
Calvin Coolidge: Classical Statesman

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In a 2012 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Adi Godrej, the chairman of Godrej Group, offered a sensible truism. “There are far too many politicians in this world,” Godrej maintained, and “too few statesmen” (Frangos 2012, para. 4). Godrej’s statement decries the modern failure to live up to the ideal of political leadership as outlined by classical philosophers. The classical philosophers Plato and Aristotle outlined a vision of political leadership inextricably linked with the pursuit of virtue and the common good. For the end of virtue, the classical statesman unites moral character, political thought, and political action. In marked contrast, modern political thinkers often disavow the entire notion that virtue can be linked with politics (Holloway 2008, 2). For such moderns, it is particular results, not moral considerations, that matter. According to this view, the task of the politician is not to minister—it is to administer. Given the increasing divorce between virtue and politics, observers can hardly avoid inquiring as to whether an older type of statesmanship can ever be restored. Statesmanship, as beleaguered as it seems, is not unprecedented within America’s political tradition. Analyses of familiar and titanic statesmen such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are numerous and often insightful. One modern American leader who both understood and acted upon principles of classical statesmanship but who has been unjustly ignored is Calvin Coolidge.

Calvin Coolidge, the stoic New Englander who served as president from 1923 to 1929, exerted leadership between two momentous ages. His presidency, during a quiet period wedged between two World Wars and

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two Progressive eras, is often neglected and considered inconsequential. This dismissal ignores the considerable accomplishments of the Coolidge era. Economically, Coolidge presided over low inflation, low unemployment, and budget surpluses during every year of his presidency (Shlaes 2013, 6). In foreign policy, Coolidge repudiated both isolationism and Wilsonianism and kept the nation at peace (Silver 1982, 2). Most importantly, Coolidge quickly restored public confidence in the government at a time when it was at a low ebb (Silver 1982, 3). These accomplishments were made possible by Coolidge's devotion to the virtues of honesty, hard work, and individual thrift. Historian Donald R. McCoy (1968) observes that the foundation of Coolidge's philosophy was that "the citizen has an obligation to serve, and to do good work—idleness was fundamentally sinful" (155). For Coolidge, as for the classical thinkers, politics involved more than producing legislation; it involved civic service and sacrifice.

Coolidge's presidency, epitomizing fiscal conservatism and foreign non-interventionism, has been dismissed by some historians as an outlier at best (Silver 1982, viii). These historians often identify the president's peace and prosperity as a ruse that simply shrouded the looming economic turbulence of the Great Depression (Silver 1982, viii). Some hostile contemporaries even suggested that Coolidge avoided running for a second full-term because he foresaw the impending calamity and wanted to shirk the responsibility of presiding over it (Urofsky 2000, 392). The influential satirist H. L. Mencken "defended" Coolidge by positing that the president slept too much to foresee the Depression. Indeed, Mencken venomously asserted that Coolidge's only "talent" was his capacity for slumber. The satirist mused that while "Nero fiddled, Coolidge only snored" (Dehgan 2003, 152). Such a politician, disparaged or ignored by historians and scarcely thought of by the general populace, seems at first glance an odd fit for the category of classical statesmanship. Yet understanding the leadership of Coolidge provides indispensable lessons for restoring the tradition of classical statesmanship in America. What the classical writers believed about the nature of politics and statesmanship will be discussed in section one below, which will describe statesmanship according to Plato and Aristotle. Plato provides a guide for a statesman's political knowledge in that he emphasizes the principle of justice and the need to serve the good of the whole. Aristotle, however, recognizes the need for adapting pursuit of the common good to particular circumstances. The classical statesman combines Plato's abstract, almost ethereal wisdom with Aristotle's sense

of practicality and notion of kingship.

Coolidge's nearly total exile from the annals of the modern academy is likely due precisely to his exhibiting traits of classical statesmanship. Modern historians gauge presidential greatness not by the virtue and knowledge of any given leader, but by their capacity to impose change, especially putatively progressive change, on the country; sometimes against its will. In the words of popular historian H. W. Brands, "great presidents are those who change the course of American history Great presidents are opportunists: They acknowledge America's strong bias toward the status quo and recognize that large changes are possible only when the status quo has been severely compromised" (Brands 2012, paras. 16-17). Brands's measure of greatness has less to do with classical statesmanship, however, than with the modern idea, supposedly epitomized by a thinker like Friedrich Nietzsche, that human history is the story of how the will to power, "the unexhausted, procreative will of life," tears down old meanings and creates new ones (Nietzsche 1982, 226). Nietzsche is usually interpreted as a nihilist glorifying unfettered, assertive, arbitrary will. Statesmanship, for Brands, is found not in the man whose "understanding rules desire" as Aristotle envisioned; it is found in the overman, whose passion for disruption is unleashed on history (Steinberger 2000, 380). Section two will explore the modern challenge to classical statesmanship and how the latter relates to the public career of Calvin Coolidge.

This disavowal of classical statesmanship is not confined to the universities; quite the contrary, it has penetrated the highest ranks of the American government. One of Coolidge's successors to the presidency, Franklin D. Roosevelt, embraced the non-classical, modern understanding of statesmanship. In his Commonwealth Club Address, Roosevelt declared that "the task of statesmanship has always been the re-definition of [the Declaration's natural] rights in terms of a growing and changing social order" (Frohnen 2008, 436). Elsewhere he noted that great statesmen possess the uncanny ability to "transfuse with new meaning the concepts of our constitutional fathers" (Roosevelt 1938, 68). The statesman, for Roosevelt, is under no obligation to protect and communicate higher values such as virtue. They must instead act decisively to reorient their nation towards new ideas for a new time. For classically minded leaders such as Coolidge, conversely, the art of statesmanship entailed a devotion to virtue and eternal truth.

