

ADAM BURNS

University of Wolverhampton

Fit to Be President: William Howard Taft, Sports and Athleticism

ABSTRACT

The early twentieth century was a time when the US public consciousness recognized an increasing association between their political leaders and sports and athleticism. With an exceptional precedent for this connection set by Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909), his replacement as US president would inevitably find it hard to keep pace. In the modern-day popular consciousness, Roosevelt's immediate successor, William Howard Taft (1909–1913), is often noted more for his obesity than for his physical athleticism or sporting prowess. Yet, as this article shows, as Taft moved closer to the White House, the contemporary US press increasingly associated him with sports, and at least the pursuit of physical fitness. In a post-Rooseveltian America, a rise to national political prominence demanded a portrayal of a president's links to sports and athleticism, even in the unlikeliest of candidates.

KEYWORDS

William Howard Taft

Theodore Roosevelt

Sports

Athleticism

American press

US presidency

INTRODUCTION

As Kenneth Cohen (2017) makes clear, the intertwining of political and sporting cultures—broadly defined—had existed in North America since before the United States came into being. However, by the start of the twentieth century a number of different social movements and ideologies in the United States fed into a growing popular notion that fitness and athleticism were highly desirable for the continued strength of the nation, and its political leaders. Amidst competing theories of Social Darwinism, Progressivism and “Muscular Christianity,” Theodore Roosevelt did more than any other US president to exemplify and advocate the benefits of the “Strenuous Life” (Swanson, 2019: 7). Yet Roosevelt's successor, William Howard Taft, was not a natural fit to this mold. Taft had been in the public eye for many years by 1908, when he ran for the presidency, but was known for his able administrative skills and significant physical weight rather than for his athleticism or links to sport.

In the decade before he ran for office, Taft had served as civil governor of the Philippines (one of the United States's recent imperial acquisitions), and then as Roosevelt's secretary of war. During this time, both his colleagues and the nation's press made numerous digs at Taft on account of his size. Taft's weight varied considerably over the years, but most accounts note that his presidential weight was the highest of his lifetime, and estimates put that in the region of 340lbs/155kgs (Rosen, 2018: 126). One of the most famous stories relating to Taft's size came from his time in the Philippines when he wrote to Secretary of War Elihu Root of a lengthy horse ride he had taken, only for the telegraphed reply to ask simply “How is the horse?” (Lurie, 2012: n63). Unlike Roosevelt, Taft did not appear to embody the athletic ideals of the era.

Though one might anticipate Taft being unable to maintain this link between the presidency and athleticism, newspaper coverage from the period of Taft's election campaign in 1908 through to his departure from the White House in 1913 offers a somewhat different story. In order to explore this shift in the popular presentation of Taft, analysis here is based upon newspaper coverage from six states: two that voted very strongly for Taft in 1908 (Vermont and Michigan); two that were more moderately in favor of Taft, and were the home states of Roosevelt and Taft respectively (New York and Ohio); and two that were very strongly in

favor of his opponent, William Jennings Bryan (Mississippi and Louisiana) (Petersen, 1963: 76). By focusing searches upon these six states, this article aims to show that the focus on Taft and his links to sports and athleticism, albeit from differing political angles, existed on a fairly widespread basis.

ROOSEVELT AS AN ARCHETYPE

There are few publications that deal with Taft's athleticism or sporting fandom in any detail (the main exceptions being Bromley, 2003 and especially Watterson, 2006). Even the rather wide historiography of Taft as an individual gives relatively little emphasis to these themes besides when it provides for a humorous anecdote. The same, however, cannot be said for Theodore Roosevelt (see especially, Swanson 2019). Yet, this imbalance is not unexpected. After all, Roosevelt, for many at the time and since, represents an archetype of presidential athleticism and sporting advocacy.

Roosevelt was not the model student-athlete as a young child; instead he was plagued by attacks of asthma, leading to a relatively coddled existence. His father, however, pushed him to build up his physical strength by taking up body-building (Dalton, 2004: 50–51). Once the ball began to roll, the young Roosevelt soon embraced what he came to call the “strenuous life” and went on to become known for his robust constitution and outdoorsmanship. As David Greenberg (2011: 1062) notes, Roosevelt's ‘stocky, muscular physique revealed his lifelong obsession with the masculine virtues of strength and athleticism’. More so than most of his predecessors—at least while in office—Roosevelt physically represented an ideal of presidential athleticism, achieved by vigorous effort and not genetic good fortune.

