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William Howard Taft

William Howard Taft (September 15, 1857-March 8, 1930) is the only person to have served as both President of the United States and Chief Justice of its Supreme Court. The sole Unitarian President since [Millard Fillmore](#), he remains the only Unitarian Chief Justice. He is remembered for services to his fellow religious liberals and to the American Unitarian Association.



William's parents, Louise Torrey and [Alphonso Taft](#), were active Unitarians in Cincinnati, Ohio. Alphonso's two sons from a previous marriage and William's three younger siblings all became Episcopalians. William—called Will by friends and close associates—enjoyed the church school of First Congregational Church (Unitarian). By the time he graduated from public high school and entered Yale he was an enthusiastic Unitarian. So much so that, when he returned home in 1878 after graduating second in his Yale class, he was an officer in the church's Unity Club. He produced, and sometimes participated in, important fund-raisers while he attended Cincinnati Law School.

Will had been a large person since birth. As a teenager he was nicknamed "Big Lub." He was athletic, however, and his weight didn't hamper him. In college, at six feet tall and well over 200 pounds, he was invited to join the football team. He preferred rowing on the varsity crew and wrestling. In his prime he weighed about 250 pounds. He was then heavy but not yet obese.

After receiving his Bachelor of Laws degree in 1880, Taft was appointed Assistant Prosecutor of Hamilton County. Two years later he was named Local Collector of Internal Revenue, a position he found not to his liking. He then went into private law practice with one of his older brothers, 1884-86. In 1886, after a long courtship, he married Helen (Nellie) Herron. She brought up their four children in her Episcopalian faith. Will nevertheless continued his active Unitarian affiliation. An ambitious woman, Nellie unceasingly pushed her husband to be President of the United States. In 1887 Taft was appointed a judge of the Superior Court of Ohio in Cincinnati. He was already widely known as an amiable and likable man, exceedingly bright and capable.

In 1890, under President Benjamin Harrison, Taft became Solicitor General of the United States. In Washington he joined, and faithfully attended, All Souls Unitarian Church. He and Nellie had hardly settled in when, in late 1891, the President appointed him a judge of the newly created Sixth District of the United States Circuit Court of Appeals, headquartered in Cincinnati. He was happy being back in Cincinnati and attending his home church.

Taft completed his legal dissertation and, in 1893, was awarded a Doctor of Laws degree by the Yale Law School. In 1896 he was appointed Professor of Law and Dean at the University of Cincinnati Law School. Because he ably managed a heavy load of legal and administrative responsibilities, during this period his reputation as a judge grew rapidly.

In 1900 President William McKinley appointed Taft chairman of a commission to organize a civilian government in the Philippines, ceded to the United States following

the Spanish-American War. Taft was disinclined to accept, telling the President that his real ambition was to serve on the Supreme Court. Besides, he had been against annexation of the islands. McKinley promised that he would appoint him to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court following the Philippines mission. The Tafts moved to Manila where the commission's work was completed. Taft was made Civil Governor of the Philippines in 1901.

During his Philippine administration Taft got to know Bishop Gregorio Aglipay, a Roman Catholic priest who had formed the new Philippine Independent Church, which had an increasingly liberal theology. Taft, who was made its Honorary President, interested Aglipay and his associates in Unitarianism. He obtained literature and letters of encouragement for them from the American Unitarian Association (AUA). The Unitarians had departed too far from orthodox Christianity for the Philippine Independent Church, however, and it eventually joined with the Philippine Episcopal Church.

Theodore Roosevelt, who became President when McKinley was assassinated in 1901, admired the job Taft was doing in the Philippines. He nevertheless kept McKinley's promise by twice offering him appointment to vacancies on the Supreme Court. Taft turned them down when groups of Filipinos begged him to continue as Governor in Manila. Roosevelt appointed him Secretary of War in 1904. During the next four years Roosevelt used Taft as his foreign affairs trouble shooter, sending him on a delicate mission to Russia, China and Japan; appointing him temporary Civil Governor of Cuba to restore order following a revolt; and putting him in charge of supervising the initial construction work on the Panama Canal. Not only did Roosevelt admire Taft's administrative skills, but he liked his genial presence.

Having renounced running for reelection in 1908, the immensely popular President Roosevelt was committed to anointing Taft as his successor. Taft was torn between the opportunity Roosevelt offered and holding out for appointment to the Supreme Court, possibly as Chief Justice. Nellie Taft was Roosevelt's most effective ally, continually urging her husband to run for President. Taft disregarded his mother's warning: "The malice of politics would make you miserable," she wrote in a 1907 letter. They only wanted him "because no one more available could be found." He was not devoid of presidential ambitions, but he knew the price of giving in to them. In a private dinner with the Tafts, Roosevelt asked Will to make his choice. Nellie made it for him when she quickly said "President" before he could say "Chief Justice."

With the President's support, Taft was nominated and defeated William Jennings Bryan handily in the election. The campaign was notable for the vicious attacks on Taft's Unitarianism, particularly in the Midwest. Evangelical Protestants, in a flood of letters and newspaper articles, accused him of being an infidel, a Catholic, etc. His religion was no secret. He attended All Souls Church faithfully. Roosevelt and others responded sharply to the attacks. Following his own instincts, as well as the advice of the President, Elihu Root, and other Republican leaders, he said nothing himself in response. Bryan did not attack Taft personally, but he would not criticize those who did, thereby implying that he agreed with them. The anti-Catholicism expressed by many of the attacks convinced urban Catholics to vote overwhelmingly Republican, contributing greatly to Taft's victory.

