

Dinner with the President

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Paper

Dining has always been an important part of American life. Americans dine together not only to strengthen relationships, but also to impress and influence one another. Our presidents are no exception. While all presidents entertain important people, Theodore Roosevelt, in his seven years in office, used his dinner table to make and maintain relationships with people from all walks of life. Many individuals, both American and foreign, dined and discussed at his table. “White House [meals] were animated affairs—more of a continuation of the president’s efforts to gather information than a meal.”¹ Teddy Roosevelt effectively used his dinner table as a springboard for debate and diplomacy.

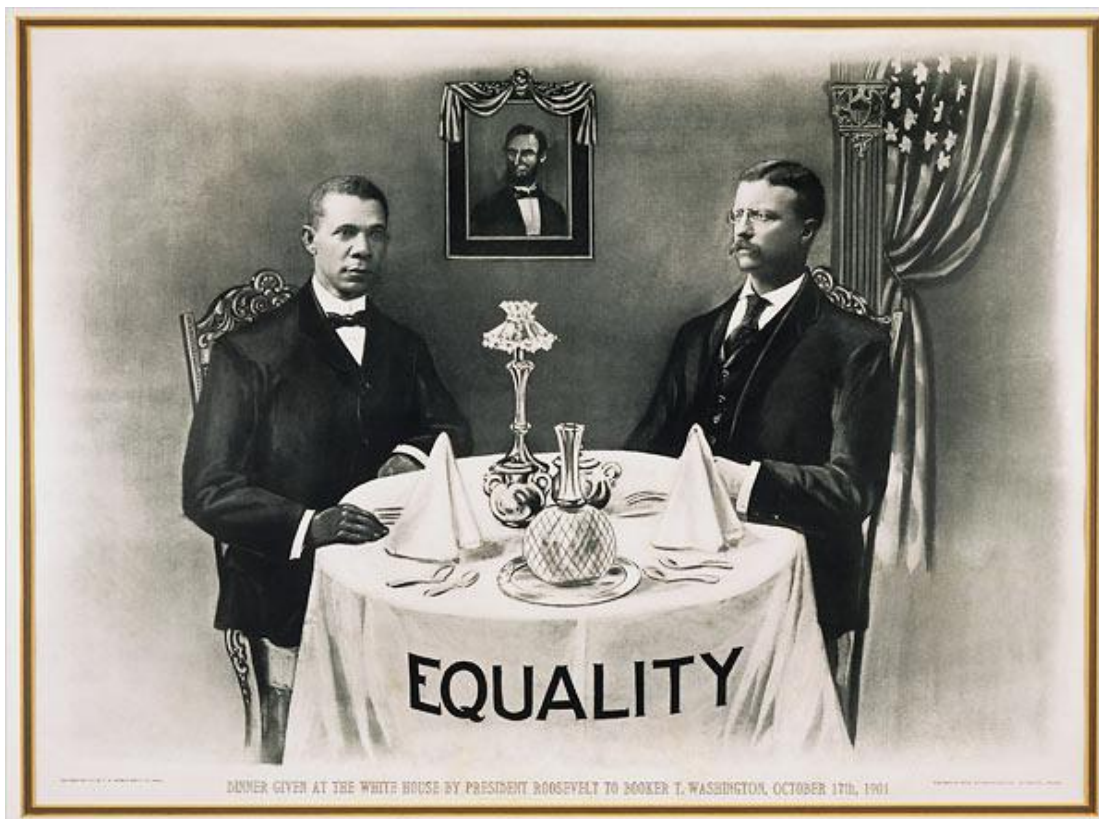
Theodore Roosevelt was the youngest president ever when he took office. He became the 26th President of the United States on September 4th, 1901, at the age of 42, following the assassination of William McKinley. He, his wife Edith, and their six children moved into the White House shortly after he took his oath of office. It soon became apparent that changes were needed. The White House², which was more than one hundred years old in 1900, needed repairs and expansion. In 1902, \$500,000 was spent on renovations. The offices of the West Wing were added, and space for entertaining grew.³

