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Theodore Roosevelt, Media, and the Martial Arts During the Progressive Era

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Abstract

As president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt famously endorsed physical culture and athletic pursuits. When the Japanese martial arts jiu-jitsu and judo arrived in America at the turn of the 20th century, Roosevelt expanded his view of sport and sought out instruction in these arts. News reports from 1900-1906 documented Roosevelt's training: His public fascination with jiu-jitsu contributed to martial arts becoming regular front-page news in papers across the United States. A review of more than 2,000 news reports between 1900 and 1906 reveals how the president's embrace of the jiu-jitsu fad affected American life in lasting and significant ways. Media depictions of Roosevelt's martial arts training show how the arts and their practitioners interacted with the social norms of the United States during the Progressive era. Media images addressed Roosevelt's literal training in jiu-jitsu and also used jiu-jitsu as a broader metaphor for his policy and strategy. Though Roosevelt was one of America's most influential presidents, the role of the Asian martial arts in his life and presidency has gone largely unexamined. Roosevelt's practice of martial arts influenced a generation, created the preconditions for the billion-dollar modern mixed martial arts industry and transformed American popular entertainment.

Keywords: Theodore Roosevelt, martial arts, media, jiu-jitsu, judo

1. Introduction

Even in Washington, D.C., it is an unusual political luncheon where a diplomat is thrown to the ground and comes up laughing.

In the private dining room of Theodore Roosevelt's White House, Swiss minister Fernand Du Martheray was engaged in a lively discussion with the 26th president about self-defense methods. It was early 1905, and as it happened, Roosevelt had acquired knowledge of a recently-arrived system that intrigued his colleague. At the Swiss gentleman's suggestion, the president stood up to demonstrate.

And "over went M. Du Martheray to the floor," causing general surprise and peals of laughter from the luncheon guests, including the recipient of the throw.

How was the Bull Moose able to achieve this feat? "President Roosevelt began the practice of jiu-jitsu over a year ago and has had considerable instruction from the famous Japanese professor in this country," reported the *Washington Times,* adding that the chief executive "cannot refrain from sometimes experimenting with his friends." This "delightfully refreshing story," the report continued, spoke to "the president's skill in the Japanese jiu-jitsu system of defense," along with his enthusiasm for athletics ("Roosevelt Throws Swiss Minister," 1905).

When the Japanese martial arts arrived in the United States at the turn of the 20th century, they found an audience with people seeking self-defense training, new tools for physical fitness or a window into a different culture through public entertainment. Within five years, jiu-jitsu had captured the popular imagination, generating mainstream press coverage throughout America. Within a century, the martial arts would bring sweeping change to America's cultural, sportive and entertainment landscape. Roosevelt's public practice of jiu-jitsu and judo, along with his full-throated endorsement of the arts, contributed to both of these transformations, and helped cement this novel form of physical training as an important part of American life. In 2026, the Ultimate Fighting Championship—a promotion founded by jiu-jitsu artists—will host an event at the White House to commemorate the country's 250th anniversary. This modern performance of martial arts at the center of the American presidency shows how prominent combat sports have become in the nation's culture. Fittingly, the phenomenon began with a president.

Though Roosevelt was one of America's most influential leaders, the role of Asian martial arts in his private and public life has gone largely unexamined. During his time as chief executive, hundreds of contemporary news reports examined Roosevelt's training in jiu-jitsu and judo. This media coverage both reflected and contributed to the growing popularity of the martial arts in America. Journalists enthusiastically reported on the president's practice, often framing it in terms of strength and masculinity, while also using Roosevelt's jiu-jitsu learning as a metaphor for his effective political tactics. Not only did Roosevelt's practice of martial arts influence a generation, it created the preconditions for today's billion-dollar modern martial arts industry and its transformation of American popular entertainment.

2. Methodology

This research examines reports from American newspapers between 1900 and 1906, including all references to "jiu-jitsu" or "jujutsu" (the two most common spellings of the era) in the Library of Congress's Chronicling America database of U.S. newspapers. Of the nearly 2,400 articles in this selection, particular attention was paid to the 730 articles that mentioned Theodore Roosevelt in conjunction with jiu-jitsu.

