

# The Political Thought of Robert A. Taft

*Lee Edwards, PhD*

*Before there was Ronald Reagan, there was Barry Goldwater, and before there was Barry Goldwater, there was Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio. From 1938 until his unexpected death in 1953, Taft led the conservative Republican resistance to liberal Democrats and their big-government philosophy.*

Taft was not your ordinary politician: After all, he was the son of William Howard Taft, a U.S. President and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. He did not slap backs; he did not twist arms; he did not sip a “little bourbon and branch” with the boys in the back room. He was the most powerful Republican in the Senate because of his formidable intellect, his huge appetite for hard work and long hours, and his political integrity. A colleague on the Yale Corporation board once went to the Senate lobby and called Taft off the floor to check on a pending railroad bill. Asked whether the bill would reach the floor that day, Taft replied, “Over my dead body” and stomped back into the Senate chamber.

## The “Liberal Conservative”

Anticipating the *National Review* fusionism of William F. Buckley Jr., the senior Senator from Ohio described himself as “a liberal conservative.” By liberal, he meant someone “who is willing to accept change, who believes in

## Robert A. Taft

### Born

September 8, 1889, in Cincinnati, Ohio, to William Howard Taft and Helen Louise Herron.

### Education

- Bachelor of Arts, Yale University, 1910; Bachelor of Laws, Harvard University, 1913.

### Religion

Episcopalian.

### Family

Married Martha Wheaton Bowers, 1914. Four children: William Howard Taft III, Robert Alphonso Taft Jr., Lloyd Bowers Taft, and Horace Dwight Taft.

### Died

July 31, 1953, in New York City.

### Highlights

- 1920: Elected to the Ohio House of Representatives.
- 1926: Elected Speaker of the Ohio House of Representatives.
- 1938: Elected to the U.S. Senate.
- 1940: Defeated for the Republican presidential nomination by Wendell Willkie.
- December 1941: Votes to declare war on Japan, Italy, and Germany.
- May 1946: Opposes President Truman's bill to draft workers who are on strike.
- October 1946: Criticizes Nuremberg trials at Kenyon College.
- April 1947: Supports the Truman Doctrine.
- June 1947: Taft-Hartley Act is passed over President Truman's veto.
- June 1948: Defeated for the Republican presidential nomination by Thomas E. Dewey.
- November 1950: Overwhelmingly reelected to the U.S. Senate.
- July 1952: Defeated for the Republican presidential nomination by Dwight D. Eisenhower.
- January 1953: Elected U.S. Senate Majority Leader.



### Notable Quote

“Every policy should be tested on that touchstone, whether it increases or decreases the liberty of our people and the promise of continued liberty in the future.” (Speech before National Canners Association, Chicago, Illinois, February 21, 1953.)

freedom for others, and is sufficiently open-minded to be able to consider any proposal that is made to him.” By conservative, he meant someone “who knows and appreciates the importance of stability. While I am willing and ready to consider changes, I want to be darned sure—*darned sure*—that they are really better than what we have.”<sup>1</sup>

Taft was a federalist. He insisted that the role of the federal government be limited to that of “a keeper of the peace, a referee of controversies, and an adjustor of abuses; not as a regulator of the people, or their business and personal activities.” His guiding principle as a legislator, he said, was whether a policy “increases or decreases the liberty of our people.”<sup>2</sup>

He believed in the rule of law, not of men, however well-intentioned. He looked to the Constitution as his North Star when voting and agreed with the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal. He supported an “equality of opportunity” whereby all men and women can rise from poverty and obscurity (as his grandfather Alphonso did) according to their ability and their ambition. He was a consistent supporter of civil rights, supporting anti-lynching laws and the desegregation of the armed forces and opposing the Ku Klux Klan and state poll taxes. He approved the Supreme Court’s position requiring states to furnish equal education to citizens of all classes.

He rejected progressivism as one extreme and laissez-faire as another. He accepted the need for limited government, which he said must provide a floor through which no one is permitted to fall. He believed in a humane economy founded “upon Christian moral principles and upon the American historical experience.”<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, he sponsored limited federal aid to education, health, and housing with the condition that administration of the programs be placed in the hands of state and local authorities. Public housing, he explained, would be available only to low-income people who otherwise would live in slums.

