

Courting White Southerners: Theodore Roosevelt's Quest for the Heart of the South

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Most studies of President Theodore Roosevelt address his “southern strategy” to revive the Republican Party’s fortunes in a region where it was effectively shut out by 1900. This essay revisits Roosevelt’s approach to the South between 1901 and 1912 and argues that wooing white southerners away from the Democratic Party, more than any other approach, represented Roosevelt’s overriding strategy for the revitalization of the southern GOP.

Keywords: Theodore Roosevelt; Republican Party; American South; Southern Strategy

In the final decades of the long nineteenth century, the southern Republican Party was effectively moribund. Nevertheless, Theodore Roosevelt, a “half-southern” Republican, aimed to revive his party’s fortunes south of the Mason-Dixon Line following his chance rise to the presidency in the fall of 1901. The Democratic Party had, to this point, successfully managed to portray the Republicans as a party bent on self-servingly advocating “negro domination” of the region, and many southern Democrats had tied their political fortunes firmly to the cause of the white man. As a result, what was left of the Republican Party’s southern electorate did indeed consist largely of the black voters of the region. Yet, Roosevelt’s ascendancy came in the midst of a period historian Michael Perman has labelled “Restoration,” when black participation in the region’s elections all but came to an end.¹ In the 1890s, southern black voters had, with few exceptions, cast their ballots for Republicans, Populists, and fusion candidates—anyone but the Democrats who controlled most state legislatures in the South by that point.² By 1901, however, most of the region had enacted state-level legislation that sought to remove black voters from

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the electoral roll.³ As a result, the number of registered African-American voters in Louisiana—to take just one example of the regional trend—had fallen from some 130,000 in 1896 to a mere 5,000 by 1900.⁴ By the time Roosevelt took office, the black vote had shifted from being a sizable minority of the southern voter base to a statistical irrelevance. Consequently, the region was more than ever the domain of the Democratic Party, which, in the South at least, wore its white supremacist credentials for all to see. For electoral success in the region, Roosevelt seemingly had two options. Either, he might revisit the unpopular Reconstruction-era strategy of federal intervention to forcefully enfranchise black voters, an idea that had last arisen with the failed Republican Force Bill of 1890, or, he could try to win over white voters instead.⁵ Roosevelt, it is argued here, pursued the latter course as part of a southern courtship strategy between 1901 and 1912, in a concerted attempt to rebuild a viable—white—Republican electorate in the South.

Roosevelt's presidency has hardly been bereft of historiographical or popular attention over the last century, and his approach to the South has been no exception to this.⁶ When attention is paid to a “southern strategy,” it tends to take two or three different guises, rather than appearing as one coherent “strategy” at all. First, some argue that Roosevelt's strategy was to overhaul his corrupt and neglected party in the South, while including the GOP's traditional African-American base in the process. Second, many argue that Roosevelt's strategy was cynically aimed at acquiring loyalty from the existing Republican factions in the South purely to secure delegates for his re-nomination in 1904. Third, there are those that see Roosevelt as trying to rebuild his party in the South by courting white voters and, in so doing, break the grip the Democrats held over the region.⁷ The issue with much of the existing literature is that it tends to focus too much upon the first two “strategies” (usually sequentially), and presents the third—if at all—as a default adopted after the first two strategies had either failed or run their course. What this consensus often underplays is Roosevelt's longer-term adherence to the third strategy: courting the white South.

In the best early essay on the subject, Roosevelt's biographer Henry Pringle focuses on the first two strategies: for him, Roosevelt began with reform but caved to pragmatic self-interest as the 1904 election approached.⁸ Pringle's view was largely reiterated by the godfather of southern history, C. Vann Woodward, and later works did little to challenge this narrative—though they added valuable depth to illustrate Roosevelt's complex relationship with African Americans.⁹ Despite scores of excellent works on Roosevelt, the Republican Party, and the South, few subsequent studies have sought to challenge this consensus presentation of Roosevelt's change of course, from a reformist pro-black approach to a cynical abandonment of African Americans by 1903–1904.¹⁰ However, Gary Gerstle's excellent *American Crucible* argues that Roosevelt was not so Machiavellian as to change course in 1904, from courting blacks to wooing white voters instead.¹¹ This essay both agrees and disagrees with Gerstle. It agrees in respect to the fact that Roosevelt did not really change course. However, it disagrees regarding Roosevelt's Machiavellian tendencies, as it is argued here that he had been slowly abandoning African Americans and increasingly wooing white southerners since the very beginning.

Clearly Roosevelt's views on race need some consideration, though they are not the primary focus here, as Roosevelt's courtship of white southerners was essentially pragmatic, given the almost impossible chance of winning elections in the South with what remained of the black electorate. The most influential works on Roosevelt's racial views are probably still those of Thomas Dyer and Gary Gerstle who both, while noting that Roosevelt's views were far more complex and nuanced than many of the race-baiting southern Democratic politicians of the era, accept that Roosevelt regarded African Americans as members of an inferior race.¹² However, even if Roosevelt had more enlightened views than some, he did believe that African Americans were, in the main, ill-fitted to exercise the political rights secured by the Fifteenth Amendment.¹³ If Roosevelt really believed the franchise had been a step too far, then it is not so hard to believe he could turn a blind eye to it being taken away. Roosevelt's key advisor on all things African-American was himself a black man, the influential educator, Booker T. Washington, whose

famous Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895 had advocated self-help for African Americans, and seemed to accept social inequality for the time being.¹⁴ Though more recent explorations of Washington have stressed his work for greater African-American rights in the period, he was widely presented at the time as an “accommodationist” who accepted the prevailing situation in the South for the sake of his own advancement.¹⁵ This presentation of Washington, albeit one-dimensional, worked well for Roosevelt: Washington could be held up as a symbol of inclusion, and a figure who did not stress the primacy of political participation. Roosevelt’s approach to African Americans was almost entirely symbolic. He felt that token appointees and rhetoric would distract from his broader abandonment of southern blacks, and yet serve to show that he was not excluding *all* black people. Though he couched his gradual abandonment of African Americans in terms of meritocracy—in his opinion, very few black people deserved elevation to political office—the ultimate purpose was to appoint more white southerners as part of a lengthy campaign to win over white voters in the region. Thus, if his grand strategy failed, he could always fall back on his traditional base, which he had technically never discarded.

