

COOLIDGE QUARTERLY

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THE LITTLE KNOWN HISTORY OF COOLIDGE AND CIVIL RIGHTS

BY KURT SCHMOKE

A few years back I wrote a piece for the online magazine *Politico.com* in which I referenced President Calvin Coolidge as one of this country's early civil rights pioneers. After my article was published I received a number of letters from people who were unaware of and surprised by President Coolidge's record. Indeed, our nation's thirtieth president played an important role in advancing the cause of civil rights for African Americans during the fraught years of the 1920s. Like much about Calvin Coolidge's administration, this story has long been glossed over. Yet the historical record testifies of Coolidge's commitment to the ideal outlined in the Declaration of Independence: that all men are created equal. He worked in many quiet ways to advance that ideal during his six years in the White House.

In the aftermath of the Civil War enslaved blacks were set free. Not only that, they were also empowered by amendments to the Constitution that gave them citizenship rights, voting rights, and the right to equal protection and due process under the law. We tend to forget this, but all of those protections were added to our governing document by a Republican Congress. Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president, issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and helped enact the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery, although he was assassinated before it came into force in late 1865.



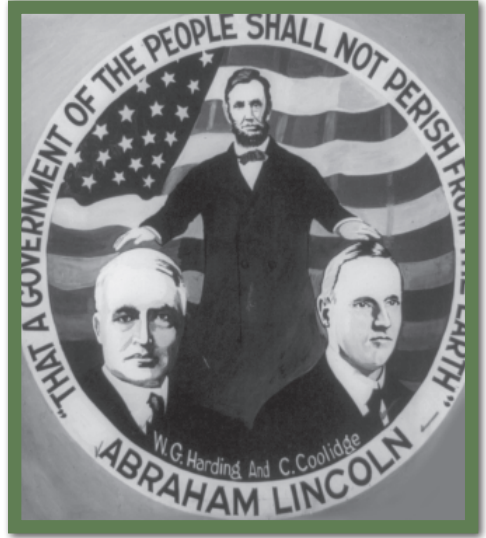
Calvin Coolidge greets an African American man on the grounds of the White House in 1925 (Courtesy of the Library of Congress).

As a result of these actions, newly enfranchised African Americans joined the Republican Party in droves. Their political influence in the South increased at astonishing rates: Mississippi appointed the first two African Americans, Hiram R. Revels and Blanche K. Bruce, both Republicans, to the United States Senate in the 1870s (Senators were appointed by state legislatures at the time). African Americans were elected to offices up and down the ballot throughout the South. They even held a majority of seats in the South Carolina Legislature for a period of time in the 1870s, taking their place as heirs to the promise of freedom.

Unfortunately, the Compromise of 1877, which ensured the election of Rutherford B. Hayes to the White House, led to the effective revocation of those previously enacted rights. Union troops were withdrawn from the South as a consequence of the compromise, and the former Confederate states were left free to “redeem” themselves from the African American political and social empowerment of the previous decade through the establishment of the Jim Crow segregation system. Black participation in Southern political life, which had reached impressive levels in the decade to 1877, gradually began to decline due to a campaign of terror and intimidation carried out by racists.

In the wake of this revanchist trend the Republican Party lost nearly all power and influence in the South, but GOP presidents like Theodore Roosevelt made symbolic gestures to maintain the support of African Americans in the North. In 1901 Roosevelt invited his friend Booker T. Washington, a pioneer of African American improvement, to dine with the First Family at the White House. This was a revolutionary gesture. Despite the fact that African American slave labor had constructed the Executive Mansion nearly one-hundred years earlier, no African American had ever been invited to dine there with the president and his family. One day after the dinner the White House issued a press statement entitled “Booker T Washington of Tuskegee, Alabama, dined with the President last evening.”

Northern newspapers posited that Roosevelt’s gesture signaled his intention to govern on behalf of all the people, including blacks. The Southern papers were nowhere near as circumspect in their reactions. For instance, the *Memphis Scimitar* announced the meeting by saying “the most damnable outrage which has ever been perpetrated by any citizen of the United States was committed yesterday by the President.”



