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Political Football: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and the Gridiron Reform Movement

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Abstract

In the early stages of Progressive reform, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson took an intense interest in the controversy over the reform of college football. In the 1890s and early 1900s, college football faced a torrent of criticism over injuries and the role of athletics in college life. Roosevelt and Wilson, loyal followers of Harvard and Princeton, had defended football in the 1890s. In the fall of 1905, however, President Theodore Roosevelt called a conference of eastern football experts at the White House to discuss brutality and unsportsmanlike conduct. During the controversies that followed, Roosevelt worked behind the scenes to bring about sufficient reform to preserve football and ensure that it would continue to be played at Harvard. In 1909–10, when college football again faced an injury crisis, President Woodrow Wilson of Princeton University worked with the other presidents of the eastern “Big Three” to make reasonable reforms. In their styles of promoting football reform, both Roosevelt and Wilson showed approaches that coincided with their strategies for political change while serving in the American presidency. In the years that followed the reforms on the gridiron, football evolved rapidly into the “attractive” game that Wilson had advocated and a far less brutal game than the unruly spectacle that Roosevelt had tried to control.

Few would regard college football as essential for a presidential job description. Yet Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford all played college football, and Ford in 1934 was voted the University of Michigan's most valuable player. Though he never took to the field, Herbert Hoover served as business manager for Stanford University's first team collecting gate receipts at the first Stanford-University of California game in 1892.

Two presidents who came to office in the Progressive Era also had an intense interest in college football. Though Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson never participated in scrub or varsity games, they had opportunities to influence the direction of football. Roosevelt in 1905 summoned eastern football experts to an informal White House conference and Wilson was president of Princeton when football faced challenges to its survival. Their pragmatic and at times emotional commitment to football as a game worth saving reflected the late nineteenth century conviction that athletics and especially football were essential to building character;

yet each's differing way of approaching political situations, so obvious in their presidencies, also showed up in their response to football. Not surprisingly, since both men admired football and wanted to preserve football, their reactions to the criticism of football parallel their approaches toward broader social and economic problems. Just as they sought to find middle-of-the-road reforms to allay criticisms of the capitalist system, so they also favored pragmatic reforms that would not jeopardize college football.¹

From the 1880s to the early 1900s, football grew enormously in popularity. From its origins in British rugby, the sport had assumed a distinctly American character. With few officials and often unenforceable rules, it also gained a sometime unsavory reputation. Members of the Harvard committee investigating football in 1884 were appalled by its brutality. One player after unfairly knocking his opponent out of bounds hit his opponent again as he was getting up and stole the ball from him. From the spectators they heard cries of "kill him" and "break his neck." In 1885, the Harvard faculty banned football, but its popularity among students and alumni led to its reinstatement the following season. In 1893, *Harper's Weekly* lamented: "Looking over the reports of the games, there is scarcely one to be found that does not contain, either in the rulings of the umpire or the running account of the game, some evidence of foul play."²

The most influential figure in college football from the early 1880s until 1910 was Walter Camp, a former player who had graduated from Yale in 1880, the same year as Theodore Roosevelt did from Harvard. Camp served as an ad hoc coach for the Yale team and secretary of the influential football rules committee. Through his prestige as well as skill in football diplomacy, Camp maneuvered through the football conventions and committees crucial changes such as the rule allowing a team to retain possession after a player was tackled and its counterpart, the yards and downs rule, that distanced American football from the old rugby game. In 1888, under Camp's tutelage, the rules' convention legalized blocking in front of the ball carrier and tackling below the knees. While pursuing a business career in New Haven, Camp "advised" a Yale team that won 285, lost only 14 and tied 12 from 1883 to 1910.³

