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# David Greenberg

## Theodore Roosevelt and the Image of Presidential Activism

NOT A SENATOR WAS ABSENT FROM THE CHAMBER ON THE afternoon of January 17, 1906. Reporters were crammed into their rows, and the galleries were filled to the last. Everyone was waiting to hear “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman, a pugilistic, six-foot-tall South Carolina Democrat known for his brusque manners, delight in violence, and racist demagoguery. A hotheaded populist—he had earned his nickname by threatening to spear Grover Cleveland with a farm implement—Tillman was large and imposing, with short, tousled hair and an empty left eye socket that compelled a gruesome fascination (the eye was extracted when he was 17 because of a tumor). Tillman was also a rip-roaring orator of the old school who could readily entrance an audience. “Going up to the Senate to hear Tillman make a speech,” said one contemporary, “was like running to a fire” (Simkins 1944: 3). This time, the buzz was that he was planning a frontal assault on President Theodore Roosevelt, whom it was known he had long despised (“Tillman Fiercely Attacks Roosevelt” 1906: 1; “Tillman Roars at Roosevelt” 1906: 1).

At half past noon, Tillman strode to the Senate floor. Using a pending treaty with Santo Domingo as a pretext, he launched into a two-and-a-half-hour tirade against the president. Interrupted only a few times by colleagues beseeching him to temper his remarks, Tillman told the audience that the charismatic and beloved Roosevelt was in fact a sham, a brazen self-promoter who owed his success to a subservi-

ent press corps and his devious use of the new arts of publicity. Indeed, Tillman charged, Roosevelt had always been a media-created fraud; the press had even padded his achievements at the Battle of San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War, which had made TR into a national hero. “He had press agents with the Rough Riders down at Guantánamo,” Tillman sneered.

It was . . . “Col. Roosevelt” here and “Col. Roosevelt” there and “Col. Roosevelt” all the time. It certainly did seem queer that the old army officers and their regiments were not mentioned except in official reports. . . . There was later a grand painting by a distinguished Russian painter showing the Lieutenant Colonel on horseback riding up San Juan Hill when as a matter of fact he was not on San Juan Hill at that time (“Tillman Fiercely Attacks Roosevelt” 1906: 1).

The audience sat silent. The journalists, one of their number noted, “became infected with the prevailing feeling of suppressed and almost hysterical excitement.” Tillman roared on. “Theodore Roosevelt owes more to newspapers than any man of his time, or possibly of any other time,” he blustered. He recited a series of practices that the president had developed for shaping his news coverage—punishing his detractors, muzzling Cabinet officials so he could control the flow of executive branch news (“Tillman Fiercely Attacks Roosevelt” 1906: 1). “The newspapers are the men who have made him what he is,” said Tillman, “because he has never had the opportunity in all his journeyings and speeches to meet more than one in a thousand of his fellow-citizens, and it is through the great instrumentality represented in that press gallery that he has become puffed to such a degree” (Morris 2001: 430)

Besides his journalistic toadies, Tillman charged, Roosevelt had other accomplices as well in his image-making campaign. William Loeb, the White House secretary—a position that in those days encompassed the roles of chief of staff, press secretary, and several others—was also

party to this hoodwinking, Tillman said; he was an “apothecary” who dispensed “pills on Panama, pills on Roosevelt, pills on railroad rates, and pills on everything pertaining to public affairs” (“Tillman Fiercely Attacks Roosevelt” 1906: 1). Nor was one press aide enough for TR’s ego. He had retained, too, a “trusted friend,” Joseph Bucklin Bishop, “at \$10,000 a year, to misinform the public about the administration of Panama Canal affairs”—an appointment that had made Bishop the first dedicated government public relations officer (“Tillman Fiercely Attacks Roosevelt” 1906: 1; Lee 2011: 36). The result of these moves, said Tillman, was not just to publicize the president’s decisions; it was to shift power from the Congress, which was rightfully the people’s body, to the White House—making the president like “Andrew Jackson or Napoleon Bonaparte or any other man who pushed things to the limit” (“Tillman Roars at Roosevelt” 1906: 1). Tillman was accusing TR of using the new mass media to arrogate power to the presidency and to turn the office from an administrative one into something akin to a monarchy.

TODAY, OPPONENTS OF EVERY PRESIDENT COMPLAIN THAT THE object of their animus has prevailed in the public mind through his devious manipulation of the news media—his use (or abuse) of public relations and hype, press management and rhetoric. Hackneyed as this allegation is today, in Theodore Roosevelt’s day it was relatively novel. For not until TR entered the White House did American presidents fully exploit the media; not until his presidency did they fully conceive of their work as promoting an agenda on behalf of the democratic masses. To be sure, all democratic leaders are ultimately answerable to the people; and it is also true that presidents since Washington have carefully superintended their images. But by and large nineteenth-century presidents did not actively try to steer the nation along their preferred policy course or leverage their personal popularity to do so. That daunting task—which Roosevelt not only embraced but made a condition of presidential success—required using modern tools and techniques of public persuasion that were newly available to TR: generating stories

for the mass-circulation newspapers; touring the country to speak on behalf of a policy agenda; hiring dedicated officials to help shape the public discourse on key issues. In these ways Roosevelt turned the presidency into a public platform—and with it, an activist office—as no one had before. “One cannot think of him except as part of the public scene, performing on the public stage,” wrote the philosopher John Dewey (1919: 115), an unlikely Roosevelt enthusiast.

Friends and foes agreed that Theodore Roosevelt had seized the public imagination like few other presidents. “He was his own lime-light,” wrote his friend Owen Wister, a well-known novelist, “and could not help it: a creature charged with such a voltage as his, became the central presence at once, whether he stepped on a platform or entered a room” (1930: 15). But assessments of Roosevelt’s news-making ways were anything but uniform. Tillman was one of many who, despising the president, feared his media techniques, regarding TR as a new breed of demagogue whose showy antics substituted for statesmanship. Similarly, H. L. Mencken jeered at Roosevelt’s overwrought rhetorical attacks: “What moved him was simply a craving for facile and meaningless banzais,” the Baltimore reactionary grumbled, “for the gaudy eminence and power of the leader of a band of lynchers, for the mean admiration of mean men.” (1920: 39). The decorous Woodrow Wilson, once an enthusiast of TR’s, came to regard his 1912 presidential rival as “the monumental fakir of history” (Lawrence 1924: 343).

