

# Calvin Coolidge's Tragic Presidency: the Political Effects of Bereavement and Depression

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Biographers commonly describe Calvin Coolidge as having had a sound, comfortable, supportive upbringing. Fuess writes, for example, that Coolidge's early life was "simple, wholesome and unfurtive." White and McCoy point out that the Coolidges were "aristocrats" and that Calvin was "a young prince" who was "brought up in as much luxury as could be expected in Plymouth township."<sup>1</sup> However, a close analysis suggests strongly that the childhood years of Calvin Coolidge were marked by great sadness and dislocation. He was an extraordinarily shy boy who had few friends and often was lonely. His father, John Coolidge, was frequently absent from the household, either because of his service in the Vermont state legislature or his various business activities. As Lynch and Kilmartin point out, a father who is physically or emotionally missing from his son's life leaves scars on the boy's psychological development.<sup>2</sup>

John Coolidge's frequent absences likely created some sense of abandonment in his son and contributed to feelings of social alienation.<sup>3</sup> They also may have contributed to Calvin's deep shyness since boys who have infrequent contact with their male parent are likely to have less outgoing

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge* (Boston: Little Brown, 1940), 25; William Allen White, *A Puritan in Babylon* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 7, 18; Donald McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 7.

<sup>2</sup> John Lynch, M.D. and Christopher Kilmartin, M.D., *The Pain Behind The Mask* (New York: Haworth Press, 1999), 44.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the avoidant personality pattern (individuals who shun social interaction because of insecurity and fear of humiliation and who have a childhood history of parental rejection and peer group deprecation), see Theodore Millon (with Roger Davis), *Disorders of Personality: DSM IV and Beyond*, 2nd edn (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 278–80.

personalities and less satisfying peer-group relationships.<sup>4</sup> For Calvin, the situation was compounded by his nasal voice and unusual manner of speaking – sometimes compared to the quacking of a duck – because he feared being ridiculed if he spoke in public. To the outside world, he was silent and stand-offish; at home, he was respectful toward his elders and highly conscientious in meeting his responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

Since his father was away so often, Calvin was left in the care of his paternal grandparents, Galusha and Sarah, and his mother, Victoria. Galusha Coolidge taught Calvin to love animals and tried hard to steer him to the life of a farmer while grandmother Sarah was the disciplinarian in the family who occasionally locked her grandson in the attic as punishment for his rare childish misdeeds.<sup>6</sup> Calvin's mother was a frail and sickly woman, suffering from tuberculosis, who provided "lavish care" to Calvin and became the center of his universe. Of his mother, he later wrote that "whatever was grand and beautiful in form and color attracted her. It seemed as though the rich green tints of the foliage and the blossoms of the flowers came for her in the springtime and in the autumn it was for her that the mountainsides were struck with crimson and with gold."<sup>7</sup>

At the age of six, Coolidge suffered his first bereavement when his grandfather died, an event that caused him to cling even more tightly to his mother. As *her* health declined, however, he had to watch helplessly as she slipped inexorably away. In her last months, she would often sit in the doorway of her home, gasping for breath. She died on her thirty-ninth birthday and was buried amid the blustery snows of a Vermont winter. Calvin was only twelve at the time and his life was indelibly marked by her death. Many years later, he succinctly described his feelings on her passing: "The greatest grief that can come to a boy came to me. Life was never to seem the same again."<sup>8</sup>

Calvin surely was overwhelmed by his mother's death. More somber than usual, he seemed thoroughly downcast and withdrawn. He was lethargic and his appetite was very poor. Sometimes he "would just sit at table, pale, pinched and silent and pick at his food."<sup>9</sup> He often claimed to have difficulty

<sup>4</sup> Ross D. Parke, *Fatherhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 127, 133.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the compulsive (conscientious) personality pattern (individuals who have experienced parental overcontrol by contingent punishment and who have been exposed to conditions that teach a deep sense of responsibility to others and a feeling of guilt when those responsibilities have not been met), see Millon, 530–33.

<sup>6</sup> McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin Coolidge, *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* (Rutland, VT: Academy Books), 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Hendrik V. Booraem, *The Provincial* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1994), 38.

in breathing, a symptom associated with the tuberculosis suffered by his mother. While this may have reflected anxiety following his mother's death, it also may have represented an identification with his mother's terminal illness, suggesting an unusually severe grief reaction.<sup>10</sup>

The young boy became a sad figure in Plymouth, Vermont. Neighbors would often see him at dusk walking forlornly down the road to the village cemetery to visit his mother's grave. Many years later, he explained that he found comfort to be near her final resting place, even in the dead of night, and that he communed with her often, bringing to her all of his problems and travails.<sup>11</sup> These frequent visits to Victoria's grave surely gave Calvin comfort since they allowed him to maintain something of a relationship with her and still have her in his life.<sup>12</sup> He built other "bridges" to his dead mother as well. During his long political career, it was *her* picture that adorned his desk rather than his wife's and it was *her* picture that he always carried in the pocket of his jacket. It was also his mother about whom he frequently spoke with associates. Many years later, his chief Secret Service bodyguard, Edmund Starling, revealed that, even as President, Coolidge "often spoke of his ... deep affection for his mother, of her fair-haired beauty, of her love for flowers, of her understanding of him and of the help she gave him in the problems he faced from day to day. He seemed to remember every day he had spent with her."<sup>13</sup>

Psychiatrist Jerrold M. Post indicates that the death of a person central to a child's life may sometimes precipitate a childhood depression but that it *uniformly* will sensitize the child to the effects of future loss. Later in life, painful loss can trigger depression.<sup>14</sup> Another psychiatrist, John Bowlby, goes so far as to warn that children who lose a parent by death are more likely than others to become "psychiatric casualties." Moreover, the death of a loved one during childhood influences the symptomatology of any psychiatric disorder from which individuals may later suffer. As adults, for example, they

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1999), 180; MaryAnn Elmswiler and James P. Elmswiler, *Guiding Your Child Through Grief* (New York: Bantam Books, 2000), 168.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Curtis and Will Curtis and Frank Lieberman, *Return to these Hills: The Vermont Years of Calvin Coolidge* (Woodstock, VT: Curtis-Lieberman Books, 1985), 23; Coolidge, 177.

