

How did President Coolidge champion civil rights during his political career?



April 1915 As president of the Massachusetts Senate, Calvin Coolidge had cast the deciding vote to ban D. W. Griffith's movie *The Birth of a Nation* after race riots greeted its Boston premiere. "The Boston triple censor bill advocated by opponents of the 'Birth of a Nation' came within an ace of striking a bad snag in the Senate yesterday," noted *The Boston Post*, "Only the action of President Coolidge in ordering his name called during a roll call prevented a reconsideration of the vote on Monday . . ."

1923 In his State of the Union speech, President Coolidge called for a major appropriation for historically black Howard University in Washington D.C. "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." Future presidents built upon this groundwork.



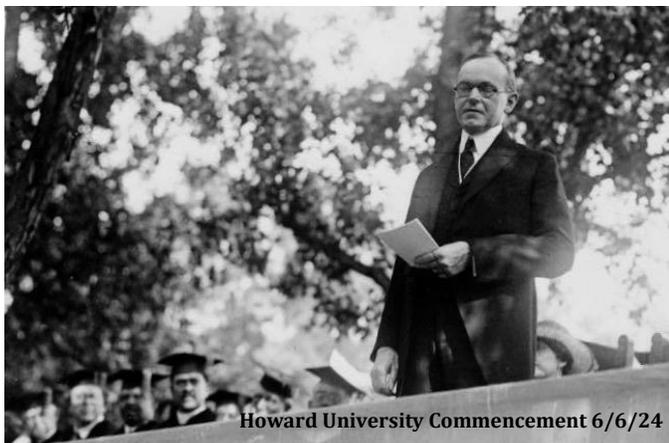
June 2, 1924 Inspired by the high rate of American Indian enlistment during World War I, President Calvin Coolidge signs the **Indian* Citizenship Act**.

June 6, 1924 Coolidge delivers the spring commencement address, "The Progress of a People" at Howard University.

August 9, 1924 Coolidge writes "Equality Of Rights," a letter written in response to a statement questioning the propriety of a black man seeking nomination as a Republican for a Congress.

(*The Chicago Defender*, a major black newspaper, praised the President for this rebuke with the front-page headline, "Cal Coolidge Tells Kluxers When to Stop.")

Sept. 21, 1924 Coolidge speaks before the Holy Name Society (a Catholic organization) "Authority And Religious Liberty".



Howard University Commencement 6/6/24

"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 in the war with the same patriotism and readiness that other citizens did.

What is the great need of American citizenship? To my mind it is this, that each should take up the burden where he is. "Do the day's work," I have said, and it should be done, in the remembrance that all work is dignified. Your race is entitled to great praise for the contribution it makes in doing the work of the world. 6/6/24

"To support the Constitution, to observe the laws, is to be true to our own higher nature. That is the path, and the only path, towards liberty. To resist them and violate them is to become enemies to ourselves and instruments of our own destruction. That is the path towards servitude. Obedience is not for the protection of someone else, but for the protection of ourselves. It needs to be remembered that it has to be secured not through the action of others, but through our own actions. Liberty is not collective, it is personal. All liberty is individual liberty." 9/21/24



Dedication of Jewish Community Center

From *Tolerance and Liberalism*:

To a great extent this country owes its beginnings to the determination of our hardy ancestors to maintain complete freedom in religion. Instead of a state church we have decreed that every citizen shall be free to follow the dictates of his own conscience as to his religious beliefs and affiliations. Under that guaranty we have erected a system which certainly is justified by its fruits. Under no other could we have dared to invite the peoples of all countries and creeds to come here and unite with us in creating the State of which we are all citizens.

But among some of the varying racial, religious, and social groups of our people there have been manifestations of an intolerance of opinion, a narrowness to outlook, a fixity of judgment, against which we may well be warned. It is not easy to conceive of anything that would be more unfortunate in a community based upon the ideals of which Americans boast than any considerable development of intolerance as regards religion.

Progress depends very largely on the encouragement of variety. Whatever tends to standardize the community, to establish fixed and rigid modes of thought, tends to fossilize society. If we all believed the same thing and thought the same thoughts and applied the same valuations to all the occurrences about us, we should reach a state of equilibrium closely akin to an intellectual and spiritual paralysis. It is the ferment of ideas, the clash of disagreeing judgments, the privilege of the individual to develop his own thoughts and shape his own character, that makes progress possible. It is not possible to learn much from those who uniformly agree with us. But many useful things are learned from those who disagree with us; and even when we can gain nothing our differences are likely to do us no harm.

May 3, 1925

Coolidge spoke on “The Spiritual Unification of America” at dedication of the Jewish Community Center in Washington, D.C.

October 6, 1925

Tolerance and Liberalism, a major presidential statement on tolerance delivered before the American Legion Convention at Omaha, Nebraska. (See below left.)

1929 Coolidge signed enabling legislation for a memorial celebrating “the Negro’s* contributions to the achievements of America.” This was a first step towards what would become the **Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture** in Washington D.C., opened September 16, 2016.

As President, Coolidge expressed his antipathy to the Klan by reaching out in a positive, public way directly to its victims: Blacks, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants, with whom he had good relations—especially so for Irish Catholics—going back long before the rise of the Invisible Empire. Coolidge sought to highlight their positive achievements and contributions to American life.

For full text of speeches and other information, see www.coolidgefoundation.org



*Colored and Negro are terms used in the past and Black or African American are in use today. Indian is now Native American.

For further information on the history of Ku Klux Klan see Jerry Wallace’s <https://coolidgefoundation.org/resources/essays-papers-addresses-23/>

Also see Kurt Schmoke’s article - coolidgefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/TheCoolidgeQuarterly_October2016.pdf

For the Klan in Vermont, see <http://vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/the-k-k-k-in-vermont-1924>

Timeline created by Diane Kemble, Education Director for the *Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation*. education@calvin-coolidge.org