The Roosevelts entertained almost every evening. While they welcomed guests from approximately forty nations, more often they entertained friends and family. President Roosevelt felt he should spend his own money in “‘upholding the social dignity of the people of the United States’.”⁴ “[Roosevelt] claimed that he spent his entire salary, a substantial fifty thousand dollars a year, on social life at the White House. (He did not think a public official ought to make money from his position).”⁵

Roosevelt enjoyed family meals, and his children were often present at dinner when important guests came. Most often, the food served at these meals was not fancy, as “Roosevelt believe[d] in plain food and high thinking for himself and older members of his family.”⁶ What Roosevelt valued most about the dinner table was the conversation. “While Roosevelt loved to eat, the dinner table to him was less an occasion for fine dining than a springboard for conversation in which he played a prime role.”⁷ Mealtime “afforded the President an opportunity for talking informally with visitors whom he wished to see. Not infrequently it brought together round the table a strange, not to say a motley, company.”⁸ Such a variety of people gave Roosevelt an opportunity to hear different opinions that could influence his decisions.

A prime example of Roosevelt’s use of the dinner table came only six weeks into his presidency. Roosevelt managed to outrage much of the South when he invited Booker T. Washington, the African American leader of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, to dinner. Washington had been called to the White House to meet with Roosevelt because he was influential with African American Republicans. The exact reason for Roosevelt’s invitation was stated in a telegram: “I want to talk over the question of possible future appointments in the south exactly in the lines of our last conversation together.”⁹ On October 16, 1901, Booker T. Washington joined the Roosevelt family for a private dinner.¹⁰ Roosevelt stated later that he hoped to “show some ... respect to a man I cordially esteem as a good citizen and good American.”¹¹ More importantly, the dinner gave Roosevelt the opportunity to gain support of an influential American. Booker T. Washington became the first African American man to dine at The White House.¹² One admirer stated, “Your act in honoring [Washington] was a masterly

stroke of statesmanship--worthy of the best minds this country has produced.”¹³ A crack had developed in this social barrier¹⁴, but it would be many years before the wall separating the White House and American minorities would fall completely.



Lithograph commemorating Booker T. Washington’s 1901 White House dinner
With President Theodore Roosevelt.

Before the night was out, the press became aware of the story. The reaction was more than Roosevelt expected. While many northern newspapers praised the action, those in the South did not. The Memphis Scimitar called the dinner an “abominable outrage.”¹⁵ The Richmond Dispatch headline read “Roosevelt Dines with a Darkey.”¹⁶ Another southern newspaper wrote, “the action of President Roosevelt in entertaining that n***** will necessitate our killing a thousand n***** in the south before they learn their place again.”

Even the Governor of Georgia, Allen Chandler, said, “No self-respecting southern man can ally himself with the President after what has just occurred.” Others warned, “Social equality with the negro means decadence and damnation.”¹⁷

President Roosevelt was unashamed of his invitation. He stated, “I shall have him to dine as often as I please.”¹⁸ Mark Twain, an acquaintance of the President, was asked shortly afterward what he thought of the situation. He carefully answered that perhaps the President was not as free as “ordinary citizens” to entertain just anyone. The President defended his invitation, but later he wrote to a friend, “No one was more astonished than I was” about the reaction.¹⁹

Although Washington was invited to the White House at other times throughout Roosevelt’s presidency, it was always during “office hours.” He was never again invited to dine at the White House. The Booker T. Washington Papers collection confirms that he was an advisor to Roosevelt throughout his presidency.²⁰ The relationship that was strengthened over the dinner table served Roosevelt for the remainder of his years in office.

