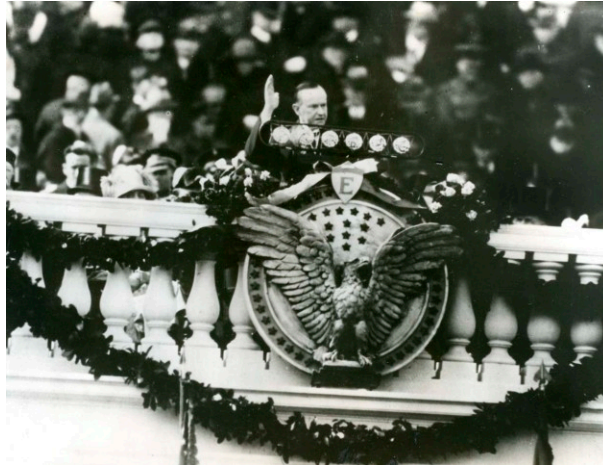


Inauguration of Calvin Coolidge (March 4, 1925)

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Essay by Amity Shlaes and Rushad Thomas (guest post)*



Calvin Coolidge at his inauguration

Silent Cal as Radio Star

President Franklin Roosevelt is known in this country as our first radio president. While Roosevelt's Fireside Chats set a new standard, the 32nd President actually had a few predecessors--most notably the 30th president, Calvin Coolidge, who also reached Americans through radio. It's ironic but true: the presidential pioneer in the radio field was the chief executive known as Silent Cal.

Calvin Coolidge came to Washington as vice president in 1921, when politicians didn't often take to the airwaves. Warren Harding, the President elected the year before, was known to crowds either from public speeches or his much-reprinted picture. But by 1923, the year the untimely death of President Warren Harding made Coolidge president, hundreds of radio stations were establishing themselves. Radio's early adopters were leading a craze for the home radio set. The new president was initially reluctant to test new media. Coolidge's voice was weak; his entire adult life he suffered from colds and bronchitis. There were few microphones in those days, so it was a strain for Coolidge to fill a room. Walking through the White House with the journalist French Strother, Coolidge noted a new device in the house. "That's our radio set," he told Strother, "I don't like radio." Yet, after hearing the counsel of advisors, like advertising guru Bruce Barton, Coolidge eventually came to see the benefit of using radio to spread his ideas.

The year 1924 brought the first great test of Coolidge's radio skills, the presidential election. The challenge to Coolidge was the same as the challenge posed by Facebook and Twitter for candidates today: to prove himself modern. The stakes were in any case high: "Thousands of people are going to vote for or against Mr. Coolidge on account of his voice," "The New Republic" told the country.

It didn't appear to help matters that Coolidge was running against several men all known to be formidable orators: Robert La Follette and John Davis. La Follette's voice boomed and trembled with emotion. Davis was such a good speaker that over a lifetime he would appear dozens of times before the Supreme Court. Davis, wrote Charles Michelson of the "New York World," "has a voice which to the direct auditor has that bell like quality of resonance that doubles the quality of his delightful rhetoric."

But politicians quickly learned that what succeeded in the lecture halls didn't necessarily work on air. Over the radio, La Follette's emotion came off as overwrought. Radio even disadvantaged Davis, whose voice the radio, Michelson wrote, "muffles and fogs to some extent." In the case of Coolidge, the shift was in the reverse direction. "There is a wire edge to his voice," commented Michelson, adding that "the twangs and shrills disappear somewhere along the aerial, and he sounds through the ether with exact clearness as well as softness." Concluded the critic: "The radio was perfected just in time for Coolidge."

Nor was Michelson alone in rating Coolidge a radio president. Newspaper editor William Allen White said of Coolidge, "over the radio, he went straight to the popular heart." Bruce Barton, the public relations expert, remarked that radio "enables the president to sit by every fireside and talk in terms of that home's interest and prosperity." Coolidge himself also noted that radio advantaged him. "I am very fortunate I came in with the radio," he told Senator James Watson when they were cruising on the Presidential yacht, the Mayflower. Not least among the advantages: travel for tiresome stump speeches was less necessary when you could reach housewives right in their living rooms.

Another test came on March 4, 1925, Coolidge's inauguration day. The occasion gave the American people their first opportunity to tune in to a Presidential inauguration in real time. Newsreel cameras captured footage of Calvin and Grace, accompanied by Vice President-elect Charles G. Dawes, riding in an open car to the Capitol Building, Grace clad in a gray dress, coat and a large hat, "a shade deeper and warmer than pearl," according to the print media of the day.

With the assistance of AT&T, an estimated 22,800,000 Americans also heard a broadcast. The listening crowd included most school children of the time who were listening in recently- and specially-built school auditoriums outfitted with electronic equipment specifically for hearing the Coolidge address. The broadcast carried the entire ceremony, including the oath-taking, the inaugural address, and related proceedings. The broadcast also allowed the American people to participate in a truly historic ceremony, given that Coolidge became the first President to be sworn in by a predecessor when Chief Justice William Howard Taft administered the oath to him that day.

As usual, this effort in a new medium did not go off without a glitch. Technical difficulties with Coolidge's microphone manifested any time Coolidge took a natural pause for breath. As "The New York Times" reported, "while he was going it was all right, but whenever he paused for breath it sounded as if somebody over at one side was mocking him." Nonetheless, the radio amplified not only the sound but also the content of Coolidge's 4,000-word address, content emphasizing savings: "I favor the policy of economy, not because I wish to save money, but because I wish to save people. The men and women of this country who toil are the ones who

bear the cost of the Government. Every dollar that we carelessly waste means that their life will be so much the more meager. Every dollar that we prudently save means that their life will be so much the more abundant. Economy is idealism in its most practical form.” Through the radio, Coolidge found support to deliver on his second-term political promises, such as tax cuts.

The scenes of that March day so many decades ago were long forgotten by most. So was the fact that Coolidge, during his 67 months in office, would deliver more than 40 radio addresses. We are fortunate that some have been recorded and preserved—including this, his 1925 inaugural address. Now more Americans will know that Presidents and politicians who spoke after Coolidge were speaking in a tradition set by Silent Cal.

Amity Shlaes, chairman of the board of the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation, is author of the “New York Times” bestseller “Coolidge.” Rushad Thomas is program associate at the Coolidge Foundation. Mr. Thomas’s audio version of Coolidge’s autobiography can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLCnKVD3HLQZYBjvTDE3I4KJ2-a_w76kBZ

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.