By the time President William McKinley was fatally wounded in 1901, Vice President Roosevelt was already established in the popular imagination as a rugged outdoorsman. Indeed, the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* (1901), in Roosevelt's home state of New York, reported that McKinley's shooting affected TR so much that he was ‘in no mood for even his favorite sport [hunting]’. Instead, having heard about McKinley's parlous state while in the Adirondacks, Roosevelt charged his wagon driver to ‘whirl dizzily through inky darkness along frightful precipices, where a single misstep of the maddened horses meant death as surely as a Spanish bullet,’ all so that he could attend the dying president. For the

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

Democrat and Chronicle, this only emphasized Roosevelt's 'title to being a man of iron will and nerve'.

As well as providing a clear model of robust physical fitness, Roosevelt was also a canny manipulator of the national press. Doris Kearns Goodwin (2013: 8) argues that the press helped transform the 1898 "war hero" Roosevelt into 'a national icon,' and thereafter he 'established a unique relationship with numerous journalists'. From then on, Roosevelt courted the press on an unprecedented scale, 'inquired after [journalists'] families, shared confidential anecdotes, and discussed their latest projects' (Goodwin, 2013: 574). As a historian and author himself, Roosevelt was more than aware of the importance of the power of image creation and was keen to promote it when it came to his rugged identity. For Gail Bederman (1995: 171), Roosevelt successfully 'constructed a virile political persona for himself as a strong but civilized white man'. Roosevelt was not just a genuine symbol of hard-won rugged masculinity, he proactively sought to forge this image into something approaching a quasi-mythical one with the help of the US media.

When Roosevelt became president, the link between politics and sports reached its peak, and most histories that connect politics and athleticism present Roosevelt in such a manner. Though there is good grounding behind Roosevelt's link to athleticism, many historians, as Swanson (2011: 428) notes, have perhaps 'succumbed to hyperbole when considering Roosevelt's influence over American culture and athletics'. Swanson notes a number of areas, such as Roosevelt's disinclination toward baseball, that ran counter to public opinion and future trends. However, he also points out that Roosevelt captured such popular attention, at least partially because his presidency was bookended 'by "little boy" William McKinley and the doughy Howard Taft' (Swanson, 2011: 428). According to such a perspective, Roosevelt was "fit" to be president, and Taft offered a contrast that served to emphasize his predecessor's superiority.

While in office, Roosevelt organized an overtly athletic cadre of advisors, known popularly during his second term as the "tennis cabinet". For the *Detroit Free Press* (1906), admission to the tennis cabinet was 'based on congeniality and ability to handle a racquet'. Though the article concedes that many of the tennis cabinet were already close to the president before

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

taking to the court, being in the tennis cabinet did require some level of athleticism. The *New York Times*' (1909) magazine section referred to them some years later as 'husky young fellows' who developed into 'first-rate athletes'. Thus, the image of Roosevelt's rugged physicality—already well-established—was only further burnished.

Not only was Roosevelt held up as a physical personification of the "strenuous life," he was also presented as a champion of athleticism and sports for others. Many books point to the oft-cited advice of Roosevelt that children should read one of his favorite books, the 1857 novel, *Tom Brown's School Days* (Roosevelt, 1910). The book was well-known for its descriptions of the title character's rugged athleticism and developing moral values, often seen as its author Thomas Hughes's instruction manual on Muscular Christianity.

Roosevelt's second term in office saw him not only advocate sports, but campaign for their protection. In 1905 American football's very future appeared to hang in the balance as critics of its violent nature campaigned for a ban, particularly in the nation's educational establishments. For John J. Miller (2011: xi), it 'took the remarkable efforts of one of America's most extraordinary men to thwart them'. Indeed, for many, Roosevelt was the man who "saved football," just as Miller's book title puts it. By the time William Howard Taft's name was being bandied around as the leading candidate to succeed Roosevelt, TR had created an unassailable record as both an athletic physical specimen, and the advocate and defender of the nation's athletic fitness.

TAFT AND THE ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE

Although Taft had been a member of Roosevelt's cabinet for some years, he was not the national celebrity that Roosevelt had been when the latter ran for office as McKinley's vice-presidential candidate in 1900. Taft's years as civil governor of the Philippines had established him on the nation's collective consciousness. However, unlike the more ruggedly masculine exemplars of imperialism at the time (such as Roosevelt, who had led his Rough Riders to fame in Cuba), Taft did not have a military background and sold himself as the genial antithesis of US military government and aggression in the islands (Burns, 2020).

