



The Tormented President: Calvin Coolidge, Death, and Clinical Depression (Contributions in American History)

Robert E. Gilbert

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Although Calvin Coolidge is widely judged to have been a weak and even an incompetent president, this study concludes that he was a leader disabled by a crippling emotional breakdown. After an impressive early career, Coolidge assumed the presidency upon the death of Warren Harding. His promising political career suffered a major blow, however, with the death of his favorite child, 16-year-old Calvin Jr., in July 1924. Overwhelmed with grief, Coolidge showed distinct signs of clinical depression. Losing interest in politics, he served out his term as a broken man. This is the first account of Coolidge's life to compare his behavior before and after this tragedy, and the first to consider the importance of Coolidge's mental health in his presidential legacy.

Gilbert carefully documents the dramatic change in Coolidge's leadership style, as well as the changes in his personal behavior. In his early career, Coolidge worked hard, was progressive, and politically astute. When he became Vice President in 1921, he impressed the Washington establishment by being strong and activist. After Harding's death, Coolidge took control of his party, dazzled the press, distanced himself from the Harding scandals, and showed ability in domestic and foreign policy. His son's death would destroy all of this. Gilbert documents Coolidge's subsequent dysfunctional behavior, including sadistic tendencies, rudeness and cruelty to family and aides, and odd interactions with the White House staff.

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