Democratic domination of the South had not gone unchallenged since the end of Reconstruction, but the rise and fall of the southern Populist movement in the 1890s had illustrated how difficult it was to battle against entrenched regionalism and southern political traditions.¹⁶ The Populists, like the Republicans, struggled to overcome the racial divisions of the South, and many of the more established black politicians in the region continued to support the Republicans in order to maintain what little power they had left.¹⁷ Meanwhile, factions of pragmatic southern Republicans, favoring a white-only party—the so-called “lily whites”—had begun appearing since the 1880s and grew increasingly dominant in some southern state Republican machines at the expense of the so-called (racially inclusive) “black-and-tans.”¹⁸ Roosevelt, however, wanted to build something far larger than the often paltry lily-white factions that his party had managed to amass to that point. The true objects of Roosevelt’s desire were the vast majority of white southern voters who were currently firmly in the hands of his

Democratic rivals. What followed was a more than decade-long courtship of these voters that was necessarily restrained, at least in public, for fear that he might ultimately be rejected.

First term

As noted above, most historians, when considering any sort of “southern strategy,” consider two approaches in Roosevelt’s first term, ahead of the underlying—and primary—strategy of courting white southerners. First, the initial enthusiasm for reform in conjunction with the traditional African-American voter base, and second, a turn to pragmatic abandonment of principle with a view to gathering delegates for his re-nomination at the 1904 convention. This article seeks not to dismiss these approaches entirely, but to reassert the primacy of the courtship of southern white voters. It is important, however, to see how these approaches bear up to scrutiny under a different light, and it is fitting to start with the idea that Roosevelt initially started with a principled stance to reform the party and uphold the rights of African Americans.

The main instance historians inevitably turn to when considering this first approach came very early on in Roosevelt’s presidency, when he invited Booker T. Washington for dinner at the White House on 16 October 1901. Inviting the most prominent black man in the nation to the White House seemed significant, particularly to those looking for hopeful signs of a true successor to Lincoln’s legacy. The meeting was recast by the press, in a variety of forms, for months to come, becoming what Roosevelt termed “an international affair.”¹⁹ Some African Americans saw the dinner as the start of a new commitment to African-American equality, while many white southerners saw the dinner as an early affront and a sign of an integrationist agenda. Roosevelt defended the dinner simply as “showing some little respect” to an exceptional black man of the age and claimed that the southern reaction was “literally inexplicable.”²⁰ However, the furor over the dinner overshadowed its true nature: the purpose of the meeting was to discuss Roosevelt’s plans for the South. Roosevelt and Washington felt that it might be best to appoint fewer blacks to federal positions in the South, so long as this was balanced with some

“compensatory” African-American appointments in the North. They also agreed to consider conservative white Gold Democrats to fill vacant southern offices.²¹ Indeed, one of Washington’s first suggestions to Roosevelt was Thomas Goode Jones, a former Democratic governor of Alabama.²² Here, from the very outset of his presidency, the roots of Roosevelt’s courtship of the white South can be seen not far below the surface, yet the purpose and outcomes of the meeting were, and have continued to be, obscured by the fiery debates and re-imaginings of the dinner itself.

The Washington dinner was certainly the most high-profile event that both African Americans and southern Democrats seized upon to depict Roosevelt, incorrectly, as an advocate of racial equality, but further such instances appeared across the southern press throughout Roosevelt’s first term. Among the most notable were his few appointments of African Americans to federal offices, such as Minnie Cox as postmistress in Indianola, Mississippi and William Crum as Collector of the Port of Charleston in South Carolina. Roosevelt defended both appointments as being motivated by merit, not racial considerations.²³ The fact that Roosevelt doggedly stuck to his guns, in spite of the backlash these appointments received, should come as little surprise to any who have studied the colonel. Roosevelt also gave a number of speeches denouncing lynching and peonage that were deemed pro-black and anti-southern despite Roosevelt’s frequent attempts to avoid overtly sectional language.²⁴ All of these examples were, however, far more symbolic than they were substantial—something African-American civil rights leaders, like Bishop Alexander Walters, came to realize by 1904.²⁵ Though couched in the rhetoric of appointing the best people for the job, regardless of race, Roosevelt’s black appointments *were* the exceptions that proved the rule. Roosevelt actively sought to appoint fewer blacks to office in the South throughout his terms, as he noted on numerous occasions that are explored below, and this was the sum total, in terms of “substance,” of his approach to African Americans during his time in office.

One of the few arenas in which southern Republicans still had any significant political role to play was in nominating their party's presidential candidate at the party convention where, despite their practical electoral inconsequentiality, southern states were still generously represented in terms of convention delegates. This is the arena to which historians since the 1930s have looked in order to show Roosevelt's change of direction, away from African Americans and towards a more pragmatic stance. As noted above, one might take issue with the idea that Roosevelt had ever truly embraced African-American rights as an issue in the first place. Furthermore, it is argued here, though Roosevelt did indeed take a pragmatic approach to secure delegates, he at no point abandoned his primary aim of wooing white southerners in the longer term.