The author engaged in narrative discourse analysis of this data, examining themes, framing and metaphors used in news coverage of Roosevelt and martial arts. Additionally, a review of all the president's personal correspondence about jiu-jitsu contained in the Theodore Roosevelt Center archive provided further context for these press reports. This discourse analysis examines how the news media portrayed jiu-jitsu's interaction with the cultural, racial, and gender norms of the United States during the period.

Among the questions this research sought to answer:

- How did the press frame reports of Roosevelt's jiu-jitsu training? How was Roosevelt depicted in these reports during this period?
- What did media portrayals reveal about how the martial arts and their practitioners interacted with the social norms of the United States during the Progressive era?

These questions were designed to better understand the context of Roosevelt's influence on the socialization of jiu-jitsu with the public. By examining coverage during this period, this study analyzes how press coverage increased during the Progressive era, and how Roosevelt's role in this expanded coverage made jiu-jitsu a topic of mainstream discourse. Through this evaluation of contemporary reports from every part of America, we see the significance of the news media in establishing jiu-jitsu as a cultural force across the nation.

3. Results

The president's embrace of jiu-jitsu dramatically increased public attention to—and media coverage of—the newly imported martial arts. Of the nearly 2,400 jiu-jitsu stories in the Chronicling America collection from 1900-1906, 30 percent reference Roosevelt, highlighting the president's role in publicizing the martial arts.

The transmission of jiu-jitsu to America has materially affected American culture—what we watch, how we spend our time, and how we train our bodies. Jiu-jitsu was also used to found the Ultimate Fighting Championship in 1993 (Hess, 2007), which launched a billion-dollar industry that affects not just public entertainment but politics.

This all started at the turn of the 20th century, when a policeman from Pennsylvania returned home after spending years in Japan. Although jiu-jitsu is indisputably a Japanese martial art, the man who introduced it to the United States was an American. John J. O'Brien, a police officer from Pennsylvania, spent four years as a constable in Nagasaki, Japan, between 1895 and 1899, where he was trained in jiu-jitsu (Svinth, 2003). Upon his return to the United States in 1900, O'Brien began doing public demonstrations, teaching, and attempting to grow his profile through news coverage.

In January 1901, O'Brien wrote a series of "Jiu-Jitsu Lesson" articles for the New York *Evening World*, using his experience from Nagasaki as a credential (O'Brien, 1901). These pieces framed jiu-jitsu as a practice for self-defense against street crime. It was O'Brien's brief time teaching President Theodore Roosevelt, though, that was most significant to American newspapers, and hence to the expansion of interest in jiu-jitsu.

3.1 How Roosevelt's Interest Fueled the Jiu-Jitsu Boom

Newspapers had already covered O'Brien's public demonstrations in a few isolated reports. With the president now taking lessons, a wave of news stories about this strange, new practice appeared. O'Brien's time in Japan was cited as a credential: "Prof. O'Brien learned the Jiu Jitsu tricks in Nagasaki, Japan, where he was formerly an inspector of police," wrote the *New York World*. "He has holds which can be used in all circumstances under which a man may be attacked." O'Brien, like instructors in boxing and catch wrestling of the era, was often described with the honorific "professor," although he was not an academic ("How the President," 1902).

If the public was largely unaware of jiu-jitsu in 1902, it wouldn't stay that way for long—and coverage of Roosevelt played a significant role in publicizing the new import. Jiu-jitsu was described as a "fad" for perhaps the first time in 1903 by the New York Daily Tribune. This description, along with "craze," was repeated by more than two dozen newspapers throughout the country over the next two years. By the fall of 1904, media reports held, jiu-jitsu had been "described in every newspaper." ("Hero of the Japanese," 1904)

Contemporary media reports credited the president's influence for much of jiu-jitsu's growing popularity. Other sports had also seen a spike in interest after the president began them, the

New York Sun noted, and "so jiu-jitsu, under the influence of his example, has become a popular fad in Washington." It wasn't just Washington, either: Newspapers from Fargo, North Dakota, to Seattle, from Birmingham, Alabama, to Hawaii were using the same language ("Roosevelt Endorses Jiu-jitsu," 1904).