The rugby game that was to evolve into American football had barely been adopted by eastern colleges when Theodore Roosevelt (Harvard '80) and Woodrow Wilson (Princeton '79) were undergraduates. Though an enthusiastic athlete, Roosevelt did not play football, perhaps because of his nearsightedness. While he developed an intense interest in the sport, Wilson also remained on the sidelines because of health problems he had earlier suffered at Davidson College. Later Wilson would apply some of the expertise he had gained as a student-observer when he served as an assistant coach to the team at Wesleyan. When he became a professor at Princeton in 1891, he closely followed Princeton's athletic fortunes as chairman of the faculty committee on outdoor sports.⁴ In speaking to Princeton alumni clubs in the 1890s, he appealed to their interest in football. "Princeton is noted in the wide world for three things," he once told an alumni group, "football, baseball, and collegiate instruction. I suppose the first of these is what you want to hear about."⁵ Despite

his apparent ranking of football above intellectual pursuits, Wilson was sometimes appalled by the student preoccupation with athletics to the exclusion of what was happening in national life.⁶

Both men defended football in the 1890s when it came under attack as a violent and dangerous activity inappropriate for college students. The first round of criticism erupted in early 1893 as football was spreading to every campus with enough male students to field a team. Such a crisis was perhaps inevitable in the midst of growing numbers playing the game with inadequate protection for heads and necks. As crowds at the big games in New York surged to more than 30,000, serious injuries gained wider notoriety. In the 1894 Yale-Harvard game, the Yale captain Frank Hinkey made a "late hit" on the Harvard ball carrier breaking his collarbone.⁷ In an even more violent Thanksgiving contest in Washington D.C., Georgetown halfback George "Shorty" Bahen was fatally injured by the beating he took at the hands of the semi-professional Columbia Athletic Club.⁸

As a supporter of football, and a debater, Woodrow Wilson engaged in a one-on-one debate with Cornell professor of anatomy, Burt Wilder, who called for the abolition of all college athletics. The topic was, "Should football Be Encouraged," and Wilson took the affirmative. "I believe," Wilson said, "it develops more moral qualities than any other game of athletics."⁹ Wilson also claimed that it encouraged valuable qualities such as precision, decision, presence of mind and endurance. He argued that colleges opposed to football were those who had been unsuccessful in making it a game of amateurs. An older man who had played an earlier version of football forty years before, Wilder responded that if football were a moral game, why did an ex-football captain recently admit that it took an umpire to keep order on the field?¹⁰

One outspoken critic of football who dismayed both Roosevelt and Wilson was Charles Eliot, the educational reformer who was president of Roosevelt's alma mater, Harvard. In his annual report of March 1894, Eliot launched an attack on college athletics, particularly on football, and those criticisms went beyond the furor over injuries. The emphasis on football conveyed to the public that colleges were scarcely more than "places of mere physical sport and not of intellectual training" and that the gate receipts for big games had put higher education in the entertainment business.¹¹ Far from building moral character, football dulled the instincts and the youthful coaches converted the players into "powerful animals."¹²

Eliot's sweeping criticisms brought powerful rebuttals from Theodore Roosevelt, whose opinions were closer to Walter Camp than to the Harvard president and faculty. In 1895, when Camp published a defense of college football from questionnaires sent out to former players, Roosevelt heartily congratulated Camp on the resulting book, *Football Facts and Figures*. "Of all games," Roosevelt commented, "I personally like foot ball the best, and I would rather see my boys play it than see them play any other. I have no patience with the people who declaim against it because it necessitates rough play and occasional injuries."¹³

He was "utterly disgusted" by the attitudes of President Eliot and the Harvard faculty. Yet he also showed the ambivalence that would characterize his reform

efforts as president. He mentioned to Camp that he favored changing the rules to eliminate unnecessary roughness and to require stiffer penalties by the officials. Still, if it were a choice of keeping football with its brutality as opposed to abolishing it, he would vote to keep it. Roosevelt quoted his friend Judge William Howard Taft, a Yale graduate, who had recently said “he wanted reformers who ate roast beef, and who were able to make their blows felt in the world.”¹⁴

Taft had been referring to civil service reform, but for Roosevelt the point applied to all reform and reformers. Politicians like football players had to be moral, but they also had to be effective. Among the most effective were former athletes such as Congressman Henry Cabot Lodge, who swam at Harvard and now was an expert horseman. Roosevelt described his own joy in riding as outdoor recreation, the rougher the better. “I was knocked sense-less at polo once, and it was a couple of hours before I came to. I broke an arm once riding to the hounds, and my nose another time; and out on the roundup in the west I once broke a rib and at another time the point of my shoulder.”¹⁵ In the Spanish-American War in 1898, he had organized a cavalry unit called “The Rough Riders.” Compared with his rough-and-tumble activities, college boys playing football ran moderate and acceptable risks. Because football encouraged virile qualities, it was a valuable antidote to the corrupting tendencies of modern industrial society.

