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In Sickness and in Health: Conceptions of Disease and Ability in Presidential Bodies

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**IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH: CONCEPTIONS OF DISEASE AND
ABILITY IN PRESIDENTIAL BODIES**

**BY
MEGAN GRATKE**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Introduction

“Bodies matter. Presidential bodies matter most of all.”¹

The President of the United States takes an oath to serve the country to the best of his/her ability, which consequently includes when in sickness or in health. In this way, the president completes a marriage vow to the country—he or she devotes time, attention, and mental faculties to their new spouse, awarding it multiple years of their lives. It is no wonder that the American public puts added emphasis on the health of its president; the president is expected to live through a full term, which implies their health must be in good enough standing to survive the pressure of governing the country. An illustration of this expectation is found in photo diaries of former presidents’ appearance before and after their presidency; graying hair, under eye bags, and deeper lines etched on a president’s face show a noticeable change.² As former President Obama celebrated his fiftieth birthday in August 2011, Cleveland doctor Michael Roizen even speculated that presidents age two years for every year in office based on the apparent accelerated aging process showing on Obama’s face.³ Although this claim was refuted that same year by a study conducted by Jay Olshansky, PhD in the Journal of the American Medical Association, the myth of short longevity of the president still stands.⁴

Americans are continually concerned about the physical ability of the president, so much so that it affects who the public considers eligible to hold office. Somewhere in the computing of

¹ Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe, *FDR’s Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), xi.

² “How Presidents Age in Office—Photo Essays,” Time, <http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1872168,00.html>; Sam Escobar, “14 Photos of U.S. Presidents Before and After the White House”, *Good Housekeeping*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/career/g3918/presidents-before-and-after-office/?slide=14>

³ Caroline Murray, “Presidents only look like they age faster,” CNN, December 6, 2011. <https://www.cnn.com/2011/12/06/health/presidents-dont-age-faster/index.html>

⁴ S. Jay Olshansky, “Aging of US Presidents.” *JAMA*. 2011;306(21):2328–2329.

public perception, physical capability is equated with mental capability—a president’s body must demonstrate strength of both the body and the mind. This strength is an essential part of building and maintaining the public image of America, as the healthy presidential body becomes an extension and representation of a healthy country. Advertising a president’s healthy body thus secures the American people’s trust, assuring the public that the body will carry the mind through however long the president is in office. Consequently, numerous presidents have withheld information about their health throughout American history, choosing to bypass the American expectation of a strong body in order to preserve their position in office. Thus, they forsake the people’s trust, choosing secrecy rather than openness.

Anxiety over the physical capability of presidential candidates plays a significant role in electoral politics, occupying a space in popular discourse about health and subsequent eligibility. Although there is a minimum age to run for president (35 years or older), there is no maximum age, raising concerns over the aging and possibly ailing bodies of candidates. For example, when Donald Trump announced his candidacy in the 2016 presidential election at the age of seventy, his possible win would surpass Ronald Reagan as the oldest person to take office. Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton also faced questions about her health in 2016, with Trump’s spokeswoman Katrina Pierson informing MSNBC that Clinton suffered from an illness called ‘aphasia’ that would impair Clinton’s reading and speaking abilities.⁵ In the years since Trump’s victory, questions regarding both his physical and mental health have been pervasive, with special emphasis placed on his bodily appearance. In response to Trump’s release of a doctor’s letter giving him a clean bill of health and listing his exact weight as 236 pounds, *The*

⁵ Jennifer Gerson Uffalussy, “Why is Hillary Clinton’s Health so Controversial?” *Yahoo*, August 19, 2016, <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/why-is-hillary-clintons-health-so-controversial-060031577.html>

Washington Post asked five experts to guess Trump's weight.⁶ There is even an entire Wikipedia page—"Health of Donald Trump"—devoted to tracking the developments in the discourse over his seemingly fluctuating status.⁷ The conversation about presidential health is ongoing, but by no means new; the conceptions of health and disease at play in today's society have been built over decades, forging a connection between the body and its subsequent ability to lead.

Before we can consider the connection between health and eligibility, it is important to examine American society's valuation of health and disease. Disease is traditionally identified by empirical judgements about normative human behavior and well-being, resulting in the classification of a body as desirable or undesirable.⁸ Thus, the consideration of the body is based on normative criteria, with judgement based on the "extent to which a life is unnatural, undesirable, or failing to flourish in some way."⁹ There is a fundamental assumption that the body functions on some common level in most people, not counting natural deviations from the norm. However, when there is an abnormal functioning of a certain system, and the abnormality is branded as 'bad,' then it is considered a disease. In this camp of thought, disease is first based on empirical, scientific evidence that can be observed on a medical level. Then, a value-judgement is made that implies that having a specific ailment means that a person would be worse-off than others.¹⁰ Health is therefore constructed as disease's counterpart: a healthy body is one that fits within the normative parameters of medical theory, functioning as expected with no major deviation from the norm. Healthy bodies subsequently devalue those of the sick; once a

⁶ Kerry Lauerman, "Just how big is Trump?" *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/10/06/just-how-big-is-trump-we-asked-5-experts-to-you-guessed-it-weigh-in/?utm_term=.68ec9eb8892d

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Health_of_Donald_Trump

⁸ Dominic Murphy, "Concepts of Disease and Health", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/health-disease/>>.

⁹ Murphy, "Concepts of Disease and Health"

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

body shows an affliction, it is judged as less-than. This valuation extends through all levels of society, ultimately informing cultural assumptions about those who are sick—if a body is not traditionally healthy, there is an underlying bias that affects how they will be considered. This connection shows itself on a national level when a person runs for president who does not demonstrate perfect health; their candidacy is weakened by the public’s perception of their physical state and they are deemed less qualified to hold office.

The conception of disease is also connected to the conception of presented masculinity of presidential bodies. Masculinity and the perception of manly strength play a large role in electoral politics, forged from a long history of politics existing as a man’s club.¹¹ The twentieth century, in particular, witnessed a significant construction of manliness as it related to the presidency, signaled by the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt, although plagued with “heart trouble” and a weak constitution as a child, took care to emphasize to the press and his peers that he overcame his body by refusing to stay sedentary.¹² Instead, he would present himself as the physical embodiment of manliness.¹³ This embodiment affected the conception of the president’s body itself—physical strength of the body is conflated with strength of the nation. By emphasizing manliness, rugged bravery, and external health, Roosevelt set an extra parameter for his successors to the presidency: a new emphasis was placed on a candidate’s expression of manly power. Connections between body and country are forged with not only a basic health in focus, but how this health is directed and represented; the old and new representations of these

¹¹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race In the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 170.

¹² Carleton Putnam, *Theodore Roosevelt, vol. 1, The Formative Years* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 198; Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1979), 129; David McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 229.

¹³ John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America*. 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 7.

presidents' bodies rely on how each expressed his masculinity and strength as well as how he interacted with his non-normative body.

How has this connection between body and country shown itself over the years? This thesis will focus on three presidents who endured the scrutiny of both the public and themselves in the realm of sickness and health: William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. These three men reckoned with their bodies in different ways, but each faced the pressure of proving their health while in office. Taft, Wilson, and Roosevelt represent the American public's confrontation with the concept of a healthy body for the presidency, ultimately demonstrating that although their experiences may have changed public outlook in the short term, Americans continued and still continue to operate under the myth that only an idealized, healthful body is fit to be president. These men all possessed non-normative bodies, existing in the realm of sickness rather than health. However, each of them chose to interact with his circumstances in a markedly distinctive way. Thus, rather than try to emphasize their basic similarities, this project is grounded in their complex differences, demonstrating that each man was not only a product of societal constructions of health and disease, but also a product of his specific moment in history.

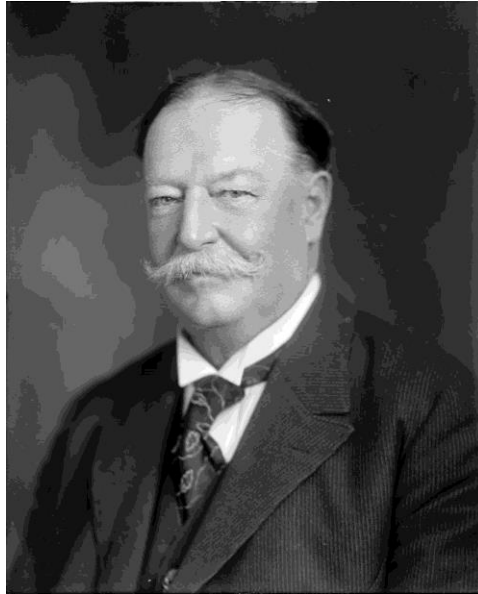
Chapter One deals with Taft, outlining how fatness has been constructed in history to survey Taft's lifetime struggle with his weight. Ultimately, although Taft constantly made light of his form, the perception of obesity in America was unchanged, as Taft's political footprint paled in comparison to his bodily imprint on history. Taft's experience is an intimate view of living with obesity, a physical condition that would continue its effects past his death; the representation of his body has continued to the present. Chapter Two examines Wilson's secret struggle with his health in office, drawing forward the modes of secrecy and deception used to

avoid publicly confronting his health. After the messy closing of World War One, Wilson shielded his illness from the world, furthering the American people's expectation that a president must be a picture of health to withstand the presidency. Thus, his sojourn with illness in the presidency changed the landscape of public trust by worsening the American people's expectation that a Presidential candidate must disclose their health in full honesty. The final chapter places Roosevelt at the helm, tracing his very public battle with polio and public perception of his disability throughout his adult life. Rather than fully hide his inability to walk, Roosevelt operated in the realm of rhetoric, confirming his health and vitality throughout his speeches and daring his detractors to deny his words. Roosevelt went to great lengths to conceal his full paralysis from the public but changed the perception of illness through his decisions to put his imperfect body on display.

Through careful monitoring, secrecy, and confrontation, each of these presidents left a specific mark on the representation of non-normative bodies of American presidents, demonstrating the complex web of presidential history weaved by each person to hold the office. While this work is by no means exhaustive, it approaches disease and disability politics with a perspective toward charting stories that have not been placed in conversation with each other in the scholarship on "sick" presidents; additionally, it seeks to demonstrate that the ways in which each president interacted with their representation affected their public perception and place in the national memory. Americans' perception of what a president's body *should* be is quite different than what many of the bodies in office have been—these three accounts are a testament to the body politics at play in American history. These body politics are informed by constructs of strength, masculinity, and the idealized embodiment of the nation as the president. Thus, the body politics presented here are not a simple fixation of the concept of health; rather, the debate

over the body reveals deeper truths about the nation's political interaction with the physical form and exists as commentary on wider societal values. Taft, Wilson, and FDR are strong examples of how these sectors of dialogue in American society come together in an oft-ignored phenomenon: the conception of disease and ability in presidential bodies.

I. William Howard Taft: Larger than Life



“When he is remembered at all, it is because he was fat and did not fit in the White House bathtub.”¹⁴

Historian Richard G. Frederick summarized perfectly what most American citizens can remember about the twenty-seventh President of the United States: a fable about being stuck in the bathtub. Weighing in at over 300 pounds, William Howard Taft would become America’s heaviest president, a fat man whose presidential achievements have paled in comparison to what is remembered about his body. Taft’s position as an obese man poses an interesting question for the start of our discussion of a healthy body: how did Taft’s physical form affect his public and personal perception as well as historical judgment? Taft faced the limitations of his body both in public and private, battling his own perceptions of his body as well as the perceptions of the American public. While some presidents battle their illness in secret, Taft’s struggle with his health could never be hidden; his body was constantly on display, prone to the wonderings of the media and general populace throughout his presidency. Obesity exists as a type of disease

¹⁴ Richard G. Frederick, *William H. Taft*. First Men, America’s Presidents Series. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc, 2010, xviii.

thought to be cured through diet and exercise; this was true especially during Taft's lifetime, when dieting became more popular as a way to battle weight gain. Thus, reflections on Taft's form labeled him as morally unsound, lazy, and weak. The representations of Taft's body both in his time and throughout history have revealed that the physical form is manipulated to communicate deeper meaning, applying pressure to the body as a means of political commentary.

Today, obesity affects 39.8% of the American population, bringing it to the forefront of modern-day discussions about health.¹⁵ The National Center for Health Statistics defines obesity as a Body Mass Index (BMI) greater than or equal to 30 in adults, which would include President Taft's 42.3 valuation under its umbrella.¹⁶ Americans now speak freely about an obesity 'epidemic,' questioning President Trump's weight and appearance along with his mental health. Conversations about obesity are relevant in both the past and the present, occupying a large space at the forefront of the American consciousness today. But how was obesity viewed in the late 19th and early 20th century—before the obesity epidemic and the stereotype of fat Americans came around—when Taft lived it? This chapter details the rhetoric of fatness, demonstrating that Taft operated within the constraints set for him by considerations of his body. Taft's presidency did not change the American public's views on obesity, nor did it make lasting impact on American history; nevertheless, Taft's reckoning with his own form is a testament to the pressure he faced assuming the presidency with a classically "sick" body.

Before we can consider Taft's specific position in our project, it is important to establish the atmosphere in which his body existed and identify how fatness became stigmatized as a

¹⁵ Craig M. Hales, M.D., Margaret D. Carroll, M.S.P.H., Cheryl D. Fryar, M.S.P.H., and Cynthia L. Ogden, Ph.D. *Prevalence of Obesity Among Adults and Youth: United States, 2015–2016*. NCHS Data Brief No. 288, October 2017, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.; Erik Kain, "A History of Fat Presidents," *Forbes*, September 28, 2011.

“pathological condition which should be prevented and controlled.”¹⁷ As a concept, fatness has existed in every culture, immortalized in medical literature and prose alike. Until the twentieth century, “plumpness was associated with good health in times when many of the most troubling diseases were wasting [ones] like tuberculosis.”¹⁸ However, for every positive connotation of fatness, there is also an intense anxiety about plumpness gone out of control, creating a permanent gap between the two spheres of thinking. Fat bodies are most likely to exist in some mixture of these two concepts, in a permanent gray area between praise and disgust; Sander Gilman posits that this gap is what is indeed real, yet the two are often placed in conversation with each other at opposite poles.¹⁹ Fatness, taken at face value in Greek medicine, symbolizes a pathological state of imbalance in the body; Hippocrates and his camp believed that there was a correlating relationship between different foods and their effects. This connection between food and bodily expressions is alive and well, expressed in “three related beliefs: first, that all foods are either poisons, which make you fat and feeble, or medicines, which make you sleek and lovely; second, that raw vegetables, including salad and crudités, fall into the medicine category; and third, that the plant kingdom has been put there by some benign force for man’s pleasure and well-being.”²⁰ Thus, thinness is equated to health, and fatness is equated to sickness.

