

# COOLIDGE QUARTERLY

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## PRESIDENTIAL GIFTS OF STATE: A MUNIFICENT HISTORY

BY RUSHAD L. THOMAS

International diplomacy can be a tremendously tricky business, even in the most prosaic respects. On his first state visit to the United Kingdom in 2009 President Barack Obama was excited about the opportunity to meet Queen Elizabeth II. "...I'm very much looking forward to meeting her for the first time later this evening," the President remarked.

On arriving at Buckingham Palace Mr. and Mrs. Obama were welcomed into the Queen's private apartments, whereupon both niceties and gifts were exchanged. The Queen opted for the present she always gives to visiting heads of state, an autographed portrait of herself. President Obama, however, went for a less traditional offering: an iPod loaded with videos and photos from her 2007 visit to the United States, some musical selections, and a few of his own speeches. The Queen, far from being confounded, welcomed the gift with great equanimity. The British press, however, was not amused by this seeming symbol of presidential chutzpah. Apparently the Queen's gift was just personal enough, but President Obama's gift was *too* personal. Thus the newly-minted president of the United States got his first taste of the delicate nature of presidential gift-giving.

Gift exchanges between heads of state go back as far in history as the nation-state itself. These presents often serve to lubricate foreign policy when nations have dealt with the inevitable strains of competing economic and political interests. Ceremonial gestures of goodwill gradually became a standard element of diplomacy.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution certainly understood the long, well-established history of gift exchanges between government dignitaries. Despite this, they opted to ban all U.S. government officials from accepting gifts from foreign leaders without the express consent of Congress. Article I, Section 9 of the Constitution reads:

*"And no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State."*

This constitutional gift ban is accompanied by language prohibiting U.S. citizens from holding titles of nobility. The leaders of our young republic enacted this ban to set a more egalitarian tone after an arduous revolutionary war fought against the ennobled monarchy of Great Britain.

Despite this strict ban, President George Washington quickly established the custom that gifts presented to him as America's head of state were received as gifts to the American people, not as personal tokens. The consensus arose that it would be impolite and unnecessarily harmful to U.S. foreign relations to reject such gifts. Washington opted for full disclosure, rather than strictly enforcing the prohibition. When President Washington received a flag from a French emissary, he quickly replied "The transaction will be announced to Congress, and the colors will be deposited with [the] Archives."

Thomas Jefferson kept only book gifts, and auctioned off all other tokens, depositing the proceeds in the Treasury. Abraham Lincoln received a great variety of gifts, and he had no compunction whatsoever about taking gifts and not disclosing them. Indeed, President Lincoln often forgot to thank the givers of those gifts.

In recent history the law has been tightened up to ensure the gifts received by presidents remain in the custody of the Federal Government. The Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act of 1966, the Presidential Records Act of 1978, and later modifications of both, govern the management of presidential gifts. Regarding foreign gifts, presidents may accept them if, to quote the official language from the Federal Register, “non-acceptance would cause embarrassment to donor and U.S. government.”

Any gift the president or First Lady accepts must be disclosed under provisions of the Ethics in Government Act of 1978. Federal regulations require these disclosures to name the source of the gift, provide a description, and estimate the value of any gift(s) from the same source that, taken together, have a value that exceeds \$260.

President Obama, for instance, has accepted many gifts from foreign dignitaries, including a bronze colored bust of Mahatma Gandhi, four bottles of tequila, and a silver-embellished trunk from the mayor of Guadalajara. Gifts of more than nominal value, including those mentioned here, have been documented and turned over to the National Archives and Records Administration.

In Coolidge’s day the legal status of presidential gifts was much less definite. The Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act of 1881, which was the governing statute of Coolidge’s era, stipulated that any gift given to the president by a foreign government could be lawfully received only if “tendered through the Department of State, and not to the individual in person...” The law also required Congressional approval before the State Department could forward the gift to the president.

### **PRESIDENTIAL GIFTS EXHIBIT COMING SUMMER 2016**

This summer the President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site will exhibit a number of gifts of state received by President and Mrs. Coolidge during their White House years. This article, written by Foundation program associate Rushad Thomas, details many such gifts and examines them in the broader legal and historical context. The exhibit, entitled “Expressions of Esteem: The Coolidge Presidential Gifts from Near and Far,” has been prepared by William Jenney, the site administrator, and opens on May 28.

