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How Teddy Roosevelt Invented Spin

He used public opinion, the press, leaks to Congress, and Upton Sinclair to reform unconscionable industries, like the meatpackers.



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For decades after his death, Theodore Roosevelt was written off as a grandstanding performer—remembered more for his rhetoric than his accomplishments. H.L. Mencken, for example, bridled at Roosevelt’s grandiosity: “What moved him was simply a craving for facile and meaningless banzais, for the gaudy eminence and power of the leader of a band of lynchers, for the mean admiration of mean men.” Even Woodrow

Wilson, once an admirer, came to regard TR as “the monumental fakir of history.”

Over time, however, Roosevelt’s reputation changed. Many historians now agree that TR revolutionized the presidency. Previously, presidents had accepted the Framers’ view of the executive as an administrative office, with Congress the seat of policymaking. But Roosevelt’s vision required not just that Washington meet the “needs of the nation,” as he wrote, but also that the president take the lead in doing so. He embraced the job of leading the public, striving to discern the public interest and engage the citizenry directly. He courted publicity aggressively, not simply to boost his ego but also to effect vigorous reform. “Yes—it is true that TR liked the centre of the stage—loved it in fact,” wrote the journalist Henry Stoddard, “but when he sought it he always had something to say or to do that made the stage the appropriate place for him.”

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Roosevelt pioneered many of the techniques presidents use today to achieve policy goals. He toured the country to promote favored legislation. He courted the Washington press corps—upgrading the shabby White House pressroom and hosting informal press conferences during his afternoon shave. He kept tabs on photographers at his statements (the better to make the front pages), hired the first government press officers, and staged ingenious publicity stunts. (He descended to the bottom of the Long Island Sound by submarine to show support for the new vessels and rode 98 miles on horseback to prove the reasonableness of new Army regulations.)

Roosevelt thus ushered in an age in which presidents would be perpetually

engaged in the work of publicity and opinion management—the work of spin. Perhaps no incident better illustrates this than his historic 1906 quest to clean up the shoddy and predatory practices in the stockyards and meatpacking houses where Americans got their daily diet of beef.

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After decades of unchecked industrial growth, American businesses and industries were in need of federal regulation—to protect workers, consumers, farmers, or simply other competitors in the marketplace. Addressing the issue of unregulated meatpacking and other foods had been on Roosevelt's to-do list for some time when he raised it in his December 1905 message to Congress. "Traffic in foodstuffs which have been debased or adulterated so as to injure health or to deceive purchasers," he declared, "should be forbidden." The Senate, dominated by business interests, resisted, but Roosevelt hoped to prevail by enlisting public support. To do so, he seized on a popular outcry triggered that spring by the reporting of a crusading, 27-year-old socialist with whom, despite profound ideological disagreements, Roosevelt locked arms.

Upton Beall Sinclair wasn't a core member of the group of journalists—like Lincoln Steffens and Ray Stannard Baker—who were close to Roosevelt and whom he famously labeled "muckrakers." But more than any other writer, Sinclair's name would come to epitomize their intrepid "literature of exposure," which pulled back the curtain on seamy business practices and corrupt politics in the hope of inciting reform. Sinclair's fame derived mainly from the success of *The Jungle*, his 1906 novel about the wretched world of Chicago meatpackers.

Like other muckrakers who wrote fiction, Sinclair didn't mind that his art read like agitprop. He saw his fiction as akin to his journalism, rooted in reportage and designed to spur social change. To write *The Jungle*, Sinclair

had spent seven weeks in the slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants of Chicago, donning grubby clothes and carrying a lunch bucket to mix in with the immigrant workers. During the daytime, he visited the squalid, lethally dangerous workplaces, documenting the indifference of management to the workers' hardships and the lack of government oversight. In the evenings, he knocked on the workers' doors, his pencil ready to record their accounts.

Sinclair wanted to steer attention to the plight of the exploited Lithuanian immigrants in Packingtown, and his novel was a melodramatic yarn of desperate working-class life. The passages in the book that caught the popular fancy, however—though they spanned just a few pages—told a more particular story about the meat that Americans were consuming. Sinclair told of rats scampering across heaps of rotting flesh, leaving droppings; of tubercular meat packaged and sold at market; of acid corroding workers' flesh; and, most shockingly, of men tumbling into cooking-room vats and ignored “till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham's Pure Leaf Lard!” Those gut-churning images would outlive any ideological message about the workers that Sinclair intended. “I aimed at the public's heart,” he later wrote, “and by accident I hit it in the stomach.”

