Educating TR: Lincoln Steffens, the Schmittberger Case, and the Politics of Police Reform, 1895-1897

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Spring 2018

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Acknowledgments

First, thank you to my thesis adviser, Professor Mark Carnes, for his invaluable advice and support throughout the process of writing this thesis. It was his class on U.S. History sophomore year that convinced me to major in History, and I was so grateful to have him guide my research on this project.

Thank you to my thesis seminar classmates, particularly my peer editor, Adele Bernhard. She read my many drafts and provided such valuable guidance at every stage of writing.

Thank you to my closest friends, Alice Lew, Ashley Taylor, Anna Naim, and Patricia Howard. They have supported me the entire year, and I am thankful for our many nights working together in the Diana Computer Lab. Thank you to Trevor Lee-Miller, who listened to me ramble about my many thoughts and concerns over the course of writing this thesis.

Finally, the most thanks and love to my family: Mom, Dad, Terry, Grandpa, Susan, Elle, Conley, Greta, and Peter. Special thank you to Mom and Dad, who encouraged my love of history from the beginning and always let me check out more books at the library as a kid than I could really carry. My family's constant support of my love of learning has carried me so far. We did it!

Introduction

Before Lincoln Steffens and Theodore Roosevelt rose to national fame as Progressive reformers in journalism and politics, they spent time gaining first-hand experience with the widespread corruption of the New York City Police Department. Organized, uniformed police forces were still a relatively new phenomenon in the early 1890s, when Steffens began work as a police reporter and Theodore Roosevelt was appointed police commissioner. The NYPD itself had only been formed in 1845. Upon the creation of the NYPD, the Democratic political machine Tammany Hall quickly became involved in filling its ranks.[1] In addition to Tammany's involvement in filling the police department with selected immigrants from communities under their patronage, a system of bribery emerged between the New York City police and local vice institutions. The widespread crime and vice in New York City during these years has been widely documented by both primary sources from the 1890s and recent historical works.[2] Across the city, nonenforcement by the New York Police Department enabled rampant prostitution, gambling, and liquor consumption.

Police reporter Lincoln Steffens was gaining prominence in New York in 1895. He was a young journalist who had begun his career in 1892 after spending time in Europe on an educational tour of the continent. A native Californian, Steffens arrived to New York ready to explore and write about life in the city. He secured his first job at the *Evening Post*, where within

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[1] Marilynn Johson, *Street Justice: A History of Police Violence in New York City* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 14.

[2] M. H. Dunlop. *Gilded City: Scandal and Sensation* (New York: W. Morrow, 2000), xix. Dunlop's *Gilded City* provides a comprehensive overview of the city's "vice" world, including information on those employed in gambling and prostitution as well as the patrons of these businesses. Richard Zack's *Island of Vice* also provides insight into the New York underworld of the 1890s. Dunlop emphasizes the lengths to which primary sources, primarily New York City newspapers, highlighted the seedy circumstances in which the city's most upper and most lower classes interacted.

the span of two years he advanced from his first position to eventually be transferred to cover the activities of the New York Police Department, which was headquartered in lower Manhattan on Mulberry Street. His superiors recognized his ambition, describing him as "reliable, quick, and resourceful."[3] Steffens first studied and monitored the city's financial dealings on Wall Street, and a year later he became the *Post*'s first reporter sent to the police department.[4] Steffens learned quickly how the criminal underworld and police of New York interacted and he learned it well. Though he had spent his early life in California and part of his young adulthood in Europe, by 1895 Steffens was well-versed in New York's system of vice and the role of the police within that system.

That same year, Theodore Roosevelt had recently returned to his native New York City after serving as Civil Service Commissioner in Washington, D.C.[5] He had been away from New York for only six years, though in some sense Roosevelt never truly knew New York as Lincoln Steffens had come to know it. Roosevelt was born into the elite class of the city and raised far from the downtown neighborhoods of the impoverished and immigrant populations. He attended Harvard University and later Columbia Law School as a young man. He had spent a number of years as a young man living in North Dakota operating a ranch there, before returning to New York to run an unsuccessful mayoral campaign in 1886. Then in 1889 he left New York for Washington for his position as Civil Service Commissioner. Due to his years in Washington,

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[3] Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1931), 178.
[4] Steffens, *Autobiography*, 180.
[5] Richard D. White, Jr., *Roosevelt the Reformer: Theodore Roosevelt as Civil Service Commissioner, 1889-1895* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 6.

D.C. and North Dakota, by 1895 Roosevelt had spent almost the entire previous decade living outside of New York.[6]

Roosevelt's long absence from New York had not diminished his interest in city affairs. Since his absence, Roosevelt had become increasingly fascinated by municipal reform, and it was upon his return to the city that he read Progressive reformer Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, a report on the status of immigrant welfare in ethnic communities in downtown Manhattan.[7] *How the Other Half Lives* impacted Roosevelt enormously, and he cited it as fundamental in influencing his ideas on how city departments could be used in "remedying some social ills."[8] In 1894, Roosevelt was approached by several prominent Republicans to run again for mayor of New York, but declined due to his wife's objections.[9] He settled back into life in New York but his desire to become involved in reform remained and he would soon find his next political opportunity in the wake of the investigation that swept New York City and exposed the underworld of vice and the police corruption that enabled it.

Biographies on Roosevelt, scholarly and otherwise, are numerous. Many focus on his time as police commissioner. However, those that do generally portray Roosevelt as the sole individual who reformed the entire police department. These studies ignore the role that his three fellow commissioners played in the reform attempts of 1895-1897, as well as the influence of experienced police reporters such as Steffens and Riis. Some historians such as Jay S. Berman and H. Paul Jeffers, in their accounts of Roosevelt's attempted reforms as police commissioner,

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[6] White, Jr., *Roosevelt the Reformer*, 151.
[7] J. M. Thompson, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Press," in Serge Ricard, ed., *A Companion to Theodore Roosevelt*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 219.
[8] Theodore Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1913), 168.
[9] White, Jr., *Roosevelt the Reformer*, 151.

credit Roosevelt's achievements as commissioner as a result of sheer idealistic dedication to reform and strength of character, despite his lack of experience, an aspect of his leadership which warrants further investigation.

Roosevelt was no mythic figure who became a Progressive icon solely through his own force of will. His political career spanned decades and he is often treated as a hero by his admirers, yet his image must be deconstructed in order to understand how his leadership style evolved and what factors influenced his growth and education in city reform issues. In particular, his time as police commissioner from 1895-1897 was crucial to the development of his political career and his concepts of leadership. His ideas of what reform should be and could effect were shaped by those he interacted with in the police department, including his fellow commissioners and police reporters. Roosevelt's practical approach to police reform has been documented, but often through the analysis of his individual leadership. The early months of Roosevelt's time as police commissioner provides a means to study how he grew in knowledge of reform and developed ideas to carry out his Progressive ideals.