By the modern metric of greatness, Coolidge utterly failed. He neither pursued nor desired the transformation of the American republic.

Instead, Coolidge believed that “to preserve also is to build, and to save is to construct” (Coolidge 1924, 173). Statesmanship, for Coolidge, demanded not revolution, but reflection. At a sesquicentennial celebrating the Declaration of Independence, Coolidge made clear his understanding that the principles of the Constitution and the Declaration were, quite simply, “immortal truths,” due to their convergence with reason as well as Christian revelation (Coolidge 1926, 446-449). His job as president, therefore, did not involve “transfusing new meaning” into America’s first documents; it rested instead in protecting these “charters of freedom and justice” (Coolidge 1926, 442). Though not earning him accolades from historians fond of assertive executive power, Coolidge’s consistency on this point connects him with Plato’s notion of statesmanship, as when he agrees with Plato that education for leadership must recognize the “binding force of right, of justice, and of truth” (Coolidge 1924, 216). In section three, this theme will be further explored. It will be suggested that Coolidge’s political thought converged considerably with Plato’s political principles. Coolidge’s view of education and religion as means to instill eternal truth and virtue into a citizenry was basic to the president’s view of politics.

Coolidge’s statesmanship consisted not solely of his capacity for political knowledge, but also of his *demonstration* of this knowledge as a leader. The classical writers believe that political understanding divorced entirely from political action does little to better a *polis*. Aristotle evinced this belief when developing three political virtues: prudence, magnanimity, and patriotism. Prudence balances political idealism with political pragmatism, properly navigating between the real and the ideal. Magnanimity balances healthy ambition with humility, and the statesman is always vigilant about his or her country’s well-being. Patriotism involves legislating for the common good and properly communicating the nation’s guiding principles. Ultimately, the just statesman does this to develop better citizens, not simply to produce legislation. Section four will demonstrate that Coolidge practiced all three of Aristotle’s political virtues during his public leadership, making him a guide for American statesmanship in the modern era.

When Coolidge ran for president in the 1920s, Dwight Morrow, a long-time friend, held that Coolidge possessed unique qualities. Coolidge, Morrow said, “was a very unusual man and a strange combination of a transcendental philosopher and a practical politician” (Chernow 1991, 287). Morrow immerses the president in laudatory language befitting an old friend; yet his statement also attributes to Coolidge the

character traits of a classical statesman. The statesman, according to the classical point of view, does not preside exclusively to “get things done.” He does what he thinks is right. That is, he does not *merely* spur the economy or create jobs; he does what he does on the basis of knowledge of the proper goals of government, man, and citizenship. In possession of this knowledge, the statesman can engage in action exemplifying the classical virtues: prudence, magnanimity, and patriotism. Morrow’s statement regarding Coolidge evokes Plato’s definition of the statesman, as that peculiar “individual who combines kingship with wisdom” (Annas 1995, 58). Coolidge’s political career, in joining Plato’s ideal understanding with Aristotle’s sense of political practice, earns him the designation of a classical statesman.

I. The Classical Understanding of Statesmanship

Often observers call a leader a “statesman” if he or she is merely an above-average politician who holds office for a lengthy period. This definition does not match the classical understanding; statesmanship, as the classical authors understood it, is politics at its finest. The statesman embodies and ably pursues and encourages certain virtues within his nation. These virtues, according to Plato’s *Republic*, include prudence, temperance, courage, and justice (*Republic* 427b). Aristotle elaborated on Plato’s virtues by explaining their nature as the mean between excesses. For example, the virtue of courage is absent from a cowardly individual who “avoids and fears all things” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1104a). So too it is alien to excess in the opposite direction in the form of recklessness. For Aristotle virtues are “destroyed by excess and deficiency, but they are preserved by the mean” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1104a). The indispensability of virtue for the just society is a shared strand in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. As the aim of the best political order is human excellence in the form of virtue, the statesman is that ruler who best advances that aim. Despite their convergence on the primacy of virtue and education, Plato and Aristotle exhibit some important differences. While Plato provides abstract ideas and a general sense of justice and direction for politics, it is Aristotle who best articulates the art of political practice.

Plato on Political Knowledge

Plato famously argues that the best possible statesman is a physically trained man or woman of strong moral character who is also a profoundly educated philosopher-king who comprehends justice and

transcendent truth. In Books VI and VII of the *Republic*, Plato details the intellectual ascent of the philosopher using the allegory of the cave (*Republic* 514a-517a). The philosopher enters the Realm of the Forms, which contains the perfect good, the eternal standard with reference to which humans can grasp justice. Plato writes that the good “provides the truth to the things known and gives the power to the one who knows” (*Plato’s Republic* 508e). Without comprehending what is eternal, no statesman can attain and maintain political knowledge. Comprehension of the perfect forms inexorably leads to an awareness that humans are flawed and incapable of living up to the forms. Yet those who can comprehend this eternal standard, the philosopher-kings, are most suited to rule. They make decisions based upon transcendent good and not their own glory.

If statesmen seek to encourage virtue within their regime, and virtue depends upon knowledge of the good, it follows that they must promote a corresponding education within the city. For Plato, a virtuous soul is inexorably tied to education, a formation of character and mind that elevates the soul. Education, in this sense, does not simply involve the mastery of “facts.” A classical education pursues knowledge of how to live a better life. Moral character and knowledge are inextricably linked. No doubt, Plato would mock the early modern dictum of Francis Bacon that “knowledge is power” and the assumption that the purpose of knowledge is domination (Weaver 1948, 13). Knowledge and education are for Plato not primarily a means to manipulate nature and attain better material conditions; they concern the conditions necessary for a virtuous life. Education is so clearly at the forefront of Plato’s desired political community that Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in some respects Plato’s antithesis, once commented that the *Republic* is not, as its name suggests, a work of political philosophy at all; it is instead “the most beautiful treatise on education ever written” (Rousseau 1979, 40). Plato’s statesman possesses this kind of education and acts to promote it for those in the city who are capable of it.

