

A PRESIDENT WITH 'BIG STICK' IMPACT

My entry in the Tezo Systems Essay Contest for Presidents Month, February 2010

With the construction of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial conceived in 1923 and completed in 1941, America chose to honor four of our nation's greatest presidents. Three of the selections were no-brainers: George Washington, beloved as the father of our country and emblem of patriotism; Thomas Jefferson, revered as author of the document which gave philosophical birth to our nation and the most intelligent man ever to occupy the Oval Office; and Abraham Lincoln who gave his life to preserve the Union of States and, with his tragic death, now "belongs to the ages." The fourth and final president to make the cut is perhaps less iconic than the three images carved next to his, immortalized in the granite of the Black Hills of South Dakota and visited by two million citizen-tourists yearly. Yet his landmark accomplishments, courageous integrity and enduring legacy both as the leader of our nation and a man who vigorously embraced high principles and unshakeable conviction in fairness for the common man make him the president I feel has had the most positive and pervasive impact on the course and development of America through the twentieth century, as well as on our national status and on the quality of daily life Americans enjoy today.

"...for the first time a moral purpose came into the street," wrote a muckraking journalist about young, do-gooding local official Theodore Roosevelt circa 1895 when much of New York City was a teeming cesspool of human misdeeds and misery crying-out for a savior to tend its ills, tame rampant corruption and establish order and fair play. He was speaking of the man's uncompromising concern for the common citizen and his refusal to knuckle-under to the pressures of party politics that coerced astray the best intentions of other idealists. Theodore Roosevelt was different. Elected Vice President under William McKinley and assuming the presidency upon McKinley's assassination in 1901, Roosevelt was, at 42, the youngest president ever to hold office. But if anyone thought he'd be a timid pushover ill-suited to the demands of national leadership, they vastly underestimated the man. "T.R.," as his friends called him, embodied high standards of personal integrity and public service in the years before, during and after his presidency, and made his mark resoundingly in any endeavor he chose in life. Born a sickly asthmatic, Roosevelt bucked his doctor's advice and chose a life of vigor to boost his personal stamina and vitality. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard where he took part on the boxing team. By age 24 he was a published author – not of a dime store novel, but a scholarly dissertation on the American/British Naval War of War of 1812, which remained the definitive word on the subject for more than a century. He was elected to the New York State Assembly in 1881 and fought crime and corruption as New York City Police Commissioner in the mid-1890s with a populist approach of professional standards and fairness for all. He even walked the beat of the local cops on the street just to make sure they were doing their jobs. He then won the governorship of New York State in 1898. And still, in his spare time during these pre-presidential years, he ran a cattle ranch and was a deputy sheriff/cowboy in the North Dakota "Badlands," hunting-down cattle rustlers and bringing them to justice. Not to mention serving as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in Washington, D.C, a cavalry army colonel in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, and marrying (twice; his first wife died) and raising five children. Where did he find the time?!!!

As president with a "bully pulpit" on the national stage, Roosevelt continued as proverbial bull-in-a-china-shop and conscience of the nation, championing the average American and breaking the stranglehold of power held by greedy corporations over various aspects of national life in their soul-less pursuit of profit at the expense of the health, safety and welfare of workers and citizens. He instituted the Meat Inspection Act and Pure Food and Drug Act which set standards for processing and proper labeling of food products, as well as banning harmful chemical ingredients, and were forerunners to the commonplace package labeling which consumers take for granted today. He gave the coterie of national news reporters their own work room in The White House and began the tradition of daily press briefings that continues to this day. He also was the first to pass laws against school segregation even before the Civil Rights era sixty years later. Under this banner of Progressivism, for which Roosevelt was forerunner, he coined the term "Square Deal" and sided with union workers in their struggles against corporate management, instituting the nation's first standards for labor hours, pay and workplace safety in an effort to improve conditions for the little man. In foreign affairs, Roosevelt established the U.S. as a global military player by sending a naval armada called "The Great White Fleet" on a world tour to put Europe and Asia on notice that America, long thought of as a second-rate power, was a force to be reckoned with. He brokered the end of the Russo-Japanese War which earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906. As a man and as the nation's Chief Executive, Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt, who hailed from a background of wealth and privilege, was all about fairness, principles and service to the common man...about 'speaking softly and carrying a big stick' which represented the political, moral and even physical muscle to defend and enforce his pursuit

