

Chapter Two

THEODORE ROOSEVELT'S EARLY POLITICAL CAREER: THE MAKING OF AN INDEPENDENT REPUBLICAN AND URBAN PROGRESSIVE

Edward P. Kohn

While TR's path to the White House may have gone through Cuba, it did not start there. Almost two decades before he charged Spanish positions at the head of his Rough Riders, TR began his political career in the New York Assembly representing his uptown Manhattan brownstone district. TR would go on to have his early political career firmly rooted in New York, the city of his birth. He served in the Assembly for three years, ran unsuccessfully for mayor in 1886, and headed the Board of Police Commissioners from 1895 to 1897. Moreover, while the Spanish-American War may have made TR a household name in the United States, the Colonel had long before "made his bones" in the Republican Party at both a local and national level. TR was continually rewarded for his loyalty to the Republican Party by choice appointments in Washington, D.C., first as Civil Service Commissioner for six years, then as Assistant Secretary of the Navy before the outbreak of War with Spain. From time to time TR displayed an independent streak that landed him in trouble with party leaders, especially New York's Thomas Platt, the "Easy Boss." He often sided with the reforming, independent wing of the party that sought to clean up politics and government. Yet from an early date TR chose to be counted among the party faithful, observing that a man could only be an effective politician by working within the party structure. TR's early political career, then, reflected two key characteristics that would eventually place him in the White House: a dedication both to reform, and to the Republican Party.

TR began taking an interest in local, New York City politics while studying law at Columbia College. Indeed, he expressed interest in the law

mainly as preparation for what he once vaguely referred to as a possible career in “public life.” In 1881, at age 22, TR began attending meetings of the Twenty-first Assembly district and speaking on local matters. His interest in the Assembly seat for the Twenty-First was aroused by a rather mundane dispute over street cleaning. TR favored a bill to establish a non-partisan method of street cleaning in order to remove this infamously corrupt and inefficient department from the hands of party bosses. Support for such a reform foreshadowed some of TR’s basic ideas as an urban Progressive: good government, efficiency, and non-partisan control of city departments. In seeking to achieve such ends, TR consistently championed reforms such as the expansion of the civil service and the convening of investigative committees to root out corruption. In the fall of 1881, when the sitting Assemblyman for the Twenty-First opposed the street cleaning bill, TR allowed himself to be reluctantly roped into challenging him in the Republican primaries. TR easily won the nomination only a day after his twenty-third birthday.

In running for his first office TR had many advantages. For most New Yorkers his very name conjured images of his deceased father, Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., who had helped establish the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Union Club, and various charitable organizations. Friends of Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., came to the young Roosevelt’s aid that fall, with such personages as Joseph Choate and Elihu Root throwing the candidate their support. TR even had the advantage of an especially weak Democratic opponent: the Dickensian-named Dr. W.W. Strew had been removed as top administrator of the Blackwell’s Island lunatic asylum for gross incompetence. “But in the last analysis,” TR biographer Carleton Putnam wrote, “none of these things compared in importance with the fact that TR had had the common sense to work from within the regular Republican organization” (Putnam 1958, 248). As would happen throughout his political career, both independent and machine Republicans came out for TR on election day, handing him his first electoral victory by a majority of 1,500, twice the usual Republican margin.

Of course, it was one thing to be elected in New York City, and quite another to be an effective legislator in Albany. At first glance some of TR’s upstate peers dismissed the nattily-dressed Harvard graduate as a dandy. Even historian John Milton Cooper has labeled TR at this point in his life merely “a dilettante” (Cooper 1983, 30). TR quickly proved he was no dilettante, however, by his hard work, his ability to make alliances, his mastery of parliamentary procedure, and his willingness to tackle large problems. After TR was appointed to the Cities Committee, the most important organ for making laws affecting New York City, which did not enjoy “home rule,” he quickly introduced four bills. The bills’ topics ranged from the city’s finances to its drinking water, but they also

included one to reform the organization of the Board of Aldermen, an un-elected and shadowy body that sat in the pockets of the city bosses, and was able to curb mayoral power. Until the day he stepped down from his Assembly seat three years later, TR would continue to view reforming or abolishing the Board as a key element for reforming New York's corrupt city government.

During that same first, one-year term in the Assembly, TR championed the impeachment of New York Supreme Court judge Theodore Westbrook. Westbrook had been publicly accused of helping depress the value of Manhattan Elevated Railway Company stock to allow its acquisition by the notorious financier Jay Gould. TR took keen note of the fact that three months after the accusations had been made in the press, Westbrook still had not professed his innocence. TR called for a bill empowering the Assembly Judiciary Committee to investigate Westbrook, thus taking on powerful interests while still only a freshman legislator. In the end, little came of the investigation, which did not involve TR's Cities Committee, and the majority report largely absolved Westbrook. Yet in defeat TR had achieved much, and perhaps learned even more. TR had made a name for himself throughout the state as a bold reformer, thus earning the loyalty of many other young, reform-minded men at Albany. He had given rousing speeches in the Assembly, including chastising his fellow legislators for letting Westbrook off the hook. "You cannot cleanse the leper," TR admonished, "Beware lest you taint yourselves with this leprosy" (Putnam 1958, 271). Finally, he had learned the power of the legislative investigating committee to uncover lurid backroom deals, the details of which could fill the press and inflame the public.

