

**IDEAS  
ON LIBERTY**

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## Why Grover Cleveland Vetoed the Texas Seed Bill



**G**rover Cleveland was the last U.S. president with a valid claim to be known as a classical liberal. (By the time “Silent Cal” Coolidge became president, the big-government horse was already out of the barn, and Ronald Reagan as president was as much the big-government problem as he was the solution.)

A lawyer who lacked a philosophical temperament or education, Cleveland derived his devotion to limited government from his reverence for the U.S. Constitution. An honest man—an *extraordinarily* honest man for a politician—he took seriously his oath to “preserve, protect, and defend” that document.

Although nineteenth-century government now appears remarkably constricted, politicians in those days were no less predatory and corrupt than our own. Our forebears, however, kept the government within tighter bounds because so many of them harbored ideological hostility to big government, and therefore they often refused to tolerate out-of-bounds government programs, regardless of the proffered rationale. Many things were still viewed as “not the proper business of government,” an attitude that allowed at least some politicians to survive while resisting raids on the public’s purse and incursions on the people’s liberties. Cleveland was one such political survivor.

As a government officer, Cleveland demonstrated that much good could be done

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*Robert Higgs (rhiggs@independent.org) is senior fellow at the Independent Institute (www.independent.org), editor of The Independent Review, and author of Crisis and Leviathan.*

simply by resisting legislative mischief. As the mayor of Buffalo, New York, for the single year 1882, he became known as the “veto mayor” by virtue of withholding his stamp of approval from the skullduggery of corrupt aldermen. Then, after taking office as New York’s governor in January 1883, he gained a reputation as the “veto governor.”<sup>1</sup> During his two terms as president (1885–89 and 1893–97), he vetoed more congressional bills than any other president except Franklin D. Roosevelt (who held office more than twelve years, as against Cleveland’s eight), and only seven of his 584 vetoes were overridden by Congress.<sup>2</sup>

Cleveland believed in keeping government expenditure at the minimum required to carry out essential constitutional functions. “When a man in office lays out a dollar in extravagance,” declared Cleveland, “he acts immorally by the people.”<sup>3</sup> He fought to lower tariffs, which the Republicans had hoisted to punishing levels, and to hold back the flood of phony pensions that congressmen were awarding in order to buy votes and to placate the Grand Army of the Republic, the most powerful political pressure group of the late nineteenth century.

It should have surprised no one, therefore, when Cleveland vetoed the Texas Seed Bill early in 1887. This legislation appropriated \$10,000—a trifling sum even in those days—to allow the Commissioner of Agriculture to purchase seed grain for distribution to farmers in certain counties of Texas that had suffered from drought.<sup>4</sup> The president’s veto message read in part as follows:

I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution; and I do not believe that the power and duty of the General Government ought to be extended to the relief of individual suffering which is in no manner properly related to the public service or benefit. A prevalent tendency to disregard the limited mission of this power and duty should, I think, be steadily resisted, to the end that the lesson should be constantly enforced that, though the people support the Government, the Government should not support the people.<sup>5</sup>

Cleveland went on to point out that “the friendliness and charity of our countrymen can always be relied on to relieve their fellow citizens in misfortune,” and indeed that “individual aid has to some extent already been extended to the sufferers mentioned in this bill.” Further, he suggested that if members of Congress really wanted to send seed to the suffering Texans, the congressmen might personally carry out this charitable transfer by using the seed routinely provided to all members for distribution to their constituents (at an expense of \$100,000 in that fiscal year).<sup>6</sup>

## Unpopular Man

Cleveland’s second term as president came to a sad end, as even his own party turned against him for the most part. After striving courageously for four years to preserve free markets, limited government, and a sound currency against those who urged resort to statist nostrums during the country’s worst economic slump, Cleveland left office an extremely unpopular man.<sup>7</sup> Although his reputation recovered later, especially after his death (in 1908), he has never been regarded as one of the country’s “great presidents.”

In recent years, historians have tended to pooh-pooh Cleveland as a reactionary who accomplished nothing of much significance (unlike, say, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom most historians idolize), and some have gone so far as to condemn Cleveland and his supporters as “Bourbon Democrats” in cahoots with greedy businessmen and bankers.

A more just verdict was reached, however, by historian Richard Welch, who wrote of the Cleveland Democrats: “They were convinced of the superiority of free enterprise to any other economic system; they defined ‘reform’ in terms of improvements in public morality and administrative efficiency; they advocated ‘sound money’ and the preservation of the gold standard—but these convictions were shared by a majority of middle-class Americans. It is false to the historical context of Gilded Age America to see such concerns as indicative of collusion with big business.”<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the highest praise came from H. L. Mencken, who wrote of Cleveland: “It is not likely that we shall see his like again, at least in the present age. The Presidency is now closed to the kind of character that he had so abundantly.”<sup>9</sup> □

1. Matthew Hoffman, “Odyssey of a Statesman,” *The Free Market*, January 1991, p. 6.

2. For figures on presidential vetoes, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 1082; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), p. 246.

3. Quoted in Hoffman, p. 6.

4. Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1932), p. 331.

5. *Congressional Record*, 49 Cong., 2d Sess., vol. XVIII, Pt. II, 1887, p. 1875.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 77–105.

8. Richard E. Welch, Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1988), p. 220.

9. H. L. Mencken, “A Good Man in a Bad Trade” [1933], in H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Vintage, 1982), p. 229.