

Theodore Roosevelt: The Making of a Progressive Reformer

by Kathleen Dalton



Teddy Roosevelt in the Rough Riders, ca. 1898. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

Theodore Roosevelt's interesting life often tempts biographers to write about him with the history left out. His story offers plenty of drama. Born in 1858 to a wealthy family in New York City he waged a life and death struggle against childhood asthma. Books about brave warriors and explorers comforted the boy when he was sick. His father, Theodore Senior, believed that nature and outdoor exercise could build boys' bodies and characters, and he put pressure on his son to throw off his invalidism by embracing exercise. In his teens, young Theodore rose to his father's challenge and strengthened his body by exercising and going hunting. He remained a forever-restless seeker after adventure and knowledge, a man who embraced many identities in his life: hunter, cowboy, writer, scientist, historian, explorer, reformer, politician, and, finally, president.

Roosevelt, or T.R. as he was known, invented the modern presidency. A man full of contradictions, he fought bravely in the Spanish-American War, but also proved himself a presidential peacemaker who averted wars by the skillful use of diplomacy and so won the Nobel Peace Prize. In retrospect, T.R. stands out as a unique American wonder, like Niagara Falls. But his story is larger than a one-of-a-kind personal journey from weakness to strength and accomplishment.

In fact, the broad scope of T.R.'s large life gives us clues about the grand historical dramas and conflicts of the era between the Civil War and World War I. In the decades after 1865 the US economy boomed. Railroads paved the way toward new national opportunities for trade and provided a business model for the rise of the modern corporation. Linking the new industrial cities and stimulating modern systems of banking and manufacturing, railroads also led the way toward business consolidations in the form of mergers and monopolies. Wealthy Americans who invested wisely in factories and railroads grew richer than ever, while industrial workers and new immigrants struggled to survive, flocking to crowded cities where they competed for difficult jobs. American cities were plagued by dirt, chaos, and crime as their streets were ripped up to make way for new sites of manufacturing and trade. By 1890 the census showed that 9 percent of the population controlled 71 percent of the wealth, and by 1900, about three quarters of the American people qualified as poor. No wonder that populists, labor leaders, and socialists of many ideological stripes railed against the trusts and the problem of inequality.

As a boy in New York, T.R. grew up within the wealthiest and most exclusive segment of society. Despite his advantages he found urban life in the Gilded Age repellent and confining. Four years after he graduated from Harvard in 1880, T.R. went west searching for a new life free of the constraints of the industrializing east. He bought two ranches in the Dakota Territory and lived the life of a cowboy. His restlessness and his time as a cowpuncher belong to a historical moment after the Civil War when urban life felt hopelessly blighted and the tide of westward migration provoked the Sioux Wars and the killing of many Plains Natives. Custer's demise at the Battle of Little Big Horn invited more vicious reprisals, and along with the military suppression of Native peoples came the dominance of western settlements by railroads and mining corporations. Nevertheless, the West and the cowboy remained powerful symbols of freedom to T.R. and many men of his generation who dreamed of living unshackled by the restrictions of modern desk jobs and polite East Coast society. On his Dakota ranches, T.R.'s cattle froze to death and he failed to turn a profit, but he wrote articles and then books for eastern audiences about the hazards and romance of his ranch life. In *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (1885), *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888), *Thomas Hart Benton* (1887), *The Wilderness Hunt* (1893), and *The Winning of the West* (1889–1896), T.R. argued that the essence of being an American was having a fierce frontier spirit. He sought to kindle across class and regional lines a strong spirit of national renewal. By the 1890s, Roosevelt found literary celebrity among a vast readership of eastern urbanites longing for visions of escape and adventure.

