

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, "THE STRENUOUS LIFE"
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Abstract: Theodore Roosevelt's "The Strenuous Life" used the nation's frontier past to contextualize the forces that he believed threatened to overwhelm America. He responded to his concerns about materialism, "race suicide," and foreign aggression by invoking romanticized accounts of the pioneers' strength and virtuous personal character. He wanted Americans to relive their mythic history in the modern era to fulfill the nation's destiny. Presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to George W. Bush would echo T.R.'s frontier legacy.

Key Words: Theodore Roosevelt, Frontier Myth, war, materialism, "strenuous life," immigration.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt was preoccupied with an earlier era. He embraced America's story of origin--hardy frontiersmen struggling against impossible odds in an uncharted wilderness during the eighteenth century. Such men had founded a civilized society unlike any other. He routinely talked about and demonstrated a rough-and-tumble individualism and a strong sense of honor, traits that he believed defined the nation's past. As Richard Slotkin noted, "Roosevelt symbolizes history itself as a series of great 'hunts' in which a succession of representative hunter-heroes and political leaders carry the nation from colony to world power."¹ But Roosevelt worried that modern America was losing its anchor to the past.

Roosevelt gave voice to his concerns during "The Strenuous Life" speech, given on 10 April 1899 to a group of wealthy men at a Chicago banquet.² During the speech, he invoked the nation's frontier past to goad citizens into accepting their responsibilities at home and their destiny abroad. For example, he described the Civil War as a modern example of the frontier experience, lauding the men who willingly met that "strenuous" challenge and chastising those who rejected it for a life of material comfort. Roosevelt even charged American women to uphold the "strenuous life" by birthing many children, thus ensuring a native-born numerical superiority over foreigners arriving in ever-increasing numbers. Finally, he framed the need to stop the anarchy caused by Filipino rebels following the Spanish-Cuban-American War, reflecting an extension of early frontiersmen's struggles against "uncivilized" Native Americans. Roosevelt's public recollection of the mythic truths about America's past set the "strenuous life" as a legacy that would guide future presidential discourse.

The Advent of Modern America

Americans faced a number of unsettling transitions in the latter part of the nineteenth century. New economic, social, and international impulses had challenged traditional views of national life, calling into question how products would be made, who would make them, and where those products would be sold. With the U. S. Census Bureau declaring the "closing" of the frontier in 1891, many entrepreneurs and laborers had begun to seek their fortunes in the city instead of living off the land.³ Advances in technology had transformed the manufacturing process from an individual endeavor into a collective enterprise of mass production. High-speed machines produced millions of units, far outpacing the efforts of even the most productive individual. As a result, economic growth skyrocketed; by the turn of the twentieth century, America had become a leading industrialized nation.⁴

The need to manage these vast increases in production, distribution, and capital spawned a new form of business organization--the corporation. This legalized entity, with its mysterious bureaucratic practices, contrasted starkly with the family-owned, neighborhood businesses that had defined American economic life for the previous century. In fact, the structure of the corporations removed owners from day-to-day contact with workers and the public, making them seem not only distant but also uncaring. During the frequent economic depressions in the latter part of the nineteenth century, corporations routinely ensured their own success by threatening workers with unemployment or by paying lower wages.⁵ The earliest corporate entities, the railroad trusts, epitomized this new way of doing business. They demonstrated a ruthless drive to form monopolies, conspired to set rates, depressed wages, and bribed government officials. Corporate railroad titans demonstrated little concern for their own employees by routinely disregarding safety considerations. Railroad brakemen, for example, often suffered life-threatening yet preventable injuries.⁶ According to Alan Trachtenberg, railroad corporations gave the country "its first taste of robber barons on a grand scale."⁷

Although the industrial boom widened the gulf between workers and owners, all Americans appeared to relish the increased prosperity that came with industrialization. Mass production created hundreds of products at cheaper prices. New technologies brought revolutionary inventions, such as the telephone and the phonograph. Americans traveled faster than ever before by train.⁸ Because of industrialization, workers' hours decreased, leaving them with leisure time that they used to frequent saloons, movies, and arcades.⁹

Yet there was a cost to all these technological and economic changes. Medical experts warned that industrialized life caused increasing numbers of people to suffer from a psychological condition evidenced by headaches, malaise, insomnia, and sexual dysfunction.¹⁰ These maladies had always existed, but now they were associated with the economic and social "progress" of the era, which proved all the more disturbing. According to Jackson Lears, this condition of "nervous illness" stemmed from the

"unprecedented speed with which railway and telegraph allowed people to transact business, the barrage of information from magazines and newspapers, [and] the monotony of routinized, subdivided labor." Doctors prescribed relaxation, exhorting sufferers to isolate themselves from the "moral and intellectual strenuousness" of their lives.¹¹ These medical pronouncements also fed cultural fears of a decline in masculinity among American men.