But to defenders like Dewey, this sort of carping was misdirected, for Roosevelt was merely succeeding on the terms of his age. “To criticize Roosevelt for love of the camera and the headline is childish,” the philosopher wrote insightfully, “unless we recognize that in such criticism we are condemning the very conditions of any public success during this period” (1919: 116). Dewey thought Roosevelt’s publicity-mongering was a prerequisite for political achievement in the new century. It was a means to an end. “Yes—it is true that TR liked the centre of the stage—loved it in fact,” explained Henry Stoddard, one of many journalists who celebrated him; “but when he sought it he always had something to say or to do that made the stage the appropriate place

for him.” Exploiting the new mass media was particularly important for those seeking to impose major reforms on a recalcitrant society. Given Roosevelt’s goals, it would have been futile for him to use the methods “of soft stepping and whispered persuasion” to try to change things, Stoddard said. After all, the overriding problem of the age was the unchecked power of corporate capitalism, and Roosevelt wanted to enlist government to preserve a modicum of economic opportunity and fairness in public life. To uproot the deeply entrenched power of the Gilded Age plutocrats, he needed to mobilize public opinion aggressively. Accordingly, wrote Stoddard, “his faults were not those of secrecy and intrigue; Roosevelt worked in the open, with startlingly frank avowals of his purpose” (1927: 310–311). According to this understanding of Roosevelt, his newsmaking wasn’t a diversion from purposeful presidential action but the very soul of it. His actions served his image, but so too his image served his actions.

To appreciate this dimension of Roosevelt’s leadership, it helps to understand the meaning of the word *publicity* in the early twentieth century (Stoker and Rawlins 2005: 177–188; Sheingate 2007: 461–480). In Roosevelt’s day, the term did not primarily connote the self-aggrandizing pursuit of attention, although that usage was growing. Rather, it meant a commitment to laying bare information; it meant *transparency* or *sunlight*. It signified an objective, not a subjective, presentation of once-hidden facts. Roosevelt and his fellow Progressives believed that if the ills of backroom politics and corporate malfeasance were exposed to the light of day, the ensuing outcry would force those in power to change. In every office he held, he sought to share with the public the operations of government. His was publicity that served to foster Progressive-era reform and, at the same time, publicity that promoted and glorified Roosevelt himself.

Within a few years, the emergence of public relations professionals would set these two meanings of *publicity* in conflict. The hired professionals would become known for spinning information self-servingly or opportunistically promoting pseudo-events that lacked intrinsic news value; they transformed *publicity* from a synonym for

full disclosure into an antonym—a term for partial (in both senses of that word) disclosure. But Roosevelt joined the word’s two meanings. Making his actions public was a way to be accountable to the people in whose name he served. He would climb behind the controls of a steam shovel while visiting Panama to dramatize the merit of the building of the canal, just as he would release a government report on Chicago stockyard squalor to push the passage of a meat-inspection bill (Streitmatter 1990: 103).

If TR’s activist agenda was helped by his image-craft, the image he crafted was that of the activist. This self-portrait was, of course, cultivated; but it was nonetheless authentic; Roosevelt was nothing if not energetic. Indeed, his dynamism seemed to inhere in his very appearance—iconic even in his own day. His stocky, muscular physique revealed his lifelong obsession with the masculine virtues of strength and athleticism; his pale blue eyes, squinting intensely behind his thick-lensed pince-nez glasses, cradled an irrepressible determination and spirit. His bulldog neck jutted out, pushing at his collars, making a pedestal for his head. And his gleaming rows of teeth, flashing forth from below his thick, drooping mustache—“very white, and almost as big as a colt’s teeth,” wrote Arthur Brisbane of the *New York World*—lit up his ruddy face in a glow of joy or menace (Pringle 1931: 137). His high-pitched, convulsive cackle could frighten, but it could also charm. “Probably the thing that has saved Roosevelt is his laugh,” wrote his friend William Allen White. “Time and again he has punctured the cant and sophistry of an argumentative statesman with a twinkling grin and a gurgling, ‘Oh, come now, Senator!’” (1902: 4).

Then there was the sense of movement, constant movement. Roosevelt was always striding, pacing, leaning forward in his chair, walking purposefully. He waved his arms, clenched his fists, tugged at his watch chain, gesticulated freely, bounded exuberantly. Companions marveled at his zeal for physical exertion—whether maniacally swinging chest weights in Wood’s Gymnasium as a teenager, boxing with oversized sparring partners as a rising politician, or thundering through Washington’s Rock Creek Park on horseback as president. After TR had

returned from Cuba a national hero in 1898, Lincoln Steffens, another fan in the press, had contracted to write a biography of the man who already seemed a good bet for the White House. But the legendary journalist found he literally couldn't keep up with his subject. "‘Come on,’ [Roosevelt] would call after some political conference," Steffens recalled. "‘Let's walk and talk.’ Darting out of his house at Oyster Bay, he would jump a fence and crash into the woods, telling me, who came running breathlessly after him," stories of his youth and upbringing. Steffens abandoned the biography (1931: 349–350).

For TR action was a moral virtue—whether expressed as athletic prowess, battlefield heroism, or the reform agenda that he championed as president. He proclaimed the superiority of "the man . . . in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again, because there is not effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds" (Roosevelt 1913b: 143). Though often marshaled behind the noble goals of bringing order and equality to industrial-age America, this vigor and self-possession had their drawbacks. They could give way to bluster and hot-headedness, and the righteousness that served as a wellspring of needed change also produced a misguided—and to a later era's sensibility, hopelessly retrograde—faith in the special fitness of his own race, class, and sex to lead. Impatient with the faint of heart, Roosevelt mistook ambivalence for weakness. "I don't care how honest a man is," he asserted, "if he is timid he is no good" (1910: 195).

