

An Account of Cynthia Taft Morris's Presidential Address to the Economic History Association
Hyatt Regency Hotel, Cincinnati, Ohio, September 1994

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The Fifty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Economic History Association was scheduled for Cincinnati, a city where President Cynthia Taft Morris's family has deep roots. Her grandfather, William Howard Taft, and her father, Charles Phelps Taft II, were born there. Her father was known as "Mr. Cincinnati" and during his mayoral term *Fortune* magazine ranked Cincinnati the best-managed big city in the country.

Even so, there was talk of a last-minute move of the meeting to Chicago. In November of the previous year Cincinnati voters had approved a referendum eliminating the legal recourse against discrimination given to gay citizens and prohibiting the City from enacting pro-gay laws in the future. These actions ran afoul of the EHA practice of holding meetings in cities where all members could be assured of equal, nondiscriminatory access to public accommodations. The matter was not resolved when the U.S. District Court issued an injunction blocking the referendum. A woman of strong principles and forceful determination, Cynthia consulted with the City's leading gay organizations. She learned that they were not advocating a boycott and instead were talking with Cincinnati businesses, large and small, to insure that patrons would be treated with respect. The fact that the Association's headquarter hotel – the Hyatt Regency – had offered such assurances from the outset and had hosted dinners for Cincinnati's largest gay organization was another good omen. So Cincinnati and Cynthia moved forward as planned.

The evening's program began on an auspicious note with a warm greeting from Cynthia's cousin Robert A. "Bob" Taft II, who was then Ohio's Secretary of State. (He later served two terms as the State's Governor.) Then it was Cynthia's turn. The subject of her Presidential address was the distributional consequences of early capitalist development. Using historical analysis she wanted to identify the characteristics of developing societies in which the benefits of industrialization were quick to reach the masses. While this topic has a large literature today, it was not much discussed in 1994. As the crowd quieted, though, it became clear that the Economic History Association was not the only group in the Hyatt Regency's Grand Ballroom. On the other side of a thin room divider, a polka band

was setting up. And although no one in the Association knew it, an evening of tuba-playing, singing, and polka dancing was about to get underway.

The band began its first number only a few minutes into Cynthia's address. She was clearly startled at the intrusion but quickly regained her poise and returned her audience's attention to important matters such as "...institutional flexibility in adapting the geographical scale of public investments to changing technological and market requirements." Little did she know that her own personal flexibility would soon be required to adapt to changing presentational requirements. The first song ended relatively quickly and everyone expected the distraction to pass. But no sooner did Cynthia regain her rhythm when another polka began, this one louder and longer than the first. Again and again, for the remainder of the talk, the tuba thumped and the neighboring crowd stomped. Cynthia soldiered on. Finally, with her conclusions in sight, she bowed to the inevitable and delivered the last few paragraphs in song, set to the tune of the musicians she had been trying all evening to ignore. The economic historians jumped to their feet and gave their President a thunderous ovation followed by several rounds of "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow." The merry-makers next door may have even taken note.

Over the course of her long and distinguished career Cynthia had developed a well-deserved reputation for grace under pressure. None expected her to be tested that evening; none was surprised by her charming response.