Fatness was also cemented into the consciousness of the Christian West. Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins, and “the temptation to overeat was written on the body in the form of fat.”²¹ The famous Early Christian writer, Augustine of Hippo recounted the struggle between food as health and food as illness in his writings, stating “I look upon food as a medicine. But..

¹⁷ Deborah Lupton, *Fat*, (Second ed. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018), Preamble.

¹⁸ Peter Stearns, quoted in “Analysis Facing the Fats,” transcript of a recorded documentary (BBC London; broadcast date: 22 August 2002).

¹⁹ Sander L. Gilman, *Fat Boys: A Slim Book* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 11.

²⁰ Jeffrey Steingarten, *The Man Who Ate Everything* (New York: Random House, 1998), 177.

²¹ Gilman, 51.

the process itself is a pleasure.”²² With this struggle, the body becomes a battleground of simple sustenance versus enjoyment. Good Christians must strive for the ideal body: not of this world; holy is *thin*. The body becomes a manifestation of the composition of the inner soul, expected to physically show the rejection of carnal desires. Thus, holy people stressed the ascetic values of abstaining from food and drink, demonstrating the divine nature of a thin body and simultaneously rejecting the fat body. This established a moral necessity to control appearance, defining fatness as a moral dilemma expressed on the body. By the seventeenth century, the idea of good and bad foods expressed earlier became cemented in literature. Johann Sigismund Elsholtz’s *Diaeteticon* (1682) listed food and drink based on their healthy and unhealthy properties, becoming the standard for the classification of foods. He also brought forth Hippocrates again, warning that even an athletic body could easily become ill or age more quickly if a man is prone to overeating.²³ By categorizing foods as good or bad, the bodies that ingest the food are also categorized as good or bad; the bad body will then be cast as lesser than the good body.

In the nineteenth century, the moral argument against obesity became a question for science, as the line between the real and imagined became blurred. Fatness was not only a moral problem, but also the focus of scientific debate. Rather than stressing the moral questions of fatness, the science of diet rose to the forefront of the rhetoric of the fat body. However, the underlying sentiment still prevailed: “the reward for the thin man is life, life extended, while the fat man dies young and badly.”²⁴ Although dieting became a popular concept, fatness in science also progressed, theorized to be a natural progression of the body over an arc of virility. Even

²² St. Augustine. *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 236.

²³ Johann Sigismund Elsholtz, *Diaeteticon* (Munich: Richter, 1985), 345.

²⁴ Gilman, 60.

then, excessive fat is never to be praised, as it becomes oppressive and dangerous and eventually becomes a “more serious import to the health.”²⁵ In Kantian fashion, the physical body returned to moral roots, as man’s rational mind must be in control of his body. With the introduction of dieting techniques and exercise regimens, those who still could not control their body communicated a lack of discipline and caring to their thin peers. So, fatness was not a sought-after trait; it was not a symbol of health, nor was it a quality of a model citizen. The concept of health excludes fatness, favoring a picture of the body that is aesthetically pleasing, or in this case, thin. Thus, the memory of Taft has been contained to the depiction of his weight. Taft’s struggle to control his body became an integral part of his identity, and he spent years corresponding with dieticians, physical education teachers, and weight specialists throughout his adult life.

Born 16 September 1857 to Alfonso and Louisa Torrey Taft, William Howard lived a comfortable life in the suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio. Although he was born into a farming family, Alfonso graduated third in his class of ninety-four at Yale before completing a law degree (also from Yale) in 1838.²⁶ Louisa Torrey Taft descended from Boston colonial families on both sides of her lineage, graduating from Mount Holyoke College before moving to New Haven, Connecticut to attend lectures. Alfonso and Louise married in December 1853, and Louise soon gave birth to William, Henry, Horace, and Frances, who would join two half-brothers from Alfonso’s previous marriage.²⁷ Dubbed a “healthy and fat” baby, William Howard Taft was described as having a “clamorous appetite” from birth.²⁸ Smart, but not a genius, Taft went

²⁵ Thomas Jameson, *Essays on the Changes of the Human Body, at Its Different Ages* (London: Longman, Hurst, Bees, Orme, and Brown, 1811), 92.

²⁶ Frederick, 2.

²⁷ Frederick, 5.

²⁸ Alphonso Taft to Increase Tarbox, September 21, 1857. Unless otherwise indicated, correspondence is found in the William Howard Taft Papers, Manuscripts Division Library of Congress.

through school diligently, graduating second from his high school graduating class before following in his father's footsteps to Yale University in 1874. After graduating second in his class of 132 in 1878, Taft returned to Cincinnati for the summer before beginning law school at the Cincinnati Law School.²⁹ He finished his law studies in 1880 and passed the Ohio state bar exam that same year, entering into private law practice at the behest of his academic parents.

Six years later, he would marry Helen "Nellie" Herron, an elementary school teacher. Taft was soon appointed to the Superior Court of Cincinnati in 1887, then took the post of Solicitor General in 1890 before moving back to Cincinnati to sit on the newly founded Sixth U.S. Judicial Circuit in 1892.³⁰ Taft spent eight years on the judicial bench, intellectually challenged and personally fulfilled by his immersion in the law. With Nellie and three children in tow, Taft took a major turn in his career: sailing to the Philippines to head a commission to establish a civil government in 1900. Now aged 43, Taft's weight became a subject of concern for those closest to him. He took daily walks on the deck of the boat, wanting to "[shed] some bulk before reaching the tropical climate of the Philippines."³¹ While on a stop in Japan, Taft ordered ten white linen suits for himself, writing to his brother that he would take a picture in one to show him "what a magnificent figure I cut."³² After his arrival in the Philippines, Taft and his party traveled to each of the provinces, feasting and enjoying the lavish festivities thrown in his and the other commissioners' honor. On the heels of a period in which much friction ensued with the military apparatus already there, Taft was inaugurated as Governor of the Philippines in 1901. He served as governor until 1903, when President Theodore Roosevelt had a bigger task for Taft to take on: Secretary of War.

²⁹ Frederick, 9.

³⁰ Frederick, 32.

³¹ Frederick, 40.

³² WHT to CPT, May 12 and 18, 1900.

Before he departed the Philippines, however, there would be one last banquet in Taft's honor. Nellie planned a Venetian Carnival, in which Taft would play the Doge of Venice. He wrote to his brother that there was difficulty in finding a robe that would "conceal my nether extremities as to make it unnecessary for me to dye my nether undergarments to a proper colour, for the entire Orient cannot produce tights of a sufficient size."³³ Taft was now over three hundred pounds, a subject that would continue to worry him entering into this next phase of his life in Washington. However, upon his return to the capitol, Taft's main challenge was helping Roosevelt get reelected, becoming a major campaigner for Roosevelt while at the same time gaining publicity and name recognition for himself on the trail. After Roosevelt's win, Taft continued to travel as the Secretary of War. He would use his time aboard steamers to walk four miles a day, again paying attention to the issue of his weight.³⁴ It would now take center stage, as Taft tried to address his weight problem for the first time in 1905. He paid \$65 (\$1,859 by today's standards) for a diet recommended by his sister-in-law, joking that "this will require me to prepare myself in the long intervals with interesting conversation" because he would be able to eat very little when dining out.³⁵ However, Taft soon felt frustration with his denial of food: "it is possible that the deprivation of everything good to eat does affect a man's bubbling appreciation of life."³⁶

The first modern diet was produced in 1863 by an English undertaker named William Banting; his diet, which focused on avoiding sugar, starch, sweet foods, beer, and most dairy, became a wildly popular work on dieting that would set the stage for subsequent diets in the

³³ Helen Herron Taft, *Recollections of Full Years* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1914), 270-273.

³⁴ Frederick, 68.

³⁵ CPI Inflation Calculator. <http://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1905?amount=65>; WHT to CPT, October 21, 1905.

³⁶ WHT to CPT, December 3, 1905.

years to come. Dieting was extremely popular during Taft's time, gaining traction as a field of study and expertise. Taft's diet was prescribed by Nathaniel Edward Yorke-Davies, an English physician well-known for his literature on diet and corpulence, or obesity. Yorke-Davies treated corpulence as a treatable disease, cementing obesity as illness throughout his works. His correspondence with President Taft came about in the formative period of obesity's relationship to medicine and treatment, so it can offer important insights into how treatment was handled at the time. As evidenced by his abundant correspondence with family and friends tracking his progress, Taft believed that by employing a physician to prescribe a personal regimen, his struggles with his weight would be solved. Yorke-Davies was a leading expert in "dietetics" at the time, publishing diet guides, several articles on obesity in medical journals, and even a treatise on alcohol consumption. By choosing Yorke-Davies, Taft was opting to consider his treatment as a medical issue in need of attention; thus, rather than forbidding things like caffeine or alcohol, Yorke-Davies offered Taft specific solutions based on lean meats and a reduced sugar intake. Taft frequently sent Yorke-Davies detailed letters that handled his weight, foods eaten, exercise schedule, and even his bowel movements. Taft wrote to Yorke-Davies that "no real gentleman weighs over 300 pounds," explaining that he needed to lose weight not only to alleviate some physical symptoms, but also in hopes of becoming a better civil servant.³⁷ Yorke-Davies obliged, sending Taft his advice and a list of foods he could and could not eat based on Taft's complaints of heartburn, indigestion, restless sleep, and fatigue.³⁸ After only two weeks, Taft wrote his brother on his progress, saying, "Everybody says that I am looking very well,

³⁷ William Howard Taft to Nathaniel Edwards Yorke-Davies, 27 October 1905.

³⁸ Deborah I. Levine, "Corpulence and Correspondence: President William H. Taft and the Medical Management of Obesity," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 159, no. 8, 15 October 2013.

which indicates I suppose that I have a good color . . . but I am pretty continuously hungry. That, however, is a good symptom. I suppose.”³⁹



Figure 1. Secretary Taft posed full-length on horseback, 1905. (Library of Congress)

Along with his diet, Taft exercised regularly, playing rounds of golf in the fall and spring and riding his horse whenever possible in the winter (Figure 1). After meeting a young physical education teacher from Wisconsin named Charles Barker, Taft followed a regular exercise regimen while staying attentive to his diet. Barker wrote that Taft “suffered from a functional disease of the heart” in his memoir about when he first started working with Taft.⁴⁰ In just four months, he lost over 60 pounds, dropping from over 315 on 1 December 1905 to 265 pounds at the end of his official diet. He would weigh 255 pounds by the summer of 1906, the lightest he had been in years. Taft stopped drowsing off after meals and felt more energetic throughout the day. He would also comment on his weight nearly every day in letters to his family, regularly informing them of his progress throughout the process. Barker even said that Taft’s heart disease had “vanished,” but Taft’s work with Barker would not end there: Barker would return to Taft’s side in 1908 in order to resume treatments again, but this time it would be in the Oval Office.⁴¹

³⁹ William Howard Taft to Horace Taft. 16 December 1905.

⁴⁰ Charles E. Barker, *With President Taft in the White House: Memories of William Howard Taft* (Chicago: A. Kroch and Son, 1947), 15.

⁴¹ Barker, 15.

Like Barker, Yorke-Davies would also continue to play a significant role, appearing in Taft's correspondence to inquire about his health for many years to come. In 1907, after Taft had discontinued his treatment for a time, Yorke-Davies wrote to his friends and family in order to keep track of his charge. When he heard back that Taft had gained nineteen pounds back, he swiftly recommended that Taft take up treatment again, warning Taft that "in another three or four years you will be almost back to your original weight."⁴²

By 1908, Taft had become a favorite for the Republican ticket for the presidency. Promising to respect the unofficial two-term precedent, President Theodore Roosevelt assured the country that he would not run again, instead throwing his support behind a candidate who would best protect his policies and the interests of the Republican party. With Roosevelt's support, Taft's nomination was all but sure. In the early months leading up to the election, Taft was directly involved in the campaign, traveling across the Midwest to gain extra exposure in less-traversed areas of the country. Additionally, he continued in his role as the Secretary of War, traveling to Panama and gaining even more support as a man well-versed in diplomacy and the world stage. When the convention met in June of 1908, Taft was comfortably situated to be the nominee, with 702 votes compared to runner-up Philander Knox's 68.⁴³ As was custom, Taft did not attend the convention, but received news of his nomination by wire at the Department of War with his family. After resigning his position in the Cabinet at the end of June, Taft returned to Cincinnati to officially accept the nomination with an hour-long speech. Initially, Taft planned to be involved with the campaign only marginally, hoping to visit friends and family as well as play more than a few rounds of golf. Much like the muted campaign for the nomination, Taft's Presidential campaign appeared to be a calm affair.

⁴² Letter from Nathaniel Edwards Yorke-Davies to William Howard Taft. 29 July 1907.

⁴³ Frederick, 88.

Taft's calm style was not up to par with one of the most avid campaigners in American politics. President Roosevelt criticized Taft's apparent aloofness, concerned that the continuing coverage of Taft's golf matches made Taft appear elitist and unrelatable.⁴⁴ Roosevelt advised Taft that "I would never let any friends advertise my tennis, and *never* let a photo of me in tennis costume appear."⁴⁵ John Hays Hammond, a close friend of Taft's, took issue with Roosevelt's criticism, quipping, "just what form of exercise a man weighing over three hundred pounds should take was not suggested."⁴⁶ The contrast made between Roosevelt and Taft would return in 1912 as Roosevelt challenged Taft for the Republican nomination; Roosevelt's bid for a third term and his digs at Taft would diminish Taft's standing in the public eye. In this particular issue that was seemingly related to likability and eligibility, the conversation was implicitly turned to Taft's body; by chastising both Taft's calm campaign and his appearance while playing golf, Roosevelt linked Taft's success to the representation of his body. So, Taft took on a more active approach to winning the presidency, setting an ambitious speaking schedule that would take him as far west as Colorado. He focused on issues that differentiated himself from Democratic nominee William Jennings Bryan, as well as laying out speaking points that worked to cement his position as Roosevelt's disciple and successor.

While Taft spoke persuasively and elegantly in his campaign speeches, there is no doubt that his appearance and good humor greatly influenced his popularity. Roosevelt encouraged Taft to smile, saying "I feel your nature shines out transparently when you do smile."⁴⁷ Taft would often break out into laughter during his speeches, creating a laugh so sincere and infectious that the audience would join him "even when the point which had amused Taft was

⁴⁴ Frederick, 94.

⁴⁵ TR to WHT, September 14, 1908. Cf. the follow-up from TR on September 16.

⁴⁶ John Hays Hammond, *The Autobiography of John Hays Hammond* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1935), II: 540.

⁴⁷ TR to WHT, September 11, 1908.

vague to them.”⁴⁸ Here, the attention is directed to Taft’s personality, and the audience was taken with his likability and friendliness. Of course, not everyone was convinced by Taft’s jolly appearance—throughout his campaign, political cartoonists took shots at his weight, portraying him as grossly obese in daily papers across the country.



