

The Limits of "Practical Equality": Theodore Roosevelt's Views on African Americans and
Women

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The object of government is the welfare of the people. The material progress and prosperity of a nation are desirable chiefly so long as they lead to the moral and material welfare of all good citizens ... We must have—I believe we have already—a genuine and permanent moral awakening, without which no wisdom of legislation or administration really means anything.¹

On August 31, 1910, these famous words were declared by the 26th President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. The speech was titled, “New Nationalism” and delivered in Osawatomie, Kansas in preparation of Roosevelt’s upcoming presidential campaign. Roosevelt believed himself to be a great champion to all people of the United States of America. He constantly preached about working progressively towards equality and uniform opportunity for all Americans. He promised that when it was achieved, all men would have the opportunity to reach their greatest potentials in whatever it is they are capable of. He wanted to create a society that felt equal and held strong morals as he had himself. Roosevelt believed that the United States was the home of the Great Experiment, where the government should work for the general welfare of its people. With a rapidly expanding wealth gap between the economic classes of the United States, Roosevelt preached in his speech, “At every stage, and under all circumstances, the essence of the struggle is to equalize opportunity, destroy privilege, and give to the life and citizenship of every individual the highest possible value both to himself and to the commonwealth.”² Roosevelt always spoke in favor of the American people and his reputation as a war hero only added to the substantial support he had received by the American public.

Theodore Roosevelt became extraordinarily popular during his time. Stories of heroism were published and shared about his time spent fighting in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, he was a fabled cowboy from the Dakota territories, and he was full of energy to fight

¹Theodore Roosevelt, “New Nationalism,” (speech, Osawatomie, Kansas, August 31, 1910), Archives: President Teddy Roosevelt’s New Nationalism Speech, The White House.

²Theodore Roosevelt, “New Nationalism.”

against the corporate giants of America such as U.S. Steel and Standard Oil. Theodore's reputation and image gave him an immense amount of power during his presidency because he had the trust of those who felt disadvantaged. However, while Roosevelt used an abundance of inclusive language in his speeches, it seems that he believed his words more on a moral basis rather than a practical one because he failed to make good on many of his promises for equality during his presidency. While he did not completely ignore the African American community and the pleas of American women, his commitment to improving their conditions were considerably underwhelming in comparison to what his speeches promised. Roosevelt spoke as if he were prepared to be their sword and shield, yet often ignored these communities and believed it was impossible to grant the full equality the groups desired. By exploring this gap between his words and his deeds, this paper demonstrates that although Roosevelt used inclusive language such as, "all American people," African Americans and women of the United States were not the groups he invested his political career on. Indeed, this gap illuminates the real limits to "practical equality" during this period, and Roosevelt's active role in undermining it.

Historiography

Theodore Roosevelt was a complicated figure. He regularly preached his moral values and many of his beliefs through the use of his Bully-pulpit, but he also contradicted his own ideas and values. This leads a number of scholars to reach different speculations and conclusions about Roosevelt's true intentions and what ideas and values he prioritized over others. David Greenberg argues in his article, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Image of Presidential Activism," that while "Theodore Roosevelt's actions served his image, so too did his image

serve his actions.”³ Greenberg’s point is that Roosevelt constantly used the press to make his words known to the public, which in turn kept him accountable to do what he promised.⁴ Greenberg also argues that Roosevelt’s progressive agenda and faith depended on his strong sense of moralism. Therefore, while much of his image was crafted by an expert usage of the media, much of it was also authentic.⁵ Greenberg’s broadest claim is that, “Roosevelt’s commitment to action found its most important expression in his redefinition of the office of the presidency.”⁶ While Greenberg is correct to note Roosevelt’s desire to rework the reach of presidential actions, because he does not sufficiently explore Roosevelt’s actions on African Americans and women, he misses the real gaps in Roosevelt’s realization of his promises. Where Greenberg sees Roosevelt’s moralism as part of his authenticity, this paper shows that his moralism was in a sense hollow because he did not fully support it with actions.

Other historians, like Gary Gerstle and Doris Groshen Daniels, give fuller attention to Roosevelt’s beliefs and actions in relation to African Americans and women, and I strongly agree with the assessments of both. Gerstle’s journal article, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Divided Character of American Nationalism,” primarily focuses on Roosevelt’s split character and how it affects his involvement with African Americans. Gerstle argues that Roosevelt’s ideologies and decisions reflect the country’s history of “civic creed promising all Americans the same individual rights irrespective of color, religion, or sex,” and the contradictory, “long harbored racial ideologies that define the United States and its mission in ethnoracial ways and

³David Greenberg, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Image of Presidential Activism,” *Social Research* 78, no. 4 (2011): 1061.

⁴Greenberg, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Image of Presidential Activism,” 1061.

⁵Greenberg, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Image of Presidential Activism,” 1061.

