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## The TR Show

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*The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism*

by Doris Kearns Goodwin

Simon and Schuster, 910 pp., \$40.00

"I've had a bully time and a bully fight. I feel as big and strong as a bull moose," Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt ebulliently told reporters when he returned to New York after the famous charge up San Juan Hill in the summer of 1898. Avid for publicity, Roosevelt had arranged for two photographers to accompany him and his Rough Riders to Cuba and had led favored reporters with him into battle. "Up, up they went in the face of death," wrote one of them, "men dropping from the ranks at every step.... Roosevelt sat erect on his horse, holding his sword and shouting for his men to follow him."

On February 15, 1898, an explosion on board the battleship USS *Maine*, anchored in Havana harbor, had killed 262 Americans and sparked the Spanish-American War. It was "an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards," fumed Assistant Secretary of the Navy Roosevelt.

Though a spontaneous fire in a coal bunker likely caused the blast, the explosion gave Roosevelt the green light for the war he hungered to fight. "Of course I feel that we ought to have interfered in Cuba long ago," he had written in mid-January. Promptly quitting the Department of the Navy, he led his own regiment to Cuba—and to glory.



Ida M. Tarbell Collection/Pelletier Library, Allegheny College

Ida Tarbell at her desk at McClure's magazine, New York City, 1894

If there is one enduring symbol of Theodore Roosevelt's leadership, it is surely the spectacle of the man on the horse charging up San Juan Hill. When he and his troops, some limping, some on stretchers, returned home and marched down the pier, TR took center stage, incarnating the courageous, righteous lone warrior. His war memoir, *The Rough Riders*, appeared in 1899. "Tis Th' Biography iv a Hero," observed political satirist Finley Peter Dunne's surrogate Mr. Dooley. "If I was him, I'd call th' book, 'Alone in Cubia.'"

As president, too, Roosevelt would view himself as the hero of the people—with the emphasis on the hero, not on the people. "I believe that whatever value my service may have comes even more from what I *am* than from what I *do*," he wrote in 1908, as his presidency drew to a close. The chief service he could render to the "plain people who believe in me is, not to destroy their ideal of me."

At the onset of World War I, that heroic leader devolved into a demagogue as his hypermasculine, martial values ran amok. In letters to his son and others, he blasted Woodrow Wilson for not throwing the country into the war, excoriating the president for being "at heart an abject coward" whose soul was simply "rotten through and through." The majority of Americans fared no better. "They have no keen point of honor," he sneered. "They are horror-struck by the thought of the hideous slaughter and of all that war would bring." In a series of one hundred shrill, bellicose essays penned for the *Kansas City Star*, Roosevelt insisted that the study of the German language in public schools be prohibited and that opposition to the war be treated as sedition. Demanding an "overwhelming triumph" over Germany, he maintained that "we are in this war to fight until Germany is beaten to her knees."

The hero and the demagogue were not the only Roosevelt incarnations. There were two others: the conservative reformer and the radical progressive. During most of his presidency, he was a conservative reformer, committed to serving as a neutral umpire, seeking a balance between capital and labor. He promised "a square deal" for "every man, great or small, rich or poor." Though faced with a rancorous Republican Party that was divided between progressives and Old Guard conservatives, he sponsored groundbreaking regulation of corporate trusts along with other pioneering progressive measures. And yet hidden behind his belief in evenhandedness and fair play was the old aristocratic fear of an unruly people driven to revolt by egregious inequality and injustice. "Roosevelt represented...the type of Progressive leader whose real impulses were deeply conservative, and who might not perhaps have been a Progressive at all if it were not for the necessity of fending off more radical threats to established ways of doing things," wrote Richard Hofstadter in his classic study *The Age of Reform*.

And then came what was perhaps Roosevelt's most consequential incarnation, the radical, idealistic crusader for social and economic justice who prepared the terrain for the New Deal. In a message to Congress in 1908, TR denounced "the representatives of predatory wealth," their oppression of wageworkers and their crushing of competition. Finally recognizing that the impartiality of a neutral umpire had only buttressed the status quo, TR started to preach a transformational agenda. "I stand for the square deal," he exclaimed in 1910. "But when I say that I am for the square deal, I mean not merely that I stand for fair play under the present rules of the game, but that I stand for having those rules changed"—and those new rules would champion working people.

In 1912, after bolting the GOP, he founded the National Progressive Party, whose Bull Moose platform went well beyond the reformism of his presidency. Its demands ranged from women's suffrage, the prohibition of child labor, and a "living wage" for workers to a system of social insurance designed to protect citizens against sickness, unemployment, and old age. Years later, Franklin Roosevelt came across the handbook of the Socialist Party. "You know, it's a funny thing," he said to Frances Perkins, his secretary of labor. "The Socialists have what they call their immediate and long-term programs. The immediate program...sounds almost exactly like the Bull Moose party of Ted's day."