Figure 3 (Left). “Illustration shows a bloated William Jennings Bryan with a paper extending from a pocket labeled “Membership Fat Man’s Club. W.J. Bryan,” riding a diminutive Democratic donkey and William H. Taft riding a diminutive Republican elephant labeled ‘G.O.P.’” 1907 May 22. (LOC)

Figure 4 (Right). “Illustration shows William H. Taft sitting on a hammock with the Republican elephant labeled "G.O.P." wooing her with a box of ‘Ohio Bonbons.’” 1907 July 24. (LOC)

In Figure 3, a May 1907 comic from Puck Magazine depicts both William Jennings Bryan and Taft as members of the “Fat Man’s Club,” each riding a miniature version of his party’s mascot and “exercising the mounts.” This is not simply a grotesque depiction of bodily form rather than political commentary; this comic demonstrates the illustrator’s lack of respect

⁴⁸ Henry F. Pringle, *The Life and Times of William Howard Taft: A Biography*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1939), I: 367.

for authority, evading the political issues of the campaign in favor of taking a shot at bodily appearance. Figure 4, published in July 1907, is another comic from Puck Magazine that depicts Taft sitting in a hammock with an elephant labelled G.O.P., feeding her ‘Ohio Bonbons’ above the caption “Just made for each other.” Again, there is an emphasis on weight: the elephant and Taft are bulging out of the hammock, while eating candy, a food notoriously known as unhealthy. The representation of Taft’s body in this particular magazine favors jokes about Taft’s form rather than engaging with his political platform.

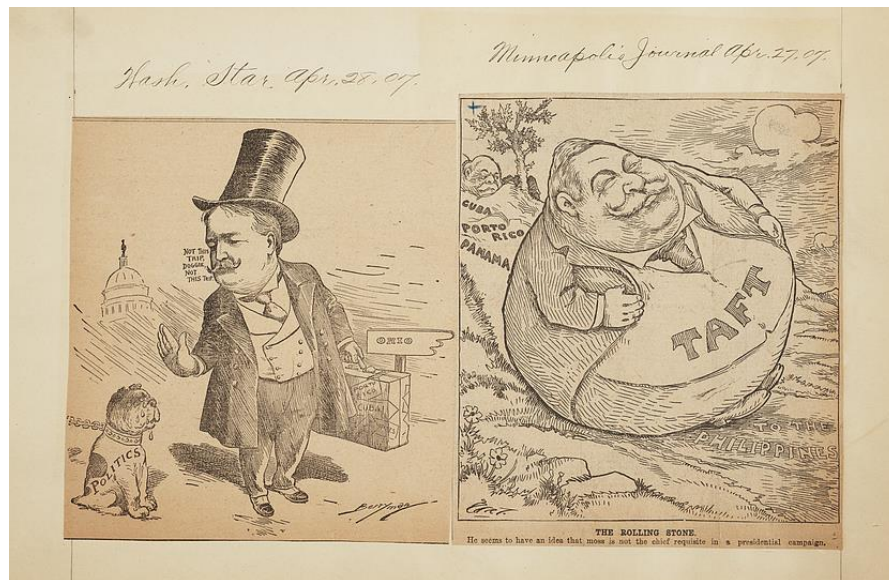


Figure 5. “Two political cartoons on one sheet: cartoon on left by Clifford Berryman published in the Washington Star, April 28, 1907, shows Taft leaving a dog labeled "Politics" behind in Washington, D.C., as he travels to Ohio; cartoon on right by Charles Lewis Bartholomew published in the Minneapolis Journal, April 27, 1907, shows Taft as a stone rolling down a hill over Cuba, Puerto Rico, Panama, and the Philippines but gathering no moss.” (Library of Congress)

Figure 5 shows two drawings of Taft, both from April 1907. The left shows Taft telling a small dog labeled ‘politics,’ “not this trip, doggie. Not this trip.” This comic is a commentary on Taft’s campaign, as he brushes off politics to travel away from the capitol building back home to Ohio. The right comic depicts Taft as a stone that gains no “moss” as he rolls away from his experiences in Cuba, Panama, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. “A rolling stone gains no moss”

is an old proverb credited to Publilus Syrus that states that people who are always moving grow no roots, making them avoid responsibilities or serious cares. These comics are clues to the public's perception of the Taft candidacy, because combined, they represent a direct criticism of Taft's inactive political style as well as a sharp doubt of his political ability for the nomination. It seems that not only Roosevelt disapproved of Taft's initial campaign; the voters also took notice of the laid-back attitude of the first months of Taft's campaign, as well as positing that Taft would shirk his duties if he were to take office. Considering that Figures 3 and 4 were published in Puck Magazine (New York), the bottom left comic in Figure 5 was published in the Washington Star, and the bottom right was published in the Minneapolis Journal, we have evidence that there were detractors of Taft's position in politics and his body that stretched over a significant area of the United States at the time. Additionally, the fixation on Taft's body could be used to embody or evade political discourse at the time—in the case of the Puck Magazine comics, the emphasis on his body was a way to disengage from issues at the time such as trust busting or progressive policy, while the comics from the Washington Star and Minneapolis Journal use his form to better communicate the illustrators' political criticism.

Regardless of the cartoons or his relationship to the public, the support from Roosevelt, healthy economy, and relative lack of scandal won Taft the presidency with little difficulty. Winning 321-162 in the electoral vote and 7,678,000 to Bryan's 6,408,000 in the popular vote, Taft's victory was a vote of confidence in the Republican Party for another four years. After the campaign, Taft returned to Hot Springs, Virginia to relax and take up golfing again. He would later go to Augusta, Georgia in order to keep golfing during the winter but minimize political contact with his peers.⁴⁹ Taft was in the delicate position of an incoming president beholden to

⁴⁹ Frederick, 97.

his party's previous administration; since he campaigned on the position of affirming Roosevelt's policies, he would be unable to change many aspects of the government without breaking campaign promises and earning the mire of the Republican party. Many of Roosevelt's cabinet members had believed they would retain their positions; in fact, Taft was already choosing his own cabinet members, shaking up the current administration even further. Thus, Taft's ascension to the presidency was subjected to political detractors from the beginning, as it seemed that forging his own path as President could satisfy neither the liberal or conservative interest groups in the Republican party.

While facing political pressure from his party, Taft was again putting personal pressure on his body. When Taft first began his diet five years earlier, he paid careful attention to his weight, weighing himself every day and sending his records to Yorke-Davies once a week. However, as time went by, Taft became less and less consistent in his efforts. His weight reports to Yorke-Davies became inflated, showing greater weight loss in his handwritten personal missives than in his official reports sent to his dietician.⁵⁰ He invited Charles Barker to return to the White House, again beginning a habit of diet and exercise. Barker's work *With President Taft in the White House* details Taft's exercise regime, which included waking up at seven A.M. before completing thirty minutes of gymnastics, a ten-minute period of rest, and twenty minutes of "boxing, wrestling, or tossing the medicine ball."⁵¹ Barker claims that when Senator Ike Stephenson asked President Taft why he got up so early in the morning for "an hour of fool exercises" when his position allows him to stay in bed, Taft replied:

Uncle Ike, I guess I hate getting up early and exercising at such ungodly hours as much as anyone. But on March 4, 1909, I took an oath declaring that I would perform the duties of

⁵⁰ Levine, 568.

⁵¹ Barker, 17.

the President of the United States to the best of my ability. In order to keep myself fit for this job I know I must do this very thing I hate—exercise.⁵²

Yorke-Davies kept a watchful eye on Taft over the years, connecting with family members and friends in Taft's inner circle to keep informed about Taft's health. While Taft may not have welcomed this behavior, he tolerated it, and Yorke-Davies never contacted the press about his famous patient. Taft's body was the subject of much anxiety by the time he took office in 1909. Standing six feet, two inches tall and 354 pounds, Taft's ascendancy to the presidency was fraught with political cartoons, offhand comments, newspaper articles, and many jokes. Taft's decisions to seek medical treatment and advice are representative of his need to escape from these trials, as well as his determination to change how his body was perceived.⁵³ While President, Taft would face even closer scrutiny, with newspapers commenting on his meals and appearance frequently.

This scrutiny carried over into his political life as well; upon taking office, Taft's promises to further Roosevelt's legacy came back to haunt him. In hopes of lowering tariffs for American goods, Taft pushed a tariff bill through Congress that left the Republican party deeply divided, enraging the political base that had elected him. While introducing foreign policy initiatives that were geared less towards intervention and more towards economic cooperation, Roosevelt stepped back into the political sphere, calling the treaties "silly and hypocritical."⁵⁴ Taft and Roosevelt were diverging more and more as Taft grew into his own presidency, asserting his extensive knowledge of law and foreign policy matters to guide him rather than Roosevelt's example. Taft existed in an interesting moment, as Roosevelt had largely redefined the personality of the president. Existing as a man who had hardened himself in the American

⁵² Quoted in Barker, 19.

⁵³ Levine, 569.

⁵⁴ WHT to Philander C. Knox, September 9, 1911, Knox Papers, Cont. 15.

West and through battle in the Spanish-American War, Teddy Roosevelt had added an extra element of masculinity to the presidency, effectively setting another parameter for his successors to meet. Roosevelt cast Taft as weak, patronizing him through claims of silliness and publicly criticizing his once-protégé. In the months leading up to the 1912 election, Taft was sure of two things: the Republican nomination would not be easy to secure and the Democrats would seize upon the unrest in a fierce fight.⁵⁵ By February, Theodore Roosevelt reneged on his 1904 pledge to not seek reelection; he threw his hat into the ring again, running for an unprecedented third term. Declaring his candidacy for the Republican Party, Roosevelt's campaign was an unprecedented rebuke of the sitting President Taft.

During the primary campaign, Taft traveled to twelve states, attempting to sell both himself and his arbitration treaties to the people. From the outset, Roosevelt did not hesitate to compare his and Taft's achievements in office, as well as imply that Taft no longer stood for the values of the American people: Roosevelt wrote that Taft was guilty of "abandoning the policies for the benefit of the people" that Roosevelt had put in to place.⁵⁶ Taft scoffed at Roosevelt's "lies and unblushing misrepresentations," and although he secured the Republican Party's nomination, Roosevelt and his supporters formed the Progressive Party, again emphasizing Roosevelt's dissatisfaction with Taft's administration.⁵⁷ A mixture of political unrest over a split Congress and splitting the votes of the Republican Party between Taft and Roosevelt swung the 1912 election to democrat Woodrow Wilson's favor, ending Taft's tenure as President after only one term. Roosevelt's loss of respect for Taft brought about Taft's demise in the public eye. Viewed as a failed incumbent, Taft's trust-busting, progressive record soon gave way to

⁵⁵ Frederick, 135.

⁵⁶ Andrew Carnegie to Theodore Roosevelt, March 1, 1912 and Roosevelt's reply, March 5, 1912, both in Carnegie Papers, Cont. 204.

⁵⁷ WHT to Horace Taft, April 14, 1912.

widespread disrespect from the American public. By the end of his presidency, the *Wall Street Journal* was reporting how many meals he had eaten in a day, going as far as remarking, “no wonder he is fat.”⁵⁸ With today’s news climate, this might not seem half-bad. However, print media was king in the early 1900s, making small columns in the *Wall Street Journal* reach many more Americans than we could think possible. When compared to Roosevelt’s Big Stick policy record, Taft’s crusade for the arbitration treaties was cast as ineffective and soured his last months in office.

Taft left the White House held in mediocre regard by the American people; however, his supposed sojourn with the bathtub sealed his fate in American memory. President Hoover wrote in his memoir that Taft got stuck in the bathtub and would need to be helped out each time he took a bath—there is no actual evidence of this, nor is there any historical scholarship that substantiates Hoover’s claim. Although he had purposely installed a larger tub in the White House and on several ships to fit his large form, the rumor that Taft had gotten stuck in the tub spread like wildfire, permeating the minds of Americans for generations to come.⁵⁹ Not only was this untrue, but it severely affected Taft’s image—the indignity of the ordeal diminished his standing as a politician, hurting his respectability and stature as the leader of the United States. Negative perceptions of obesity in America have permeated the social consciousness, imbuing the public with the idea that fatness is not only unhealthy, but wholly undesirable and morally weak. From perceptions of fatness as imbalance in Greek culture, to fatness as sin and illness in Western Christianity, and finally to fatness as a medical condition ripe for curing in more recent collective mind, the negative conception of fatness has transcended our history, still existing in society today. The blending of the moral implications of obesity and the medical lens with which

⁵⁸ “No Wonder He is Fat,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 1913.

⁵⁹ Scott Bomboy, “Clearing up the William Howard Taft Bathtub Myth,” *Constitution Daily*, February 6, 2013.

it is approached has created an American people that delights in the propagation of an easy caricature of a fat man stuck in a bathtub. Taft's experience was one of near constant worry, as the specter of his own weight haunted him throughout his private and public life. Much of his correspondence with his family and friends details the state of his body rather than the state of his mind, demonstrating that his attempts to diet and create a "healthy" body for himself took center stage far too often in his sense of self. Taft's pressure on his own form sprung from societal expectations; while the American public did not always have a negative view of his body, Taft's operated under the assumption that his personal success would parallel his bodily progress. Correlation does not imply causation, but Taft's focus on his weight and bodily appearance often coincided with moments of political pressure and uncertainty—his body became a vehicle through which Taft expressed worry.

While Taft's physical form was not a direct obstacle to his success, it still shaped how he approached the presidency and much of his personal philosophy. It was his duty to serve the country to the best of his ability, so losing weight became both a goal and a necessity. Taft would go on from the Presidency to become the tenth Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, making him the only man in history to hold the highest offices in both the executive and judicial branches. However, because of his body and its perceived sickness, Taft's impressive accomplishments as a president who championed progressive policy, established the first income tax, and almost finished the Panama Canal are ignored in favor of propagating a story about a fat man stuck in a bathtub. As a lawyer, Solicitor General, circuit court judge, Governor of the Philippines, Secretary of War, President, and Chief Justice, the story of Taft's life has so much more to be remembered by than a tall tale about his body, yet the form of the body is what has been constantly brought to the public eye. At the 75th Celebration of the National Archives and

Records Administration in 2009, NARA held a special exhibit, titled “BIG!” The exhibit featured a replica of Taft’s massive bathtub alongside a giant Civil War map of the Gettysburg Battle and the size 22 sneakers of Shaquille O’Neal.⁶⁰

Taft’s position as the only noticeably fat president in the 20th century meant that his reckoning with his body did not change the social fabric of America; rather, the jeers directed toward his weight and appearance solidified the crude, disrespectful way Americans respond when confronted with fatness. In this respect, Americans have still never broken through the mold of discussing fatness that was constructed in the early 20th century; Americans’ perception of obesity is still stuck in the bathtub. Thus, the representation of Taft’s body in life mattered greatly for how he would be remembered in death—the strong fixation on his body throughout his lifetime unfairly influenced public memory for years to come, disproportionately constraining Taft’s memory to the bathtub.