⁶Greenberg, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Image of Presidential Activism,” 1063.

have sought to prove American racial superiority.”⁷ Gerstle explains, that while Roosevelt felt it was important that Americans cultivate their racial superiority, he also located within American nationalism the civic tradition that celebrated the freedoms for people of all colors, religions, and genders. Gerstle continues to argue that while Roosevelt was certainly racist, he still felt a moral responsibility to make advances toward equality for all types of Americans. However, Roosevelt’s opinion that African Americans were an inferior race of people surely helped steer his attention primarily to helping the White working class more than the Black community.

In Daniels’s journal article, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” she concentrates on Roosevelt’s ideas of gender equality and the actions he took to advance them. The problem, Daniels argues is that Roosevelt’s views of “females and their roles in society was often inconsistent and contradictory,”⁸ because while Roosevelt believed women were equal to men, he also believed women had certain duties to perform and those duties often restricted a woman’s involvement in social and political rights. Daniels argues that, “both in rhetoric and performance he endeavored to reconcile his Victorian world view to the era of the ‘new woman,’ to resolve the tensions between modern and more traditional systems of thinking and behavior.”⁹ Daniels explains that it was this belief that kept Roosevelt hesitant to verify the modern social position that women were actively pushing for.

⁷Gary Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Divided Character of American Nationalism,” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 1280.

⁸Doris Groshen Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1996): 648.

⁹Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 648.

While Roosevelt's moral beliefs may maintain that all Americans deserve equal rights, his political actions show how he made very few attempts to help African Americans and the women of the United States who were largely disenfranchised in the early 1900's.

First I will focus on Roosevelt's complicated history with African Americans. While Roosevelt did feel morally responsible to make a few attempts to increase the rights of African Americans, he failed in many more cases than he succeeded. Roosevelt had moments where he praised Black Americans but oftentimes refuted those praises in many of his future writings. Unfortunately, Roosevelt was also quick to believe accusations targeted at Black Americans as well. He believed that some Black men were of good character and appointed a few those who he regarded to be of high character, to government appointed positions. Though, Roosevelt rarely ensured that many received the positions he gave them. Finally, while at first he did try to increase Black involvement in government positions, he would later betray his previous support for them in hopes of gaining southern votes for future presidential campaigns.

My other focus will be about Roosevelt's moral beliefs and his idea of a woman's role in society. While he has said he believed that women were equal to men he was reluctant to support many of the rights they fought for and was a big supporter of traditional gender roles that undermined women equality. He believed his vision of a woman's duties were more important than government representation and their civic rights. It was not until after Roosevelt left the presidential office that he truly seemed to begin campaigning for women's rights such as women's suffrage and their involvement in politics.

Roosevelt and African Americans

While Roosevelt had said unquestionably prejudiced statements, it is important to remember that racism in the early 1900s was as voracious as ever. New “science” during this point of time supported the thought that Anglo-Saxons were superior to all types of men, and Roosevelt was a big subscriber to the beliefs of Darwinism and White superiority.¹⁰ These beliefs were also why Roosevelt held so much disdain for Native Americans. He believed that “civilized races triumphed over the lower, savage or barbaric ones.”¹¹ While in today’s standards he held very problematic views, in the early 1900s it could be argued that Roosevelt truly was among the more progressive of his time. “Roosevelt’s approach to racial issues was to proceed slowly toward the goal of social and economic equality. He cautioned against imposing radical changes in government policy, favoring, hopefully, gradual adjustments in the attitudes of white Americans toward ethnic minorities.” Though, even slow proceedings toward equality for Black Americans were strongly opposed by the White Southerners of Roosevelt’s time, and the progress he made was less than impressive despite his inaugural speeches claim to

During the Spanish-American war, while fighting in Cuba, Roosevelt was in charge of the Rough Riders and the 9th and 10th Negro Cavalries. Amidst the chaos of the fighting to take San Juan hill, Gerstle states that, “White regulars, the heavily southwestern Rough Riders, the journalists, and even Roosevelt himself all heaped praise on the Black soldiers, who returned to the United States as heroes.”¹² The 10th Negro cavalry even marched in a parade in Washington receiving a salute from then-president William McKinley. When leaving the Rough Riders, Roosevelt toasted the Black soldiers stating, “The Spaniards called them ‘Smoked Yankees,’ but

¹⁰Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and American Nationalism,” 1283.

¹¹Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and American Nationalism,” 1283.

¹²Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and American Nationalism,” 1290.

we found them to be an excellent breed of Yankees. I am sure that I speak the sentiments of officers and men in the assemblage when I say that between you and the other cavalry regiments there exists a tie which we trust will never be broken,” to which the Black soldiers roared their approval.¹³ The issue is that Roosevelt later contradicts himself. He later in his life wrote a book that chronicled his time spent fighting the war in Cuba, titled, *The Rough Riders*. In this book Roosevelt wrote that in order to behave, “the colored soldiers ... are, of course, peculiarly dependent upon their white officers,”¹⁴ depicting Blacks as inept soldiers who only fought as valiantly as the Whites when under the command of their White superiors. Roosevelt continued, calling the Black soldiers cowards and he said that they were fleeing the frontline requiring him to threaten to shoot them if they did not return to their positions.¹⁵ But according to a Black soldier named Presley Holliday, “[a White officer] quickly reassured Roosevelt that the Black soldiers had been following orders; the next day, Roosevelt even visited members of the Tenth Cavalry and apologized to them.”¹⁶ It is unclear if Roosevelt purposely changed these facts or whether or not he forgot about this specific situation, but the fact did remain, Roosevelt did not think Black soldiers should be allowed to achieve the rank of officers in the army which was not an uncommon sentiment in his time.. Although Roosevelt’s opinion on the 10th Negro cavalry was murky, he may have been critical to this particular cavalry unit because he believed they were showing cowardice which is not an admirable trait in any soldier.

