



The Reluctant President

President William Howard Taft was single-minded in his goal ... to become chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court

BY LISA DE NIKE

The only American ever to have served both as president of the United States and chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, William Howard Taft is remembered not for his achievements, but for a largely unsuccessful presidency and an obvious discomfort with the political process.

Taft was born on September 15, 1857, in Cincinnati, the third of five children of a prominent Ohio family headed by a distinguished judge. Like his father, Alphonso, Taft graduated from Yale University, where he was second in his class and a member of the well-known "Skull and Bones Society." He studied law at the University of Cincinnati and subsequently went into private practice.

At age 29, he married the ambitious and intellectual Helen "Nellie" Herron. Born and raised in Cincinnati, Nellie worked intermittently as a teacher and, from a young age, had a strong interest in music. She was instrumental in founding the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and served as president of its board of directors from 1893 to 1900. "I found, at last, a practical method for expressing and making use of my love and knowledge of music," she once said. As a teenager, Nellie visited the White House, and from then on, she was determined that if she married, it would be only to a man who could be president.

William Howard Taft held several judicial positions between 1887 and 1890, including judge of the Cincinnati Superior Court and member of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Though he did not hide the fact that his lifelong ambition was to serve as chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Taft was pushed to strive for more than just a judicial career by Nellie.

During their time in Washington, D.C., while Taft was serving as solicitor-general (1890), Mrs. Taft did all she could to further her husband's career through social connections. Nellie's fears that her husband's ambition was focused on the judiciary and not on the presidency were confirmed when he accepted President Benjamin Harrison's offer to serve as a federal Circuit Court judge, which he did from 1892 to 1900.

When President William McKinley asked Taft to travel to the Philippines to serve as president of the commission overseeing the newly won territory, Taft was disappointed and reluctant, but, pushed by his wife and the promise from McKinley of a future position on the Supreme Court, he agreed.

Taft found his work in the Philippines fulfilling, even to the extent that he twice turned down President Theodore Roosevelt's offer of a Supreme Court appointment to finish his work there. Taft ultimately became governor of the islands, and by the time he left in 1903 to become Roosevelt's secretary of war, the islands were pacified and a civil regime had been established. Even though Taft was pleased with his newly appointed position, he knew that his wife held loftier goals for him. She urged him to pursue the presidency.

During Roosevelt's second term as president, Taft met

with the emperor of Japan and temporarily became civil governor of Cuba when Roosevelt sent troops to that country to restore order during a revolt. During those years, Taft also acted as secretary of state periodically. Despite these globe-trotting diplomatic experiences, Taft repeatedly told Roosevelt how much he wished to become chief justice.

Roosevelt, however, had other plans for him. He, too, thought that Taft should become the next president and, after much persuasion from both Nellie and Roosevelt, Taft reluctantly joined the presidential race. Indeed, with Roosevelt's backing the 51-year-old Taft handily defeated William Jennings Bryan and found himself taking the Oath of Office on a windy, wet March day in 1909.

Though he had promised to continue Roosevelt's agenda, it did not take long for Taft (who lacked Roosevelt's charisma and struck many people as "low energy") to begin alienating those on all points of the political spectrum with his dogged and very law-centered approach to issues.

During his tenure, a postal savings system was established and the Interstate Commerce Commission was directed to set railroad rates. But issues that antagonized colleagues and Roosevelt supporters overshadowed any successes that Taft may have had.

As president, he initiated 80 antitrust lawsuits, including one against U.S. Steel (the country's largest corporation) for an acquisition that Roosevelt had approved. This angered many: Roosevelt, who reportedly was humiliated; big business

(for obvious reasons); and even the antitrust lobby, who disapproved of Taft's conservative rhetoric on the topic.

Taft alienated many liberal Republicans (who later formed the Progressive Party) by defending the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act, which unexpectedly continued high tariff rates. Progressives also were irritated that Taft upheld his secretary of the interior, accused of failing to carry out Roosevelt's conservation policies.

Many historians believe that part of the public's disillusionment with Taft was due to his introverted personality and "judicial" temperament. He was clearly overshadowed by his ebullient predecessor: the public joked that Taft stood for "take advice from Theodore." The Republicans renominated Taft in 1912, but he had so disappointed his mentor and friend that Roosevelt opposed Taft's nomination and bolted from the Republican Party to lead the Progressives, creating the opening that Democrat Woodrow Wilson needed to take the election.

After his loss, Taft, who loathed campaigning anyway ("the most uncomfortable four months of my life"), returned to Yale as a professor of law and president of the American Bar Association.

In 1921, Taft's fondest wish finally came true when he was appointed by President Warren G. Harding to replace Chief Justice Edward Douglass White on the Supreme Court. Taft held that position until just before his death in 1930. To Taft, it was his greatest honor: "I don't remember that I ever was president." ■

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