

Title: **Theodore Roosevelt's America** Mick Chantler, instructor

Course Description: Teddy Roosevelt was one of perhaps five or six truly transformative presidents in American history. A cultivated, scholarly aristocrat, Roosevelt entered politics during the nation's "gilded age," much to the dismay of his peers who regarded government as a tawdry affair dominated by saloon-keepers and greedy commercial types. In the course of his thirty years in public service, he resolved to restore the "heroic, manly virtues" and a sense of sublime destiny to American life. This course will examine the career of this remarkable—if often abrasive and authoritarian—American statesman.

Weeks One & Two: The Character of 'Theodore Rex'

Writer Henry Adams applied this moniker to our 26th president, and both Roosevelt critics and supporters found it remarkably apt. There was something almost inhuman about the man's manic energy and appetite for conquest. In this lecture we will drill down into the restless and constantly bubbling psyche of this young man on the march. Whether it was slaying animals by the score on his endless hunting trips, bullying Army Generals who displeased him, cleaning up the mean streets of New York, or cracking down on illegal monopolies, Teddy (he hated that nickname, but it stuck) was determined to impress his passionate will on all concerned.

Roosevelt's massive ego and animal vitality impressed many and infuriated others, but bored no one. Henry Adams observed "Theodore is never sober, only he is drunk with himself and not with rum." Given to uninhibited monologues on any subject, he could wear down the most patient listener. Yet, in most cases, he knew of what he spoke, and grounded his arguments soundly in facts. A voracious reader (Teddy *never* went anywhere without a book) with a prodigious memory, he could declaim with equal ease on ancient history or the anatomy of pigeons. Some have detected more than a whiff of narcissism in his makeup, and even worse. Historian Richard Hofstadter saw him as an authoritarian militarist with a dangerous propensity for physical violence. Yet this lover of war who idolized boxers and football players would win a Nobel Peace Prize for settling the Russo-Japanese War. He was undoubtedly racist in his attitudes toward Blacks

and Native Americans, yet he invited Booker T. Washington to the White House for dinner (and paid a heavy political price for this controversial outreach.) Clearly, we are dealing with a complex man who must not be judged too quickly. Our goal today will be to make sense of this kaleidoscopic personality.

Weeks Three and Four: Roosevelt and “The Gilded Age”

TR came into this world 1858; hence he grew up during that period of American history which Mark Twain dubbed “The Gilded Age.” This era, stretching from about 1870 to 1900, was a time of rapid change: economically, politically, and culturally. By the turn of the twentieth century, America looked radically different from the still rather raw and primitive adolescent society into which Roosevelt was born. Swelled by a massive wave of immigration, the nation’s population soared dramatically. While we were still predominately an agricultural society, industrialization transformed the urban landscapes. Fantastically wealthy “Robber Barons” took control not only of the nation’s economic infrastructure, but of its governmental functions as well. Corruption in high places was the norm, not the exception. Powerful “bosses” ran urban politics; both parties seemed more interested in looting the public coffers than in providing services for their constituents.

A maturing Theodore Roosevelt viewed these developments with a mixture of satisfaction and alarm. As a member of the New York aristocracy, he thoroughly enjoyed the fruits of being a member of the privileged class. His station in life enabled him to acquire a first rate education at Harvard followed by rapid entry into the inner sanctum of The Empire State’s Republican Party. He seemed, as one reporter put it, a “man of destiny.” But he grew increasingly disturbed at the demoralizing effect of Big Business’s domination of politics, and as a young NYPD Commissioner he threw in his lot with the reformers who wanted to clean up the scandalous relationship between entrenched wealth and government. In this talk, we will explore the gradual awakening of Teddy Roosevelt’s sense of public duty.

Week Five & Six: The White House Years

Roosevelt became President more or less accidentally. Urged by the New York Republican establishment to run as McKinley's Vice-President, Teddy rose to power simply by being in the right place at the right time. After just a few months squirming restlessly in the Vice-President's chair (a do-nothing position he loathed) President McKinley was assassinated, and TR became our 26th President. Teddy began his administration cautiously, not wanting to upset Wall Street with any grand plans for reform. But privately, he was plotting a strategy designed to fundamentally change the course of American history. By 1902 he was ready to announce that "there was a new sheriff in town," one determined to assault the hallowed maxims of Laissez Faire, minimalist government. That year he stunned the business community—which for decades had enjoyed a cozy relationship with both state and federal governments, allowing it to do much as it pleased—by launching a suit against the giant railroad trust, Northern Securities. He also shocked conservative plutocrats everywhere by seeming to side with labor against management in that year's potentially disastrous anthracite coal strike. Such a blasphemous departure from traditional norms shocked the likes of J.P. Morgan, Mark Hanna, and John D. Rockefeller, who fumed that there was now a "socialist demagogue" in the White House. Teddy would go on in the same vein for the next six years, winning him (a somewhat exaggerated) reputation as a "trust-buster." But while the financial community fumed, the common people of America loved it. Teddy was undoubtedly our most beloved president since Andrew Jackson. Had he not abjured a third term (a statement he made after his landslide victory of 1904, and one that he would come to bitterly regret) he could easily have been re-elected to a third term in 1908, and possibly a fourth again in 1912. (Americans seem to love Roosevelts, don't they?)

Today we will discuss the highlights—and some of the dismal failings— of Teddy's seven years as POTUS.

Week Seven: "Colonel Roosevelt" and The Bull Moose Campaign

Safe to say, Teddy did not handle retirement gracefully. How could he, given his superhuman energy, his determination to rebuild the very infrastructure of American government, and the never-ending demands of his own outsized ego?

All of “the Colonel’s” biographers, as he liked to be called, agree that his last seven years (he would die at the relatively young age of 60, in 1919) were marked by pettiness, paranoia, and megalomania. Rather like a star athlete who didn’t know when to call it quits, an aging and not very healthy Teddy could never relinquish center stage. He turned cruelly on many of his old friends, and lashed out savagely at his political opponents, Woodrow Wilson in particular. He never recovered from his rejection by the GOP establishment at the 1912 nominating convention, (the process was “rigged against me” he churlishly complained in somewhat Trump-like fashion) and bolted from the party. He ran that year on the newly formed Progressive “Bull Moose” Party, a quixotic gesture that was doomed to failure. Third party rebellions don’t do well in presidential politics, as Teddy well knew. But he couldn’t contain his gall, and made a futile run anyway.

Week Eight: Roosevelt and The Great War (1914-1918)

Even more embarrassing for Teddy’s admirers was his petulant and almost unhinged reaction to the outbreak of war in Europe in August 1914. TR demanded that America enter the war on the allied side, and when Wilson demurred for some two and a half years, he attacked the president mercilessly, often using unseemly and undignified language. When we finally did get into the war in April 1917, Teddy shrieked “it’s about time!” and insisted that he be given command of a division of volunteers to go into the trenches at once. Indicating that his now monstrous ego was running out of control, he also called for the authority to choose his own staff and select officers as he saw fit (which doubtless would have included his four sons.) For Teddy, this was going to be his last hurrah, redolent of the Rough Rider Spirit of ’98. Needless to say, President Wilson and the regular military hierarchy nixed Teddy’s grandiose vision of either winning the war single-handedly, or going down in a blaze of glory.

TR’s last year was terribly painful, and rather pathetic. He sent his boys to France to win the acclaim that was denied him, and felt terribly guilty when one son was killed in action, and two others grievously wounded. His health declined precipitously, and Teddy died early in 1919. Historians agree that the cause of death was a broken heart.