⁶⁰ “BIG! Exhibition Celebrating National Archives 75th Anniversary,” Press Release, December 5, 2008. <https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2009/nr09-26.html>

II. Woodrow Wilson: A Secret from the Masses



“Living out his last months in the White House as an invalid, Wilson saw his greatest dream shattered.”⁶¹

Woodrow Wilson is best remembered by his leadership during World War One and his tireless efforts to ratify his Fourteen Points of Peace, a progressive measure written to help establish order in the broken world that limped away from the Great War. Wilson was not only a great statesman, but an idealistic academic, letting his sharp mind shape his political decisions in the White House. Another distinguishing factor of Wilson’s presidency was the amount of time he spent bedridden; although it was billed as a case of acute exhaustion, Wilson suffered from far more serious health issues than he ever let on. Strokes, transient ischemic attacks, and general sickness plagued Wilson’s last seventeen months in office. However, this fact was not widely known to the public—those closest to Wilson went to great lengths to conceal the truth about his health. Unlike his predecessor Taft, Wilson’s sojourn with sickness greatly affected his ability to

⁶¹ Kendrick A. Clements and Eric A. Cheezum, *Woodrow Wilson*, American Presidents Reference Series (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2003), 6.

act as commander-in-chief. Thus, in the wake of the greatest conflict the world had ever seen, Wilson and his staff hid his frailty from the world in order to uphold the show of strength the Americans had shown in battle. Wilson's sickness had no place in the months following WWI, leading to a time of secrecy and lies from the highest office in the nation. So, he turned to confidentiality and privacy rather than face the scrutiny of the public. Wilson contributed to the rhetoric of presidential bodies by refusing to release details of his ordeal; instead, Americans would discover later that the twenty-eighth President of the United States had not been serving as president at all by the end of his second term in office.

Long before his sickness, Wilson led an average life. Born 28 December 1856, Thomas Woodrow Wilson was the third child born to Joseph Ruggles Wilson and Jessie Woodrow Wilson. Joseph was a Presbyterian minister, so the Wilson family traveled where the church called him. Wilson did not learn the alphabet until he was nine and did not fully learn to read until twelve. Many historians blame this fact on poor education in the South during the war or the psychological conflict with his father. However, most recent scholarship shows that he most likely suffered from a mild form of dyslexia.⁶² Once literate, Wilson adopted shorthand and the use of a typewriter, both devices used to help mitigate the struggles of dyslexia. After Joseph joined the faculty at the Columbia Theological Seminary in 1870, the Wilson family moved to Columbia, South Carolina. Joseph was a large part of Woodrow's academic life, stressing independent thought and analysis rather than rote memorization; Joseph would read aloud to the family from British books and magazines and encourage his son to write down his thoughts on the matter.⁶³ Wilson would later remember the lesson as "the penalty for cramming one's mind

⁶² Clements and Cheezum, 10.

⁶³ Clements and Cheezum, 11.

with other men's thoughts is to have no thoughts of one's own."⁶⁴ Religion played an understandably large role in the Wilson household; Woodrow tagged along with his father to seminary frequently, which helped to establish his strong roots in faith and religion.

In September 1873, Wilson left for Davidson College in North Carolina at age sixteen. He completed one year, but was frequently ill, which some biographers have posited was at least partly psychosomatic.⁶⁵ Wilson completed his next year at home before attending Princeton University in the autumn of 1875. Intellectually unchallenged, Wilson turned again to the British literature his father loved, spending his time independently studying British intellectual debates and policy. He lived an insulated life at Princeton, rarely engaging in the world around him until the end of Ulysses S. Grant's administration and the Presidential election of 1876, about which he remarked, "the American Republic will... never celebrate another Centennial" without drastic reform.⁶⁶ Following the embattled election and the shaky victory of Rutherford B. Hayes, Wilson published his first article in 1879. In "Cabinet Government in the United States," he proposed replacing the branches of the American system with a parliamentary system similar to Britain.⁶⁷

After he graduated from Princeton in 1879, he enrolled in the University of Virginia law school, where he found that legal study was not nearly as interesting as his idealistic self-education. Wilson wrote to a friend that he was "struggling...and swallowing the vast amount of its technicalities with as good a grace and as straight a face as an offended palate will allow."⁶⁸ He dropped out of school after a year and a half, opting to finish his last semester of studies from home. After he passed the Georgia bar exam in October 1882, he set up an unsuccessful practice

⁶⁴ Arthur S. Link and others, eds. 1966-1994, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 3:144.

⁶⁵ Clements and Cheezum, 12.

⁶⁶ Link and others 1966, 1:143.

⁶⁷ Link and others 1966, 1: 500-503.

⁶⁸ Link and others 1966, 1:591.

in Atlanta with a Princeton classmate. Giving up after sixth months, he wrote, “the profession I chose was politics; the one I entered was law. I entered the one because I thought it would lead to the other.”⁶⁹ Thus, he abandoned practicing law in favor of pursuing a graduate degree in history and political science at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. In his last weeks of practicing law, he met Ellen Axson, whom he courted until she agreed to marry him in June 1885. Although he pursued his academic career with vigor, he bemoaned that it would make him “an *outside* force in politics...through literary and non-partisan agencies” rather than on the front lines of the action.⁷⁰ He finished his study of Congress started earlier at Princeton, publishing the book in 1885 after only a little over a year of graduate work. Johns Hopkins then changed its PhD requirements to accept the book as a PhD dissertation, awarding Wilson a PhD at age thirty.

While teaching at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Wilson published his second book, *The State*, in 1889, which made him an established scholar in the academic community. From there, he received an offer from Princeton to become a professor of jurisprudence and political economy; by the age of thirty-three, Wilson became the university’s highest paid professor.⁷¹ However, Wilson still felt drawn to public service: he wanted to achieve his “heart’s first—primary—ambition and purpose, which was, to take an active, if possible a leading, part in public life, and...a statesman’s career.”⁷² In 1896, Wilson experienced his first serious health scare: he suffered a stroke, suddenly losing control of his right hand.⁷³ This would be the initial event of many; moving forward, Wilson would suffer additional strokes and illnesses that would ultimately leave him unable to govern the country. However, this fright did not slow his

⁶⁹ Link and others 1967, 2:500.

⁷⁰ Link and others 1967, 3:172.

⁷¹ Clements and Cheezum, 17.

⁷² Link and others 1970, 8:220.

⁷³ Robert H. Ferrell, *Ill-advised: Presidential Health and Public Trust* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 12.

ambitions; Wilson continued to dedicate himself to his work at Princeton, where he was unanimously elected the thirteenth president of the university in 1902 (Figure 1).

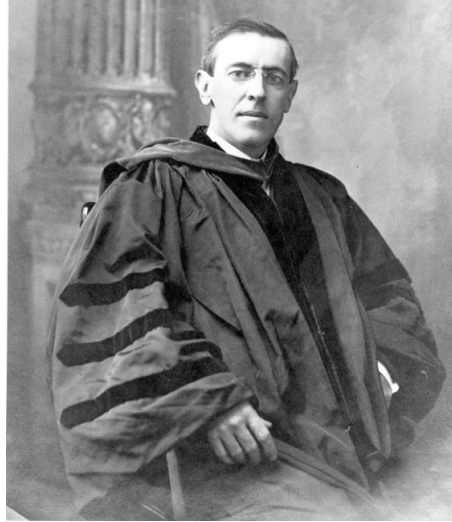


Figure 1. Wilson, President of Princeton University. (Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library)

In June 1904, Wilson suffered from another stroke, again affecting his right hand for several months. Along with the strokes, he experienced more health issues, including a corrective operation on an intestinal hernia and a bout of phlebitis in one of his legs that left him bedridden until February 1905. It would get worse—in May 1906, he awoke blind in his left eye. Although the first reports concluded that it was merely a burst blood vessel, later reports informed the Wilsons that it was a hardening of the arteries and high blood pressure. His wife Ellen described it as “dying by inches, and incurable.”⁷⁴ Although he recovered from these illnesses for the most part, he never regained his peripheral vision in his left eye. “Firm-jawed, stern-eyed, he looked the very picture of health”—and his ambition would propel him further still.⁷⁵ Thus, his appearance still projected the picture of health, not allowing for signs of illness to the outside

⁷⁴ Link and others 1973, 16:430.

⁷⁵ Ferrell, 12.

world. Wilson's record of unseen sickness would resurface later in his presidency, creating his ability to shield his health status from the public.

At this time, Wilson was facing sharp criticism from alumni for attempting to remove selective eating clubs in favor of residential quadrangles. The trustees removed their support of Wilson's plan in light of falling alumni donations, squashing Wilson's hopes to create a more open, close-knit academic community. He was frustrated further by the dean of the graduate school, who wished to establish the new graduate campus "near the campus and yet sufficiently retired to ensure the residential separation of the graduate from the undergraduate students."⁷⁶ Wilson thence informed the trustees that they would have to decide which vision for the future of the university would move forward in May 1907, creating further stress for himself. These decisions lasted into November 1907, when Wilson suffered what he called "an act of Neuritis" that left his right arm partially paralyzed for several weeks.⁷⁷ He took his doctors' advice to take a break and vacationed in Bermuda to convalesce in January 1908. By 1910, Wilson's struggles with the graduate dean came to a head, when the dean secured a bequest that would allow him to build the graduate buildings wherever he pleased. While Wilson contemplated resigning as Princeton's president, his quadrangle plan established him as a progressive in the eyes of the Democratic Party's leaders.

George Brinton McClellan Harvey, the publisher of *Harper's Weekly* and a conservative Democrat eager to unseat William Jennings Bryan's leadership of the Democratic Party, believed that Wilson would hold wide appeal as a moderate candidate.⁷⁸ Although Wilson did not take Harvey seriously at first, Harvey seized on Wilson's popularity in the newspapers as Princeton's

⁷⁶ Link and others 1974, 17:143.

⁷⁷ Link and others 1974, 17:549.

⁷⁸ Clements and Cheezum, 21.

progressive president and engineered Wilson as the Democratic candidate for New Jersey's governorship in 1910. Because he had dreamed about this opportunity since his youth, Wilson was delighted at the prospect of a political career. Wilson's health problems were not publicized, so his healthy appearance was assurance enough that he was up to the task. At this time, New Jersey was controlled by party bosses who were looking for a suitable candidate to fall in line with their policies: not only "a Democrat of high character" who would appeal to middle- and upper-class voters, but also someone with relatively little political experience, thus making them easier to control after the election.⁷⁹ With the party bosses' support, Harvey assured Wilson that the nomination came without strings attached, so Wilson assured friends that he would accept it because it came "unsought, unanimously, and without pledges to anybody or anything."⁸⁰ After he secured the nomination with one ballot at the Democratic convention of 1910, Wilson set about campaigning, promising major reform for the party that had secured his nomination. He appealed to voters to trust his leadership and personal strength, saying, "government is personal, gentlemen, the responsibilities of government are personal." Welcoming the opportunity to put his theory of executive leadership developed throughout his academic years to the test, Wilson's willingness to bear the brunt of the responsibility in the government appealed strongly to the voters: he won 233,682 votes to his Republican challenger's 184,626.

Wilson had a taste of political success and wanted more—he told a friend that the governorship was "the mere preliminary of a plan to nominate me in 1912 for the presidency."⁸¹ Wilson performed well as governor, challenging the party bosses and bringing about reform through a few key bills: the direct primary bill nominated candidates by public primaries rather

⁷⁹ Quoted in John F. Reynolds, *Testing Democracy: Electoral Behavior and Progressive Reform in New Jersey, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 138.

⁸⁰ Link and others 1975, 20:147.

⁸¹ Link and others 1975, 20:543.

than party conventions, the corrupt practices act set disclosure standards for campaign contributions, the Egan bill created a public utilities commission, and the Edge bill created a subsidized fund by employers to provide workers compensation to workers injured on the job.⁸² With the tide of reform, New Jersey became one of the most progressive states in the nation and Wilson became nationally discussed as a presidential candidate. Additionally, his health was in good standing during this period; although he faced great stress on the job, his overall success meant that he suffered little of the health issues that had plagued him in his previous positions. Supporters were drawn to his camp by his progressive policies and identity as a Southerner, bringing him the same attention given to William Jennings Bryan in the last few elections. After meeting with each other on a few different occasions, the two men found that they quite liked each other; Wilson praised Bryan's "stout heart" and the "doctrines that he [had] so diligently preached," strengthening his own candidacy with the support of the long-time leader's base.⁸³ In his early speeches, Wilson generated excitement for his candidacy without alienating the conservative pockets of the party. Thus, his candidacy was in good shape moving into 1911.

Wilson felt that his campaign should not follow a traditional campaign structure backed by big money, but instead convey a low-key, slow start; he would leave "the movement in [his] favor" alone and let it "take care of itself."⁸⁴ However, when Speaker of the House Champ Clark announced his candidacy in November 1911, Wilson stepped his campaign style up a notch, planning to visit the states in the West that gave support to Clark. But by May 1912, Wilson's campaign was faltering: he was running out of money and had fallen ill again. Competition in the Republican party between incumbent President Taft and former President Roosevelt presented

⁸² Clements and Cheezum, 25.

⁸³ Link and others 1976, 22:536.

⁸⁴ Link and others 1977, 23:135.

the Democrats with their best chance of winning in years, but the Democratic party, like Wilson's campaign and physical health, seemed to be buckling under the intense pressure.⁸⁵ At the Democratic convention, after forty-six ballots and many side deals, Wilson secured the nomination of the Democratic party in 1912. Meanwhile, the Republicans were struggling—when conservatives at the convention re-nominated Taft, Roosevelt and his followers walked out and held a different convention in Chicago, renaming themselves the “Bull Moose” Progressive Party and immediately nominating Roosevelt. Taft wrote to his wife, “I think I might as well give up so far as being a candidate is concerned,” demonstrating his awareness that the legendary showdown between two presidents would not end well for him.⁸⁶ With Wilson's appeal as a Southerner geared toward reform, he stood at the head of a united Democratic machine in the face of the splintered Republican Party.⁸⁷

Wilson felt that Taft was effectively sidelined by mid-August, focusing his worries and attention on Roosevelt. He recognized that Roosevelt was a man that the American people had “seen and shouted themselves hoarse over and voted for, millions strong” while he himself was only a “vague, conjectural personality, more made up of opinions and academic prepossessions than of human traits and red corpuscles.”⁸⁸ It was clear that the public did not particularly take to either man: the election produced the lowest percentage of turnout between 1836 and 1920.⁸⁹ Thus, although Wilson won with 6,294,326 popular votes to Roosevelt's 4,120,207 and Taft's 3,486,343, he actually secured 100,000 fewer popular votes than Bryan had in 1908.⁹⁰ His victory also delivered the support he needed from Congress; with an undivided government,

⁸⁵ Clements and Cheezum, 69.

