Vol. 5 No. 1 Spring 2026

PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine

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Calvin Coolidge Between Conservatism and Progressivism: Revisiting Tacoma's "Burkean Americanist" Thesis

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Review: *The Political Thought of Calvin Coolidge: Burkean Americanist* by Thomas J. Tacoma (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020). 260 pp. Hardcover, $117; Ebook, $93.60.

Thomas Tacoma's book *The Political Thought of Calvin Coolidge: Burkean Americanist* seeks to define Calvin Coolidge's political thought as reverent of but distinct from that of the American founding and critical of the Progressive era even while influenced by it. Tacoma argues that Coolidge was a conservative who deeply valued the achievements of the American founding and the Constitution and fiercely defended them against their opponents. However, he suggests that Coolidge's defense of the founding was not grounded in the true principles of the American founding as the founders understood them. While Coolidge appreciated the founders' contributions to civilization and their dedication to living in accordance with transcendent truths about human nature and government, he neither adhered to nor appealed to their abstract philosophical claims about natural law and natural rights.

Additionally, though Tacoma admits Coolidge is not a historicist, he asserts that much of Coolidge's rhetoric is very similar to the historicist rhetoric of the Progressives. To make this case, Tacoma traces much of Coolidge's political thought to the influence of the neo-Hegelian Amherst professor Charles Garman, most notably in his understanding of the law of service in social relations, which appears to be somewhat in accord with the Social Gospel movement. He further argues that while Coolidge's speeches contain plenty of references to the founding fathers and the Constitution, Coolidge never seriously discussed their philosophical arguments, opting instead to extol the founders' contributions to civilization and progress. This rhetoric about civilization, Tacoma contends, is derived from Coolidge's other Amherst professor, Anson D. Morse, who spoke of the steady advancement of civilization towards freedom. Although unlike some progressive historicists, Morse believed that regression was possible.

Nevertheless, Tacoma correctly identifies many instances where Coolidge's political thought seems to be consistent with the American founding, if perhaps via a slightly different

avenue. For example, Coolidge's convictions about equality and individual rights are fully consistent with the founders' political thought, even when he traces their origin to the American colonists' religious convictions. Instead of exploring the origins of these convictions in depth, however, Tacoma tends to rest on the assertion that the underpinnings of Coolidge's political thought are fundamentally different from the Founding. This serves Tacoma's broader thesis, which is that Coolidge's reverence for American institutions and traditions of republican government makes him a "Burkean Americanist," i.e., a conservative who regards American institutions more for being well-established and proven sound than for the abstract theory underlying them. In doing so, Tacoma implies that Coolidge's defense of the founding was too weak to resist the attacks of Progressivism, by which Coolidge himself was influenced to some degree. The argument is well-articulated, but one could reply that Coolidge's repeated emphasis on equality and the importance of living according to eternal laws is consistent with the core of the natural law political philosophy of the founding.

Tacoma's book begins by identifying the key tenets of Progressivism. He demonstrates that the Progressives "self-consciously rejected the principles and institutions of America's founding regime" (1). The Progressives had great faith in historical development and human evolution, holding that the progress mankind had made since the American founding had rendered many of its constitutional features obsolete. Tacoma explains that the Progressives were influenced by several different schools of thought: the Historical School, Pragmatism, Social Darwinism, Positivism, and the Social Gospel movement. These schools of thought afforded Progressives a set of common beliefs, like the historical contingency of truth, faith in human progress, a conviction that American institutions were outmoded, a new understanding of political leadership, more confidence in direct democracy, and a belief in government by expert administrators (12). These beliefs all denied the idea that there can be anything right by nature. While Tacoma correctly notes that Coolidge's political thought is far removed from these tenets and is much closer to those of the founders (23), he holds that Coolidge himself was influenced by his progressive college professors at Amherst. Coolidge's political ideas were "influenced by progressive, pragmatic, or social gospel thought" (23).

Tacoma argues that Coolidge drew many political lessons from his favorite professor, Charles E. Garman. Garman taught his students that man is not merely a material but also a spiritual being, and this was the foundation for his individualism. The individual has a duty

to seek his self-improvement and self-realization, and this means he has a measure of dignity that cannot be exploited by industry (33). From this teaching, Coolidge learned that man improves himself through his relations with others, for he has obligations to others. This is also why Coolidge repeatedly emphasized Garman's teaching on the law of service. And like Garman, Coolidge believed that the state and the individual have reciprocal duties to each other (34-35). However, in spite of Tacoma's characterization, these ideas were not fundamentally at odds with the founding. They neither contradicted the founders' belief in individualism, nor asserted that human nature is constantly evolving or that American institutions are deeply flawed and inadequate to address new conditions.

Professor Anson D. Morse's views about civilization, argues Tacoma, also had a significant impact on Coolidge's political thought. For evidence, Tacoma points out that many of Coolidge's historical references were the same as those which Morse used (29). Morse believed civilization is a process of perfecting mankind, but contrary to the historicism of the Progressives, he believed "de-civilization," or regression to a more ancient time in history, was always a possibility (27). In Coolidge's understanding, the American founding historically provided the principles (like rule of law and individualism) that would allow civilization to advance and humanity to progress.