During the late nineteenth century, more and more American men worried that they had become too civilized.¹² The romanticized notion of masculinity, originating in the nation's agrarian past, had identified men as "conquerors" of nature. This idea, though, had given way to the modern notion that masculinity was defined by restraint and gentility. Since young men now needed to demonstrate their worth by amassing capital for their business ventures, they needed to appear refined in character--they had to act more "civilized"--in order to gain the approval of those who controlled this new economic environment. Yet as they became more "civilized," many felt less "manly," less in control of the environment around them. According to Gail Bederman, a "recurring round of severe economic depressions" between 1873 and 1896 "drove home the reality that even a successful . . . small businessman might lose everything, unexpectedly, through no fault of his own."¹³ Once conquerors of the wilderness, these new economic men seemed vulnerable to being overwhelmed by industrialized forces beyond their control.

Not only did middle-class men find their sense of masculinity threatened by economic changes, but also by a new working class that included large numbers of immigrants. Immigrants arrived on American shores in ever-increasing numbers in the latter half of the nineteenth century, drawn by the promise of good-paying jobs in the new industrialized factories. Although some native-born Americans called for restrictions against foreigners, whom they considered an unhealthy influence on American culture, immigrants satiated the nation's "voracious appetite for unskilled labor."¹⁴ Before long, however, immigrants would be blamed for the crippling and violent strikes staged by an increasingly assertive labor movement, and many immigrants even ran for political office, propagating what some native-born Americans viewed as foreign ideologies. The increasing economic and political power of nonwhite immigrant men further called into question the status and even the masculinity of the white men who had controlled the country for more than a century.¹⁵

Tensions at home mirrored the anxieties Americans felt about foreigners abroad. Business entrepreneurs voiced the need for markets overseas, claiming that the industrial boom had created more goods than could be sold in the United States. Yet Germany, Spain, and other European powers had been acting on their imperialistic designs to control economic resources in undeveloped parts of the world for centuries. America had been content to stay largely removed from world affairs, despite its brief participation in the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1898. Attempting to shake off its isolationist tendency, some speakers declared that America needed to help enlighten the backward people in other countries, teaching them how to be cultured by acquainting them with economic civility. Couching the need to help "backward people"

by bringing them civilization and "material splendor" made the very ideas that had been endangering middle-class notions of masculinity all the more influential.¹⁶

American citizens had seemingly ignored their beliefs in the necessity of a physically vigorous and principled life. Many corporations generated huge profits through underhanded means. "Nervous illness" caused a malaise in the middle and upper classes. Alien and "unhealthy" immigrants had begun to take over the national body. And "overcivilized" men had cast their unseemly money-making mission overseas as a moral imperative. Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, concerns about the weakening of the national character opened a rhetorical space for those who advocated a return to traditional, "manly" virtues. That space would be occupied for many years by Theodore Roosevelt.

The Rise of Roosevelt

Asthmatic since his birth on 27 October 1858, Theodore Roosevelt was a sickly boy. At age 14 he had a life-altering experience. As he recalled in his autobiography, two "mischievous" but "good-hearted boys" about his same age had made him the target of their roughhousing. What vexed Roosevelt was that each boy handled him with "easy contempt" and prevented him from "doing any damage whatever in return." After this humiliating treatment, he resolved that he would never "again be put in such a helpless position."¹⁷ To that end, he remade his young body, training to become proficient in boxing, horseback riding, wrestling, and any activity in which he could demonstrate his physical prowess.¹⁸

Roosevelt was also raised to believe that a strong moral character was as important as physical hardiness. As a child growing up in New York City, he was taught the importance of personal virtue as he watched his father engage in an "immense amount of practical charitable work."¹⁹ Roosevelt admired his father as a moral exemplar who inspired others, and he looked for ways in which he could do the same.²⁰ For instance, after graduating from Harvard in 1880, Roosevelt immediately began the study of law, but was troubled by the law's tendency to "be against justice." Roosevelt was offended particularly by corporate lawyers whose standards were not compatible "with the idealism I suppose every high-minded young man is apt to feel."²¹

