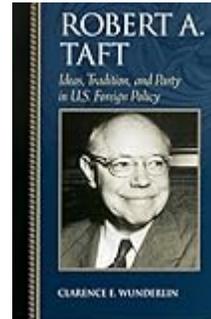


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Clarence E. Wunderlin. *Robert A. Taft: Ideas, Tradition, and Party in U.S. Foreign Policy (Biographies in American Foreign Policy)*. Lanham, Md.: SR Books, 2005. xx + 243 pp. \$89.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-4489-5; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-4490-1.



Clarence E. Jr., Wunderlin, ed. *The Papers of Robert A. Taft, Volume 3: 1945-1948*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2003. xx + 620 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-764-4.



Reviewed by George Fujii (Department of History, University of California, Santa Barbara)

Published on H-Diplo (December, 2005)

Isolating the Principles Behind “Mr. Republican”

Nestled in a shady grove a few blocks northwest of the U.S. Capitol, isolated away from more popular tourist attractions, stands the Robert A. Taft Memorial. Though the chimes from its one-hundred-foot carillon reach the nearby Capitol, few tourists venture past on a hot, humid July morning in D.C. Those few chance visitors might well wonder who Taft was and why he came to have such an imposing monument dedicated to his legacy. After all, Robert Alphonso Taft is hardly a household name today, except, perhaps, amongst Ohioans, foes or fans of the Taft-Hartley Act, careful readers of John F. Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage*, or academics.

What, indeed, are the legacies of this powerful Ohio

senator and thrice suitor for the presidency, dubbed “Mr. Republican” by friends and foes alike for his reputation for personal integrity and his staunch defense of G.O.P. principles?

Writing in 1972, historian James T. Patterson concluded in his still-definitive biography of Taft that the Ohio senator left a “limited legacy.” While later “senators like Goldwater claimed to wear Taft’s mantle, they stood well to his right on domestic matters and sounded much more warlike on international matters.” Although libertarians subsequently revived Taft’s anti-statist critiques, and critics of the U.S. war in Vietnam “seized on his opposition to the draft,” Taft, concluded Patterson, resembled South Carolina senator John C. Cal-

houn as a spokesman “for sectional and ideological factions” rather than national interests.[1]

The publication of the Robert A. Taft papers series offers historians a new opportunity to reassess Taft’s career and legacy. This third volume (spanning the years 1945 to 1948) in an eventual four-volume series illustrates how Taft used his national stature to develop a complex, conservative political philosophy that cannot simply be reduced to the neat label of “isolationist” by which he has often been identified.[2]

In terms of technical matters, one can find much to praise in this Clarence Wunderlin edited series of papers, which features useful chapter introductions, helpful annotations of key individuals and events, and a thorough bibliography. The selection of documents on the whole is judicious, although scholars of certain topics, such as Taft’s 1948 presidential campaign, will also want to consult the relevant archives, such as the Library of Congress, themselves for additional materials, such as pamphlets and reports. One quibble is the volume’s lack of citation by series, which hampers finding related materials in the archives. Also, incoming correspondence is not included, although excerpts from some letters to Taft appear in footnotes.

The papers reveal that in this turbulent period from World War to Cold War, Taft responded to domestic and international developments on the basis of several key principles. He advocated freedom over security, especially on economic matters, and expressed a strong preference for local self-government over government bureaucracy. He emphasized the importance of judicial review, impartial standards of international law, and judicial prerogatives. He defended the principle of separation of church and state, stridently opposed compulsory military service as a dangerous step towards militarism, and sought repeatedly to reduce federal government expenditures. Finally, he feared that the Marshall Plan and other foreign aid measures would raise prices and potentially even end in “police state controls and another OPA,” the wartime Office of Price Administration (pp. 330-331). He charged in 1947 that a revived OPA would end economic freedom leading “to the end of political freedom” (p. 347).[3]

In 1941, FDR articulated “Four Freedoms,” one of which was “freedom from want.” In contrast, Taft, fearing that he lived in a world dominated by totalitarianism, stressed that “freedom of opportunity must be our goal rather than security,” in an October 19, 1945 speech (p. 84). Accordingly, he opposed such New Deal and Fair

Deal initiatives as the Full Employment Bill of 1945, National Health Insurance, continuation or revival of OPA, and the Fair Employment Practice Commission Act, all of which he feared could easily become totalitarian in nature and could not possibly effectively regulate all of a vast United States. Furthermore, Taft declared in an October 11, 1948 speech that federal bureaus were “dominated by theory and ideology” so that “the man who comes to complain is just a ‘hick’ from the sticks’” (p. 463). Instead of federal bureaus, Taft advocated a more federalist approach, asserting that local self-government was not only more capable of responding to regional needs but also was “an absolute essential of real freedom” (p. 87).

While Taft’s antistatism may not be surprising, his views on judicial and legal matters are generally less well known aside from his controversial opposition to the Nuremberg war crimes trials. Taft’s critique of the trials as “a blot on the American record which we shall long regret” on the grounds that they were based on *ex post facto* law, triggered a firestorm of protest but earned him a section in JFK’s *Profiles in Courage* (p. 200). Aside from those controversial remarks, Taft, drawing on his background as an attorney, sought to restore or extend judicial review to government agencies (pp. 8, 18), and advocated the settlement of disputes between nations in international tribunals, such as the International Court of Justice. Finally, he opposed the U.N. Charter as “not based on international law but rather on force organized by the great powers acting unanimously” (p. 125). Taft, though, did not provide detailed specifics for how exactly said standards of international law would be developed, let alone agreed upon by the nations of the world.