<sup>12</sup> Phyllis R. Silverman, "When Parents Die," in *Living with Grief: Children, Adolescents, and Loss*, Kenneth J. Doka, ed. (Washington, DC: Hospice Foundation of America, 2000), 222.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Starling, *Starling of the White House* (Chicago: People's Book Club, 1946), 212.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Jerrold M. Post, M.D., personal communications with the author, 18 Feb. 2002, 13 April 2002; also, see Dianne Hales, *Depression* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 48.

may have a greater predisposition to excessive grief reactions or to “clinging behavior.”<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, Victoria’s death was not the only bereavement Calvin suffered during his adolescence. When he was 17, his only sibling, 13-year-old sister Abbie, became ill and died, probably from appendicitis. She had been his close companion and confidant, and her unexpected death represented another traumatic loss for the boy. In a revealing letter written to his austere father after her funeral, Calvin admitted that he was lonesome at school without Abbie.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, his grief was intense. Within a few months of her funeral, he himself fell ill and required a lengthy period of recuperation time, postponing for a year admission to Amherst College.

Although the loss of both his mother and sister was devastating to him, Calvin’s emotions in each instance remained tightly controlled and even repressed. His external behavior was that of a mature and dignified adult but he was still only a child with inner reactions similar to those other children experience at such moments – desolation, fear, loneliness, and even anger. The failure to mourn adequately by repressing emotions or the inability to come to terms with a death may result in unresolved grief, a pathological condition that increases the risk of later depression.<sup>17</sup>

Unresolved grief is found more often in personalities characterized by insecurity and inferiority. Such traits were Coolidge’s intimate companions. As a child, he was made insecure by his disjointed family relationships and he felt unequal to his peers because of his desperate shyness. Sometimes his shyness was even interpreted as stupidity, an error that heightened his feelings of inferiority. For example, a sheriff from a neighboring town in Vermont found Calvin so strangely tongue-tied that he advised the boy’s father that it would be a waste of money to try to educate him.<sup>18</sup> No wonder that Calvin spent so much time alone. Later, as a student at Amherst College, he was rejected for membership in fraternities he very much wanted to join and, for more than three years, was numbered among the minority of Amherst College students who were commonly referred to as “oudens” (nothings).

<sup>15</sup> John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, Vol. 3 (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 295; Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1987), 153.

<sup>16</sup> Coolidge Family Papers, Doc. 217, Folder 16 (Montpelier, VT: Vermont Historical Society).

<sup>17</sup> Sanders, 128; Warwick Middleton, Beverley Raphael, Nada Martinek, Vivienne Misso, “Pathological Grief Reactions,” in *Handbook of Bereavement*, ed. Margaret Strobe, Wolfgang Strobe, and Robert O. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 52.

<sup>18</sup> Duff Gilfond, *The Rise of St. Calvin* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1932), 9.

Coolidge's personality attributes and the early bereavements that seared his childhood created in him a vulnerability to loss that he could not transcend as President many years later. When his 16-year-old favorite son and namesake died of blood poisoning in 1924 after developing a blister on his toe while playing tennis on the White House grounds, he simply succumbed to grief. Coolidge's loss was understandably profound, since for most parents the loss of a child is the most painful of all losses. Therapist Marian G. Secundy reports that "strong emotions are often displayed overtly for a longer period of time" and that "overt psychiatric problems may result more frequently."<sup>19</sup> A child's death often reactivates the parents' earlier losses and precipitates a global reaction that touches virtually every area of functioning.<sup>20</sup>

Since he was President of the United States at the time, Coolidge's loss was the nation's. Compounding the problem was that it occurred only eleven months into his presidency and just after he had been nominated by the Republican Party for a term in his own right. His *personal* behavior patterns changed noticeably to those closest to him and his *political* life was profoundly and grievously affected. He lost much of his zest for the presidency and much of his interest in politics just at the moment he most needed these qualities. Rather than entering boldly and optimistically into the term of office to which he was elected so easily in November 1924, Coolidge had slipped into a state of clinical depression from which he never recovered.<sup>21</sup>

### MAJOR DEPRESSIVE DISORDERS

According to the American Psychiatric Association, the essential feature of a major depressive episode is a period of at least two weeks during which there is either depressed mood or the loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities. Also, at least four additional symptoms must be present from among the following: changes in appetite or weight (usually reduced appetite; occasionally an increase); changes in sleep patterns (insomnia or hypersomnia); changes in psychomotor activity (agitation: pacing, hand wringing, the inability to sit still; or retardation: slowed speech, reduced speech inflection, muteness); decreased energy (sustained fatigue without physical exertion);

<sup>19</sup> Marian G. Secundy, "Bereavement: The Role of the Family Physician," in *Sourcebook on Death and Dying*, ed. James A. Fruehling (Chicago: Marquis Professional Publications, 1982), 181.

<sup>20</sup> Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After*, 162; Simon Shimshon Rubin, "The Death of a Child is Forever: The Lifecourse Impact of Child Loss," in *Handbook of Bereavement*, 298.

<sup>21</sup> For a fuller discussion of Coolidge's deep depression, see Robert E. Gilbert, *The Tormented President: Calvin Coolidge, Death and Clinical Depression* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

feelings of worthlessness or guilt (unrealistically negative evaluations of one's worth or obsession over minor past failings); difficulty in thinking, concentrating, or making decisions (indecisiveness); and recurrent thoughts of death (regardless of age or health status). Symptoms must either be newly present or must have clearly worsened when measured against the person's previous status and must persist for most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two consecutive weeks. Moreover, major depressive episodes must be accompanied by clinically marked upset or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning.<sup>22</sup>

The National Institutes of Health indicate that individuals suffering from such episodes may complain not of feelings of sadness but of physical aches and indispositions, occasionally to the point of hypochondria. Also, many such individuals demonstrate increased irritability, intense and lasting anger, and a proclivity toward outbursts of temper. They may show a tendency to place blame on others for various failings, evidence excessive irritation over insignificant matters, and become increasingly spiteful and suspicious of others. Additional "signs" may include brooding, excessive crying, pessimism about life, avoidance of friends, deterioration in work performance, being bothered by crowds, anxiety, phobias, and poor memory.<sup>23</sup>

Invariably, the loss of a loved one produces feelings of sadness. Bereavement, then, is a normal part of life and is not to be confused with major depressive episodes. Significant differences exist between being sad and being sick. According to the American Psychiatric Association:

As part of their reaction to the loss, some grieving individuals [show] symptoms characteristic of a Major Depressive Episode. ... The duration and expression of 'normal' bereavement may vary considerably among different cultural groups. The diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder is generally not given unless the symptoms are still present two months after the loss. However, the presence of certain symptoms that are not characteristic of a 'normal' grief reaction may be helpful in differentiating bereavement from a major depressive episode. These include (1) guilt about things other than actions taken or not taken by the survivor at the time of the death, (2) thoughts of death other than the survivor feeling that he or she would be better off dead or should have died with the deceased person, (3) morbid preoccupation with worthlessness (4) marked psychomotor retardation (5) prolonged and marked functional impairment and (6) hallucinating experiences other than thinking that he or she hears the voice of, or transiently sees the image of, the deceased person.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edn (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 349.

