

THE BULLMOOSE AND THE BEAR:
THEODORE ROOSEVELT
AND JOHN WANAMAKER STRUGGLE
OVER THE SPOILS

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ate in the evening of March 8, 1892, Theodore Roosevelt burst unexpectedly into a meeting of the Civil Service Reform Association in New York City. Fresh off the train from Washington, Roosevelt glanced around the room to make sure no newspaper reporters were present. Satisfied he was alone with trusted friends, he let his anger fly.

“Damn John Wanamaker,” sputtered the crimson-faced Roosevelt. His audience cringed, as it was unusual for the often high-strung but always moralistic Roosevelt to curse so angrily. It also was unusual for a thirty-three-year-old federal Civil Service commissioner, Roosevelt’s rather innocuous position at the time, to curse a senior cabinet officer who in this case was Postmaster General Wanamaker and one of the nation’s more powerful and richest politicians.¹ What would infuriate Roosevelt, impetuous but not politically suicidal, to make such a foolhardy curse?

Theodore Roosevelt and John Wanamaker clashed constantly from 1889 to 1893. Throughout this period Roosevelt and the

Civil Service Commission attempted to reform the civil service, remove corrupt government officials, and replace the traditional spoils system with a process of merit selection of federal employees. At the same time, Postmaster General Wanamaker, with the passive consent of President Benjamin Harrison, thwarted Roosevelt's efforts by perpetuating the spoils system and replacing large numbers of government employees with Republicans loyal to Harrison. Roosevelt's anger at the New York meeting symbolizes a larger dispute over spoils and civil service reform that erupted nationwide from the mid-1800s through the Progressive Era. As Civil Service commissioner, Roosevelt found himself in the midst of a fight between radical reformers on one side and Old Guard Republicans, including Wanamaker, on the other. Young Roosevelt, nominally a member of both camps, was now comfortable in neither.

This narrative is about the battle over civil service reform, its effect upon Roosevelt and his later presidency, and its later consequences. The nationwide crusade for civil service reform is portrayed through the clash of two energetic, stubborn men—Theodore Roosevelt and John Wanamaker—neither ever yielding to the other and both self-righteous in the causes they championed.

“as rugged as a bull moose”

Roosevelt's tenure as a Civil Service commissioner is a period that many of his biographers sweep aside, a period that at first appears less important and less colorful than his lively journeys across the Dakota Badlands, his precocious triumphs in the New York State Assembly, his charge up San Juan Hill, and his uphill fight to overcome childhood illnesses. In fact, Roosevelt's first years in Washington D.C. were quite meaningful and influential on the future president.² His six years at the Civil Service Commission were especially prominent as it was the longest period, other than his two terms as president, that Roosevelt stayed in one job: he spent just three years as a state assemblyman, two years as New York City Police Commissioner, one year as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, four months as a Rough Rider colonel, two years as New York governor, and one year as vice president under William McKinley.

Roosevelt's tenure at the commission was an event-filled period of unbridled energy, a time in which he felt “as rugged as a bull moose.”³ His family

welcomed three new children during this period, his brother would die tragically, he authored some of his best literary works, and he cultivated friendships and allegiances that later proved invaluable during his presidency. As commissioner, he intensified all the qualities of energy, impatience, courage, political maneuvering, and moral idealism that were to become better known while he was in the White House.⁴ As his struggle over civil service reform revealed, he learned how to prevail in the treacherous political arena of Washington. Surviving his skirmish with the powerful Wanamaker would prepare Roosevelt for his epic collisions a decade later with the likes of John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan.

“I hated to take the place”

When Theodore Roosevelt arrived in Washington in the spring of 1889, the Civil Service Commission was only six years old. With the passage of the Pendleton Act of 1883, Congress created the three-man commission, introduced a merit system for federal employees based on competitive examinations, and banned political assessments. With the development of a merit system, civil service reformers hoped for an end to the spoils system that had spawned widespread corruption and government inefficiency since the days of Andrew Jackson. The civil service reformers, many with ideological ties to antislavery, temperance, and woman’s suffrage, embraced a clear moral timbre, even a passion, in their crusade for reform.⁵

However, neither the reformers nor the passage of the Pendleton Act successfully destroyed the spoils system. At the time of Roosevelt’s arrival, the Commission controlled only one fourth of federal jobs—the other three quarters were fair game for the spoilsmen. Spoils politicians controlled a majority in both Houses, and Cabinet members were generally unfriendly to the Commission, while Presidents were lackadaisical on crucial occasions. Opponents of merit and civil service reform, especially those Washington politicians whose livelihoods depended on patronage, were “heartily sick of the subject of civil service reform.”⁶

Regardless of these obstacles, reformers like Roosevelt remained undaunted. An energetic member of the National Civil Service Reform League, Roosevelt brought a passion for reform into his new job as Commissioner.⁷ Since his student days at Harvard, Roosevelt championed civil service reform. As a three-term New York state assemblyman

(1881–1884), Roosevelt saw patronage politics in action and learned to fight the spoilsmen. While in Albany, he helped to pass the first state civil service law.⁸ He neatly summed up anti-spoils conviction when he wrote,

