

DOMESTIC AFFAIRS DURING ROOSEVELT'S  
PRESIDENCY

NOTHING could have been further from Roosevelt's intentions than to set up as the prophet of some great Reformation or make a violent breach with the past. Some ardent souls among his friends may have been a little disappointed when, upon taking the oath of office, he announced that he would retain McKinley's Cabinet instead of surrounding himself with men of his own choice, and would continue McKinley's policies — which indeed he had been elected Vice-President to do. He was not alarmed at being called "a pale copy of McKinley." "If," he said afterwards, "a man is fit to be President, he will so impress himself on the office that the policies pursued will be his anyhow." The originality which in fact he displayed in facing the problems that arose for him, lay chiefly in that high and vivacious courage with which he reënforced an honesty not lacking in his predecessors.

Before touching singly on some of the issues with which he dealt, — confining ourselves in the present chapter to domestic issues, — we may consider

his general relations with the Republican party, of which the ostensible leadership had devolved upon him. It had come into being nearly fifty years before as the party of progress. It was now the party which had preserved the Union and under which an extraordinary growth of wealth had occurred. The claim to be called the party of progress might for a while seem to have passed to the Democrats. But the strong and upright President Cleveland had ended at outs with his party, and from 1896 onward the Democratic party, taken as a whole, represented to Roosevelt a combination of unthinking conservatism in some respects with reckless demagogism in others. Except for an interval under Jackson's leadership, it had always stickled for the rights of the States against the National Government and the strict limitation of the latter's powers — principles which were great obstacles to dealing with urgent industrial questions. But in 1896 the theory of bimetallism (much in favor then with Lord Chaplin, as the farmers' friend, and with others in England) offered a new disguise for the oldest of quack remedies for popular discontents, debasing the currency. Not to mention the views of the silver-miners, Western farmers, suffering from fallen prices while their mortgage interest remained as before, offered a field for

agitation. Whatever may be the true extent of the advantage of a system of bimetallism by international agreement, such as McKinley like many English statesmen advocated, it is certain that the silver proposals with which Mr. Bryan then bade fair to stampede the West would have worked widespread disaster. And the spirit of his amazing eloquence, inflamed by such sincerity as the truly rhetorical temperament is capable of, — "you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold," and so forth, — was that of unredeemed claptrap with all its cruel potency of harm.

In 1900 the Democratic party, as a party, still meant Mr. Bryan, though its war cry for the moment had been mere condemnation of McKinley's foreign policy, to which we must turn in the next chapter. Roosevelt, with his view of that policy, was bound to regard the Republican party as in effect the party of honest policy, which had now for the second time fought and won a battle for the honest cause as such, against an altogether spurious radicalism. "This," however, as he wrote twelve years later, "regrettably, but perhaps inevitably, tended to throw the party into the hands not merely of the conservatives but of the reactionaries: of men who sometimes for personal and improper reasons, but more often with entire sin-

cerity and uprightness of purpose, distrusted anything that was progressive and dreaded radicalism." This was a just analysis. And we may regard it as Roosevelt's chief political ambition, up to a certain moment in 1912, to make the party, which he deemed on the whole that of essential sanity, the ready instrument of practical and, at need, of radical reforms.

This meant at the outset that he should coöperate as far as possible, though steadily increasing friction was bound to come, with established leaders of his party, especially in the Senate and the House. With his own Cabinet loyal fellow-working was assured. Few Presidents can have been more fortunate than he was in the men (more particularly John Hay, Mr. Taft, and Mr. Root) whose chief he was. And — which seems the mark of great Presidents — he welcomed strong men in his Cabinet, maintaining even daily intercourse with any departmental chief whose business made it desirable; governed by advice or going his own way, and leaving his subordinates free or taking the whole responsibility for great decisions off them, as the needs of the moment made fitting; and eagerly claiming for them the credit for their work. But his fearless nature went a long way to make him a good worker with

any man with whom it was possible to work.