Roosevelt's commitment to action found its most important expression in his redefinition of the office of the presidency. Previous White House occupants had largely accepted the framers' view of the executive as an administrative office, with Congress as the locus of governmental activity. In contrast, wrote TR,

My view was that every executive officer . . . was a steward of the people bound actively and affirmatively to do all he could for the people and not to content himself with the negative merit of keeping his talents undamaged in a

napkin. I declined to adopt the view that what was imperatively necessary for the nation could not be done by the president unless he could find some specific authorization to do it. . . . [I]t was not only his right but his duty to do anything that the needs of the nation demanded, unless such action was forbidden by the Constitution or by the laws (Roosevelt 1913a: 357).

This philosophy encouraged him to use executive power to tame industrial capitalism—a use of state power that he identified not with radicalism but with responsible governance in the name of the whole nation. Like other reformers of his generation, he sought to replace the Gilded Age spoils system, in which presidents oversaw a partisan agenda, with a Progressive politics in which the president served not the party or set of factions that elected him but the people at large. The great theorist of Progressivism, Herbert Croly, thus described Roosevelt as “the first political leader of the American people to identify the national principle with an ideal of reform” (1909: 168).

Roosevelt considered the president to be not just the agent of the people but the repository of their hopes and fears. Attuned to the special place that the presidency occupied in their inner lives, he recognized himself as a transcendent symbol. Dewey wrote that Roosevelt’s “ordinary and native acts gained a representative significance”; whether in private gestures such as “chopp[ing] down a tree at Oyster Bay” or in official acts like “sending a fleet around the world,” Roosevelt was “the man in whom we saw our own ideals fulfilled or betrayed” (1919: 115). Again, image was not a diversion from action but integral to it: the people’s interest in the president’s doings allowed him to dramatize himself, to make use of his role as a symbol. Roosevelt, wrote historian William Garrott Brown, “is the man whom his countrymen hear about and talk about the most. It is doubtful if any power he has over us through his office or through his leadership of a party is so great as this which he exercises directly through his example and character” (1903: 1547). As TR told the English historian G. M. Trevelyan, “Whatever value

my service may have comes . . . more from *what I am* than from *what I do*. . . . The bulk of my countrymen . . . feel that I am in a peculiar way their president, that I represent the democracy” (Morison, Vol. 6: 1088).

ROOSEVELT HAD BEGUN TO FUSE IMAGE AND ACTION AS EARLY AS 1881, when he won election to the New York State Assembly at age 23. A Manhattan-born newcomer to Albany, TR soon figured out that the ministrations of the press and the attention paid to him as a personality could aid his efforts to change the state government’s hidebound ways. In the 1890s, as New York City police commissioner, he likewise turned to journalists Jacob Riis and Lincoln Steffens—reformers like himself—to guide him through the urban demimonde of cops and criminals; in return Roosevelt helped them publish in the *Atlantic* an investigative report of police department corruption that he wanted exposed (Ponder 1999: 18–20; Filler 1968: 45–46). And as assistant navy secretary in the 1890s, he watched with the rest of America as the Cubans rose up against their Spanish overlords’ rule; after the mysterious and deadly explosion of the U.S.S. *Maine* off the shores of Cuba in February 1898, Roosevelt eagerly shared with journalists his firm—though mistaken—conviction that the Spanish were to blame, thereby feeding the war frenzy. As the president temporized, TR bridled.

In April, McKinley bowed to pressure and opted for war. Roosevelt quit his desk job, secured a commission as a lieutenant colonel, and set up a training ground in San Antonio. Along with Leonard Wood, the president’s chief surgeon, he readied for battle a motley assortment of volunteer cavalymen whom the *New York Sun*’s Richard Oulahan dubbed the “Rough Riders.” Roosevelt telegraphed Brooks Brothers for an “ordinary cavalry lieutenant-colonel’s uniform in blue Cravenette” (Morison, Vol. 2: 822). As competitive as he was patriotic, Roosevelt meant for his men to vanquish the Spanish. But he also wanted them to seize the imagination of their countrymen. Photographers and journalists swarmed the base, where a sign on the gate read “All Civilians, Except Reporters, Prohibited from Camp.” TR wrote to Robert Bridges, the editor of *Scribner’s* magazine, offering him “first chance” to publish

six installments of a (planned) first-person account of his (planned) war exploits—a preview of what would be a full-blown book and, in Roosevelt’s humble assessment, a “permanent historical work.” Bridges accepted (Morris 1979: 669–670). Roosevelt again had wedded image to action.

When war came, 500 reporters, editors, illustrators, and photographers streamed to Florida. Western Union telegraph cables connecting Havana with Key West—and hence the whole of the United States—would give Americans news of the battles with unprecedented speed (Headrick 1991: 82). For this journalistic flotilla, Roosevelt was an obvious draw. When he charged into combat at the Battle of Las Guasimas, he marched alongside the famous reporter Richard Harding Davis, on assignment for the *New York Herald* and *Scribner’s*, and Edward Marshall of Hearst’s *Journal*, who was wounded by a Spanish bullet. (Stephen Crane, whom TR disliked, was consigned to the rear.) A week later, when Roosevelt led the charge up Kettle Hill, as part of the larger Battle of San Juan Hill, the embedded journalists faithfully recorded his courage (Charles Brown 1967: 312–324, 350–364). Though Roosevelt’s heroism was genuine, the precise nature of his battlefield contribution was murky; he claimed that he initiated the charge, but the *Army and Navy Journal* credited Captain Charles Taylor with doing so—a view corroborated by other witnesses. No one, however, disputed that Roosevelt rushed to the front and led the way up the slope. In any case, his leadership drew disproportionate acclaim (Samuels and Samuels 1997: 247–248). Davis was especially lavish in the use of his literary palette. He described Roosevelt speeding into combat with “a blue polka-dot handkerchief” around his sombrero—“without doubt the most conspicuous figure in the charge. . . . Mounted high on horseback and charging the rifle-pits at a gallop and quite alone, [he] made you feel that you would like to cheer” (1898: 402). Others, in the retelling, credited Roosevelt with taking San Juan Hill rather than its smaller neighbor (a linguistic substitution TR himself later made as well). Some years later the Russian painter Vasili Vereshchagin would portray TR in full glory at San Juan and exhibit his work at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel—an

act of lionization that Senator Tillman would denounce (“San Juan on Canvas” 1902: 15; Baylen and Weyant 1971: 258).

