The Republican William Howard Taft worked as a judge in Ohio Superior Court and in the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals before accepting a post as the first civilian governor of the Philippines in 1900. In 1904, Taft took on the role of secretary of war in the administration of Theodore Roosevelt, who threw his support to the Ohioan as his successor in 1908. Generally more conservative than Roosevelt, Taft also lacked his expansive view of presidential power, and was generally a more successful administrator than politician. By 1912, Roosevelt, dissatisfied with Taft's presidency, had formed his own Progressive Party, splitting Republican voters and handing the White House to the Democrat Woodrow Wilson. Nine years after leaving office, Taft achieved his lifelong goal when President Warren Harding appointed him chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; he held that post until just before his death in 1930.

Taft's Early Life and Career

William Howard Taft was born on September 15, 1857, in Cincinnati, Ohio. His father was Alphonso Taft, a prominent Republican attorney who served as secretary of war and attorney general under President Ulysses S. Grant, then ambassador to Austria-Hungary and Russia under President Chester A. Arthur. The younger Taft attended Yale University (graduating second in his class) before studying law at the University of Cincinnati. He was admitted to the Ohio bar in 1880 and entered private practice. In 1886, Taft married Helen "Nettie" Herron, the daughter of another prominent local lawyer and Republican Party activist; the couple would have three children.

From early in his career, Taft aspired to a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court. His ambitious wife, meanwhile, set her sights on becoming first lady. With her encouragement, Taft accepted several political appointments, beginning in 1887 when he was named to fill the term of a judge in Ohio Superior Court. He was elected to a five-year term himself the following year. (Other than the presidency, it would be the only office Taft ever obtained through a popular vote.) In 1890, he was appointed as U.S. solicitor general, the third-highest position in the justice department. Two years later, he began serving as a judge on the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, which had jurisdiction over Ohio, Michigan, Tennessee and Kentucky.

Taft's Path to the White House

In early 1900, President William McKinley called Taft to Washington and tasked him with setting up a civilian government in the Philippines, which had become a U.S. protectorate after the Spanish-American War (1898). Though hesitant, Taft accepted the post of chairman of the Second Philippine Commission with the knowledge that it would position him well to advance further in national government. Taft's sympathetic administration in the Philippines marked a dramatic departure from the brutal tactics used there by the U.S. military government since 1898. Beginning with the drafting of a new constitution (including a Bill of Rights similar to that of the United States) and the creation of the post of civilian governor (he became the first), Taft improved the island economy and infrastructure and allowed the people at least some voice in government. Though sympathetic to the Filipino people and popular among them, he believed they needed considerable guidance and instruction before they could be capable of self-rule, and predicted a long period of U.S. involvement; in fact, the Philippines would not gain independence until 1946.
After McKinley was assassinated in 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt twice offered Taft a Supreme Court appointment, but he declined in order to stay in the Philippines. In 1904, he agreed to return and become Roosevelt's secretary of war, as long as he retained supervision of Filipino affairs. Taft traveled extensively during his four years in this post, including overseeing the construction of the Panama Canal and serving as provisional governor of Cuba. Roosevelt, who had pledged not to run for a third term in office, began promoting Taft as his successor. Though he disliked campaigning, Taft agreed to mount a presidential run in 1908 at the urging of his wife, and soundly defeated Democrat William Jennings Bryan by pledging to continue the Rooseveltian program of progressive reforms.

The Taft Presidency
Despite his pledge, Taft lacked Roosevelt's expansive view of presidential power, as well as his charisma as a leader and his physical vigor. (Always heavy, Taft weighed as much as 300 pounds at times during his presidency.) Though he was initially active in "trust-busting," initiating some 80 antitrust suits against large industrial combinations--twice as many as Roosevelt--he later backed away from these efforts, and in general aligned himself with the more conservative members of the Republican Party. In 1909, Taft's convention of a special session of Congress to debate tariff reform legislation spurred the Republican protectionist majority to action and led to passage of the Payne-Aldrich Act, which did little to lower tariffs. Though more progressive Republicans (such as Roosevelt) expected Taft to veto the bill, he signed it into law and publicly defended it as "the best tariff bill that the Republican Party ever passed."

In another key misstep where progressives were concerned, Taft upheld the policies of Secretary of the Interior Richard Ballinger, and dismissed Ballinger's leading critic, Gifford Pinchot, a conservationist and close friend of Roosevelt who served as head of the Bureau of Forestry. Pinchot's firing split the Republican Party further and estranged Taft from Roosevelt for good. Often overlooked in the record of Taft's presidency were his achievements, including his trust-busting efforts, his empowering of the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to set railroad rates, and his support of constitutional amendments mandating a federal income tax and the direct election of senators by the people (as opposed to appointment by state legislatures).

Taft's Post-Presidency and Supreme Court Career
By 1912, Roosevelt was so incensed with Taft and the conservative Republicans that he chose to break from the party and form his own Progressive Party (also known as the Bull Moose Party). In the general election that year, the divide among Republicans handed the White House to the progressive Democrat Woodrow Wilson, who received 435 electoral votes to Roosevelt's 88. Taft received only eight electoral votes, reflecting the repudiation of his administration's policies in the wave of progressive spirit that was then sweeping the nation.

Undoubtedly relieved to be leaving the White House, Taft took a position teaching constitutional law at Yale University Law School. In 1921, President Warren Harding fulfilled Taft's lifelong dream by appointing him chief justice of the United States Supreme Court. In that post, Taft improved the organization and efficiency of the nation's highest court and helped secure passage of the Judge's Act of 1925, which gave the court greater discretion in choosing its cases. He wrote some 250 decisions, most reflecting his conservative ideology. Taft's most prominent opinion came in Myers v. United States (1926), which invalidated tenure of office acts limiting the president's authority to remove federal officials; President Andrew Johnson's violation of a similar act had led to his impeachment by the House of Representatives in 1868. Taft remained chief justice until shortly before his death, on March 8, 1930, from complications of heart disease.