

## **Revisiting Theodore Roosevelt’s *Citizenship in A Republic*: Principles for Democracy or a Modern World**

### **I. Introduction**

President Theodore Roosevelt (“TR”) is considered one of the most revered U.S. Presidents. His unorthodox conduct and pugnacious philosophy of life and politics have been cited as examples of unique and arguably transformational leadership. In the beginning of the twentieth century, during his administration (1901-1909), the U.S. was experiencing the effects of rapid modernization, for example, in the realms of industrialization and economy, during TR’s terms in office. TR oversaw the transition from the gilded age to the progressive era, and dealt with the sundry sociopolitical and economic effects and consequences that emerged from this transitory period in American history. TR is credited with, among other things, the tireless pursuit for equity, and attempts to ensure that the “American Dream” was obtainable not just for the few but for the many. Examples of his progressive ideological posture are reflected in his being termed the “Trust Buster”: being a Trust Buster encompassed TR’s efforts to implement a progressive political agenda, and led to confrontation with one of the most powerful Gilded Age oligarchs, i.e., J. Pierpont Morgan. Also, at a time when public lands were being ruthlessly exploited by the elite class of the Gilded Age, TR championed the Newland Reclamation Act of 1902, which eventually led to the modern-day Conservation movement. TR’s political philosophy and ideological posture continues to find expression in the present; his speeches, for instance, are quoted by politicians, media icons, and aspiring leaders across all generations. In light of the foregoing, this paper explores and examines select themes from one of his most cited speeches, “Citizenship in a Republic.” This speech is the subject of this paper because it effectively articulates key concepts that not only inform TR’s political and ideological posture, but also provide insight into the complex and enduring notions that inform the present. Thus, this paper explores the contention that TR is very relevant as far as making sense of and addressing the issues and challenges that

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<sup>1</sup> The Authors wish to thank editor Marvin L. Astrada.

stem from the present sociocultural, economic, and political milieu that inform and constitute U.S. politics and society.

TR was, without a doubt, a product of his time. An analysis of his political and ideological thought and practices reveals this to be the case. Upon reaching the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration of his tenure as President, it might be tempting to look at TR's thought and achievements as relics of American political thought and history—certainly testaments to his significant contributions and accomplishments, nonetheless part of an antiquated past. Yet, the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary serves a purpose beyond a mere historical milestone; we can observe the relevance of TR's civic and political philosophy in the present. As far as TR's relevance and application to the present, the following questions can be answered in the affirmative: Can we revisit, and re-engage TR in the wake of post-colonialism and the fall of global imperialism? Can TR speak to us about the central place of race and gender that have emerged at the forefront of civil society in recent history? In short, TR's thought as it pertains to politics and society is quite relevant in our challenging present. TR's ideals and leadership philosophy were certainly disruptive when considering economic equity, questions of race, and what exactly constitutes the American People/Citizenry. Yet, as is the case with any human being or ideology, TR's views and philosophy had negative dimensions as well, e.g., on the future of race relations, gender equity/equality, justice and America's role in international affairs, that are not considered to be reflective of present progressive notions of the .

It should be noted that this paper will not and cannot comprehensively assess the totality of TR's thought or legacy, nor posit any conclusions as to whether or not TR, as person and the embodiment of a distinct politics and ideology, can or rather should be considered “good” or “bad.” Rather, this brief paper seeks to locate TR in the present by analyzing his thought vis-à-vis the salient issues of his time and the “methodology” he employed to resolve them. In many ways, his initial, disruptive approach to address the social ills and systemic tensions of his time, set the course for the future development of the FDA, national conservation law, the notion of fair dealing and positive duties of corporations and businesses to the public and society, and a fundamental commitment to enabling more of the populace to realize the “American Dream.” TR's distinctive approach to politics and society is captured, in part, in his correspondence with Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes discussing the ethics underpinning “true” democracy:

“it is only the second-rate that lasts, and that the greatest works of intellect soon lose all but their historical interest. In other words, the man who writes of what is the deepest, about what goes below the surface, must be only a pioneer as regards those who come after him, no matter how much he may have profited by and improved upon the work of those who were ahead of him[...] his own work will have been superseded by the work of the very men to whom it pointed out the way.”<sup>2</sup>

This self-effacing notion, i.e., of the necessity to be superseded, is perhaps one of the most underrated “radical” notions of TR’s thought, in his recognition of necessarily being “left behind” by progress, and that greatest contributions are what prompt the progressive journey forward, even if only for a short time. The enduring legacy of TR is thus less in the details of his writings, but resides in the general concepts and principles that underpin his interpretation of a progressive path for American society and the U.S. as a sociocultural, political, and economic unit. To flesh out TR’s thought as it pertains to the present, a cursory examination of some of these concepts and principles follows.