Newsreels too seared Roosevelt’s heroism in the public mind. Although accounts that cameras accompanied him into battle are probably false, the Rough Riders’ more quotidian activities did make it onto celluloid, redounding to TR’s glory (Smith 1952: 57–63; Musser 1983: 22–66). Despite the pedestrian actions that were documented, audiences lapped up shorts like *Roosevelt’s Rough Riders at Drill*, shot at camp in Texas, and *Roosevelt’s Rough Riders Embarking for Santiago*, which captured the troops’ early steps toward war. So too did *Raising Old Glory over Morro Castle*, even though the American flag it depicted was hoisted by actors on a Manhattan studio rooftop before a painted backdrop (Tillapaugh 2003: 98–99). The valorous grunts in the Cuban battles may have resented Roosevelt’s fame, but none could deny that the young lieutenant colonel had become, as the *World* wrote, “more talked about than any man in the country” (*New York World* 1898: 1). Weeks after the end of the “splendid little war” in Cuba, Roosevelt was elected governor of New York.

That victory elated old friends like Riis (who had given speeches on TR’s behalf) and newly minted fans like Ray Stannard Baker, destined to be the greatest of his era’s muckrakers (Riis 1902: 381; Baker 1898: 23–32). Once in the statehouse, Roosevelt continued to court the press. At twice-daily sessions, he would plop himself on the rim of his desk, a leg tucked underneath him, spewing out a rapid stream of tidbits, judgments, and jokes—off the record, of course (Henry S. Brown 1919: 20; Morris 1979: 693). His national reputation grew. Then, in 1900, with McKinley’s vice president, Garret Hobart, having died, TR was chosen as the new Republican understudy. And when, six months into McKinley’s second term, the president was assassinated, Roosevelt, 39, stepped into the office as if he had been ready for the job for years.

“MOST OF US ENJOY PREACHING,” ROOSEVELT FAMOUSLY SAID, “and I’ve got such a bully pulpit!” (Roosevelt 1917: vi) No president before him had made such regular, skillful use of this declamatory

vehicle, which Roosevelt, by naming, fairly invented; no one to that point so acutely discerned or eagerly seized the opportunity, afforded simply by being president, to command attention with rousing, morally laden speeches. Roosevelt used speeches about policy and legislation to circumvent Congress—to lead from the White House. He traveled more than any of his predecessors to promote his agenda; nineteenth-century presidents had spoken infrequently, seldom toured the hinterlands, and addressed themselves to ceremonial matters more than advocacy. TR transformed presidential rhetoric into a tool of activism. Soon presidents would be expected to promote their programs through direct popular appeals (Tulis 1987: 4).

The speeches Roosevelt delivered brimmed with the righteousness that suffused his worldview. “The presidency has given to Mr. Roosevelt a far-reaching, megaphone-like Voice,” wrote William Kittle, “raucous and strident indeed, but of high purpose, like the prophets of old” (1909: 449). His Progressive faith in a “common good” depended on a strong dose of moralism not found in the pragmatic liberalism of later generations; like other Progressives, his belief in social improvement was high-minded, hortatory, and messianic. In his speeches he denounced greedy corporations, excoriated corruption, implored his audiences to improve their character, and called for a restoration of the manly virtues he held dear. His scorn fell upon both the “malefactors of great wealth” and the “apostles of discontent”—radicals who demagogically fomented violence or resentment. Favoring Manichaeic language, Roosevelt damned “real and great evils,” “the wicked who prosper,” “wolfish greed and vulpine cunning”; he exalted “the eternal principles of right and decency,” and “the moral lift toward righteousness” (Dorsey 2003: 58). Puckishly, Herbert Croly compared him to “Thor wielding with power and effect a sledge-hammer in the cause of national righteousness.” Audiences, if not blinded, would be “rewarded by certain unexpected gleams of insight” (Croly 1909: 174).

The stridency, certainly, could grate. “Probably some offended persons see in Roosevelt a kind of masculine shrew who merely

storms and frets without purpose or direction,” wrote William Allen White, who was himself more forgiving (White 1902: 4). Others, more harshly, noted that while TR denounced his rivals as demagogues who twisted the truth, he was quite capable of hyperbole, distortion, and even demagoguery himself. But Roosevelt, a raging moderate if there ever was one, put his declamatory horsepower behind causes that he presented as sensible and judicious, and he usually managed to keep public opinion at his side. He prevailed, White concluded, “because he has taken the right side of a simple issue that people could understand, and always has kept the moral side of that issue before them” (White 1907: 389).

To reach more people, Roosevelt embarked on several “swings around the circle,” as presidential tours were called. The old ceremonial practice of paying call on different regions became in his hands a modern publicity device, as he traveled to New England, the Midwest, the South, and even abroad (a first for a sitting president) to Panama in 1906 to hype his transoceanic canal. A 1903 Western tour was especially ambitious: over nine weeks Roosevelt traversed 14,000 miles, delivering 265 speeches in 150 cities and towns, many of which today would never rate a presidential visit. TR rejoiced in the “processions, masses of school children, local Grand Army posts; sweating, bustling, self-conscious local committees; universal kindness and friendliness; little girls dressed up as Goddesses of Liberty” (Ellis 2008: 207–211). He fed off their enthusiasm. “If you desire an idea of the way in which Roosevelt’s admirers admired him,” recalled the reporter Charles Willis Thompson of the 1912 presidential campaign, “you may get it from the fact that by the time he reached Oklahoma on the way back, the single suit of clothes which he brought with him had been nearly wrecked by the frenzied crowds.” A woman at Joplin, Missouri had torn from the armpit down on the right side; in Tulsa an overly enthusiastic man ripped it on the left; and soon other fans were grabbing for swatches of his garb as souvenirs. “When I get back to Oyster Bay,” TR concluded, “the only thing I can do with this coat is to burn it” (Thompson 1929: 185–186).