Disenchanted with studying the law, Roosevelt sought other avenues in which to demonstrate his moral and manly idealism. Joining the Republican Party in 1880, he served a three-year term as a New York State Assemblyman from 1881-1884, earning a reputation as a crusader who sought reforms in child labor laws and worker safety, and drawing headlines each time he chastised corrupt corporate practices. Roosevelt's rising political career, however, would be cut short by the death of his first wife and his mother within hours of one another in 1884. He responded to this tragedy by exiling himself to the Dakota Territory, where he had previously started a cattle ranch. According to biographer William Harbaugh, Roosevelt attempted to "lose himself in the challenge--of the roundup, of exploration, of man-killing animal, and of near total isolation." This two-year exile marked one of the "great formative experiences" in Roosevelt's life.²²

Reinvigorated by his self-imposed exile, Roosevelt remarried in 1886, returned to New York, and placed his mark on a number of literary, political, and military endeavors. Over the next three years, he published several works, most notably his adventures on the Dakota frontier, *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail*. Roosevelt worked from 1889-1895 as a Civil Service Commissioner who fought to ensure equality in the civil service hiring process. He rejected the system that allowed politicians the freedom to appoint their unqualified friends to government positions. In 1895, he became the President of the New York City Board of Police, prowling the city at night and looking to stamp out corruption in both police activities and criminal enterprises. Appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1897, Roosevelt spent a little more than a year in that position, lobbying to increase spending in preparation for war, particularly given the escalating tensions between Spain and Cuba. His most controversial act as Assistant Secretary occurred when he, without the approval of his superiors, ordered the fleet to seize Manila after the battleship *Maine* had blown up near Cuba in February 1898. With suspicions of Spanish treachery for the Maine incident driving America into war, Roosevelt resigned and accepted command of the First Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. He and his "rough riders" charged into history during the famous battle of San Juan Hill. Roosevelt's success in the Spanish-Cuban-American War gave him the support he needed to win the governorship of New York in 1898. During his two-year term, he continued his crusade to enact reforms in the workplace and in public housing.²³

Throughout his career, Roosevelt communicated his belief in the necessity of moral spirit and martial vigor. As one biographer noted, Roosevelt had "learned how to move crowds," realizing that speeches about virility and integrity "worked better on the stump" than speeches about "tariff policy."²⁴ Roosevelt had chronicled many of his exploits out west as a rancher and abroad as a soldier. Along with his speeches, he wrote various narrative histories about the heroic men that he believed epitomized manly strength and steely resolve. His popular works, such as *The Winning of the West* and *Hero Tales from American History*, along with his numerous magazine and newspaper articles centering on themes of strength and honor, cemented his image as a modern frontiersman. Moreover, as a war hero, he had many opportunities to address an adoring public. He frequently used such occasions to promote the themes of the "strenuous life" as fundamental to American progress. His most notable opportunity came on 10 April 1899, when he addressed the prestigious Hamilton Club in Chicago.

Roosevelt's Mythic Framing of National Character

Roosevelt possessed a "supreme belief" in character,²⁵ comprised of both physical strength and personal integrity. As he contemplated America's problems on the eve of the twentieth century, he considered the same qualities crucial to the success of the nation, declaring: "As it is with the individual, so it is with the nation."⁽⁴⁾²⁶ In "The Strenuous Life," he called upon the members of the Hamilton Club to shoulder their responsibility as role models, something he believed that many corporate titans and other men had abandoned in their drive for material success. According to Roosevelt, either the "men of the greatest city of the West" would embrace the

"doctrine of the strenuous life," demonstrating a manly character and embracing hard work and "bitter toil," or they would worship the "doctrine of ignoble ease" (1), shrink from such challenges, and prove themselves unfit for the "serious work in the world" (3). To promote the correct character both at home and abroad, he inspired his audience with examples from its storied past.

According to Slotkin, Roosevelt "looked to history for a usable past," one that could "offer clues" about appropriate behavior in the modern world.²⁷ Roosevelt frequently framed the nation's past within the myth of the frontier, a compelling narrative that historically has defined America's character and obligations in a wide variety of contexts.²⁸ This narrative romanticized the history of European settlers who demonstrated a martial and moral spirit on the North American continent. These mythic settlers fought "savage wars" against both indigenous peoples and harsh environments to "conquer" the wilderness and establish America's democratic ideology in the new world.²⁹ Roosevelt lauded the personal traits forged by the frontier experience, offered the frontiersmen as timeless role models, and called for modern citizens to exhibit similar qualities in fulfillment of America's destiny as a preeminent world power. His political rhetoric invoked elements of this mythic story as an antidote to modern impulses, for he believed that the lessons of the frontier had been lost amid the greed and scrambling commercialism of the late nineteenth-century industrialized culture.

