

This Day in History... September 15, 1857

Birth of William Howard Taft

William Howard Taft was born September 15, 1857, near Cincinnati, Ohio.

As a student at Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut, he was a member of the Livonian Society, a literary and debate group. After graduating second in his class in 1878, he attended Cincinnati Law School.

From an early age, Taft had great aspirations to serve on the Supreme Court, so he embarked on a career in law. Admitted to the Ohio bar, he served as assistant prosecutor of Hamilton County, and then local collector of Internal Revenue. After marrying his long-time sweetheart, Helen Herron, he was appointed a judge of the superior court of Cincinnati. In 1890, at age 32, he became the youngest-ever solicitor general of the United States. The following year, he began his service on the new US Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. At the same time, he also spent four years as a professor of constitutional law and served as the first dean at the University of Cincinnati.



Issued four months after Taft's death.

In 1900, Taft was approached by President William McKinley to serve as chairman of a commission to organize a civilian government in the Philippines.

The Philippines had recently come under US control following the Spanish-American War. Though Taft had initially opposed annexing the islands, he took the post. Taft then served as the first civilian governor-general of the Philippines from 1901 to 1903. During his service he negotiated the purchase of Philippine lands owned by the Roman Catholic Church. He then convinced Congress to buy the lands for \$7 million before selling them to the Filipinos.

In 1903, President Roosevelt offered Taft the job of his dreams – a seat on the Supreme Court. But Taft felt that the Filipinos were not yet able to govern themselves and declined the post. Roosevelt offered him the job several more times, but Taft had a strong resolve to complete the task at hand before considering his own personal interests.

Taft's career took another large leap in 1904, when Roosevelt appointed him secretary of War. Following a revolt in Cuba, Taft served as that country's provisional governor, negotiating with the rebels for a peaceful outcome. After the 1903 Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty gave the US construction rights for the Panama Canal, Taft oversaw the early stages of its development.

Though Taft had expressed that he wanted to be chief justice of the Supreme Court several times, Roosevelt began advertising him as the Republican nominee in the presidential election of 1908. Taft's wife had always wanted to be first lady. Therefore, he agreed that he would run if he received the party's nomination, which he did on the first ballot. He went on to win the election by 159 electoral votes.

In contrast to his predecessor, Taft faced the tariff issue head-on. He encouraged congressional reformers to institute lower rates, while speaking publicly that he would compromise with those who sought to keep the rates high. He called this his "policy of harmony." Though Taft did not speak as critically of big business as Roosevelt had, his administration filed 90 antitrust suits, compared to 44 during the previous term. When 25 Western railroads announced they would raise rates by 20%, Taft threatened to enforce the Sherman Antitrust Act against them. As a result, they agreed to submit rate requests to the new Interstate Commerce Commission. This helped Taft's approval with some progressives. As the nation's labor movement began to rise, Taft called for a "central organization in touch with associations and chambers of commerce throughout the country." This resulted in the creation of the US Chamber of Commerce.

Taft made major strides in the area of federal spending, making drastic and lasting changes in the federal budgeting process. His changes resulted in a \$92 million reduction, essentially creating the first presidential budget.

As the election of 1912 neared, the Republican Party began to split. When Taft received the party's nomination at their convention, Roosevelt and his supporters started their own "Bull Moose" Progressive party. In the end, Democrat Woodrow Wilson won the election, with Roosevelt in second and Taft in third. He had won just eight electoral votes, the worst defeat of an incumbent president in American history.

After leaving the White House in 1913, Taft became a professor of Law and Legal History at Yale Law School. Elected president of the American Bar Association, he spent a great deal of time writing newspaper articles and books, with much of his focus on legal philosophy.

In 1921, Taft achieved his life-long dream of serving as chief justice of the Supreme Court. He enjoyed an eight-year career in that position, reorganizing court systems, introducing lasting reforms, and promoting the construction of the US Supreme Court Building. Taft retired in 1930 due to ill health and died five weeks later, on March 8. He was the only chief justice to have a state funeral and first president to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery.



Taft was the only person to serve as both president and chief justice of the Supreme Court.



1930 Rotary Stamp



Taft stamp from the 1938 Presidential Series

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