As Roosevelt's secretary of war in the years that followed, press reports held up Taft as a model of efficiency. The media frequently reported that when Roosevelt was away doing something most likely robust and physical, Taft could be deployed to "sit on the lid" and keep affairs under control, at home or overseas. Yet, even this seeming praise was riddled with mockery of Taft's weight. Newspapers recognized Roosevelt's use of the expression as evidence of the latter's 'pretty capacity for humor... his picture of the rotund Mr. Taft sitting on the lid of San Domingau [sic] complications is, perhaps, his best' (*Buffalo Commercial*, 1905). This image did not soon disappear. As the Shreveport *Caucasian* (1907) noted in an article on his potential run for the presidency, Taft 'is noted first of all, perhaps, for his bigness—the weight, the ponderosity of both body and brain, that makes him a good man to sit on the lid when there is something underneath that is steaming hot and liable at any minute to cause an explosion'. Even when Taft was dispatched as a man of action, this image was often linked to his weight.

Despite the apparent mismatch between the active Roosevelt and the more sedate Taft, as attention on a potential Taft presidency increased so did a fresh focus on his physical fitness and athleticism. Campaign biographies released at the time presented Taft as an heir to the vigorous Teddy. 'To anyone who might be looking forward to a few days of recreation on the Secretary's [Taft's] playground, I would recommend at least two months of hard physical training,' reported journalist Robert Lee Dunn (1908: 43). Dunn went on to detail Taft's golfing, vigorous walks and even occasional tennis. In another biography, journalist Oscar King Davis (1908: 9) noted in his introductory lines Taft's 'robust and generous proportions'. Yet, when recounting Taft's youth, Davis remarked that he 'believed in athletics. ... The sound body was the foundation for sound work,' and then outlined Taft's time at Yale where he 'worked in the gymnasium, wrestled, and played football a little' (Davis, 1908: 40).

It was not just supportive full-length biographies written by journalists that added emphasis to Taft's athleticism. As he looked more and more a presidential candidate—the press, more broadly, followed suit. In what is generally a sympathetic and highly-illustrated biographical article on the front page of the supplementary section of the *Brooklyn Daily Times* (1907), "Big Bill" Taft's golf received a good deal of coverage. Yet, despite its attention to physical activity, Taft's weight arose frequently in the same article. It noted that Taft played golf because he enjoyed it, as well as it being a means to 'reduce fat,' as 'otherwise he will grow

too big'. Thereafter followed a story about Taft using the scales at the Chevy Chase golf links, only to find they had insufficient ballast to add to the machine in order to weigh him. This supposedly led Taft to say 'Why don't you have scales that are big enough to weigh *men*? ... These are only boys' size'. Yet, despite these jibes, the article stressed that 'Mr. Taft is always ready for any kind of sport when he is not too busy with work. He plays tennis, swims in the river or swimming tank, goes fishing, walks through fields or drives around the country'. The friendly press certainly did not avoid mentioning Taft's weight, but cast anecdotes about his weight into a wider narrative of what otherwise was a fairly active and sporting life.

Less favorable coverage, of course, was still possible to find. A feature in Crowley, Louisiana's *Daily Signal* (1907) described Taft's vacation to Canada that summer. Once again there was a link between Taft's weight and his outdoor pursuits, in this case fishing. However, the tone was markedly less genial: 'Creaking wagon springs tell when Taft goes out to ride ... If Taft has gained weight or lost it since he crossed the border the story told by the scales is kept a government secret ... Taft does not diet. At the hotel they know this to be true'. The article then went on to critique Taft's fishing skills. Elsewhere, however, coverage of Taft's vacation focused on his golfing expertise. The *Marion Daily Star* (1907), owned by future Republican President Warren G. Harding, ran a front page image of Taft in his golfing outfit, noting that while on vacation he was 'always ready for a long walk, a game of tennis, a swim in the river or a round of the golf links'. The link between Taft and athleticism might often have been tempered by asides about his size, but it was frequently made.

With increasing press interest in Taft, when election year came around, some of his primary backers became concerned about the Republican frontrunner's predilection for golf, a sport that had a reputation for being the preserve of the social elite. In 1908, President Roosevelt advised Taft to avoid being photographed playing golf: 'Photographs on horseback, yes; tennis, no; and golf is fatal' (Roosevelt cited in Cashman, 1998: 23). Roosevelt's concerns were certainly not without foundation, as a *Brooklyn Times* (1908) report that August, noted: 'Sundry querulous cranks have been criticizing Mr. Taft's devotion to the game of golf, on the ground that it is "a rich man's game," and therefore an improper pastime for one who aspires to be regarded as the champion of the plain people'. Yet, despite the president's

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

entreaties, and criticism from 'querulous cranks,' Taft did not retreat from his favorite pastime.