His support of federal housing caused a Senate colleague to comment caustically, “I hear the Socialists have gotten to Bob Taft.”<sup>4</sup> Shrugging off the remark, Taft declared that decent public housing in blighted areas would revive private-sector building in the inner cities. “I have seen public housing projects in Cleveland and elsewhere,” he said, “which have changed the whole character of the neighborhood. Private owners have come in and

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1. Caroline Thomas Harnsberger, *A Man of Courage: Robert A. Taft* (Chicago: Wilcox and Follett, 1952), p. 7. Emphasis in original.

2. Russell Kirk and James McClellan, *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft* (New York: Fleet Press, 1967), p. 62.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

4. John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 196.

improved all the homes in the neighboring section, new stores have been built and a standard established extending far beyond the number of homes covered by public housing.”<sup>5</sup>

His goal of ensuring an “equality of opportunity” for everyone led him to reverse his stand on federal aid to education. In his first years in the Senate, Taft opposed all federal subsidies to public schools, concerned that such subsidies might lead to federal control of local schooling. After World War II, however, intense study persuaded him that public schools had been neglected during the war and that funds had to be allocated to repair that neglect and provide for a rapidly increasing school population. Public instruction, he said, was a matter of national concern.

In a 1949 address to the American Council on Education, Taft said that the federal government should confine itself to seeing that a decent minimum was provided for the schooling of children in states—particularly Southern states—where the need for federal assistance clearly existed. He was guided by our constitutional system, which provides that in education, “the primary responsibility and right belong to the state and local governments.”<sup>6</sup>

Any proposal for federal action, Taft insisted, must be judged by its effect on the liberty of the individual, the family, the community, industry, and labor. “Such liberty,” he said, “cannot be sacrificed to any theoretical improvement from government control or governmental spending.” The conservative historian Russell Kirk wrote that from the beginning of his career to the end, Taft contended against “ideology, concentrated power, grandiose political schemes...economic folly.”<sup>7</sup>

Taft freely admitted that he was not an intellectual. He occasionally read books like Thomas Hewes’s *Decentralize for Liberty*, published in 1945, and sometimes quoted John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* in his speeches, but when a reporter asked whether he had read Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, Taft shook his head and chuckled. “You remind me of Thurber’s *Let Your Mind Alone*. There are some questions that I have not thought very much about, but I’m a politician, not a philosopher.”<sup>8</sup> But he had a strong sense of moral right and wrong, a willingness to stand up for first principles, even when it was unpopular to do so.

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5. Kirk and McClellan, *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft*, p. 151.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

8. James T. Patterson, *Mr. Republican: A Biography of Robert A. Taft* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), p. 330.

## Taft and the Nuremberg Trials: “The Spirit of Vengeance”

A prime example of Taft’s commitment to principle regardless of prevailing opinion was his blunt criticism of the Nuremberg trials that took place in the fall of 1946 during an election year when Republicans expected to make major gains in Congress and to lay the foundation for a return to the White House two years hence. There seemed to be no serious impediment to a resounding Republican victory until Robert Taft stunned Washington’s political community by censuring the trial, conviction, and execution of 11 prominent Nazis including the number-two Nazi, Hermann Goering, who committed suicide at the last moment to avoid hanging.

Taft had accepted an invitation to participate in an October conference at Kenyon College, located in Gambier, Ohio, on the heritage and responsibility of English-speaking peoples in a post-war world. In an address titled “Justice and Liberty for the Individual,” he declared that “the trial of the vanquished by the victors cannot be impartial no matter how it is hedged about with the forms of justice.” The Nuremberg trials, he said, violated the fundamental principle of Roman, British, and American law that “a man cannot be tried under an *ex post facto* statute.” With typical directness, he said:

I question whether the hanging of those, who, however despicable, were the leaders of the German people, will ever discourage the making of aggressive war, for no one makes aggressive war unless he expects to win. About this whole judgment there is the spirit of vengeance, and vengeance is seldom justice. The hanging of the eleven men convicted will be a blot on the American record which we shall long regret.<sup>9</sup>

Although he did not use the term, the Nuremberg trials were an example of legal positivism and the unrestrained use of judicial power. Liberal Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas agreed with Taft, saying that the crime for which the Nazis were tried had never been formalized as a crime or outlawed with the death penalty by the international community.