Mark Hanna, President William McKinley's chief campaign strategist in 1896, had played out his own version of the delegate-grabbing kind of "southern strategy" to ensure McKinley's nomination at that year's convention. Hanna went so far as to purchase a holiday home in Georgia and engineer an "impromptu" visit of the McKinleys to the region in order to impress delegates, who in turn hoped for federal patronage if McKinley went on to win with their votes.²⁶ Roosevelt wrote extensively about his disdain for this sort of politics and claimed he would eschew a patronage-based approach.²⁷ But, inevitably, to change the face of the party in the South in the long term would mean remaining in the White House in the short term and seeing off a potential challenge from Hanna in 1904, who had a ready-made base from his earlier campaigns for McKinley.²⁸ Thus, Roosevelt did indeed take on a pragmatic approach to securing delegates in order to support his re-nomination in the region, picking up the scraps left over by Hanna by distributing patronage according to the local dynamics of the various state Republican parties.²⁹ Roosevelt supported lily-white Republicans in some states while supporting black-and-tans in others.³⁰ This was neither an abandonment of a pro-African American approach—which had never really existed—nor an abandonment of his courtship of white Democrats, whom he continued to pursue. For Roosevelt, who disingenuously claimed not to understand claims he

was delegate-grabbing, his critics were missing the point. Though he may have been gathering delegates with strategic distribution of federal appointments, his long-term strategy of wooing Democratic white southerners was unaffected, and this was more likely to upset both factions of his own party. If he was primarily concerned with delegates above all else, he reasoned, why would he keep appeasing Democrats who could not return him as his party's nominee? He wrote to Henry Payne, one of his chief delegate-securers in the South, to decry press criticism along these very lines:

The correspondent of the [New York] Times is a particularly malicious and slanderous liar, and he is now seeking to discredit me by the utterly absurd statement that through you and [Thomas] Clarkson I have been maneuvering to get southern delegates. The comic feature of the situation is that you and I had agreed that the course I was following would probably render it certain that if there was any formidable opposition to me I should lose the delegates from the Gulf States, at least.³¹

Though lacking sincerity in his incredulity about his attempts to secure delegates in the region, Roosevelt hits upon an important point when he suggests that his policy up to that point had hardly been well-coordinated to this end. Appointing Democrats to federal patronage positions, ahead of both main factions of his own party, was counterproductive in a delegate-grabbing strategy. In terms of the long-game of wooing a new white voter base, however, it made perfect sense. Though Roosevelt did wish to secure delegates, and played Hanna at his own game in trying to do so, it was not his overriding aim for the South.

Forging relations with Democrats in the South was not unique to Roosevelt's administration, but it was approached to a different end. Hanna and McKinley had, after all, given Democrats like Senator John McLaurin of South Carolina considerable control over federal patronage in the region as part of Hanna's lily-white, delegate-securing strategy in the region.³² When Roosevelt set about his own course in the South, despite the senator's links to his rival Hanna, Roosevelt continued to consult McLaurin, who himself was a victim of the fractious

political scenes that varied enormously from southern state to southern state.³³ McLaurin's closeness to the Republicans, and spectacular falling out with his former ally and fellow Democratic Senator, Ben Tillman, saw him effectively de-selected in 1902 and caricatured in the press as a "Roosevelt" man.³⁴ Roosevelt soon set about finding McLaurin a federal judicial appointment instead, though McLaurin balked at this, sensing it would look like a reward for loyal service.³⁵ Despite consulting and appointing many such southern Democrats, Roosevelt felt that his efforts to placate white southerners went under-appreciated and that—to a large degree—most southerners seemed to be overlooking his subtle overtures.

In early 1903, Roosevelt wrote to North Carolinian newspaper editor Silas McBee to point out that the "immense majority" of his southern appointments had been "white and in some States, in fact, I think in most of the States in question, the majority have been Democrats."³⁶ Later that same month Roosevelt listed his various Democratic appointees in a letter to the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*.³⁷ If Roosevelt was solely interested in attracting delegates from within his own diminished party, he certainly spent a lot of time working with Democrats and worrying about what the southern press made of him.³⁸ By the end of 1903, as Roosevelt's own re-nomination and re-election battles loomed into view, he wrote to Republican veteran Carl Schurz explaining once again his policy of not saying "one bitter word" about the South in public, even to the extent that he had chosen to ignore the rampant abuses against African Americans' constitutional rights in the region. Instead, Roosevelt suggested, he had:

...confined myself to supporting such men as Judge [Thomas Goode] Jones (my appointee by the way) in the peonage cases etc. I have had to frown on lawlessness, as in the Indianola case [Minnie Cox].... in the Southern States as a whole the great majority of these appointments that I have made have been of democrats, and not more than one or two per cent have been colored men.³⁹

He then decried the bad press he received in South Carolina and Mississippi, despite appointing ex-Confederate Democrats ahead of the "utterly rotten" Republicans in those states.⁴⁰ However, the final remark Roosevelt made was particularly telling: he argued that

his actions in these states had surely turned his party there against him, to the extent that “anyone would see that my course was not dictated by my political self-interest.”⁴¹ Though never one to overlook his own political self-interest, here Roosevelt stressed the potential precariousness of balancing a short-term delegate-grabbing effort alongside his long-term courtship strategy. Unfortunately for historians seeking to find out how this potential clash of strategies might have turned out, Roosevelt’s great potential rival for the nomination, Mark Hanna, died in February 1904, some months before the nominating convention. Though it is going too far to suggest Roosevelt was not interested in delegates, as he most certainly was keen to secure his re-nomination, it is important to recognize that all along he continued to pursue his careful dalliance with white southern Democrats, however imprudent this might have been.

Second term

With re-nomination secured, the presidential election of 1904 ultimately followed predictable lines when it came to the actual votes cast in the South. Roosevelt fared well in the border states, where he retained Delaware, Maryland and West Virginia, gained Missouri (a state twice lost by McKinley), but lost in Kentucky (a state McKinley had carried in 1896, but not in 1900). Roosevelt wrote to historian James Ford Rhodes that he “cared especially for carrying Missouri because that is a partly Southern State.”⁴² Nevertheless, the story in the upper and lower South was unchanged: Roosevelt was rejected across the board in favor of his Democratic opponent. Though he bettered McKinley’s 1900 share of the vote in Arkansas and Florida, in the other states the Republican share of the vote fell when compared with 1900. Evidently, Roosevelt’s courtship strategy had yet to have taken effect in a measurable way.

