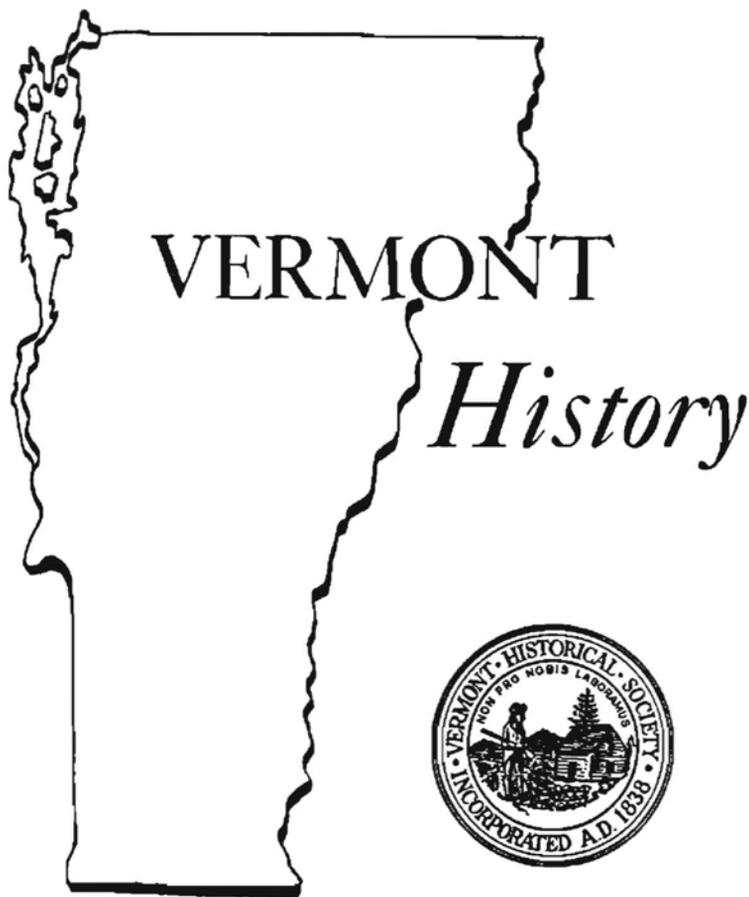


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As President, Coolidge understood how radio could help him politically, and he grasped this opportunity boldly.

Calvin Coolidge and the Advent of Radio Politics

By JOHN L. BLAIR

ONE EVENING in the spring of 1924 when French Strother was spending a week in the White House to gather material for an article about Jim Bishop, he and the President strolled past a recently acquired piece of furniture. "That's our radio set," said Coolidge; "I don't like radio."¹ Knowing the purpose for Strother's visit, the President may have made this remark to further his image, which was so carefully nurtured, of the stern, forbidding, and humorless "Puritan in Babylon." He was not, in any event, so blind or so opposed to the radio as not to see its potential and actively to enlist its aid in his behalf. Indeed, the rapidity with which Coolidge adjusted his political technique to this new instrument showed "a very rapid and significant recognition of radio as a medium in its own right, rather than as a mere adjunct to the old-fashioned public meeting."²

Coolidge quickly perceived the revolution radio would bring to American politics. While relaxing on the presidential yacht, the *Mayflower*, with Senator James E. Watson of Indiana, he told his guest: "I am very fortunate I came in with the radio. I can't make an engaging, rousing, or oratorical speech to a crowd like you can . . . but I have a good radio voice, and now I can get my message across to them without acquainting them with my lack of oratorical ability or without making any rhetorical display in their presence."³ When Coolidge traveled he seldom

1. French Strother, "A Week in the White House with President Coolidge," *World's Work* 47 (April, 1924), 586.

2. Elmer E. Cornwell, "Coolidge and Presidential Leadership," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (Summer, 1957), 269.

3. James E. Watson, *As I Knew Them* (Indianapolis, 1936), 239.

spoke from rear platforms, partly because he deemed it a style made obsolete with radio's advent. After leaving the White House he wrote: "The excuse for such appearances which formerly existed has been eliminated by the coming of the radio. It is so often that the President is on the air that almost anyone who wishes has ample opportunity to hear his voice."⁴ From the day he became President to the day he left Washington for Northampton the radio was a prominent feature in the political life of his administration, and it was largely the President who made it so.