The author of the *Brooklyn Times* (1908) piece clearly sided with Taft's approach, noting that although the nation's plutocrats played golf, the average American too could reasonably afford to play (on public courses at least). Less supportive papers, such as the *Times-Promoter* (1908) of Hernando, Mississippi, saw Taft's penchant for golf more along Rooseveltian lines. The paper implied that Taft's campaign trip to North Dakota in 1908 aimed to quell suggestions his pastime was elitist. Taft 'might invite that other distinguished golfer, John D. Rockefeller [later to become the world's first billionaire], to play with him, but John D. is not so popular with the farmers and laboring men as he is with the Republican party, so Mr. Taft did not mention him'. Instead Taft stressed that the game was not only affordable (and played by the poor in Scotland), but that more vigorous activities, such as tennis and baseball, were not really options 'when a man weighs 295 pounds'. Whether Taft was really able to escape the elitism associated with golf unsurprisingly depended on people's existing views of Taft politically. Nevertheless, focus on the fact that Taft was such an active golfer was omnipresent across his campaign, and the early months of his presidency would show no let-up in this regard.

GOLFER IN CHIEF

Shortly after his election, the *New York Times* (1908) reported that Taft's fondness for golf would likely bring about a 'golf boom'. In an interview on page two of the sports supplement, golfing star Walter J. Travis said that President Roosevelt had 'done a great deal to instill in the minds of the people the benefits of legitimate exercise in health-giving sports, and although his strenuous methods of physical exercise may not be so vividly portrayed by the new President, the influence will be the same'. Travis even suggested that President-elect Taft's golfing reputation might well have earned him vital votes, with the article noting that Travis himself had swung from his previously Democratic-voting inclinations. In contrast to Roosevelt's fears, the United States' first amateur champion, Charles Blair Macdonald, added that Taft's advocacy of golf would itself be a means to quash 'the absurd notion, still largely prevalent in this country, that golf is a rich man's game'.

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

For historians Doris Kearns Goodwin (2013: 574–575; 589) and Peri Arnold (2009: 123–124) Taft maintained a friendly and open relationship with the press during his time in the Philippines and at the helm of the War Office. Indeed, it was only once he was installed in the White House that he became more guarded and cautious in his dealings with reporters, and this did him few favors when considered in contrast to his predecessor's effusive embrace of the press. Simple newspaper database searches of key terms alongside the president's name, though unscientific, certainly imply that discussion of Taft's golf decreased as his presidency wore on. However, for the first year or so, golf was a key focus of reporters keen to add color to reportage of Taft's otherwise not particularly vibrant presidency.

The *New York Times* (1909), in a lengthy article relegated to the depths of the paper's magazine section, suggested that Taft's "golf cabinet" would be unlikely to hold as much sway as Roosevelt's tennis partners had: 'The President [Taft] plays the game for all there is in it, and dislikes very much indeed to spoil his recreation hours by dragging business in outside of business hours'. Echoing this theme, but given front page prominence in Taft's home state of Ohio, the *Mansfield News* (1909a) noted that, just days before taking office, Taft was busy 'on the golf links with Gen. Clarence Edwards walloping the little white ball'. As others were admitted to the golf cabinet, admission did call upon those chosen to actually be able to play. The *Vermont Standard* (1909) reported, for example, that Secretary of State Philander C. Knox was 'an expert' but that Speaker Joe Cannon was 'not very adept as yet'. One Mississippi newspaper, though, stated that the Speaker's shinny [a sort of hockey] experience stood him in good stead. It noted that although Cannon had only handled a golf club once (prior to March 1909), 'when a bevy of fair young women induced him to,' according to his secretary the Speaker's 'first drive was the longest ever made by any golfer' (*Kosciusko Herald*, 1909). One Michigan newspaper, in a long article that ran across the nation, noted that people 'who have never seen President Taft on the links would be surprised at his agility and enthusiasm in tramping over a four-mile course, keeping up a running fire of jest and comment all the while' (*L'Anse Sentinel*, 1910). Despite the frequent humor in such reports, there was always a sense that golf was regarded as a game of skill and of physicality.

So closely did Taft become associated with golf that he even got dragged into a minor controversy. Golfing star, Walter J. Travis had used a US-created Schenectady putter to claim the British amateur championship in 1904, only for the British governing body to later ban it

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

(Davies, 1992: 148). Several newspapers reported on Taft's objection to new putter regulations issued from the self-proclaimed home of the sport in St. Andrews, Scotland, during his presidency. Taft wrote a well-publicized response to a letter from Travis, noting: 'I think the restriction imposed by St. Andrews is too narrow. I think putting with a Schenectady putter is sportsmanlike and gives no undue advantage' (*Times-Democrat*, 1911). Though not on the scale of Roosevelt's intervention in the debate over football in 1905, Taft's intervention here did act as another sign of the commander-in-chief's continuing public role in sporting matters.

