

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, "ADDRESS OF PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT AT THE LAYING OF THE CORNER STONE OF THE OFFICE BUILDING OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SATURDAY, APRIL 14, 1906 (THE MAN WITH THE MUCK-RAKE)," (14 April 1906)

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Abstract: Responding to what he considered sensationalistic reporting, President Theodore Roosevelt condemned the "muckrakers" in strong moralistic terms, yet he also acknowledged the need for "absolutely truthful" exposés of corruption in the Progressive era. Adopting a middle ground between those who celebrated the muckrakers and those who would limit their First Amendment right to free speech, Roosevelt upheld the same progressive principles he applied to other political and social controversies: balance, moderation, order, and stability.

Key Words: Theodore Roosevelt, Muckraking, Progressive Era, Freedom of Speech

Theodore Roosevelt is remembered as the youngest person to become president, a Rough Rider, and a trust buster. Many Americans recall his famous phrase, "speak softly and carry a big stick," and he is also remembered for describing the presidency as a "bully pulpit." On issues of free speech and First Amendment rights, however, Roosevelt's views are barely known. In one of his most famous speeches, "The Man with the Muck-Rake," Roosevelt discussed the role of journalism in a free society, employing the moralistic rhetoric of "right vs. wrong" and "good vs. evil" typical of the Progressive Era. It is the contention of this essay that despite the sometimes polarizing nature of his moralistic rhetoric, Roosevelt was able to articulate a moderate stance on free speech and the First Amendment with "The Man with the Muck-Rake" speech. Roosevelt's balanced position on muckraking and the accumulation of excessive wealth in particular were consistent with the progressive principles he applied to other social, economic, and political issues of the day.<sup>1</sup>

Roosevelt's "The Man with the Muck-Rake" speech also provides a good case study in the "rhetorical presidency,"<sup>2</sup> as Roosevelt took his case against journalistic sensationalism and the accrual of extreme fortunes directly to the American people in hopes that the power of public opinion might help curb such abuses. The legacy of Roosevelt's rhetorical presidency is evidenced today, not only when modern presidents address the American people directly, but also when presidents manage their press relations with Roosevelt-era innovations such as the press leak, the timed release of good and bad news, the use of unnamed White House sources, and the photo-op or

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media event. Ultimately, Roosevelt's rhetorical presidency and "The Man with the Muck-Rake" speech invite us to debate the enduring excesses of "tabloid" journalism and the dangers of corporate greed in a democratic society, as well as the merits of moralistic rhetoric, the politics of modern progressives, and the powers of the rhetorical presidency.

This essay proceeds in four sections beginning with a brief biography of Theodore Roosevelt. The second section contextualizes "The Man with the Muck-Rake" by providing some historical background on the Progressive Era, including the controversy surrounding the rise of investigative journalism. The third section analyzes the text of "The Man with the Muck-Rake," illuminating how Roosevelt used moral arguments about "right and wrong" and "good vs. evil" to advocate balance and moderation in both journalism and big business. The final section of this essay considers the legacy and lessons of the "Muck-Rake" speech in light of contemporary debates over journalistic ethics, moralistic rhetoric, and the powers of the presidency.

### *Theodore Roosevelt*

Theodore Roosevelt was born "a sickly, delicate boy" to a wealthy family on October 27, 1858, in New York.<sup>3</sup> Theodore, or "Teedie" as his close friends and family called him,<sup>4</sup> grew up in a Dutch Reformed household—a branch of the Protestant Church—and said his prayers every morning with his father and every evening with his mother.<sup>5</sup> From 1876 to 1880, Roosevelt attended Harvard University, and in 1880 he joined the Republican Party and entered Columbia Law School. Leaving Columbia in 1882 without finishing his law degree, Roosevelt began his political career later that year when he became the youngest person ever elected to the New York State Assembly. He served three one-year terms as an assemblyman. In 1884, months after his mother and first wife Alice Hathaway Lee both died on the same day,<sup>6</sup> Roosevelt returned to public life as a delegate to the Republican National Convention.

Between 1889 and 1895, Roosevelt sharpened his political skills serving as U.S. Civil Service Commissioner, Police Commissioner of New York City, and eventually President of the Board of Police Commissioners. In 1898, after serving a one year appointment as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Roosevelt became a lieutenant colonel in the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, a regiment famously known as the Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War. Roosevelt earned a promotion to colonel before the Battle of San Juan Heights and became "one of the most conspicuous heroes of the war."<sup>7</sup> Riding high on his war fame, Roosevelt easily won the office of governor of New York in 1898, and two years later he was elected vice president of the United States. Roosevelt served as vice president for only seven months before President William McKinley died at the hands of an assassin and Roosevelt took the oath of office as the 26<sup>th</sup> U.S. president at the age of 42.