Lincoln Steffens and Theodore Roosevelt were eager to influence reform, but they were not the city's first citizens to take action against its widespread corruption. The first major figure to dive into the world of New York City vice was Dr. Charles Parkhurst, a Presbyterian minister who was outspoken in his support for reform. Parkhurst had conducted a series of personal investigations into the city's underworld of vice, beginning in 1892. He developed the information and testimony that he gathered from his investigations into a series of sermons, which shocked and outraged his congregation.[10] According to scholar Jesse T. Todd, Jr.,

[10] Charles Parkhurst, *My Forty Years in New York* (New York: MacMillan, 1923), 112. "While we try to convert criminals, Tammany Hall manufactures them," Parkhurst announced to his congregation,

Parkhurst's goals were "unapologetically political."[11] As one of many in an emerging municipal reform movement, Parkhurst's aim was to organize the state government into formally acknowledging and eradicating both the prostitution and gambling of the city and the police corruption that enabled these institutions. The public outcry that followed Parkhurst's series of sermons on what he found in assorted brothels, gambling houses, and saloons led to the creation of the Lexow Commission.

The New York State Senate initiated the Lexow Commission to investigate these accusations of criminal activity.[12] The committee of the Lexow Commission, which was named for its committee's chairman, State Senator Clarence Lexow, began its hearings in January 1894 and remained in session until January 1895. The main goal of the committee was to investigate Parkhurst's allegation of crime and vice, but that meant inevitably scrutinizing the police who allowed this vice to persist. First owners of saloons and brothels were brought in to testify, and after their accounts implicated the police in their activity, police officers themselves were brought in to testify.[13] The star police witness of the Lexow investigations was Captain Max Schmittberger.

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referring to prostitutes, gamblers, and drinkers on February 14, 1892. New York City he declared "a very hotbed of knavery."

[11] Jesse T. Todd, "Battling Satan in the City: Charles Henry Parkhurst and Municipal Redemption in Gilded Age New York," *American Presbyterians,* 71 (1993): 244.

[12] J. S. Berman, "The Taming of the Tiger: The Lexow Committee Investigation of Tammany Hall and the Police Department of the City of New York," *Police Studies*, 3 (1981), 55.

[13] "An Angry Witness." *New York Tribune*, May 22, 1894.

The Schmittberger Case and Roosevelt's Attempts at Reform

During the Lexow Committee investigations of 1894-1895, German-born Police Captain Max Schmittberger rose to infamy among his colleagues and reformers alike when he turned state's evidence during the final months of the investigation. When Lincoln Steffens later wrote of him, he recalled that Schmittberger "had always been known at police headquarters as the collector of the Tenderloin precinct" who "superintended" the gathering of bribes, which as a captain he distributed to his subordinates. By Schmittberger's own account, when he became a policeman, he was completely unaware of its widespread corruption. During his first year as a police officer, his first night beat was in a neighborhood littered with brothels. One evening a young prostitute approached him with ten dollars, saying "Here, Officer." When Schmittberger went to his superior to ask what the money was for, his superior replied with "…That's what the Cap put you on that fat job for: to make a little on the side." This was Schmittberger's entrance into the system of bribery.[14] He electrified the Lexow Committee with a confession that openly acknowledged not only his own involvement in the corruption over the previous two decades, but the involvement of police officers and officials across the department.

"I have come to tell the whole truth," he announced to the Lexow Committee the day of his testimony in late December 1894. Captain Schmittberger's confession was full of details that brought judgment down on the police department. His confession "directly implicated" Commissioners Martin and Sheehan, Inspectors Williams and McAvoy, and several other police captains. He exposed the bribery, blackmail, and extortion that were part of the daily business of the police. Schmittberger told the Committee how ward politics played a role in individual

[14] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 269.

promotions, how patrolmen payed their sergeants to be given lighter work, and he exposed the work of "go-betweens," men who were not technically employed by the NYPD but who nevertheless arranged police officers' chosen appointments for them (for a fee). Regarding brothels and saloons, Schmittberger stated "No pretense of observing the excise law at these places was ever made," thus criminals did as they pleased.[15] He claimed these places would "certainly not" have been able to run without "special arrangements" with the police.[16] In fact, many of these establishments were under direct police protection. Schmittberger even reported sending a patrolman to apologize to a brothel owner for having made "inquiries concerning the conduct of her house."[17] Schmittberger also acknowledged the political influence of Tammany Hall in securing police promotions.[18]

In quantifiable terms, Schmittberger confirmed that he paid a collector, Wardman Vail, $190 per month for "the graft," as the bribery system was referred to. Schmittberger himself gathered $20 weekly from policy shops, and policy shop collections across the city amounted to about $600 per month. Schmittberger informed the committee that he was expected to pay Inspector Alexander "Clubber" Williams fifty dollars a month. "It was the custom of all the captains to pay this money to the inspectors," Schmittberger declared.[19] Schmittberger's testimony confirmed the Lexow Committee's greatest suspicions and shocked the public, causing a "great commotion."[20] "The facts have never been so clearly testified to," reported the *St. Louis Post*.[21]

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[15] "GAVE IT AWAY," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 22, 1894.
[16] "GAVE IT AWAY."
[17] "POLICE," *St.Louis Post-Dispatch*, Dec. 23, 1894.
[18] "Lexow Investigation: Captain Schmittberger On the Stand," *Austin Daily Statesman*, Dec. 21, 1894.
[19] "GAVE IT AWAY."
[20] "POLICE."
[21] "POLICE."

"In brief, Schmittberger gave the whole system away, Steffens later recalled.[22] His language indicates that Schmittberger was a figure of consequence in the police department. Over time, as Schmittberger had become the "collector" of the bribes, he had also become a powerful police captain. He was involved in the bribery system at a powerful level. He had been on the police force for roughly twenty years, and held just as many years' worth of evidence of corruption, which he shared in his widely publicized confession during the investigation.

Schmittberger believed the entire police department in New York City was "rotten to the core." His confession confirmed "…what have been hitherto considered the most exaggerated cases of police and official corruption."[23] It detailed the criminality prevalent throughout the department. By his thorough and frank testimony to the Lexow Commission, Schmittberger brought public opinion down on the police department. The *New York Tribune* reported that "…if the [Lexow] committee does not climb up and dislodge the rascals the public will want to know why."[24] By his confession, Captain Schmittberger secured the public's disdain for the police department and also by extension disdain for the officials at Tammany Hall who enabled and encouraged police corruption. The *Tribune* called his testimony the "most sweeping and damning proof yet given on the Lexow stand of the rottenness that has long pervaded the Police Department."[25] Schmittberger found himself a target of both sides of the trials, as his fellow officers denied that corruption was rampant and prominent New York reformers such as Dr. Charles Parkhurst declared that no good could come from an admitted bribe-taker.[26] The

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[22] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 254.
[23] "A Full Confession," *The Nashville American*, Dec. 22, 1894.
[24] "Captain Schmittberger's Confession," *New York Tribune*, Dec. 23, 1894.
[25] "Captain Schmittberger's Confession."
[26] "May Save Schmittberger," *New York Times*, Jan. 5, 1895.

extensive coverage of Schmittberger's testimony suggests the depth of public interest and investment in police corruption. Schmittberger's confession and the subsequent exposure of the extent of police corruption ultimately affected the outcome of the municipal elections of November 1895, as the public called for reform.

During the Lexow hearings, Lincoln Steffens had watched and reported as various city officials were drawn in to be questioned by the committee. Twenty-seven years old at the start of the investigations, he was still in the process of building his career at the *New York Evening Post* and was eager for more details on the now-infamous police graft system.[27] According to scholar Jay S. Berman, Steffens became familiar with Captain Schmittberger's rise to infamy during the Lexow investigations of that year.[28] During the investigations, from January 1894 to January 1895, Steffens maintained his belief that for reform to succeed, corrupt police captains must inevitably "fall" and be removed from their posts.[29] According to his autobiography, during the investigations Steffens had repeatedly asserted "Get Schmittberger," believing that in securing Schmittberger's witness, the whole department could be exposed.[30] However, after the shock of Schmittberger's initial confession, Steffens failed to keep up with the career of the Tenderloin district police captain and would only come into contact with him again a year later during the summer of 1895.