The zeal had more to do with Roosevelt's charisma than any silver-tongued grandiloquence. Untrained in rhetoric, Roosevelt lacked the practiced command of his rivals—the classical orotundity of a Bryan or the professorial polish of Wilson. His boyhood asthma had kept him from learning to “speak enough from the chest,” he wrote, “so my voice is not as powerful as it ought to be” (Murphy 1955: 313–364). When he campaigned for long spells, his throat failed him. What made him compelling was the sheer energy and gusto. He spoke quickly and confidently, in a steady tempo. His incongruously high-pitched voice often veered into the upper register—reaching a comical falsetto (“Dee-lighted!”) when he emphasized a point. He hissed and spat his words. Parodists transcribed his remarks by sticking hyphens between each letter of a word. (To mimic him, Upton Sinclair explained, “You must recite the discourse with slow emphasis, showing your teeth, and hitting the table at a separate thump at each accented syllable: ‘The most in-nate-ly and es-sen-tial-ly mal-e-vo-lent scound-rel that God Al-might-y ev-er put on earth!’”) (Sinclair 1963: 119). Physically, too, TR behind the podium was the picture of controlled chaos. He smacked his open left palm with his right fist, thrust the finger of an extended arm from the rear platform of a train, or grasped a prop for illustration. And he fully exploited his expressive face, running through a range of emotions as he narrowed and widened his eyes and bared his teeth (Murphy 1955: 313–364).

Roosevelt disdained the classical style because he had no interest in taking listeners through the long, discursive reasoning characteristic of nineteenth-century debate. Instead he blared his points like a twentieth-century billboard. “Make your point as dear as possible,” he wrote, “and thrust the steel well home.” Mindful of newspaper coverage, he spoke in pithy slogans: “speak softly and carry a big stick”; “my hat’s in the ring.” To Steffens he explained, “I try to put the whole truth in each sentence. . . . I’ve found how one sentence quoted without context can be made to stab back and hurt me” (Murphy 1955: 352–353).

THIS SENSITIVITY THAT ROOSEVELT SHOWED TOWARD HIS PRESS coverage was evident from throughout his administration—indeed from the very start. Hours after McKinley's burial, the new president summoned the three leading wire-service reporters to the executive mansion. As recounted by Washington reporter David S. Barry, then running a wire service, the three sat around the Cabinet room table listening silently as Roosevelt spoke. The president promised that he would be accessible and candid but only if they used discretion in publishing what he told them; if anyone broke his trust, that man would be cut off. Barry protested what sounded uncomfortably close to a policy of *lèse majesté*, but Roosevelt, more amused than offended, brushed past the objection. Having set the terms of his relationship, he grinned cheekily. "All right, gentlemen," he declared, "we now understand each other" (1924: 266–269).

This mix of charm and imperiousness marked Roosevelt's dealings with the press for the next seven and a half years; along with his speaking it would sustain his activist image and promote his policy goals. A student of the newspapers, Roosevelt discerned that with objective, nonpartisan reporting on the rise, the papers' influence now stemmed more from the information they publicized than from the opinions they promulgated. This change played into the president's hands. As newspapers relinquished the role of telling readers what to think about politics, politicians had an opportunity to put their own spin on events in the news pages. The slant that a president gave to events could build support for his agenda. As Barry wrote, "President Roosevelt knew the value and potent influence of a news paragraph written as he wanted it written" (1924: 270).

Roosevelt generated news constantly. His outsized personality, ambitious agenda, and taste for political theater inspired fascination from the press and public. "The spotlight of publicity followed Roosevelt all his life with curious devotion—by no means without Roosevelt's encouragement," wrote William Allen White, who provided TR with more than his share (1928: 309). He loved the publicity stunt: the president descended to the bottom of Long Island Sound in a

submarine, made a point of shooting the first bear of anyone in his party on a Colorado hunting trip, and once rode 98 miles on horseback in 17 hours—all designed to seize headlines and shape public debate (Marcosson 1920: 85; “President Takes Plunge in Submarine” 1905: 1; “President Kills Bear; His Train in Danger” 1905: 1; “President Rides Seventeen Hours to Refute Critics” 1909: 2; Streitmatter 1990: 103). This sort of personalized newsmaking, rare in the nineteenth century, cemented TR’s image as a doer of big deeds and riveted public attention on his goals.

The press also showered attention on Roosevelt by tagging along on his family retreats to Sagamore Hill, his Oyster Bay homestead. When McKinley had visited his native Canton, Ohio, reporters rarely followed. But in 1902, after the Roosevelts launched a renovation of the executive mansion and repaired to Long Island, TR announced that he would be conducting business all the while—in one stroke, a reporter noted, “transfer[ring] the capital of the nation to this village by the sound” (“The Summer Capital” 1903: 1, 3; Ponder 1999: 30–31). Roosevelt’s family also drew delirious coverage. The first president since Lincoln to bring young children to the White House, Roosevelt tried to shield his brood, but he couldn’t suppress their exuberance or hide their mischief, which may even be said to have outrun their father’s. From Alice, his daughter from his first marriage, who at seventeen burst upon the Georgetown social scene, to the three-year-old Quentin, who soon joined his five brothers and sisters in hurling snowballs at Secret Service agents, the First Family engineered a fusion of political news and society journalism.

If TR drew notice when he didn’t seek it, more numerous were the occasions when he pursued it earnestly. He knew newsmen by name and read their work (Juergens 1981: 24). He learned details about their families; Isaac Marcosson was floored when Roosevelt told him how the teenage sons of his boss, editor Walter Hines Page, were faring in college (Marcosson 1920: 86). Some received letters that gushed with praise or catalogued what the president took to be an article’s mistakes. Even the independent-minded succumbed. One October day

Ray Baker received in the mail proofs of Roosevelt's upcoming message to Congress, with a request for confidential comments—a bald-faced cooptation that left Baker, he confessed, with “deep joy and satisfaction” (Baker 1945: 197). “Many a journalist of national standing,” wrote Norman Hapgood, a leading magazine editor, “was cured of amused or serious criticism [of TR] by the radiance shed on him . . . by the White House” (1930: 216).