Even though the dinner with Booker T. Washington was casual, not all White House dinners were informal affairs. Dinners held to celebrate important guests at the White House were very elegant. The Roosevelt’s hosted many distinguished guests: the Duke of Abruzzi, a relative of the King of Italy; Crown Prince Gustav of Sweden; and Lord Curzon, a British statesman.²¹ Prince Henry of Prussia, brother of Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, was the most influential guest to dine with Roosevelt.²² It was a rare occasion for a royal visitor from arguably the most powerful nation in Europe to visit the United States. Henry was sent to America to pick up a yacht that had been built for the Kaiser in America. Several events were held in his

honor, including the christening of the Meteor, and “the most elaborate state dinner ever seen in Washington.”²³

Roosevelt’s intentions went deeper than simply honoring the Prince. Germany had recently gained status as a naval power, and was secretly attempting to create a foothold in Latin America. In Venezuela, the self-proclaimed dictator, Cipriano Castro, had nearly driven the nation into poverty, leaving it unable to pay its European creditors. Early in 1902, Germany attempted to force Venezuela into paying its debts by threatening to block Venezuelan ports.²⁴ Roosevelt was apprehensive that Germany’s intention extended beyond debt collection. These tensions so close to home made Roosevelt realize it was necessary to showcase America’s military strength. Prince Henry’s visit provided an opportunity.

This rising threat confirmed Roosevelt’s belief that America needed a stronger navy to protect itself from Germany. Roosevelt said, “The American people must either build and maintain an adequate navy, or else make up their minds definitely to accept a secondary position in international affairs. It has been well said that there is no surer way of courting disaster than to be opulent, aggressive, and unarmed.”²⁵ Prince Henry happened to be admiral in Germany’s navy, so Roosevelt again used his dinner table, this time for a diplomatic purpose. Henry’s visit was an opportunity to acquire information about a rival nation’s military.²⁶

A state dinner was held on February 24, 1902, during the Prince’s visit. The “state dinner” as we know it today, was a new idea in 1902. Ulysses S. Grant was the only other President who had hosted such an event for a foreign head of state at the White House.²⁷ Prior to this, “state dinners” had been formal social events honoring members of Congress, the president’s cabinet, or members of the Supreme Court, but not foreign dignitaries. Roosevelt

wanted an opportunity to mingle with Prince Henry and other German officials attending with him. A dinner in his honor was the answer. The event gave the President an opportunity to converse with the Germans, and “showcased the global power and influence” that America was gaining.²⁸

Protocol, or the social rules of the day, created a problem. With two very influential and important men at the same function, it was unclear who would be introduced first. When an envoy of the Prince suggested that “Prince Henry, representative of the Almighty Kaiser, should walk out to dinner first, there was no discussion, for the President replied curtly, ‘No person living precedes the President of the United States in the White House’.”²⁹ The problem was solved by having President Roosevelt and Prince Henry enter the room at the same time from opposite ends, meet in the middle, and introduce themselves. Only then were the guests allowed to enter.

The dinner was held in the East Room rather than the State Dining Room to accommodate the large number of guests. The dinner was for men only; Mrs. Roosevelt hosted a separate ladies’ reception. The dinner was a great success. Roosevelt had ample opportunity to display America’s growing presence on the world stage.

The consequences of the dinner were far-reaching. Kaiser Wilhelm II had once said “If I had ships enough, I would have taken America by the scruff of the neck.”³⁰ However, Henry returned to Germany to report that Roosevelt could not be pushed. In December, when the Venezuelan crisis reached a boiling point, Roosevelt’s threat of naval intervention was enough to curb German aggression.



The East Room of the White House decorated for a State Dinner Honoring Prince Henry of Prussia.

The Roosevelt family also influenced the social expectations of Washington, D.C. They already had extensive experience with the inner workings of Washington society. In 1902, Robert Meyers, an early biographer of President Roosevelt, wrote of the First Lady “Mrs. Roosevelt, by birth and wide social acceptance, is entitled to admission to the most exclusive circles of this country and Europe...she knows how to be formal as well as gracious, and she has the exquisite tact of the real women of the world.”³¹ Many thought Edith Roosevelt was a hostess to rival the most gracious First Ladies, even Dolly Madison. Mrs. Abby Baker wrote of Mrs. Roosevelt in The Christian Herald, “Mrs. Roosevelt fills her position with gracious hospitality that is felt throughout the country. It is she who sets the social activities in motion...”³²