No republic can permanently endure when its politics are corrupt and base; and the spoils system, the application in political life of the degrading doctrine that to the victor belongs the spoils, produces corruption and degradation. The man who is in politics for the office might as well be in politics for the money he can get for his vote.⁹

Despite his keen interest in civil service reform, Roosevelt originally did not wish to become Civil Service commissioner.¹⁰ Like many Washington politicians, he saw the Commission as a political graveyard, later admitting he gave up all idea of a political career when he accepted the position.¹¹ The commission controlled only about 28,000 subordinate federal jobs, and there was no great honor attached to the office. At the same time, the commission's anti-spoils efforts attracted the criticism of "snivel service" from sarcastic Congressmen and "other virile advocates of plunder."¹²

But Roosevelt did yearn for a political appointment in President-elect Benjamin Harrison's administration. A loyal Republican at the time, Roosevelt campaigned vigorously for Harrison in the election of 1888. Despite his aversion to spoils, he felt he deserved a political appointment. Early in 1889, Massachusetts Congressman Henry Cabot Lodge and House of Representatives Speaker Thomas Reed pressed Harrison to appoint their friend Roosevelt as Assistant Secretary of State. To Roosevelt's disappointment, the new Secretary of State, James G. Blaine, refused to accept the New Yorker as his assistant.¹³ Blaine responded to Lodge that he was fearful of Roosevelt's lack of patience, writing,

I do somehow fear that my sleep [while vacationing] at Augusta or Bar Harbor would not quite be so easy and refreshing if so brilliant and aggressive a man had hold of the helm. Matters are constantly occurring which require the most thoughtful concentration and the most stubborn inaction. Do *you* think that Mr. T.R.'s temperament would give guaranty of that course?¹⁴

Roosevelt should not have been surprised at the rejection, as he and Lodge had openly opposed Blaine's nomination for president in 1884.

While not necessarily desiring to be a commissioner, Roosevelt's interest in civil service reform persisted. As early as April 1888, he wrote to Lodge hoping "the President will appoint good Civil Service commissioners."¹⁵ Finally, on May 7, 1889, Harrison interviewed Roosevelt in the White House for a possible position in his administration. The young New Yorker apparently impressed the president. Ten years later, when Roosevelt was New York Governor and rumored as a vice presidential candidate, Harrison favorably recalled, "the only trouble I ever had with managing [Roosevelt] was . . . he wanted to put an end to all the evil in the world between sunrise and sunset."¹⁶ When Harrison offered the Civil Service post during the interview, Roosevelt immediately accepted.¹⁷ The next day Roosevelt wrote the Baltimore reformist, Charles Bonaparte, "I hated to take the place; but I hardly thought I ought to refuse. I was a good deal surprised at the offer."¹⁸

Part of Roosevelt's reluctance in accepting the Commissioner post was due to his financial worries. The salary was \$3,500 and barely sufficient for Roosevelt's needs.¹⁹ Indeed, Roosevelt's six years as Civil Service commissioner provided few financial rewards to help him meet his growing burdens. During that period three of his six children were born, he traveled frequently, and he maintained his residence at Sagamore Hill, another in Washington, and a ranch at Medora, South Dakota.

Roosevelt's appointment met approval with the more radical elements of the reform movement. Two days after he accepted Harrison's offer, *The Nation's* E. L. Godkin described Roosevelt as "erratic and impulsive, but . . . energetic, enthusiastic, and honest and may be relied on to see that the law is faithfully executed . . . the Commission as now constituted is the best we have had." Harrison also appointed Hugh S. Thompson, twice governor of South Carolina, to the second vacant Commissioner position.²⁰ To Roosevelt, Thompson was a "trump," while the third holdover commissioner, Charles Lyman, was "honest, hardworking, and very familiar with the law."²¹

When Roosevelt reported for work on a sunny morning in May 1889, the Civil Service Commission occupied a wing of City Hall at the south end of Judiciary Square. The commission was a pleasant and tranquil place to work, with large quiet offices, high ceilings, and views of lawns and trees. Across Louisiana Avenue there was a splendid fried oyster restaurant where politicians and bureaucrats ate long lunches and carried out much of the government's business. Matthew Halloran, the commission's executive secretary and an employee there for forty-five years, remembered Roosevelt's arrival that

morning.²² As Halloran worked at his desk, Roosevelt burst in the office and in his distinctive high-pitched voice, announced imperiously,

I am the new Civil Service Commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt of New York. Have you a telephone? Call up the Ebbit House. I have an engagement with Archbishop Ireland. Say that I will be there at ten o'clock.²³

“\$3 suits . . . delivered in a wheel barrow”

Two months before Roosevelt arrived at the Civil Service Commission, John Wanamaker became Postmaster General and a powerful member of Harrison’s Cabinet. In many ways, Roosevelt and Wanamaker were polar opposites. Roosevelt was a Harvard-educated, Knickerbocker blue-blood, an outspoken progressive Republican, but rather penurious at the time. Wanamaker came from rugged Pennsylvania Dutch stock and was a self-educated dropout, a devout Presbyterian elder, a successful merchant, an Old Guard Republican, and a millionaire. But the two men were alike in important ways. Both possessed excellent administrative abilities, inexhaustible energy, confidence, stubbornness, and a headstrong moralism. A collision between the two could be thunderous.

