



# Progressivism Under Taft

## MAIN IDEA

Taft's ambivalent approach to progressive reform led to a split in the Republican Party and the loss of the presidency to the Democrats.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Third-party candidates continue to wrestle with how to become viable candidates.

## Terms & Names

- Gifford Pinchot
- William Howard Taft
- Payne-Aldrich Tariff
- Bull Moose Party
- Woodrow Wilson

Early in the 20th century, Americans' interest in the preservation of the country's wilderness areas intensified. Writers proclaimed the beauty of the landscape, and new groups like the Girl Scouts gave city children the chance to experience a different environment. The desire for preservation clashed with business interests that favored unrestricted development. **Gifford Pinchot** (pɪnˈʃɒt), head of the U.S. Forest Service under President Roosevelt, took a middle ground. He believed that wilderness areas could be scientifically managed to yield public enjoyment while allowing private development.

### ★ A PERSONAL VOICE GIFFORD PINCHOT

“The American people have evidently made up their minds that our natural resources must be conserved. That is good. But it settles only half the question. For whose benefit shall they be conserved—for the benefit of the many, or for the use and profit of the few? . . .

There is no other question before us that begins to be so important, or that will be so difficult to straddle, as the great question between special interest and equal opportunity, between the privileges of the few and the rights of the many, between government by men for human welfare and government by money for profit.”

—*The Fight for Conservation*

President Roosevelt, a fellow conservationist, favored Pinchot's multi-use land program. However, when he left office in 1909, this approach came under increasing pressure from business people who favored unrestricted commercial development.

## Taft Becomes President

After winning the election in 1904, Roosevelt pledged not to run for reelection in 1908. He handpicked his secretary of war, **William Howard Taft**, to run against William Jennings Bryan, who had been nominated by the Democrats for the third time. Under the slogan “Vote for Taft this time, You can vote for Bryan any time,” Taft and the Republicans won an easy victory.



**TAFT STUMBLES** As president, Taft pursued a cautiously progressive agenda, seeking to consolidate rather than to expand Roosevelt's reforms. He received little credit for his accomplishments, however. His legal victories, such as busting 90 trusts in a four-year term, did not bolster his popularity. Indeed, the new president confessed in a letter to Roosevelt that he never felt like the president. "When I am addressed as 'Mr. President,'" Taft wrote, "I turn to see whether you are not at my elbow."

The cautious Taft hesitated to use the presidential bully pulpit to arouse public opinion. Nor could he subdue troublesome members of his own party. Tariffs and conservation posed his first problems.

**THE PAYNE-ALDRICH TARIFF** Taft had campaigned on a platform of lowering tariffs, a staple of the progressive agenda. When the House passed the Payne Bill, which lowered rates on imported manufactured goods, the Senate proposed an alternative bill, the Aldrich Bill, which made fewer cuts and increased many rates. Amid cries of betrayal from the progressive wing of his party, Taft signed the **Payne-Aldrich Tariff**, a compromise that only moderated the high rates of the Aldrich Bill. This angered progressives who believed Taft had abandoned progressivism. The president made his difficulties worse by clumsily attempting to defend the tariff, calling it "the best [tariff] bill the Republican party ever passed."

**DISPUTING PUBLIC LANDS** Next, Taft angered conservationists by appointing as his secretary of the interior Richard A. Ballinger, a wealthy lawyer from Seattle. Ballinger, who disapproved of conservationist controls on western lands, removed 1 million acres of forest and mining lands from the reserved list and returned it to the public domain.

When a Department of the Interior official was fired for protesting Ballinger's actions, the fired worker published a muckraking article against Ballinger in *Collier's Weekly* magazine. Pinchot added his voice. In congressional testimony he accused Ballinger of letting commercial interests exploit the natural resources that rightfully belonged to the public. President Taft sided with Ballinger and fired Pinchot from the U.S. Forest Service. **A**

## The Republican Party Splits

Taft's cautious nature made it impossible for him to hold together the two wings of the Republican Party: progressives who sought change and conservatives who did not. The Republican Party began to fragment.

**PROBLEMS WITHIN THE PARTY** Republican conservatives and progressives split over Taft's support of the political boss Joseph Cannon, House Speaker from Illinois. A rough-talking, tobacco-chewing politician, "Uncle Joe" often disregarded seniority in filling committee slots. As chairman of the House Rules Committee, which decides what bills Congress considers, Cannon often weakened or ignored progressive bills.