HEIRS TO LINCOLN

The Harding-Coolidge ticket receives the heavenly benediction of the martyred President Abraham Lincoln, whose action in the Civil War saved the Union and freed enslaved African Americans (Courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Southern politicians used even more inflammatory language. For instance, Mississippi Senator James K. Vardaman remarked that, as a result of Washington’s visit, the White House had become “so saturated with the odor of nigger that the rats had taken refuge in the stable.”

More than ten years later Woodrow Wilson, a man whom we acknowledge was a great president in many ways, outdid himself in promoting racist policies. He refused to support a law criminalizing lynching, even after thousands of African American soldiers who had fought valiantly in the First World War came home facing harassment; some of those African American veterans were lynched in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Wilson also actively moved to segregate the Federal civilian workforce. To make matters worse Wilson held a screening at the White House of the film “The Klansmen,” also known as “The Birth of a Nation,” which glorifies the infamous white supremacist terrorist organization the Ku Klux Klan.

Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge succeeded Wilson in the presidency. During his two years in the White House, Harding made a few laudatory statements about African Americans, but did not go very far in attempting to improve their plight. It was Calvin Coolidge who, surveying the landscape of the country, thought we could do better.

In particular, Coolidge recognized an opportunity in historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C. Howard University was founded in the years following the Civil War by members of the First Congregational Church of Washington, D.C., the house of worship the Coolidges attended during their White House years. President Coolidge's commitment to self-improvement and self-determination prompted him to call for a major appropriation for Howard in his 1923 State of the Union message, the first of his presidency. In that speech, Coolidge said: "Already a considerable sum is appropriated to give the negroes vocational training in agriculture. About half a million dollars is recommended for medical courses at Howard University to help contribute to the education of 500 colored doctors needed each year."

Coolidge's efforts matched both his commitment to civil rights and to education as a means of social uplift for African Americans. Coolidge's \$500,000 foundation helped improve medical care and health outcomes for African Americans. It also laid the groundwork for future presidents to build upon, sending more Federal dollars to Howard. This enabled the university to catalyze the creation of a middle class in the African American community. To this day Howard is considered the "Harvard" of historically black universities, granting more PhDs to African Americans than any other higher education institution in the country. Howard has produced an impressive array of African American leaders in all areas of life, from Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall to Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. Coolidge's appropriation helped lay the groundwork for that impressive record.

Beyond providing financial support for Howard, Coolidge wanted to make a bold statement about his commitment to the equality of African Americans. In this spirit, on June 6, 1924, Coolidge went to Howard University to deliver the spring commencement address.



President Calvin Coolidge delivers the commencement address to an open-air assembly at Howard University on June 6, 1924 (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Coolidge began his address by referencing the sad history of slavery and the importance of religious leaders in ending that wretched period in American history. He highlighted the importance of small business in the African American community, giving both legitimacy to these businesspeople and also recognizing the vital role small businesses played in the building of the African American middle class. Then he looked out at the Howard graduates and said the following:

“NUMBERED AMONG OUR
POPULATION ARE SOME
12,000,000 COLORED PEOPLE.
UNDER OUR CONSTITUTION
THEIR RIGHTS ARE JUST AS
SACRED AS THOSE OF ANY
OTHER CITIZEN. IT IS BOTH A
PUBLIC AND A PRIVATE DUTY
TO PROTECT THOSE RIGHTS.”

*President Calvin Coolidge,
First Annual Message to
Congress on the State of the
Union, December 6, 1923.*

The nation has need of all that can be contributed to it through the best efforts of all its citizens. The colored people have repeatedly proved their devotion to the high ideals of our country. They gave their services to the war with the same patriotism and readiness that other citizens did. The propaganda of prejudice and hatred which sought to keep the colored men from supporting the national cause completely failed. The black man showed himself the same kind of citizen, moved by the same kind of patriotism as the white man. They were tempted, but not one betrayed his country. They came home with many decorations, and their conduct repeatedly won high commendation from both American and European commanders.