The events that followed the Lexow Committee investigations pushed Steffens and Roosevelt together. The Lexow Commission, by publicizing corruption, started a reform

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[27]Stein, Harry H. "Apprenticing reporters: Lincoln Steffens on 'The Evening Post.'." *The Historian* 58, (1996), 367.
[28] "The Taming of the Tiger: The Lexow committee investigation of Tammany Hall and the Police Department of the City of New York," 55.
[29] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 250.
[30] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 266.

movement that culminated in the election of Mayor William Lafayette Strong in November 1894. The following spring in May 1895, the new mayor was tasked with appointing three new police commissioners. The board of police commissioners had been created in 1870 to oversee the activity of the police department and was solely a political entity, whose commissioners were were not selected from the police department itself. The board was set to have four members, with a president at its head. The commissioners themselves were chosen by political affiliation and their terms lasted six years.[31] Roosevelt received his next political opportunity in the reform movement when Mayor Strong appointed him as police commissioner. Mayor Strong placed Roosevelt on the board along with Andrew Parker and Colonel Frederick Grant.[32] Parker was a Tammany Hall Democrat, while Commissioner Grant was Roosevelt's fellow Republican on the board.[33] Parker, Grant, and Roosevelt joined Democrat Commissioner Avery Andrews on the board, who had been appointed three weeks prior to the rest of the board. Commissioner Andrews nominated Roosevelt as President of the board which the other commissioners unanimously supported.[34]

Reporter Jacob Riis later wrote of TR's entrance into reform: "It was like a man coming to enlist for the war because he believed in the cause."[35] Roosevelt himself said "…whatever ability I have I shall give to the work, and that as Police Commissioner I shall act solely with a view to the well being of the city…and shall take account only of the efficiency, honesty, and records of the [police officers]."[36] Roosevelt also expressed excitement at reentering New York

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[31] H. Paul Jeffers, *Commissioner Roosevelt: The Story of Theodore Roosevelt and the New York City Police, 1895-1897* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1994), 68.
[32] "New Men on Police Board," *New York Times*, (New York, NY), May 7, 1895.
[33] "New Men on Police Board."
[34] Jeffers, *Commissioner Roosevelt*, 69.
[35] Jeffers, *Commissioner Roosevelt*, 33.
[36] Jeffers, *Commissioner Roosevelt*, 66.

City politics. "I think it is a good thing to be definitely identified with my city once more," he wrote to his sister. "I would like to do my share in governing the city after our great victory; and so far as may be I would like once more to have my voice in political matters."[37]

As newly appointed Police Commissioner (and unanimously elected President of the Board of Commissioners), Roosevelt struggled to work with his colleagues nearly from the start of his tenure.[38] Political differences combined with Roosevelt's overbearing personality led to him ignoring any attempts at cooperation with the other commissioners. Dissent among the board seemed almost inevitable given the stark political contrast between Roosevelt and his fellow Commissioners Andrews and Parker, and their disagreements were followed closely by local newspapers such as the *New York Times* from the time of the men's appointments. Newspapers were especially keen to follow the developments of the police commissioners' relationships because their appointments came with the assignment to reform, rearrange, and reorganize the police department in the wake of the corruption scandal.

Roosevelt assigned each commissioner to different tasks within the police department. Commissioner Parker was charged with "reorganizing the detective bureau, as well as the police department's duties in supervising elections." Grant controlled supplies and repairs and Andrews was tasked with "revising departmental rules and regulations."[39] Roosevelt would be involved with each Commissioner's activities and control the board's relationship with the press. Mayor Strong declared that he wanted to have the affairs of the Police Department administered "with fairness toward all, and with partisanship toward none". The *Times* pronounced that "[Roosevelt]

[37] Theodore Roosevelt to Anna Roosevelt, 14 April 1895, Theodore Roosevelt Collection.
[38] Jeffers, *Commissioner Roosevelt*, 69.
[39] Jeffers, *Commissioner Roosevelt*, 69.

was always an ardent advocate of reform legislation," making him an ideal candidate to make the new Mayor's vision of a reformed police department a reality.[40]

Roosevelt's choice of close companions during his time on the board of police commissioners also revealed how he felt toward sharing power with the other commissioners. Roosevelt chose partners such as journalists Lincoln Steffens and Jacob Riis whose expertise could benefit him on the police force but whose status as outsiders also kept them from challenging his power as president of the board. Roosevelt kept reporters as close companions during his time as president of the Police Board. As documented by Steffens and Riis in their autobiographies, from the time he became Police Commissioner, Roosevelt maintained close relationships with both Steffens and Riis, relying on their experience to boost his understanding of the operation of the New York City world of police corruption and vice.

In Roosevelt, Steffens found a politician in need of a professional connection with outsider police experience. Like TR, Steffens had proven his interest in reform during the Lexow Commission. He was ambitious and keen to be a part of Roosevelt's reform movement among the police board. The two were introduced by their mutual friend and fellow Progressive reformer Jacob Riis, and they set out to achieve their professional goals and effect lasting reform on a police department whose corruption had been made public during Lexow.

The member of the press most important to Roosevelt was Jacob Riis. Riis was a longtime member of the Progressive reform movement and journalist for the *Evening Sun*.[41] According to Steffens' autobiography, Riis guided young Steffens when he became a police reporter two years prior to Roosevelt's being appointed a police commissioner. Riis was a

[40] "New Men on Police Board."
[41] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 207.

veteran reporter on Mulberry Street. By the time Roosevelt joined the board, Steffens was familiar with police corruption, having covered the Lexow Commission.[42] The two had more experience with the police than Roosevelt, and Roosevelt was keenly aware of this. Roosevelt found both of them to be key allies.

Though just two of many reporters that Roosevelt engaged with during his time at the police department, Riis and Steffens were present to witness Roosevelt's first attempts at reforming the police force. Roosevelt was aware of his lack of police experience and relied on Riis and Steffens to keep him informed and to help boost his credibility. Riis especially was an exceptional figure in the city's reform movement. His book *How the Other Half Lives* had played a major role in influencing Roosevelt's interest in reform, while Steffens was known for his interviewing skills as a reporter and was able to persuade his subjects to reveal the information he was looking for.[43]

Roosevelt partnered his quest for reform with Jacob Riis throughout his tenure on the police board. According to Jeffers, prior to joining the police board Roosevelt had approached Riis saying "I have read your book, and I am here to help."[44] Statements like these contributed to the widespread scholarly picture of Roosevelt as a single-minded reformer. TR planned to learn from Riis the conditions of the city and the oversight (or lack of oversight) of the police department on different neighborhood institutions Roosevelt intended to shutter, including prostitution houses, saloons, and gambling centers. Roosevelt's friendship with Riis had both immediate and long-term impacts on his political legacy. TR's connection to Riis was strategic,

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[42] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 266.
[43] Peter Hartshorn, *I Have Seen the Future: A Life of Lincoln Steffens* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2011), 53.
[44] Jeffers, *Commissioner Roosevelt*, 70.

