

Analysis of the Presidencies of Grover Cleveland

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Cleveland as Candidate in 1884

Cleveland's activities during the election of 1884 proved a preview to his presidencies. Although he campaigned vigorously, most of his political gains were made because of mistakes by his opponent. Despite this Cleveland was the best candidate the Democrats could have put up in 1884. His solid reputation as mayor of Buffalo and, especially, his rejection of Tammany Hall politicians as governor of New York made him a different kind of candidate. He was not a big star of politics like



An 1884 Democratic party campaign poster.

like Blaine or Conkling or Chandler. To many he seemed the anti-politician, perhaps because of his reforms as governor. The perceived honesty and incorruptibility of Cleveland proved

not just to be political hype. Cleveland was exactly what he promised to be during the election of '84.

Another thing about the election of 1884 to note was the choice of Cleveland, a very conservative Democrat. Despite losing in very close elections the Democrats were forced to find a candidate who could win them Republican votes. The conservative face of the electorate is reflected very clearly in the nomination of Grover Cleveland. By the end of his second term, the electorate would begin taking on a new appearance altogether. The nation was in political transition throughout the Cleveland presidencies, something he often had a hard time coming to grips with.

Re-establishing authority by the book

Cleveland believed in a strict interpretation of the Constitution and of his duties as chief executive. He saw himself

merely as the implementor of the laws passed by Congress. In his inaugural address he promised "a just and unstrained construction of the Constitution."

Congress held the real power and prestige in the nineteenth century, something with which Cleveland seemed discontented, as he fought for equality among the branches of government (as is constitutionally prescribed.) Cleveland judged every bill that passed his desk with his scrutinizing constitutional standard. His leadership as chief legislator was by the book and decisive at first as he struck down bill after bill. His 414 vetoes in his first term set a record for a single term.

Most of the bills he struck down offered special benefits to industries, veterans, and railroads. He continued to see himself as a righteous watchdog, above partisan politics and offered privilege to no one.

When veterans marched to receive their pensions early, Cleveland refused. Congress had been granting pensions to individual veterans who were rejected by the pension boards for various reasons. This activity, which Cleveland deemed unfair and unjust since most petitioners were cronies of Congressmen, invoked his hostility. He vetoed a bill that would have given extra money to veterans who acquired disabling injuries after their discharge.

Cleveland's most famous veto was the rejection of the 1887 Texas Seed Bill which would have aided drought-stricken farmers by appropriating \$10,000 of the treasury's money to buy grain seed. Cleveland felt the "paternalistic" bill was unconstitutional and that it weakened the "sturdiness of [our] national character." He met great criticism when he vetoed the bill, but he remained firm in his opinion that such a program was not the responsibility of the federal government.

Cleveland's vetoes and scrutinizing legal eye helped reestablish the authority of the presidency that had been lacking in previous administrations. He proved because of this to be the most effective president since Abraham Lincoln. Cleveland took his veto power seriously and used it liberally, causing a previously dominating Congress to begin tailoring bills to the president's liking. This was all part of Cleveland's campaign promise to re-establish

Grover Cleveland proved, even in his own time, a political dinosaur. The conservatism that marked his political beliefs became less and less appealing in an age of great political realignment.



lish presidential authority and equality among the branches of the federal government (something which was clearly lacking since the Johnson impeachment.)

His statements regarding the Texas Seed Bill have been used by welfare opponents throughout American history. Cleveland saw no constitutional grounds to implement the program and, despite the negative response he knew he would receive with his veto, Cleveland remained firm in his position and did not budge.

This proved Cleveland was an honest leader whose back was not bent by polls and the criticisms of the electorate. Cleveland was not a politician while *in* office like so many presidents were, instead he was a leader. He took a legal stance and did not budge. This is a quality many presidents lack and one which Cleveland used effectively to further reassert presidential authority.

On Labor, Industry, and Infrastructure

Cleveland not only refused privilege to those seeking aid, but also to big business. He ordered railroads to return unused land grants which they had been selling off for profit. Reacting to an 1886 Supreme Court case which rescinded an Illinois law regulating railroads, Cleveland pushed for the Interstate Commerce Commission to be created. The ICC was the first government effort to regulate a major industry. Cleveland also signed the Hatch Act of 1887 subsidizing agricultural experiments and elevated the Department of Agriculture to a Cabinet position.

His ordering of railroads to give back their unused land, while legal and seemingly just, had far-reaching impact as indebted railroad companies found themselves sink further and further into debt. It also may be considered one of the causes behind the depression of the 1890's which saw many railroads go bankrupt.

Cleveland's attitude toward labor was hard to pin down at first, although he spoke of industrial labor unions as a force asking for unjustified privilege. During a major railroad strike in his first term he urged Congress to consider arbitration, but his reactions to the famous Pullman strike in 1894 showed quite a different stance toward labor.

He sent troops to Chicago to put down the strike led by Eugene V. Debs on the grounds that mail was not being delivered. Violence broke out when the troops arrived on the scene to enforce an injunction to halt the strike and rioting plagued the city. Debs was imprisoned for violating the injunction and was launched into national prominence as a Socialist activist.