While Coolidge was undoubtedly influenced by the ideas of his Amherst professors, his political thought was very much his own and developed further over the course of his long political career. Moreover, there is evidence that it was influenced by the founders' own ideas as well as their reverence for the Constitution. This is something Tacoma always recognizes even as he qualifies it by pointing to Coolidge's more heterodox sources. Tacoma's main point is that Coolidge largely avoided speaking in abstract philosophical terms. At a time when America's founders and constitutionalism were under assault by the progressives, Coolidge sought to remind Americans of why the founding ought to be held in high esteem and why the Constitution ought to be preserved. Tacoma writes, "Coolidge provided his audiences with a coherent sense of the nobility of the American founders, a defense of the republican government they created"; it was, "in his own terms, a vindication of the Declaration and Constitution" (66). But this returns the reader to the difficulty of how Coolidge's rhetoric related to his principles.

Tacoma strongly implies that Coolidge's defense of the Declaration and the Constitution was insufficient in that it tended to skirt appeals to abstract natural law philosophy, even as he held to the same convictions that were their natural outgrowth, i.e., equality and individual rights. Coolidge viewed these ideas as a derivation of the commonly held religious beliefs of the founding era: "These principles were, for Coolidge, always rooted in the Protestant heritage of the nation, not in the political philosophy developed by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural law philosophers" (66). However, in keeping with the founders, and in contrast to the Progressives, Coolidge held that these principles which undergirded the Declaration and the Constitution were indeed eternal and unchanging. He merely chose to stress that they were accessible through a historical religious faith rather than abstract philosophy. For Coolidge, "the novelty of the Declaration was in recognizing these eternal principles in politics, giving them life on a grand scale in America" (76).

There is evidence that Coolidge's political principles were more than just consistent with the founding, but that they too included an appeal to natural law. For example, he makes it clear that equality and individual rights inhere in man by nature and are always the same. In *Have Faith in Massachusetts*, Coolidge proclaims that there is an eternal law, from which man's equality and rights stem, for "Men do not make laws. They do but discover them," and they ought to "rest on the eternal foundation of righteousness."[1] Moreover, Coolidge asserted that equality and "inalienable rights" were "final," irrespective of what custom might dictate—in other words, they were logically defensible truths.[2] He argued that during the founding, these principles were finally recognized as more important than custom, leading to a growing acknowledgment of man's equality. Coolidge said, "Custom was giving way to reason. Class and caste and place, all the distinctions based on appearance and accident were giving way before reality."[3] Reality was discovered when men questioned senseless customs or "distinctions which were temporal to those which are eternal," allowing them to exchange the sovereignty of kings or aristocrats for the "sovereignty and nobility of all men."[4] By looking to reality or nature, Coolidge argued, the founding generation was able to recognize

[1] Calvin Coolidge, "Have Faith in Massachusetts," in *Have Faith in Massachusetts: A Collection of Speeches and Messages,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), 4.
[2] Coolidge, "The Inspiration of the Declaration," in *Foundations of the Republic: Speeches and Addresses* (Reprint: London: Forgotten Books, 2015 [1926]), 451.
[3] Coolidge, "Address at Roxbury Historical Society Bunker Hill Day," in *Have Faith in Massachusetts*, 116.
[4] Coolidge, "Address at Roxbury Historical Society Bunker Hill Day," in *Have Faith in Massachusetts*, 116.

rights more fully than had been possible under English law, particularly when they began regarding all human beings as inherently equal. It was then that "the unequal in quantity became equal in quality."[5]

Coolidge did not say that this discovery of nature was without conditions. He pointed out that these ideas had developed in America because the people who settled it were from a certain social stratum; moreover, their deep Protestant convictions (and desire to practice them) included a rationalism that directed adherents to see God in the works of nature. According to Coolidge, Americans had "wanted to escape from the rule of a force imposed from without and live in accordance with the light of reason which comes from within."[6] While he recognized that Americans had been influenced by custom and experience, they rightly rejected the old and unnatural system of "class and caste," letting "slip their grasp upon conventionalities that they might lay a firmer hold upon realities."[7] These realities, the doctrines of equality and natural rights, he fully believed to be true and enduring in the same manner the founders understood them. Thus, Tacoma's thesis of Coolidge as a Burkean Americanist may hold when analysing Coolidge's deference to tradition, but there is room to disagree with his characterization of Coolidge's political thought as fundamentally different from that of the founding.

Though Tacoma argues that Coolidge, like Burke, saw that natural rights misunderstood could be a threat to established order, Coolidge did defend the American founders' natural rights and natural law against Progressivism (xviii). Like the most prominent founders, even the conservative John Adams, Coolidge thought that natural rights could be discovered in nature and discerned by reason because they had a basis in nature and reality, not merely in English tradition or custom. Coolidge did stress that the Americans had been contending for old rights under the English constitution—the American Revolution was inherently conservative—but he also noted that no other country had ever recognized the notion of inherent rights, and especially equality, to the same extent. Rather than a departure, Coolidge's principles harmonize the natural law accessible to reason with the religious doctrines of the Puritans and colonial clergymen who urged Americans to recognize and accept it long before the revolution.

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[5] Coolidge, "Address at Roxbury Historical Society Bunker Hill Day," in *Have Faith in Massachusetts*, 117.
[6] Coolidge, "Great Virginians," in *The Price of Freedom*, 181.
[7] Coolidge, "The Destiny of America," in *The Price of Freedom*, 335.