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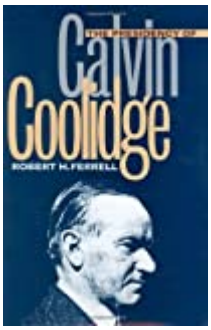

Robert H. Ferrell. *The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. xii + 244 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0892-8.

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The seventy-fifth anniversary of Calvin Coolidge becoming the thirtieth president saw extensive interest in the Vermonter from Plymouth Notch. The Library of Congress published a selection of papers from its symposium "Calvin Coolidge and the Coolidge Era," the JFK Library held a widely-publicized conference, and presidential historian Robert Ferrell published *The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge*, the first full-length study since Donald R. McCoy's *Calvin Coolidge: the Quiet President* in 1967. Ferrell, who has written about Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding's death and Coolidge's press conferences, Coolidge's and Herbert Hoover's foreign policies, and Harry S. Truman, brings his vast knowledge of extensive primary and secondary sources to his assessment of Coolidge for the American Presidency Series of the University Press of Kansas. Ferrell has found particularly valuable the Joel T. Boone papers, opened by the Library in 1994. Boone, the assistant physician to the president and his family, left an unpublished autobiography of some one thousand typewritten pages on the Coolidge period, and his papers add an important personal dimension to the understanding of Coolidge.

After discussing Coolidge's rise in Massachusetts politics and "the three pieces of fortune" (p. 14) that led him to the White House (his telegram after the Boston police strike, his nomination for vice president, and Harding's death), Ferrell describes the provincial Coolidge–who had been neither west of the Alleghenies nor to Europe by 1920–and his anonymity in Washington. Drawing on the Boone papers, Ferrell shows Coolidge's rudeness, temper, and quietness, especially toward his lovely wife, and emphasizes the Vermonter's strong "sense of public service." Shortly after becoming president, Coolidge wrote: "I am going to try to do what seems best for the country, and get what satisfaction I can out of that" (pp. 23-24).

After an overview of American society and the state of the federal government in 1923, Ferrell largely concentrates on Coolidge's presidency. "I thought I could swing it" (p. 39), Coolidge said on becoming president; first, however, he had to "convince the unbelievers" (p. 39) by dealing with Congress. He also had to handle the Teapot Dome scandal, particularly "damage control" (p. 45) from the complicated affair that led to the resignation of Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty (of which the Boone papers provide interesting insights). Gradually, Coolidge disposed of his rivals for the 1924 Republican nomination and selected his vice-president. With Calvin Jr.'s tragic death that summer, the president did little campaigning. Yet, he needed to do little; Coolidge, Ferrell argues, had "too much success for it to have been only" luck (p. 51).

A series of thematic chapters on industry and labor, agriculture, society, Latin America, and Europe and the Far East follow. Coolidge knew well enough to leave the thriving economy alone, and "the fate" of the FTC was "the most obvious symbol of presidential disdain for regulation" (p. 71). Industry flourished, and labor was better off than it had been. Farmers, however, suffered from overproduction, and the administration's solutions were of no help. The farm bloc's efforts for McNary-Haugen legislation "faced a clever opponent in the White House, . . . an experienced calculator" who twice vetoed farm legislation (p. 91).

The administration, according to Ferrell, "made its presence felt" in society "positively," only in one area, highway construction, and even there it was "on a relatively small scale" (p. 95). Although "the car boom was clear to all adults," the government virtually ignored . . . a revolutionary change in the way Americans lived" (p. 101). The administration's involvement in other areas, Ferrell stresses, was "all negative" (p. 95). It enforced Prohibition in "a lackadaisical way"; it did "little for civil rights and liberties"; "it went along" with the determination to restrict immigration; and, finally, it "looked with a jaundiced eye" toward the Muscle Shoals social experiment, when "the usually clear Coolidge" made his proposals "difficult to understand" (pp. 95-96, 120).

Ferrell, in addition to being a noted presidential scholar, first established his reputation as a diplomatic historian. Not surprisingly, he devotes considerable attention to foreign policy during the Coolidge era, although he admits that Americans thought little about the subject. Latin America was the administration's "greatest concern" (p. 121), where it focused on Nicaragua and Mexico. It retreated from the previous "imperial era" of foreign policy, largely because "intervention and imperialism" (p. 140) did not mean the same thing. In the Far East, China's turmoil during the period posed the main problem. In Europe, where American concern was least, Coolidge did seek "greater limitation of naval arms" and discovered, to his irritation, that nations with expensive navies "did not wish to pay" their war debts (p. 146). "The single American contribution to the organization of peace" was the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and its "only effect . . . was to make wars in the 1930s undeclared." Moreover, Ferrell adds ironically, "somewhat strangely, the pact became one of the bases" of the World War II war crimes trials (p. 161). In retrospect, one would have hoped," he concludes, that the Coolidge administration "would have acted differently" (p. 206).

Coolidge saw an "absolute, positive good in fiscal economy" (p. 167). Retiring the debt was a necessity, and he obtained a budget surplus every year. The Bureau of the Budget, his talents, and Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon played a vital role "in holding down government expenditures and saving" money to retire the debt (p. 168). In a thoughtful discussion of the Federal Reserve, Ferrell stresses its "inactivity" in 1928 and then its history in early 1929 that, "in retrospect, appears almost incredible" (p. 179), especially when "it did not have the spine to stand up" to the president of the nation's largest bank (p. 181). Underconsumption, holding companies, and "the new morality operating on Wall Street" should have been watched, he concludes, so that they "might have been seen" by the president (p. 188).

In assessing the purpose of Coolidge's "political bombshell" in 1927 that he would not seek re-election in 1928, Ferrell emphasizes that the president wanted to and did make Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover nervous. Hoover's ambition and "poaching" on the territory of other Cabinet members increasingly had "antagonized Coolidge (p. 66), and by 1927 the president had turned against him.

Throughout, Ferrell persuasively states that the caricatures of Coolidge are "not true. . . . he was no simple farmer or farmer's son"; he attended a prominent college; and "from the beginning of his adult years, he was a city man, not a country bumpkin or even a rural philosopher (p. 205). Ferrell agrees with critics that more should have been done in foreign affairs, but argues that to presume "foresight . . . is unhistorical (p. 207). More troubling, for him, was the administration's failure "to face up to the stock market speculation of the time." It was "clearly underway," but Coolidge did not understand it, and he understood the economy "less than some of his contemporaries." Ferrell concludes that "the student of Coolidge's era must confront . . . a failure to remedy something that might have involved going beyond the possibilities of his time" (p. 207).

This is a thoughtful and carefully reasoned study with perceptive insights based on Ferrell's vast knowledge of sources and the period. He draws upon the work of many of the participants in the Library of Congress publication, *Calvin Coolidge and the Coolidge Era: Essays on the History of the 1920s.* Most of the general accounts of the 1920's, he notes, are critical of Coolidge, but his thesis and interpretation of Coolidge are not always entirely clear. Perhaps the publishing format posed space constraints: the book is very readable, but too much valu-

able material is packed into too few pages, and the reader wishes that interpretations and themes had been more fully developed. The critical bibliographical essay and footnotes include the most recent literature and offer an excellent starting point for monographs; Ferrell's book, however, will set the standard for studies of Coolidge's presidency, and his work is a welcomed contribution.

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