as it allowed him to associate himself with the reform movement in New York City. Riis, one of the Progressive Era's most prominent reform advocates, wrote several biographies of Roosevelt, including *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen*.[45]

Roosevelt and Riis' adventures were the most widely publicized of all accounts of Commissioner Roosevelt. According to Riis and Steffens' accounts, Roosevelt would parade around the city by night to expose and correct the laziness and corruption of individual police officers on duty. According to an article published by the *New York Times,* just a month after Roosevelt's appointment he "assumed the role of Roundsman" one night to examine the behavior of policemen on duty in New York's 21st district. He was "accompanied by a friend who is familiar with the affairs of the department."[46] That night, according to the article, Roosevelt found the patrolmen for that district asleep or unengaged in their work. Upon realizing this was the norm for the officers on beat, he reprimanded them "severely" and threatened them with further punishment if they did not immediately change. According to the article, "the action of Mr. Roosevelt, when it became known, made a sensation throughout the department and as a consequence, more faithful patrol duty may be performed by the force for some time to come."[47]

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[45] Jacob Riis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen,* (New York: Outlook Co., 1904).
[46] "Police Caught Napping," *New York Times*, Jun. 8, 1895. Based on Steffens' and Roosevelt's later writings, the "friend" in question was almost certainly Jacob Riis.
[47] "Police Caught Napping."

Cartoons such as these represented police officers' resentment of Roosevelt's intrusion into their department.[48]

This type of incident was most illustrative of Roosevelt's leadership style as president of the board of police commissioners. He wanted to personally engage with the police force and took charge individually in changing their work performance. He most often took reporters on these nightly adventures, which became a regular occurrence.[49] Roosevelt did not collaborate with his fellow commissioners in these endeavors. His engagement with journalists and individualistic leadership style marked the early months of his time as police commissioner.

Yet despite their close interaction, Roosevelt and Steffens had differing ideas on how to best enact police reform. The divide in their ideas, combined with Roosevelt's lack of interest in collaboration with the other commissioners, culminated in the decision to fire or retain Captain Max Schmittberger, the key Lexow witness whose confession to corruption had already brought down many police officials, in the summer of 1895. Roosevelt's leadership has been

[48] "Teddy Roosevelt's Battle with the Deeply Depraved New York of Yore." *WNET: New York Public Media*.<https://www.thirteen.org/metrofocus/2012/03/teddy-roosevelts-battle-with-the-deeply-depraved-new-york-of-yore/> Accessed 15 April 2018.
[49] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 264.

well-documented as highly energetic, reform-minded, and individualistic, but it is less appreciated how his direct confrontation with day-to-day incidents of reform, as seen in the case of Captain Schmittberger challenged his traditional beliefs in how the criminal underworld (including the police officers involved in this world) should be handled.

Roosevelt planned to rid the department of all corrupt officers (those who had either confessed to or been implicated in bribery, currently or prior to 1895) within the first few months of his time as police commissioner, and keep those officers who he felt would support his leadership. Steffens wrote of Roosevelt's plan and Jacob Riis' involvement in the plan: "What TR was really doing-the idea of Riis in proposing it-was to talk personally with the individual policeman and ask them to believe in him, in the law, which they were to enforce."[50] In addition to winning the trust of those non-corrupt police officers Roosevelt did not wish to remove, Steffens also quotes Roosevelt as saying, "…I threatened that we would pursue and punish those [policemen] that served on the other side."[51] By Roosevelt's definition, Captain Schmittberger would have soon been a target for removal. But during the summer of 1895, Lincoln Steffens began to develop a personal interest in the case of Captain Max Schmittberger. Steffens had targeted Schmittberger during the investigation, as it was known that Schmittberger was involved with the widespread bribery. However, it was only following the Lexow investigation that Steffens came to know Schmittberger personally.

Steffens devoted a chapter of his autobiography to the development of his new opinion on Captain Schmittberger titled "Schmittberger: An Honest Policeman."[52] In it, Steffens describes

[50] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 264.
[51] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 265.
[52] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 266.

the interactions he had with Schmittberger during the summer of 1895. During that summer Steffens became convinced of Schmittberger's commitment to reform. However, Schmittberger was not so easily convinced of Steffens' newfound interest in him. Steffens wrote "He had not forgotten that all through the [Lexow Committee] investigation I had sung one monotonous song, day in and day out. 'Get Schmittberger.'"[53] Despite Steffens' apparent hounding of Schmittberger during the investigations, he found the police captain's behavior impeccable following the trial, saying it was "…as if his mind was made up to no more graft."[54]

During the summer of 1895, Steffens "bicycle days" were spent exploring Schmittberger's "goatville" precinct with his wife.[55] Schmittberger had been transferred there following his confession, a precinct known for very little criminal activity, and thus very few opportunities for Schmittberger to fall back into accepting bribes.[56] Steffens and his wife repeatedly saw the captain on the job, attentive and alert. Schmittberger's apparent dedication to his position left an impression on Steffens, who attempted to greet him. Steffens quickly felt the repercussions of his anti-Schmittberger campaign the year before. On his attempts to greet Schmittberger during these encounters, Steffens wrote "He did not greet me. I saw him look, recognize me, and turn away."[57] However, this was only the beginning of a series of interactions in the summer of 1895 that transformed Steffens' opinion of him and eventually led to Steffens' defense of Schmittberger when Commissioner Roosevelt sought to have him removed.

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[53] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 266.
[54] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 267.
[55] Thale, 187. "Goatville" referred to a precinct that was largely farmland and less populated, thus less likely to provide sources of bribes to the police working there.
[56] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 266.
[57] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 265.

Steffens' recalling of this summer portrayed not one, but two changed men, including himself. After their conversations during those months, Steffens took a different view of Schmittberger. Steffens wanted to build on his experience as a police reporter and his growing relationship with Roosevelt to devise a plan that would keep Captain Schmittberger on the force. He also felt his plan would help gain the reformers the trust of the average police officers who were wary of Roosevelt's leadership, but first he had to determine Schmittberger's potential as a police captain for reform. Steffens was an active participant in the reform of the police board, able to use his role as a reporter to win the trust of both officers and police commissioners.

Steffens was regretful of his previous distrust of Schmittberger and sought out interactions with him during the summer of 1895 where he saw the captain working. Schmittberger avoide him, but Steffens' persisted. In determining the captain's new opinions of reform and plans for his future, Steffens indicated that wanted to play a role in the Captain's future, since at this time he was under the threat of being fired by Roosevelt. "Do you regret the old days, Captain?" Steffens asked Schmittberger. "…I wouldn't go through what I have gone through for-for a million times what there was in it for me," Schmittberger replied. "Never again. Not on your life." Steffens wrote that Schmittberger's tone persuaded him that he was genuine. In subsequent conversations, Schmittberger continued to emphasize his disdain for re-entering into the bribery system. He was eager to convince Steffens, saying to Steffens' wife once that he wished she would "…help me make your husband believe that I'm on the square now."[58] Schmittberger needed Steffens' support if he was to have any opportunity to stay on the police force. In Schmittberger, Steffens saw an opportunity for applying his practical approach to

[58] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 273.

reform to Roosevelt's list of goals within the department. While Schmittberger was not an obvious candidate for reform within the police department, Steffens found in him personal and professional strengths that he knew could be put to use in a department that had recently found itself under new leadership and whose popular opinion was that reform was disorganized and ineffective under the guidance of Progressive outsiders.