Roosevelt declared that modern citizens had placed too great an emphasis on materialism and a "life of ignoble ease," forgetting how hard their ancestors had struggled to found a nation (2). As a result, too many people sought a "period of freedom" from struggle and conflict, becoming content to wallow in "mere enjoyment" (3). Roosevelt strategically invoked America's mythic origins to promote an alternative approach to life: one that embraced the strength and fortitude that had helped create the nation's "glorious history" (4). He reminded his audience of the "strenuous life" of their ancestors on the frontier, noting how they understood that it was "better . . . to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much" (4). Roosevelt's own reputation as a frontiersman lent credibility to his romanticized memories of how the pioneers fought against impossible odds to tame a savage wilderness.

To further illustrate the virtues of the "strenuous life," Roosevelt also invoked a more recent event in America's "usable past": the Civil War. In recalling this "savage war" that pitted brother against brother, Roosevelt taught the same lesson that he drew from the frontier experience: the need for sacrifice, the martial spirit, and moral commitment in both the individual and the nation. "Thank God for the iron in the blood of our fathers," Roosevelt declared, for the men who "bore sword or rifle in the armies of Grant!" Manly vigor on the part of those "who upheld the wisdom of Lincoln" saved the union. Had the nation instead listened to those who--because of their love of money and ease--shrank from "strife" and preached peace at any cost during the Civil War, the nation might have saved "hundreds of millions of dollars" in "blood and

treasure" (4). Yet in doing so, it would have signaled to the whole world that America was a nation of "weaklings . . . unfit to stand among the great nations of the earth" (4).

Roosevelt's definition of national character raised questions about the nature of "real" Americans. Unlike their fair-haired and blue-eyed "old" counterparts from northern Europe, he observed, the "new" immigrants from the southern regions of Europe seemed to resist assimilating into American culture. Roosevelt, along with other politicians, nativists, and even some scientists worried that these "new" immigrants would cling to their foreign ways of thinking, bringing with them crime, anarchy, disease, and a host of Old World ideologies and problems.³⁰ Roosevelt indirectly may have reaffirmed these nativist fears by insisting that a "healthy state can exist only when the men and women who make it up lead clean, vigorous, healthy lives."³¹ The potential threat of immigrants was compounded, according to Roosevelt and many nativists, because the birth rates of these foreign peoples outpaced that of whites, posing a long-term threat to the very survival of the white race.³²

Despite these concerns, Roosevelt endorsed a "melting pot" nation, where people of various races and ethnicities would assimilate and blend together into a unique American culture.³³ Of course, there was a limit to his support for the "melting pot." According to Thomas Dyer, Roosevelt favored liberal immigration as long as the "breeding powers of the old-stock Americans remained strong enough to enable them to absorb the great masses of new people."³⁴ In addition, he did not consider certain ethnic groups--Asians and African-Americans, most notably--sufficiently advanced or "civilized" to participate in democratic self-governance. In short, Roosevelt embraced immigration as long as "real" Americans continued to set the standard for national culture. For him, that meant citizens of white, Anglo origin not only had to outnumber immigrants but also define the standards of politics and culture.

In "The Strenuous Life," Roosevelt put a special burden on white, Anglo women to perform their "womanly" duties and sustain the population. For women, living the "strenuous life" meant embracing their natural roles as mothers and bearing many healthy children. In his four-volume history of the American frontier, *The Winning of the West*, Roosevelt had praised frontier women for fearlessly bearing many children despite the challenges of the wilderness.³⁵ Roosevelt returned to that theme in "The Strenuous Life," insisting that modern women should do no less. Quoting from one author's "melancholy" novel, Roosevelt observed that the "'fear of maternity'" and the "'haunting terror'" of motherhood had led to a decline in the birthrate in America.³⁶ Although many women had worked tirelessly to gain equal access and rights in the public sphere,³⁷ Roosevelt called upon them to show the same dedication to their traditional roles. He declared that the "woman must be the housewife" and "the wise and fearless mother of many healthy children." When men shirked the "strenuous life" by fearing to work or to wage "righteous war," and when women feared motherhood, each would "tremble on the brink of doom; and well it is that they should vanish from the earth, where they are fit subjects for the scorn of all men and women who are themselves strong and brave and high-minded."³⁸

By expanding the "strenuous life" to women, Roosevelt gave all Americans of his generation the responsibility of emulating their frontier ancestors. Moreover, by linking

men who "fear righteous war" to women who "fear motherhood," he elevated those women who bore many children to heroic status; they became the equivalent of male warriors defending their country.³⁹ The maternal impulse, no less than bravery in combat, was necessary to sustain the "strenuous life."

