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Jonathan Lurie
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PART ONE

THE ROAD TO THE PRESIDENCY

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I

The Early Years, 1857–1887

AT HOME WITH ALPHONSO AND LOUISA

Chartered as a village in 1802 and incorporated as a city in 1819, Cincinnati by 1843 had become a typical Midwestern urban center. Already the city featured macadamized roads, a canal and railroad system, and a bustling waterfront replete with daily arrivals of cargo and passengers. In mid-century, it was home to meat packers, brewers, dry goods merchants, book sellers, printers and publishers, physicians, and above all, lawyers, who easily outnumbered all the other occupations. Names such as Wurlitzer, Proctor, and Gamble attested to the city's success as a magnet for new commercial enterprise, while, increasingly, well-known politicians such as Salmon P. Chase affirmed its relevance as a community replete with significant discussions/meetings on national political issues such as the tariff, internal improvements, temperance, abolition, and the looming threat of civil war. By the 1870s, its population had reached more than 200,000.¹ Numerous houses of worship dotted the greater Cincinnati area, and the city even boasted of a growing line of suburbs that had sprung up among the seven hills that surrounded the downtown area.²

One of these suburbs was known as Mt. Auburn, where late in 1853 a young lawyer and widower, Alphonso Taft, resided. His first wife had died in 1852, leaving him with two young sons. Barely eighteen months later, Taft remarried. The resulting family included five more children, of whom four survived. The oldest son, William Howard Taft, was born in 1857. Throughout their lives, the five Taft brothers – Peter and Charles (from their father's first marriage), William, Henry, and Horace – formed with their wives the nucleus of a surprisingly close family network. As will be seen, the influence of his family upon William (the subject of these chapters, and familiarly known as Will) should not be underestimated.

¹ Ishbel Ross, *An American Family: The Tafts, 1678 to 1964* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1964), 8–9; hereafter cited as Ross.

² Henry F. Pringle, *The Life and Times of William Howard Taft*, 2 volumes (New York: Hoet, Rinehart and Winston, 1939), 6–7; hereafter cited as Pringle; Ross, 58–59.

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The Taft boys grew up in a home that was comfortable, with financial means ample but not excessive. It revolved around Alphonso and Louisa Taft, who apparently were devoted but demanding parents. Louisa has been described as “enormously energetic, aggressively intellectual, and decidedly ambitious.”³ One of his sons later remembered Alphonso as a father with “a rare combination of strength, gentleness, simplicity and tolerance.”⁴ To these might be added the skills of an able attorney with what appears to have been a well-deserved reputation for honesty and integrity.

A graduate of Yale, Taft, like many of his generation, gravitated from the Whig party to the newly established Republicans. Indeed, he ran for Congress as a Republican in 1856 and, as will be seen, unsuccessfully sought the gubernatorial nomination in 1875 and again in 1879. Elected a trustee of both Yale and the University of Cincinnati, he also served on the Cincinnati city council. As the second administration of President Grant became mired in corruption, Grant turned to his fellow Ohioan, Alphonso Taft, and appointed him first as his secretary of war, and then as attorney general, a position he held for the last eight months of Grant’s term.

Three characteristics of Taft’s career should be noted. He graduated from Yale, studied law, and from 1854 until his death thirty-seven years later, consistently identified himself as a Republican. All the sons of Alphonso Taft followed the same road. All went to Yale, all studied law, and all considered themselves (with a few occasional and temporary exceptions) as Republicans, seeking with varying degrees of success to serve the public interest. In the late nineteenth century, political independence did not mean what it means today. Once party affiliation had been determined, one rarely changed it. One might criticize from within, participate in what sometimes could be very bitter factionalism, and even call for stringent reforms – but always as a member of the party. It is one of the many ironies associated with William Howard Taft’s life and career that he would be involved in the greatest internal crisis of the Republican Party since its founding.

