

“A Perfectly Stupid Race”:  
Finding the Factors That Shaped Theodore Roosevelt’s Views On and Actions Towards  
African Americans

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Master’s Thesis  
North American Studies  
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January 7th, 2016

ENGELSE TAAL EN CULTUUR

Teacher who will receive this document: Dr. J. van den Berk

Title of document: "A Perfectly Stupid Race": Finding the Factors That Shaped Theodore Roosevelt's Views On and Actions Towards African Americans

Name of course: MA Thesis

Date of submission: 07-01-2016

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### Summary

Theodore Roosevelt is often seen as a progressive president. Yet his views on and actions towards African Americans and other minorities have come under frequent criticism in the century after his death. By looking beyond just his actions, we find examples that show Roosevelt's true motivations behind some of these actions. Though racial views may have played a part, it seems that shrewd political maneuvering played a more important role in both the dinner with Booker T. Washington at the White House in 1901, and the Brownsville Affair in 1906.

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## Introduction

Few countries are as obsessed with their future as the United States. The nation, and its citizens, seem focused on always going further, building towards a better, brighter future. The American Dream, that concept that always seems to define the United States, is present in almost all aspects of American life. On a grand, nationwide scale, the American Dream symbolizes that desire to be the greatest country on earth, with fair chances and equal rights for all. On a personal level, it symbolizes the idea that every man and woman can make something great of themselves. There is little time to look back – the future is always just over the horizon, and it will be a greater time for the country than ever before.

Even among political conservatives, a group whose names implies that they are perfectly pleased with the present, there is a constant drive towards the future. A glance at the campaign slogans for the Republican Party presidential hopefuls for 2016 quickly reveals common ground. Marco Rubio is campaigning for a “New American Century” (“Join Marco Rubio”), while Mike Huckabee adds some religious imagery and claims he wants to take America to a “higher ground” (“Mike Huckabee for President”). Yet here we also immediately see the odd paradox that the American Dream poses, as the concept of a greater America always seems to be built on the idea of overcoming struggles from the past. Ted Cruz couches his slogan in this paradox: he wants to “Reignite the Promise of America” (“Ted Cruz for President”). Similarly, Donald Trump promises to “Make America Great Again” (“Trump”). American politics, and in fact most discussion surrounding the American Dream, seems to be built around the idea that the American Dream is always just over the horizon, while the weeks, months, years or even centuries that have passed were just a speed bump on the way towards that Dream. It is, and has been for hundreds of years, a seemingly unachievable goal.

Though Americans themselves seem to be aware of this paradox to some degree (popular comedian Stephen Colbert’s book was titled *America Again: Re-Becoming the Greatness We Never Weren’t*, playing around with this concept), it continues to be a highly effective political strategy. Perhaps the best example of its usefulness in politics came just a few years ago, during the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Obama built his campaign around the themes of hope and change. His campaign logo was a landscape with a sun rising over an American flag, a striking reference to the positive vision Obama had for the United States. Yet the story that propelled his campaign ahead of his Democratic Party opponents was one that mostly linked back to America’s past. Obama was implicitly seen as a way for America to close the books on parts of its racial history, or at the very least set major steps

towards moving past it. Obama himself was reluctant at first to tie his campaign to a racial theme, as previous presidential candidates who centered their campaign around race had failed. When he was finally forced to address these themes after controversy surrounding his former pastor, he did so in a speech titled "A More Perfect Union". Eventually, it only made Obama's campaign stronger than ever before. Americans once again showed their passion for getting a better future through closing loops on their past.

Of course, other countries have their fair share of tragic events in their pasts. Yet few seem to harken back to them as frequently as Americans do. Each race riot in America will bring back reminders of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, and modern movements such as Black Lives Matter are rooted in these protests. On the other side of the political aisle we see conservatives advocating for gun rights largely on the basis of constitutional documents that are hundreds of years old, yet seen as almost sacrosanct to this day. Similarly, while Angela Merkel will rarely if ever be confronted with decisions the Germans made during World War II, comparisons to older American presidents will frequently be made to either damn or praise a current president. The Trail of Tears caused by Andrew Jackson's Native American policies are still seen as essential to understanding the plight of these people, while the millions that died in the Napoleonic Wars of Europe are a relative footnote in most high school history books. Tragic or powerful moments from European history are remembered, but only in the sense that we understand they must never be forgotten or repeated. Yet for America, the book almost never closes on history. The results of the Civil War have reverberated for over 150 years, and continue to some degree to impact daily political life. America's understanding of its own past greatly influences how it deals with its present and future.

Considering this, it is interesting to see the evolution of the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt. Though he is now considered one of America's greatest presidents, as the man who ushered his country into the American Century and one of the four faces of Mount Rushmore, that appreciation was not always present. Theodore Roosevelt left the White House in 1909, but it is widely acknowledged that had he stood for re-election he would have won in a landslide victory (Morris, "Presidential Biographer"). William Howard Taft, Roosevelt's Secretary of War and practically appointed as his successor, rode Roosevelt's popularity straight into the White House. This despite Taft not possessing nearly the same ebullient personality that Roosevelt offered. When Roosevelt created his own Progressive Party in 1912 after being disappointed in Taft dismantling some of his policies, he attracted more votes than the Republican Party though both lost to the Democrats. While still loved by many Americans, Roosevelt's fame and fortune in the political world fell away when he

turned out to be a danger to the future of 'his' Republican Party. Thus, when Roosevelt passed away in 1919, the appreciation for the man was already trending downward. The Republican presidents of the 1920's offered a vastly different agenda to the American people, and for a while Roosevelt was seen as an odd blemish on the Republicans' political and historical record. There was still some appreciation, but also "a postwar revulsion against military values, and a consensus among those making policy never again to attempt the kind of democratic imperial that Roosevelt (...) had wished upon the world" (Morris, "Theodore Rex" 564). The man may still have been respected, but his policies were quickly seen as out-of-date.

Perhaps the definitive view of Theodore Roosevelt in these decades came from Henry F. Pringle, who published *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography* in 1931. It was the first major biography on Roosevelt, and was for a while considered the authority on many aspects of his life. It in fact won the Pulitzer Prize for best biography the year after it was released. Yet contrary to what we might expect these days, the book shines an altogether quite negative light on Roosevelt. Edmund Morris, now considered the definitive biographer of Roosevelt, writes that Pringle "was the first major biographer who declined to take Roosevelt seriously". In his book, Pringle

"(...) mocked the Rough Rider's fake humility and, with documentary evidence and authoritative anecdote, demolished many legends that Hagedorn and many others had so long taken as gospel. He made full use of the Roosevelt presidential papers on deposit in the Library of Congress, and was clever enough to conceal the fact that he knew little about the final decade of his subject's life. If he was often unfair, his prejudice was excusable as a reaction against too much myth." (Morris, "Theodore Rex" 564)

By demythologizing Roosevelt, Pringle allowed new views on the dead President to be discussed in public debate. Roosevelt was no longer a shining figure on top of a hill; now his figure would ride the waves of history like so many other aspects of America's past. His actions would frequently be filtered through the lens of the present and what was yet to come. By the 1950's, the dust of Pringle's demolition had settled and scholars seemingly started delving into Theodore Roosevelt en masse. Harvard University published an eight volume collection titled *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, with the editors admitting that they "had eliminated ten letters for every one of the fifteen thousand [they had] printed" (Morris 568).

Roosevelt would ride a wave of biographical popularity during this decade, as other titles followed swiftly. Carleton Putnam's *Theodore Roosevelt: The Formative Years* followed in 1958, as did Edward Wagenknecht's *The Seven Worlds of Theodore Roosevelt*. In 1961, the then-definitive *The Life and Times of Theodore Roosevelt* by William Henry Harbaugh was released. Pringle's work was by then definitively thrown out of the window by all serious scholars of Roosevelt, though it had certainly served its purpose (Morris, "Theodore Rex" 569). It continued to be useful as a way of seeing the lens through which Roosevelt was viewed in the 1930's, but the opinions it offered and the viewpoint it seemed to have was mostly disregarded.

From this decade on, a number of presidents from both sides of the aisle would bring up Theodore Roosevelt as inspirations for their policy and ideology. A speech John F. Kennedy would have given on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963 had he not been assassinated featured numerous references to Roosevelt's views on foreign policy. Richard Nixon, a scant few years later, happily took Roosevelt's moniker of being the man in the arena fighting for the common people (Morris, "Theodore Rex" 569). Something akin to a game of hot potato started over what party owned various parts of Roosevelt's legacy. Democrats were eager to claim Roosevelt the trustbuster, the man who fought against corporations growing too large. Surely Roosevelt could have acted against the Military-Industrial Complex that Eisenhower had warned against. Then, when the Vietnam War started ramping up, Roosevelt was once again seen by many of everything that was wrong with the United States. The former President was seen as "a bully, warmonger, and racist. He was castigated for being unaware of the civil rights movement, free sex, meditation and mutually assured destruction" (Morris, "Theodore Rex" 569-570). The New Left of the 1970s, especially, was quick to distance themselves from most of Roosevelt's ideology. Even now, the debate continues. Barack Obama will frequently invoke Roosevelt's vision in speeches and is happy to compare himself to the Republican president (Nakamura, Kornblut, and Rucker). On the other side of the aisle, prominent conservatives like Glenn Beck have disowned Roosevelt from their party and are labeling him a socialist (Avlon). This has all relatively little effect on Roosevelt's reputation amongst ordinary Americans: in a recent poll he was still voted America's fourth-greatest president, ranking only behind George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt ("Washington, Lincoln Most Popular Presidents"). As we have seen though, the dust on American history rarely settles, and his reputation might shift again in the next few decades or even centuries. Whenever next the prism of the future reshapes Americans' view on the past, even the reputation of Theodore Roosevelt might not be safe.



In fact, we might be at such a crucial moment in time right now. Though Roosevelt was praised as a progressive President, defending the rights of the working classes, he failed to achieve much regarding minorities. Roosevelt did not see African Americans as true equals to white Americans, and felt that they were simply unqualified for many positions that went to white people. The low point in Roosevelt's actions regarding race came during his involvement in the Brownsville Affair of 1906. Roosevelt was responsible for deciding to dishonorably discharge 167 black soldiers, a move that led to wide criticism both from within the black community and the greater American populace.

The wider response to Roosevelt's involvement in the Brownsville Affair differed from decade to decade, as new current events allowed Americans to reevaluate what exactly had occurred through new lenses. Angry responses came from the black community immediately after, while the actions were put in a broader negative context by the 1930s as Roosevelt's reputation as a warmonger and racist became established by academics and biographers such as Henry F. Pringle. Though the issue would then disappear from the forefront of public knowledge for a few decades, it once again became an issue of great concern by the 1970s. Civil rights had by this time become an important issue throughout America, and within both academic and political communities it became possible to delve into some other black spots of America's recent history regarding race. Roosevelt's role in the Brownsville Affair was condemned by some as a "shocking act of racism" (Weaver), and a new investigation was published over sixty years after the original events. The results of this investigation led to new hearings by Congress, as President Nixon finally decided the soldiers should be reinstated into the army.

This conclusion to the Brownsville Affair in a legal sense also quieted the debate surrounding Roosevelt's actions, and since the 1970's very little has been published regarding the topic. Yet though the broader political fallout of the Affair has been dealt with, Roosevelt's involvement in it was given relatively short shrift. When Nixon decided to reinstate the soldiers, Roosevelt's decisions were simply classified as wrong. But how did he come to those decisions, and what does this 'wrong' choice tell us about Roosevelt's views on race, if anything? Through this thesis, I hope to shed some new light on Roosevelt's views on African Americans, with all the knowledge we possess today, with letters and other texts by Roosevelt and his contemporaries, recent biographies and modern thinking on racial issues. And as is the American tradition, I hope to do so by placing it in some contemporary debates surrounding race. How can we understand Roosevelt's actions, what were they based on, and what do they tell us about how Roosevelt viewed race and dealt with it during his presidency?

I will do this by relating the actions of the Brownsville Affair to a crucial earlier moment in Roosevelt's involvement with African Americans. Shortly after becoming President in 1901, Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House. Washington was one of the, if not the most well-known black men among white Americans. Yet the 1901 dinner caused an uproar, as it was the very first time a president 'entertained' a black man at the White House. The response to this event, which preceded the Brownsville Affair by about five years, offers some insights of how Roosevelt dealt with issues surrounding race. What do the responses from the media and politics to the Booker T. Washington Dinner tell us about the state of the African American in American life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?

Though the focus of this thesis is Theodore Roosevelt's handling of the Brownsville Affair, it is important to understand some of Roosevelt's education and other actions regarding racial issues. As such, the thesis will open with a look at the ideas and people that shaped Roosevelt's views on race. From the Southern family on his mother's side to the Neo-Lamarckian views he picked up in college, Roosevelt's understanding of race seemed to come from a solid theoretical ground. Yet as his involvement in the Spanish-American War would show, that theoretical view might swiftly be set aside once Roosevelt came face-to-face with those of another race.

In the final chapters, I will set out the events that encompass the Brownsville Affair, the reaction from the press at the time, and what Roosevelt's response to it might tell us about his views on race and African Americans. By the end I hope to provide a greater understanding of the thought and motivation that went into Roosevelt's actions. The goal of this text is not to provide a definitive answer on what Roosevelt's views on race might have been, but to delve into the various motives that could have played a role in these actions. What political, social and racial factors might have played a role in the Brownsville Affair and the dinner with Booker T. Washington, and how did Theodore Roosevelt himself feel these factors influenced him? What was Roosevelt's attitude to African American racial politics, and how did that attitude shape his views in important political issues during his presidency?

Before starting this thesis, I feel it is important to consider the evolution of racial thought. In no way is it my intention to argue that the actions of Roosevelt should not be considered racist in a current-day environment. Ideas on race have shifted greatly in the past hundred years, and there is no denying that many if not all of Roosevelt's views on race would now be considered outdated. The question that I hope to answer through this thesis is

one that is based on context. Where do Roosevelt's views on race originate, how did they fit in the spirit of the time, and what consequences did his views have? Did his decisions on the Brownsville Affair come from these views, or was there more at play? A number of texts that deal with the Brownsville Affair are quick to condemn Roosevelt as a racist and his actions as repulsive. Accurate and appropriate as that may be, I feel it is also giving short shrift to some of the other machinations that might have been in play at the time. Because of these condemnations it is a part of Roosevelt's history that in some sense has not been properly explored, at least not through the political and social dimensions that might provide new contexts. With America's struggle with racial inequality once again at the forefront of political debate, I hope that this look into Roosevelt's actions allows us to better understand some of the factors that continue to play a role.

## Literature review

For most of the twentieth century, Roosevelt was at or near the top of lists of popular presidents. Though his popularity would have its ups and downs in the years immediately following his death, it seems at this point to be relatively stable. This has led to a near continuous interest in Roosevelt's life and times in the past century. As such, numerous biographies and academic texts regarding the former President have been written over the years. Chronicling these authors provides us with insight into the trajectory of Roosevelt's reputation, and the topics that were most relevant to the author at the time of writing.