As John F. Kennedy recounts in his award-winning *Profiles in Courage*, Taft was widely denounced for his forthrightness. Critics included those who had fought in Europe against the Nazis, the many nationalities in Europe who had suffered under Nazism, Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, and partisan Democrats who saw an opportunity for political gain. The

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9. The Hon. Robert A. Taft, “Justice and Liberty for the Individual,” in *The Heritage of the English-Speaking Peoples and Their Responsibility: Addresses at the Conference October 1946, Kenyon College* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), p. 157.

Democratic campaign manager in New York challenged Taft “to come into this state and repeat his plea for the lives of the Nazi war criminals.”<sup>10</sup>

Republicans quickly separated themselves from Taft’s remarks. New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, who would secure the Republican nomination for President in 1948, declared that the verdicts were justified: “The defendants at Nuremberg had a fair and extensive trial. No one can have any sympathy for these Nazi leaders who brought such agony upon the world.” Alben Barkley, Democratic Majority Leader in the Senate and a future Vice President, resurrected an old cliché, saying that Taft had “never experienced a crescendo of heart about the soup kitchens of 1932, but his heart bled anguishedly for the criminals at Nuremberg.”<sup>11</sup>

Taft was taken aback by the ferocity of his critics and embarrassed by such supporters as the acquitted Nazi leader Franz von Papen, but he did not retract his comments. Far from sympathizing with the Nazi leaders, he suggested that they be shut in prison for the rest of their lives “on the ground that if free they might stir up another war.... My big objection is the use of the forms of justice to carry out a predetermined policy. That is the Russian idea of a trial.”<sup>12</sup> Taft biographer James Patterson writes that “the trials so clearly rested on victor’s ‘justice’” that many experts later conceded the essential correctness of Taft’s position and that Taft’s “outspoken view of the trials...revealed the depth of his convictions on crucial issues.”<sup>13</sup>

John F. Kennedy was so taken with Taft’s stand on principle that he featured him in his book *Profiles in Courage*. As an apostle of constitutionalism, Kennedy writes, Taft was undeterred by the possible injuries to his party’s political chances or his own presidential prospects. “To him, justice was at stake and all other concerns were trivial.” His independent stand on the Nuremberg Trials, Kennedy concluded, was characteristic of the man who wrote the following when asked what he meant by liberalism:

Liberalism implies particularly freedom of thought, freedom from orthodox dogma, the right of others to think differently from one’s self. It implies a free mind, open to new ideas and willing to give attentive consideration to them.... When I say liberty, I mean liberty of the individual to think his own thoughts and live his own life as he desires to think and live.<sup>14</sup>

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10. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, p. 201.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 201–204.

12. Patterson, *Mr. Republican*, p. 328.

13. *Ibid.*

14. 11 Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, p. 205.

## A Small-C Conservative

Taft's definition could have been written by John Stuart Mill or a 20th century libertarian, but Taft also called himself a conservative. What was his philosophy, and what principles held his philosophy together? Taft's unofficial biographer, the award-winning historian James T. Patterson, proffers a multifaceted answer.

*First*, Taft was flexible: conservative when necessary, liberal when appropriate. "We cannot blindly oppose every measure looking towards the improvement of conditions in the field of social welfare," he wrote a friend who disapproved of his housing initiative.<sup>15</sup>

*Second*, he was not attracted to abstract thought, but instead sought specific solutions to pressing problems.

City-bred and widely traveled, Taft did not share the nostalgia of some conservatives for the agrarian way. His hero above all others was his father; his Senate office contained photographs and a bust of William Howard Taft, 27th President and 10th Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the only American to hold both offices.