Roosevelt served two terms as president and achieved many notable successes. He earned the title "trust buster" for bringing antitrust suits against large corporations under the Sherman Act. He also oversaw the construction of the Panama Canal and warned against European intervention in the Caribbean with his "Roosevelt Corollary" to

the Monroe Doctrine. He "upgrade[d] significantly the nation's naval capabilities during a time of peace,"<sup>8</sup> and in 1906 he won the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating an end to the Russo-Japanese War. Another area of great success involved Roosevelt's conservation policies, which "added enormously to the national forests in the West, reserved lands for public use, and fostered great irrigation projects."<sup>9</sup> Roosevelt promised a "square deal" to all Americans, especially the middle class, by regulating trusts, conserving the environment, and enacting progressive social reforms.

Roosevelt's greatest successes, however, were arguably rhetorical.<sup>10</sup> Roosevelt had a reputation as "an omnivorous reader and devoured an enormous quantity of books," which informed his own prolific writing; he published at least 18 books and many more essays in his lifetime.<sup>11</sup> Some argue he became our first "media/political celebrity" and is credited with inventing the "press leak," the "unnamed White House source," and modern "photo-ops."<sup>12</sup> Realizing the important role of the press in advancing his policies and gaining popular support, Roosevelt allowed reporters unprecedented access and even created a space for them inside the White House.<sup>13</sup> "TR" or "Teddy," as he became known to the nation, also discovered the benefits of timing the release of news: unfavorable news released on Friday would attract little attention over the weekend, while good news released on a Monday virtually guaranteed a week of positive coverage. Roosevelt also perfected the art of crafting memorable phrases that made headlines in the newspapers--our modern day sound bites.<sup>14</sup> All of these innovations helped Roosevelt transform the presidency into the "bully pulpit" from which he pressured Congress to enact his legislative agenda by appealing directly to the American people. Roosevelt's approach helped increase the powers of the office, turning what had been largely an administrative post into the modern "rhetorical presidency."<sup>15</sup>

After deciding not to run again for president in 1909, Roosevelt went on an African safari for the Smithsonian and returned home a year later ready to re-enter politics. Losing the Republican nomination to William Howard Taft, he ran for president in 1912 as the candidate of the Progressive Party--a third political party he helped found. Answering reporters' questions about his health and fitness for office, TR responded that he felt "fit as a bull moose" and the nickname stuck to his Progressive Party. While at a campaign stop in Milwaukee in October of 1912, a mentally deranged saloonkeeper shot Roosevelt in an assassination attempt, but Roosevelt went on to deliver his 90 minute speech. The bullet remained lodged in Roosevelt's chest for the rest of his life. Woodrow Wilson won the election in 1912, but Roosevelt remained active in progressive politics until he died in his sleep of a coronary embolism on January 6, 1919, at age 60.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Progressive Era*

The Progressive Era unofficially spanned the years from 1900 to 1920 and marked a collective push for reform in U.S. politics, economics, and society. Progressivism grew in response to the unprecedented industrialization and urbanization of the late nineteenth century--specifically, the years between 1865 and 1900 known as

the Gilded Age<sup>17</sup>--which brought new and exciting advances in technology and industry, but also ushered in a host of new problems for Americans. While western settlement substantially increased, the number of U.S. farms doubled, and the population growth and industry in U.S. cities boomed. As Hofstadter explains, "certain moral facets of the American character had become all but invisible."<sup>18</sup> As traditional moral constraints weakened, the nation faced new problems with alcohol consumption, child labor, prison conditions, immigration, unethical business practices, working conditions, unsanitary food production, lynchings, governmental corruption, and the demand for woman suffrage. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Progressive movement took shape and began to push for reform in a number of these areas.

