The William Howard Taft Presidency
By Lewis L. Gould
(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009. Pp. xv, 269. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index. $34.95.)

Helen Taft
Our Musical First Lady
By Lewis L. Gould
(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010. Pp. viii, 220. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. $34.95.)

Lewis L. Gould, author of many distinguished works of political history, has used his voluminous knowledge of the Progressive Era and the Republican Party to produce two succinct works that offer a definitive view of the overlooked presidency of William Howard Taft. Sandwiched between the charismatic Theodore Roosevelt and the idealistic Woodrow Wilson, the ponderous, three-hundred-pound Taft generally has been written off as a lackluster chief executive. Gould, however, calls attention to his abilities and integrity, painting an absorbing picture of the downward spiral of a presidency that floundered in part because of inadequate political advisors. In this volume from the American Presidency series, Gould re-assesses Taft's administration in a well-argued work that shows how Taft's relationship with his chief patron, Roosevelt, soured in a series of relatively minor misunderstandings that included distrust between the wives of the two leaders.

The book provides a fascinating object lesson in how not to function successfully as president in spite of good intentions and a profound belief in following the U.S. Constitution and existing law. Taft's genial nature, which perhaps led him to procrastinate, seemingly obscured his recognition of the need to plan his public utterances more carefully. His compulsion to take lengthy speech-making trips may have gratified his need for polite applause but did not serve him well politically in the long run. Unlike T.R., his ebullient predecessor, Taft lacked the ability to mesmerize his audiences, and perhaps some of the key issues during his administration—such as complicated arguments over the tariff, reciprocal trade agreements with Canada, and his support for a controversial secretary of the interior who disagreed with Roosevelt's conservation policies—did not lend themselves to exciting pronouncements. At any rate, he failed to stir public sentiment as Roosevelt had, and he lacked his predecessor's adeptness at public relations.

Gould's companion work on Helen Taft, part of the Modern First Ladies series of which he is the editor, introduces readers to a sprightly, strong-willed woman who played
bridge for money, and smoked and drank even after Prohibition, to her husband's dismay. Although Helen Taft previously has been pictured as the power behind the throne, Gould points out that her husband, who valued her counsel highly, was just as ambitious as she. While Helen Taft's stroke in 1909 greatly diminished her plans to expand the role of first lady into one of enhanced social and cultural prominence, Gould offers the first extensive look at her extraordinary efforts to bring acclaimed musicians to the White House. This book shows that she should be remembered for more than simply overseeing the planting of Washington's notable cherry trees.

Taken together, these histories illuminate the years from 1908 to 1912, when a somewhat ill-starred couple occupied 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Yet, as Gould notes, Taft exhibited little bitterness when he came in a distant third in the presidential election of 1912 and Wilson emerged victorious, with Roosevelt, running as a third party candidate, coming in second. The press of the day did not view the Taft presidency as a failure and, after these reading these books, the modern reader is likely to have the same opinion. As Gould expressed it, “there was a sense that . . . Taft had done his best for his country” (p. 201 in The William Howard Taft Presidency). Taft went on to become chief justice of the United States. One wishes for such civility in politics today.

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Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare
Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle
By Leigh Raiford

Leigh Raiford's new book, Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare, is a close examination of the role of the photograph in capturing the history of black social movements in the United States. Raiford's approach focuses on the agency of the photograph and the act of photography, not only in documenting the legacy of racism but also in shaping public cognition of the “black body, the black eye, and black memory” (p. 9). This argument is of particular importance as it locates these three points as sites of political and social resistance within the trajectory of the civil rights struggle in the United States. Raiford cites many resources in her research, but