Even before he won the 1904 election, there were signs that Roosevelt was going to continue his effort to woo white southerners into his second term. He wrote to Silas McBee in July of that year regarding the creation of a taskforce of influential southerners who, after

November, could “come to see me at the White House, and see if I cannot arrive at some policy as regards the South which will, as far as possible, *not* be susceptible of misconstruction!”⁴³ He wrote to another correspondent a couple of weeks later, bemoaning the unfair treatment he received from southerners: “Not a law has been passed or threatened affecting the negro or the southern white in his relation to the negro during the three years that the South has been indulging in hysterics over me... I have had to exercise all my power to prevent something being done in a vindictive or a retaliatory spirit.”⁴⁴ He reiterated these sentiments the following day to Rhodes, explaining his appointment of African Americans as—more overtly than usual—tokenism: “just enough to make it evident that they were not being entirely proscribed.”⁴⁵ It seemed apparent, even before it started, that Roosevelt’s second term would seek to build upon the courtship strategy of his first.

In February 1905, Roosevelt made a speech about the so-called “Negro problem” at the Lincoln Dinner of the Republican Club of New York City. He spoke of national reconciliation and suggested that, although there was no “perfect solution,” it was important for black people to seek education and avoid sheltering their own criminals if there were to be progress. The speech was far from radical and, though it condemned lynching, Roosevelt also argued that the person who was best placed to help an African American was the “white man who is his neighbor.”⁴⁶ The week after his speech, Roosevelt indicated that he felt the tide was beginning to turn: “At present,” he told Rhodes, the South is, “as a whole, speaking well of me. When they will begin again to speak ill I do not know.”⁴⁷ The *New York Tribune*, suggested that such sentiments had been stirred by the 1904 election, and noted the participation of “an unusually large number of Southern Governors and military organizations in the inauguration ceremonies.”⁴⁸ That summer, building upon this perceived shift in the views of southerners, lily-white Republican (and former senator) Jeter Pritchard of North Carolina wrote to the president about an exciting new plan dreamed up by their mutual acquaintance John McLaurin the erstwhile junior Democratic senator for South Carolina.⁴⁹ Pritchard said the time was better than

any since Robert E. Lee's surrender for the Republicans to do something in the South, and that thousands of Democrats wished to switch affiliation in South Carolina. Pritchard continued by outlining a plan, purported to be McLaurin's, for the former Democratic senator to lead a new movement in the state that would draw disaffected Democrats into the Republican ranks.⁵⁰

With such momentum seemingly building, Roosevelt took a tour of the South in October 1905.⁵¹ For historian Edward Frantz, who contrasts Republican presidential tours of the South across several decades, the tour was a "critical turning point" signaling Roosevelt's move away from African Americans and towards wooing white southerners.⁵² While it is fair to say that it marked a more overt courtship of white southerners, it was hardly a departure from what Roosevelt had by now been doing for several years. Nevertheless, accounts abound that Roosevelt was greeted with much adulation upon his arrival in the South. The *Times Dispatch*, reporting on the president's first visit to the old Confederate capital of Richmond, noted that:

Four years ago, and at this very season, he made himself in a single night the most hated man known to the white people below the Mason and Dixon's line; to-day idolized by the entire country, he comes to draw back to him the South, already won, and to cause in Richmond a demonstration of enthusiastic approval, the like of which has seldom, if ever been seen before in all Virginia.⁵³

As Roosevelt toured the former Confederacy, he spoke with warmth about Confederate veterans, General Robert E. Lee, his own Georgian mother and her Confederate family, and even of the number of southerners among his Rough Rider regiment in Cuba during the Spanish-American War.⁵⁴ One newspaper sarcastically remarked that by the end of his time in Virginia, "One would suppose that the President himself fired the last shots from the [CSS] Alabama instead of his uncle."⁵⁵ The *New York Tribune* suggested that southerners could now see that Roosevelt had "sought no quarrel with them or their ideas; that he was moved only by a sincere desire to carry into effect his theories of a 'square deal' for every class and for every section."⁵⁶ Not all of the press felt Roosevelt's warm reception and reciprocal friendly yet ambiguous speeches were sincere, especially in South Carolina, but even these voices admitted

that much “slobbering” over Roosevelt had taken place.⁵⁷ Summing up the trip, one Mississippi publication announced that, though it was a proud Democratic newspaper, “we think we can conscientiously extend our fist to President Roosevelt, the South’s friend, the United States’ wisest president and the world’s greatest diplomat. Here’s to you Teddy.”⁵⁸ By all accounts, Roosevelt’s blushing southern debut was considered a triumph; the State of Virginia’s legislature even endorsed him for a third presidential term.⁵⁹

Following Roosevelt’s successful tour of the South, Pritchard wrote once more to the president and enclosed a letter he had received from McLaurin regarding the plans he mentioned to Roosevelt before his excursion.⁶⁰ Pritchard presaged the enclosure with a short note, pointing out his disappointment with McLaurin, who appeared to have backtracked from playing an active role in this pursuit.⁶¹ McLaurin felt that Roosevelt’s tour had convinced the South that he would bring about the “formation of a new white party” and that this was perhaps the main reason for the warm welcome the president had received. However, McLaurin argued that his running as an independent stalking horse in South Carolina, as Pritchard and the president had previously suggested, would be certain to fail. He urged Roosevelt, instead, to run for another term in 1908 and stand as a non-partisan candidate that neither party could afford *not* to nominate.⁶² Here a “Roosevelt” Democrat was urging the president in 1905, to do in 1908, what he effectively was forced to do in 1912. Roosevelt wrote back to Pritchard the following day that *if* it appeared the warmth of his reception in the South was due to “the belief that I intended to inaugurate a new white party,” he had not expressed such a sentiment overtly at any point upon the tour.⁶³ At this point in time, however, right up to losing the nomination to Taft in June 1912, Roosevelt wanted to lead a movement in the South along very similar lines to those McLaurin suggested, but subtly and from *within* the Republican Party.

