As President of the United States from 1909 to 1913, William Howard Taft's minimum body mass index was 42 kg/m². This article presents evidence that he suffered from obstructive sleep apnea, manifested by excessive daytime somnolence, snoring, systemic hypertension and, perhaps, cognitive and psychosocial impairment. As president, Taft's hypersomnolence was severe and obvious, but never prompted official discussion of his fitness to govern. Within 12 months of leaving office, Taft permanently lost over 60 pounds. His somnolence resolved. As Chief Justice of the United States from 1921 to 1930, he was not somnolent. President Taft's case illuminates historical puzzles of his performance as President, raises public awareness of sleep apnea, and informs discussions of presidential disability and the 25th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

Key words: disability evaluation; hypersomnolence; obesity; obstructive sleep apnea; public policy; United States Constitution; William Howard Taft

Abbreviations: OHS = obesity hypoventilation syndrome; OSA = obstructive sleep apnea

I have lost that tendency to sleepiness which made me think of the fat boy in Pickwick. My color is very much better and my ability to work is greater.

William Howard Taft
President of the United States
June 28, 1909

William Howard Taft was President of the United States from 1909 to 1913, and Chief Justice of the United States from 1921 to 1930. Despite this unequalled record of achievement, “Taft is remembered, if at all, for being the fattest president. His obesity has become a staple of quiz shows and trivia games, a humorous sweetener that generations of historians have sprinkled through bland lectures.”

Taft’s obesity was not a humorous sprinkle. I will present evidence that Taft suffered from a serious complication of obesity, severe obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), before and throughout his Presidency. Because OSA can cause hypersomnolence, psychosocial difficulties, and neurocognitive defects, it is appropriate to ask whether Taft was disabled by his illness. I will, therefore, also describe how his inner circle and his physicians reacted to his manifestations of OSA. Taft’s relationship to Sir William Osler is particularly instructive, since Osler was one of the few physicians of the era attuned to the medical implications of sleepiness in obese patients.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
I examined multiple published works about Taft and his times, plus items from the 700,000 documents in the William Howard Taft papers held by the Library of Congress. As all Taft scholars have found, the candid, contemporaneous observations of Taft’s closest White House aide, Major Archibald Butt, proved especially valuable. I could not locate Taft’s medical records.

TAFT’S PROFESSIONAL LIFE
Taft was born in 1857. Before becoming president in 1909, he had been an attorney, a judge, Solicitor General of the United States, civil governor of the Philippine Islands and, under President Theodore
Roosevelt, Secretary of War. Taft won the 1908 Presidential election easily, but had a stormy administration and was soundly defeated for re-election in 1912. On leaving office, he became Professor of Law at Yale. In 1921, President Warren Harding fulfilled Taft's lifelong dream and appointed him to the Supreme Court as Chief Justice. Taft spent 9 happy and productive years on the bench, resigning his position just 5 weeks before dying in 1930.

**TAFT'S ADULT HEALTH INTO MIDDLE AGE:**

*1874 TO 1903*

Taft was 5 feet 11.5 inches tall, although he seemed taller in person. Figure 1 shows his adult weights.

In college, Taft's sleep tendencies were, to his occasional dismay, normal. He wrote home about sitting in church where "the Fickle Goddess sleep wouldn't come worth a cent and so I was doomed to listen to one of the dryest [sic] sermons I ever heard." Evidence of excessive somnolence appeared as early as 1900. Taft was 43 years old and living in the Philippines when a typhoon struck in the night, shaking his house, uprooting trees, and sounding like "the bombardment of heavy artillery." Taft's terrified wife awakened him only with great difficulty. He got to a chair, but was quickly asleep again, and snoring. When re-awakened, he fell asleep yet again. Years later, his wife was still upset over the episode.

Seven months earlier, Taft had weighed 275 pounds. His weight increased rapidly in the Philippines and soon exceeded 300 pounds. Four months after the typhoon, Taft wrote about the episode.

