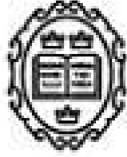

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Coolidge and Presidential Leadership

By Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr.

Writing on the history and evolution of the Presidency in the past has been almost exclusively at the level of broad generalization, and only rarely aimed at detailed analysis of specific developmental trends. This article is part of a broader effort by the author to come to grips with one of these trends, the increasingly important and complex Presidential role as leader and molder of public opinion on a national scale.

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Theodore Roosevelt in his Autobiography categorized his White House predecessors as either Lincoln or Buchanan type Presidents—of course including himself in the former group and his unfortunate successor Taft in the latter. In general terms a "strong President," "weak President" notion such as this has become the accepted theory for interpreting the Presidency. The office is viewed as possessed of great plasticity, with some of the occupants so molding it as to use it for vigorous leadership, and others compressing its scope to conform to their vastly more limited ambitions and conceptions. Thus the pendulum is said to swing—the swings toward strong leadership usually coinciding with periods of national need, and the rather wider swings in the other direction corresponding to a more frequent desire for normalcy and rest. Since T. R.'s day Calvin Coolidge has taken over from Buchanan the role of popular image of Presidential lassitude.

From one point of view such a categorization of Coolidge is amply justified. But this whole interpretative theory of the Presidency has limitations which in turn tend to obscure a very significant twentieth century evolutionary trend. The oscillating theory stems largely from a preoccupation with the substantive policy achievements, or lack of them, which coincided with succeeding administrations. What it obscures, is a twentieth century developmental trend that might be called the popularization of the public image of the Presidency, and that may have the long term effect of ironing out these very cyclical fluctuations. The strong and weak Presidents have continued to succeed one another in the twentieth century even as in the nineteenth, at least as defined by policy impact. Yet, thanks to the communication revolution, the image which the Presidency throws on the public screen has steadily ballooned to the extent that it is unrecognizable as the office occupied six or more decades ago by Hayes or Arthur or even Cleveland.

Until roughly 1900, with notable exceptions, the office was honorific and ornamental, but only vaguely operational, and was frequently overshadowed

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in the public eye by Congressional leadership. The "War Hawks" versus the ineffectual Madison, the Radicals versus Johnson and the dignified obscurity of Benjamin Harrison come quickly to mind. The contrast between this state of affairs, and the virtual personification of government and national leadership which Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower have represented is extraordinary. The public image of the President today dwarfs virtually all other rivals for attention on the political stage, and dwarfs even such luminaries as the Hollywood or sports personalities of the moment.

Whence this evolutionary trend? Why has this development taken place? The steady march of communication technology is the key. Mass communication media are generally better adapted to the dramatizing of persons than of institutions. Unlike other parts of the government the Presidency has the unique quality of being a person as well as an institution, and hence lends itself uniquely to popularization. Presidents like Teddy Roosevelt found that they could develop and turn this dramatization potential to their own ends to advance particular policies in which they were interested. But Presidents with programs were not necessarily the only ones who could benefit from exploitation of the new opportunities for self-advertisement. The new publicity tools could be used to advance a President's *electoral* fortunes quite apart from any desire to affect policy. Hence in theory "weak Presidents" as well as "strong Presidents" had reason and motive for harnessing successive communication innovations to the service of the office. They as well as the Roosevelts and Wilsons may well have advanced this twentieth century evolution.

The record seems to show that Calvin Coolidge, the weakest of modern day weak Presidents, did just that. With no program worthy of the name to advance, he nevertheless skillfully harnessed the publicity techniques available, to the advancement of his electoral fortunes almost exclusively. It can be argued, that in so doing he did nearly as much as any of the strong Presidents of this century to bring the office to its present peak of prestige and popular deification.

Few men have come to the Presidency as suddenly and unexpectedly as did Calvin Coolidge. Partly because of this, and partly because of the almost accidental manner in which this unknown Massachusetts politician was elevated to the Vice Presidency in the first place, the American people found themselves on the morning of August 3rd, 1923 with a President they hardly knew. Yet a scant ten months later Coolidge was overwhelmingly nominated by an initially skeptical party to succeed himself, and overwhelmingly elected by a nation for whom his name had become a household word. He was the sixth Vice President to succeed upon his chief's death; only the second to win a term in his own right. The first was Theodore Roosevelt, and the difference between the two men is instructive. T. R. came to the Vice

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Presidency with a national reputation made by a personality and knack for flamboyant publicity almost without precedent in American politics.