<sup>23</sup> Isadore Rosenfeld, M.D., "When the Sadness Won't Go Away," *Parade Magazine*, 19 Sept. 1999, 10; David B. Cohen, *Out of The Blue: Depression and Human Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 72, 50.

<sup>24</sup> American Psychiatric Association, 740.

Although there is a wide variation in the degree of impairment associated with a major depressive episode, in all instances there must be a clinically significant distress or some interference in social, occupational or other activities. Such interference may render the person wholly disabled socially and/or occupationally. Persons who are clinically depressed may retain the ability to react affirmatively to positive events and to smile or even laugh in the presence of affection or encouragement but these responses tend to be fleeting. Calvin Coolidge's occasional smiles, then, should not be interpreted as indications that depressive illness was not present.<sup>25</sup>

Most of those who become clinically depressed after a death have had a prior history that puts them more at risk.<sup>26</sup> Also, most of those who experience a major depressive episode in their life are likely to suffer another, with those who experienced their first depressive episode before they were out of their teenage years being particularly susceptible. Somewhat surprisingly, recurrences of depressive episodes may come after years, and sometimes even after decades, of apparently good health.<sup>27</sup> In as many as 35 percent of all cases, symptoms are persistent, depression never fully disappears and social and occupational impairment continues. Such individuals are said to suffer from chronic depression.<sup>28</sup> Although in today's world medications are available that may correct the physiological imbalances associated with depression,<sup>29</sup> in Coolidge's day, there were none.

### A CLINICALLY DEPRESSED PRESIDENT

Following his young son's death, Calvin Coolidge's grief went far beyond what most parents experience when they suffer the loss of a child. This emerges clearly from his autobiography, published soon after he left the White House, and from his personal behavior in the latter four years of his presidency. In his 1929 memoirs, Coolidge's words about his dead son are not only poignant but also quite revealing. He described young Calvin as "a boy of much promise, proficient in his studies, with a scholarly mind" who "had a remarkable insight into things."<sup>30</sup> When he wrote of his son's

<sup>25</sup> Cohen, 76.

<sup>26</sup> John Rush, M.D., quoted in Kathy Cronkite, *On the Edge of Darkness* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 29.

<sup>27</sup> Aaron T. Beck, M.D., *Depression: Causes and Treatment*, 13th edn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 53.

<sup>28</sup> Hales, *Depression*, 38; Demetri Popolos, M.D. and Janice Popolos, *Overcoming Depression* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 50.

<sup>29</sup> Hales, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Coolidge, *Autobiography*, 189.



death, however, he disclosed that he saw it as intertwined with, and inseparable from, his presidency. In response to the death of his son, Coolidge showed patterns of behavior that corresponded to *each* of the symptoms specified by the American Psychiatric Association for a major depressive episode and to many of those identified by the National Institutes of Health. These pertained to both his personal and his political life.

#### Personal Behavior Changes

Coolidge's eating habits changed dramatically. After the death of his mother, he experienced a complete loss of appetite. After the death of his son, however, he would eat incessantly despite the fact that his constant "nibbling" brought on a weight increase and often was accompanied by intense abdominal discomfort. Eventually, his doctors changed his diet so that fattening foods would be reduced or eliminated and, later, he dropped so many items from his menu in order to alleviate his abdominal distress that his wife became convinced that he was suffering from malnutrition.<sup>31</sup>

Coolidge's sleeping habits also changed noticeably. Before July, 1924, he normally slept eight or nine hours each night and then took a brief nap in the afternoon. After July, 1924, however, he suffered from severe hypersomnia, sleeping up to eleven hours each night, sometimes taking a nap before lunch, always taking a nap – lasting as long as four hours – in the afternoon and sometimes falling asleep at his desk as well. In all, this President, following the death of his son, slept as many as fifteen hours out of every twenty-four, and sometimes even more. Earlier in his career, one of his most famous remarks to his fellow state legislators in Massachusetts had been to "do the day's work."<sup>32</sup> But after July, 1924, he no longer lived up to this standard, choosing instead to escape his anguish in sleep.

Moreover, Coolidge showed a marked change in psychomotor activity. "Silent Cal" had tended to be rather sparing in conversation throughout his earlier life but as an adult, managed to tame his shyness. In his years as a local politician in western Massachusetts, his custom had been to campaign door to door and ask his constituents for their vote. A number of his associates were quick to comment that he had been quite loquacious in their company, at times doing most of the talking.<sup>33</sup> After July 1924, however, he became much more silent and withdrawn, refraining even from the political

<sup>31</sup> *Washington Post*, 11 Jan. 1927, Hanney Scrapbook, Vol. 7, Forbes Library.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin Coolidge, *Have Faith in Massachusetts* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1919), 185–86.

<sup>33</sup> Papers of Calvin Coolidge, MS/9/IE/39, Simeon Fess, Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts.



conversations in which he had previously engaged. No longer did he lobby, no longer did he campaign, no longer did he want to engage in the public speaking that in college he had said gave him more pleasure than any other activity.<sup>34</sup> An abdication of this kind represents a serious form of political paralysis, especially for the President of the United States whose success is dependent on his interpersonal and public skills.<sup>35</sup>

Also, Coolidge complained often, after his son's death, of being exhausted, of never feeling rested and of having no energy. He walked with a slow gait, seemed far older than his years and often appeared to be on the point of collapse. Further, despite his relatively youthful age, he had recurrent thoughts of death after July 1924. For example, he shared with his father in December, 1925 that, even though his father might die before him, they both would soon be reunited at Christmastime with his mother, his sister, his grandmother and his young son.<sup>36</sup>