Wanamaker was born in Philadelphia in 1838. The eldest of seven children, he quit school at fourteen-years-of-age to work in his father’s brickyard, and at twenty became the first salaried secretary of the Young Men’s Christian Association. While working at the YMCA, he saved part of his \$1,000 annual salary to start his own business. In April 1861, three days before the shelling of Fort Sumter, Wanamaker opened his first small clothing store near the present-day Liberty Bell pavilion. He started out selling \$3 suits, and when the Philadelphia Custom House ordered uniforms, Wanamaker delivered them personally in a wheel barrow. In only ten years Wanamaker’s small store grew to be the largest men’s clothing store in the country, and served as the foundation for one of the world’s most successful and profitable business empires. From this phenomenal success, Wanamaker amassed a personal fortune.²⁴

Wanamaker was not a stereotypical, conservative turn-of-the-century businessman; instead, he resembled a risk-taking entrepreneur and inveterate innovator. Many of his modernizations were ahead of their time, with his

stores often in a state of flux and reconstruction. In 1876, he was the first person to place a restaurant in a large department store; in 1878, the first to illuminate a department store with electricity (Thomas Edison was a close friend); and in 1879, the first to install a Bell telephone in a department store. He was among the first Americans to own an automobile.²⁵ A master of the art of publicity, Wanamaker appreciated the value of advertising and pioneered the use of full-page advertisements that saturated daily newspapers. He was the first to guarantee his customer a “goods returned and money refunded” policy.²⁶

Unlike his merchant colleagues, Wanamaker was a true reformist in his paternalistic attitude toward his employees and implemented programs designed to “engender diligence and loyalty.” He created an employees’ mutual benefit association, training classes for clerks, paid vacations, a medical clinic, life and pension insurance, and most radical for the time, profit sharing. In 1889, he dispensed \$100,000 to his employees in shared earnings. He fought for prohibition and permitted all female employees to march in suffrage parades during work hours.²⁷

“the tower of saving strength”

Wanamaker was energetic in politics, a proud Old Guard Republican who worked loyally with party leadership in every national campaign from 1888 to 1920. On occasion he boasted that the first vote he cast was for Abraham Lincoln. He detested the disloyalty of the mugwump Republicans who bolted from the party in 1884 to protest Blaine’s candidacy.²⁸

During the presidential campaign of 1888, Wanamaker served as campaign finance chairman for Harrison and raised \$200,000, the largest sum for a presidential campaign up to that time. He personally contributed \$10,000.²⁹ During the campaign Wanamaker organized the business community as a united political force. Using the protective tariff as a weapon, he solicited fellow businessmen for donations to the Harrison campaign in amounts that would “fry all the fat out of them.” He sent a confidential circular to manufacturers saying that “we want money and we want it quick.”³⁰ Like his innovations in merchandising, Wanamaker’s political fund-raising techniques were well ahead of their time.

Wanamaker, like Roosevelt, desired a post in the Harrison administration. However, the president-elect had not yet met the Philadelphian who

managed his campaign finances and contributed so much to assure his election. During the winter of 1888, Harrison sought information on Wanamaker's character and competence. Matthew "Boss" Quay, chairman of the Republican National Committee, described his fellow Pennsylvanian Wanamaker as "the tower of saving strength" and suggested he be given a Cabinet post.³¹ Charles Emory Smith, editor of the *Philadelphia Press* and a wealthy neighbor of Wanamaker, wrote Harrison that Wanamaker "represents new blood . . . fresh spirit . . . progressive ideas . . . and a pillar of strength."³² Harrison had to balance such praise with a less favorable report from F. P. Davidson, an old Pennsylvania soldier, who warned, "You do not need the Philadelphia tailor—a sharper and rich . . . He is not and cannot become a statesman." Another Philadelphian, John R. Paxton, wrote Harrison on January 10, 1889, describing Wanamaker as a "colossal hypocrite and humbug."³³

Paxton also reported that Wanamaker planned to leave for Europe a week later. Harrison sent word to Wanamaker requesting he delay the European trip and meet him in Indiana. Four days later, Wanamaker arrived by train in Indianapolis where the two met for several hours. It appears that Harrison and Wanamaker, both Presbyterian elders, took to each other immediately.³⁴ According to one Wanamaker biographer,

It was a sudden discovery of affinity. Each was unlike what the other had expected. Harrison was not as stiff and unbending as Wanamaker had thought he would find him. Wanamaker was far from being the ambitious business man ready to accept office as a *quid pro quo*.³⁵

Over the next year, Harrison and Wanamaker became close, trusted friends. For example, Wanamaker sold Harrison a beach house in Cape May, and in October 1889, the president stayed at the Wanamaker residence "Lindhurst" for the launching of the cruiser *Philadelphia*, which Wanamaker's daughter Minnie christened.³⁶

During their Indiana meeting, Harrison asked Wanamaker to become Secretary of the Navy. Wanamaker declined the offer because he feared a conflict of interest in awarding contracts to Pennsylvania steel mills.³⁷ The vice chairman of the Republican committee, James S. Clarkson, a former editor of the *Iowa State Register* and well-known spoilsman, suggested Harrison appoint Wanamaker as Postmaster General, with Clarkson as his First Assistant.³⁸ When offered the Postmaster Generalship, Wanamaker—like Roosevelt—immediately accepted.