Though Wilson led the armchair life that Roosevelt often deplored, he was an avid follower of Princeton’s football fortunes. Belying his later reputation as aloof and unemotional, Wilson was overwhelmed by the defeat of Princeton by the University of Pennsylvania in 1892. “I think Woodrow would have had some kind of collapse if we had lost in politics too!”, wrote his wife Ellen Axson Wilson.¹⁶ (Luckily for Wilson’s peace of mind, Democrat Grover Cleveland had defeated the incumbent Benjamin Harrison that same week.)

Always the advocate, Roosevelt was upset by Harvard’s inability to win the big game with Yale. Under Walter Camp, Yale won practically every meeting with Harvard before 1910, even when Harvard seemed to have stronger teams. After the Yale triumph in 1907 the President nearly lost his composure at a cabinet meeting when Interior Secretary James Garfield, a Williams graduate, taunted the president with the suggestion that Harvard substitute Vassar for Yale. “I behaved with what dignity I could,” Roosevelt confessed, “under distressing conditions.”¹⁷

The crises of the 1890s persisted into the first decades of the twentieth century, despite some rules changes by Walter Camp’s elite committee. Many critics deplored what were known as “momentum plays.” Players were permitted to go in motion before the snap of the ball so they often sprinted toward their opponents before the ball was put in play. The flying wedge, which was prohibited in 1893, virtually sealed the ball carrier between two wedges that converged at midfield. While the momentum plays were gradually eliminated by rules changes, the pushing and pulling of the ball carrier known as mass play allowed the tangled mob of players to engage in violence undetected by the officials. The open play that had characterized early football seemed to have degenerated into a tug of war at what was later called the line of scrimmage.¹⁸

With the dawn of the Progressive Era in the early 1900s, college football came under the same scrutiny as other problem areas in American life. Though some critics like Eliot complained that football subverted the spirit of academic life, the most common complaints before 1905 were directed against the persistent acts of violence and unsportsmanlike conduct. Colleges also were supposed to field teams of amateur athletes, yet football had since the 1890s verged on the professionalism identified with baseball and the prize ring. The high moral tone that Wilson had claimed for football in 1894 was undermined by unamateur recruiting practices and semi-professional “tramp athletes” posing as legitimate college students. This was on President Theodore Roosevelt’s mind in June 1905 when in his commencement speech at Harvard he coupled criticisms of commercial interests with the problems of brutality and professionalism in college athletics.¹⁹

This speech came just after the first of a two-part series of muckraking articles on college athletics in *McClure's Magazine*. The author, Henry Beach Needham, was a friend and admirer of Roosevelt, and the two planned to meet just after Roosevelt’s Harvard speech. What they discussed is not known, but it is hard to believe that the president had not read the articles and that the subject would not have arisen in their conversation.²⁰

Needham devoted his articles to various evils, including recruiting, payment of coaches, professionalism and violence. He gave examples of athletes who were allowed to cheat on entrance exams and were supported by financial assistance not available to other students. One player at Yale was given the lucrative cigarette franchise for the American Tobacco Company, while a Princeton star received the baseball scorecard concession. Needham also described one eastern tramp athlete, who after playing a strong game for Penn State against the University of Pennsylvania, showed up the next week for practice with the Penn team. The following year he played games for both Penn and Penn State.²¹

Nor did Needham overlook violence. Since the 1890s, the term “put out of business” had referred, in a football context, to intentional injuries of key players. Needham gave the example of a black player for Dartmouth who suffered a broken collarbone early in a game against Princeton. When the guilty Princeton player was confronted by a friend on the Dartmouth team, he denied that the injury had anything to do with race. “We didn’t put him out because he is a black man,” he replied. “We’re coached to pick out the most dangerous man on the opposing side and put him out in the first five minutes of play.”²²

