

**Presidential Campaign Songs of the Progressive Era:**

**The Political Language of Personality**

**LUKE GULLICKSON**

In October of 1912, Theodore Roosevelt was hitting the campaign trail hard. Following the disappointing loss of the Republican nomination to his friend, the incumbent William Howard Taft, Roosevelt had formed his own Progressive Party and continued his battle to return to the White House. But that October, in Milwaukee, a bullet nearly brought the campaign to an abrupt halt. A would-be assassin shot Roosevelt in chest, but against the recommendations of several doctors, the candidate insisted on giving his speech. After informing the audience that he was shot, and roaring that “it takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose,” Roosevelt proceeded, with the bullet still inside of him, to speak for almost an hour.

The event created a sensation, and for a time, it appeared to have turned the tide of the election: soon after, oddsmakers doubled Roosevelt’s chances of winning the presidency over his main contender, Woodrow Wilson.<sup>1</sup> For Roosevelt, the bravado of this event reinforced the popular legend surrounding his personality. And in an era characterized by “the politics of personality rather than party,”<sup>2</sup> the force of one’s character in the public eye could be decisive.

The Progressive Era’s emphasis on political personalities stands in contrast to most other eras in American history, including our own, and the resultant political discourse encouraged a rich and charismatic political atmosphere. The presidential campaign songs from this era are a testament to this atmosphere. Since these songs were written during the campaigns, for the

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<sup>1</sup> James Chace, *1912* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 233.

<sup>2</sup> John Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 188.

specific purpose of swaying voters, they can be seen as cultural constructs and as political propaganda. They provide insight into the political atmosphere of the era: into the language that was used to discuss the issues and the rhetoric that was effective at mobilizing public opinion for an era of change. Colored by a number of predictable appeals, including those to racism, nativism, history, jingoism, and militarism, as well as some rare discussion of the issues, this language that incited popular involvement and political reform was centered on the personalities, often caricatured, of the candidates.

The personalities of various candidates have always been an important influence on voters, and prior to the early twentieth century, campaign songs were a vital way of communicating those characters to the masses. In fact, the Progressive Era can be considered the end of the golden age of campaign songs, which began with the 1840 campaign between Harrison and Van Buren and ran through World War I. During these years, every campaign had its collection of songs, written by professional songwriters as well as amateurs.<sup>3</sup> These songs were sometimes newly composed, but were often based on popular tunes such as “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean” or “Yankee Doodle.”

Thematically, there are many commonalities among all political songs. They function, as sociologist Serge Denisoff asserts, “to persuade individuals,” to reinforce the values and assumptions of the listeners, and to “create social cohesion or a feeling of solidarity among the membership of a specific social movement.”<sup>4</sup> The use of popular tunes and appeals to common factors such as American history and patriotism show this attempt to create a sense of “commonality of experience” among listeners.

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<sup>3</sup> Irwin Silber, *Songs America Voted By* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 18.

<sup>4</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, “Songs of Persuasion: A Sociological Analysis of Urban Propaganda Songs,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 79, no. 314 (Oct.-Dec. 1966): 583-4.

The advent of modern America's mass culture and communication made old-fashioned campaign strategies, including the campaign song, obsolete. But in their time, campaign songs were an essential way of reaching the masses. David Dunaway writes that the song is the "most populist of all art forms,"<sup>5</sup> and in the sense of an attempt to reach the people, this is true of campaign songs as well. Giving people entertaining or humorous political songs involves them in the political process, and as communication researcher James Lull pointed out, "active involvement with a medium increases its potential as an agent of socialization."<sup>6</sup> Since each individual song is directed at large numbers of people, campaign songs are the type of political language most aimed at the masses—at the lowest common denominator of all Americans. Their language is that which the songwriters considered to be the most persuasive to the largest number of listeners.

