Stephen Grover Cleveland

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Cleveland, Stephen Grover (b. Caldwell, NJ, 18 March 1837; d. Princeton, NJ, 24 June 1908), 22nd and 24th President of the United States, was a fiscally conservative Jacksonian Democrat.

Grover Cleveland, a descendant of Connecticut Valley Puritans, was the fifth of nine children of a Presbyterian minister and his wife. The family moved to New York in 1841 and eventually to Holland Patent where the elder Cleveland died in 1853. The burly Grover abandoned plans to attend Hamilton College and spent a year at a school for the blind in New York City as his brother's teaching assistant. Intending to move west, he stopped to visit an uncle in Buffalo and stayed to help him prepare a pedigree book on his stock of Shorthorn cattle. He took a job as a law clerk and was admitted to the bar in 1859 after several years of study.

Already active in Democratic Party affairs, Cleveland won election as ward delegate and ward supervisor before being appointed assistant district attorney in 1862. It meant taking a severe pay cut and responsibility for most of the district attorney's work, but it positioned him for future races.

A strong Unionist during the war, Cleveland hired a substitute for $150 so he could continue to support his mother and sisters. Then in quick succession he suffered two electoral setbacks, including the race for district attorney, which he lost to his roommate.

Chastened by defeat, Cleveland concentrated on his legal practice and became known for his skill and boundless energy. Twice he assisted the defense of Fenian rebels who had made raids into Canada. He won a libel case after proving the accuracy of a newspaper exposé of the common practice among grain dealers of using fraudulent warehouse receipts to obtain bank loans. Yet as serious-minded as he was at work, no less was he the jovial afterhours denizen of local saloons. It was this dual character of his personality that equipped him for his successful campaign for sheriff in 1870.

Mark Twain has described Buffalo in those days as a sink of iniquity, filled with gambling houses, saloons, and brothels. Upon taking office the conscientious Cleveland was dismayed by the corruption and brutality of the overcrowded county jail. He responded with a thorough housecleaning that made him unpopular with party leaders. He chose to preside over two hangings rather than hire a substitute and suffered considerable anguish on both occasions, especially in the case of a family man he sought to get off with a plea of insanity.

Cleveland completed his term in 1873 and joined with two friends, including his old roommate, to establish a new law firm. Known for his candor, integrity, and intense convictions, he was also generous with his time and tried many cases gratis when aroused to prevent or redress an injustice. In one case, as a newly elected mayor, he overcame the governor's resistance and obtained commutation of a death sentence for one of his constituents. After a former law
partner was killed in an accident, Cleveland undertook to manage the estate on behalf of the man's widow and young daughter. He rose in prominence and helped found the City Club in 1877.

Cleveland returned to politics in 1881 after the nomination of the Republican mayoral candidate, a machine politician, led to rebellion in the ranks. Democratic leaders turned to Cleveland, whose reputation for honesty made him an ideal candidate to win crossover support. He accepted the Democratic nomination with the stipulation that an unreliable candidate for another office be dropped from the ticket. Even though at the state level the Republicans still won in Buffalo, Cleveland carried the local Democratic ticket to victory on his coattails.

What gave Cleveland his reputation as a reformer was his hostility to the prevailing cronymism. In June, he vetoed an extortionary street cleaning contract designed to enrich several aldermen. He also tackled a major public health hazard caused by raw sewage that was infiltrating the Hamburg Canal. Bypassing the city engineer, Cleveland fought to create a special commission of citizens to hire professional engineers and supervise a major long-term sewage treatment project. In each case he skillfully maneuvered a hostile majority on the city council into compliance. The project was completed after he left office at half the original projected cost.

Coupled with his repeated vetos of pork barrel appropriations and his candor in admitting mistakes, these triumphs enhanced Cleveland's reputation for bluff honesty. That summer a deadlock among the anti-Tammany factions over two gubernatorial candidates led, after some prompting by friends, to Cleveland's entry into the race. His independence from the major factions made him an attractive compromise candidate, especially when meddling by the White House split Republican ranks. Nominated on the third ballot, Cleveland stayed in the background during the campaign and won handily.

As governor, Cleveland pursued a largely negative agenda. He stunned the state assembly by vetoing a politically expedient rate reduction on New York City's elevated railroad, using his veto message to single out its defects. It was a formula he was to follow repeatedly. He opposed the demands of organized labor and believed most social legislation to be outside the proper scope of government, making an exception with reform legislation sponsored by Theodore Roosevelt, who had been investigating corruption in New York City.

Many of Cleveland's difficulties stemmed from inexperience. When the boss of Tammany Hall complained of a loss of patronage, the temperamental Cleveland refused to fill any vacancies from its ranks. The resulting feud culminated in a loss of Democratic control in the legislature. Political reality then forced him to mend fences within the party or face defeat in the next election.

Cleveland's new-found flexibility persuaded Samuel Tilden and Daniel Manning, leaders of the conservative business wing of the party, to disregard their misgivings and promote him for the presidency. His hard money philosophy and opposition to tariffs squared with their own views. His reputation as a reformer made him attractive to Republican Mugwumps.
Despite opposition from Tammany Hall he was nominated on the first ballot at the national convention.