The rhetorical goodwill of the South did not, however, convince Roosevelt that votes would soon follow. “I am half a southerner myself,” Roosevelt wrote to Owen Wister in 1906, before going on to lament that “when I have tried to fall in with the views of the very southern

people... you seem to be upholding, the results have been worse than in any other way.”⁶⁴ In late September that year, days of race rioting broke out in Atlanta, Georgia, and Roosevelt remained largely mute on the issue, and certainly did not threaten to come to the aid of black southerners.⁶⁵ African-American civil rights activists criticized Roosevelt’s inaction, ushering in a season of fire-fighting for Booker T. Washington who himself was increasingly becoming the target of the more radical activists’ ire.⁶⁶ Privately, Roosevelt wrote to his friend, Louisiana businessman John M. Parker, that the riots were caused by “the wickedness of certain white leaders” who riled up both races in the South. The president also assured Parker that he had spoken out publically on the subject of race violence in the South in previous speeches and that any further intervention would be unwise.⁶⁷ Roosevelt was continually frustrated by the coldness shown to him by the white South, despite his numerous advances, yet he kept these vexations—in the main—on the pages of letters to his friends and allies.

If white southerners still did not believe that Roosevelt was their man, the president gave them further pause for thought that same year. In August 1906, Roosevelt was informed of an incident that had occurred in Brownsville, Texas, where it was reported that African-American soldiers of the 25th Infantry had launched a display of violence in the town, firing shots into buildings and at bystanders.⁶⁸ Roosevelt requested an investigation, which went on to be dominated by white witnesses and where the soldiers were accused of conspiring to protect the real culprits. The crux of the situation came, however, when Roosevelt went on to discharge all of the soldiers—without honor—releasing the order, tactically, the day after the midterm elections had taken place in November.⁶⁹ The president was hounded in the press almost as dogmatically as he had been after the Booker T. Washington dinner, but by precisely the opposite side of the political spectrum. Republican Senator Joseph B. Foraker of Ohio, a man with his own presidential ambitions, continued to keep the issue alive right up to the elections of 1908, with African Americans across the nation dismayed at what they saw as Roosevelt’s change of tone.⁷⁰ Brownsville was as much of a disaster as the Washington dinner in terms of public

relations, but equally, in Roosevelt's mind, a misreading of his intent. He declared himself, "amazed and indignant" at the views of blacks and sympathetic whites toward his actions, and argued that the dismissals were a matter of "naked right and wrong" and that the soldiers were to blame for banding together to "shelter their criminals."⁷¹ Roosevelt claimed that Brownsville was not about race inequality, in the same way that inviting Washington to dinner was not about race equality; once again, however, this was difficult to spin to the public. For black leaders in the North, like W. E. B. Du Bois, Brownsville was simply another symptom of the Republicans' abandonment of the black population. Du Bois told one correspondent: "It is not that I wish to desert the Republican party, but it is that the Republican [sic] seems about to desert me and mine. And I do not propose to go with it."⁷²

As Roosevelt's final year in office dawned, Brownsville and its aftermath rumbled on, and his anointed successor for the Republican nomination, Secretary of War William Howard Taft, was marred by the same controversy. Roosevelt's rival, Senator Foraker, not only pointed to Brownsville again, but also denounced the pro-Taft lily-white convention in Virginia that April as bringing into question "human rights."⁷³ Foraker's voice was in concert with that of Du Bois, who wrote to the Chairman of the National Republican Committee, concerning lily-white delegations, that "no group of people can afford to support a Party which without reasons excludes them from its counsels."⁷⁴ While the solid black Republican vote in the North seemed to be under threat, Roosevelt (and Taft) still appeared to be more interested in making headway in the white South. Roosevelt assured one journalist that Taft was in perfect accord with himself when it came to the race question: "Most emphatically Taft will not make a Garrisonian issue of the questions of Negro suffrage."⁷⁵ Silas McBee, the influential southern editor, lauded Roosevelt's policy of making himself "President of the whole Nation," noting that, "In his Federal appointments in the South he has gone entirely outside party lines." McBee even held up Roosevelt and Taft's handling of Brownsville as evidence of their commitment to justice.⁷⁶

In November, Taft won the presidential election with ease against William Jennings Bryan, who failed at his third and final attempt. In the South, Taft gained white support in 1908 (unlike Roosevelt in 1904), recording a close second in both North Carolina and Tennessee.⁷⁷ For Roosevelt these were really *his* gains: “the fight being made straight out for Taft as representing my policies.”⁷⁸ Roosevelt claimed once again, in the face of accusations to the contrary, that he had made a concerted effort to win in the South across his two terms, and added that his policy of appointing whites, including Democrats, ahead of blacks was one endorsed by many ex-Confederates of high regard.⁷⁹ President-elect Taft visited the South in January 1909 and lauded Roosevelt’s success in the region, as well as the “hearty support” Roosevelt found there and which he now also felt. Most importantly, Taft outlined a continuation of Roosevelt’s courtship policy, noting that he would keep making “such appointments in the South as shall prove this [his] sympathy to be real and substantial.”⁸⁰ When Roosevelt left the White House in March, it appeared that his southern courtship strategy was in safe hands, along with the rest of his policies. Time would show Roosevelt that only the former was correct.⁸¹

Coda

The breakdown in relations between Taft and Roosevelt has been the subject of many studies, yet the South was not really an area where their policies had diverged markedly prior to 1912.⁸² When Roosevelt finally announced he would run against Taft for the 1912 Republican nomination, John McLaurin wrote enthusiastically that he would support and promote Roosevelt’s policies in whatever way he could.⁸³ Indeed, it was in the South that the most divisive and bitter part of the 1912 Republican nomination campaign played out.⁸⁴ In attempting to win the Republican delegates in the region in 1912, Roosevelt accused Taft of putting southern “offices on the auction block” in North Carolina.⁸⁵ However, as Joseph Steelman notes, many North Carolina Republicans that supported Roosevelt were actually highly concerned with Taft’s

distribution of patronage to Democrats during his term—a policy Roosevelt had steadfastly adhered to—even if this was not their only issue with the Taft administration’s policies.⁸⁶ Regardless of this, it is true to say that Taft’s southern delegate-grabbing effort, orchestrated by William B. McKinley, began earlier, and was more effective in securing delegates, than Roosevelt’s alleged counter-campaign in the region.⁸⁷ Of course, Roosevelt’s long-term courtship of white Democrats offered little more than the moral support of McLaurin when it came to GOP-only votes such as this. At the Republican National Convention that summer, Taft saw off Roosevelt’s challenge and the aid of Taft’s southern delegates proved decisive. Roosevelt, in turn, bolted the Republican Party and opted to run a third-party campaign instead.