Anecdotes abound, indeed, of the comical vigor with which he would denounce, in any hearing, weighty personages and even august bodies who conflicted with him; they were accused of not knowing, when the roll of their grave assembly was called, whether to answer "present" or "not guilty"; or they were made life members of the "Ananias Club," sometimes for more serious inaccuracies than that of Ananias, but sometimes, it appears, for relating only too accurately what honorable men would have treated as a confidence. Spiteful critics delighted to point out that Roosevelt all the while would enter into practical relations with the very kind of men that he thus unrestrainedly denounced. But quite enough of his correspondence is now before the world to set his conduct in these regards in a clear light. His refusal to conciliate any one, in appointments or any other matter, at the expense of what — in his own judgment — the public interest required was expressed with an instant and astonishing frankness which left no room for mistake. But, that line being once plainly drawn, he had no Pharisaic reluctance to going along with any man just so far as their ways lay together, even with a man whom he openly condemned, when that man happened to

be working for a good end. Thus, when by a malicious trick the management in the Senate of a bill which he promoted was thrown by its opponents into the hands of a Senator whom he had publicly stamped with his disapproval but who supported the bill, Roosevelt felt no trace of the embarrassment by which almost any other man would have been hampered.

This, which it would be easy to illustrate further, is not merely an honorable but a beautiful trait. To speak broadly, it seems beyond question that Roosevelt with unflinching courage departed all along the line from tradition which had, in many ways, bound down Presidents to consulting the greatest number of private interests where the single public interest should have been plain; but, in doing so, he sought to disturb as little as might be the harmony of those relations with his party without which he would have been powerless for good. It would be peddling to enquire whether on some occasion or another he conceded what he need not have conceded. This man from an early time had thrown away any advantage that could ever be his from mean compliance with mean people.

Of his dealings with men there is one outstanding example, in his relations with a person who was anything but mean, the once famous Senator Mark

Hanna. This once much-abused potentate, who had made McKinley President and was reputed to hold his party in the hollow of his hand, was, we may take it, the type of those Republicans whom Roosevelt respected and disagreed with. Nobody will now defend all Hanna's principles of action, as he himself fearlessly did, though many may still act upon them: The party had saved the Union and business prospered under it; the party must win, and must win at all costs. If, as is very freely suggested, Hanna carried out this principle almost as thoroughly as, say, Sir Robert Walpole in the eighteenth century, it must be remembered that there is a real analogy between the points of view of the English Whig Minister with the exiled Stuart dynasty still threatening, and of this Republican stalwart. In one cause at least, that of conciliation between capital and labor, he and Roosevelt could work together whole-heartedly, and when they did not differ openly each knew that the other was loyal to him. But Hanna was plainly shown that his influence was at an end in the very first appointment of a kind which he had previously controlled, and in the policy in regard to trusts which the new President avowed from the outset.

Before long the two were the recognized leaders of two opposing tendencies in the party, and the

question was bound to arise whether the next Republican candidate for the Presidency should be Roosevelt, or Hanna himself, or perhaps some deputy of his. During 1903 a rival of Hanna's in his own State saw fit to thrust the question forward. Hanna was forced to try to put off a declaration from his own State in Roosevelt's favor. Instantly and effectively Roosevelt frustrated his move and secured his own position. A few months later Hanna lay dying, and the last simple notes between the old chief and Roosevelt remain a significant memorial of the great hearts of two strong men.

Roosevelt was determined, he said, to be "the President of the whole nation: not of a section," not of the North (to which his actual words referred) more than of the South; not of the white men, to the exclusion of the Negro or the Indian; not of business and of the rich, rather than of labor and of the poor — nor the other way on. No doubt any man in his place might have used the phrase. The clue to any just estimate of his presidency lies in his having fully made good this claim.