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**Figure 1. Adult weights of William Howard Taft.** Born in 1857, Taft's adult height was 71.5 inches. A body mass index of 40 kg/m² is considered severe obesity. Circles are known weights. Arrow indicates June 28, 1909, the day Taft wrote of his Pickwick-like tendency to sleep. Secondary sources report weights from 297 to 332 pounds the year preceding.
tropics: “one’s appetite is very strong at meals, and one’s desire to sleep is also great.” He spent adequate time in bed, drank little alcohol, and did not smoke.

**Taft’s Health as Secretary of War: 1904 to 1908**

After suffering a near-fatal rectal abscess, Taft returned to the United States in early 1904 to become Secretary of War. Though removed from the tropics, he was still somnolent, sometimes snoring in meetings with President Roosevelt.

Taft had insight into his problem. In October 1905, he promised his wife: “I will make a conscientious effort to lose flesh. I am convinced that this undue drowsiness is due to the accumulation of flesh . . . were I appointed to the bench I fear I could not keep awake in my present condition.” He claimed to sleep “very well” at night.

Two months later, Taft began a diet prescribed by Dr. Nathaniel E. Yorke-Davies of London, plus a program of “physical culture.” Over 5 months, Taft’s weight dropped from 320 to 255 pounds.

Taft maintained his reduced weight into September 1906, but by July 1907 he weighed 284 pounds and was becoming noncompliant with Yorke-Davies’ diet. As the 1908 Presidential election neared, Taft’s weight reached 297 pounds. During the campaign, he fell asleep on speaking platforms, while driving on the street, and while dining out.

**Taft’s Health as President: 1909 to 1913**

Taft was 51 years old and weighed between 300 and 332 pounds on his inauguration day. Despite his continuing physical culture program, Taft weighed > 300 pounds his entire presidency. Pressured to diet by his wife and doctor, he freely indulged his appetite during his frequent travels outside the White House.

As President, Taft could fall asleep anywhere, anytime (Fig 2). He fell asleep during conversations with the Speaker of the House, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and the wife of the French ambassador. He napped before and after a mid-morning meeting with the President of Mexico. Senator James Watson observed: “Most of the time [Taft] simply did not and could not function in alert fashion . . . Often when I was talking to him after a meal his head would fall over on his breast and he would go sound asleep for ten or fifteen minutes. He would waken and resume the conversation, only to repeat the performance in the course of half an hour or so.”

The White House butler would leave the last few courses of dinner in front of the sleeping Taft rather than awaken him. The doorman, who was the last servant to leave, would eventually collect the dishes.

Taft frequently fell asleep “in the middle of the day’s business—at his desk, at a public affair, or while signing commissions.” Publicly, he slept at the opera, at funerals, and, “invariably,” in church. He fell asleep while playing cards and while sitting upright in his car, even an open car on Fifth Avenue in New York City. On a cross-country drive “his great bulk would lunge from side to side as the car turned or jolted over street-car tracks and crossings, yet he would never wake.” He could sleep while standing.

Two photographs of Taft at a Naval review in November 1911 show him standing with face relaxed and eyes apparently closed (Fig 3).

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Figure 2. Undated photograph of Taft. The distinct floor shadows suggest it is daytime. Reprinted with permission from Pringle.
Taft’s somnolence was more trying to his guests and intimates than to himself. When his wife scolded him over his “bad habit,” Taft would only reply “Now, Nellie, you know it is just my way.” Possibly for this reason, Nellie called him “sleeping beauty.” She also prodded him awake when necessary and covered for him in conversations. The ever-present Archie Butt would stay near Taft in public, inconspicuously awakening him with a hard nudge, by dropping an object, or with his “old trick,” a coughing spell. Butt took this seriously, feeling it as much his duty “to protect him from such situations as to guard his person from anarchists.”