The ideology of Progressivism embraced a wide variety of causes, yet there were a few distinguishing characteristics of the movement as a whole. First, Progressives were generally optimistic, Hofstadter argues, and "believed that the people of the country should be stimulated to work energetically to bring about social progress." They also assumed that the "positive powers of government" could be used "to achieve this end."<sup>19</sup> While conservatives "generally believed in time and nature to bring progress," Progressives "believed in energy and governmental action."<sup>20</sup> Second, Progressives generally focused upon questions of morality--of right or wrong--in their efforts to build a better society. Hofstadter observes that a "social Christianity" at the end of the nineteenth century "helped to give the Progressive movement the character of an evangelical revival in politics and economics."<sup>21</sup> Such "evangelical" appeals to morality and religion had always been powerful motivators, especially for an American culture reared in the Puritan rhetorical tradition. Through "moralistic appeals," Progressive reformers hoped to make people "feel the awful weight of wrong in the world" and "accept personal responsibility for its eradication."<sup>22</sup> While not all measures proposed by self-described Progressives strike us as all that "progressive" today, their moralistic appeals brought about a "rhetorical renaissance," as J. Michael Hogan argues. The rhetoric of progressivism "represented a new common language of political and social analysis that was reform oriented, moralistic, and optimistic about the possibilities for human 'progress.'"<sup>23</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt clearly spoke this new, moralistic rhetoric of progressivism. Although not always regarded as a true Progressive,<sup>24</sup> Roosevelt gave voice to many of the themes and ideals of the Progressive movement during his tenure as president, including opposition to corporate monopolies, conservation, and public safety. On the occasion of "The Man with the Muck-Rake" speech, it may have seemed that he was retreating from his support for Progressive causes as he denounced the very journalists who called attention to society's problems. Yet Roosevelt's argument in the speech was consistent with his views on most other issues; his speech thus can be read as a call for the Progressive reform of investigative journalism.<sup>25</sup>

The rise of investigative reporting during the Progressive Era went hand-in-hand with the various movements for social reform. Some of the most famous investigative journalists of the time were Lincoln Steffens, who wrote about corruption in the New York police department and municipal government, and Ida Tarbell, who exposed John D. Rockefeller's questionable business practices in a series for *McClure's Magazine*, "The

History of the Standard Oil Company." Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* is also identified with the investigative journalism of the era, even though this exposé of "Packingtown" was fictional and intended to highlight the plight of the working class, not expose unsanitary conditions in the meat-packing industry. Another famous muckraking work, Ray Stannard Baker's *Following the Color Line: America Negro Citizenship in the Progressive Era*, detailed the country's pitiful race relations at the time, especially the spread of lynching and Jim Crow laws. And on the public health front, Samuel Hopkins Adams worked to uncover the false claims and the potential hazards of patent medicine, contributing to concerns about the purity of America's foods and medicines.<sup>26</sup>

The exposés of the investigative journalists often led to actual reform. After reading *The Jungle*, Theodore Roosevelt ordered an investigation that eventually led to the passage of the Meat Inspection Act (1906). Also based on his reading of *The Jungle*, along with Adams' reports on dangerous medicines, Roosevelt pushed for passage of the Pure Food and Drugs Act (1906). Due largely to the popularity of Tarbell's critique, the Standard Oil Trust was eventually dismantled, and other exposés led to child labor laws in many states, worker's compensation laws, and antitrust suits against monopolistic corporations, including the Northern Securities Company.<sup>27</sup>

Yet Roosevelt apparently felt that some of the muckrakers did more harm than good. Too many of their reports, to him, were inaccurate, overly sensationalized, and served only to undermine real reform. He came to believe that too many of the muckrakers were more interested in scandals and salacious details than social reform. In Roosevelt's view, this attitude was not conducive to "true reform" and was actually destructive to the public good. In addition, sensationalistic reporting, in Roosevelt's view, contributed to social disorder. Hofstadter argues that Roosevelt had a strong distaste for "the mob" and that any sign of "organized power" among the masses "frightened him."<sup>28</sup> Certainly, as John M. Blum asserts, he had a "jagged dread of violent revolution" and a "morbid fear of social violence."<sup>29</sup> This fear of unchecked power and social disorder was evident in his efforts to regulate trusts and railroads as well. As Roosevelt himself once exclaimed, "I believe in a strong executive; I believe in power," and he used that power "precisely for the purpose of establishing order."<sup>30</sup> In launching his famous attack on investigative journalism, he opened another front in his fight to maintain social order in the nation.

