**A biographer speaks up for Calvin Coolidge**

**by** [**Thomas Mallon**](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/thomas_mallon/search?contributorName=thomas%20mallon) ***New Yorker*, March 11, 2013**



Coolidge (photographed around 1924) is heralded by Amity Shlaes as “a rare kind of hero: a minimalist president, an economic general of budgeting and tax cuts.”

When attending a concert in the Library of Congress’s Coolidge Auditorium, visitors to Washington and even natives of the city often surmise that they are sitting inside a monument to the nation’s thirtieth President. The auditorium is actually named for its donor, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a patron of chamber music who put up the money for it while Calvin Coolidge, no relation, was in the White House. The capital contains no significant memorial to Coolidge, who is also the last President not to have a government-run Presidential library, one of those ever larger pyramids now speckling a land supposedly without pharaohs. A portrait of the thirtieth President was kept in the Cabinet Room by the fortieth, Ronald Reagan, but, since 1989, the stern-faced, ginger-haired likeness of Coolidge has commanded no special reverence within the house he inhabited from 1923 to 1929.

Coolidge is, in American memory, a cluster of anecdotes, a minor legend embraced largely for its irony: the taciturn figure at odds with the jazzed-up, boozing, and crazily acquisitive decade over which he came to preside; a tortoise reigning over hares, cutting budgets while the citizenry bought their way, on margin, toward doom. Only a few years after the Great War turned the United States into a world power, he set out to shrink the size and reach of its government, to hark back instead of race forward. He was not at ease among automobiles—a Ford Runabout once accidentally struck him on Main Street in Northampton, Massachusetts—and, during the festive frenzy that followed Lindbergh’s return from Paris, he asked that the flier change from a white suit to a dark one before he would escort him to church. William Allen White, the Kansas newspaperman, nicely captured the mismatch between President and nation in the title of his Coolidge biography, “A Puritan in Babylon” (1938). As White saw it, America felt moved to “erect this pallid shrunken image of its lost ideals and bow down before it in subconscious repentance for its iniquities.”

Sinclair Lewis, the literary Nobel laureate of Coolidge’s era, detested both the idol and its worshippers. During the President’s last full year in office, he published “The Man Who Knew Coolidge,” less a novel than a grindingly obvious series of monologues by Lowell Schmaltz, an office-supplies salesman from George F. Babbitt’s fictional Midwestern city of Zenith. An endlessly digressive gabber, Schmaltz is a man who’ll tell you that a sense of humor means more than intellect and who’ll try to gain admittance to a New York speakeasy with his Zenith Elks Club card. He pronounces Calvin Coolidge—whom he lies about having known at Amherst College—to be a leader by virtue of “his profound thought, his immovable courage, his genial and democratic manners,” and much besides. Lewis’s book, which annoyed Coolidge, is an extreme example of the imitative fallacy, by which an author replicates the disagreeable characteristics—in this case, self-satisfaction and verbosity—that he seeks to suggest. Coolidge himself winds up unscathed, a sort of gray white whale that has eluded its baleful hunter.

Silent Cal has always been ideal for cameos in period novels and films, showing up to say “You lose” to the woman who bet she could get him to say more than two words. But there is probably just one other novel, aside from Lewis’s, in which he figures importantly: John Derbyshire’s strangely absorbing “Seeing Calvin Coolidge in a Dream” (1996), about a onetime Chinese Red Guard who immigrates to America and develops a fascination with the laconic leader. “Clutching resolutely at truths learned on a farm” in Plymouth Notch, Vermont, Coolidge is a Confucian moralist who finally appears in the dream promised by the novel’s title: “I suppose you’ve read all my biographers?” he says to the narrator.

The latest of these is Amity Shlaes, who in 2007 published “The Forgotten Man,” an economic history in which she argued that, between 1929 and 1940, “from Hoover to Roosevelt, government intervention helped to make the Depression Great.” Americans should stop “glorifying the New Deal,” she thinks, and disdains even the meddlesomeness of the Republican Administration that preceded it. “Coolidge” (HarperCollins) evidently represents the next initiative in Shlaes’s revisionist campaign: in it, the author blows a bugle for Silent Cal, “a rare kind of hero: a minimalist president, an economic general of budgeting and tax cuts.” In her view, “economic heroism is subtler than other forms of heroism, harder to appreciate.”