Convinced of Schmittberger's conversion to reform, Steffens next faced the task of persuading Roosevelt to keep the reformed police captain on the force. Steffens' second chapter on this incident, "Saving Schmittberger," addresses how he went about persuading Roosevelt not to fire Schmittberger. Public opinion sided with Roosevelt and was strongly against Schmittberger. "It was understandable that public opinion should have expected to see Captain Schmittberger, the confessed collector of the police graft system, punished or at least discharged. The belief in the existence of good men and bad men and that the guilty should suffer is deeply implanted in all men," Steffens wrote. "The good were against him for his grafting, the underworld for squealing," Steffens observed. "Both counts counted with me." While Steffens accepted both sentiments, he perceived a change to conduct an "experiment in morals." "Cannot an honest man do dishonest things and remain honest?" he asked.[59]

"Roosevelt was harder to win," Steffens recalled.[60] When Steffens approached the president of the board of the police commissioners about keeping Schmittberger on the force, Roosevelt "revolted," saying "no, no, no."[61] Roosevelt was at this point well-involved in his struggle with the police, and was experiencing difficulty establishing his authority and

[59] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 267.
[60] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 275.
[61] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 275.

persuading them to support his leadership and the reform movement overall. However, Steffens understood this, and played Roosevelt's problems to his advantage. Cops did not believe in reform, and officers such as Schmittberger had told Steffens and Riis that they believed Tammany Hall would soon return to power. Steffens particularly emphasized the lack of trust in the lasting power of police reform among the actual policemen themselves. The power of the political machines was too strong to be defeated and to persuade the police officers of the reformers' work. The police officers also expressed a mistrust of the reformers themselves. Reform would soon be gone, one way or another. Police officers had the attitude that reform politicians such as Roosevelt used their positions to advance professionally, to move from New York City to Albany and then eventually to Washington, D.C. Thus officers believed that reform was more selfishly motivated and unlikely to last. This made them less likely to commit to any reform efforts. This was the basis for their distrust in reform, and their distrust in Roosevelt was magnified by his agenda of promoting only certain men who were followed his exact rules.[62]

With this knowledge in mind, Steffens put his influence to use as a member of the so-called "kitchen police board" (himself, Jacob Riis, and Roosevelt). He told Roosevelt that if he moved the captain to a precinct where corruption was rampant, Schmittberger would prove his dedication to reform by "cleaning it up" and "best of all, the board would show that it knew and would favor the police officers on 'our side'."[63] Steffens argued that it was natural for those on the side of corruption to want Schmittberger removed for his exposing of their crimes, but

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[62] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 275. Roosevelt's critics on the police force were later proven right, as Roosevelt did just as they predicted, moving from his position as police commissioner to Albany and Washington, serving as Governor of New York, Assistant Secretary of the Navy and eventually as President.

[63] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 275.

that there was no real reason for Roosevelt, Riis, Steffens, and the other commissioners to want Schmittberger fired when he could be put to use. Roosevelt's initial aversion to hearing Schmittberger's case was predictable given his strategy for reform during the previous several months. After, Steffens recalled that "many an analyzing talk we, the kitchen police board, T.R., Riis, and I, had over this problem" of how to inspire dedication to reform among the police force. [64] Roosevelt, although reluctant, was willing to engage with Steffens on this issue.

Steffens persuaded Roosevelt, who "yielded at last" and agreed to Steffens' idea, but challenged him to pass it by the other three police commissioners. However, next he had to seek out the counsel of his colleagues on the board. Roosevelt did not like to be told what to do, and he did not like sharing power with his fellow police commissioners.[65] So Roosevelt instruced Steffens, "Go to [Commissioner] Parker," regarding how to implement Schmittberger in districts where he could assist with Roosevelt and the rest of the board's reform measures.

Next Steffens realized that he would have to navigate the power struggle of the police commissioner board, in which TR was embroiled. The commissioners were politically divided two against two and "could only go as far as TR could drive by himself."[66] Steffens attested to Roosevelt's power as president of the board by stating "the board would not always support him, but it could not keep him from breaking through and giving orders and examples on his own."[67] He also stated that TR and Parker typically refused to work together, especially in the area of

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[64] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 275.
[65] "Pulls Will Not Avail: President Roosevelt Define the Police Board's Position," *New York Times*, July 12, 1895.
[66] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 275.
[67] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 279.

police reform, suggesting that Steffens must have had to overcome a significant amount of opposition in order to achieve this "saving Schmittberger."

According to Steffens, Parker and Roosevelt came into conflict not just because of political differences but also because of starkly contrasted personalities and leadership styles. TR was loud and described the work of the police commissioners using terms like "I" and "my policy," while Parker preferred to "direct his troops mysteriously from the rear unseen."[68] Parker and Roosevelt were different types of leaders. TR was loud and blustery while Parker was more quiet and mysterious, according to Steffens. Steffens played Parker and Roosevelt against each other and succeeded. They agreed to his plan to keep Schmittberger on the force. Roosevelt, in telling Steffens to go to Parker, played to the practical side of his conflict with Parker, and had Steffens act as though he, TR, had directly refused to accept keeping Schmittberger on the force. [69] In this deception, Roosevelt had Steffens play to Parker's interests-which were to defy Roosevelt, and it worked. Steffens wrote "A few days later Schmittberger was transferred to the precinct next below his, and within a week Parker said that the 'new broom had swept away' two local gambling centers."[70] Despite Roosevelt's previous unwillingness to cede authority to Parker, Grant, or Andrews, he shows significant deference during the Schmittberger decision.

After the decision was made, Steffens wrote that Schmittberger confessed to him that he still worried about what would happen if Tammany Hall came back into power, because he was considered a bad man on both sides, especially because of his official transition to supporting reform under the leadership of Roosevelt.[71] Schmittberger was striving to stay committed to

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[68] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 276.
[69] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 277.
[70] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 277.
[71] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 280.

reform and sought to avoid becoming involved in the politics of Tammany Hall again. Schmittberger's fear emphasizes his interest in fighting corruption. Had he not expressed concern about Tammany's potential return, this would have suggested that he was not invested in the outcome of police reform.

Soon after Schmittberger was put in place as a reform cop, the police commissioners tested him. Parker placed some wire tappers for horse races in the new precinct where Schmittberger was assigned, instructing them to bribe Schmittberger into letting them continue to work there. It did not work. Schmittberger, in his aggressive style for which he was also somewhat infamous, had violently reprimanded the "criminals," placing them in the hospital.[72] Steffens' captain was a success, and Roosevelt's reaction asserted his own feelings on the matter. "'Atta boy,' TR shouted."[73]

Afterward, Schmittberger was transferred to precincts known to be corrupt. "Like all converts, he was worse than the accustomed righteous," Steffens recalled in his autobiography. "His reliability, once established, was a comfort to the reform board, but his ferocity when in action, especially in strikes, troubled me, and I undertook to tame it. He had learned of my part in his restoration to favor and was so grateful that he would take any advice from me."[74] Schmittberger's at times violent dedication to his profession was publicly known. The *New York Tribune* reported in the spring of 1897 of the captain's being lectured by a Justice Hinsdale after Schmittberger reportedly raided a suspected "disorderly house" (brothel) without a warrant.

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[72] "Captain Schmittberger Lectured," *New York Tribune*, Mar. 27, 1897.
[73] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 278.
[74] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 279.