The campaign centered on personalities rather than issues. Cleveland's frank acknowledgment that he provided financial support to a widow and her illegitimate son undoubtedly cost him votes. But offended Irish voters may have decided the outcome after a Republican clergyman castigated Democrats as the party of "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion." New York went to Cleveland and so did the presidency. It was the first of his three pluralities in the popular vote.

As president Cleveland's chief policy concerns were domestic. He brought Southerners into his cabinet, supported the civil service reforms, and signed the Dawes Severalty Act. He strengthened the presidency by reasserting its independence from Congress and taking strong legislative and administrative initiatives on several occasions. He exercised the veto power to an unprecedented degree, rejecting two-thirds of the bills that came across his desk, most of which involved Civil War pensions. In 1887 he rejected the Texas Seed Bill, declaring that "though the people support the government, the government should not support the people."

Despite his laissez-faire economic philosophy, Cleveland supported limited federal regulatory initiatives, including creation of the Interstate Commerce Commission. He fought to revise federal land laws during his first term and issued executive orders to reclaim millions of acres of public lands that had been diverted by the railroad, cattle, and timber interests for their exclusive use. By the end of his second term, the size of the National Forest Reserve had been doubled.

In 1886 Cleveland married his ward, Frances Folsom, who became a popular White House hostess. Although married life smoothed some of his rough edges, he remained a formidable though increasingly embattled figure. The intractable tariff issue was his undoing. A large surplus induced him to call for lower tariffs during his annual message but his free trade rhetoric failed to convince the electorate. Industrialists and powerful leaders in both parties voiced strong opposition. Cleveland's defeat in the 1888 election was due in part to Tammany Hall opposition and in part to his anti-tariff views.

The respite was welcome. Cleveland joined a New York law firm and often served as a consultant or referee. Although he respected his Republican successor, he was alarmed by the evident plundering of the treasury by special interests. Yet he spurned the campaign trail until a Democratic tide swept Congress during the midterm elections. A week later Cleveland publicly attacked the McKinley Tariff, then followed with a Jackson Day speech on "The Principles of True Democracy" early in 1891. In the autumn Frances gave birth to their first child, "Baby Ruth." In 1892 Cleveland overcame Populist opposition in his party to win the nomination and defeat the incumbent.

The Panic of 1893 kept Cleveland off balance virtually from the start. The most severe economic downturn of the century, it was intensified by the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the country. Business failures continued for months; many railroads passed into receivership. Overseas investors worried about free-silver agitation by Populists. Cleveland's campaign to repeal
the inflationary Silver Purchase Act alienated many Senate Democrats and outraged Populists, who sought unlimited coinage of silver.

If the measure of man is best taken in the heat of battle, the character of Cleveland’s gritty determination is most clearly revealed by an incident that was kept secret for years after his death. Early in the summer a cancerous growth was found on the roof of his mouth. Seeking to avoid a panic, the president slipped out of Washington and, while aboard a yacht on the East River, had his upper jaw surgically removed. Later fitted with an artificial jaw that left his appearance unchanged, he vacationed at Buzzards Bay while aides and his physician quashed rumors about his health. He was left thinner by the experience and never fully regained his accustomed energy.

That autumn Cleveland depleted his political credit during the silver battle and could not get a substantial tariff reduction the following year. When presented with the compromise Wilson-Gorman bill, the disappointed president let it pass without his signature. He made no protest when the Supreme Court later struck out the income-tax provision.

Cleveland continued to alienate powerful factions within the party, particularly the Populists. In 1894 he sent troops to Illinois to break the Pullman strike because it disrupted the mails. That same year armies of unemployed workers demanding public works projects tramped into Washington only to be turned away. Then, faced with a dangerous drain on the gold supply early in 1895, Cleveland accepted a loan to the treasury from a consortium of bankers led by J. P. Morgan, arousing Populist suspicions of a bank conspiracy.

In the area of foreign policy, Cleveland adhered to the Monroe Doctrine by maintaining the hegemony of the United States in the western hemisphere and avoiding entanglement in European power politics. His overall performance has been described as "an uneasy mixture of anti-imperialism, moralism, and belligerent nationalism." The moralism is most strikingly evident in his refusal to annex Hawaii after American sugar plantation owners overthrew the monarch. His handling of the boundary dispute between Venezuela and British Guiana has been dismissed by many historians as irresponsible saber-rattling, but it cleared the air and was followed by improved relations with Britain.

During his last year in office, Cleveland was rebuffed by his party during a bitter battle with Populist silverites, who seized control of the party apparatus and led the party back into another string of defeats. The annoyed president chose to sit out the election.

In 1897 Cleveland retired to Princeton, served as a trustee of the university, and sometimes clashed with its president, Woodrow Wilson. His remaining days were productive and full of honors, though saddened by Ruth's death in 1904.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

--Steven Alan Samson