Throughout the Coolidge Years the White House was bombarded with requests for the President to deliver messages over the air. Shortly after Harding's death, one William H. Mayhew wrote asking if Coolidge might be willing to participate in the opening exercises of the most powerful broadcasting station in the world which was recently constructed in Oakland, California, by General Electric. In declining for Coolidge, C. Bascom Slemple, the President's Secretary, wrote: "the fact is, that from the beginning of radio-broadcasting, both President Harding and President Coolidge have been in receipt of numerous invitations to avail themselves of these facilities to make addresses."⁵ The volume of such requests grew. A year later Slemple was writing: "It is absolutely amazing that there is so much demand for this particular consideration by the President."⁶ In some cases, as for "an expression of good will" to the people of Great Britain, the request was referred to the Secretary of State who, in this case, replied: "It seems to me that it is unnecessary for him to take his time to meet requests of this sort and that it would be much better if he would ask to be excused."⁷ The days were obviously not yet over when foreign affairs happily allowed time for the Secretary to deal personally with such inquiries. Most invitations were turned down, whether it was Franklin Roosevelt's request that Coolidge deliver a radio message on the occasion of the Congregation Shearith Israel presenting an American flag to Grace Episcopal Church or a citizen's invitation to speak on behalf of a movement to establish a national home for incapacitated physicians.⁸

Coolidge's awareness of the growing importance of radio was perhaps sharpened by the quantity of broadcast requests received at the White House, but it is clear that even without such reminders he knew, though not precisely how, that the new invention signalled a radical change in politics.

4. Calvin Coolidge, "The President Lives Under a Multitude of Eyes," *American Magazine* 108 (August, 1929), 20.

5. Slemple to William H. Mayhew, September 28, 1923, Coolidge Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., File 136, reel 79.

6. Slemple to Matthew Glaser, December 15, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 80.

7. Hughes to Slemple, March 12, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 79.

8. Roosevelt to Clark, January 14, 1925, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 80.

Such requests were also a new experience for the White House staff, and the politically oriented among them, some of whom served more than the clerical functions indicated by their titles, would soon get ideas on the partisan uses to which radio could be put. But such insight was not limited to the President and his aides. On March 27, 1924, Edward J. Wilson, citizen, and presumably of the Republican variety, wrote Coolidge pointing out the value of radio for "securing public support in your forthcoming campaign." Slemp, in a reply which suggested the decision was already made to give radio a leading role in the elections just ahead, wrote Mr. Wilson that we "look to the utilization of this very valuable instrumentality in precisely the fashion which you suggest."⁹

It is, of course, only with the 1924 elections that we can examine how Coolidge adapted himself and his campaign to the radio. The elections that November were the last in which Coolidge's name appeared on a ballot — the first was in 1898 — and the first in which radio was widely utilized. By the date of the election there were more than five hundred radio stations in operation, and about three million receiving sets. More or less confirming Slemp's letter to Wilson, the *New Republic* concluded at the same time that both parties would rely heavily on radio, noting that William G. McAdoo had applied for a permit to erect a broadcasting station at his Los Angeles home. As for Coolidge, the *New Republic* observed: "Thousands of people are going to vote for or against Mr. Coolidge on account of his voice. While Mr. Harding was known to most of us as a photograph, already to many, even to those who have never heard him, Mr. Coolidge is distinctly known as a voice, a nasal New England voice."¹⁰ Finally, in July, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, William M. Butler, made it official when he announced that Coolidge would remain in the White House during much of the campaign, and that "most of his speeches will be made from the White House or before audiences in the national capitol or immediate vicinity and will be broadcast by radio from coast to coast." The Chairman felt Coolidge's public utterances could be "carried to firesides throughout the land . . . to audiences assembled in large halls equipped with receivers and loud speakers."¹¹ It seems clear that Coolidge early decided to avoid the hurly-burly of the campaign trail, and to say what he had to say over the radio. Republican strategy in effect called for Coolidge to remain on a pedestal embodying the virtues of American life with his economical, fearless, imperturbable and reticent

9. Edward J. Wilson to Coolidge, March 27, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 79. Slemp to Wilson, April 1, 1924, File 136, reel 79.