The tale of Roosevelt and the making of a white Republican South ended with his Progressive “Bull Moose” Party campaign for the presidency, which has been dealt with in depth elsewhere.⁸⁸ In some respects, Roosevelt took a similar course with his Progressive campaign by adopting a pro-white strategy to attract southern Democrats. However, not without hesitation, Roosevelt took the extra—and fatal—step of adopting an overtly sectional strategy as a Progressive: he ran a “lily-white” campaign in the South and courted blacks in the North. Unsurprisingly, it was hard to see either approach as sincere.⁸⁹ Where the white South had always been suspicious of Roosevelt’s racial views, despite his constant overtures since the Washington Dinner, the sectional Progressive campaign showed too cynically that Roosevelt wanted to have his cake and eat it. The multiple options before voters in 1912 served to inflict yet further damage to both the Republican and the Progressive causes in the South. First, it created a three-way split among existing southern Republicans: Taft Republicans, Roosevelt Republicans (looking toward state elections) and Roosevelt Progressives (looking more toward the presidential election).⁹⁰ Furthermore, the option of a genuine southern candidate, in the form of Democrat Woodrow Wilson, did little to convince white Democrats to jump ship for either Roosevelt or Taft.⁹¹ Wilson swept the South in a landslide and what work had been achieved by

Roosevelt, and built upon by Taft prior to 1912, was swiftly and ingloriously undone by Roosevelt's rash actions in 1912.

Though historians have ascribed to Roosevelt several different “southern strategies,” the only one that lasted across the years was his slow courtship of the white South. “Courtship” is an apt term, as Roosevelt's strategy was designedly slow and cautious—at least after the Washington dinner—to the extent that he often lost patience with the target of his affections in private correspondence. He had taken care to avoid casting others entirely aside, lest his advances were ultimately unreciprocated and he had to retreat to a safer option. However, in 1912 Roosevelt became abrupt and sought a rapid conquest before the groundwork had been fully completed. In so doing, he upset both the object of his desire and those voters he had strung along across the years. Regardless of this, the realignment of the African-American vote had yet to begin in force: this was a relationship that could still be salvaged, though it would continue to prove fruitless in terms of presidential votes in the region for decades to come.⁹² Whether Roosevelt's southern courtship strategy would ever have been successful, had the events of 1912 not brought about its untimely end, is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize what Roosevelt tried and failed to achieve at the end of the long nineteenth century and, in so doing, reassert the primacy of his often underplayed courtship strategy toward the white South.

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Notes

¹ Perman, *Struggle for Mastery*, 22.

² Ali, “Reconceptualizing Black Populism,” 138.

³ Measures such as literacy clauses or poll taxes.

⁴ Fauntroy, *Republicans and the Black Vote*, 32.

⁵ For discussion of the impact of the Force Bill on southern views see: Williams, *Realigning America*, 15.

⁶ For a historiographical overview of Roosevelt’s approach to African Americans and the South see: Burns, “Half a Southerner.” For a more wide-ranging study of historiographical and popular presentations of Roosevelt, see: Cullinane, *Theodore Roosevelt’s Ghost*.

⁷ Closest to this is Williamson, *Crucible of Race*, 345–346, though he still leans to seeing the strategy adopted only after 1904. See also: Milkis, *Transformation of American Democracy*, 167.

⁸ Pringle, “Theodore Roosevelt and the South.” This is a picture reiterated in: Tindall, “Southern Strategy.” Grantham, “Dinner at the White House,” similarly sees Roosevelt’s approach to the South as being led by a desire to affirm his control over the Republican Party.

⁹ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 463–66. The best works assessing Roosevelt and African Americans came in the 1960s and 70s, with Scheiner, “Roosevelt and the Negro” and Gatewood, *Roosevelt and the Art of Controversy*. Sherman, *Republican Party and Black America*, 23–51, is a very insightful overview but takes little issue with these earlier interpretations. A further, less valuable essay (based heavily upon Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt*), adds little to the picture outlined by these other works (oddly, however, it does not cite Gatewood, Sherman or Scheiner), see: Lutz, “Theodore Roosevelt’s Southern Strategy.”

¹⁰ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 4–5. Weiss presents Roosevelt as a potential second Lincoln in his first term, only to move away from black voters in his second term and eschew them further as a Progressive.

¹¹ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 65.

¹² Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race*, chap. 5; Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and American Nationalism.”

¹³ See, for example: TR to Henry Smith Pritchett [President of M. I. T.], December 14, 1904, in Morison, *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, 4:1066–72; hereinafter cited as *Roosevelt Letters* (volume: page).

¹⁴ Cox, *Death of Reconstruction*, 2–3.

¹⁵ Norrell, *Up from History*, 439; Cox, *Death of Reconstruction*, 5.

¹⁶ Beeby, “Introduction,” ix.

¹⁷ Ali, “Reconceptualizing Black Populism,” 137.

¹⁸ The terms “lily-white” and “black-and-tan” were used at the time to refer to factions of the Republican Party that were white-only or allowed the involvement of African Americans, respectively, see: Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites*, 36–37. Fauntroy, *Republicans and the Black Vote*, 43–44, suggests that these splits led many in the South to view Republicans as opportunists. This article uses the term “lily-white” to refer to the faction(s) of the southern Republican Party that existed prior to Roosevelt taking office and avoids using the term to describe Roosevelt’s own pro-white courtship strategy in the region.

¹⁹ TR to Philip Bathell Stewart, October 25, 1901, *Roosevelt Letters*, 3:182. See also: Grantham, “Dinner at the White House,” 130; Gatewood, *Art of Controversy*, chap. 1.

²⁰ TR to Lucius Nathan Littauer, October 24, 1901, *Roosevelt Letters*, 3:181–82 (quotations on 181).

²¹ Gold Democrats were a faction of the Democratic Party that rejected silver coinage, in line with Democratic President Grover Cleveland (1885–1889 and 1893–1897). However, William Jennings Bryan, the party’s presidential candidate in 1896 and 1900, supported silver coinage.