As in most cities of the time, there was a “social season.” At the turn of the twentieth century, Washington society was “made up of resident officials, a small circle of citizens and occasionally the families of a few senators and representatives. The city was a collection of isolated villages widely separated and at times almost inaccessible”³³The season, which lasted about 10 weeks, began with a White House dinner hosted by the President and First Lady. It was attended by the President’s Cabinet and their wives. This was followed by weekly dinners hosted by each cabinet member at his home. Roosevelt liked to talk, and he liked to be listened to even more. With the same people at dinner each week, the conversation became repetitive.

Roosevelt was in need of a new audience. He became the first president to allow cabinet members to invite other guests to these dinners.³⁴ The only requirement was that the President approve the guest list ahead of time. Should the host have out of town guests, or friends of lesser position, they could now be afforded the opportunity to exchange their ideas over dinner with the President. The society page of the New York Times often printed the guest list for these dinners, showing a variety of attendees.³⁵ This accomplished two things. First, Roosevelt gained a wider audience. Second, a greater variety of people had an opportunity to express their views to the President over dinner.

Novelists, sculptors, historians, philosophers, poets, artists, former Rough Riders, and old Harvard friends came to stay for a night or a week, mingle with political regulars, and over lunch and dinner discuss everything from the day’s events to Roman history, or one or more of the hundreds of subjects on which the president was eager to talk. Grudgingly, H.K. Mencken later acknowledged that Roosevelt was the “only...president since the birth of the republic who ever welcomed men of letters to the White house.”³⁶

Subsequent presidents followed in Roosevelt's footsteps. He excelled as America's chief diplomat and expanded America's role in world politics. The role as a world power required increased diplomatic efforts. For instance, Woodrow Wilson continued to work with Latin American countries to create democratic governments and freedom from European control. Following Roosevelt's time in office, state dinners continued to be affairs to welcome foreign dignitaries. This tradition has been interrupted only by times of war. In addition, the social barriers that had begun to fall under Roosevelt's watch continued to break away until the White House was truly America's House. In fact, an entry in President Lyndon Johnson's diary on March 11, 1965 tells of a civil rights sit-in taking place in the East Wing of the White House.³⁷ The progressive work of President Roosevelt continued to influence future presidents. None, however, has rivaled Roosevelt in his ability to use mealtime as a political tool.

In Roosevelt's White House, the dinner table was used to influence people in politics, strengthen America's diplomatic image, and win the support of notable Americans. At the dinner table, Roosevelt created alliances and acquaintances with not only his cabinet members and members of Congress, but other influential Americans as well. He used that same table to show America's strength to other countries, such as Germany. Roosevelt also began opening the door toward racial equality in the White House. President Roosevelt was a commanding force at his desk and his dinner table. British writer John Morley put it best when he said, "I have seen two tremendous works of nature in America. One is Niagara Falls and the other is the President of the United States."³⁸