It is needless now to revive all the controversies in which he was involved. It would be enough to tabulate those actions of his which were in intent or effect most provocative. It would be seen at once that, roughly speaking, they balance one



another. He recognizes just Southern claims as no one since the Civil War had done, and goes out of the way to attack the chief thing that was disgracing the South, as hardly any man would have done; he gives the Negro race a peculiarly useful encouragement in the very spirit of Lincoln, and suppresses riotous Negro troops with extreme severity; falls violently upon the misdeeds of men of wealth one day, and attacks lawless labor-agitators to their faces as violently the next day. And in every case he has a good plain reason, given in good dignified English, for what he has done.

In this slight sketch I pass over many details to insist the more emphatically on this one point. It may or it may not be possible to criticize Roosevelt severely on one incident or another of his administration; but if once you set before you as a whole the mass of the criticized transactions, this conclusion leaps to light: the statesman who was censured during eight years for all these particular things needs no further proof that he was a man of splendid justice everlastingly in action — of splendid justice, and with the gift of all-embracing sympathy.

This should be borne in mind while we consider the domestic controversy which filled the largest space in his career, the question of trusts, in the

loose sense in which the word means great industrial combinations. Possibly it may be asked why Roosevelt, who took an aggressive attitude on this question, avoided that of the tariff, which some people — probably mistaken — would think a matter of deeper economic and political consequence. A thoroughgoing English free-trader, by the way, approaches the American tariff question with serene impartiality; he must suppose that free trade would be good for America, which has probably long outgrown the stage in which the plea for fostering infant industries has any application; but he must equally suppose that the adoption of free trade by the United States would bring a perilous crisis upon English commerce. Roosevelt, who confessedly and very naturally knew little about this economic question, came to see clearly, later on, how unsatisfactory it was that tariffs should be settled by the process — which then prevailed — of barter, between powerful interests, in committees. On becoming President he considered, as we know from Hay, whether he should demand a revision of the tariff. Whatever his own views as to a satisfactory kind of tariff may have been, his deliberate conclusion was that he could not hope to carry his party with him in any handling of the matter that was worth attempting. There can really be

no question that he was right in this. Nor was there at that moment, or thereafter while he remained President, anything to make immediate agitation of this question his proper course. We shall see that it was otherwise with the trusts question.

The history of this matter can be summed up briefly. When big trusts began to be heard of, after the formation of Mr. Rockefeller's oil trust in 1882, conservative opinion in America was alarmed by them, and it was easy to pass a law (the Sherman Act of 1890) by which agreements in restraint of trade, being at common law void and unenforceable, were further made the subject of criminal proceedings — in so far, that is, as they concerned commerce between different States and thus came within the scope of Federal legislation. This disposed of the original device by which previously competing companies agreed to deposit their voting-powers in the hands of a group of trustees (whence the name, "trusts"). It was sought to evade the law by the formation of new companies, which acquired and held a majority of the stock in each of the companies to be combined. In 1894 the proceedings taken against one of these new combinations failed, the Supreme Court holding in the "Knight case," among other matters, that the buying and holding

of stock in other corporations, which was what the holding companies did, was not "commerce" and thus not within the scope of the Federal power of legislation as to commerce between States. Thereupon, contrary to the intention of the law, a number of large combinations had by 1901 sprung up, each of which was believed by competent lawyers to be justified by the Knight case; and it would appear that the great business-world generally had by this time become interested in such developments.

Roosevelt in his first message to Congress — called by Hay "the most individual message since Lincoln" — declared, without consultation of any man, his general attitude towards the movement. In the changing conditions of trade, combinations of capital were, he said, necessary; they should be regarded in no spirit of envy; but there was a general conviction that in certain of their features and tendencies they were hurtful to the general welfare. Government was bound to see that these powerful agencies worked in harmony with the general welfare. But the first requisite was knowledge and publicity. With a view to this he recommended now the appointment of a new Cabinet officer, the Secretary of Commerce and Labor. This first step, the creation of this officer with a Bureau of Corporations under him, may seem unsensational;

but it was important enough to be opposed by reactionary business-interests with all their power. By vigorous efforts he secured this measure from Congress early in 1903. The new Bureau could investigate; could secure a certain amount of publicity; could recommend necessary measures. That was all, but there seems to be no doubt that it sufficed to check many abuses and to direct much business ambition into useful rather than harmful paths.