We see this, for example, in one of the first full biographies published on Roosevelt's life. This was Henry F. Pringle's *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography*, published in 1931. The book was well-regarded in its time, and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1932. Pringle's biography was written during perhaps the lowest point of Roosevelt's reputation. Though Roosevelt was seen as one of the greatest American presidents in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, biographers were not so kind to him in the years immediately following his death. After his Presidency, Roosevelt had given the American populace plenty of reasons to be down on him. He had caused a split in the Republican Party by founding his Progressive Party, and his positive feelings on war clashed with the hundreds of thousands of men that were killed during the harsh First World War. Pringle follows that negative outlook, and is critical of most of Roosevelt's views and actions. Though Roosevelt had shaped the United States in a way that would prove to be highly influential for most of the 20th century, America was not yet wholly comfortable with that shape prior to the Second World War. As such, Pringle offers a more critical lens at Roosevelt's life. Yet he is not critical of Roosevelt's views or actions on race, as is not wholly surprising for a book published in 1931. Though the NAACP was technically active at the time, most of America paid little attention to their struggle for equality. As such, most events relating to race are little more than a footnote in Pringle's writing. Both Brownsville and the Booker T. Washington are described in one short sentence as "tangles in which Roosevelt became involved that made his countrymen love him" (Pringle 173), a description that could not be further from how these events are perceived today.

What is perhaps surprising is how much of the content of a biography can be influenced simply by the time period it was published in. The fact that Pringle remarks upon the events of the Dinner and Brownsville at all is somewhat significant. Most prior biographies were written by friends or people close to Roosevelt, and tended to describe the relationship between the author and the former President. Other biographies were little more than attempts

to cash in on the popularity of the Roosevelt name. *Theodore Roosevelt and His Times*, for example, a book in the *The Chronicles of America Series* written by Harold Howland and published in 1921, contains not a single reference to the plight of African Americans during Roosevelt's Presidency. The book comes in at slightly under 300 pages, and makes no reference to Booker T. Washington, Brownsville, or Roosevelt's views on black people.

For well over forty years after his death, biographers paid little attention to Roosevelt's actions relating to race. The authors seemingly felt the subject to be relatively unimportant, just as most Americans were content to ignore the growing complaints of African Americans for as long as possible. If they mentioned it at all, it was usually discussed in little more than a sentence or paragraph, as Pringle did in his biography. Even authors that claimed to focus on Roosevelt's progressivism did not see fit to pay much attention to this aspect of his career. In 1948, Richard Hofstadter wrote *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, in which he provides an overview of how various Presidents shaped American politics. Hofstadter describes Roosevelt as "the conservative as a progressive" (Hofstadter 207), and discusses the Square Deal, the Progressive Party and various progressive policies Roosevelt focused on. In previous chapters, Hofstadter goes into detail on Jefferson's role in allowing slavery to continue to exist, and Lincoln's role in abolishing it. Yet when he discusses Roosevelt, the single reference to his actions regarding race comes when Hofstadter claims "[Roosevelt] had generous enthusiasms. He invited Booker T. Washington to the White House, elevated Holmes to the Supreme Court, and gave Edwin Arlington Robinson a political sinecure" (Hofstadter 228-229).

By the late 1960s, some biographers start including sections on the various incidents relating to race Roosevelt was involved in. In the 1958 biography *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, George E. Mowry claims that Roosevelt was seen as "champion of the Negro" (165) following his invitation of Booker T. Washington to the White House. Yet Mowry also gets a number of crucial facts wrong: he claims Washington was invited to lunch at the White House (165), and when discussing Brownsville remarks that the soldiers were dishonorably discharged shortly before the 1906 election, while it actually happened after. Furthermore, Mowry's description of the Brownsville Affair seems to imply that the soldiers were almost certainly to blame for the shooting, and he only briefly mentions the lack of proof against them (Mowry 212-213).

Though Roosevelt's life was perhaps too broad for a biographer to capture all aspects of it in a single book, it is still notable that, up until fairly recently, few of them carved out any room for subjects relating to race. The fact that this topic has only been in vogue since the

latter half of the 20th century indicates just how much even a study of American history is influenced by debates currently playing in society. Though these books were not necessarily valuable sources on the events described in this paper, they did provide interesting insight into how they were perceived and discussed in the years after Roosevelt's death.

Currently, Edmund Morris' trilogy seems to be the most well-regarded biography of Roosevelt's life. The complete work encompasses well over two-thousand pages, and was published fairly recently. The first part, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, was published in 1979, while *Theodore Rex* followed in 2001 and *Colonel Roosevelt* in 2010. *Theodore Rex* deals with Roosevelt's time in the White House, but dedicates only half a chapter to the Brownsville Affair and mixes it in with more exciting tales of Roosevelt's plans for South America. Morris is relatively uncritical of Roosevelt's handling of the affair, even though he is apt to hand out praise for more positive moments in the President's history. A page or two are dedicated to Booker T. Washington's remarks on the affair to Roosevelt, and they conveniently double as a way to discuss some of the criticism of Roosevelt's handling of it. Though the positivity Morris effuses makes *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, *Theodore Rex* and *Colonel Roosevelt* some of the most enjoyable presidential biographies out there, they eventually make the reader wonder if Roosevelt had any flaws at all.

More exhaustive discussion of Roosevelt's views on and actions relating to race can be found in more specialized texts. Thomas G. Dyer's *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* deals exclusively with Roosevelt's racial upbringing, and his writing and views on different non-white races. Dyer has collected a large amount of Roosevelt's writings on race, and also delves into some of the common racial theories of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though not necessarily what Dyer set out to do, *The Idea of Race* also provides some insight into how Roosevelt's views evolve over time. The author dedicates a chapter to Roosevelt's racial education, as in the views he was taught by his parents and through schooling. These views contrast quite interestingly with Roosevelt's racial actions in later life, and also provide insight into how his opinions were greatly shaped by those around him and by prevailing common thought of the societal circles he moved in. Dyer limits himself almost entirely to these views and Roosevelt's education on race, and the text does not go into detail on how these views affected actual policy.

There are two prominent texts that deal with the Roosevelt-Washington dinner of 1901. The first is *Guest of Honor*, a 2012 book by Deborah Davis. The book provides a deep delve into what brought Theodore Roosevelt and Booker T. Washington together, discussing both their upbringings and paths to power. It also paints a picture of the racial landscape of

America the two men grew up in, offering insight into how monumental the event could be considered. However, the book is entirely focused on the dinner, and is thus somewhat limited in scope. Davis does not dive into what the dinner would mean for the later careers of both men, and what other, similarly racially sensitive events took place in the years following it. Thus, Davis is somewhat constrained in the connections she is able to make and analysis she can provide. William B. Gatewood Jr. takes a different approach in his 1970 book *Theodore Roosevelt and the Art of Controversy: Episodes of the White House Years*. It focuses exclusively on the various affairs Roosevelt caused between 1901 and 1908, and is thus able to provide a bigger context. *The Art of Controversy* includes many primary and secondary sources on the events and their aftermath, and thus provides valuable insight into the direct response to the Roosevelt-Washington dinner. In his chapter on the dinner, Gatewood Jr. seems to provide almost every single variation of how the dinner was described.

The same can be seen in some of the most important books dealing with the Brownsville Affair. Ann J. Lane's *The Brownsville Affair: National Crisis and Black Reaction*, published in 1971, provides an extensive historical play-by-play of the events and the response to it. Lane manages to condense dozens of responses from equally as many sources into one coherent narrative. She succeeds in painting a picture of how hard the break between Roosevelt and the black community was, following Brownsville. African Americans were shocked, appalled and heartbroken at Roosevelt's decision, feeling as if they had lost one of their most trusted allies.

Lane's book was written shortly after *The Brownsville Raid*, the book by John D. Weaver that is considered by many to be the definitive work on Brownsville. It was Weaver's thorough investigation of the affair that led to Congress reopening the case, which eventually gave way to President Nixon's pardon for all the men involved in the affair. Weaver was the first to shed new light on the Brownsville Affair in many decades. His book is relatively dry, but succeeds in showing how the soldiers of Fort Brown were almost certainly innocent. By being the book that got the ball rolling on the pardon, Weaver's work has nonetheless become one of the most important historical documents surrounding the case.

Looking into Theodore Roosevelt's involvement with racial issues is certainly not a new thing to do. America has long been obsessed with its own racial history, and for good reason, and Theodore Roosevelt is an interesting lens through which to look at this subject. Yet none of the texts I read seem to deal with the seeming evolution of Roosevelt's thoughts on race during his presidency. The man that enters the White House in 1901 seems to act vastly different towards not only the African American community, but also the Native

American community by the time he leaves his office in 1909. Though Roosevelt could be a complex man, he could also be very direct in his interactions with others. Yet he notably stayed silent during some of the most critical moments relating to race. Looking at every single presidential decision Roosevelt made related to race would certainly provide interesting new insight, it is also beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I felt a start could be made by delving into two of the most crucial moments of Roosevelt's presidency. The first, his dinner with Booker T. Washington, is now seen as one of the high points in African American advancement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the second, the Brownsville Affair, is regarded as perhaps the worst decision Roosevelt made during his presidency. Just a few years separate these events – what circumstances led to these radically different responses?



## Chapter 1: Roosevelt's Racial Education

In 1897, Theodore Roosevelt remarked that “negroes are not treated as they should be treated, and politically in particular the frauds upon them have been so gross and shameful as to awaken not merely indignation but bitter wrath” (“Our Poorer Brother”). It is quotes and remarks like these that have shaped America’s perception of Theodore Roosevelt, the 26<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. The legacy of Roosevelt is striking: he was a strongman, remembered for being a trustbuster, offering a ‘square deal’ to all, and as the man who opened up America to the rest of the world and thus launched the United States into the American Century. His popularity lasted throughout most of his presidency, and even as he chose not to be electable in 1908 his popularity helped launch Taft into the Presidency. Though Roosevelt’s popularity waned a bit after his death, he is at this point considered one of America’s greatest presidents by many well-known scholars. Much of Roosevelt’s popularity can arguably be traced back to his progressive bent. Theodore Roosevelt was a man who fought for the people, as signified by his central piece of policy: the ‘Square Deal’. Theodore Roosevelt was a man who constantly read, and was willing to listen to anyone he deemed an expert on a subject. His own opinions were frequently shaped by those surrounding him, and so to perhaps better understand how his vision on black Americans came to be it is important to look back on his upbringing and education.

Roosevelt was born in 1858, shortly before the Civil War. At this time, America was still a nation divided when it came to African-Americans and slavery, and cracks in the divide between North and South were popping up more frequently. During the preceding decades more and more African American slaves from the South attempted to flee to the Northern states where slavery had been abolished. Roosevelt grew up in unique surroundings considering the different sides of the conflict: his mother’s family came from the South, while his father’s was based in the North. Relatives of Theodore’s mother even fought for the South during the war itself, which was part of the reason why his father never fought in it: his mother was worried her husband could eventually be faced with killing her own relatives, and forbade him to fight.

Theodore’s family on his father’s side had a lineage the young Roosevelt would frequently boast of in later life. The family had moved to the United States in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Dutch Claes Maartenszen van Rosenvelt moved from the province of Zeeland to what was then still Nieuw Amsterdam. Claes had bought 48 acres of farm land in America, vast parts of what is now known as Manhattan. The land Claes and the van

Rosenvelts used to own is now home to the Empire State Building, amongst many other New York landmarks. Nicholas Roosevelt, son of Claes, was the first of the Roosevelt clan to try his hand at American politics. He became an alderman for New York in 1698 at the age of 40, and again in 1715. The impact Nicholas himself had on politics was relatively small, but a first mark by the Roosevelts in political history had been made. Furthermore, Nicholas had ten children, two of which would come to define their family for centuries to come. Johannes Roosevelt was born in 1689, and would become the first of the Oyster Bay Roosevelts. This was the branch of the family that would eventually include both Theodore and Eleanor Roosevelt. Jacobus Roosevelt, born in 1692, would become the progenitor of the Hyde Park branch of the family which would eventually bring us Franklin D. Roosevelt. Johannes and his wife Heyltje Sjoerts moved to the Oyster Bay and would have eleven children, including Theodore's great-great-grandfather Jacobus Roosevelt born in 1724. Johannes was mostly a businessman, though like his father he was also alderman for a few years: assistant alderman for New York from 1717 to 1727, and alderman from 1730 to 1733.

It is very likely that by Johannes' generation multiple members of the Roosevelt family had owned slaves. The family had been concentrated mostly around Manhattan and other parts of New York or Nieuw Amsterdam, an area that contained one of the largest number of slaves of all of the Thirteen Colonies. But by 1741, the slave population had grown so much they were beginning to pose a problem in what later became known as the 'Slave Insurrection of 1741', or the 'Great Negro Plot'. In this year various barns, houses, forts and other buildings were burnt to the ground throughout New York. The culprit of these crimes was often unknown, but it was slaves who were accused of arson in almost every single case (Lepore). The events would later become more well known as 'The New York Conspiracy of 1741', as the prosecution was often on a witch hunt to accuse as many blacks and poor whites as possible to ensure the richer folks would not need to worry about a revolt. Through intimidation and scare tactics, they aimed to ensure that any threat or riot could be avoided.

It is through a link to the Roosevelt family that we can better understand the conspiratorial nature of the events of 1741. This is because an African American named Quack was one of the first slaves accused of arson. This slave was in the possession of Johannes Roosevelt, and it was Johannes who came to Quack's defense in the trial. Johannes would go on to state that Quack had an excellent alibi, and had been at home at the time of the supposed crime. Though Johannes was a respected member of New York society at the time, and his testimony would thus ordinarily have been sufficient to declare Quack not guilty, the judge convicted the slave anyway (Lepore). Quack was burnt at the stake a few days later, and

many hundreds of African Americans would be convicted for other crimes of arson in the following months. Johannes Roosevelt and his family would continue to own slaves, but had at least resisted the easiest option of simply refusing to offer any defense for Quack at all.

Over the next few generations the Oyster Bay Roosevelts would steadily continue increasing their stature. Almost all of the male Roosevelts became involved with either the business or political side of New York, accruing both financial wealth and political power. Theodore's grandfather Cornelius Van Schaack Roosevelt, for example, who was born three generations after Johannes Roosevelt, was one of the richest men of New York City and thus one of the richest men of the entire country. Cornelius had inherited a large amount of that money from his father, but he himself also proved quite adept at business. He founded the Chemical Bank, which became one of the largest banks of New York City. The bank continues to exist to this day, and after a series of mergers and take-overs is now known as the JP Morgan Chase Bank, one of America's four biggest banks. Proving the continued strong ties of the Roosevelt family to the political and economic upper classes, Cornelius' brother was James John Roosevelt. This Roosevelt was an alderman in New York's state assembly, who would later become a congressman, and would for a short time also be New York's District Attorney and a member of its Supreme Court.

Theodore's father, Theodore Sr., was born in New York state, and lived there for most of his life. He had four older brothers, Silas, James, Cornelius Jr. and Robert, and a younger brother who died at the age of one. His career path differed somewhat from his predecessors. Though Theodore Sr. worked for the Roosevelt and Son family business of importing plate-glass, he was mostly respected for being a philanthropist.

The Oyster Bay Roosevelts are traditionally seen as the Republican branch of the family, primarily because Theodore Roosevelt, its most well-known member, is one of the most famous Republicans of all time. Yet within the Oyster Bay Roosevelts there were plenty who did not stick to this 'doctrine'. The aforementioned James John Roosevelt spent most of his life campaigning for and being attached to the Democratic Party, for example, and there were a few Roosevelts who stayed away from politics as much as possible and focused themselves on their business. On the issue of slavery the family did little to stray from what was commonly accepted. Johannes Roosevelt, first of the Oyster Bay Roosevelts, owned a number of slaves himself, and there are some indications that his son Jacobus did so too. The process of the abolition of slavery in New York State started after the American Revolution, towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it appears quite likely slaves were in the possession of the Roosevelts up to the introduction of abolition.