Early in his term, Taft’s somnolence improved as noted in the introductory quotation. Taft ascribed the improvement to his exercise program, which made him “harder” without weight loss. Within months, however, the somnolence returned. To stay awake, Taft would “balance his eyeglasses on his finger end; when sleep overtook him, the finger became limp, the glasses would topple and wake him up.”

Taft continued to snore as President. Butt describes an evening in which the President “wanted some music from the Victor [but] greatly marred its effect by snoring noisily through it.” On at least one public occasion, Butt had concerns that the sleeping Taft “would fall into heavy snores.” Because partial sleep deprivation worsens snoring, it is noteworthy that Taft would sleep in a separate room from his wife when “particularly tired.”

Taft could work for long stretches, but generally “spent but a few hours a day” in his office. He awakened at 7 AM and covered for him in conversations. The ever-present Archie Butt would stay near Taft in public, inconspicuously awakening him with a hard nudge, by dropping an object, or with his “old trick,” a coughing spell. Butt took this seriously, feeling it as much his duty “to protect him from such situations as to guard his person from anarchists.”

Taft’s obesity produced other complications. In October 1910, he developed gout at the summer White House in Massachusetts. A Boston physician, Dr. James Marsh Jackson, evaluated Taft and found the President’s systolic blood pressure was 210 mm Hg. Butt spoke with Jackson:

I told [Jackson] how the President had a way of dropping to sleep as he was writing or playing cards, and he shook his head in such a way as to cause chills to run up and down my spinal column. . . . I then urged on [Jackson] the utmost secrecy in turn in regard to this matter, and I tried to bring to his mind the result of the condition of the country should such a state of affairs become known—to say nothing of the fatal results to the President’s political

![Figure 3. Taft asleep on his feet? The relaxation of Taft’s facial muscles is apparent when compared to those of the other men in the picture. A second photograph taken at the same event also shows Taft standing with his eyes apparently closed. At far right is Secretary of the Navy George Meyer, and to his right, Major Archibald Butt. Reprinted with permission from Howe.](http://journal.publications.chestnet.org/pdfaccess.ashx?url=/data/journals/chest/21998/)
future if any hint of invalidism should even be whispered. He said he would not mention it to anyone.\(^6\) In January 1912, the writer Henry Adams had a chance street encounter with the President and wrote the following:

[Taft] gave me a shock. He looks bigger and more tumble-to-pieces than ever, and his manner has become more slovenly than his figure; but what struck me most was the deterioration of his mind and expression. [He] is ripe for a stroke. He shows mental enfeeblement all over, and I wanted to offer him a bet that he wouldn’t get through his term.\(^5\)

Rumors about the President’s health began circulating\(^6\) But knew Taft needed help, but was powerless:

He looks terribly. His flesh looks like wax, and his lips are thin, and he is getting those unhealthy bags under his eyes. I begged him to see a specialist, for I felt sure that all his drowsiness was due to some toxin in his system . . . His response was a slap on the back, followed by: “Archie, you go to hell! I will not be hauled around by specialists! [Secretary of the Navy] Meyer has been talking to you, I know.”\(^6\)

Butt’s chronicles end in April 1912, with his death aboard SS Titanic.

**Taft’s Health after the Presidency: 1913 to 1930**

In March 1913, Taft, then 55 years old, left the White House at his peak lifetime weight: 335 to 340 pounds.\(^5\) He later recalled: “I was nervous and fretful, and for a month I found it hard to sleep.”\(^19\) He then began a weight loss program directed by Dr. George Blumer, Dean of the Yale Medical School. A year later, Taft weighed 264 pounds.\(^5\) He retained that weight, approximately, until the end of his life. Taft’s hypersomnolence resolved. As President, he had been a “poor reader [who] soon gets tired and goes to sleep.”\(^6\) As a Yale professor, however, Taft prepared his many addresses and articles himself, without a research assistant.\(^7\) He stayed awake in church.\(^7\) As Chief Justice (from 1921 to 1930), “some of his colleagues often dozed in court, [but] Taft was now always alert to everything going on.”\(^39\)