In September 1905, Roosevelt received a plea from his friend Endicott Peabody, the headmaster of Groton School. On behalf of a group of eastern private schools, Peabody asked the president to intervene. The headmasters were concerned that the behavior on the college gridiron was corrupting their own athletes. The plea to a chief executive who had graduated from Harvard and took an interest in college athletics might not have been unusual. That the president who had just resolved Russo-Japanese War and had earlier intervened in the far more crucial coal strike in 1903 would commit himself to football reform was unprecedented.²³

Yet Roosevelt may have had reasons that went beyond the public criticisms of college athletics. His son Ted was playing for the Harvard freshman team, and

his son's place on the team could only make the president more aware of college football generally. Also Charles Eliot and members of the Harvard faculty persisted in their hostility toward football. If Eliot and the faculty had their way, football at Harvard might be suspended. As a believer in the virtues of football, the president must have realized that if Harvard ever abolished football, as it had threatened to do several times since 1885, it would deal a crippling blow to big-time eastern football. Unlike Woodrow Wilson who preferred to sponsor structural reforms, Roosevelt tended to intervene publicly and then set changes into motion by exerting pressure from behind the scenes.

In October 1905, the president invited representatives from Harvard, Yale and Princeton to the White House. By appealing to the most powerful figures in eastern football, he could influence football at every level, or so it may have seemed. On the afternoon of October 9, the six football experts including Walter Camp and Harvard coach Bill Reid sat around a table in the dining room of the White House. Roosevelt opened the meeting by remarks on football generally and gave examples of unfair practices drawn from each of the colleges. Several of those present took issue with some of president's remarks, but Roosevelt had the last word. After the group had retired to the porch for more discussion, he asked the three senior members of the group to draft a statement pledging their schools to play the game in a fair and sportsmanlike manner. A statement was drawn up on the return trip and signed by all of the participants.²⁴

Unfortunately for Roosevelt, the meeting did not end violence in eastern football. If anything, it directed more attention to football in a season in which there were a larger number of deaths reported from football and several violent games among eastern teams. In the Harvard-Yale game, the Harvard captain Francis Burr was kicked in the nose after calling for a fair catch. Though Burr's nose was broken and bleeding, the official Paul Dashiell did not penalize Yale. Even the president's son Ted had his arm broken in the freshman game between Harvard and Yale.²⁵

Only one of the twenty-five deaths took place in eastern college football, but that one death proved a turning point. When a Union College player was killed in a game against New York University, Chancellor Henry M. McCracken of NYU summoned the first of two intercollegiate conferences. In the second conference invitations went out to all football-playing colleges and universities, and representatives of more than sixty schools met in late December. The old rules committee had met in early December, yet no reforms had been enacted. As a result, the New York conference appointed a committee to draw up new rules.²⁶

Roosevelt closely followed the crisis, but from behind the scenes. He met twice more with Bill Reid, the Harvard coach, and corresponded with Paul Dashiell, the official in the Harvard-Yale game who was also a member of the rules committee. He pressured Dashiell to merge the old committee with the new group. His protégé, the Harvard coach Bill Reid, left the old committee to meet with the new. In this way Roosevelt contributed to the merger which took place in mid-January. This merger probably saved football at Harvard, because the Harvard faculty had voted to suspend football unless their list of demands for changes in the rules were met.

The joint rules committee enacted a series of sweeping changes designed to reduce the mass play at the line. To create a more open game, the rulemakers adopted a ten-yard rule. This would allow a team to have three opportunities to gain ten yards, rather than five yards as before. More controversial was the forward pass that marked the most radical departure from the older styles of football since the possession and blocking rules of the 1880s.²⁷

