The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt

(Edmund Morris)

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This is a forty-year-old biography that is as fresh today as it was in the 1970s. *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* is the best-known of modern biographies of Theodore Roosevelt, although it only covers his life up to his accession to the Presidency, in 1901. It wholly warrants its reputation—the writing is clear and compelling, the facts are relevant and interesting, and the author, Edmund Morris, treats the man through the lens of his time, not with any jarring ideological overlay imported from today. The reader feels like he is practically living in the time, and that is a hard trick to pull off, especially for eight hundred pages.

Roosevelt was born in 1858, and was therefore a small boy during the Civil War. He grew up in New York, but his mother was a southern belle and an active supporter of the Confederacy, which created some tense marital moments in an otherwise happy marriage. The family was very wealthy and very established, and Roosevelt's father (also Theodore) was a dominating presence within it, a benevolent patriarch. Morris follows Roosevelt from birth, through education, early politics, time spent in the West, more politics, yet more politics, Cuba, and, finally, his brief time as Vice President. The focus, though, is on Roosevelt the person in the context of his times, not on his times—thus, there is a vast amount of information about Roosevelt's personal life, which makes him a much more compelling figure than would a focus on, say, the politics of his time as Governor of New York (though that is covered too).

One thing that comes through very clearly in the book is the old American expectation of the wealthy, where the rich hewed closely to the Biblical injunction, "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required." In those days, as shown by Roosevelt's father, great wealth carried with it great expectations, an obligation that, while it was not always honored at that time, has almost totally disappeared in the liquid modernity of today, where the idea that rigid social expectations should constrain anyone at all is anathema to the modern belief in total and continual personal autonomy. Putatively the elder Theodore was a businessman, but not only did he devote much of his working life to philanthropy (among other things founding the

New York Orthopedic Hospital), during the Civil War (although he paid another man as a substitute to serve in the Army, to the later dismay of his son) he designed a system to allow soldiers to authorize payroll deductions to support their families, and then, at his own expense, travelled all over for months selling the program to soldiers, sitting on a horse in the open air and pouring rain persuading soldiers to sign up. The idea of a rich man undertaking risks and pain to make a charity he had conceived of real, rather than donating money and then going to dinners so people can suck up to and admire him, seems bizarre today.

Unsurprisingly, his father had a great influence on our Theodore Roosevelt, not least because his father died of colon cancer just as he came of age, thus forming an abstract model to which Roosevelt could aspire, but which was fixed and did not comment further on his life. Roosevelt inherited quite a bit of money, but not enough to live lavishly, and until later life he didn't make much money himself (which is why his father told him that if he was not going to earn money, he "must even things up by not spending it"). He didn't, therefore, live lavishly, but he did spend more than he should have, resulting in (like Winston Churchill) the frequent need to support his family in part by writing for the popular market.

Still, despite not oozing money, Roosevelt was able to afford benefits to his work that are essentially incomprehensible today. Chief among those was continual attention by servants and other servitors, allowing him to focus on his work. He had preternatural drive and discipline, and worked long hours, but turning that into his volume of output was only made possible by being relieved by others of having to do anything that might distract him. (Of course, it's a good thing he lived before the internet, the telephone, and other such diversions.) Morris does not emphasize this benefit to Roosevelt, perhaps figuring it's obvious, but it shows up on nearly every page, and was continual from Roosevelt's earliest life. For example, in a letter home during his freshman year at Harvard (where he snobbily refused to associate with any but the upper-crust students), Roosevelt casually refers to how his "scout" had "made the fire and blacked the boots," and then called him to breakfast, prepared, naturally, by others. The rest of each day went the same. Glimpses of how other, less monied peers lived show up occasionally—Morris quotes "an old friend, separated from the Roosevelts by lesser means,"

when he sees Roosevelt leaving the opera, "I remember thinking what an enormous start he had over youths like myself, whose daily bread depended on their daily effort." Yes, Roosevelt accomplished an enormous amount, starting at an early age, but that was made possible by his circumstances as well as by his character—and even the rich today don't have those same advantages, even if they are internally compelled to produce value, rather than spending their days posting on the Rich Kids of Instagram. I sometimes look at myself, now well into my forties, and wonder what I would have done with my life if I had not spent the past twenty-five years grinding away to become wealthy, only then turning my mind, somewhat, to other possible productive pursuits. Of course, maybe what I have done is enough, and presumably I still have a month or two left in which to do something maximally useful, plus maybe I just would have been a druggie if born rich and served hand and foot. Who's to say? As Aslan told Lucy, "Child, no one is ever told what would have been."