Meanwhile, however, Roosevelt was concerned with the associated question of the railways and their rates. A measure forbidding rebates was passed, also in 1903. And in 1906, largely through efforts of his in the course of which he was led to adopt a more advanced view than that with which he started, there was passed an Act giving to the Interstate Commerce Commission — an executive body guided by considerations of policy and only in a small degree restrained by the Courts — drastic and general powers of fixing rates. It is arguable on economic grounds that in the long run rates will fix themselves best of themselves; but in such matters there is always an interest — that of a public of innumerable small people — which can assert itself only through a public agency; nor can popular feeling in the modern world be asked to

forgo all public control over capitalist undertakings of vast public import. Roosevelt then was probably right (against that sturdy life-long champion of sound causes, Senator Lodge, his respected friend whether in an agreement or disagreement), in regarding the decision then taken not as leading toward public ownership of the railways but as the best hope of escape from that probably very wasteful form of Socialism. However that may be, the knowledge gained by the Bureau of Corporations and the example set in the case of the Interstate Commerce Commission together pointed the way to the next step in the Big Business problem: namely, to entrust an expert Commission, continuously engaged in the study of all the relevant facts, with large powers of deciding that particular practices or actions tended to monopoly or were unfair (or, as economists would say, destructive) competition, and requiring them to be discontinued. This is the principle which eventually, in 1912, Roosevelt advocated, and which the Clayton Acts, passed two years afterward, substantially if not in a perfect form, carry out.

"America," says the most enlightening economist since Adam Smith, Alfred Marshall, "has developed the scientific application of economic doctrines to many practical problems, with great

energy and thoroughness. More perhaps than any other country she has learned that general propositions in regard to either competition or monopoly are full of snares. . . . Consequently she is now engaged in leading the world in the very difficult task of restraining such methods of competition as are aimed at narrowing the basis of competition." This stage was not reached till five years after Roosevelt left office, but it is evidently the outcome of the fight which he fought.

The fight involved much bitterness, and so far only one side of the story has been told. Roosevelt never professed any admiration for the Sherman Act, which struck blindly at combination as such, with little regard to whether its results were good or bad. But public opinion had relieved itself by putting this law on the statute book, and then the Courts had made it a dead letter. Perhaps it is not unfair to say that to a once prevalent school of American political thinking this seemed a very satisfactory state of affairs. To Roosevelt it would have seemed a breach of plain duty to let the matter stay there — much as if, when Police Commissioner of New York, he had left the Sunday Closing Act, good or bad, remain unenforced.

It was important to know if the Sherman Act was really invalid. If it was, then for the same

reason any better Act would have been so; if it was not, law was law. In the former case, as he told Congress in his first message, a Constitutional Amendment was needed to give the requisite powers of legislation; but immediately a case came up on which the matter could be tested. The Northern Securities Company was a probably beneficial combination of different railways, honestly carried out by one of the best of railway men on the strength of the decision in the Knight case; but it was against the Sherman Act. Roosevelt consulted his Attorney-General, Mr. Knox, and that able lawyer advised him in effect that the Supreme Court had been wrong in the Knight case and would probably find ways of deciding a new case differently. Roosevelt immediately announced his intention to bring action. Wild astonishment and indignation were aroused. The Administration won their case, and thereupon Roosevelt had action brought in every known case that arose of infringement of the Sherman Act. He was called on once to give his approval to the buying up of one concern by another in a manner intended for no other purpose than to stop a panic (which it did); but gladly and promptly as he consented, he did not do so till it was proved to him that there was no transgression of the Sherman Act involved.



From such a beginning it is obvious how hot a controversy would surround Roosevelt's career. The greatest of modern financial magnates asked him privately whether he was going to be hostile to him — as if hostility or friendship to any man was the governing motive of an Executive enforcing the law. That gentleman's state of mind and Roosevelt's amused incomprehension of it, taken together, explain the whole of his fight with the Great Business world.