Roosevelt's objections to sensationalized journalism were apparently sparked by "The Treason of the Senate," a series of articles by David Graham Phillips published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine beginning in February of 1906. After reading Phillips' accusations of "corruption and illegal relationships with special interests" among U.S. Senators,<sup>31</sup> Roosevelt "began to wonder if the literature of exposure was not becoming a destructive force. He approved of public attacks on corruption and fraud, but not this kind of 'hysteria and sensationalism'."<sup>32</sup> Adding to Roosevelt's concern was the fact that media-magnate William Randolph Hearst, who owned *Cosmopolitan*, was himself a member of Congress. In Roosevelt's view, this represented a potential conflict of interest, because attacks on other members of Congress launched from Hearst-owned media might well enhance Hearst's power and influence in Congress, not to mention fuel his presidential ambitions.<sup>33</sup>

To Roosevelt, Hearst and other media magnates represented as big a threat to society as industrial monopolies and unregulated wealth. In a letter to his friend Lyman Abbott on March 16, 1906, Roosevelt expressed his growing frustrations with sensational journalism and referred specifically to Hearst and Phillips. "These make-believe reformers, these preachers of rabid hatred, these ranters against corruption and in favor of social reform," Roosevelt wrote, were "the real enemies of every effort to secure genuine reform."<sup>34</sup> The very next day, Roosevelt went public with his critique when he delivered the first version of his famous "Muck-Rake" speech at a dinner of the Gridiron Club. This version of the speech was not recorded but it was reportedly well-received.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Roosevelt continued to refine his thoughts and look for an appropriate venue for a major address on the topic. That occasion presented itself on April 14, 1906, when Roosevelt spoke at the dedication of a new federal office building.

### *"The Man with the Muck-Rake"*

In preparing one of his most famous presidential addresses, "The Man with the Muck-Rake," Roosevelt followed his usual speech-writing routine: "[he] outlined his speeches, often dictated them, corrected and revised them, and after criticism by friends, cast them into final form. As he matured as a speaker he normally read from his manuscript."<sup>36</sup> Roosevelt delivered the address at an event that he knew would attract media attention--the laying of the cornerstone of a new congressional office building in Washington, D.C.--but the White House also "leaked word to the press a few days before the ceremony that the president was going to make an especially important statement."<sup>37</sup> Among the thousands in attendance were many of Roosevelt's cabinet officers, members of the Supreme Court, representatives of foreign governments, members of the Senate and House of Representatives, and a good proportion of Washington's population.<sup>38</sup> Roosevelt delivered the speech in a reportedly "splendid voice," and throughout his speech, "hearty and long applause greeted his words."<sup>39</sup>

The speech itself featured the sort of moralistic rhetoric typical of the Progressive Era. As Charles Conrad explains, moral rhetoric often assumes a "romantic form" that contrasts a "demonic world" of evil with an "idyllic world" of good.<sup>40</sup> The demonic world is impious and "populated by agents of the devil," while the idyllic world is a "pious society" inhabited by "righteous persons"<sup>41</sup> Conrad sensed the romantic form of moralistic rhetoric in a study of the contemporary Moral Majority, but it has deeper historical roots in the rhetoric of the investigative journalists of the Progressive Era. Like all moral crusaders, the investigative journalists of the Progressive Era elevated themselves "above morally inferior others" and declared themselves soldiers of "right" who would bring about the "moral regeneration of society and the spiritual rebirth of its citizens."<sup>42</sup> Casting themselves as the vanguard of righteous crusades to save the American democracy, they encouraged all citizens to become more "active members of a moral society."<sup>43</sup>

The penchant of Progressives to employ moralistic rhetoric reinforces Weaver's argument that "language is sermonical" and "we are all of us preachers in private or public capacities."<sup>44</sup> Expounding on his argument, Richard M. Weaver explains that "the

honest rhetorician . . . has two things in mind: a vision of how matters should go ideally and ethically and a consideration of the special circumstances of his auditors."<sup>45</sup> In his attempt to offer an "ideal and ethical" vision of responsible journalism, Roosevelt's "Muck-Rake" speech certainly rang "sermonic." And like the "romantic form" of moral rhetoric that contrasts the "demonic world" of evil with an "idyllic world" of good, sermonic rhetoric typically features "ultimate terms." The ultimate terms known as "god terms," Weaver explains, offer strong positive connotations that represent the ultimate "good" for the rhetor.<sup>46</sup> Progressive rhetors typically used god terms such as "progress" and "reform," along with explicit appeals to "morals" and "right vs. wrong." Naturally, the counterparts to god terms are "devil terms," or ultimate "terms of repulsion."<sup>47</sup> Devil terms in the Progressive era included labels like "un-American" or "reactionary." Using such ultimate terms, Roosevelt "preached" a "sermon" on the morality of the investigative journalists of the day, a "sermon" that exhibited the romantic form and had a pronounced moralistic tone.<sup>48</sup>