Speaking of output, I did not know that the first book Roosevelt wrote is still regarded as a classic and relevant—*The Naval War of 1812*, which he published when he was twenty-three. It is exhaustive, and I found most relevant of all his stated reason for writing it: "[T]o learn anything from the past it is necessary to know, as near as may be, the exact truth—if only from the narrowest motives." Given that most of what we are offered today is mutated histories, in which ideology is served at the expense of the exact truth, such a philosophy is something that would be well worth recapturing as the general rule. His later books, though, are regarded mostly as hackwork, not false but fairly pedestrian and bombastic. Morris read and commented on them all, coming to the charitable conclusion that their main worth is illuminating Roosevelt himself, given his frequent habit of really talking about himself when he's supposedly commenting on his biographical object.

Roosevelt was a constant risk-taker, who exemplified (and pushed) masculinity, something that everyone knows what it is, since it's primarily biological, but today our cultural elite denies exists other than as a social construct, usually termed pernicious. Roosevelt's life, in many ways, refutes the silly idea of masculinity (and femininity) being a construct in the same way that Samuel Johnson, when told that one could not prove matter existed, vigorously kicked a rock and exclaimed

"I refute it thus!" Examples of Roosevelt's over-the-top masculinity abound, including his repeatedly risking his life by riding scores of miles through blizzards in the Badlands, chasing for weeks down an icy river in the Dakota Territory cutthroats who had stolen his small boat, and his pushing through frequent severe ailments. But my favorite example is when, during his Dakota Territory career, he had a business dispute with a local man named Paddock, a known killer who had shot several men. Roosevelt was told that Paddock was threatening him behind his back. So he rode to Paddock's house, knocked on the door, and when Paddock appeared, rasped "I understand that you have threatened to kill me on sight. I have come over to see when you want to begin the killing." Paddock backed down—but really, who among us would be so manly today? Not me, even in my younger, more aggressive days. Still, we could use a lot more of this masculinity today, rather than Pajama Boy and an effeminate, lift-up-your-skirts-and-shriek terror of mythical "toxic masculinity," which is a contradiction in terms, when masculinity is properly defined—though the deliberate conflation of masculinity with what, in an earlier time, would simply have been called "vice" or "evil" is the entire point of the myth, if you think about it.

And Roosevelt constantly pushed masculinity as a tonic for others and society, too, as well as exemplifying it nearly to the point of caricature. Not everybody responded favorably. It certainly didn't raise Henry James's already low opinion of Roosevelt that Roosevelt thought he had "delicate, effeminate sensitivities" and was a "miserable little snob" who, "because he finds he cannot play a man's part among men, goes [to England] where he will be sheltered from the winds that harden stouter souls." (On balance, though, Roosevelt was right, as you will discover if you subject yourself today to any of James's novels.) Roosevelt was only too happy to prescribe a heaping dose of masculinity for anything that ailed any man, but it seems unlikely anyone took him up on it to the degree he probably thought necessary.

While I hesitate to make the comparison, because it is grossly unfair to Roosevelt and implies a wholly undeserved elevation of Trump, it is fascinating to see that the chattering classes often saw Roosevelt in the same way as Trump is viewed. Woodrow Wilson called Roosevelt "the most dangerous man of the age." Mark Twain called him "clearly insane." Luminaries like Henry Adams and Henry James regarded him

with distaste. A prominent newspaper editor said "he is the most dangerous foe to human liberty that has ever set foot on American soil." But like Trump, Roosevelt simply ignored these criticisms, and charged forward, his default stance for his entire life. He was blessed by good luck, he had discipline (even if he was very quirky in his personality), and he did not face the unified opposition of the dominant classes like Trump does, so my guess is that Roosevelt's strategy worked a lot better for him than its rough analogue will work for Trump (though early returns are looking pretty good for Trump). Nonetheless, it's worth noting that men of action do best when ignoring the caviling of effete intellectuals, who wish they were men of action, as every man does, but just can never seem to manage it.