²² Harlan, *Making of a Black Leader*, 306–8. For more on the appointment of Judge Jones, see: Aucoin, *Thomas Goode Jones*, 116–118; Riser, *Defying Disfranchisement*, 142.

²³ For an overview of the Cox and Crum controversies, see: Gatewood, *Art of Controversy*, chaps. 3 and 4. See also: Frantz, *Door of Hope*, 160–165.

²⁴ For a good overview of Roosevelt’s approach to lynching and peonage, see: Sherman, *Republican Party and Black America*, 64–71.

²⁵ Alexander, *Army of Lions*, 240

²⁶ Williams, *Realigning America*, 56–57.

²⁷ Roosevelt even reiterated such rhetoric to critique Taft in 1912, see: TR to Julian La Rose Harris, August 1, 1912, *Roosevelt Letters*, 7:584–90.

²⁸ Robert Chisolm to Albert Clarke, September 22, 1901, Theodore Roosevelt Papers (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), microfilm, Series 1, Reel 19; hereinafter cited as Roosevelt Papers, 1(19); D. H. Reese to TR, August 29, 1901, Roosevelt Papers, 1(18). Pringle, “Theodore Roosevelt and the South,” suggests that the threat of a Hanna run in 1904 was unlikely, but real enough in the mind of Roosevelt.

²⁹ Richardson, *To Make Men Free*, 161.

³⁰ Scheiner, “Roosevelt and the Negro,” 179; Sherman, *Republican Party and Black America*, 36–37. For example, lily-whites in North Carolina and black-and-tans in Alabama.

³¹ TR to Henry C. Payne, July 8, 1902, *Roosevelt Letters*, 3:285–86. Payne, who had urged Roosevelt to join the McKinley ticket in 1900, was appointed by Roosevelt as U.S. Postmaster General in 1902 (he served until his death in 1904). Roosevelt appointed Clarkson as surveyor of the Port of New York. He was previously a former assistant postmaster general under President Benjamin Harrison and the founder of the National Republican League, see: Scheiner, “Roosevelt and the Negro,” 179–80; Sherman, *Republican Party and Black America*, 29–31.

³² Gatewood, “William D. Crum,” 308.

³³ See, for example: John M. McLaurin to TR, October 30, 1901, Roosevelt Papers, 1(21); George Cortelyou to McLaurin, January 17, 1902, Roosevelt Papers, 2(328).

³⁴ Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman*, 254–255. Tillman felt McLaurin had abandoned the agrarian cause and this, coupled with his U-turn on Philippine annexation and his closeness with the GOP, saw the two come to (physical) blows in the U.S. Senate. Tillman ensured McLaurin would be unable to run in 1902 by seeing to it that candidates in South Carolina would need to endorse the entire national Democratic platform to run (which McLaurin could not do, without performing another U-turn on imperialism). For his own party’s attacks on him, see: McLaurin to TR, May 5, 1902, Roosevelt Papers, 1(26); “Senator McLaurin’s Appeal,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1902, p.1.

³⁵ TR to McLaurin, May 6, 1902, Roosevelt Papers, 2(328); McLaurin to TR, May 15, 1902, Roosevelt Papers, 1(26); McLaurin to TR, July 17, 1902, Roosevelt Papers, 1(28). Roosevelt, meanwhile suggested that he would keep up his offers, despite this demurring, see: TR to McLaurin, July 1, 1904, Roosevelt Papers, 2(334).

³⁶ TR to Silas McBee, February 3, 1903, *Roosevelt Letters*, 3:418–19 (quotation on 419).

³⁷ TR to Clark Howell, February 24, 1903, Roosevelt Papers, 2(330).

³⁸ For examples of TR outlining his white-centric and often Democratic appointments, see: TR to Robert Goodwyn Rhett [future mayor of Charleston], November 10, 1902, *Roosevelt Letters*,

3:375–76; TR to James Adger Smyth [mayor of Charleston], November 26, 1902, *Roosevelt Letters*, 3:383–85; TR to William Huggins Brawley, December 3, 1902, *Roosevelt Letters*, 3:387–89; TR to Clark Howell, February 24, 1903, *Roosevelt Letters*, 3:430–32

³⁹ TR to Carl Schurz, December 24, 1903, *Roosevelt Letters*, 3:679–82 (quotations on 680 and 680–681 respectively).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 681.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 682.

⁴² TR to James Ford Rhodes, November 29, 1904, *Roosevelt Letters*, 4:1049–51 (quotation on 1051).

⁴³ TR to McBee, July 14, 1904, *Roosevelt Letters*, 4:857.

⁴⁴ TR to Pritchett, December 14, 1904, *Roosevelt Letters*, 4:1066–72 (quotation on 1070).

⁴⁵ TR to Rhodes, December 15, 1904, *Roosevelt Letters*, 4:1072–73 (quotation on 1072).

⁴⁶ Roosevelt, “The Negro Problem,” 343–50 (first quotation 345, second quotation 347).

⁴⁷ TR to Rhodes, February 20, 1905, *Roosevelt Letters*, 4:1125.

⁴⁸ “The South and the President,” *New York Tribune*, October 21, 1905, p. 4.

⁴⁹ North Carolina Senator Jeter Pritchard (1895–1903) felt that Roosevelt’s southern strategy would make the party a vote-winning force in the South, unlike what the senator called the “old plan,” see: Jeter Connelly Pritchard to James Sullivan Clarkson, September 15, 1902, *Roosevelt Papers*, 1(29). Pritchard is seen by many scholars as adopting a lily-white approach in order to protect his electoral base, see: Sherman, *Republican Party and Black America*, 33; Scheiner, “Roosevelt and the Negro,” 174.

⁵⁰ Pritchard to TR, August 7, 1905, *Roosevelt Papers*, 1(57).

⁵¹ Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 424–25, gives a nice overview of the tour; Lutz, “Theodore Roosevelt’s Southern Strategy,” 27–30, recounts the tour using primarily a report in *The North American Review* of October 1905; Frantz, *The Door of Hope*, Chapter 5 (esp. 168–190), also looks at Roosevelt’s tour in detail, particularly how African Americans were disenchanted by it.