Until his death in 1891, the elder Taft watched his sons with a sense of patriarchal pride, attended with lasting expectations of excellence. In 1865, the Ohio legislature appointed him to the superior court, the same bench on which his son would sit at the start of his own judicial career. Four years later, possibly in tribute to his reputation for integrity, both Republicans and Democrats nominated Taft for a second term. He served until 1872. His most famous case concerned bible reading in the Cincinnati public schools, a controversy that for a short time attracted national attention.

³ Judith Anderson, *William Howard Taft: An Intimate History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), 39.

⁴ Ross, 51. Will Taft’s wife, Helen (Nellie), described her father-in-law as “one of the most lovable men that ever lived because he had a wide tolerance and a strangely understanding sympathy for everybody.” Carl Sferazza Anthony, *Nellie Taft: The Unconventional First Lady of the Ragtime Era* (New York: William Morrow, 2005), 86.

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Responding to the potential divisiveness of this issue within an environment of many different faiths, the school board in 1869 had barred any “religious instruction and the reading of religious books,” including the Holy Bible. Its action received nationwide publicity and, not surprisingly, a case questioning the board’s authority to enact such a ban soon reached the Ohio Superior Court. In 1870, by a vote of 2–1, that tribunal rejected the board’s new regulations. The lone dissenter was Alphonso Taft. Because his actions were widely criticized in some quarters, and because his son William later received similar negative attention for *his* religious views, his father’s dissent merits a brief discussion here.

Taft argued that far from having a constitutional right to mandate bible reading, the school board in reality was obligated to end the practice. In fact, it represented “an unconstitutional preference of one religion over another.” Bible-reading from the King James version actually was an effort to enshrine Protestantism as the religion of the Cincinnati School District, something neither the court nor the school board had any authority to undertake. Further, Taft did not want his dissent equated with a plea for religious toleration. An inherent right was not to be equated with a generous offer of acceptance. Rather, he spoke of the “natural indefeasible rights of conscience which, in the language of the [Ohio] Constitution, are beyond the control or interference of any human authority.”⁵ In 1872, the Ohio Supreme Court unanimously reversed the lower Court’s decision, and closely followed Taft’s analysis.⁶

The negative fallout from Taft’s dissent may well have killed his chances for statewide political office, even though he remained proud of it. Seeking the Republican nomination for governor in 1875 (he lost to Rutherford Hayes) and again in 1879, he was passed over each time, with his position in the Bible Reading Case cited as a key reason for his perceived “inelectability.” Yet another drawback also applied to Alphonso. The elder Taft seemed to have “no driving ambition to rise in the political sphere.”⁷ With the exception of his brief cabinet stint for Grant, his failed attempts at statewide office in Ohio, and his ambassadorial services to Austria-Hungary and Russia from 1881 to 1885, he did not seek much beyond the law. As will be seen, this lack of interest in the warp and woof of politics was also noteworthy in William Howard Taft, who loved and lived in the law and had no desire to play the political game. This reluctance – perhaps revulsion is not too strong a word to describe it – would have major consequences later in his life. These consequences would be all the more important because of Alphonso’s oft-stated conviction that “the parents’ accomplishments were measured” not by their own deeds, but “largely by the honor and prosperity of their children.”⁸ Will

⁵ Ross, 54. Taft noted that plaintiffs in the case “have a constitutional right to object to” bible reading “as a legal preference given by the state to the Protestant sects, which is forbidden by the Constitution.”

⁶ *Board of Education of the City of Cincinnati v. John D. Minor*, 23 Ohio St. 211, 240 (1872).

⁷ Anderson, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*

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Taft did not disappoint them, although his father occasionally pointed to a few missteps in his path toward this goal.

Thus the Taft boys matured, nurtured in a tranquil, loving atmosphere, but nourished by high expectation. Outwardly austere in manner, Alphonso to his family reflected “a gentleness and sweetness far more familiar to the children.” When they were away, he found the house too quiet. “There is no noise and no mischief . . . and on the whole it is not satisfactory to have no mischief about the house.”⁹ The boys all attended public school, and soon Will began to demonstrate some tendencies that would characterize his entire career.

