

Someone for Everyone

TR: The Last Romantic

H.W. Brands

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REVIEWED BY

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The president who built a bridge to the twentieth century was a Republican aristocrat from New York named Theodore Roosevelt. It would be difficult to think of anyone with fewer personal and political similarities to the president who is building a bridge to the twenty-first century; yet a bust of Roosevelt (alongside another of his distant cousin Franklin) stands behind Bill Clinton's desk in his White House office. Undoubtedly this tells us more about Clinton than about Roosevelt. But it also begs a larger question, one that has challenged historians, journalists, political scientists—and most recently H.W. Brands, professor of history at Texas A&M—for nearly a century: Where, exactly, does Roosevelt stand in the scheme of American history, and what is his legacy?

We might do well by considering the course of Roosevelt's reputation. My mother, now in her eighty-sixth year, remembers her own mother weeping at the news of Roosevelt's death in 1919. At the time of his demise, TR's standing with the public was probably higher than at any time since his presidency ended ten years before. The bitterness he provoked in his 1912 challenge to the Republican incumbent William Howard Taft had largely dissipated. He was admired for his early and prescient advocacy of American participation in the Great War, in which one of his sons was killed. He

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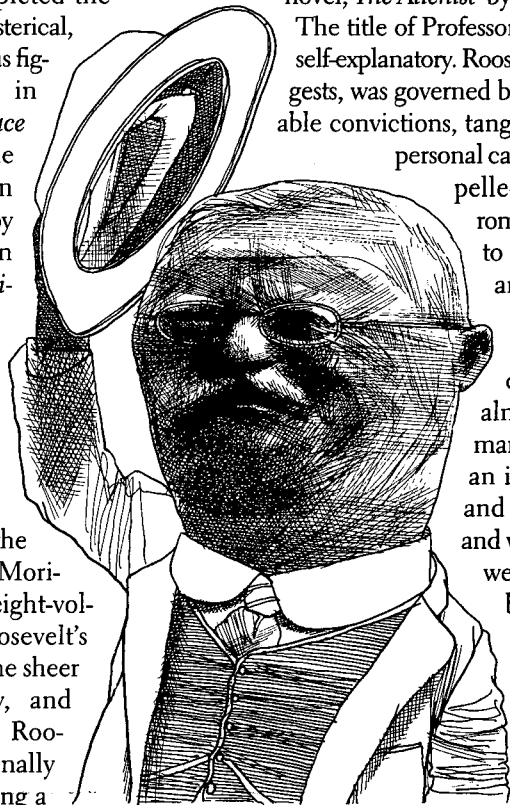
was generally considered to be the front-runner for the 1920 Republican presidential nomination.

And yet, had he lived, it is not so easy to say how things might have evolved. Between Roosevelt's death and the election of Warren Harding came the struggle over American participation in the League of Nations—a “defining” event, as we would now say—and national disenchantment with global ambition. It is difficult to imagine a statesman less in tune with the Jazz Age than Theodore Roosevelt. TR would not have considered “normalcy” a fit pursuit of a great people; nor would he have argued that “the business of America is business.” Dead at 60, the president who had been so precocious in his day was on the threshold of anachronism. Things went steadily downhill after that. In 1931 the first serious biography, by Henry F. Pringle (1944), depicted the bellicose, slightly hysterical, and faintly ridiculous figure of fun seen in *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944), a theme smoothly wrapped in scholarly trappings by Richard Hofstadter in *The American Political Tradition* (1948). In the pantheon of leadership, the second Roosevelt had effectively supplanted the first.

Then things turned around. In the early 1950's Elting Morison published an eight-volume edition of Roosevelt's correspondence. The sheer depth, complexity, and expansiveness of Roosevelt's mind was finally on display, prompting a

slow and favorable public reassessment. In 1954 John Morton Blum, associate editor of Morison's project, wrote *The Republican Roosevelt*, a brief, admiring study which examined TR's copious intellect, traced the pervasive influence of his policies, and sought to dissect the substance behind the style. Its very title, however, suggested that Roosevelt I seemed destined to remain in the shadow of Roosevelt II. But not for long: a second biography, by William Harbaugh in 1961, corrected Pringle's biases and inferences, and Edmund Morris's *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (1979) drew a sympathetic, and immensely popular, personal portrait. That opened the floodgates. Now scarcely a season goes by without another monograph, study, or profile on the market. There have been several television biographies of Roosevelt in the past few years; he is even featured in a recent best-selling novel, *The Alienist* by Caleb Carr.