Shlaes, a columnist for *Bloomberg View*, is not attempting much subtlety herself. She is a trustee of the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation, and her biography is unblushing in its mission to secure a new deal for the laissez-faire Chief Executive whom Theodore Roosevelt’s daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, judged to have been “weaned on a pickle.” To Shlaes, Coolidge’s silences are golden; his “inaction reflects strength.” Among American Presidents, he is, she argues, “our great refrainer,” an epithet that doesn’t cry out for an obelisk, or even an auditorium, but which she urges upon us with an unflagging nineteen-twenties sort of pep. Shlaes seems engaged not so much in history as in leafletting, pushing her neglected subject back onto a platform that he departed in 1929, prematurely but also in the nick of time.

Coolidge came from “the ones who stayed,” those who didn’t flee Vermont—a land as green as Ireland and nearly as harsh—in the middle of the nineteenth century. Calvin grew up hearing cautionary tales about the woes that indebtedness had brought upon neighbors and family, and he got his first glimpse of political life at Plymouth town meetings, selling popcorn and apples while his father, a storekeeper and a legislator, participated in the proceedings. Victoria Coolidge, the boy’s romantic, melancholy mother, died when he was twelve. From his grandfather Calvin Galusha Coolidge, young Cal inherited an unyielding forty-acre parcel, the family’s “limekiln lot,” with the stipulation that his own children eventually receive it, too. “The language the grandfather had chosen rendered the bequest even less valuable,” Shlaes explains. “One could hardly borrow against something that could not be given up. The purpose of such an inheritance, the whole family knew, was not merely to pass something on; it was to tie his grandson to the land.”

Once grown, Calvin Coolidge, as he put it in “The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge” (1929), “reverted to Massachusetts,” where his family had been during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He began his student days at Amherst as an “ouden,” unwanted by the fraternities and thus, Shlaes says, “as much town as gown.” At boarding-house tables, he picked up a measure of social skill that developed into a mild prowess in speechmaking and debate. In time, Coolidge got himself elected the Class of 1895’s Grove Orator and secured membership in Phi Gamma Delta. Like other Amherst boys of his era, he fell under the spell of Professor Charles Garman, “a mystifier, a charmer of young men, with an edge of hocus pocus,” who, according to Shlaes, “taught his own private blend of psychology, philosophy, politics, and ethics.” Something in the otherwise wary young Coolidge thrummed to Garman’s hymning of individuality, property, and modest social service. But, mostly, Coolidge was learning how to rise, in barely detectable increments, through hard work and steady application.

After graduation, he read law—and the local mood—at a small Northampton firm. Shlaes portrays him in this period as a man who was drawn to women livelier than he was. He met the vivacious Grace Goodhue, a teacher at Northampton’s Clarke School for the Deaf, in the spring of 1904. Calvin heard Grace laughing through a window; she’d just noticed the bachelor lawyer shaving with his hat on. Once they were an item, the joke became: “Miss Goodhue had taught the deaf to hear; now she might be able to teach the mute to speak.” Today, Mrs. Coolidge’s White House portrait—she’s posed in a red dress alongside a white collie—charms visitors far more than her husband’s does.

While handling humdrum cases, he made a successful run for the city council and a losing one for the school committee. The second experience was one he never repeated during his long slog to the White House, through the Massachusetts House of Representatives, the Northampton mayoralty, the state senate, the lieutenant governorship, the governor’s office, and the Vice-Presidency. It is doubtful that any other American President was ever on the ballot so often or so successfully. H. L. Mencken, in his obituary for Coolidge, felt compelled to point out that America’s greatest business champion had remained “on the public payroll . . . without a break for exactly thirty years.” Coolidge understood that all politics was not only local but also personal. Examining the returns from the Northampton mayoral race in 1909, he noted, “The nearer I got to my house or office, the better I did, and it was the opposite way with the other fellow.”

In the state legislature, Coolidge experienced his foremost political realization. As he later said, “It is much more important to kill bad bills than to pass good ones.” When he was senate president, he counted it progress when, between 1914 and 1915, the number of measures adopted dropped from seven hundred and ninety-six to six hundred and sixty-eight. During his years in local and state politics, Coolidge did take a number of forward-looking positions: he favored woman suffrage, voted for a minimum wage, and, as a Yankee able to get his share of the burgeoning Irish-Catholic vote, was generally sympathetic to immigration. But he remained ambivalent about the Progressivism of Theodore Roosevelt and felt that, after so much reform, a time had come to “give administration a chance to catch up with legislation.” In the three-way Presidential race of 1912, he stuck with Taft and avoided T.R.’s Bull Moose insurgency—something that Alice Roosevelt Longworth probably didn’t forget. That same year, Coolidge, when he was asked to help mediate the “Bread and Roses” strike of millworkers in Lawrence, got a bellyful of the I.W.W. (the Wobblies) and became more reflexively sympathetic to business. He didn’t calcify, but he can be said to have shrunk. The process, as depicted by Shlaes, will win the admiration of conservative Republicans whose gorges still rise whenever they hear liberal Democrats speak, with lordly condescension, of a Dole or a McCain or a Hagel who has “grown.”