10. Eunice Barnard, "Radio Politics," *New Republic* 38 (March 19, 1924), 92.

11. *New York Times*, July 18, 1924, p. 3.

characteristics. It was left to the Vice-Presidential candidate, Charles G. Dawes, whose personality differed sharply from Coolidge's, to race about the country depicting Coolidge as the brave defender and perfect exemplar of the American faith.

Coolidge's first message to Congress was delivered over the radio. Radio listeners a thousand miles away from the Capital "reported that the broadcast was so perfect that they could hear President Coolidge turn the pages of his manuscript." Coolidge was thus not totally unfamiliar with broadcasting techniques when he fired the opening gun of his campaign for nomination in a Lincoln's Day address which was broadcast from the grand ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria. After this, until convention time, he periodically addressed the nation via radio. His address on Washington's Birthday came direct from the White House. On April 14, he spoke before the Daughters of the American Revolution, and on the 22nd at the annual luncheon of the Associated Press at which, according to the *New York Times*, "unprecedented steps were taken to broadcast Mr. Coolidge's address as far as possible across the country."¹² And on May 10th and 30th he spoke at the Amphitheater at Arlington Memorial Cemetery. The Republican convention was broadcast, as was Coolidge's acceptance speech.

Unfortunately for the Democrats their convention, held after the Republican gathering, also reached the ears of millions of Americans. The Democrats, meeting at Madison Square Garden, put on their worst show in years. The unseemly disputes and many ballotings, in contrast to the smooth running Republican affair, wearied and disgusted many listeners. The ever-familiar "Alla-bahma casts twenty-foah votes foah Os-cah double-yew Underwood" became a matter for nation-wide jest.

Significantly, during the conventions Slemp made use of the radio to follow the proceedings, not simply as a listener but as a member of the Republican high command immediately prepared to report to his chief or make decisions on his own if things did not appear to be going as planned. The radio was loaned to the White House force by the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company. In thanking them Slemp made it plain that the radio was an integral part of the White House command post: "It enabled me to keep track of all that was going on, so that the President was fully informed without the necessity of going to the House or resorting to the telephone."¹³ He asked if the staff might retain the radio for the Democratic convention. This convention must have amused Slemp no end. Professional politician and political strategist, it took neither of these to conclude the Democrats were not only hopelessly divided but were tearing themselves apart. Many

12. *New York Times*. April 23, 1924, p. 1.

13. Slemp to A. E. Berry, June 14, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 79.

Americans, listening to the Democratic proceedings, must have decided then and there to either stay away from the polls or to vote for Coolidge.

It was not until October that the Republican radio campaign was fully underway. Slemp, living up to his reputation, wrote early that month to get the latest figures on the number of people who listen to radio talks. Representative William E. Hull, in his reply, "estimated that the total radio audience is something like twelve million. Probably four million heard the acceptance address by President Coolidge."¹⁴ If there were any doubts, and there is no evidence there were, about the proposed campaign by radio, Hull's letter and others like it must have removed them.

On the whole, things went well. When A. H. Grebe of station WHAG in Jamaica, New York, wired Slemp on October 9th asking who he could "get in touch with in New York City for Republican speakers for station WHAG," the response was quick.¹⁵ It was not long before the Director of the Speakers Bureau, John Q. Tilson, informed Slemp: "I have made arrangements to utilize station WHAG during the remaining period of the campaign. Our present plan is to assign at least two speakers a week to address the station's radio audience."¹⁶

At the same time a radio was installed at the Republican headquarters in New York City, and on October 20th a series of Republican speakers began to address the radio audience at regular intervals. Such speakers included local Republicans of note, as well as those of Cabinet rank. The first such speaker was Secretary of the Navy Curtis D. Wilbur. The Party did not hesitate to pull all stops. One of the President's teachers in grade school, Ernest C. Carpenter, prepared an address on "The Boyhood Days of Calvin Coolidge." At first he spoke in New England high schools, and before Kiwanis, Lions and Rotary Clubs. But eventually, as Carpenter wrote in a letter to his former pupil, the National Republican Committee "has got hold of this matter and made arrangements for me to broadcast some of this Plymouth stuff over the radio."¹⁷

