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Source: *The North American Review*, Vol. 193, No. 666 (May, 1911), pp. 653-662

Published by: University of Northern Iowa

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25106928>

Accessed: 05-03-2022 15:49 UTC

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PRESIDENT TAFT AND HIS PROGRAMME

BY RICHARD HOOKER

A NARROW view of the situation confronting President Taft on the day he issued his call for the special session might have suggested to a politician of little courage that to call Congress together eight months in advance of its ordinary convening was a mere foolhardy playing into the hands of eager adversaries. In the House of Representatives Mr. Taft at length stood face to face with the Democratic majority of 67 which, through the results of the November elections, had been substituted for an uncertain yet nominal Republican majority of 38.* In the Senate there still remained, assuming the eventual settlement of contests then holding several State Legislatures in deadlock, a Republican majority of eight. This majority, however, was scarcely even nominal. Included in it were at least eight insurgents, most of whom had shown themselves openly hostile to the administration by their efforts to discredit it, and several of whom were known throughout Washington to be nursing hopes of the Republican nomination in 1912 and to be ready to build upon Mr. Taft's failure if they could accomplish it.

In substance, then, President Taft invited into activity a Congress in which each house was predisposed to hostility. It was true that upon the issue of Canadian reciprocity, which was the direct cause of the special session, the previous action of the House of Representatives and a canvass of the Senate indicated the final enactment of the bill in which the reciprocity agreement had been embodied. Yet it was fully understood that not only among the insurgents, but

* Toward the close of the Sixty-first Congress deaths and resignations had reduced the Republican majority in the House of Representatives from its original figure.

also among the so-called regulars of the Senate, there were shrewd strategists whose support, if reluctantly given to the reciprocity bill, would be due only to the force of public opinion and might be so coupled with the offering of dangerous amendments as to be more of a menace than direct opposition. Nor had President Taft either received or sought assurances from the Democratic leaders in the House that they would content themselves with the passage of the reciprocity measure or of any limited number of other bills revising additional tariff schedules. Some of the more cautious Democrats would clearly have preferred such a course, but they had no power to pledge their party to it in advance. On the contrary, the moment Mr. Taft's determination to call a special session became clear the air at Washington had been filled with Democratic talk of investigating each of the Government departments and plans had at once been considered by the more partisan for various bills which, it was hoped, might tend from a political point of view to "put the President in a hole." Yet in spite of the warnings of timid advisers, Mr. Taft held to his determination and resolutely called the special session for the one purpose of seeing the reciprocity agreement ratified. With eyes open to its manifold possible embarrassments and political dangers he calmly braved the situation.

A President entering upon the last half of his term with the assured support of an organized majority in each House of Congress may not unreasonably have a fairly definite programme of the legislation which he hopes to prevail upon Congress to enact before his term ends. But that Mr. Taft lacks such support is the main fact of the present situation, and any programme that he contemplates must necessarily be framed with practical recognition of it. For example, it would be labor wasted to further press for the passage of a ship subsidy bill, although the Republican platform of 1908 declared for such a measure and although President Taft has set a new standard of political honor in insisting to the extent of his power that platform pledges be fulfilled. The Congressional elections of 1910 effectively abrogated the contract of 1908 in so far as it concerned ship subsidies. But the reason why active effort for ship subsidies would be futile on Mr. Taft's part suggests the limits within which he actually has a most important programme aside from the ratification of the reciprocity agreement which is his first

and greatest concern. There are certain questions of the highest public importance to which Mr. Taft has given close and increasing attention and which have not as yet become subjects of party division, largely because of their nature and perhaps partly because they have not thus far been projected into the field of serious discussion in Congress. Upon such non-political matters it is not unreasonable for him to hope that he and the Democrats can arrive at sufficient harmony to do business to the public advantage and then let the public apportion the credit where it will. That he entertains this hope and will consistently maintain the attitude that he and the Democrats of the House of Representatives ought to be able to find much common ground on which to work together, has been made clear in the course of several frank discussions which the President has recently granted upon his plans for the future.