Roosevelt often contrasted his idealized view of America's past with present conditions to highlight the decline of virtue in the modern era. On the one hand, the nation's foundational story had justified waging a "savage war" to bring civilization to a backward land; it was a noble and honorable pursuit. On the other hand, the modern era emphasized material ease, with men fearing war and women fearing childbirth. This attitude threatened Americans reaching for new frontiers.

Although Roosevelt recognized that "No country can long endure if its foundations are not laid deep in the material prosperity which comes from thrift, from business energy and enterprise . . . in the fields of industrial activity," he was quick to warn his audience that no nation could be "truly great if it relied upon material prosperity alone" (6). For him, to worship profits was to "sit huddled within our borders and avow ourselves merely an assemblage of well-to-do hucksters" (7). Roosevelt acknowledged the contributions of the "great captains of industry who have built our factories and our railroads," but he also depicted those who pursued wealth as an end in itself as contemptuous of the "strenuous life" (6). To solve this crisis of spirit in America, he directed his audience to look beyond America's own borders. Just as the nation's ancestors demonstrated strength and determination by conquering the frontier, and just as the last generation renewed its character on the battlefields of the Civil War, Americans of the twentieth century would need to embrace new challenges abroad as a great world power.

Roosevelt pointed to the fate of China as a cautionary tale. Content to "rot by inches in ignoble ease," sunk in a "scrambling commercialism" and "heedless of the higher life, the life of aspiration, of toil and risk," China had lost the "manly and adventurous virtues" (5) and suffered a crushing defeat by Japan in the 1890s.⁴⁰ Training itself to "a career of unwarlike and isolated ease," it had gone "down before other nations" which had "not lost the manly and adventurous qualities" (5). As such, China had become an object lesson for the United States: "[W]e have our tasks, and woe to us if we fail to perform them (5)!" America had risen to the challenge in 1898 to face down Spain, yet even then there had been "large bodies" of men in both branches of government who had "opposed the declaration of war . . . who opposed the upbuilding of the army," and who opposed the "building of any new fighting-ships for the navy" (13). These "public men who . . . so lamentably failed in forethought" had risked the nation's honor, and they bore responsibility for "any shame" that might come to the United States from some future military "disaster" (13). By failing to prepare America for the "strenuous life," they risked reducing the nation to the "China of the western hemisphere" (15).

Now that America had defeated Spain and emerged as a world power, Roosevelt insisted that it could not "avoid the responsibilities that confront us in Hawaii, Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Philippines" (5). For Roosevelt, the war with Spain and the subsequent conflict in the Philippines had opened up America's next frontier, and the

United States was duty bound to continue to advance "civilization." America's frontier legacy had echoed in the "guns that thundered off Manila and Santiago," ending the "medieval tyranny" of the Spanish. Now, America was obligated to protect that legacy by safeguarding those island territories against "savage anarchy" and "utter chaos" (8).

In advocating an active role in the Philippines, Roosevelt reminded his audience of America's mythic struggle to defeat the American Indians. Citizens of the new nation then felt the responsibility to "civilize" their indigenous foes by providing for their material and educational needs.⁴¹ He declared that modern Americans had a similar duty to help the backward Filipinos who, because of their population of "half-caste and native Christians, warlike Moslems, and wild pagans," had distinguished themselves as "utterly unfit for self-government" (17). Roosevelt had no patience for those who "make a pretense of humanitarianism to hide and cover their timidity, and who cant about 'liberty' and the 'consent of the governed,' in order to excuse themselves for their unwillingness to play the part of men" and civilize the Filipinos (17). Taking that position to its extreme, he announced that such logic "would make it incumbent upon us to leave the Apaches of Arizona to work out their own salvation, and to decline to interfere in a single Indian reservation." Indeed, that sort of thinking would "condemn your forefathers and mine for ever having settled in these United States" (17).

Roosevelt obviously exaggerated to make his point and submerged the suffering of the American Indians at the hands of white men. Yet by invoking the nation's frontier legacy, he affirmed the lesson of "The Strenuous Life" in dramatic, mythical terms: Anglo Americans had a responsibility to challenge the unknown and to "civilize" backward peoples (e.g., American Indians and Filipinos). American soldiers may have been guilty of atrocities and other war crimes during their occupation of the Philippines,⁴² but for Roosevelt their presence symbolized the vigor and morality of the "strenuous life." To abandon U.S. obligations in the Philippines, Roosevelt asserted, would not just be bad foreign policy, but a betrayal of America's frontier legacy and its moral responsibilities as a "civilized" nation.