Coolidge had none of these assets. Had Harding died in the nineteenth century instead of the twentieth, Coolidge no doubt would have shared the fate of other succeeding nineteenth century Vice Presidents. But the power of the Presidency to focus public attention on the White House occupant had reached a point by the early 1920's, that ten months in this uniquely potent position were enough to make Coolidge, the unknown Vice President, into Coolidge the unchallenged standard-bearer of his party. But he did not merely coast to prominence, thrust forward willy-nilly by a burgeoning communications industry. He himself took considerable initiative—as had some of his predecessors—in adapting the Presidency to the new media, and, conversely, adapting the publicity potential of the media to Presidential use. The name of Calvin Coolidge must be listed among those Presidents who helped sketch the giant outlines of the present day public image of the Presidency.

RADIO AND THE PRESIDENCY

In August 1923 Coolidge had a dual problem if he wanted to secure his party's nomination and an electoral victory a year hence. He had to mend his political fences, an easy task for the most experienced politician ever to sit in the White House, but above all, he had to project himself on the consciousness of the American people. To do this he adopted a variety of techniques, some old and some rather startlingly new. The use he made of radio is perhaps the most startling of the new techniques. Radio had had its first impressive demonstration in broadcasting the election returns of 1920. During Harding's short period in office he made several radio speeches, which no doubt had much to do with his very considerable popularity and the wave of emotion that greeted his death.

To appreciate the potential impact of radio in this period of its infancy one must recall the fascination this new toy aroused. Set owners sat far into the night listening to anything and everything, writing down gleefully new stations picked up, enthralled by this latter-day miracle. The quality of the programs was less important than the sheer joy of hearing voices and music coming through the ether. By the same token this was a day of captive audiences—audiences held to the earphones by a kind of hypnosis devoured the programs offered and cried for more. To the would-be exploiter of the medium it meant, one imagines, a dependable audience that required little of the skill that later audiences demanded.

It was at this juncture in history that the shy, dour, unimpressive looking Calvin Coolidge appeared on the scene. Radio was a natural for him. On the stump in 1920 he had been a doubtful asset to the party. Had he had to rely on his barnstorming abilities to make his mark in the painfully short

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time before the convention in June of 1924, his success would have been dubious. But he had the radio, and he realized it. Senator James Watson of Indiana reproduces in his memoirs a conversation with Coolidge in which he has the President saying: "I am very fortunate that I came in with the radio. I can't make an engaging, rousing, or oratorical speech to a crowd as you can, . . . but I have a good radio voice, and now I can get my messages across to them without acquainting them with my lack of oratorical ability . . ."[1] Watson goes on to say that Coolidge laughed "about as heartily as I ever knew him to" over what he considered his good fortune. Bascom Slemp, the President's secretary, in the introduction to his compilation of Coolidge views, writes that radio seemed to have been invented for him.[2]

There is little question then that Coolidge and his immediate advisors, of whom Slemp was one of the most important, were highly conscious of the value of this new medium and exploited it quite deliberately. Even in the absence of such evidence, a look at the radio appearances by the President before the convention met bespeaks some very shrewd stagemanagement. From August to December when Congress was to meet, the President rather ostentatiously refused all speaking engagements, pleading pressure of work in picking up the threads of his new job. This did *not* mean that the people of the country learned nothing about their new leader indirectly through the press, but it did mean that their thirst for first hand contact with him was allowed to grow before it was slaked.

The President's first significant public appearance was his State of the Union Message delivered in person to Congress on December 6th, 1923. This was the first Presidential message to Congress to be broadcast. Secretary Slemp had done everything possible to insure the largest possible radio audience and checked on reaction to it afterward. The chain which sent it out onto the airwaves comprised stations in Washington, New York, Providence, St. Louis, Kansas City and Dallas. Listeners a thousand miles away reported gleefully that his crisp New England accent and even the noise as he turned the pages of his manuscript came through clearly. The impact seems to have been considerable.

Before the convention in June he made five more large-scale, carefully staged, broadcasts plus at least three more broadcasts that went out over one or two stations (usually WEAF in New York and a Washington station). The first of the major speeches originated in his study in the White House on December 10th and took the form of what the *New York Times* called a "touching eulogy of President Harding."[3] Then in February he made

[1] James E. Watson—*As I Knew Them*—Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1936, p. 239.