His systolic blood pressure improved by 40 to 50 mm Hg.\(^5,54\) but he experienced intermittent atrial fibrillation, treated with digitalis.\(^55–58\) Gout continued to trouble him; more than 30 uric acid calculi were removed from his bladder in 1922.\(^11\) As early as 1925, Taft noticed that he was mentally declining.\(^11\)\(^107\) By 1928, he considered himself an invalid.\(^11\)\(^107\)

Taft’s final illness began with bladder problems in January 1930. A medical bulletin was issued when he resigned from the Supreme Court on February 3, 1930: “For some years Chief Justice Taft has had a very high blood pressure, associated with general arteriosclerosis and myocarditis. Together with these conditions he had a chronic cystitis. He has no fever and suffers no pain. His present serious condition is the result of general arteriosclerotic changes.”\(^79\) There are indications, however, he had cancer.\(^17\) Taft died on March 8, aged 72 years.\(^11\)\(^107,108\)

**Did Taft Have Sleep Apnea?**

Taft had three major risk factors for OSA: he was male, severely obese, and had a “short . . . generous” neck.\(^39\) His size-54 pajamas had a neck size of 19 inches.\(^6\) His body habitus exhibited central obesity (Fig 4).

Taft had two signs of OSA: excessive daytime somnolence and snoring. He may also have been polycythemic: his face was described as “ruddy” and “florid.”\(^6\) Systemic hypertension is a known complication of OSA,\(^6\) albeit common in the
general population. Most importantly, Taft’s somnolence correlated with his weight. Taft’s remarkable weight loss after the presidency produced an equally remarkable improvement in his somnolence, blood pressure and, likely, survival.

In October 1910, President Taft was 53 years old, weighed 330 pounds, and snored. With these data, the model of Viner et al predicts a 97% chance that Taft had sleep apnea, defined as an apnea-hypopnea index > 10/h.

The nature of Taft’s sleeping difficulty in 1913 is unclear. Although OSA may masquerade as insomnia, heart failure is another possibility, given Taft’s “weak heart” and “panting for breath at every step.” Sleep disturbances such as orthopnea, paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnea, Cheyne-Stokes respiration, and central sleep apnea are associated with heart failure. Any combination of hypertension, obesity, and OSA could have caused heart failure. The reasons for his transiently decreased somnolence in June 1909 are unclear; there are reports of exercise without weight loss improving sleep apnea.

Taft lacked the cardinal manifestations of two other syndromes causing excessive daytime somnolence: periodic leg movements of sleep and narcolepsy. A third cause, the obesity hypoventilation syndrome (OHS), cannot be excluded without blood gas measurements. Most patients with OHS have sleep apneas, but the defining feature is hypoventilation while awake and asleep. Taft lacked other signs of OHS, such as cyanosis and pedal edema.

OHS has been known as the “Pickwickian syndrome” since 1956. Before (and after) the nosologic separation of OSA from OHS in 1965, it was common to call any sleepy obese patient “Pickwickian.” Biographers have entertained whether Taft had Pickwickian syndrome, but more strongly hold that a psychological need to escape the demands of the presidency. When Taft slept through music that would “wake anyone but a dead man,” his Attorney General joked: “He must be dead.” Watson explicitly links Taft’s sleepiness and lack of executive ability with overeating, and seems to suggest a related memory dysfunction.

Yet, Taft’s biographers do not record accusations of disability from either politicians or the public. Instead, amusement was a common reaction to Taft’s sleeping spells, even from persons familiar with the demands of the presidency. When Taft slept through music that would “wake anyone but a dead man,” his Attorney General joked: “He must be dead.” Watson himself told a just-awakened Taft: “Mr. President, you are the largest audience that I ever put entirely to sleep in all my political experience.”