However, it would appear that Roosevelt’s prejudices against African Americans would get the best of him once again in 1906. At midnight on August 13, 1906, there was a shooting in

¹³Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and American Nationalism,” 1291.

¹⁴Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, (New York: Random House, 1996), 87.

¹⁵Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 87.

¹⁶Willard B. Gatewood, *“Smoked Yankees” and the Roosevelt Struggle for Empire: Letters from Negro Soldiers, 1898-1902*, (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 92.

Brownsville, Texas where the 25th Infantry, a regiment of colored soldiers happened to be stationed. In the aftermath of the shooting, a bartender was found dead and a police lieutenant had been wounded. The colored soldiers, who the people of Brownsville did not welcome, were immediately charged for the disturbance without a single clue of evidence.¹⁷ Roosevelt promptly accepted the townspeople's accusations, and "Theodore Roosevelt sent a message to the Senate in which he said that the soldiers were 'midnight assassins,' and 'cowardly and deliberate murderers,' and asserted that the affair was 'unprovoked and murderous savagery.'"¹⁸ Followed by this statement he ordered the dishonorable discharge of companies B, C, and D. This was unusual for Roosevelt because he was usually diligent about investigations and typically made his responses from a lawful basis. Yet, in this case, Roosevelt's prejudice clearly got the better of him and he made no effort to review the vast lack of evidence that the Black soldiers had any involvement with the incident. Roosevelt's decision received massive backlash by newspapers and politicians alike. Senator Morgan Bulkeley wrote in disapproval of Roosevelt's decision:

These men, as Senator Foraker showed, had served their country faithfully for many years; they had fought in battle to defend their country's flag; they had an unblemished record for bravery, sobriety and discipline; they all had honorable characters; and yet they were disgraced before the world and branded as criminals without an opportunity to prove that they were not guilty. No wonder that Senator Foraker characterized the action as a shame and a disgrace to the American people.¹⁹

Bulkeley was one of the few Republicans who were not afraid to speak out against Roosevelt's decision. Bulkeley understood the decision was unfair to the Black Americans Roosevelt said he would help in his inaugural address. The Baltimore Afro-American Ledger wrote, "When Roosevelt was inaugurated his 'all men up and not some men down' and his 'door of hope'

¹⁷Nathan B. Scott et al., *Roosevelt's Hostility to the Colored People of the United States*, (Washington: Ephemera Collection, 1906), 1.

¹⁸Scott et al., *Roosevelt's Hostility to the Colored People of the United States*, 2.

¹⁹Scott et al., *Roosevelt's Hostility to the Colored People of the United States*, 2.

speeches were looked upon as opening a new era to the Afro-American and that at last there had come ... one man to whom at least the Afro-American could look for hope in the future.”²⁰ Here it shows that Roosevelt had lost a lot of support from the African American people in which his speeches said he would support. His promise to lift all men upon was unquestionably broken here when he discharged the Black soldiers without a trial, effectively shutting the “door of hope” for African Americans. *The Washington Bee*, one of the most influential papers printed for the colored race wrote, “it is becoming more and more apparent to me every day, from one official utterance and then another, that President Roosevelt and his advisers are prejudiced against the negro and have no real love for him.”²¹ In a sense this was true. Roosevelt was not only prejudiced but racist as well and believed that Blacks were inferior. It is because of these poor characteristics of his, he ordered the discharge of the Black soldiers without a trial. If the soldiers were White, there is no question they would have received a fair measure of justice. The criticisms were not over either. The Regular Colored Republican Organization of the Ninth Assembly district of New York City held a meeting denouncing Roosevelt stating, “we hereby give expression to our pain that the one man our race has loved best since Lincoln has betrayed us.”²² It is clear here, that so many African Americans genuinely believed they could trust Roosevelt, they felt like they were included and took his speeches to heart. But when Roosevelt decided to condemn these Black veteran soldiers without so much as a trial or any evidence to support they were the offenders; it came as a betrayal and as a contradiction to everything he had said about supporting them and equalizing them like he promised to do for all American people.

²⁰Scott et al., *Roosevelt's Hostility to the Colored People of the United States*, 2.

²¹Scott et al., *Roosevelt's Hostility to the Colored People of the United States*, 2.

²²Scott et al., *Roosevelt's Hostility to the Colored People of the United States*, 2.