Results from the Chronicling America data confirm Roosevelt's outsized influence on the public discourse: Where 1900 and 1901 each saw fewer than 10 stories feature jiu-jitsu, 1902 (the year the president took his first lesson) and 1903 more than doubled this amount, containing 25 and 26 reports, respectively. Coverage of the martial art exploded, though, in 1904 (398 stories) and 1905 (1,504 stories). Instead of a few stories about an arcane and mysterious combative practice, suddenly coverage increased by orders of magnitude. Press reports about jiu-jitsu portrayed Roosevelt in masculinized terms as a strong leader who was using martial arts for self-defense. The art of jiu-jitsu itself was portrayed in evolving ways over this period, from a mysterious and deadly method for self-protection, to a physical culture practice with sport applications, and finally, to a dishonorable art filled with trickery.

Beyond reporting on the president's new interest, though, the early stories generated broader coverage of the trend. Media regularly covered jiu-jitsu once Roosevelt became involved. Jiu-jitsu performances and challenge matches were commonly described in sports sections. Cartoons and poems about jiu-jitsu began appearing on the front pages of newspapers, and on occasion, jiu-jitsu found its way into the fashion, gossip, and lifestyle pages as well.

Roosevelt's training with O'Brien may have lit the fuse, but the explosion began in earnest after the president began taking lessons from Yoshiaki Yamashita in 1904. A brief note on terminology: Jiu-jitsu can refer to a wide range of weaponless fighting systems. Although O'Brien was teaching jiu-jitsu, Yamashita was teaching judo, a martial art founded by Jigoro Kano in the 19th century. Most press reports made no distinction between the two arts, using "jiu-jitsu" to describe both. Although there are nearly 2,400 stories in the data set, only 66 refer to judo, and none before 1905. For the purposes of this paper, the term "jiu-jitsu" is used to reflect the way it was most commonly used by newspapers during this period.

3.2 A Weird, Magic Art for Manly Self-Defense

As American journalists got to know the newly-imported martial arts, early stories advanced two consistent frames: Roosevelt as an exemplar of strong, rugged American masculinity, and jiu-jitsu as an arcane, deadly art practiced by a mysterious other. This appears in the earliest stories about Roosevelt's classes with O'Brien, such as when *The Providence News* (1902) expressed surprise that Roosevelt was learning the science of "killing without a mark," which was "redolent of eastern cruelty." Jiu-jitsu was represented as a quasi-mystical practice: "It is weird, and seems half eastern magic, or what skeptical Americans call 'a fake,'" continued the *News*. "But no man who ever met a master of the art ever concluded that there was anything of the fake about it, so when President Roosevelt has added the knowledge of this art to his accomplishments, he will be a man wholly insane who will try to assault him and allow him half a chance." ("President in Training," 1902)

This was a consistent theme: Roosevelt was learning a dangerous, alien set of skills that would enable him to protect himself. News coverage portrayed the primary purpose for learning jiu-jitsu in terms of self-defense. Congress, media reports noted, was debating a bill intended to add protection for the president. But with this training, the *News* concluded breathlessly, Roosevelt "will need little aid from congress or any but his own splendid body, heart and brain to care for himself at close quarters."

In these early reports, jiu-jitsu is represented as deadly, strange and inaccessible, a practice "only taught to the nobles of Japan." News reports racialized and exoticized the practice. Many stories, like one from the *New York Sun,* framed jiu-jitsu as having been a "jealously guarded … national secret in Japan for over 2,000 years," and portrayed it as protected by secrecy ("Jiu-jitsu Will Be Taught," 1904). Armed with these new tools, one story about his lessons with O'Brien held that the president "hopes soon to be able to break the arms, legs or neck of any Anarchist or thug who may assail him" ("How the President," 1902). Those claims would only escalate once Roosevelt found a new instructor.

When Yamashita came to Washington, media reports were quick to announce President Roosevelt had again taken up jiu jitsu — and "this time it is the real thing," assured the *Indianapolis Journal* in 1904. The reason that the author was certain of this instruction's authenticity? "His instructors are two Japanese who are masters in the art of doubling a man in agony with a gentle punch of the thumb or breaking an arm with the twist of the wrist."

These men were Yamashita and fellow judo practitioner Tsunejiro Tomita. They knew that Roosevelt had taken lessons in jiu-jitsu from O'Brien, and they asked the president to let them show him what they could do. "Their exhibition caused Mr. Roosevelt to stop winking and gasp. They showed him what jiu jitsu really is and they were engaged on the spot. The president is now spending an exceedingly strenuous hour with them on two afternoons a week and he always is promptly on hand, no matter what business has to be dropped." ("Roosevelt is Learning," 1904). The president's main interest in jiu-jitsu was framed as a desire for self-defense, and to continue his pursuit of what he termed the strenuous life. This was cast in gendered terms, celebrating Roosevelt's interest in "the manly arts."