Roosevelt played a critical role in shaping America's domestic and international policies as it entered the twentieth century. Denouncing the lust for material wealth in the new industrial age, he called upon the nation to embrace its international obligations in an increasingly dangerous world. He reminded his audience of America's glorious past, and he tried to revive the nation's spirit of adventure and service. Hoping to create his own "usable past," he called for a renewed demonstration of America's moral and physical might, an exertion of the "strenuous life" that would ensure "true national greatness" (20). His attitude toward America's obligations in the world, for both good and ill, continues to echo into the twenty-first century.

The Legacy of "The Strenuous Life"

Theodore Roosevelt's speech resonated powerfully with his audiences and helped to position him for his next political conquest. Newspapers lauded the speech as a "splendid illustration of American fearlessness" and a rousing call for "battle and work and heroics."⁴³ According to biographer Kathleen Dalton, this speech "touched a nerve

and inspired a generation of young men . . . to serve their country and to grasp world leadership." Because of his war-time heroics, along with his proven ability as a public speaker, the Republican National Committee urged Roosevelt to accept the vice-presidential nomination and campaign alongside presidential incumbent William McKinley.⁴⁴ The McKinley-Roosevelt ticket won the 1900 election.

After an assassin killed President McKinley in 1901, Roosevelt ascended to the presidency, where he could "preach" his lessons about national strength and morality from the "bully pulpit."⁴⁵ Roosevelt's use of that office to exhort the public to transcend its greedy and fearful nature helped transform the office into the modern "rhetorical presidency," where the chief executive serves as a moral leader providing the citizenry with a compelling vision of the nation's destiny.⁴⁶

For President Roosevelt, that destiny would be found by the nation's active engagement overseas. As a result, he initiated a number of opportunities for America to demonstrate the "strenuous life." For example, Roosevelt reinterpreted the Monroe Doctrine--a decades-old request to the European powers to refrain from interfering in the Western hemisphere; most foreign powers had given it little notice. Roosevelt's famous "Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine declared that the United States had the right to intervene anywhere in the Americas to maintain order. He invoked the "Corollary" in 1902 to threaten Great Britain with war if it did not leave Venezuelan waters.⁴⁷ Less than a year later, Roosevelt wrested control of Panama from Colombia, considered by many Americans as an act of presidential belligerence. Roosevelt successfully diverted attention by promoting a patriotic story of American workers who conquered the disease-ridden isthmus to perform a heroic feat of excavation in creating the Panama Canal.⁴⁸ In the last years of his presidency, Roosevelt sent the nation's battleship fleet on an unprecedented world tour. Stories by national and international media reported the awe created by this technological concentration of power, endorsing Roosevelt's policy for maintaining a strong navy and establishing America as a major participant in world affairs.⁴⁹

Roosevelt's legacy continued to influence American politics long after his death in 1919. Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, used his first inaugural address in 1933 to chastise the "rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods" for their "own stubbornness and their own incompetence," which FDR blamed for the Great Depression. Echoing his cousin Theodore, FDR charged his audiences with displaying the character necessary to continue the nation's march to destiny, declaring: "Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort. The joy, the moral stimulation, of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits."⁵⁰ Similarly, Harry S Truman echoed Roosevelt's warning against isolationism as he urged Americans in 1947 to assist Greece in resisting communist encroachment in that region. Truman warned that if "we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world--and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation."⁵¹

Other American presidents have likewise justified their policies by echoing TR's appeals to the "strenuous life." During John F. Kennedy's "Inaugural Address," the young president assured the "people in the huts and villages" around the world that the

United States would help them "break the bonds of misery," and, reminiscent of the Roosevelt Corollary, warned "hostile powers" that it would "oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas." Kennedy specifically invoked a "New Frontier" when he spoke months later about American citizens volunteering for the Peace Corps. He likened them to mythic pioneer heroes who served "under conditions of physical hardship" and lived "under primitive conditions" to assist long-suffering peoples in Third World countries. Like Roosevelt, Kennedy invoked the frontier as a means for physical and moral regeneration, summoning citizens to put aside their selfish concerns and to join together in selfless acts of heroism.⁵²