Contradictory once again to his stance on Black soldiers, Roosevelt is on record stating, “The only wise and honorable and Christian thing to do is to treat each Black man and each white man strictly on his merits as a man, giving him no more and no less than he shows himself worthy to have.”²³ What Roosevelt prized more than anything was individual achievement, Roosevelt held the idea that, “although white men held firm at the top of the social hierarchy, ‘inferior’ races could rise from their lower stations.”²⁴ This is the reason why Roosevelt invited arguably the most powerful Black man at the time, Booker T. Washington, to dine with him in the White House. This invitation was a symbolic gesture and it made Roosevelt the first American president to invite a Black man to dine with him.²⁵ Roosevelt wanted to speak to Booker T. Washington about patronage appointments in the government. This was one of Roosevelt’s attempts to help equalize Black Americans. He tried to get them involved in the American government, but wanted to ensure his appointments were to Black men of higher education and good merits. This invitation brought a flurry of attacks from southern newspapers. One article writing, “President Roosevelt has committed a blunder that is worse than a crime, and no atonement or future act of his can remove the self-imprinted stigma.”²⁶ The White Southerners took the President’s invitation of Washington as a sign that Roosevelt believed Blacks were complete equals to Whites, and they refused to tolerate that notion. President Roosevelt was surprised by the amount of vilification he received from the Southern Whites, but he refused to apologize for his decision.²⁷ Northern Newspapers jumped to his defense writing,

²³Christopher Klein, “How Teddy Roosevelt’s Belief in a Racial Hierarchy Shaped His Policies,” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, August 11, 2020.

²⁴Klein, “How Teddy Roosevelt’s Belief in a Racial Hierarchy Shaped His Policies.”

²⁵Sidney Milkis, “Theodore Roosevelt: Domestic Affairs,” *Miller Center*, Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, July 24, 2017, <https://millercenter.org/president/roosevelt/domestic-affairs> (accessed November 17, 2020).

²⁶“President Criticised,” *The Times-Democrat*, October 18, 1901, 1.

²⁷Milkis, “Theodore Roosevelt: Domestic Affairs.”

“President Roosevelt has honored not only himself but the colored race by having Booker Washington dine with him” and “When Mr. Washington was here I sat with him on the platform and introduced him. Roosevelt did right. Booker Washington is a man and a great one. ... Were I in Roosevelt’s place I would feel an intense pity for those who denounced me for such an action.”²⁸ Dining with Washington was indeed a historic moment, but Washington was also the safest choice Roosevelt could have invited as a Black guest to eat with. Booker T. Washington was a famous accommodationist among Black leaders and Washington urged African Americans to "cast down your buckets where you are," that is, to remain in the Jim Crow south and tolerate racial discrimination rather than make what he considered intemperate calls for equality.²⁹

While Roosevelt never again invited Washington to dine at the White House, he did appoint several Blacks to patronage government positions based on Washington’s recommendations. In 1905, Roosevelt wrote, “I wish to appoint Charles W. Anderson Collector of Internal Revenue because I want to appoint a colored man to a conspicuous position in my own State.”³⁰ Roosevelt followed suit with this and made Charles W. Anderson the first Black man to be appointed to a federal government position. Effectively winning a few Black citizens government jobs in higher positions despite the outcry from the White south. Roosevelt’s meeting with Booker T. Washington, despite his accommodating tendencies, was celebrated by the African American community and his appointments of Black citizens to government seats were praised as well.³¹ Booker T. Washington wrote, “in my opinion, the President of the United States [Theodore Roosevelt] was the greatest man in the country.”³² Although, when it came to

²⁸“Roosevelt is Both Praised and Attacked,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 1901.

²⁹“Booker T. Washington,” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service.

³⁰Theodore Roosevelt, “Theodore Roosevelt to Mr. Bliss, February 2, 1905,” Letter, From Raab Collection. *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*.

³¹“The Lie Nailed that he is Opposed to the Negro,” *The Washington Bee*, October 19, 1901.

³²Booker T. Washington, *My Larger Education*, (Los Angeles: The University of California, 1911), 178.

appointing positions in the south, Roosevelt was often advised not to do so by his associates. Lyman Abbott writing in relation to Black appointments stating, “I want to see the administration stand firmly for the principle of justice for the negro; but I also should regret to see it take any action which would make it practically impossible for those in the Southern states who believe in justice for the negro, to give to you their moral support.”³³ With this in mind, Roosevelt was reluctant in appointing Black men to positions in the South, and most of his appointments would remain in the North and West. Also, in 1903, Roosevelt can be seen writing in a personal letter to Roll Ogden:

I meant literally what I said – that all I wanted was a square deal for the negro. If he is fit to vote by a test we apply to a white man, let him vote. If he is unfit, don't. If he is unfit in an office turn him out; not because he is a negro, but because he is unfit. If, on the other hand, if he is fit, appoint him; again not because he is a negro, but because he is fit.³⁴

This would imply that he really did approve of more equality for African Americans. But again, after Roosevelt made many of these appointments he generally failed to fight the political battles that were necessary to secure their appointments. Especially in the South where Roosevelt's influence had been diminishing due to his slow push for the increased rights of African Americans.

