Theodore Roosevelt on the Proper Role of Women
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Theodore Roosevelt is famously known for defining masculinity in America. From his obsessions with war, cowboys, and sports, TR imparted to the country that a manly life required physical strength, social cunning, and fearlessness in the face of adversity. In the hype surrounding TR’s manly pursuits, his views on femininity and womanhood have often been overlooked. Few would know, for example, that TR regularly contributed to such women’s magazines as *Ladies’ Home Journal*. In the examination of documents produced by TR during and after his presidency, including speeches, letters, and printed articles, I hope to help answer the following questions: What did TR perceive as a woman’s proper role, and what rights accompanied said role? How did his views change over the course of his late political career?

In 1905 at the start of Theodore Roosevelt’s second term as President, he delivered a speech to the National Congress of Mothers on the role men and women must play in family life. TR declared, “the primary duty of the husband is to be the homemaker, the breadwinner for his wife and children, and that the primary duty of the woman is to be the helpmeet, housewife, and mother.”¹ These ideas were hardly radical for the time period, especially among a group of women who had already fulfilled them, but this speech was significant because the emphasis that TR placed on a woman’s duty became a recurring theme in his writings on gender and dictated his stance on issues of women’s rights, particularly suffrage and equal opportunity. With regards to women’s right to vote, inherit, and enter any profession, TR said, “[woman] has no claim to rights unless she performs the duties that go with those rights [i.e. motherhood] and that alone justify her in appealing to them.”² Along these lines of thinking, TR concluded that a woman’s professional life must be restricted. While he admired educated women and the “exceptional” career woman, he expressed disdain for “independent” women and maintained such views as women “need not be, and generally ought not to be, trained for a lifelong career” because work would not interfere with their primary duty as mother.³

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To understand how TR formulated his views on familial duty, one must examine his early relationship with his family, namely his father and mother, and the historical context within which TR first wrote about American motherhood. Theodore Roosevelt Sr. was a devout, evangelical Christian, and in an effort to impress his father, TR took it upon himself to learn passages from the Old Testament. The lessons TR gleaned from the Bible and his father engendered a staunch Victorian moral code within him, which he, like his father, used to define right and wrong for himself and his family. In the “right” column of Victorian principles, TR placed devotion to family and country. In the “wrong” column lay self-indulgent pursuits. TR’s views on the responsibilities of a woman may have been a response to his own mother’s shortcomings. Mittie Roosevelt defied Victorian expectations in that she failed to provide domestic and child-rearing stewardship in the Roosevelt household. Homesick and physically worn from the series of ailments her children suffered, Mittie often shirked her motherly duties by consigning herself to bed rest or fleeing to water cure establishments. TR, though he would never have admitted it, probably begrudged Mittie’s weak parenting and blamed her for feeding his own physical weakness. Such sentiments manifested themselves in his 1905 speech when he articulated that the mothers who “through weakness” failed to inspire in their children “a steadfast resolution to wrest success from labor and adversity… will be responsible for” the unhappiness of many wives.

In the first few years of the 20th century, TR allowed himself to be consumed by the declining birthrate of affluent, white Americans in comparison to the increasing birthrate of African Americans and immigrants—what he termed “race suicide.” This belief in race suicide translated into TR’s applying pressure on mothers to prove their

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patriotism through large families.\(^8\) His infatuation with combating race suicide through motherhood, however, clouded his judgment in matters concerning women’s rights. After having read Bessie Van Vorst’s book *The Woman Who Toils* in 1902, TR wrote the author a letter expressing his gratitude for bringing up race suicide, a matter “fundamentally infinitely more important than any other question in this country.”\(^9\) The point of Van Vorst’s book was to expose the harsh living conditions that factory women faced, and TR’s reading of the book should have inspired a stronger imperative for him to improve factory conditions and help poor women attain the right to vote. Alas, his obsession with race suicide (along with other pressures) resulted in his postponing aid for female laborers until 1910.