Slavery was a part of New York state's history almost from the day it was founded as Nieuw Amsterdam, as was the case for most of America. Nieuw Amsterdam was founded in 1625, and the first shipment of slaves arrived in 1626. Their population would rise steadily, and by 1703 almost half of New York City's households owned one or more slaves (Oltman). This was a rate higher than in practically every other American city. Only Charleston, the South Carolinian city in the 'slave-owning South', had a higher number of households with slaves. Manhattan is also home to the largest colonial cemetery of America. A burial site discovered in 1991 contained the bodies of over 15,000 African Americans (Oltman). Within the city, slaves were asked to carry out menial jobs in homes, while those who lived in the rest of New York state were put to work on farms. The increasing number of slaves created fears amongst the white population of New York City that the African Americans would eventually rise up and revolt. Whenever the fear of a revolt started increasing, such as in 1741, city officials would convict and execute a number of black people in the hopes that it would set an example for other slaves. The State of New York's process of abolition started in 1781, when the state legislature voted that those slaves who fought for the American side during the Civil War should be freed. Manumission, or the act of a slave owner freeing their slaves, became gradually more popular towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The New York Manumission Society, founded in 1785, fought for abolition and tried to help former slaves by opening schools for black children.

Members of the Roosevelt family put their stamp on local, statewide and even national politics from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century up until midway through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and both the towns of Oyster Bay and Hyde Park continue to attract a large number of Roosevelt related tourists each year. And like the Kennedys would be towards the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Roosevelts were somewhat a political dynasty. The family had started amassing political and economic power almost as soon as they set foot in New York, on both the Oyster Bay and Hyde Park branches of the family. It was, then, in many ways inevitable that Theodore would eventually follow in his family's footsteps. In this environment that Theodore learned his first lessons about race. His father, Theodore Sr., was a caring man, friendly and helpful to all who approached him. Theodore later wrote that his father "was the best man I ever knew. He combined strength and courage with gentleness, tenderness, and great unselfishness. He would not tolerate in us children selfishness or cruelty, idleness, cowardice, or untruthfulness" (*An Autobiography* 18). Senior seemed to instill his son with a sense of openness and understanding towards other races early on.

Theodore Sr. handpicked the tutors for his son early on, which was “of particular importance to his emerging sense of racial consciousness” (Dyer 2). These early tutors infused Theodore’s upbringing with some popular literature of the time, most of which offered a view on race we might now find outdated. Theodore’s early reading material included James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans*, the *Nibelungenlied*, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Saga of King Olaf*. Dyer notes that these texts “emphasized the virile racial character of the American frontiersman”, and “helped to shape an awareness of the Teutonic tradition and a lifelong sense of racial kinship with the German people” (2). Theodore spent a few months studying in Germany during his youth, and would go on to tie the idea of the ideal American back to the Teutonic myth, noting the similarities between “the hard-fighting, hard drinking, boastful hero of Niebling [sic] fame” (qtd. in Dyer 2) and the American frontiersmen of his time.

Theodore was afflicted with many childhood weaknesses, including heavy asthma attacks, which meant he was for a long time a fragile child who stayed indoors whenever possible. Large portions of his childhood were spent inside, reading, investigating, and increasing his knowledge. As such, the full breadth of ideas he might have picked up during his childhood is impossible to fully list. Most of the material aimed at youth his age, including magazines such as *Our Young Folks*, was very traditional for its time in its ideas. Some of these publications offered racial stereotypes considered grossly outdated in our contemporary society, while others might appear more innocent at a glance but seem to still stress the boundaries that should exist between the races. The most progressive thoughts one was likely to find in widely circulated published materials at the time would be that black people should have some decent place in society, but were generally less intelligent and more fit for a serving role. Theodore himself noted that the four servants in the Roosevelt household were “really the best representatives of the devoted colored family servant type, their attitude varying from one of warm, personal friendship to the injured dignity of a big child detected in shortcomings” (qtd. in Morris 316). This seems to indicate that Roosevelt’s early ideas of race fell into line with traditional thinking of this time. Roosevelt enjoyed and appreciated the servants, but his description of them reads somewhat distant, as if viewing an animal and not a human.

Sources are conflicted on whether his mother or his father influenced Theodore’s racial thinking most during his childhood, or if it was even a factor early on. Thomas G. Dyer claimed that his parents and especially his father were “of particular importance to his emerging sense of racial consciousness” (Dyer 2), while Henry F. Pringle notes that Junior

quickly chose his own path, and that the “youthful Theodore became markedly more pro-Northern than his kindly parent” (17).

The influence his mother had on shaping his early opinions on other races seems limited. Articles claim that “the Georgian blood of his mother flowed feebly in his veins” (Pringle), and there are little to no indications that she had a profound impact on his education. Martha Bulloch-Roosevelt was a gentle mother, but her intellect seemingly provided little inspiration to her son. Carleton Putnam, in his biography of Theodore’s early years, notes that Martha (or Bamie, as Theodore affectionately called her) and her family stressed the idea that whites were the superior race (31). Theodore’s autobiography also makes note of the fact that his mother frequently regaled him with recollections of her youth, and life on the plantation (7). Dyer notes that though this might not have shaped young Theodore’s views on race directly, it might have caused him to think that the idea of race was “especially important” (5).

If Roosevelt were to follow the path of the generations that preceded him, he was likely to end up a powerful political figure in New York’s government because of his family’s history. However, young Theodore actually hammered out a very different path for himself at first. At Harvard College, Roosevelt excelled in biology, became a published ornithologist, and was greatly fascinated with taxidermy. After Harvard, he enrolled at Columbia Law School, though law did not appeal to him. When his family eventually pushed him towards politics, he dropped out of Columbia. He would later write that he did so because he “intended to be one of the governing class” (qtd. in Brands 126).

In his book *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race*, Thomas G. Dyer explores Roosevelt’s views through the lens of Neo-Lamarckist theories. Though Roosevelt does not seem to specifically mention the theory in any of his letters, Dyer argues that all of Roosevelt’s views can be applied to the thoughts behind Neo-Lamarckism. Dyer cites numerous letters, writings and speeches which support that view, stretching all the way from when Roosevelt is in his twenties to very near the end of his life.

Neo-Lamarckism was a theory that appeared first late into the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a response to Darwinist theory. Darwinism itself came about in this short time, and greatly shaped many biological debates of the time. It took the concept of evolution, of biology changing over time, and added Darwin’s idea of natural selection to it. This argued that evolution was a battle of the fittest, and the most adequately prepared species would be more likely to survive and thus more likely to influence evolution. Roosevelt himself was in disagreement with Darwinist thinking, arguing that he found it a “rather irritating delusion

[that] somehow or other we are all necessarily going to move forward in the long run” (qtd. in Dyer 33). Roosevelt did not believe in the generalization of always progressing, and would later in life remark that “throughout this immense period form succeeds form, type succeeds type, in obedience to laws of revolution, of progress and retrogression, of development and death, which we as yet understand only in the most imperfect manner” (qtd. in Dyer 34). Theodore believed that there was more to evolution than simply struggle, which is where Neo-Lamarckism came into play. This theory took aspects of evolution but replaced natural selection with a more direct focus on inheritance.

Neo-Lamarckist theory argued for the inheritance of acquired characteristics. This meant that it “emphasized the theory of environment as opposed to the importance of heredity,” meaning that “the racial past of any people was a “bio-social past”, one which combined elements of biological heredity with characteristics acquired through the influence of environment and culture.” Proponents of the theory argued that anything, even social aspects of life, might shape the physical shape of a race or species (Dyer 38). This differs from Darwinist thought, which argued that evolution was determined by survival of the fittest. That theory meant that any species living at that moment was already the product of thousands of years of evolution prior to it, which would continually ‘breed out’ weaker aspects of that species. However, those who sided with Neo-Lamarckist theories would claim that the weak could continue to survive, but were simply unable to achieve their full potential, at least so far.

Of course, applying evolutionary theory to various human races instead of the species as a whole is somewhat of an odd thought in modern times anyway, but in Roosevelt’s time many considered the gap between the whites and the blacks similarly large as between man and any number of humanoid species. Thus, the differences between Neo-Lamarckism and Darwinism are indeed a great key to understanding some of the Theodore’s views. Those who would believe in Darwinist thought might claim that black people were simply the weaker species or race, and their failure to amount to anything in American society merely proof that they had not been able to evolve to achieve anything in life. Followers of Neo-Lamarckism, though, could argue that black people were simply hindered too much by society to get the chance to evolve and adapt to it. It was not the biological aspect of black people that was weak, it was their society, history and culture. They might thus argue that, though black culture would need to be replaced by white culture, black people as a whole still had a chance to succeed in America and were simply not going in the right direction for this yet. As Roosevelt himself would put it,

A perfectly stupid race can never rise to a very high plane; the negro, for instance, has been kept down as much by lack of intellectual development as by anything else; but the prime factor in the preservation of a race is its power to attain a high degree of social efficiency. Love of order, ability to fight well and breed well, capacity to subordinate the interests of the individual to the interests of the community, these and similar rather humdrum qualities go to make up the sum of social efficiency. The race that has them is sure to overturn the race whose members have brilliant intellects, but who are cold and selfish and timid, who do not breed well or fight well, and who are not capable of disinterested love of the community. (qtd. in Dyer 110)

Though Dyer offers up various examples of letters that support claims of Roosevelt being a Neo-Lamarckist, an argument could be made that this is giving short shrift to Theodore's evolving views. There seems to be a marked difference between Roosevelt's racial views during his youth and the views he held towards the end of his life. There are clear signs that Theodore approaches race in a more academic sense during his twenties and early thirties. All knowledge about race, at that point, seems to come from his upbringing and his studies. He has had very little contact with 'ordinary' people, especially those of other races. In the circles he and his family moved in, non-white people would only be present as servants. The time he has spent in Germany however would apparently shape his views, seen in his frequently describing the Teutonic, Germanic race as the ideal foundation for an 'American' race. By the time Roosevelt becomes president, he has started to surround himself with at least some non-white Americans. Booker T. Washington has become somewhat of a friend, and an adviser on all issues related to African Americans. Roosevelt become willing to promote African-Americans to higher positions of power on multiple occasions. He has not suddenly become truly enlightened on race, admittedly, still believing that African-Americans are backward and individuals need to work hard to prove themselves. Yet he has come a long way from condemning the race as a whole, believing all of them have a long way to go to amount to anything in America's future.

We see these views evolving even more when it comes to Roosevelt's ideas about Native Americans. At the age of 28, he was quoted as saying "I don't go so far as to think that the only good Indian are dead Indians, but I believe nine out of every ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth" (King). His views were perhaps not considered as reprehensible at the time as they would be now, but they were certainly on the



more conservative, extreme side. Roosevelt, as discussed, definitely viewed the Native American race as savages, and believed that the only way forward for them would be to breed with white people. His knowledge was based on spending some time in the badlands of North and South Dakota, and encountering the Native Americans of that state, but it still seems clear that most of his views seem to come from books and popular sentiment at the time. During his presidency, Roosevelt would extend some of his progressive policies towards the Native Americans and ensure their race, too, would profit from his positive sentiment toward the poorer classes. He has few liaisons with the Native American community compared to his talks with Booker T. Washington and others in the African American community, but the more positive intent seems apparent.

It is important to understand the theories that lay behind the racial thinking of Roosevelt and other Americans at the time. After all, they greatly shaped how upper-class white Americans dealt with those of other races. It is safe to say that in modern times, race has become more of a social issue. It is widely accepted that differences in race lay almost entirely in how we treat those of a race other than our own. If a black man is less successful at something than a white man, the reason for that can usually be found in social, cultural circumstances rather than it having a biological footing. The opposite was the case in the time of Theodore Roosevelt. The 'backwardness' of the black race was blamed almost wholly on biological circumstances, and not on their political or societal position. It was simply assumed that black people (and Native Americans, for that matter) were too dumb and unevolved to be a match for whites. No education would change that, was the prevailing opinion. There was room for the occasional black person to rise above what was expected of his race, but Roosevelt and many others of his time felt that blacks as a whole just needed centuries of evolving before they could achieve what the white man had accomplished. The biological, and not the social, aspects of race were constantly at the forefront of discussions, which is why Roosevelt's belief in Neo-Lamarckism is such a big deal.

Certainly, Theodore Roosevelt's belief in theory was strong. He was a man who would frequently revel in his own academic knowledge, always eager to spout some new theory supporting his views whenever it could make him sound intelligent. Yet he was always a practical man, too, and would often times gladly be proved wrong by witnessing something that might have opposed his views. Though Dyer might claim that Roosevelt held on to Neo-Lamarckist views for his entire life, there is substantial evidence that as the years progressed and Roosevelt's world view broadened more and more, so did his views on race.

In fact, there are examples of Theodore jumping on the bandwagon of a new and developing racial theory but quickly abandoning it once he realized its deeper implication or understood its wrongness. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Roosevelt wrote letters indicating he was a supporter of eugenics and using the size and shape of someone's head to determine various other intellectual and biological aspects of a person. "Someday we will realize that the prime duty, the inescapable duty, of the good citizen of the right type is to leave his or her blood behind him in the world; and that we have no business to permit the perpetuations of citizens of the wrong type," Roosevelt wrote in a 1913 letter to eugenicist Charles Davenport, also saying that "society has no business to permit degenerates to reproduce their kind" (qtd. in Sussman). These ideas have obviously been rejected in modern times, and scholars will sometimes point to these quotes by Roosevelt to ridicule some of the former President's views on race. Most of all, though, it offers us a better understanding of how Roosevelt was sometimes perhaps too excited and eager to jump on board on whatever theory he picked up from those around him. Roosevelt's early framework of racial thought seems to be built at least partially around Neo-Lamarckist theory, but his views were so all over the place at various points in his life that it seems reductionist to apply all his actions to that mode of thought.

Perhaps the best example of how Theodore's racial views could evolve through experience can be found in his writing on the Spanish-American war for Cuba of 1898. Roosevelt had always been a fervent believer in the power of the military, greatly pushing for the United States to get involved in military conflicts wherever it could. He believed it hardened men, and was thus essential to creating what he viewed as the perfect American race. Thus, when America attempted to intervene in Cuba's war for independence, and a war between Spain and the United States broke out, Theodore was one of the first to get involved. He left his post as Assistant-Secretary of the Navy when war broke out in 1898, and formed his own regiment consisting of around 1200 volunteers. Though the regiment was officially the 1<sup>st</sup> United States Volunteer Cavalry, they became far more well-known by their nickname, the 'Rough Riders'. The name refers to the type of people the regiment consisted of: cowboys, miners and other outdoorsmen who were a tad rougher than was generally considered appropriate for the army. They drew not only from young people at colleges, but also "from among the men who belonged neither to club nor to college, but in whose veins the blood stirred with the same impulse which once sent the Vikings over sea," Roosevelt would later write (*Rough Riders*). The official first in command was Joseph Wheeler. Theodore was second in command, but only because he believed he lacked the training to truly lead his

troops. To the outside world, it appeared as if Theodore Roosevelt was the leader of these Rough Riders, not Wheeler. The regiment fulfilled an important role in the war, and became famous for the Battle of San Juan Hill on July 1, 1898. It was perhaps the bloodiest fight of the war, but also proved decisive in allowing the United States to beat the Spaniards. Though other regiments certainly played a role in this Battle, it was Theodore and his Rough Riders who would later get most of the credit for this victory.