Schmittberger had arrested everyone in the house, securing their names and addresses yet failing to secure evidence that could be used in court.[75]

Regarding his fellow police commissioners, Roosevelt continued to experience conflict. The bipartisan makeup of the board eventually led to dissent among its members over what police reform should be and how it should be carried out. New York reporters continued to follow the interactions of the police commissioners and their disagreements were often made public. Roosevelt was frequently at the center of these disagreements. He was known for taking his role as president of the board seriously, and notified his colleagues that he would engage in oversight of each of their individual committees. That Roosevelt deferred to Democratic Commissioner Parker when dealing with the issue of Schmittberger's potential removal was a deviation from his previous politics as commissioner.

Using his knowledge of the police commissioners' plans and the opinions of a distrustful police force, Steffens' had Schmittberger kept on the force. Steffens' plan worked, much to the surprise of Commissioner Roosevelt, and Schmittberger became one of the most effective captains of the police department. Captain Max Schmittberger, who had been one of the most obvious targets for removal under Roosevelt's plan for reform, became one of Roosevelt's greatest successes during his time on the board.

[75] "Captain Schmittberger Lectured."

Aftermath

Granted, Schmittberger continued to face opposition throughout his career for his participation in bribery. In February 1903, following the publication of a letter from George B. Cortelyou, Secretary to now-President Roosevelt in which Roosevelt stated that he was "delighted" to be used as a reference for Schmittberger, a colleague came out against any promotion of the captain.[76] Later in March when Schmittberger had been promoted to the position of inspector, he again faced attack by a colleague who stated that "[Schmittberger] ought not to be promoted."[77] The correspondence between Roosevelt and Schmittberger attests to the idea that Roosevelt was pleased with the professional success of Schmittberger that he had enabled during his time as commissioner.

Despite the resistance Schmittberger faced, later correspondence between Steffens and Schmittberger also confirms his success as a police captain. Steffens had worked to produce a reform cop who was useful to the board of police commissioners, against the reluctance and initial resistance of Roosevelt. Overall, the case of Schmittberger proved Steffens' larger influence on the police board in general at this time. Specifically it showed Steffens' influence on Roosevelt, because he was the most powerful on the board as the president. That Steffens was able to get through to Parker as well, in addition to the other police commissioners is evidence of his use and understanding of his place within the world of police reform during this time.

In addition to the outside praise that Schmittberger received, he also reveals his own dedication to the reform movement in his letter to Lincoln Steffens from January 20, 1909, upon

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[76]"Captain Schmittberger: Commissioner Greene Receives Letter from the White House," *The Hartford Courant*, Feb. 16, 1903.
[77]"Schmittberger Promoted," *The Hartford Courant*, Mar. 3, 1903.

Schmittberger's being appointed acting chief inspector. He writes: "This is not only a great victory for myself over the crooked element but also for you who has played no small part in this fight since Mr. Roosevelt's time. Have I made good? With best regards to Mrs. Steffens and with best wishes for yourself, I remain, Yours sincerely, Max F. Schmittberger 'The Chief Inspector.'"[78] The letter indicated that the fight for reform in the police department continued long after Roosevelt and Steffens' time with the board. Importantly, the letter also highlighted Steffens alliance with the reformers, as he wrote of a "victory for himself over the crooked element."

This letter also signaled Steffens' significance during Roosevelt's time on the police board. Schmittberger called him "…you who has played no small part in this fight since Mr. Roosevelt's time." Schmittberger acknowledged both Steffens' role and continued investment in the reform movement. By asking, "Have I made good?" Schmittberger showed that he felt an indebtedness to Steffens for saving his career and seeks his approval. Schmittberger's note confirmed Steffens' role in the police reform movement during Roosevelt's time as president of the board of police commissioners.

These letters attested to Schmittberger's success as a reform police officer, a success which Roosevelt and Steffens claimed as their own. Schmittberger included excerpts from letters from his superiors in his correspondence with Steffens because he wanted Steffens to be aware of his success on the force and to show gratitude for Steffens' advocacy in keeping him in his job. On February 19, 1909, Schmittberger wrote to Steffens: "Among the hundreds of letters and telegrams of congratulations received, I have one from General Greene [that] says, 'I was sure

[78] Max Schmittberger to Lincoln Steffens, 20 Jan. 1909, Steffens Collection.

that I was right when I promoted you, and your career has since proven it, your thorough knowledge of every detail in the Police Department and your ability, energy and integrity, make your success certain' …With best wishes from myself and family, I am, faithfully yours, Max F. Schmittberger."[79] Steffens had referenced his own interaction with another police official, General Greene in his autobiography, stating that he again had to make the case for Schmittberger to remain on the police force when Greene was appointed to the police commissioner board. Steffens overcame not just one authority, that of Roosevelt, to make the case for Schmittberger's work, but two, and General Greene was no less difficult to convince.[80]

The Schmittberger case addressed several important aspects of Steffens' views on police reform, a major area where Roosevelt and Steffens worked together. First, it provides insight into a time when Steffens was professionally at an advantage over Roosevelt because of his prior police reporting years and he believed that Roosevelt and the reformers knew little about the change they wanted to effect. Second, Steffens viewed himself and Riis as authorities in police matters and policemen agreed with him. Roosevelt's largely outsider-run, ideologically-driven crusade for reform was viewed with skepticism by most of the police department, so officers turned to Riis and Steffens to express their concerns. In the case of Captain Schmittberger, Steffens used Roosevelt's lack of professional reform experience to advance his more practical views of how reform could work in the police department. He used his position as a reporter to gain information on Schmittberger from the beginning of the reform movement during the Lexow Committee investigation and his interview skills to later confirm Schmittberger's conversion to reform. This chapter of Steffens' and Roosevelt's careers illustrated how Steffens

[79] Max Schmittberger to Lincoln Steffens, 19 Feb. 1909, Steffens Collection.
[80] Steffens, *Autobiography,* 284.

had an independent interest in reform that influenced his relationship with Roosevelt. His continued correspondence with Schmittberger shows his ongoing interest in police reform.

Other substantive evidence that the Schmittberger case was a politically powerful one is found in the collection of letters that Schmittberger received from different leaders in the police department following his retirement, including Roosevelt. The letters showcased the praise and obvious approval he received during his time there. One of the letters was from Roosevelt himself, but the other letters from other superiors spoke just as clearly to Schmittberger's ability as a reformed cop. Schmittberger's letters from leaders in the police and political world attested to the significance of his career and suggest that from a public relations standpoint, the example made of Schmittberger benefited Roosevelt politically and professionally for years to come.

There was first a letter from Roosevelt himself. The letter was written on September 8, 1898, shortly after Roosevelt finished his tenure as president of the board of police commissioners. He writes "My dear Capt. Schmittberger…you are one of the men whom I grew to trust and like in the Department, and shall hope to see you soon. Faithfully yours, (signed) TR." Roosevelt's language, indicating "one of the men whom I grew to trust" implies two facts of significance. Roosevelt might have trusted the men he worked with, including his colleagues and the police reporters, but he rarely chose to rely on this trust to carry out his work.[81] Roosevelt also says that he "grew" to trust Schmittberger, implying that he did not trust him when he first was deciding whether or not to have him removed.

[81] Jacob Riis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen*, 134. In his biography of Roosevelt, Riis, a police reporter, wrote that "I think, to the end of his official life, that he did not get quite rid of a notion that I was nursing some sort of an unsatisfied ambition and reserving my strength for a sudden raid upon him." That Riis, a close friend and confidant of Roosevelt, felt this suspicion is indicative of Roosevelt's greater mistrust of those he worked with during his time on the police board.