[2] C. Bascom Slemp—*The Mind of the President*—Doubleday, N. Y., 1926, p. 10f.

[3] Comment on each broadcast can be found in the issue of the *New York Times* for the

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what was to be his first "political" speech at a Lincoln Day Dinner on the 12th. This was broadcast to what one source (probably optimistically) estimated was an audience of five million. Then on February 22nd he delivered from the White House a tribute to Washington and again was heard by "several million" people. Regarding his next major effort before the Convention of the Associated Press, a *Times* article ran: "Probably never before has the voice of the head of a government been heard by so many people, for unprecedented steps were taken to broadcast Mr. Coolidge's address as far as possible across the country." Finally, on the 30th of May he made a 300 word radio speech on behalf of the movement for better homes.

There are several things about this series of public utterances that suggest a highly imaginative, and judging from the event, highly successful exploitation of the new medium. After the State of the Union Message Coolidge made sure that he revisited the homes of eager radio fans at least on the average of once a month. The occasions and subjects chosen were admirably calculated to convey a general impression of the man and his ideas without in the least offending by their partisanship. The first capitalized on the great wave of sorrow at the late President's death, in the rest, save possibly the Lincoln Day Dinner, he chose non-partisan forums and themes with a wide and down-to-earth appeal. His less widely broadcast appearances followed the same line—an address to the D.A.R. in April, his Memorial Day speech, and a speech in connection with an oratorical contest in early June. Finally note that several appearances were from his study in the White House. In other words he quickly made the transition from the mere broadcast of a set speech aimed primarily at a live audience, to speeches aimed exclusively at the radio audience. This suggests a very rapid and significant recognition of radio as a medium in its own right, rather than as a mere adjunct to the old fashioned public meeting.

Nominated easily on the first ballot with 1165 out of a possible 1209 votes, Coolidge and his managers turned to the campaign. In mid-July National Chairman Butler announced that Coolidge was not going to make any swings around the country but rather would conduct a McKinley-Harding front porch campaign (albeit from the White House front porch) with a difference—the use of radio speeches. Perhaps the pièce de résistance of this radio campaign was the President's speech to the U. S. Chamber of Commerce on October 23rd in Washington. Twenty-two stations from coast to coast had been linked to carry it. Again on the eve of election he made a widely broadcast plea for the people to go out and vote.

Though the President's own appearances on the radio were relatively few, a cabinet figure or lesser-light did battle for the G.O.P. on the airwaves

date following the day of delivery, and also in Gleason L. Archer—*History of Radio to 1926*—American Historical Society, N. Y., 1938, pp. 323-337.

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virtually every day. On October 30th a monster rally was broadcast from New York—a show remarkably similar to latter-day productions that have become standard campaign equipment. That this exploitation of the airwaves, particularly by the President, had a considerable impact if not on the result, at least on the proportions of the victory, is not doubted by contemporary observers. Charles Michelson,[4] later to become the long-time publicity director of the Democratic National Committee and in 1924 a correspondent for the Democratic *New York World,* says that radio fitted Coolidge like a glove. Davis' handsome appearance, polished platform manner, and deep voice could not register themselves on the unseen audience. Coolidge's unimpressive physique, sharp and peevish-looking features and high twangy voice which would have been a liability on the stump, were neutralized or became actual assets on the air. In those days of primitive radio technology the deep Davis voice came over badly, so it seems, while Coolidge's voice "cut through" as he once put it. William Allen White summed up the matter well: ". . . over the radio, he went straight to the popular heart. His radio campaign helped greatly because it is one of the few campaign meduims by which the President always appears with his best foot forward. During the campaign he had little to say and said it well."[5]

Throughout his presidency Coolidge allowed his sentiments to be broadcast from time to time. In his valedictory, an article he wrote for the August 1929 issue of the *American Magazine,* he again made clear his awareness of the potency of this medium in the exercise of the Presidential office and its significance in the evolution of the office. "It was never my practice to speak from rear platforms. . . . The excuse for such appearances which formerly existed has been eliminated by the coming of the radio. It is so often that the President is on the air that almost anyone who wishes has ample opportunity to hear his voice."