Furthermore, while Roosevelt may have held the belief that Blacks were inferior to White Americans, he did try to improve the role of Black citizens in American politics despite the opinions of many of his close associates, such as Henry Cabot Lodge, Madison Grant, and Frederic Remington, who longed for a pure Anglo-Saxon America. Nowhere in Roosevelt's

³³Lyman Abbott, “Letter from Lyman Abbott to Theodore Roosevelt, December 4, 1902,” Letter, From Library of Congress Manuscript Division, *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*.

³⁴Theodore Roosevelt, “Theodore Roosevelt to Rollo Ogden, June 6, 1903.” Letter. From Library of Congress Manuscript Division. *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*.

voluminous writings, neither in his published work nor his private letters, is it possible to find the kind of indiscriminate revulsion against ‘outsiders’ expressed by Remington,” who in a letter expressed his wishes for a genocide of all non-whites.³⁵ Roosevelt in contrast gave credit to who he considered lower classes of people and on multiple occasions defended the rights and aspirations of selected Black Americans and Asians who had achieved a level of intelligence and moral competence. But of course, Roosevelt still held onto the idea that a vast proportion of nonwhites would not achieve these levels in their lifetimes. Still unable to shake his prejudiced values of superiority, Roosevelt’s opinions and values of colored people towered high above most other Americans. Especially American politicians who were generally very staunch opponents of colored people in the United States.

Additionally, when Roosevelt worsened his reputation among African Americans when he ran for the presidency again in 1912, and employed what he called the “southern strategy,” which aimed to attract White southern republican voters.³⁶ In order to receive these votes, Roosevelt pandered to the racist views of the south by supporting their racial segregationist policies and by abandoning his support of Black political groups. Roosevelt’s catering to White southern voters only encouraged the enforcement of Jim Crow laws, as well as the racial discrimination, and disenfranchisement of Black Americans. Black Americans were robbed of the promise Roosevelt made in his speech to create, “Practical equality of opportunity for all citizens,”³⁷ and the opportunity to reach their greatest potentials in whatever it is they are capable of. Showing that his commitment for all citizens did not include African Americans at all.

³⁵Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and American Nationalism,” 1296.

³⁶“White Supremacists Who Once Occupied the White House,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 24 (1999): 77.

³⁷Theodore Roosevelt, “New Nationalism,” (speech, Osawatomie, Kansas, August 31, 1910), Archives: President Teddy Roosevelt's New Nationalism Speech, The White House.

All in all, in 1901, it would be fair to concede to the White southern opinion that Roosevelt's words in regard to race, could have been claimed as "radical" at the time, his actions were not. It was only Roosevelt's moral ideals that could be considered radical because altogether he took very few actions toward improving the condition of African Americans in the United States. His words and attitudes were unfortunately more progressive than his actual dedication to push African Americans closer to equal rights. After the criticism Roosevelt received by the South for dining with Booker T. Washington, his influence had unfortunately diminished greatly in the South and it appeared Roosevelt did not want to aggressively push for Black rights or their political involvement out of fear of losing more southern political support.

Roosevelt on Women's Equality

Roosevelt's views on gender roles and women's rights were complex and often contradictory for most of his life. While Roosevelt commonly spoke favorably about women's rights, his position on gender roles and lack of feminist action as President would suggest otherwise. When Theodore Roosevelt was a young man attending Harvard University, he wrote a thesis titled, "The Practicability of Equalizing Men and Women Before the Law." In this thesis he wrote, "Viewed purely in the abstract, I think there can be no question that women should have equal rights with men." Although that certainly sounds progressive, the phrasing is important in that statement. Roosevelt clearly articulated that "purely in the abstract," women are equal to men. Meaning that, as an idea, women are equal. He makes no actual mention of trying to apply this idea to become a societal norm. It is more of a philosophical statement than a call to action even though he claims to be an ally of women's rights. Roosevelt writes in more detail that, if a woman works just as well as a man, she should get paid the same wage, and that women

should not have to take their husband's last name after marriage. Roosevelt also wrote, “the man should have no more right over the person or property of his wife than she has over the person or property of her husband. . . . I would have the word ‘obey’ used no more by the wife than by the husband.”³⁸ Again, Roosevelt only made claims that he was in favor of these ideals, not that he was willing to push for them. Ultimately, he was firmly in acceptance of the reality of women’s inequality and did little to try and remedy it in his political future.³⁹

First of all, Roosevelt’s thesis statements are contradictory in regard to his views of gender roles. Roosevelt supported traditional gender roles where the man was the provider of the house as well as head of the family, and that a woman's role was limited to home, husband, and family. Anne Roosevelt, years after her father’s death wrote, “Roosevelt stood at the center of his family circle and the women subordinated their lives to his. They had ability, charm, and intelligence and he took counsel from them, but when he took a stand he expected unswerving loyalty”⁴⁰ Roosevelt respected the advice he was often given from his wife and older sister. He often spoke to them about decisions behind closed doors and their input was valued. Yet, he was typically opposed to a woman’s direct political involvement and his opinion would not change until his presidential campaign for a third term.