Coolidge himself remained in the background, following the strategy laid out months before. When he did choose to speak, the impressions he made were more favorable than would have been the case were his audience restricted to people in the immediate hall or banquet room. William Allen White, ever the astute observer, after the elections discussed Coolidge's radio performance:

14. Slemp to William E. Hull, September 30, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 80. Hull to Slemp, October 4, 1924, File 136, reel 80.

15. A. H. Grebe to Slemp, October 9, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 80.

16. Tilson to Slemp, October 9, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 80.

17. Ernest C. Carpenter to Coolidge, October 8, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 80.

He developed talent as a radio speaker. He spoke slowly, used short sentences, discarded unusual words, was direct, forthright and unsophisticated in his utterances. And so, over the radio, he went straight to the popular heart. His radio campaign helped greatly because it is one of the few campaign mediums by which the President always appears with his best foot forward. During the campaign he had little to say and said it well.¹⁸

The campaign was brought to a close with an election eve address by Coolidge carried over a nation-wide hookup. Election returns gave the Republicans a landslide victory, Coolidge capturing an absolute majority of all votes cast, setting records which in several instances remained unbroken until the Democratic juggernaut of 1964.

There seems little doubt, on the basis of the returns, that even without the radio Coolidge would have won the election in his own right; however, neither can it be questioned that radio played a major role in providing the dimensions of the victory accorded him. The Republicans spent huge sums of money, their receipts totalling over four million dollars, while the Democrats had to be satisfied with less than a million. Radio expenditures of the Democrats were approximately \$40,000, while Republicans spent three times as much.¹⁹ This was in a time when an hour of prime time on radio cost about \$5,000.

Not long after the election it was claimed by the *Radio Press Service* that broadcasting won more votes for Republicans than Democrats. As previously indicated, the Democratic convention hurt badly. "Religious bigotry and sectional intolerance showed their ugly heads and raised their strident voices. These voices were carried to the farthest corners of the U.S.A., and the radio fans listening in grew disgusted." This analysis of the place of radio in its first campaign continued with the observation that though John Davis was a nice enough man, he "lacked that new resource which the 1924 model public man needs to win popular approval and votes — he lacked a 'radio voice' and 'radio personality.' His voice sounded grey and colorless and lacked conviction; his personality, unfortunately, was not the kind that got through the microphone." Coolidge on the other hand had a "clear, natural, well modulated voice" which was easily heard and understood.²⁰ In short, we may agree with Mr. Tilson, who in a report to Slemp on the party's radio activities expressed his feeling that "our suc-

18. William Allen White, *Calvin Coolidge: The Man Who is President* (New York, 1925), 139.

19. Louise Overacker, *Presidential Campaign Funds* (Boston, 1946), 98.

20. As quoted in "Was Coolidge Elected By Radio?" *Literary Digest* 84 (January 10, 1925), 61-63. For an account of the bigotry at the Democratic convention see Stanley Frost, "Fear and Prejudice in Deadlock," *Outlook* 139 (July 16, 1924), 422-424. Frost thought the Democratic performance was such that the party had "already destroyed any chance of victory."

cess was little short of marvellous, considering the fact that we began at zero and without any previous experience to guide us."²¹

After the elections Coolidge continued to make use of the radio. His inauguration was the first to be broadcast, with twenty-seven stations connected to the microphone in front of the Capitol. It is estimated that twenty millions heard his speech before a joint session of Congress on Washington's Birthday, 1927. On this occasion transmitters at KDKA in Pittsburgh and WGY in Schenectady sent the speech into the air on short-wave lengths which were picked up by the BBC thus giving British listeners a chance to hear the American President.²²