For Plato, religion also holds an imperative role in a good political society, and statesmen must encourage it to protect their nation’s commitment to eternal truth. In Book 10 of his *Laws*, Plato argues that a political community cannot long survive if atheism is prevalent within its borders (*Laws* 885b). Those who explain the world as the outcome of mere chance and nature, Plato explains, inevitably undermine the divinely ordained morality necessary to sustain law and order (*Laws* 888c-d). Political laws are not enough by themselves, as they need the support of citizens who believe in an eternal moral order revealed through reli-

gion. The nature of Plato's religion is a source of scholarly controversy, with some holding that his eternal Form of the Good was a personal God (much as in Christianity), while others suggest that Plato did not assume that his Good was personal and sentient (Sproul 2000, 38). Be that as it may, Plato's religious views bear at least a superficial similarity to Christianity. This resemblance was noted by Friedrich Nietzsche, who attacked Christianity and Plato in the same breath when he mused that the Christian faith "was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine" (Nietzsche 1982, 450).

Aristotle on Political Practice

While Plato associated statesmanship with abstract forms, his most famous student, Aristotle, regarded it as a practical skill related to experience and prudential deliberation. To be sure, Aristotle agreed with Plato that the end of the best political community is virtue. Aristotle's political society is a partnership made for the sake of living well, and it is imperative that a good government pay "careful attention to political virtue and vice" (*Politics* 1280b). However, while Plato had argued that virtue depends primarily upon knowledge of the good, Aristotle insists that a virtuous statesman translates knowledge into action (Smith 2012, 7). For Aristotle, virtue depends as much on being capable of right political action as it does on theoretical knowledge. Statesmen are able to avoid the excess that can be fatal to efficacy.

No virtue is more important for the statesman, according to Aristotle, than the virtue of prudence. Prudence, Aristotle claims, "is a true characteristic that is bound up with action, accompanied by reason, and concerned with things good and bad for a human being" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1140b). Like Aristotle's other virtues, prudence is a mean between two excesses, which we might label "idealism" and "pragmatism," the latter lacking moral purpose. Adherents to idealism lose themselves in abstraction, abandoning a realistic understanding of political practice. Pragmatists, conversely, shirk higher standards and pursue only "what works." Prudence makes politics an art, not a science, because it is by nature an unrepeatable skill concerned with adapting to particulars. Prudence takes the universal good worth pursuing and actualizes it in the best manner given the circumstances. A statesman understands that there is no formula for sound politics; it is not mathematics. Statesmanship deals with the needs of diverse citizens in unique circumstances. It navigates the often imprecise and unpredictable streams of the political society, and it does so for the sake of virtue and the common good. Ar-

istotelian prudence, thus, aims high but takes into account the considerable limitations of human nature and political society.

A second quality of statesmanship identified by Aristotle is magnanimity. Magnanimity, as the philosopher describes it, is the “crowning ornament of the virtues, for it makes them greater and does not arise without them” (*Ethics* 1124a1-4). The magnanimous statesman, Aristotle adds, corresponds to a “gentleman” (*Ethics* 1124a1-4). His passion is held in check by reason and education. Magnanimous statesmen seek glory, but they do not do so for the *sake* of glory itself but for the sake of human excellence. Though magnanimous statesmen may wrestle with impassioned public opinion, they ultimately act for the common good instead of being politically expedient. The magnanimous statesman holds office, but works to be *worthy* of that office. The honor and glory that he pursues in the political sphere is compatible with following moral principles, especially humility (Holloway 1999, 592). The honors and offices that the magnanimous statesman attains are not the end; they are the means to a virtuous end.

Though Aristotle does not include patriotism within his canon of cardinal virtues, his writings certainly include it as an important component of statesmanship and political action. “Man,” Aristotle famously taught, “is by nature a political animal” (*Politics* 1253a). If this be the case, then no individual can exist as an isolated unit set apart from the rest of his country. Individuals find fulfillment within a political society, as it represents their interests and belongs to them in an intimate way. As political life is natural, so too is citizenship and patriotism natural. For Aristotle, a good citizen can be “defined by no other thing so much as by partaking in decisions and offices” (*Politics* 1275a). Man’s political nature is linked to patriotism through the citizens’ adherence to the common good. Devotion to what is best for the entire country, instead of what is best for one’s personal interest, invokes patriotism while fulfilling Aristotle’s criteria for good statesmanship. Classical statesmen are patriots as their policies are directed to the welfare of their entire country.

II. The Modern Challenge to Statesmanship

The classical statesman is fundamentally at odds with most of modernity’s political assumptions. Modern political philosophy has sought to undermine the adherence to eternal, transcendent standards for politics. Political society, according to a powerful strain of modern thought, needs to be concerned with what the world *is*, not what it *ought* to be. As Francis Bacon, a prophet of modernity, once put it, the classical

philosophers wasted time devising “imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths” (Berns 1987, 396). A modern “statesman” protects only his subject’s life and liberty, and does not intervene on questions of virtue. Modern thinkers who have posited an ought for politics, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, have done so in ways that are radically divergent from classical thought with its emphasis on the need for self-control and moral character as the basis for understanding. The possibility of statesmanship in the classical sense has been thrown into question by an array of modern intellectual forces, ranging from subjectivism and historical relativism to Marxism. Their attacks on the classical understanding of statesmanship did not go unnoticed by America’s thirtieth president, Calvin Coolidge, who, in the face of their rise, formulated a formidable defense of classical statesmanship, including its assumption that political action ought to be guided by the enduring higher truths discerned by philosophy.