THE PRESS CONFERENCE

If radio was the most spectacular publicity medium exploited by Silent Cal for purposes of adroit and timely self-advertisement, it was by no means the only one. The mass circulation newspaper had arrived on the American scene around the turn of the century, partly as the result of technological developments like the new linotype machine introduced in the 1890s. The newspaper thus became and remains one of the most potent media for the dissemination of information on a mass basis. Radio and television have challenged it in certain areas, but have yet to convey detail and human

[4] Quoted in Mark Sullivan—"Will Radio Make the People the Government?"—article in *Radio Broadcast* (published by Doubleday, Page) November, 1924, p. 20.

[5] William Allen White—*Calvin Coolidge, the Man Who Is President*—New York: Macmillan, 1925, p. 139.

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interest as effectively as the newspaper, or produce its sustained volume of information.

The Presidency had been partially adapted by Coolidge's predecessors to capitalize on the press for publicity purposes. Theodore Roosevelt had begun the essential task of breaking down the barrier that separated the President from the working press. Taft here, as elsewhere, walked somewhat uncertainly in his predecessor's footsteps. Wilson inaugurated the bi-weekly press conference, lived with it uneasily and abandoned it when the war furnished excuse. Harding revived it and Coolidge took it over from his dead chief. The correspondents attended their first conference with the unknown man from Vermont shortly after he got back to Washington from Plymouth as President. They were apprehensive to say the least about the usefulness of press conferences with a man whose only claim to fame as Vice President had been his taciturnity. They were pleasantly surprised on finding him friendly, though hardly effusive or informal, very willing to cooperate with them within the accepted rules of no direct quotation and written questions, and they wound up giving him a round of applause.

Coolidge's remarks in his first Gridiron Club speech on December 8th, 1923 offer a good point of departure for an examination of his use of the press conference as a crucial adjunct to the Presidency.[6] Speaking of the press conference as it had functioned since he took office he said: "It is helpful and stimulating, and I trust it has been more or less satisfactory to them [the reporters]. I suppose that I am not very good copy. . . . The usual and ordinary man is not the source of very much news. But the boys have been very kind and considerate to me, and where there has been any discrepancy, they have filled it in and glossed it over, and they have manufactured some."

"Manufactured some" is a bit of understatement, in retrospect. Actually they manufactured a great deal. Frank Kent wrote a biting attack in the *American Mercury* for August 1924 on the handling of Coolidge by reporters in which he lays the creation of the "Coolidge myth" squarely at their door and indirectly at the door of the publishers, enthusiastic over the President's backing of the Mellon tax plan. The significant point for the development of Presidential publicity techniques, however, is the extent to which Coolidge *himself* very ably and acutely capitalized on the opportunities the press conference gave him. This Kent totally ignores in implying that he was a mere on-looker watching the inflationary antics of the reporters. Even the President, in typically Coolidgean understatement also implies a disclaimer of initiative in the words quoted above. Be that as it may, there is ample evi-

[6] This passage and later material quoted from press conference transcripts have been obtained from Coolidge papers on deposit in the Coolidge Memorial Room of the Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts. The author is grateful to the trustees of the Forbes Library for permission to make use of these materials.

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dence that by accident or design—and Coolidge rarely did things of this sort by accident—his use of the press conference, though hardly up to the mark to be set by F.D.R., was a shrewd and rather considerable advance over the situation as he found it.

The key characteristic of the regular Presidential press conference in publicity terms is the fact that it brings the Chief Executive in contact with the general public, via his direct contact with the working press, on an almost continuous and uninterrupted basis. The vast difference between this and the episodic and indirect contact between President and people that existed in pre-press conference days, contact largely confined to irregular official appearances, is apparent. The advent of the regular news conference is very largely responsible for the development of the White House into *the* prime national news source. All this Coolidge seems to have sensed. He was the first President to put the bi-weekly news conference on a regular permanent basis—to make it a permanent fixture of the Washington scene with which future President's would tamper at their peril. True, Wilson inaugurated bi-weekly press conferences but he later abandoned them. Harding reinstated them but his tenure was too brief to serve as a definitive precedent. It remained for Coolidge to carry them on week in and week out for his nearly six years in the White House—the longest continuous period of their functioning, until then and easily long enough to entrench the precedent.