While campaign songs were an important part of each election in the Progressive Era, the amount of song activity varied widely from election to election based on the volume and energy of each campaign's issues. The campaign song trade was just that—a trade, reliant on popular support, and in a lackluster campaign season such as 1908, there were fewer songs.<sup>7</sup> However, the issues were far from paramount in campaign song construction: the songs more often contained simplified references to the issues within a framework that emphasized persuasion, solidarity, and popular appeals. And these factors were all informed by the personality dynamics of the various candidates.

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<sup>5</sup> David King Dunaway, "Music as Political Communication in the United States," in *Popular Music and Communication*, ed. James Lull (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 38.

<sup>6</sup> James Lull, "Listeners' Communicative Uses of Popular Music," in *Popular Music and Communication*, ed. James Lull (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 153.

<sup>7</sup> Silber, *Songs*, 193.

The first two personalities of the Progressive Era songs were William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan, the two major players in the elections of 1896 and 1900. Bryan was a young maverick who had ignited the Democratic Convention with his “cross of gold” speech, a powerful, biblically styled oration that solidified the free silver movement in the Democratic Party and drew the Populist vote to Bryan. McKinley was a traditional Republican candidate who would win the presidency by blaming the economic woes of the 1890s on Democratic leadership. As historian Richard Hofstadter points out, the Bryan campaign of 1896 was the high point of the populist uprising, the reform movement that led into progressivism.<sup>8</sup> Populist reforms, specifically their proposed solutions to the economic problems stemming from the Panic of 1896, were the main subjects of the 1896 election.

One of Bryan’s 1896 songs, *We Want None of Thee*, invokes the people’s economic problems and, naturally, presents free silver as the panacea. Parallel musical phrases suggest that “the people are bound to be free” and that “Bryan’s the man who will make silver free.” The later verses involve the candidates in a regionalist opposition. McKinley is “backed up by the East,” not involved with the people, while Bryan “comes from Nebraska,” and is “offering relief to the poor man.”<sup>9</sup> The appeal to Midwesterners was logical, as populism began as essentially a farmers’ movement, and the West was a key region of populist support.

Bryan also plays on economic issues in another song, *How It Happened (or, The Jew of Lombard Street)*. This song, as the title suggests, invokes racism against conspiring, money-hoarding Jewish bankers. In many of this campaign’s songs, Bryan and free silver stand as

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Nellie Saunders, “We Want None of Thee,” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 167-8.

liberators of the poor and oppressed.<sup>10</sup> The Republicans' songs, on the other hand, contained little substance and mostly rabbleroising patriotic rhetoric. Bryan's personality is used centrally in jabs that would become a pattern: in one song, he is lampooned for his "startling 'metaphors'" and "silver tongue," an orator who prefers words to action.<sup>11</sup>

By 1900, the issues had shifted, but the characters remained the same. Bryan's persona as an upstart reformer had been weakened by the 1896 loss, and now McKinley was a proven winner, "the champion heavyweight" who symbolized prosperity. *The Full Dinner Pail* connected McKinley to a happy and well-fed America, while his opponent was "Silver Dollar Bryan," running again "On the platform that's already proved so frail." The familiar jab at Bryan the ineffectual orator is also present: "his policy to murmur and to wail." McKinley is the man with the "well-filled Dinner Pail," while Bryan represents empty promises and a "bill of fare so meagre and so stale."<sup>12</sup> Another song cast Bryan as a shouting, scheming loser, while McKinley and Vice-Presidential nominee Theodore Roosevelt were the honest, tough, down-to-earth guys that were loved by everyone.<sup>13</sup>

These updated personalities were now woven around the hot question of imperialism following the Spanish-American War. The presence of this issue escalated the Republicans' potshots and jingoism to new heights. The song *Anti-Imperialism*, set to the popular tune "On the Banks of the Wabash," was a triumph of empty, flag-waving rhetoric. A picture is painted of grateful Filipinos, freed of the cruel rule of Spain, now living under the American flag, which of

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<sup>10</sup> Silber, *Songs*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> M.C. Dawsey, "Marching with McKinley to Victory," in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 175.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Tyrrell and Charles Puerner, "The Full Dinner Pail," in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 177.