Ronald Reagan also embodied the Rooseveltian legacy. Both men, seen as cowboy-presidents, promoted America's "strenuous" responsibilities at home and abroad. According to Sloktin, Reagan ushered in the widespread use of the term "frontier" to frame everything from the daunting methods needed to create a new American economy, to the revolutionary developments of the Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars") to protect the nation from Soviet space-based attacks.⁵³ In fact, Reagan's rhetoric about the Soviets cast them as a mythic, godless threat that America was destined to stop. He identified them as the "focus of evil in the modern world," and urged Americans to resist the temptation to "ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire." For Reagan, America's military might was important in the coming struggle, but it was the nation's "moral will and faith" that would ensure victory.⁵⁴

As we enter the twenty-first century, George W. Bush continues Roosevelt's legacy. Critics may mock Bush for his "far-fetched" historical comparisons between himself and Theodore Roosevelt, calling the "wilderness-drilling, Halliburton-coddling second Bush . . . no match for the wild-life-loving, trust-busting first Roosevelt."⁵⁵ Yet rhetorically, Bush does mimic Roosevelt in many ways by insisting upon our obligations as a great nation to promote democracy around the world. For instance, President Bush's rhetoric concerning the War in Iraq recalls the frontier legacy and the "strenuous life."⁵⁶ In his address to the nation on 10 January 2007, Bush echoed Roosevelt's rhetoric about the insurgents in the Philippines, as he described the "Radical Islamic extremists" who attempted to "topple moderate governments" and "create chaos in the region." As the leader of the free world, Bush suggested, America had a moral duty to assume the burdens of this "savage war" and lead this "new struggle that will set the course for a new century."⁵⁷

Roosevelt's rhetorical legacy is a powerful narrative that provides contemporary Americans a way of understanding their domestic and international responsibilities. On the one hand, the "strenuous life" imagines a glorious destiny and calls upon Americans to rise above their own selfish interests to sacrifice for some larger good. It asks all Americans to overcome their weaknesses and to aspire to their rightful place among the legendary and noble heroes of history. On the other hand, Roosevelt's "usable past" has a dark side, encouraging a sort of public forgetfulness about the costs of prejudice, imperialism, and war. For both good and ill, Roosevelt's legacy has helped shape American history, and we continue to heed his call to the "strenuous life" to this day.

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Notes

1 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 42.

2 The text of Roosevelt's speech appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* on 11 April 1899, the day after it was delivered. This unit examines this version of Roosevelt's speech.

3 The Census report is quoted in Ray A. Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1971), 114.

4 See John W. Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era 1890-1920* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 19-20; George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 4-5.

5 Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 39; Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16-17.

6 See Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 57-58; Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865-1905* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 60.

7 Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 58.

8 Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change*, 2.

9 See Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in An Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986).

10 Edwards, *New Spirits*, 56.

11 T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 51-52.

12 See Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

13 Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 11-12.

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15 Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 13-14.

16 Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 49-57.

17 Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 27-28.

18 H. W. Brands, *T. R.: The Last Romantic* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 26.

- 19 Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 9.
- 20 Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 18.
- 21 Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 54.
- 22 William H. Harbaugh, *The Life and Times of Theodore Roosevelt*, Rev. ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 54.
- 23 For information on these parts of Roosevelt's life, see his *An Autobiography*; Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt*; Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc. 1979); Carleton Putnam, *Theodore Roosevelt: The Formative Years, 1858-1886* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1959); Brands, *T. R.*; and Harbaugh, *The Life and Times of Theodore Roosevelt*.
- 24 Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 192-193.
- 25 John M. Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 33.
- 26 All of the remaining passages from Roosevelt's April 10, 1899, speech before the Hamilton Club are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the speech that accompanies this essay.
- 27 Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 19.
- 28 See Leroy G. Dorsey and Rachel M. Harlow, "'We Want Americans Pure and Simple': Theodore Roosevelt and the Myth of Americanism," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 55-78; Leroy G. Dorsey, "Sailing into the 'Wondrous Now': The Myth of the American Navy's World Cruise," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997): 447-465; Leroy G. Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric: Theodore Roosevelt's Campaign for Conservation," *Western Journal of Communication* 59 (1995): 1-19; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*; and Janice H. Rushing, "Mythic Evolution of 'The New Frontier' in Mass Mediated Rhetoric," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 265-296.
- 29 See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 29-62.
- 30 See Vanessa B. Beasley, ed., *Who Belongs in America: Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006); Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MD: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Keith Fitzgerald, *The Face of the Nation: Immigration, the State, and the National Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).
- 31 This passage from "The Strenuous Life" appears in paragraph 3 of the 1901 version of the speech: *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (New York: The Century Co., 1901) but not in the version printed in the *Chicago Tribune* on 11 April 1899. The substantive difference between the two versions is Roosevelt's inclusion of paragraph

[3] in the 1901 version that does not appear in the text printed from the *Chicago Tribune* of 11 April 1899. To read the version with paragraph 3 inserted, see the 1901 version included in this unit on "The Strenuous Life." The 1901 version continues to be published again in the 1911 edition of Roosevelt's speeches, and it is the version used by the Theodore Roosevelt Association, an organization "founded in 1919 and chartered by Congress in 1920 to preserve the memory and ideals of the 26th President of the United States"--see <http://www.theodoreroosevelt.org>.

