



## 'Mr. Republican' largely ignored by today's GOP

By Dan Freedman

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As they compete to see who is most conservative of all, the GOP presidential contenders are quick to identify themselves as true disciples of [Ronald Reagan](#) and [Barry Goldwater](#).

However, with the exception of Ron Paul, they rarely (if ever) mention Sen. [Robert A. Taft](#) of Ohio, known as "Mr. Republican" during his time on Capitol Hill between 1939 and 1953, and identified by right-leaning connoisseurs as the conservative's conservative.

The list of conservative principles Taft championed reads like a playbook for the Republican candidates vying for the 2012 nomination: low taxes, limited government, balanced budgets and strident opposition to labor unions. Indeed, he lent his name to the most famous anti-union legislation in American history, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947.

"He was a huge figure, the most important conservative figure of his time, if not one of the most important of all time," said [Doug Bandow](#), senior fellow at the libertarian [Cato Institute](#).

### *Change in thinking*

But Taft is not in vogue among today's conservatives for one major reason: His isolationist foreign policy, which was mainstream Republican thinking in the first half of the 20th century but receded amid the twin threats of fascism and communism.

Texas [Congressman Paul](#) links his own non-interventionist foreign policy views to Taft's isolationist stance in opposition to U.S. entry into World War II prior to Pearl Harbor, and opposition to U.S. participation in NATO and the [U.N.](#) afterward.

"Taft, 'Mr. Republican,' said that we shouldn't be engaged in these entangling alliances; he believed what the founders taught us," Paul said after finishing third in the Iowa caucuses. "He didn't want to be in NATO. We certainly don't need NATO and the U.N. to tell us when to go to war."

### *Driven by principle*

Much like Taft, Paul has taken heat from his competition for arguing that the U.S. scale back its international commitments and not confront Iran over nuclear weapons development.

And like Paul, Taft competed for the GOP presidential nomination three times but ultimately was more concerned with principle than political expediency.

The year after World War II ended, Taft gave a speech in which he decried the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals as a violation of the constitutional ban on ex post facto prosecutions - cases based on laws legislated after crimes were committed.

Taft was roundly condemned for his unpopular position, but it ended up winning him a place in the 1956 book Profiles in Courage by the young Sen. [John F. Kennedy](#), who would be elected president five years later.

Son of President [William Howard Taft](#), who also served as chief justice, Robert Taft was steeped in traditional conservative views of limited federal powers under the Constitution.

One such stance that resonates with modern-day conservatism: opposition to President [Harry Truman](#)'s call for national health insurance.

"He was a fiscal conservative; he thought a national health program would bankrupt the United States," said [Clarence Wunderlin](#), a history professor at [Kent State University](#) and co-editor of numerous volumes of Taft's papers. "He didn't want the government intruding into medicine."

*Unpopular positions*

Taft formed alliances with Southern Democratic conservatives to overcome Truman's veto of the Taft-Hartley Act, which significantly diminished the power of labor unions. Taft-Hartley is the basis of "right to work" laws in mostly Southern states (including Texas) that prohibit requiring union membership as a condition for employment.

But Taft also took positions that would be anathema to today's GOP presidential crop. He favored federal funds for public education, "slum clearance" and public housing - a 1960s-vintage project in New York's Harlem bears his name.

And if he felt government spending was justified, he was not opposed to raising taxes. He preferred tax hikes to budget deficits, Wunderlin said.

"Yes, he believed the rich should pay more," Wunderlin said.