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Robert Taft of "The Great Tradition"

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In this article, Mr. Kirk examines the contributions and character of the man known as Mr. Conservative during his life, and who was considered by many to be the most competent Republican leader of his time.

his party, still no one who had met him could hate him. The man's ability, courage, and rectitude were manifest.

Yet for the crowd, he had no charisma. There was in him nothing of Theodore Roosevelt's magnetism, or of Franklin Roosevelt's beguiling public charm. His own father's wit and humor were not Robert Taft's — not in public, that is. Like his friend Herbert Hoover, or like John Adams, Taft seemed to the crowd a stiff and sober figure — benign, perhaps, but not constituted to warm one's heart. He could win Ohio elections thumpingly; but, like the Venetian Glass Nephew, he did not know how to play. The demagogue's arts were not his, nor the heroic attitudes of the Periclean master of men. "Taft has been called a poor politician," a friendly observer wrote. "In a conventional sense, he is. He not only lacks glamor, he scorns it — 'there is so little underneath it.' "

And — what is not always the highroad to political success — he regularly spoke his mind. When told that he was tactless, he replied with characteristic simplicity, "It is not honest to be tactful." As much as Calhoun, and more than Webster or Clay, he declined to sacrifice his principles to prospects of glory; and like those Silver Age senators, he was fixed by his steadfastness never to rise beyond the Senate. In his candor, he was somewhat like Harry Truman, though conspicuously less salty; but Truman ascended to the presidency only by accident. Like the Adams presidents, like Hoover, he was given to uttering unpalatable truths. Taft — who had in him little of the poet — may never have read Yeats' poem "The Leaders of the Crowd", but he disdained the cajoling of Demos as did Yeats.

The man's independence of thought and action, too, though it secured his election three times to the Senate and gave him intellectual ascendancy within his party, did not open to him the doors of the White House. He came very near to being made president; in his last contest for the Republican nomination, he would have succeeded but for the abrupt introduction into Republican politics of a triumphant military man.

Yet even within his party, Taft's blunt and able honesty was as much handicap as advantage, in the competition for executive power. Robert Taft was not supple; and, when his first principles were concerned, not given to compromise. Some of his Republican competitors sincerely disagreed with him on matters of importance; but others who opposed his nomination were uneasy with his very uprightness and practical ability. For Senator Taft could not be counted upon to accept and to grant favors, or to perform special services for those possessing the means to advance him. It was patent that in the presidency, he would be governed only by his mind and conscience; no man, however much influence or money he might have, would be able to look to Taft for peculiar consideration of his particular interests.

What he had prevented being done had mattered more than what he had himself accomplished. A leader of the opposition leaves few statutes bearing his name, although Taft's labor legislation would last and would be strengthened by his successors.

Unendowed with much eloquence to give him a place in the copybooks, lacking executive decisions to evoke his memory in manuals of American history, will Taft's reputation endure? Of all the members of Congress who have sat in Washington since 1789, perhaps a score continue to influence discernibly the American mind and the American character. Taft was not picturesque; nevertheless, he will not be forgotten quickly by students of American politics.

A campanile on Capitol Hill reminds senators that Robert Taft was among the greatest of their number; it is not so grand as the monuments of Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson, but it signifies that Taft was not unworthy, in cast of mind and devotion to the commonwealth, of comparison with statesmen such as these.

Their promise was fulfilled; given more years, Taft might have left as strong an imprint upon the American republic. Responsible party, ordered freedom, power confined by law, a humane economy, a foreign policy founded upon enlightened national interest: these were his sober concerns, and he did not spare himself in his task. Because these principles which he upheld are among what T. S. Eliot calls "the permanent things", some will repair to Taft in a time of catastrophic change.

The editor of a very influential newspaper remarked to me recently that he is not overmuch impressed by the present set of aspirants to the Republican presidential nomination. It seems to this gentleman, indeed, that of the American politicians (for Taft did not care to be called a statesman, nor yet a public servant) in his own lifetime, only four had the qualities which the American presidency demands: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and — "one who didn't make it, Robert Taft." If the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong — why, still it is better to have forfeited the highest distinction then to murmur to one's self (as do a good many modern political leaders when they have preferred office to principle), "Nothing is lost save honor."

