American President

William Howard Taft

William Howard Taft faced the difficult task as President of living up to the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt. Taft so disappointed his predecessor, former mentor, and friend, that Roosevelt opposed his renomination in 1912 and bolted from the Republican Party to form his own "Bull-Moose" party, creating an opening for Democrat Woodrow Wilson in the 1912 presidential election. Taft's lifelong ambition was to serve as Chief Justice of the United States, to which he was appointed after leaving the presidency. He remains the only man in American history to have gained the highest executive and judicial positions.

Meeting Expectations

Taft, born in 1857, spent his boyhood in Cincinnati, Ohio, trying to live up to the high expectations of his demanding parents, especially his father, Alphonso Taft. Alphonso Taft was a distinguished Cincinnati attorney and a prominent Republican who served as secretary of war and then attorney general under President Ulysses Grant, and was U.S. minister (ambassador) to Austria-Hungary and Russia under President Chester Arthur. The elder Taft had also sought but lost the 1879 Republican gubernatorial nomination in Ohio.

From childhood, William Howard Taft had a weight problem, a reaction perhaps to his parents' very high expectations for him. At times during his presidency, he reached 300 pounds. He followed his father's and half-brother's path to Yale University, graduating second in his class. He studied law at the University of Cincinnati and entered private practice while also holding several local appointive positions. At age 29, Taft married an ambitious, intellectual, and independent woman, Helen "Nellie" Herron, who pushed him to strive for more than a judicial career. He held several key legal and judicial posts from 1887 to 1900, including judge of the Cincinnati Superior Court, U.S. solicitor general, and then as a member of the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. President William McKinley then asked Taft to serve as president of the commission to oversee the newly won Philippine Islands. Taft was disappointed, but pushed by his associates, including his wife, he took the job, with McKinley's promise of a future position on the Supreme Court upon his return.

A Judicial President

Taft's disposition was more prone to judicious administration than presidential activism. Though he came to the White House promising to continue Roosevelt's agenda, he was more comfortable executing the existing law than demanding new legislation from Congress. His first effort as President was to lead Congress to lower tariffs, but traditional high tariff interests dominated Congress, and Taft largely failed in his effort at legislative leadership. He also alienated Roosevelt when he attempted to break up U.S. Steel, a trust that Roosevelt had approved while President. Taft also forced Roosevelt's forestry chief to resign, jeopardizing Roosevelt's gains in the conservation of natural
resources. By 1911, Taft was less active in "trust-busting," and generally seemed more conservative. In foreign affairs, Taft continued Roosevelt's goal of expanding U.S. foreign trade in South and Central America, as well as in Asia, and he termed his policy "dollar diplomacy."

President Taft's life-long dream of reaching the U.S. Supreme Court was satisfied in 1921 with his appointment as chief justice by President Warren Harding. Taft had been uncomfortable with politics. His tendency to contemplate every side of an issue served him well as chief justice but rendered him indecisive and ineffectual as President. His presidency is generally viewed as a failure, swinging as he did from a progressive program of "trust busting" to reactionary conservatism in the face of withering criticism from Roosevelt and his allies. While Taft's presidency left a mark on the organization and conduct of the executive branch, and developed the administration of anti-trust policy, his public leadership has been widely seen as below average for 20th century Presidents.

Born in the Mount Auburn section of Cincinnati, Ohio, on September 15, 1857, William Howard Taft was a physically active child, playing sports and taking dancing lessons despite his tendency to obesity. He loved baseball, and he was a good second baseman and a power hitter. Taft studied at Woodward High School, a well-regarded private school in Cincinnati, graduating in 1874 second in the class with a four-year grade point average of 91.5 out of 100.

At Yale University, Taft followed his father's advice to refrain from athletics lest his participation impede his academic progress. He graduated second in his class of 132 students and then went on to the University of Cincinnati Law School while working part time as a courthouse reporter for the Cincinnati Commercial. Taft passed his bar exams in May 1880.

**Living Up to High Expectations**

Taft was raised in a large, close, and stimulating family. He had five siblings, two half brothers by his father's first marriage and two brothers and a sister born to his mother. The family identified with the Unitarian Church, subscribing to a belief in God but not the divinity of Christ. Taft's father, Alphonso Taft, was a lawyer and served as secretary of war and then attorney general in President Ulysses S. Grant's cabinet. President Chester A. Arthur appointed Taft's father to serve as minister (the title of ambassador in those days) to Austria-Hungary and Russia. A significant role model for William, Alphonso Taft was sensible, kind, gentle, and highly "Victorian"—a man who kept his emotions under rigid control. Politically active in the Republican Party, the senior Taft served on Cincinnati's city council and sought unsuccessfully the 1875 Republican nomination in the Ohio gubernatorial race. Alphonso had liberal views on women's rights, however, and encouraged Taft's mother, Louisa Maria Torrey Taft, in her independent ways and numerous outside activities and her intellectual curiosity. The energetic Louisa Taft organized a local and statewide kindergarten movement, an art association, book clubs, German and French clubs, and traveled widely with her husband on his diplomatic missions. Of the two parents, Louisa was the more curious and
adventurous, often taking the family down paths none would have ventured on their own. Taft's father died in 1891.

William lived in constant fear of not meeting his parents' expectations. No matter how well he performed, he was anxious about their approval. When he graduated from high school in 1874, he chose for his graduation ceremony address the subject of women's suffrage, telling the audience about his progressive parents. Taft's large variations in his body weight, according to some scholars, stemmed from his social and family anxieties.

After reading the article, write one sentence in your own words about the most interesting or important part of each section. You will have a total of 4 sentences…

1. William Howard Taft:

2. Meeting expectations:

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