Roosevelt remembered Schmittberger's work for years after leaving the police board. A letter written in December of 1902, George B. Cortelyou, Secretary to President Roosevelt, told Schmittberger, "The president directs me to say that he will be delighted to have you refer to him for your entire service during the period that he was a member of the police commission of New York."[82] Four years after he left the police board, Roosevelt was willing to serve as a reference for Schmittberger. Given his aforementioned mistrust of many he worked with, it is significant that Roosevelt was "delighted" to be a reference for Schmittberger, given his initial desire to fire Schmittberger.

In addition, Steffens remained an important figure to Roosevelt long after their time together in the police department. Steffens' and Roosevelt's relationship did not end with TR's departure from New York. Just as letters exchanged between Schmittberger and Steffens and Roosevelt after 1897 spoke to the significance of this incident, continued correspondence between Steffens and Roosevelt attests to the strength of their professional relationship. Roosevelt continued to look to Steffens for guidance in matters of political corruption. Their correspondence also hinted that he requested special considerations when Steffens published material that concerned municipal and national corruption. Roosevelt even expresses concern over Steffens' sympathies to the socialist cause. Overall, their correspondence confirms that their relationship, personal and professional, lasted long after each had moved on from police work and that Steffens retained his ability to use his experience as a journalist to influence Roosevelt's policy-making.

[82] George B. Cortleyou to Max Schmittberger, 31 Dec. 1902, Steffens Collection.

The strong political connection between Steffens and Roosevelt was forged during their time working with the New York City police, especially in Roosevelt's early months during the Schmittberger case. When Steffens proved himself able to create positive reform in the Police Department, this left a lasting impression on Roosevelt. Roosevelt maintained his knowledge of Steffens' work as a journalist. This connection benefited Steffens, as Roosevelt later collaborated with him in his research on Congressional corruption, granting Steffens special privileges to interview government figures.

In a 1903 letter from Roosevelt's Secretary William Loeb, Steffens was informed that "The President has been very much interested in your articles…"[83] and requested that Steffens visit Washington to see the president. A month later, Loeb wrote on Roosevelt's behalf to Steffens that "Referring to your personal letter of the 28th, I beg to state that both of the matters mentioned therein have been attended to…Thank you for calling the matters to my attention…." [84] Roosevelt listened to Steffens and "attended to" issues of concern that Steffens voiced.

Roosevelt also attempted to exercise influence over material Steffens published. In February 1904, Loeb wrote "On thinking over the matter the President agrees with me that it would be very inadvisable to publish that article...The president was immensely interested in your article…Remember to write out for the President the thing you promised to write out for him."[85] This letter addressed Roosevelt's continued use of Steffens' experience and position as a reporter to boost his own political ambitions.

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[83] William Loeb to Lincoln Steffens, August 23, 1903. Steffens Collection.
[84] William Loeb to Lincoln Steffens, October 1, 1903. Steffens Collection.
[85] William Loeb to Lincoln Steffens. February 18, 1904. Steffens Collection.

Conclusion

Yet despite their well-preserved correspondence, Roosevelt made no mention of Steffens in his autobiography. A number of factors potentially explain the reason for this. Roosevelt took care to emphasize his connection to Jacob Riis during his time as police commissioner, while disregarding Steffens' presence during this time period. Riis was better known than Steffens, and by the time of Roosevelt's autobiography, Riis was also less controversial politically than Steffens. Roosevelt and Riis also shared a profound mutual admiration for each other. In his autobiography, Roosevelt reflected, "The man who was closest to me throughout my two years in the Police Department was Jacob Riis."[86] He described the benefits of his relationship with Riis in "enabling [him] to see what the Police Department was doing."[87] Riis authored a biography of Roosevelt in 1904 that praised Roosevelt's moral character and commitment to reform.[88] Steffens was a less enthusiastic supporter. As some of his and Roosevelt's correspondence later indicated, Steffens' political views were often in contrast with Roosevelt.

By the time of his autobiography being published, Roosevelt had also publicly spoken out against reform journalists, whom he labeled "muckrakers." In 1906, President Roosevelt gave his famous "Man with the Muck-Rake" speech. In this speech, Roosevelt denounced the activity of Progressive journalists, christening them "muckrakers" for their work exposing information on crime and corruption in political and social spheres around the United States.[89] Roosevelt attacked these "Wild agitators against the entire existing order…"[90] and those who exposed

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[86] Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography*, 168.
[87] Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography*, 199.
[88] Jacob Riis, *Theodore Roosevelt, The Citizen*.
[89] Theodore Roosevelt, "Address of President Roosevelt at the laying of the cornerstone of the office building of the House of Representatives (The Man with the Muck-Rake)," April 14, 1906.
[90] "Address of President Roosevelt."

wrongdoing with no plan other than to incite disapproval of corrupt institutions. With this speech, Roosevelt denounced the type of journalist that Steffens was known for being. Roosevelt's public disapproval of muckraking journalists could possibly have led him to make private his connection to Steffens.

Despite this speech, their correspondence continued after 1906. While it was logical to publicly deny his connections to muckraking journalists, in private Roosevelt continued to make use of his relationship to Steffens. In January 1906, Roosevelt gave Steffens a handwritten card to present to government officials for interviews. The note stated: "To any officer…Please tell Mr. Lincoln Steffens about the running of [the government] provided only that you tell him the truth…No matter what it may be-I will see that you are not hurt. Theodore Roosevelt."[91] With the authorization granted by this note, Roosevelt tied his power to Steffens. Roosevelt also asked for special favors in exchange for this. In February 1906, he wrote to Steffens:

> "I shall be very much interested in learning what you have obtained in reference to the execution of the laws by the Government agents under me. May I ask that you let me know first what you have found out about the Government officials before making it public. This is not to prevent your making public everything you find; but simply that I may conduct any investigations with the advantage of not having the facts made public in advance…"

Their correspondence following the "Man with the Muck-Rake" speech also hints at emerging divisions in their politics. In one letter from 1908, Roosevelt wrote "But come, come, friend Steffens, if your theory is correct, the Government has got to own the saloons…I think

[91] Theodore Roosevelt to Lincoln Steffens, January 6, 1906. Steffens Collection.

you are in error about Europe…," referring to Steffens' proposed idea that government ownership of businesses was a way to guard against bribery.[92] This letter expressed the tension between TR and Steffens over Steffens' developing socialist views. "I do not believe you have struck the right cause," Roosevelt wrote to him.

By the time Roosevelt wrote his autobiography in 1913, Steffens' support of socialist ideas had attracted public attention.[93] In Roosevelt's position as a former president, he would have felt pressure to distance himself from a socialist and later Bolshevik sympathizer. Roosevelt would have chosen to emphasize his connection to Jacob Riis and avoid discussion of Lincoln Steffens, even though Steffens was just as widely known by that time for his famous work on municipal corruption, "The Shame of the Cities," and his writing for *McClure's Magazine*.[94]

Among the scholarly literature done on Roosevelt's leadership as president of the police commissioner board, scholars have emphasized the self-contained nature of his behavior and independent actions as commissioner. But this narrative is skewed, as few works have studied the role of outsiders aside from Jacob Riis on the decision-making of the Roosevelt board of police commissioners. A number of works have touched on the idea that Roosevelt was not simply an idealistic, impractical politician venturing into the world of Progressive reform in the 1890s, but writing on the varying power dynamics of the police commissioner board were handled is lacking, with more emphasis placed on disagreements between the commissioners rather than agreements and how this positively influenced reform policy in the department.