The words Coolidge spoke in this speech were astonishing. Many African Americans who had fought in the First World War came home from that conflict to a society woefully in thrall to state-sanctioned segregation.

Many of America's black veterans received honors from the French government, but their sacrifices and contributions to their homeland were met with disregard when they sought a remedy to their plight. In his Howard speech Coolidge acknowledged the patriotism of African Americans, even in the face of contrary voices, who tried to persuade them that they shouldn't fight for the United States. African Americans had not failed their country, but their country had definitely failed them.

As Coolidge's speech continued, he praised Howard and the leadership role its graduates played in America. He ended by returning to the theme of the national crisis which the United States was bound to encounter in the future:

We cannot go out from this place and occasion without refreshment of faith and renewal of conscience, that in every exigency, our negro citizens will render the best and fullest measure of service wherefore they are capable.

Race relations were by no means perfect in the 1920s. The Klan was resurgent in the early part of the decade, even overshadowing the Democratic National Convention in 1924. Coolidge gave his most pointed rebuke to the Klan spirit during his 1925 speech to the American Legion in Omaha, where he said “whether one traces his Americanism back three centuries to the *Mayflower*, or three years of the steerage, is not half so important as whether his Americanism of to-day is real and genuine. No matter by what various crafts we came here, we are all now in the same boat.”

REPORTED BLACK VICTIMS OF LYNCHING; 1882-1963

YEAR	NUMBER	YEAR	NUMBER	YEAR	NUMBER	YEAR	NUMBER
1882	49	1903	84	1924	16	1945	1
1883	53	1904	76	1925	17	1946	6
1884	51			1926	23	1947	1
1885	74	1905	57	1927	16	1948	1
1886	74	1906	62	1928	10	1949	3
1887	70	1907	58	1929	7	1950	1
1888	69	1908	89			1951	1
1889	94	1909	69	1930	20	1952	0
1890	85	1910	67	1931	12	1953	0
1891	113	1911	60	1932	6	1954	0
1892	161	1912	61	1933	24	1955	8
1893	118	1913	51	1934	15	1956	0
1894	134	1914	51	1935	18	1957	0
1895	113	1915	56	1936	8	1958	0
1896	78	1916	50	1937	8	1959	1
1897	123	1917	36	1938	6	1960	0
1898	101	1918	60	1939	2	1961	1
1899	85	1919	70	1940	4	1962	0
1900	106	1920	53	1941	4	1963	1
1901	105	1921	59	1942	6	1964	1
1902	85	1922	51	1943	3		
		1923	29	1944	2		

Source: Historical Statistics of the United States: From Colonial Times to the Present (1975)

As Coolidge biographer Amity Shlaes has noted, “Under Coolidge... lynchings themselves became less frequent and Ku Klux Klan membership dropped by millions.” Famous African American civil rights icon W.E.B. DuBois remarked that in the 1924 presidential election Coolidge received a million votes in the black community. He was worthy of them all.

Nearly forty-one years later to the day after Coolidge’s address, President Lyndon B. Johnson went to Howard University to give the commencement address. In that memorable graduation speech President Johnson proclaimed: “... it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.”

In his speech, Johnson committed himself to binding up the nation’s racial wounds and finally enforcing the constitutional guarantees of equal protection and due process Abraham Lincoln and his collaborators placed in the Constitution one-hundred years before.

Calvin Coolidge forged the path that led to Johnson’s actions four decades on. It was Calvin Coolidge who led the way and helped the country on its long road to improving race relations and shaping a more perfect union. Reared in an age where prejudice against blacks was standard fare, Calvin Coolidge stood firm for the principle of equal protection under law for which Abraham Lincoln died. For that, we must applaud the 30th president of the United States.



KURT SCHMOKE is president of the University of Baltimore. He served as mayor of Baltimore from 1987 to 1999 and was Baltimore City State’s Attorney from 1982-1987. Prior to joining the University of Baltimore, he was dean of the Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C., from 2003 to 2012. Following that, he was appointed general counsel for Howard and also served as the institution’s interim provost. Schmoke earned his undergraduate degree in history from Yale University. He pursued graduate studies on a Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford University and earned his Juris Doctor degree from Harvard Law School.