As the art grew in prominence, the view of what jiu-jitsu broadened. Instead of just a way to defend oneself against thieves and street criminals, it was a sport you could play, a spectacle you could watch to entertain yourself, or a fitness tool. Here, too, coverage of the president played a role. Roosevelt struggled with efforts to lose weight, and newspapers noted in spring 1904 that jiu-jitsu was part of President Roosevelt's "strenuous plan to reduce his flesh" ("Washington Chitchat," 1904). Unfortunately, a year later, the *Topeka State Journal* ("His Vacation," 1905) reported that one purpose Roosevelt's impending holiday was that "the president desires to reduce his weight somewhat. Boxing, riding and even jiu-jitsu have not prevented an increase in avoirdupois during the win[t]er months."

The most consistent element in all these portrayals: Training jiu-jitsu, the reports agreed, would make Roosevelt impossible to physically harm. A Birmingham, Alabama newspaper predicted that after his lessons with Yamashita, "President Roosevelt will soon become so formidable that there will be no further necessity for secret service men." ("A Japanese Professor," 1905)

3.3 The Public's Interest Broadens: Jiu-Jitsu as Physical Culture

As the martial arts grew in prominence, more instructors and practitioners popped up, expanding the view of jiu-jitsu. Here, too, the president played a key role.

While jiu-jitsu was still largely framed in the press as a deadly self-defense art, the audience broadened to people who were interested in training for physical health and fitness. Part of this was due to economics: When instructors beyond O'Brien and Yamashita began to teach in America, financial reality necessitated a broader marketing strategy for those who wanted to make a living with the art. Not everyone could be Yamashita, who would receive a contract to teach at the U.S. Naval Academy.

Perhaps the most prolific written voice on jiu-jitsu at the time was Irving Hancock, a children's author who had written for the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Journal*. Hancock's work

extolled the virtues of jiu-jitsu for both self-defense and lifestyle, although he had no verifiable experience training jiu-jitsu at all. By the end of 1904, he had published four books on jiu-jitsu, endorsing it as a general physical practice for health, and specifically targeting women and children. His writings were excerpted — and his books reviewed — in newspapers across the nation. Yae Kichi Yabe, who made a living from both in-person and mail order instruction, was another example ("Jiu-Jitsu Will Be Taught," 1904).

Promoters like Yabe and Hancock, who relied on jiu-jitsu for income, were quick to use Roosevelt as a powerful, important implicit endorser of what they were selling. Both framed Roosevelt as a high-level devotee of the art they were selling, which conferred legitimacy on the art via the chief executive ("Roosevelt Endorses Jiu-jitsu," 1904). Yabe declared that "Mr. Roosevelt, through persistent practice has become an expert in jiu-jitsu." Hancock wrote: "Jiu-Jitsu has its most distinguished American exponent in the president. And he has expressed his opinion that the art is worth more in every way than all of our athletic sports combined" ("Greatest of all Athletic Sports," 1905).

They weren't the only ones declaring Roosevelt an accomplished martial artist. Journalists, too, portrayed the president as a dedicated expert, framing this in terms of his personal strength. As the *Washington Times* put it: "President Roosevelt in addition to his other accomplishments is possessed of no little skill in the jiu-jitsu He had given the subject attention for years. By reason of his strength and great activity he is particularly adapted to the exercise ("Japanese Jiu-jitsu Experts," 1904)." When Yamashita moved on from teaching at the White House to full-time duties at Annapolis, the *Times* speculated that he would not need to return to Washington, since, after the lessons Yamashita had given Roosevelt months ago, "the President is doubtless so proficient in the art that he does not require further instructions." (Professor of Jiu-jitsu," 1904) Other newspapers discussed how evidently proud Yamashita was of his distinguished student.

3.4 Roosevelt as Expert Gatekeeper

In addition to journalists portraying Roosevelt as a skilled practitioner, he was also positioned in media reports as a gatekeeper of the art. Reporters portrayed him as ensuring that what was being taught to Americans was effective by personally inspecting instructor quality. In this case, press reports differ slightly from Roosevelt's private accounts, and both are illustrative.