Thereafter, Roosevelt played no further role in football reform. In his few public statements, he reverted to his pre-1905 defense of college football. In a speech at Harvard in 1907, he strongly opposed abolishing it. His argument was that the preparatory schools were able to keep football clean without abolishing it, though a plea from those schools had spurred him into action in 1905. "There is no excuse whatever for colleges failing to show the same capacity, and there is no real need for considering the question of the abolition of the game."²⁸ If necessary, the college authorities could intervene to prevent abuses, but only in a limited way. He defended sports in general "in their rougher forms" as promoting courage, an echo of his pre-1905 credo. Possibly Roosevelt had learned that President Charles Eliot in his soon-to-be-released annual report would criticize the new football as just as "fierce" and as much as ever "an undesirable game for gentlemen to play or for multitudes of spectators to watch."²⁹

Whatever his motives, Roosevelt in football, as in social and economic reforms, preferred to allow those entrusted with power, in this case the football establishment, to operate without interference as long as the excesses were held in check.

As the ideological gulf between Eliot and Roosevelt suggests, the crisis of confidence in college football had not wholly disappeared. While deaths and serious injuries from football at first dropped, the eastern teams had reason to approach the forward pass with caution. Incompleted passes were penalized with a fifteen-yard penalty. As teams adjusted to the new rules, the pushing and pulling resumed. In 1909, injuries once again rose alarmingly and an outcry resulted when players died in the Army-Harvard and University of Virginia-Georgetown games. With demands for abolition, the university presidents played a larger role than they had in 1905-06. The Big Three, Harvard, Yale and Princeton had not attended the December 1905 conference nor joined the Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (predecessor of the NCAA). President Arthur Hadley of Yale invited Lawrence Lowell, the new president of Harvard, and Woodrow Wilson, now president of Princeton, to meet and set up a committee to propose changes.³⁰

Wilson like many college presidents had played a sidelines role in the 1905-06 controversy. Far more than Roosevelt, Wilson reacted to events on the gridiron rather than anticipating problems and framing solutions as Roosevelt had. Writing to President Wheeler of the University of California in December 1905, Wilson saw the need for reform but was unwilling to commit himself to the conference of football-playing schools. "I am not ready to have football abolished," he said, "and yet I am painfully aware of our situation in regard to reform."³¹ That "situation" referred to the December 1905 conference of professors and college presidents that succeeded in breaking the control of Walter Camp's eastern-oriented football rules committee.

Unlike the earlier crisis, the presidents of Harvard, Yale and Princeton in the early months of 1910 had little choice but to address the outcry against football. As president of Princeton, Wilson had warred against the eating clubs at Princeton in an attempt to improve the quality of the institution. Such a campaign to improve education could not be separated from the efforts to prevent abuses in college football. Yet the Big Three had taken a conservative approach in 1906 by remaining outside the new Intercollegiate Athletic Association. It may now have bothered Wilson that President Hadley wanted to control the pace of reform while recapturing the influence that Yale had once wielded.

Whatever Hadley had in mind, Wilson proved a disappointment in their first meeting. Hadley wrote to Lowell that Wilson seemed "emotional" about the injury problems. He wanted the committee of football experts from the three schools to make sweeping demands about safety and called for abolition if these demands were not met. In deciding on instructions to the committee, Wilson reacted strongly against the "microscopic" preoccupation with injuries. Though he was concerned with safety, Wilson called for broader changes including the abolition of mass play to create a game that was "more attractive."³²

Wilson could hardly have devoted the time to football that many of his fellow presidents did in 1910. He was locked in his own struggle over the location of the graduate school, a conflict that would lead to his resignation in April 1910. Yet he clung to his earlier unqualified support of football and supported those presidents and faculty who wanted to eliminate mass play. Other than the crisis over gridiron safety, however, he did not consider "mere athletics" a serious problem. "I would abide the intellectual rivalry of study with athletics without much misgivings," he said. He deplored the tendency of the average student to "standardize" himself, yet considered eating clubs at Princeton far more subversive to education than the students' preoccupation with college sports.³³

