

The Long Shadow of Roosevelt

Narrator:

Throughout his first term as president, William Howard Taft was viewed by most as owing his victory to the support of Teddy Roosevelt. However, Roosevelt and his former War Secretary actually had a rather volatile relationship—so volatile, in fact, that at the end of Taft’s first term, Roosevelt chose not to support his re-election bid.

In the 1908 election, though, Roosevelt threw his name and influence behind Taft and running mate James S. Sherman.

Taft was opposed by the perennial Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan, but the Republicans easily won a significant majority of the vote. Most voters seemed to expect Taft to continue the policies of his larger-than-life and very popular predecessor. In this unusual signed poster from the 1908 election, there is even something of a resemblance to Roosevelt in terms of the positive and energetic qualities Taft displayed.

Even in 1912, most Americans thought that Taft and Roosevelt were allies. This political cartoon of that year depicts Roosevelt and Taft riding the Republican Elephant to the Republican convention while Vice-President James S. Sherman is trampled under the elephant's foot. The cartoon expressed some Americans’ hope for a Roosevelt-Taft presidential ticket for 1912.

However, the relationship between Taft and Roosevelt took a serious turn for the worse as the 1912 campaign unfolded. Not only did Taft lose Roosevelt’s support, but it seemed that Roosevelt intended to enter the presidential race as the Progressive Party candidate—*opposing* Taft.

Taft attempted to use his incumbency as a springboard to a second term, but it became clear that a split vote was likely, since both Taft and Roosevelt were running on basically the same Progressive platform.

In 1912, Taft was also only running against Woodrow Wilson, a well known law professor. The two candidates and their parties were similar in many ways, and it was up to Taft to draw distinctions between them. This postcard produced by Taft’s campaign predicts that elderly Americans will lose their pensions if Wilson is elected.

Taft tried to use the prestige of his office to convince American voters to return him to power, taking every opportunity to make himself look presidential and powerful. Taft was the first U.S. President to own a car while in office, and as you can see he was careful to select one that conveyed success.