⁵² Frantz, *Door of Hope*, 156.

⁵³ “Southern President to be Guest of City To-day,” *Richmond (Va.) Times Dispatch*, October 18, 1905, p. 1.

⁵⁴ “Enthusiastic Reception to the President in Richmond,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Semi-Weekly Messenger*, October 20, 1905, p. 1; “The President’s Tour,” *Grenada (Miss.) Sentinel*, October 28, 1905, p. 1.

⁵⁵ “Favor Mr. Roosevelt,” *Washington (D.C.) Evening Star*, October 26, 1905, p. 6. Roosevelt was fond of recounting the heroism of his uncle, who fired the last shots aboard the *CSS Alabama* during the Civil War.

⁵⁶ “The South and the President,” *New York Tribune*, October 21, 1905, p. 4.

⁵⁷ [No title], *Sumter (S.C.) Watchman and Southron*, October 25, 1905, p. 5; [No title] *Bamburg (S.C.) Herald*, October 26, 1905, p. 4 (quotation in the former).

⁵⁸ [No title], *Columbus (Miss.) Commercial*, October 29, 1905, p. 2.

⁵⁹ TR to Pritchard, January 9, 1906, *Roosevelt Letters*, 5:130–31. As ever in this period, Roosevelt declared his decision not to accept a third term was “definite and irrevocable.”

⁶⁰ By this time, Roosevelt had appointed Pritchard to the U.S. Court of Appeals (5th Circuit), while McLaurin was serving as Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Trade of the Southern Cotton Association.

⁶¹ Pritchard to TR, January 8, 1906, *Roosevelt Papers*, 1(62).

⁶² McLaurin to Pritchard, December 23, 1905, *Roosevelt Papers*, 1(62).

⁶³ TR to Pritchard, January 9, 1906, *Roosevelt Papers*, 2(340).

⁶⁴ TR to Owen Wister, April 27, 1906, *Roosevelt Letters*, 5:221–30 (quotations from 224).

Roosevelt was talking about Charleston aristocrats as portrayed in Wister’s novel, *Lady Baltimore*.

⁶⁵ Crowe, “Racial Massacre in Atlanta,” 150–173.

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- ⁶⁶ Alexander, *Army of Lions*, 282.
- ⁶⁷ TR to John M. Parker, October 3, 1906, Roosevelt Papers, 2(434).
- ⁶⁸ Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 453.
- ⁶⁹ Harbaugh, *Life and Times*, 290–291, and Thornborough, “The Brownsville Episode.” For Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 322, the heart of the matter at Brownsville was Roosevelt’s “long standing ambivalence on race.”
- ⁷⁰ Harbaugh, *Life and Times*, 291–293.
- ⁷¹ TR to Silas McBee, November 27, 1906, *Roosevelt Letters*, 5:509.
- ⁷² Du Bois to E. W. Krackowizer, April 7, 1908, The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), microfilm, Reel 2, Frame 344, hereinafter cited as Du Bois Papers.
- ⁷³ “Foraker Makes Plea to Negro Conference,” Philadelphia *Inquirer*, April 12, 1908, p. 28.
- ⁷⁴ Du Bois to Harry S. New, June 1, 1908, Du Bois Papers, Reel 2, Frame 1265.
- ⁷⁵ TR to Lawrence Fraser Abbott, October 6, 1908, *Roosevelt Letters*, 6:1276–77 (quotation on 1277). The term “Garrisonian” refers to the prominent nineteenth-century abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison.
- ⁷⁶ Silas McBee, “The South and Mr. Taft,” *Sewanee Review* 16 (October 1908), 486–494 (quotations 487).
- ⁷⁷ Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances*, 84.
- ⁷⁸ TR to Richard Watson Gilder, November 16, 1908, *Roosevelt Letters*, 6:1356–65 (quotation on 1358).
- ⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ Taft, “The Winning of the South,” 173.
- ⁸¹ Taft’s policy towards the South is not within the remit of this study but, for an overview, see: Sherman, *Republican Party and Black America*, 83–112.
- ⁸² For example, Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit*, and Gould, *The Republicans*, chap. 5.
- ⁸³ McLaurin to TR, January 20, 1912, Roosevelt Papers, 1(124); McLaurin to TR, April 20, 1912, Roosevelt Papers, 1(137).
- ⁸⁴ Gould “Disputed Delegates,” 33–56, provides a glimpse into this fractious battle as it played out in Texas.
- ⁸⁵ TR to Richmond Pearson, March 2, 1912, *Roosevelt Letters*, 7:516.
- ⁸⁶ Steelman also notes the unpopularity of Taft’s Canadian reciprocity policy and his proposal for life tenure for presidential appointees, see: Steelman, “Richmond Pearson,” 122–39. In fact, in December 1911, Pritchard wrote to Roosevelt describing Taft’s unpopularity with the “Roosevelt” Republicans in his state as due to the fact he had appointed too many white Democrats, not because of a delegate-grabbing strategy, see: Pritchard to TR, December 7, 1911, Roosevelt Papers, 1(119).
- ⁸⁷ Green, “Republicans, Bull Moose, and Negroes,” 153–64; Brands, *Last Romantic*, 711; Milkis, *Transformation of American Democracy*, 81. News reports of Ormsby McHarg’s alleged delegate-grabbing mission in the South on Roosevelt’s behalf led him to write a letter of denial to Roosevelt, where he not only denies *instruction* to do this, but even that he attempted to do it in the first place: McHarg to TR, March 5, 1912, Roosevelt Papers, 1(132).
- ⁸⁸ See, for example: Milkis, *Transformation of American Democracy*.
- ⁸⁹ Mowry, “The South and the Progressive Lily White Party,” 237–47 (especially 245).
- ⁹⁰ Steelman, “Richmond Pearson,” 138.
- ⁹¹ Link, “Theodore Roosevelt and the South in 1912,” 314–315.
- ⁹² For discussion of continued African-American disenchantment with the Republicans after the Roosevelt-Taft era see: Topping, *Lincoln’s Lost Legacy*. For the further development of the party after this see also Weed, *Transformation of the Republican Party*.