While many people applauded the action of Cleveland in Chicago since it re-established trade and commerce, many laborers resented the action. The violence was to be expected, but Cleveland took a stance, hoping to save American commerce. Cleveland was no fan of labor unions, which he deemed as radical, and his violent opposition to them caused a lot of hostility. Cleveland set a dangerous precedent for future presidents trapped in the position of re-establishing commerce during major transportation strikes. Nevertheless his actions effectively put the railroads back in action.

The issue of the tariff is a historical Democratic position. Cleveland's insistence to lower it throughout his presidencies met with little support. What got him elected in 1892 was more his position on currency than the tariff. His support of the tariff, despite lots of election inconsistencies and scandal, helped lose him the presidency. Harrison's reactionary McKinley tariff followed a slew of unpopular social legislation by the Congress of 1890. The extreme McKinley Tariff, in my opinion, was a disaster and this vindicated Cleveland and helped launch him back into the presidency in 1892. Cleveland's opposition to the Sherman Silver-purchase Act was the catalyst for a series of events that changed American politics and the party platforms forever. By the end of his second term Cleveland was a political dinosaur.

Cleveland as Commander in Chief

Cleveland's efforts as commander in chief were few and far between. His top priority was reform in the Navy Department. He helped build an all-steel-plated navy, the same Navy that helped America

defeat the Spanish in the war following his administrations.

His second term was full of international problems. Cleveland refused to offer annexation to the Hawaiian regime of Sanford Dole, who had captured the island from the natives in an 1893 coup. Cleveland refused imperialism every chance he could, objecting to the use of U.S. Marines to take the islands during the Harrison administration. Cleveland, in another principled stand, ordered Dole to restore Queen Liliuokalani's rule, but Dole ignored him.

In the Caribbean Cleveland staunchly defended the Monroe Doctrine, telling the British who threatened war with Venezuela in 1895 that the "United States is practically sovereign" in the Western hemisphere. Britain backed down and offered to settle the matter more peacefully in order to avoid confrontation with the U.S. and its new steel Navy. Cleveland, himself, propelled the presidency into international politics as he worked out the deal for peace. "My aim," Cleveland told a friend later, "was at one sharp stroke to compel England to yield to arbitration, and put Congress in a position where it could not interfere."

During the Cuban independence revolts in the same year Cleveland proclaimed American neutrality and tried to restrain assistance to the island from many sympathizing Americans. Later, as the American people moved more clearly in the direction of the revolutionaries, Cleveland supported Congress in ordering Spain to grant home rule to Cuba. One year after he left office, the U.S. found itself at war with the Spanish.

The Rise of the Silverites

Populist candidate James Weaver's respectable showing in 1892 may have sparked the Democrats to change their course in 1896 by backing the silverites and deposing the Cleveland faction. This shift in platform definitely reflected the people's concern about corporate influence in government.

It is more likely, however, that Cleveland's inadequate dealings with the Panic of 1893 and the depression that followed helped push the silverites and liberals in his party to the forefront.

The gold standard, it was argued by opponents, led to an inflexible currency which made credit

available limited. The push for silver, it was felt, would regenerate prices and help failing banks. Many bankers, however, were not interested in losing wealth, something that was certain to happen with silver caused inflation. Experimenting with silver, to Cleveland, was not only dangerous, but immoral. He proposed a Sound Currency policy that hindered the silverites. Throughout much of his second term, Cleveland was working more with Republicans than with his own party.

Progressivism was breathing its first breaths as Grover Cleveland found himself increasingly a political dinosaur, a Democrat from days of past. His legacy of disallowing aid to those in need, breaking unions, and supporting the likes of J.P. Morgan were becoming distasteful to voters. By the end of his term in 1896 Cleveland was a man without a party.

Summing up Cleveland

Considering the presidents he followed and the presidents that came after him, Cleveland should be credited with saving the authority of the office. Congress and machines bullied their way into the executive branch, pulling the strings of Johnson, Grant, Hayes, and Arthur. The only person pulling Cleveland's strings was himself. He was slow in making decisions, but once his mind was made up he stuck with whatever he deemed most correct despite popularity with the people or Congress. Unlike the presidents who came before him, Cleveland was a true leader, someone with firm convictions.

The presidents who came after him found a strengthened office, unbound by a supreme Congress. McKinley, Roosevelt,



Grover Cleveland at his inaugural ball in 1885.

and Wilson used the strength built by Cleveland to implement their respective policies and plans.

Cleveland should most of all be remembered for his character, his incorruptibility, and his ability to say 'no.' Vincent DeSantis wrote that Cleveland was "a largely negative president. He firmly believed it was his duty to prevent hurtful things from happening rather than to make beneficial things take place."

Grover Cleveland was the most effective president of the later part of the nineteenth century and laid the foundations for the more powerful modern presidency. While some would label him insensitive and stubborn, he should be ranked very high among presidents due to the leadership he provided to a time that lacked good leaders.