

who was also afflicted by a misunderstood and untreated mental condition that destroyed his authority and undermined his judgment. Calvin Coolidge, rated by historians as among the worst presidents in history, strode boldly into the White House in 1923 only to lose his young son 11 months later and plunge into clinical depression.

Following President Warren G. Harding's sudden death of a heart attack, vice president Coolidge proceeded confidently to dominate the capital. He met almost daily with members of Congress, entertained them at breakfast and on the presidential yacht, corresponded extensively with influential government leaders, and upon the death of the wife of an important farm bloc leader, invited the senator to live at the White House for a while.

In his first State of the Union message, which was delivered in person at the Capitol and was the first such address to be broadcast on radio, Coolidge made 44 requests, including the establishment of a world court, creation of a cabinet-level department of health and welfare, tax cuts,

the reopening of intercoastal waterways, and a constitutional amendment to limit child labor. Many of these proposals were enacted. The redoubtable Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R.-Mass.) praised Coolidge for the ratification of 32 treaties—"no such record . . . has ever been made by any administration." The former governor of Lodge's home state was elected to the presidency in his own right with 54 percent of the vote in 1924, and brought in 25 more Republican members of Congress on his coattails.

In the midst of that campaign, however, Coolidge endured a personal tragedy that would change his life. On June 30, Coolidge's two sons played a game of tennis on the White House court. Sixteen-year-old Calvin Jr. developed a blister on his foot that became infected, and, in that era before antibiotics, he was dead within a week. Coolidge became hysterical at his son's deathbed. He broke down sobbing when the body was removed from the White House, began sleeping 15 hours a day, and seemed to be on the verge of collapse. His secretary described him as "mentally ill," and

his surviving son said, "My father was never the same again." Coolidge had already lost his 39-year-old mother to tuberculosis when he was 12, and his only sibling, Abbie, to appendicitis when she was 14.

After Calvin Coolidge Jr.'s death, the president lost interest in working with Congress for the remainder of his presidency. He was indifferent to enemies and friends, Gilbert writes. When allies brought up his cherished world court proposal from his first State of the Union address, he was mute. When a congressman visited him at the summer White House, Coolidge went off fishing and left him waiting. The president now sent up vague and tentative State of the Union addresses to be read by a clerk. His few proposals were often holdovers, or trivialities—such as providing a location for a statue commemorating the victims of the explosion on the battleship *Maine*. Congress considered Coolidge easy to ignore and safe to challenge. There was little disappointment when "Silent Cal" declared, with characteristic brevity, "I do not choose to run for president in 1928."

SOCIETY

Let Them Sue

THE SOURCE: "Doctors and Juries" by Philip G. Peters Jr., in *Michigan Law Review*, May 2007.

DESPITE DOCTORS' LOUD COMPLAINTS about medical malpractice suits, there is little evidence that

juries are awarding unjustified bonanzas to lawsuit-happy patients. If anything, jurors have a slight bias in favor of doctors, even when they are negligent, writes University of Missouri, Columbia, law professor Philip G. Peters Jr.

Nevertheless, Congress is again considering legislation to experiment with "health courts" staffed by judges with health expertise and intended to eliminate irrational and unjust verdicts. Such verdicts are thought to contribute to the high cost of medical care by forcing doctors to pay expensive malpractice insurance premiums and to practice defensive medicine by ordering extra tests and procedures to protect themselves in the

event of a suit.

Actually, Peters writes, doctors win most malpractice cases—twice as many as they lose. They are much more likely to win in the courtroom than other kinds of defendants accused of causing injury. “Juries are so reluctant to hold physicians liable that they render defense verdicts in half of the cases that medical experts think plaintiffs should win,” he says.

Peters analyzes seven studies of large numbers of malpractice cases conducted in the last three decades. Generally, the studies compared jury decisions with the private assessments of cases made for insurance companies by outside medical or legal experts. Juries did give patients victories in about 10 to 20 percent of the cases reviewers felt they should lose, but patients won only 20 to 30 percent of the cases rated as tossups and about 50 percent of cases with strong evidence of negligence.

Many doctors, however, are horrified over the effect on their livelihood and reputation of facing even a 10 to 20 percent chance of losing a case in which experts think they have not been negligent. Peters sees this fear as exaggerated. “Easy” cases in which liability is clearly present or absent are most likely to be settled before going to trial. The court docket contains a preponderance of “weak cases” in which the evidence is ambiguous and experts disagree on the quality of care.

Peters contends that juries may frequently be right in ruling

for the patient in the 10 to 20 percent of cases in which experts find no negligence. This is because experts review the cases shortly after they are filed, while juries hear the cases after lawyers have gathered more evidence.

Juries may hear “more complete and stronger evidence of medical negligence,” he notes.

It’s unclear why doctors have such an edge in court. Jurors may be skeptical of patients who sue their doctors, because physicians are high-status professionals whose role is to heal. Doctors seem to be much more likely to have experienced attorneys and superior experts, and juries apparently take the burden of proof very seriously when it comes to medical malpractice, giving physicians the benefit of the doubt in close cases.

In the end, the “health courts” for which some doctors are clamoring might backfire, according to Peters. Trained “health judges” might well wind up being tougher on physicians than today’s supposed hanging juries.

SOCIETY

The History of History

THE SOURCE: “History’s Struggle to Survive in the Schools” by Diane Ravitch, in *OAH Magazine of History*, April 2007.

IT’S EASY TO IMAGINE THAT American children in some golden period of the last century got a thorough grounding in history. They didn’t. The subject came to

the U.S. high school curriculum in the late 19th century, bloomed swiftly, then declined precipitously. Only now is it making a slow recovery from the dark days of the 1930s to the 1980s, writes historian Diane Ravitch of New York University.

History entered high school alongside science as a “modern” subject in the 1880s. For more than four decades schools tended to offer a Eurocentric course that started with ancient times, focusing on the Greeks and Romans, and moved through medieval and some modern history. But as the curriculum grew, leading educators became alarmed about the helter-skelter increase in courses. In 1893 came the first in a series of prestigious commissions to guide the nation’s schools toward a goal that remains elusive today: a core curriculum.

The Committee of Ten, led by Harvard president Charles W. Eliot, recommended the study of biography and mythology in the fifth and sixth grades, American history and civil government in the seventh, Greek and Roman history in the eighth, French history in the ninth, English in the 10th, and American again in the 11th, with an intensive study of a selected period in the senior year. As historical study then mostly involved memorization and recitation, the committee called for student participation, more critical discussion, and the use of primary documents and even historical novels rather than a single textbook.

Critics contended that the committee was trying to force an academic education on all children, and