Robert Taft was a willing spokesman for free enterprise who opposed price controls and excessive taxation of business, arguing that such taxes hurt everyone. He was a prudential optimist, an American conservative who rejected the Hobbesian view of human nature. He did not accept that race determined the fate of black Americans: "I see no reason to think that inequality of intellect or ability is based on racial origin."<sup>16</sup> The most important thing that government could do to eliminate inequality, he said, was to assure equality of opportunity. He had been taught the "joys of striving and of individual effort" by his father and delighted in the long hours that Senate leadership demanded.<sup>17</sup>

With respect to religion, Taft "was a nominal Episcopalian who occasionally went to church but made little pretense of being devout." Asked what church her husband attended on Sundays, Taft's wife Martha replied: "I guess you'd have to say The Burning Tree," the name of an exclusive men-only Washington golf course.<sup>18</sup>

Summing him up, Patterson writes that Robert Taft was a small-c conservative, equating any growth of the federal government with the curtailment

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15. Patterson, *Mr. Republican*, p. 329.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

of individual liberty. He viewed with suspicion any new welfare program intended for the benefit of “the people.” He relied on gradual reform to solve most problems.

Above all, says Patterson, Taft “insisted on adherence to ‘principle,’ instead of the opportunism adopted by the Democrats since 1932.”<sup>19</sup> Three general principles guided him: equal justice under the law, equality of opportunity, and human liberty—“the freedom of the individual to choose his own work and his life occupation.”<sup>20</sup> Liberals argued that the right to social and economic security was the greatest liberty of all, but Taft hewed to conservative principles of limited government and individual responsibility along with individual freedom.

### “Mr. Republican”

From 1946 until 1953, Robert Taft was “Mr. Republican,” leading his party in and out of the Senate. He was the party’s chief spokesman in the 1946 election with its slogan, “Had Enough? Vote Republican!” Most Americans had had enough of constant strikes, high prices, black markets, rent gougers, and “government by crony.” They were past ready for a change after 20 years of Democratic dominance: The new House of Representatives had 246 Republicans, 188 Democrats, and one Independent, and Senate Republicans had a 51–45 majority.

The allegedly “Do-Nothing 80th Congress” was in fact an extraordinary Congress that cut 7.5 percent of the federal budget and trimmed personal income taxes from top to bottom—but it could not override President Harry Truman’s veto. Truman maintained that tax cuts would encourage consumer spending, an argument borrowed from Alfred Keynes and rejected by Taft and other conservative Republicans.

The Taft–Hartley Labor Act was the 80th Congress’s most significant action in domestic public policy. Much had changed since passage of the Wagner Act of 1935, hailed as “Labor’s Magna Carta.” Organized labor was now widely perceived by the public as too strong and too prone to use the strike in every bargaining session. During the war and afterward, many Americans commented that “[s]oldiers in their foxholes don’t strike.” Taft was determined to bring about labor reform, but his sense of justice compelled him to acknowledge that although strikes might be disorderly and wasteful, they were necessary and constitutional. He would not accept the

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19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.



more punitive provisions of the House version, which included the prohibition of industry-wide bargaining and sharp restrictions on the union shop.

The vote on final passage of the Taft–Hartley Act was 308–107 in the House and 68–24 in the Senate. Truman vetoed the legislation, but the House and Senate overrode his veto. In a national radio address, Taft explained the measure’s purpose: “It seems to me that our aim should be to reach the point where, when an employer meets with his employees, they have substantially equal bargaining power, so that neither side feels it can make an unreasonable demand and get away with it.”<sup>21</sup>

Taft did not play the same dominant role in foreign policy, deferring to Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It fell to Vandenberg to resolve the contradictions within the 80th Congress regarding America’s relations with the world, especially the Soviet Union. Most Republicans wanted a tough approach toward Moscow but did not want to pay for it. They were politically internationalist but economically isolationist.

To ensure that neither Greece nor Turkey went Communist, a bipartisan congressional coalition approved what came to be called the Truman Doctrine and in effect endorsed a policy of containment with respect to the Soviet Union. Taft expressed doubt about the proposal but did not want to appear to be backing down to the Soviets. When he formally approved the legislation, he qualified his support: “I do not regard this as a commitment to any similar policy in any other section of the world.” But with his approval, he accepted the basic premise of the Truman Doctrine: America should assist free nations and peoples threatened by the Soviet Union.

Consequently, when the Marshall Plan providing U.S. aid to Western Europe was introduced, Taft did not oppose the plan but did try to trim its size. His position was pragmatic rather than isolationist: “I am in favor of extending further aid to the countries of western Europe beyond the demands of charity only because of the effect our aid may have in the battle against communism.”<sup>22</sup> He voted “aye” on final passage after trying unsuccessfully to cut several billion dollars from the measure.