## II. **The Average Citizen**

At the heart of TR’s thought is the notion of the primacy of the average citizen. This focus on the civic participant, the average citizen, is at the heart of the debate about everything from modern “fake-news” to the efficacy of voting. The average citizen is more than a mere political trope; it is a main driver of a politics and society wherein accountability of the governing elite perpetuates social progress and good society. TR’s belief that the sovereignty of the people is (or should be) the driver of politics, represented in Congress, and whose will should be the focus of policy, renders the average citizen as the measure of a good society by facilitating accountability of political elites.<sup>3</sup> The institutions of society, the legislative and legal structures that set the stage for the citizenry to drive democracy, rest on the critical mass of the average citizen. “The Stream will not permanently rise higher than the main source; and the main source of national power and national greatness is found in the average citizenship of the nation.”<sup>4</sup>

Within the notion, construct of the average citizen there is a focus on common sense and community that does not rely on the zero sum game that political identity politics seemingly rests upon. Rather, the average citizen enables American politics to reflect what can be termed a

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<sup>2</sup> See *Letter to Oliver Wendall Holmes*, Theodore Roosevelt , *Letter & Speeches*, Library of America Press (2004), 349

<sup>3</sup> See *Letter to Charles Dwight Willard*, *Id.*, 642)

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, *Citizenship in a Republic Speech*

democratic character. TR's political formulations are not steeped in academic jargon, or an overly intellectually complex political narrative, but instead clearly reflects a first principle of TR's civic philosophy. The average citizen was a guiding principle that informed the acrimony between TR and the Gilded Age's oligarchs, which had little interest in implementing TR's "square deal."

The average citizen, for TR, was often cast in light of rights *and* duties toward (and from society) society. The average citizen is thus the fulcrum by which a democratic politics, in the form of liberty, balance of individualism v. the group, representation, access, and prosperity, is facilitated: "We can just as little afford to follow the doctrines of an extreme individualism as the doctrinaires of extreme socialism [...] I am a strong individualist by personal habit, inheritance and conviction; but it is a mere matter of common sense to recognize the State, the community, and the citizens acting together, can do a number of things better than if they were left to individual action."<sup>5</sup> In his letter to Charles Dwight Willard, he aligns himself with the average citizen, speaking of a satirical cartoon picturing a "barley furnished room, and before a small fire, seated in a shabby old rocking chair, shabbily dressed, was an old fellow, apparently a farmer;"<sup>6</sup> he goes on to write, "That is the man I have tried to represent. That is the man with whom I deeply sympathize, whose welfare and convictions I have ever before me, and with whom I feel absolute community of thought in essential things of life."<sup>7</sup> The average citizen is thus the beginning and the end of a cycle of an administration of justice via the rule of law wherein a rotation of sovereignty from the people to the government, and through a social network of duties and rights, then circulate back to the people.

### III. The Optimist

Optimism is not a term that most would use to describe the present state of American politics and society. Irrespective of one's ideological or politicized identity affiliation, optimism as to the future salubriousness of the American polity. Polarization, acrimony, and alienation seem to be the mainstays of our present politics. In spite of the current state of American politics and society, generally speaking, partisanship has always been a staple of American political thought and practice, to include TR's time.

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<sup>5</sup> Id., Citizenship in a Republic Speech

<sup>6</sup> Id., Citizenship in a Republic Speech

<sup>7</sup> (Letter to Charles Dwight Willard, LoA p. 645).

The high degree of vituperative cynicism in the present political climate has resulted in constituent groups in need of pressing legislative solutions being subject to apathetic responses or non-responses from Congress. During the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, substantial progress was made in rectifying substantial wrongs suffered by various constituent groups experiencing disenfranchisement. Both Republicans and Democrats came together united to vote in favor of civil rights legislation to address pressing issues for the polity as a whole. TR sought to bring about progressive politics by basing policy on optimism in the ability of Americans to come together and steer a path to what has been verily described as an (American) “shining city upon a hill” by John Winthrop. TR always sought out fellow citizens across party lines, divisions, creed, and culture to promote his interpretation of a “greater good.”

