

COOLIDGE QUARTERLY

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COOLIDGE AND THE CLASSICS

BY JIM OTTAWAY, JR.

Calvin Coolidge's study of the classical poets, orators, statesmen, and generals of Greek and Roman history helped him build the skills of clear thinking, writing, and speaking that made him an effective president of the United States.

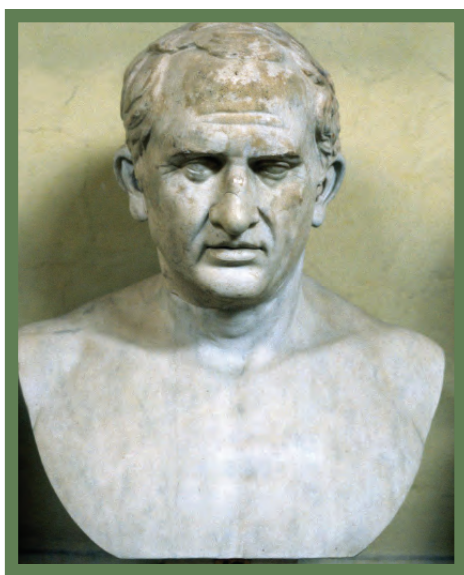
Coolidge didn't just learn the classics, he was born into them. The Coolidges, especially Coolidge's grandmother Sarah Brewer Coolidge, knew their Bible. The Greeks and Romans also enjoyed a place of respect in the Coolidge home—so much so that Coolidge's grandparents named one of their sons Julius Caesar. Among the family books in the collection Coolidge left behind were editions of Cicero's *Orations* and translations of Horace.

Coolidge's formal classical education began at the age of 14 when he left Plymouth Notch, his village, to attend Black River Academy, a high school in Ludlow, Vermont, ten miles from the Coolidge home.

In those days, classics dominated education. A transcript of Coolidge's courses and grades for his sophomore through senior years in high school (1887 to 1890) shows that seven of his 12 courses were in Latin and Greek classical subjects. Coolidge read Caesar, Cicero, and Virgil first. Next, Coolidge moved on to Demosthenes and Homer in Greek.

From the Fifth Century B.C. on, the study of rhetoric (a Greek word) or oratory (a Latin word) was rated essential to success in public speaking. That

was especially true for any man ambitious for public office and civic leadership in Greece or Rome. Many Americans in Coolidge's day still believed that progress without classics was difficult. Coolidge quickly came to the same conviction. An avid observer of politics as early as college, Coolidge was particularly interested in the *Orations* of Cicero, whose long political career paralleled the decline of the Roman Senate. The *Orations* held "my attention to such a degree that I translated some of them in later life," Coolidge wrote. In a 1932 *New York Times* story, Coolidge cited the *Orations* as one of his 14 favorite boyhood books.



Marcus Tullius Cicero. Young Calvin Coolidge studied and admired Cicero's *Orations*.

Coolidge biographer Amity Shlaes writes that Coolidge “gained an affection for the orations of Cicero and saw that he might use oratory in his own life,” as he did in his high school graduation speech (May, 1890) about the power of oratory. He spoke of “the force of Cicero’s oratory that helped to bring down dictators and made even Caesar tremble.”

It is difficult for 21st Century students brought up on Facebook, Google, and Wikipedia in our Internet Age to imagine Greek and Roman classics as core courses in British, German, and American universities. But classics were “core” in Coolidge’s day. When William Lyon Phelps, a popular professor of English at Yale College, proposed to the Faculty Senate in 1905 that he be allowed to give a course titled “Modern Novels,” Phelps was turned down. A crowd of 500 students staged a public protest of the faculty refusal.

Amherst College, which Coolidge attended from 1891 to 1895, had a strong offering in the classics. In his sophomore year, Coolidge studied Greek, rhetoric again, German, and analytic geometry. The undergraduate read Demosthenes’s speeches for the independence of Athens against Philip of Macedon and his all-conquering Macedonian armies.