TR won re-election in 1882 in the face of, as he noted, a "Democratic Deluge" that elected Grover Cleveland governor of New York and placed the Republicans in "a hopeless minority" (TR to William Thomas O'Neil, 12 November 1882, Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 58). His fellow Republicans named him minority leader, and TR continued his education as an urban reformer. That year he helped usher through the Assembly a bill forbidding the manufacture of cigars in New York tenements, a filthy job that exacerbated the already horrific conditions inside the tenements. When the bill came before TR's Cities Committee, TR was named one of three members tasked to investigate the problem. He was approached by the local union representative, Samuel Gompers. When Gompers described the conditions in the tenements, the Gramercy Park-born TR did not believe the labor leader. Only after TR took three tours of the tenements did he come away shocked at what he saw. Writing in his *Autobiography* nearly three decades later, he could still vividly evoke the harsh conditions in which New York's working poor lived:

The work of manufacturing the tobacco by men, women, and children went on day and night in the eating, living, and sleeping rooms – sometimes in one room. I have always remembered one room in which two families were living. On my inquiry as to who the third adult male was I was told that he was a boarder with one of the families. There were several children, three men, and two women in this room. The tobacco was stowed about everywhere, alongside the foul bedding, and in a corner where there were scraps of food. The men, women, and children in this room worked by day and far on into the evening, and they slept and ate there.

When the bill reached Governor Cleveland's desk, Gompers asked TR to champion the bill to the skeptical governor. TR did so, "acting," he recalled, "as spokesman for the battered, undersized foreigners who represented the Union and the workers" (Roosevelt 1985, 82). Cleveland signed the bill.

A photo taken of TR in Albany that year shows the 24-year-old surrounded by some of his closest colleagues in legislative work, including Walter Howe, Isaac Hunt, and William O'Neill. Significantly, seated at the center of the photo is the legislative correspondent for the *New York Times*, George Spinney. TR's Albany experience began a long career in which he cultivated good relations with the press. As equally Republican and reform-minded as TR, the *New York Times* was usually a dependable ally and supporter of his efforts. In March 1883, the *Times* praised TR's "rugged independence": "Whatever boldness the minority has exhibited in the Assembly is due to his influence, and whatever weakness and cowardice it has displayed is attributable to its unwillingness to follow where he led" (*New York Times*, 26 March 1883).

TR's final session in the Assembly in 1884 promised to be his greatest. The Republicans had regained their majority, and TR was even a candidate for the position of Speaker. With 1884 a presidential election year, however, the party bosses could not allow the independent-minded TR such a prominent position, and they engineered his defeat. TR consoled himself with the chairmanship of the Cities Committee, and chair of a special committee to investigate corruption in city departments. In New York City department heads essentially bought their positions, and enriched themselves at the taxpayers' expense. One cause of this was the power held by the Board of Aldermen to confirm mayoral appointments. With this in mind TR introduced a bill to strip the aldermen of this confirmation power and instead give the mayor complete control. A similar law in Brooklyn had given Mayor Seth Low the same power, and the result seemed to be better department heads. The investigating committee – known as the Roosevelt Committee – and the aldermanic bill – known as the Roosevelt Bill – followed parallel and reinforcing paths that early spring of 1884. Moreover, with the Democrats in power in the city, TR served his party's interests well by calling in front of the committee and questioning Mayor Franklin Edson, and Tammany boss "Honest" John Kelly. As the city press published the

lurid details of corruption exposed by the Roosevelt Committee, the Roosevelt Bill made its way through the Assembly.

TR's experiences in the 1884 Assembly session will forever be overshadowed by his personal tragedy of that February. On February 12, with the third reading of his Aldermanic bill imminent, TR received a telegram from the city. Both his wife and mother lay dying. The bill was laid aside as TR rushed for a train to the city. The next day both women died. Four days after their double funeral, TR was back in his seat at Albany speaking on behalf of his bill. TR condemned "the aristocracy of the bad," the office-holders who "fatten in the public offices upon the plunder wrung from the working man and from the taxpayer alike."¹ The Roosevelt Bill passed, and Governor Cleveland signed it into law. Years later TR would remember the investigating committee and his Aldermanic Bill as "the most important part I played" in the New York legislature (Roosevelt 1985, 84). While corruption remained, TR's time in the Assembly had taught him valuable lessons, and proved the 25-year-old a tough and shrewd politician.

