



Session I Essay

Theodore Roosevelt: the Bully Pulpit

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Theodore Roosevelt defined the modern presidency. His expansive view of the office reflected his delight in power and imbued his intention to manage government and preserve stability by fostering social equity. Assuming the presidency in 1901 after William McKinley was assassinated, T.R. welcomed the responsibility of the office. "I did and caused to be done", he later wrote, "many things not previously done by the President...I did greatly broaden the use of executive power."



Theodore Roosevelt.†

Roosevelt advanced a broad federal program for the regulation of private economic power. By using the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, which had languished for a decade, he began to break up the giant corporations that, unrestrained, had alienated consumers by their business practices. The Supreme Court validated the suits he brought against the "trusts" dominating northwestern railroads, gunpowder, oil and tobacco. Accepting corporate size as an aspect of modernity, Roosevelt put his larger effort into promoting regulation of corporate behavior. Using the office of the president as a "bully pulpit" to rouse public opinion, Roosevelt led Congress to empower the Interstate Commerce Commission to begin the regulation of railroad rates and to enact statutes calling for federal inspection of meat packing and for federal standards of purity in foods and drugs.

T.R. intervened in a bitter nationwide strike in the coal industry on the side of labor, unprecedented for the White House. He led the movement for the conservation of natural resources, placing 230 million acres of U.S. land under public protection from development. Before leaving office he outlined an agenda for the future which favored pro-labor legislation and furthered social reforms. His agenda occupied progressives for the next thirty years.



Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders, 1898.†

Roosevelt brought to foreign policy his conviction that America had a destiny to rival the great imperial powers of the time. He reformed the army and built up the navy to mobilize national power. He used American influence to preserve a balance of power in both Europe and Asia so as to prevent any one country from dominating the western Pacific or eastern Atlantic, oceanic pathways to the United States.

Accordingly he successfully negotiated peace in the Russian-Japanese War, for which he was awarded a Noble Prize. Treating the Caribbean Sea as an American lake, vital for national security, he pronounced a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine that asserted the right of the U.S. to intervene in any Caribbean nation where instability might invite European intercession. He used that assertion as a pretext for recognizing Panama and acquiring the Canal Zone there when Colombia refused to sell it to the United States. His "large view" of the American role in foreign affairs influenced national policy for the rest of the century. Both during his presidency and for the rest of his life, he was the best known American of his time.

† *Still Picture Branch, National Archives at College Park.*

Suggested Readings:

- Theodore Roosevelt, *Autobiography*
- John M. Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt* (second edition, 1977)
- Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt* (1990)
- Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (1966).
- Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (2001)

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