Wanamaker's appointment attracted immediate and intense criticism. The *New York World*, which blamed Grover Cleveland's loss to Harrison on Wanamaker's fund raising, described him as a wealthy merchant who bought his position.³⁹ A *Harpers Weekly* editorial protested that,

Wanamaker is in no sense a leader of the party, and before the late election he had been unknown in political life. We have stated frankly the reasons why his appointment must be deeply regretted. They are not affected by the fact that he is undoubtedly a man of great executive ability and kindly and generous impulses. It was not for these reasons that he was appointed. We have no grounds for supposing that he sought the appointment. But it is none the less to be deplored.⁴⁰

The influential reformer Carl Schurz wrote that Wanamaker's appointment "was the first instance in the history of the Republic that a place in the Cabinet had been given for a pecuniary consideration."⁴¹ *The New York Times* saw the Wanamaker appointment as "scandalous" and "so offensive a blunder," and a later editorial declared,

It is hoped that the rumor is unfounded . . . recommending Mr. Wanamaker of Philadelphia for an appointment . . . A Cabinet appointment would be far superior even to the acquisition of a picture of CHRIST before PILATE for the purpose of directing attention to Mr. Wanamaker's store.⁴²

"an apostle of efficient business methods"

History provides two conflicting views of Wanamaker's performance as Postmaster General and his repute as a dispenser of the spoils. The predominant view was that "Wanamaker was, to put matters kindly, no great friend of civil service reform," a Republican of the old school, and a staunch defender of spoils, and upon becoming Postmaster General, "soon showed that his pieties did not embrace civil service reform."⁴³

The other view, however, is more complex and portrays Wanamaker as an effective administrator who balanced the political needs of his party with the efficient management of the Post Office department. While reformers labeled him a died-in-the-wool spoilsman, Wanamaker was interested in change and

asserted that he was a real civil service reformer. His business training and success as an innovator would have tended in the direction of reform.⁴⁴ He was difficult for reformers to understand or accept because he promoted economy and efficiency in the postal service, the very same benefits that reformers claimed for the merit system, while at the same time yielding to patronage necessity.⁴⁵ Wanamaker accepted the theory, often endorsed by Roosevelt himself when challenging mugwump independence, that political reform is most effective when controlled within the framework of the existing party system rather than propelled by idealistic methods outside it.⁴⁶

Wanamaker brought his skills as “an apostle of efficient business methods” to the Post Office where he achieved a number of improvements.⁴⁷ He modernized the postal service in many ways, including a complete departmental reorganization, establishment of Rural Free Delivery, sea post offices, commemorative stamps, and abolishment of the lottery. He recommended parcel post, postal savings, and government ownership of the telegraph and telephone. In 1891, Wanamaker created a merit system of promotion for his employees that was administered within the Post Office Department, not from the Civil Service Commission.⁴⁸ Wanamaker desired “to improve the civil service within the [postal] service by examinations and promotions and equalization of salaries in every post office of fifty or more.”⁴⁹

It is doubtful that Wanamaker ever allowed the wholesale distribution of spoils appointments, as his standards of efficiency forbade the selection of incapable men. He looked at the patronage question as one demanding the use of common sense, and, provided the privilege was not abused, there was nothing distasteful to him in the idea of the spoils belonging to the victor.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, he entrusted most of the post office patronage to his efficient assistant and spoilsman, Clarkson.

“an ill-conditioned creature”

While Wanamaker desired to improve the efficiency of the Post Office department, his first priority as Postmaster General was to strengthen the Republican party. He convinced Harrison to avoid the more drastic anti-spoils measures preferred by the civil service reformers. Carl Schurz, for one, urged the president to be a “St. George against the spoils dragon.”⁵¹ While Harrison had campaigned with a zeal for abolishing the spoils system, Wanamaker convinced him that the most pressing problem was to reform the

party machinery without demoralizing or destroying it.⁵² To that end, Harrison must reward his loyal party members with political patronage—the spoils of their victory.

