

Approaching the Presidency Roosevelt & Taft

Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States from 1901-1909, embodied what many scholars typically refer to as the ‘stewardship presidency.’ In the words of Roosevelt, it is the president’s “duty to do anything that the needs of the nation demanded unless such action was forbidden by the Constitution or by the laws.” Under Roosevelt’s expansionist view, anything the president does is considered acceptable unless it is expressly forbidden by the Constitution or laws passed by Congress. Roosevelt believed he served the people, not just the government. He took many actions as president that stretched the limits of the executive branch, including the creation of national parks without regard for states’ jurisdiction and fostering revolt in Colombia to establish the Panama Canal.

On the other hand, William Howard Taft, President of the United States from 1909-1913, embodied what many scholars refer to as a ‘strict constructionist’ model of the presidency. Under this approach, unless the Constitution or Congress explicitly grants a certain power, the president does not have the right to act. In Taft’s words, “the President can exercise no power which cannot be fairly and reasonably traced to some specific grant of power or justly implied and included within such express grant as proper and necessary to its exercise.”

While Roosevelt expanded federal power in many areas, Taft felt many of these actions were legal overreaches. For example, as a “trust-buster” Roosevelt differentiated between ‘good’ trusts and ‘bad’ trusts, using his expanded powers as president to make this distinction unilaterally. He made a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ with U.S. Steel and told them that the American government would not attack their corporation as a monopoly since he believed the company was working in the interests of the American people. Roosevelt did not, however, pass any legislation or make any binding orders to this effect. Taft took a more legalistic view and later, as president, directed his attorney general to file an anti-trust lawsuit against U.S. Steel. Roosevelt took Taft’s actions as a personal attack upon Roosevelt’s presidency and positions.

Although Taft continued many of Roosevelt’s policies, he was inclined to look at the facts of the situation and make a choice based on evidence. Roosevelt, on the other hand, was more inclined to do what he felt was “right.” Their disagreements, which hinged on the grey areas of the legal and the ethical, ultimately propelled the break within the Republican Party during the 1912 elections.



Discussion Questions:

1. What differences do you see between Roosevelt's and Taft's views of their ethical responsibilities as president?
2. How did Roosevelt and Taft each negotiate the line between law and ethics?
3. Between Roosevelt and Taft, do you think one demonstrated overconfidence bias more than the other? Explain.
4. In the case of U.S. Steel, whose actions caused more harm: Roosevelt by making an informal agreement, or Taft by violating that agreement? Explain.
5. Whose approach to the U.S. presidency, Taft's or Roosevelt's, do you think is preferable in light of both legal and ethical considerations? Why?
6. Can you think of an example of another president or world leader whose approach to leadership is similar to either Roosevelt or Taft? How does this leader's approach affect his/her political actions?

Resources:

The Constitutional Presidency

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/constitutional-presidency/oclc/263497942>

The Evolving Presidency: Landmark Documents, 1787-2010

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/evolving-presidency-landmark-documents-1787-2015/oclc/911004600>

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