The only truly odd thing I noted about this book is that there are repeated glancing references not only to the large, extended Roosevelt family, but to its great power, and to its influence over Theodore Roosevelt at important junctures. The family had been wealthy and prominent for generations, so its relevance to New York society is not surprising. What is surprising is that we never get any remotely clear picture of the extended family. We don't get any details at all, not even how many people were considered to be "in" the family. I suppose that would have made the book longer, but the reader is mystified by the occasional references to "rich uncles" or "cousins" who have important opinions and whose good offices need to be solicited, or to the "resentment of family elders against Theodore" when the scandal of his drunken, adulterous brother became public, where neither the "uncles" nor the "elders" are ever specified, and no further mention is made of them.

Roosevelt was not an ideologue; he was too close to real humans for that. He criticized utopians from Marx to Tolstoy to Henry George—anyone who "believes that at this stage of the world's progress it is possible to make everyone happy by an immense social revolution, just as other enthusiasts of a similar mental caliber believe in the possibility of constructing a perpetual-motion machine." Not that raw populism was any better. The vox populi was "the voice of the devil, or what is still worse, the voice of a fool." He was an populist elitist, in a sense—he was all for the people, if they were first suitably led and guided, with their wants and choices channeled, if and to the extent their wants and choices lacked objective merit when rated on universal standards. But

Roosevelt was all about the merit—other than limitations caused by merit, he wanted no limitations at all on people's ability to participate and achieve. Thus, he wanted to extend the franchise to women, when that was not a popular position. And, rarely for his time. he was strongly opposed to racial discrimination in America, and more broadly opposed to the belief that other races, in America or anywhere, were biologically inferior, again when the opposite was received wisdom. He certainly thought, with good reason, that other cultures were inferior, but firmly believed that any culture, in any place, in time, with guidance, could climb up to be just as good as American culture, and probably would, given time.

This approach led, usually, to a clear-eyed grasp of the realities of cultural clashes. Roosevelt described the result of frontier warfare as "where brutal and reckless frontiersmen are brought into contact with a set of treacherous, vengeful, and fiendishly cruel savages a long series of outrages by both sides is sure to follow." James Cozzens, in *The Earth is Weeping*, describes the Indian Wars with more detail and less overt judgment, but really, both men see those wars the same. As Morris summarizes Roosevelt's thought, "Any black or red man who could win admission to 'the fellowship of the doers' was superior to the white man who failed." By the same token, any culture, if it tried hard enough, could be "as intellectual as the Athenian." Accustomed as we are to the stupid idea that oppression, real or imagined, dictates outcome regardless of "doing," rather than merit and hard work overcoming any real oppression just as it can overcome any of the other limitations every person faces, as reality tells us, this approach is a breath of fresh air. On the other hand, Roosevelt's cultural diagnoses were not perfect—he also thought that the aristocratic class in America would decline in relative numbers, but standards would be maintained, because of the "transmission of acquired characters" to the rest of America. Looking around, it hasn't exactly worked out that way, as Charles Murray will be happy to detail for you, or J. D. Vance.

Roosevelt was primarily, by choice, a politician. Being a national politician was very different back then, not because the issues were different (they are in every time), nor because the political class was more virtuous (it's always been dumb and vicious—it's the ruling class that's deteriorated), but because the whole country was relevant. To

take one of many examples, Roosevelt assiduously cultivated William Allen White, "editor of a powerful Midwestern newspaper." Today, to say those words is to snicker at the oxymoron embedded in them. Similarly, at every political convention, many kingmakers were men from places like Cleveland and Indianapolis. It was true in less obvious ways, too—senators were still elected by their state legislatures, rather than by popular vote, so their election was not subject, as it is today and increasingly so, to corrupting influence from outside the state. Our modern system, where only wealthy people on the coasts are relevant to most national political decisions, is much less healthy than the system Roosevelt worked in, where the national political ecosystem was composed of people in every sizeable community in the entire nation.

In any case, in his political life, Roosevelt had two main political obsessions, only one of which is really associated in the public mind with Roosevelt today. That one was American expansionism—a variety of Manifest Destiny, but since the frontier was closed during Roosevelt's youth, a Manifest Destiny focused outward, to Cuba and the Philippines, with Canada and Mexico occasionally getting a baleful glance. I imagine that the average educated person, if asked to characterize Roosevelt in one word, would probably say something like "imperialist" or "jingo," being quite familiar with that aspect of the Rooseveltian program.