In the latter part of Taft's presidency, as press attention turned ever more to the splits within the Republican Party (and, as the years progressed, the showdown between Taft and his erstwhile friend and patron Roosevelt), attention toward his athleticism ebbed. Indeed, the less friendly press raised the issue of golfing elitism that Taft had attempted to tackle directly during his 1908 campaign. As one Mississippi newspaper noted, 'even the national sense of humor is insufficient to prevent the growth of impatience with the apparent unwillingness of the Taft administration to bear in mind the fact that there are other classes in the United States than those with whose representatives President Taft likes to play golf' (*Meridian Weekly Star*, 1910).

FAN IN CHIEF

Historian Ryan Swanson (2019) convincingly shows that President Roosevelt was fairly consistent in his disinclination toward baseball. However, this was not always apparent in the news coverage of the time, with the *Jackson Daily News* (1907), describing Roosevelt as 'a great baseball "fan"'. Nevertheless, it continued, if Taft were elected president 'baseball will have a friend in the white house [sic] who will make his every predecessor look like the proverbial Chinese coin punctured with a square hole [likely a reference to low value coins, which could be strung together]'. Indeed, if Taft's primary sporting passion was playing golf, his love of watching baseball might be deemed a close second. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* (1908) suggested that Taft's growing popularity as a presidential candidate might well be linked to baseball. They reported that, according to the Chicago Cubs' president, Charles W. Murphy, word that Taft had played baseball as 'a mere stripling' had very much boosted his and others' enthusiasm for Taft's candidacy. Though the suggestion of Taft's physical

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

involvement in baseball was rare as the years progressed, attention to his status as a fan increased markedly.

Where some criticized golf (and sometimes Taft also) for the sport's relative elitism, the same could not be said for Taft's other great sporting passion. The *Shreveport Times* (1909) in Louisiana called on the nation to thank Taft for his commitment to the national game: 'a man who can lay down the cares and responsibilities of his great office and who can ignore the call of the golf links in order to attend a baseball game is big enough to be President of this big country'. The paper noted that Taft was not like some who sneered at baseball as a "common" sport, and by putting himself behind the game had 'done a distinct service to good, clean sport'. Indeed, it was not the only time journalists noted the mutual benefit done to Taft and baseball as a result of their relationship. Ohio's *Mansfield News* (1909b) reported that, during Taft's first six months in the presidency, the rise in prestige for that game had been 'inestimable'. Meanwhile, it presented Taft as an everyman who, 'for an hour and thirty minutes doffed all strictly presidential attributes ... and ate popcorn and drank lemonade as simply as a big boy enjoying a long expected holiday'. The article was emphatic that Taft was 'not a base ball [sic] fan because it is the popular pastime, but because he is one and because he not only likes the game, but knows it'. This, the author suggested, qualified Taft as 'president of the United Fans' association'.

In April 1910, Taft made a piece of oft-cited presidential sporting history when he threw out the first ball from his presidential box, in a game between the Washington Nationals and the Philadelphia Athletics. The Washington D.C.-based club had earlier presented Taft with "baseball pass number 1". Accompanied by his wife Nellie, and his closest aide Archie Butt, Taft then proceeded to attend the game using this very ticket—though, as ever, his weight was noted, through the observation that 'the big president squeezed his way' through the crowd. According to the *Shreveport Times* (1910), in an article that was reprinted in newspapers across the nation, the president at first seemed unsure what to do when presented with a new ball by the umpire. His throw, when it eventually came, was a little low, though the pitcher, Walter Johnson, managed to catch it. However, if Taft's athletic prowess was underwhelming, his enthusiasm as a fan was once again restated. When the game started he became increasingly gripped by the action, often applauding enthusiastically. Indeed, he 'insisted on remaining until the last Philadelphian had been retired'.

The sincerity with which Taft followed and enjoyed the game was something that seemed worthy of note well beyond this season opener. The following month, the *Brooklyn Daily Times* (1910) reported on its front page that residents of Pittsburgh were under no illusion that the only reason the president traveled to their city was to watch the baseball. It described him in no uncertain terms as ‘America’s leading baseball fan’ who arrived without ‘pomp or ceremony’ but much to the appreciation of the crowd who showed ‘a whole lot of lusty rooting for “Oh, you Bill”’. In May 1910, the Michigan-based *Alma Record* ran a short column on Taft and baseball titled “King of Sports”. Though likely referring to the game itself, the title nevertheless hung above a picture of Taft’s face. After reporting that Taft recently watched parts of two different baseball games in the same day in St. Louis, it cited a subsequently oft-quoted Taft speech on baseball:

The game of baseball is a clean, straight sport, and it summons to its presence everybody who enjoys clean, straight athletics. It furnishes amusement to thousands and thousands. I like to go for two reasons—first, because I enjoy it myself, and, second, because if by the presence of the temporary chief magistrate such a healthy amusement can be encouraged I want to encourage it (*Alma Record*, 1910).