Reform-minded Republicans decided that their only alternative was to strip Cannon of his power. With the help of Democrats, they succeeded in March 1910 with a resolution that called for the entire House to elect the Committee on Rules and excluded the Speaker from membership in the committee.

William Howard Taft



### DIFFICULT DECISIONS

#### CONTROLLING RESOURCES

Historically, conservationists such as Gifford Pinchot have stood for the balanced use of natural resources, preserving some and using others for private industry. Free-market advocates like Richard Ballinger pressed for the private development of wilderness areas. Preservationists such as John Muir advocated preserving all remaining wilderness.

1. Examine the pros and cons of each position. With which do you agree? What factors do you think should influence decisions about America's wilderness areas?
2. If you'd been asked in 1902 to decide whether to develop or preserve America's wilderness areas, what would you have decided? Why?

#### Background

See *tariff* on page R46 in the Economics Handbook.


#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Issues

**A** How did Taft's appointee Richard Ballinger anger conservationists?



KEY PLAYER



WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT  
1857–1930

William Howard Taft never wanted to be president. After serving one term, Taft left the White House, which he called “the loneliest place in the world,” and taught constitutional law at Yale for eight years.

In 1921, President Harding named Taft chief justice of the Supreme Court. The man whose family had nicknamed him “Big Lub” called this appointment the highest honor he had ever received. As chief justice, Taft wrote that “in my present life I don’t remember that I ever was President.”

However, Americans remember Taft for, among many other things, initiating in 1910 the popular presidential custom of throwing out the first ball of the major league baseball season.

By the midterm elections of 1910, however, the Republican Party was in shambles, with the progressives on one side and the “old guard” on the other. Voters voiced concern over the rising cost of living, which they blamed on the Payne-Aldrich Tariff. They also believed Taft to be against conservation. When the Republicans lost the election, the Democrats gained control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 18 years.

**THE BULL MOOSE PARTY** After leaving office, Roosevelt headed to Africa to shoot big game. He returned in 1910 to a hero’s welcome, and responded with a rousing speech proposing a “New Nationalism,” under which the federal government would exert its power for “the welfare of the people.”

By 1912, Roosevelt had decided to run for a third term as president. The primary elections showed that Republicans wanted Roosevelt, but Taft had the advantage of being the incumbent—that is, the holder of the office. At the Republican convention in June 1912, Taft supporters maneuvered to replace Roosevelt delegates with Taft delegates in a number of delegations. Republican progressives refused to vote and formed a new third party, the Progressive Party. They nominated Roosevelt for president.

The Progressive Party became known as the **Bull Moose Party**, after Roosevelt’s boast that he was “as strong as a bull moose.” The party’s platform called for the direct election of senators and the adoption in all states of the initiative, referendum, and recall. It also advocated woman suffrage, workmen’s compensation, an eight-hour workday, a minimum wage for women, a federal law against child labor, and a federal trade commission to regulate business. **B**

The split in the Republican ranks handed the Democrats their first real chance at the White House since the election of Grover Cleveland in 1892. In the 1912 presidential election, they put forward as their candidate a reform governor of New Jersey named **Woodrow Wilson**.

#### Vocabulary

**“old guard”:**  
conservative members of a group

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Contrasting

**B** What were the differences between Taft’s and Roosevelt’s campaign platforms?

## Democrats Win in 1912

Under Governor Woodrow Wilson’s leadership, the previously conservative New Jersey legislature had passed a host of reform measures. Now, as the Democratic presidential nominee, Wilson endorsed a progressive platform called the New Freedom. It demanded even stronger antitrust legislation, banking reform, and reduced tariffs.

The split between Taft and Roosevelt, former Republican allies, turned nasty during the fall campaign. Taft labeled Roosevelt a “dangerous egotist,” while Roosevelt branded Taft a “fathead” with the brain of a “guinea pig.” Wilson distanced himself, quietly gloating, “Don’t interfere when your enemy is destroying himself.”

The election offered voters several choices: Wilson’s New Freedom, Taft’s conservatism, Roosevelt’s progressivism, or the Socialist Party policies of Eugene V. Debs. Both Roosevelt and Wilson supported a stronger government role in economic affairs but differed over strategies. Roosevelt supported government action to supervise big business but did not oppose all business monopolies, while Debs