Second of all, when it came to terms of a woman's sexuality, he labelled it as pornographic. He was very opposed to any individual that did not support a domestic or wholesome value and rejected them. But despite his views on female sexuality, “much of his code has a modern dimension. He was angered by humor that placed women in an unfavorable

³⁸Theodore Roosevelt, “The Practicability of Equalizing Men and Women Before the Law,” (Thesis, Harvard University, 1880).

³⁹Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 656.

⁴⁰Alice Roosevelt Longworth, *Crowded Hours: Reminiscences of Alice Roosevelt Longworth*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1935), 25.

light and his pronouncements on rape, wife abuse, and prostitution are those of late twentieth-century feminists”⁴¹ Roosevelt was a firm believer that the mistreatment of women was one of the worst offenses a man could commit. He believed that rapists in particular, were among some of the most vile human beings, and “urged that nothing be done to allow the courts to protect the men.”⁴² So while Roosevelt did not always advocate specifically for women’s equality, he did have an unwavering code of morality when it came to protecting them through the law, but again his patriarchal beliefs insisted that men should serve as a woman’s protector.

Furthermore, Roosevelt insisted that women should always be “willing to perform the first and greatest duty of womanhood, able and willing to bear, and to bring up as they should be brought up, healthy children, sound in body, mind, and character, and numerous enough so that the [White] race shall increase and not decrease.”⁴³ He found that the women who used forms of birth control to be unnatural and said that these women and those who purposely refrained from bearing children were great disgraces of Americanism. Roosevelt said in his speech on American womanhood that, “The existence of women of this type forms one of the most unpleasant and unwholesome features of modern life”⁴⁴ These sorts of remarks received criticism by many women who were activists for reform and the expansion of women’s rights such as Margaret Sanger. Sanger was famous for supporting the use of birth control and criticized Roosevelt in a newspaper interview stating, “Colonel Roosevelt, whose specialty is Americanism, has done more to enslave the women of America and to cheat the children of America, than any other man or organization in the country has done”⁴⁵ Americanism is an ideology that was promoted by

⁴¹Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 651.

⁴²Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 652.

⁴³Theodore Roosevelt, “On American Motherhood,” (speech, Washington, March 13, 1905), Patriot Post.

⁴⁴Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 653.

⁴⁵Frances Wayne, “Woman Rebel Scores Roosevelt as Enslaver of Mothers in U.S.,” *The Denver Post*, May 17, 1916.

Roosevelt because it stresses the reinforcement of American traditions, duties, and culture, much like he had done himself. As a result, Roosevelt often expressed that a woman's greatest duty was her responsibility to bear children not just for her husband, but to expand the population of the greatest race of people in the world, the White Americans. "Roosevelt loved the idea of America as a melting pot-a 'crucible'-in which a hybrid race of many strains would be forged. Mixing of this sort, Roosevelt believed, had created and would sustain American racial superiority"⁴⁶ and therefore insisted women bear children to contribute to this cause. Sanger criticized Roosevelt by saying, "when a man of Colonel Roosevelt's personality and influence beg us to talk, people, especially women, listen."⁴⁷ Making Roosevelt's Americanist ideals a sharp contrast to Sanger's own.

Yet, ironically in 1912, Roosevelt aligned himself politically with the exact women he used to scorn for not marrying or creating families of their own. These women rebelled against traditional gender roles Roosevelt was known to embrace. Many did not marry or have children because it was likely they knew that maternity confined a woman's place. They were well educated and sought to wield power themselves, rather than marry a man who had it.⁴⁸ Roosevelt disapproved of these types of women because he thought they shirked off their duty as American woman and said, "I think that the duties are even more important than the rights; and in the long run I think that the reward is ampler and greater for duty well done, than for the insistence upon individual rights."⁴⁹ Due to this, he appeared prejudiced about career women and often seemed opposed to appointing women to government positions which acted as an immense

⁴⁶Gerstle, "Theodore Roosevelt and American Nationalism," 1281.

⁴⁷Wayne, "Women Rebel Scores Roosevelt."

⁴⁸Daniels, "Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles," 654.

⁴⁹Roosevelt, "On American Motherhood."

disappointment to female reformists. One example pertained to Florence Kelley, a reformist who was appointed Chief of the Illinois State Department of Factory Inspection. Daniels notes that, “Though [Kelley’s] reports were classics in social welfare literature, she soon antagonized manufacturers, particularly those who used child labor, and when her mentor Governor John Peter Altgeld left office, Kelley lost her post.”⁵⁰ Kelley and her friends who were inspired by Roosevelt’s speeches condemning sweatshops, reached out and hoped he would appoint Kelley to another similar position because her qualifications made her a logical choice, but Roosevelt repeatedly made poor excuses that even embarrassed many of his loyal followers. All Roosevelt could truly muster for a reasoning was, “the time was not ripe ... to appoint a woman.”⁵¹ Although Roosevelt had many failures in his support for women, he has a number of successes too. During his presidency, he supported an investigation of work conditions for women and children on behalf of the appeal of Jane Addams. Congress gave Roosevelt funds needed to investigate and the result was a nineteen-volume Report on the Condition of Women and Child Wage Earners in the United States that provided the ammunition the women needed to press for more vigorous factory inspection and improved work conditions.⁵² Roosevelt also supported the proposal of the Federal Children’s Bureau which would investigate and report on all matters pertaining to child conservation and welfare, but despite his enthusiasm, he did not press the issue hard enough and the bureau did not come into fruition until 1912, during Taft’s presidency.⁵³ Sadly, it was not until after Roosevelt’s presidency that he seemed to truly endorse

⁵⁰Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 655.