There is doubtless scant appreciation of the importance of the work which has been begun under President Taft's direction by the so-called Economy Commission to which brief references appear in the newspapers. As a result of the President's urgent recommendations to Congress he received in 1910 an appropriation for instituting an inquiry into the efficiency and economy of the Federal service, and at the recent session an additional appropriation of seventy-five thousand dollars was made. What this inquiry is aimed to eventually accomplish is the adoption of modern business methods in the conduct of the great national concern in which every taxpayer is a stockholder and whose operations involve the annual expenditure of approximately \$1,000,000,000 and whose civilian employees, according to the most recent figures, number no less than 411,322. Hitherto Congress has been forced to appropriate the funds for the running of this vast establishment utterly without that intelligently classified information as to past and prospective expenditures which would be required in any private business, and which by affording a simple basis for comparison between the different bureaus and departments would indicate clearly those which were economical and efficient and those which were extravagant.

Tucked away in the annual appropriation bills, which are framed not according to any logical system, but according to the haphazard growth of custom, are items of various sorts which ought either to be brought together under one

head or at least to be brought into direct comparison. For example, the inquiry, although not yet long in active progress, has brought out the fact that during the current year the Government will expend approximately \$12,000,000 for ordinary traveling expenses, exclusive of extraordinary expenses incident to the army "manœuvres" along the Mexican border. This is probably the first time in history that it has been ascertained how much the Government proposed to expend on this item in any one year. But, of more importance, it has been found that while many of the well-run bureaus have been getting the benefit of the lowest transportation rates, one of the biggest of the departments, owing to an antiquated system, has been paying ten per cent. more than it should. President Taft has lately given orders that in preparing the estimates for the next fiscal year this item of transportation shall be so treated as to give an early demonstration of the practical value and actual saving which may be expected from the commission's work.

As the commission reports to the President, from time to time, its recommendations, in many instances, can doubtless thus be made effective by executive order. But for a thorough reorganization of present business methods, or rather for the substitution of business-like methods for those that are unbusiness-like, the action of Congress will be required, since the methods of Congressional appropriation are also involved. In this field, where the opportunity is evident for the annual saving of millions of dollars, it is President Taft's belief that Democrat and Republican can co-operate and that they should be made to do so by the force of public opinion.

But the question of efficiency in the civil service is not limited to the methods of national bookkeeping. The question of a properly graded personnel, from which the elimination of superannuated and otherwise incompetent members should be provided for, is even more fundamental. The army of 411,322 civil employees like Topsy has "just growed" until it is honeycombed with inconsistencies, such as the payment of the same salary to two men who sit side by side, one of them doing work that, as President Taft has said, "is far more difficult and important and exacting than that of the other." The result is, to quote the President again, that "superior ability is not rewarded or encour-

aged." Unless the reclassification of the service which was recommended during the Roosevelt administration and which President Taft has strongly urged is soon carried out, the service must come perilously near breaking down. Not less serious, however, is the question of superannuation. Mr. C. D. Norton, until recently private secretary to the President and before that an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, has declared the Government service to be "paralyzed by the presence in it of probably twenty-five per cent. of its servants who have become incompetent either through superannuation or for other reasons." If Mr. Norton does not exaggerate, and he speaks from a personal investigation and study that had much to do with the creation of the "Economy" Commission, this means that the Government has upon its rolls over 100,000 incompetent employees, most of whom, however, have only committed the fault of growing old. In his message of December, 1909, President Taft, to the dismay of many persons, declared himself in favor of civil pensions. But his interest in the subject was so great as to lead him to give thorough study to the experiences of other and older Governments, particularly that of England, with this same problem. As a result of this study he frankly and unequivocally reversed himself in his message of December, 1910, and came out strongly for the introduction of a system of compulsory insurance. There can be no question that such a reorganization of the Federal budget as must come if the work of President Taft's Economy Commission is intelligently performed and its recommendations are adopted must mean the annual saving of immense sums if, as Mr. Taft earnestly desires, the reform is logically rounded out by including a regrading of the civil service and the introduction of compulsory insurance so as to afford a practical means of retiring the superannuated and inefficient. The task is big, but it is long overdue.