<sup>13</sup> D.J. Muir, "McKinley is the Man!" in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 179.

course “floats o’er them, not for conquest, but for freedom.” McKinley, meanwhile, is the brave liberator: “He unfurled the Stars and Stripes in Porto Rico [*sic*], Liberation and expansion—don’t you see?”<sup>14</sup>

With the edge of populist class consciousness worn off since the previous election, Bryan’s supporters turned to anti-imperialism, as well as typical veneration of their candidate. *When Bryan Comes Marching In* predictably praises Bryan’s morality and fairness: “The friend of right, the foe of wrong.”<sup>15</sup> And the response to the Republicans’ patriotic defenses of imperialism was in appeals to emotion. *America Has Sons To Crush Oppression*, interestingly set to the same tune as the parallel McKinley song *Anti-Imperialism*, describes a mother crying as her son leaves to die in the Spanish-American war. McKinley, meanwhile, “sits smiling in the White House...dreaming of a second term to stay.” He is depicted as an uncaring politician, unconcerned with the people.

The influence of personality on the McKinley-Bryan elections, however, provided little preparation for what was to come. The rise of Theodore Roosevelt to the Presidency after McKinley’s assassination changed everything. McKinley had updated the presidency from the previous “caretaker presidents,” but even in this more active approach, he would pale in personality to his Vice-President.<sup>16</sup> Roosevelt was one of the most dynamic political personalities in American history: a reformer, a conservative, a conservationist, a hunter, a boxer, a soldier, and a politician. This powerful personality projected something that early twentieth-

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<sup>14</sup> Edwin Hartshorn, “Anti-Imperialism,” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 178.

<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Bernard J.C. Abel, “When Bryan Comes Marching In,” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 181.

<sup>16</sup> Chambers, *Tyranny*, 43.

century Americans desired. As Hofstadter asserts, he “spoke the views of the middle class of all parts of the country,”<sup>17</sup> providing strong leadership that reflected their beliefs.

Campaign songwriters, in turn, reached out to Roosevelt, which was not difficult—his dynamic and multifarious nature, as well as contributing to his political success, also made him easily caricatured. Roosevelt was the dominant political presence of the next phase of the Progressive Era, and the strength of his personality informed the dynamic of the next few campaigns. Additionally, while this period, as the apex of Progressivism, certainly saw no dearth of issues, the Progressive consensus in the electorate was so strong that differences on the issues between candidates were not likely to be deciding factors in the contest. This is certainly true of the 1912 election, in which the two Progressive candidates, Roosevelt and Wilson, ran on platforms that differed little in content, and the two together tallied three times the votes that the conservative candidate Taft did.<sup>18</sup>

However, prior to the emergence of Wilson in 1912, there was no political personality that could match Roosevelt. In terms of character, the 1904 election was a rout, and the votes reflected this. The spectacularly forgettable Alton B. Parker never stood a chance. Roosevelt even dominated many of Parker’s songs, such as *Good-By, Teddy, You Must March! March! March!*, which is addressed to the President, with Parker himself scarcely mentioned.<sup>19</sup> The song also contains no references to the issues of the election—which, admittedly, were few.

Another decisive shift in the rhetoric of the songs, influenced by the presence of Roosevelt, occurred in 1904. A militaristic language emerged in Roosevelt’s songs, which

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1970), 227.

<sup>18</sup> Chace, *1912*, 238.

<sup>19</sup> Paul West and John Bratton, “Good-By, Teddy, You Must March! March! March!” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 188-9.

quickly spread to other candidates and remained ubiquitous until Roosevelt departed the political scene. This may be residual from the Spanish-American War, but even McKinley's jingoistic anthems contained few of the battle metaphors of Roosevelt's songs.