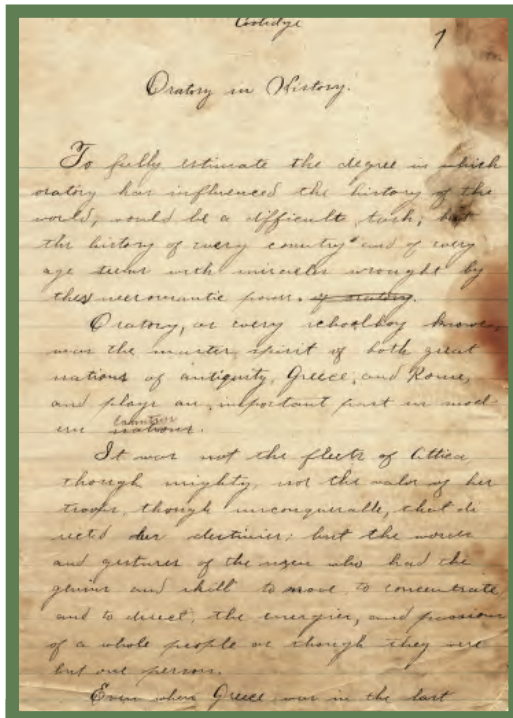
“Latin was not difficult for me to translate, but I never became proficient in

its composition,” Coolidge said. Coolidge later conceded he had found Greek difficult—not an uncommon reaction! “It is a language that requires attention and close application,” Coolidge said. “Among its rewards are the moving poetry of Homer, the marvelous orations of Demosthenes, and in afterlife an increased power of observation.”

Like many students of the ancient classics, Coolidge found wider uses for what he’d read. “I found that the English language was generously compounded with Greek and Latin, which it was necessary to know if I was to understand my native tongue. I discovered that our ideas of democracy came from the agora of Greece, and our ideas of liberty came from the forum of Rome.”

Coolidge soon appreciated the fact that his studies of Greek and Roman classics were basic to understanding Mediterranean and European history and literature.

But what of politics? Coolidge spent much of his career in government in Massachusetts, rising from ward committeeman to state representative to Governor of Massachusetts, with many stops on the way. At the time, many observers noted that Coolidge’s spare rhetoric evoked the classics. Coolidge’s style did not shift much when he became Vice President, or U.S. President. His style came from



Original copy of Coolidge’s speech “Oratory in History.” In the speech, delivered at a commencement ceremony for his high school in 1895, Coolidge described the power of oration and its Roman and Greek roots. (Image courtesy of the Vermont Historical Society.)

the Bible, from sermons he had heard at Plymouth Notch or in college, and from the heavily inflected classical languages, which waste not a word when they convey meaning.

“Antithesis,” a classical rhetorical device in which the speaker juxtaposes two contrasting ideas using a similar phrase, was one of Coolidge’s tools. Many peers rated Coolidge a master of antithesis. One example of Coolidge antithesis, found in a speech on the pilgrim fathers, read: “Measured by the standards of men of the time, they were the humble of the earth. Measured by later accomplishments, they were the mighty.” This passage was noted by the writer Charles Willis Thompson who classed Coolidge speeches as examples of “Attic Style,” the simpler, clearer, and more fact-based oratory common in the time of Julius Caesar.

The Stoics, who put virtue before instant happiness, clearly influenced Coolidge. In the last chapter of his autobiography, Coolidge discusses one of the most important decisions of his life,

whether to run for re-election in 1928. While considering the matter, Coolidge thought of past leaders. “We draw our Presidents from the people,” he recalled. “It is a wholesome thing for them to return to the people. I came from them. I wish to be one of them again... Months

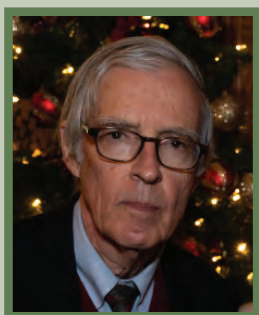
later I found that Washington said practically the same thing.” It would have gratified Coolidge’s ego to have been re-elected in 1928, and it is almost certain the American public would have granted Coolidge another term. But the right thing to do was to forgo that pleasure and retire.

It is very likely that Coolidge was also thinking of the highly-respected Roman citizen-soldier Cincinnatus. Cincinnatus agreed to serve his country for one year as

“dictator” to fight off an enemy tribe. But Cincinnatus also insisted on going back to his plough as a country farmer afterwards. And that’s what Coolidge decided as well. After serving the country for five years, Coolidge turned his back on a new campaign, and told Americans: “I do not choose to run for President in 1928.”