While President Hadley's committee was trying to get into motion, the joint committees of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association moved in the direction Wilson had favored. Mass play was finally eliminated, and though the forward pass was still hampered by restrictions, the most severe penalties were removed. Adding a fourth down in 1912 as well as abolishing the twenty-yard limit on forward passes put the finishing touches on a far more acceptable game. With the convincing use of the forward pass in 1913 by Notre Dame against Army, the more "attractive" game that Wilson had called for was emerging. On November 10, 1910, in a talk to the Princeton football team, Woodrow Wilson, now Governor-Elect of New Jersey, argued that the "new rules are doing much to bring football to a high level as a sport, for its brutal features are being done away with and better elements retained." He praised the elimination of mass play, pointing out that the game was more interesting and more "desirable" to the players. All of this reflected a rebirth of American ideals, he opined, and a rejection of pure material success.³⁴ It is worth noting that neither he nor Roosevelt addressed the problem of football's role in college life, but viewed football's problems almost exclusively from the standpoint of what happened on the playing field.

Still, after decades of uncritical support for college football, Roosevelt and Wilson were remarkably willing during 1905–06 and 1909–10 to support changes in the rules. Despite his talk of abolition to Hadley, Wilson identified mass play as the source of the injury problem and of football's tarnished image. Roosevelt in 1905 briefly took in his hands a situation that Walter Camp's rules committee had failed to resolve. Both Roosevelt and Wilson associated football in different ways with the educative purpose of building moral character, but for practical purposes treated football as if it were a political question. While Roosevelt intervened directly as he had in major domestic and international crises, Wilson suggested structural solutions, as he did with the banking system and the tariff. Obviously there are major differences—neither had to face Congress or the electorate with football as an issue and both reacted somewhat as ardent fans who did not want to give up a favorite spectator sport. Yet in style if not substance, the shifts in Roosevelt's and Wilson's attitudes toward football reform from the 1890s to the crises of the 1900s parallel their approach toward capitalism: to do away with the abuses so that an activity, worthy in principle, might continue to flourish.

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Notes

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3. Hartford W.H. Powel, *Walter Camp, the Father of American Football, An Authorized Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1926). Richard P. Borkowski, "The Life and Contributions of Walter Camp to American Football," (Unpublished Ph.D., Dissertation, Temple University, 1979). Guy M. Lewis, "The American Intercollegiate Football Spectacle, 1869–1917" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation: University of Maryland, 1964).
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6. *Ibid.*, 47–48.
7. *New York Daily Tribune*, November 25, 1894. *New York Times*, December 1, 1894.
8. Georgetown University Archives, Football, 1888–1896.
9. Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 8, 482–483.
10. *Ibid.*
11. "President Eliot's Report," *Harvard Graduate's Magazine*, III, 1894: 374–383.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Theodore Roosevelt to Walter Camp, March 11, 1895, Walter Camp Papers, Yale University Archives, New Haven.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Ellen Axon Wilson to Anna Harris, November 22, 1892, Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 8, 47–48.
17. Theodore Roosevelt to Henry Beach Needham, July 19, 1905, Elting Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (8 vols; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 4, 1280–1282. Roosevelt described himself as "not an athlete, I am simply a good, ordinary, out-of-doors man."

18. John Hammond Moore, "Football's Ugly Decades, 1893–1913," *The Smithsonian Journal of History*, 2 (1967): 49–63. John Lucas and Ronald Smith, *Saga of American Sport* (Philadelphia: Lea & Feabiger, 1978), 242–245.
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21. Needham, "The College Athlete, How Commercialism Is Making Him Professional," 272.
22. Needham, "The College Athlete, His Amateur Code: Its Evasion and Administration," 270.
23. Theodore Roosevelt to Walter Camp, November 24, 1905, Morison (ed.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, 5, 94. It had been rumored that Ted had been "ambushed" by Yale, but Roosevelt quoted from Ted's letters to assure Camp that this was not the case.
24. Diary, Bill Reid, Entry for October 9, 1905, Harvard University Archives. Ronald Smith, (ed.), *Big Time Football at Harvard, 1905: The Diary of Coach Bill Reid* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 193–195.
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27. Guy M. Lewis, "Theodore Roosevelt's Role in the 1905 Football Controversy," *Research Quarterly*, 40 (1969): 717–724.
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33. "An Address to the Princeton Club of Chicago", March 12, 1908, Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 18, 17–34.
34. "Talk to the Football Team," November 10, 1910, Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 22, 4–5.