



Grover Cleveland: The Veto President

The courage to say “no” under pressure is a hallmark of sturdy character. For a U.S. president, one test of this courage is the willingness to veto bad bills—bills that spend too much money or that contradict Article I, Section 8, of the Constitution. In that test of character, perhaps no president passed more convincingly than Grover Cleveland (1837–1908), America’s 22nd president.

During Cleveland’s first term (1885–1889), he vetoed 414 bills, more than twice the total vetoed by all previous presidents. The reason for the onslaught of vetoes was that Congress, in the 1880s and 1890s, decided to give taxpayer dollars to various special interests in return for votes. Cleveland drew a line in the sand and said “no” to subsidy grabs.

In his most famous veto he quashed a \$10,000 subsidy for drought-stricken farmers in Texas by pointing out that the Founders wanted private citizens, not government, to aid their fellow men and women in distress. “Though the people support the government,” Cleveland said, “the government should not support the people.” (See Robert Higgs, “Why Grover Cleveland Vetoed the Texas Seed Bill,” *Ideas on Liberty*, July 2003, www.fee.org/vnews.php?nid=5463.)

Over half of Cleveland’s vetoes involved pensions to Civil War veterans. Congress-

men, especially Republicans, were increasingly trying to funnel taxpayer dollars to unqualified veterans in hopes of capturing “the soldier vote.” During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln and others created the Pensions Bureau, which set up strict rules of eligibility for two groups only: disabled soldiers and the widows and dependents of soldiers killed in the war.

Some of Cleveland’s fellow Democrats complained that these rules siphoned government funds from the defeated, and largely Democratic, South to the more Republican North, where most of the veterans lived. But Cleveland argued that the Union won the war and that the disabled Union veterans and the widows of war should be compensated for their sacrifice to the Union. What Cleveland opposed were Republican efforts to expand pension payments to unworthy applicants.

The Pensions Bureau, with advice from local physicians, passed judgment on who qualified for pensions. The problem was that some claimants who failed to persuade the Pensions Bureau turned around and asked their congressmen to include them for full pensions in special appropriation bills. The presidents before Cleveland, fearing the vote of the veterans’ lobby, signed all these bills. But Cleveland refused to do so. He reviewed all pension bills, signing some and rejecting others.

For Cleveland, maintaining the integrity of the pension system was a matter of principle and sound government. He refused to allow unworthy or phony claimants to

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extract pensions from hard-pressed taxpayers. One man claimed a pension for an injury incurred on horseback *before* he enlisted in the army; a widow, whose husband fell from a ladder in 1881, claimed a war wound was the real cause of his accident; another veteran wanted a pension for a disease of the eyes, which he insisted was caused by army diarrhea; even deserters tried to capture pensions for their brief stints in the army. Remarkably, Congress supported these claims one after another. Cleveland, however, did not. He piled veto upon veto. He called the pension list a “roll of honor” and wanted to keep it legitimate.

Cleveland’s biggest challenge came not from deceitful claimants, but from determined politicians. Senator Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire introduced a bill to give pensions to every veteran disabled for any reason during or after the war. Even old age would qualify as a disability, and local physicians and towns would have financial incentives to certify the hundreds of thousands of veterans certain to apply if the Blair bill became law.

Republicans in the House and Senate almost unanimously supported the Blair bill, but Cleveland shuddered at the thought of doubling the pension rolls with the blitz of applications from allegedly disabled veterans. Others agreed with the President. The *Chicago Tribune* concluded that the Blair bill would “put a serpent of temptation at the ear of every veteran” to feign injuries. General Edward Bragg of Wisconsin denounced the Blair bill as an effort “to pension the rubbish of the United States, and to revive the business of claim agent in Washington.”

Raid Postponed

When Cleveland eagerly vetoed the Blair bill, he did not end, but only postponed, the raid on the U.S. Treasury. In 1888 Republican Benjamin Harrison took the White House from Cleveland and opened its doors to the veterans’ lobby. Historian John Garraty of Columbia University observed that in doing so Harrison “saw no harm in dispens-

ing federal pensions lavishly to undeserving veterans.” The Blair bill again passed Congress, and this time the new President signed it and welcomed the votes he thought he would gain.

Sure enough, during Harrison’s term the number of pensioners roughly doubled to almost one million—a fourfold increase in 20 years, or about three pensions per Union casualty almost 30 years after the war had ended. Pension payments approached \$150 million and easily became the largest item in the federal budget. Harrison also tried to satisfy the silver industry by signing the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, which required the government to buy 4.5 million ounces of silver per month.

Cleveland’s response was to challenge Harrison to a rematch in 1892, and he vigorously attacked the “Billion Dollar Congress” that spread federal largess so freely. American voters could choose between two presidents: One held the record for saying “no” and the other broke the record for saying “yes” to so many interest groups. Cleveland won—becoming the only president to win two nonconsecutive terms.

Cleveland’s second term began with a depression, the Panic of 1893. He argued that it was caused by unsound government spending. He immediately got the Sherman Silver Purchase Act repealed and stopped other groups from raiding the federal treasury: No more free seeds for farmers; no more salaried “rainmaker” in the Agricultural Department; no more high tariffs for many northern manufacturers.

Included in Cleveland’s fiscal vigilance was another slew of pension vetoes. Cleveland was astonished that with each passing year the pension list grew rather than shrank. “I am unable to understand,” Cleveland announced early in his second term, “why frauds in the pension rolls should not be exposed and corrected with thoroughness and vigor. . . . Thousands of neighborhoods have their well-known fraudulent pensioners.”

A man of character to the end, Cleveland spent his last days in office in March 1897 vetoing more specious pension claims. He was America’s last *laissez-faire* president. □