In earlier years, even Theodore Roosevelt, seeing his hand-picked successor asleep and snoring, “would only beam the more, like a mother pleased to see a child at peace.” A present-day politician describes Taft’s “public naps [as] the stuff of legend,” without questioning his fitness for office. Despite Archie Butt’s efforts, the public knew of Taft’s hyper-somnolence, as intimated by doggerel in Life magazine encouraging Roosevelt to re-enter politics.

Teddy, come home and blow your horn, The sheep’s in the meadow, the cow’s in the corn. The boy you left to tend the sheep Is under the haystack fast asleep.

Butt initially believed Taft’s sleeping ability was an asset, enabling the President to “catch these little cat naps on trains and between interviews.” He continued to believe this, even after speaking with Dr. Jackson. Finally, 3 years into the administration, Butt realized Taft’s sleepiness was pathologic and vainly begged him to see a specialist. Butt, and signing documents, he would be classified as having severe OSA syndrome.

**Was Taft Disabled?**

Disability is traditionally judged according to the requirements of an occupation. Taft recognized that judges should not be somnolent or sleep on the bench, but as President dismissed his own hypersomnolence as “just my way.”

No formal definition of Presidential disability existed during Taft’s era. Only in 1967 did the 25th Amendment to the US Constitution define a disabled president as one “unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office.” The Amendment charges the Vice President and Cabinet to judge disability. Thus, in applying the modern standard to Taft, the reactions of persons around him must be examined.

Among Taft’s inner circle, Archie Butt and Senator Watson expressed concern over Taft’s sleepiness, as perhaps did Secretary of the Navy George Meyer. Watson explicitly links Taft’s sleepiness, and lack of executive ability with overeating, and seems to suggest a related memory dysfunction.

Yet, Taft’s biographers do not record accusations of disability from either politicians or the public. Instead, amusement was a common reaction to Taft’s sleeping spells, even from persons familiar with the demands of the presidency. When Taft slept through music that would “wake anyone but a dead man,” his Attorney General joked: “He must be dead.” Watson explicitly links Taft’s sleepiness and lack of executive ability with overeating, and seems to suggest a related memory dysfunction.

Thus, I conclude that OSA is the most probable explanation for Taft’s hypersomnolence. Except for periods associated with successful dieting (1906 to mid-1908, and perhaps briefly in 1909), he was likely afflicted from approximately 1900, when he started gaining weight in the Philippines, into 1913, when he started his post-presidency weight loss. He appears to have become symptomatic at approximately 300 lb. Based on Taft’s history of falling asleep during tasks requiring active attention, such as card playing...
however, never expressed [written] concerns that somnolence undermined the President’s effectiveness. 
Thus, despite Taft’s extraordinary hypersomnolence, there is no evidence that anyone in his inner circle, or in politics, questioned his ability to discharge presidential powers and duties. By modern Constitutional standards, Taft was, therefore, not disabled.

**Medical Science, Taft, and the Physicians**

Sleep apnea was not a recognized clinical entity in Taft’s era. Although case reports of sleepy obese patients existed,75,76 the significance of hypersomnolence was generally unknown. However, William Osler, the leading physician in the English-speaking world in the early 20th century, was an exception. Osler knew the case reports, and his textbook77 popularized Dr. Christopher Heath’s observation78 that patients in these reports resembled a severely obese, hypersomnolent boy named Joe in Charles Dickens’ 1836 novel *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. By 1905, Osler had seen a case himself,77 and earlier had described obstructive apneas in sleeping children,79 including their behavioral sequelae.80

Osler and Taft maintained a warm, but mostly long-distance friendship from 190281 until Osler’s death in 1919.82 Osler had multiple opportunities to observe Taft from 1904 to 1905 (Fig 5),83,84 years when Taft would have been somnolent as Secretary of War. Although Osler gave medical advice regarding Taft’s daughter,17(p160),85 their correspondence does not mention Taft’s health or sleepiness. Osler resided in England during Taft’s presidency; thus, one of the few physicians able to appreciate the President’s symptoms did not have access to the President.