At the end of this last of TR's Assembly sessions, TR readied himself for two trips during the summer of 1884. TR was about to embark upon his western sojourn in the Badlands, perhaps escaping from the crushing grief that awaited him in New York. Before leaving, however, TR attended the 1884 Republican National Convention in Chicago as a delegate-at-large from New York State. There, he and his new friend, Massachusetts delegate Henry Cabot Lodge, made a very public stand against the choice of the party leaders for the presidential nomination, James Blaine. Blaine had long been tainted by accusations of receiving bribes when he served as Speaker of the House of Representatives, making his candidacy unpalatable to reformers such as TR and Lodge. They instead backed the bland US Senator from Vermont, George Edmunds. At the convention both Lodge and TR made a name for themselves as they politicked to obstruct Blaine's nomination. In a symbolic move they even opposed the party leaders' choice for honorary chairman of the convention, and TR gave his first speech to a national audience as he rose to address the convention. Asserting the independence of every delegate, TR declared to the 10,000 in attendance, "Let each man stand accountable ... let each man stand here and cast his vote, and then go home and abide by what he has done" (*New York Times*, 4 June 1884). The *New York press* praised TR's speech, as the *New York Times* asserted that it had given TR "a place among leaders of the convention."

In the end, Blaine easily secured the nomination, and both Lodge and TR backed the party's choice. While other Independent Republicans bolted to vote for Democratic nominee Grover Cleveland, TR avowed his loyalty to the Republican Party. He even returned from the Bad Lands that fall to campaign for Lodge and the party, although not for Blaine himself. Years later TR's old Assembly ally Isaac Hunt explained that in Albany TR had

learned to stay in the party “and fight for righteousness.” “The thing to do,” Hunt said, “is to stay in the party and fight inside the ranks and you may be able to accomplish something.”² The 1884 Republican National Convention had briefly made TR a national figure, and had also made him a new friend and ally in Henry Cabot Lodge. The convention had also shown TR’s independent streak, but eventual loyalty to the Republican Party. The party leaders, however, may not have been all that impressed with TR’s lukewarm support of Blaine that fall. Blaine lost New York, and thus the election, by fewer than 1,200 votes. If only 600 Independent Republicans had voted for Blaine rather than Cleveland, Blaine would have been elected instead. The machine would remember that this split in the New York Republican Party had been caused at least in part by the young Theodore Roosevelt.

TR would have ample time to muse about his political past and future during his months on his Dakota ranch. While some historians have speculated that TR might truly have abandoned the East for the West, this seems unlikely. By this time, politics had a powerful hold on the young New Yorker. Letters to Lodge in early 1885 discussed Cleveland’s new administration and the composition of his cabinet. And TR strongly felt the pull of New York politics. In June a New York assemblyman asked TR whether he was considering a place on the state ticket in the fall. That same month New York City mayor William R. Grace offered TR the position of President of the Board of Health. Grace had been elected in 1884 as a reform Democrat, and sought a candidate to replace an indicted bribe-taker. The fact that he reached out to Republican Theodore Roosevelt indicated the value of the Roosevelt name in New York City politics, a name associated with independence and good government. Lodge warned TR that the position was beneath TR’s dignity. TR, however, seemed ready to jump at the chance to return to New York, and expressed his fear to his sister Corinne: “I should very soon get to practically give up the east entirely” (TR to C.R. Robinson, 5 July 1886, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 107). When Mayor Grace did not follow through on his offer, TR despaired. “It is no use saying that I would like a chance at something I thought I could really do,” he wrote Lodge, “at present I see nothing whatever ahead” (TR to Lodge, 20 August 1886, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 109). In the end, perhaps personal rather than political affairs drew TR back to the city of his birth. In 1884 he had left his baby girl Alice in the care of his sister, and by the fall of 1886 he had become secretly engaged to his childhood friend, Edith Carow. They planned to wed in England before Christmas.

TR returned to New York in October, and attended the Republican County Convention on October 15. The big political story in New York that fall was the mayoral candidacy of Henry George, labor advocate and author of the 1879 *Progress and Poverty*. By the time the Republicans met to choose their candidate, the Democrats had already chosen

Abram Hewitt, a popular and progressive former congressman whom reform-minded Republicans could support with a clear conscience. From the beginning it was expected that George's radical philosophy would send Republicans running into the arms of Hewitt, and that the Republican candidate for mayor that year stood little chance of winning. Much to his surprise, at the October 15 convention in the Grand Opera House, party leaders asked TR to run. He received the backing of both the regular district managers controlled by party boss Thomas Platt, and a Citizens' Committee of One Hundred that represented the independent, reform wing of the party. In other words, the Republican Party of New York City, so divided over the nomination of Blaine that it had probably thrown the 1884 election to the Democrats, in 1886 united behind a single candidate – Theodore Roosevelt.

