


President William Howard Taft's Trowel: spreading the cementing of unity and tolerance in public health

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ABSTRACT

President William Howard Taft is remembered as being the largest US president and a Freemason. However, Taft's work and legacy in public health are often overlooked by his predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt, and the ensuing political scuffle both held towards each other at the end of Taft's presidency. Taft's many chronic illnesses, most notably his obesity, made visitations and long-distance communication with over 30 physicians, including Sir William Osler, a regular occurrence through this life. Yet Taft's struggles with his health and his beliefs as a freemason were deeply rooted in his appreciation for health care and public health measures. This article aims to explore the motivations and contributions of Taft to public health initiatives to explore the impact public health has had in the past and continues to have in the modern COVID-19 pandemic.

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1. Introduction

President William Howard Taft is remembered as being the largest US president and a Freemason. William Howard Taft was President of the USA from 1909 to 1913, and Chief Justice of the USA from 1921 to 1930. Despite his progressive reforms and other achievements as president, 'Taft is remembered, if at all, for being the fattest president. His obesity has become a staple of quiz shows and trivia games, a humorous sweetener that generations of historians have sprinkled through bland lectures' [1]. His work and legacy are often overlooked by his predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt, and the ensuing political scuffle both held towards each other at the end of Taft's presidency. In many of these interactions, Theodore Roosevelt would poke jabs at Taft's weight. As James E. Watson, the House Representative from Indian, recalled, 'One day I was in the President's private room ... when [good-natured Senator] Chauncey Depew came in. ... After we had talked serious matters for a few minutes and were about to depart, Mr. Depew stepped up to Taft and, taking liberties that I never would have thought of taking with a president, said to him, putting his hand on Mr. Taft's big frontal development: "What are you going to call it when it comes, Mr. President?" It was just about that time when Mr. Taft was beginning to have some difficulty with [Theodore] Roosevelt, and he quickly responded: 'Well, if it's a boy, I'll call it William; if it's a girl, I'll call it Theodora; but if it turns out to be

just wind, I'll call it Chauncey' [2]. Taft's appearance even carried over to political commentary of both President's debates and attacks during the Election of 1912. As shown below, a political artist quipped "Uncle Sam appears as a professor of physics 'to witness what really happens when an Irresistible Force meets an Immovable Body', [3] [Figure 1].

Despite the personal attacks from his political opponents and commentators, Taft often joked of his massive size in public interactions and his speeches as a method building rapport and overcoming his physical appearance. As one writer observed, 'They made infinite jests about his fatness – and no one heard or repeated the jokes with greater savor than Taft himself. Making a speech he would pause, with an effect of suspense, just long enough to intensify the audience's attention; then throughout the immense torso and up into the broad features would run little tremors and heavings, rising to a climax in a rumbling chuckle as infectious as only a fat man could achieve, and Taft would tell a story in which the point was, as he would say in an engaging falsetto, 'on me' [4]. However, Taft's weight fluctuations often mirrored periods of his life of either intense stress, particularly during his political roles as head of the Philippine Commission, Governor of the Philippines, and President of the USA [1]. Taft's weight around 243 pounds after graduating college before ballooning to over 335–340 pounds



Figure 1. William Howard Taft and obesity: an irresistible force meets an immovable body.



Figure 2. President William Howard Taft's above 300 pounds.

at the end of his presidency, as shown below [Figure 2].