Before Roosevelt became an advocate of jiu-jitsu, he set up a challenge match in the White House between Joe Grant, an American wrestler, and Yamashita. By all accounts, this was an encounter that Yamashita dominated. Grant was thrown, reported the *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* sustaining a painful muscular strain, and convincing the president of jiu-jitsu's efficacy. ("Grant Defeated," 1905).

According to other reports, it was Roosevelt's own challenge to Yamashita that convinced the president to install Yamashita to teach at Annapolis. "The President made a personal test of the art at the White House," according to the *Evening Star,* by sparring with Yamashita in front of observers ("Jiu-Jitsu at Annapolis," 1905). "He was astounded at the outcome. … The President is a powerful man and heavy, but he could not stay a minute with the Japanese exponent of jiu jitsu. That set him thinking and he induced Capt. Brownson to try it Annapolis." If he, the president, was defeated so easily, "then our sailors should by all means learn the art."

Yamashita did a series of public demonstrations at service academies, colleges and universities, and the White House, but occasionally his private demonstrations, such as the one with Grant, would end up in the media. One such article from the *Washington Times* is an excellent example of how the art and its practitioners were categories in racialized and gendered terms ("Jap

Pigmy Plays With a Giant," 1905). Roosevelt and his cabinet members observed Yamashita demonstrating throws on Navy Secretary Paul Morton. In this case, the art itself is also portrayed as "manly" and able to conquer larger amounts of "manhood"—with Morton's "six feet of manhood" surprisingly proving to be just "dough in [the] hands of a jiu-jitsu expert."

3.5 Jiu-Jitsu as a Metaphor for Strength and Skill

In relatively short order, the language of martial arts entered media American parlance both in describing the art itself and as a common figurative reference. By 1903, Roosevelt's enthusiasm for the martial arts had penetrated popular culture enough for it to serve as a broader metaphor for journalists and political cartoonists to use with some regularity—and with the confidence that audiences would understand.

Jiu-jitsu, especially when applied to the president, was a metaphor for cleverness, strength and the political acumen to get things done. The use of jiu-jitsu as a metaphor was applied to Roosevelt in matters of international diplomacy as well as domestic policy. It was also deployed in describing his appeal to voters. As the *Fairmont West Virginian* (1905) wrote two months after the president earned a second term: "The President is enthusiastic about jiu jitsu. which is said to be the science of overcoming physical strength by skill in finding the essential nerves that control the muscles. There is no doubt that the President found the essential nerve of the voter last November."

Most commonly, the jiu-jitsu metaphor showed up as a description of his fight against railroad trusts. Roosevelt had campaigned on preventing these institutions from dominating markets and exploiting consumers. Newspapers called on the president to use jiu-jitsu to assist. "If it works in the army and navy," the *Jimplecute* newspaper from Jefferson, Texas, reasoned, "the president should try it on Congress on the railroad questions." Editorial cartoons from around the nation visually portrayed Roosevelt using jiu-jitsu to persuade the railroad trusts — with varying degrees of force — to see things his way. One deployed the president using what could be called "aggressive physical negotiating tactics" on railroad baron Edward Harriman ("Jiu-jitsu, the System of Japanese Physical Exercise," 1905).

In domestic policy and international affairs stories alike, jiu-jitsu was used as a figurative rhetorical reference to Roosevelt's influence. After the debt crisis between Venezuela and its creditors in 1902 and 1903, the president developed his Roosevelt Corollary, declaring the right of the United States to intervene if needed. After tense negotiations, American newspapers concluded that Venezuelan leader Cipriano Castro "is probably of the opinion that Roosevelt does not need any more instruction in jiu-jitsu (Lehi Banner, 1905)."