An attractive young man, quite agile for one with a heavy build, Will Taft appears not to have possessed a particularly precocious mind. He compensated for this by an unusual “ability to concentrate,” balanced by a tendency to procrastinate. On the other hand, if attracted to a topic or assignment, he worked at it with single-minded determination. For the most part, the result was excellent grades, earned by an extremely good-natured lad who “took few things, particularly his own gifts, very seriously.”¹⁰ In one class, his performance was less than outstanding, resulting in a statement from Alphonso that “mediocrity will not do for Will.”¹¹

These traits were reaffirmed when the thirteen-year-old Taft entered Woodward High School in 1870, located in the downtown area, more than a mile from his house. Thus he had a two-mile round-trip every school day, climaxed by a steep climb up the hill to the family home in Mt. Auburn. Again, Alphonso had chosen a public high school, even though by 1870, he could well have afforded a private school for his children had he so desired. According to one of Taft’s biographers, Woodward High School “resembled a grim looking building . . . with an iron fence suggestive of the Bastille.”¹² Apparently, academic standards were high, and on one occasion the headmaster did not hesitate to dismiss 40 percent of a class when it did not measure up to his standards.

Taft enrolled in what today might be called college prep courses. As in elementary school, so also in high school, Will did very well, but not that well. One of his instructors told Alphonso Taft, who of course relayed the conversation to Will, that “you had the best head of any of my boys and if you [were] not too lazy you would have great success.”¹³ Judith Anderson notes that Will’s parents “openly debated the question of [his] alleged laziness, since they felt that the high grades he earned” came as a “result of their prodding.”¹⁴ She further argues that from an early age, young Taft concluded that academic diligence and “exemplary behavior” would result in affection and approval from his family. Thus, she writes, “doing his duty became a special obligation,

⁹ Pringle, 15.

¹⁰ Pringle, 22–23.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ross, 52.

¹³ Pringle, 21.

¹⁴ Anderson, 42.

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and yet he often delayed,” resulting in “guilt and, in turn, anxiety.” Therefore he felt he had to “work doubly hard” in order to compensate “for his prior neglect.”¹⁵ Finally, Anderson posits that demanding parents tend to withhold fulsome praise from their children, resulting in an “over concern for accomplishment,” frequently accompanied by a feeling of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with what has been accomplished.¹⁶ She believes that this analysis accurately described the young Will Taft.

While not necessarily agreeing with all of Anderson’s analysis, there is no doubt that throughout his career, as will be seen, Taft would downplay his successes and “belittle his own abilities,” even predicting failure on his part.¹⁷ Further, he apparently had a deep-seated need for external sources to continually urge him forward – roles taken first by his parents, then his brothers, and later by his wife, Helen, best known as Nellie. From an early age, Taft also demonstrated a healthy respect for what today might be called feminine rights. Before he graduated from high school, he wrote an essay extolling both coeducation and the suffrage for women. Coeducation, insisted Taft – soon to be a freshman at Yale – “shows clearly that there is no mental inferiority on the part of the girls...” Taft confidently predicted that “in the natural course of events, universal suffrage must prevail throughout the world.”¹⁸

YALE AND LAW SCHOOL

All the Taft boys followed their father to Yale, which had changed somewhat from the days when Alphonso had been a student there in the early 1830s. Tuition had been \$33 a year, and the students were required to attend religious services on a daily basis. Daily classes started at 6:00 A.M. How much Yale had changed or not changed by 1874 when Will arrived may be surmised from the comments of one biographer that Taft “found the chapel seats unduly hard, the sermons dull, and Livy difficult.”¹⁹ About chapel, he added in one letter to Alphonso, “the Fickle Goddess sleep wouldn’t come worth a cent and I was doomed to listen to one of the driest sermons I ever heard.” A week later, Will asked “why don’t they try to make religion a little more attractive?”²⁰

Handsome, heavy, already equipped with a jovial laugh that would in time become one of his most famous and endearing characteristics, Will – as a classmate later recalled – “stood high, but that was because he was a plodder and not because he was particularly bright.” His academic credentials were very good, but his reputation for integrity was supreme. “He towered above us all as a moral force,” and, consequently, was the most admired and respected

¹⁵ Anderson, 43.