## 1948: Dewey vs. Truman

In the political summer of 1948, the outcome of the fall election seemed certain. Every poll reported that if Truman ran for the presidency, he would

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21. Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), p. 21.

22. Kirk and McClellan, *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft*, p. 171.

be defeated. In choosing their presidential candidate, Republicans decided to play it safe, nominating moderate New York Governor Thomas Dewey rather than liberal Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen or conservative Ohio Senator Robert Taft. After all, Dewey had received 46 percent of the popular vote in 1944 running against the legendary Franklin D. Roosevelt.

A majority of Republicans leaned toward Dewey rather than Taft because Taft was considered a regional (mostly Midwestern) candidate; he was not a proven vote getter at the national level; he took pride in not being charismatic, resisting all attempts to “improve” his image; he was the leader of the “Do-Nothing 80th Congress” that Truman had transformed into a central campaign issue; and Dewey was handily beating Truman in all of the polls.

Not for the first time, the polls were wrong. In the most unexpected outcome in modern presidential politics, Harry Truman defeated Dewey by more than two million popular votes and by 305 to 189 in the Electoral College. The third-party efforts of Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond and radical Progressive Henry Wallace had little impact, with each garnering just a little over one million votes. Wallace received no electoral votes, and Thurmond received only 38.

Would Taft have defeated Truman? Perhaps. We can be sure that Taft would not have duplicated Dewey’s deliberately bland message of “constructive change.” He would have responded promptly to Truman’s hyperpartisan charges, especially the myth of a “Do-Nothing 80th Congress.” Disappointed conservative Republicans assured themselves that the Republican Party had learned an important lesson: It would not again nominate a candidate who failed to carry the campaign to the opposition or take clear-cut stands on the issues. In the wake of Dewey’s defeat, there was every reason to believe that Robert Taft would be the Republican presidential nominee in 1952.

## Reelection to the Senate

Taft demonstrated his vote-getting ability in his 1950 reelection campaign for the Senate. He visited every one of Ohio’s 88 counties and spent an estimated \$5 million (about \$55 million in 2020 dollars), an astronomical sum for a Senate race at the time. The importance of the election was elevated when national leaders of organized labor marshaled all their horses and all their men to unseat the author of what they called the “Taft–Hartley Slave Labor Law.” Taft responded in kind. By Election Day, he had given 873 speeches, spoken 147 times over radio, and visited 334 industrial plants, shaking the hands of startled union workers unprepared for a visit from the Devil.

Taft called for the election of orthodox Republicans, saying that America needed a Congress that would pass the Mundt–Ferguson bill, which would have required the registration of every Communist or Communist-front organization.<sup>23</sup> Such anti-Communist rhetoric went down well with voters who were concerned about the outcome of the Korean War, which had started in June with the unprovoked invasion of South Korea by North Korean forces. In domestic policy, Taft charged that Truman was seeking “complete and arbitrary power” over the economy.<sup>24</sup>

Taft buried his liberal Democratic opponent Joseph Ferguson by a record 431,184 votes, carrying 84 of Ohio’s 88 counties. He was proud that large numbers of people who were not remotely identifiable as “fat cats” had voted for him along with thousands of union members. He wrote former President Herbert Hoover, a long-time friend and counselor, that his reelection showed that “the American workman will not listen to a class appeal but proposes to vote as an American first.... We certainly upset the theory that a heavy vote is necessarily radical.”<sup>25</sup>

## 1952: Taft vs. Eisenhower

The Ohio results demonstrated the broad appeal of Taft’s fusionist politics, and he decided to offer himself and all he represented—what he felt was true Republicanism—as a presidential candidate. By mid-1951, nearly every political observer agreed that the GOP would win the White House in 1952, but conservative Republicans insisted that the party had to nominate the right kind of Republican. Pointing to the bitter disappointment of 1948, Taft argued that the Republican Party could not survive unless it turned away from the Deweys and Eastern internationalists.” He was convinced that millions of conservative Republicans had not been voting in presidential elections because the two major parties’ candidates were merely Tweedledum and Tweedledee.<sup>26</sup> Taft saw it as his duty to offer a conservative choice and bring the faithful back into the fold.

