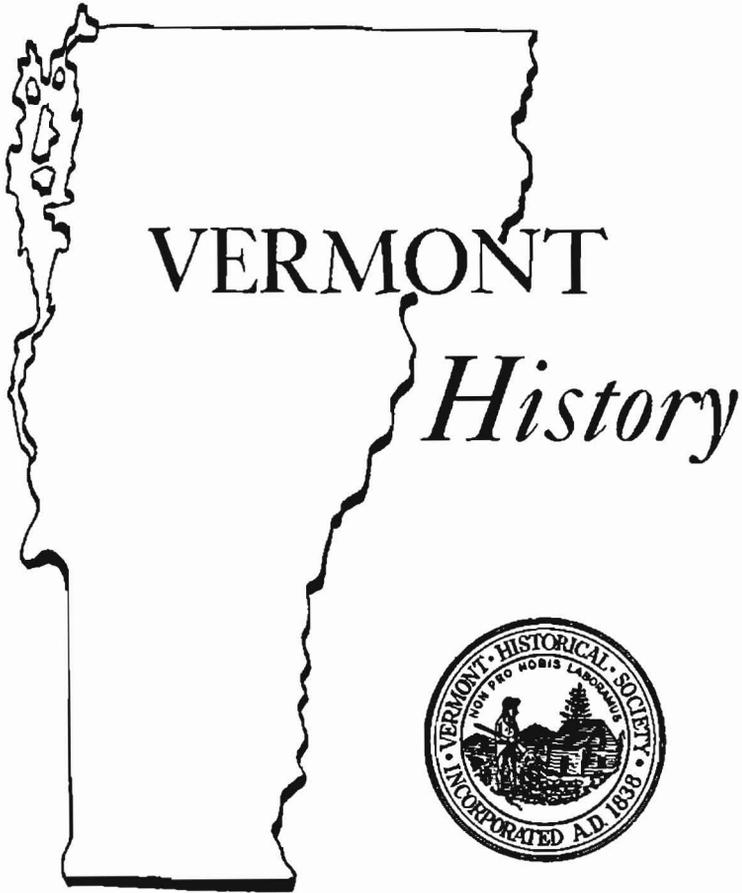
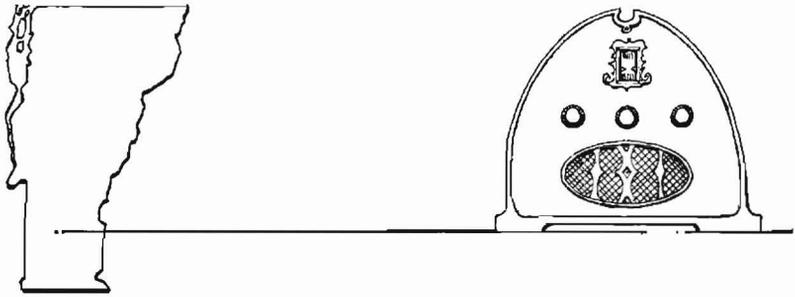


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Despite a nasal twang and a high-pitched voice, this Vermont-born President used radio effectively in the 1920's. . .

Coolidge's Delivery: Everybody Liked It*

By ARTHUR F. FLESER

WHEN ASKED what was of first importance in oratory, Demosthenes replied, "Delivery," assigning it second and third place as well.¹ Quintilian considered delivery of even more importance than "the nature of the speech composed within the mind."² Although few contemporary critics would agree with this emphasis, it must be admitted that the manner in which ideas are expressed helps to determine their impact upon an audience. A speaker's personality and delivery assist in determining audience reaction.

Calvin Coolidge, the serious, uncommunicative Yankee, provided a welcome contrast in personality to the handsome, easygoing Harding. To Undersecretary of State W. J. Carr, Coolidge possessed a "great power of concentration," much "strength of character," and "seemingly no warmth."³

His aloofness manifested itself even during his Amherst days. Charles J. Adams, a graduate of 1896, recalled going for a walk one Sunday afternoon with a group of friends: "As we crossed the campus, we saw Coolidge standing on the brow of a hill behind the college church, his arms folded on his breast, his eyes seemingly fixed on the hills across the

* Reprinted from the *Southern Speech Journal*, Winter, 1966, with the permission of Mr. Fleser and of Dwight L. Freshley, Editor of the *Southern Speech Journal*.

1. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1922), IV, 245.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

3. W. J. Carr Diary, November 4, 1927, Library of Congress.

intervening valley. He gave no sign of recognition as we passed, and when an hour later we returned, he was still standing there, immovable as a statue."⁴ This shy, retiring manner restricted Coolidge in projecting enthusiasm to his listeners.

Although Coolidge disliked social functions, he "was not a man to be deliberately rude to a dinner guest." "He was never loquacious," and Wilson Brown recalled that "when pressed, especially by gushy matrons, [he] would clam up completely."⁵ His aversion to social functions stimulated much newspaper copy, some factual, some imaginary.

Nothing about Coolidge's physical appearance attracted unusual attention. As Mayor of Northampton he was remembered as a "pale, slender man with a sharp chin, tightly closed lips, a prominent nose, steely blue eyes, and sandy hair."⁶ As Vice-President he was described as a "timid, precise man who slipped quietly into the executive office when the cabinet met . . . and slipped out always a few minutes before the meeting broke up."⁷ Cameron Rogers portrays him as "sallow, ginger-haired . . . of medium height, with pallid, cold blue eyes."⁸ One imaginative contemporary, however, pictures his eyes as "gleaming from their deep sockets like balls of fire."⁹ The inflexible, solitary, unsocial, and shy Mr. Coolidge projected to the American people "a strong character . . . always serious." Perhaps the pinched, drawn face of Coolidge provided relief from the austere, sophisticated appearance of Woodrow Wilson. "A personality out of an old family album," Coolidge personified "a sphinx in an era of loud speakers."¹⁰

THE COOLIDGE TWANG AND PHEGMATIC MANNER

The outstanding characteristic of Coolidge's delivery was his high-pitched voice with a nasal twang. Senator Murray Crane said his nasality would "be worth a hundred thousand votes" in the campaign for lieutenant-governor. Coolidge won by some 52,000 votes.¹¹ One newspaper spoke of his "heavily nasal utterance" and "firm, strong voice."¹² His

4. Charles J. Adams, "An Early Memory of Calvin Coolidge," *Vermont Quarterly*, XXII (1954), 285.

5. Wilson Brown, "Aide to Four Presidents," *American Heritage*, VI (February, 1955), 72.

6. Charles J. Dean, "Mayor Coolidge," *Vermont Quarterly*, XXIV (1956), 327.

7. *Atlanta Constitution*, November 9, 1924, p. 1.

8. Cameron Rogers, *The Legend of Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), p. 1.

9. W. J. Carr Diary, April 22, 1927.

10. H. I. Phillips, *Calvin Coolidge: 1872-1933* (New York: G. Sully, 1933), p. 2.

11. William Allen White, *Puritan in Babylon* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 122; Robert A. Woods, *Preparation of Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), p. 114.

12. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 4, 1924, p. 15; *Washington Post*, March 5, 1925, p. 2.

nasality often gave a humorous turn to some of his pronunciation. Speaking at the opening of an art gallery in Pittsburgh, he referred to the development of American railroads, saying, "With the invention of the engine . . ." A suppressed giggle went through the audience. An English gentleman sitting next to a lady from Virginia asked, "Is that a Virginian pronunciation?" She replied, "It certainly is not; he is a Yankee."¹³

When addressing the Amherst College Alumni Association, February 4, 1916, Coolidge quoted a familiar quatrain from Josiah G. Holland's "Gradatim":

Heaven is not reached at a single bound;
We build the ladder by which we rise
From the lowly earth to the vaulted skies,
And we mount to its summit round by round.