For this Coolidge was quite obviously not responsible, but his willingness to cooperate with the men of radio on such occasions evidences a real comprehension of the meaning of this technological advance. Still, things did not always come off without a hitch, and there were limits to how Coolidge believed the radio might be effectively used. During the campaign there was a mix-up, inconceivable in later days, when both Herbert Hoover and Frank Lowden were scheduled to talk on the same day at about the same time; in fact, their speeches would overlap due to the time difference between the places where the speeches were to be delivered. Slemple, none too pleased about the confusion, wrote Hoover asking "a word of advice . . . regarding the use of radio in the campaign." The Secretary, expressing his own ire at the situation, concluded his remarks to Slemple by noting there was a "lack of coordination in these things." All in all, however, things went along smoothly, and there was little cause for complaint.²³

As is well known, it was left to Franklin D. Roosevelt to become the radio's master. But the idea of a fireside chat did not originate with F.D.R. It was apparently tossed about the White House for a time during the fall of 1924, and then discarded. At least one member of the Republican National Committee, James F. Burke, was for Coolidge having a few chit-chats with the citizenry. He wrote the White House about it, and Clark later replied: "I am inclined to doubt whether his hold upon the country would be strengthened by 'neighborly talks', or what I judge to be offhand remarks. I do not think that the country wants casual speeches, or those which have not been completely studied and perfected."²⁴ Clark — and Coolidge — were dead wrong, though the President's popularity was such it is dubious

21. Tilson to Slemple, November 15, 1925, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 80.

22. Orring E. Dunlap, Jr., "When the President Broadcasts," *Scientific American* 137 (July, 1927), 36-38. President Harding was first heard on June 21, 1923 when he spoke on the World Court in St. Louis.

23. Slemple to Hoover, October 9, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 80. Hoover to Slemple, October 15, 1924, File 136, reel 80.

24. Clark to James F. Burke, September 27, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 79.

if such "neighborly talks" at this time would have made any appreciable difference. It does show, however, that the full potential of the radio as a campaign instrument was not yet realized. Neither did Coolidge make any use of the radio in boosting his own programs, and there is no evidence it ever occurred to him to use the radio as a means for drumming up public support of Presidential proposals in trouble with Congress.

As with the press, Coolidge's success in working with radio was due in part to elements he could not control, though again as with the press they worked to his advantage. An editorial in the *Saturday Evening Post* predicted, with something less than complete accuracy, that the advent of radio meant the end of silver-tongued orators.²⁵ Coolidge was not a gifted speaker and he knew it, but radio unquestionably served him well. He had, as one observer saw, a local accent which can be a liability when dealing with the whole country. "But the radio filtered most of the Yankee peculiarities from his accent and left the quality of a well-bred, cosmopolitan American."²⁶ Slep, who may have played a greater role than is usually credited in planning Coolidge's radio strategy, thought it was one of his great assets. "It seemed to have been invented for him. It came just as he did. His voice is perfectly adapted to its use in an enunciation clear and distinct. The invisible audience without the dramatic appearance of the speaker must listen, if at all, to the thoughts of the speaker . . . in this role the President shines."²⁷ Perhaps the best analysis of Coolidge's radio personality was written by Charles Michelson of the *New York World*, one of the few prominent anti-administration organs. It is a lengthy appraisal, but merits full quotation. There is now a generation of Americans which cannot recall the part played by radio in election campaigns before the days of television. Michelson's vivid discussion might give this group in particular an idea of the importance of a candidate's performance before the microphones. It could be nearly as ruinous or as beneficial as any television debate.

Mr. Coolidge is no orator. There is a wire edge to his voice, due in some degree to the regular nasal twang of the thirty-third degree Yankee and in part to his meticulous enunciation of each syllable; but according to the professors of the new art, he has a perfect radio voice. The twang and shrills disappear somewhere along the aerial, and he sounds through the ether with exact clearness as well as softness. Mr. Davis, on the contrary, has a voice which to the direct auditor has that bell-like quality of resonance that doubles the quality of his delightful rhetoric. Via radio, however, this muffles and fogs to some extent. The radio was perfected just in time for Mr. Coolidge. His adversary has all the best of it in

25. "The Spellbinder and the Radio," *Saturday Evening Post* 197 (August 23, 1924), 20.