In 1920, Coolidge became the only man to defeat Franklin Roosevelt in a national election, an especially inspiring fact to readers signing on for Shlaes’s corrective mission. The men faced off for the Vice-Presidency on tickets headed by Senator Warren G. Harding and Governor James Cox, both from Ohio. Coolidge gained his spot almost entirely as a result of the way, as governor, he had handled a strike by the Boston police. Expected to compromise with the officers, whose grievances he recognized as real, Coolidge surprised the electorate by doing an end run around the mayor, firing the strikers, and sending in the State Guard to deal with violence and looting in the city. He sent a telegram to Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, saying that “there is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody comma anywhere comma any time stop.” Like Byron, this least Byronic of men awoke to find himself famous. President Wilson, who had been travelling around the country urging approval of the League of Nations, called Coolidge’s quick reëlection to the governorship a “victory for law and order.” (When firing the federal air-traffic controllers sixty years later, Ronald Reagan no doubt looked up at that Coolidge portrait.) Narrative is rarely Shlaes’s strong suit—she is much more interested in economic ideas—but the police strike provides her book with a propulsive and satisfying stretch.

For all Coolidge’s sudden popularity, his Vice-Presidential nomination required a rebellion by rank-and-file delegates. They were restive about being shut out of the smoke-filled Chicago hotel room where Harding had been given the top spot. Coolidge remained at home in Boston. “Nominated for vice president,” he told his wife after getting the phone call. “You are not going to accept it, are you?” she asked. “I suppose I shall have to,” he answered.

The Republicans’ victory, with its promised return to “normalcy,” was probably sealed when, on September 16, 1920, anarchists bombed Wall Street and killed thirty-eight people. By the following March, Calvin and Grace Coolidge had moved into the Willard Hotel, more or less next door to the White House; their sons remained mostly at school. The Vice-Presidency, still in its Throttlebottom days, proved unsatisfying to a man who had preferred executive posts to legislative ones among all those he’d already held. He was especially frustrated by being the presiding figurehead of a Senate dominated by the Republican majority leader, Henry Cabot Lodge. Months could go by without his seeing Harding—a blessing in disguise, because it kept him at a distance from the wicked dens of the “Ohio Gang.” As soon emerged, Harding’s Secretary of the Interior took hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes from oilmen while overseeing the government’s Teapot Dome oil reserves, and his director of the Veterans’ Bureau made vast sums selling off its hospital supplies.

Shlaes’s readers will suspect that she’s getting ready to overhaul Harding, too—a heavier lift, but one that seems already under way, with her references to his “boldness,” his establishment of a budget bureau, his cuts to defense spending and veto of a profligate veterans’ bonus. Conducting a sentimental head count of the Senate, Shlaes convinces herself that its members “loved Harding and had shown him that by refusing to override any of his five regular vetoes.” The President may have said “yes” a little too often, she concedes, but he comes across mostly as a victim of his unscrupulous Cabinet members. Passing lightly over the Teapot Dome scandal, Shlaes refers mildly to “the troubles that had dogged” Harding. He died in August, 1923, probably of a heart attack, in the middle of a West Coast speaking tour.

Coolidge’s ascent to the Presidency occurred in a tiny, Rockwellian tableau. He was sworn in by his father, a notary public, by the light of a kerosene lamp, after word of Harding’s death reached Plymouth Notch, where the Vice-President was vacationing. “I believe I can swing it,” the new President was heard to say as he set off for Washington. The feel of the White House changed almost as soon as he got there. “The atmosphere was as different as a New England front parlor is from a back room in a speakeasy,” Alice Longworth observed. Coolidge set to work with a new secretary, C. Bascom Slemp, a former congressman who seems to have been named by Nathanael West.