⁸⁶ Henry F. Pringle, *The Life and Times of William Howard Taft: A Biography* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1939), 817.

⁸⁷ Clements and Cheezum, 71.

⁸⁸ Link and others 1978, 25:56.

⁸⁹ Clements and Cheezum, 72.

⁹⁰ *Presidential Elections, 1789-2000* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2002), 134.

Wilson moved forward with the relative support of the legislative branch. He set about building his cabinet, choosing candidates who were experts in each of the fields—this way, he could delegate to his cabinet members without the danger of overworking himself. Wilson was now prone to intestinal disorders, which caused nausea, heartburn, and gastritis that he treated himself with a stomach pump and a “series of powders.”⁹¹ Wilson’s physician Lieutenant Cary Grayson put Wilson on a strict diet based on raw eggs and orange juice until his stomach issues calmed down; then he was only served oatmeal, chicken, steak, Virginia country ham, and a bit of port after dinner.⁹² Grayson also felt that these flare-ups came after long periods of work, so he regularly built in leisure time to Wilson’s schedule, taking a car ride or playing a round of golf to offset his busy days.⁹³ The leisure time greatly eased Wilson’s worried mind: “each stroke requires your whole attention and seems the most important thing in life,” Wilson wrote to a friend. “While you are playing golf you *cannot* worry and be preoccupied with affairs.”⁹⁴

Working closely with Congress, Wilson addressed the body in person rather than by letter (breaking with a tradition championed by Thomas Jefferson, the hero of the Democratic Party) and established a direct phone line from Capitol Hill to the White House. A tariff reduction, Wilson’s first priority, was secured by the beginning of October 1913, and a reform of the banking and currency system was completed by Christmas that same year. He then modernized the federal antitrust law and created a Federal Trade Commission by the autumn of 1914; Wilson had followed through on the three main promises he had preached in his campaign just two years into the presidency.⁹⁵ While he experienced success on the home front, matters abroad had taken

⁹¹ Gene Smith, 8.

⁹² Smith, 8.

⁹³ John A. Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson*. Profiles in Power (London: Routledge, 2013), 67.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Thompson, 67.

⁹⁵ Clements and Cheezum, 27.

a dangerous turn. With the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in the summer of 1914, Wilson's mission to keep America neutral was tested when the rest of the world descended into global conflict. At the same time, Wilson was dealing with tragedy in his personal life: his wife Ellen succumbed to an incurable form of cancer as well as tuberculosis of both kidneys in August 1914, throwing Wilson into a period of deep depression in which he was "nearly paralyzed" with grief.⁹⁶ Wilson's emotions rode close to the surface, preventing him from even speaking Ellen's name. Following Ellen's death, Wilson told a number of people that he would not consider reelection, claiming that his original legislative programs were completed and that he did not have the strength to run.⁹⁷ Although this dealt with Wilson's emotional rather than physical health, his handling of the situation was on par with his attitude toward his physical health. Overwhelmed and overcome, Wilson turned in on himself, unable to discuss or disclose his status at the time. This would mirror his struggles with his physical health moving forward; rather than advertise openness and relatability, Wilson instead chose secrecy. Additionally, although this mention of paralysis was not consequential at the time, paralysis would haunt Wilson for years to come.

Wilson's period of mourning, although intense, was brief. He met Edith Bolling Galt in March 1915, and after a secret courtship, they announced their engagement in October and were married in December of the same year. With his emotional health restored, Wilson rescinded his earlier statements that he would abandon reelection in favor of presenting a new and greater mandate—Wilson's campaign depended on the outward appearance of strength and trust, asking the American people to again place their faith in Wilson to carry them through this time of uncertainty. Wilson did deliver an outward appearance of strength; although he struggled with

⁹⁶ Link 1965, 463.

⁹⁷ Clements and Cheezum, 29.

his health on and off during his first term, these episodes were never publicized, continuing to give the public a sense of security in Wilson's ability to govern. With his legislative record and claims that he had kept America out of the war, he won reelection in 1916 by an extremely close margin (it was not until two days after the election that it became clear Wilson had won).⁹⁸ Continuing to govern, his promise to keep the United States from the war did not last long. Germany announced that it would conduct unrestricted submarine warfare, leading Wilson to ask Congress for a declaration of war in April 1917.

While the United States equipped its army and navy to ship to France, the Republican Party criticized Wilson at every turn, infuriating Wilson with the members' insolence and attempts to sow distrust of the administration. Wilson released a statement condemning the party in the country's newspapers, begging voters to vote Democrat in the 1918 midterm elections. Saying that a Republican majority would be "a repudiation of my leadership," Wilson urged voters to give their support of his administration.⁹⁹ Instead of a conformation of support, the Democrats lost majority in both houses, creating a divided government once again. As World War One came to a close, Wilson embarked on a journey to the Paris Peace Conference to push his ideals for the treaties; he was running out of time and support for his brainchildren, the League of Nations and the Fourteen Points of Peace. In the midst of the stressful peace talks, Wilson "grew thin and gray and his hair seemed to whiten day by day. The twitching of his face was continuous."¹⁰⁰ After months of negotiations, Wilson brought home the Treaty of Versailles and the construction of the League of Nations, which he hoped would be a "forum for the dispensation of justice for all men and wipe out the threat of war."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Clements and Cheezum, 73.

⁹⁹ Link and others, 51:381-382.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, 47.

¹⁰¹ Smith, 50.

Upon his return to the United States, the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles and American involvement in the League of Nations twice. Wilson attempted to save the treaty by spending the summer of 1919 trying to convince individual senators to come over to his side to no avail.¹⁰² Wilson thought that the only way to sway the senators was with the voice of the American people, so he planned a dramatic speaking trip throughout the Western United States. Wilson became obsessed with the idea, even as his doctor and wife voiced their concerns about his health. “I don’t care if I die the next minute after the treaty is ratified,” Wilson told a journalist.¹⁰³ It seemed that Wilson could not be swayed from his decision—a twenty-six-stop speaking tour was planned that canvassed almost every state west of the Mississippi. However, he would never see the trip through; on 2 October 1919, on the way to his speaking engagement in Wichita, Kansas, Wilson suffered a major stroke that left him paralyzed and bedridden for months.¹⁰⁴

The morning after the stroke, Wilson was still determined to continue on. He got up, shaved, and changed into new clothes for the morning. When his advisors told Wilson that he needed to cancel the rest of the tour, Wilson said, “I must go on. I should feel like a deserter.” As he spoke, saliva trickled down from his mouth, and they saw that the left half of his face was fallen and unmoving.¹⁰⁵ A man with a sickly constitution, Wilson’s sickness did not come as a surprise to those around him. However, the response to this illness was markedly different than before; for the last seventeen months of his presidency, Wilson and those around him would betray the public’s trust, keeping his status as an invalid carefully concealed from the people. His physician told the staff that “the President has suffered a complete nervous breakdown” and

¹⁰² Smith, 57.

¹⁰³ Cary T. Grayson, *Woodrow Wilson: An Intimate Memoir* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), 95.

¹⁰⁴ Clements and Cheezum, 78.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, 84.

would need to return to Washington immediately.¹⁰⁶ He wired telegrams to Wilson's daughters, which said, "RETURNING TO WASHINGTON. NOTHING TO BE ALARMED ABOUT. LOVE FROM ALL OF US" and informed reporters that he was certain the president was not seriously ill, but rather was suffering from a serious reaction in his digestive organs brought on by the rigors of the trip.¹⁰⁷

While on the train, the president's private secretary, Joseph P. Tumulty, met with Secretary of State Robert Lansing to discuss what should be done moving forward. Lansing felt that considering Wilson's state, they should call in the vice president to take over matters as soon as possible. Reading from what Tumulty recalled as "Jefferson's Manual," Lansing read:

In case of the removal of the President from office, or his death, resignation, or inability to discharge the powers and duties of the said office, the same shall devolve upon the Vice President.

Lansing informed Tumulty that either he (Tumulty) or Doctor Grayson would need to certify Wilson's disability; to this, Tumulty replied, "You may rest assured that while Woodrow Wilson is lying in the White House on the broad of his back I will not be a party to ousting him." Grayson soon joined them, stating that he also would not certify to Wilson's disability. Tumulty told Lansing that if anybody "outside of the White House circle" attempted to remove Wilson, he and Grayson would deny the allegations.¹⁰⁸ Lansing did not certify Wilson's disability himself, instead waiting for a cabinet meeting in which Wilson's health was discussed. The members summoned Grayson, who described Wilson's health in general terms and did not name a stroke. When Grayson stipulated that the president had asked why the members had wanted to meet with Grayson and on whose authority they were meeting, the members assured Grayson that they

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Smith, 89.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Smith, 90.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph P. Tumulty, *Woodrow Wilson as I Know Him* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Pub, 1925), 443-444.

were merely concerned for Wilson's health.¹⁰⁹ Thus, Wilson's administration became complicit in the cover-up of the truth about Wilson's body, contributing to the atmosphere of secrecy and dishonesty throughout the rest of Wilson's term.



Figure 2. Wilson, soon after the stroke, 1919. (Arizona Health Sciences Library – University of Arizona)

At every stop, Grayson answered inquiring telegrams from outsiders in vague terms, assuring all who asked that Wilson was merely suffering from headaches, nervousness, or indigestion. When the train finally reached Washington, Wilson walked from the train to the waiting car, nodding to the people and smiling when photographers approached. Although his face was somewhat uneven and lopsided, the crowds did not notice anything was terribly wrong (Figure 2). The traveling party made it back to the White House without any mishaps, but Wilson's intense headaches prevented him from working or even reading. Wilson could not focus on any matters of state, unable to work for more than ten minutes at a time before feeling too tired to go on.¹¹⁰ He would see no officials, spending time with the family and refusing access to servants who were not completely necessary. News spread throughout the White House

¹⁰⁹ Ferrell, 17.

¹¹⁰ Ferrell, 11.

that the President was ill, but no information escaped about Wilson's condition beyond that.¹¹¹ Grayson refused to name the illness as a stroke, instead intimating to other government officials that it was merely a nervous breakdown; he felt that any information besides that was a confidential matter.¹¹²

While the public speculated about his health, Wilson's doctors would not release any information besides Grayson's claims of a nervous breakdown. Finally, on 10 February 1920, one of Wilson's attending physicians, Hugh H. Young, told a reporter from the *Baltimore Sun* that Wilson suffered from cerebral thrombosis. Still, the public had no idea just how serious the President's illness was; even the cabinet members could not get to him, instead conducting meetings without the president, called by Lansing, twenty-one times over five and a half months. In February 1920, Wilson wrote to Lansing, asking "is it true, as I have been told, that during my illness, you have frequently called the heads of the executive departments of the government into conference?" Lansing replied, "it is true... Shortly after you were taken ill in October, certain members of the Cabinet, of which I was one, felt that in view of the fact that we were denied communication with you, it was wise for us to confer informally together." Wilson responded, "I find nothing in your letter which justifies your assumption of Presidential authority in such a matter... I must say that it would relieve me of embarrassment, Mr. Secretary, if you would give your present office up."¹¹³

After giving his resignation, Lansing released the letters to the press, prompting a torrent of astonishment and criticism of Wilson. The letters betrayed the charade that the White House

¹¹¹ Smith, 96.

¹¹² (Franklin K. to George W. Lane, December 1919, in Anne W. Lane and Louise H. Wall, eds., *The Letters of Franklin K. Lane: Personal and Political*, 330). "No one is satisfied that we know the truth, and every dinner table is filled with speculation. Some say paralysis, and some say insanity. Grayson tells me it is a nervous breakdown, whatever that means."

¹¹³ Quoted in Smith, 143. The Lansing-Wilson correspondence is preserved in the Papers of both men.

had kept up for months, alerting the newspapers that the commander-in-chief was not in charge, as everyone had thought; instead, he was just learning that his Cabinet had been meeting for months without him. The New York *Evening Post* pointed out that all this time, the public had been assured that the President was fully “in touch” with matters of state. The Worcester *Evening Gazette* stated that it was “unthinkable that a sane man” would object to the meeting of the department heads; the New York *Tribune* likened Wilson to the Sleeping Princess, “alive, yet of suspended animation;” and the *Los Angeles Times* ran the headline “WILSON’S LAST MAD ACT.”¹¹⁴ The jig was up; with this act, Wilson lost the public trust he had built up through his previous years in office. With this betrayal, it is no wonder that the American people put further emphasis on the health of the President—because they were told that Wilson was in control and in fine health, then subsequently informed that he was incapacitated in such scandal, Wilson’s reputation as the wartime president ingloriously fell to the temptation of secrecy.

Wilson finally called a meeting himself on April 14, 1920; Secretary of Agriculture David F. Houston left a long account of his impression of the worn president in a later book about his experience on Wilson’s cabinet:

The President looked old, worn, and haggard. It was enough to make one weep to look at him. One of his arms was useless. In repose, his face looked very much as usual, but, when he tried to speak, there were marked evidences of his trouble. His jaw tended to drop on one side, or seemed to do so. His voice was very weak and strained... Someone brought up the railroad situation for discussion. The President seemed at first to have some difficulty fixing his mind on what we were discussing. Doctor Grayson looked in on the door several times, as if to warn us not to prolong the discussion unduly for fear of wearying the President. The discussion dragged on for more than an hour. Finally, Mrs. Wilson came in, looking rather disturbed, and suggested that we had better go.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Smith, 144. The adverse newspaper comments were collected by Lansing and are found in his Papers.

¹¹⁵ David F. Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson’s Cabinet: 1913 to 1920: with a Personal Estimate of the President*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1926), 2:70.

White House usher Irwin H. (Ike) Hoover said that Wilson was propped up prior to the cabinet meetings and sat there “as one in a trance” while the cabinet members talked amongst themselves.¹¹⁶ As time went on, Wilson showed little improvement (he would be physically crippled for the rest of his life and his mental faculties would never fully return), telling Grayson that “it would probably have been better if I had died last fall” in 1920.¹¹⁷

Although Wilson fancied a third term for himself, foreign and domestic policy was stunted while Wilson struggled to deal with his illness. For all the policies that he had put into place in the first two years of his presidency, the machine of state came to a grinding halt in the months after his stroke. He refused to see the former British foreign secretary who came over as ambassador, Sir Edward Grey, on the basis that he did not like one of Grey’s assistants in the embassy. Grey had hoped to persuade Wilson to appeal to the Senate another time to ratify the Treaty of Versailles; in the face of Wilson’s refusal, Grey left the United States for England and informed the other signers that they could ratify the treaty without America’s approval.¹¹⁸ At home, things were not much better. Wartime inflation had taken prices to 102% of 1914, which was then followed by an intense recession. National strikes broke out across the nation in protest of unfair labor treatment, with people of color and laborers subsequently targeted in a “red scare” that aimed to quiet their displeasure. Moving into the election of 1920, Grayson warned the Democrats at the convention that Wilson truly was not in good enough health to handle another term. He informed Robert W. Woolley, “no matter what others may tell you, no matter what you may read about the President being on the road to recovery, I tell you that he is permanently ill physically, is gradually weakening mentally and can’t recover. He couldn’t possibly survive the

¹¹⁶ “The Facts about President Wilson’s Illness,” Irwin H. Hoover Papers.