It is the sort of arrogant remark which on general principles I do not think an Englishman should make, but, on reading Roosevelt's plain record, I feel that even the moderate criticism made upon his principal activities by wise and high-minded Americans shows blindness to what he clearly saw. What good came of all this fighting? To that question I think the answer has already been found by looking a little beyond his time.

It is asked, first, why harry at all a harmless body like the Northern Securities Corporation? And secondly, — since, when the big drum was beaten against him, he beat a much bigger drum in answer, — was it not an evil influence on the working class that he should talk so much of "malefactors of great wealth" and the rest of it? But, as to the

first of these questions, what ought he to have done? If the Knight decision was to stand, unaltered either by the Supreme Court or by Constitutional Amendment, we can all see now, as Roosevelt saw then, that the Federal legislature was in a position of perilous impotence. If it needed courage to raise the question, yet surely it was a President's obvious duty. And when, by the practical reversal of that decision it proved that a possibly laudable combination was unlawful, it would surely be foolish to suggest that the President should not enforce the law against it. Unenforced laws are of most pernicious example anyway, and in this case there would have lain in the mouth of every perversely intelligent poor man the suggestion, with a terrible amount of truth in it, that any illegality was allowed if there was enough money at the back of it.

And this answers the further question as to his alleged inflammatory language. Labor, unless it is very different in America and in England, did not need Roosevelt to tell it that there can be malefactors of great wealth; but it very much needed him to tell it that the established order does not exist to secure them. He never suggested that all rich men or all great corporations were malefactors; on the contrary, the reader to-day of his

collected speeches grows weary with his insistence, up to the utmost bounds of permissible platitude, that it is not so. Nor did he say that no poor men or labor organizations were malefactors; he hit them with all his might. And be it remembered that "malefactors of great wealth" was not an excessive term as a description of the more advanced type of unscrupulous persons contemplated by Roosevelt. That "very perfect, gentle knight," Henry Higginson, deploring his friend Theodore's inexperience, protested that the great business men whom he had dealt with in his own long business career were the most honorable men and the most useful to the community that he knew. This was doubtless true. But it was also true, for example, that a certain extremely able manufacturing company was convicted for "causing its agents to injure internal parts of rival machines when in actual use." And facts like this last get much talked about, except perhaps in the world of good and steady-going business men.

Said Roosevelt: "There are good and bad men of all nationalities, creeds and colors; and if this world of ours is ever to become what we hope some day it may become, it must be by the general recognition that the man's heart and soul, the man's worth and action, determine his standing.

I should be sorry to lose the Presidency, but I should be a hundredfold more sorry to gain it by failing to try, in every way in my power, to put a stop to lynching and to brutality and wrong of any kind; or by failing on the one hand, to make the very wealthiest and most powerful men in the country obey the law and handle their property (so far as it is in my power to make them) in the public interest, or by failing on the other hand, to make the laboring men in their turn obey the law and realize that envy is as evil a thing as arrogance, and that crimes of violence and riot shall be as sternly punished as crimes of greed and cunning." These sentiments are simple enough; but as compared with brilliant championship of one section or another, one half-truth or its opposite, unflagging and undaunted action upon these simple principles is so rare that it is hardly recognized as a merit when it occurs.

Roosevelt's fighting courage, when he was brought up against excesses on the part of labor organizations, need not be illustrated. Nor are many words necessary now upon that extraordinary exercise of watchful waiting, firmness, and diplomatic tact by which, when a long-continued coal strike threatened to become a national calamity, he succeeded in getting the dispute settled, quietly

preparing in reserve his — fortunately needless — measures for seizing and working the mines. It was the year before Mr. Mundella in England induced Lord Rosebery, the Foreign Secretary, to play an equally successful part as conciliator in a kind of dispute in which such unexpected interventions might be very useful so long as they were rare. In America Roosevelt's action, helped by Hanna and encouraged by Cleveland, seems incidentally to have brought public opinion a step forward in recognizing that labor combinations, after all, exist for the protection of very real human rights.