When his book appeared, Sinclair undertook a promotional campaign. That effort included writing a slew of pieces about the sordid state of Chicago meatpacking for a variety of magazines. It also entailed mailing out copies of *The Jungle* to important people. One recipient was Theodore Roosevelt, who, fortuitously, was just then considering how to marshal public support for regulation of the so-called Beef Trust.

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Never one to mince words, the president deemed Sinclair a “crackpot.” But he shared the novelist’s dim view of the meat moguls. He wrote Sinclair a three-page letter that mocked the young man’s “pathetic belief” in socialism and offered a critique of *The Jungle*—but one that concluded with: “The specific evils you point out shall, if their existence be proved, and if I have the power, be eradicated.” Roosevelt extended an invitation to the White House.

By this point, Roosevelt was at work on his own plan. He had previously asked the Agriculture Department to investigate conditions in Chicago. The president thought that if he could confirm even a portion of Sinclair’s report, he could galvanize public opinion and force the balky Congress—which was warring with TR over his reform agenda—to move on meat-inspection legislation. When Roosevelt shared the news of this preliminary step with Sinclair, the novelist demurred, fearing, as he told the president, that having the Agriculture Department examine the issue “was like asking a burglar to determine his own guilt.” Instead, Sinclair urged Roosevelt to open “a secret and confidential investigation” by a disinterested party.

In early April 1906, the two men met in TR’s study. Piles of papers, magazines, and reports lay on the coffee table. *The Jungle* rested beside the president’s chair, index cards sticking out from its pages. Roosevelt told Sinclair that he too had a low opinion of the meat-packers, having eaten their bad meat in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. The president also said that he now agreed with Sinclair that a second, independent body would indeed be better poised than the Agriculture Department’s team to get the full story about the stockyards. Charles Neill, Roosevelt’s commissioner of labor and a solid progressive, agreed to undertake this second probe. The president instructed Sinclair to promptly go see Neill and his partner, James Reynolds, who were ready, Roosevelt promised, to “do everything you suggest in terms of interviewing witnesses and gathering information.”

As Neill and Reynolds began their inquiry, the Agriculture committee returned its verdict—rendering, as Sinclair feared, a low opinion of his work. Their report made clear the downside of Sinclair’s histrionic style. If it could arouse readers with shock and horror, its purple prose also lent itself to easy dismissal. The Agriculture Department investigators did just that, judging *The Jungle* guilty of “willful and deliberate misrepresentations of fact.” “In his anxiety to be as sensational and ‘yellow’ as possible,” they said, Sinclair had “selected the worst possible condition which could be found in any establishment as typical.” Though they confirmed problems with the meat-inspection system, they affirmed that the federal government had virtually no power, as the laws stood, to correct them.

By the next week, Sinclair was nervous about the fate of food-and-drug reform—and his reputation. The meatpackers’ own publicity campaign was now in high gear. *The Saturday Evening Post*, whose editor had worked for the Armour beef company, was running ghost-written articles under the byline of that firm’s president, J. Ogden Armour, who was bent on quashing the reform bill. Armour attacked Sinclair while asserting that the industry’s products contained “not one atom of any condemned animal carcass.” Upsetting to Sinclair, too, was an article in the conservative *Chicago Tribune* reporting the Agriculture team’s anti-Sinclair findings. The *Tribune* added that Roosevelt was preparing to go after Sinclair in a forthcoming speech.

Sinclair panicked. But Roosevelt was too prudent to attack a key ally at such a delicate moment and assured Sinclair that he planned no public rebuke to the novelist. (Soon thereafter, however, he did deliver his famous denunciation of unspecified muckrakers, and he privately considered Sinclair guilty of many of the journalistic sins he was assailing.) Still, Roosevelt talked down his ally. “You *must* keep your head,” he replied, as if to a child. “I intend before I get through to be able to have authoritative reasons for saying ‘proved’ or ‘unproved,’ ... of each specific charge advanced against the

packers.”

Sinclair, meanwhile, kept up his own publicity campaign. He drafted rebuttals to Armour, which ran in *Everybody's Magazine* and *The Independent*, and continued to publish articles about his findings, he wrote, “until I was dizzy.”