It is not uncommon for presidents to frame public issues in moral terms, of course, but Theodore Roosevelt seemed especially inclined to do so. As Jon Paulson argues, Roosevelt's "moral center...drove his politics and pragmatics."<sup>49</sup> William A. Behl contends that trust-busting marked a moral issue for Roosevelt,<sup>50</sup> and Leroy G. Dorsey illustrates how Roosevelt framed conservation and hunting in moral terms.<sup>51</sup> Roosevelt even took "the high moral ground," Robert A. Bode notes, when talking about "America's vigilante tradition, violence, fighting, and the use of firearms."<sup>52</sup> In short, moral arguments were fundamental to Roosevelt's rhetoric. Indeed, as Dorsey concludes, "Roosevelt's assumption of the role of moral guardian" distinguished his "rhetorical presidency."<sup>53</sup>

From the very beginning of "The Man with the Muck-Rake," the romantic form of the speech placed the emphasis on moral concerns, casting the controversies surrounding muckraking as part of the constant struggle between right and wrong, good versus evil. Frequently employing the ultimate terms "good" and "evil,"<sup>54</sup> Roosevelt proclaimed that, "we war with the same tendencies toward evil that were evident in Washington's time, and are helped by the same tendencies for good" (1).<sup>55</sup> These "tendencies toward evil," Roosevelt explained, included trusts and "the growth of wealth and the growth in complex interests," yet they also included irresponsible journalism (1). Roosevelt made clear what he considered "good" journalism, and he applied those same standards to big business in general: truth, moderation, and a commitment to the public good. By the end of the address, Roosevelt had put both journalists and corporate leaders on notice that he personally would hold them to the moral standards he articulated in the speech.

### The Image of the Muck-Raker and the Virtues of Moderation

Roosevelt crafted a lasting image of the evils of sensationalistic journalism by invoking the moral imagery of a literary classic, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan first published *The Pilgrim's Progress* in 1678, and it quickly became one of the most significant literary works of its era. In the nineteenth century, *The Pilgrim's*

*Progress* was "a standard volume in nearly every literate household in the United States and England. Most children read it along with the Bible and the great plays of Shakespeare."<sup>56</sup> Bunyan's tale took the form of a religious allegory that followed the main character, "Christian" (everyman), on his journey from the "City of Destruction" (the earthly world) to the "Celestial City" (heaven). One of the people who Christian encountered on his journey was the man with the muck-rake, a man who, as Roosevelt explained, "could look no way but downward, with the muck-rake in his hand; who was offered a celestial crown for his muck-rake, but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor" (2). In Roosevelt's speech, as in Bunyan's novel, the man with the muck-rake was allegorical, representing those blinded to inspiration and opportunity by a cynically negative attitude.

Fixated on "carnal instead of on spiritual things," Roosevelt's man with the muck-rake refused "to see aught that is lofty" and instead fixed his eyes "with solemn intentness" only on things "vile and debasing" (3). In the political world, that manifested itself in an obsession with corruption and fraud at the expense of recognizing the more positive and constructive acts of people in government. The result, according to Roosevelt, was the undermining of social progress. As Roosevelt explained, "the man who never does anything else, who never thinks or speaks or writes, save of his feats with the muck-rake, speedily becomes, not a help to society, not an incitement to good, but one of the most potent forces for evil" (3). Already the term "muckraker" had become something of a devil term in the speech, and it would assume still more negative connotations as Roosevelt continued to use it throughout the remainder of the speech.

How did the muckrakers hurt society? According to Roosevelt, their unfair attacks on "honest men" discouraged other good men from entering public service, thereby doing "untold damage to the country as a whole" (3). In their "effort to make financial or political profit out of the destruction of character," Roosevelt argued, the muckrakers became "a profound deterrent," discouraging "able men" from "entering the public service at any price" (6). In addition, the "gross and reckless assaults on character" in the literature of muckraking created a "morbid and vicious public sentiment," according to Roosevelt--a sort of pervasive public cynicism that actually undermined social reform (6). Roosevelt thus registered both moral *and* practical objections to the excesses of the muckrakers, concluding that their exposés had damaged the public mind: "To assail the great and admitted evils of our political and industrial life with such crude and sweeping generalizations as to include decent men in the general condemnation means the searing of the public conscience" (8).

