

# The Great Coolidge Mystery

Special Correspondence from Washington

By STANLEY FROST

**P**OLITICAL Washington has at last awakened to the fact that President Coolidge is getting an immense and increasing backing from the American public. The recognition of this rather amazing phenomenon is grudging and reluctant, to be sure, and tinged with a sort of blinking incredulity, but it can no longer be overlooked. Its consequences in the political situation are far-reaching. Democrats are made more cautious by it, and Republicans more aggressive.

## *The Sense of Power*

**A**CCCEPTANCE of Coolidge as a power in himself, apart from his office, has been the slower because it has been so utterly unexpected. It violates almost all notions of what a man should be and do to win public favor. It flies in the face of every political rule of thumb. There were, indeed, some who, when President Harding died, did hope that Mr. Coolidge would "develop qualities of leadership," but comparatively few believed that he could, and almost none suspected that just as he was, with his known character of caution, calmness, silence, and retirement, he could become a dominant figure. He has not changed, he has shown little of what is usually considered leadership, yet his strength is as unmistakable as it is surprising. It is the one strength of the Republican party.

It is also Washington's pet mystery, and politicians are scratching their heads to solve it, without much success so far. The question of what it is that feeds the greatness of leaders has always been a fascinating and perplexing one; in this case it is more perplexing than usual, and of even more importance. For the man who can find what makes Coolidge popular will have solved the problem of our present American state of mind, will know how to control or forecast opinion, and will hold the keys to the coming campaign.

His present popularity is immense, obvious, and growing, though it is neither vociferous nor enthusiastic. The question to be settled during the campaign is whether it will last. There is grave doubt of this among some of the Republican leaders. "The Coolidge strength is based on a myth which is likely to explode at any moment," one of them told me some weeks ago. "I can't understand

how it's lasted so long, and don't dare hope it will last till November." Yet since he made this remark it has grown enormously. Beyond question, the election will hinge on it.

There are evidences of the Coolidge strength on every hand. One has only to note the applause which greets him when—rarely—his picture is thrown on a movie screen. Any one who reads many papers has been surprised to find how much support is given him even in journals which are strongly Democratic.

Much more concrete is the evidence of the primaries. In State after State the Coolidge vote has run far ahead of his friends' best hopes, and this even in the Middle West, where he was supposed to be weak. Nor is it true that this is due either to the use of money or to extreme organization pressure, as has been charged. There has been no need to spend much money, since his nomination was conceded from before the time of the earliest primaries except by his most bitter and optimistic enemies. Also the organizations have been none too friendly, and, if they had been, no organization could account for the weight of the indorsement given. That can come only from public favor.

## *The Senatorial Repulse*

**M**OST striking of all has been the collapse of the attack on him in the Senate. The stage had been carefully set for a Roman holiday, with Coolidge as the Christian martyr. Yet, though weeks have passed, the play has not begun. And when the extremely unterrified Democrats in the upper house find reason to abandon so pleasant a promised pastime, it may safely be assumed that they have run into a staggering influence.

This strength of the President's has come to him in the face of handicaps which were enough to justify any skepticism. In the first place, his personality lacks almost all the elements usually thought necessary for popular appeal. He is anything but a "mixer;" he has about him nothing romantic or inspiring; no such trick of coining catch phrases as Wilson owned, nor power of inflaming emotions as Roosevelt did. He has no dash, no color, no flaming heat. He is a pitifully poor self-advertiser. And he has made no effort to imitate any of these qualities or to be other than himself.

He has not, either, assumed any vivid leadership; indeed, little leadership of any kind. He has made no visible effort to force legislation or spectacular changes in administration, advanced no thrilling theories, and sounded no clarion calls. Worse, he has inherited an Administration weakened by scandals, and has been given little and grudging support from his party. Yet he has struck back at his attackers only once, and has not "taken his case to the people."

## *Where the President Failed*

**F**INALLY, any politician will tell you that, while he has played politics, he has not always played well. His choice of Slep as private secretary, his permitting Denby to resign, his waiting so long before ousting Daugherty and then acting on a minor and doubtful issue, his long delay in calling his hecklers to time and then basing his attack on a small and lawyer-like technicality instead of on the broader questions of fairness and good government which were involved and on which the public was ready to support him—all these are generally considered blunders, both by his friends and his enemies.

Even his warmest supporters grieve, too, over the chances he has missed. There were numberless openings for plays to the galleries while the scandals were at their height. He could have demanded resignations right and left, ordered officials suspended pending trial, taken the lead in a dusty house-cleaning. Instead he did only what apparently simply had to be done. The politicians think with longing of what Wilson or Roosevelt would have made of such a situation. How, they ask, can any such man as he hold public support?

Now that they are finally convinced that he does just that, however, they are beginning to discover reasons and explanations for it—reasons which did not occur to them till the result was forced on their attention. Talks with many men, both in and out of Congress and of the political organizations, show a consensus on certain of them.

"He shines by contrast with Congress;" "Congress is so discredited that every attack on him has been a boost;" "The Democrats have overplayed their hand and he wins on the roorback." These are the most pat and prompt of

the reasons given. Even conservative Democrats admit the truth in them.