During his presidency, TR established himself as a forward-thinker for his commitment to bettering the lives of the common man. Despite having moments of progressive thinking regarding gender roles (such as in his senior thesis where he defended a woman’s right not to take her husband’s last name after marriage), he was still quite conservative about women’s roles in the sense that he did not believe women should gain too much independence at the risk of eroding family life, and he held motherhood as the highest ideal of a woman.\(^11\) In 1912, however, when TR threw his proverbial hat in the ring for presidency, his interpretation of the proper way a woman ought to lead her life began to expand, affording women more leeway in acting independently. Before TR began his official campaign, he had allied himself with female reformers from “the women’s labor movement, the Consumers’ League, and [the] child

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\(^10\) Roosevelt to Van Vorst, "Letter from Theodore Roosevelt."

labor” movement. Many of these women joined TR’s presidential constituency, making up the “Female Brain Trust” for his Progressive Party. Women were more involved in TR’s party than any other party before it. After the Progressive Party Convention, TR telegraphed Jane Addams to thank her for supporting him and affirm his confidence in the ability of female politicians. He said:

It is idle now to argue whether women can play their part in politics, because in this convention we saw the accomplished fact, and moreover the women who have actively participated in this work of launching the new party represent all that we are most proud to associate with American womanhood.

Less than a decade before the convention, TR had placed his utmost pride toward American womanhood in motherhood, so his statement to Addams demonstrated his growing appreciation for workingwomen as ideals of American society. What’s more, many of the women with whom TR surrounded himself during the election, including Jane Addams, were unmarried and childless, and although these women still represented the exception to proper womanhood, TR’s support for their abilities attested to his loosening views on a Victorian life.

15 Roosevelt to Addams, telegram.
One factor indispensible in assessing TR’s views on gender is recognition that he was first and foremost a politician. His stance on gender was, therefore, ripe with contradictions as he often had to appeal to people with opposing views. In 1912, for example, TR hurried to have his secretary telegram Frances Kellor after his letter to Ida Husted Harper, suggesting that women in conservative states vote on the question of suffrage, was published in the newspaper. His secretary wrote:

Mr. Roosevelt was never very strongly in favor of the method of the women themselves voting upon the question in conservative states, but he thought that that would be a way out of the difficulty in states where there was active opposition on the part of the women to the granting of suffrage to them.\(^{16}\)

Roosevelt’s telegram revealed the pressures he faced to appease parties with varying opinions. Moreover, such a telegram raises the following issue: How can a historian ever know when TR was being sincere about his views on women’s roles? Such a task is a challenge, especially given TR’s habit of self-censoring even private letters, and the best a historian can do is attempt to identify these political pressures and isolate meaning. I have taken his works from after the election of 1912 as most indicative of his real views on gender because, although he was still campaigning for other men, TR’s own political career was essentially over, which diminished some of his need to appeal to opposing groups.

By 1916, TR came as close as he ever would to supporting the life of a modern woman. In a response letter to Alice Carpenter, Theodore Roosevelt professed his support for a federal amendment granting women’s suffrage. This was not news, as TR had already endorsed women’s suffrage back in 1912, but what was significant about his letter was the way in which he instructed Ms. Carpenter to proceed. He approved of the formation of a woman’s organization to further the cause of suffrage and advised that the organization “should act in this matter as men (and women) do in the movement for national defense.”\(^{17}\) Years earlier, TR subscribed to the opinion of Ida M. Tarbell, who stated, “[Woman] must not prove her equality by doing in his way the things man does; but by doing the things [i.e. domestic work] for which she is fitted, and which the world needs from her.”\(^{18}\) In advocating that Ms. Carpenter emulate political movements of other men, he further established a woman’s right to operate in the public sphere as a man would. Moreover, in 1916, TR published an article within *Ladies’ Home Journal* expressing that even mothers could maintain a professional career after having children,
which was a significant departure from his 1905 views that only “exceptional women… can and ought to lead great careers” outside the home. \(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) Roosevelt, "Theodore Roosevelt on Motherhood," 144.

\(^{20}\) Roosevelt, "Man and Woman."