The need to employ TR’s optimism in our present politics is necessary in order to ensure that the American public feel that government genuinely represents them, and actually works toward resolving challenges and issues that the public faces on a structural and micro level. TR was able to push the envelope, so to speak, on such levels, e.g., concerning issues such as conservatism and ensuring that small business interests were adequately represented and had fair dealings when dealing with corporate monopolies. Optimism among the American public was high during TR’s time because he was able (at least at the level of perception) to make government work for the average citizen. In the present time, we need to revisit TR’s notion of optimism to defuse the impasse, animosity, vitriol, and cynicism that permeates our politics and polity.

#### **IV. Moral Sense, Rhetoric & Deeds**

TR was known for breaking up monopolies. He unequivocally opposed concentrations of wealth based, in part, on a sense of political morality. TR’s administration sued successfully to break up monopolies such as Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Co. and J.P. Morgan’s Northern Securities Co. TR was adamant that monopolies were politically immoral in that massive concentrations of wealth in a few select entities were detrimental to the wellbeing of the average citizen, of the American polity. In 2019, we can observe that monopolies are again on the rise. One only has to look at the financial industry, for instance, to see the newfangled growth of monopolies on the economic stage. TR’s moral sense may provide a means by which the average citizens that comprise the American public is able to combat the rise and consolidation of wealth. Monopoly,

it can be contended, erodes the capacity of the average citizen to receive fair and high quality financial services. Such a state of affairs can be viewed as violating TR's notion of moral sense.

The divisiveness of what can be termed the noxious political rhetoric of the present appears to be at an all-time high. Political rhetoric, how one articulates politics and how he or she engages with those that disagree with their politics, seems to be an important factor when assessing if someone is qualified for the Presidency. For example, when Oprah Winfrey gave her speech at the 2018 Golden Globes she received such praise from the mainstream media that many thought she was (automatically) a potential candidate for President. The current 2020 Democratic primaries polling has been dominated by individuals who are renowned for their oratory skills. The value of words evoked by individuals is the primary criteria used by today's standards, which stands counter to those articulated in TR's speech "Citizenship in a Republic." As TR contended, mere oratory should NOT be the criteria used to evaluate someone's political viability in an electorate, but rather their deeds. Deeds are the metric by which one's public value is measured, as opposed to words. Focusing on the moral sense of deeds is thus a more productive basis for politics. A politics based on mere oratory results in what TR described as political weakness.

Monopolization of industries, particularly the financial sector, without the controls TR advocated for and implemented can potentially cause American society to regress toward plutocracy. Such a development has the effect of undermining the progress made in the era of trustbusting. If wealth continues to be concentrated in a few institutions, efforts to effectively serving the average citizen will be hampered. In his correspondence concerning the Court and Justice Holmes he writes:

"The ablest lawyers and greatest judges are men whose past has naturally brought them into close relationship with the wealthiest and the most powerful clients, and I am glad when I can find a judge who has been able to preserve his aloofness of mind so as to keep his broad humanity of feeling and his sympathy for the class from which he has not drawn his clients. I think it eminently desirable that our Supreme Court should show in unmistakable fashion their entire sympathy with all proper effort to secure the most favorable possible consideration for the men who most need that consideration."<sup>8</sup>

## V. Race

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<sup>8</sup> See. *Correspondence to Henry Cabot Lodge*, Id. 249

In assessing TR's civic philosophy vis-à-vis the present, we cannot ignore the role of race in the era of TR's presidency. TR's thought concerning or implicating race, because it is a product of his time, certainly has problems when viewed through the morality of modernity. Nonetheless, TR was, in fact cognizant of how racism is antithetical to democracy and the foundation of a just rule of law. In his correspondence regarding his invitation to Booker T. Washington to the White House, he states: "I have consulted so much with him it seemed to me that it was natural to ask him to dinner to talk over his work, and the fact that I felt a moment's qualm on inviting him because of his color made me ashamed of myself and made me hasten the invitation ... As things turned out, am very glad that I asked him, for the clamor aroused by the act makes me feel as if the act was necessary."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to note that: "the only wise and Christian thing to do is to treat each black man and each white man strictly on his merits as a man, giving him no more and no less than he himself shows himself worthy to have. I say I am 'sure' that this is the right solution. Of course, I know that we see through a glass dimly, and, after all, it may be that I am wrong; but if I am, then all my thoughts and beliefs are wrong."<sup>10</sup> This is in parallel to the historical fact that Booker T. Washington was never again invited to the White House, and provides an example of where TR failed to follow through on the conclusions of his convictions. The mediating force to expel the prejudices against race was to hold up the pillars of law and order and instill a level playing field where each individual was valued viz a viz his social contribution. For example, in additional correspondence answering criticism he received regarding his appointment of black federal employees, TR wrote: "I felt that I would be untrue to my beliefs and principles if I failed to reappoint them merely because they were colored. [...] I cannot consent by my action to take the position that the door of hope—the door of opportunity—is to be shut upon all men, no matter how worthy, purely upon the grounds of color. Such attitude would be according to my convictions be fundamentally wrong."<sup>11</sup>