Taft’s love of baseball might have been politically beneficial, and may even have helped to counteract the supposed elitism of his golfing habit, but few would argue that it was an affectation.

A PRIZE FIGHTER

Even though reportage of Taft’s golfing and baseball fandom often set Taft up as both a practitioner and advocate of athleticism, who might seem akin to his energetic predecessor, it so often—as has been noted above—came with at least a mention of the president’s size. Where sometimes his size was presented as imposing and robust, it was more often presented as a critique of the president. Though Taft might have been just as much of a fan, and a different sort of active sports practitioner, he could not rival the less rotund Roosevelt in physical athleticism. Yet, even in this regard, the press gave some attention to Taft’s efforts.

The health of a president had long been, for fairly obvious reasons, of significant interest to Americans. However, in-depth studies of presidential health have more often been undertaken on presidents who followed Taft (see especially, McDermott, 2007). Among those who have received the most coverage from historians in this regard are: Woodrow Wilson (Weinstein, 1981), Franklin D. Roosevelt (Evans, 2002), Dwight D. Eisenhower (Allen, 1993) and John F. Kennedy (Dallek, 2003). In all of these cases, enormous efforts were made by presidential staff, in conjunction with the press, to disguise what might have been viewed (in their respective times) as physical shortcomings or disabilities, and instead present images of fully “fit” presidents (Ferrell, 1992). For Taft, such issues were less “disguised” by the press of the day than viewed through rose-tinted spectacles.

John Sotos (2003) suggests that Taft's obesity likely caused severe obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), which might prompt one to question whether his ability to carry out his duties as president was affected. As Sotos (2003: 1133) puts it ‘OSA can cause hypersomnolence, psychosocial difficulties, and neurocognitive defects’. Though physicians at the time might not have been aware of this particular complication to the extent they are today, journalists of the early-twentieth century did not ignore Taft's underlying health conditions. The contemporary press, though, even managed to place a “strenuous life” spin on the fact Taft often had personal trainers and dieticians keeping him under constant observation. ‘The president, nowadays, it seems, must have a trainer, just like a professional prize fighter, to keep him in condition for the grind,’ one Ohio newspaper reported (*Coshocton Daily Tribune*, 1909). The article then went on to outline the rigorous regime that Charles E. Barker, a former athlete turned diet and fitness expert, prescribed for Taft. Furthermore, the article also specifically likened Taft's relationship with Barker to Roosevelt's relationship with Mike Donovan, a sparring partner of TR's before and after he entered the White House.

Other reports echoed this idea that Taft's embarking on a regular fitness regime to address his health issues was almost akin to the president training as an athlete. The *Burlington Free Press and Times* (1909) gave a lengthy report on Taft's training sessions with Barker. Barker's ‘new champ,’ it noted, had ‘a nifty wallop in his right arm and a vicious whip to the body with his left’. A short piece in a Buffalo-based paper the following year reported that Taft had injured Barker whilst wrestling, and suggested that Taft might be better off

challenging champion wrestler Stanislaus Zbyszko instead, presumably while his trainer recovered (*Buffalo Enquirer*, 1910). Thus, the fact Taft was forced through a grueling exercise regime and diet, all overseen by a professional, was presented rosily, as akin to Roosevelt boxing with his chums.

Barker was not alone in attending to Taft's health. Aside from his general golfing buddies, his closest aide Archie Butt was a constant sporting and social companion. As a paper reporting on one of Taft's tours around the nation noted, 'Captain Butt is one of the most splendid physical specimens in the army.... He will see to Mr. Taft's exercise while Dr. [J. J.] Richardson will be on hand in case his services are needed' (*Scioto Gazette*, 1909). It continued to note that, despite his strenuous efforts with Barker, an 'expert dietitian,' to help reduce his weight, Taft was set to attend twenty-two banquets during the tour, so 'he will have to exercise his will power if he hopes to return to Washington in November in good condition for the winter's work'. In cases such as this, as Levine (2013) suggests, the press not only noted Taft's weight and physical condition, but sometimes expressed muted concerns that his obesity might have some impact on his abilities in office. Nevertheless, where examples of this can certainly be found, they are often subtle and are also heavily outweighed by reports of Taft's hearty efforts to combat his obesity.