However, prevailing protocol in Coolidge’s time deviated from this strict language. Many of the gifts granted to the Coolidges during their six years in the White House remained with the family after leaving Washington and were subsequently gifted to organizations such as the Forbes Library in Northampton, Ma., and the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation. This was not uncommon in those years. Sarah Andrews of the Woodrow Wilson House reports that President Wilson

accepted many gifts, including a Gobelin tapestry from the French government. The Wilsons tried to leave the tapestry at the White House on their departure, but the donor, the French government, objected.

Exploring the gifts the Coolidges received reveals a fascinating dimension on the Coolidges’ White House years. Indeed, these gifts demonstrate the unique opportunity the president has to meet and greet the great and the good, as well as the ordinary and downtrodden. The Coolidges knew both as they welcomed the tokens of good will presented to them so often during their time in the White House.



### ARMENIAN ORPHAN RUG

President Coolidge surveys the Armenian Orphan Rug with the Vice Chairman of Near East Relief, Dr. John Finley (Courtesy: The Missak Kelechian Collection).

Among the more poignant tributes in the Coolidges' receipt was the Armenian Orphan Rug, also known as the Ghazir Orphans' Rug, woven by orphans in the midst of the Armenian genocide in Lebanon in the early 1920s. Over one-hundred thousand of these orphans had been assisted by the Near East Foundation, an American welfare and refugee assistance organization. In gratitude for the generosity of the American people, a contingent of four-hundred orphan girls wove the rug over an 18-month period. The rug was presented to President Coolidge at the White House on December 4, 1925. Upon receiving the gift, President Coolidge remarked:

*"This, their expression of gratitude for what we've been able to do for this country for their aid, is accepted by me as a token of their goodwill to the people of the United States who have assisted in the work of the Near East Relief. Please extend to these orphans my thanks and the thanks of the vast number of our citizens whose generosity this labor of love is intended to acknowledge. The rug has a place of honor in the White House where it will be a daily symbol of goodwill on earth."*

The rug measures 11" x 7" and is composed of 4,404,206 individual knots. The rug also includes a label on its back, which reads "In Golden Rule Gratitude to President Coolidge." This is in reference to the annual Golden Rule fundraising campaign, held on the first Sunday of December, in which Americans were encouraged to forego one meal and donate the money saved to Near East Relief.

In March 1929, after more than three years in the White House's Blue Room, the rug went with the Coolidges as they returned home to Northampton, Ma. After Calvin and Grace Coolidge died the rug remained with their son John Coolidge, who decided to return it to the White House during the Reagan Administration. The rug has remained a live political controversy to this day because of the sensitivity of the Armenian Genocide issue to both the Turkish Government and the Armenian people.

For many years the rug was simply tucked away in storage, but pressure from several members of Congress and the Armenian American community led the White House to permit the display of the rug briefly in late 2014 at the White House Visitors Center. This gift highlights the tremendous sensitivity presidential gifts can evoke, even decades after they were first received.

The Coolidges received other gifts under much more fortuitous circumstances. In 1926 the President received the curious offering of twin lion cubs from the Mayor of Johannesburg, South Africa. The Coolidges were known for their exotic pets, including Rebecca the Raccoon (originally intended for the dinner plate), but the Coolidges opted not to keep the lion cubs in the White House, sending them to the National Zoological Park in Rock Creek.

The president did put his mark on the cubs first, however. In keeping with his pro-growth, fiscally-responsible policies, he named the cubs "Budget Bureau" and "Tax Reduction." He insisted that the cubs be fed the same amounts to keep them the same weight, symbolizing his commitment to both cutting federal spending and lowering taxes, in equal weight.



### BUDGET BUREAU AND TAX REDUCTION

The Coolidges' twin lion cubs, named Budget Bureau and Tax Reduction, in their cage at the National Zoo. The cubs were given to the Coolidges by the mayor of Johannesburg, South Africa (Courtesy: The Library of Congress).

Other gifts bespoke deep and lasting ties between the United States and other countries. In 1926 Their Royal Highnesses Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf and Crown Princess Louise of Sweden made an official visit to the United States to attend the dedication of the Statue of John Ericsson, a gallant Swede who conceived the Monitor class of vessels that helped the Union triumph in the Civil War. The Crown Prince and Crown Princess began their visit in New York City on May 27, 1926, where they were received by Mayor Walker at City Hall and participated in a press pool interview.