The Spanish-American War had been the first war the United States had been involved in since the Civil War thirty years earlier, and it had been even longer since the country had had any conflict with another nation and not just its own people. Many Americans wanted to prove that their country was capable of playing a role on a global stage, but few considered the war more important for their image than black people. By getting involved as soldiers they believed that they could show that the black man was in all ways equal to white men. Jim Crow laws had started to crop up in the South in the years after the Civil War, and it was hoped by the African-American community that by participating in the Spanish American war some of that damage could be undone and steps towards true equality could be made. George Prioleau, a black chaplain in the army, wrote that “the American Negro is always ready and willing to take up arms, to fight and to lay down his life in defense of his country’s flag and honor.” Though Prioleau felt that “the Negro of this country is freeman and yet a slave” and America was little better than Spain, he also noted that “the Negro is loyal to his country’s flag” (qtd. in Gatewood, *Letters* 27-28). This was a common sentiment, with other black soldiers saying “we left out (...) wives, mothers, sisters and friends (...) to help break down that infernal race prejudice and to have a page in history ascribed to us. That is what we came to this, the Hell-hole of the Island, for” (qtd. in Gatewood, *Letters* 224).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, volunteer regiments were still for the most part segregated. As Roosevelt’s Rough Riders were part of the volunteer army, it consisted entirely of white soldiers and a few Native Americans. However, his troops were joined by the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> cavalry upon arriving in Cuba. These both consisted entirely of ‘colored troops’, except for a few white leaders. According to sources at the time, these troops proved essential in securing a victory. “If it had not been for the Negro Cavalry, the Rough Riders would have been exterminated. I am not a Negro lover. [I] was born in the South, but the Negroes saved that fight and the day will come when General Shafter will give them credit for their bravery,” claimed a reporter for the Washington Post, a sentiment echoed by (white) members of the rough riders (Edgerton 52-52).

While reading “The Rough Riders,” one can almost see Theodore’s views slowly change as he sees them fighting. The first half of the book has Roosevelt explaining in great details the type of men his regiment consisted of, and at some point it feels almost as if he is describing every single one of them in great detail. We learn that one soldier, Allyn Capron, perfectly exemplifies Theodore’s views of what an American should be: “he was the fifth in descent from father to son who had served in the army of the United States, and in body and mind alike he was fitted to play his part to perfection,” Roosevelt wrote. “Tall and lithe, a remarkable boxer and walker, a first-class rider and shot, with yellow hair and piercing blue eyes, he looked what he was, the archetype of the fighting man.” The colored troops get a far worse deal, comparatively, in this first half. The first mention of any colored troops is when Theodore describes a boat filled with them capsizing, and mentions that a white soldier, Bucky O’Neill, tried in vain to save them. Then, a fair few pages later, we have the first explicit mention of a named colored troop when he describes sergeant Wright as showing courage and coolness. It is a single, throwaway line, but is notable for being one of the first times of Roosevelt showing respect for a colored troop. This continues when Roosevelt describes the aftermath of the Battle of San Juan Hill, when he notes that “[our] men behaved very well indeed--white regulars, colored regulars, and Rough Riders alike.” He almost begrudgingly allows a modicum of respect: “In the cavalry division a peculiar meed of praise should be given to the officers of the Ninth and Tenth for their work, and under their leadership the colored troops did as well as any soldiers could possibly do” (*Rough Riders*). Towards the end of the book, Theodore makes the observation that he finds it ‘curious’ that “the colored troops seemed to suffer as heavily as the white. From week to week there were slight relative changes, but on the average all the six cavalry regiments, the Rough Riders, the white regulars, and the colored regulars seemed to suffer about alike” (*Rough Riders*). Remarkably simple as these observations may sound, they at least show Roosevelt made some realizations about the African American soldiers’ abilities to fight. Some might consider it damning with faint praise, but at the very least there is some degree of praise coming from the future President.

Of course, some of these views can easily be contrasted with other observations Roosevelt makes in his book. He notes that a certain point the colored troops lost their white leaders, and suddenly became hard to manage. Theodore goes on to claim that

“no troops could have behaved better than the colored soldiers (...) but they are, of course, peculiarly dependent upon their white officers. Occasionally they produce

non-commissioned officers who can take the initiative [like] whites; but this cannot be expected normally, nor is it fair to expect it" (*Rough Riders*).

In his book, Roosevelt also makes a few references to Native American soldiers that joined him. Here again, we can see how Theodore's opinions can change when he actually comes face-to-face with a different race. In 1886, Roosevelt had said: "I don't go so far as to think that the only good Indians are dead Indians, but I believe nine out of ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth" (King). Perhaps not too shocking of a quote for that period in time, but also clearly not the thoughts of a man who would consider Indians his equal. Yet in his book on the Spanish-American war, Theodore writes that his regiment contained a fair number of Native Americans: "Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Creeks. Only a few were of pure blood. The others shaded off until they were absolutely indistinguishable from their white comrades; with whom, it may be mentioned, they all lived on terms of complete equality." Further on, Roosevelt notes that "the whites, Indians, and half-breeds in it, all fought with equal courage" (*Rough Riders*).

On the other hand, Roosevelt's views on integration and the future of the Native American race is relatively unchanged during this period. He repeatedly mentions that the way forward for an Indian is to learn the way of the white man as quickly as possible. He makes an example of Pollock, "a full-blooded Pawnee. He had been educated (...) at one of those admirable Indian schools which have added so much to the total of the small credit account with which the White race balances the very unpleasant debit account of its dealings with the Red." Theodore also claims that "men of Indian blood, when adopted into white communities, are usually treated precisely like anyone else" (*Rough Riders*).

All of this is to say that though Roosevelt's views were almost certainly rooted in Neo-Lamarckist thought, especially early on, they were also subject to change. There are marked differences in Roosevelt's views from decade to decade. To judge his views on race during his presidency through the views he wrote and spoke about in the 1880s would be inappropriate. Certain views would remain consistent throughout his life, but other would slowly evolve over time. On numerous occasions Roosevelt would ignore the views he himself held and seemed to make decisions that appeared mostly based on his gut feeling. When confronted with the realities of his racial views, coming face-to-face with those people his views affected most, Roosevelt seemed often always willing to change those views, at least for a while.

## Booker T. Washington

Theodore Roosevelt became President of the United States on September 14, 1901, shortly after William McKinley was assassinated. Roosevelt, boisterous as ever, immediately embraced his new role. He had been very frustrated in his role as Vice-President in the months leading up to his presidency, and was ready to get back into action. Theodore's trademark excitement to get started almost immediately led to controversy, when he invited Booker T. Washington to have dinner at the White House just a few weeks after becoming President.

In the political world of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Booker T. Washington was one of the most prominent African American voices of his time. He was a black man born into slavery in 1856. Washington never knew his father, but he and his mother were freed at age 9. Though the family who previously owned them was willing to hire them as paying servants, Booker's mother felt that this would not allow them to achieve true freedom and independence. She moved the family to West Virginia, where her husband was living. The family was poor, and Washington was required to start working in the local salt furnaces at an early age. When his mother noticed Washington was interested in being educated, she gave him his first book. With this book, he was able to teach himself the alphabet, and even how to read and write. There was no opportunity for Washington to go to school until a year later, in 1866, when he started working as a houseboy for the wife of the owner of the local coal mine. She noticed his curiosity and intelligence, and allowed him to go to school for an hour a day (Davis 21). It was here that he finally gave himself a last name: prior to 1866, he was simply 'Booker Taliaferro', or Booker T. for short. Though many claim that he took his last name from his stepfather, who was named Washington Ferguson, Washington himself in his autobiography seems to suggest his name might also have come from George Washington (Washington, *Up from Slavery* 13).

During his years in West Virginia, Washington learned about the value of improving himself. He did not judge the chance of someone's success in life by the color of their skin, but by their moral character, noting that "some of our neighbors were coloured [sic] people, and some were the poorest and most ignorant and degraded white people. (...) Drinking, gambling, quarrels, fights, and shockingly immoral practices were frequent" (Washington, *Up From Slavery* 10). Washington continued to educate himself, but after a while felt he needed formal education. After he and his family saved up money for years, he left for boarding school in the fall of 1872. He walked and hitchhiked his way to Hampton, Virginia, and

enrolled there in the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. Though Washington had no money to pay for tuition and board, head teacher Mary F. Mackie gave him a job as a janitor to fulfill his fees. The chance given to him by Mackie made him “one of the happiest souls on earth,” he would later write (Washington, *Up From Slavery* 20).

It was at Hampton that Booker T. Washington learned most of the skills that made him so successful in later life. He studied as much as he could, and in the few free hours that he created a debate club to practice public speaking. He modeled himself on Abraham Lincoln, acting modestly to get his values and points across. Lincoln’s style was to frequently include jokes and anecdotes in his speech, and Booker would have great success by following this example (Harlan 68). He employed this style in a debate during his graduation in 1875, resulting in much praise from *The New York Times*. They claimed he “presented with vigor [and] carried the whole audience, both white and black” (qtd. in Harlan 76).

After graduating, Booker would further hone his skills and tried to figure out what to do next in life. He took a job at the Hampton institute in 1879, joining the faculty. The school was greatly respected by that time, and frequently received inquiries from towns in the South if they had any recommendations for principals for local schools. In 1881, the town of Tuskegee, Alabama asked for a white educator for a new industrial school for ‘negroes’, and the head of Hampton brazenly recommended them Washington, a black man, instead. Somewhat surprisingly, Tuskegee accepted, and Washington officially became the first African American to have his own school in the South.

Upon arriving in Tuskegee Washington discovered that the school did not yet exist. A small amount of money had been raised to build and support it, but all the work had yet to be done. It was at this point that we get an excellent example of how good Washington was of convincing others of his vision: in very little time, he had found thirty students to join his school. He started teaching them almost immediately, in an old and leaky church, and had them help him in building a school. When one of the students protested that they were at Tuskegee “to be educated, and not to work” (Abott 272), Washington demonstrated how important he considered the task by doing it himself.

Booker’s focus on hard work and technical skills diverged from what many other African Americans considered important at the time. After the end of the Civil War, many black people delved into classical literature, Latin, and many other ‘white’ sources of knowledge. Washington did not see value in this approach, and instead advocated a more practical education. Hygiene was high on the list of things he valued: he demanded that

prospective students of Tuskegee owned a toothbrush before they could enroll.

“[Booker’s] philosophy was that the man who brushed his teeth was more likely to succeed in life, and not just because he was clean. He understood the importance of image at a time when so many blacks were unfairly labeled “dirty” and “shiftless,” and claimed that one of the saddest sights he ever saw was a young black man wearing unkempt clothes, in a filthy, untended cabin, studying a French grammar book. French wouldn’t get him very far if he didn’t know how to take care of himself, Booker T. pointed out.” (Davis 45-46)

The fame and fortune of Washington and Tuskegee continued to expand, especially when Washington published his autobiography. The book, titled *Up From Slavery*, was read by the upper echelons of American power. Andrew Carnegie, one of the richest men of the time, immediately pledged \$20,000 to Tuskegee after reading the book. By the time Theodore Roosevelt became President in 1901, the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute had a 2,300-acre campus hosting 86 faculty members and 1100 undergraduates. Just two decades earlier the school had yet to be built, by Washington and his thirty students.

Yet if there was one specific moment that made Booker T. Washington the defining African American voice of his generation, it was on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1895. Washington had been asked to give a speech during the opening of the Cotton States and International Exposition, an event that organizers hoped would do for Atlanta what the World’s Columbian Speech had done for Chicago two years early. It was considered a tremendous honor for Booker to speak during the opening: few if any black men had spoken at major events in the South, and the majority of his audience would be the white middle and upper class. For the speech, he used the tricks he had picked up over the years: standing “straight as a Sioux chief” before starting, then later “bending his body toward the audience in a folksy, conversational way that called to mind the casual style of Abraham Lincoln” (Davis 67).

The speech is now often referred to as the “Atlanta Compromise”. Booker opens with what could be considered the very gentlest of threats, when he reminds his audience that African Americans constitute a third of the population of the South, and that “no enterprise seeking the material, civil, or moral welfare of this section can disregard this element of our population and reach the highest success”. This could be considered relatively confrontational for the time: he implores his white audience to consider African Americans and the impact that they have on white business. Later on in the speech, he also notes that a prosperous black



race is essential to the future of the South:

“Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward, or they will pull against you the load downward. We shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic.” (Washington, “Atlanta Compromise”)

Yet that confrontational aspect is hard to find in the rest of the speech. Though he implores white people to respect the hard work done by African Americans up to this point, he strikes down the argument that true equality should be immediate. Equality is a gradual process, Washington argues, and has to be earned. The crux of Washington’s speech revolved around the concept of “cast down the bucket where you are”: instead of asking for handouts, black people should instead work with what they have, as they already had for hundreds of years in his view.

The views Washington espoused sometimes hewed close to a segregationist view, a separate but equal approach: he called for society to be “as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (Washington, “Atlanta Compromise”). This was quite close to what most white Southerners preferred, too. Washington and the white Southerners backed up their views with different arguments, though. White people often believed African Americans to be inferior, and frequently considered them filthy, dangerous or worse. Any interaction on the level of equals with even the friendliest black man, woman or child could pose a threat to the white man’s carefully constructed view of white superiority. Washington, however, seemed to advocate his policy because he believed it was best for the black man. He, too, seems to argue that black and white are not equal *yet*, but the best way to achieve that would be through giving African Americans the ability to build themselves up. Segregation was not a tool to keep black people down, Washington seemed to argue, but a way to lift themselves up. If they proved themselves through hard work, the South would eventually see to it that equal rights would be granted.

Though it was this speech that propelled him to fame, the Atlanta Compromise was mostly identical to what Booker T. Washington had argued for years. Almost twenty years earlier he had railed against certain educated groups of black people he saw as spoiled, those who “knew more about Latin and Greek when they left school, but they seemed to know less

about life” (qtd. in Davis 35). He offers up a similar argument in his speech, when he claims that “the opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house” (Washington, “Atlanta Compromise”). His view of a practical, gradual type of equality was for the first time truly able to reach a national audience through his speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition.

The response of the black community to Booker’s speech was mixed at best. W.E.B. Du Bois, another prominent spokesman for the African American community at the time, was highly critical of Booker. Du Bois, and other educated African Americans who called themselves the “talented tenth”, felt that the Atlanta Compromise would be a dangerous path for the black race to go down. The group felt that they should fight for equal rights and opportunities as much as possible, instead of hoping that the rich white men of the South would gradually bestow these rights on them as a reward for working hard. Though Du Bois had agreed with Booker in the past, the two would develop radically different ideas in the next few decades. While Booker continued to advocate his Compromise, Du Bois became one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Du Bois and the NAACP would become an important part of the early Civil Rights Movement of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote an essay reflecting on Washington’s Atlanta Compromise eight years earlier. Du Bois wrote that “Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission. (...) [Washington’s] programme [sic] practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races” (Du Bois). Du Bois blames Booker for some of the lack of progress in civil rights issues in the preceding years. Though he does not hold Booker wholly responsible, he feels the speech in Atlanta did far more harm than good. Du Bois notes that, after Booker’s “tender of the palm branch,” three things occurred: “1. The disenfranchisement of the Negro. 2. The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the negro. 3. The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the negro” (Du Bois).