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[92] Theodore Roosevelt to Lincoln Steffens, June 12, 1908.
[93] Russell M. Horton, *Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc.), 83. "It is a social manifestation of a condition, not a mere legal offense, this crime," Steffens wrote of the McNamara brothers on trial for a Los Angeles bombing, who had become a symbol for the labor movement.
[94] Horton, *Lincoln Steffens*, 57.

Writing on the role of other civilians involved with the police force such as Steffens is also lacking.

Scholar Edmund Morris' assessment concludes that Roosevelt could never have attained the level of political power that he did without the "…shrewd application of reason," something Roosevelt displayed during the Schmittberger case.[95] Jay S. Berman's biography of Roosevelt as police commissioner emphasizes that every policy change in the police department could be credited to Roosevelt, which overlooks external factors and treats everything as "…a consequence of [Roosevelt's] naivete and idealism," according to a review by Jeffrey S. Adler.[96] Still another biography by scholar H. Paul Jeffers that focuses on Roosevelt's time on the board of police commissioners fails to acknowledge Riis and Steffens' writing as primary source material for his work. Many authors overlook the influence of external forces in Roosevelt's decision-making and often focus too much on the single-mindedness of his leadership style. Despite the common overlooking of the other people and factors involved in Roosevelt's leadership as police commissioner, historians have accurately grasped his dedication to reform and desire for practical measures to be put in place. Morris' assessment does so in acknowledging that Roosevelt was pragmatic in his approach to reform. Historian Edward P. Kohn also accurately assesses that the connections Roosevelt formed on the police board with his members of the police department and immigrant communities educated him as an urban Progressive leader.[97]

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[95] Glenn C. Altschuler and Eric Rauchway, "Presidential Biography and the Great Commoner Complex," *American Literary History,* 16 (2004): 363-74.
[96] Jeffrey S. Adler, "Police Administration and Progressive Reform: TR as Police Commissioner of New York," *Criminal Justice Review,* 13 (1988): 95-96.
[97] Kohn, Edward. P. "Theodore Roosevelt's Early Political Career: The Making of an Independent Republican and Urban Progressive." In *A Companion to Theodore Roosevelt*, S. Ricard (Ed.) 2011. p 41-42

Because of the factors that are often used to identify his leadership style as police commissioner, Roosevelt's behavior during the Schmittberger case is noteworthy. During the decision process for Schmittberger's career, Roosevelt not only was persuaded by Steffens, a young reporter, but he also ceded authority to his fellow commissioners, whom he tended to disregard in his work. Roosevelt's decision to allow Schmittberger, a confessed corrupt cop, to remain on the police force complicates scholars' understanding and portrayal of Roosevelt as an individualistic, ideologically pure reform leader. One of the most powerful impacts of this case is how it shifts Roosevelt's leadership style. During the summer of 1895, Roosevelt was willing to acknowledge the agency of his colleagues. He allowed the decision on Schmittberger to go to Parker and in doing so trusted Parker to implement Schmittberger and test his loyalty to reform. This was a great risk for Roosevelt, who at the time was struggling to establish his authority with police officers. His keeping Captain Schmittberger on the police force during a time of serious change showed a willingness to engage with his colleagues, both those within the police department and those outside of it. It shows a practical side to Roosevelt's reform, as he understood the importance of winning the trust and approval of the police force. His reforms would have been unsuccessful without this. Roosevelt also continued to shape his ideas on the usefulness of the media in his career, a significant aspect of Roosevelt's politics. Steffens remained a media figure in Roosevelt's career throughout his presidency. The example TR set through Captain Schmittberger legitimized his reforms in the eyes of the police force just months into his career as police commissioner. Because of Schmittberger's later success as police captain, Roosevelt's decision proved a professional victory for both Schmittberger and himself, despite the later issues he faced as police commissioner.

The Schmittberger case also challenged Roosevelt's conceptions of different ethnic groups. He was heavily influenced in his reform ideas by Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives,* which portrayed various ethnic groups according to the stereotypes of the era and represents German immigrants as innately impoverished.[98] Captain Schmittberger, a German immigrant, was one of Roosevelt's first professional connections with an immigrant who had grown up in the poor, ethnic neighborhoods of downtown Manhattan, and his later success challenged Roosevelt's notions of crime and poverty that stemmed from the book. The incident also impacted his understanding of New York's impoverished, immigrant class.

Some of the conflict Roosevelt faced as commissioner stemmed from class and ethnic tensions. One of his most controversial policies as commissioner was his enforcement of the Sunday excise laws, which closed saloons on Sundays. The enforcement of this law neglected the cultures of many of New York's immigrant populations, particularly the Germans and alienated Roosevelt from their support of his reform.[99] Yet Roosevelt did understand some of the needs of the communities with whom he worked, and despite the class divide between himself and the city's poor, his relationships with immigrants such as Captain Schmittberger enabled him to demonstrate involved, understanding leadership toward their communities, particularly during the heat wave of August 1896. A monopoly on ice by the Consolidated Ice Company made it inaccessible for the city's poor during the heat wave that killed roughly 1,300 New Yorkers. According to Kohn, TR "emerged as one of the few New York officials to address the crisis." Roosevelt turned police wagons into ambulances and supervised police distribution of ice himself. Having discovered that the less privileged communities of New York were not simply

[98] Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 26.
[99] Kohn, "Theodore Roosevelt's Early Political Career," 41.

criminals, he became an advocate for New York's immigrants and impoverished communities. His interactions during the early months of his time on the police board informed his changing conceptions of Progressive reform and his later actions as commissioner.

The impact of the Schmittberger case on Lincoln Steffens was twofold. First, it cemented his status as a useful companion to Roosevelt throughout his tenure as police commissioner. Roosevelt's gratitude for Steffens' presence during those years continued beyond 1897, and Steffens benefited professionally from his connection to Roosevelt. TR granted Steffens access to government interviews and provided presidential review of his work during the first decade of the twentieth century. Second, Steffens gained professional and personal experience during the Schmittberger case. For the first time in his career, he exercised influence over political figures more powerful than himself. Through his connection to Captain Schmittberger, he gained insight into the moral complexity of typical targets for reform, in this case a confessed corrupt cop. He recognized that his own ideas of reform were too simplistic to be practical, and altered his belief that all corrupt figures must be removed, realizing that true reform was impossible without the reform of those most in need of it.

The situation of Captain Schmittberger provides a case by which to assess which forces were actually in play in enacting reform in the police department during Roosevelt's time as president of the board of commissioners. Lincoln Steffens proved a key figure in Roosevelt's gaining the support of the police force. The Schmittberger case forced Roosevelt to share power with the other commissioners, which had a positive outcome when their decision to retain Schmittberger on the police force proved to be successful. Yet the career aspirations and desire for reform that placed Roosevelt and Steffens together in 1895 later proved to be the reasons that

drove them apart in the later years of their careers, as their respective definitions of reform shifted and each became concerned with his own professional development. Theodore Roosevelt's time as police commissioner is an acknowledged period of growth in his political career, and through experiences like the Schmittberger case, Roosevelt became a shrewder and more understanding figure in the reform movement.

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