¹⁶ Ibid., 46–47.

¹⁷ He wrote to his father in 1874 that “You expect great things of me, but you mustn’t be disappointed if I don’t come up to your expectations.” Pringle, 35.

¹⁸ Pringle, 30.

¹⁹ Ross, 60–61.

²⁰ Pringle, 40.

man ... in my class....”²¹ As usual, Alphonso was less than impressed with Will’s potential for popularity. “I doubt,” he wrote to his two youngest sons, “that such popularity is consistent with high scholarship.”²² Medals Will received, and he served as the salutatorian for his class at commencement; but unlike his older brother Peter, Will failed to win the Woolsey [Yale amard] for the highest rank in the class. His parents had to settle for his standing second in a class of 132. They were disappointed, but young Taft probably thought it was just fine.

Of special interest was the senior oration he delivered in June 1878. Taft noted and faulted the evils currently afflicting the country. He commented on “political corruption, the growth of unsound radical thought,” and above all “the too great centralization of government.” As for the Republican Party – to which he would soon form a lifelong affiliation – in truth it “has lost its grip on the affections of people,” largely because of the “irresponsible position of power to which [it] had been elevated” because of the Civil War. Finally, he predicted of his generation that it would be part of an age “when there are no political giants because of the absence of emergencies to create them.”²³ Within only three decades, Will Taft would succeed his closest friend at the time to become president of the United States.

Meanwhile, the study of law beckoned Will, for Alphonso had already decided that such “is his destiny and he should be in it.”²⁴ Although he did not know what his immediate future held in 1878, Will Taft in time would happily embrace a career in law and the judiciary. Indeed, he would yearn for nothing else. Other members of his family, however, had different goals for him. While bitterness and frustration were not to be absent from his career, in fact the most meaningful years of his life would begin and end with judicial appointment to a court.

The decision for Will Taft to undertake the study of law was easy. After all, he was Alphonso’s son, and every one of the Taft boys had attended or would go to law school. Taft the elder had studied law at Yale, while two of Will’s brothers selected Columbia. Yet Will chose to return to Cincinnati, and enrolled in its school of law in the fall of 1878. His choice was understandable and in some ways typical. His social life had always revolved around his home city rather than New Haven. Moreover, the choice of law school was not that important a matter in 1878. Legal education had not yet been captured by the full-time law school reforms of Christopher Langdell at Harvard Law School.²⁵ In 1878, it was still very easy to pass the bar and never attend law school at all.

²¹ Pringle, 35.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 44.

²⁴ Ibid., 32.

²⁵ An outstanding analysis of legal education and its transformation in the late nineteenth century is found in William P. LaPiana, *Logic and Experience: The Origin of Modern American Legal Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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Compared with that of his undergraduate years at Yale, the pace for Will Taft dramatically lessened in intensity while he was at law school. His average class time was barely two hours a day. Even so, the young law student “disliked the drudgery of his courses.”²⁶ He soon started part-time work as a legal reporter for a local newspaper, the *Cincinnati Commercial*, and began the actual process of “reading law” in his father’s office. Under Alphonso’s tutelage within a working office – as contrasted with the leisurely pace of the classroom downtown – Taft participated in a process that “has the effect of making me absorb some of the practical workings of the law.”²⁷ But Alphonso, who apparently found the art of relaxation impossible to master, soon had several gripes with the recent Yale graduate.