THE MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY: COOLIDGE'S VISION FULFILLED

BY RUSHAD L. THOMAS



The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, overlooked by the Washington Monument. (Photo courtesy of Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC).

On September 24, 2016 America's first African American president, Barack Obama, presided at the ceremony to inaugurate the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. This living monument to America's black heritage was many decades in the making, and in some respects the effort can be traced back to our own President Calvin Coolidge. On his final day in office, March 4, 1929, President Coolidge signed Public Resolution 107 which initiated a commission to design and construct a national monument to the Negro, which would stand as a "tribute to the Negro's contributions to the achievements of America."

Unfortunately, the legislation was signed without any funding attached, due to the demands of recalcitrant southern Democrats in Congress. With the onset of the Great Depression during Herbert Hoover's presidency the project eventually fizzled out. It wasn't until the 1960s Civil Rights era that African American lawmakers and leaders reignited the plan. After many years of struggle, President George W. Bush signed the authorizing legislation for the museum in 2003. The National Museum of African American History and Culture now stands as the fulfillment of the initiative President Coolidge launched in 1929.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH: A PROUD CIVIL RIGHTS LEGACY

BY RUSHAD L. THOMAS

Marian Anderson is a civil rights icon, known to history as one of the greatest African American musical artists of the 20th century. In 1939 Anderson was kept from singing at Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution due to her skin color, prompting then-First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to resign her membership of the DAR. Then, in dramatic fashion, Mrs. Roosevelt organized a concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where Anderson sang before a crowd of 75,000 people.

This famous event looms large in our collective memory of Marian Anderson. Yet a decade and a half before her famous Lincoln Memorial concert, Anderson sang in another presidential venue: Washington, D.C.'s First Congregational Church. What made First Church a presidential venue? It was the church of Calvin and Grace Coolidge.

Everett O. Alldredge's "Centennial History of First Congregational Church 1865-1965" tells the story of this tremendous house of worship. He notes that at its founding in 1865, First Congregational Church was well ahead of its time on issues of race and civil rights. Indeed, a major internal feud in the church's early years made strikingly clear that First Church would tolerate no racial biases whatsoever. On one side of the feud was General Oliver Otis Howard, a charter member of First Church and a powerful man in Washington as head of the Freedmen's Bureau. On the other side was Rev. Charles Boynton, the church's first pastor.

On a fundraising trip to St. Louis in 1867, Howard made remarks stating that First Church would be open to members of all races, including African Americans. This message was well received by Howard's racially tolerant audiences.



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH ON EASTER SUNDAY 1925

President and Mrs. Coolidge were thronged by adoring crowds as they attended Easter Services at the First Congregational Church in 1925 (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress).

While Howard was away, Rev. Boynton preached a sermon entitled “A Duty Which the Colored People Owe to Themselves,” in which he presented two alternative paths for newly-emancipated African Americans. The first path, preferred by Gen. Howard, involved what Rev. Boynton called “racial intermingling,” with blacks and whites integrating together. The second path, which Rev. Boynton advocated, would see African Americans pursuing their own independent path, completely divorced from social and economic integration with whites. Several African Americans had wanted to join First Church, but withdrew their applications after hearing the sermon.

When General Howard returned to Washington he was taken aback by Boynton’s sermon. He strongly supported equality for African Americans and the integration of schools and churches. The row eventually led to a split in the congregation, with Boynton leading a rump out of the Congregational Church entirely and into the Presbyterian Church. Those who remained at First Church were determined that their next minister would be “free of every kind of racial bias.” That commitment to racial inclusivity continued to shape the character of First Church. Over the course of many years First Church helped found several Congregational parishes that welcomed African Americans in the Washington, D.C. area, several of which still gather for worship to this very day.