Taft's overeating was notorious among his colleagues, who encouraged him to decrease his eating to no avail. Taft's increased weight made him suffer from extreme sleep apnea throughout much of his life, which did not go overlooked by Taft himself. In one conversation with his wife, Taft recalled, 'I will make a conscientious effort to lose flesh. I am convinced that this undue drowsiness is due to the accumulation of flesh ... were I appointed to the bench I fear I could not keep awake in my present condition' [1]. His sleep apnea would often cause Taft to asleep on speaking platforms, while driving on the street, and while dining out; on some occasions, Taft would even fall asleep standing up [1]. Sleep became a constant struggle as well as breathing in many instances. Taft's obesity caused further complications

with Dr. James Marsh Jackson measuring Taft's systolic blood pressure to be 210 mmHg. As Jackson observed, '[Taft] gave me a shock. He looks bigger and more tumble-to-pieces than ever, and his manner has become more slovenly than his figure; but what struck me most was the deterioration of his mind and expression. [He] is ripe for a stroke. He shows mental enfeeblement all over, and I wanted to offer him a bet that he wouldn't get through his term' [1].

After leaving office, Taft's overall health improved with his weight dropping to 264 pounds and his blood pressure decreased between 40 and 50 mmHg. However, Taft would continue having health problems, which included atrial fibrillation, gout, and uric acid kidney stones [1]. Despite his physical limitations, Taft's funeral showed 'an enormous outpouring of grief and tribute. The public had long forgotten his presidential bumbling, replacing them with admiration and fondness for a man who gave 35 unswervingly honest years to public service. Now, an additional facet of William Howard Taft emerges: his perseverance and ultimate triumph against appetite, obesity, and sleep apnea' [1]. Taft's many chronic illnesses made visitations and long-distance communication with over 30 physicians, including Sir William Osler, a regular occurrence through this life [1]. Yet Taft's struggles with his health were deeply rooted in his appreciation for health care as well as a continuation of his ideals as a Freemason.

2. William Howard Taft's Freemason address and public health

A glimpse of Taft's perspective on the purpose of Freemasonry as well as his focus on the well-being of society can be found in his 150th Anniversary Address at St. John's Lodge No.1 at Newark, New Jersey on 13 May 1911. A poignant part of Taft's

address has important implications for his views on medicine and public health. Taft argued that, 'Masonry aims at the promotion of morality and higher living by the cultivation of the social side of man, the rousing in him of the instincts of charity, and the love of his kind. It rests surely on the foundation of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God' [5]. Taft followed this statement with progressive ideals stating that the USA is a 'people who have learned the lessons of self-restraint, without which popular government can not be a success, but a people who still have the progressive spirit prompting them to seek improvement where improvement may be possible but with the capacity for that second sober thought which bids them adhere to their ancient institutions as long as they serve them well' [5]. Taft's progressive ideas were a reflection of a possibility of improving the lives of Americans during the industrial revolution and the global political struggles of the day. For Taft, these ideals could be found in St. John's Lodge No.1 and its role in the establishment of America and their community. As Taft states, 'The account that we have of the establishment of the lodge [St. Johns Lodge No.1] in 1795 in the quarters given them in the New Academy ... shows that the whole community regarded the prosperity of the lodge as part of the prosperity of the town [Newark], and that its inauguration of a new home called for the active interest and enthusiastic expression of Masons and non-Masons who lived in the neighborhood and knew of its influence of good' [5].

The mission of Freemasonry to 'Making Good Men Better' extends to both Masons and non-Masons. For Taft, the progression of society lays in the union and cooperation of both groups towards a better future together. Despite our many imperfections, the journey together, as Taft argued, sought to promote the highest ideals of human beings. This sentiment was emphasized by Taft's concluding thoughts, 'I came here that by my presence I might testify to the respect I feel for such a worth association, that I might convey my congratulations to its members on its long life of love and charity and to express the hope to them that they and their successors may continue to maintain this historical association'. This emphasis on community and charity is reflected in one of the only photos of Taft in his masonic regalia, holding the trowel [Figure 3].

