

SECTION 3

The Taft Administration

Guide to Reading

Main Idea

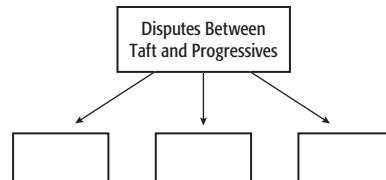
President Taft continued with Roosevelt's Progressive policies, but he did not live up to the expectations of many progressives.

Key Terms and Names

Joseph G. Cannon, Payne-Aldrich Tariff, Richard Ballinger, syndicate, insubordination

Reading Strategy

Organizing As you read about progressivism in this section, complete a graphic organizer similar to the one below listing Taft's conflicts with the progressives.



Reading Objectives

- **Explain** how Theodore Roosevelt helped Taft get elected.
- **Discuss** why progressives were disappointed with Taft as president.

Section Theme

Continuity and Change Political differences with Roosevelt caused President Taft to lose Progressive support, even though he supported many Progressive policies.

Preview of Events



★ An American Story ★



William Howard Taft

One evening in January 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt sat chatting with Secretary of War William Howard Taft and his wife, Nellie, in the second-floor White House library. The mood was relaxed. Seated comfortably in his easy chair, Roosevelt was talking about a subject he had often discussed with his guests: the future role of Taft. Roosevelt toyed with a couple of options. "At one time it looks like the presidency," he mused, considering a future role for his trusted lieutenant, "then again it looks like the chief justiceship."

The Tafts knew that Roosevelt had the power to bring about either of these options. "Make it the presidency," interrupted Nellie Taft, always ambitious about her husband's career. Taft himself was less convinced that he would make a good chief executive. "Make it the chief justiceship," he uttered.

In the end, Taft bowed to the wishes of his wife and his boss. Following George Washington's example and honoring his own promise of 1904, Roosevelt decided not to seek reelection in 1908. Instead, he endorsed an experienced administrator and moderate progressive to run for president on the Republican ticket: William Howard Taft.

—adapted from *The American Heritage Pictorial History of the Presidents of the United States*

Taft Becomes President

Roosevelt loved "Smiling Bill" Taft like a brother and believed him to be the ideal person to continue his policies. He was, Roosevelt said, a leader who possessed "a scorn of all that is base and mean, a hearty sympathy with the oppressed [and a] kindly generosity of nature which makes him feel that all of his countrymen are in very truth his friends and



brothers.” Taft had been Roosevelt’s most trusted lieutenant. He had served as a judge, as governor of the Philippines, and as Roosevelt’s secretary of war. In fact, Taft seemed acceptable to almost everyone. Thanks to Roosevelt’s efforts, he easily received his party’s nomination. His victory in the general election in November 1908 was a foregone conclusion. The Democratic candidate, twice-defeated William Jennings Bryan, lost once more.

Taft’s Approach to Government “My dear Theodore,” Taft wrote to his old friend a couple of weeks after assuming office. “When I am addressed as ‘Mr. President,’ I turn to see whether you are at my elbow.” The comment was telling.

In that same letter, Taft admitted some of his early fears about his presidency:

“I have no doubt that when you return you will find me very much under suspicion. . . . I have not the prestige which you had. . . . I am not attempting quite as much as you did . . . and so I fear that a

large part of the public will feel as if I had fallen away from your ideals; but you know me better and will understand that I am still working away on the same old plan.”

—quoted in *The American Heritage Pictorial History of the Presidents of the United States*

Roosevelt and Taft were very different people. Roosevelt was a dynamic person who loved the spotlight and the rough-and-tumble world of politics. He had grand ideas and schemes but left the details of administering them to others. Taft was the opposite in many ways. He was a skillful administrator and judge. He disliked political maneuvering and preferred to avoid conflict with others. Unlike Roosevelt, who acted quickly and decisively on issues, Taft responded slowly, approaching problems from a legalistic point of view. “I don’t like politics,” he wrote, “I don’t like the limelight.” Although committed to many progressive ideas, Taft’s personality and approach to politics quickly brought him into conflict with progressives.

Picturing History

Presidential Ritual In 1910 President Taft threw out the first baseball of the season at Lincoln Park in Washington, D.C., as his wife Nellie looked on. [Why do you think presidents often continue this practice today?](#)



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Political Uprow Taft's interior secretary, Richard Ballinger, pictured at left, ignited controversy when he made nearly one million acres of public land available for development. Progressive Gifford Pinchot, at right, leaked the story to the press. [How was the controversy resolved?](#)



The Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act Like many progressives, Taft believed high tariffs limited competition, hurt consumers, and protected trusts. Roosevelt had warned him to stay away from tariff reform because it would divide the Republican Party. Taft, however, went ahead and called Congress into special session to lower tariff rates.

To pass a new tariff, Taft needed the help of Speaker of the House **Joseph G. Cannon**. As Speaker, Cannon appointed all committees and decided which bills they handled. By exercising almost total control over debate, Cannon could push some bills through without discussion and see that others never came to a vote. Progressives, however, wanted to unseat Cannon because he often blocked their legislation.

Taft disagreed with the effort to unseat Cannon. He pressured progressive Republicans into stopping their campaign against Cannon. In exchange, Cannon quickly pushed the tariff bill through the House of Representatives. Taft's compromise angered many progressives. The following year, they defied the president by joining with House Democrats and removing Cannon from power.

