



My Dearest Nellie: The Letters of William Howard Taft to Helen Herron Taft, 1909-1912

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Few presidential couples enjoyed a closer relationship in the White House than Will and Nellie Taft. Throughout William Howard Taft's rise in American politics, she had been his most intimate confidant. When circumstances separated them, as when Helen Herron Taft became incapacitated by a stroke and was unable to accompany the president on his storied travels—or was herself on recuperative trips—she pressed him for letters, and he obliged with gossipy correspondence that provides a fascinating account of his presidency at decisive moments in his single term.

These 113 letters, all but a few never before published, represent a rare glimpse into the mind of a chief executive speaking candidly about individuals and issues. In them, Taft commented on political issues he encountered and decisions he made—as well as his growing disillusion with Theodore Roosevelt, his unhappiness with Congress, and his struggles with his weight and golf score. Breathing new life into a bygone era in all of its complexity and humanity, they also open a new window on Washington early in the twentieth century—providing Taft's reactions not only to social figures of the Progressive Era but also to the impact of innovations like the automobile and rudimentary air conditioning.

Sometimes indiscreet and frustrated with his political prospects, Taft comes through as a man who worked hard at a job for which he was not well suited. Indeed, Taft has been written off as a failed chief executive who was pushed into office by his wife; yet, as he insisted to Nellie, he was a creditable chief executive confronted with a changing political environment. Taft's letters may not warrant calling him a great president, but they reveal a more thoughtful occupant of the White House than scholars have acknowledged.

Other than those that Harry Truman wrote to Bess, there is no comparable archive of modern presidential letters to a spouse that equals the letters to "Dearest Nellie" that Will Taft sent. Edited and introduced by a leading historian of the Progressive Era, Taft's letters not only reveal the inner workings of a presidency at decisive moments but also humanize a chief executive to whom history has been less than kind.

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