As freemasons, this 'implement made use of by operative Masons to spread the cement which unites the building into one common mass; but we, as Free and Accepted Masons, are taught to make use of it for the more noble and glorious purpose of spreading the cement of brotherly love and affection; that cement which unites us into one sacred band, or

society of friends and brothers, among whom no contention should ever exist, but that noble contention, or rather emulation, of who best can work, and best agree' [6]. Taft's association with the Trowel was recorded by Claire Wright in 1911 who recorded a speech that Taft gave. She remembered, 'Vera and I went down to see the President of the USA together. And we saw him [William Howard Taft] at three places and how we ever did it is remarkable. We were at the depot, saw him get off his private car and saw him the first time he tipped his hat in Kazoo. Saw him get into the automobile and ride slowly down the crowded street. We rushed to the Y.M.C.A. corner and papa literally pulled me through the dense crowd till I was within about five ft of the president while he was laying the corner stone for the new Y.M.C.A. building. His speech was simple and to the point. When they handed him the silver trowel to place the mortar he said "give me a man's tool" They made him a honorary member of the masons' [7]. For Taft, the Trowel was a symbol of his own devotion for serving humanity and improving the lives of his constituents; in a broader sense, it was a reminder of his application of Freemasonry to his public service work as President and in the Philippines where his public health efforts saved countless lives. Although Taft's presidency is often remembered for its dissolution of large corporations through anti-Trust laws, Taft also promoted public health measures that sought to improve the livelihoods of Americans. Taft's personal health problems, as well as his experiences as governor of the Philippines, were significant contributors to his views on public health, as he would later recall to the Medical Club at Bellevue-Stratford in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (4 May 1911).

3. Taft's public health address for the medical club at the Bellevue-Stratford

Before his address for the Medical Club at the Bellevue-Stratford, Taft had garnered much public attention for his public health measures, which included enforcing child labor laws to protect children from dangerous occupations. Such progressive policies from Taft was deeply linked to his experiences in Latin America and as governor of the Philippines before becoming president. As reported by the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA),

The fact that President Taft, during the rush incident to the first few weeks of his administration, has taken a business-like initiative in an effort to secure a satisfactory national public health policy is a comforting reassurance to the friends of that movement. This step on the part of the President cannot, . . . have been advised of his active interest in great

sanitary and scientific problems that have come under his administrative supervision. In the Philippines, he not only placed sanitation on a strong footing, but established original scientific investigation and general medical education on a firmer governmental foundation than obtains in any of the states. The moment that he, as Secretary of War, took charge of the affairs in the Isthmian Canal Zone, the sanitary administration was for the first time given proper status in that great undertaking. His activities in improving the conditions of the Army Medical Corps and his recent address before the University of Pennsylvania are additional evidences, not only of his general interest in these and allied subjects, but that he has intimate knowledge at first hand on all of them [8].

This legacy in public health policies was something that Taft alluded repeatedly to the medical students at Bellevue-Stratford in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Taft expounded on his experiences and the importance of public health in expanding medical and scientific knowledge, particularly in tropical regions. As Taft recounted,

It was while we were in Cuba that Walter Reed, an Army doctor, investigated and verified the correctness of the theory announced some little time before, that the germ of yellow fever was conveyed from one human being to another by a certain species of mosquito. This discovery revolutionized the method for treating yellow fever, and it was made clear that the great effort and expenditure of money required to clean up Haban and the other infected towns, while useful in the prevention of other diseases, had little or no effect to prevent yellow fever. An entirely different course of procedure had to be followed. It was adopted in Habana and the other cities of Cuba, and was most successful and one of those officers engaged in the work of Col. Gorgas, of the Army Medical Corp

Taft continued his speech discussing a similar episode concerning public health measures he helped incorporate in Porto Rico. Taft spoke saying,

We found that in that island [Porto Rico] the people were not suffering so much from yellow fever, but there was what was called "tropical anemia," and it was not long before an Army doctor named



Figure 3. William Howard Taft in masonic regalia holding the Trowel.