⁵¹Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 655.

⁵²Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Summary of the Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage Earners in the United States : Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics*, Charles P. Neill. No. 175, Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, December 1915. <https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/title/3830> (accessed December 11, 2020).

⁵³Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 655.

the women's agenda of equality. While Roosevelt was unable to produce any actual legislation, he and his female supporters did make advancements in a number of keyways.

Interestingly, when Roosevelt finally endorsed women's suffrage in 1912, he took a leadership role and deeply committed himself to the cause. Roosevelt, always the optimist in his political influence, telegraphed Jane Addams in 1912 stating, "the Progressive Party is for women's suffrage, and I believe that within half a dozen years we shall have no-one in the United States against it."⁵⁴ After women have been fighting for their right to vote for decades, Roosevelt believed that with his influence as a politician of the American people, that within six short years he will have won for women, the right to vote. While his goal was admirable, it cannot help but appear a little condescending that he believes he exclusively had the power to influence the minds of the people, and given that he had this belief, makes it more of shame that he did not pursue women this right during his presidency. Nonetheless, "Roosevelt kept his word and continued to campaign for suffrage after his defeat in 1912. He gave numerous speeches and contacted Republican party friends asking for support of a federal amendment."⁵⁵ In a speech given in Vermont, Roosevelt finally made a speech with suffrage being the primary issue in mind and said, "there should be equality of right, between men and women, and we are therefore for equal suffrage for men and women,"⁵⁶ solidifying his stance before a public audience. One woman he worked with in his Progressive Party, maintained that Roosevelt did his best over those campaign years and that, "when meeting with female leaders he was never patronizing and presumed they were able. He even came at times to accept their militant tactics and at one point

⁵⁴Theodore Roosevelt, "Telegram from Theodore Roosevelt to Jane Addams," Telegram, From Library of Congress Manuscript Division. *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*.

⁵⁵Daniels, "Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles," 657.

⁵⁶Theodore Roosevelt, "Speech on Suffrage," Speech, St. Johnsbury, VT, August 30, 1912, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University, <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o291795>.

predicted that he might ‘soon join you women in jail.’⁵⁷ Roosevelt was present during many women’s rights gatherings and even demonstrations and stood as a leader for many women. He had the political influence as a male that women during this time did not, and was able to champion for their rights, and Roosevelt loved being in the spotlight and seen as a hero, even if he did not agree with everything women activists stood for. Suffrage was something he supported, and for many women that was enough.

While Roosevelt did eventually full heartedly endorse the women’s suffrage beginning in 1912, it draws speculation of why he may not have been so open to the idea while he was in the presidential office. It is possible he feared that raising such a controversial topic could further alienate himself from some regions of the United States, such as his dinner with Booker T. Washington had with Southern Whites. Afterall, White Southern Democrats were a huge obstacle to overcome in order to achieve women’s suffrage. The vast majority of them were directly opposed.⁵⁸ Daniels suggests it is possible that, “Roosevelt the politician, could not ignore the likelihood of eventual success of the drive to enfranchise women and he probably thought ahead. Whatever his chances for election in 1912, he would still be young enough to run for president in 1916 or 1920 and might enjoy the support of 25 million new voters.”⁵⁹ Though I think it is more likely that Roosevelt saw the success of women’s suffrage being ratified to vote in western states, and with it believed the time may have been right to finally endorse the equality of men and women in the east.⁶⁰ With Women’s suffrage existing in the western states, his endorsement would have been seen as less radical and would receive less criticism. Roosevelt

⁵⁷Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 658.

⁵⁸John Gable, “Theodore Roosevelt and Women's Suffrage,” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service.

⁵⁹Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 657.

⁶⁰“Today in Herstory: Theodore Roosevelt Comes Out in Support of Suffrage.” Feminist Majority Foundation. Feminist Majority Foundation, May 2, 2014.

was protective of his image, and another unorthodox ideology of his time could have cost him more of support he worked hard to cultivate. For a long time, Roosevelt was more under the impression that equalizing women was an impossible task and preferred to work on matters that he deemed more realistic. "He believed in the vote for women 'as a matter of abstract right,' but there was no sense in backing the demand since it would never be carried through."⁶¹ However, his opinion may have finally been swayed by seeing the ratification of women's suffrage in the nation's western regions.