Some claim that around this time a split occurred in the educated black community, with two clear groups developing: those who supported Booker’s views, and those who agreed with Du Bois. In his essay, Du Bois claims that this is false. According to him, even those who support and honor Booker will find fault in much of his reasoning. “They insist that the way to truth and right lies in straightforward honesty, not in indiscriminate flattery; in praising those of the South who do well and criticizing uncompromisingly those who do ill,” Du Bois writes. “In failing thus to state plainly and unequivocally the legitimate demands of

their people, even at the cost of opposing an honored leader, the thinking classes of American Negroes would shirk a heavy responsibility” (Du Bois). He makes it clear that he greatly respects Washington, but feels it is important to stand up for his own views lest those of Washington damage the potential of what African Americans were to achieve in the next few decades. Du Bois seems to argue that there is not necessarily a hard split amongst the ‘thinking classes’ of black Americans, but simply different paths both of them are taking towards a common goal.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the response of white people to the Atlanta Compromise was far more positive. A journalist from *Century Magazine* claimed the speech heralded “the burial forever of the old South and negro slavery [and] a great cause for national rejoicing” (qtd. in Davis 69) That conclusion might be seen as rather hasty now, but it certainly fit with the hopes of many whites in the South. The speech came only three decades after the Civil War had ended, and the ensuing Reconstruction was still effecting the Southern states. The states had recently begun passing various Jim Crow laws, laws that severely limited the newfound freedom of African Americans. Many Southerners were keenly aware that a large part of their population was black, and they thus feared an uprising. The Jim Crow laws were intended to keep blacks at a distance as much as possible. Thus, when Booker T. Washington presented his accommodationist vision, the South was eager to embrace this. They were happy to have Washington on their side, as he himself had many black people on his side. The more followers Washington had, the less the South had to fear, seemed to be the idea.

This is not to say that Booker was responsible for keeping African Americans down. Many Jim Crow laws were already in effect by the time Booker presented the Atlanta Compromise. Considering the rampant racism and constant fear surrounding African Americans in the South, there was little if nothing he could have done to drastically change the course. W. E. B. Du Bois, whose visions would be considered only slightly more progressive in today’s environment, was at the time considered a dangerous revolutionary. Du Bois had power amongst black people, but very little respect amongst whites. Though some might claim that Washington’s Compromise held back his race, there is plenty of evidence to prove the contrary.

In the next few years Washington’s star would rise even further. He had been offered an honorary master’s degree by Harvard; the first time this had ever been offered to a black man. His eloquent acceptance speech was received incredibly favorably by the press present at the graduation ceremony: *The New York Times* wrote that “the colored man carried off the oratorical honors”, while the owner of the African Americans newspaper the *New York Age*

coined him “the Negro Moses” (qtd. in Davis 72). When Theodore Roosevelt first met Booker in August of 1898, the future president was eager to talk to him.

There is very little that indicates Roosevelt had met any African American men that he truly respected prior to this. References are made to friendly black servants in descriptions of his childhood, but they are passing references at best. And though he mentions some black soldiers who fought alongside him during the Spanish-American War, it appears that he did not fraternize with them in any significant matter. Compare this to the strong bond he seemed to feel with the (mostly white) Rough Riders, and it seems clear that Roosevelt’s contact with African Americans had still been extremely limited up to this point. We see this in some of his writing, too: it is still very theoretical, as has been discussed in prior chapters. His knowledge of, his plans for and views on African Americans seems based on what he has picked up from people he respects and consults with, and from books. This made his meeting with Booker even more significant: it would be the first time Roosevelt met a black man he might consider his equal. Even though Roosevelt was only about three years away from the Presidency at this point, the two men were in a similar place. They had both been prominently featured in many newspapers in the past few months. Theodore as ‘Colonel Roosevelt’ following the Spanish-American War, and Booker as a ‘Black Moses’ following his triumph at Harvard.

In the years that followed, Washington and Roosevelt would meet a number of times. Theodore told his friends that he saw Washington as “a man for whom I have the highest regard and in whose judgment I have much faith” (Davis 112). When Roosevelt became William McKinley’s Vice-President in 1901, he made plans to visit the Tuskegee Institute (Gatewood, *Controversy* 33). These plans were quietly scuttled when President McKinley was assassinated in early September, and Roosevelt became the 26<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Theodore had suddenly become the most powerful man in America, but was as keen as ever to consult Booker T. Roosevelt had by this time assumed that Washington was “the spokesman for Negro America” (Gatewood, *Controversy* 33), and saw his advice as invaluable.

As President of the United States, Roosevelt had to appoint many local political positions. At the time, the President would decide on port masters, postmasters and judges all around the country, even for some rather small districts. These positions were heretofore usually handed out on a patronage-based system: the President’s most loyal supporters were either offered positions themselves, or could pick which of their friends would get the plush jobs. Roosevelt, however, was not keen on continuing this system. He had previously been

Civil Service Commissioner from 1889 to 1895, during which time he tried reforming the ‘spoils system’ that had been created. He seemed intent on breaking the ‘political machine’, where almost all local, state and federal jobs were appointed based not on merit but on being friends with the right people. Roosevelt was trying to continue this reform upon reaching the White House, but with so many jobs to hand out, he needed advice. Thus, when Roosevelt was inaugurated as President on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1901, he contacted Washington almost immediately. Writing “I want to talk over the question of possible future appointments in the South exactly on the lines of our last conversation together,” (qtd. in Gatewood, *Controversy* 33-34), Roosevelt invited Washington to visit him at the White House as soon as possible.

The first meeting Washington had with Roosevelt as President was on September 29<sup>th</sup>, at 9:00 PM, only two weeks after the inauguration. He seemingly felt that Washington would be able to offer more impartial advice than the senators and congressmen who usually offered their picks to the president. This put Washington in a position of tremendous power: not the political machine, but a black man became partially responsible for political appointments. Both men saw this as a chance to improve the position of black people in the South, though Roosevelt was not keen to force black nominations through.

“[He] told [Washington] he had no intention of appointing a large number of colored people to positions in the South. Other presidents that tried that approach in the past, and it just didn’t work. (...) [Roosevelt] intended to pick the best man for the job, regardless of color or political affiliation.” (Davis 169)

Washington jumped on board, and recommended T.G. Jones as a new judge in Alabama (Davis 170). Jones had previously been governor of the state, and would be the perfect first example of Roosevelt’s view on appointments. Jones was a white Democrat, yet was also opposed to lynching and a big booster of education for both blacks and whites. Though he was not aligned with Roosevelt in a political sense, Jones had similar views on a number of ideological issues that mattered to the President.

By the end of the night’s meeting with Washington, Roosevelt was not yet fully convinced. Washington returned home, and continued his advocacy for Jones by mail. On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, he sent Roosevelt a letter claiming that Jones “stood up in the Constitutional Convention and elsewhere for a fair election law, opposed lynching, and he has been outspoken for the education of both races. He is head and shoulder above any of the other persons who I think will apply for the position” (Morris 49). Yet Roosevelt still hesitated:

Mark Hanna, head of the Republican political machine at the time, would be firmly opposed, and Roosevelt was none too eager to anger the party so soon into his presidency. On the other hand, picking Jones had a variety of other advantages. It would show Southern Democrats Roosevelt was willing to work with them, it would show Southern African Americans he could protect them, and it showed the political world that he was prepared to break their machine.

This quandary offers us some insight into the conflict between the ‘political’ Roosevelt and the ‘moral’ Roosevelt. As we have seen in previous occasions, Roosevelt was willing to stand up for what he believed in. He fought in the Spanish-American War he pushed so hard for, and was willing to make tough decisions as head of the Civil Service Commission. But he was also realizing the danger of offending his political power base early into his Presidency. At times when his political power was at risk, Roosevelt needed a little more prodding than usual. When the President had still not decided by October 5<sup>th</sup>, Washington sent an aide, Emmett J. Scott, to the White House. Scott further made the case for Jones, but also revealed that Jones had voted for Democratic candidate William J. Bryan in the last presidential election. Roosevelt response was as impulsive as ever: “Well I guess I’ll have to appoint him, but I am awfully sorry he voted for Bryan” (Morris 50). Mark Hanna’s response was “miffed,” with the Senator responding frustrated that he was not consulted before a decision was made: “Reserve your decision – unless in cases which may require immediate attention” (qtd. in Morris 50). Outside of the Republican machine, however, the response was about as positive as could be expected. The *Atlanta Constitution* wrote that Roosevelt’s appointment “electrified [the Republican party] (...) with hope of a new day” (qtd. in Morris 50). In Alabama, young Republicans grouped together to form a ‘Roosevelt Club’ to celebrate the occasion.

Beyond that, the response to the appointment was muted. The appointment of a local judge did not normally merit large headlines. And among those who did know, very few were aware of Washington’s involvement in the appointment. However, this lack of response might have actually boosted Roosevelt’s confidence. Though the victory might have been minor, he had still successfully managed to push back against the Republican machine. He had stood up against Mark Hanna, and managed to come out unscathed. Washington’s involvement in the decision was very underreported, which might have given off further signals to Roosevelt. He had been able to consult a black man without getting any flak for it. Prior correspondence showed that Roosevelt had trusted Washington for years, and he was perhaps relieved to learn that he could continue their relationship of trust while he was in the White House.

## The Dinner

On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1901, Booker T. Washington returned to Washington, D.C. for various appointments. By the end of that day, Washington and Roosevelt would have met once again, discussing various possible appointments in the South. The next morning, the news had already broken, and both men would be in hot water for the next few weeks and months. Southern newspapers opened with headlines as “Roosevelt Dines a Darkey,” “Our Coon-Flavored President,” and “Roosevelt Proposes To Coddle the Sons of Ham.” Within the week, South Carolina Senator Benjamin R. Tillman would exclaim that “the action of President Roosevelt in entertaining that nigger will necessitate our killing a thousand niggers in the South before they will learn their place again” (Morris 55).

Before delving into the aftermath of this meeting, it is important to first delve into what actually happened. After all, Roosevelt and Washington had met numerous times before October 16<sup>th</sup>. What made this particular meeting different was that it was reported as a dinner between Washington and the President at the White House. This would make it the first time a black man was invited to dine with the President at the White House. Yet in the weeks, months and even years following the meeting, new reports on what might have happened surfaced. Some claimed the dinner happened ‘accidentally’, others termed it a lunch, and some even said it was no lunch at all. By discussing some of scenarios that popped up, this chapter will give an indication of the significance of the event. Then, by discussing Roosevelt’s and Washington’s views of and responses to the event, I will attempt to explore how the meeting might have shaped Roosevelt’s views on race.

Upon learning that Booker T. was in Washington, Roosevelt immediately sent him a letter inviting him to the White House. Most sources note that the invitation explicitly invited Washington to have dinner at the White House. In fact, Roosevelt himself would later describe his thought process as follows:

“When I asked Booker T. Washington to dinner I did not devote very much thought to the matter. (...) I respect him greatly and believe in the work he has done. I have consulted so much with him it seemed to me that it was natural to ask him to dinner to talk over this work, and the very fact that I felt a moment’s qualm on inviting him because of his color made me ashamed of myself and made me hasten to send the invitation. I did not think of its bearing one way or the other, either on my own future or on anything else.” (qtd. in Gatewood, *Controversy* 32)

Dinner would take place at 7:30 PM, and Washington and the President would be joined by Theodore's family and Philip B. Stewart, a Republican businessman from Colorado. This version of events is confirmed by letters Roosevelt later sent to Stewart and Washington, and by various other second-hand sources that described day-to-day life at the White House. According to most of these sources, the group had dinner together, after which Roosevelt discussed various Southern affairs with Washington, as the two were wont to do. This was also the story sent out by the Associated Press over the wire. At 2 AM, a reporter summarized the whole affair in a single, innocuous sentence: "Booker T. Washington, of Tuskegee, Alabama, dined with the President last evening" (qtd. in Morris, *Theodore Rex* 54).

With the news not yet reaching the South by morning, early newspapers in the North responded positively. The White House received various telegraphs, thanking or congratulating Roosevelt for his progressiveness. "Your act in honoring [Booker T. Washington] was a masterly stroke of statesmanship – worthy of the best minds this country has produced" (qtd. in Morris, *Theodore Rex* 54) was one such message received in the early hours. By the afternoon, Southern newspapers were able to publish their response to the events. The *Memphis Scimitar* was one of the first to get a scathing response out there, writing that "no Southern woman with a proper self-respect would now accept an invitation to the White House, nor would President Roosevelt be welcomed today in Southern homes. He has not inflamed the anger of the Southern people; he has excited their disgust" (qtd. in Morris, *Theodore Rex* 54). Not long after, Senator Tillman came out with his aforementioned proposal of genocide in response.

Publicly, Roosevelt refused to respond to the news. In the next few days or weeks, he would not comment on what had happened, or even confirm or deny that a dinner had taken place. Yet privately, he indicated to friends that the response throughout the country disturbed him. "I regard [the attacks from the South] with the most contemptuous indifference, but I am very melancholy that such a feeling should exist in such bitterly aggravated form. (...) I shall have [Washington] to dine just as often as I please" (qtd. in Morris, *Theodore Rex* 57). No records exist of Roosevelt writing to Washington to discuss the situation, though Washington did reflect on the events in a letter sent to the President. He seemed remarkably positive about the eventual effects of the dinner, writing

"I do not believe the matter is felt as seriously as the newspapers try to make it appear. (...) I am more than ever convinced that the wise course is to pursue exactly the policy which you have mapped out in the beginning. Not many moons will pass before you



will find the South in the same attitude toward you that it was a few years ago.” (qtd. in Morris, *Theodore Rex* 57)

In a later letter, Washington would add “I cannot help but feel (...) that good is going to come out of it (qtd. in Morris, *Theodore Rex* 57). Both men seemed to not regret the events, but only admitted to this privately. This seems like a reasonable response for Washington – responding publicly would only put Roosevelt under further scrutiny, which might have put the relationship between the two men on the line. The response from Roosevelt, however, was more remarkable. Though he privately expressed disappointment and disgust at the Southern response, he did nothing to clear the air. Considering Roosevelt had always been keen to make headlines in the past, his sudden retreat from the spotlight causes questions.

There are further signs that Roosevelt seemed unprepared and unwilling to discuss his views on race with the wider American public. In the days following the dinner, various alternate versions of events started popping up while Roosevelt did little to disavow these reports of the event. Some sources claimed Washington just happened to meet Roosevelt while dinner was already being served, and that the President in an off-hand gesture simply invited him to grab some food as well. Others claimed it was a lunch, a story that would be repeated for years to come despite the invitation clearly being for a meeting early in the evening. Some even combined these versions of events, claiming it was an accidental luncheon. According to some of these sources, Washington did little more than grab just a few bites while he quickly stopped by the White House. At times, the words were used almost interchangeably, and from 1901 until the early 1930’s sources would frequently contradict each other (Gatewood, *Controversy* 43-60). Washington himself was not keen to deny these claims, as he himself even referred to the events once or twice as a lunch. However, it is believed Washington mostly did so to protect Roosevelt: “It would have been like the man Washington was (...) to tell a version, which (...) would do the least harm to the white man, the President who was his friend,” biographer Mark Sullivan would later write (qtd. in Gatewood, *Controversy* 59).

When politicians eventually did come to Roosevelt’s defense, they did so not by acknowledging how reasonable it should be for a President to invite a man to dinner, regardless of his color. Instead, they pointed to prior Presidents who had invited black men to important occasions, claiming Roosevelt was not the first to do so as their defense. Congressman Charles F. Scott of Kansas and others argued that President Grover Cleveland had invited a black man to the White House and even to his wedding. The claim was

apparently deemed so offensive that Cleveland himself eventually denied any and all invitation to black people for meals at the White House (Gatewood, *Controversy* 46). Congressman Richard Bartholdt of Missouri even attempted to defend Roosevelt by claiming that a black man named Julius Melbourn was frequently allowed to be a guest at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello plantation. If the founder of the Democratic Party was free to host a black man, Bartholdt claimed, why should Roosevelt not be free to do the same (Gatewood, *Controversy* 46-47)?