¹¹⁷ Ray Stannard Baker, *American Chronicle: The Autobiography of Ray Stannard Baker* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1945), 469.

¹¹⁸ Ferrell, 19.

campaign.”¹¹⁹ At the convention, Wilson’s operatives on the ground squashed any murmurings of nominating Wilson and the nomination went to James M. Cox, a candidate that represented compromise in the party. Come November, Americans overwhelmingly voted for the Republican candidate, Warren G. Harding, who won electoral college’s votes 404 to Cox’s 127.

On 1 March 1921, Wilson held his last cabinet meeting. As his cabinet members thanked him for their years together and complimented his time in office, Wilson cried, saying, “it is one of the physical handicaps of my physical condition that I cannot control myself as I have been accustomed to do. God bless you all.”¹²⁰ Wilson participated in Harding’s Inauguration ceremony, carried when needed and walking a few steps when possible. Wilson ended his presidency tired, ready to live out the rest of his life with Edith at a residence in Washington, D.C. Wilson’s health rapidly declined by the end of 1923 and he died on 3 February 1924, with Edith and Grayson by his side. Wilson’s common legacy includes his expansion of the Federal Government and his support for the League of Nations and the Fourteen Points of Peace, but his legacy also includes the way his health affected the rhetoric of body politics for future presidents.

While Wilson asked for Americans to put their trust in his ability to lead the government, his body was in fact deteriorating, making him unable to follow through on his promises to the people. The secrecy furthered in this narrative of presidential health was never fully communicated to the public, but only made public years after his death through the memoirs of the people who had known and worked with him. In working to keep Wilson’s confidence, his doctors had forsaken public trust, leading to more paranoia and worry over a candidate’s body in election years. By the end of his Presidency, Wilson’s body could no longer support the strain that he placed upon it—but instead of removing him from office when he could no longer

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Smith, 161.

¹²⁰ Houston, 147-149.

govern, his doctors, wife, and closest advisors stayed mum on the subject, believing that Wilson's health was not the public's business. Additionally, in the wake of the devastation of World War One and Wilson's responsibility to represent American interests in the peace treaties, Wilson could not afford to appear weak, prompting his team further toward secrecy from the masses.

However, the body of the President becomes the public's business, as it is meant to represent the country as a whole in dealing with matters at home and abroad. Wilson's narrative is unique in this sense; he never took an active role in his fate, as his sickness prevented him from being able to take charge of the events that passed in the months after his final stroke. His place in the body rhetoric is an absence of speech: rather than address his paralysis and painful body, Wilson and his advisors created a void of truth, leading to a distrust of physical maladies in societal consciousness. Moving forward, Americans would not be so naïve as to place their full trust in a candidate and assume their health issues were just scares—from here on, they would face disability and sickness with a watchful eye. Wilson's team took great care to present him as able to govern, even after his body could no longer handle the strain of office; the charade of his bodily health defined how he would be considered in the national memory. Although Wilson is a prime example of the debate that asks whether a president's health is really the nation's business, he is also important in our discussion of representation of disease and ability. Wilson plays perfectly into the idea that the president's body and the nation's body are one and the same: if he presented himself as manly, strong, and capable, then, surely, the nation would be viewed the same way on the world stage. Wilson kept his non-normative body a secret, controlling the conception of his health in public memory for years to come.

III. Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Marching Toward Public Office



“If the infantile paralysis didn’t kill him, the Presidency won’t.”¹²¹

Bodies do matter, and no presidential body had been scrutinized more in the twentieth century than that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), who was paralyzed from the waist down due to infantile paralysis, or polio. FDR served nearly four terms in office, the longest sitting president in history. However, the road to the presidency was not by any means easy; the 32nd President faced an intense whispering campaign against his body conducted by his detractors, who aimed to decrease public confidence in his health and vitality in order to undermine his ability to hold office at a national level. Roosevelt reckoned with his body very publicly, facing doubts of his physical ability, mental fitness, and identity as a man throughout his adult life. Instead of sweeping this criticism under the rug, Roosevelt’s every move in his polio-riddled body was to confront perceptions of his disability and consequently dispel the public’s fears. Roosevelt’s disability was a large part of his person, not only demonstrating his determination

¹²¹ Eleanor Roosevelt, quoted in Earl Looker, *This Man Roosevelt* (New York: Brewer, Warren, and Putnam, 1932), 140.

and dedication to the country, but also his dedication to himself. His experience with sickness and health was one of framing and reclaiming—by controlling the narrative around the body, FDR also controlled the public’s perception of the body. By demonstrating that his body was strong enough to carry him through the rigors of the nation’s highest office, Franklin D. Roosevelt established that those with physical disabilities could inhabit the White House, and even further, showed Americans that physical disease does not equate mental disability.

Unlike other infectious diseases, polio had made its rounds quietly around the world for centuries, creating a mild infection and subsequent immunities in most everyone who contracted it.¹²² The resulting awareness was not widespread, as polio did not exist in an epidemic form, but in an endemic form. However, in the 1890s, polio cases appeared in droves, leading observers to take down a few key points about the disease: first, the disease affected children and adults, so the name “infantile paralysis” was misleading; second, the disease could create an epidemic depending on its severity; third, the disease could express itself in varying degrees of severity on its victims.¹²³ Polio could affect adults, children, and infants alike, finally creating awareness and the need for research on the disease. The germ theory had now evolved enough for public health officials to admit that moral behavior (unless sanitary by nature) could not protect an individual from infection, and that disease could spread over race and class lines without discrimination. Solutions to this came in the form of individual change: by promoting sanitization practices, proponents of new health measures believed that maintaining cleanliness in food and water as well as the streets would decrease the spread of disease.¹²⁴ Disease in general was linked with

¹²² David M. Oshinsky, *Polio: An American Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

¹²³ Oshinsky, 11.

¹²⁴ Naomi Rogers, *Dirt and Disease: Polio Before FDR*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 4.

those who practiced poor hygiene, namely immigrants who would spread germs through contact with middle class, native-born citizens.¹²⁵

At this time, contraction of polio was still commonly associated with lower class communities who were perceived to be unclean and susceptible to germs, but not with promising politicians in the prime of their youth. However, polio again became an epidemic in 1916, affecting children from high and low classes alike: “rich or poor, clean or dirty, no child seemed immune” to the disease that caused 27,000 cases in 26 states.¹²⁶ Polio showed no evidence that it struck hardest in crowded neighborhoods like so many other diseases, linking its victims only through relative age.¹²⁷ In fact, some were convinced that polio was more likely to strike in clean, domestic households; officials in Ohio thought, “if anything, the so-called middle classes [seem to] suffer the most.”¹²⁸ It baffled scientists and public health officials, as none were able to agree on what caused the virus nor how the virus spread throughout the body; all they knew was that the virus was too small to be viewed by microscopes at the time and that the disease entered the body through the mouth.¹²⁹ FDR contracted polio in this time of scientific uncertainty; as public health measures failed to stem the spread of the disease, little could be done to mitigate or control it once a person was infected. Thus, FDR’s diagnosis would change the implications of polio in both the medical community and wider public; his prominent battle spurred more intense efforts to research the disease and created more acceptance and awareness of the disease in the wider public eye. He also made major strides in the awareness of disabled bodies; FDR’s sojourn

¹²⁵ Rogers, 10.

¹²⁶ Rogers, 10.

¹²⁷ Oshinsky, 16.

¹²⁸ F. G. Boudreau, “Acute Poliomyelitis with Special Reference to the Dis-ease in Ohio,” Monthly Bulletin, Ohio State Board of Health, January, February, March 1914.

¹²⁹ Oshinsky, 12.

with paralysis and the success he still enjoyed after his infection demonstrated that a disabled body was indeed willing and *able* to occupy highly important positions in the public sector.

Born January 30, 1882, FDR entered the world as the only child of James Roosevelt and Sara Delano, the descendants of two prominent New York families. A promising child, he attended the prestigious Groton School in Groton, Massachusetts at age fourteen. From there, he attended Harvard; although never a recipient of academic honors, he was a dedicated student, taking courses in history, government, and economics.¹³⁰ Just one year out of Harvard, he married his fifth cousin once removed, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, in 1905. He then studied law at Columbia for three years but dropped out once he passed the New York State bar exam in 1907.¹³¹ FDR practiced law until successfully running for state senate in 1910, then served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Woodrow Wilson from 1913-1919 and made an unsuccessful bid for the vice presidency with James M. Cox in 1920. After the campaign loss, he returned to New York, planning on launching another election bid in the 1922 elections. Instead, his plans were derailed by disease. While vacationing with Eleanor and his five children at Campobello Island, New Brunswick on 10 August 1921, FDR complained of tiredness and back pain and, turning in early for the night, climbed the stairs to bed.¹³² By morning, he would never walk on his own again: he had contracted polio and became paralyzed from the waist down.

From the outset, the family was concerned about the fallout for his political career. In a letter written to FDR's half-brother updating him on Franklin's condition, Eleanor said that she was "writing the family that he is ill from the effects of a chill" and that she "[did] not want the

¹³⁰ Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 30.

¹³¹ James MacGregor Burns, *FDR, the Lion and the Fox* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1984), 7.

¹³² Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe, *FDR's Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 13-14.

particulars to get in the papers.”¹³³ Eleanor knew that a well-known physical disability would likely block Franklin from rising any further in politics, especially if broadcast widely to the public. He could fall subject to any number of disability myths, most notably that physical deformity is a “sign of internal flaw.”¹³⁴ In this myth, mental deficiencies manifest themselves in physical, seeable disabilities, becoming a transition from internal to external illness. Thus, physical illness, disability, or noticeable imperfection becomes an indication of mental ability (or rather, disability). Although FDR’s background as a wealthy, middle aged man combatted the myth that polio widely affected immigrant or low-class communities, it would be difficult to overcome the implications of the disease. In addition, with the classification by medical experts that polio was primarily a neurological disease, the infected body also signified an infected mind.¹³⁵ The perception of a paralyzed FDR would need to be both privately and publicly manipulated if he would ever return to the political stage: FDR’s aspiring career in electoral politics meant that his body would be on public display, subject to visible scrutiny. So, at the age of thirty-nine, FDR entered into a battle he would fight for the remainder of his life: gaining control of the portrayal of his body.

Mirroring practices at the time to resign those with disabilities to family homes away from the public eye, Franklin’s dotting mother Sara wanted him to return home to Hyde Park, NY, where she would be able to look after him in peace.¹³⁶ However, Eleanor, with the aid of FDR’s confidante and newspaper journalist Louis Howe, controlled the narrative around his initial recovery and return to New York City; rather than letting Sara dictate that Franklin would

¹³³ Eleanor Roosevelt to “Rosy” Roosevelt, Aug. 14, 1921, Family, Business, and Personal Papers, Box 23, FDR Papers, FRPL.

¹³⁴ Jay Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*. Vol. First edition. Critical Perspectives on Disability. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

¹³⁵ Houck and Kiewe, 17.

¹³⁶ Houck and Kiewe, 22.

live “the life of a so-called country gentleman at [their] Hyde Park home,” he would focus on improving his health before returning to society.¹³⁷ In the first month of FDR’s convalescence, the *New York Times* reported that FDR had been seriously ill but was improving, and, two days later, that he was in danger of contracting pneumonia but was now safe from infection.¹³⁸ Then, on September 16, just a little over a month after the initial attack, the *New York Times* ran the bombshell: “F.D. Roosevelt Ill of Poliomyelitis.”¹³⁹ While the two previous articles downplayed the severity of Franklin’s sickness, this article exposed that FDR was fighting a much more serious diagnosis. Still, the narrative was controlled, saying that he was regaining the use of his affected members and would not be permanently crippled, as well as that FDR’s general health was better than it had been in years, attempting to assuage the public’s perception of his illness.

This would become an important rhetorical staple for FDR; by continually proclaiming that the rest of his body felt strong, capable, and *normal*, he set about planting that same rhetoric in other people’s minds. His illness would be framed as only affecting his legs, leaving his mind and other capabilities intact. FDR was convinced that it would take only a few weeks for him to be walking on crutches from the hospital, and even wrote to friends that he would eventually walk with only canes.¹⁴⁰ However, his doctors were less sure; when relaying Franklin’s health to Dr. Lovett, Dr. Draper remarked that “the lower extremities present a most depressing picture.”¹⁴¹ After Franklin’s discharge from the hospital in October—in which he still showed no improvement—he set about convincing all those around him that he was indeed on the road to recovery. With the help of hydrotherapy, in which he would swim three times per week, FDR

¹³⁷ Anna Roosevelt, “The Real Truth about FDR’s Health,” Box 52, Anna Roosevelt Halsted Papers, FRPL.

¹³⁸ “Franklin D. Roosevelt Ill,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1921, p. 9; “Franklin D. Roosevelt Better,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1921, p. 11.

¹³⁹ “F.D. Roosevelt Ill of Poliomyelitis,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1921, p. 1.

¹⁴⁰ Burns, 88.

¹⁴¹ Quoted in John Gunther, *Roosevelt in Retrospect* (New York: Harper, 1950), 225–26.

built up the muscles in his back, shoulders, and arms, training the top half of his body to do the work of the bottom half.

While he focused on strengthening his body, Roosevelt waited for the right moment and opportunity to make his first public appearance since falling ill. This by no means meant that he did not keep a hand in political affairs: right after the 1921 election, politicians in New York state assembly got congratulatory letters from Roosevelt.¹⁴² He became continually active in Democratic politics, emphasizing his mental viability and keeping his name on the back burner of Democratic officials' minds. To some extent, this tactic worked too well—in 1924, the *New York World* reported that Roosevelt was being considered by Tammany Hall a candidate for the Senate; the *Chicago Tribune* reported that he would be a good choice for governor; some even personally expressed their support for a presidential run.¹⁴³ However, Franklin used his illness as the reason to *not* reenter the political ring.¹⁴⁴ Although he projected a picture of health and optimism to friends and family, he bought time to prepare himself for public service through his claims of physical weakness to the Democratic party. He instead agreed to become the head of the New York Smith-for-President committee (campaign manager) for Al Smith, the popular Catholic, anti-prohibition New Yorker. Together, they covered the religious, social, and geographic span of the Democratic party in 1924.¹⁴⁵ After entertaining other speakers, Smith eventually asked FDR to give a formal nomination speech at the 1924 Democratic National Convention at Madison Square Garden. Although Roosevelt was not Smith's first choice, it was

¹⁴² Burns, 91.