Within the year, while Will was enjoying himself on some sort of summer trip, Alphonso reminded him that “you ought to be at home for the business you have to attend to.” He followed this complaint with a longer exposition of what he expected from his son. Had he been at the office, Will might have “earned a nice little fee for yourself.... This gratifying your fondness for society is fruitless or nearly so. I like to have you enjoy yourself, so far as it can be consistent with your success in life....” Indeed, before the year ended, Alphonso informed the future president that “I do not think you have accomplished this past year as much as you ought with your opportunities. You must not feel that you have time enough to while away with every friend who comes.”²⁸ Reflecting his underlying concern, Will’s father reminded him that “our anxiety for your success is very great[,] and I know that there is but one way to attain it, & that is by self-denial and enthusiastic hard work in the profession.”²⁹

During mid-1879, Will continued his desultory work as a reporter, even as he assisted Alphonso in a vain attempt to gain the Republican nomination for governor. The news job was easy, and it had a fringe benefit in that he visited the county and federal courts on a regular basis and had ample opportunity to become more familiar with their legal environments. By 1880, he was ready to take the Ohio bar exam, even though he had not yet finished law school. Henry Pringle, Taft’s leading biographer, observed that while automatic bar admission was no longer the rule, “only obvious idiots or persons of demonstrable depravity” had cause for concern. Obviously Taft had none. Together with a group of law-school acquaintances, he spent the night before the exam drinking and singing songs about Yale. The entire group passed.³⁰

²⁶ Ross, 66.²⁷ Pringle, 48.²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48–49.²⁹ Ross, 67.³⁰ Pringle, 52–53.

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EARLY PATRONAGE FOR WILL

Yet the twenty-three-year-old lawyer still hesitated to start out on his own, even though Alphonso was headed to Europe as Minister, first to Austria-Hungary, then to Russia. Instead, he accepted an appointment as an assistant to the Cincinnati prosecutor, with whom he had become acquainted while making his reporter's rounds. He served for barely one year, and did a competent job. Will failed, however, to demonstrate any desire to tap public interest or concern or to use the public as an aid in his court cases. At such an early age, while he gained good experience in the courtroom, he declined to seek publicity, and disclaimed any interest in politics.

Taft later recalled to William Allen White that from 1882 to 1892, any political benefits he had received came from the confluence of two factors. "I got my political pull, first, through father's prominence, and second, through the fact that I was hail-fellow-well-met with all the political people..." Like "every well trained Ohio man I always had my plate the right side up when offices were falling."³¹ Taft's description was especially apt in describing Ohio politics during 1881 and 1882. Congressman Benjamin Butterworth apparently called President Chester Arthur's attention to Will Taft as a "popular young man in Hamilton County, showing power and good spirit." Further, "Will Taft had no enemies."³² Arthur, a veteran of the rough "stalwarts" school of politics, welcomed an opportunity to make a change in Ohio patronage even as he was about to appoint Will's father Minister to Austria-Hungary. In January 1882, President Arthur formally offered Will the post of collector of internal revenue in a federal district with headquarters in Cincinnati.

One should not be surprised to note that Alphonso, reflecting once again a candid honesty uncommon in Gilded Age politics, if not in our own, did not welcome news of Will's selection. He was too young, believed his father. And how, with his own ambassadorial appointment imminent, could his son's new post be seen as anything but "favoritism?" Indeed, Alphonso went so far as to point out that in his judgment, Arthur's action would not constitute "a sound political appointment."³³ Further, Ohio Senator John Sherman – no great admirer of Arthur's – approved of Will's nomination, although he doubted that "so inexperienced a person" would succeed in such a post.³⁴ Yet the elder Taft realized that the time was past when he would or could order the actions of his five sons. Will accepted Arthur's offer and took office in March 1881, just a few months before his parents sailed off to Europe.

Taft's brief career as tax collector – he lasted barely one year – provides some insights as to why he did not find it rewarding or satisfying. It further helps us understand why he was never very effective in the political arena. There are

³¹ Pringle, 57–58.³² Ross, 70.³³ Ibid.³⁴ Pringle, 61.