Here was the argument for the courting of the Forgotten American, the Silent Majority, the Moral Majority, and the Tea Party that would be advanced by conservatives in the decades ahead. Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, and Donald Trump all depended on the cornerstone

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23. Patterson, *Mr. Republican*, pp. 447 and 455.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 443 and 454.

25. Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution*, pp. 45–46.

26. Patterson, *Mr. Republican*, pp. 306 and 425.

laid down by Robert Taft. Going into the Republican National Convention in Chicago, Taft was the seemingly invincible favorite with over 500 delegates pledged to him and 604 delegates needed to secure the nomination. There did not seem to be any way that he could be denied what he had so clearly earned. The forces arrayed for Dwight D. Eisenhower, Taft's formidable opponent, found one by challenging accredited delegates from the South.

Since the Civil War, Republican workers in the South had two main responsibilities: to serve as postmasters when there was a Republican President and to vote at national conventions. These party regulars were solidly behind Mr. Republican, Robert Taft. Texas regulars met and selected 30 delegates for Taft, four for Eisenhower, and four for General Douglas MacArthur. In response, Eisenhower managers boldly placed ads in Texas newspapers and mailed thousands of postcards inviting Democrats to come to Republican meetings and "vote" for General Eisenhower. As a consequence, Eisenhower "Republicans" convened separately and picked 33 Ike delegates and only five Taft delegates. Two Texas delegations showed up in Chicago, each claiming to be the legitimate representative of the Lone Star state.

Pro-Taft convention officials sought to seat the Taft delegates without debate but withered under Eisenhower's charges of "a Texas steal" and backroom deals. A majority of convention delegates wanted to nominate Taft but didn't. Why? Because the polls showed Eisenhower easily beating any Democrat by a wide margin. Republicans loved Taft, wrote historian William Manchester, but they loved victory more.<sup>27</sup>

Following Eisenhower's nomination on the first ballot, furious Taft supporters threatened to walk out of the convention. Reversing the usual practice of the loser calling on the winner, Ike visited Taft in his hotel headquarters. "I came over to pay a call of friendship on a great American," the general said. "His willingness to cooperate is absolutely necessary to the success of the Republican party in the campaign and the administration to follow." Taft responded generously: "I want to congratulate General Eisenhower. I shall do everything possible in the campaign to secure his election and to help in his administration."<sup>28</sup> Taft's refusal to display any public bitterness and his quiet acceptance of defeat awed friend and foe alike.

The two rivals solidified their political partnership in September with a two-hour breakfast meeting in New York City at which the President-to-be promised the Senate Majority Leader-to-be that he would not censor Taft proposals such as a 15 percent cut in federal spending, would firmly defend

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27. *Ibid.*, pp. 561-562.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 563.

Taft–Hartley against any attempt to rescind it, and would abandon Truman’s accommodationist foreign policy as developed at Yalta and Potsdam. In return, Taft assured Ike that he would campaign “vigorously” for the Eisenhower–Nixon ticket, ensuring a united Republican Party.

What difference would it have made if Taft rather than Eisenhower had been the Republican nominee? Taft was convinced, as were his partisans, that he too would have won. Taft believed that the independent vote would have gone—as it did in his 1950 senatorial campaign—to an aggressive limited-government candidate like himself. Political pollster Samuel Lubell concurred, telling a Washington audience several years later that while Taft would not have won by as large a margin as Eisenhower, “still he would have been elected.”<sup>29</sup> According to biographer James T. Patterson, the consensus of analysts was that “Taft would have won, but on nothing like the scale amassed by the beloved Ike.”<sup>30</sup>

## Taft’s Political Legacy

As to what kind of President he would have been, Taft had little doubt, writing a friend in December 1952 that “I am confident that my administration would have given the people what they want much more than the General’s will.” A Taft Administration would have reduced federal spending, balanced the budget, and cut taxes (all of which had been accomplished by the “Do-Nothing 80th Congress” under Taft’s leadership); provided carefully prescribed government services in public housing and education; cleaned out the State Department; ended the conflict in Korea; and met the Soviet challenge with an expanded Air Force and Navy while keeping the deployment of American armed forces overseas to a minimum.