26. Will Irwin, *Propaganda and the News* (New York, 1936), 249.

27. C. Bascom Slep, *The Mind of the President* (New York, 1926), 10.

presence and magnetism. Davis is tall, with a face that would fit in a group picture of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and features like an idealistic medallion. Coolidge looks shorter than he is; his features are sharp and give a probably unjust impression of peevishness. Before an audience Davis glows, while the President always looks unhappy whether he is or not. Under these circumstances, the radio must be Mr. Coolidge's salvation. He doesn't look as if he had the physique to stand the strain of an old-fashioned campaign — half a dozen speeches a day and traveling every night for months — in the first place, and in the second, his hard, statistical, analytical method of expression is scarcely calculated to counterbalance the unimpressiveness of his appearance. So the advent of radio must be listed as one more item in the total of the Coolidge luck or destiny or whatever it is that seem to make things come right for him politically.²⁸

It is not unlikely that Michelson, who later ghosted speeches for Roosevelt, picked up valuable lessons in closely watching Coolidge's radio performance. Certainly Coolidge was something of a trail-blazer in Presidential use of the new medium, and Will Irwin was willing to state quite plainly that "Coolidge was a pioneer in making effective use of it."²⁹ In some areas Coolidge's foresight was limited, but in others he saw farther ahead than many of his contemporaries. In November, 1924, he wrote to Mr. Grebe of station WHAG thanking him for his services and concluding, with typical understatement: "The cooperation of our friends of the radio was unquestionably a most helpful factor in the campaign."³⁰

In treating the radio as a useful ally, Coolidge also, though probably unintentionally, helped to strengthen the office of the presidency in the public mind. Public attention before radio was more or less divided between the President and Congress, but Coolidge was largely responsible through his awareness of the service which both press and radio might render him, of putting the spotlight on the man in the White House — and there it has remained ever since. We can agree with Professor Elmer Cornwell's conclusion that Coolidge "skillfully harnessed the publicity techniques available to the advancement of his electoral fortunes almost exclusively. It can be argued, that in so doing he did nearly as much as any of the strong Presidents of this century to bring the office to its present peak of prestige and popular deification."³¹

It is easy, years later, simply to assume that Coolidge did only what common sense dictated. Yet, common sense does not always work when confronted with the uncommon. The press conference was new, the radio was new, and his reaction to both was by no means as inevitable as some

28. As quoted in Mark Sullivan, "Will Radio Make the People the Government?" *Radio Broadcast* 6 (November, 1924), 20-21.

29. Irwin, *Propaganda and the News*, 248.

30. Coolidge to Grebe, November 18, 1924, Coolidge Papers, File 136, reel 80.

31. Cornwell, "Coolidge and Presidential Leadership," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 266.

may think.³² They could have been ignored, or he could have experimented with them with disastrous results. He chose the latter — minus the disastrous results — though he must have known risks were involved. Coolidge's recognition that the campaign techniques with which he started his career were no longer likely to bring electoral success found him devising new ways of bringing candidates and issues before the public. For this purpose he quickly latched on to both press conference and radio. By so doing he placed virtually all the means of propaganda at the disposal of the Chief Executive which in turn has given the Presidential office a power limited only by the President's ability and the people's intelligence. These contributions are not minor. But in so making them it is offered that in matters of public relations Coolidge had not only a flair in grasping opportunities, but even a boldness in using them.

32. For Coolidge and the growth of the press conference see Blair, "Coolidge the Image-Maker: The President and the Press, 1923-1929" in *New England Quarterly* (December, 1973).

It was in those dimly but happily remembered days before inflation when old Mrs. Black died "on the town," and the town fathers got Reuben to dig the grave. He dug a nice grave, they planted Mrs. Black, and Reuben put in his bill for ten dollars. The selectmen wouldn't pay it and the question came up in Town Meeting. Reuben put in a powerful plea and wound up with a game-winning clincher:

"By god, I'm going to get ten dollars — or up she comes."

— from *The Old-Timer Talks Back*, by Allen R. Foley (Brattleboro: The Stephen Greene Press, 1975, pp. 79; \$2.45), page 77.