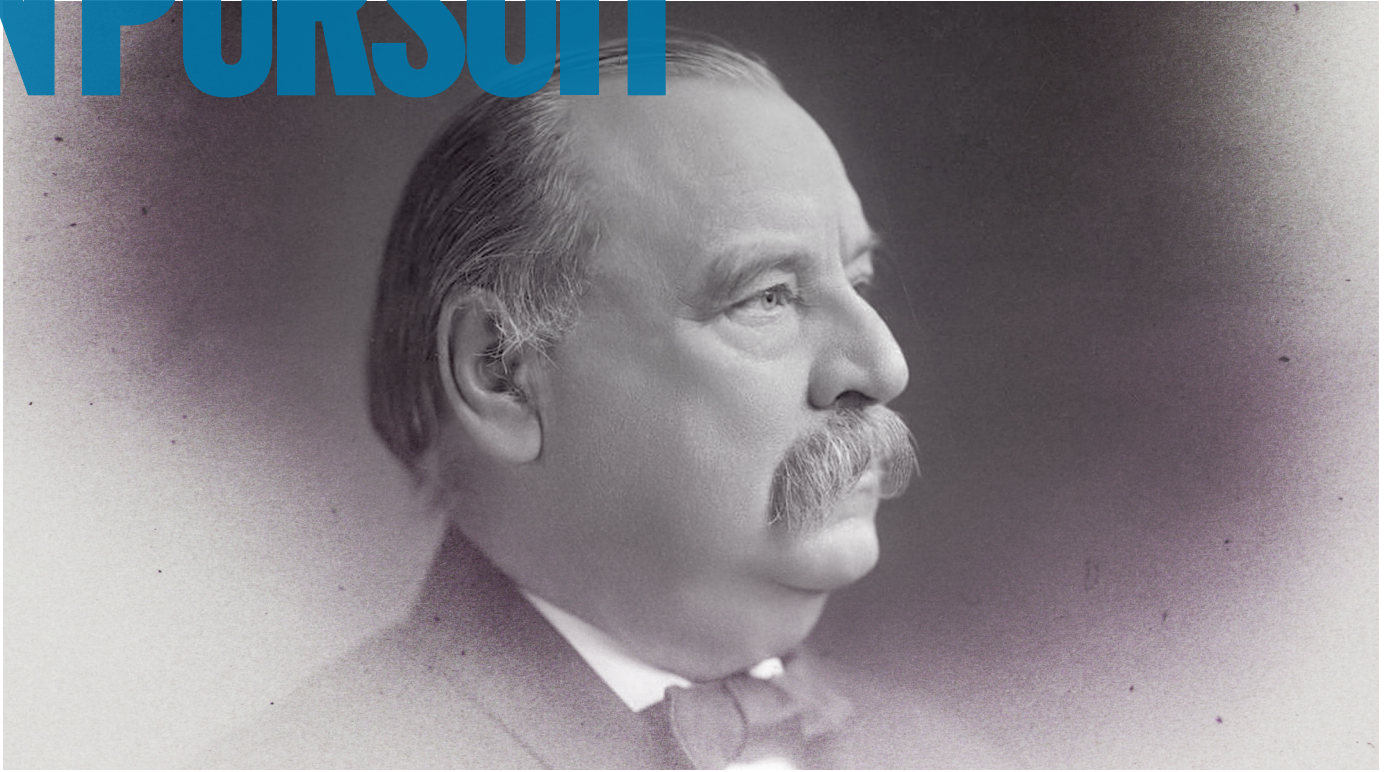




LESSON #30 • FROM GROVER CLEVELAND

MORAL CLARITY INSPIRES BOTH TRUST AND OPPOSITION



by Troy Senik

In 1881, the year of his 44th birthday, Grover Cleveland was a relatively obscure figure. A bachelor lawyer known for putting in 18-hour work days, Cleveland's reputation for tirelessness and honesty earned him respect at the bar in Buffalo — but not much in the way of notoriety. He was a public figure only to the extent that anyone remembered his brief tenure as sheriff of Erie County, New York, a decade prior. It was not obvious to anyone, least of all Cleveland himself, that this was a man only three years away from being elected President of the United States.

Yet between 1881 and 1884, Cleveland experienced one of the most vertiginous ascents in the history of American politics. In short order, he was elected to the mayor's office in Buffalo, the governor's mansion in New York, and finally the White House. If anything, this chronology understates the improbability of Cleveland's elevation to the presidency. His victory in 1884 — and subsequent return to office for a non-consecutive term in 1892 — marked the only presidential elections the Democratic Party won in the 56-year window between James Buchanan in 1856 and Woodrow Wilson in 1912.

How did such an unlikely figure become President of the United States? Distilled down to a single word: integrity. Cleveland's example underscores that character has a power all its own. And his political fortunes

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— both his own rapid rise and his party’s historic electoral defeats — stand as a reminder that moral clarity inspires trust and opposition in equal measure.

Cleveland’s career took place in a post-Civil War era that represented perhaps the high-water mark of public corruption in American history — a period where cynics grimly joked that an honest politician was one who, once bought, stayed bought. His ascent to higher office owed largely to the fact that he was regarded as the antidote to that sickness.

As a candidate for mayor of Buffalo, Cleveland stressed that his loyalty was to the voters rather than to party, noting that “A Democratic thief is as bad as a Republican thief.” He would deliver on that commitment in office. After vetoing a bloated street-cleaning contract larded with kickbacks, the mayor told its intended beneficiary — a man who was both his close friend and former client — “While I was your attorney, I was loyal to your interests. Now the people are my clients and I must be loyal to them.” At every turn throughout his career, this pattern would repeat: Grover Cleveland defined his role as protecting the citizenry at large from self-serving interest groups, even when those groups were populated by his allies.

It was this kind of behavior that led Cleveland to earn the nickname “Grover the Good” — an almost unthinkable sobriquet for a politician — and collect endorsements like the one the New York World provided for his 1884 presidential campaign, which pronounced that “There are at least four good reasons to vote for

Grover Cleveland. 1. He is an honest man. 2. He is an honest man. 3. He is an honest man. 4. He is an honest man.” Paradoxically, this point was only reinforced by an election-year scandal in which he was accused of fathering a child out of wedlock. Asked by associates how to respond, Cleveland gave the order “Whatever you do, tell the truth.”

Throughout Cleveland’s two terms in the White House, he was guided by the mantra “A public office is a public trust.” What that meant in practice was that the president put pursuing the national interest — and protecting taxpayers — ahead of his own political fortunes. Dedicated to eliminating wasteful spending, for example, Cleveland vetoed 414 bills in his first term alone — more than all 21 of his White House predecessors combined.

Those vetoes came at a cost. Many of them were rejections of fraudulent pension applications for Civil War veterans. While Cleveland thought it a matter of civic



Another voice for Cleveland | Frank Beard, 1884

hygiene that charlatans should not appear on the pension rolls alongside genuine military heroes, the rejections nevertheless occasioned a backlash from veterans' groups, which played a role in Cleveland's failure to win his first attempt at reelection in 1888. The vanquished candidate did not regard the matter as a political mistake, however, just as the cost of standing on principle.

Throughout his two terms in Washington, Cleveland remained similarly immovable on several fronts, often to his political detriment. Seeking to arrest the abuse of Native Americans, his administration clawed back 80 million acres of Western land that had been wrongly distributed to railroads or awarded via fraudulent homestead claims. He irritated his fellow Democrats when he rebuffed efforts to inflate the currency during the Panic of 1893, an economic downturn so severe that it was known at the time as "The Great Depression." He provoked their ire again when he deployed federal troops to Chicago in 1894 to put down the Pullman Strike, which threatened to paralyze commerce throughout broad swathes of the country. And he defied growing imperialist sentiment by refusing to sign on to an annexation of Hawaii — where the government had been overthrown in a coup abetted by the American ambassador — writing "I mistake the American people if they favor the odious doctrine that there is no such thing as international morality; that there is one law for a strong nation and another for a weak one..."

In many ways, Grover Cleveland fit the abstract ideal that most Americans profess to have for our presidents: self-made, scrupulously honest, and dedicated to the public good rather than to the politically expedient. Yet while his career can be interpreted as a rebuke to political cynicism, an equally plausible reading would emphasize that standing on principle came at a high cost. Whatever its other merits, Cleveland's disregard for the give-and-take of politics proved disastrous for his party. In the 1894 midterm elections, Democrats suffered the biggest loss in the House of Representatives in American history. By the time of the 1896 Democratic Convention, Cleveland had become a punching bag within his own party. And after his departure, Democrats would not reclaim the White House for another 16 years.

But while those political losses have to be weighed in the balance, so too do the judgments of Cleveland's contemporaries. Even the most notoriously jaded figures of the era found his moral seriousness irresistible. H.L. Mencken described him as possessed of a more admirable character than any president "at least since Washington." Mark Twain characterized him as "the greatest and purest American citizen." Even Woodrow Wilson, a man who would later steer the Democratic Party in a decidedly different direction than Cleveland, conceded that he had been "the sort of president the makers of the Constitution had vaguely in mind: more man than partisan..."



Grover Cleveland | National Portrait Gallery

And though Cleveland's legacy would eventually fade — a victim, in part, of how antiquated the issues of his era would come to seem — the generations that retained a memory of his tenure kept revising their judgment upward. In the 1920s, Cleveland was considered such a significant figure that the Treasury Department staff suggested he be placed on the \$20 bill. In Arthur Schlesinger's 1948 poll of historians, Cleveland was ranked

the eighth greatest president of all time, just behind Theodore Roosevelt and just ahead of John Adams.

Grover Cleveland was too modest to have ever countenanced such honors, but he would have understood the logic that produced them. As he once told a friend while discussing an opportunistic politician, “the trouble with that sort of fellow is that he is always ready to make the mistake of thinking there is no political force in a moral idea.”