Coolidge showed several additional symptoms typically ascribed to a major depressive episode. He complained frequently of bodily indispositions and demonstrated signs of hypochondria, taking, according to his wife, "various sorts of pills upon slight provocation."<sup>37</sup> He insisted not only that his pulse be taken twice each day by White House physicians but also had them called away from dinner, social events or even from the theater in order to treat his afflictions, no matter how minor they might be. On one occasion, Dr. Boone was summoned from a social engagement to treat the President's sore toe.<sup>38</sup>

Then, too, Coolidge showed frequent and increasingly severe outbursts of temper after July, 1924, sometimes screaming in anger, and often over inconsequential matters. Also, he became spiteful and vindictive toward aides and White House employees, berating them, humiliating them, and filling them with feelings of fear and dread. Earlier, he had been polite and considerate toward subordinates. When he was Governor of Massachusetts, his secretary had described him as the "kindest, most understanding man he ever met, deeply considerate of everyone around him."<sup>39</sup> After 1924, however, it would be difficult to find anyone who would express such sentiments about Calvin Coolidge. In fact, the chief usher at the White House, who had served nine presidents, described him as "the hardest to please

<sup>34</sup> Edward Connery Lathem, *Your Son, Calvin Coolidge* (Montpelier, VT: Vermont Historical Society, 1968), 62–63.

<sup>35</sup> See Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and The Modern Presidents* (New York: The Free Press, 1990). <sup>36</sup> Lathem, 216. <sup>37</sup> McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge*, 390.

<sup>38</sup> Papers of Joel Boone, Autobiography, Box 47, p. 645 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress). <sup>39</sup> Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 198.

and least thought of” chief executive, a man so unpleasant, so “positively unkind” and even so cruel that everyone tried to shun him as much as possible.<sup>40</sup>

Some aspects of the President’s behavior went beyond cruelty and actually suggested sadistic tendencies. For example, when Coolidge went fishing, he insisted that a Secret Service agent bait his hook. One observer reported that on at least one occasion, the President deliberately jerked the line sharply, just as the agent was baiting the hook, in an effort to embed the fishhook in the agent’s hand.<sup>41</sup> On another occasion, the First Lady accidentally embedded a fishhook into her finger as the President stood at her side. He made no attempt to assist his distressed wife and instead simply looked on and then walked away. His behavior in this instance infuriated members of the Secret Service detail.

Not surprisingly, in the period after his son died, Coolidge’s relationship with members of his family became increasingly tempestuous. His interactions with his wife were marked more and more often by shocking explosions of temper. Sometimes he would become enraged at her, even in the presence of others. On one occasion in 1927, for example, the First Lady intended to go horseback riding and so purchased a complete riding outfit which she happily modeled for the President in the White House. His reaction embarrassed her deeply and stunned onlookers. As one of them later wrote, “when he saw her, the President was furious. He really hit the roof and screamed in anger and told her to take off that apparel and never let him see it again.” He then stormed out of the room. This same onlooker also reported that “Mrs. Coolidge seemed heartbroken and, of course, very disappointed.” She never appeared in her riding outfit again and never rode horseback while she was in the White House.<sup>42</sup>

The President even became suspicious of the First Lady, apparently thinking at one point in the summer of 1927 that she had become romantically involved with her Secret Service agent. They had gone walking one morning along mountain trails in South Dakota, where the Coolidges were vacationing, and apparently had difficulty finding their way home. When they arrived back at the lodge some 75 minutes late, the President was consumed with rage. He had the agent abruptly reassigned and replaced, without giving him a chance to defend himself. A close observer described Mrs. Coolidge as

<sup>40</sup> Irwin Hood Hoover, *Forty-Two Years in the White House* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1934), 323.

<sup>41</sup> Frank Cormier, *Presidents are People, Too* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1966), 119.

<sup>42</sup> Papers of Joel Boone, Autobiography, Box 47, 621, 895–96.

being despondent over the incident and, from that day forward, she was never willing to travel in the company of one Secret Service agent alone.<sup>43</sup>

Coolidge's clashes with his wife were not surprising since somewhere between 75–90 percent of marriages experience severe strains after the death of a child.<sup>44</sup> Communication between the President and the First Lady had never been free-flowing. Coolidge had rarely discussed matters of importance with his wife, leading her to comment that he did not respect her education, even though she held a university degree. She once claimed that she was “rather proud of the fact that after nearly a quarter of a century of marriage, my husband feels free to make his decisions and act upon them without consulting me or giving me advance information concerning them,”<sup>45</sup> but on occasion at least, such treatment must have rankled. After their younger son died, not only did their interpersonal relationship deteriorate but sharp disagreements arose between them over their surviving son, John. The President showed almost constant irritation at him, complaining of his clothing, his laziness, his companions, his manners, and provoking John to tell a friend that visits to the White House were “like being in the penitentiary” and that he was “damn glad” to get away from his father.<sup>46</sup> The First Lady complained to a friend at the time that her husband was unwilling to talk over his concerns with John “man to man” but that she would stand behind her son unflinchingly. This attitude caused Coolidge's anger at John to spill over onto the First Lady, badly straining the marital bond.

Further, Coolidge experienced severe guilt feelings as a result of his son's death. This is not unusual for individuals who are highly conscientious in their behavior patterns. Millon explains that the conscientious-compulsive personality, characterized by compliance to the expectations of others, a strong sense of duty, hard work, and a deflated sense of self-esteem, is predisposed to self-reproval and guilt. Indeed, they are strong candidates for generalized anxiety disorders.<sup>47</sup> As both boy and man, Coolidge had always been conscientious and hard working – at least until the summer of 1924. In addition to this high level of conscientiousness, psychiatrist C. Knight Aldrich tells us that Coolidge exhibited several prominent compulsive traits. “He was on time to a fault. ... He was a compulsive counter: he would count the cars in the White House parking spaces and the apples in the bowl

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 839–41, 846–47.

<sup>44</sup> Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After*, 171–73.

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence E. Wikander and Robert H. Ferrell, *Grace Coolidge: An Autobiography* (Worland, WY: High Plains Publishing Company, 1992), 65.

<sup>46</sup> Papers of Joel Boone, Autobiography, Box 47, 604.