¹⁴³ Eleanor Roosevelt to "Rosy" Roosevelt, Aug. 14, 1921, Family, Business, and Personal Papers, Box 23, FDR Papers, FRPL.

¹⁴⁴ Houck and Kiewe, 28.

¹⁴⁵ Burns, 91.

an extremely important opportunity to present his post-polio body to the world after nearly four years since his last important public address in 1920.¹⁴⁶



Figure 1. FDR delivers the nominating speech for Alfred E. Smith at the Democratic Convention at Madison Square Garden, New York, NY, 1924. (FRPL)

At the convention, Roosevelt approached the platform in a wheelchair, then was carried to the platform, then walked on crutches with the help of his son James, not without difficulty; it took him a long time to reach the podium.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the delegates cheered him on, nearly drowning him out by the end of his speech (Figure 1). Referring to Smith as the ‘happy warrior,’ his speech was received with great enthusiasm, and the last few lines from Roosevelt were lost to the crowd.¹⁴⁸ However, Roosevelt’s speech was not enough to galvanize the delegates to Smith’s side. The nomination was given to John W. Davis, a previous ambassador to Great Britain and a

¹⁴⁶ Houck and Kiewe, 29; Burns, 93.

¹⁴⁷ Kenneth S. Davis, *Invincible Summer: An Intimate Portrait of the Roosevelts Based on the Recollections of Marion Dickerman* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 2.

¹⁴⁸ Richard V. Oulahan, “Governor Smith Is Put in Nomination Amid Wild Cheers,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1928.

more conservative choice. Although the convention was a loss for both Smith and the other Progressive democrats, it was undoubtedly a win for Franklin Roosevelt. His charisma, ease, and political finesse won him praise from politicians at both ends of the political spectrum, a testament to his widespread appeal.

After the convention, he returned home to work on his health once again. He made his first trip to Warm Springs, Georgia in October 1923, the future site of his death twenty-one years later. In the thermal spring waters, he experienced improved locomotion and truly believed that he would regain the use of his legs eventually (Figure 2). While concentrating on hydrotherapy, he also focused on the restorative abilities of rest and relaxation and their positive effects on his mental state. He continued to inform friends and family of his improvement, assuring them that he was getting closer and closer to walking without the braces or crutches.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, the *Atlanta Journal's* article in late October, titled "Franklin Roosevelt Will Swim to Health" detailed his exercises to the public, describing the warm sun and spring waters as possessing a healing power to help "overcome the effects of the disease."¹⁵⁰ This article became an early public relations success for Roosevelt; combined with other frequent statements, the positive portrayal of Roosevelt's methods to recovery surely built up the narrative of Roosevelt's health, especially in establishing that with a bit more time, he might be ready to enter the national political stage once again.

¹⁴⁹ Houck and Kiewe, 35.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Hugh Gregory Gallagher, *FDR's Splendid Deception* (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1985), 37–38.



Figure 2. FDR swimming at a pool in Warm Springs, Georgia, 1929. (FRPL)

By 1928, Roosevelt's rhetorical labors had paid off; the media was portraying him evermore positively, and Roosevelt, now walking with a cane and braces, was hailed as healthy and fit. He relied on a tactic referred to as 'two-point contact:' while walking with a cane on one side and holding the arm of another person, FDR could give the impression of walking. By swinging one leg forward from the hip and maintaining contact with both his son James and a cane, his ability to walk vastly improved from his physical state in 1924. There was a marked change in his reception as the 1928 Democratic National Convention in Houston, with reporters hailing him as "a figure tall and proud even in suffering" and "full of glow and health."¹⁵¹ As Smith had secured the Democratic nomination in 1928, he tapped Roosevelt to run for the governorship of New York. Roosevelt was reluctant to accept the summons from his party, as he and Howe speculated that the election would go to the Republicans; he again argued that his health would be an impediment to his campaign. After some persuasion, Roosevelt agreed to join the fray for public office, setting out on a three-week, 1,300-mile campaign.¹⁵² Sensing the

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Gunther, *Roosevelt in Retrospect*, 250; Richard V. Oulahan, "Governor Smith Is Put in Nomination Amid Wild Cheers," *New York Times*, June 28, 1928, 1.

¹⁵² Burns, 102.

importance of close contact with voters, he switched to a car to reach certain areas of New York; that way, he would be able to shake hands with people at crossroads (Figure 2). He would also appear to stand in the car, with the help of a metal bar installed in the back seat; this gave him an air of warmth and friendliness to the public. At each stop, he would have to be helped out of the car. In more difficult to reach locations, Roosevelt was carried up flights of stairs or fire escapes. With a smile on his face, he would straighten his braces, take James' arm, and "walk out on the platform as if this were nothing unusual."¹⁵³

Roosevelt did not shy away from confronting his disability on the campaign trail: he told his audience in Salamanca, NY, "for a man who deserves sympathy, it seems to me that I am pretty husky" and asked his audience in Jamestown, NY, "do I look to you good people like an unfortunate, suffering, dragooned candidate?"¹⁵⁴ This campaign was designed to display FDR's physical vigor and capability, presenting his body as a mere setback in his grand plans. Instead of focusing on the campaign issues, which he posited that the public already knew, he tackled his post-polio body with irony and wit in order to dispel fear that he would not be up to the task of governing. Fighting against Republican claims that he was "dangerously ill" and the notion that he was not well enough to govern (mostly stirred up by Roosevelt's previous protests against the nomination), Roosevelt's in-person campaign was certainly to his benefit, although it is hard to estimate exactly how much.¹⁵⁵ Roosevelt won by a margin of ~25,000 votes, securing the governorship for the Democrats for another four years.

¹⁵³ Burns, 103.

¹⁵⁴ FDR, Speech in Salamanca, N.Y., Oct. 19, 1928, Public Papers File: Speech File, Oct. 19, 1928–Apr. 3, 1929, Container 6, FDR Papers, FRPL; "Speech in Jamestown, N.Y., Oct. 19, 1928," in FDR, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1:61.

¹⁵⁵ Houck and Kiewe, 43.

Although not a sweeping victory, Roosevelt had nevertheless continued his rise in politics, successfully running a campaign that required palpable physical and mental strain. He could stand on his own, offering visual evidence that he had improved from his initial attack of polio; this continued to strengthen his rhetoric of a healthy, capable body. While in the governor's mansion, Roosevelt became an avid user of radio; this was a medium perfect for him, as it multiplied his voice but removed his body from the collective mind.¹⁵⁶ If any newspapers questioned his health, he was quick to bite back, stating that he had been in excellent health both currently and in the past years.¹⁵⁷ Affirming his active nature by shutting down his detractors in the papers, FDR prepared for his reelection to the governorship in 1930. Accentuating his network of contacts, he campaigned again, touring and speaking throughout the state. In addition, Howe very publicly released a hefty insurance policy on Roosevelt's behalf as well as a report from his medical examination, a precursor to that of future President Donald Trump's eighty-six years later.¹⁵⁸ Its existence proves that there was enough questioning of Roosevelt's viability that he deemed it necessary to supplement his own word with that of a health official; additionally, intentionally advertising a life insurance policy of this amount was an anomaly at the time, meant as a monetary vote of confidence in Roosevelt's vitality. In the medical examination, his doctor complimented him on his "splendid" physical condition and made his remarks about Roosevelt's still intact moral health.¹⁵⁹ His opinion as a physician medically cleared Roosevelt for further service, in effect blessing his vitality for the presidential runs to come. And run he did: a week or two after his reelection, Roosevelt said, "I believe I can be

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 53.

¹⁵⁷ Quoted in Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph*, 53–54, 68.

¹⁵⁸ Houck and Kiewe, 55.

¹⁵⁹ "Newspaper Interview on Governor Roosevelt Accepting Delivery of \$500,000 Life Insurance Policy in Favor of Georgia Warm Springs Foundation," Albany, N.Y., Oct. 18, 1930, Family, Business, and Personal Papers, Box 42, FDR Papers, FRPL.

nominated in 1932 on the Democratic ticket.”¹⁶⁰ Due to his name, his good public standing, record as governor, and upstate background, he quickly became a frontrunner for the 1932 election, while publicly and privately keeping mum on the subject into 1931.

Roosevelt’s success was not without its critics. Referred to as the ‘whispering campaign,’ he faced incessant questions about his health, sowing doubt in the people’s minds. These whispers seeped into every corner of the country, with some even claiming that Roosevelt was incapable of governing because he had contracted syphilis.¹⁶¹ As his candidacy grew stronger, so did the whispers; by the summer of 1931, a public response was deemed necessary. Like before, Roosevelt’s health needed to be confirmed in the public eye in order for his campaign to succeed. Earle Looker, a writer with ties to Eleanor’s side of the Roosevelt name, wrote an article about Roosevelt’s health in *Liberty Magazine*, which was widely read and circulated at the time. Titled “Is Franklin Roosevelt Physically Fit to Be President?,” the article was featured on the cover of the July 25 issue, accompanied by the subtitle, “A Man to Man Answer to a Nation Wide Challenge.” Here we see an introduction of the discussion of manliness—Roosevelt’s physical ability was conflated with his identity as a man. By asserting Roosevelt’s strong body and manly potential, Looker assured the readership of the magazine that Roosevelt’s body could handle the pressures of the presidency. Howe sent the article to every Democratic chair in the country, squashing the often-posed questions about FDR’s well-being and physical state. Looker estimated that the article reached seven and a half million readers, a national distribution of material praising Roosevelt’s fitness to be President.¹⁶² While Houck and Kiewe believe that Looker was in cahoots with Roosevelt one way or another, Looker avidly denied his

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Burns, 123.

¹⁶¹ W. M. Odell to [James J. Mahoney], Oct. 1, 1930, DNC 1932, FRPL.

¹⁶² Earle Looker to Franklin D. Roosevelt, July 16, 1931, Governorship Papers, Series 1, Earle Looker, FDR Papers, FRPL.

connection with the family, insisting that his report was impartial on the basis of three leading New York specialists (a physician, an orthopedist, and a neurologist).¹⁶³ This was most likely a public farce in order to steer the conversation back toward Roosevelt's viability; letters from Looker to FDR from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library's archives demonstrate that Looker regularly informed Roosevelt of the happenings around the article.¹⁶⁴ Either way, the article aided Roosevelt's cause, providing a very public answer to his detractors across the country.

On January 23, 1932, Roosevelt finally announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination as his name appeared in a preferential primary ballot in North Dakota.¹⁶⁵ This suited sitting president Herbert Hoover well, as he believed that Roosevelt was a lightweight who would not be able to handle the physical strains of the presidency.¹⁶⁶ More than that, individuals in the Hoover administration considered Roosevelt's disability to be a sign of decreased masculinity. In the 1930s, the image of the boxing champion was rampant, portraying politics as the sport in many political cartoons and using metaphors that cast mental and rhetorical strength as a manifestation of a candidate's manliness. Referred to as "lady like" and a "pussy-footer," language of gender was invoked to question Roosevelt's very identity, implying that he had neither the physical stamina nor manly constitution to suit a presidential campaign or term.¹⁶⁷ This could also be attributed to Roosevelt's 'aristocratic' upbringing and lineage, which removed him from the rough-and-tumble man's world of the middle class. At the yearly Governor's

¹⁶³ *Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican*, July 18, 1931, clipping in Governorship Papers, Series 1, Earle Looker, FDR Papers, FRPL.

¹⁶⁴ Earle Looker to Franklin D. Roosevelt, July 20, 1931, Governorship Papers, Series 1, Earle Looker, FDR Papers, FRPL; Earle Looker to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Aug. 12, 1931, Governorship Papers, Series 1, Earle Looker, FDR Papers, FRPL.

¹⁶⁵ Burns, 130.

¹⁶⁶ Houck and Kiewe, 81.

¹⁶⁷ James H. MacLafferty, diary entry of Jan. 15, 1932, Box 2, James H. MacLafferty Papers, HIWRP; James H. MacLafferty, diary entry of Apr. 21, 1932, Box 2, MacLafferty Papers, HIWRP.

conference in April 1932, Hoover invited the Roosevelts to dinner at the White House. While the Roosevelts arrived early (to situate Franklin), Hoover was half an hour late. In order to not show any weakness, Franklin stood the whole time, sweating from the strain, but also from the muggy weather.¹⁶⁸ Later, Hoover's press secretary would write that Roosevelt "would not live a year in the White House."¹⁶⁹ Roosevelt was furious, but he also had the last laugh: Hoover lamented footage of himself from the conference, saying that he looked old and decrepit while Roosevelt looked youthful and vigorous.¹⁷⁰

Although Roosevelt was fighting a rhetorical battle about his body, he also needed to secure his party's nomination. Leading up to the 1932 Democratic Party Convention, Roosevelt's camp determined that he needed to make a grand gesture in order to charm the delegates. Roosevelt sat by the radio in Albany, communicating with his men on the floor of the convention through a private telephone line.¹⁷¹ Although he missed the 2/3 majority needed to secure the nomination on the first ballot, delegates soon shifted their support to Roosevelt, falling in line to deliver the nomination to FDR on the fourth ballot in 1932. The cheering roared through the radio to Roosevelt, who "sat back and grinned broadly."¹⁷² Breaking with tradition, FDR booked a charter plane to take him to Chicago, where he would accept the nomination immediately, rather than waiting the customary few weeks to address the delegates. The choice to fly was also significant—it portrayed Roosevelt as a man of action and a man of bravery. After all, aviation was still in stages of infancy; it took Roosevelt eight hours to reach Chicago from Albany. This speech, although long and winding, would set up FDR's legacy: "I pledge you, I pledge myself,

¹⁶⁸ Houck and Kiewe, 82.

¹⁶⁹ Theodore Joslin, diary entry of Apr. 27, 1932, Box 1, Joslin Papers, HHPL.

¹⁷⁰ Theodore Joslin, diary entry of Apr. 30, 1932, Box 1, Joslin Papers, HHPL.

¹⁷¹ Burns, 136.

¹⁷² Burns, 137.

to a New Deal for the American people.”¹⁷³ While on the campaign trail, Roosevelt would employ metaphors of sickness and health, casting the nation as suffering from disease and himself as the doctor who could cure it: “the physically crippled man had come to ‘take care of’ a sick nation.”¹⁷⁴ Roosevelt used physical and medical terms to describe the policies that would come as part of the New Deal legislation; by emphasizing his amount of activity through campaigning, Roosevelt asserted his vitality and implied that he had already suffered strain and would be ready for more.