But the second obsession, and one which dominated Roosevelt's early career, was so-called civil service reform, and that is largely forgotten today. At the time, this meant improving the quality of government workers by various changes to the system by which they were hired, chief among them ending the spoils system, whereby government jobs at all levels were handed out to political supporters upon a change in administration, and those who held those jobs under a prior administration were shown the door. The proposed alternatives mostly involved competitive examinations for place, as well as permanent appointments—i.e., choosing on objective merit and breaking the tie to a particular political party that turnover permitted. Roosevelt referred to his view, and of his allies, as those "whose only care is to secure a pure and honest government." This optimistic view made sense at the time, for no doubt the unseemly scramble by untalented men for sinecures was an affront to those seeking efficient and impartial government. At that time, legislative bribery was extremely common, and the idea of

bureaucrats who would be immune to bribery was also attractive. This was long before the explosion of bureaucracy detonated by Woodrow Wilson and the Progressives, and long before the corruptions of leftist ideology took hold in the imagination of the ruling classes, to be implemented by the unaccountable agents of those ruling classes, with ill effects far exceeding mere bribery.

Roosevelt was very successful in making great strides toward his goals, which were then furthered by others. Unfortunately, however, the ultimate result is the opposite of "pure and honest government." What we have today is a monstrous federal bureaucracy, the administrative state, wholly an aggressive wing of the most leftist elements of the Democratic Party, permanently entrenched and ever-expanding, with no accountability to anyone at all except their ideological compatriots. And that bureaucracy is ever increasing, not only in numbers, but in power, in the grip it has on ordinary Americans, and in the gloating enjoyment it takes in grinding those Americans, in general and in particular those who oppose its leftist dictates, into the dirt. Roosevelt would be appalled and dismayed at the horror to which his idealism contributed (though, certainly, Wilson and the Progressives bear more of the responsibility).

True, in the Age of Trump, there have been a few small victories—such as the Department of Justice's announcement last week that it would no longer enforce regulations based on "guidance" (extra-legal pronouncements by regulators, whose entire purpose is to avoid the sunshine provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act, yet which had the effective force of law, and are usually in direct opposition to the legislative will), or yesterday's announcement by the Department of Education that it will no longer give legal effect to demands by mentally ill children (or, more accurately, by their parents, or, even more accurately, by the LGBTIQCAPGNGFNBA pressure groups using both children and parents as disposable tools to advance their bigoted agenda) to use the bathroom of the sex opposite of the one they are, ridiculously claiming "civil rights" violations. But those "victories" will be short lived unless the system is permanently changed and the power of their proponents utterly broken. As with employees under the old spoils system, they will last only as long as the inauguration of the next administration, with the difference that today it's not a seesaw, but rather conservatives only ever are able to take holding actions, perhaps rolling

back a tiny, tiny percentage of the massive progress made in building the edifice of the Left during their time in power. A permanent solution is therefore required.

That permanent solution I have written about elsewhere at more length. Among other things, we should reverse the civil service reform that Roosevelt was so passionate about, and return to the spoils system, with protections against actual bribery (but allowing jobs to be awarded for purely political reasons). We should have a near-complete turnover of all government bureaucrats every time an administration changes, along with rigid term limits and a lifetime ban with severe criminal penalties on post-government employment lobbying or private enterprise work in the same sector. Unionization of governmetn employees should also be criminalized and no job protections of any kind should be given to bureaucrats, who should be at-will employees who can be fired by anybody above them for any reason or no reason, with no rights under any circumstances to bring any lawsuit in response. Furthermore, bureaucrats should be rusticated—only a tiny percentage should be allowed to remain in Washington, with the rest moved all over the country, scattered in small cities and towns, in office space that is a maximum of Class C. That would be part of the civil service reform we need today. Certainly, such actions would merely be part of the solution, but the key takeaway is that, sad to say, Roosevelt was totally wrong about what would ultimately make "pure and honest government." Or, perhaps, he was right for his time, but his solution no longer works, and what has resulted from his cure is far worse than the disease was in his day, so we will have to do something now, or something less pleasant later.

Finally, there are glimpses in this book, but only glimpses, of what was to become a later Roosevelt obsession—the "unnatural alliance of politics and corporations." In this age when the Lords of the Network have gained intolerable powers over the lives of ordinary Americans (whether that power was voluntarily granted is totally irrelevant), and are increasingly using those powers for bad, both to harm society and to aggressively advance leftist domination, Roosevelt's later smashing of that unnatural alliance has lessons for us all. But I will, I think, save hectoring my readers about that topic for a later review, a decision that the few people who have read this far probably wholeheartedly agree with.