Elihu Root, one of TR's oldest supporters and chairman of the county Republicans, had actually turned down the nomination before TR accepted. This indicated fairly strongly that the Republican nominee's chances were slim in a contest with Henry George and Abram Hewitt. In September George had been nominated as the United Labor candidate at a trades union meeting that represented over 40,000 workingmen. He proved a formidable candidate, with even the *New York Times* admitting that he could "express himself with enough vigor to give him a good status before any audience" (*New York Times*, 24 September 1886). And the numbers seemed to be on George's side. Considering that in 1884 William Grace had been elected with about 96,000 votes, if George could simply secure the workingman's vote, he stood a chance at being elected. It was expected that this possibility would spur frightened Republicans to vote for Hewitt.

Why did TR run? Edmund Morris speculates that TR had been asked to run "to reward him for his support of James G. Blaine in 1884" (Morris 1979, 345). Yet as Elihu Root's demurrals showed, no one expected the Republicans to win. Moreover, TR understood this, and accepted that he was running as a "sacrifice candidate" in order to unite the party. Immediately after his nomination, he wrote his friend Henry Cabot Lodge with the news. TR admitted he faced "a perfectly hopeless contest," but that the party wanted "to get a united republican party in this city to make a good record before the people." TR repeatedly indicated that he felt he *had* to accept the nomination. "I did not well see how I could refuse," he told Lodge. "If I could have kept out I would never have been in the contest" (TR to Lodge, 17 October 1886, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 111–12). But if TR planned to continue any sort of political career in New York, then he would have to do the bidding of the party leaders, even if this meant offering himself as a sacrifice on election day.

Even the timing of the Republican nomination indicated the party's difficult position in 1886. By the time TR received the nomination, only two weeks before the election, he had missed the momentum of the

campaign. News of his nomination was overshadowed by a public debate between Hewitt and George appearing in the city newspapers. George and Hewitt themselves largely ignored TR's candidacy, as did the city's labor press (Hurwitz 1943, 126). By the end of TR's first week as a candidate, the *New York Herald*, which backed Hewitt, focused on George as the Democrat's main opponent. In the very first published account of the campaign that would appear the following year, the authors referred to TR as "only a third party candidate."³ Even at the convention that nominated TR, a Republican speaker told the crowd, "I do not think there are a half-a-dozen men in this body who believe that TR can be elected or who will honestly support him for Mayor of this city" (*New York Evening Post*, in Hurwitz 1943, 133).

TR appeared to accept this "necessary defeat," and ran a lackluster campaign (Kohn 2006a). He did not attack his opponents, and only spoke to groups of Republicans. TR used his short campaign to discuss the issues dearest to him, and vowed to reform municipal government. Time and again TR, fellow Republican speakers, and the sympathetic *New York Times* stressed the unity of the party in fielding a single candidate for mayor. The climax of TR's campaign came on October 27, his twenty-eighth birthday, at a large meeting of Republicans at Cooper Union Hall. In his speech TR referred to himself as a "radical reformer," promising to clean up city government. Yet he also made plain that he was "a strong party man," and repeated at the end of his speech, "I will remain strong for my own party."⁴ Once again TR draped himself in the dual mantles of reformer and Republican.

On Election Day TR came in a distant third with only about 60,000 votes, and Hewitt emerged the victor. He seemed to take the results in stride, appearing more interested in Lodge's winning a seat in Congress and his own upcoming nuptials. TR blamed his defeat on independents who voted for Hewitt. This was the common understanding of the election results. Yet Roosevelt did better than might have been expected. Previous mayoral elections in New York had shown that the Republican candidate stood little chance in a three-way contest involving a reforming Democrat. In 1886 Roosevelt won 16,000 fewer seats than Republican Alan Campbell had in 1882 in a two-way contest with Democrat Franklin Edson, a mid-term election marked by low voter turnout. Yet Roosevelt won 16,000 *more* votes than Republican Frederick Gibbs in 1884 in a three-way contest with Tammany candidate Hugh Grant and County (anti-Tammany) Democrat William Grace. Those 16,000 votes were crucial in a state that had gone to the Democrats in 1884 by fewer than 1,200 votes. With the Empire State the most important swing state in the nation, New York City alone had provided the margin of national victory in 1880 as well, and would again in 1888 and 1892. With only one statewide election in New York that year, the city's 1886 mayoral race took on extra importance as an indication of Republican voting for the presidential election of 1888.

After his October nomination TR had explained his acceptance to a perhaps dubious Lodge: "I have a better party standing than ever before" (TR to Lodge, 20 October 1886, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 110). On the very night of his defeat he gave an interview in which he indicated his understanding that he had entered "a hopeless fight," but stressed, "if I have been the means of holding the Republican Party in the city together I am satisfied and gratified" (*New-York Tribune*, 3 November 1886). TR understood that he had been defeated while serving a greater cause, that of uniting the Republican Party behind a single candidate. In 1886 TR had used the campaign to present himself as both a loyal party man, and as a "radical reformer" dedicated to urban reform. It was this very ability to win the support of both machine and independent Republicans that contributed to TR's later political success.

