in the 21st century.

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