One of the first Roosevelt "fight" songs in 1904 was *We Want Teddy Four Years More*, which effectively summarizes TR's public image. The whole song is composed in aggressive language, with images of conflict, noise, and a general shaking-up:

There's a *hot time* coming soon,  
 There'll be *blood* upon the moon,  
 And the great old Yankee Eagle will *scream*.  
 There will be a grand *earthquake*  
 That is very sure to *wake*  
 The Democratic donkey from its dream.  
 And the people of this land,  
 They will *shout* to beat the band  
 The other nations all will hear the *roar*.  
 We will make the welkin *ring*  
 When this song we *loudly sing*:  
 We want Teddy for four years more.<sup>20</sup> (Emphasis mine)

This boisterous character, paired with some references to trust- and graft-busting, form a summary of Roosevelt's heroic persona. The song's language suggests the strong leadership that Roosevelt offered to the American people, and that they supported with their votes. This was the leader who was able to stimulate popular involvement in reform. As the song said, "We want Teddy the brave... We want honor and right, And a man who can fight."<sup>21</sup> *You're All Right, Teddy* similarly utilizes Roosevelt's fighting ways, emphasizing that he wasn't afraid to fight in Cuba, and reminding the listener, "when the game begins, He goes right in and wins."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Frank Abbott and Gus Edwards, "We Want Teddy For Four Years More," in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 190.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-1.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Cole, James Weldon Johnson, and J. Rosamond Johnson, "You're All Right, Teddy," in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 192-3.



The 1908 campaign was of a similar caste: the candidates themselves filled the vacuum of issues. Roosevelt had decided not to run again, but his presence was distinctly felt—Taft’s selling point seemed to be that he was as close to Roosevelt as America was going to get. Taft’s most famous campaign song, *Get on the Raft with Taft*, tellingly admits, “We’d like some more of Theodore, but Theodore has said, that Taft was meant for President To follow in his stead.” However, the same song also seizes on Taft’s grandfatherly character: “The man worthwhile, with the big glad smile, will get the honest vote.” Jabs at Bryan similar to those of 1896 also make an appearance, implying that the orator, so many times a presidential loser already, is an old bluffer who may be going crazy.<sup>23</sup>

Bryan’s supporters, meanwhile, made use of his old reputation as a radical, borrowing Roosevelt’s war metaphors in the song *Line Up For Bryan*. The song lifted the phrase “hot time,” from the song “A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight,” which was used famously by the 1904 Roosevelt campaign.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, in its two verses, *Line Up For Bryan* uses the word “battle” four times, as well as phrases including “the rolling of thunder,” “a chorus good and strong,” “the grand refrain,” and “marching on to victory.”<sup>25</sup>

It has been observed that both candidates in 1908 were substitutes, Taft standing in for Roosevelt and Bryan for his younger self.<sup>26</sup> The songs make it clear that both parties, fired for reform and active politics, were unsatisfied with their candidates, and further, that each candidate was insecure about the fact that he was not Roosevelt. Taft lacked Roosevelt’s sense of public

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<sup>23</sup> Harry Kerr and Abe Holzman, “Get on the Raft with Taft,” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 195-6.

<sup>24</sup> Silber, *Songs*, 191.

<sup>25</sup> George W. Gale, “Line Up For Bryan,” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 196-7.

<sup>26</sup> Silber, *Songs*, 193.

relations and keen ability to use the press and public opinion to his advantage.<sup>27</sup> And the years had blunted Bryan's radicalism: he had been caught since 1896 in a "quest for issues," and had recently been forced to retreat on his latest crusade, government ownership of railroads. While Bryan's ideas remained influential, his potency as a political personality had passed.<sup>28</sup>

The campaign of 1912, then, represented both continuity and change among the major players and forces. The replacement of Bryan with Woodrow Wilson was an important step for the Democratic Party, which entered the Progressive arena with this move. Wilson adopted the role of the moderate reform candidate, left of Taft but right of Roosevelt, and his approach to the issues attracted the moderate wing of the middle class.<sup>29</sup> His image differed greatly from Roosevelt's. Wilson was an academic, a political theorist, while Roosevelt was known as a man of action. Wilson himself admitted, "I feel that Roosevelt's strength is altogether incalculable."<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, Roosevelt, whose real-life outing to Africa had not affected his presence just below the surface of the 1908 election, reemerged, to much popular elation. As usual, campaign songs functioned as a barometer of public enthusiasm—Roosevelt songs began to emerge as early as 1910, well before the former President had given any indication that he wanted to return to the White House.<sup>31</sup>

Had the drama involved only these two players, it would have been fascinating, but the dynamics were enriched and complicated further by the presence of two candidates who believed they had no chance of winning the election: the Republican incumbent Taft and Socialist Eugene

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<sup>27</sup> Chambers, *Tyranny*, 185.