### GLASS BOWL

This glass bowl and saucer were given to the Coolidges by Their Royal Highnesses The Crown Prince and Crown Princess of Sweden on their official visit to the United States in 1926 (Courtesy: Vermont Division for Historic Preservation).

That same day they made their way to Washington, D.C., where they were received at the White House by President and Mrs. Coolidge. As a memento of their visit, Their Royal Highnesses gifted the Coolidges with an engraved glass bowl and under tray. This gift can be seen on permanent display in the museum at the President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site.

Those illustrious Bernadottes were not the only royal personages to call upon the Coolidges in the White House. Her Majesty Queen Marie of Romania, a granddaughter of Britain's Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, also made an official visit to the Coolidge White House. On October 18, 1926 Queen Marie, along with her son and daughter Prince Nicolas and Princess Ileana, landed in New York City and were feted with a ticker-tape parade. They then progressed to Washington, D.C., where they were received by President and Mrs. Coolidge. The Queen's gift to the Coolidges was a signed photograph in a silver case. The First Couple held a state dinner in her honor at the White House.

Julia P. Gelardi's book *Born to Rule: Five Reigning Consorts, Granddaughters of Queen Victoria* provides an amusing account of Queen Marie's experience at the White House:

*"Like President Wilson before him, a morose President Calvin Coolidge was not prepared to be enchanted by Marie of Romania. The White House visit, in which Marie sparkled in her diamond tiara and a Jean Patou gown of white velvet, had its awkward moments, thanks to the Coolidges' dour attitude. After lighting up a cigarette together with Alice Longworth, Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Marie was ushered out of the White House in less than two hours."*

From royals to revolutionaries, we turn to Cuba, a nation whose relations with the U.S. have been fraught with difficulty for more than a century. In Coolidge's day Cuba and the U.S. had much more straightforward dealings.



A democratic republic at the time, it was governed by Gerardo Machado y Morales. On April 25, 1927, during the Cuban president's visit to Washington, President Coolidge was given a ceremonial medal and the insignia of the Great Cross of Cuba's National Order of Merit. The President also received a more traditional island gift, a humidor stuffed with cigars. Coolidge thanked Machado for "the wonderful chest of Cuban cigars."



## HUMIDOR

The President of Cuba gave this humidor for storing cigars to the Coolidges in 1927 (Courtesy: Vermont Division for Historic Preservation).

Machado sought in these overtures to extend a gesture of goodwill to the United States. The Cuban president wanted revisions of the 1903 treaty that governed Cuba's relationship with the United States, as well as the relaxation of certain trade and tariff barriers that prevented freer commercial exchange between the island nation and America. Each of the gifts Machado gave is on permanent display in the museum at the President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site (although for some reason the cigars have disappeared).

Coolidge's policy towards gifts received after the presidency appears to have been stricter. In his retirement years a diamond bracelet came from an American woman who, according to the account of newspaperman Herman Beaty, felt "that in these times there was nobody she felt she could trust except Mr. Coolidge." The woman asked that Coolidge safeguard the bracelet for her. Beaty reported that, "He [Coolidge] treated that diamond bracelet as if it were a scorpion." He returned the thing straight away, ensuring that the postal receipt was retained in his files and witnesses could be produced in case any accusations of impropriety arose.

\* \* \*

Efforts to catalogue every gift the Coolidges received in the White House could fill many books. Shining a light on these bequests puts a more human face on events and people long since gone. The 1920s brought tremendously consequential personalities and events to the orbit of the White House. By peeling back the shadows of history we can understand those events more clearly and inform ourselves about the great contributions of Coolidge and his era. We hope you will visit the President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site this season to see firsthand many of Calvin Coolidge's presidential gifts of state.

**RUSHAD THOMAS** is the Program and Editorial Associate at the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation. In this capacity he coordinates all programming for the Foundation, including lectures, the debate program, and other events. He is also in charge of the Foundation's social media outreach, and is responsible for the website and the blog. Additionally, Rushad manages the Foundation's research and scholarship efforts.



A native of Bushnell, Florida, Rushad attended Florida A&M University as a Bill Gates Millennium Scholar, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science in December 2011. In May 2014 Rushad obtained a Master of Arts degree in Government from the Robertson School of Government at Regent University. He has been with the Coolidge Foundation since May 2014.

# “DEAD PRESIDENTS”

## AN INTERVIEW WITH BRADY CARLSON



**BRADY CARLSON** is a host on *New Hampshire Public Radio*. His new book, *Dead Presidents: An American Adventure into the Strange Deaths and Surprising Afterlives of our Nation's Leaders*, explores the myriad ways in which our presidents are remembered. In this interview with the Coolidge Foundation, Mr. Carlson discusses the book.