“THROUGHOUT THE 19TH CENTURY, VIRGIL WAS A CENTRAL FIXTURE IN AMERICAN GRAMMAR SCHOOL EDUCATION; THE ABILITY TO TRANSLATE PASSAGES ON SIGHT WAS A STANDARD ENTRANCE REQUIREMENT AT MANY COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES. JOHN ADAMS BOASTED THAT HIS SON JOHN QUINCY HAD TRANSLATED THE ENTIRE AENEID (OF VIRGIL).”

Classics Professor Daniel Mendelsohn of Bard College in *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2018.



JIM OTTAWAY, JR has a vacation farmhouse down a dirt road from the Plymouth, Vermont, cemetery where Calvin Coolidge is buried, and near his homestead where he was sworn in as President in 1923. A retired Director and Senior Vice President of Dow Jones, Ottaway studied Latin for four years at Phillips Exeter Academy, and started learning Ancient Greek after he retired from Dow Jones in 2003. He has translated 14 of the 24 books of the *Odyssey* into English, and continues that work.

WHY CLASSICS?

BY AMITY SHLAES

Today Americans have trouble talking to one another. We too often talk past one another. Many times we just want to push our own views. We lack common touchpoints. It is as if individuals are speaking different languages.

But we do have a common culture, the culture of classical Western civilization. Even those of us who were not raised in the classical Western traditions can find much to like, including the principle of democracy (Greece) or the principle of the rule of law (Rome and England). America's Founding Fathers taught and thought in terms of the Greek orator Demosthenes, the Roman Cicero, and the Bible.

America would not have known how to be America without this backdrop. To this day, many Americans are interested in the tension between a republic, on the one hand, and a democracy on the other, — that is, at heart what the debate about the Electoral College is about. Cicero lived that tension — and in fact died it, when he was murdered by his opponents' hit man for opposing the rise of the authoritarian state and dictatorship. The story of Cato and his fight against Roman corruption and the spoils system too remains relevant more than 2,000 years later. When

we worry about politicians who stay too long in office, we could learn something from Cincinnatus, who went back to the plow rather than rule too long. Cincinnatus inspired George Washington, and both men inspired Coolidge, who chose not to run for another term in 1928. Studying these men, their actions and their works helps us understand our own challenges.

Calvin Coolidge understood the need for classics (please see Jim Ottaway's article nearby). Coolidge was far from the only leader of his day to cast debates in terms of Cincinnatus or Cato. Classics do not have to be offered up as an exclusive curriculum in schools, but they can enrich everything else we study. Today, many students learn several different (programming) languages in order to code. If Python, why not also Latin? It is an understatement to say that Classics are enjoying a revival, with Greek and Latin being taught at many schools. In its August/September 2018 newsletter, the American Classical League reports a shortage of Latin teachers. Classical Conversations, a homeschooling program, has 120,000 students enrolled, and founder Leigh Bortins reports to us that the curriculum mandates Latin instruction for grades 7-12.



From left to right, Roman Dictator Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli), George Washington (by Gilbert Stuart), and Calvin Coolidge (by Joseph E. Burgess). All three chose to relinquish political power and return to civilian life.



John F. Kennedy addresses the crowds in West Berlin. (Photo courtesy of the White House.)

There is another reason to study classics. Classics give us an opportunity to bridge our gaps by providing common ground. Latin, especially, can serve as an international bridge. Catholics across the world still find one another through Latin, despite the fact that most masses take place primarily in the region's native language.

In 1962, the city of Berlin was under what seemed a permanent siege by the governments of the Soviet Union and East Germany. President John F. Kennedy travelled to speak in West Berlin—to an audience of hundreds of thousands. Kennedy wanted desperately to connect with the Berliners, to let them know the United States would not give up on Berlin. Kennedy turned to German to declare: “Ich bin ein Berliner.”

The President's German wasn't very good, and he knew it. Fortunately, he was also able to insert before the “Berliner” line a phrase in another language he did have in common with Berliners, Latin. Kennedy said, “Civis Romanus Sum,” “I am a Roman citizen.”