<sup>28</sup> Hofstadter, *Political Tradition*, 195.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>30</sup> Woodrow Wilson to Mary Hulbert Peck, August 25, 1912, quoted in Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters, Governor, 1910-1913* (London: William Heinemann, 1932), 3:390.

<sup>31</sup> Silber, *Songs*, 199.

Debs. Roosevelt and Wilson both quickly identified the other as their primary opponent, leaving Taft to play the spoiler and Debs to achieve the greatest popular vote for a Socialist presidential candidate in American history.

The stage was set, the actors prepared, and the play did not disappoint. 1912 delivered the most dramatic election of a politically dramatic era. It was also the apex of the Progressive politics of personality. Each candidate emerged with songs that clarified his place within the storm of debates.

Of all the candidates, Debs is the one whose songs center most on actual political agendas, which is appropriate, since his program was the most unique, and much of the public did not likely understand the substance of Debs' platform. Situated between the various branches of the American left, Debs was dedicated to "industrial unionism and revolutionary politics."<sup>32</sup> The substantial nature of the songs is appropriate given Debs' personal dedication to the cause, but it should not be ignored that his presence was essentially holding the Socialist Party together in 1912.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, as a rousing orator and skilled politician, Debs was not averse to biting personal attacks on his opponents. While his songs more often took the form of appeals to labor rights and solidarity—for example, *What A Weapon Is the Ballot*, which appealed to the poor and downtrodden<sup>34</sup>—*Voting for Labor* indulges in mockery of Roosevelt and the "big fat man" Taft, while casting Debs as a Union man with a "genial face."<sup>35</sup>

Taft, the "fat man" himself, who had little ground to stand on in the election, centered his campaign songs on attacks of the other candidates, a manner of describing the situation

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<sup>32</sup> Chace, *1912*, 222.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>34</sup> M.A. Smith, "What a Weapon is the Ballot," in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 225-6.

<sup>35</sup> James Townsend, "Voting for Labor," in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 227.

negatively, which is a common thread among persuasive songs of all kinds.<sup>36</sup> *Teddy Must Be King* provided a biting critique of Roosevelt's strong presidency and supposed usurpation of power: "We must know no other leader, Simply to his plans we bow...Smash the poor old Constitution, Teddy he must be our king."<sup>37</sup> Roosevelt was also present in the anti-Democratic *Taft and Sherman*: the chorus of the song, each time it occurs, contains a reminder that Teddy would hear the protest cries of the Republican voters.<sup>38</sup> The only song to touch on Taft's own personality is *Taft the Leader*, which describes the President as "steadfast," "wise, not overbold," a "man of peace" with a "winsome smile."<sup>39</sup> In this election and era, these are weak descriptors, but likely they were meant to establish Taft as a clear alternative to the rambunctious Roosevelt.

The personality between the extremes was Woodrow Wilson, who stood neither for Debs' radicalism nor Taft's conservatism, and lacked the progressive pedigree of Roosevelt. His "cautious liberalism" would turn out to be the position most in tune with public opinion, but early in the campaign, what Wilson lacked was a unique image.<sup>40</sup> He sought to differentiate himself by his intellectual nature and a self-groomed image as a moralist.<sup>41</sup> The campaign songs also reflect this search for a public image. *Wilson-That's All*, one of the most famous campaign songs of the era, seems odd initially. The title comes from a popular advertising slogan for a

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<sup>36</sup> Denisoff, "Songs of Persuasion," 585.