After a couple years pursuing a literary career that found him writing the first volumes of *The Winning of the West*, TR took to the campaign trail in 1888 for Benjamin Harrison. With a smashing Republican victory that fall, TR and Lodge hoped to convince Harrison's new secretary of State to accept TR as his assistant. But the new secretary, James G. Blaine, remembered TR's opposition to his candidacy only four years before at the Republican National Convention. To Lodge's inquiry Blaine expressed doubts about TR's temperament, viewing the 30-year-old TR as impatient, "aggressive," and "too quick to execution" (Garraty 1953, 104). Instead TR had to be content with the position of Civil Service Commissioner. On the one hand, the new job fit with TR's longtime interest in the cause of Civil Service reform. Back in the New York Assembly TR had openly attacked the spoils system and the corruption it engendered. On the other hand, the 1883 Pendleton Act placed only one-quarter of the 140,000 federal jobs under the commission's purview. These 28,000 jobs had to be filled based on merit, regardless of party, and were "permanent" in the sense that they could not be re-filled based solely on a change in administration. Moreover, the Civil Service Commission only had the power to investigate, not prosecute any malfeasance. Finally, looking into corruption in a Republican administration was bound to bring any righteous and progressive-minded commissioner into conflict with powerful forces inside his own party. Understanding this, the other two commissioners were content to do little more than warm their seats in their cushy offices. Such a course probably never even occurred to TR.

TR began his new job by returning to New York and looking into irregularities in the Customs House examinations. His investigation resulted in the dismissal of three officials. Following this he tackled corruption under the local postmaster of Indianapolis, William Wallace. This was TR back in crusading form, as Indianapolis was the hometown of President Harrison, and Wallace was a friend of the president. TR's investigation led to further dismissals, and the humiliation of Wallace. The Midwestern tour

then took TR to Milwaukee, and revealed more scoundrelism in the postmaster's office. TR's actions were not making him many friends among Republican leaders, including the president. Moreover, TR, always careful to cultivate public opinion, made sure to leak his findings to the press, an action that even Lodge cautioned him against. By the end of 1889 opposition to TR was mounting, and it found an outlet in the attacks of Frank Hatton, editor of the *Washington Post* and a former postmaster general. Hatton's attacks on the Civil Service Commission even led to a congressional investigating committee. Despite the potential for embarrassment, including revelations that TR had helped elevate an informer to a top position in the Census Bureau, the committee report praised the work of the Civil Service Commission. TR had scored a personal and political triumph.

Aside from the actual work of the commission, TR's time in Washington served as a valuable education. TR became intimate with some of the most important figures of Washington society and politics, including Henry Adams, John Hay, Cecil Spring Rice, and Alfred Thayer Mahan. TR's Washington tenure also allowed him to solidify his friendship and political alliance with Henry Cabot Lodge. Richard White rightly points out that TR's six years as Civil Service Commissioner constituted his longest tenure in a single job before he became president. "During his commissionership he honed his extraordinary skills as an administrator and as a politician," White writes. "His achievements in civil service reform were substantial and, taken alone, would serve as the capstone of any public servant's career" (White 2003, 2-3). His walks often led him past the White House, and he later admitted it was at this time that he began picturing himself a president.

Although Grover Cleveland defeated Harrison in 1892, the former Democratic governor of New York kept the Republican Roosevelt as commissioner. Perhaps he remembered working with the young Roosevelt on reform matters in Albany almost a decade before. Almost certainly Cleveland knew that keeping on an independent-minded Republican like Roosevelt sent a strong reforming message to the goo-goos and mugwumps. While TR stayed on another two years under Cleveland, a Democratic administration was not the ideal launching pad for advancement. During the six years in Washington much had changed in TR's personal life as well. His writings were receiving good reviews and achieving good sales. Edith had given birth to three more children. And in 1891 TR had been shaken by the premature death of his alcoholic brother Elliott, his best friend from youth. The time was ripe for a change.

In 1894 TR was approached about again running for mayor of New York City. Edith apparently believed they could not afford the campaign, and TR turned down the offer. That fall, William Strong, a reform Republican much like TR, was elected. TR felt he had missed an opportunity, and wrote to his sister Anna, "I made a mistake in not trying my luck in the

mayoralty race. The prize was very great; the expense would have been trivial; and the chances of success were good. I would have run better than Strong” (TR to Anna Roosevelt, 22 October 1894, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 407). After Strong became mayor, he offered Roosevelt a place on the city’s Street Cleaning Commission. In other words, TR would have been responsible for hauling away the city’s garbage, not exactly the ideal stepping stone to higher office. TR turned the position down, yet he still wanted to be a part of Strong’s reform government. TR indicated this in a letter to his old friend Jacob Riis, perhaps hoping Riis would soothe any ill-feelings held by Strong: “As I told you, I am afraid the Mayor may have taken it a little amiss that I would not accept the position of Street Cleaning Commissioner. I would like to have done so very much, because I want to help him out in any way, and I should have been delighted to smash up the corrupt contractors and to have tried to put the street cleaning commissioner’s force absolutely out of the domain of politics; but with the actual work of cleaning the streets, dumping the garbage, etc., I wasn’t familiar” (TR to Jacob August Riis, 3 January 1895, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 419–20).