Mostly Roosevelt enchanted reporters with the personal impression he made—the image of action even more vivid in person than it was to newspaper readers. “I first met him in the White House,” recalled Will Irwin. “As he advanced toward me, clicking his teeth so violently that I was afraid he would break them, extending his hand with a motion like that of a heavyweight wrestler grabbing for a hold, I marveled that any human frame could store and exude such energy” (Irwin 1942: 157). Oscar King Davis of the *New York Times* gaped at Roosevelt's performances during their afternoon tête-à-têtes, at which the president would read letters and edit documents without losing his train of thought (Davis 1925: 128). For William Allen White, the first encounter with TR bordered on the biblical: “I was afire with the splendor of the personality that I had met, and I walked up and down our little bedroom at the Normandie trying to impart to [my wife] some of the marvel that I saw in this young man” (White 1946: 156).

Exploiting this rapport, Roosevelt developed practices that became staples in the presidential bag of tricks. Whenever he spoke to reporters, according to Charles Willis Thompson of the *New York Times*, he “directed the form the interview should take” (Thompson 1929: 118). He leaked information purposefully, floating “trial balloons” by sharing possible future plans with a select few under the protection of anonymity; the reporters would test the fallout without the president having to take any public risks. TR studied the presence—or absence—of cameras at events; he once delayed the signing of a Thanksgiving Day proclamation until the Associated Press photographer arrived, the better to wind up on the front page (Dunn 1922: 24–25). When he traveled, Thompson

wrote, Roosevelt “seemed to sense the immense amount of toilsome and unnecessary work the reporters have to do,” and “after a speech he would round us up” and tell the press pack whether upcoming remarks would contain any further news (1929: 118). When he renovated the White House in 1902, Roosevelt upgraded the press room to make more space, installing telephones and instilling gratitude (Essary 1927: 87–88)

Most delightful were Roosevelt’s informal press conferences, the first of any sort held by a president. TR would ask a handful of favorites from among his “newspaper cabinet,” as he called them, to join him in the afternoon in a small room next to his office. There, a Treasury Department messenger who moonlighted as the barber-in-chief would groom Roosevelt as he held forth on politics, policy, and gossip. Frequently, in midshave, the excitable president would spring out of his armchair, lather flying off his face, to make a point. Barely able to squeeze in a word, the journalists concocted stratagems to assert themselves. Steffens would let Roosevelt prattle on until the barber’s razor skimmed his lower lip, forcing it shut; only then would the journalist fire off his sallies, as the president, wriggling in his chair, would try to butt in, only to be stilled by the barber’s blade (Steffens 1931: 509–515). “A more skillful barber never existed,” declared Louis Brownlow, a cub reporter who would later work for Franklin Delano Roosevelt; Brownlow pronounced TR’s freewheeling sessions “more fun to see than a circus” (Brownlow 1955: 399). The rigid rules, paradoxically, enabled a spirit of candor: since Roosevelt knew his words wouldn’t come back to haunt him, he could carry on freely. The sessions became masterpieces in self-serving disclosure. “You might have an hour with the president, and talk all around the horizon,” wrote Oscar King Davis, “politics, diplomatic affairs, military, naval or congressional situation, money trust, labor, undesirable citizens, or whatnot, and yet not get out of it all a word that you could write that day” (1925: 124, 135).

Roosevelt paired his carrots with sticks, punishing those who broke from the official line. “You must not print news objectionable

to or censorious of the administration, especially from the White House, or you will get disliked, and will probably suffer for it," wrote Washington correspondent Walter Clark (Gould 2003: 21). With equal parts humor and gravity, Roosevelt created the "Ananias Club," named for a Christian bible figure who dropped dead after lying to the apostle Peter; it comprised reporters whom Roosevelt felt had crossed him. At one point he barred the entire staff of the *Boston Herald* from the White House after a reporter claimed that TR's sons had tortured a Thanksgiving turkey; the punishment extended even to the *Herald's* meteorological reports, which were kept from using the federal weather bureau (Pollard 1947: 572–575; Medved 1979: 116). Roosevelt self-righteously insisted that he retaliated against only those who printed falsehoods or broke his trust, but he seldom acknowledged that a reporter might have legitimately construed his words in a manner different from how he meant them. Differences of opinion or interpretation always became, through the distortion of Roosevelt's pincez, a simple matter of truth versus falsehood. Worse still, TR had no qualms about falsely denying that he had said things that he simply wished to disown.

ROOSEVELT'S OVERT MANIPULATION AND PUBLICITY MONGERING gave rise to complaints that he used the press only to burnish his image, or that his rhetoric was unmatched by action. Undeniably, he had a taste for theater. Yet on a few significant occasions he clearly converted words into policy. Probably his most potent effort came in 1905 and 1906 on behalf of the Hepburn Act, named for its House sponsor, William P. Hepburn of Iowa, which tightened the regulation of railroads—at the time the most formidable of the corporations. Because TR's own Republican party was dominated by pro-business forces, the president faced a battle in getting a bill through Congress. To do so, he rallied public opinion by courting the press, mastering publicity, and serving up his newspaper-ready rhetoric.

Throughout 1905 and 1906, Roosevelt kept railroad regulation in the headlines by releasing reports and announcing investigations of rail-

road malfeasance. Between January and mid-March 1906, he garnered 11 front-page stories in the *New York Times*. He also marshaled support from editorialists and writers for the mass-circulation magazines. Ray Stannard Baker contributed a five-part exposé of the railway companies to *McClure's*—which the president, who was given an advance look at the galleys, credited with inspiring thoughts for his State of the Union message (Seymour 1985: 122–125; Juergens 1981: 56–58). Other magazines similarly lent support (Juergens 1981: 58).