It should be mentioned here that before he went out of office Roosevelt had a great share in the passing of the first effective Act in the United States for securing purity of food and drugs, and of the first measure involving the principle of employers' liability — both of course limited in their scope by the Federal Constitution.

In a very different direction, too, he saw the need of a bold departure from traditional policy. The alienation of public land by the Government had been a sound proceeding so far as it resulted in the creation of a great multitude of small farming freeholders. It was a very different matter when it began to result in the rapid using up of the nation's

timber supplies for private gain, — with the added consequence of possible injury to the climate, — the making presents to lucky individuals of mineral wealth still belonging to the whole people, and the falling into private ownership of water supplies upon whose use thereafter for irrigation the fertility of large regions would depend. Enthusiasts for the conservation of national resources had met with his ready friendship before his Presidency, and he worked with unremitting zeal in this cause, from his entry into office up to the end, when he was endeavoring — for his care of the public good was not limited within narrow bounds of patriotism — to procure international discussion of world-wide questions of this kind. Frauds in the administration of public land were vigorously checked (at the cost of sending a Senator to jail); vast tracts of undeveloped wealth were set aside for the public profit; an efficient forest-service was organized; desert tracts were made fertile by vast irrigation-works; sanctuaries were reserved for beautiful wild creatures threatened with extinction. The high degree of imagination which this splendid public service demanded is unhappily illustrated by the persistent petty opposition which it encountered.

With like imagination, he later seized upon the fact that, with all the fine work that was already

being done by government for the technical advancement of agriculture, the life of the farming people themselves was depressed by many causes which the intelligent good-will of the community might remedy, and his appointment in 1908 of the Country Life Commission demands this slight allusion as an instance, among many, of his alert and wide-ranging sympathy.

"And who is my neighbor?" Roosevelt was one of the men who have never needed to ask themselves this question. In the normal course of administration Roosevelt was able to take some care of the Indians, whom, by the way, in an extraordinarily pathetic dying interview, Senator Quay — that great target for the reproaches of the reformers — bequeathed to his special charge. In the far larger and harder problem that concerns the Negro, perhaps with him (as with Lincoln after he had killed slavery) the example of a rare right-feeling was the one service that he could render. Englishmen cannot throw much light on this vaguely menacing problem or judge of the progress made in it. Yet a traveled Englishman is apt to have dealt with men of every possible color, and certainly must appreciate keenly that matter which sets a limit to the kindly — often extremely kindly — intercourse of the Southerner

with the Black. Perhaps it should be confessed that the greatest shock which Roosevelt ever gave his English admirers was when, having invited Mr. Booker Washington to meet his wife and family at luncheon, and having set the South in a blaze by so doing, he failed to repeat his offense. But cowardice cannot be suggested in his case; he became sincerely convinced that the sensation, so astonishing to him, which he had thus aroused, was hurtful to the Negro. The matter is but one of the illustrations which he gave of a simple principle, surely incontrovertible (I am not saying that no Englishmen need to learn it), that the racial inferiority of a people, however marked, is no reason — but the contrary — for failure to give fair play to those who individually rise above the general level, or for failure to meet every man, irrespective of class or race, unaffectedly on his merits as a man.

To this slight sketch of a career in office comparable, in its record of solid achievement, to that of any great Minister for a hundred years past (say, for example, to that of Gladstone in his first Ministry), one thing must be added. It is evident that Roosevelt set his mark, in heightened capacity and devotion more conscientious and unselfish, on every branch of the service under him, naval, military,



or civil, with which he had any close contact. He himself took especial pride in the testimony of a first-rate witness, Lord Bryce, who declared that in his intimate studies of government in many countries he had "never seen a more eager, high-minded, and efficient set of public servants than the men doing the work of the American Government" under Roosevelt. It is characteristic that this so especially pleased him. The quality which creates good subordinates is a quality mainly of the heart.