

A Toast to President Coolidge and his Foundation  
Annual Gala Dinner, Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation  
The Union League Club, New York City, 7 December 2021

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One of the many fine features of the Foundation's new edition of *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* is Amity and Matt's inclusion of several of President Coolidge's greatest addresses—"Have Faith in Massachusetts"; the 1925 Inaugural; deep essays on the rule of law, war and justice, and the Declaration of Independence.

Among them is a talk delivered by telephone hookup to a dinner meeting of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropic Societies of New York City, about a century ago, on October 26, 1924. The Jewish philanthropists were assembled up the block at the Waldorf Astoria. The cover charge was \$100, about the same as seats at this evening's dinner in today's pitifully shrunken dollars. An anonymous donor paid for the meals, so the evening was certainly a money maker.

Mr. Coolidge began by noting that the invitation to give a speech "is not the rarest experience that comes into a president's life," and that he had treated this one with "proper politeness." But then he was informed that the purpose of the gathering was to consider a budget, and that the Federation hoped he might address them on the subject of budgeting. This, clearly, was a Coolidge kind of philanthropic society, and he readily accepted.

The president's theme was that "a good budget is among the noblest monuments of virtue." The budget, he said, is the foundation of true philanthropy—to "eliminate the waste of indiscriminate charity"; to see that benevolence is purposive and discriminating so that it "will not do more harm than good"; to ensure that high sentiments are not undermined by sentimentality.

How fitting that the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation's astounding achievements in the past eight years have been built on these precepts. In 2013, the Coolidge Foundation was a small state foundation at the family's handsome home base in Plymouth Notch, Vermont—New England-modest, with none of the fuss of the government-sponsored shrines that began with our man's successor. That year's warm reception of Amity's *Coolidge* suggested that the Foundation pursue a national calling—propagating President Coolidge's character and career, his words and deeds and wisdom, to an age that urgently needed to understand them. Discussions ensued among trustees, family, Amity, and Matt.

I was tangentially involved in those deliberations and have here a piece of institutional history—a 2013 memorandum in which your Board, Amity, and Matt settled on four goals “to bring America to Coolidge and the man to America.”

The first was to promote earnest inquiry and academic excellence in the young, in the Coolidge tradition, through a program of policy debates and, aspirationally, a “Coolidge Scholarship.” The memo said rather grandly that the Coolidge might be modeled on the Rhodes Scholarship (and then noted, with some prescience, that it could bring glory to the name of a fellow far more attractive than Rhodes).

The second goal was to find “some kind of outpost in Washington” so that more children could “meet CC.” A place in DC that connected America to Coolidge and his time in Washington—and also connected him to the Founders.

The third goal was to begin to prepare for the Coolidge presidential centennial a decade hence: To be the “ready brand” for books, products, events, swag, and networks of alumni and adherents that would advertise the thirtieth chief executive’s message of “civility, government restraint, service, and education.”

And then the fourth goal: “To seize opportunity while staying in the black.” The Foundation had recently climbed into the black, and had plenty of work to do just to sustain its operations at Plymouth Notch. Going national would be expensive, and half the memo was devoted to costs and revenue sources. It bluntly acknowledged the risks of failure and emphasized the need for constant discipline. The Foundation hoped that a leading gift from Thomas Smith would make a start that others might follow.

Now here we are eight years later. The debates are well established, and I daresay the Coolidge Scholarship is the most enviable, innovative, and prestigious in the country. This academic year, thousands of high school juniors have already registered for four scholarships to be awarded in 2022. Last year, 4,700 students applied for what turned out to be five scholarships. There are 50 Coolidge Scholars, Coolidge Senators, and Coolidge Debaters here tonight. Through highly competitive scholarships and debates, and many gatherings of fine young men and women in Vermont and in Washington, the Foundation has created fresh institutions at a time of institutional decline, and is countering the retreat from merit and open discourse in the wider culture.

Second, the Foundation has indeed managed to secure an outpost in Washington. And not just an outpost but a fine Georgian house, originally named Quality Hill, from the period of America’s founding, where George Mason whispers at you when you walk the halls. Coolidge House is a club house, a home away from home, and symbol to our

students and stewards and, not incidentally, to the scheming partisans of contemporary Washington. Together with our home at the Notch, Coolidge House is a place for teaching about Coolidge and for civil, respectful discourse about the problems of our own day.

Third, the Foundation is preparing for 2023. The splendid new edition of Mr. Coolidge's autobiography is out, the first printing is already sold out, and a second printing is on the way. The Board had hoped to raise money for a film about Coolidge—it is already largely in the can, and you'll see the trailer for it tonight.

As to the fourth goal, the Foundation has remained in the black throughout this period of rapid growth, never once getting ahead of financing-in-hand for ambitious new ventures. And it has counted not only its dollars but its blessings: that first major gift from Thomas and Diane Smith has led to others from Ravenel Curry, John Childs, Dave and Connie Coolidge, and many others here assembled.

The Foundation has earned a license to invoke Mr. Coolidge's words for its own work. He concluded his address to the Jewish philanthropists by describing what careful budgeting had enabled: "I want you to know that I feel you are making good citizens, that you are strengthening the government, that you are demonstrating the supremacy of the spiritual life and helping establish the Kingdom of God on earth." That is what the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation is now doing a century later.

It would be appropriate on this record to toast the Foundation's trustees, donors, friends, staff, and scholars, senators, and debaters. I propose instead that in modesty we raise our glasses not to ourselves but to Mr. Coolidge's life and legacy.

Although the Foundation's successes have been due to the efforts of many, we all know and acknowledge that it is our chairman who has been the essential, the indispensable leader and mover. She is a woman of great virtue and perspicacity, and of indomitable energy and perseverance.

Please: a warm Coolidge Cheer for Amity Shlaes.

— Chris DeMuth