It is notable that when the Coolidges arrived in Washington in 1921 they selected First Church as their own house of worship. After all, First Church’s reputation as one that welcomed people of color was well-known, given its history. Certainly any church in Washington would have been happy to count among its worshipers the Vice President and his family, but the Coolidges chose First Church. Their decision to worship there

may have been influenced by the Rev. Jason Noble Pierce, a fellow Amherst man who served as pastor of First Church. Pierce led congregations in Massachusetts before coming to First Church in September 1920. He would serve as an important spiritual adviser to the President.

In late 1925 First Church was approached by the College Alumnae Club, a scholarship organization led by educated African American women for the benefit of young black girls

seeking to attend Howard University and other eastern black institutions. The Club wanted to sponsor a fundraising recital at the church. First Church, being one of the few integrated congregations in Washington, readily obliged, and the date was set: November 10, 1925. But as the event approached, the originally scheduled singer, Charlotte Wallace Murray, took ill, forcing the club to find another headliner. They called upon an up-and-coming soprano from Philadelphia named Marian Anderson, certain that she would shine as a more than capable fill-in.



Marian Anderson sings The National Anthem at the dedication of a mural commemorating her concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, 1939. The ceremony was held at the Department of Interior on January 6, 1943 (Courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Anderson was born in Philadelphia in 1897. She grew up singing in her church, and faced racial discrimination when she applied to the Philadelphia Music Academy. Nonetheless, she persevered, taking lessons privately. Anderson's first major break occurred in June 1925 when she bested more than 300 competitors in a singing competition put on by the New York Philharmonic, leading the *Washington Post* to report that Anderson's performance received rave reviews "from leading musical critics and journals."

Anderson's star was rising as she was invited to sing at First Church. The recital featured great pieces including "Before My Window" by Rachmaninoff, "O Del Mio Dolce Ardor" by Gluck, and the spiritual "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho." "Schubert's 'Wohin' was especially good," the *Preston News* reported. "There was a large audience of both white and colored people," the wire service noted. Acclaiming Anderson's musical style, the paper continued:

...it seemed as though each successive song showed a successful answer to the various obstacles which have beset Marian Anderson's path. Her tone is beautifully resonant in every note of a wide range from lowest contralto to soprano heights. Her breath control is intelligent and without effort. All her energies are put into the pronunciation of her words and interpretation.

The article closes "there is undoubtedly a progressively great future before a singer with the voice and training that Marian Anderson possesses."

The historical record does not disclose any major blowback for First Church from hosting Anderson's recital. Nonetheless, it was daring for the church of the president to host such a concert in the mid-1920s. These were the years of state-enforced segregation, of lynchings and a resurgent Ku Klux Klan. It took courage and conviction on the part of Dr. Pierce and his congregation to open their doors to Anderson and the College Alumnae Club.

Neither does the record reveal any thoughts of the Coolidges regarding Anderson's recital at their family church, yet we know from President Coolidge's own letters and speeches just how he felt about the equality of African Americans. When he received a letter of complaint in August 1924 about a black Republican Congressional candidate in Harlem, Coolidge responded in part "...I quote my great predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt: '... I cannot consent to take the position that the door of hope—the door of opportunity—is to be shut upon any man, no matter how worthy, purely upon the grounds of race or color.'"

It is no coincidence the Coolidges worshipped at an integrated church. Doing so reflected their deepest values: fairness, justice, and equality under the law. Coolidge's example reminds us that even in those dark days of segregation there were men in high places willing to stand up for human dignity. Calvin Coolidge was one of those men, nurtured by the faith preached by the Rev. Dr. Jason Noble Pierce at Washington, D.C.'s First Congregational Church.



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.

CALVIN COOLIDGE AND CIVIL RIGHTS: THE REST OF THE STORY

BY DAVID PIETRUSZA

In August 1924, Harlem Republicans nominated a black dentist and former city alderman, Dr. Charles H. Roberts, for Congress in New York's 21st District. Not everyone approved. Among the critics was Army Sgt. Charles F. Gardner, stationed at Brooklyn's Fort Hamilton. Gardner, not revealing his army status, wrote to Coolidge in protest.

