

This Day in History... July 11, 1921

William Howard Taft – Only Man to Serve as President and Chief Justice

On July 11, 1921, William Howard Taft fulfilled a lifelong dream when he was appointed chief justice of the US Supreme Court. He is the only person in American history to serve as both president of the United States and chief justice of the US Supreme Court.

Taft always dreamed of being a Supreme Court justice. He was even offered the chance several times throughout his career but refused out of a sense of duty to the various posts he was already serving. While his presidency lasted from 1909 to 1913, it was his later role as chief justice—from 1921 to 1930—that he truly cherished. In fact, Taft once said, “I don’t remember that I ever was president.”

Taft became chief justice on July 11, 1921, after being appointed by President Warren G. Harding. He was 63 years old and thrilled to return to the law, which had always been his true passion. Even before his presidency, Taft had served as a judge and had dreamed of sitting on the Supreme Court someday.

As chief justice, Taft brought important changes to the federal court system. In 1922, he visited Great Britain to study how their courts managed to drop so many cases so quickly. Using what he learned there, he proposed the Judiciary Act of 1925, one of his biggest achievements. The Judiciary Act of 1925, sometimes called the “Judges’ Bill,” gave the Supreme Court more control over which cases it heard. Before that, the court had to hear nearly every case that came to it, which created a huge backlog. Taft pushed Congress to give the court the power to choose the most important cases. This made the court more efficient and helped it focus on major legal questions.

Taft also played a big role in improving the organization and image of the federal courts. He gave the Supreme Court and chief justice supervisory power over the various federal courts, uniting America’s courts into an independent third branch of the government for the first time. Taft believed the judicial branch should be seen as strong and independent. To help with this, he lobbied for the construction of a separate building for the Supreme Court. At the time, the justices worked inside the US Capitol. Taft thought this made the court seem less powerful. Although he didn’t live to see the building completed—it opened in 1935—he was responsible for getting the project approved.

In terms of legal opinions, Taft was not considered a bold or radical thinker like some justices. He was more traditional, focusing on order, stability, and clear legal principles. He believed in following the Constitution closely and not stretching its meaning. For example, he often sided with businesses and opposed laws he felt gave too much power to labor unions or government regulators. He thought the government should not interfere too much in the economy unless necessary.

Taft also worked hard to improve how the Supreme Court operated. He introduced better procedures for managing cases, keeping records, and making decisions more orderly. His background in administration—both as president and as a former judge—made him especially good at managing the court.

Taft retired in February 1930 due to poor health and died a few weeks later, in March. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery, one of only two presidents buried there. His legacy as chief justice remains strong. Even though his presidency was often criticized, his time on the Supreme Court is remembered as successful and deeply influential. While several of his more prominent rulings have since been overturned (such as *Lum v. Rice* and *Olmstead v. United States*), others (like *Carroll v. United States* which permitted warrantless searches of automobiles) have had a lasting impact. Taft helped shape the modern Supreme Court and strengthened its role in American government.



Issued four months after Taft’s death.



Taft stamp from the Presidential Series



Coil Stamp Perforated 10 Vertically



Taft is the only former president to swear in subsequent presidents – Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover.



Taft instructed the building’s architect Cass Gilbert to design “a building of dignity and importance suitable for its use as the permanent home of the Supreme Court of the United States.”



In the West Pediment, Taft is depicted as a student representing the allegorical figure of Research Present.

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