And as the middle of the twentieth century approached, swelling Washington might remind one of

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the prophecy of Henry Adams, in his novel *Democracy*. Rascally old Baron Jacobi, in that picture of the capital after the Civil War, predicts with relish, "I do much regret that I have not yet one hundred years to live. If I could then come back to this city, I should find myself very content — much more than now. I am always content where there is much corruption, and *ma parole d'honneur!*' broke out the old man with fire gesture, 'the United States will then be more corrupt than Rome under Caligula; more corrupt than the Church under Leo X; more corrupt than France under the Regent!' "

If imperial Washington, during Taft's fourteen years there, had not arrived quite at the condition foretold by Jacobi, still the political apparatus could be employed to enrich or to ruin whole vast interests. And the trouble with Taft as presidential possibility, for some people, was not merely that Taft stood personally incorruptible; that defect was shared by certain other men with an eye to the White House. No, Taft's trouble was that Taft always would make his own decisions, without much need of privy advice; and that Taft *knew* — knew, as Hoover had known, the whole workings of the federal machinery, and how interests would be affected by legislation and executive policy. Such a person in authority might be difficult to manipulate.

There existed other reasons, too — some of them accidental — why Robert Taft never obtained his party's presidential nomination. No man ever was better prepared to assume the presidency; and yet Taft's nearest approach to executive power came in his last days, when, though he had lost the Republican nomination and the presidential chair to General Eisenhower, it was Taft's experienced hand that formed national policy for some months in 1953. One thinks again of that tragi-comedy *Democracy*. Of course President Eisenhower was a man far more amiable than Adams' fictitious president called the Hoosier Stonecutter; and Senator Robert A. Taft was poles apart, morally, from the fictitious Senator Silas P. Ratcliffe. Yet as in the novel, a president who was a political tyro and innocent came under the indispensable influence of a veteran senator who had been his arch-rival; and presently the senator was determining every important policy. Then, in the midst of great affairs, paradoxically the effective head of state, Robert Taft died.

In political structures like that of Britain, where a party's parliamentary leader becomes prime minister if that party takes office, it would have gone otherwise. But few eminent members of Congress have proceeded directly to the executive mansion. Taft had as good a claim to the chief honor which an American party can bestow as any American politician ever had possessed. Yet that claim did not suffice. As candidate, Taft could not have failed worse than Landon and Willkie and Dewey failed; where Eisenhower succeeded, Taft too might have won — if by a smaller margin. However that may be, it was as a leader of opposition, nearly all his public life, that he has a place in history.

In some sense, Taft was victorious in death. The foreign press was astounded at the praise of Taft, dead, from men who had opposed him bitterly enough in life. (Foreign observers often fail to understand how American partisanship rarely is ideological in character, and how, therefore, five very different Americans who had won the presidency, or who were to win it — Hoover, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson — could unite in appreciation of the dead leader of party.) As Senator Lyndon B. Johnson said then in his eulogy, difference with Robert Taft "was the kind of disagreement which gentlemen could discuss without rancor."

Whatever Taft's disdain for pandering to the crowd, his personal following was very large and strongly devoted; his abrupt end dismayed them. And even more Americans, not passionately concerned in party struggles, were saddened by the disappearance of the politician whose integrity had represented the best in the American political commonwealth. The incorruptible man, says John Jay Chapman, will find his nook in time: "Honesty is the greatest luxury in the world, and the American looks with awe on the man who can afford it, or insists upon having it."

John F. Kennedy, then junior senator from Massachusetts, was among Taft's most understanding admirers. "Sometimes a nation's illustrious dead remain among its most influential men." Kennedy wrote. "Their character and personality are sometimes so strong and all-pervading that their influence continues to endure after death . . . For his valiant effort to be to America what Churchill is to Great Britain; for being so right in his mind that he kept the respect of those of us who thought him wrong in some of his ideas; for showing the Nation how a man is big enough to deserve victory knows how to take defeat; for the inspiration his career must be to all those who

share in his patriotic aspirations — I nominate for the man of the year the late Senior Senator from the State of Ohio — Robert A. Taft."

Taft's party, and the Senate, have not since found his peer. For nearly fifteen years, the American public had sensed that Taft stood for permanence in the United States: for what must be made to survive in a time of troubles. Taft spoke for constitution, self-government, private rights, the rule of law, security, peace, community, economic stability, the fabric of civilization. He had contended against ideology, concentrated power, grandiose political designs, imperial aspiration, class hostility, economic folly, the rootless mass-age.