Just as an exaggerated emphasis on the importance of historical circumstance undermines statesmanship by quelling the potential of leaders to rise above their surroundings, so does Marxism imprison leaders within the confines of their own class interest, while attributing to Marxist theoreticians themselves an ability to transcend class origins. Under this kind of outlook, statecraft ceases to be soulcraft and instead becomes, as the socialist Harold Lasswell once posited, a matter of “deciding who gets what, when and how” (Lasswell 1936, iii). While the classical writers held that the best political society cares for the good of all, Marxism holds that only the proletariat has an interest worth advancing. The Marxist view of statesmanship is manifest in the words of Erich Fromm, who mused that “the successful revolutionary is a statesman, the unsuccessful one a criminal” (Fromm 1994, 258). In the absence of transcendent standards, statesmanship and criminality are fundamentally the same.

Calvin Coolidge, who had no patience for those who denigrated enduring standards of right, has been disparaged by modernists who rejected classical statesmanship. Donald R. McCoy has lamented that Coolidge was a “man of his time—but not *for* his time” (McCoy 1967, 417). McCoy suggested that Coolidge’s belief in civic sacrifice and virtue were relics of the nineteenth century, and had no place in a more “modern” civilization. Similarly, the Marxist historian Howard Zinn viewed Coolidge as a “pigmy” president who was disinterested in the “economic problems” of all but the richest Americans (Zinn 1958, 80, 111). Zinn gleefully noted Coolidge’s statement that “the business of America

is business”—conveniently disregarding the president’s subsequent argument against excessive materialism—to paint a picture of a president hopelessly wedded to greed and inconsiderate of the lower class (Zinn 1993, 99-115). Both Zinn and McCoy viewed the president as constrained by his historical or economic context and rejected the notion that in his political leadership Coolidge was rightly guided by a commitment to enduring higher standards of political thought and practice.. Coolidge, contra Zinn and McCoy, provides a lesson in statesmanship not just for his time or class, but for all time and all citizens.

III. Calvin Coolidge and Political Knowledge

During the 1920s, urban legends emerged about America’s famously taciturn president, Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge, it was alleged, “could be silent in five languages,” and on those rare occasions that he opened his mouth, “moths flew out” (Lathem 1960, 6). These stories were often told in jest and with endearment, but they contributed to the mythical image of Coolidge as “Silent Cal.” However legendary Coolidge’s silent demeanor became during the Roaring Twenties, it is, in fact, a misleading assessment of America’s thirtieth president. Coolidge actually communicated his ideas, specifically his belief in the importance of classical political philosophy, throughout his career as a public servant. Coolidge published three volumes of political writings, entitled *Have Faith in Massachusetts*, *The Price of Freedom*, and *Foundations of the Republic*. All three demonstrate Coolidge’s profound respect for the tenets of classical statesmanship and his disdain for modern political assumptions to the contrary. Far from being the “Silent Cal” of popular legend, Calvin Coolidge loudly and frequently articulated the principles that he believed must guide America—principles remarkably similar to those of the classical philosophers. “If a society lacks learning and virtue,” Coolidge once admonished, “it perishes” (Coolidge 1919, 183). Like Plato and Aristotle, Coolidge believed that his country’s end must be virtue and that, to secure this end, political leaders are obliged to support religion and education.

Coolidge on Virtue and Truth

Coolidge’s career in public service epitomized the classical idea that statecraft is soulcraft. Indeed, in Plato’s words, politics must be understood as nothing less than the “art whose business it is to care for souls” (*Laws* 650b). No one, according to the classics, could be deemed a states-

man who ignored the virtue and character of his citizenry. No president embraced this mantra more heartily than Coolidge, who constantly remarked that America's success depended upon the heart of its people. A contemporary of Coolidge's once observed that, for the president, "public life is a sacred ceremony and the statesman is priest" (Johnson 2013, 113). Coolidge believed that the public servant exists to minister not only to his country's material prosperity, but to its virtue. Citizens, he believed, only lie to themselves if they believe that their material wealth can be sustained without virtue. Coolidge held that "there is no substitute for virtue," which he identifies as service to the common good stemming from comprehension of truth (Coolidge 1924, 190). A good political society for Coolidge, therefore, was not so much a matter of the citizens' proclaiming and pursuing what they want as their volunteering for what they could do for the good of the whole. "The assertion of human rights," the president admonished, "is naught but a call to human sacrifice" (Coolidge 1919, 36). As a classicist by intellectual background, Coolidge concerned himself foremost with civic duties and obligations, not with the modern notion of rights conceived as separate from virtue.

For Coolidge, as for Plato, man's capacity for virtue proceeded entirely from his capacity to rise above the desires and to achieve knowledge of man's ultimate end. In a manner reminiscent of the classics, the president devoted himself to the pursuit of truths which he believed to be enduring. "If men do not follow the truth," he exhorted, "they cannot live" (Coolidge 1929, 51). As a student at Amherst College, Coolidge revered a professor named Charles Garman, a Platonic philosopher who instilled in Coolidge the belief that "man is endowed with reason, that the human mind has the power to weigh evidence, to distinguish between right and wrong and to know the truth" (Coolidge 1929, 65). In Coolidge's thought, eternal truth is foundational for any human life, and no individual or society could possibly live well without pursuing it. Much like his classical forebears, Coolidge believed that the unexamined life is not worth living. As he once exclaimed, "for a man not to recognize the truth . . . is for him to be at war with his own nature, to commit suicide" (Coolidge 1929, 67). The search for truth, Coolidge believed, is a necessary condition of our humanity. Unlike many modern thinkers, for whom truth disappears in historical changeability or subjectivism, Coolidge held that the truth about humanity and a higher good is embedded in the laws of nature. That truth cannot be altered, and it can be discovered by men of truly inquisitive dispositions.