<sup>37</sup> George Fairbanks, "Teddy Must Be King," in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 206.

<sup>38</sup> George Fairbanks, "Taft and Sherman," in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 206.

<sup>39</sup> M. Strauss and P. Fox, "Taft the Leader," in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 207-8.

<sup>40</sup> Silber, *Songs*, 204.

<sup>41</sup> Chace, *1912*, 215.

brand of whiskey, and the whole song seems to endorse drinking “for the Democratic cause.”<sup>42</sup>

All of this, of course, seems contradictory when it is considered that the Wilson administration signed the Prohibition amendment into the Constitution in 1919. But the boisterous and fun tone of the song was likely meant to compensate for any lack of these attributes in Wilson himself. The use of a popular alcohol slogan and a generally playful tone would certainly help to endear a stuffy academic to the public.

Then, of course, there was Theodore Roosevelt, whose very presence in the 1912 election spoke to the force of his personality in early twentieth-century America. Roosevelt failed to win the Republican presidential nomination due to the party bureaucracy’s favor for the incumbent Taft, but popular support for Roosevelt was so strong that he easily created a new Progressive Party, styled in his image and known by his own epithet—the “Bull Moose” party. Roosevelt and Taft would pull from the same Republican pool of voters, and Roosevelt’s platform resembled Wilson’s in many ways, but his personality alone made him a viable and unique candidate in his own right.

The 1912 Roosevelt songs pick up where the 1904 songs left off, with the aggressive, heroic, militaristic tone that reflected Roosevelt’s own assertiveness. Much of his campaign evoked the feeling of a crusade. One of his campaign songsters (a collection of song lyrics for popular consumption, set to folk tunes) is titled *Progressive Battle Hymns*, and on the title page is printed, “We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord.”<sup>43</sup> *When Teddy Comes Marching Home*—notice the military metaphor even in the title—riffs on Roosevelt’s experience

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<sup>42</sup> Ballard MacDonald and George Walter Brown, “Wilson—That’s All!” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 205-6.

<sup>43</sup> William Miles, *Songs, Odes, Glees and Ballads* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 130-1.

hunting in Africa, and promises that, although it may seem quiet, “it won’t be quiet here... When Teddy comes marching home again.” The second verse contains a number of racist praises of Roosevelt that would never exist in the modern day: for example, “Dot Teddy is von fighter yet, Says Schultz to Guggenheim; There’s Irish blood in him, I’ll bet, Says Casey to O’Brien.” And of course, there are references to “a hot old fight in Washington” and “no sleep, and...no rest When Teddy comes marching home.”<sup>44</sup>

Very similar messages are present in *Teddy, Come Back*, including a claim that “we’ve got the sleeping sickness since you went,” and a plea to “wake us up and shake us up And put us on the track.” The song also evokes the old popular image, now bathed in nostalgia, of Roosevelt swinging his big stick and busting grafters and trusts.<sup>45</sup> The message of Roosevelt, in contrast to Taft, who was quickly judged as a weak president<sup>46</sup>, as loud, raucous, and in charge is bluntly and repeatedly emphasized. Roosevelt’s most famous 1912 song, *We’re Ready for Teddy Again*, casts all of these ideas in perhaps their catchiest incarnation. Present are the appeals to nostalgia, to progressive reforms, and to the people. The song also contains a fine summary of the Progressive approach to politics and political leaders: “The time is right for a man to fight,” and the people, correspondingly, would “now begin to fight and win.”<sup>47</sup>

Despite finely tuned propaganda efforts, Roosevelt did not win the 1912 election. The Republican vote was split between Taft and Roosevelt, so victory went instead to Wilson, who began his influential years in the White House. Wilson’s presidency is most remembered for

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<sup>44</sup> Irving Lee and W.R. Williams, “When Teddy Comes Marching Home,” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 199.

<sup>45</sup> W.D. Nesbit and R.N. Lombard, “Teddy, Come Back,” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 201.

<sup>46</sup> Chambers, *Tyranny*, 184.