Conservative Republicans believed that Taft should have been the presidential candidate in 1948 and 1952 but had been denied the nomination by the machinations of the Eastern liberal establishment. They were determined that next time they would nominate a conservative candidate. They settled for Richard Nixon in 1960 as the Republican most likely to win. When Nixon lost after running as a “modern” Republican, conservatives’ belief that a right-of-center candidate would attract millions of ignored voters was reinforced.

Consequently, when the National Draft Goldwater Committee began to line up delegates for the 1964 Republican National Convention, they sought

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29. *Ibid.*, p. 580.

30. Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution*, p. 58.

conservatives who would stick with Goldwater until California froze over. When Goldwater won the presidential nomination on the first ballot, control of the Republican Party shifted from the liberals to the conservatives.

Events were also set in motion for the political debut of Ronald Reagan. If Goldwater had not been nominated, Reagan would not have been asked to deliver a national television address that made him a political star overnight. Every other Republican presidential candidate in 1964 was a liberal who would have rejected Reagan as an advocate. And if he had not delivered “A Time for Choosing” in the last week of the campaign, Reagan would not have been approached to run for governor of California. On such little things as a TV speech do large outcomes like the Age of Reagan depend.

With Taft’s all-out help, Ike won easily, gaining 55.4 percent of the popular vote and sweeping the Electoral College by 442–89. His long coattails helped to produce Republican majorities in both houses of Congress. For the first time since 1930, Republicans controlled the White House and Congress. It seemed that a moderate President and a conservative Senator would forge a nonideological alliance for the good of their party and the country. Tragically, in just six short months, Robert Taft, the requisite link between regular Republican and moderate Republican, Midwest and East, internationalist and nationalist, was dead of cancer.

Who knows what these two political giants might have accomplished if they had had four or eight years to work together? But in April, the 64-year-old Taft felt a severe pain in his hip while playing golf with Ike. Two months later, he announced on crutches that he was stepping down temporarily as Senate Majority Leader. The cancer was so far advanced that no meaningful treatment was possible. He died quietly on July 31, 1953. His body, like his father’s two decades before, was placed in the Capitol rotunda, where thousands paid their last respects to Mr. Republican.

Almost single-handedly, Taft had strengthened and shaped the conservative strain in the American character, demonstrating that change was not to be feared but blended and harmonized with the historical experience of the nation. His accomplishments, according to conservative historians Russell Kirk and James McClellan, were significant:

- He revived the GOP during the postwar period and restored “a conscientious opposition” when parliamentary government had fallen into decay throughout most of the world.
- He stood for liberty under law—“the liberties of all classes of citizens, in all circumstances.”

- He spoke with effect against “arbitrary power,” as when President Truman tried to crush the right of railroad workers to strike.
- He contended for “a humane economy” in which the benefits of American industry might be extended to every citizen.
- He helped to restore the balance between management and labor with the Taft–Hartley Act.
- He criticized the conduct of American foreign policy vigorously and fairly, supporting, for example, the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan but opposing NATO.<sup>31</sup>

Four years after his death, Taft was elected to a Senate Hall of Fame, joining John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Robert La Follette, Sr. The “statesmanship” of these five men, according to a bipartisan Senate committee, transcended party and state lines and “left a permanent mark on our Nation’s history and brought distinction to the Senate.”<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

Robert A. Taft’s stature, wrote biographer Robert Patterson, rested on the personal qualities of honesty, conscientiousness, courage, and intelligence. Regardless of criticism and consolidated opposition, he rarely departed from principle. The liberal political columnist Joseph Alsop remarked that those who disagreed with Taft acknowledged his “deep Americanism” as much as those who agreed with him did. Among those who were inspired by his political thought of limited constitutional government, free enterprise, and individual freedom and responsibility—an early version of William F. Buckley fusionism—was the junior Senator from Arizona, Barry Goldwater, an essential maker of the modern conservative movement.<sup>33</sup>

**Lee Edwards, PhD**, is Distinguished Fellow in Conservative Thought in the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies, of the Edwin J. Feulner Institute, at The Heritage Foundation.

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31. Kirk and McClellan, *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft*, p. 195.

32. Report No. 279, *Senate Reception Room*, Special Committee on the Senate Reception Room, U.S. Senate, 85th Cong., 1st Sess., May 1, 1957, p. 6.

33. Kirk and McClellan, *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft*, p. 194.