Coolidge's steadfast commitment to eternal truth and virtue led him

to support the principles fought for in the American Revolution and manifested in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These documents are often identified with a fundamentally modern brand of Lockean political thought, but Coolidge saw them as infused with classical notions of truth and virtue. "About the Declaration there is a finality that is exceedingly restful," Coolidge eloquently stated (Coolidge 1926, 451). This document, "the most important civil document in the world," did not, contrary to popular belief, proclaim any new theories (Coolidge 1926, 446). It articulated eternal truths of human equality, man's endowment with unalienable rights, and his capacity to govern himself. These principles, as old as time itself, could not be replaced with something more "modern" as Coolidge's progressive opponents proposed. He reconciled political equality, in appearance a distinctly modern idea, with classical political thought by connecting it to the human longing for truth. Equality, for Coolidge, took its meaning from all men's "divine power to know the truth" (Coolidge 1924, 233). The classical writers attributed a capacity to know the truth only to an elite few, but Coolidge believed that all hearts long for truth. He held that a system of limited government allowed people to effectively pursue it.

Coolidge on Education and Religion

While Coolidge understood that the end of the best political society must always be virtue and truth, he harbored no lofty delusions that human nature could be perfected by the force of government. In his 1924 Inaugural Address, the duly elected president maintained that it is vital to realize that ". . . human nature is about the most constant thing in the universe and that the essentials of human relationship do not change" (Coolidge 1926, 194). For this reason, Coolidge cautioned, "We must frequently take our bearings from these fixed stars of our political firmament if we expect to hold a true course" (Coolidge 1926, 194). Coolidge argued that, although human nature has certain permanent traits, individuals must endeavor to better their characters and comprehension of higher values. Coolidge believed with the Framers that the federal government's role was limited but that it included helping to create circumstances that make this individual striving possible. "Man everywhere," Coolidge once observed, "has an unconquerable desire to be the master of his own destiny" (Coolidge 1926, 443). Individuals have a capacity for understanding, but they also long to be free so as to be able to realize their higher purpose. Coolidge believed that his role as a statesman en-

tailed the channeling of this passion into the pursuit of what is virtuous.

Coolidge believed that a virtuous citizenry could only come to fruition by adhering to principles communicated through education and religion. As human nature was irreparably damaged, Coolidge had little faith in the ability of legal institutions morally to improve society. Coolidge argued that “there is no way by which we can substitute the authority of law for the virtue of man” (Coolidge 1926, 153). Real moral and other qualitative reform, he believed, must come from “the heart of the people” or else it would not come at all (Coolidge 1926, 143). The human heart could be spurred through education to know the truth about life and to strive for something higher because education can minister to the souls of men. Though Plato assumed that only a small minority would be capable of this kind of education, there are similarities between Plato and Coolidge in that they believed that health in a society could only come from healthy souls. In general, Coolidge reflected the strongly classical orientation in education that was taken for granted among the American Framers, whose historical, political, philosophical, and cultural frame of reference was heavily weighted in the direction of Greece and Rome.

Clearly disavowing modern Baconian educational philosophy, Coolidge proposed that a true education must give “not only power, but direction” (Coolidge 1919, 183). Education does not exist simply to teach citizens “*what* to think”; it must teach citizens “*how* to think” (Coolidge 1919, 155). Coolidge explained that science and math do not provide citizens with anything for which to lay down their lives. The men who laid down their lives for America during the Great War, he observed, had not done so for “any rule of mathematics or any principle of physics or chemistry” (Coolidge 1919, 184). Indeed, “the laws of the natural world would be unaffected by their defeat or victory” (Coolidge 1919, 184). In truth, these soldiers “were defending their ideals, and those ideals came from the classics” (Coolidge 1919, 184). Education and its communication of ideals, Coolidge admonished, are the chief defense of civilization. It is of course possible to ask to what extent the “ideals” for which Americans were supposedly fighting in the Great War actually aligned with the thought of Plato or Aristotle.

While education is an indispensable support for civilization, Coolidge gave equal weight to religion. Knowledge of the classics comes from education; yet Coolidge noted that “the classic of all classics is the Bible” (Coolidge 1919, 185). He concluded that the foundation of American government actually rested on religion, as “it is from that source that we

derive our reverence for truth and justice, for equality and liberty, and for the rights of mankind” (Coolidge 1926, 149). Coolidge’s words on the irreligious resembled Plato’s argument in Book X of the *Laws*. For Plato, impiety produces poor humans and neglectful citizens (*Laws* 888c-d). Coolidge agreed and even doubted the capacity of the impious to be great men. In Coolidge’s view, atheists who lack belief that their life is eternally meaningful will fail to contribute to civil society, as “doubters do not achieve” (Coolidge 1926, 68). For Coolidge, religion and education were not mere tools for social engineering; they are first and foremost sources of transcendent ideals. While we cannot assume that for Plato and Coolidge religion and impiety mean the same, Coolidge’s almost otherworldly devotion to virtue and eternal truth seems to endow him with the chief distinction of Plato’s statesman.