Roosevelt was equally keen not to lose the war for public opinion, which he expected would dictate the bill's fate. In March, he had given orders to Charles Neill: “I want to get at the bottom of this matter, and be absolutely certain of our facts when the investigation is through.” In late May, Neill and his team finally provided the president with their report: a bleak picture of putrid conditions and reckless practices in the stockyards—mostly in line with Sinclair's account. Neill described workers spitting or urinating on the floors, workroom surfaces blanketed in dirt and rotten meat, and the reheating of bad meat to be relabeled for sale. Neill couldn't substantiate *The Jungle's* tales of human workers being processed into lard—Sinclair claimed that the Beef Trust had paid off the victimized families or shipped the widows back to the old country—but the overall verdict was supportive.

For tactical reasons, Roosevelt kept Neill's report under wraps. He wanted to use it as leverage with Congress—leaking hints of its damning details, and threatening the release of more, to pressure the meat industry's patrons. This strategy took time, frustrating the politically naïve Sinclair, who wanted the document released, not least to vindicate himself.

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Neither man needed have worried. Public support for reform was building.

With Roosevelt's backing, Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana introduced an amendment to the agriculture appropriations bill that imposed stringent rules on meat inspection, including dating canned meat, with meatpackers forced to pay the costs. Spurred by this flurry of activity, the Pure Food and Drug bill—which prohibited the adulteration and mislabeling of foods, beverages, medicines, and other drugs—also now started to advance, separately, toward passage.

On the defensive, the meatpacking and livestock industries joined forces. They warned that any legitimation of Sinclair's charges would dry up foreign markets for U.S. meat; federal regulation, moreover, would shift control of the industry from the businessmen with the relevant know-how to “theorists, chemists [and] sociologists,” as one spokesman said. When it became clear that some version of the bill was likely to pass, the industrialists switched to trying to strip out the most severe provisions. The beef companies even placed newspaper ads inviting readers to visit the packinghouses and judge for themselves.

While the battle raged on Capitol Hill and in the press, Sinclair capitulated to his impatience. On the evening of Sunday, May 27, 1906, he walked into the office of *New York Times* editor Carr Van Anda with a briefcase containing letters, affidavits, and other materials that Neill and his team had collected. Van Anda sat Sinclair down for several hours with two *Times* stenographers, and by 1:00 a.m., a story was ready for Monday's paper. Roosevelt, who read it the next day, erupted at Sinclair for his “utterly reckless statements.” But he proceeded to make Neill's full report public, sending it to the House with a call to pass the Beveridge amendment and its meat-inspection provisions.

The beef industry had been routed in the court of public opinion. As the packinghouses literally whitewashed their facilities as part of a desperate

cleanup job, the press grew withering. The *New York Evening Post* offered doggerel: “Mary had a little lamb/And when she saw it sicken/She shipped it off to Packingtown/And now it’s labeled chicken.” Before a House committee, Neill and Reynolds rehearsed with fanfare their gory findings, including an account of a pig carcass that fell into a urinal before getting hung, unwashed, in a cooling room.

House conservatives made a defiant stand, and Roosevelt and Beveridge ultimately made some concessions. But the Indiana senator proclaimed the final bill “the most pronounced extension of federal power in every direction ever enacted.” Its achievements far outweighed its deficiencies, and it established important standards and precedents. On June 30, 1906, Roosevelt, with a stroke of the pen, made meat inspection the law of the land—and with another stroke signed into law the Pure Food and Drug bill. “In the session that has just closed,” he said to the press, “The Congress has done more substantive work for good than any Congress has done at any session since I became familiar with public affairs.”

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The meat-inspection episode showed the president’s skill not only at discerning public opinion aroused by the press but also at using statements, leaks, and the cultivation of journalists to pass his progressive agenda. In an article hailing “The Reign of Public Opinion,” the great muckraker Lincoln Steffens called it “the real power behind Theodore Roosevelt.” Congressmen submitted to the presidential will, Steffens said, because he was “the leader of public opinion” and they feared popular retribution if they defied him. Even Sinclair, who had wanted a stronger bill than the final compromise, praised TR: “He took the matter up with vigor and determination, and he has given it his immediate and personal attention from the very beginning.”

Roosevelt is remembered as the first president of the modern age not simply

because he used presidential power on behalf of sweeping reform—a feat in itself—but because he redefined the president’s job by governing with an acute consciousness of his power to reach the public. Tackling major national problems meant the president had to set the political agenda through speeches, the press, and the other emerging media, and this in turn meant commanding public attention by mastering the assorted tools and techniques of image- and message-craft that would, decades later, come to be known as spin.

This article is adapted from David Greenberg’s [Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency](#).

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