<sup>47</sup> Harry Kerr and Alfred Solman, “We’re Ready for Teddy Again,” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 203.

World War I and its aftermath, and the shadows of war in Europe began to emerge in Wilson's first term. By 1916, war was on everyone's mind, and Wilson campaigned on a peace platform. Traditional appeals were common in the 1916 songs, including those to history and American exceptionalism—such as the tactfully titled *I Think We've Got Another Washington (And Wilson Is His Name)*. However, the departure of Roosevelt, and more importantly, the chilling advent of real war, removed militaristic and war-related language from the campaign song vernacular.

The optimistic *We're Going to Celebrate the End of the War in Ragtime (Be Sure That Woodrow Wilson Leads the Band)* evoked not marching and fighting for victory, but rather peace, prosperity, and the party music of the day, with a plea to “Lay the sword and gun away.”<sup>48</sup> World War I has been described as progressivism at high tide, and 1916 certainly saw the decline of Progressive languages in campaign songs. Politics had fundamentally changed by 1920, and voters picked their leaders based on a much different set of criteria, on entirely new rules.

Campaign songs in general are a relic of the political past, and the 1916 songs stand out particularly in this regard. *Go Along, Mister Wilson (And We'll All Stand By You)* is utterly amazing to the modern listener. The song invokes blind nationalism: “Go right along, Mister Wilson, We're all for you strong; You speak for us as a nation, and we're for the nation right or wrong.” Patriotism of this type still exists, of course, but an unironic request for blind trust in the government, following the events of the last century, is no longer in the American repertoire. The song suggests that Wilson is striving for peace, but that the people may have to get involved:

Wilson knows the sorrows of a war,  
And he's trying to spare us the pain.  
But even he may have to call on you,  
And so prepare to play your part:

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<sup>48</sup> Coleman Goetz and Jack Stern, “We're Going to Celebrate the End of the War in Ragtime (Be Sure That Woodrow Wilson Leads the Band),” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 211.

*Polish your gun while you pray for peace,  
And say to him with all your heart:*<sup>49</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Campaign songs are vestiges of an older, more personal style of politics that disappeared in the twentieth century: evidence of a time, stated romantically, “when a candidate had to face his peers as a man and a human being.”<sup>50</sup> Mass media and mass culture contributed to this decline, but this 1916 song points out also that these songs, and the “bygone political culture” they represent, “were lost in the tragic symphonies rising from twentieth century history.”<sup>51</sup>

Some continuity remains in post-Progressive Era politics. Personal attacks and appeals to candidates’ character remain central to political discourse, and many of the same historical and patriotic appeals discussed above are still evident in another type of discourse: the political slogan. However, there is no denying that today’s politics are of a decidedly different caste than those of the early twentieth century. Low voter participation numbers in recent years reveal an America that is less than enthusiastic about political involvement, and there has been a lack of sustained reform efforts. For these reasons, historian Michael McGerr describes our era as “a politically disappointing time.”<sup>52</sup>

Certainly, whether or not the Progressive Era’s politics were superior to those of our own time, it is clear from the campaign songs of that era that the Progressive political atmosphere was singular. The force of the various personalities that entered the presidential arena in those two decades, and the dynamics that emerged between those personalities, created a rich and vibrant political discourse, which in turn helped political leaders to mobilize public opinion. Regardless

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<sup>49</sup> A. Seymour Brown, “Go Right Along, Mister Wilson (And We’ll All Stand By You),” in *Songs America Voted By*, Irwin Silber (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971), 212-14.

<sup>50</sup> Silber, *Songs*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> Donald Pickens, “The Historical Images in Republican Campaign Songs, 1860-1900,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 15, no. 3 (1981), 172.

<sup>52</sup> Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), xiii.



of one's judgment of the achievements and failures of the progressives, there can be no doubt that the large amount of popular involvement in political and social issues during this time was a success for those who were running the country. Ultimately, the political language of personality, as evidenced in the Progressive campaign songs, facilitated an atmosphere that encouraged popular enthusiasm and involvement in social change.