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| |  | | --- | | **A Crime Equal to Treason**  Vice President Theodore Roosevelt, after reading an advance copy of *Up From Slavery*, wrote to thank its author, Booker T. Washington, and asked to meet with him. TR had known Washington for some time and wanted advice from the country’s most famous and respected Black man on selecting candidates for office, based on character instead of patronage. He planned to occasionally recommend a Black man, or even a Democrat, if they proved to be the most qualified for the position. After meeting in New York in April 1901, they exchanged letters and telegrams for the next few months. Another meeting was scheduled for November at Washington’s Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. On this trip, TR was also planning to visit Roswell, Georgia and the plantation where his mother grew up. Roosevelt was hoping to boost his following in the South, and Booker T. hoped a visit by the very popular Roosevelt would be good publicity for his school.  After Roosevelt became President on September 14, 1901, following the death of William McKinley, his plans to visit Tuskegee were put on hold. He immediately wrote to Booker T. and said he wished to discuss some possible future appointments in the South. They met one evening at the White House during the last week of September and TR asked him to stop by again whenever he was in town. A few weeks later, on October 16, Roosevelt heard Booker T. was back in town and invited him to join the family for dinner. TR was the first president to include political discussions in his White House dinners, and they discussed politics as well as education. This dinner became the first controversy of Roosevelt’s new presidency.  A reporter for the *Washington Post*, after looking at the day’s guest list, wrote in his column the next day that “Booker T. Washington, of Tuskegee, Ala., dined with the President last evening.” It didn’t take long for the telegrams to spread the news. Many of the Blacks and liberal whites reacted favorably. One telegraph called it the “Greatest step for a race in a generation.” Yet many Blacks in the South were critical of Washington accepting Roosevelt’s invitation. They felt it might hurt their struggle for equality rather than help it. For the first time in history, the President’s wifewas even the subject of what was considered a tasteless and shocking cartoon (which backfired on the Democrats who were blasted with criticism).  Several Southern white newspapers and congressmen felt that the act of having a Black man to dinner at the White House was unforgivable. The *Richmond News* claimed that “At one stroke, and by one act, he has destroyed the kindly, warm regard and personal affection for him which were growing up fast in the South.” The *Memphis Scimitar* printed a similar outrage: “The most damnable outrage ever which has ever been perpetrated by any citizen of the United States. . . No Southern woman with a proper self-respect would now accept an invitation to the White House, nor would President Roosevelt be welcomed in Southern homes.”  But Senator “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman of South Carolina had a no-holds barred, even more hateful retort: “Entertaining that n\*\*\*\* would necessitate our killing a thousand n\*\*\*\*s in the South before they will learn their place again.”  Hate mail and death threats swamped the White House and Tuskegee. Many in the South considered this dinner crossing the line by encouraging racial mixing and social equality for Blacks. They felt Booker T. was fine in his place, but he had to know his place. Some even felt he deserved to die because he had dared to dine at the wrong table. A group of angry racists pooled their money to hire an assassin.(1) Congressman Thomas Heflin of Alabama went so far as to say, “If some Czolgosz had thrown a bomb under the table” where the presidential family sat Booker T. Washington, “no great harm would have been done the country.”  TR had entertained Blacks before, at the governor’s mansion and at Sagamore Hill, and he told a friend, “No one could possibly be as astonished as I was,”(2) at the reaction to this dinner. But he admitted he had made a political blunder and feared it might have compromised Booker T.’s influence in the South. He said he felt “melancholy” about the depth of race hatred the incident uncovered.(3) TR remained in contact with Booker T. and they continued to work closely together.  Though Roosevelt claimed he would have his Black adviser to dine at the White House any time he wanted, he never had him, or any other Black man, to dinner at the White House again: “Although the controversy eventually died down, its impact shaped White House politics for decades. No Black person would be invited to dinner at the White House again for nearly thirty years.”(4) | |

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