Coupled in President Taft's mind with the question of Federal economy is one other great non-political problem, that of the conservation of natural resources. When Mr. Taft accepted the resignation of Mr. Ballinger as Secretary of the Interior, it first became possible for the administration to proceed along constructive lines and to think of framing progressive legislation in relation to the vexed questions of water-power leases, of coal lands, of oil and gas lands, of phosphate lands, of the Alaska coal lands, and so forth,

with any reasonable expectation that it would be adopted by Congress. This may be said without any reflection upon the merits of the Ballinger controversy, but merely with a recognition of the practical fact that so long as Mr. Ballinger remained in office hostility and suspicion tied the administration's hands. Except for the act validating the Presidential withdrawal of public lands, which was passed in 1910 on Mr. Taft's urgent representations that it was needed to prevent a condition of possible utter chaos, practically all other matters relating to conservation have been necessarily left in abeyance as far as legislative action is concerned. By the appointment of Mr. Fisher this situation has been changed. Despite the flings of hysterical critics, there is no truer conservationist in the country than Mr. Taft, and his address before the conservation Congress in St. Paul last fall bears witness to the deep study which he has given the various phases of the problem which he now hopes to see dealt with by adequate legislation and without division of party.

Included in this programme of non-political subjects is the creation of a parcels post system and the settlement of the vexed question of the postal rates on second-class mail-matter, now carried at great loss, after the recently appointed commission, of which Justice Hughes is chairman, shall have made its findings. President Taft is deeply in earnest in his advocacy of the parcels post and may be expected to press it upon Congress with all the energy at his command. That he is equally in earnest upon the question of second-class mail rates scarcely needs to be said after his venturing to force it to the front in the closing days of the recent session when the situation in regard to various administration measures was precarious. To stir up a hornet's nest at the moment when he needed whatever support he could get, and to do it simply because he believed the proposition to be just, was as little comprehensible to the ordinary politician in Washington as it was unthinkable that Mr. Taft meant what he said in regard to an extra session, until the proclamation was actually issued on the 4th of March. But it is Mr. Taft's confident belief that the findings of the investigating commission will have such weight with the country, owing especially to the great reputation of its chairman for ability in the analysis of figures and for even justice, that it will necessarily result in appropriate

legislation. Another special commission whose report the President awaits with interest is that which was created a year ago to investigate the subject of railroad securities, and whose creation was a compromise acquiesced in by those who opposed the President's recommendations that supervision over the issuance of such securities be vested in the Interstate Commerce Commission. Upon the nature of this report, which will also carry special weight because of the commission's strikingly able membership, will depend the further recommendations which the President will be able to make to Congress at the next regular session.

The prompt ratification of the new treaty with Japan—the most important action taken in Congress at the recent session which was otherwise rendered so barren of general results by Republican disorganization—leaves the administration in a comfortable position in regard to its foreign policy with nations overseas. The treaty or fiscal convention with Honduras remained unacted upon, however, when the Sixty-first Congress adjourned, and President Taft will press strongly for its ratification. It is chiefly to be regarded a part of his policy of putting the United States in a position such that this Government may have ground for stepping in and preserving the peace in Central America, when extreme need arises, and thus put an end to periodic disorder and lend its friendly influence to the healthy development of the Central American countries. But while opposition to the Honduran treaty may be expected in the Senate from the Democrats, since they opposed the somewhat similar treaty with San Domingo, and possibly also from the insurgents, no such alignment is to be looked for on any treaty which President Taft may submit to the Senate in accordance with his notable declaration of last December favoring the negotiation with "some great nation" of a "positive agreement" to arbitrate any issue, "no matter what it involves, whether honor, territory, or money." The recent statements of Sir Edward Grey have developed the fact that negotiations for such a treaty have been in progress with the Government of Great Britain, and its submission and ratification would alone constitute an enduring monument to Mr. Taft's administration.