Perhaps the most significant examples came after the 1904 outbreak of war between Russia and the nation where jiu-jitsu was born. Before hostilities began, western observers saw Japan as a small, out-of-the-way nation without a chance of victory if it came to military contest. From the time the Russo-Japanese war began until its conclusion in 1905, perception shifted dramatically — and dozens of news articles from this period advanced the view that jiu-jitsu itself was a primary reason for Japan's victory. William Eleroy Curtis, a traveling correspondent for the *Chicago Record Herald*, reported from Tokyo, declaring jiu-jitsu to be "[o]ne of the chief reasons for the success of the Japanese in battle. … Jujutsu, the noble science of self-defense ('the soft art,' to translate the word literally), may be called the national sport, and has been of incalculable advantage to Japan." ("Science of Jujutsu," 1904)

A front-page illustration from the *Birmingham Age-Herald,* "Jiu Jitsu Applied," offers a potent visual example of this narrative: A Japanese man applies a wristlock to a surrendering Russian while an anthropomorphized globe labeled "The World" watches, taking notes.

While Roosevelt was training Japanese martial arts, world events were driving the perception that he'd made an effective choice (Blackman, 1905).

Kogoro Takahira, the Japanese Foreign Minister, also expressly invoked jiu-jitsu in the American press when explaining both why Japan would succeed in its military endeavors and, humorously, to explain why Roosevelt had paused his jiu-jitsu lessons with Yamashita ("Mr. Takahira," 1904). When Takahira was asked in mid-1904 why the lessons had concluded, the diplomat joked to reporters that "perhaps [Russian envoy Artur Pavlovich Cassini] objected to the lessons as a breach of neutrality."

Though there were distinctions in how jiu-jitsu was portrayed, it always fit into broader portrayals of Roosevelt as a practitioner of the masculinized "strenuous life" (Swanson, 2019). But as important as the president was to the transmission of martial arts, it had to grow beyond this narrow portrayal—and beyond the halls of political and social power—if it was to find a foothold in America. The art found that growth opportunity in sports and popular entertainment. Roosevelt's influence helped there, too.

3.6 Sporting Culture and Entertainment

In 21st century America, people from all walks of life train martial arts for more than simply self-defense, and millions who don't train martial arts at all watch combat sports for entertainment. Roosevelt's interest in jiu-jitsu at the turn of the 20th century helped marketers build this sporting culture for martial arts. Two core venues for this athletic culture shift were vaudeville and the sports pages of newspapers.

Robert Edgren, a sportswriter, columnist, and illustrator, was possibly the most important media figure in terms of promoting combat sports during the period. After O'Brien began teaching Roosevelt, Edgren applauded the president's embrace of the art, producing a memorable cartoon depicting the president using jiu-jitsu on his boxing coach.

Edgren lauded the virtues of jiu-jitsu when promoting matches and helped to build the fame of Katsuguma Higashi, the first competitive jiujitsu star in America (Edgren, 1905). When high-profile matches were booked between jiu-jitsu athletes and boxers or wrestlers, Edgren would hype the events with his column. If no high-profile matches were scheduled, Edgren would draw potential outcomes that speculated on how prominent sports figures of the time — the boxer Jim Jeffries, the wrestler Nurullah Hassan — would fare against each other (Edgren, 1904a). This built a market for mixed-art challenge matches as a staple of sports entertainment.

The martial arts historian Joseph Svinth has argued that these challenge match performances were one model that influenced the modern Ultimate Fighting Championship, established by the Gracie family in 1993 (Svinth, 2003) and won by the promoter's brother, Royce Gracie, a 170-pound jiu-jitsu black belt. We can draw a direct line from martial arts marketing during Roosevelt's time to modern practice: The UFC, the world's largest mixed martial arts company, promoted itself by highlighting fights between huge, muscled wrestlers such as Ken Shamrock against Royce Gracie, the smaller, presumably weaker representative of jiu-jitsu. In this way, events during the Progressive era both foreshadowed modern practice and established a template for media marketing. Edgren's work is an excellent example.

Edgren had a canny sense of when and how to use current events, and a gift for evocative metaphor. Writing in late 1904, as the Russo-Japanese war turned in Japan's favor, Edgren explained their army's advance in terms of jiu-jitsu. He compared Japan's military strategy to the tactics by which a jiu-jitsu fighter could inexorably beat a larger opponent, such as the Turkish wrestler Hassan: "The Japanese are taking Port Arthur bit by bit, a fort or an

intrenchment at a time. In that way they will eventually capture the citadel. A Japanese jiu-jitsu expert might whip the giant in the same manner, breaking bone after bone until his huge opponent became helpless" (Edgren, 1904b). Sport is always about more than sport, after all.