Moreover, it is arguable that the exposure Roosevelt gave women in politics was even more important than his support for women's suffrage. A woman's presence in politics in the early 1900s was minimal at best, but during Roosevelt's presidential campaign, he gave women a platform in which their voices were finally heard. Even Daniels agrees that, "there is little doubt that women, even those of a class in which it was bad form to have a photo in the papers, were in politics and it was Roosevelt who made it possible. ... The woman political worker was here to stay."⁶² Even after 1912, women continued to work in the Progressive Party, and it was Roosevelt who urged that Jane Addams and Frances Kellor among others to be put into positions where they could act as party voices on questions of legislation and publicity. This endorsement showed that Roosevelt valued their opinions and judgement. Roosevelt also encouraged women to become active in all aspects of politics regardless of whether it was county, state, or on a national scale. Daniels writes that even Frances Kellor acknowledged that the Roosevelt's Progressive Party, "offered women a unique political opportunity because 'for the first time we are on the inside of a great political party with all the machinery of that party at our disposal.'

⁶¹Daniels, "Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles," 656.

⁶²Daniels, "Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles," 658.

Women were visible as never before at the convention, where Addams seconded the president's nomination, and was part of the inner circle.”⁶³ Roosevelt also sent a telegram to Addams telling her that, “Four women are to be put on the National Committee, and I trust that there will be a full representation of them on every State and County committee.”⁶⁴ Daniels even notes that, “[Roosevelt] predicted that he would put women in two or three places in his administration. He even intended to name a female, probably Addams, to his cabinet.”⁶⁵ These examples fully demonstrate that Theodore had embraced the idea of who he believed were exceptional women in his political party and encouraged their involvement in his effort to win the presidency. Taking it one step further, “During the 1914 New York Constitutional Convention, Roosevelt insisted that women be put on the ballot. 5 women were chosen to run in senatorial districts. None won election, since no party really wanted women on the ballot, but ... the effort had great value because of the publicity given women's accomplishments.”⁶⁶ This was another big push forward Roosevelt won for women in politics, men would have to get used to seeing women on the electoral ballots from then on.

The main issue here is that while Roosevelt supported women's rights after his presidency, he did not actually have any power to enforce them. He had to rely strictly on the political influences he had from his previous presidencies to try and convince the people for their support. Once Roosevelt was no longer in office some of that influence was lost. He was no longer the leader of the American people, but only the previous champion of the White working class, and no longer carried the same power as before. His support for women's right to vote was

⁶³Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 658

⁶⁴Theodore Roosevelt, “Theodore Roosevelt to Jane Adams, August 8, 1912.” Telegram, From Library of Congress Manuscript Division. *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*.

⁶⁵Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 658.

⁶⁶Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” 659.

three years too late, despite his previous claims that he stood to improve the conditions of all American people. With this in mind it is hard to determine exactly how instrumental he was in the women's suffrage movement. Some women still did not trust that he was genuine in his promise to win rights for women, despite his speeches and efforts to get women active in politics. They "rejected the idea of identifying with any political party and never believed his commitment to suffrage."⁶⁷ This is because of his previous actions as the sitting president. When he had the chance to promote Florence Kelley, he did not. When he had chances to support women's efforts to ban child labor, which he agreed needed reform, he did not. He was an avid supporter of gender roles and would scorn the women who did not abide by them. In the past, he called many of the feminists he now worked with hysterical, and while many of his speeches called to support the conditions of all Americans, the rights of women were largely ignored during his presidency, and the White working class seemed to be Roosevelt's main focal points for the majority of his political career.

Although Theodore Roosevelt commonly spoke to the public using phrases such as "all Americans" and "equal opportunity" his actions were not as inclusive to the disenfranchised as his speeches implied they would be. Although he believed in practical equality, he often lacked the political drive to use his image and political influence to inspire change and reform for the betterment of African Americans and women. While Roosevelt had made small attempts to improve the condition of African Americans, he ultimately abandoned their push for equality in favor of receiving White southern votes during his presidential campaigns. It illuminated the fact

⁶⁷Daniels, "Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles," 659.

that the approval of White Americans took priority over the rights and freedoms of Blacks. Furthermore, while Roosevelt did eventually fully support the suffrage of women in the United States, it was after his presidency and during the slow diminishment of his political influence, and it is hard to determine how much of a difference Roosevelt truly made. Women did not fully receive the support they needed from him until after he lacked executive power and some still did not believe they could trust his commitment to women's rights at all.

This perspective of President Theodore Roosevelt is important because he is not the great champion of all American that he is commonly romanticized to be. Roosevelt was unquestionably racist, and in many cases sexist as well. But he was important to the United States because many of his progressive ideologies remained focal points in American politics for several decades after his presidency. While he did not improve the rights of African Americans, he gave credit to those he believed rose up from their lower stations and appointed some into the American government. Those appointments served as important examples that Black Americans were not inferior to Whites and could be entrusted with higher political positions such as Collector of Internal Revenue. Additionally, even though Roosevelt did not fully support women until after he was out of office, they were given political exposure and larger voices thanks to their inclusion of the Progressive Party. Roosevelt even managed to get women on the New York political ballot. Many of Roosevelt's policies and moral values he held towards African Americans, were forced to be addressed by future politicians, and for women, many of his promises like fighting for their right to vote, were realized in the following years and decades after his death. Some scholars such as Gary Gerstle, even argue that it was Theodore Roosevelt

who is responsible for constructing a modern liberalism that would come to full fruition 14 years after his death, in the presidency of his cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁶⁸

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