Sources even disagreed on the purpose of the meeting. Some claimed that during the dinner Washington was finally able to convince Roosevelt to appoint T.G. Jones, and that Washington left "[with in his hand an invitation to accept appointment as district judge" (Banks and Armstrong 386). Even Roosevelt at one point wrote to a friend that this was his purpose in the meeting (Gatewood, *Controversy* 39), indicating that the President himself may at times have been confused over what exactly occurred. As the appointment had been announced a week prior to the dinner, this version of events seems rather unlikely.

There are multiple ways to read the continued silence from Roosevelt following the dinner. One way would be to argue that Roosevelt was unprepared to wade into the racial debate. He could have been somewhat naïve in inviting Washington to the White House, acting on impulse and ill-prepared to deal with the consequences. Roosevelt was nothing if not impulsive, so there is certainly some validity to this theory. According to some sources, Roosevelt reacted "surprised" to the response of the South, realizing that some of the people "upon whom he relied for moderation and reason participated in the agitation" (Gatewood, *Controversy* 39). One of Roosevelt's primary purposes in keeping Washington as an ally and friend was to ensure that governmental jobs would go to the right people. Washington had a wide network of prominent people, and could in Roosevelt's views be relied upon to provide trustworthy advice. It was perhaps not even a question of Washington's value trumping the problematic color of his skin, but simply Roosevelt being temporarily 'racially colorblind'; being goal-oriented to such a degree that he ignored any other aspects that might be discussed in public surrounding his friendship with Washington.

Yet it is likely that a certain amount of opportunism played a part in his actions, too. Roosevelt was looking to build a Republican base in the South, and was hoping to attract black and moderate Southerners. Though these population groups were considered by many to be on the Republican side already, Roosevelt considered himself an 'accidental' President and thus wanted to strengthen his base as much as possible. Even behind some of Roosevelt's most impulsive actions, there was usually a plan, or a goal to work towards.

Given the controversy, it should not be surprising that different versions of events started circulating. What is surprising was how many versions appeared, and how much staying power they had. When Booker T. Washington passed away in 1915, a number of obituaries described the ‘lunch’ he had with the President. Even some of the papers that had described it as dinner fourteen years prior suddenly changed their story. When Theodore Roosevelt passed away in 1919, numerous sources still described an incorrect version of the events. It would take until the 1930s for a member of the Roosevelt family to publicly weigh in on what happened. When a journalist asked Edith Roosevelt whether it had been lunch or dinner, she consulted her calendar and confirmed it was dinner (Conan). Even though the confirmation of a dinner was now about as on-the-record as it would ever be, some Southern history books would still continue to refer to the events as lunch for the next few decades.

It should be noted that Roosevelt was by no means the last President to cause controversy by inviting a black person into the White House. Almost thirty years later another Republican president came under attack for a nearly identical incident. Lou Hoover, First Lady to President Hoover, would invite Jessie DePriest to have tea at the White House in 1929. DePriest was the wife of Oscar DePriest, the first African American Congressman from outside the Southern states. Hoover’s invitation was perhaps even more innocent than Roosevelt’s, as it was common courtesy for the First Lady to invite all the wives of Congressmen to have lunch at the White House. Lou Hoover was unaware of the slumbering hate she would awaken, as she was also simply following protocol. When the invite for Jessie DePriest was discovered by the press, both DePriest and the Hoovers came under immense criticism almost immediately.

Jessie DePriest’s appointment at the White House was linked to the infamous Booker T. Washington dinner in other ways, too. Following the incident, South Carolina Democratic Senator would read a poem titled “Niggers in the White House” on the floor of the Senate. That poem was first written and published in 1901 as a direct response to Washington’s dinner. The author of the poem is unknown, but it was republished frequently in major Southern newspapers between 1901 and 1903 (“Niggers”). The poem uses the n-word twenty-four times in just fourteen short stanzas, and suggests that one of Roosevelt’s sons marry a black woman. In its final stanza, Theodore Roosevelt is decapitated by the titular “Niggers in the White House”. Though the reading of this vile poem on the floor of the Senate was stricken from the record after protest by the Republican Senators, a few large Southern newspapers were happy to reprint it almost thirty years after it was originally written. If

anything, the incident perfectly illustrates how little America had progressed since Roosevelt first invited Washington to dine at the White House.

To judge Roosevelt's intent, over a hundred years after the dinner took place, seems almost impossible. There are dozens of sources describing the events, almost all contradicting each other in at times the tiniest of ways. Though we can be fairly certain that what took place was a dinner, and that Washington had been invited instead of accidentally dining along, the fact that we cannot be absolutely, definitively certain is somewhat remarkable. There are multiple direct and indirect quotations from both Theodore and his wife, Edith, confirming the version of events that originally became public: it was an actual, proper dinner, and Washington had been invited to participate in it beforehand. Yet other sources claim that it was Roosevelt who told them this was not, in fact, what took place.

After all this time, the question we should perhaps be asking is not what transpired, but what caused Roosevelt to respond the way he did? Why was he so hands-off in handling the affair? Even though Roosevelt would usually be the first to defend his record publically, he remained remarkably silent and non-committal on this front. There are a number of reasons that might have contributed to this. Firstly, Roosevelt had been President for only a few weeks, and had not been voted into the White House. He might not have wanted to risk his presidential power this early into his run, by undermining his popularity in all of the South. By allowing rumors of a luncheon to continue to exist, Southern voters who otherwise appreciated Roosevelt could continue to believe him to be fully on their side. Second, Roosevelt might have felt that the affair would simmer out sooner rather than later, and any public involvement from his side might only fan the flames of controversy. By remaining silent in public, he ensured that newspapers had little to no new material to publish regarding the affair. Finally, there are a few reasons to believe that Roosevelt was simply acting opportunistically, keeping one eye on his future legacy, and the other on his current political career. Roosevelt was a believer in the theory that black people would eventually be 'just as capable' as white people, even though that might take a long time. By being the first President to invite a black man to dine with him, he could ensure that future generations would look upon him favorably when black people were eventually accepted as equals. This is supported by some of the writing he did on the affair later. He wrote to friends defending his decision, but did not have these letters published until after his death. And though he wrote about feeling a pang of regret about feeling doubt regarding Washington's invitation to the White House, he made sure to not have those remarks appear to the public until many years later. He

made sure, through multiple avenues, that his progressiveness would be apparent in the future, but was unwilling to appear progressive about race in the present.

If we assume staying silent on the event was a remarkably cowardly choice for a man like Roosevelt, his relationship with Booker T. Washington does deserve at least some praise. This could be countered by arguing that Washington's views certainly did not represent the entire black community, as we see in W.E.B Du Bois firm rejection of Washington's Atlanta Compromise. Yet supporting Washington still did not come wholly without controversy. As compromising Washington was towards the South, general opinion of African Americans shortly after the Reconstruction Era was as low as it had ever been. Slavery had ended, but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jim Crow laws were popping up. This was the era of separate but equal: the white South was only willing to tolerate black people if they stayed away as much as possible. Not just that, the South was getting away with it. There was no effective form of protest against these new policies, either from within the South or from the government in the North. Open racism was tolerated, put into law, and black people could do little or nothing to stop it. Washington, though considered weak by some, was still at least swimming somewhat against the stream. He was able to accomplish things, and for that he was criticized plenty, both from within his own community and by white Southerners. Roosevelt seemed willing to support that fight, though perhaps not as publicly as the black community might have wanted or deserved.

Studying the Roosevelt-Washington Dinner shows us the two different planes Roosevelt's views operated on. On a private level, we can see how Roosevelt's views have evolved rather drastically over a few decades. The Roosevelt that confides in Washington seems markedly different from the Roosevelt of the 1880's, who would not give a black man the time of day. Though certain Neo-Lamarckian tendencies still seem present in his racial views, his approach has become more pragmatic instead of academic. In Washington he had met a black man he might at least on some levels consider his equal, a man who deserved the same respect he showed the powerful white politicians who surrounded him previously. Some might argue we should be careful to ascribe too much importance to this relationship, considering Washington was just a single black man, a black man with views that skewed closer to that of white men than others of his race. Yet we can see that, perhaps through Washington, Roosevelt seemed to gain a deeper appreciation of the African American struggle. Prior to meeting Washington, Roosevelt would write that African Americans needed to evolve further on their own before they would be the intellectual equal of the white man. In later years however, Roosevelt is looking out for African Americans to put in political

positions of power, and in other situations finding politically likeminded folks who would support that policy. On this personal level, Roosevelt has become more progressive over the years and seems to be ahead of the curve of America's racial views.

On a political level, Roosevelt is far more cautious. He seems unwilling to share the more progressive aspects of his racial views in public, perhaps fearing it might hurt his political standing. He will not stand up for Washington, and is comfortable in rumors and gossip twisting the true story. And though Roosevelt is prepared to appoint both Democrats and Republicans who support African Americans in important positions, he does not want to continue the previous practice of actually attempting to appoint black people in these positions. Though there is an argument to be made that this would be a pragmatic, more realistic way of ensuring things got done, it also undermines the image of Roosevelt willing to stand up for what he actually believes in. What drives Roosevelt to attain power as a President, if not to take action on the issues he believes in? It is this divide between the personal and political Roosevelt that helps us understand the decisions made in the Brownsville Affair of 1906.

## The Brownsville Affair

In the summer of 1906, a troop of African Americans were transferred to and stationed in the small city of Brownsville, Texas. Tensions quickly rose between the black soldiers and mostly white citizens of Brownsville. The citizens were afraid of the African Americans, not fully trusting the soldiers. Then, only two weeks after the soldiers arrived, the seemingly inevitable occurred. On the night of August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1906, one Brownsville man was murdered, another wounded. Witnesses claimed the shooting was done by men in uniform, while the white men in charge of the African American soldiers maintained that all men were accounted for at the time of the shooting. Despite these claims to the contrary, and after some lackluster investigation, President Roosevelt decided to dishonorably discharge all 167 black troops in the regiment. Roosevelt was heavily criticized for acting so decisively with very little evidence to back up his, and would continue to be attacked for his involvement in what became known as the Brownsville Affair. The issue would not be laid to rest in the ensuing decades, and would continue to be a sore point until the 1970s. A book published in 1970, with a proper, more thorough and unbiased investigation of the Affair, argued that the soldiers of the regiment were very likely to be innocent, and at the least did not deserve their dishonorable discharge. The conclusions of the book returned the Brownsville Affair to the political spotlights once again, and in 1972 President Nixon pardoned the men and retroactively honorably discharged them. The lone surviving soldier was offered a pension by Congress.

The Brownsville Affair is considered to be the absolute low point of Theodore Roosevelt's relationship with African American people. Roosevelt had been respected, appreciated, liked and sometimes disagreed with, but there was a certain common perception by Booker T. Washington and the black community at large that on a whole, Roosevelt was doing good things for them. This perception greatly changed after the Brownsville Affair. Roosevelt's poor handling of the situation resulted in a complete rejection by almost the entire black community. Booker T. Washington, once their golden boy, lost most of his political power when he refused to disavow Roosevelt's actions.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of what happened in Brownsville in the summer of 1906. What happened during the shootings, why were African American framed and blamed so quickly, and why was so little done to stop these accusations? What is the true story of the First Battalion of the United States Twenty-fifth Infantry, and what does it tell us about Roosevelt's racial beliefs?

The First Battalion of the United States Twenty-fifth Infantry had been a respected regiment, having been in action during various moments of conflicts in American history. The battalion had fought in the Philippines, in Cuba, and had helped to defend the frontier. Prior to the summer of 1906 they had been stationed in Nebraska for two years, and had served there admirably. They were then sent to relieve a battalion of the Twenty-sixth Infantry in Brownsville. That battalion had consisted entirely of white soldiers, while the Twenty-fifth Infantry's battalion was black entirely, except for some of the officers.

At first, it appeared as though Brownsville might be welcoming towards the black troops. Frederick Combe, the Mayor of Brownsville, was friendly with the officers and "encourage[d] an atmosphere of harmony" (Lane 15). Combe had served with black soldiers in the past, and "found colored troops well disciplined and anticipated no trouble" (Lane 15). According to Combe, there was no hostility towards the troops prior to their arrival. This is supported by George Newton, one of the soldiers in the regiment, relating a story from a local drug store attendant. The attendant had told Newton that the soldiers were "the nicest set of boys he had ever met" (qtd. in Lane 15). Yet there were also signs that support was limited. Citizens and officials of the city had written to ask the War Department to not send colored troops, and despite claims from the Mayor conflict was sought almost from the very first day. Of the four bars in Brownsville, two denied entrance to any black troops. The other two allowed them in, but required them to sit in a separate area in the back.

Again, we see how white Americans from the Southern states had a hard time dealing with race in the early 20th century. On a public level, they were expected to be tolerant, open, and not openly aggressive towards black people. Mayor Combe appearing somewhat welcoming of the troops supports this, as does the fact that the people of Brownsville appeared friendly at first when face-to-face with the black soldiers. Yet on a private level, they were harboring plenty of hatred and racism. Letters had been sent out by Brownsville citizens to the government and various military departments stop the black soldiers from being sent to Brownsville. Any minor conflict was quickly perceived as a grave provocation. A small, almost certainly accidental shove on the sidewalk gave a white man cause to assault a black soldier. A pair of disorderly drunk soldiers ended up in an altercation at the merest hint of a threat. The black soldiers might have been a rowdy bunch at times, but even the smallest of their actions was put under a microscope of scrutiny. This seems to indicate that the citizens of Brownsville were simply looking for an excuse, any excuse, to confirm their pre-existing notions of black people in general and these black soldiers in particular.



What might seem remarkable is that, even within the army, the black battalion was not fully accepted. This despite the fact that the battalion had served admirably in previous conflicts, and had never caused any real problems before. The troops had previously been stationed in Nebraska, and were to swing by Austin, Texas for maneuvers before going on to Brownsville. The great hostility towards black troops in Texas forced the regiment to skip these maneuvers. Captain J.C. Leitch, one of the white officers of the battalion, wrote

“In my opinion the sentiment in Texas is so hostile against colored troops that there is always danger of serious trouble between the citizens and soldiers whenever they are brought in contact. The hostility of a regiment of Texas National Guard toward the Twenty-fifth Infantry at the maneuver camp at Fort Riley in 1903 was so marked that it was considered necessary to take measures to defend the camp of the regiment against an attack which was threatened by said Texas regiment.” (qtd. in Lane 13)

It seems that the white officers were keen to protect their black troops, afraid that hostility could break out at any moment. Donald D. Hay, a Second Lieutenant, noted that troops “hissed and jeered” at passing black soldiers (Lane 13). Though the black soldiers were able to keep their cool, their superiors seemed to think an eventual conflict was almost inevitable. Michael J. Lenihan, a military captain, wrote to the War Department:

“Our officers and men at that time retained their self-control under trying circumstances. Can the War Department, if it puts them again, knowingly, in a similar disagreeable position, hope that trouble will be avoided? Judging from our past experience, is the outcome of this encampment liable to reflect any credit on either the United States or Texas?” (qtd. in Lane 13)

Here we see some of the divide that existed in the American army of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, all young men could be conscripted into the army. However, richer people were able to hire others to substitute for them, and those few intellectuals and elites that did fight usually landed in higher positions. Thus, if you possessed any intelligence or wealth, you were relatively unlikely to end up a common soldier. This meant that most troops were uneducated, and often tended not to be particularly progressive on racial issues. Especially those soldiers conscripted in the South would be unlikely to respect their fellow black soldiers, even though they might be brothers in arms. Higher-ranking officers and the

War Department were keen to change this however, sensing that a united army would be stronger in the long run. When Secretary Taft of the War Department received a letter urging him not to send black troops into Brownsville, he replied

“The fact is that a certain amount of race prejudice between white and black seems to have become almost universal throughout the country, and no matter where colored troops are sent there are always some who make objection to the coming. It is a fact, however, as shown by our records, that colored troops are quite as well disciplined and behaved as the average of other troops. (...) The records of the Army also tend to show that white soldiers average a greater degree of intemperance than colored ones. It has sometimes happened that communities which objected to the coming of colored soldiers have, on account of their good conduct, entirely changed their view and commended their good behavior to the War Department.” (qtd. in Lane 14)

This quote tells us a few things. First, it indicates that the War Department has collected hard numbers to back up the advantages of colored troops. Taft remarks that white and colored troops perform the same, and should thus be treated the same. For the federal government to statistically back up this level of equality is still somewhat significant. Secondly, it signifies that Taft and his War Department were committed to fair chances for colored troops. Roosevelt later decided to dishonorably discharge every single black soldier in this particular battalion, but prior to the troops' arrival in Brownsville they at least had some level of support from the federal government.

By the time the soldiers had only been in Brownsville for slightly over two weeks, their reputation amongst Brownsville's citizens was largely set in stone. It did not seem to matter whether the soldiers showed good behavior, poor behavior, or simply stayed back and tried to avoid getting involved in the town's affairs. The citizens seemed to have made up their minds, and tensions were high. Then, on August 12th, 1906, a rumor started to spread that one of the black soldiers assaulted Mrs. Evans, one of the women of Brownsville. There was never any proof that this incident actually occurred, but Mayor Combe nonetheless felt something had to be done. He consulted Major Penrose, a white Major in charge of the battalion, and the two agreed to a curfew for the black soldiers. This came not so much from a friendly request, but from a veiled threat. Combe is quoted as having told Penrose “Major, if you allow these men to go into town to-night I will not be responsible for their lives” (qtd. in Lane 17).

Things quickly went south from there. On the night of August 13th, 1906, a group of about ten to twenty unidentified men stormed through Brownsville. They fired a number of shots in the direction of Fort Brown, where the soldiers were stationed. Then, they stormed through Brownsville itself, firing shots at the house of the Cowen family. The house, filled with a Mrs. Cowen and her five children, was struck by a number of bullets “low enough to have seriously endangered the family” (Lane 17). When the marauding men then encountered a Brownsville police officer, they shot at him and killed his horse. The group split into two, with one group storming into a saloon and killing the barkeeper. The other group shot at the house of one of Brownsville’s citizens, but did not hurt anyone. By the end of the raid, which took about thirty minutes at most, the men had killed one Brownsville man and injured two more.

Mayor Combe heard the shots, and quickly ran toward them to see what was going on. He was warned by a police officer to stay away, because “the negroes are shooting up the town” (qtd. in Lane 17). Combe was told the same when he eventually got to a saloon, where a few of the townsfolk had gathered. Rumors were starting to swell up, and all in attendance seemed to agree that the soldiers were responsible. Some of the men in the bar even intended to march up to the fort to find the guilty party, but Combe pointed out the danger of storming a well-guarded fort. Meanwhile, Major Penrose also heard gunshots coming from Brownsville while he was within Fort Brown, and feared his battalion was under attack. He called for defensive positions to be established among the walls of the fort. He quickly asked for a roll call, which indicated that all black soldiers were accounted for. Penrose, unsure of what was going on, sent soldiers into town to bench Combe. The Mayor then informed Penrose that his soldiers were suspected of the Raid, amazing the Major. Penrose, though respectful of Combe, did not believe him. That very night, he investigated his troops and guns, but found nothing that would prove their involvement (Lane 17-18).

Here we see somewhat of an unsurprising, though nonetheless disappointing culmination of the previous two weeks. The citizens of Brownsville, looking for anything to pin on the black soldiers, blame them without a shred of evidence. Mere hours after the Raid, the black soldiers have become the main and only suspects, and that theory has the support of both the Major and most of the town’s residents. Rumors had started to spread before most of Brownsville was even fully sure of what had occurred. This makes it incredibly hard for there to be a proper investigation of the raid: citizens of Brownsville have seemingly made up their mind already, and thus any testimonies given by them will be somewhat tainted. In the next

few days, weeks and months, various types of supporting evidence popped up, yet they could all be discredited relatively easily.

The first proof came in the form of fifty or so gun shells, found along the route of the raid. They were rifle shells, from a type of gun ordinarily only used by the troops. At first, they were convincing evidence to Major Penrose and the other white officers that their men must be guilty. Yet when later investigated, the shells showed markings indicating that they had been fired multiple times. Ordnance experts from the War Department later reported that the shells “had not been fired in Brownsville during the raid. Some of the shells showed they had been inserted in a rifle two or more times before they had been fired; some had double indentations on the cap, indicating that the first attempt to fire them had failed but the second succeeded” (Weaver 179). Furthermore, an inspection by quartermaster Walker McCurdy shortly after the raid indicated that all 70 rifles in the possession of the battalion were locked up in the store room at the time of the shooting (Weaver 178).

Those who considered the black soldiers guilty argued that the shells had been used multiple times because they had been picked up to fire again during the raid. This seems unlikely, as those who participated in the raid moved quickly and acted at night. Conditions were far from ideal for reusing the same shells over and over.

“When the bolt of a Springfield rifle is pulled back, (...) the ejector throws the cartridge a distance of some eight to ten feet. Men shooting up an unfriendly town in the middle of the night would hardly have taken the trouble to rood around an unlighted alley for a shell that had misfired.” (Weaver 180)

The more likely theory is that the shells had been picked up from a military target range, where they would have been used multiple times during training. Such a range had not yet been set up in Fort Brown, though the battalion had frequently used one while stationed in Nebraska, at Fort Niobrara. When the battalion had moved from Nebraska to Texas, the used shells had been moved as well, in a footlocker that broke during the trip. Then, while the storeroom was set up at Fort Brown, the broken and open footlocker was left unguarded on the back porch of one group of soldiers. The porch was visible from Brownsville, making it likely that some of the used shells were stolen while they were unguarded. Complicated as the story may seem, there is a lot of evidence to back it up. At the very least, these shells offer no real proof that the Fort Brown soldiers were involved in the raid.

When physical evidence was absent, the prosecution pointed towards the statements of various witnesses. In the days after the raid, twenty-two citizens of Brownsville were heard by a specially established Citizens' Committee. A number of these witnesses identified the people involved in the raid as black soldiers. Yet the questions asked by the Citizens' Committee were heavily biased, fishing for a particular answer. One witness was asked "You know the object of this meeting. We know that this outrage was committed by negro soldiers. We want any information that will lead to a discovery of who did it" (qtd. in Lane 19). Another was asked "We are inquiring into the matter of last night with a view to ascertaining who the guilty parties are. We know they were negro soldiers. If there is anything that would throw any light on the subject we would like to have it" (qtd. in Lane 19). Yet even with this highly suspicious questioning method, only eight of the twenty-two citizens identified those involved in the raid as black soldiers. Of those eight, three were unable to confirm visual identification, confirming only that they had "recognized them by their voices as blacks" (qtd. in Lane 19). Many of Brownsville's citizens would be questioned again in later investigations, but by that time a narrative had likely begun to form. If early witnesses offered no conclusive certainty that black soldiers were involved, why would later testimonies suddenly offer a vastly different pictures?

Much was also made of the fact that none of the soldiers stationed in Brownsville would accuse any of their fellow men. Though they were all heavily questioned on multiple occasions, none of them seemed able to offer any further hints on what happened. When investigators asked soldiers to disclose the names of those involved in the raid, none of them were able to offer any names. The investigators claimed this was because of a grand conspiracy. The soldiers had all agreed to stay silent on the affair, they argued, to prevent any punishment from being handed out to them. The argument seems ludicrous from the start - it puts the soldiers in a position of being 'presumed guilty until proven innocent'. Yet it became even stranger when the prosecution continued to argue this after all black soldiers had been dishonorably discharged.

The hearings in Congress and the Senate led to one of the oddest moments of the Brownsville Affair. In 1908, President Roosevelt hired two detectives to investigate and talk to the soldiers in the hopes of finally acquiring a decisive testimony. One of the detectives was William B. Baldwin, the head of a black detective agency. The other was Herbert J Browne, who had previously been hired by Senator Foraker to provide evidence for the defense of the soldiers but was quickly fired for providing inadequate reports. Browne returned to the Senate triumphantly in late 1908 with a confession by Boyd Conyers. In it,

Conyers confessed to being one of the men involved in the raid, and named some of the other men. The testimony contained many details, and seemed at last to offer definitive proof of who was involved.

Yet it quickly became apparent that Browne had falsified the entire confession. On the floor of the Senate, Foraker read an affidavit by Conyers in which he “denied any knowledge of the raid, made no confession, and that Herbert Browne’s report, published in the *Congressional Record* of December 14, was a misrepresentation of the truth” (qtd. in Lane 61). This was further backed up by a statement from E.C. Arnold, a Georgia Sheriff who had been present at the interviews between Browne and Conyers. Arnold absolutely destroyed any shred of truth surrounding the confession produced by Browne.

“[Conyers was put through the] most rigid examination I have ever seen any person subjected to in all my long experience in dealing with criminals. I have always believed that some of the soldiers ‘shot up Brownsville,’ and for this reason I was glad of an opportunity to aid in getting at the bottom of it. (...) [Browne claimed he] was prepared to offer Conyers absolute immunity from any punishment and a pardon from the President if he would only tell what he knew. (...) We made all sorts of promises to him; then we told him what the consequences would be if he did not tell it, but he still denied knowing anything or who did the shooting” (qtd. in Lane 61).

Try as the prosecution might, no decisive evidence framing the black soldiers ever seemed to materialize. A number of investigations followed after the Brownsville Affair, each more extensive than the last. A large number of Brownsville citizens and all of the black soldiers were questioned, but not a single guilty name was ever found. And though material evidence was produced, all of it was discredited fairly easily. The grounds for dishonorably discharging the entire regiment seemed shaky at best.

### Examining Roosevelt's Actions in the Brownsville Affair

On November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1906, President Roosevelt ordered the Secretary of War to dishonorably discharge the members of Companies B, C and D of the Twenty-fifth Infantry, or practically all the black soldiers that were thought to be involved in the Brownsville Affair. The order was carried out on November 9<sup>th</sup> by Secretary Taft. Despite the lack of evidence pointing towards the troops, Roosevelt was firm in his criticism of them. "The act was one of horrible atrocity, and, so far as I am aware, unparalleled for infamy in the annals of the United States Army," Roosevelt would later write (qtd. in Lane 136). He refused to believe anyone outside of the soldiers could be accused, claiming that concept was "an absurdity too gross to need discussion and unsupported by a shred of evidence" (qtd. in Lane 136). What do these statements tell us about Roosevelt's views on race? Have they shifted from the time of the Booker T. Washington dinner five years earlier, or are they from a similar mindset?

When discussing Roosevelt's actions in response to the Brownsville Affair, critics often point to his timing. Though the Brownsville Affair would take place in early August, no action would be taken against the soldiers until over three months later. His order was made on November 5<sup>th</sup>, just one day before the midterm elections of 1906. They were not carried out until after the elections were over. Thus, few if any newspapers carried his decision until most Americans had already voted. Though his decision would cost him the support of almost all African Americans, they were not aware of it until after they had voted. As such, Roosevelt could still rely on this key part of the Republican base for support. Had his decision been made earlier, perhaps close to the elections, it was likely that a significant number of African Americans and those who supported them would have stayed home, or perhaps even voted for the Democratic Party. This decision, then, seems to come from a certain political shrewdness. It shows that Roosevelt was keenly aware of the possible political impact of his decision.

At times, Roosevelt was surprisingly harsh in denying that race played a role in his decision. He claimed that "any assertion that these men were dealt with harshly because they were colored is utterly without foundation" (Lane 137). In a roundabout way, by giving this remark at all Roosevelt proves its truth at least partially. If the decision had been related to race, Roosevelt would have been better off not replying at all. By addressing these rumors, he strengthened their prominence while also indicating that he was willing to fight for his beliefs. The decisions in the Brownsville Affair were important to Roosevelt, but simply not on a

racial level. These remarks thus underline how the Brownsville Affair was important to Roosevelt's core beliefs in masculinity.

He would also note that he saw his decision not as a punishment, but simply the termination of a contract. The soldiers were enlisted and employed for the public interest, and by being seen as possible murderers of innocent people they no longer served that public interest. Roosevelt would go on to note that he would have gladly punished the men (Lane 137); harsh, considering punishment for mutineers such as these soldiers would be death. Again, the fact that Roosevelt seems to even consider the death penalty for these black soldiers signifies how much this issue has hit him to his core.

Roosevelt's close relationship with Booker T. Washington provided a further interesting dimension to the story. On the October 30<sup>th</sup>, Roosevelt invited Washington to the White House to discuss the matter. This was five years after their controversial dinner, two months after the Brownsville Affair, and just a few days before the Midterm Elections of 1906. All these factors played a role in what was discussed that evening. Despite the claims that Roosevelt's racial policy had become less progressive during his Second Term, he at the very least still considered Washington a close personal friend, and a trusted advisor. The South was still not comfortable with black men in power, and any relationship Roosevelt would have with Washington could presumably damage the President's chances in the 1906 elections. Yet Roosevelt also valued the opinions of Washington. The willingness to continue to meet seems to indicate that Roosevelt valued the potential advice over the risk of a blowback among voters in the South. This seems to further strengthen the idea that Roosevelt, when unable or unwilling to decide on his own, was always more than willing to surround himself with advisors he felt he could trust. Yet in the end, it failed to matter. Though Washington kept attempting to convince Roosevelt to reconsider his stance in private correspondence, Roosevelt refused. The President would write to Washington his strictest refusal to budge:

“I could not possibly refrain from acting as regard these colored soldiers. You cannot have any information to give me privately to which I could pay heed, my dear Mr. Washington, because the information on which I act is that which came out of the investigation itself.” (Lane 93)

These meetings do show the continued strength Washington held in the black community up until this point. Between 1901 and 1906, Washington had continued to clash



with W. E. B. Du Bois and other notable people in the black intellectual community. Washington was still seen by many of them as kowtowing too much to white people. In private, Washington made it clear that he felt that Roosevelt was making poor decisions in the Brownsville Affair. Yet in public, Washington was unwilling to distance himself from the President. He still considered him a friend (Morris, *Theodore Rex* 464), not just to him personally but to African Americans in general. Though other black leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois would publicly disavow Roosevelt, Washington's focus was on keeping the black community calm. In a statement issued following the Brownsville Affair, Washington warned:

“Let us not become unduly alarmed or depressed when seasons of disturbance and riot overtake us. (...) Every iota of influence that we possess should be used to get rid of the criminal and loafing element of our people. (...) We should not fail to give due credit to those of the white race who have stood manfully and courageously on the side of law and order.” (Lane 92)

Washington's unwillingness to let go of his support for Roosevelt would greatly limit his future support within the black community. With the almost unanimous anger at Roosevelt's actions, any man who would support those actions was sure to be at the center of some ire too. As such, Washington's support suddenly came tumbling down from his carefully built-up position at the head of the African American community. Though this was of course no formal position, there seemed to be a definite switch of power. The swift condemnation of Roosevelt's actions by almost all in the black community except for Washington created a power vacuum, and one man was able to fill that vacuum almost perfectly. The time had come for W. E. B. Du Bois to rise to power: he had already been a respected black intellectual, but was previously deemed too controversial by some. When it was proven once and for all that Washington's pandering proved ineffective at actually accomplishing anything, Du Bois' harsher tone suddenly struck a chord.