In sheer number of conferences held, the Coolidge record is truly impressive. He was in office almost exactly sixty-seven months. In that time, according to the number of transcripts in the Forbes Library, he held 520 press conferences, or an average of 7.8 per month. In slightly over 145 months, F.D.R. held 998 press conferences, or an average of only 6.9 per month. More important than sheer numbers, Coolidge never broke for long the continuity of the outpouring of Coolidge opinions and Coolidgiana during vacations and other extended periods away from Washington. This is a matter of no little significance from a couple of points of view. In the first place it indicates in general terms his determination to make full use of the medium to which the conferences gave him access. Had he declined to meet the press during the lengthy vacations he took in the Adirondacks, the Black Hills and elsewhere, usually from the adjournment of Congress in June or July until well into September, he would have missed the opportunity to fill the national news stage almost alone. With Congress in adjournment the executive branch becomes in these periods the sole source of news. At any time, Presidential trout fishing is front page news, but in such a vacuum it may rank with rapes and murders in journalistic importance. Coolidge, by taking the press with him on vacation and meeting them nearly as often as in Washington, made sure this vacuum was turned to good account and the

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year-round drumfire of news about the Presidency remained uninterrupted.

President Coolidge's encounters with the journalists on September 6th and on September 13th, 1927 are highly instructive along these general lines. The meeting of the 6th was the last held in the Black Hills before the trek back to Washington. Toward the end of the conference one of the reporters, on behalf of his colleagues, arose and said that ". . . the newspapermen are very anxious to express their appreciation of all you have done this summer for them and they hope you have enjoyed yourself." The President accepted this sentiment graciously, and then at the next meeting—the first back in Washington—commiserated with those that had not been with the group in South Dakota. He went on "... there was such a diversity of happenings that I think the newspapermen found sufficient material nearly every day on which to make a story. . . . I haven't seen the official figures of the amount of space that went out from the Black Hills. I think a computation was made of the space that went out from White Pine Camp [his 1926 summer White House in the Adirondacks]. Of course I stayed in the Black Hills considerably longer, but I judge that the amount of material was certainly as much as that of a year ago." A reporter thereupon cited the figure of 2,150,-000 (words?) as having issued from the Black Hills, 600,000 more than the year before.

At least two morals can be drawn from these exchanges. In the first place the very definite awareness Coolidge showed of his publicity successes while on vacation is certainly significant. He was perfectly aware of, and apparently kept very close tabs on, the problem of getting good press coverage during these periods of political lull. He also shows clear evidence here, and elsewhere in the conference transcripts, of concern not only with quantity but with content. That is, he often showed himself clearly aware, as here, of the necessity of saying something at news conference that could become the basis of a story. The value of the press conference to a President as a year round publicity forum depends in some measure on whether or not he can cause at least one good story to come out of most meetings, which will be prominently printed. And, the reporters want their daily—or at least bi-weekly—story just as much, if for somewhat different reasons. Coolidge shows here that he was quite aware of this double need for a flow of news, and not infrequently, particularly while on vacation, suggested "local color" or other topics that might be used. He was ever careful, also, to include reporters on his side trips and to bring them in contact with his frequent vacation visitors.

The second moral leads one into another aspect of Coolidge's use of the press conference device. There is also clearly presented here a concern for the problems and convenience of the working press. This is another of the

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keys of successful press conference exploitation which Coolidge clearly grasped. There was little chance that the man who had been weaned on a pickle, according to a bon mot attributed to Alice Longworth, would captivate the reporters as individuals, as did both Roosevelts. Coolidge could, however, and did do whatever he could in his own quiet way to make the work of the reporters as convenient as possible. Not infrequently in the transcripts there is discussion between press and President of the time most convenient (for the reporters) for holding conferences, of arrangements to accommodate them on Presidential junkets, of the need to choose a vacation site at which they too could be housed, and of excursions on the Presidential yacht Mayflower and other social get-to-gethers the President had arranged with them. David Lawrence in an August 1927 *Saturday Evening Post* article makes the point that it is Coolidge that reporters must thank for setting the precedent of always providing for reportorial comfort on Presidential journeys. Rarely does evidence appear in the transcripts that Coolidge showed any irritation at their questions or behavior, in spite of the fact that the President-reporter relationship is inherently one involving divergent and often mutually exclusive objectives.