Photo Courtesy of Brady Carlson.

**COOLIDGE FOUNDATION (CCPF):** How did you develop your fascination with American presidents?

**BRADY CARLSON (BC):** It's something I've always had. As a kid I'd go to the library and check out piles of books on the presidents - each one seemed so unique, important and fascinating. The more I learned, the more interested I became.

**CCPF:** When did you decide to compile all these presidential stories into a book?

**BC:** Seeing all the graves is something I've wanted to do since I visited my first (Abraham Lincoln), but it was while covering the 2012 New Hampshire presidential primary that the idea came back up. Seeing would-be presidents up close always reminds me of the past presidents, I guess. And in looking into the graves I realized there was a bigger story to tell - about how and why we remember and honor the presidents in these ways after they're gone.

**CCPF:** Did you have any trouble finding any of the presidential graves you visited?

**BC:** Yes, actually. Most of them are clearly marked and easy to find. But several are in large, rural cemeteries with winding paths, and I get lost easily.

I allowed for extra time when I was tracking those down.

**CCPF:** How did the way presidential legacies are remembered and presented change in the 20th century?

**BC:** Presidential libraries have been a huge change in how we mark presidents. In the past, leaders would mostly rely on history to judge them. But the library system lets the presidents add their own voices back into the debate. Critics say the presidents get too much leeway in portraying their time in office. That said, many of the libraries have top-notch exhibits and invaluable documents that shed light - favorably or unfavorably - on each presidency. And, of course, most of the presidents who have federally-funded libraries are also buried on the grounds of their libraries.

**CCPF:** What are some unique ways that fans of more obscure presidents have sought to build up their legacies?

**BC:** The Lyndon Johnson Library in Austin, Texas has an animatronic version of the president. And it tells jokes! Apparently there was talk at one point about putting it out to pasture but there was a public outcry and he and his jokes stayed put.

**CCPF:** Your description of the interplay between Presidents Ronald

**Reagan and Calvin Coolidge is very poignant, yet the two men had real differences, both in their presidencies and in the ways they've been memorialized. How do you think the dichotomy between these two speaks to their personas?**

**BC:** I'm glad you spotted that, because I found the comparisons and contrasts between the two really interesting. Coolidge, despite his reputation, was an able public speaker - his "brave little state of Vermont" speech is proof of that - but he tended to use that gift in a very functional way. And he was one of only a few presidents to essentially downplay his legacy - he had offers for large monuments but he turned them down. Reagan, on the other hand, saw politics in cinematic terms. He recognized that in the public mind, personalities and narratives matter. After death, Reagan has become a big part of the American conservative narrative - which is why there are these ongoing efforts to name something after him in every county in the United States. That's something Calvin Coolidge never

would have wanted. So while the two had something in common philosophically, their approaches in life and death have been quite different.

**CCPF: Your description of the President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site and the Plymouth Cheese Factory is fantastic. Would you agree that the Coolidge Site is one of the best presidential sites in America? If yes, why?**

**BC:** The Coolidge site is one of my favorites, and I'm not just saying that because this interview is for the Coolidge Quarterly. I love learning about life in Plymouth Notch when the president was young - my now 4-year-old was fascinated by the "Treadmill For A Horse" that's included in the collection. Among presidential sites it tells a unique and interesting story - not to mention the delicious cheese.

**CCPF: Is there a less well-known presidential site you'd highly recommend to our readers?**

**BC:** One of the best parts of writing this book was getting to travel to some hidden gems. One of my favorites is the library of Coolidge's successor, Herbert Hoover, in West Branch, Iowa. It does a nice job of showing the social, cultural and technological changes during the presidencies of both Coolidge and Hoover. And once a year they have people come to town and play the only sport named for a president, "Hoover-Ball," which the president himself played on the grounds of the White House. We Americans have found some really creative and unique ways to remember our leaders.

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## COOLIDGE RETREAT

JUNE 30 – JULY 4, 2016



## “CITIZENSHIP, THE CONSTITUTION, AND IMMIGRATION”

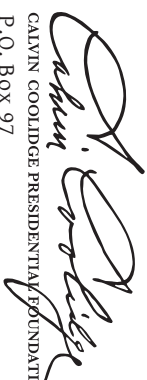
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