<sup>47</sup> Millon, *Disorders of Personality*, 519–520, 526.

on the dining room table. He was troubled by dirt. . . . He was penurious.”<sup>48</sup> As a conscientious-compulsive personality, Coolidge clearly blamed himself and his own political ambitions for creating the circumstances that led to the death of his son, writing in his autobiography: “we do not know what would have happened to him under other circumstances but if I had not been President, he would not have raised a blister on his toe, which resulted in blood poisoning, playing lawn tennis on the South Grounds.”<sup>49</sup>

It is likely that Coolidge experienced another kind of guilt feeling that commonly afflicts those who have lost someone close to them. According to psychologist Erich Lindemann, this leads the bereaved to search “the time before the death for evidence of failure to do right by the lost one. He accuses himself of negligence and exaggerates minor omissions.”<sup>50</sup> Coolidge had been extremely busy throughout the years of his children’s lives. Time for them had always been sharply limited. Indeed, he had to have realized that, just like his own father before him, he had been an absentee parent during much of his sons’ upbringing and had loved his sons too often from afar. He had chosen to spend most of his time away from home and had deliberately decided not to have his sons join him in Boston or later in Washington, DC when they conveniently might have done so. Instead, they first remained back in Northampton and eventually were transferred to Mercersburg Academy, a Pennsylvania school chosen precisely because it was far enough away to preclude too frequent visits to the White House. After the death of young Calvin, this must have been a very painful recollection for the President. Also painful must have been the recollection that Coolidge had occasionally allowed his frugality to interfere with his sons’ visiting with him, once telling his father that the boys had visited their parents “only” four weeks before and that “it does not seem as if it would pay to have them here again as it would cost about \$100.”<sup>51</sup> Soon, all the money in the world could not make possible another visit between this father and his cherished son.

During the first eleven months of his presidency, a period of time that coincided almost perfectly with the final months of his younger son’s life,

<sup>48</sup> C. Knight Aldrich, M.D., “Personal Grieving and Political Defeat”, in *Papers on Presidential Disability and the Twenty-Fifth Amendment*, Vol. 3, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 88.

<sup>49</sup> Coolidge, *Autobiography*, 190.

<sup>50</sup> Erich Lindemann, “Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief,” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 101 (1944), 142.

<sup>51</sup> Amherst College, Miscellaneous Manuscript Collection, Calvin Coolidge to Frank Stearns, circa 1922, Folder 22.

Coolidge had been totally enthralled by his new position and had thrown himself wholeheartedly into its many responsibilities. Not only was he the new President of the United States but he had to launch a campaign almost immediately for the nomination of his party for the upcoming general election battle. He had been so busy that his sons had not visited him for more than a month after he became President and he rejected several other opportunities to spend time with them. For example, in June, 1924, he was invited to Mercersburg Academy to hear his sons sing but he declined, saying that he “couldn’t leave Washington even for an afternoon.”<sup>52</sup> This decision must later have distressed him greatly since it came just a month before young Calvin’s voice was silenced forever. It is understandable, then, that Coolidge’s political successes and his great enjoyment of the presidency, followed so closely by the death of his favorite child, would create severe guilt feelings and these emerge forcefully in his autobiography. As Matsakis points out, “survivor guilt is tortuous. Part of the torture is that the burden of guilt feels unending because there is no way to undo the past.”<sup>53</sup>

There was another possible reason for Coolidge’s guilt feelings on his son’s death. These go back to his experiences as Vice President and specifically, to his relationship with his chief, Warren Harding. As Aldrich explains, Coolidge may well have seen Harding as a father figure who was obstructing his own career aspirations and, as a result, may have wished for his death. That he became President after his wish was realized “would stir up an inner unconscious guilt over the fulfillment of his unacceptable wish for the father figure to disappear. If so, it would make him vulnerable to any event ... which could be interpreted as punishment for the unacceptable wish.”<sup>54</sup> His young son’s tragic death, then, just eleven months after Harding’s, may well have been seen by Coolidge, at least in part, as God’s punishment for his wicked thoughts.

Whatever the source of his guilt, it is no wonder that, according to one of the doctors treating the boy, the President became “hysterical” when he learned that his son was on the point of death and shouted that he would soon join him “in the great beyond and requesting that young Calvin so inform” the president’s dead mother. The doctor later wrote that this was “the most touching and heart-rending experience of my whole professional career.”<sup>55</sup> It had been Coolidge’s as well and the President’s mourning knew no end. His enduring grief not only produced the striking *personal* behavior changes

<sup>52</sup> Papers of Calvin Coolidge, PPF/3/14/2, Coolidge Sons, Forbes Library.

<sup>53</sup> Aphrodite Matsakis, *Survivor Guilt* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1999), 119.

<sup>54</sup> C. Knight Aldrich, M.D., personal communication with the author, 9 Sept. 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Albert Komer, M.D., “A President’s Grief,” *Time*, 18 July 1955, 55.

discussed above but also profound *political* changes that reverberated across his presidency and that affected the entire American political landscape.

#### Political Changes

In his earlier political career, Coolidge had shown himself to be a politically astute and conscientious leader. As Mayor of Northampton, Massachusetts, he had been an effective and hard-working chief executive, spending more time on his duties than any of his predecessors. As President of the Massachusetts State Senate, he had dominated that body, deciding what legislation would, and would not, be considered on the floor. As Governor, he was seen as a strong and resolute leader, one who used a hands-on approach toward state administration. As Vice President of the United States, he was described as “the workhorse of the Harding Administration.”<sup>56</sup> As a new president, almost immediately after being informed of Harding’s death, Coolidge moved quickly to signal his being in control by instructing the Secretary of State to meet with him as soon as he returned to Washington and by sending for General Pershing and giving him specific instructions about the handling of Harding’s state funeral.<sup>57</sup>

Not only did Coolidge take control of the executive branch with firmness but he also defended it effectively from legislative encroachments. When in February, 1924, for example, the Senate passed a resolution, directing the President to remove from office the Secretary of the Navy, Coolidge rejected it firmly and rebuked that body for violating the Constitution’s separation of powers principle. Despite his combativeness in this instance, he worked hard at establishing positive relationships with key congressional leaders, calling them often to the White House for consultations and sending them congratulatory messages for their accomplishments and even their birthdays. Reaching out to members of Congress of all political persuasions, Coolidge launched a series of White House breakfasts and dinners in an effort to develop strong rapport with as many Senators and Representatives as possible. He even ignored the objections of the American Legion and the misgivings of his Attorney General by pardoning those found guilty of violating the Sedition Law during World War I because he felt that those who favored such a pardon could be vital legislative allies.<sup>58</sup> So hard did he work at his

<sup>56</sup> *L’Independent*, Fall River, Massachusetts, 2 June 1921, Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts.

