Coolidge against the world: Peace, prosperity, and foreign policy in the 1920s

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Abstract

The common narrative of the 1920s is either to largely ignore the nation during this time and the men who presided over it or to simply dismiss the decade as a time of isolationism and Republican failure and the three presidents as corrupt, lazy, silent, or incompetent. The problems of the more typical narratives are most starkly shown in the realm of foreign policy. A more thorough examination of the role of President Calvin Coolidge and the American nation in that area reveals something very different. Because, if we approach those years as a “historical way station on the road to the New Deal” and Coolidge’s Presidency as years of inaction then we will miss much of the reality of not only Coolidge’s thoughts and actions while President, but also this nation’s deep and complex level of global interaction that occurred during those interwar years.

The best way to challenge the normal narrative is granting even greater voice to President Calvin Coolidge himself. He wrote and delivered hundreds of speeches during his political career, presidential or otherwise. Through his presidential speeches we see not inaction and inactivity, but thoughtful and prudent action and an expectation of other men in his administration to do their jobs. Instead of a United States cut off from the world, hoarding her wealth, ignoring pleas for help, and sitting alone in isolation, we are provided glimpses of global and regional cooperation, the expansion of international trade, and the desire to create peace separately from political entanglements like the League of Nations. These visions of President Coolidge and American foreign policy in the 1920s should change the way we think about and teach the period.

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“Peace on Earth, good will toward men.” One hears this phrase in the United States this time of year, but prospects for peace and goodwill abroad, not to mention at home, appear to be evaporating before our eyes. Staving off a gradual downward spiral of foreign and domestic politics into violence and rancor requires some serious reflection on what’s gone wrong, and a willingness to rethink our present approach. A little over a year ago, I wrote a column explaining why international peace was in the U.S. national interest. Yet none of the presidential candidates — not even Bernie Sanders — made... And as Matt Bai points out, these various foreign and domestic policy blunders helped bring us to where we are today. So in the end Coolidge appears to be saying that while he knows newspapers are businesses and want to show profits, he had confidence such matters would not sway reporters and editors. What Coolidge expressed that day was a thought he explored often in his speeches. He was a shattered hero in the view of the New Deal School, whose dreams for peace and justice were smashed, but fortunately were revived by the man who served him as assistant secretary of the navy, FDR. It is also likely that businessmen during the 1920s applauded Coolidge because they felt his approach was good for them, and for the rest of the country as well. Too often historians assume the former rather than the latter. World Court: Also named the International Court of Justice, the World Court was established in 1946 exceeding from a charter that was established by the UN. The principle is to hear cases that extended from the different participants in the court; not all cases submitted would be tried; the World Court has the option of choosing cases. reparations: Reparations is a term applied to the issuing of money from one nation to another. Pertaining to this treaty was the reconciliation of the two countries on the issue of foreign policy in the Far East. It also helped to reinstate the Open Door Policy. Calvin Coolidge, the president at the time felt it necessary to send troops to Nicaragua. However, by 1933 Hoover expelled the troops for they were no longer needed. Subject