Of all the cabinet officers, the Postmaster General had the most powerful patronage stockpile, with 150,000 postal jobs spread across the nation and throughout every congressional district. Of these, there were more than 57,000 fourth-class postmasters, the most fruitful spoils for rewarding party faithful.⁵³ Wanamaker's assistant, Clarkson, wasted no time in disposing of the spoils. When Roosevelt arrived at the Commission, Clarkson was “decapitating” Democratic postmasters at the rate of one every five minutes.⁵⁴ By November 1889, Wanamaker had proven his party loyalty by replacing 32,335 fourth-class postmasters with Republicans.⁵⁵

Roosevelt was appalled at Wanamaker's efficiency in dispensing the spoils and feared the ransacking of the postal service demoralized the personnel. Shortly after becoming Commissioner, he requested that the Postmaster General stay Clarkson's axe. Wanamaker ignored him, and Roosevelt appealed to the president, who also took no action.⁵⁶

Roosevelt, at first quite loyal to Harrison, assumed the president would make sweeping extensions in the merit civil service, but became increasingly impatient with Harrison's delay and his acquiescence to Wanamaker. Roosevelt soon realized that the president generally ignored him, and almost every time a dispute arose between the Commission and the Postmaster General, Harrison sided with Wanamaker.⁵⁷ Writing to Lodge, Roosevelt mewed, “Oh, Heaven, if the President had a little backbone, and if the Senators did not have flannel legs!”⁵⁸ In another letter, Roosevelt's growing animosity toward the Postmaster General is clear: “Wanamaker has been as outrageously disagreeable as he could possibly be . . . We have done our best to get on smoothly with him, but he is an ill-conditioned creature.”⁵⁹

“Oh Lord, don't help the b'ar”

Soon after Roosevelt arrived in Washington, the three Civil Service commissioners set out on an inspection tour that began in New York. The first act of the Commissioners was to have three corrupt Customs House employees removed for selling civil service examinations at \$50 a head.⁶⁰ Roosevelt surely found satisfaction in his actions, as spoils politicians had thwarted his own father from becoming the New York Collector of Customs in 1879.

From New York the commissioners made a ten-day swing through the Midwest that included stops in Indianapolis, Chicago, and Milwaukee.⁶¹

In Indianapolis, Roosevelt investigated complaints against Postmaster William Wallace, described as a “well meaning weak old fellow.”⁶² Wallace, however, was a former law partner of the president and the brother of General Lew Wallace, author of *Ben Hur* and a biographer of Harrison. Roosevelt, originally charging the postmaster with illegally removing three employees, eventually found no real fault with the efficient and honest Wallace, who was permitted to remain in office. While in Indianapolis, Roosevelt had several corrupt employees dismissed, and his actions began to attract criticism. Indiana Attorney General Louis T. Michener wrote to his friend Harrison:

It seems to me that [Roosevelt] should be given to understand that it would be well for him to have less to say to newspapers. When he was here, he was positively insulting to the republicans he met and extremely agreeable to every interest hostile to the republican party.⁶³

As was his style, Harrison never censured Roosevelt. Instead, the President let his appointee carry out his duties, an indication that Harrison—who possessed one of the country’s keenest legal minds—favored at least moderate reform. But Roosevelt was difficult to handle, and while Harrison and later Cleveland wanted to be rid of him, neither was willing to face the hostile criticism from powerful reform forces.⁶⁴

Roosevelt, feeling the pressure, stubbornly dug in his heels. From Washington on June 29, 1889, he complained to Lodge,

As for me, I am having a hard roe to hoe. I have made this commission a living force, and in consequence the outcry among the spoils-men has become furious; it has evidently frightened both the President and [his assistant] Halford a little. They have shown symptoms of telling me that the law should be rigidly enforced where the people will stand it, and handled gingerly elsewhere. But I answered militantly that as long as I was responsible the law should be enforced up to the handle every where fearlessly and honestly.⁶⁵

After Indianapolis, Roosevelt traveled to Milwaukee where he accused Postmaster George Paul of re-marking the tests of Republican office seekers.

Writing to Lodge, Roosevelt described Paul as “about as thorough paced a scoundrel as I ever saw—an oily gammon, church-going specimen. We gave him a neat hoist.”⁶⁶ After Wanamaker took no action on Postmaster Paul, Roosevelt appealed to Harrison. The Civil Service Commission did not have the power to remove employees—only the president or the Postmaster General could remove postal workers. Harrison delayed.

Seething over the retention of Paul, Roosevelt requested a personal meeting with the president. On August 1, 1889, they met, and later that day Roosevelt recounted to Lodge,

Today I caught a glimpse of the President, and repeated to him the parable of the backwoodsman and the bear. You remember that the prayer of the backwoodsman was “Oh Lord, help me kill that b’ar; and if you don’t help me, Oh Lord, don’t help the b’ar.” Hitherto I have been perfectly contented if the President would preserve an impartial neutrality between me and the bear, but now, as regards Postmaster Paul of Milwaukee, the President *must* help somebody, and I hope it won’t be the bear. I guess he’ll stand by us all right; but the old fellow always wants to half-do a thing.⁶⁷

The president eventually allowed Paul to resign.⁶⁸ Writing to Lodge a week later, Roosevelt showed his frustration. In a letter that also suggested his inability to see the value of compromise:

Harrison in the Milwaukee Postmaster business followed his usual course of trying to hold the scales even between myself and the Bear (Wanamaker). He accepted Postmaster Paul’s resignation on the one hand, and notified him on the other that if he hadn’t resigned he would have been removed. It was a golden chance to take a good stand; and it has been lost. It is absolutely impossible for any man to deserve removal more than Paul did.⁶⁹

“a fetish of non-compromise”