Ashbrook discovered that this was not the result of starvation and the absence of nutritious food, but was a disease due to the presence in the intestines of the so-called hookworm, and that it yielded to treatment, and that the many deaths and the general disability that the hookworm produced in the people of Porto Rico could be avoided in the future by comparatively simple and specific treatment. Half a million people have been recipients of this treatment and have recovered and a second campaign is now being planned of greater thoroughness, preparation, and practice, which will doubtless rid the island of this disease

Taft further elaborated his overseas experience with public health initiatives in the Philippines recalling that in:

In the Philippines we did not encounter yellow fever, for that as yet has not reached the Pacific; but we found there, in glorious exuberance, cholera, bubonic plague, beriberi, malaria, smallpox, amoebic dysentery, and leprosy, a bill of fare for the enterprising and progressive physician and knight of investigation and research calculated to make his mouth water, and a list of scourges which the civil administrator viewed with alarm and despair . . . When we went to the Philippines lepers were at large. There were leper hospitals in Manila, in Cebu, and in some parts of the country, but the horrible and sickening character of them beggars description. We have segregated the lepers in all Provinces in the islands . . . The effect of this segregation has been to reduce the new cases annually of leprosy to 16 per cent of what they were formerly

Taft summarized all of these public health achievements he witnessed and participated in fondly saying, 'We expend many lives and money in the Spanish War and in the discharge of the responsibilities that have followed that war. But they are as nothing compared with the benefits to the human race that have already accrued and will continue accrue from the discoveries made under the conditions and necessities, which the exigencies of that war and governmental burdens following it presented. I congratulate the Medical Corps of the Army, I congratulate the medical profession at large (for these discoveries were not all made by Army doctors) that they have had the opportunity and have seized it to make such progress in relieving the suffering of the human race in becoming in so conspicuous a way the benefactors of mankind'.

4. Taft's Public Health Policy: Swallowing the Elephant Whole

Within three months after becoming president Taft wrote to one of his colleagues, "I think the first thing that ought to be done is to assemble all the bureaus relating to health matters under one head in one bureau, or to assemble them at least in one

department". Yet Taft's admiration and support for public health initiatives was not universally received. This was particularly apparent with Taft's national public health policy and department he wished to implement. As one newspaper wrote:

"There hasn't been much of a popular roar for this new department or else our hearing is defective. Perhaps it is because it is so doubtful what would be done to the people medically. Cabinet officers are appointed because of their politics, as one of the heavy considerations, and nobody kicks on that account. Ordinarily, there's no digging into a secretary's religious denomination, or diet, or things like that. If he's a good party man, it goes. But suppose that Mr. Taft should appoint as our national doctor an allopath, a homeopath, or one of the "irregular" schools. Would the whole medical profession that was left "out-side" rise en masse? Wouldn't the whole country, indeed, soon be divided against itself?" [10].

The writer concluded his critique of Taft's public health policy stating, "We're all pretty partial, pretty factional, pretty clannish at heart. Each one of us, in degree, is partial to his own way of praying, feeding, and taking pills. To put any particular "school" over us is to make us ugly and, while the move for a national department of health may be a good thing. Mr. Taft should realize that in rolling along with it, in his easy, corpulent way, he's liable to wind up against troubles besides which the great Ballinger "conspiracy" would appear like a glorious utopian dream" [10]. As this writer believed, Taft was biting a problem much too big even for a large man himself. Instead of eating the elephant one bite a time, Taft was trying, as some believed, to swallow the whole issue of public health in one national public health policy. Though daunting, overwhelming, and even impossible to some, Taft saw it as a necessary step towards ensuring the safety and health of the U.S. population, particularly as they ventured outwards to the world stage economically and militarily. Taft saw the economic prosperity as further reason for the U.S. to take leadership in developing accessible healthcare for all. As Taft argued at the Tuberculosis Congress in March 1910 with regards to a national public health department, "We cannot stop improving our government...For instance, we ought to have a Bureau of Health. We ought to have that kind of a Bureau which shall render, with reference to the human being, the opportunities for research and for information that we now through the agriculture... We have an Agricultural Department and we are spending \$14,000,000 or \$15,000,000 a year to tell the farmer . . . how they ought to treat the soil and how they ought to treat the cattle and the horses, with a view to having good hogs and good cattle and good horses. Now, there is nothing in the Constitution