The title of Professor Brands's work is self-explanatory. Roosevelt's life, he suggests, was governed by a set of unshakable convictions, tangled by a series of personal calamities, and propelled by a fierce, romantic attachment to ideals, ambition, and self-competition. The author's sources for these conclusions are almost entirely primary: Roosevelt was an inveterate diarist and correspondent, and while his writings were often meant to be read for effect, they are also immensely, sometimes unintentionally, revealing. A daunting



task is successfully mastered: Brands commands his copious subject, and the narrative proceeds at an orderly pace, in understated tones and subtle conjecture, through the course of Roosevelt's tumultuous life. TR's voice is frequently deployed to emphasize points or illustrate problems: the reader is guided, not pushed, to conclusions; the author lets the subject speak for himself, seldom interrupting to render final judgment. There are occasional side trips to the analyst's couch—Brands sees Taft as a substitute for Roosevelt's feckless brother Elliott—but these are thankfully limited in scope. The volume and diversity of Roosevelt's career is harnessed in lucid and occasionally humorous tones; the sense of his distinctive temperament is conveyed.

Roosevelt struck his contemporaries as a force of nature, and it is easy to see why: the passion, and occasional violence, of his character is a wonder to behold. So is his capacity for intense absorption and self-delusion. Wherever he looked—as statesman, conservationist, party politician, trust-buster, naturalist, social critic, or scholar—Roosevelt was swift to draw lines in the sand and apply moral lessons to suit his particular needs.

Yet the president who wrote more books than any other, who spoke German to the Kaiser and could identify hundreds of bird songs and species, was far from anyone's idea of an intellectual. His instincts were reactive, not analytical; his faith was in action, not reflection. And he entered politics not because he sought to elevate society, but because (as he said) he intended to be a member of the governing class. A life in science, which he had contemplated at Harvard, failed to arouse the competitive instincts which, if left unsatisfied, might easily have devoured him. He believed that privilege demanded public service, but he didn't regard himself as a civic supplicant: he wanted power, too, and craved success.

To the modern reader this is all very startling and refreshing. Roosevelt was a practical politician, to be sure, but he was also essentially indifferent to public opinion. His convictions were sure, his views were intense, and his notions of right and wrong were fixed and inflexible. As with

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any politician, he was easily convinced that people who disagreed with him were not only misguided, but lethal. Roosevelt did not say one thing while meaning another; nor did he abandon principles for expedience. This served him well when adjusting government to the demands of a modern industrial economy, defying powerful interests or defining America's position in the world. It served him less well, however, when he was persuaded that his successor was spoiling his legacy. He became so infuriated with Taft, who sought only to please his mentor, that he gleefully divided the Republican Party and elected his nemesis, Woodrow Wilson.

The great challenge, for any Roosevelt biographer, is to calculate the source of TR's energy and zeal. The story is well known: The asthmatic little boy who willed himself to robust manhood; the amateur enthusiast who pushed every interest—in natural history, in scholarship, hunting, physical exertion, even the pursuit of his first wife, Alice Lee—to the outermost limits. Professor Brands provides us with the ingredients, and skillfully examines the evidence and stories. But there is a central mystery that can never be explained. Not every determined boy becomes Theodore Roosevelt, and, as he himself acknowledged, Roosevelt never quite grew into maturity. There were formative, even chastening, experiences—the deaths of his father, first wife and youngest son, as well as his various political disappointments—but none seemed to quench his frantic ambition, or satisfy his appetite for struggle and adversity.

Roosevelt is usually credited with the creation of the modern presidency—which is to say, he broke the pattern of post-Civil

War control by Congress and pushed the claims of the executive branch. To some degree, this was a matter of historic inevitability. The Gilded Age had transformed the United States from a largely agrarian state to an industrial society, and the impetus for “reform”—in the management of cities, the power of commerce, the changing relations between capital and labor—yielded a president with powerful designs. It is interesting to note that, until he entered the White House, Roosevelt considered himself something of a failure in life. As scientist and scholar, he was strictly a gifted amateur; his Dakota ranch had not prospered; his public career was a series of fits and starts, largely dependent on patronage and luck. Only as a citizen-soldier, in his charge up San Juan Hill, did he consider himself an unqualified success. The presidency, which fell into his lap with the assassination of William McKinley, suddenly afforded him a suitable outlet for his manifold interests, obsessions, and concerns. The White House, as it were, was a therapeutic accident.

This blended nicely with the dawn of the modern age of publicity. Roosevelt was a character; he had a large, handsome family, he provoked and excited, and he happily intruded in places where presidents never before thought to go. Indeed, his various contradictions were part of his appeal. Something of a dandy-aristocrat at heart, he fashioned himself a tribune of the people, reveling in exploits of gunfire and sweat. Like many inheritors of old money, he harbored a contempt for the rising business class, preferring to idealize the sturdy rustic yeoman. He preached the achievement of great objects in life, but wasted much energy in petty press debates on simplified spelling and sentimental naturalists. He was publicly indifferent to critics and opponents, but privately raged and indulged in trivial feuds.