32 Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change*, 91.

33 Dorsey and Harlow, "'We Want Americans Pure and Simple,'" 55-78; Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 59.

34 Thomas Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 123.

35 Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West--An Account of the Exploration and Settlement of our Country from the Alleghanies to the Pacific: The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, National edition, 20 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 8: 93.

36 To review this passage, see paragraph 3 of the 1901 version of "The Strenuous Life" contained within this unit. For a more developed explanation of this paragraph, see note 31 of this essay.

37 See Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (1965; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981); Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1973); and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric*, 2 vols. (New York: Praeger, 1989).

38 To review this passage, see paragraph 3 of the 1901 version of "The Strenuous Life" contained within this unit. For a more developed explanation of this paragraph, see note 31 of this essay.

39 To review this passage, see paragraph 3 of the 1901 version of "The Strenuous Life" contained within this unit. For a more developed explanation of this paragraph, see note 31 of this essay.

40 Warren Zimmermann, *First Great Triumph: How Five Americans Made Their Country a World Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 446.

41 By seizing the Philippines, America ensured its trade routes to Asia. However, Roosevelt emphasized the endeavor as a manifestation of Americans' marital vigor and acknowledgment of its frontier legacy. On the attempt to educate and "civilize" Native Americans, see David W. Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 5-27.

42 Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 243-244.

43 "Roosevelt on 'The Strenuous Life,'" *Chicago Tribune*, April 11, 1899, p. 12; "Last Week in Chicago," *New York Times*, April 16, 1899, p. 26.

44 Dalton, Theodore Roosevelt, *A Strenuous Life*, 186-192.

45 The term, "bully pulpit," is attributed to Roosevelt by George H. Putnam in "Roosevelt: Historian and Statesman," which appeared in Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, 9: x.

46 See Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, "The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981): 158-171. Recent scholarship questions the rhetorical presidency beginning in the twentieth century, identifying it instead as originating with George Washington; see Leroy G. Dorsey, ed., *The Presidency and Rhetorical Leadership* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002). For examples of Roosevelt's use of the rhetorical presidency, see Mary Stuckey, "Establishing the Rhetorical Presidency through Presidential Rhetoric: Theodore Roosevelt and the Brownsville Raid," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 287-309; Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric, 1-19.

47 Howard K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 81-86.

48 J. Michael Hogan, *The Panama Canal in American Politics: Domestic Advocacy and the Evolution of Policy* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 34-56.

49 Dorsey, "Sailing into the 'Wondrous Nowm,'" 447-465.

50 Franklin D. Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address," in *American Rhetorical Discourse*, 3rd ed., eds., Ronald F. Reid and James F. Klumpp (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2005), 749.

51 Harry S. Truman, "Aid to Greece and Turkey: The Marshall Plan," in *Contemporary American Voices: Significant Speeches in American History, 1945-Present*, eds., James R. Andrews and David Zarefsky (New York: Longman, 1992), 11.

52 See John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address," in *American Rhetorical Discourse*, 788; Leroy G. Dorsey, "The Myth of War and Peace in Presidential Discourse: John Kennedy's 'New Frontier' Myth and the Peace Corps," *Southern Communication Journal* 62 (1996): 47; and Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 489-504.

53 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 643-654.

54 Ronald Reagan, "Speech to the National Association of Evangelicals (The 'Evil Empire' Speech)," in *American Rhetorical Discourse*, 802-803.

55 Michael C. Schaffer, "Reflect Shun: George W. Bush Claims the Mantle of Teddy Roosevelt," *The New Republic Online*, February 15, 2007, located at <http://www.tnr.com>. See also "T.R.? He's No T.R.," Editorial, *New York Times*, February 11, 2007, Late Edition, 4.11.

56 See Mark West and Chris Carey, "(Re)Enacting Frontier Justice: The Bush Administration's Tactical Narration of the Old West Fantasy after September 11," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 379-412; and John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Scribner, 2004).

57 George W. Bush, "President's Address to the Nation," *The White House*, January 10, 2007, www.whitehouse.gov.