The President picked up two pairs of scissors, one to cut spending and the other to cut tax rates. “I regard a good budget as among the noblest monuments of virtue,” he declared, admitting to “a sort of obsession” with the task of trimming. He met every Friday morning with Herbert Lord, his budget director, so that the two of them could draw lines through the smallest items. “Post office bags,” Shlaes notes, “could be made of plain gray canvas, not the traditional white with blue stripes: savings, $50,000 a year.” Andrew Mellon, Coolidge’s Treasury Secretary, foresaw “a great virtuous cycle” that could be set in motion by “scientific taxation,” or what, sixty years later, the Reagan White House would revive as supply-side economics. If taxes were cut, economic activity would expand and revenue would thus actually grow. Coolidge got less of a cut for the highest earners than he wanted (Alice Longworth’s husband, the House majority leader, compromised away much of Mellon’s bill), but he took another crack at the issue in the Presidential term he won in 1924. With an economy more than revived from its post-First World War slump, Coolidge, “a Scrooge who begat plenty,” took fifty-four per cent of the popular vote in a three-man race that included the Progressive Party’s Robert La Follette.

Shlaes impresses readers with the single-mindedness of Coolidge’s pursuit, though she makes us aware, sometimes almost inadvertently, of blind spots in his peripheral vision: the free-market President remained mostly sympathetic to tariffs and took the peculiar position that it was more appropriate for states than it was for the federal government to award bonuses to former soldiers of the United States Army. Regular veterans’ benefits “were about equivalent to all the payments made for civilian government together, and larger than any other single kind of payment by the federal government.” The only permanent way to reduce that sum was to have permanent peace, and one guesses that the chance of such a utopian linkage helped move Coolidge to support, with whatever reluctance and delay, an international pact outlawing war, the brainchild of his Secretary of State, Frank Kellogg. Shlaes declares that Coolidge “succeeded where both Wilson and Harding had failed in winning a great multilateral treaty that united not only a party or a nation but the world.” The author’s hurrah doesn’t, however, linger in the ear as long as the line that Senator Hiram Johnson used to characterize the Kellogg-Briand pact: “A helmless ship, a houseless street, a wordless book, a swordless sheath.”

Coolidge was not quite the “darling of the gods” that Mencken pronounced him. A year into his Presidency, his sixteen-year-old son, Calvin Coolidge, Jr., died from blood poisoning acquired through a blister he got while playing tennis on the White House lawn. The Coolidges’ grief was, in its way, as intense as what the Lincolns had suffered when their son Willie died, in 1862. Something changed between Cal and Grace, though Shlaes never really explains the subsequent “tensions,” or conclusively explores the suspected flirtation between Grace and a Secret Service man that is supposed to have infuriated the President in the summer of 1927. Whatever the case, Coolidge was already tiring of the Presidency. His last two years in office involved a number of “legislative humiliations,” with Congress laying out more money for farm subsidies, the merchant marine, and flood relief than he wanted to spend. The President put Hoover, his Secretary of Commerce, in charge of the latter. It was a sensible choice, given Hoover’s remarkable record with wartime refugees, but Coolidge was wary of this subordinate he called a “superman,” and fearful of what Shlaes now rues; namely, “that Hoover, the activist, would subvert the Coolidge legacy.”

Shlaes finds no coyness in his famous demurral—“I do not choose to run for President in 1928”—only an awareness that, “if he believed in the mechanisms he and Mellon had established, he had to let them run for themselves, and not hover over them.” Coolidge saw the bad times coming, but refused the stockbroker Charles Merrill’s offer of a job, at a hundred thousand dollars a year. Merrill hoped the new ex-President would “warn against speculation . . . speak out so that investors made themselves less vulnerable to a coming crash.” Instead, Coolidge returned to Northampton, wrote a newspaper column, and served on the board of the New York Life Insurance Company. He was sixty when he died of a heart attack, early in 1933, between Hoover’s defeat and Franklin Roosevelt’s Inauguration.

Coolidge’s psychology has driven several biographers to fits of frustrated supposition. Not long after the President left office, Gamaliel Bradford, in an essay called “The Genius of the Average,” saw in Coolidge “a persistent, insistent, certainly not buoyant, but aggressive and almost tediously reiterated optimism, which seems partly physical in its nature, and which always suggests a more or less conventional and traditional habit and attitude of mind.” Ten years ago, in “The Tormented President,” Robert E. Gilbert, a political-science professor at Northeastern University, made a grim, one-sided case for Coolidge’s having been, during the four years after his son’s death, “a *disabled* chief executive” whose long naps must be seen not as endearingly Reaganesque but as a depressive manifestation of hypersomnia.