When Taft took the oath of office in 1909 he had been immersed in politics for four years. Under this stress his weight had ballooned to 355 pounds. It was a constant source of public humor and commentary, both in writing and pictures. He did not enjoy being President, dealing with a reluctant Congress. He turned to Unitarianism for solace. In

1909 Taft was the principal founder of the National League of Unitarian Laymen. He was made honorary President of the organization. Regular attendance at All Soul's Church provided him relief and spiritual support.

The *Christian Register*, a publication that held Taft in high regard, later commented on his presidency: "Mr. Taft is not referred to as one of the great Presidents. Two reasons may be assigned: his election depended too much on the will of his predecessor, President Roosevelt; he was temperamentally and mentally unfitted to fulfill the functions of Chief Executive of the nation. He did not enjoy the office, and could not summon the tremendous energy necessary to push through legislation in the face of powerful opposition. He made himself beloved by the people on account of his readiness to smile through difficulties; but that method did not work with Congress, and things simply did not get done."

The election of 1912 was a political disaster for the Republicans. Woodrow Wilson easily defeated both Taft and his former supporter Roosevelt (now running for the Bull Moose Party). Taft moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where he became Dean and Professor of Law at Yale Law School. A supporter of President Wilson's war policies, he served as co-chair of the National War Labor Board and spoke widely in support of the League of Nations.

Taft also became active in AUA governance. In 1915 he was named president of the National Conference of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Churches. He chaired their biennial conferences until 1925. He served as a vice-president of the AUA, 1916-22. In 1919 he helped reorganize the National League of Unitarian Laymen into the Unitarian Laymen's League. He served on its Council, later called the Executive Committee, for five years.

At the 1917 meeting of the National Conference in Montreal, Taft delivered a speech, *The Religion Convictions of An American Citizen*. It was the speech so many of his backers wished he had made in 1908. The AUA gave it wide distribution. "A Unitarian believes," he said, "that Jesus Christ founded a new religion and a new religious philosophy on the love of God for man, and of men for one another, and for God, and taught it by his life and practice, with such Heaven-given sincerity, sweetness, simplicity, and all-compelling force that it lived after him in the souls of men, and became the basis for a civilization struggling toward the highest ideals. . . . [Unitarians] feel the life of Jesus as a man to be more helpful to them, as a religious inspiration, than if he is to be regarded as God in human form." And also, "The creeds and dogmas that attached themselves to the religion of Jesus, needed perhaps in securing its spread among the nations and its triumphal march to a better civilization, have encountered the searching freedom of scientific intellectual inquiry and have shaken, in the minds of many, not the essentials of Christian faith as we Unitarians believe them to be, but the incidental tenets of a rigid theology. . . . Unitarianism offers a broad Christian religious faith that can be reconciled with scientific freedom of thought and inquiry into the truth . . ."

At the 1917 conference [John Haynes Holmes](#) proposed a resolution in favor of reconciliation, peace, and social justice. Taft denounced Holmes's proposal and introduced a pro-war resolution which passed nearly unanimously. The AUA having taken this stand, many pacifist ministers were eventually dismissed by Unitarian churches throughout the country. One of these, ironically, was the First Congregational Unitarian Church of Cincinnati. Its minister, Alson H. Robinson, was a victim of the Unitarian pro-war tidal wave initiated by Taft, the congregation's most famous son.

In 1921 President Warren G. Harding fulfilled Taft's major ambition by appointing him Chief Justice of the United States. The Tafts gladly returned to Washington where Will resumed his regular attendance at All Souls and his active role in its governance. At a 1927 meeting of the International Congress of Religious Liberals in Prague, Taft was elected its president by acclamation. He held this job until his death. His separation after 1913 from the world of politics, his successful legal work, first in teaching and then leading the Supreme Court, and his participation in both local and national Unitarian organizations restored his congenial disposition and sense of purpose and reduced his weight substantially. Illness forced him to resign from the Supreme Court in 1930. He died soon after. His funeral was held in All Souls Unitarian Church. He was interred in Arlington National Cemetery.

The Tafts had three distinguished children. Robert Alphonso (1889-1953), "Mr. Republican," was a United States senator from Ohio. Helen (1891-1987) was the dean of Bryn Mawr College. Charles Phelps II (1897-1983) was a reform mayor of Cincinnati and, as an Episcopalian layman, head of the Federal Council of Churches.

The William H. Taft Papers are in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Henry F. Pringle, *The Life and Times of William Howard Taft: A Biography*, 2 vols. (1939) remains the definitive Taft biography. Pringle had access to all the family archives and to living family members. Ishbel Ross, *An American Family: The Tafts, 1676 to 1964* (1964) is helpful on Taft's early years. *The Records of First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati*, in the Library of the Cincinnati Historical Society, provides good material on Taft's church life. See also the entry in *American National Biography* (1999).

The *Christian Register* (March 20, 1930) is devoted almost entirely to Taft's Unitarianism and his work for Unitarian organizations. See also Robert Bolt, "William Howard Taft: A Frustrated and Fretful Unitarian in the White House," *Queen City Heritage: The Journal of the Cincinnati Historical Society* (Spring 1984) and Edgar Albert Hornig, "The Religious Issue in the Taft-Bryan Election of 1908," *Proceedings of the American Philisophical Society* (Dec. 15, 1961). Frederick John Muir, *Maglipay Universalist: A History of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines* (2001) details Taft's considerable role in encouraging this new liberal church movement. John Buehrens, "Pacifists and Pragmatists," *UU World* (January/February, 2002) covers Taft's support of the war at the 1917 General Conference and its influence on local congregations. The impact on Taft's old congregation is discussed in Edward S. Lutton, *Sesquicentennial History of First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati* (First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati, 1982). The UUA Public Information Office provided useful data about Taft's denominational activities, gleaned from the annual directories of the American Unitarian Association.

Article by [Walter Herz](#).

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