Much of the contemporary comment on Coolidge's press conferences had to do with the mythical "White House Spokesman." To get around the injunction against direct quotation or attribution the reporters settled on this fictitious person as the source of views in reality expressed by the President at press conferences. Coolidge did not invent the spokesman, the reporters did. It would be easy to get the impression from the generally hostile comment about the spokesman device that Presidential-reporter relations were continually strained. This impression seems unjustified, however. J. Frederick Essary, in a symposium appearing in the *American Political Science Review,* commented on the discussion. He found the problem of indirect attribution not serious, and that in spite of it the press conferences, ". . . are distinctly to my advantage as a working journalist at the capital, by giving me twice a week a slant upon the President's mind. . . . I may go to five or six of these conferences and come away without a scrap of what we call 'spot' news. But at least I have some intimate closeup of what the President is thinking or the lines he may eventually take on a given policy."[7] In other words, despite the veil which the quotation ban represented between President and press (and hence between President and the country), it is clear that the press conference as Coolidge conducted it was far ahead of any device that had previously existed in the extent it enabled the nation to get to know its President's mind intimately and the President himself as an individual.

[7] *American Political Review,* Vol. XXII, p. 907.

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PUBLICITY AND THE PRESIDENCY

There are two final items which, though less tangible and measurable than matters discussed heretofore, nevertheless represent refinements of, if not substantial additions to, the publicity generating and attention arresting potential of the Presidency. The first of these has to do with the veritable flood of formal utterances that issued from the allegedly Silent One, while he was in the White House. It is said that in his somewhat less than six years in the White House he used up more wordage in public papers and addresses than T. R. and Wilson combined. This outpouring was made possible by an unprecedented resort to ghost writing. Ike Hoover in his chatty memoirs said that so far as he knew all Presidents until Harding wrote their own speeches but that the latter brought Judson Welliver, a newspaperman, into the White House to work at this chore.[8] Coolidge inherited Welliver, using him for the same purpose, later bringing in fellow Amherst alumnus Stuart Crawford to replace him. Again, since Harding's tenure was too brief to serve as a stable precedent, it can be fairly said that Coolidge did the most to thus enlarge the President's capacity for public articulation.

A compilation of his utterances which appeared in the *New Republic* in June, 1926 indicates the extent to which Coolidge became a general oracle on every and any subject to a quite unprecedented extent. In 1925, the first year of his first full term, he made twenty-eight public addresses, as against fifteen and seventeen respectively, in the first years of each of Wilson's terms. Besides this, Coolidge issued an additional sixty-one statements, letters for publication, messages to meetings, and the like. Charles Merz, the compiler of these figures suggests, after examining the audiences to which remarks were severally directed, that the underlying motive was to spread as many of these Presidential favors as widely as possible among various racial, religious, and occupational groups. He implies a direct similarity with the local politician's purpose in joining and cultivating as many organizations and groups in his area as possible. This may well have been the case. However, the President probably also had in mind the general impact on the public in the mass, of such a stepped up program of public utterances, supplementing as they did the other media in stamping the Coolidge image indelibly on the public consciousness. Only the addition of ghost writers to the Presidential staff could make such a project feasible.

One final problem with important publicity implications Coolidge faced with a realism that was equalled by few if any of his predecessors and not even by all of his successors. Again in his *American Magazine* article he him-

[8] Irwin H. Hoover—*Forty-Two Years in the White House*—Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1934, p. 252.

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self makes the point: "Not only in all his [the President's] official actions, but in all his social intercourse, and even in his recreation and repose, he is constantly watched by a multitude of eyes to determine if there is anything unusual, extraordinary, or irregular, which can be set down in praise or in blame." Coolidge recognized what royal families and moving picture stars have doubtless also discovered, that in an age of flourishing mass communication media, the white light of publicity finds difficulty in distinguishing between the public and the private lives of those involved. The wider the audience and the greater the notoriety, the greater the thirst for every scrap of information about the popular idol. The most sensible and realistic approach to this problem for the public figure whose success depends upon publicity is to accept the fact that he must offer up his private life as a sacrifice. In fact, he might as well recognize the positive advantages of news about his private life as a means of maintaining popular interest in him as a public figure and hence paving the way for ready acceptance of his *public* utterances.