Roosevelt's personal advocacy included two speaking tours. They began with a January 1905 address to the Union League Club of Philadelphia, a Gilded Age gathering place for the city's moneyed class, in which Roosevelt laid out the need for a strengthened Interstate Commerce Commission to determine fair rates—a strong repudiation of the regnant doctrines of *laissez-faire* (“Addresses by the President” 1905: 6; “Roosevelt Advises Business Leaders” 1905: 1). After the Senate recessed that spring without acting on a bill that the House passed, Roosevelt intensified the pressure with a swing through the Midwest and Southwest. When the bill remained stuck in October, Roosevelt took his pitch to the Southeast, the region that held the balance in the congressional fight. The spectacle of a Northeastern Republican president touring the South made headlines, and TR milked the journalistic interest with gestures like a courtesy call to Stonewall Jackson's widow. Dixie swooned. In Raleigh, TR was made a “guest of the city” (“Ovation Lasts Through State” 1905: 11); in Atlanta, 12,000 schoolchildren lined Peachtree Street, the main thoroughfare, throwing bouquets (“Children to Line the Way of President” 1905: 1). Roosevelt pitched regulation as a middle path between government ownership and *laissez-faire* (“President Demands Railroad Control” 1905: 9). “No President, not even Jackson when he defied the power of the National Bank,” wrote the *Washington Post*, “has ever before initiated a struggle with powers so strong as those which President Roosevelt now summons to a trial of strength before Congress and at the bar of Public Opinion” (“The President in the South” 1905: 6).

The railroads—themselves the first corporations to exploit the new field of public relations—fought back. In *McClure's*, Ray Baker called theirs “the most sweeping campaign for reaching and changing public thought ever undertaken in this country” (1906: 535). The railroads, he revealed, even enlisted the Boston-based Publicity Bureau, the first firm of its kind, to argue against Roosevelt’s reforms, spending freely on newspaper ads, commissioning articles, and circulating supportive speeches (Cutlip 1966: 269–280). Although Baker acknowledged the corporations’ legal right to make their case, he noted that their “unlimited money, representing a private interest which wishes to defeat the public will” raised the question of whether “those who believe that the present conditions are wrong” would ever be heard (1906: 539). For Baker and others of like mind, Roosevelt’s White House publicity was a needed corrective to the special pleading of the wealthy, self-interested corporations.

As it happened, Roosevelt was more than a match for the railroads, and on the Hepburn bill public opinion ran in his favor. In February 1906, the House passed the bill 364 to 7. “It is not hazardous to say that the president’s underlying idea has very steadily gained public favor,” Harry Beech Needham, wrote in *The World’s Work*, reflecting Roosevelt’s spin; “and it is a safe prediction some bill, which shall embody this underlying idea, will become law—if not during this Congress then during some other” (Juergens 1981: 58). Realizing the limits of rhetoric, TR chose to accept some concessions to get a bill passed. In May, a revised bill sailed through the upper chamber; Roosevelt signed it at the end of June. Though short of what some desired, the Hepburn Act was historic, empowering the Interstate Commerce Commission to control rates and furnishing a precedent for federal agencies to manage business in the name of the public. Roosevelt’s public leadership had been critical (Blum 1954: 104–105; Cornwell 1965: 23–25). “He believed,” Henry Stoddard wrote, “that if he got the people, he was certain to get the politicians” (1927: 311).

ROOSEVELT’S USE OF PUBLICITY FOR PROGRESSIVE ENDS MADE critics like Tillman seem shortsighted on many counts. But his detrac-

tors leveled a potent (if oversimplified) charge in suggesting that he was arrogating too much power to the presidency, particularly with his reliance on public relations aides. In this regard, too, Roosevelt was an innovator whose activism remade the office.

In the 1890s, William McKinley's secretary, George Cortelyou, had set up a meticulous system of handling the swelling number of press inquiries. Roosevelt, recognizing Cortelyou's bureaucratic talents, put him in charge of all executive branch communications. That policy brought order to a process in need of taming, and it kept Cabinet secretaries and agency heads from issuing messages that might undermine Roosevelt's own. But silencing other executive branch officials ultimately proved impossible, and the president soon saw the wisdom of enlisting Cortelyou's abilities elsewhere—elevating him to a series of high-level administration posts culminating in the treasury secretaryship (“Mr. Roosevelt’s Bureau of Publicity” 1902; “A White House Press Agent” 1902: n.p.; Hilderbrand 1981: 56–57).

To replace Cortelyou, TR named as White House secretary William Loeb, a crisp-looking veteran of New York politics who had attached himself to TR back in Albany. A loyalist, Loeb even mimicked his boss's pince-nez eyeglasses and short-cropped haircut. Neither he nor Cortelyou before him boasted the title of press secretary, but both men could be said to have held the office *avant la lettre*. Both secretaries befriended reporters, mastered the art of the leak, and closely guarded how the president was characterized in the press. They also enhanced Roosevelt's influence by issuing daily press releases about the president's activities—bills signed, pardons issued, visitors met, speeches scheduled, positions taken. Although such handouts would eventually become routine (and dismissed or treated with due skepticism by reporters), in these early years the device gave Roosevelt's secretaries leverage over what newsmen wrote. Because reporters were hungrier than ever for news and yet unaccustomed to viewing the handouts as government spin, the press releases became the foundation, if not the sum and substance, of many stories. Roosevelt himself sometimes wrote in longhand what he wanted a reporter to publish only to see

his prose, or Loeb's, appear in the newspapers verbatim (Medved 1979: 107–109; Juergens 1981: 50).

TR also authorized special publicity efforts for two pet programs. He supported Gifford Pinchot's salesmanship on behalf of the US Forest Service—actions that by furnishing information on forest policies also served to trumpet TR's conservation record (Ponder 1986: 177–186). And in 1905, as Roosevelt's project of building the Panama Canal was meeting resistance from the railroads (who feared a loss of business), the president decided that to combat what he saw as the railroads' distortions, he needed to run his own counter-campaign of information. To this end he hired Joseph Bishop, who explained his mission by stating flatly, "I give out the situation as it is" (Lee 2011: 32–37).

Bishop soon found himself in the predicament faced by the countless officials who would follow in his footsteps. What he and his patron considered the neutral provision of public information—or a counterweight to partisan misinformation—struck newsmen as self-serving, selective disclosure, if not outright dishonesty. Before long reporters were accusing Bishop of "withholding the truth" (the *New York Times*) and "evasions and suppressions" (the *New York Evening Post*) ("The Muzzle Order Revoked" 1905: 8; Lee 2011: 39). TR's political foes, too, objected to Bishop's role, particularly given his fat salary. When in December the House began debate on appropriating funds for the canal, New York congressman John Fitzgerald spoke out against Bishop's hiring, and a few days later the Senate Appropriations Committee called the publicist to testify. Coached beforehand by TR, Bishop coolly defended his role as reasonable and even anodyne, and he seemed to disarm, or at least exhaust, the committee's questioning. But two days later Ben Tillman renewed the assault. The only reason Roosevelt might want to retain a public relations officer, he insisted, was for illegitimate ends—in the service of "hypnotizing public opinion or of misinforming the people." One Democrat then proposed to bar federal spending on all public relations work for the canal. Roosevelt, sensing the tide turning, sent word that if Bishop could remain as secretary to the Panama Canal

Commission, the press duties could be deleted from the job description. The concession was canny, since Bishop continued as before to give information to the press—simply without any official acknowledgment of that role (Lee 2011: 46).