Strong then offered TR a place on the Board of Police Commissioners, the bipartisan, independent oversight committee of the police department. TR accepted the job with the understanding that he would be named the head of the four-man commission. Following his appointment TR wrote of his excitement to his sister Anna: “I think it a good thing to be definitely identified with my city once more. I would like to do my share in governing the city after our great victory; and so far as may be I would like once more to have my voice in political matters” (TR to Anna Roosevelt, 14 April 1895, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 441–42). If the prospect of being part of a reform administration excited TR, his friend Lodge expressed concern that TR must always keep an eye on *national* party politics while doing his job. In other words, TR must keep in mind the bigger picture, which was the 1896 election. “You need not have the slightest fear about my losing my interest in National Politics,” TR reassured Lodge, “in a couple of years or less I shall have finished the work here for which I am specially fitted, and in which I take a special interest. After that there will remain only the ordinary problems of decent administration of the Department, which will be already in good running order. I shall then be quite ready to take up a new job” (TR to Lodge, 18 May 1895, Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 457).

By the time TR returned to New York to take up his new job in early 1895, both he and Lodge had their gazes firmly fixed on the coming national election. Both men knew the Republicans stood a good chance to recapture the White House in 1896. With Cleveland leaving office, Republicans would not have to battle a Democratic incumbent, while the economic crisis that had begun in 1893 and the split over bimetallism had

weakened the Democratic Party. The effect of this had already been seen in the 1894 mid-term elections, which have been called a “turning point in American political history.” In the House of Representatives, Republicans gained 117 seats while the Democrats lost 113 seats, “the largest transfer of strength from one party to another in the history of the United States” (Gould 1996, 276). In 24 states in 1894, no Democrats were elected to national office. The year 1896, then, was shaping up to be a Republican year. Lodge knew that TR was likely to receive an appointment in Washington in any new Republican administration. He cautioned his friend to always keep an eye on the bigger political picture while doing his job as police commissioner in New York. “I shall not neglect the political side, you may be sure,” TR reassured Lodge, yet he shared Lodge’s fears that the police commissioner job would be a thankless task that might bring him down. “It is a position in which it is absolutely impossible to do what will be expected of me; the conditions will not admit it. I must make up my mind to much criticism and disappointment” (TR to Lodge, 18 May 1895, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 457). He was absolutely right.

Just as tackling the spoils system as Civil Service Commissioner opened TR to attack, so did battling the rampant corruption in the New York City Police Department. The department was the linchpin of the entire city’s corruption. The chief of police admitted to being worth \$350,000, although TR would later speculate he had amassed a fortune of well over one million dollars. The money trickled down from there. Gambling houses and brothels paid the police to ensure against raids; saloons paid thousands of dollars to obtain a liquor license; and even local greengrocers paid perhaps a dollar a day to be able to stack their produce on the sidewalk. Just before TR took his position on the police commission an investigation had reported on the widespread corruption in the force. The Lexow Commission had concluded that the only remedy for such a rotten organization was to indict the entire police force. Upon taking office TR was able to force the resignation of the chief of police, as well as other corrupt officers. Accompanied by Jacob Riis Roosevelt began to take midnight walks through the city, making sure that officers were on duty when and where they were supposed to be, instead of asleep, in taverns, or in brothels, “partly concealed by petticoats,” as the *Tribune* colorfully put it (*New-York Tribune*, 8 June 1895).

But TR’s main struggle would be to enforce the Sunday Excise Law that forbade the selling of liquor on Sunday. This was a state law that reflected the rural, upstate temperance vote, and had long simply been ignored in the city. TR himself was not a drinker, perhaps the result of his brother Elliott’s suffering and death as a result of alcohol abuse. TR was never a prohibitionist, and even believed the Sunday anti-liquor law to be a bad law. Yet not only was it the law, and thus needed to be enforced, but the saloons were also the most public and profitable of the city’s illegal ventures,

with ties both to the police force and to political corruption. Especially within the Tammany political organization, many saloonkeepers were also political bosses and saloons often doubled as unofficial Tammany headquarters. In other words, TR was not only enforcing the law, but seemed to be working in the interest of the Republican Party.

When TR took office in early 1895, there were between 12,000 and 15,000 saloons in New York City. By Sunday, June 30, 1895, TR had succeeded in closing 97 percent of the saloons in accordance with the law, stopping the normal flow of three million glasses of beer. TR referred to the Sunday closing fight as a “war,” while the *Times* called it a “crusade.” Whatever the label, it made TR the most unpopular man in New York. TR was attacked by Tammany Democrats, of course, but he was also attacked by German-Americans, who usually voted Republican and enjoyed a traditional drink of beer on Sundays. Some unknown drinker even sent TR a letter bomb that a postal clerk opened harmlessly to find it packed only with sawdust.