Finally, it should be noted that Taft's efforts to lose weight while in office were largely unsuccessful. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Taft's weight reached its peak while he lived on Pennsylvania Avenue, and his health was increasingly strained by the pressures of his office and the impacts of sleep apnea. It was only after he left office that Taft began to lose weight and recover from the worst effects of these health concerns (Sotos, 2003: 1140). Despite some of the press coverage presenting Taft as almost a trainee Olympian while serving as president, his exertions were not nearly as effective as those supporting his efforts had hoped.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the sections above that nobody tried to present Taft as a second coming of Theodore Roosevelt when it came to embodying the spirit of Muscular Christianity in the White House, and nor does this article. However, the press of the time did much to highlight both Taft's physical activities and his keen interest in sports as president, and certainly

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

focused far more upon these factors than before he ran for this office. Taft's passion for golf and his enthusiasm for baseball were certainly factually accurate, but presentation of these pastimes in the contemporary press frequently added a layer of hyperbole that needs to be taken into account.

Press attention to Taft's obesity never disappeared during his time in office, but it did start to become linked to both Taft's sporting pastimes and his efforts to control his weight. On this latter point, though Taft's size increased while in office and his general health showed few signs of improving, some of the reports presented above suggested things were moving in quite the opposite direction. Though hardly a "coverup" on the scale of some later presidential health scares, it is worth noting.

What is illustrated here is an exaggeration of Taft's connection to athleticism across a range of areas throughout the press of the time. Though today Taft is perhaps not best remembered as a sporting president, contemporary views would have been somewhat different and the stark contrast between Roosevelt and Taft in this regard would likely have been far less apparent than one might think. This was a time when the nation's growing interest in ideas about fitness and athleticism had intersected with a president who embodied them—in the case of Roosevelt. Yet, what becomes clearer from the analysis presented above is that, even in a figure who did not fully match these ideals—in the case of Taft—these expectations were still strong and perhaps influenced a representation of the president along those very lines.

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

REFERENCES

- Allen, Craig (1993), *Eisenhower and the Mass Media: Peace, Prosperity, and Prime-Time TV*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Arnold, Peri (2009), *Remaking the Presidency: Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, 1901–1916*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Bederman, Gail (1995), *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bromley, Michael L. (2003), *William Howard Taft and the First Motoring Presidency, 1909–1913*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co.
- Burns, Adam (2020), *William Howard Taft and the Philippines: A Blueprint for Empire*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Cashman, Sean Dennis (1998), *America Ascendant: From Theodore Roosevelt to FDR in Century of American Power, 1901–1945*, New York: New York University Press.
- Cohen, Kenneth (2017), *They Will Have Their Game: Sporting Culture and the Making of the Early American Republic*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Dallek, Robert (2003), *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co.
- Dalton, Kathleen (2004), *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*, New York: Vintage.
- Davies, Peter (1992), *The Historical Dictionary of Golfing Terms: From 1500 to the Present*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Davis, Oscar King (1908), *William Howard Taft: The Man of the Hour*, reprinted 2002, Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific.
- Dunn, Robert Lee (1908), *William Howard Taft, American*, Boston, MA: Chapple Publishing Co.
- Evans, Hugh E. (2002), *The Hidden Campaign: FDR's Health and the 1944 Election*, New York: Routledge.
- Ferrell, Robert H. (1992), *Ill-Advised: Presidential Health and Public Trust*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Goodwin, Doris Kearns (2013), *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt and the Golden Age of Journalism*, London: Viking.
- Greenberg, David (2011), 'Theodore Roosevelt and the Image of Presidential Activism', *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 78:4, pp. 1057–1088.

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

Levine, Deborah I. (2013), 'Corpulence and Correspondence: President William H. Taft and the Medical Management of Obesity', *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 159:8, pp. 565–570.

Lurie, Jonathan (2012), *William Howard Taft: The Travails of a Progressive Conservative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McDermott, Rose (2007), *Presidential Leadership, Illness, and Decision Making*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miller, John J. (2011), *The Big Scrum: How Teddy Roosevelt Saved Football*, New York: Harper.

Petersen, Svend (1963), *A Statistical History of the American Presidential Elections*, New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co.

Roosevelt, Theodore (1910), 'The American Boy', *St. Nicholas*, May 1900, republished in: Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life*, New York: Review of Reviews Co., 1910, pp. 128–137.

Rosen, Jeffrey (2018), *William Howard Taft*, New York: Times Books.

Sotos, John G. (2003), 'Taft and Pickwick: Sleep Apnea in the White House', *Chest*, 124:3, pp. 1133–1142.

Swanson, Ryan A. (2011) "I Never Was a Champion at Anything": Theodore Roosevelt's Complex and Contradictory Record as America's "Sports President", *Journal of Sport History*, 38:3, pp. 425–446.

Swanson, Ryan A. (2019), *The Strenuous Life: Theodore Roosevelt and the Making of the American Athlete*, New York: Diversion Books.