When the nasal twang rang out through the room, Mrs. Coolidge was so overcome with laughter that she hid herself behind the pillar in front of her in order to conceal her mirth from those at the head table.¹⁴

Coolidge seldom showed any emotional feeling when delivering an address. In writing of his inaugural address, the *Atlanta Constitution* observed that "only twice was the quiet, unhurried cadence of his voice tinged with deep feeling."¹⁵ David Lawrence stated that he delivered his speeches "in a rather flat manner, with very little of the 'light touch.'"¹⁶ Phonograph recordings reveal that he employed little change in tempo and little variation in pitch.¹⁷ On occasion, however, he reacted emotionally to situations. The *New York Times* reported his return home after nomination as Vice-President in 1920: "The welcome was too much for him. He could not, it appeared, control his thoughts."¹⁸

RADIO TO THE RESCUE

Coolidge made effective use of radio. He was the first President to use radio extensively in presenting his ideas to the public. The National Association of Broadcasters proposed that Coolidge use radio to conserve his health and to reach more listeners.¹⁹ Thus Coolidge spoke to more of his countrymen than did any previous President.²⁰ In 1924, his first year in office, he made 265 addresses and spoke an average of 9,000

13. Letter to author from Mrs. Emma Miller, November 30, 1960.

14. Claude Moore Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge: Man from Vermont* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1940), p. 153.

15. *Atlanta Constitution*, March 5, 1925, p. 2.

16. Letter to author from David Lawrence, March 17, 1961.

17. Author's reaction to recordings at Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts.

18. *New York Times*, July 16, 1920, p. 5.

19. *Ibid.*, February 24, 1924, section 8, p. 15.

20. *Ibid.*, September 4, 1924, section 8, p. 11.

words a month. Estimated audiences of 30,000,000 and 5,000,000 respectively heard his Washington's Birthday address on February 22, 1927, and the annual Press Association address on April 25, 1927. When presenting Lindbergh the Distinguished Flying Cross he spoke to an audience estimated at some 30,000,000.²¹

Radio aided in extending the Coolidge image. Its use in national politics changed the nature of campaigns and campaign orators. The florid political speaker found his career endangered by the microphone. The spellbinder could no longer sway voters with broad, sweeping gestures and booming voice. The radio audience demanded simple, concrete facts rather than verbosity. Coolidge possessed the precision, clear enunciation, and calmness that appealed to radio audiences. "The radio was perfected just in time for Mr. Coolidge," said one contemporary; and according to professors of the new art, he had a perfect radio voice.²² Hypnotized by the sound of a human voice transmitted into their homes, listeners wondered at a speaker who could sit in the White House or stand before Congress and have his voice simultaneously penetrate the ether over Washington, New York, and Providence.²³ The broadcast of a message to Congress came through so clearly that stations in the Middle West were able to hear him "thumb the pages of his manuscript."²⁴ Coolidge's use of short sentences, familiar words, and unsophisticated utterances "went straight to the popular heart."²⁵ Studying the public reaction to broadcast of the Republican convention of 1924, an American Telephone and Telegraph expert said that Coolidge had "a great political asset in that he is extremely popular as a radio speaker."²⁶

One thousand subscribers to a radio magazine of the mid-twenties ranked Coolidge as the fourth most popular performer in America. Only John McCormack, Walter Damrosch, and Schumann-Heink outranked him. Will Rogers followed in seventh place.²⁷ In a straw vote of popular radio artists in 1927 Coolidge ranked among the first ten.²⁸ In reply to a request by the President's secretary for reactions to Coolidge's first radio broadcast one political friend replied: "There wasn't no

21. *Ibid.*

22. Gleason L. Archer, *History of Radio to 1926* (New York: American Historical Society, 1939), pp. 346-347.

23. *New York Times*, February 24, 1924, section 8, p. 15.

24. *New York Evening Mail*, December 8, 1923, section 2, p. 1.

25. William Allen White, *Calvin Coolidge, the Man Who Is President* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), p. 139.

26. *New York Times*, June 17, 1924, p. 2.

27. *Ibid.*, September 4, 1927, section 8, p. 11; September 16, 1928, section 12, p. 4.

28. *Ibid.*, September 16, 1928, section 12, p. 4.

reaction. Everybody liked it.”²⁹ Such responses indicate that Calvin Coolidge, who personified complacency, had become the political idea of the American people. America wanted to feel secure; Coolidge intensified that feeling of security.