<sup>57</sup> Papers of Charles Evans Hughes, Reel 16, Library of Congress; Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 313.

<sup>58</sup> Guy Fair Goodhue, *Calvin Coolidge: A Study in Presidential Inaction* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1969), 147.

legislative responsibilities during these early months that he actually stopped talking morning walks in order to have more time available to interact with Congress. Even while on board the presidential yacht, Coolidge regularly studied legislation and was accompanied by a stenographer who helped him draft messages. In late May, 1924, he confided to reporters that he was “working rather hard and getting tired out.”<sup>59</sup>

The hard work paid handsome dividends for the President. His first State of the Union Address, delivered in person by Coolidge to the two Houses, was an impressive and well-received document in which he proposed an extensive and quite progressive agenda. He made thirty identifiable requests, including the enactment of environmental legislation, an expansion in veterans' benefits, the establishment of a separate Cabinet-level department of education and welfare, an expansion of the civil service system, a constitutional amendment imposing limits on child labor, and the establishment of a Permanent Court of International Justice. The reaction to the address in both Congress and the country was enthusiastically positive and by June of his first year in office, much of his legislative program had been enacted, giving him a record of achievement that was impressive.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, Coolidge showed interest in and aptitude for the conduct of American foreign policy and personally directed various of its aspects. For example, he restored diplomatic relations with Mexico which he referred to as “our sister republic” and strengthened US–Mexican relations by asking Congress to provide funds to settle claims resulting from the 1914 American invasion.<sup>61</sup> Also, a month after becoming President, he responded to a catastrophic natural disaster that had killed 130,000 people in Japan by summoning the Secretary of State to the White House for consultations and then almost immediately dispatching the US Pacific Fleet to Japan to help provide relief. He acted so quickly, in fact, that the US ships arrived on the scene even before their Japanese counterparts.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Coolidge's personal note of sympathy was the first received from any foreign head of state by the Japanese emperor.

In his actions in both domestic and foreign policy, Coolidge impressed the political elite with his diligence and decisiveness. Members of Congress praised him for being astute and bold. Reporters were so impressed with his

<sup>59</sup> Howard Quint and Robert Ferrell, *The Talkative President* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1964), 39.

<sup>60</sup> Fred L. Israel, ed., *The State of the Union Addresses of the Presidents, 1790–1966*, Vol. 3 (New York: Chelsea House, 1967), 2642–55; Papers of Calvin Coolidge, MS/5/1-1B/36, “Recommendations 1923 and Actions Taken,” Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts. <sup>61</sup> McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge*, 179. <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 178–79.



performance at press conferences that they described him as being “more communicative than any man, with the possible exception of Theodore Roosevelt, who ever sat in the White House.”<sup>63</sup> Chief Justice Taft referred to him as “most courageous” in dealing with matters vital to the public interest and praised him for the “quickness with which he acts, the hardheadedness that he displays and the confidence that he is stirring in the people.”<sup>64</sup>

After his son’s death in July 1924, however, Coolidge shied away from exercises of power and became indecisive and withdrawn. He refused to assist members of his administration in making decisions and instructed them to act on their own authority rather than trying to seek guidance from him. When Secretary of State Frank Kellogg spoke to the President in June 1925 about a pressing problem in US foreign relations, Coolidge simply told him to “use your own judgment.” Later, when Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew sought to consult with him about an important matter confronting the State Department, Coolidge responded, “I don’t know anything about this. You do ... and you’re in charge. You settle the problem and I’ll back you up.” When his Secretary of Labor, James Davis, tried to learn through a subordinate Coolidge’s view on a matter of labor policy, the President became enraged and snapped to the subordinate, “you tell ol’ man Davis I hired him as Secretary of Labor and if he can’t do the job, I’ll get a new Secretary of Labor.”<sup>65</sup>

After July, 1924, Coolidge’s interactions with Congress grew perfunctory and infrequent. His State of the Union Addresses were no longer delivered in person but rather sent over to the capitol to be read to each House by clerks. His requests to the legislature now were fewer in number and most of them were of minor consequence. In 1925, for example, he began his message by announcing that his proposals responded to “comparatively small and apparently temporary difficulties needing adjustment and improved administrative methods.”<sup>66</sup> No wonder legislators paid him little heed. His 1927 and 1928 messages were similarly lightweight in tone and his pallid recommendations aroused little interest in Congress or the country. In these messages, Coolidge recommended such proposals as that the Post Office Department should be granted power to make long-term contracts for carrying the mail; that the powers of the Auditor of the Phillippines should be clarified; that the law requiring the Secretary of the Interior to make leases of

<sup>63</sup> *Boston Globe*, 2 Sept. 1923, Scrapbook, Vol. 25, 37, Massachusetts State library, Boston.

<sup>64</sup> Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 337.

<sup>65</sup> L. Ethan Ellis, *Frank B. Kellogg and American Foreign Relations, 1925–1929* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 109. Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 406; Starling, *Starling of the White House*, 209. <sup>66</sup> Israel, *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents*, 2669–88.

land belonging to the Osage Indian tribe should be repealed and that Congress should provide a place in which to locate a marble statue commemorating those who lost their lives in 1898 when the battleship *Maine* was destroyed.<sup>67</sup>

Coolidge provided no leadership to the administration's legislative allies in either chamber in the post-1924 period. Rather than cultivate key members of the House and Senate as he had done before, the President now was oddly aloof and even offended members of Congress with his occasionally rude indifference. Once, for example, a congressman who visited him was ignored and allowed to "cool his heels," a fact that appalled even Coolidge's closest supporter.<sup>68</sup>

Rather than trying to emphasize the *interdependence* of the executive and legislative branches, as he had done during his first year in office, Coolidge now emphasized the *independence* of Congress and indicated that it must be respected. The few bills that he sent over were intended for legislative *consideration* but no real effort was made to lobby for their passage. Even more striking, Coolidge now began to suggest that Congress was the *superior* branch for making policy decisions because its contacts were so much broader than his. In February 1926, for example, Coolidge stated to the press that members of Congress "come in contact with a great many sources of information merely as a result of their large number that do not come to a single executive. ... The Congress ought to be left with a pretty free hand to make its own determinations and reach its own decisions."<sup>69</sup> This had certainly not been his earlier opinion.