Why, a century later, are we interested in reading about Theodore Roosevelt? And why would a Democratic president cherish an icon of this partisan Republican?

The answer to the first question is simple. In the annals of the presidency, TR is easily its most vivid and distinctive incumbent—even if his two terms were rela-

tively placid. As a personality and executive, there had been no president like him before he took office, and there has been none since. Reading about Roosevelt is instructive and entertaining. Moreover, there is probably a Roosevelt for everyone: at once a soldier, conservationist, enemy of Wall Street, truculent statesman, cowboy, historian, asthmatic, New York Brahmin, naval enthusiast, political progressive, Victorian, great white hunter, grieving widower, and devoted father.

The second question is more complicated. As with any historic figure, it is difficult to translate Roosevelt's actions and convictions into modern times. The presidency he invented was suited to a certain epoch in our history, now long past. He could not have known how posterity would look, and we cannot imagine how he might have adapted himself to changing times. Roosevelt was a dynamic figure, whose actions were broadly influential in the growth of American government. That influence, however, has verifiable

limits. The modern Republican Party is no more the party of Lincoln than the Democratic Party is the party of Jefferson, and the circumstances in which these politicians thrived are unimaginably different from our own. This is equally true of Theodore Roosevelt. The progressive who taunted "the malefactors of great wealth" could not have conceived of the Great Society. The naturalist who set aside great tracts of the West would be mystified by Superfund.

We see in Theodore Roosevelt what we wish to see. The modern conservative will admire his projection of U.S. power; the contemporary liberal shares his attitude toward capitalists; the interested reader will savor his life story. In this impressive work, Professor Brands has allowed us to see Roosevelt as he was, and perhaps more important, as he saw himself. The times are bound to alter our retrospective view, but the careful historian has performed his basic task, with elegance, insight, sympathy, and style. ❧

Koresh, who led his followers in Waco to fiery deaths at the end of another FBI-BATF siege, was a grotesque caricature of a religious authoritarian. But that is only the foreground. Not even the most liberal Democrats in the 1960's wanted to be seen embracing the violent rhetoric of the Black Panther Party. Nor are followers of the Aryan Nations—or bizarre religious sects like Koresh's Branch Davidians—exactly the sort of people with whom contemporary Republicans want to be associated.

On both sides, there was a readiness to embrace particular sensational charges because they resonated with a wider sense of victimization. Liberals in the 1960's and early 70's were receptive to the claims about FBI abuse because such claims echoed wider notions of a government abusively targeting racial minorities and "obsessed with subversives." And such wider complaints rang true for many liberals because politicians on the right were still trying to win elections by appealing to racial resentments or anti-Communist alarms.

In 1995, the House of Representatives, as one of the first priorities of its new Republican majority, launched recriminatory hearings on what had happened at Ruby Ridge and Waco. The National Rifle Association, which had long been critical of BATF abuses, urged such oversight and provided a good deal of staff support in organizing the hearings. But despite the demonstration of NRA political support in the Republican electoral sweep of the previous fall, the spring of 1995 proved a most awkward moment to air the accumulated grievances and concerns of gun-owners. No sooner were the hearings under way when the horrifying bombing in Oklahoma City prompted a wave of excited media reports on private "militias," gun-nuts, and right-wing extremists. All these fringe phenomena were readily associated with rage against the federal government and the demented act of Tim McVeigh was assumed to be motivated by such rage, given its target and timing—a federal office building, blown up on the second anniversary of the Waco fire. President Clinton moved quickly to denounce fevered anti-government rhetoric. It was, almost as much as the ill-fated confrontation over the budget that year, a turning point for Clinton, allowing him to reposition himself as the nation's

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In the late 1960's, the left-wing of the Democratic Party gave at least a sympathetic hearing to charges that the FBI, having previously framed Alger Hiss

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and the Rosenbergs and other alleged Communists, was now conspiring to disrupt the anti-war movement, to kill innocent black men in a vicious conspiracy to destroy the Black Panther movement, and generally to perpetrate the abuses of a secret police. Not a few people noticed the irony in the mid-1990's, when conservative Republicans began to heed claims that the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had indulged in murderous rampages at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and at Waco, Texas. And this time, liberals rallied to the defense of law and order and demanded trust and respect for law enforcement officials.

Of course, the Feds have been goring different oxen in the past decade. Where the Black Panthers professed to admire Castro and Che Guevara, Randy Weaver—whose wife and son were killed in the joint FBI-BATF operation at Ruby Ridge—had been associated with the Aryan Nations. David