Unlike a number of later conservatives, Taft strongly defended the principle of separation of church and state, an issue that arose over proposals for federal funding of private and parochial schools equivalent to that proposed to public schools. On January 18, 1946, he wrote to Rev. Edward A. Freking, editor of the *Catholic Telegraph-Register*, which had editorialized against Taft, that “the whole basis of the American Constitution is a complete separation of Church and State. It is not necessary to review the reasons for this.” Taft argued that religious education in state-funded schooling would invariably impose “the religious views of those who happen to be in authority” on children who might well be “unable to pay for instruction elsewhere” (p. 121).

On another major issue of the day, Taft was prescient in his call for a professionalized voluntary military, “an

expert Army with the most modern weapons,” rather than the postwar military training model advocated by the Truman administration in 1945 (p. 52). Taft opposed a national draft both as a matter of principle and of military efficiency, declaring that “military conscription is essentially totalitarian.” He feared that “handing boys over for 12 months to the arbitrary and complete domination of the government” could lead to government indoctrination (p. 53).

Finally, Taft fought a mostly losing battle to reduce government expenditures and to curtail or prevent foreign aid measures such as the British loan of 1945 and the Marshall Plan. He feared that these measures would “destroy the freedom of the individual, freedom of States and local communities, freedom of the farmer to run his own farm and the workman to do his own job” (p. 375), thereby threatening the foundations of American prosperity and leading to a “totalitarian state” (p. 377). Echoes of Taft’s critique of an expansive federal state, though, would reappear years later in the Reagan revolution of the 1980s.

A final assessment of Taft’s political legacy based on these published papers awaits next year’s release of the fourth and final volume, covering his final years. The principles Taft articulated in this third volume show, though, that he left a mixed legacy. While contemporary fiscal conservatives and libertarians, among others, would applaud Taft’s critiques of statist federal government problem-solving methods, his views on other matters, such as religion, would be less familiar to many Americans today.

Drawing upon his editorial expertise with Taft’s papers, Wunderlin seeks to assess Taft’s intellectual origins and legacy in his *Robert A. Taft: Ideas, Tradition, and Party in U.S. Foreign Policy*. This densely written, intellectual biography seeks to link Taft’s conservative views “in a contextual web of ‘intellectual traditions,’ rational connections to earlier thinkers, previous schools of thought, even multiple generations of intellectual life” (p. 1). Specifically, Wunderlin links Taft to “five key ‘traditions of thought,’” constitutionalism, independent and conservative internationalism, and neomercantilism [sic] and continentalism (pp. 212-213). Taft, therefore, opposed the New Deal’s expansion of the federal government, viewed “free trade” skeptically, and advocated an ultimately unilateral American foreign policy tempered by support for “international arbitration and collective arrangements” (pp. 4-5).

As a work written primarily for undergraduate and

graduate courses in U.S. foreign relations, Wunderlin’s book is relatively short (about a third the length of Patterson’s *Mr. Republican*) and narrowly focused on Taft’s political thought. Scholars seeking detailed discussion of Taft’s presidential campaigns, childhood, or role in Ohio politics would be well advised to consider another work, as this book is an intellectual biography.

On the whole and within these narrowly defined parameters, Wunderlin’s book is a useful complement to Patterson’s more politically focused and biographical work, although it is not without its limitations. This work is at its most convincing in its discussion of the intellectual origins of Taft’s political thought and less compelling in its discussion of Cold War issues. Wunderlin’s sections on Taft’s support for “civic nationalism” (pp. 3-4, 43-48), for neomercantilism, which led to a keen interest in “protection of the home market” (p. 39), and on the Taft-Hartley Act (pp. 119-120) are three particularly noteworthy areas. Conversely, Wunderlin’s claim that anticommunism “remained a secondary influence on [Taft’s] foreign policy thinking before 1948” (p. 3) is less convincing, given Taft’s long-held antistatism and his belief in individual liberty (see Taft papers, p. 84).^[4]

Both a strength and weakness of Wunderlin’s work is its tight focus on Taft’s own papers, an approach that sometimes neglects addressing the broader contexts of issues Taft confronted. Discussion of other contemporary conservative thinkers, such as F.A. Hayek, is limited or nonexistent, and a detailed assessment of Taft’s longer-term legacy is lacking. Wunderlin, though, does address some issues, such as the British loan of 1945-1946, that were left largely unaddressed in Patterson’s earlier biography.

In short, Wunderlin’s account offers a useful contribution to the scholarly literature by tracing the intellectual roots of Taft’s political thought back to the nineteenth century, although it offers little discussion or consideration of Taft’s influence on future conservatives.

Notes

[1]. James T. Patterson, *Mr. Republican: A Biography of Robert A. Taft* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), pp. 615-616.

[2]. For a review of the first volume in this series, see Daniel Nelson, “Review of Clarence E. Wunderlin, Jr, *The Papers of Robert A. Taft*, Volume 1, 1889-1938,” H-Ohio, H-Net Reviews, June, 1999. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=>

684930763646 .

pp. 245-246.

[3]. See also Meg Jacobs, " 'How About Some Meat?': The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941-1946," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 3 (December 1997): pp. 910-941.

[4]. On this point, see also Patterson, *Mr. Republican*,

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: George Fujii. Review of Wunderlin, Clarence E., *Robert A. Taft: Ideas, Tradition, and Party in U.S. Foreign Policy (Biographies in American Foreign Policy)* and Wunderlin, Clarence E. Jr., ed., *The Papers of Robert A. Taft, Volume 3: 1945-1948*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11024>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.