As American cities mushroomed in the 1880s and 1890s, political parties dominated by bosses and supported by immigrant voters offended reformers of T.R.'s privileged class. He believed that garbage pickup, clean water, safe bridges, public transportation, and sewers were investments that city governments needed to make to promote public health and to facilitate economic development. Boss-run cities were slow to respond to such urban problems. Even before his western interlude, T.R. as a New York State assemblyman had proven he was a precocious reformer who knew how to work with the regular Republican Party. He went after a corrupt judge and tried hard to reform the conditions of immigrant labor in tenements. When Roosevelt returned to New York in 1886, it was in the role of urban reformer at a time when corrupt party bosses won elections in part to give their followers jobs and collect political assessments from officeholders. T.R. believed that party hacks should not get government jobs; instead he wanted hiring to be based on civil service exams to raise the level of literacy and competence of government workers. Because of T.R.'s role in the emerging civil service reform movement President Benjamin Harrison appointed him a federal Civil Service Commissioner in 1889. In this role, he and other reformers expanded the number of jobs filled by exam rather than by party loyalty.

Shocked by reports that party bosses and the police were in cahoots with saloons and prostitution rings, New York City reformers formed new alliances in the early 1890s. Though women could not yet vote in New York, they joined reform groups such as the Woman's Municipal League of New York and various good government groups to elect William Lafayette Strong, a reform mayor, in 1894. Mayor Strong brought T.R. back to New York as a police commissioner, where he worked to clean up the police department. T.R. soon pushed the police chief out of the department after discovering that he had accepted bribes at the same time he charged brothels and saloons protection money. T.R. also expanded and professionalized the police by giving his cops telephones, bicycles, fingerprinting, and photographic rogues' galleries. In addition to his belief in law and order, T.R. wrote articles advocating laws to regulate housing to make it safer and more affordable, and called for rapid transit and parks for city dwellers.

After serving as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, lobbying for American expansion and fighting in the Spanish-American War, T.R. ran for governor of New York in 1899. Heeding the serious challenge that Democrat William Jennings Bryan had made to William McKinley in 1896 by railing against trusts, monopolies, and railroads, T.R. as governor won the passage of new factory-inspection and tenement-house laws. T.R. believed that he had not gone far enough as a reformer, but his gubernatorial career was

cut short in 1900 when New York's Republican boss, Boss Platt, pushed T.R. out of New York by arranging for him to become McKinley's vice presidential running mate. Then the vice presidency was seen as a dead-end job rather than a political stepping stone. The McKinley-Roosevelt ticket won the election, but in 1901 an anarchist assassinated President McKinley and T.R. ascended to the presidency.

As president, Theodore Roosevelt had to deal with the dominant conservative wing of his party and a Congress hostile to reform. He took the reins of the presidency without much more of a plan than to emulate Abraham Lincoln's wisdom and his ability to unite the nation. But legislation required the cooperation of Congress, and it was not readily won. T.R.'s legislative victories were modest but historic—a railroad regulation bill, a Meat Inspection Act, and a Pure Food and Drug Act that established federal responsibility for inspecting products to protect consumers.

Roosevelt had better success using his presidency as a “bully pulpit,” popularizing reform ideas among voters. He convinced a generation of Americans that government should be responsive to injustice. When he grew impatient with the executive-legislative give-and-take, he took bold executive action that did not require legislative cooperation. Most notably, he instructed his Justice Department to prosecute the Northern Securities holding company, charging it with monopolistic practices. He won the case when it came before the Supreme Court, earning the moniker of “trust buster.”

He also made labor history. Although previous strikes had usually prompted presidents to side with management by sending federal troops to suppress strikers, in the Anthracite Coal Strike T.R. pressed management to negotiate with labor. He also used executive orders to protect forests, wildlife, the Grand Canyon, and other natural wonders and historic sites, thereby cementing his reputation as America's greatest conservationist president.

T.R.'s evolution as a reformer did not end when he left the presidency in 1909, for he had been swept up in a tidal wave of progressive reform ideas. Influenced by a large network of woman reformers, including settlement house founder Jane Addams, the Consumer League's feisty Florence Kelley, and activists in the Women's Trade Union League, T.R. endorsed state minimum-wage laws and mother's pensions (later Aid to Families with Dependent Children). When he ran for president in 1912 on the third party Bull Moose ticket he endorsed woman suffrage and the modern welfare state, i.e. unemployment, health, and old age insurance. Though he never returned to the White House, T.R. made his mark as an environmental and urban reformer, a man who reflected his times and their debates, but also a man who tried to face the future by promoting new causes. T.R.'s story then is not just a private tale of growth and change. Roosevelt the reformer remains one of the most fascinating personalities in American history.

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