Roosevelt’s zeal caused not only concern at the White House but also, even less to his satisfaction, approval among the mugwumps.⁷⁰ Roosevelt explained this irony in a July 1889 letter to Lodge,

I have been seriously annoyed at the mugwump praises for fear they would discredit me with well-meaning but narrow Republicans, and for the last week my party friends in Washington have evidently felt a little shakey.⁷¹

Roosevelt's party loyalty and belief in practical politics prompted him to disassociate himself from the majority of Republican mugwumps who bolted from the party in 1884 after the nomination of Blaine.⁷² In a letter to Lodge on December 27, 1888, Roosevelt's growing disdain for the more radical reformers is clear:

I can tell the Professional Civil Service Reformer—who never really does anything for what he calls reform—if I can see two sentences of any of his speeches or writings . . . Speaking quite dispassionately I believe we who have really worked hard to take the civil service from politics have been far more hurt than helped by the loud-mouthed advocates of the cause during the past few years.⁷³

Roosevelt could not accept the mugwumps' rejection for politics and their considerable elitism, observing that "the men who took the lead in [reform] were not men who as a rule possessed a very profound sympathy with or understanding of the ways of thought and life of their average citizen."⁷⁴ While scorning the more fanatic mugwumps, Roosevelt maintained close ties with less-radical reformers, notably Charles Bonaparte and John Rose from Maryland, and William D. Foulke and Lucius B. Swift from Indiana. To Roosevelt, these were men who "added common-sense, broad sympathy, and political efficiency to their high mindedness."⁷⁵

As much as it annoyed him, Roosevelt must have realized that the mugwumps were his natural constituency. His moralistic temperament that insisted on clean contrasts was identical to the most radical of the mugwumps. He liked to think of himself as one who refused to compromise on matters of principle, but, like the mugwumps, "made a fetish of non-compromise."⁷⁶

"and I have to hit him a clip"

The most serious quarrel between Roosevelt and Wanamaker resulted from an investigation of the Baltimore Post Office. Soon after Roosevelt arrived in

Washington, Bonaparte informed the Commission of widespread government corruption in the Maryland city.⁷⁷ On July 17, 1889, Roosevelt wrote Lodge,

[Wanamaker] opposes us so much that we have to go cautiously. [Bonaparte, etc.] have wished us to investigate the Baltimore Post Office; it is doubtless bad; but Wanamaker antagonizes what we do so freely that I shall try to have them get his department to investigate it instead; then he'll be hot for it. I mean to avoid a quarrel with him; both for the sake of the reform and of the party; but every now and then he intrudes too much, and I have to hit him a clip.⁷⁸

In the spring of 1891, John Rose, a member of the Maryland Reform League, wrote Roosevelt to resurface the Baltimore problem. Rose complained that the Baltimore postmaster was illegally influencing an upcoming Republican primary election and shaking down postal employees for \$5 to \$10 apiece to finance pro-Harrison candidates.⁷⁹ Roosevelt, not wishing to get embroiled in another Post Office dispute, requested Wanamaker to investigate.

When the Postmaster General did nothing, Roosevelt went to Baltimore to observe the primary election. Roosevelt's subsequent report recommended the dismissal of twenty-five of Wanamaker's Baltimore appointees. Again, Wanamaker took no action, explaining that he was not responsible for what had taken place in Baltimore, that others had hired men over whom he had no control, that in the non-classified service he had to distribute the positions among the various wards, and that the ward leaders nominated the men to fill them.⁸⁰ An exasperated Roosevelt wrote Lodge on October 10, 1891, that

[Wanamaker] intends to "prove the falsity" of my report. Now that fool Wanamaker is quite capable of trying this, for his sloppy mind will not enable him to see that his case is weak . . . but he may involve me against my will, in such a muss that the President will have to turn me out simply because he can't turn out Wanamaker. If only the President would take me into confidence!⁸¹

A year after the Baltimore investigation, when Wanamaker still had not acted on the commission's recommendations, Roosevelt gave repeated interviews to the press, spoke vituperatively against Wanamaker at a meeting of the Civil Service Reform League ("Damn John Wanamaker!"), and sent his report directly to the House Committee on Civil Service. On April 19, 1892, the

House began an investigation of the Baltimore situation. During testimony before the committee, a bitter exchange took place between Roosevelt and Wanamaker—an obvious political embarrassment for Harrison, powerless as two of his appointees went tooth-and-nail. A Democratic majority of the House Committee found in favor of Roosevelt and censured Wanamaker for not removing the employees.⁸²

Another significant conflict between Wanamaker and Roosevelt occurred in the summer of 1892 as President Harrison began his reelection campaign against Grover Cleveland. Wanamaker refused to believe that Roosevelt had gone West for his health and thought that he, like other loyal Republicans, should be on hand to speak in the presidential campaign. To Wanamaker, who made no allowances for physical incapacity, Roosevelt's actions looked like disloyalty to the president when all his friends should have rallied round him.⁸³