Doris Kearns Goodwin's exuberant new book, *The Bully Pulpit*, offers a sprawling panorama centered for the most part on TR, the reformer in the White House, whom she portrays not as Hofstadter's grudging Progressive, but as an inspired crusader. In addition to her principal focus on his already well-known presidency, Goodwin has found two other fresher and less well-known angles to investigate. First, TR's relationship with William Howard Taft, the Ohio judge who would serve under him as governor of the Philippines, secretary of war, and then as his hand-picked successor in the White House before becoming, in the election of 1912, the political rival of a deeply embittered and vindictive Roosevelt. And second, Roosevelt's adroit and enterprising use of what he called "the bully pulpit" of the presidency and the relationships he cultivated with a talented crew of muckraking reporters that included Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, and Ray Stannard Baker, all writers for *McClure's* magazine.

Goodwin fathoms and interweaves the worlds of people and policies, of politics and journalism, of the White House and the halls of Congress and popular opinion, infusing her narrative with sketches and anecdotes of dozens of characters' public, personal, and family lives, their backgrounds, educations, finances, wives, children, illnesses, golf games, travels—including on the *Titanic*—friendships, enmities, and daily routines. Goodwin is a superb storyteller, an author of fascinating narratives that are rich in hard-won detail, though *The Bully Pulpit* offers no distinctive interpretation of Roosevelt and

his era. For that, one might turn to the likes of Hofstadter, Bruce Miroff, Sidney Milkis, William Harbaugh, George Mowry, and others.

When New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt was chosen to run as vice-president on the Republican ticket with President William McKinley in 1900, his reaction was disappointment. "These fellows have placed me in an awful position," he complained, deciding to accept only so that people wouldn't say that "Roosevelt has a big head and thinks he is too much of a man to be Vice-President." The job he coveted was that of governor-general of the Philippines, an exciting challenge after the American seizure of the islands from Spain in 1898—but McKinley had already tapped William Howard Taft to head the occupation authority. Unlike TR, who believed that if Americans refused to take tough stands abroad "the bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and win for themselves the domination of the world," Taft had been strongly opposed to the US occupation of the Philippines, but agreed to accept the job. After all, he would sigh, "we are there."

Arriving in Manila in early June 1900, with a Filipino insurrection still blazing despite the presence of about 70,000 American troops—almost three quarters of the US Army—Taft shrugged off the cold welcome he received. He offered a reassuring and conciliatory message, suggesting the beginning of the end of military rule. He was there to do "justice to the Philippine people, and to secure to them the best government in our power." How to do that was far from clear, especially when Taft privately believed that Filipinos might need "the training of fifty or a hundred years before they shall even realize what Anglo-Saxon liberty is." While Taft deplored the American military's bigotry and cruelty, he himself saw Filipino resistance against American occupation as a "conspiracy of murder and assassination" and, as the historian Stanley Karnow wrote, proposed that enemy troops be executed or exiled.

Atrocities punctuated the conflict. After the ambush and vicious murder in September 1901 of fifty-four American soldiers, Army officials blamed Taft's "silly talk of benevolence and civilian rule," and one general gave the directive to "kill and burn." By 1902, the insurrection had dwindled to harassing actions. But by then, as Karnow underscored in his magisterial study of America's rule in the Philippines, over 4,200 American troops and 20,000 Filipino soldiers had died in the conflict, with an estimated two hundred thousand Filipino civilians perishing from famine and other causes.

Although Goodwin doesn't ignore the brutality of America's occupation of the Philippines, her emphasis is on what she portrays as Taft's constructive role in nation-building. Taft's course was to create a base of support for American rule by co-opting Filipino elites into the new colonial administration, which constructed schools and roads,

opened medical clinics, made legal reforms, and recovered the Catholic Church's vast landholdings for redistribution to Filipino farmers. Self-rule remained a distant mirage, but in Goodwin's account, Taft's use of carrot and stick, of vigorous Americanization with appeals to national pride, as well as the efficiency of his administration won him loyalty among Filipinos as their "beloved governor" and quieted opposition to the US.

