Russell Kirk & McClellan James. *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft. With a new introduction by Jeffrey O. Nelson*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2010. 243pp.

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Mention Robert A. Taft to a class of US history students and you will likely be met by a sea of blank stares with the occasional mumble of "Wasn't he a President?" The problem with Robert is that he was never President – and isn't even the most famous Taft in his own dynasty.

The Grandson of Attorney General and Secretary of War Alfonso Taft, and son of US President William Taft, Robert Taft was a Senator for fourteen years: according to a committee chaired by John F Kennedy in 1957, he was one of the five greatest US senators in history. Yet if he is considered by historians today, it is either as a three-times failed candidate for the Republican nomination for the Presidential contest, or as an isolationist who bitterly opposed Roosevelt and the United States' involvement in World War II.

When this book was first published on the eve of the 1968 Presidential race, some fifteen years after Taft's death, Kirk and McClellan drew a dramatically different picture of Taft: not the embittered isolationist, but a highly intelligent master of political practice who had the misfortune to serve his best years at the political coalface at a time when the fortunes of the Republican party were in the deepest of doldrums.

Reissued last year with a new introduction by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute's Jeffrey Nelson, the book is a timely reminder of one of the bastions of conservative Republicanism at a time when the GOP appears resurgent. Nelson's eleven-page introduction sets the reissue in context. Originally published to reawaken Republican thought in the wake of the Kennedy/Johnson Presidencies, Nelson notes that the text has been republished in the wake of the George W. Bush administration, stating that "the perennial principles that animated Lincoln and Taft are in need of

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…refreshed consideration" (*ix*). Nelson continues by sketching Taft's political career and focuses on the authors, particularly Russell Kirk, who was considered one of the leading thinkers of the New Conservative movement of the 1950s.

What is apparent in reading this meticulously-researched work is that Taft represents the antithesis of much of the current Republican discourse. He is presented as a man of relatively modest means who based a political career on being "the apostle of strict constitutionalism as the chief defense attorney for the conservative way of life and government" (85). Potential front-runners for the 2012 Republican nomination have yet to emerge, and the Tucson shooting of Democrat Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords may have seriously damaged the previously buoyant Tea Party Republican right wing. Nonetheless, it is likely that any serious candidate will be a Christian Conservative, and they could do worse than to follow the principles on which Taft built his career.

This is not a political biography. Little is said about Taft's life and interests outside the Senate. Instead, the authors chronicle the series of principles by which Taft operated and illustrate how he brought them to life in the Senate through his speeches and his impact on legislation he supported or, in the New Deal era, often opposed.

Each chapter dissects a particular principle – democracy, responsibility, liberty, restraint of power, organisation of labour, a humane and free economy and a foreign policy for Americans, and concludes that Taft was a rather more nuanced politician than he is generally given credit for. It is indeed quite bracing to delve into a political mind suffused with forensic intellect built on a coalition of Christianity and Constitutional conviction.

It remains interesting to bring twenty-first century eyes and prejudices to a book written over forty years ago, yet this work feels far older than its 1960s genesis. Taft comes across almost as Victorian in his principles, a man out of time with the venality of politics in the era of the Depression, World War Two and the slide into the Cold War. The authors make the case for him as a natural successor to the nation's forefathers: libertarian, but primarily constitutionalist and comfortable only in his perception of the correct balance of Executive, Legislative and Judicial powers.

The subtext to a rather overly eulogistic paean to Taft's many qualities is that for all of his superb Senatorial skills, he lacked the qualities that turn a great political player into a credible Presidential candidate. He was austere, sometimes abrasive and

often humourless. He lacked the skill to bring people with him. What also denied Taft greatness was the fact he knew just how clever he was – and rarely failed to ensure those in the room with him knew that too.

Kirk and McClellan unearth a politician who believed that the New Deal was the gateway to socialism in America and opposed strongly and effectively the extension of Federal powers under both Roosevelt and Truman, a Senator who sought to balance the relationship between organised labour and management "through a mastery of parliamentary tactics in the cloakrooms, and the art of persuasion on and off the floor" (118). What emerges too is not the isolationist of revisionist caricature, but a conviction-led non-interventionist, almost Jeffersonian in his desire to slacken the United States' ties to the corruption of the old world.

Seen best in his opposition to the politicisation of law in the Nuremberg Trials, Taft emerges as a "just man" (109) who operated at some remove even from the GOP establishment across the mid-twentieth century. His reputation rests on him being the most astute critic of the New Deal and Democratic politics – but that fame was gained in opposition. A weakness of the book is that it does not delve into why Taft failed to gain the Republican Presidential nomination on three occasions. Extrapolating from the quotes from speeches that flow liberally through the text, it may be that Taft was unable to distinguish between politics and government. Astute as he was in political behaviour, he appeared to lack the ability to rise above partisanship to the extent that, say, Eisenhower could, and nor did he have the stomach for the political fight shown by the coming man of the time, Richard Nixon. While the book highlights the bitter-sweet nature of Taft's political 'power', it is in itself most powerful as a salutary read on just how much today's US politics are dominated by short-termism rather than constitutionally-led conviction.