Beyond doubt, Coolidge's interest in public affairs dwindled precipitously in the period after his son died. For example, in his first year as President, he had taken a keen interest in the economic problems that were cropping up in various parts of the country. When several banks in the Northwest failed in early 1924, the President showed his concern and his commitment to resolve the problem. He announced on January 24, 1924 that "we are making plans to see what we could possibly do to relieve that situation. ... The Federal Reserve Bank and the Federal Reserve Board are going to do what they can. I have been in conference with Comptroller Dawes about it and the War Finance Corporation stands ready to be of any possible assistance." These words reveal an informed and involved President, one ready to intervene

<sup>67</sup> For a fuller discussion of Coolidge's post-1924 State of the Union Messages, see Gilbert, *The Tormented President: Calvin Coolidge, Death and Clinical Depression*, 186–89.

<sup>68</sup> Papers of Joel Boone, Diaries, Box 40, August 25, 1926, Library of Congress.

<sup>69</sup> Quint and Ferrell, *The Talkative President*, 97.

personally in economic problems and use the machinery of the federal government to improve economic conditions in the northwestern states.

After his son died, however, Coolidge's stance was a remarkably different one. In September 1927, he revealed his pervasive passivity when he told the press that "I haven't any information about the action of the Federal Reserve Board in lowering the re-discount rate in Chicago ... This is a board that does function and ought to function entirely apart from the Executive ... I do not recall that I have ever made any suggestion to the Board as to any action that it ought to take." Four months later, Coolidge again showed himself to be a poorly informed and disinterested President when he responded to a question about a pressing economic problem by announcing to the press: "I am not familiar enough with the exact workings of the Federal Reserve System so that comments I might make relative to the amount of brokers' loans and so on would not be of much value." As if that was not bad enough, Coolidge embarrassed himself further when, in May, 1928, he announced: "I have no information relative to proposed legislation about loans on securities. I saw by the press there was a bill pending in the House or the Senate. I don't know what it is or what its provisions are or what the discussion of it has been."<sup>70</sup>

The President's transformation was complete. In early 1924 he had expressed great concern about bank closings in *one* region of the country and had pledged an activist stance in surmounting them. Later, however, he announced that the responsibility for handling *national* economic problems did not lie with him. Also, although he had earlier contacted the Federal Reserve Bank, the Federal Reserve Board, the War Finance Corporation and the Comptroller of the United States in a concerted effort to provide federal assistance to the Northwest, he later indicated that he knew little about the Federal Reserve System, regarded the Federal Reserve Board as wholly independent of the executive branch, never made recommendations to it, and had no interest whatsoever in potentially important economic legislation then pending in Congress.

The same shattering transformation could be seen in agricultural policy. In March 1924, Coolidge had revealed himself to be concerned and proactive in trying to lessen the nation's agricultural problems. He announced to the press:

Now that there has been a failure to pass the bill known as the Norbeck-Burness bill, I am going to ask the Agricultural Credit Corporation to function in the same way that the provisions of the bill would have functioned. That is, to assist farmers

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 135, 137–38, 142.

in diversification. That organization was created as a result of the conference I called here on the 4th of February and the bankers and businessmen of the northwest, mid-west and down as far as New York at once joined and raised a \$10,000,000 fund which can of course be supplemented by a loan from the War Finance Corporation, about \$20,000,000 or \$30,000,000 more, which ought to enable them to assist very materially in diversification.

In 1925, however, the President was a far different man. Now he delegated the farm problem to Congress, announcing to the press that, "The members of the Congress, and especially the members of the House and Senate Committees on Agriculture come from the agricultural regions. They are much better informed than I am as to the necessity for present action." Soon after, Coolidge made a rather surprising admission to reporters: "I don't know as I can make any particular comment about the rejection of the conference agriculture bills. I don't know enough about the details of those bills to discuss the details with any intelligence."<sup>71</sup> Once again, the active and committed President of early 1924 had been replaced by a president who failed not only to provide leadership on agricultural policy but had even neglected to *review* the agricultural legislation that had been drafted by congressmen and Senators and was then being debated in each House.

In the area of US foreign policy, the same presidential disengagement can be seen. Perhaps the best demonstration of this is reflected in two important issue areas of the time, the World Court and American relations with China. In each of these, the President withdrew wholly from the field and allowed others to provide the leadership that is normally seen as being the province of the President. This represented a significant departure from the activism he had shown earlier in shaping the nation's external relations.

At the beginning of his presidency, Coolidge was interested in the establishment of a World Court. As a sign of this interest, he met with influential journalists and noted public figures on the issue almost immediately after becoming president and promised to keep an open mind on the subject and to continue to consult widely. In his first Annual Message, he urged acceptance of the World Court protocol and then tried to persuade the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to endorse it. He wrote to one prominent Senator and told him that "in order that there may be no misunderstanding about my position in relation to the International Court, I refer you again to my message and will restate that the plan ... has my approval." He also told the press: "I know the Senate Foreign Relations Committee are working on it ... I had a conference the other night with several of them in which ... I

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 124–25.

told them that I had taken my position and virtually gone to the country on it.”<sup>72</sup>

However, in 1925, when the Senate moved toward a resolution of the issue, the president – now in mourning – was thoroughly disinterested and provided no support or encouragement whatsoever to his legislative allies. Although Senators added objectionable language to the proposal before finally approving it, Coolidge did nothing to dissuade them from doing so. Instead, he remained silent and aloof. Historian Donald McCoy writes that Coolidge “gave the impression of constitutional impartiality while the struggle went on in the Senate.”<sup>73</sup> In the final analysis, his profound indifference doomed the proposal to failure since the objectionable language added to the protocol by the Senate was rejected by the other signatory nations.

A second foreign policy issue from which the President was wholly detached represented one of the few international achievements credited to the Coolidge administration: the rapprochement that developed in the late 1920s between the United States and China. Despite the great turmoil existing in China at the time, the United States communicated its willingness to renegotiate existing treaties with this country before other major powers had done so. In 1928, China and the United States signed a major new treaty giving China tariff autonomy, extending most-favored-nation status to both nations and recognizing Chiang Kai-Shek’s government as being legitimate. This pact represented an American triumph and reinforced the position of the United States as one of China’s principle friends.<sup>74</sup> The President, however, played essentially no role in achieving this triumph and stood by mute and indifferent. Instead, the lion’s share of the credit must go to Secretary of State Frank Kellogg who served as the major architect of American policy in the Far East in the later years of the Coolidge administration. When he had attempted to discuss his thoughts about China with the President, he learned immediately that Coolidge had no interest at all in them and was entirely willing to follow whatever policy his Secretary of State might construct. Kellogg was occasionally frustrated, if not irritated, by the President’s absentee leadership style but had no alternative than to acquiesce in it.