When a US senator from New York, Tammany Democrat David Hill, attacked TR for wasting police resources enforcing the Sunday law at the expense of fighting crime, TR responded in a speech to German-Americans, the second-largest ethnic group in the city after the Irish. The law, TR said, was never meant to be honestly enforced:

It was meant to be used to blackmail and browbeat the saloon keepers who were not the slaves of Tammany Hall; while the big Tammany Hall bosses who owned saloons were allowed to violate the law with impunity and to corrupt the police force at will. With a law such as this enforced only against the poor or the honest man, and violated with impunity by every rich scoundrel and every corrupt politician, the machine did indeed seem to have its yoke on the neck of the people. But we threw off that yoke. (*New York Times*, 17 July 1895)

Massachusetts Senator George Hoar wrote his congratulations to TR, saying, “Your speech is the best speech that has been made on this continent for thirty years. I am glad to know that there is a man behind it worthy of the speech” (TR to Lodge, 20 July 1895, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 469).

Still, TR worried to Lodge that city Republicans were distancing themselves from him. Many blamed TR for the poor showing among city Republicans during the 1895 Assembly elections, and party leaders had not even allowed him to campaign for Republican candidates. As always, Lodge encouraged his younger friend to maintain a broader view. “You are making a great place and reputation for yourself which will lead surely to even better things,” Lodge wrote. “Remember too that apart from the great principle of enforcing all laws there is a very large and powerful body of Republicans in the State who will stand by you and behind you because you

are enforcing that particular law. This may be a narrow view but it is of the greatest political importance” (Henry Cabot Lodge to TR, 3 August 1895, in Lodge 1925, 1: 157–58). In other words, TR might be losing support in the city, but he was gaining support statewide, perhaps for the next political office. Lodge talked about TR’s path soon leading to a seat next to his in the United States Senate.

Despite Lodge’s encouraging words, 1896 had been a tough year so far. In January TR had fought to keep his job, in danger of being legislated out of existence by an Assembly bill engineered by Republican leaders. The following month he began a dispute with a fellow commissioner, Democrat Andrew D. Parker, which would color the rest of his time in New York. Time and again Parker, in alliance with the new Chief of Police, threw up obstacles in the path of TR’s conduct of the commission, by holding up officer promotions and not attending commission meetings. In April TR testified in Albany in favor of a bill to break the commission’s deadlock. He and Parker squared off in their testimony, with Parker accusing him of playing politics with the police promotions. During Parker’s testimony TR stalked about the room, unable to contain his rage. The bill died in committee, a defeat for TR. In May when the city comptroller lectured him about using taxpayers’ money to pay off informants, TR challenged him to a duel with pistols. In June, unable to remove Parker without a trial, Mayor Strong had decided to bring him up on charges to prove “neglected duty.” Essentially, Strong, using “evidence” supplied by TR, accused Parker of missing many meetings and falling behind on paperwork. It was a dull and dreary affair, possibly the low point of TR’s New York career. While testimony ended in July, the matter was never fully resolved.

The climax of TR’s tenure as police commissioner came in August 1896. Beginning on August 4, the city was struck by a ten-day heat wave that killed as many as 1,300 New Yorkers. Laborers literally worked themselves to death, as temperatures inside the brick tenements easily reached 120 degrees. Hundreds of dead horses littered the streets, creating a health hazard. A virtual monopoly on ice in the city by the Consolidated Ice Company priced that life-saving commodity out of reach of many poor New Yorkers. City officials, however, did nothing, with Mayor Strong not even calling a meeting of his department heads until the heat wave was almost over. Theodore TR emerged as one of the few New York officials to address the crisis. While he did not allow his police to alter their heavy, blue wool uniforms in any way, TR did order that police wagons be pressed into service as ambulances. He also addressed the ice monopoly, requesting that the city purchase and distribute ice in the poorest districts. Not only did TR personally supervise the distribution from police precinct houses, he made a point of investigating how people used the ice. He saw fathers chipping at the ice in alleyways, giving pieces to their children. Mother wrapped pieces of ice in scarves to tie around the heads of sick infants. The heat wave

experience had a profound effect on TR. He recounted in a letter to his sister Anna the “strange and pathetic scenes” he witnessed during the ice distribution (TR to Anna Roosevelt, 15 August 1896, in Morison, Blum, and Chandler 1951, 557). Even years later in his memoirs he remembered the “tragic week” of the heat wave, “the gasping misery of the little children and of the worn-out mothers” (Roosevelt 1985, 205). Just as his intimate involvement with the poor of the city shaped his education as an urban progressive, his championing the city’s distribution of free ice was his first experience as a trustbuster.

