



Robert Taft: Count Him Conservative

Taft was no Lone Ranger. He believed very much in political parties and could be as highly partisan as a Republican as Franklin Roosevelt or Harry Truman were as Democrats. Yet he was not afraid to deviate from party orthodoxy or fly in the face of popular sentiment. He drew the wrath of the press and public for arguing against the post-World War II war crimes trials at Nuremberg. "Today, the government has become a busybody," Taft said in a campaign speech in 1944, "determined to meddle with everybody else's business, to regulate every detail of private enterprise and even in many cases to set in motion direct government competition with private enterprise." But while Taft was declaring there was "hardly a field of activity into which the government has not intruded itself," he was also advancing legislation to create a federal housing program and provide federal aid to education.



"Education is socialistic anyhow, and has been for a hundred and fifty years," he explained to William S. White, a reporter and later the author of a biography of the Senator, called *The Taft Story*. Children, through no fault of their own, suffered the effects of inadequate housing and underfunded schools, said Taft, who, departing from his usual strict construction of constitutional powers, believed the federal government had a role to play in relieving those hardships. Many of his longtime supporters were not pleased, and White, in his book, related tales of old gentlemen "grumbling in their clubs" that "Taft is becoming a damn Socialist."

He would have made a strange socialist, this son of a one-term Republican President who lost his bid for reelection when the party's "progressive" wing found William Howard Taft unacceptably hide-bound. They followed former President Theodore Roosevelt into the new Progressive or "Bull Moose" Party, and in that fateful year of 1912, Roosevelt led the most successful third-party insurgency in American political history, finishing second to Democrat Woodrow Wilson and leaving the incumbent President a distant and embarrassing third, winning but two states and a woeful eight electoral votes. Small wonder then, that Taft's first-born son, who tried three times to win the presidency himself, put such a high premium on party loyalty and cohesion. "Much more effective results can be accomplished through the party channels than by independent action," he observed as a young man just entering the world of politics. His father's experience no doubt influenced as well his own preference for conservative or "regular" Republicans and a discomfort with and distrust of those with a more "progressive" agenda.

Learning and Looking



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on October 28, 2011

Robert Alphonso Taft was born in Cincinnati in 1889, the first child of William Howard and Helen Taft. At an early age, he was seen developing traits that would mark his life and career: industry, ambition, independence of mind, and exceptional ability to concentrate on the task at hand. His early adolescence was spent at the Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut, a private academy founded and still run at the time by his uncle Horace. With limited skill and interest in athletics, Taft threw himself into his studies, essay writing, and the debate team.

“Debating is hard for him,” his Uncle Horace observed. “He grasps arguments easily, but has no readiness of speech on his feet.... He is handicapped by his voice, which is not a pleasant one when he uses it with great force as he does when he speaks.” Still, when Taft graduated at age 16, he had won the \$10 scholarship prize for leading the top two classes in academic achievement and a second prize in an essay competition. In nationwide entrance exams for Yale, he shared first prize in Greek and Latin. He entered Yale, as had his father, grandfather, and uncles, and finished as valedictorian. He was number one in his class at Harvard Law School as well, winning the prize for most promising student, and he edited the law review in his final year. He passed up a job as law clerk to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes on the U.S. Supreme Court and, following his father’s advice, went on a tour of Europe before returning home to Cincinnati to practice law.

He married and started a family with the former Martha Bowers, whom he had met in Connecticut when she was a student at Rosemary Hall, a girls’ boarding school, and he was a sophomore at Yale. When the United States went to war with Germany in 1917, Taft volunteered for the army but was rejected for nearsightedness. Looking to serve in some way, he took a position in a Wilson wartime agency called the Food Administration, headed by future Republican President Herbert Hoover. Taft, the future leader of conservative, small-government Republicans, got his first taste of federal bureaucracy, and it was not appealing. He complained of “red tape and delay and confusion” in administering the regulations described by James T. Patterson in his biography of Taft, *Mr. Republican*:

Should Washington regulate tomato pulp, Honduras rice, sweet yeast? What concessions were due the makers of catsup, of green coffee, of evaporated apples? Could the Food Administration commandeer distilled spirits for redistribution? Bakers complaining of a lack of albumin for dried eggs demanded that Bob review the terms. And the radical Nonpartisan League of North Dakota, furious at regulations on the pricing and grading of wheat, forced Bob to take a trip to the Plains, where he engaged in negotiations with Attorney General William Langer of North Dakota, who was later to be one of his most aggressively independent allies in the Senate.

He was later legal advisor to Hoover when “the Chief” led the postwar American Relief Association, providing humanitarian assistance in war-ravaged Europe. Though the effort saved countless lives by averting continent-wide famine, Hoover, who would become Taft’s friend and mentor for life, was appalled by the corruption, jealousies, and intrigues of governments on the continent and grew increasingly pessimistic over the future of international cooperation. The United States, “the only great moral reserve in the world today,” should “retire from Europe lock, stock and barrel,” Hoover concluded.

Taft ran for and was elected to the Ohio Senate in 1920, the year America returned Republicans to power, opting for a “return to normalcy” with Ohio Senator Warren G. Harding as President. Taft ridiculed the notion that government “can wave its finger and accomplish any object.” The many conflicting interests abroad in the land can never be satisfactorily reconciled, Taft warned, “except under the pressure of a great war.” Inflation, he conceded, was a serious problem, but “prices are going



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to go up and down in general, following the law of supply and demand. So long as the government does not interfere with that law, no class can blame the government.” Expressing the political philosophy for which he would become nationally famous — and infamous to most liberals and “progressives” — Taft said, “There are some things that simply have to be borne until they reconcile themselves.”

He won handily, but in that and subsequent elections he attributed his political success to the soundness of his principles rather than the persuasive power of his rhetoric. “While I have no difficulty in talking,” he observed to his father at the end of his first term, “I don’t know how to do any of the eloquence business that makes for applause.” He likened his speeches to “a rather dull argument in court.”

Serve the People by Staying Home

He did well enough in the “eloquence business,” however, to win the first of his three elections to the U.S. Senate in 1938. By September of the following year, war was raging again in Europe, and Taft was among a large bloc of Senators, both Republican and Democratic, that looked suspiciously on President Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts to bend the nation’s official “neutrality” toward support of Great Britain in another war with Germany. Taft was critical of what he called the “destroyer deal” of trading U.S. warships for British bases. At a Senate hearing, he grilled Secretary of War Henry Stimson, a Republican who had also served Taft’s father as Secretary of War, on whether Stimson was in favor of America entering the war “to prevent the defeat of England and the destruction of the English fleet?” Stimson declined to answer what he characterized as a hypothetical and “dogmatic” question.

Taft fought unsuccessfully against the reinstatement of the military draft, arguing that a strong air force, a two-ocean navy and a volunteer army would be adequate for a truly defensive war. “I do not believe any of the nations will attack the United States,” he said, “and I believe that even if they do our present forces can defend against an attack across 3,000 miles of water.” Though he had much company at the time, both in the Senate and among the American people, his statements gained him the “isolationist” label that would dog him throughout his career. Accused by even close friends and family members of a cold indifference to the plight of our former allies in England, Taft maintained his duty was to protect the freedom and sovereignty of the United States. America, he noted in a letter to his sister Helen, was a nation of 130 million people. “It is not selfish in putting the interests of those people ahead of any prejudices or sympathies with other peoples.” For Taft, as for many Americans, the previous war proved armed conflict abroad was a poor guarantor of either freedom or security. War, he said, would mean the “death and wounding of our boys, the terrible destruction of life and property, the practical establishment of a dictatorship in this country through arbitrary powers granted to the President, and financial and economic collapse. Nor do I think that our intervention in Europe can permanently solve the European problems any more than it did in 1919.”

In only his second year in the Senate, Taft in 1940 made the first of his attempts to capture the GOP presidential nomination, a prize that went instead to Wendell Willkie, a devout internationalist and investment banker whose fondness for talking about his humble beginnings earned him the nickname, the “barefoot boy from Wall Street.” Both Willkie and Roosevelt, then running for an unprecedented third term, pledged to keep the nation out of war.

The bombs that landed at Pearl Harbor the following year put an end to anti-war sentiment, and America would soon be at war in Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Taft stayed out of the presidential race in 1944, leaving it to fellow Ohio Senator John Bricker to compete for the right to oppose Roosevelt’s quest for a fourth term. Instead, Bricker wound up on the lower half of a ticket headed by New York



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Governor Thomas Dewey. The Dewey-Bricker ticket went down to defeat, while Taft survived a hard-fought battle in Ohio to win a second Senate term. When the Republicans bounced back to capture both houses of Congress in the first postwar election of 1946, Taft's influence and his ability to get legislation passed naturally grew. In 1947, Congress passed his signature bill, the Taft-Hartley law, over the bitter opposition of organized labor. Among other things, the law allowed states to ban union contracts that required membership in a union as a condition of employment, required a 60-day "cooling off" period before a strike, and prohibited secondary boycotts.

Turning on Taft

By 1948, Taft was looking confidently toward another run for the White House. His chief competition was Tom Dewey, back for another try, though his unimpressive campaign four years earlier had dampened enthusiasm for him in some quarters and prompted Theodore Roosevelt's saber-tongued daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, to observe: "You can't make a souffle rise twice." Taft, meanwhile, had gained the grudging respect of journalists and editors, who praised him for his integrity, even as they distanced themselves from his views. The Senator, for his part, was only too happy to distance himself from theirs. "No, your question completely confuses the issue," was a not uncommon Taft response to an inquiring reporter. "No, I think you are entirely wrong," was another. Edwin Lahey, a newsman covering the labor beat, found Taft to be both "a good, gentle soul" under the gruff exterior and "a complete washout in the field of public relations. He won't truckle. He won't explain, he won't polish apples with any group."

Happily for Taft the television age had not quite dawned. But it was already an age of image builders, ad men, public relations experts, apple polishers, and ghostwriters. Taft had limited tolerance for any of that. "He still insisted on dictating his own speeches and boring his listeners with statistics," Patterson wrote, later adding, "no amount of image-building would have been likely to turn him into a colorful man of the people." Taft, the political pros said, was too outspoken, too colorless for a presidential candidate. His place was in the Senate. In a race for the White House, "Taft can't win."

Neither, as it turned out, could the eventual nominee. The glib, gregarious Dewey was the souffle that somehow did rise a second time, only to be baked and burned in the searing heat of Harry Truman's "Give 'em hell" kitchen. Truman, the supposedly hopeless underdog, tore into the Republicans, while Dewey did his best to stay above the battle, speaking in soothing platitudes, telling the people what they supposedly "want to hear." But a majority, it turned out, heard what they wanted to hear on the morning after the election — the news of Dewey's political demise.

Taft tried again in 1952, only to find Dewey, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., and other scions of the Eastern seaboard establishment backing General Dwight D. Eisenhower, whom both parties had courted four years earlier. The drumroll of support for the general who led the Normandy invasion and was the victorious Supreme Commander of Allied forces in Europe was loud and long. *The New York Times*, the nation's "newspaper of record," saw a winner in Eisenhower and a loser in Taft. "MR. TAFT CAN'T WIN" the *Times* declared on its editorial page, having already proved in its news columns that Taft certainly could not win in the *New York Times*. When the Ohio Senator won 15 of West Virginia's 16 delegates in early May, the story for the next day's *Times* was on the delegate he lost. "TAFT SWEEP FAILS IN WEST VIRGINIA" ran the headline over the story — on page 18. And if a picture is worth a thousand words, editorial cartoonists waxed eloquent at Taft's expense. The candidate's bespectacled, balding head and prominent front teeth seemed to have a special appeal to the widely syndicated Herbert Block, who put his caricature of it on everything from the cat who swallowed the canary to a



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dinosaur that towered over a frightened Uncle Sam. The dinosaur's name, of course, was "Isolationism." Taft's demeanor on the campaign trail didn't help his cause. He was, wrote White, "a man who could never smile, except when he really wanted to." He declined to kiss babies or sign autographs, explaining with mathematical certitude that it took three times as long to sign an autograph as it did to shake a hand. Still, he arrived at the convention in Chicago with the support of 500 of the 604 delegates needed for the nomination. He came prepared to defend his record, especially on foreign policy, but the main event at the convention was a battle over delegates' credentials. In Texas, for example, the Eisenhower camp openly advertised for Democrats and Independents to come to the precinct caucuses and vote for their man. Texas law was ambiguous on who may participate in the nominating process, but Taft's people were able to get many of the Eisenhower delegates disqualified and replaced with Taft supporters. That led to charges of theft from the opposing camp, which quickly drew up placards bearing the slogans "Rob with Bob" and "Graft with Taft," as well as the commandment "Thou Shalt Not Steal."

When the Taft forces lost the credentials battles over the Texas and Georgia delegations, Taft, who relied heavily on his solid support in the South, knew he was done. He gave a brave speech the following morning to his supporters, who, thus encouraged, marched into the convention hall, singing "Onward Christian Soldiers." But when the ballots were counted, Eisenhower was the nominee.

After meeting with the nominee and gaining pledges of support for the Taft-Hartley Act and the principles defined in the Republican platform, Taft declared himself "completely satisfied" the general would give America an administration of "continued and expanding liberty" in opposition to "the continued growth of New Deal socialism." Ever the party loyalist, he campaigned for the Republican ticket, though the name at the top was, once again, not Taft. It would be his last campaign. He died of cancer in July 1953. A year later, a young Senator, a Democrat who had served but a few months with Taft, included a chapter on "Mr. Republican" in a Pulitzer Prize-winning volume entitled *Profiles in Courage*. John F. Kennedy paid tribute to Taft for the courage he displayed in taking the unpopular position of opposing the Nuremberg trials of World War II war criminals, international trials that Taft believed violated core principles of our own Constitution. Taft, said Kennedy, "was more than a political leader, more than 'Mr. Republican.' He was also a Taft — and thus 'Mr. Integrity.' "

Photo: Robert Taft



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