In the years following the Brownsville Affair, Washington would continue to do a lot of good work supporting the black community. He raised millions for the Tuskegee Institute, ensuring its future. He campaigned tirelessly for black education; in fact, his death in 1915, at the age of 59, was blamed on over exhaustion, after a life filled with campaigning for his cause. Yet his position within the black community would never be the same again. W. E. B. Du Bois' star rose, and he became the leading face of his people. When further riots occurred

in the ensuing years, it would be Du Bois providing the 'on the record'-voice of African Americans. It eventually led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP for short, in 1909. The NAACP has been one of the most important groups during the Civil Rights struggle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Du Bois greatly assisted in getting it off the ground. Though the Brownsville Affair was certainly not the catalyst for its foundation, the damage it caused to Washington's reputation would prove to be an important factor.

Furthermore, Roosevelt's actions created a more fraught relationship between the Republican Party and the African American community. Ever since black men were given the vote, they had overwhelmingly voted for the party of Lincoln. This came both from a sense of loyalty, in that it was the Republicans who had been the catalyst for the emancipation proclamation, but also from a severe lack of options. Even if African Americans felt disappointed in the Republicans, the only other option they had was the Democratic Party. That party was heavily tied to the South, and found among its ranks many racists. The Democratic Party was the party of the Jim Crow laws, the party of separate but equal, and of senators, congressman and other federal employees barely willing to stop any lynching from occurring. Though a very limited number of more progressive Democrats was around in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the overwhelming majority would pose a threat to African Americans if they came to power. Black people might have been disgruntled to vote for Republicans at certain times, but they had little real choice.

Was Roosevelt's involvement in the Brownsville Affair "a shocking act of racism," as John D. Weaver claimed in his book on the incident? Perhaps not. Roosevelt's views on the importance of strictness regarding military issues might have also played a role. The president was a believer in men being wholly responsible for their reputation, and that true greatness could only be achieved through hard work. The army was the perfect place for that philosophy, he argued: any man willing to fight and die for his own country was showing great moral strength. Thus, men who failed to prove exemplary during their time in the military signed their own fate: they were not fit for greatness.

The soldiers of Brownsville failed not just because they were deemed responsible for the deaths of innocent people, but because they were unwilling to admit this responsibility. Roosevelt believed they were guilty, or at least some of them were, and the failure for any of them to come forward in pointing a finger towards the guilty showed moral weakness. That moral weakness as perceived by Roosevelt was, according to some, the major downfall of the

soldiers in Brownsville. Ann J. Lane, author of *The Brownsville Affair: National Crisis and Black Reaction*, argued as such.

“Roosevelt was indeed a racist, but he was probably right when he claimed that his actions would have been the same had the soldiers been white. There was little room for the weak and helpless, white or black, in his outlook which glorified the valiant and strong man. (...) His limited compassion and his inflexibility prevented him from perceiving with any profundity or reasoning with any depth or feeling with any genuine connection to his fellow man, regardless of race, creed or color” (141).

Lane wrote her book in 1971, when Roosevelt’s legacy was under heavy fire due to the resurgence of the Brownsville Affair, and his reputation was reaching its nadir. Though Lane makes a broad remark on all of Roosevelt’s action, the origin of the remarks seems based heavily on Roosevelt’s views on masculinity and the military. To argue that Roosevelt had “limited compassion” and was unable to form connections to those around him could almost certainly not be further from the truth. Though Roosevelt’s outward personality was confrontational to some, it was also the basis for a large part of his success. He was able to connect to the American public better than most presidents that preceded him. Furthermore, his actions as a trust buster, conservationist and proponent of a square deal seem relatively clear signs that Roosevelt was not wholly without compassion for ordinary Americans.

Yet Lane’s point that Roosevelt might have acted the same had the soldiers been white is a valid and fair one, and at the very least important to consider. Roosevelt saw the army as an important institution, and military values were instilled in him throughout his life. Though it is perhaps unfair to claim that these values were lurking beneath as the reasoning behind almost all of his actions, it seems likely that they guided him. Roosevelt was a man who was often quick to change his beliefs, always looking to those around him to inspire him and to guide his views along. Yet though he might change his interests on a whim, these military values were held to relatively steadfastly throughout his life. As such, anything that might break with those values might cause a harder internal backlash than most other ideological beliefs and values. Considering this, there is likely some validity in the theory that not race, but military values were the deciding factor in Roosevelt’s actions.

However, the argument that Roosevelt’s dismissal of the soldiers was couched almost wholly in his military views fails to hold up considering some of the other circumstances. Most prominent among them is the date the soldiers were dishonorably discharged. The

President waited until after the 1906 election to announce his decision. He was fully aware of how the black community might respond to the dishonorable discharge of the Brownsville soldiers. Afraid to lose the support of this large demographic during some crucial local elections meant he waited until after the polls had closed. Furthermore, Roosevelt had treated black troops markedly different from white troops in the past. During his time with the Rough Riders, Roosevelt was effusive in praising many white soldiers by name, while never even naming a single African American involved in the efforts in the Cuba. Finally, Roosevelt's tendency to keep his head down when issues involving race popped up also speaks against him. He was 'the man in the arena', willing to debate any point, yet aside from some arguments with Booker T. Washington and some minor remarks he had little to say in public on the Brownsville Affair. Only a small handful of times did he have anything to say about the affair of public; most of his remarks were focused on defusing any tension. Of course, the discourse on the position of African Americans in the United States was extremely limited in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century compared to today's world. Yet for an ordinarily quite argumentative man like Roosevelt to stay away from these issues signifies at least something.

In the end, it is difficult to assign a wholly racial reasoning to Roosevelt's actions in the Brownsville Affair. Other scholars have noted that it seems more likely that Roosevelt was politically motivated as well. Though it may times appear if the two are interwoven, there seems to be a difference between Roosevelt the human being and Roosevelt the politician. On a personal level, he could be direct, fighting for his beliefs, and appearing almost aggressive in his enthusiasm while also wildly switching viewpoints whenever a more convincing argument would appear on the oppose side. Yet on a political level, he was far more shrewd than he was often given credit for. Delaying the news until after the elections proves that shrewdness. Furthermore, his outburst against critics who argued race was a key factor shows at least a certain willingness to engage in the racial debate surrounding the topic. Roosevelt was not afraid of it; he was simply being calculated.

The end result might have been disappointing at the time to African Americans and those who believed in and support Roosevelt's more progressive views. It is also disappointing to those in modern times who see Roosevelt as a shining example of progressiveness, and as a President who greatly reshaped American society. Yet Roosevelt himself seemed to have a clear purpose in mind when deciding, and did not seem to base it on gut racial instinct. Though Roosevelt still held a certain set of overarching beliefs and policies he was willing to fight for at all cost, rasher aspects of his personality disappeared at crucial moments and he was prepared to compromise on other issues to achieve those true goals.

## Conclusion

When I enrolled in American Studies, my view of Theodore Roosevelt was relatively simplistic. It was, in all honesty, probably not too different from what the ordinary American considers him: heroic, adventurous, progressive, and one of the greatest American presidents ever. He was a man who deserved his place among the great leaders on Mount Rushmore. Obviously, that view would evolve over the years, as my knowledge of United States history grew, but there was never much room to properly delve into Roosevelt fully. Through this thesis, I have been able to explore some of his more problematic views regarding race, African Americans and social progress.

When I told people I was studying Theodore Roosevelt, they would often attempt to get to the gist of my thesis by asking me whether I thought he was racist. On paper, it might seem like this thesis is attempting to answer that question. Yet that is in many ways an irrelevant question. Our standards of what constitutes a racist have shifted so greatly over the past hundred years, perhaps even the past twenty or so years, that asking this particular question has become meaningless. Even some of the most enlightened people born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century will seem backwards in today's political world. If we simply label Roosevelt a racist, the same label would have to be applied to almost every President of the United States, and in fact to any political figure born since the dawn of time. Furthermore, even the definition of 'racist' is constantly up for grabs. An African American woman growing up in poverty will likely have a very different stance on topics relating to race compared to a privileged white male. Labeling Theodore Roosevelt a 'racist' might technically be accurate, but it is too vague and would also greatly dampen the chance for any interesting debate.

So instead of asking this rather redundant question, more can be gained from placing Roosevelt's views, theories and action in the context of his time. What led Roosevelt to invite a black man into the White House for dinner, and why would he later be so reluctant to acknowledge the true nature of the event? And what would cause a man to dishonorably discharge dozens of black soldiers with a very limited amount of evidence? By studying these actions, and the people and culture that Roosevelt's views, we can come to understand what role race played in Presidential politics during Roosevelt's presidency.

In certain ways, the actions confirm what we already know. With regards to the Roosevelt-Washington Dinner, Roosevelt's famous impulses played a deciding factor in creating the event in the first place. Roosevelt had been President for just a scant few weeks, and had greatly respected Booker T. Washington prior to September, 1901. Both primary and

secondary sources seem to point towards Roosevelt acting without a greater purpose in mind when he invited Washington over for dinner.

Yet if we think Roosevelt's personality can be used to explain these actions, the aftermath is not as easily explainable. Roosevelt was often seen as a man who stood for what he believed for, who was willing to fight for these views. If a man attacked him on his views, a rebuttal would often be on its way shortly. This is not what happened following Washington's dinner at the White House.

It seems likely there were two factors playing a role in both the Brownsville Affair and the Roosevelt-Washington Dinner, and those two factors conflict during most of Roosevelt's actions regarding African Americans. The first is pure political pragmatism. Roosevelt was keenly aware of the political position he was in. For a brand new President to involve himself in such a political hotbed would be dangerous. He was likely to lose support from the South if he came out as a fervent supporter of his own decision to invite Washington. Though Roosevelt might have been willing to defend his friendship with Washington, he also probably realized there was little to gain by doing so. Even if Washington had Roosevelt's full support, both men probably would have been condemned by the South. By staying silent and letting Washington take most of the fall, Roosevelt at least somewhat allowed himself the chance to deal successfully with Southern politicians.

Few would probably describe the direct and at times verbally aggressive Theodore Roosevelt as a pragmatist, and as such there was likely another factor in play. This is the divide between Roosevelt as politician, and Roosevelt as human being. Though Roosevelt was pragmatic in wanting to retain political power, his impulses still steered many of his decisions. The impulses that came from being a rational (or irrational, at times) human backed him into many corners, that the political Roosevelt would then have to argue his way out of to contain his power. We can see this in both how he handled the Roosevelt-Washington Dinner, and in the Brownsville Affair. In the case of the dinner, Roosevelt himself has admitted that he felt ashamed at even the smallest doubt of whether to invite Washington over. Though Roosevelt the human being might have had some rather ignorant views regarding race, he could still recognize his equals when he saw them. He respected Washington, and any man he respected deserved a dinner invitation, he might have reasoned. Politics be damned was the first impulse here, until Roosevelt was confronted with the harsh reality of early 20<sup>th</sup> century American politics. When he witnessed the enormous backlash that followed his invitation and dinner, Roosevelt had reasonable suspicion to argue that his political position was in danger. He had been President for so short a time that for most Americans this would likely be his

first Presidential decision they would read about. With this being the case, he risked losing all support in the South, just a few weeks after becoming President.

Roosevelt makes some of these arguments himself, in private letters published after his death. When writing to a friend on the subject of the dinner and another incident involving the appointment of an African American man, Roosevelt said

“It may be that it would have been better for me not to have Booker Washington at dinner. It may be that it would have been better not to have originally nominated Crum for the Charleston collectorship. Personally I think I was right in both instances. But even if I was wrong, to say that the South’s attitude is explained by these two acts is to say that the South is in a condition of violent chronic hysteria.” (Resh 30-31)

Remarks like these go a long way towards explaining Roosevelt’s behavior in the Brownsville Affair. The decision to dishonorably discharge over 160 black soldiers may appear rash, but can be explained both through this political carefulness and his fervent belief in the importance of strictness in the military. This is not to say that race was not a factor in the decision; it was, in fact. But it seems likely that Roosevelt was not directly motivated by any personal racism, but by a keen awareness of the mood on race amongst the people of the United States. Roosevelt realized that, if he failed to act on the Affair at all, he risked losing the support of the entire South. The harsh reality of American politics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was that he stood to lose far more by supporting the soldiers than he could gain by dropping and discharging them. Over a hundred years later, this decision makes Roosevelt appear perhaps more cowardly than we expect from him.

Political shrewdness was almost certainly not the entire reason behind Roosevelt’s decision. Throughout his life, Roosevelt was a great believer in masculine values. Thus, the military, one of the most masculine concepts of American life, was important to Roosevelt’s core beliefs. That these black soldiers did not uphold the values of the military might have been somewhat of a personal affront to Roosevelt’s core beliefs. There is more to be explored regarding Theodore Roosevelt, his views on masculinity and the military, and how they might be linked. Yet in this thesis, I attempted to focus exclusively on the political reasoning behind Roosevelt’s actions.

While writing this thesis, I became acutely aware of how maddeningly inconsistent Roosevelt could be at times. The common perception is that Roosevelt was a man who was direct and straight to the point, but the sheer volume of correspondence he produced tells a

somewhat different tale. The opinions he entrusted to close friends would at times differ greatly from what he would say in public. At other times, he simply stayed silent to the general population while venting his frustration on a subject through letters to friends. This meant that there was often no definitive, singular Rooseveltian view on a subject. In regards to the Booker T. Washington Dinner, for example, we could believe his public statements that he was not interested in the racial connotations of his actions. Or we could trust his correspondence with Booker T. Washington, in which he expressed great sorrow over the outrage that had broken out. We could even look to the numerous biographers of Roosevelt in the next few years who all offer slightly different variations on what the President's intent with the dinner and its aftermath may have been.

Perhaps by looking purely at Roosevelt's views on masculinity and the military could we define a more singular interpretation of all this. The claim by some historians that Roosevelt would have made the same choices regarding the Brownsville Affair whatever the color of the soldiers' skin had been remains an intriguing one. With no similar affairs involving white soldiers during Roosevelt's presidency, we have nothing to test this claim. Yet it is perhaps a claim Americans *want* to be true. Theodore Roosevelt remains one of the most popular American historical figures, and as such there is a continuous attempt to redefine what his legacy was.

To put it into context of modern American politics: it is commonly accepted that Roosevelt *was* great, and as such he *is* great. He greatly shaped the United States of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and any attempt to discredit those accomplishments will attract complaints from many. As such, the problem becomes figuring out how to 'remove' or obfuscate those less-great aspects from his biography. We 'make Roosevelt great again' by placing his problematic actions in a new context. So it has always been: the Washington Dinner was redefined as a lunch immediately afterward, despite a lot of evidence to the contrary. And so it shall always be: the actions in the Brownsville Affair can be re-explained as an issue of military strength and political shrewdness instead of one rooted in racial issues. These new contexts soothe the American historical consciousness. We can believe Theodore Roosevelt was not simply a good, but a thoroughly great president, by creating new context for those issues that might otherwise gnaw at the back of one's head. Just as Americans in the future will decide on newly questionable parts of Roosevelt's legacy, there will also always be those to put that legacy into new context. Roosevelt is a quintessential American figure: forever a problematic figure, but in a way that will never truly impact the heroic historical shrine he has been lifted on.



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