Wanamaker may have been somewhat justified in his criticism, as Roosevelt's letters to Lodge suggest frustration and deteriorating loyalty towards Harrison over the years.⁸⁴ In Roosevelt's defense, his trips West each summer were a well-known sabbatical, and he did stump for Harrison, albeit in Deadwood, South Dakota.⁸⁵

“struck terror into the hearts of contumacious postmasters”

In the election of 1892, Grover Cleveland barely defeated Harrison and avenged his loss of 1888. Both Harrison and Wanamaker would leave Washington after Cleveland's inauguration, but, surprisingly, Roosevelt would stay. Upon the urging of Carl Schurz, Cleveland chose to retain Roosevelt as Civil Service Commissioner. Roosevelt continued his impassioned work for another two years, attacking the pro-spoils Secretary of the Treasury John G. Carlisle with almost the same tenacity as he had attacked Wanamaker. Roosevelt resigned from the commission in May 1895 to become New York City Police Commissioner.⁸⁶

During his six years as Civil Service Commissioner, Roosevelt had made his mark. Between 1889 and 1895, the commission added 25,000 employees to the classified service, a doubling of the number of merit positions.⁸⁷ According to the historian Leonard White,

Beyond doubt [Roosevelt] made the Commission a force in the governmental system, and in its first decade this was an achievement of

primary importance. He struck terror into the hearts of contumacious postmasters and collectors of customs by making personal investigations and roundly castigating offenders . . . He left the Commission stronger in every respect than he found it.⁸⁸

Roosevelt's work at the Commission not only furthered the cause of civil service reform, but also provided critical administrative experience to a man who later would be president for eight pivotal years. Better than any president before or since, Roosevelt knew the details of the civil service law and regulations. According to historian Paul Van Riper, Roosevelt deserves to be regarded as the first president since James K. Polk, and possibly George Washington, who either comprehended or cared about administration.⁸⁹ When he became President, supporters of reform expected much from the new president, and they were not disappointed.⁹⁰

Roosevelt proved his commitment when he appointed his reformist friend from Baltimore, Charles J. Bonaparte, as Secretary of the Navy and William Dudley Foulke as a Civil Service Commissioner. Foulke had been an active member of the Reform League in Indiana since 1885 and fearlessly exposed corruption and inept administration while at the Commission. Roosevelt was not without criticism from the reformers, however, as he appointed his old Post Office nemesis and spoilsman, James S. Clarkson, as Surveyor of the Port of New York.⁹¹

As an administrator, President Roosevelt—despite being the youngest to hold the office—had a keen understanding of both the strengths and weaknesses of the governmental system. During his presidency, the total number of classified employees surpassed the total number of patronage employees for the first time.⁹² In 1901, the classified service included 108,967 positions out of 235,766, and by December 1908, it had grown to around 220,000 out of 352,104. Among the important extensions were the Rural Free Delivery Service, Forestry Service, Spanish War employees, Census Office, Indian agents, and fourth-class postmasters in fourteen states.⁹³ President Roosevelt convened the first meeting of states and cities with civil service systems.⁹⁴

As President, Roosevelt strengthened the curbs on political activity for government employees, establishing regulations that persons in the classified service, while retaining the right to vote and to express privately their opinions, "shall take no active part in political management or in political campaigns."⁹⁵ He also began efforts to streamline the administration of the civil service, primarily examination of job seekers.⁹⁶ Roosevelt was a strong

advocate of practical tests and took an interest in the contents of examinations. As Commissioner, for example, he became disgusted when he failed to implement an exam for cattle inspectors that tested brand reading, shooting, riding mean horses, and roping and throwing steers.⁹⁷

Roosevelt's administrative talents were conspicuous throughout his years as President. He personally redesigned the organizational structure for the building of the Panama Canal, centralizing authority from a previous, unworkable seven-man commission into a single directorship.⁹⁸ In 1903, he worked with his Secretary of War, Elihu Root, to reorganize the Army General Staff into a design that remains relatively unchanged.⁹⁹ He was instrumental in the development of civil government in the Philippines, reorganization of the Forest Service, modernization of the Navy, and creation of the Department of Commerce and Labor.¹⁰⁰

In 1905 Roosevelt appointed the Keep Commission to examine government administration, assuming that "the president ought to be responsible for the condition of administration."¹⁰¹ The Keep Commission was a systematic effort to improve administrative management and to "place the conduct of the executive business of the Government . . . on the most economical and effective basis in the light of the best modern business practice."¹⁰² Roosevelt's detailed instructions to the Keep Commission reveal a sophisticated awareness of administrative theory and practice that goes beyond the specifics of individual agencies. The president divulged his own convictions about administration when he told the Keep Commission that salaries should be commensurate with the character and market value of the service performed and uniform across departmental lines; that government supplies should be standardized and purchased through a central purchasing office; that fiscal restrictions should not interfere with executive discretion; that comparative costs should be ascertained; and that there should be interdepartmental cooperation in the use of expert or technical knowledge.¹⁰³ Such administrative awareness had not emanated from the executive since Alexander Hamilton designed the administration of George Washington.