Coolidge’s View of Political Action

For Plato and Coolidge, a society lacking in the sources of virtue—education and religion—would not be a society for very long. However, as Plato and, especially, Aristotle recognized, statesmanship requires more than theoretical knowledge. Statesmen apply philosophical truths to political action in such a way that, although they may not be perfectly realized, they are actualized as much as possible. Indeed, Coolidge understood better than most leaders the need for action to keep a society true to its first principles. The greatness of George Washington, Coolidge claimed, rested in his capacity to translate the high ideals of the Declaration into monumental actions on the battlefields and in the Constitutional Convention (Coolidge 1924, 144). It was not the Declaration that resisted tyranny—however true and universal its principles were. It was the army of virtuous individuals devoted to eternal truths (Coolidge 1924, 144). Coolidge argued that we must supplement knowledge with political action, and he demonstrated this in his practice of prudence, magnanimity, and patriotism as a leader.

Coolidge’s Prudence

Soon after the death of her husband, Grace Coolidge remarked of Calvin Coolidge that “moderation in all things governed his life” (Lathem 1960, 67). This observation is just one of many which recognized Coolidge’s devotion to this central Aristotelian virtue. Prudence is not to be confused with mere expediency or other unprincipled action; prudence is the art that allows the statesman to accomplish things of

high worth while working within the practical constraints of his office and given political situations. Coolidge understood with Aristotle that the statesman does not have the capacity to remake the world according to utopian preconceptions. Yet that limitation is no excuse for the statesman not to try to make the best of the circumstances. Among presidential scholars Coolidge has the reputation of “doing nothing,” but this accusation is unjust and merely demonstrates a prejudice among these historians for bold and especially “progressive” action. An examination of Coolidge’s political career reveals that, owing to a preference for what Arthur Schlesinger Jr. called the “imperial presidency,” Coolidge’s devotion to the classical virtue of prudence—virtuous action circumscribed by a proper sense of limits—has erroneously been dismissed as inaction (Schlesinger 1974, ix). As commentators have come to want and to expect the world from their political leaders, cautious presidents respectful of constitutional and other limitations and devoid of radical inclinations—presidents like Coolidge—are viewed as uninspiring and impotent despite their steady leadership.

As president, Coolidge vigorously worked to prevent profligate spending, having a deep concern for proper administration. Should the federal government acquire too many responsibilities, the president warned, its ability to enforce existing laws would wane (Coolidge 1924, 180). Throughout his presidency, Coolidge made considerable use of his veto pen and executive power to ease burdens on the taxpayer and to stymie pork spending. He had the same propensity during the rest of his political career. Upon vetoing a piece of special-interest legislation as governor of Massachusetts, he declared that “representative government ceases when outside influence of any kind is substituted for the judgment of the representative” (Coolidge 1924, 406). Coolidge’s aggressive stand against special interest legislation did not cease when he ascended to the office of the presidency. During an election year, Coolidge bravely vetoed the McNary-Haugen Farm Bill, which would have awarded massive federal subsidies to the agricultural sector (Sobel 1998, 327). Though Coolidge’s background in small business and farming gave him sympathy for the plight of the common citizen, his principles would not allow him to devote federal funding to a sectional interest. The president’s main rule for action, a contemporary observer once noted, was “the public good” (Johnson 2013, 113). Though he found many of these particular interests legitimate, he did not believe that they justified violating the principles of constitutional, limited government upon which America was founded.

A statesman in the classical tradition has a high regard for the rule of law and the maintenance of civil order. Aristotle argued that a good regime possesses a stable character and resists “reckless dissolution of the laws” (*Politics* 1269a). Coolidge agreed, noting that great statesmanship involves an ability to “unify political action under just and stable institutions of government” (Coolidge 1924, 101). A nation characterized by frequent disregard for the law, Aristotle feared, would be susceptible to tyranny or anarchy. Aristotle’s fears were shared by Coolidge, whose national political career began with a stirring defense of the rule of law. During the Boston Police Strike, order was greatly endangered when the police officers of Massachusetts went on strike and demanded a pay raise (Sobel 1998, 142). Boston’s police officers were willing to endanger the public by refusing to perform their duty to uphold the reign of law. These actions were deemed reprehensible by the public at large, with no less of a progressive than the sitting president, Woodrow Wilson, declaring that the officers’ actions constituted a “crime against civilization” (Sobel 1998, 144). Coolidge decisively put down the strike, arguing that “there is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time” (Sobel 1998, 144). Coolidge was lauded by all who cherished law and order, and this event would later propel him to the Republican nomination for vice president at the party’s national convention in 1920.

Coolidge’s Magnanimous Humility

In his 2013 work *Why Coolidge Matters* the conservative historian Charles C. Johnson (2013) maintained that, while Calvin Coolidge was a remarkable and underappreciated leader, he “does not fit the standard image of the great man that we owe to Aristotle” (232). Coolidge’s soul, Johnson holds, was far too small to award him the distinction of magnanimity. Johnson’s declaration is not particularly surprising. After all, Coolidge was widely admired for his humility and small-town character. Aristotle, in apparent contrast, argued that the magnanimous statesman knows that he is great and endeavors to make himself worthy of his great honors (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1124a1-4). Coolidge, conversely, rather clearly denied that he was a “great man.” In his *Autobiography*, the retired leader modestly suggested that “it is a great advantage to a President, and a major source of safety to the country, for him to know that he is not a great man” (Coolidge 1929, 173). Coolidge added that, “when a man begins to feel that he is the only one who can lead in this republic, he is guilty of treason to the spirit of our institutions” (Coolidge 1929,

173). Coolidge despised conceit in all its forms and did not want political ambitions to consume him. Is Coolidge's attitude, then, reconcilable with Aristotle's notion of the magnanimous statesman? A closer examination of the subject reveals that humility is not only compatible with magnanimity; it makes it possible.