At least since the newsmen pursued President Cleveland on his honeymoon, and were bitterly resented, the public, abetted by the mass media, has assumed its right to know all. The twentieth century tendency for White House occupants to dramatize their office, and inevitably themselves, has powerfully supplemented this natural impact of the developing media. Most presidents, however, have found it very hard to accept these facts of life and put themselves under the microscope willingly. Wilson's failures with the press were due in considerable part to his stubborn rear-guard action in defense of his family's privacy. Coolidge seems not only to have accepted the inevitable but to have turned it to positive advantage. Taking the press along on his vacations was a highly significant example of this. His willingness to pose for pictures, still or the relatively new newsreels, was almost a standing joke. His careful selection of successively different vacation spots—he was the first President to spend a vacation west of the Mississippi River—was unquestionably motivated in part by a realization of the publicity possibilities. The abundance of homey details about his home life, reading the Sunday paper in his suspenders, could hardly have grown to such proportions without the acquiescence if not the aid of the subject. In general, he rarely chided the press for prying, and then in very gentle terms indeed. All this from an essentially shy and self-conscious individual indicates considerable publicity sense and determination.

ACTIVE OR PASSIVE?

On the evidence it would seem that Coolidge was hardly the archetype of the passive President. In building up the news generating potential of the office Coolidge was anything but passive, and in using this to advance his

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own cause as President he was equally active. The weak President or passive President label derives solely from his impact on *public policy*—on his virtual failure as legislative leader. How could a President with such a talent for gaining access to the public mind have produced so meager a legislative record? The answer seems to have lain in the fact that he was basically a standpatter. He never had a legislative program of any significant proportions to advance, hence he used his publicity talents for quite other purposes than advancing any such program. He used them, in short, as suggested earlier, for electoral and party advantage. This had an obvious impact on the *content* of his public utterances, though by no means decreased their frequency—if anything it increased it. His public statements were for the most part homilies on American history, the American way of life, the moral virtues, and the like, with only remote relevance to specific policy proposals.

The closest he came to using the potent position which publicity had given him for specific "policy" rather than "electoral" purposes is in itself instructive. Several commentators, William Allen White in most detail,[9] suggest that Coolidge followed a general policy of bolstering business confidence, by precept if not example. Time after time in his press conferences he would make the point on a variety of pretexts that business conditions were excellent and the prospects even better. Among these utterances was the famous statement to the effect that brokers' loans were not dangerously high. At his January 6th, 1928, press conference, in answer to a question about brokers' loans he began by disclaiming detailed knowledge, and went on to note that numbers of securities dealt in and bank deposits were much greater than of yore. Then came the key sentence: "Now, whether the amount at the present time is disproportionate to the resources of the country I am not in a position to judge accurately, but so far as indicated by any inquiries that I have made of the Treasury Department and so on I haven't had any indications that the amount was large enough to cause particularly unfavorable comment." This opinion, reported after the Stock Exchange had concluded Friday's business, produced the second biggest Saturday in history. Even here he was not seeking public support for any specific *legislative* action but rather to create a climate of opinion favorable to continued business prosperity.

That the twenties have come to be labelled the period of Coolidge prosperity is therefore hardly accidental. Coolidge may not have created the prosperity, but he mobilized an impressive array of publicity media to identify himself with it. Presidents in the past have given their names to the eras of their ascendancy but the twentieth century with its Coolidge prosperity, Hoover depression, Roosevelt New Deal has adopted this form of

[9] In his *A Puritan in Babylon*—New York: Macmillan, 1939, p. 389 and passim.

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presidential shorthand as never before. This is one measure of the importance the image of the Presidency has come to assume in the eyes of the American public. For much of this new habit of mind we have Coolidge to thank. Would Hoover have been blamed so unanimously for the depression had not Coolidge been so successful in teaching people to look to the White House for a sign? F.D.R., then, did not create the image of the President as Great White Father, he merely took up the process where others had left off.

Finally, to bring matters quickly down to date, what of Eisenhower? One detects some desire on his part to play the moral leader (utilizing television in a manner not unlike Coolidge's use of radio), and avoid policy leadership. But the two roles, separable as they may be in periods of tranquility, tend to become merged in periods of crisis. A public taught to train its gaze on the Presidency will do so with increasing insistence and urgency in periods of crisis. Thus Eisenhower has been compelled to exercise policy leadership as well, however reluctantly. Each succeeding President, as in the last half century, can be expected to continue the process of perfecting the use of the developing mass media for Presidential benefit. At the same time, each succeeding President will reap what he and his twentieth century predecessors have sown. The point will soon be reached, if it has not been already, when *no* President will be able to be less than the final architect of national policy, even as, long since, Presidents have become the nation's moral leaders. While in the nineteenth century the man made the office over in his image, in the twentieth, more and more, the giant public image of the office will mold the man to its demands.

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