As the heat wave settled on the city that August 1896, Mark Hanna came to town to open Republican National Committee headquarters to begin the McKinley campaign. TR made sure to visit the new Republican kingmaker and offer his services to the campaign. His saloon-closing crusade had made TR something of a political pariah in the city. The police commission was deadlocked by his feud with Parker. Now TR pinned his hopes on a McKinley victory and a new post in Washington, D.C. TR campaigned for McKinley in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Michigan, three states that swung to McKinley on Election Day. Pressing for a job through his influential friends, including Henry Cabot Lodge, TR waited for word from McKinley and Hanna. December brought even more doubt as the New York state legislature began proceedings to appoint a new United States Senator. A Republican legislature meant a Republican senator, and there were only two serious candidates: Joseph Choate, the old Roosevelt family friend and political advisor, and the Easy Boss himself, Thomas Platt. As boss of the Republican machine, Platt’s seat in the Senate seemed assured. Would this constitute for TR yet another obstacle to a Washington post?

Showing again his political savvy and ability to compromise, TR requested a meeting with Platt, and turned down requests to speak on Choate’s behalf. Still, months went by without a word from the president-elect or his man Hanna. Inauguration Day came and went, as the longstanding deadlock on the police commission continued. With the main oversight body of the police force so publicly hamstrung, discipline in the ranks began to break down. Despite TR’s efforts to build a professional force in the city of his birth, his feud with Parker almost destroyed what he had helped to create. Finally, in early April came word that TR had been named assistant secretary of the Navy. Platt had apparently been convinced that TR would do less harm in Washington than in New York. The Easy Boss would again come to this conclusion in 1900 as he considered placing Governor Roosevelt on the Republican national ticket.

TR’s career after his leaving the New York City police commission is better known. After war broke out with Spain in 1898, TR resigned as assistant secretary of the Navy and joined the army, gaining fame with his Rough Riders in Cuba. As soon as he returned to New York he received the nomination for governor. As governor TR continued to display his

progressivism and his loyalty to the Republican Party, two qualities that would place him on the Republican ticket in 1900, and eventually in the White House. Even as president TR continued to perform the difficult balancing act between the reforming and conservative factions of the Republican Party, an act he had been performing since the Republican National Convention in 1884. In 1884, torn between his commitment to reform and commitment to the party, TR had stayed loyal to the party. In 1912, however, these same tensions led to his split with the party. For TR, staying loyal to progressive ideals was incompatible with party loyalty, especially after that party denied him the Republican nomination for 1912.

Until 1912, however, TR's political career had been built upon the twin pillars of urban progressivism and Republican Party loyalty. His early political career reflected this. He had championed efficiency and reform in city and national government. He had learned the efficacy of investigative committees, while not shying away from tackling big problems and powerful interests. He continually battled the conservative wing of his party, represented by men like Thomas Platt, but did not break with the party as other Republicans did. Indeed, he held such mugwumps in disdain. TR cultivated relations with the press, such as George Spinney, Jacob Riis, and Lincoln Steffens. He also cultivated relationships with important people, such as Joseph Choate, Elihu Root, Henry Cabot Lodge, Henry Adams, John Hay, and Cecil Spring Rice. Perhaps more than anything else, TR's early political career illustrated that from an early age he was, quite simply, a professional politician, and not a dilettante. This simple fact has been largely lost amid the speculations about the influence of his time in the west. Over a half century ago, historian John Morton Blum observed that TR "made a career of seeking and holding public office. His professional concern was with politics and government, with parties, elections, legislation and rule." Blum rightly noted that these "simple, central" facts of TR's life have been forgotten. "John Marshall without a robe, Stonewall Jackson without an army make no more sense than TR without a public office in hand or on order" (Blum 1954, 7). After the 1884 convention TR reportedly said, "I have been called a reformer, but I am a Republican."⁵ In reality, he was both.

NOTES

- 1 Theodore Roosevelt, "The Mayor's Power of Removal," *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, National Edition, ed. Hermann Hagedorn, Volume 14 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 34. The National Edition incorrectly places this speech on March 12 rather than February 20.
- 2 Isaac Hunt to Hermann Hagedorn, Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- 3 Louis F. Post and Fred C. Leubuscher, *Henry George's 1886 Campaign: An Account of the George-Hewitt Campaign in the New York Municipal Election of 1886*, (New York, 1887; reprint Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1976), v.

- 4 Speech to Cooper Union Hall, *Works*, 14: 72–74. The National Edition incorrectly places this speech on October 15 rather than October 27.
- 5 Morison, 72–73, n2. Roosevelt was quoted saying this in a St. Paul newspaper in June 1884. Although Roosevelt denied giving an interview “for publication,” it is likely he said something like this off the record. See E.P. Kohn, “Crossing the Rubicon: Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, and the 1884 Republican National Convention,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5.1 (2006b): 35.

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