There is a theme in TR's thought and philosophy about the foundational role that the rule of law and order have in civilization that are infused with moral sense and optimism: Law and Order enforced with justice and by strength lie as the foundations of civilization. Law must be based on Justice; else it cannot stand.<sup>12</sup> There is perhaps an overreliance and blind faith that the

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<sup>9</sup> See *Letter to Albion W. Tourgèe*, Id. 244

<sup>10</sup> Id. 245

<sup>11</sup> See *Letter to Robert Goodwyn Rhett*, Id. 260-261

<sup>12</sup> Id.

laws that set the rules of social action are just in effectuation. Subsequent notions of structural racism and discrimination were not even considered in TRs analysis on race, and it is one of the most glaring blind spots of TR’s fight for equity. However, systemic and structural inequality was perhaps not completely lost upon TR. In his speech “The New Nationalism,” he expounds upon notions of fairness: “I Stand for the square deal. But when I say that I am for the square deal, I mean no merely that I stand for fair play under the present rules of the game, but rather I stand for having those rules changed so as to work for a more substantial equality of opportunity and reward for equally good service.”<sup>13</sup> This logic is not prevalent in terms of ensuring the rules of the game are fair in terms of race, as opposed to economics, but it points to a realization of the requirement of a more comprehensive notion of equity—one that is apparently lacking in American political thought.

## VI. Liberty

Freedom is at the heart of TRs vision for civil society. But it is a freedom tied to responsibility. TR stated this succinctly in *Citizen*: “The good citizen will demand liberty for himself, and as a matter of pride he will see to it that others receive the liberty which he thus claims his own.”<sup>14</sup> This is the responsibility of freedom, and the countervailing force that tempers unfettered individualism at the expense of a collective sense of American identity and community. TR goes further, raising the bar for equity: “Probably the best test of true love of liberty in any country is the way in which minorities are treated in that country.”<sup>15</sup> Although there is a voluminous amount of literature about impressionism and America under TR, it is unquestionable that TR was acutely aware of equity issues for minority (interpreted broadly) representation. The hyperpolarization of today’s political climate is the opposite of this idea of communal liberty, or as TR describes it: “In a republic, to be successful, we must learn to combine intensity of conviction with a broad tolerance of difference of conviction.”<sup>16</sup> This is a model of communal freedom that thrives on difference, disagreement, but ultimately drives the democratic process. It seems that TR was Aristotelian in his approach to politics and society, as he always seemed to balance competing interests and contrarian elements within the context of obtaining progressive dialectical advancement for the American polity.

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<sup>13</sup> See Speech *The New Nationalism*, Id. 803

<sup>14</sup> See Speech, *Citizenship in a Republic*

<sup>15</sup> Id.

<sup>16</sup> Id.

## VII. Conclusion

TR's legacy has proven to be an enduring one. From time-to-time, U.S. Presidents have invoked TR when rationalizing their actions or policy proposals. His "Citizenship in a Republic" speech, as well as his other ruminations, are still relevant for America today. The issues and challenges that TR addressed during his time have resurfaced today, e.g., in the form of unregulated monopolies due to the dismantling of because of the various controls implemented during TR's time and cynicism. American democracy has been progressing toward providing the means for the average citizen to pursue life, liberty and happiness. Much work remains to be done in the present. TR's civic philosophy continues to be relevant, providing insight into the means by which to better enable a critical mass of the average citizen to pursue the foregoing. The necessity to have difficult dialogues about who we are as a country, and who we want to be is in line with TR's thought. In his correspondence, when he describes his "genuine democracy" (as one that requires constant reevaluation of the dream of democracy), seems on point for our present politics:

"I do not think that the most fervent zeal. The utmost earnestness, and the most resolute determination to help forward the cause of the people, ought to be permitted to mean that we are afraid to look facts in the face. I too am a dreamer of dreams; I hold the man worthless who is not a dreamer, who does not see visions; but I also hold him worthless unless in practical fashion he endeavors to shape his actions so that these dreams and visions are partially realized."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See *Letter to Charles Dwight Willard*, Id. 651