Though Coolidge humbly and adamantly denied that he was any greater than most other men, this very denial may be viewed as a sign of greatness. "Whoever would be great among you," Jesus Christ said to his disciples, "must be your servant" (Matt. 20:26 English Standard Version). Christ's words, it may be objected, could be interpreted as opposing Aristotle's view of magnanimity. However, various medieval scholastics, such as Thomas Aquinas, did not believe that the two contradicted each other (Holloway 2008, 173). For Aristotle, magnanimity is "the virtue that disposes us to do good to others on a large scale" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1123a30–1125b). Christian scholastics, therefore, concluded that magnanimity is only possible if connected to humility. As the excessive love of glory easily consumes ambitious men, humility is necessary to hold it in check. Coolidge evinced this Christian understanding of magnanimity when he discerned that the power of humble men of truth who do what is righteous "rises to a height which cannot be measured" (Coolidge 1924, 241). Coolidge viewed arrogance and vainglory as a threat to the republic, a view that should not be confused with Aristotle's idea of "smallness of soul." In their warnings against the arrogance of hubris, Aristotle and other Greeks foreshadowed the Christian condemnation of pride. The proper view of self of the good man avoided both the extreme of exaggerated self-regard and the extreme of self-denigration.

Coolidge did not exhibit the smallness of soul that is incompatible with the classical idea of statesmanship. It is not often remembered that Coolidge was a politician of healthy ambition who held a large number of political offices during his lifetime. Out of the nineteen elections in which Coolidge ran for office, he lost only two (Sobel 1998, 10). Late in Coolidge's career, a persistent woman asked Coolidge what his hobby was, and Coolidge humorously answered that it was "holding office" (Fuess 1940, 71). There was more truth to this claim than the woman likely realized. Coolidge was ambitious and endeavored to be famous, but he always treated public service as just that: a *service*. After a presidency characterized by peace and prosperity, Coolidge was at the peak of his popularity. Another term would have been his for the taking, but he did not choose to run, saying that "the Presidential office is of such a nature that it is difficult to conceive how one man can successfully serve

the country for a term of more than eight years" (Coolidge 1929, 240). Coolidge, who served two years of the late president Harding's term, would have had a ten-year presidency had he run for and won an additional term. Ever aware of the dignity of the presidency, Coolidge feared that a ten-year presidency would look as if the president was selfishly "grasping for office" (Coolidge 1929, 241). In letting his political ambition be tempered with humility, the president demonstrated that he was a magnanimous statesman.

Coolidge's Classical Patriotism

Calvin Coolidge was the only president in American history who was born on the Fourth of July (Postell 2013, 1). This distinction seems appropriate, as Coolidge was perhaps the last president who fully exemplified the ideals of the Founding Fathers (Johnson 2001, 219). Coolidge strove to maintain the constitutional framework that had been bequeathed to Americans by much sacrifice and toil. In an inaugural address immersed in patriotism, the president declared that, "because of what America is and what America has done, a firmer courage, a higher hope, inspires the heart of all humanity" (Coolidge 1926, 193). "These results," he exhorted, "have been secured by a constant and enlightened effort marked by many sacrifices and extending over many generations" (Coolidge 1926, 193). Coolidge possessed no idealistic delusion that America's wellbeing would last forever. For him, the constitutional order depended upon a virtuous citizenry hostile to materialism. As president, Coolidge had little affinity for the "bully pulpit" as a tool to alter the destiny of America. He preferred to recommit America to eternal principles by delivering consequential addresses across the nation and by pioneering the use of the radio to communicate these principles to a wide audience (Sobel 1998, 302).

Coolidge's patriotism stemmed from his embrace of the Aristotelian notion that man is by nature a political animal. The word "political" here has the wide Greek meaning of "pertaining to life in the *polis*," the ancient city state. The idea is not that man is naturally a "politicking" creature but that he needs society to become fully human and that the ultimate purpose of society, including institutions of government, is to foster virtue and the common good. In his convention speech accepting the Republican nomination for president, he explained that political parties are positive goods due to man's nature. Political parties endure, he said, due to the great truth that a true citizen "cannot exist as a segregated, unattached fragment of selfishness, but must live as a constituent part of

the whole society" (Whiting 1924, 380). Echoing Aristotle, the president argued that a citizen can only "secure his own welfare" as he "secures the welfare of his fellow men" (Whiting 1924, 380). It was his Aristotelian devotion to the naturalness of political-social life with its proliferation of subdivisions and groups that led Coolidge to support limited government, decentralization, and federalism. Coolidge was no anarcho-capitalist but believed that schemes for centralization would hamper man's impulse towards self-government in families and local communities. Political centralization would be unjust and dangerous. Coolidge's defense of American federalism stemmed from his Aristotelian belief in the civic responsibility of all Americans. He warned that "when the local government evades its responsibilities," what will follow is a "disregard of law and laxity of living" (Coolidge 1926, 229). Coolidge's defense of limited government during his presidency was based not upon Lockean social contract theory, but on an Aristotelian understanding of man's natural desire to live in community and be a citizen.

