

Calvin Coolidge's Inaugural Address Warned of the Dangers of 'Legalized Larceny'

Calvin Coolidge understood that if government can do something for you, it is only because it can do something to you.

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In accordance with longstanding custom, Joe Biden's first act upon being sworn in as the 46th US President will be to deliver an Inaugural Address. It will likely be longer than the shortest one (George Washington's **135-word speech in 1793**) but mercifully shorter than the longest one (William Henry Harrison's two-hour, **8,450-word sleeper** in 1841).

Most inaugural speeches are fully forgotten but every now and then, a new president coins a memorable term or utters an enduring phrase for the ages. FDR's "We have nothing to fear but fear itself"; John Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country"; and Ronald Reagan's "Government is not the solution to our problem, government *is* the problem" come to mind.

Biden is not known for such eloquence. We will find out if his speechwriters are.

In any event, he will deserve a pat on the back if his address is half as good as that of a previous president who wrote his own speeches. That would be our 30th, Calvin Coolidge, whose **Inaugural Address on March 4, 1925** was both profound and substantive.

History teaches endless lessons whether people want to learn them or not. Its pages instruct us painfully that the two greatest dangers from

government are mission creep and creeps on a mission. The last thing you would ever hear from the lips of Calvin Coolidge were arrogant pretensions to knowledge or grand plans to “fundamentally transform” America. He was smart enough to know what his job was—to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution,” not to ignore it, shred it or rewrite it.

Coolidge’s appreciation of history and human nature tempered any illusions about government power he ever had. In a political leader, that’s a superlative quality, and a humbling one. It is often swept aside by lesser politicians (the creeps on a mission) who let the moment go to their heads. Our 30th president understood that if government can do something *for* you, it is only because it can do something *to* you, that it can get *bigger* only if you get *smaller*.

On that chilly March day in 1925, Coolidge noted America’s achievements at the same time he acknowledged they had sprung from a bedrock of principles:

We cannot continue these brilliant successes in the future, unless we continue to learn from the past. It is necessary to keep the former experiences of our country both at home and abroad continually before us, if we are to have any science of government. If we wish to erect new structures, we must have a definite knowledge of the old foundations. We must realize that human nature is about the most constant thing in the universe and that the essentials of human relationship do not change. We must frequently take our bearings from these fixed stars of our political firmament if we expect to hold a true course.

We know what Coolidge’s principles were because he repeated them throughout his public life: Respect for the Constitution; without it, we are at

the mercy of whim and power lust. Respect for the highest authority, by which he meant the Creator, not a self-anointed elite or a congressional committee. Respect for the individual, especially his freedom to exercise his abilities and uniqueness in peaceful trade and service to fellow citizens. Long before the Austrian economist F. A. Hayek noted that “The more the State plans, the more difficult planning becomes for the individual,” Coolidge knew it in his gut. To be an American was to love free people, not the State. He cautioned us,

We believe that we can best serve our own country and most successfully discharge our obligations to humanity by continuing to be openly and candidly, intensely and scrupulously, American. If we have any heritage, it has been that. If we have any destiny, we have found it in that direction. But if we wish to continue to be distinctively American, we must continue to make that term comprehensive enough to embrace the legitimate desires of a civilized and enlightened people determined in all their relations to pursue a conscientious and religious life. We cannot permit ourselves to be narrowed and dwarfed by slogans and phrases.

In “progressive” nanny state fashion, Biden will probably tell us he cares for us, that he seeks to help us, that he has a laundry list of proposed spending to prove that he cares and wants to help. Calvin Coolidge also cared for people and wanted to help them, but to him that meant respecting their rights and property. Americans, he declared,

are opposed to waste. They know that extravagance lengthens the hours and diminishes the rewards of their labor. I favor the policy of economy, not because I wish to save money, but because I wish to save people. The men and women of this country who toil are the ones who bear the cost of the Government. Every dollar that we carelessly waste means that their life will

be so much the more meager. Every dollar that we prudently save means that their life will be so much the more abundant. Economy is idealism in its most practical form.

Amid record budget deficits and unconscionable debt, perhaps Biden will muster the courage to tell us the till is empty and it's time to get real about spending. Maybe he will value the lessons of the past as Coolidge did, and tell us that fiscal insanity is the path to bankruptcy and tyranny. What are the chances? The "progressives" in the audience would have a collective heart attack but I would cheer if Biden repeated these words from Coolidge's Inaugural:

The wisest and soundest method of solving our tax problem is through economy...The collection of any taxes which are not absolutely required, which do not beyond reasonable doubt contribute to the public welfare, is only a species of legalized larceny. Under this republic the rewards of industry belong to those who earn them. The only constitutional tax is the tax which ministers to public necessity. The property of the country belongs to the people of the country. Their title is absolute. They do not support any privileged class; they do not need to maintain great military forces; they ought not to be burdened with a great array of public employees....

I am opposed to extremely high rates, because they produce little or no revenue, because they are bad for the country, and, finally, because they are wrong. We cannot finance the country, we cannot improve social conditions, through any system of injustice, even if we attempt to inflict it upon the rich. Those who suffer the most harm will be the poor. This country believes in prosperity. It is absurd to suppose that it is envious of those who are already prosperous. The wise and correct course to follow in taxation and all other economic legislation is not to destroy those who have already secured success

but to create conditions under which everyone will have a better chance to be successful.

By early afternoon of January 20, 2021, we will all know what Joe Biden said in his Inaugural. Did it lift up “we the people” or “they, the government”? Did it empower free men and women or did it empower planners, bureaucrats and spenders to shackle those men and women? Did it do justice or violence to the Constitution? You be the judge, but I personally will be watching to see how Biden’s words measure up to these of Calvin Coolidge:

Those who want their rights respected under the Constitution and the law ought to set the example themselves of observing the Constitution and the law...Those who disregard the rules of society are not exhibiting a superior intelligence, are not promoting freedom and independence, are not following the path of civilization, but are displaying the traits of ignorance, or servitude, of savagery, and treading the way that leads back to the jungle.



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