



The New Jersey Police Chief

The Official Publication of the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police

Vol. 20, No. 2 • February 2014

102nd Annual Training Conference & Police/Security Expo

Featuring Col. Dave Grossman

**Trump Taj Mahal
Hotel & Casino
Atlantic City, New Jersey**



June 23-26, 2014

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Sensible Diet Advice...From A Century Ago

By Matt Brzycki, Assistant Director of Campus Recreation, Fitness, Princeton University

Aficionados of American history may recall William H. Taft who served as our nation's 27th president from 1909 to 1913. And if you recall President Taft, then you recall his legendary heft. At his inauguration, he reportedly weighed 354 pounds at a height of 6'2" which would give him a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 45.4. Remember, obese is considered as having a BMI of 30.0 or higher so President Taft was way off the charts. Look at it this way: In order to be a normal size, he'd need to decrease his weight to 195 pounds . . . or increase his height to 8'4".

To treat his obesity, President Taft corresponded back and forth with Nathaniel Yorke-Davies, a physician who lived about 3,700 miles away across the Atlantic in merry olde London. Their letters were described as "frequent and detailed" by Deborah Levine, PhD, an assistant professor in the Health Policy and Management program at Providence College. Dr. Levine discussed their correspondence in her fine article that was published in a recent issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Much ado was made about the article by the media. Among other things, it was widely reported that President Taft followed a low-carbohydrate diet. But he didn't, at least not the type of low-carbohydrate diet that first comes to most people's minds.

As noted in the article, the personalized diet for President Taft included lean grilled meat, fish, cooked green vegetables (without butter), baked or stewed unsweetened fruit, "gluten biscuits," "clear" soup and salads. Recommended beverages were coffee or tea (without milk or sugar), hot water and sugarless wines.

By default, a diet that's low in carbohydrate means that it's high in fat and/or protein. Clearly, the diet that was recommended to President Taft didn't contain high amounts of fat and/or protein. So his diet wasn't really a low-carbohydrate one. Yes, sugars are carbohydrates and there's an emphasis on eating less of those. But fruits and vegetables are also carbohydrates and there's an emphasis on eating more of those.

Other useful pointers for weight loss that can be gleaned from his diet are preparing foods grilled, baked or stewed (not fried); choosing lean meat and fish; eliminating high-fat products (such as butter); eating salads; and drinking low- or no-calorie beverages. Those simple recommendations have stood the test of time.

Note, too, that President Taft's diet was low in calories which is the real key to losing weight. It appears as if the diet was too low in calories, though, since he lost nearly 60 pounds during the first four months of the plan (reducing his weight from 314 to 255 pounds). This is roughly twice as much weight as most authorities would advise someone to lose in that time span. However, the point here is that you'll lose weight with any diet as long as the number of calories that you consume (eat) is less than the number of calories that you expend (use).

Besides decreasing caloric intake, the other important aspect of the weight-loss equation is increasing caloric output by becoming more active. Only brief mention is given to President Taft's exercise regimen which mainly seems to have been horseback riding. Is horseback riding a good activity? Yeah, for the horse. So this is an area that needed more of his attention.

Despite being overweight and morbidly obese for many years, President Taft lived until the age of 73 (when he died of heart failure; he weighed 280 pounds). His age at the time of death is even more surprising when you consider that the life expectancy for a man in those days was less than 60. And for you trivia buffs, he was the first president to be buried in the Arlington National Cemetery . . . and the last president to have facial hair while in office.

Bottom line: More than 100 years ago, President Taft followed a very balanced diet of carbohydrates, protein and fat that would still be appropriate today for anyone who wants to lose weight or improve health.

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