Vaudeville events were important venues to showcase the martial art for people who hadn't yet seen it in person. With the jiu-jitsu craze in full swing, martial artists began touring with singers, comedians, acrobats, ventriloquists, and other acts. During these performances, there would always be demonstrations of jiu-jitsu's throws, submission holds, and other techniques. There would often be challenge matches as well, pitting jiu-jitsu athletes against other combat athletes, such as wrestlers or boxers.

Here, too, Roosevelt's influence was evident: Promoters of these shows often invoked the president's name for marketing purposes. One illustrative example was an advertisement from the *Providence News* ("Keith's Banner Bill of the Season," 1905), which described the attraction as: "The interesting and instructive Japanese science of self-defense which has been endorsed by President Roosevelt and adopted at West Point and Harvard. Four genuine Japanese experts will show how easily an opponent's arm may be broken or his leg paralyzed by means of 'the gentle art.'" The profile of the art was growing.

Broad appeal comes with consequences, though. Inevitably, jiu-jitsu representatives lost some of these challenge matches. Especially after an ill-fated 1905 West Point demonstration, news stories were more likely to contain descriptions that were critical of jiu-jitsu. In the wake of these events, nativist forces that were already uncomfortable with the Japanese martial arts seized the opportunity to present wrestling and boxing as preferred alternatives. The result would be a shift in the way the news media portrayed jiu-jitsu, and ultimately would help bring an end to this first wave of jiu-jitsu's popularity in the United States.

3.7 The Switch From Manly to Unmanly

Public demonstrations—some involving sparring, some not—had been a staple for jiu-jitsu and judo representatives since O'Brien returned to America. In February 1905, one such event at the United States Military Academy at West Point did not go as planned. On its face, the demonstration's events do not seem especially noteworthy—an older judo instructor, Tomita, was unable to throw young cadets—but the coverage that resulted would have wide impact. The incident was widely reported, and often exaggerated, in the months that ensued. From that point on, much of American media coverage advanced new themes of American wrestling and boxing as superior pursuits for superior athletes. This was not new: Jiu-jitsu athletes had lost to wrestlers before. With the West Point event suddenly prominent, though, newspapers began to declare jiu-jitsu "a busted boom" ("Boosts and Boots," 1905).

The bad press gave jiu-jitsu's critics the chance to re-frame the art. Often, these arguments were explicitly racialized. This was not new: Instead of its techniques being exoticized as cruel and deadly, though, jiu-jitsu and its teachers were more likely to be described in gendered terms. A representative piece from the *New York Daily Tribune* called jiu-jitsu "unmanly," and complained about Yamashita's salary of $2,000 per year at the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. Jiu-jitsu, the argument went, was "more dangerous than ordinary wrestling, with a tendency to encourage trickery and such practice as would naturally injure an adversary." This "is contrary to the spirit of true sport," the article concluded (Svinth, 2003).

This argument would be advanced in explicitly racial, gendered terms. "The newly introduced knowledge of the jiu-jitsu exercises of the Japanese brings to mind a curious distinction between the Germanic races and those that have accepted their standards and Asiatic races and some European nations," wrote *The Greene County Herald* ("The Foul Blow," 1904). Jiu-jitsu,

the article concluded, was "foul play" and was thus "ruled out of sports and the manly art of self-defense." This type of ungentlemanly conduct had been seen before, the piece concluded, but "the Japanese have elevated the foul blow and the unfair advantage to a science. The art of offence and defence is to take one's opponent unexpectedly at a disadvantage to fracture his leg, to dislocate his arm, or break his neck."

Similar claims—that this dangerous, foreign art was dishonorable and unmanly— had appeared here and there years prior. Now, they had new ammunition and a clearer target. Influential newspapers began to make the explicit case that wrestling should take the place of jiu-jitsu at Annapolis ("Annapolis Athletics," 1906). Roosevelt himself was unmoved, and wrote Secretary of the Navy Charles Bonaparte that he felt strongly that the martial arts should remain at the service academy. Despite the president's efforts, he only won a reprieve for one semester ("Jiu-jitsu is Given Another Trial," 1906). The ensuing few months would see the closing of what we could call the first wave of jiu-jitsu in America. Yamashita's final course at Annapolis was completed. He left the Naval Academy at the end of the academic year (Svinth, 2003).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The Japanese martial arts have played an underappreciated role in American culture, society and identity. Understanding the genesis of jiu-jitsu and judo in America provides insights into how cultural practices are transmitted, how depiction of those practices evolve, and how social forces such as race and gender are represented in the discourse.