Taft had a doctor-patient relationship with some 30 physicians during his life, including White House physicians Matthew DeLaney86,87 and Cary Grayson.86(p445,449) Whether they learned of the Butt-Jackson conversation is unknown. Dozens more physicians were socially acquainted with Taft, including W. W. Keen,88 who had operated on President Grover Cleveland’s maxillary cancer in 1893; Harvey Cushing89; and S. Weir Mitchell,90 the dean of American medicine, who himself had a long interest in sleep medicine.76

Apart from James Marsh Jackson, no physician mentioned Taft’s somnolence, although most of Taft’s health-related correspondence occurred during his nonsomnolent post-presidential years. Nevertheless, it appears that physicians close to Taft did not regard him as disabled.

**Was Taft Impaired?**

If not disabling, to what extent did sleep apnea impair Taft’s performance as president? Sleep apnea is associated with several cognitive impairments, including difficulties in attention and psychomotor function, memory and learning, and executive and frontal lobe function.91 In severe sleep apnea, these decrements “appear substantial and of a size that might be expected to produce deleterious consequences for everyday function.”91 Moderate sleep apnea impairs 50% of the psychomotor decrement associated with hypnosedative use.92

Historians note a perplexing contrast between Taft’s presidential buffetings and his exceptional government service before and after the presidency.39(p14) Taft’s “clear, strong mind” in college83 and the Philippines,94 and his “exceptional intellectual productivity” after the Presidency,53 contrast with presidential characterizations of “thinking with only half of his normal clarity”11(p812,822) and of “mental enfeeblement.”50

Beyond intellect, politics requires an exacting assembly of careful speech, thinking on one’s feet, memory, and understanding of human nature. Spe-
cific defects of verbal fluency,95 mental flexibility,96 and working memory97 may occur in sleep apnea.

The politics of the presidency left Taft “haflled,” “foggy,” and “bewildered.”10(p232);11(p856);98 Even his brother called him a “very poor politician.”15 With a “naive inability to judge the sound of words in private conversation, as well as in public utterances,”10(p230) President Taft made politically self-damaging remarks so often41 that he was called “Mr. Malaprop” and “Taft the Blunderer.”10(p213–227,232) By contrast, Taft “demonstrated no little artistry” subduing a political foe in the Philippines.94 In college, Taft had “a decided aptitude for undergraduate politics”41, and “what is more remarkable, Taft out of office was a man of good political judgment.”10(p234) One senator wrote of the ex-President, “If Mr. Taft could have done as well when in office as he talks while out of office he would never have been defeated for re-election.”99

These striking contrasts suggest OSA interfered with Taft’s conduct of the presidency. Assessing the precise effect will require a more detailed medico-historical analysis, however, because Taft disliked interpersonal conflict and the contentious politics of the Presidency tormented him. Nevertheless, given Taft’s profound hypersomnolence, it seems doubtful he fully commanded as president the extraordinary executive skills he demonstrated as chief executive of the Philippines and of the Supreme Court.

TAFT’S PLACE IN HISTORY

Because of his severe OSA, Taft likely experienced unrelenting mental and physical fatigue each day of his presidency. Fortunately for the nation, these burdens did not unbalance him. He adhered to his bedrock principle of reverence for the law93 and made significant accomplishments during his administration. Unfortunately for Taft, however, his unrecognized sleep apnea probably impaired mental faculties critical for political success and contributed to his political reputation as an inept bungler.

When Taft died in 1930, there was an enormous outpouring of grief and tribute. The public had long forgotten his presidential bumbling, replacing them with admiration and fondness for a man who gave 35 unservingly honest years to public service. Now, an additional facet of William Howard Taft emerges: his perseverance and ultimate triumph against appetite, obesity, and sleep apnea.

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