Disregarding political advisors, who told Roosevelt that the election was in the bag and that campaigning might hurt the Democratic cause, he began his most active campaign yet, spurning both ideas and continuing to demonstrate his physical vigor on the road.¹⁷⁵ Soon after Chicago, Roosevelt’s flight was already becoming something of national notice, used as evidence by the Democratic National Committee of Roosevelt’s temerity. For all of Roosevelt’s claims of perfect health, he did persuade many people of his capability; however, many people on both sides of the political spectrum had their doubts. As Roosevelt prepared to embark on a cross country train trip to campaign and meet voters, democratic officials worried that the rumors of his health had foundation and that he would *not* be able to withstand the extensive itinerary. This doubt was in addition to the preexisting gossip from his Republican counterparts, who were now busy claiming that the Democrats had unseated the perfectly healthy Hoover to install someone who could not get out of his own chair without being assisted.¹⁷⁶ In this campaign, Houck and Kiewe posit, Roosevelt’s disability made him more human, delivering him empathy

¹⁷³ “Speech Accepting Nomination for the Presidency,” Chicago, Illinois, July 2, 1932, Box 9, President’s Master Speech File, FRPL.

¹⁷⁴ Houck and Kiewe, 90.

¹⁷⁵ Burns, 142; Houck and Kiewe, 92.

¹⁷⁶ James H. MacLafferty, diary entry of July 22, 1932, Box 2, MacLafferty Papers, HIWRP.

from women voters in particular. Although, as previously mentioned, there were men inclined to view him as less masculine, women were more forgiving, painting a picture of Roosevelt as a whole man—not only did he possess the brains to be president, but he had experienced hardship that earned him his heart.¹⁷⁷ In a flier titled “Three Reasons Why Every Woman Should Vote for Roosevelt and Garner,” Roosevelt’s hardship was exactly what gave him the tools to understand the nation’s dilemma: he had both the head and the heart to govern.¹⁷⁸ The Democratic National Campaign Committee even presented its women’s division with a speaker’s kit to help direct their responses to Republican women during the campaign; it encouraged these women to emphasize that “in spite of this disability of the legs, Mr. Roosevelt is in topnotch physical condition.”¹⁷⁹



Figure 3. Franklin D. Roosevelt gives a campaigning speech on back of train at Redding, California. (FRPL)

Roosevelt had perfected his campaign strategy: he would walk out to the back of the train on James’ arm, greet the assembled crowd, and say a few sentences from his speech the night before—all while holding on to the car for support (Figure 3). This did more than simply prove

¹⁷⁷ Houck and Kiewe, 96.

¹⁷⁸ “Three Reasons Why Every Woman Should Vote for Roosevelt and Garner,” flyer in President’s Subject File, Republican National Committee, Box 255, HHPL.

¹⁷⁹ “Speaker’s Kit,” Democratic National Campaign Committee Women’s Division, President’s Subject File, Republican National Committee, Box 255, HHPL.

that he could do it; it gave Westerners who had only seen Roosevelt in photos a chance to see him in the flesh, matching his voice to his person. Along the road, Roosevelt had to do more than just show his person—he also had to speak on his prospective policies. He brought back the metaphor of the sick economy, using language that portrayed it as a healthy or sick body. As he had already suffered from a crippling disease and survived to become an endorsed candidate for president, this suited him well.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, the political climate completely supported its use. The Great Depression affected the body in the form of denying food, clothes, and medicine to needy bodies, so the human body became the physical board on which economic downturn could be felt. Roosevelt traveled the country casting himself as the person who could deliver the country out of its supposed illness, centering his speeches on his ability to become the nation’s doctor. He also introduced the idea that he planned to stem the flow of disease before it affected people, rather than seeking to mitigate it once it already hit. In Salt Lake City, UT, Roosevelt spoke about the railroad industry, describing it as suffering from an “epidemic” that “strangled [it] to death” because of an “unbalance[ed] system of things,” which Roosevelt would cure with incorporation and coordination with other systems of travel.¹⁸¹ In Seattle, WA, Roosevelt lamented the “poison” released into the nation’s economic health by Hoover’s high economic tariffs, which Roosevelt would “remedy” through talks and bartering with specific countries.¹⁸² Endorsed by his colleagues from the Wilson administration and delivering fifty-six speeches in the span of twenty days, Roosevelt spoke with confidence and charm, assuring audiences of his healthy form with his presence and his words.

¹⁸⁰ Houck and Kiewe, 102.

¹⁸¹ “‘The Railroad Mesh Is the Warp on Which Our Economic Web Is Largely Fashioned’: Campaign Address on Railroads at Salt Lake City, Utah, September 17, 1932,” in FDR, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1:721–22.

¹⁸² “Campaign Address on Reciprocal Tariff Negotiations, Seattle, Wash., September 20, 1932,” in FDR, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1:725.

FDR made his final major campaign address at Madison Square Garden in November 1932, a parallel between his first post-polio address eight years before. He addressed the crowd, stating that every person's experiences had shaped the policies past, and that there would be a part of them in the policies for the future.¹⁸³ Roosevelt was making a promise to bring the light at the end of the tunnel, to show that something new could grow from scorched earth, and that sick bodies could heal. He knew much more than the average person about how sickness could change a person and those around them; in carrying the rhetoric of sickness and health throughout his path to the presidency, Roosevelt inserted a part of himself into the equation, fighting tooth and nail against the whispers that would brand him as weak. He then became a permanent part of the equation: he won the presidency with 472 electoral votes to Hoover's 59. Eleanor understood the victory as a sort of compensation to Franklin: "I knew that in many ways it would make up for the blow that fate had dealt him when he was stricken with infantile paralysis."¹⁸⁴ Along with Eleanor, many assume that Roosevelt overcame his disability to become President; however, his disability was woven into every speech he made, beseeching his listeners to reach past his physical form to recognize the strong heart beating in his chest. He refused to be sidelined because of his disease, and the eleven-year saga from his infection to the presidency is a testament to his determination and ultimately, his vitality. Roosevelt succeeded not *in spite* of his disability, but *because* of his disability—dealing with the partial loss of his body was a vital part of his ascension to the presidency and it should not be separated from his narrative of success.

¹⁸³ "I Believe That the Best Interests of the Country Require a Change in Administration": Campaign Address at Madison Square Garden, New York City, November 5, 1932," in FDR, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1:862–63.

¹⁸⁴ Quoted in Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph*, 371.

Roosevelt's infection had no bearing on the functions of his mind, but he suffered from societal stigmas that branded those with disabilities as mentally feeble and unfit. In addition, his body was emasculated by other men, who implied that a 'man' needed to be physically whole to claim his belonging to the gender. The rough-and-tumble, 'man's world' position of the president could only be filled by someone who was 'strong' enough to survive the term. Yes, the president's body matters; however, FDR is proof that the body's health should not be construed as a representation of the mind behind it. Franklin D. Roosevelt's body was a battleground, instrumentally employed throughout his campaigns to exceed the expectations placed upon him because of his disease and subsequent disability. This battleground exceeded his lifetime, as debates about term limits and the portrayal of his body had lasting echoes in American society. Amendment XXII to the Constitution passed in 1951, limiting presidents to two terms in office for a total of eight years.¹⁸⁵ When designing his memorial in Washington, DC in the late 1990s, groups argued over whether or not he should be displayed in a wheelchair, because he had adamantly refused to let people see him in the chair while alive.¹⁸⁶ Advocates for disability awareness, however, argued that his body was imperfect, but it was still his; his experience with disability should not be erased in public memory.¹⁸⁷

Roosevelt operated within the established opposites of sickness and health; he fashioned the public perception of his body through metaphors, casting himself as doctor, cure, and antidote for the nation. He promised to usher in a time of social and structural healing, dedicating himself to the betterment of the nation through policies that all bore the rhetoric of sickness and health. Roosevelt redefined sickness, framing it as manageable on both a personal and national

¹⁸⁵ "FDR's Third Term and the 22nd Amendment," NCC Staff, *Constitution Daily*, November 5, 2018.

¹⁸⁶ Lois Harmon Alcosser, "The FDR Wheelchair Controversy," *The Washington Post*, June 25, 1996; Charles Krauthammer, "FDR in a Wheelchair? No." *The Washington Post*, June 2, 1996.

¹⁸⁷ Meghan Mutchler, "Roosevelt's Disability an Issue at Memorial," *The New York Times*, April 10, 1995.

level. His interaction with sickness and his consequent disability allowed him to transfer himself from the pole of sickness to the pole of health, permanently establishing his memory in the presidential body politic as strong and capable. Roosevelt's body informed the way he approached the rhetoric of disability and, to some extent, laid out the steep mountain he would have to climb in order to continue along the path he had set for himself before the infection. Roosevelt did finish his climb—he ascended to the highest office in the nation, all while wearing iron braces and a smile.

Conclusion

In order to fulfill the oath a President swears to the country, Americans expect the President to be healthy. To be able to withstand the pressures of the position, the President must not only be mentally sound, but in great physical shape—this awards the public some reassurance that the President will not have to put the nation’s health on the back burner in order to attend to their own bodily health. Beginning in 1972, the American public has demanded that the Presidents release a doctor’s summary of their physical and mental health.¹⁸⁸ So, the President not only agrees to devote their mental faculties to the job; they also sacrifice their own privacy in service of demonstrating to the public that they are healthy and able to run the country. While in office, the President’s body is not only their own, but also the property of the nation. Taft, Wilson, and Roosevelt chose to communicate (or not communicate) about their health in vastly different manners. In many ways, this was representative of who each man was: Taft, always the joker, good-naturedly embraced the public’s perception of his body and quietly tried to remedy it; Wilson, an academic of principle and pride, hid the seriousness of his condition in order to keep himself in the Presidency; Roosevelt, determined to not let his paralysis hinder his career, reframed the discussion about his body to better suit his ambition.

Concern over presidential health has a long and twisted history, resulting in the focus on health in the 2016 election. Both Hillary Clinton’s and Donald Trump’s health was put on trial over the course of the campaign cycle, in which detractors of each candidate conducted another whispering campaign, although more like a shouting campaign, that neither of them had the constitution to be president. Additionally, because the presidency has been traditionally imbued

¹⁸⁸ Matt Pearce, “How much do presidents and candidates need to tell the public about their health?” *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 2016. <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-presidential-health-disclosure-20160912-snap-story.html>

with the expectation of manly strength, there has been a long tradition of placing unnecessary emphasis on a candidate's expression of manhood, conflating the needs of the presidency with the construct of manhood. Taft's body was construed as morally weak, doubting his ability to take control of his form. Wilson performed acts of secrecy, internalizing the public discussion of his body in order to preserve his position. Roosevelt asserted his strength in words and by the splendid deception of two-point contact and leg braces, affirming his virility through his rhetoric. But in 2016, Donald Trump capitalized on this rhetorical strategy, pointing fingers at Clinton's supposed weakness while refusing to release extensive coverage about his own health. Thus, while people already questioned her politics, they also became afraid that Clinton was "beginning to fall apart" and could not prove her health would stay intact during a term in office.¹⁸⁹

In the current atmosphere of the watchdog press and little privacy for public figures, Taft, Wilson, and Roosevelt would face far harsher criticism for their bodies and how they used them. Taft's medical reports would be dinner conversation about how the President should simply lose some weight. Wilson's secrecy in office would not be tolerated; investigative journalists would have a field day in exposing the deceptive apparatus that kept the President's true condition from the American public. Even Roosevelt, for all his good work in changing the perception of polio, would be discounted from office as soon as he was asked to walk unaided from one spot to another. For all the changes sick Presidents have put into play from the birth of the country, electoral politics have much to catch up to with regards to body rhetoric. The battle for the bodies is a battle of representation; if a person can control the diffusion of public thought

¹⁸⁹ Newt Gingrich, quoted in Cristiano Lima, "Gingrich: Additional Clinton health reports won't count," *Politico*, September 12, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/gingrich-additional-clinton-health-reports-wont-count-228069>.

surrounding their health, they control the narrative for years to come. While Taft demonstrated a life filled with executive and judicial success, representations of his body at the time continued to be reproduced, leading to the abundant images of his body in American memory today. Wilson and his closest advisors prevented the public from viewing and commenting on his body, so it was subsequently saved from Taft's fate: instead of being remembered for his body, Wilson is best remembered for his leadership during war and his plans for peace. Roosevelt observed the political and social climate of the time, demonstrating his 'healthy' body through employing both metaphor and examples of physical rigor.

Each man left his mark upon American expectations for the President's body and interacted with the representation of his body while in office. Taft, while seriously addressing his weight to better his circumstances and health, could not personally change the perception of fatness in American culture. By only dipping a toe in the subject of his body, he did not take an active role in pushing against the prejudice against obese people; instead, his lighthearted jokes painted the picture of simply laughing along with the crowd. Thus, his effect on the presidential body rhetoric was to further it, continuing the prejudice against fatness in American society. Additionally, because there was such a fixation on Taft's body in life, the fixation continued after his death. Popular representations of Taft today still further the longevity of the focus on weight; Taft's legacy, while politically robust, is inextricably tied to his physical representation. Wilson recognized that if his poor health was publicly broadcasted, he would likely have to resign. In hopes of preventing this, his close advisors and confidantes purposely avoided words like "stroke" and "paralysis" to keep the public at bay. Wilson and his team refused to divulge his health, claiming that the public had no claim to Wilson's personal business. Because of this

betrayal, the public was then distrustful, putting added emphasis on the necessity of health that plagued Roosevelt when he ran for office.

However, Roosevelt refused to be kept from the Presidency and labeled as a cripple. Rather than let the world pity him, he used his disability to demonstrate that he came away stronger from his personal trauma. Using metaphors of health and sickness, Roosevelt and his imperfect body ran for and won the presidency, going on to lead the United States for three and a half terms (more than had even been expected of him). Roosevelt perhaps made the biggest changes in the scope of presidential body politics, existing as living proof that a paralyzed body, when not affecting the mind, could succeed as the leader of the United States. The work he did in promoting awareness of polio was instrumental in furthering scientific research to creating a vaccine for the disease; without Roosevelt's openness about his struggle, those strides would have come years later.

Strength, manliness, virility, and a normative body create the modern conception of health—conversely, weakness, femininity, stagnancy, and a non-normative body define disease. The president's body is the embodiment of the nation, assigning extra meaning and scrutiny to the physical form. This basic embodiment, combined with how the president chooses to interact with it, forms the specific representation of his body in both the memory of his time and public memory in years to follow. Taft, Wilson, and FDR inhabited non-normative bodies, using their particular circumstances and positions in history to help define the greater representation of their bodies. The representation of disease and ability in presidential bodies is an amalgamation of many histories, resulting in a multi-faceted concept informed by the politics of health vs. disease, masculinity vs. femininity, and ability vs. disability. Together, these three bodies demonstrate

that the physical form can be used to both evade and embody politics, making the representation of political bodies in the United States an important and relevant segment of electoral politics.

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