Coolidge recognized the political potentialities of radio and exploited his effectiveness as a radio speaker. “I am very fortunate,” he said, “that I came in with the radio. . . . I have a good radio voice, and now I can get my messages across . . . without acquainting them [listeners] with my lack of oratorical ability or without making any rhetorical display in their presence.”³⁰ Speaking before the delegates of a radio conference at the White House, October 8, 1924, he called radio a “new agency brought by science to our people which may . . . become one of the greatest of our blessings.”³¹ To carry out his desire to “properly safeguard” radio he endorsed a bill providing for a Federal Radio Commission.³²

Radio played a significant role in helping Coolidge win votes. The *Literary Digest* claimed that he had the “magic quality of voice and personality” which accurately mirrored the man behind the voice. “It is not far-fetched in the least to say that radio re-elected Calvin Coolidge.”³³

MANNER OF DELIVERY

Occasionally Coolidge delivered speeches impromptu or from memory, but usually he spoke from manuscript. He seldom departed from the text except to make a few introductory remarks before reading his manuscript.³⁴ The *Atlanta Constitution* described the opening of his inaugural address: “He was serene and unhurried as he turned . . . to the vast throng that waited to hear his deliberate, serious address to ‘my countrymen.’ ” As he spoke that salutation, he

paused a long moment, looking out over the sea of faces upturned below him. . . . Then his eyes dropped to the manuscript before him on the stand and he went on steadily, quietly to his solemn declaration that America cherishes no purpose ‘save to merit the favor of Almighty God.’ ”³⁵

29. Ira R. T. Smith, *Dear Mr. President* (New York: J. Messer, 1949), p. 123.

30. James E. Watson, *As I Knew Them* (Indianapolis: New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1936), p. 239.

31. Calvin Coolidge, *The Mind of the President*, ed. C. Bascom Slemp (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1926), p. 197.

32. Gleason L. Archer, *Big Business and Radio* (New York: American Historical Company, 1939), p. 306.

33. *Literary Digest*, January 10, 1925, p. 63.

34. Interview with Wallace B. Davis, who heard Coolidge speak at Asheville, North Carolina, October, 1920.

35. *Atlanta Constitution*, March 5, 1925, p. 2.

This dramatic account may misrepresent the Coolidge personality; nevertheless, Coolidge was successful in gaining audience attention through his direct delivery and his ability to adapt to every occasion.

Limited by his manuscript as well as his personality, Coolidge employed few gestures in his delivery. The inspiration of the occasion could, however, cause him to use broad gestures. Ray Lyman Wilbur, who heard him deliver an address to the Pan-American Conference in Cuba, said that at one point the President "unleashed his right arm in a grand sweep," indicating that the vivacity of the Cubans infected even the sedate Coolidge.³⁶

LISTENER RESPONSE

Even after his retirement from office Coolidge continued to win a warm response from his listeners. At the dedication of the Coolidge Room at Forbes Library, Claude Moore Fuess recalled:

One of the last times I saw Calvin Coolidge was at the National convention of the American Legion, in Boston, on Monday, October 6, 1930. . . . After President Hoover had finished his speech and the applause had died away, cries arose all over the auditorium, "We want Cal!" gradually developing into a rhythmic chant. The tumult shook the walls and the ex-president rose and bowed. Still the demonstration continued. . . . Mr. Coolidge responded: 'To save the time of this convention, I am going to give you one sentence. You paid your debt to yourself and to the U.S.' Yet the cheers which greeted this simple injunction were even more sincere and prolonged than if he had responded with Websterian eloquence. All the crowd wanted was to hear that familiar voice once more.³⁷

TO SUM UP

Coolidge did not have the oratorical flourish often associated with political speakers. He possessed little of the power of the successful orator. His phlegmatic delivery was almost void of emotion. Yet his high-pitched New England twang caught and held the attention of his audience. With the advent of radio Coolidge discovered that his voice was an asset that added much to his popularity with the American public. Measured by the tests of immediate response and the votes of the citizenry of the United States, Calvin Coolidge possessed an effective delivery.

36. *The Memoirs of Ray Lyman Wilbur: 1895-1949*, eds. Edgar Eugene Robinson and Paul Carroll Edwards (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1960), p. 355.

37. Claude M. Fuess, "The Heritage of Calvin Coolidge," September 16, 1956, MS., Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts.