

William Taft
27th President




Terms: 1909-1913

Political Party: Republican

First Lady: Helen Herron Taft

Vice President: James S. Sherman

Overview

Born: September 15, 1857 in Cincinnati, Ohio... First president to draw a salary of \$75,000 (up from the \$50,000 earned by his predecessors dating back to [Ulysses Grant](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/presidents-grant/>)... In spite of achieving a relatively large number of accomplishments in office, Taft's lack of passion for the office, combined with the fact that he was operating in the shadow of TR's <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/presidents-troosevelt/> brand of forceful, expansive leadership, did much to diminish his popularity and reputation. His judicial temperament undermined his efforts to exert executive force. In spite of the many valuable traits he possessed, he was ultimately viewed as lacking presidential leadership skills... Died: March 8, 1931.

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The Era

- Admiral [Robert Peary](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/ice-peary/) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/ice-peary/> reaches the North Pole (1909)
- [NAACP](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/peopleevents/p_naacp.html) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/peopleevents/p_naacp.html> founded (1909)
- Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts introduced to United States (1910)
- First transcontinental [airplane flight](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/lindbergh/timeline/) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/lindbergh/timeline/ > (1911)
- Mexican Revolution begins (1910)
- Revolution sweeps China (1911)

Domestic Policy

Taft appeared to enter his term as president with every intention of carrying on the progressive policies introduced by Theodore Roosevelt. Indeed, Taft broke up nearly twice as many trusts as Roosevelt had -- the monolithic [Standard Oil](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/rockefellers-trial/)

<www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/rockefellers-trial/> and American Tobacco

among them. Yet Taft's lack of ideological passion and narrow interpretation of presidential power would cause

him to lose the support of the progressives within his own party. A compromise with conservatives in Congress over tariff reductions and conservation of natural resources sealed his fate in the eyes of many reformers as a traitor to the cause.

“The President cannot make clouds to rain and cannot make the corn to grow, he cannot make business good; although when these things occur, political parties do claim some credit for the good things that have happened in this way.”

– William Howard Taft, 1916

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Foreign Affairs

Employing an approach termed Dollar Diplomacy, Taft sought to assert U.S. influence in foreign lands through investment and trade. A 1911 free-trade agreement between the U.S. and Canada would have gone far toward lowering tariffs between the neighboring countries had it not been rejected by the Canadian parliament. Taft did not shy away from displaying American military might to protect U.S. business interests, especially in Latin America. When revolution threatened in Honduras and Nicaragua, Taft dispatched troops to safeguard U.S. citizens and property. Equally noteworthy were his decisions not to interfere with revolutions taking place in Mexico and China.

Presidential Politics

William Howard Taft's presidency stood in stark contrast to that of Theodore Roosevelt. Taft refused to see himself as the embodiment of the public's hopes and aspirations. Bowing to party tradition, he felt himself more indebted to the political machinery than public mandate. During the 1910 primaries Taft quietly used the party machinery against progressive Republican candidates -- fearing that the [progressives](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/eleanor-progressive/>, if elected, would challenge his programs. Taft failed in his attempts to purge the party of progressives and incurred the wrath of Theodore Roosevelt, as well as an unforgiving electorate. President Taft so antagonized Roosevelt that the ex-president split off from the Republican party and formed his own party to [run against Taft](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wilson/sfeature/sf_candidates.html> in 1912.

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