Watterson, John Sayle (2006), *The Games Presidents Play: Sports and the Presidency*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Weinstein, Edwin A. (1981), *Woodrow Wilson: A Medical and Psychological Biography*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Newspapers

Alma Record (1910) [Alma, MI], 'King of Sports,' 12 May, p. 6.

Brooklyn Daily Times (1907) [Brooklyn, NY], 'Snapshots of Secretary Taft,' 24 Aug., Section 2, p. 1.

Brooklyn Daily Times (1910) [Brooklyn, NY], "'Oh, You Bill!'" Greets Fan Taft,' 2 May, p. 1.

Brooklyn Times (1908) [Brooklyn, NY], 'A Rich Man's Game,' 15 Aug., Section 2, p. 2.

Buffalo Commercial (1905) [Buffalo, NY], 'What the Papers Say,' 7 April, p. 6.

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

Buffalo Enquirer (1910) [Buffalo, NY], 'Why Not Match Mr. Taft and Zbyszko,' 9 May, p. 3.

Burlington Free Press and Times (1909) [Burlington, VT], 'Taft is Nifty With Gloves,' 18 Aug., p. 2.

Caucasian (1907) [Shreveport, LA], 'Taft of Ohio,' 19 May, p. 6.

Cincinnati Enquirer (1908) [Cincinnati, OH], 'Liked Result in Maine,' 17 Sept., p. 7.

Coshocton Daily Tribune (1909) [Coshocton, OH], 'President Taft's "Trainer",' 9 Sept, p. 6.

Daily Signal (1907) [Crowley, LA], 'Taft on His Vacation,' 7 Sept., p. 7.

Detroit Free Press (1906) [Detroit, MI], 'Mr. Roosevelt's Tennis Cabinet—Kindred Spirits Who Help the President in Work and Play,' 25 Nov., Part 4, p. 7.

Jackson Daily News (1907) [Jackson, MS], 'Taft and Baseball,' 16 June, p. 4.

Kosciusko Herald (1909) [Kosciusko, MS], "'Uncle Joe" Practices Golf on the Sly,' 14 May, p. 7.

L'Anse Sentinel (1910) [L'Anse, MI], 'Our Public Men at Play,' 14 May, p. 7.

Mansfield News (1909a) [Mansfield, OH], 'Mr. Taft and Two of His Golf Cabinet; Mr. Roosevelt and His Tennis Cabinet,' 10 Mar., p. 1.

Mansfield News (1909b) [Mansfield, OH], 'President Taft, Baseball Fan, Shaking Hands With Three Fingered Brown' 23 Sept., p. 8.

Marion Daily Star (1907) [Marion, OH], 'Secretary Taft as a Golf Player,' 3 Aug., p. 1.

Meridian Weekly Star (1910) [Meridian, MS], 'Ballinger is Unfit,' 17 Mar., p. 4.

New York Times (1908), 'Golf Boom Coming, All Due to Taft,' 22 Nov., Part 4, p. 2.

New York Times (1909), 'The "Kitchen Cabinet" of the President,' 8 Aug., Part 5, p. 9.

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle (1901) [Rochester, NY], 'Roosevelt's Ride to Bed of Death,' 24 Sept., p. 8.

Scioto Gazette (1909) [Chillicothe, OH], 'Keeping Taft Well,' 2 Oct., p. 9.

Shreveport Times (1909) [Shreveport, LA], 'Mr. Taft and Baseball,' 22 Apr., p. 4.

Shreveport Times (1910) [Shreveport, LA], 'American League Season Opened by Taft,' 15 Apr., p. 7.

Author's accepted manuscript for publication in the *European Journal of American Culture* – please see the journal's website for the final published version.

Times-Democrat (1911) [New Orleans, LA], 'President Taft Declares in Favor of Golf Stick English Clubs Discard,' 7 Jan., p. 11.

Times-Promoter (1908) [Hernando, MS], 'Taft's Campaign of Bunko,' 23 Oct, p. 7.

Vermont Standard (1909) [Woodstock, VT], 'The Golf Cabinet in Session,' 15 Apr., p. 4.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Rothermere American Institute at the University of Oxford for their Vacation Visiting Research Fellowship, and the Centre for Historical Research at the University of Wolverhampton for their financial support—both were invaluable in supporting my research for this piece. Also, many thanks go to Professors Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, Robert Mason and Laura Ugolini, along with the journal's reviewers and editors, for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Adam Burns is a Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Wolverhampton. He is the author of *American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783–2013* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), *The United States, 1865–1920: Reuniting a Nation* (Routledge, 2020), and *William Howard Taft and the Philippines: A Blueprint for Empire* (University of Tennessee Press, 2020). This article forms part of his current research project exploring US sporting culture in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. His article on the transnational origins of American football will appear in *Sport History Review* in 2021.