The importance of Theodore Roosevelt in American history is broadly acknowledged. Considering the role that the martial arts played in Roosevelt's life and presidency, there is a considerable opportunity to explore this further. Roosevelt scholars have established that the 26th president's passion for sports influenced a generation of athletics in America, shaping the way Americans approach fitness (Swanson, 2019). Other Roosevelt researchers have observed how the president's affinity for Japanese culture affected foreign policy, including immigration policy (Cullinane, 2014). This research adds a dimension to that scholarship, highlighting how Roosevelt's practice of jiu-jitsu and judo specifically affected the transmission of martial arts into mainstream American culture.

These findings open new lines of inquiry for cultural studies and sports history. Jiu-jitsu and judo adoption began with elites and spread outward to include other social groups. Scholars have detailed this process in Brazil as well (Cairus, 2020). This was not true of all combative arts. Besides studying these patterns of dispersal, future research could also track the transmission of martial arts that began with socially disadvantaged groups, such as capoeira.

Dr. Wendy Rouse has traced the roots of the modern movement for women's self-defense to this period, documenting women using jiu-jitsu and other martial arts for this purpose (Rouse, 2017). The role of the Japanese martial arts in gender performance merits further discussion. Scholars have suggested that women's jiu-jitsu demonstrations during the period had wider applications for social movements beyond simply defending endangered bodies (Looser, 2010). Future research could examine the symbolic significance of martial arts as performance.

In both practice and performance, events the Progressive era set in motion shaped the future martial arts landscape. One of the instructors who left America around the end of the first wave was Mitsuyo Maeda. He is best known for landing in Brazil, where he taught his brand of jiu-jitsu to the Gracie family. That family would subsequently come to America and in 1993 create the Ultimate Fighting Championship. Royce Gracie, won the first two UFC events as a representative of jiu-jitsu, and he did so by defeating significantly larger opponents trained in traditional American disciplines such as boxing and wrestling. This effectively birthed the

mixed martial arts industry in the United States (Hess, 2007). Historical media representations, too, echoed modern practice. Early UFC events advertised themselves as a contest of brutal reality, where the referee wore a shirt emblazoned with "there are no rules." In victory, jiu-jitsu was portrayed as a transformative art that anyone serious about martial practice had to learn. As UFC commentator Jim Brown said after Gracie's win at the first event: "What we have learned here is that fighting is not what we thought it was." (Bolelli, 2014)

In this and other respects, we can draw a direct line from this time period to modern practice. Roosevelt's jiu-jitsu training dramatically increased media coverage, building public understanding of the art. The press debates of the time played a role both in Yamashita's instruction at Annapolis and subsequent departure, creating the pre-conditions both for the transmission of jiu-jitsu throughout the world. Perhaps most poignantly, the UFC became the world's largest mixed martial arts company in part through promotion tactics that mirrored the promotion tactics of the Progressive era: Highlighting fights between huge, muscled wrestlers such as Ken Shamrock and Dan Severn against Royce Gracie, the smaller, presumably weaker representative of jiu-jitsu. The Roosevelt era both laid the groundwork for martial arts as public entertainment and established a marketing template.

When the *Washington Times* reported on Roosevelt throwing the Swiss minister Du Martheray, the newspaper wryly noted that the chief executive could not resist showing the art off to his friends. When Robert Johnstone Mooney visited the White House in August 1904 with his brother, William McKinley Mooney, an amateur boxer, this was on full display. After sparring a little with his guests, the president asked: "By the way, do you boys understand jiu-jitsu?"

They did not, the brothers replied. "I practically introduced it to Americans," Roosevelt told them, citing the months he'd employed Yamashita at the White House. "'You must promise me to learn that without delay,' said the president. 'You are so good in other athletics you must add jiujitsu to your accomplishments. Every American athlete ought to understand the Japanese system thoroughly.'" (Mooney, 1923, p. 311)

The president was right. O'Brien might have been the nation's first instructor, but no American was more responsible for building public awareness of jiu-jitsu than Theodore Roosevelt.

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