Particularly significant for Taft's Philippines mission was his deepening relationship with Roosevelt, who had been thrust into the presidency with McKinley's assassination in September 1901. TR quickly came to think of Taft as his most reliable and sympathetic partner. "Thank Heaven you are to be with me!" Roosevelt exclaimed in 1903 when Taft hesitantly accepted the job of secretary of war. Taft would become the administration's "pack horse," as TR heaped assignments on him that went far beyond his War Department brief. He became the president's intermediary with Capitol Hill, worked as a crucial adviser and surrogate in the 1904 presidential campaign, supervised complex aspects of the Panama Canal project, and facilitated a peace conference in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, that would end the Russo-Japanese War—an achievement for which Roosevelt won the Nobel Peace Prize. "He helps me in every way more than I can say," TR wrote to a friend.

The talented, introspective Taft succeeded as an administrator, diplomat, and legal thinker. And as he followed Roosevelt into the presidency in 1909, he carried much of TR's reformist program forward. Indeed, he instituted more antitrust suits than had Roosevelt and expanded the jurisdiction of the Interstate Commerce Commission. During his administration, Congress passed a tax on corporations as well as constitutional amendments for an income tax and for the direct election of senators. But Taft's conservatism gradually revealed itself—in his refusal to break with the Republican Old Guard in Congress as well as in his six Supreme Court appointments that would erect a decades-long roadblock to reform. Taft's failure to "carry out my work unbroken," as TR put it, helped to unleash Roosevelt's radicalism as well as his furious hostility to Taft, climaxing in his kamikaze-like bid for the presidency in 1912.

As for Taft, he "ultimately failed as a public leader," Goodwin concludes, locating his principal shortcoming not in his conservatism but rather in his failure to seize the bully pulpit and connect with the American people. His relationship with journalists was uneasy from the start. "He was never able," Goodwin comments, to "harness the press corps to broadcast a coherent narrative concerning his legislative goals." And that was precisely where Theodore Roosevelt excelled.

To a great extent, Goodwin views Theodore Roosevelt's career through the lens of his relationships with the press. Much of *The Bully Pulpit* focuses on the complex, often

constructive, and sometimes contentious partnerships that Roosevelt worked out with a generation of investigative journalists. Goodwin credits these partnerships not only with illuminating the corruption and abuses of the industrial age but with clarifying “a progressive vision for the entire nation,” a vision aided by Roosevelt’s astute use of his presidential bully pulpit.

Notwithstanding the tremendous growth of the industrial age—railroads, telegraph wires, steamships, mines, cities—as Henry George argued in his 1879 *Progress and Poverty*, these vaunted advances made it “no easier for the masses of our people to make a living. On the contrary, it is becoming harder.” Progress had widened the gulf between rich and poor, making the struggle for existence more intense and jeopardizing the stability of a democratic society. “To base a state with glaring social inequalities on political institutions where people are supposed to be equal,” George wrote, “is to stand a pyramid on its head. Eventually, it will fall.”

Millions of Americans hungered for change and reform, and the press was at the forefront. “The Progressive mind was characteristically a journalistic mind,” remarked Hofstadter. “Before there could be action, there must be information and exhortation.” But Hofstadter noted that investigative reporting was not a Progressive invention. What was new in muckraking, he explained, “was neither its ideas nor its existence, but its reach.” The investigative magazines had circulations in the hundreds of thousands.

Goodwin closely examines that golden age of journalism, particularly the influence of reporters on TR and his cultivation of them in maximizing the power and reach of his presidency. He corresponded with them, invited them to the White House, and sought their counsel. At times, he was irritated by their negativity, complaining to Taft in 1906 that their articles contained a “great amount of evil...mixed with a little good [and] a little truth.” Still, working together, they and TR were, in effect, shaping public opinion and mobilizing action on a host of reforms.

In 1893, in the midst of a severe economic crisis when, Goodwin writes, “millions feared that in the wreckage of the Gilded Age, democracy itself would crumble,” the first issue of *McClure’s* magazine appeared. Its crusading editor, Sam McClure, intended for his magazine to become “a power in the land...a power for good.” McClure hired a gifted staff of hardworking writers—not only the nucleus of Tarbell, Baker, Steffens, and William Allen White, but also Mark Sullivan, Willa Cather, Stephen Crane, and others—and gave them good salaries and generous expense accounts. There was “the sense of vitality, of adventure, of excitement” at *McClure’s*, said Tarbell. Together the magazine’s team produced hundreds of potent, provocative articles that changed the face not only of American journalism but, ultimately, of American government.

Tarbell's own target was John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil, the octopus that controlled the nation's petroleum supplies. In a series of groundbreaking exposés launched in 1903, she revealed that the ascendancy of the company was aided by discriminatory railroad rates and illegal tactics to wipe out competitors, including insider deals, bribery, intimidation, and fraud. "And what are we going to do about it?" Tarbell finally demanded, challenging the public to take action. "For it is OUR business," she insisted, "we, the people of the United States, and nobody else, must cure whatever is wrong in the industrial situation."