Like Kennedy, the Berliners knew a little Roman history and so they knew that he was referring to the fact that, in the days of the Roman Republic, Roman citizens needed only announce their citizenship to enjoy legal protections. Hearing Kennedy reference Rome in the context of their own safety reminded the Berliners in a dark time that the President from across the Atlantic was not only protecting a fellow nation, he was also protecting a larger community, theirs, and one to which we all still belong.



AMITY SHLAES is chairman of the board of the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation and CEO. She is the author, most recently, of *Coolidge* (Harper), a comprehensive biography of America's thirtieth president. Miss Shlaes is the author of three other *New York Times* best-sellers, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (HarperCollins 2007), *The Forgotten Man: Graphic Edition*, and *The Greedy Hand*, a history of the U.S. tax code. She currently serves as a Presidential Scholar at The King's College where she teaches economic history. Miss Shlaes lives with her family in New York, and is currently at work for HarperCollins on a history of the 1960s and the Great Society.

COOLIDGE IN WASHINGTON

From the Lincoln Memorial to the Woodrow Wilson House to Roosevelt Island, many presidents have a presence in Washington. This makes sense. Washington is not only our seat of government, but also headquarters of “history tourism” and where Americans go to learn civics.

But somebody is missing from those tours: Calvin Coolidge. The thirtieth president has no monument of his own.

Today the lessons and legacy of America’s thirtieth president are needed more than ever. Coolidge stared down a large national debt, balancing the budget every year while cutting taxes to a top rate of 25% — even lower than President Reagan achieved. He allowed space for enterprise to flourish, and oversaw one of the most prosperous and peaceful eras in American history. Heir to the Founders, Coolidge had a profound respect for the Constitution and American institutions. Coolidge conducted himself with a degree of civility we yearn for today.

The Coolidge Foundation is proud to bring the legacy of Calvin Coolidge to Washington and is excited to announce the opening of a new address there:

Coolidge House
3425 Prospect Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20007

Starting this year, Coolidge House will serve as a base for expanded operations of the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation. Coolidge House will serve as a place where people from across the country can come to learn about Coolidge and find inspiration from his legacy. Coolidge House will host an exhibit telling the Coolidge

story — from his boyhood days in Vermont to his time as Massachusetts governor to his remarkable presidency. Lectures, seminars, conferences, and special events will illuminate Coolidge principles. Importantly, Coolidge House will be a home for the Foundation’s Coolidge Scholars and will serve as a gathering place for the growing community of Coolidge enthusiasts.

Coolidge House is located at the historic Quality Hill property in the heart of Georgetown. The property was originally built in 1797 by John Thomson Mason, nephew of George Mason. Among past owners of the property is Senator Claiborne Pell, who together with colleagues, created the “Pell Grant,” an important source of college financial aid. It is wonderfully appropriate that the Coolidge Foundation, which operates the Coolidge Scholars Program, should now enjoy the same address.

We’re sure many visitors to Coolidge House will be inspired to plan a subsequent trip to the President’s hometown of Plymouth Notch, Vermont where the Coolidge Foundation remains dedicated to its ongoing work in partnership with the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation. Though the Foundation will now have two office locations, a visit to the “Notch” will remain as meaningful as ever. We look forward to continuing our Vermont programs, including school visits, high school debate, naturalization ceremonies, the Coolidge 5K, and celebrations such as the Fourth of July and the anniversary of Coolidge’s 1923 “Homestead Inauguration,” while launching new events and programs in the nation’s capital.

**COME JOIN US IN 2019 IN
 WASHINGTON AND PLYMOUTH!**



*Coolidge House at Quality Hill
3425 Prospect Street, N.W.
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...AT COOLIDGE HOUSE



YOUR GIFT OF \$250 ENDOWS AN ACTUAL CHAIR IN YOUR NAME!

Your donation of \$250 to the Coolidge Foundation will endow **not of a professorship but an actual chair** at Coolidge House, complete with an engraved plaque with your name to recognize your contribution.

Coolidge House is an important milestone in the Coolidge Foundation's long held goal of bringing President Calvin Coolidge back to the national stage, but needs furnishings in order to hold events. Your chair will make Coolidge House ready to welcome Coolidge fans such as yourself, and to host Coolidge-related programs, seminars, and special events in our nation's capital.

Be a part of Coolidge Foundation's latest endeavor and donate today at www.gofundme.com/endow-a-chair

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