It is difficult to believe that the man who served as President of the United States from August, 1923 until July 1924 was the same man who served as President of the United States during the following five years. The former

<sup>72</sup> Papers of Calvin Coolidge, PPF/12/681/10, George Pepper, Coolidge to Pepper, 24 May 1924, Forbes Library; Quint and Ferrell, 206. <sup>73</sup> McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge*, 359–61.

<sup>74</sup> Warren I. Cohen, *Empire Without Tears: America’s Foreign Relations 1921–1933* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 83.

President was shrewd, politically involved and diligent; the latter disinterested, negligent and lackadaisical. Coolidge's presidency – and indeed his political life – was thus strangely truncated. Dividing it sharply was the tragic death of his favorite child, 16-year-old Calvin Jr.

### A CRISIS OF GENERATIVITY

Psychologist Eric Erikson wrote about mid-life crises and their precipitating factors. He indicated that “the crisis of middle age occurs when an original man first stops to realize what he has begun to originate in others.” He argued, therefore, that the dominant crisis of middle age is that of “generativity” which he defined as “primarily the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation.”<sup>75</sup> Calvin Coolidge's boyhood experiences established a framework for the crisis of generativity that would eventually engulf him. Despite being born into a fairly well-to-do family, the harsh deprivations he suffered in his youth likely planted in him feelings of alienation. This began shortly after his birth with his father's spending part of each year away from home, leaving young Calvin in the charge of his sickly mother and his stern grandmother. It continued with the death of his grandfather when he was six, his mother when he was twelve and his only sibling when he was seventeen. Although Calvin had always been reliable and conscientious in meeting fully the expectations of his elders, the events of his childhood taught him that such behavior did not always reap rewards or result in personal happiness and contentment.

For many years, Calvin Coolidge continued to be true to his family values of thrift, hard work and reliability. He eventually established a family, built a law practice and then entered into a successful political career on the local, state and national levels. Consistently, he worked hard, whether as Mayor, State Legislator, Governor, Vice President and also as a new President. Although without strong social skills, he demonstrated impressive leadership ability and considerable political astuteness. The culmination of his hard work came in his easy nomination victory at the Republican National Convention in 1924 when he crushed his nearest competitor by the lopsided margin of 1065 delegate votes to 34. Once again, however, he learned that his hard work and conscientiousness would not spare him from personal tragedy

<sup>75</sup> Eric H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1958), 225.

or prevent his universe from disintegrating.<sup>76</sup> Now, his favorite child – the image of his dead mother – was taken from him at the crowning moment of his political career. All of his power did not allow him to save his own son. Calvin Coolidge simply did not survive this crisis of generativity.

Overwhelmed with guilt at his son's death, Coolidge's personal behavior changed in several notable respects and, more importantly, he recoiled from his presidential responsibilities. Becoming estranged from politics, he served out his four remaining years in office as a broken, and heartbroken, man. Deeply depressed, Coolidge became a distracted, disinterested and absentee leader. The loss of his son was a crushing blow and the defining moment of his life.

Clinical depression, even today, is often difficult to diagnose because the symptoms that patients report are so varied.<sup>77</sup> Although it may seem problematic to now offer such a “diagnosis” in the case of a man so long dead, it is important to note that not only did Coolidge exhibit so many symptoms of the illness but also that several of his contemporaries noted and commented on the changes in his behavior patterns that *they* had observed. In fact, those closest to him saw a very troubled man. His wife remarked that after young Calvin died, the President had lost his “zest for living.”<sup>78</sup> His surviving son reported that his father “was never the same again after my brother died.”<sup>79</sup> One of his White House physicians, unfamiliar with clinical depression, simply described him as “emotionally deranged” and his private secretary found him to be showing signs of “mental illness.”<sup>80</sup> Clearly, something quite profound and quite noticeable to those closest to him had taken place in Coolidge's life and he would never recover from its effects.

Although Coolidge had been a difficult husband to Grace and an absentee father to his sons, he still regarded family as quite important. One close observer once commented that “deep went the roots of Calvin Coolidge and they were close bound about that wife of his and the children.”<sup>81</sup> Such “roots” are not unusual since strong emotional bonds tie parents to their children throughout life. Children are both love objects for their parents and projections of themselves into the future.

<sup>76</sup> See Harry Stack Sullivan, “Psychiatric Aspects of Morale,” in *Personality and Political Crisis*, ed. Alfred H. Stanton, M.D. and Stewart E. Perry (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1951), 48–49.

<sup>77</sup> Lewis Wolpert, *Malignant Sadness* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>78</sup> Ishbel Ross, *Grace Coolidge and Her Era* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1962), 188.

<sup>79</sup> John Coolidge, interview with the author, 2 Aug. 1997.

<sup>80</sup> Papers of Joel Boone, Autobiography, Box 47, p. 1006, Library of Congress.

<sup>81</sup> Ross, 188.



That Calvin Coolidge saw family ties as vital was strikingly revealed in a letter of condolence he wrote to President Harding's father in August 1923: "I know these must be days of sadness for you and yet I feel you may find in them that satisfaction which has come to few American fathers. You have seen the entire rise and triumph of your distinguished son. It is a memory that you will always cherish as a great blessing."<sup>82</sup> Just eleven months after writing these words, Coolidge had to live with the terrible realization that he would never see the "entire rise and triumph" of his own son because the boy had died at the tender age of sixteen. This was especially painful because, as he later disclosed, "it seemed to me that the world had need of the work that it was probable he could do."<sup>83</sup>

Coolidge had become father of his country in middle age. Because he believed that he had "failed" in middle age as father to his son when his son most needed him, Coolidge's sense of himself as father to his country withered and died. Of his dead son he later wrote: "when he went, the power and glory of the presidency went with him."<sup>84</sup> This is a quite startling confession. According to Coolidge's own interpretation of events, the presidency that had begun with such high hopes and such positive signs in August 1923 virtually disintegrated just eleven months later. The victim of depressive illness, the President became a badly disabled leader. All too truly, then, Calvin Coolidge's personal loss became a national tragedy.

<sup>82</sup> Papers of Calvin Coolidge, PPF/7/67/4, Dr. George T. Harding, Forbes Library.

<sup>83</sup> Coolidge, *Autobiography*, 190.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*