Following Tarbell's sensational investigation, Roosevelt successfully proposed an antitrust program in 1903 aimed at curbing corporate power, which inevitably would result in the empowerment of the government. Some people might fear that it was "a step toward socialism," wrote Roosevelt's friend William Allen White, adding that "if so, well and good; the step will not be retracted."

Ray Baker took aim at corruption in the government and labor movement and in the practices of monopolies like J.P. Morgan's Northern Securities. Morgan, whose annual income and spending were almost as great as that of Imperial Germany, controlled the two largest corporations on earth, United States Steel, which produced more than a quarter of the world's steel, and Northern Securities, which, with its tens of thousands of miles of railroad track and hundreds of ships, possessed, wrote Baker, "monarchical powers in all matters relating to transportation." To tackle Northern Securities, Roosevelt revived the Sherman Antitrust Act, and in 1904, after a Supreme Court decision upheld his action, the corporation was dissolved. But Roosevelt's preference was to regulate rather than break up such firms; he believed that megacorporations were a natural outcome of industrialization and that they made lower prices and efficient service possible.

In 1905, Baker embarked on a six-part series for *McClure's*, "The Railroads on Trial," showing that a handful of corporations had a stranglehold on the country's transportation network. He asked TR if he would like to read his first installment before it was published. "Yes," the president replied. "I have learned to look to your articles for real help." A few weeks later TR returned the favor, sending Baker pages from the draft of his State of the Union message. Disappointed to find "too much of the President's favorite balancing of good and evil," Baker successfully urged Roosevelt to go further in regulating the rates railroads charged shippers. The next year, Congress passed the Hepburn Act, a compromise bill that at least brought the railroads under federal control. "Congress might ignore a president," editorialized an Indiana newspaper, "but could not ignore a president and the people."



So too with Upton Sinclair's revelations in *The Jungle* about hideous sanitation and brutal work conditions in the meatpacking industry—they led to legislation mandating federal meat inspection; and in 1906, Mark Sullivan's reports on scores of useless and even dangerous patent medicines resulted in the Pure Food and Drug Act. So powerful had periodicals like *McClure's* become that William Allen White quipped that it was as if Americans had "Government by Magazine."

Ultimately more transformative than Theodore Roosevelt's reforms were his personality, his energy, and, as Goodwin shows, his seizing of the bully pulpit that prepared the political landscape for expansive new concepts of government, rights, and community. When White and Roosevelt first met in 1897, TR's progressive ideas came as a revelation to the conservative Kansas newspaper editor. "He sounded in my heart the first trumpet call of the new time that was to be," a call that signaled "the passing of the old into the new."

Roosevelt created a new standard for the presidency as a source of engaged, forward-looking leadership. In his post-presidential life, that youthful spirit remained intact. Feverish and unhinged as his demands for war against Germany may have appeared, TR retained his strong sense of the injustices of industrial capitalism and his faith in government's power to ameliorate them. In his speeches and writings of 1917 and 1918, he repudiated "our present industrial and social system, or rather no-system of every man for himself," and called for such measures as a steeply graduated tax on excess profits, a bill of rights for returning soldiers, higher education for all men and women who desired it, the rights of workers to share in profits and in management, permanency of employment, day nurseries for the children of working mothers, and a right to "reasonable leisure." A century later, most of those proposals remain a dream.

Theodore Roosevelt died on January 6, 1919; across his strenuous life, he had contained multitudes—the indomitable hero, cautious pragmatist, groundbreaking progressive, intolerant demagogue, and political visionary. In all of those roles, he conceived politics as a battle culminating in the fireworks of his own personality, courage, intellect, and heroic deeds. Yet unremitting intensity on the public stage rarely wears well. As Franklin D. Roosevelt would caution Ray Stannard Baker in a 1935 letter in which he took a critical look at his distant cousin Theodore's leadership, the public psychology cannot "be attuned for long periods of time to a constant repetition of the highest note in the scale."

TR instinctively reached for that higher note, which may explain his failures as well as his successes. Yet his presidency awoke Americans to the demands and possibilities of the twentieth century. His death, a decade after he left the White House, would leave many of his friends and admirers in American politics and journalism facing a gray void.



Tarbell, Baker, and White were all in France covering the Versailles peace conference when they received the jolting news of TR's death. "Again and again I looked at the headlines to be sure that I was reading them correctly," White recalled. Later that morning, Baker and Tarbell joined him, and the three old friends "sat down to talk it all over, and get used to a world without Roosevelt in it."

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