The Bishop flap signaled a backlash against TR's publicity methods. For all his successes in tending his activist image and message, Roosevelt's hand often became too heavy. Criticism along these lines proliferated (Dickinson 1907: 1410; Benedict, 1907: 397–401). Detractors often exaggerated the danger that Roosevelt's stratagems posed, and yet they presciently identified what would become a common practice of chief executives: using all the tools at their disposal (and creating new ones) to marshal public opinion behind their goals. Notably, these critics came mainly from the ranks of those who already opposed the president's policies, whether businessmen who chafed at his proposed regulations or Bryanites who deemed him a pseudo-reformer. Charging the president with seducing the press corps or hijacking public opinion let them believe, or hope, that the public would side with their own views if only they had a fair chance to make their case. This convenient alignment of ideological enmity and suspicion of opinion manipulation would recur in presidential politics for decades to come. Defeated parties in electoral or legislative battles would find comfort in holding that they had lost not in the arena of ideas or action, but only in the more superficial, grubby, and disreputable realm of communication.

Indeed, the critique that Roosevelt embodied only the triumph of image over action rested on a dim view of the public's capacities that sat uneasily alongside a robust commitment to democracy. John Dewey, who shared the rising suspicion of public relations—worrying in the 1920s that America was “approaching a state of government by hired promoters of opinion called publicity agents”—was careful not to take this concern too far (Dewey 1927: 169). He recognized that in an age when news traveled across telegraph wires, newspapers reached millions, and Americans delighted in celebrity, no serious politician could ignore these vehicles of communication. “When one

has performed a resounding act,” Dewey wrote, addressing TR’s critics, “it is stultifying not to allow it to resound.” Unlike critics such as Tillman, who disparaged the public as easily duped by the wiles of publicists, Dewey was careful not to write off the public. He maintained some confidence that people who kept abreast of the news could see through posturing. “A petty deed cannot be made great by heralding,” Dewey wrote of Roosevelt, “and . . . his acts commanded publicity because they were in the first place of a quality to command attention” (1919: 116).

Dewey’s remark touched on a question at the core of the debates over presidential efforts to shape the news: the public’s susceptibility to manipulation. Progressives struggled in these years to confront the power of the new arts of publicity without drawing dark conclusions about democratic rule. “The average reader of the daily paper is in a hurry. He reads headlines,” wrote the journalist George Kittle in *The Arena* in 1909. “He does not note the careful coloring, the skillful arrangement of parts, the appeal to prejudice, the half-truths or the shrewd misstatements.” Yet despite this cynicism, Kittle went on to endorse Lincoln’s famous adage, “You can’t fool all the people all the time” (1909: 450). Similarly, the sociologist Edward Ross endorsed the sardonic judgment of Mark Twain, who noted that while 75 million Americans untrained as tailors would never dream of cutting their own suits, “they all think they can competently think out a political . . . scheme without any apprenticeship”; in fact, Twain said, they get their politics “where they get their astronomy—entirely at second-hand. Being untrained, they are no more able to intelligently examine . . . a policy than they are to calculate an eclipse.” Yet no sooner had Ross seconded Twain’s dim view of the public’s capacities than he proceeded to insist that “collective rumination” would lift public opinion from its ignorance (1908: 349–351). Was a master of publicity like Roosevelt fooling the public or admirably finding agreement among the people? The answer usually turned on one’s political viewpoint.

In the following years, skepticism of publicity agents grew apace. The use of taxpayer funds for publicity—which was coming to

seem less like healthy exposure and increasingly like propaganda—was especially controversial. And yet as the executive branch grew in size and its functions multiplied, it continued to rely on public relations techniques and personnel. That growth in publicity did not directly enlarge the president’s power, but it did oil the newly complex machinery of White House decision-making, and in this way the rise of presidential publicity became intertwined with the expansion of executive power. There was no turning back: a concern with press management and image-making was now an indispensable part of presidential governance.

Theodore Roosevelt’s detractors, distrusting both images and the public’s judgment, cried that publicity was a form of deception. Roosevelt, in contrast, recognized that for a president to avail himself of the new machinery of image-craft was, in fact, to lead. Presidents now drew their strength from public opinion, and they had to show the public people that there was, in Alexander Hamilton’s old phrase, energy in the executive. Success therefore required conveying an activist image, for the presidential image served as the handmaiden of purposeful, progressive action.

After Roosevelt left office, his successors continued to rely on publicity and thereby to provoke controversy. A telling instance came in 1912, when the Bureau of Public Roads advertised for a “publicity expert” to place news items in “various periodicals and newspapers, particularly in country newspapers” (Lee 2011: 84–88). The notice drew sharp criticism from editorial pages, including that of the *New York Times*—which had run the ad in the first place (“Topics of the Times” 1913: 8). In Congress, Frederick Gillett of Massachusetts used the incident to propose barring federal funds from being used to compensate any publicity experts, except where Congress specifically allowed. His measure passed on a voice vote and was approved by the Senate (Pimlott 1951: 69–71). It then went to the new president, Woodrow Wilson, for his signature. Although less flamboyant in his personal style than Roosevelt, Wilson very much emulated TR in his conception of the presidency: he was a Progressive, an activist, and a public

president who used the new tools and techniques of persuasion to take the country in the direction he preferred. Asked a press conference if he might veto the Gillett bill, Wilson said no, and that he agreed that the departments shouldn't rely on publicity agents. But, he added, "It won't affect [this] office. We'll have publicity, I can promise you that" (Hilderbrand 1985: 260–261).

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