Coolidge opposed perversions of patriotism that did not further the common good. "Patriotism," he held, "does not mean a regard for some special section or an attachment for some special interest" (Coolidge 1924, 348). Instead, Coolidge cautioned that "it means a love of the whole country" (Coolidge 1924, 348). Though he supported the general principle of America First, he admonished that the citizens cannot "make America First" if they cultivate "national bigotry, arrogance, or selfishness" (Coolidge 1926, 299-300). Coolidge did not simply proclaim high-minded principles. He acted on his understanding of the common good. In his first State of the Union Address, Coolidge maintained that the rights of African-Americans were "just as sacred as those of any other citizen" under the Constitution and argued that it was a "public and a private duty to protect those rights" (McCoy 1967, 328-29). He lobbied extensively for anti-lynching laws throughout his time in office, despite their assured defeat at the hands of a Congress inclined toward racism (McCoy 1967, 328-29). Additionally, Coolidge was a supporter of women's suffrage from the time the movement began, and he spearheaded bills to ensure the safety of women and children (National Notary Association 2010, 52). His devotion to the common good as against sectional interests was rewarded when, in 1924, he won the African-American vote and the women's vote (and the presidential election) in a landslide (Booker 2012, para. 6).

Coolidge's brand of patriotism was clearly evident in his foreign policy. He opposed both ardent isolationism and ardent international-

ism. He was sharply opposed to war due to his view on the sanctity of human life (VanTil 2015, 157). The president conducted a foreign policy based upon the notion that, though America should interact with and have dialogue with other nations, it must not impose its will upon sovereign states—militarily or otherwise. Though Coolidge believed that America might have a role as an international leader, he held that the country must not abdicate its sovereignty or abandon its citizens for the sake of internationalist schemes. With these concerns in mind, Coolidge favored American membership in the World Court while opposing the League of Nations (Kalb 2006, 99). The former, he believed, could prudently promote peace and justice whereas the latter abdicated too much of America’s national sovereignty. Observers who today consider backlash against excessive globalization to be “populist” might wonder whether Coolidge’s patriotic aversion to internationalistic overreach was justified.

Conclusion

Plato lamented that political communities fear philosophy and wisdom and instead seek rulers who promise them wealth and comfort (*Republic* 473a-473e). Plato’s low expectations, amounting even to cynicism, may not have been entirely misplaced, but they did not quite describe America in the 1920s. This era’s president, Calvin Coolidge, had an understanding of the nature of politics that was profound for a practical politician. His vigilant leadership kept politics from deteriorating into some kind of pagan materialism. Coolidge constantly reminded Americans that what was truly worth pursuing and preserving were things unseen, eternal values communicated through education and religion. These were vital to human virtue. His success, however, was not due solely to his capacity for political understanding. He was also a man of practical ability who acted to improve the economy, who magnanimously understood the need for humility in politics, and who patriotically devoted himself to the common good. It was Coolidge’s blending of knowledge and prudent action that ultimately explained his being able to preside as an arbiter of limited government and federalism and made him oppose all plans for centralization.

The art of politics, per Plato’s *Laws*, is “the art whose business it is to care for souls” (*Laws* 650b). There is of course a great deal of difference between Plato and Coolidge as to what they thought could be expected of a popular government. Plato was an idealist and an elitist with a deep prejudice against popular self-government, and he thought that

justice could be achieved only by radically remaking society. He had none of Coolidge's faith in the common man and little of Coolidge's constitutional temperament. Yet Coolidge shared with him a concern with virtue as the goal of politics. In his constant drive to improve not simply the material lot of Americans but also their spiritual welfare, Calvin Coolidge demonstrated, though in circumstances of republican constitutionalism and a system of popular consent, a mastery of the "art of politics." Coolidge regarded great statesmanship as mandating more than protection of life and property. Truly great statesmen, Coolidge once explained, are "granted the power to call forth the best there is in those who come under their influence" (Coolidge 1924, 17). In the work to reduce in Americans the distance between being a citizen and being a moral human being, Coolidge stood in the classical tradition, leaning in his political practice more in the Aristotelian than in the Platonic direction.

To Coolidge, remembrance of great men was necessary to spur public greatness, a belief so important that in 1924 he maintained that, "when the reverence of this nation for its great men dies, the glory of the nation will die with it" (Coolidge 1924, 101). For citizens to endeavor to greatness, they need carefully to consider the great men who preceded them. People who look up to and try to be like admirable men can rise with them. An inclination to imitate such men is a sign of health. Coolidge remarked: "Reverence is the measure not of others but of ourselves" (Coolidge 1919, 109).

It has been the purpose here to show that Calvin Coolidge himself deserves accolades and commemoration. Coolidge's way of embodying the classical notion of statesmanship makes him a worthy guide for those who aspire to political leadership in our day.

In a 2010 address at Hillsdale College, then-Congressman Mike Pence maintained that "there is no finer, more moving, or more profound understanding of the nature of the presidency and the command of humility placed upon it than that expressed by President Coolidge" (Pence 2010, 3). Pence's high opinion of Coolidge as a leader worthy of emulation is by no means restricted to leaders of the Republican party. A former presidential candidate of the Democratic party, John F. Kerry, expressed a similar esteem for Coolidge when he remarked that "America needs a new Coolidge to restore our faith in the office of the Presidency and in politics more generally" (National Notary Association 2010, 45). Pence and Kerry agreed that the country needs a restoration of classical statesmanship to counteract cynicism regarding the nature of the Ameri-

can republic. In an age increasingly disconnected from questions of virtue and character and the common good, having aspiring political leaders emulate principles of classical statesmanship would be an effective way to rekindle faith in the American system of government. Americans can find no better twentieth-century model for political leadership than Calvin Coolidge. His way of combining theory and action offers a prime example of how the spirit of classical statesmanship can elevate modern historical circumstances that are in important respects very different from those of ancient Greece or Rome. Coolidge offers a strong antidote for the disillusionment and cynicism that have become ubiquitous in our increasingly fragmented and corrupt government and society.

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