President Taft is hopeful of the final enactment of at least one proposition which cannot be listed as "non-political," since the parties have differed upon it and since a large ma-

jority of the Democrats in the House of Representatives opposed it at the recent session. This is the creation of a permanent tariff commission. The President believes that his present Tariff Board, which was continued for another year by an appropriation agreed upon in the closing hours of the Sixty-first Congress and which he has since enlarged by the appointment of two Democrats, will so demonstrate its value while the Democrats are undertaking their tariff legislation that they will agree to its further continuation and in the end to the creation of a permanent commission. Mr. Taft has intimated that he may not oppose such tariff revision, schedule by schedule, as the Democrats adopt, provided it is based upon a reasonable regard for the findings of the board. The board is thus presented to them as a bridge.

Four years ago when Mr. Roosevelt had reached the same period in his second term that Mr. Taft has now reached in his first term various articles appeared in magazines and newspapers giving what purported, with some apparent authority, to be Mr. Roosevelt's programme during the remainder of his stay in the White House. It is worth recalling that, in spite of Mr. Roosevelt's great popularity and remarkable ability as a campaigner in behalf of any cause which he might champion, comparatively little of the programme was accomplished. In the first place, Mr. Roosevelt's brain is both so fertile in itself and so quick in adopting suggested ideas that his programme included enough to occupy Congress for almost a decade at the usual rate of progress. In the second place, circumstances arose which even Mr. Roosevelt could not foresee. So in Mr. Taft's case things now invisible may develop and change the situation and indicate new directions in which his influence with Congress may be best directed. But it may be pointed out that he has never devoted himself to all the long list of "isms" and "causes" upon which Mr. Roosevelt brilliantly preaches, and that for this reason he has been able to pursue with more concentration and tenacity those things which have claimed his interest and support. Consequently, although the programme here suggested by no means exhausts the number of subjects upon which he either expects legislation or considers legislation desirable, he is less likely to be led aside from those issues which he holds most important.

But more important than any specific article in Mr. Taft's

programme is the determination, on which it is based, to endeavor, with practical recognition of the existing political situation, to meet the Democrats on common ground, in so far as it is possible without yielding an inch on any conviction, and thus to prevent the enactment of progressive legislation from coming to a standstill. If the observer behind the scenes at Washington is apt at times to exaggerate the importance of personality in the settlement of large affairs, the man at a distance is more apt to underestimate it. For example, during the recent session of Congress the most important measure which failed of passage in the closing hours was lost because its sponsor in one of the two Houses had made himself so disliked by his manners in debate that the members of the opposing party seized this last opportunity to "haze" him before he retired into private life, and for so long a time prevented action that it finally proved impossible by a narrow margin to secure concurrent action by the other House before the session expired. Yet those by whom the bill was thus held up were frank in confessing that if any one else had had the measure in charge they would have permitted action upon it an entire day earlier, which would have insured its passage by both Houses. The example, although negative, is striking. President Taft, if not a clever politician, is perhaps for that very reason the more popular with the opposition party; certainly his course in playing the game always with the cards "face up"—sometimes called his "appalling frankness"—has spared him animosities in Democratic ranks, and his appointments of Democrats to the Supreme Court and his Cabinet have tended to strengthen an atmosphere of good feeling which, in spite of the natural Democratic desire to constantly manœuvre with relation to the campaign of 1912, should help to make possible a degree of fruitful co-operation between the Executive and Congress instead of a paralysis of the legislative machinery.

But while Mr. Taft has never shown either the slightest capacity or the slightest desire to make a conscious dramatic appeal, it may prove that, by inviting political trial simply because of his implicit faith that the reciprocity measure which he has submitted to Congress is sound and wise, he has unconsciously presented himself to the imagination of the country as a lonely figure shaping his course, not by political expediency, but by his conception of right and jus-

tice, and that he thus has won the recognition which has hitherto been denied him and which will bring with it a new power, the power built upon strong popular approval. If events take this turn it may well be that the last two years of the term which Mr. Taft is now serving will yield results more gratifying to him and to his admirers than the first two years, and this in spite of Democratic control of the House and the doubtful complexion of the Senate. At least the situation has the advantage from Mr. Taft's standpoint that open opposition is easier to deal with than insecure support and covert attack.

RICHARD HOOKER.