Second comes taxation. To be sure, the tax plan was prepared without his initiative and would have been put forward just the same if Harding had lived; but credit for it and for supporting it goes to Coolidge. This is widely believed to account for the favor given him by business men generally, by chambers of commerce, and by a vast army of people whose taxes would have been reduced if it had gone through. His opposition to the bonus is believed to have given more of the same kind of strength. •

### *The President Plays the Game*

ANOTHER source of popularity, not so obvious, is admitted by some. This is that he "plays the game" with the local political organizations. President Harding did not; just why is not clear, since he was so thoroughly an organization man. He kept Democrats in many places where they might have been dropped; he often refused to recognize the claims for patronage made by local party workers. So there developed toward him a wide coolness, which appeared in lack of support from minor leaders everywhere and from some major ones. Their failure to "root" for him was a serious weakness. Coolidge has convinced them that he will "take care" of them, and so is getting enthusiastic propaganda among the rank and file where it counts most.

There is some suspicion among the bigger men that he is planning at some convenient time to get rid of the last of the "old guard," of the "Harding crowd," the "politically minded" leaders. Some of the men from whom he takes advice are undoubtedly urging this, and believe that he will attempt it. The spreading hope of this is a strength with many of the people; on the other hand, it would have little effect on the minor workers just mentioned. The men whom it would offend—mostly in the Republican National Committee—are very lukewarm toward Coolidge, anyway. They support him because they must. If he shall delay his attack on them till after election, they will be unable to damage him very severely. So here his cautious methods have brought him, for the time at least, support from three different directions.

These three reasons—taxation, reaction against Congress, and shrewd politics—are as far as most politicians go in trying to explain the President's strength. One or two point out in addition that there is no important competitor for public favor, and suggest that he could not hold his own against a real rival. Others agree with Senator Pepper that recognition of his honesty and devotion to duty,

as well as of his coolness under fire, is a great source of popularity. One man argues that his strength is due merely to his office, that "we Americans have a habit of worshipping our bosses till we get ready to kill them."

An entirely different point of view comes from a traveling salesman whose work carries him to all parts of the country.

"Folks are taking to Coolidge just because he doesn't throw any bluffs," this man told me. "He isn't making any promises or threats or noise of any kind. He doesn't go up in the air, or go off half-cocked. He isn't rocking the boat. He's just sticking to his job and using plain ordinary common sense of the kind any one can understand in doing it. He's a relief to them after the fuss they're used to."

### *The Views of Senator Capper*

SINCE it is generally granted that the coming election will be decided in the Middle West, and chiefly by the farmers, I asked Senator Capper, whose big string of farm papers gives him a particularly close touch with farm thought, for his estimate of its attitude toward Coolidge. He began by pointing out the very strong sentiment for the President in rural districts, citing some figures gathered in a poll conducted exclusively along rural routes by the "Farm Journal." These show that of 41,668 votes cast for sixteen candidates of all parties, Coolidge received 16,598, or almost forty per cent. He had nearly three times as many as La Follette, who was his nearest rival.

"The real strength of the President among the farmers," Senator Capper said, "is that they trust him. They trust him absolutely, and for several reasons that are peculiar to themselves, as well as for the reasons which are affecting public opinion everywhere. They like him especially because he has the same background they have; he was raised on a farm, knows their problems and troubles, talks their language, thinks their thoughts. Many of his characteristics are of the kind they particularly understand. His taciturnity, his simple speech, his religious convictions, his quiet life, the very tones of his voice—he shares these with the great bulk of farmers."

"Another thing is that they have no reservations about his honesty. They know he plays politics; so do they, and they have no objection. But they also know that he has no taint of Wall Street, no affiliations with big business, nothing that prevents his being an absolutely honest and straight servant of all the people."

"A third thing is that he doesn't worry them. They are rather tired of noise in

politics, and of wild promises and purposeless excitement. He handles his problems on the basis of the kind of common sense they understand and appreciate."

"One thing, I think, has not been given the importance it deserves. That is the indorsement which Ford gave the President some time ago. Ford is tremendously strong with the farmers; his word counted for more than that of any other man could have counted. They trust him for much the same reasons that they trust Coolidge, and when Ford backed up the President they were more than ready to back him, too. I believe that it was Ford's brief statement that really started the Coolidge boom among the farmers."

These, greatly condensed, are all the explanations I have been able to gather as to the growth of Coolidge sentiment. There is undoubtedly truth in all of them, but there seems to be another, deeper, and more fundamental reason than them all for the public's support. It is implied and hinted in several of these statements. It would not, of course, be effective if the other things were not true, and yet they might all be true—they have often enough been true of other public men—without winning any such indorsement as is being given him.

### *The Ebb of Emotionalism*

THIS fundamental thing seems to be a change in the state of mind of the American public, which finds in Mr. Coolidge's rather unusual character and temperament a kind of leadership and expression which at other times would not have been accepted. This change is the appearance in full force in the political field of the reaction, so often remarked in other parts of our National consciousness, from the high tensions of the last few years.

For above twenty years, now, American politics has been on a strongly emotional and strained basis. There was a lull after the free silver campaign, which was broken when Roosevelt became leader. He accustomed us to spectacular and thrilling politics, to high seasoning, vivid colors, and hot issues. His fight with Taft increased all this, the war further increased it, and President Wilson, whatever his intellectual power, was skillful in stirring and maintaining emotionalism.

Other politicians have found no way to win attention except by outblazing the previous records. Each new aspirant has beaten a bigger drum, shot off more highly colored fireworks, been more vociferous than the one before. Exaggerations, violent charges and equally violent promises, hifalutin language, hifa-