End Notes

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- ¹ Nathan Miller, *Theodore Roosevelt: a life* (New York: Morrow, 1992), 425.
- ² Historical note: The White House was given this official name by Roosevelt. From 1789-1865, it was known as “The President’s House”. After the Civil War, it became known as “The Executive Mansion.” It was only after the 1902 renovations that it was officially renamed “The White House.”
- ³ William Roscoe Thayer, *Theodore Roosevelt: an Intimate Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), 100.
- ⁴ Patricia Mitchell and Sarah E. Mitchell, *Plain Food and High Thinking: An Anecdotal History of White House Entertaining, 1901—1953* (Chatham, Va: Patricia B. Mitchell, 2005), 3.
- ⁵ Aida Donald, *Lion in the White House: A Life of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 169.
- ⁶ Willets, 341.
- ⁷ Barry H. Landau, *The President’s Table: Two Hundred Years of Dining and Diplomacy* (New York: Collins, 2007), 115.
- ⁸ Thayer, 118.
- ⁹ Roosevelt Telegram, Oct. 14, 1901.
- ¹⁰ Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001), 53.
- ¹¹ Donald, 139.
- ¹² Historical note: There was much debate at the time as to whether Booker T. Washington was in fact the first African American to dine at the White House. Research indicates that Senator Blanche K. Bruce, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth had all been to receptions at the White House. Washington was certainly the first African American to receive an invitation to a private dinner hosted by the President of the United States.
- ¹³ Morris, 54.
- ¹⁴ Ariel Gonzalez, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner: From Booker T. Washington to Barack Obama,” Huffington Post, www.huffingtonpost.com/ariel-gonzalez/guess_whos_coming_to_dinn_b_137764.html.
- ¹⁵ Memphis Scimitar, Oct. 17, 1901.
- ¹⁶ Richmond Dispatch, Oct. 17, 1901.
- ¹⁷ Rick Beyer, “Guess Who’s coming to Dinner?” *The Greatest Presidential Stories Never Told: 100 Tales from History to Astonish, Bewilder and Stupefy* (New York: Collins, 2007), 122-123.
- ¹⁸ Beyer, 123.
- ¹⁹ Beyer, 123.

²⁰ Booker T. Washington, *The Booker T. Papers Collection*, Volumes 6-11, 1901—1909 (University of Illinois Press), www.historycooperative.org/btw.

²¹ Willets, 367.

²² Historical note: Wilhelm II was the last German emperor (Kaiser) and king of Prussia. His politics and instability helped to bring about WWI. Wilhelm was born on 27 January 1859 in Berlin, the eldest child of Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia and Victoria, daughter of Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom. In 1888, Wilhelm's father succeeded as Frederick III. He died shortly afterwards, making Wilhelm Kaiser at the age of 29. He was a strong believer in increasing the strength of the German armed forces, particularly the navy. He chose his brother Heinrich, Prince of Prussia, to travel to America as an envoy in 1902, just as tensions in Latin America were rising.

²³ Morris, 93.

²⁴ Morris, 177-180.

²⁵ Meyers, 468.

²⁶ Landau, 118.

²⁷ Historical note: The first ruling monarch to attend a “state dinner” at the White House was King David Kalakaua of the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), hosted by President and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant on December 12, 1874.

²⁸ "The White House State Dinners," *The White House Historical Association*, www.whitehousehistory.org.

²⁹ Thayer, 104.

³⁰ Thayer, 104.

³¹ Meyers, 411-412.

³² Willets, 74.

³³ "The White House State Dinners".

³⁴ Willets, 311.

³⁵ "Cabinet Dinner in Honor of the President and Mrs. Roosevelt," [New York Times](#), Feb. 3, 1904.

³⁶ Miller, 413.

³⁷ Lyndon Johnson, journal entry, March 11, 1965.

³⁸ Willets, 66.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Washington, Booker T. *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 6, 1901-1902*. University of Illinois Press. historycooperative.org/btw. February 23, 2011.

This particular volume of Booker T. Washington papers allowed me access to telegrams sent between Roosevelt and Washington. I could see that Washington was an advisor to the president until his term ended.

"Cabinet Dinner in Honor of the President and Mrs. Roosevelt." *New York Times*, 3 Feb. 1904, 9.

From this source, I got an idea of who was invited to state dinners.

"Dinner given at the White House by President Roosevelt to Booker T. Washington", lithograph in David J and Janice L. Frent Collection, Sept. 12, 1903.

This lithograph of Washington and Roosevelt shows me that the President saw that racial equality was where the country was headed. He believed that African Americans could become as "socially evolved" as his own race.

Johnson, Lyndon, journal entry, March 11, 1965.

As I looked for how Roosevelt left a lasting impression of the White House in the area of race relations, I discovered this entry that showed that it took many years, but eventually permanent change did come to the White House in regards to be open to all races.

Memphis Scimitar, Oct. 17, 1901.

This newspaper article from the day after Booker T. Washington dined at the White House helped me to understand the anger of people in the South toward the President for his decision.

Richmond Dispatch, Oct. 17, 1901.