This is a President who has always led biographers toward stylistic, not just psychoanalytic, defeat. William Allen White’s Coolidge is a more ambiguous, less savory figure than Shlaes’s, an “inwardly proud and sentimental little New Englander,” an “insatiable consumer of gossip” whose distance from the Harding scandals seems to have been achieved through a certain willed obliviousness. But, in his own sometimes smug attempts to illuminate Coolidge, White bounces off any number of rhetorical walls, using exclamation points and a hectoring imperative—he sometimes sounds like Tom Wolfe’s grandfather—to force himself toward revelation. His most penetrating moment may arrive when he throws up his hands and holds a long note of bafflement:

Was it some accidental combination of a thousand circumstances which always kept Coolidge and his works slightly out of focus, always drab and cheerless, or was it some touch of his own aura, some curious emanation from his own slight public personality, which slowly uncorked whatever vessel he used for his political purposes and let the flare and fizz and culminating zip dribble out in a luke warm serenity?

Shlaes wisely avoids trying to invade every recess of Coolidge’s mentality, but she has no particular gift for the simpler business of biography. She tends to leave out information crucial to an understanding of whatever matter she’s just taken up; her paragraphs don’t so much segue as skip onto and off the page, like the fast-playing, quickly changed records on a nineteen-twenties Victrola. Still, her enthusiasm for cranking the machine never flags. When she says that “the new tax schedule Mellon’s men drew up was a beauty to behold,” those are her wide-eyed words, not some bit of indirect discourse meant to echo Coolidge.

The President’s own attempt at writing the story of his life is beloved by some for its brevity; it runs to just two hundred and forty-seven pages of generously sized type. An almost anecdote-free production, the autobiography was dismissed by Bradford as “unrevealing,” a once-over-lightly job “written at the instance of the popular magazines.” Anyone getting hold of it (the volume remains in print, from Honolulu’s University Press of the Pacific) has to tap the maple pretty hard to get any sap. But the tree isn’t entirely empty. Coolidge’s repeated use of the word “clean” to describe life in Plymouth Notch may interest those inclined, like Professor Gilbert, to the psycho-historical, while others will be struck by the frequency with which this Yankee Republican sounds like Tammany Hall’s George Washington Plunkitt, who famously remarked, “I seen my opportunities and I took ’em.” Between Harding’s death and funeral, there occurs this one-sentence paragraph: “I issued the usual proclamation.” In a 1998 biography, Robert Sobel reports a statistician’s discovery that “Coolidge’s sentences averaged 18 words, compared to Lincoln’s 26.6, Wilson’s 31.8, and Theodore Roosevelt’s 41.”

For the next decade or so, it may be Amity Shlaes who has custody of Coolidge’s reputation, and, for all her admiration of the man, she seems happy having him belong to this moment rather than to the ages. From its praise of “a predictable tax policy” to its blurb from Paul Ryan, “Coolidge” seeks to demonstrate the thirtieth President’s current economic and political relevance. Even Shlaes’s portrait of Coolidge as a unifier who remained friends with his opponents and preferred a big, ethnically expanded Republican tent (“we care not at what shrine you worship or how you eat your pie”) seems offered as instruction to today’s crabby-sounding G.O.P. Along these lines, she might mention how Coolidge, in that post-Presidential autobiography, felt able to say, “The more I had seen of the workings of the Federal government the more respect I came to have for it.”

Even if she did, Shlaes would not end up making a reader feel Coolidge’s applicability to the present day. True, one prefers his terse sententiousness to the purple gases of rhetoric that puff out of modern White House chimneys; and he does make one wistful for the days when a President could be buried after a twenty-two-minute service. But if it really all does come down to money—as it seemed to in his time and does once more in ours—what good can all Coolidge’s cheese-paring (his term) and anybody’s “scientific taxation” do us now? The budget wars in Shlaes’s book, even the ones over veterans’ benefits, feel like fantastically small-scale skirmishes in comparison with those currently being fought. In Coolidge’s time, the nation had not yet piled high its commitments to the sick and to the poor and, especially, to the old, whom we will have with us—who will be us—for longer and longer stretches. Coolidge was indeed able to “swing it,” but in a world that we have since—gradually, deliberately, and with a fundamental bipartisanship—exchanged for another. If he did come back to us in a dream, and looked up at the fiscal cliff over which we teeter in mutual bad faith, he would likely offer no more than an uncomprehending shake of the head and a disbelieving question: “You built that?”