Regarding Dr. Roberts' Harlem congressional bid President Coolidge responded to Sgt. Gardner on August 9. Two days later he released his response to the press. Said the black *Brooklyn Daily Times*: "The President has made the clearest, quietest and most convincing statement on this subject yet made."

President Coolidge responded to Sgt. Gardner as follows:

My dear sir,

Your letter is received, accompanied by a newspaper clipping which discussed the possibility that a colored man may be the Republican nominee from one of the New York districts. Referring to this newspaper statement, you say:

"It is of some concern whether a Negro is allowed to run for Congress anywhere, at any time, in any party, in this, a white man's country. Repeated ignoring of the growing race problem does not excuse us for allowing encroachments . . ."

Leaving out of consideration the manifest impropriety of the President intruding himself in a local contest for nomination, I was amazed to receive such a letter. During the war 500,000 colored men and boys were called up under the draft, not one of whom sought to evade it. They took their places wherever assigned in defense of the nation of which they are just as truly citizens as

are any others. The suggestion of denying any measure of their full political rights to such a great group of our population as the colored people is one which, however it might be received in some other quarters, could not possibly be permitted by one who feels a responsibility for living up to the traditions and maintaining the principles of the Republican Party.

Our Constitution guarantees equal rights to all our citizens, without discrimination on account of race or color. I have taken my oath to support that Constitution. It is the source of your rights and my rights. I purpose to regard it, and administer it, as the source of the rights of all the people, whatever their belief or race. A colored man is precisely as much entitled to submit his candidacy in a party primary, as is any other citizen. The decision must be made by the constituents to whom he offers himself, and by nobody else. You have suggested that in some fashion I should bring influence to bear to prevent the possibility of a colored man being nominated for Congress.

In reply, I quote my great predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt: ". . . I cannot consent to take the position that the door of hope—the door of opportunity—is to be shut upon any man, no matter how worthy, purely upon the grounds of race or color."

Yours very truly, etc.

Calvin Coolidge

The NAACP's W. E. B. DuBois estimated that Silent Cal received a million black votes in the 1924 election. He deserved every single one of them.

A version of this article originally appeared at TheBlaze.com

A CHRISTMAS APPEAL

Dear Coolidge Friend,

Every year at this time, those of us at the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation reflect on the coming year. In 2017, we will do much to share President Coolidge's values and legacy with a national audience.

Our Coolidge Cup National Debate Tournament will continue to grow, teaching hundreds of high school students about Calvin Coolidge and the lessons of his presidency. We'll award our second class of Coolidge Scholars, and in the process reach thousands of ambitious high school students across the United States who will write essays on the values Coolidge cherished. We'll welcome hundreds of school children who will visit Plymouth Notch for the first time. And of course we'll continue to enjoy longtime traditions at Plymouth Notch when we celebrate Calvin Coolidge's birthday on the Fourth of July and the anniversary of President Coolidge's "Homestead Inauguration" in August.

We appeal to you for support of these worthy projects, and humbly ask that you consider making a tax-deductible end-of-year donation to the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation's exciting ventures.

Last year, donors who contributed \$100 or more to the annual appeal received a wonderful Christmas ornament depicting all the stages of Coolidge's life. This year we continue that tradition, and offer a brand

new ornament featuring the Union Christian Church, the Coolidges' historic church here at the Notch. This beautiful ornament, made of pewter, was produced by the world-famous firm Danforth, and was



sponsored by the Coolidge Foundation and the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.

We're pleased to offer an ornament complimentary to those donors who give \$100 and over.

An envelope for donations is enclosed. We hope you'll find it in your heart to support our annual fund in whatever way you can. All support is welcome and appreciated. Thank you for all you do to keep the memory of President Coolidge alive today.

Amity Shlaes, Chairman
Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation

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A COOLIDGE CHRISTMAS

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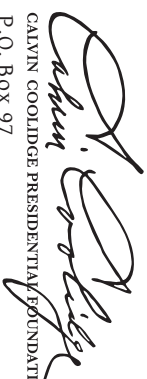


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