Taft further alienated progressives when the tariff bill went to the Senate. The powerful head of the Senate Finance Committee, Republican Nelson Aldrich from Rhode Island, wanted to protect high tariffs, as did many other conservative senators. The result was the **Payne-Aldrich Tariff**, which cut tariffs hardly at all and actually raised them on some goods.

After discussions with Aldrich and other senators, however, Taft decided to accept the new tariff.

Progressives felt betrayed and outraged by Taft's decision: "I knew the fire had gone out of [the Progressive movement]," recalled chief forester Gifford Pinchot after Roosevelt left office. "Washington was a dead town. Its leader was gone, and in his place [was] a man whose fundamental desire was to keep out of trouble."

The Ballinger-Pinchot Controversy With Taft's standing among Republican progressives deteriorating, a sensational controversy broke out late in 1909 that helped destroy Taft's popularity with reformers for good. Many progressives had been unhappy when Taft replaced Roosevelt's secretary of the interior, James R. Garfield, an aggressive conservationist, with **Richard A. Ballinger**, a more conservative corporate lawyer. Suspicion of Ballinger grew when he tried to make nearly a million acres of public forests and mineral reserves available for private development.

In the midst of this mounting concern, Gifford Pinchot charged the new secretary with having once plotted to turn over valuable public lands in Alaska to a private **syndicate**, or business group, for personal profit. Pinchot took the charges to the president. Taft's attorney general investigated the charges and decided they were groundless.

Still not satisfied, Pinchot leaked the story to the press and asked Congress to investigate. Taft fired



Pinchot for **insubordination**, or disobedience. The congressional committee appointed to study the controversy cleared Ballinger.

By signing the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act, supporting Ballinger against Pinchot, and backing Cannon, Taft gave the impression that he had “sold the Square Deal down the river.” Popular indignation was so great that the congressional elections of 1910 resulted in a sweeping Democratic victory, with Democrats taking the majority in the House and Democrats and Progressive Republicans grabbing control of the Senate from the conservatives.

Reading Check **Summarizing** What problems did President Taft have with progressives on tariff issues?

Taft's Progressive Reforms

Despite his political problems, Taft also had several successes. Although Roosevelt was nicknamed the “trustbuster,” Taft was a strong supporter of competition and actually brought twice as many antitrust cases in four years as his predecessor had in seven.

In other areas, too, Taft was at least as strong a progressive as Roosevelt. Taft established the **Children's Bureau**, a federal agency similar to Roosevelt's Bureau of Corporations. The Children's Bureau investigated and publicized problems with child labor. Taft also supported the **Mann-Elkins Act** of 1910, which increased the regulatory powers of the ICC.

The Ballinger-Pinchot controversy aside, Taft was also a dedicated conservationist. His contributions in this area actually equaled or surpassed those of Roosevelt. He set up the Bureau of Mines to monitor

the activities of mining companies, expanded the national forests, and protected waterpower sites from private development.

After Taft took office in 1909, Roosevelt left for a big-game hunt in Africa followed by a tour of Europe. He did not return to the United States until June 1910. Although disturbed by stories of Taft's “betrayal” of progressivism, Roosevelt at first refused to criticize the president.

In October 1911, Taft announced an antitrust lawsuit against U.S. Steel, claiming that the company's decision to buy the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company in 1907 had violated the Sherman Antitrust Act. The lawsuit was the final straw for Roosevelt. As president, he had approved U.S. Steel's plan to buy the company.

Roosevelt believed Taft's focus on breaking up trusts was destroying the carefully crafted system of cooperation and regulation that Roosevelt had established with big business through the Bureau of Corporations. In November 1911, Roosevelt publicly criticized Taft's decision. Roosevelt argued that the best way to deal with the trusts was to allow them to exist while at the same time increasing government's ability to regulate them.

Having broken with Taft, it was only a matter of time before progressives convinced Roosevelt to reenter politics. In late February 1912, Roosevelt announced that he would enter the presidential campaign of 1912 and attempt to replace Taft as the Republican nominee for president.

Reading Check **Evaluating** How did President Taft's accomplishments regarding conservation and trustbusting compare to President Roosevelt's?

SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT

Checking for Understanding

- Define:** *syndicate, insubordination.*
- Identify:** Joseph G. Cannon, Payne-Aldrich Tariff, Richard Ballinger.
- Describe** how Taft helped conservation efforts, alleviated child labor problems, and strengthened the ICC.

Reviewing Themes

- Continuity and Change** How did replacing Roosevelt's secretary of the interior cause a dispute between Taft and the progressives?

Critical Thinking

- Comparing** What was the difference between Roosevelt and Taft regarding the relationship between the president and Congress?
- Organizing** Use a graphic organizer like the one below to list Taft's Progressive reforms.

Taft's Progressive Reforms

Analyzing Visuals

- Examining Photographs** Study the photograph on page 563. Note the formal attire of the president and his wife. How would you compare the clothes the people in the photograph are wearing with today's style of dress for leisure activities?

Writing About History

- Descriptive Writing** Write a magazine article in which you defend or criticize President Taft's administration in terms of its support of progressivism.