especially about hogs or cattle or horses, and if out of the Public Treasury at Washington we can establish a department for that purpose, it does not seem to be a long step or a stretch of logic to say that we have the power to tell how we can develop good men and good women” [11]. Ironically, Taft’s proposal for a national public health policy was argued by Theodore Roosevelt at his last address to congress. At his last speech, Roosevelt argued, “There are numerous diseases, which are now known to be preventable, which are, nevertheless, not prevented. . . . This Nation can not afford to lag behind in the world-wide battle now being waged by all civilized people with the microscope foes of mankind, nor ought we longer to ignore the reproach that this government takes more pains to protect the lives of hogs and cattle than of human beings. The first legislative step to be taken is that for the concentration of the proper bureaus into one of the existing department” [11]. For Taft, the progression of society lay in the union and cooperation of both groups towards a better future together. Despite our many imperfections, the journey together, as Taft argued, sought to promote the highest ideals of human beings. This sentiment was emphasized by Taft’s at another of his speeches, “I came here that by my presence I might testify to the respect I feel for such a worth association, that I might convey my congratulations to its members on its long life of love and charity and to express the hope to them that they and their successors may continue to maintain this historical association” [5].

5. The Trowel in the medical profession

Historically, human beings have often sought unity as a form of safety in numbers. The combined efforts reduced the risk of each member from themselves and the natural world. As humans organized smaller groups into larger collectives, the potential for human achievement has been impressive with the artistic, scientific, political, and social developments. However, none of this is possible without tolerance and respect between each member of society. As with any building, the stability of its structure depends on the size, placement, and material of its components. Similarly, human beings are unable to survive without the mutual support and maintenance of its social, political, and religious institutions.

For Taft, he embodied this belief through his efforts in public health initiatives for enforcing child labor laws and public health initiatives before and during his presidency. As one editorial remarked, ‘The fact that President Taft, during the rush incident to the first few weeks of his administration, has taken a business-like initiative

in an effort to secure a satisfactory national public health policy is a comforting reassurance to the friends of that movement [progressivism] In the Philippines, he not only placed sanitation on a strong footing, but established original scientific investigation and general medical education on a firmer governmental foundation than obtains in any of the states’ [8]. The experience allowed Taft to form a strong appreciation and friendship with many physicians who helped him oversees.

Similarly, the rigors and challenges of medical practice foster a form of brotherhood and friendship among physicians given the demands and substantial commitment in education, work hours, and dedication to patient health and professional development. This has remained true despite the significant social, political, scientific, and technological changes within the medical profession. As Sir William Osler observed, ‘The profession [medicine] in truth is a sort of guild or brotherhood, any member of which can take up his calling in any part of the world and find brethren whose language and methods and whose aims and ways are identical with his own’ [9].

6. Conclusion

Taft’s progressive policies and emphasis on public health emphasized his belief that alleviating the sufferings of his fellow neighbor had broader impacts on society. His personal struggles with his weight embodied the feelings of embarrassment, helplessness, and struggles that he witnessed throughout his travels in Latin America and the Philippines. Taken together, Taft’s experiences with public health measures and the impact on society is a potent reminder of the power of modern medicine to overcome some of history’s worst diseases. This lesson continues to ring true with the COVID-19 pandemic where public health measures and modern medical interventions have saved thousands of lives from the raging pandemic. As Taft emphasized through his speech, facing the challenges of public health advanced modern medicine while also showing our interconnectedness as a species towards a larger brotherhood.

Disclosure statement

The authors, whose names are listed immediately below, report the following details of affiliation or involvement in an organization or entity with a financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Author contributions

Jonathan Kopel PhD participated in the critical review, drafting, and submission of the final manuscript. All authors have given final approval to the manuscript.

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