of these ideals. He promoted the nation's movement to protect nature, created the national parks system and set aside more land for preservation (if you don't count Alaska) than any president before or since, and is credited with arranging for the building of the Panama Canal to foster commercial interests and make America a two-ocean naval power. And still, the man was noted for avidly reading several books cover-to-cover (in all, tens of thousands) each day! Where did he find the time?!!!

With massive and unprecedented popularity, Roosevelt could have easily won a third term in office, but chose to follow George Washington's precedent and exit the stage after two in 1908. In his retirement, he went on safari in East Africa, collecting specimens for The Smithsonian and the American Heritage Museum. The fact that he shot and killed animals may perhaps belie his reputation as a conservationist in modern minds; but Roosevelt was an avid outdoorsman who loved and valued nature. He came out of retirement in 1911 when he saw his Republican Party abandoning the progressive reforms he instituted to bolster the situation of the average American, combat corruption and ward-off feelings of powerlessness against powerful corporate interests that might erode people's faith in the democratic form of government. Railing against his successor William Howard Taft and the political machinery that he felt had betrayed him and betrayed America, Roosevelt – through the vigor of his own charisma and indefatigability – erected a viable third party (the Bull Moose Party) to contest the 1912 election against both Republicans and Democrats. A master of political invective during his stump speeches, Roosevelt lambasted Taft and his cronies in commerce and government as *“an unholy alliance between corrupt business and corrupt politics.”* On the campaign trail, he took an assassin's bullet in the chest (it was slowed as it passed through his eyeglass case and speech text) and still went on to finish his 90-minute address, telling his audience, *“Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know whether you fully understand that I have just been shot; but it takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose!”* He survived the bullet but lost the election, splitting the Republican vote and outpolling the betrayer Taft (which was gratifying), but losing to Woodrow Wilson and the Democrats.

In quieter moments over the course of his life, Roosevelt the family man spent time at his Sagamore Hill estate in Oyster Bay on the north shore of Long Island, New York, referred to as the Summer White House during his presidency. The estate is 30 miles from where I was born and grew-up, and the three-story home and grounds of Sagamore Hill is a national museum and preserve now, which I have visited on several occasions, each time feeling more personally impacted, inspired and impressed by the vigor and greatness of a man who led his life with a determination to make the most of his gifts in the service of his country and in always endeavoring to do what was good, just and right. He was a strong proponent of the Boy Scouts, seeking to instill in the nation's youth high moral standards and the confidence and purpose they bring. For his remarkable character, Roosevelt gave credit elsewhere: *“I was fortunate enough,”* he wrote, *“in having a father whom I have always been able to regard as an ideal man. He really did combine the strength and courage and will and energy of the strongest man with the tenderness and...purity of a woman. He made me feel that I must force myself to hold my own with the other boys and prepare to do the rough work of the world. He gave me the feeling that I was to be both decent and manly, and that if I were manly, nobody would laugh at my being decent.”* Roosevelt raised his own five children with these same principles, handing down to them what his father passed on to him: a sense of honor as a personal tradition for conducting the course of one's life. Roosevelt steered his course with both the conscience of faith and sincerity of unshakeable conviction that led to unmatched achievement over the course of his life – a brief sixty years. How amazing that a man could pack such breadth of activity, impact and accomplishment into so short a span! Oh, and did I mention T.R. authored 18 books (some with multiple editions and volumes) over the course of his short life? You needn't ask where Roosevelt found time for all of this. He made time. Through the force of will and principle, he made every day and every gift count.