"should prefer to have his right hand cut off"

John Wanamaker's conflict with Roosevelt did not end when the retail merchant left Washington in 1893 and returned to Philadelphia. The two

men would continue to collide throughout the Roosevelt presidency and beyond. Ever active in Republican politics, Wanamaker helped Willam McKinley win the presidency in 1896 and again in 1900, when he deposited \$50,000 in a New York bank for the prosecution of election frauds. From 1888 to 1900, Wanamaker's "moderation and common sense" helped to strengthen Republican party organization, insuring the victories for McKinley, and, ironically, provided a solid party foundation that made possible then-Vice President Roosevelt's rise to the presidency upon McKinley's death in 1901.¹⁰⁴

During Roosevelt's election bid in 1904, however, Wanamaker seems to have done nothing except make the campaign contributions that were expected of a prominent Republican.¹⁰⁵ Wanamaker again became active in 1908, campaigning energetically for William Howard Taft, a close Wanamaker friend for more than twenty years.

In 1912, the animosity between Wanamaker and Roosevelt-boiled to the surface. Wanamaker continued to support his friend Taft for re-election, seconding his nomination at the Republican Convention. Wanamaker could not accept the disloyalty of progressive Republicans, and their charges against Taft, openly sponsored by Roosevelt, stirred the Philadelphian deeply. Wanamaker would write, "Theodore Roosevelt should prefer to have his right hand cut off rather than to have penned the things he has written against Republicanism." As the split between the Old Guard and the progressives widened, Wanamaker foresaw the Republican, disaster with the departure of Roosevelt to create a third party. In his diary Wanamaker correctly predicted, "I do not believe Roosevelt can be elected, but by dividing the party he will prevent the election of Taft and open the way for a Democrat [Woodrow Wilson]." He added later that the country had wanted no "whirligig administration of an unbalanced president [Roosevelt]," describing him as "a madman trying to wrest the presidency from the man [Taft] who, in all fairness, should have Roosevelt's support."¹⁰⁶

After the election, with Wilson victorious over Roosevelt and Taft, Wanamaker agonized in his diary that,

Well, the stormy war is settled. How hateful to many states to drive them off from their old party of glorious history, and rather than trust themselves to Nero Roosevelt, throw in their lot with the untariffsafe Democrats. Pity of Pities.¹⁰⁷

“no insincerity lurked behind his ever-welcoming smile”

To the loyal Old Guard Republican John Wanamaker, having the Democrat Woodrow Wilson in the White House was gut-wrenching. Wanamaker was hopeful that a Republican would again capture the presidency when Charles Evans Hughes challenged Wilson's reelection in 1916. Wanamaker believed extreme measures were necessary for Hughes to defeat Wilson. Wanamaker, ever the innovator, conceived of inviting his old enemy, but still-popular ex-president, Theodore Roosevelt to make a keynote campaign speech for Hughes in the final week of the campaign. Wanamaker sent a telegram on October 24, 1916, reminding him that:

There is still much to be done to make sure the election of Mr. Hughes . . . it seems as though you might crown your splendid work for Mr. Hughes by the soul cry of a true patriot from Cooper Union [in New York city] Friday night, November 3rd, awakening the people to the crisis of the hour, like unto the speech of Abraham Lincoln, delivered on the same spot, which roused the people of the United States to put their seal upon him for the Presidency. The fight is becoming more intense daily and next Friday would be the psychological moment for your supreme effort for Hughes and the Republican and Progressive parties, for which every loyal American will rise up and call you blessed. Please wire. Your friend, John Wanamaker.¹⁰⁸

Three days later from Toledo, Ohio, Roosevelt accepted. The Cooper Union meeting sealed the return of Roosevelt to the Republican Party and the re-marriage of the Republican Old Guard and the Progressives. The meeting also marked the rapprochement of Roosevelt and Wanamaker. To Wanamaker, who presided over the meeting seated at the same desk and chair that Lincoln used in 1861, bringing Roosevelt back into the Republican fold must have been one of his most satisfying political and personal achievements. There is little evidence of Wanamaker holding deep animosity for Roosevelt, and if there had been, the Cooper Union meeting replaced it with the Philadelphian's gratitude. Age was probably a factor in the rapprochement, as Wanamaker then approached eighty and Roosevelt, sixty. In 1919, when he learned of Roosevelt's death, Wanamaker wrote in his diary,

Not since Abraham Lincoln fell asleep has there been in this country such a sorrow as on Monday when the messages came from Theodore Roosevelt's silent home. Like a flash of lightning, it touched the whole world. The immeasurable loss to America and the world at this time is beyond human thought. It were well worthwhile to seek for the real secret of Theodore Roosevelt's masterful greatness. Was it in the fact that no insincerity lurked behind his ever-welcoming smile.¹⁰⁹

John Wanamaker died two years later.

NOTES

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3. Henry Cabot Lodge, *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge: 1884-1918* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 134; Theodore Roosevelt, *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* Elting E. Morison, ed., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951). Hereafter cited as *Letters*. Theodore Roosevelt wrote over 100,000 letters in his lifetime and, of those, about 10,000 are published. The correspondence between Roosevelt and Lodge is a priceless chronicle of the public and private lives of two eminent politicians and the events of their lifetimes.
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