This newspaper article also showed the reaction to Booker T. Washington's visit to the White House.

Roosevelt, Theodore to Booker T. Washington. Sept. 14, 1901. Booker T. Washington Papers Collection. University of Illinois Press. historycooperative.org/btw. February 23, 2011.

This source also provided me with telegrams between Roosevelt and Washington.

Roosevelt, Theodore. Lincoln Day Dinner Address. New York City. Feb. 13, 1905.
Keynote address. www.emersonkent.com/speeches/lincoln_dinner_address.

This speech gave me some insight into the views and values of Theodore Roosevelt.

“State Dinner to Prince Henry. East Room of White House, Washington, USA.” Robert N Dennis Collection, New York Public Library Digital Collection, 1902.

This photo shows the lengths of extravagance Roosevelt went to in order to make an impression of Prince Henry.

Secondary Sources:

Beyer, Rick. "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" *The Greatest Presidential Stories Never Told: 100 Tales from History to Astonish, Bewilder & Stupefy*. New York: Collins, 2007, 122-123.

This chapter gave me several quotes and an improvement on my understanding of the impact of Roosevelt’s invitation to Booker T. Washington. It also explained how the newspapers portrayed his actions.

Donald, Aida D. *Lion in the White House: A Life of Theodore Roosevelt*. New York: Basic Books, 2007.

This book offered me a better understanding of the inner workings of Roosevelt’s administration and the Roosevelts life in the White House.

Gonzalez, Ariel . "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: From Booker T. Washington to Barack Obama." *Breaking News and Opinion on The Huffington Post*.
[www.huffingtonpost.com/ariel-gonzalez/guess_who's_coming_to_dinn_b_137764.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ariel-gonzalez/guess_whos_coming_to_dinn_b_137764.html).

This news article gave me a better understanding of the breakage of social barriers throughout the history of the White House.

Landau, Barry H.. *The President's Table: Two Hundred Years of Dining and Diplomacy*. New York, N.Y.: Collins, 2007.

This book offered me a better understanding of the inner workings of Roosevelt and the White House, and its impact. This book was my best source about the history of White House dinners. I also learned about how subsequent presidents continued some of Roosevelt’s traditions, such as making State Dinners events for foreign dignitaries.

Meyers, Robert Cornelius V. *Theodore Roosevelt, Patriot and Statesman; The True Story of an Ideal American*,. Philadelphia, Pa. and Chicago, Ill.: P. W. Ziegler & Co., 1902.

I took several quotes from this source. It helped me comprehend Mrs. Roosevelt's responsibilities in the White House. It also led me to understand the importance of Prince Henry's visit. Because it was written in 1902, it showed me how the Roosevelts were viewed during their time in the White House.

Miller, Nathan. *Theodore Roosevelt: a life*. New York: Morrow, 1992.

This biography of Roosevelt provided me with several quotes.

Mitchell, Patricia, and Sarah E. Mitchell. *Plain Food & High Thinking: An Anecdotal History of White House Entertaining, 1901-1953*. Chatham, Va.: Patricia B. Mitchell, 2005.

This small book gave information about the food served at the White House and Oyster Bay. I started to understand the simplicity of the food at the Roosevelt table.

Morris, Edmund. *Theodore Rex*. New York: Random House, 2001.

This was the most informative biography I read. It helped me to understand the character of the President, and gave me several quotes.

Thayer, William Roscoe. *Theodore Roosevelt: an Intimate Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919.

This source gave me a better understanding of the diplomacy that happened around the table during Prince Henry's visit. It helped me to understand what protocol demanded in this situation.

"The White House State Dinners," *The White House Historical Association*.
www.whitehousehistory.org. March 21, 2011.

This website provides the history of the White House. This particular article gave information about how "State Dinners" have changed over time.

Willets, Gilson. *Inside History of the White House* . New York: The Christian Herald, 1908.

Because this book was printed at the end of Roosevelt's Presidency, it gave information that was relevant to the time period. It was an accurate description of life in the White House.