Roosevelt carefully distinguished between good investigative journalism and irresponsible "muckraking." "Now, it is very necessary that we should not flinch from seeing what is vile and debasing," he stated (3). "There is filth on the floor, and it must be scraped up with the muck-rake; and there are times and places where this service is the most needed of all the services that can be performed" (3). Elaborating on the point and acknowledging the moral shortcomings of the Gilded Age, Roosevelt continued: "There are, in the body politic, economic and social, many and grave evils, and there is

urgent necessity for the sternest war upon them. There should be relentless exposure of and attack upon every evil man whether politician or business man, every evil practice, whether in politics, in business, or in social life" (4). In other words, to "denounce mud slinging" was not to endorse "whitewashing," as Roosevelt insisted that both were equally abhorrent to "honest men" and detrimental to society (5).

Roosevelt made serious and far-reaching allegations against the muckrakers, accusing them of contributing to "a general attitude either of cynical belief in and indifference to public corruption or else of a distrustful inability to discriminate between the good and the bad" (8). In Roosevelt's view, they had thus damaged the moral compass of the citizenry and set back his own efforts at Progressive reform. Stopping short of advocating any sort of legal action or governmental censorship of the muckrakers, however, Roosevelt used public opinion as a means to hold the journalists to a higher moral standard--a standard that no more tolerated irresponsible muckraking than it endorsed the whitewashing of corruption and fraud. What was needed, according to Roosevelt, was "sanity" in reporting on the issues of the day, and once again he cast that preference in terms of "good versus evil": "It is because I feel that there should be no rest in the endless war against the forces of evil that I ask that the war be conducted with sanity as well as with resolution" (7). Although an obviously vague concept, "sanity" thus became Roosevelt's measure of "good," which captured his sense of responsible journalism.

Roosevelt summarized his critique of the muckrakers by again invoking the imagery of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Emphasizing both moral and practical concerns, he stated,

The men with the muck-rakes are often indispensable to the well-being of society; but only if they know when to stop raking the muck, and to look upward to the celestial crown above them, to the crown of worth endeavor. There are beautiful things above and round about them; and if they gradually grow to feel that the whole world is nothing but muck, their power of usefulness is gone. (7)

The forces of evil in the modern world were "great and terrible," Roosevelt conceded, but "the forces of truth and love and courage and honesty and generosity and sympathy" were also "stronger than ever before" (9). By harnessing those positive forces while also exposing evil, Roosevelt suggested, journalists could do more good. It would be "a foolish and timid, no less than a wicked thing" to ignore all the wrongs in society, he concluded (9). But it would be "even worse" to "fail to take into account the strength of the forces that tell for good" (9).

Calling upon journalists to move beyond "hysterical excitement," Roosevelt thus called for more balance and moderation in investigative reporting (12). Only by restraining popular emotions with reason, common sense, and a respect for the truth could the movement for social reform have a lasting effect. As Roosevelt explained,

It is a prime necessity that if the present unrest is to result in permanent good the emotion shall be translated into action, and that the action shall be marked

by honesty, sanity, and self-restraint. There is mighty little good in a mere spasm of reform. The reform that counts is that which comes through steady, continuous growth; violent emotionalism leads to exhaustion. (15)

In so describing his philosophy of social reform, Roosevelt invoked principles of order, stability, and moderation that he routinely preached from his "bully pulpit." Roosevelt's "The Man with the Muck-Rake" may have had a chilling effect on some journalists, but it was consistent with the approach he took to all the political, social, and economic problems he tackled as president. Indeed, in the last half of the speech, he applied those same principles to the other pressing issues of the day: the accumulation of great wealth and the monopoly powers of big corporations.

### The Morality of Wealth

As the *New York Times* reported at the time, it was not the "muck rake feature" of Roosevelt's April 16th address that attracted the most attention. Rather, it was Roosevelt's "new scheme for the progressive taxation of fortunes" that garnered the most notice.<sup>57</sup> This part of the speech has not received as much attention from historians or rhetorical critics, as Stephen E. Lucas observes, but it is just as important to Roosevelt's larger rhetorical purposes as his critique of the muckrakers.<sup>58</sup> While Roosevelt's thoughts on sensational journalism and economic reform might, at first glance, seem unrelated or even inconsistent, they make sense as a "unified whole" when "welded with his assumptions on the nature of social order."<sup>59</sup> Put another way, "The Man with the Muck-Rake" did not just caution about irresponsible journalism or excessive wealth; it also stressed the need for moderation and order in all aspects of social life.

As in the first part of the speech, Roosevelt positioned himself as the preacher of a sermon about good and evil, right and wrong, this time on the issue of corporate greed and the accumulation of wealth. Arguing that "We should discriminate in the sharpest way between fortunes well-won and fortunes ill-won," he drew a clear line between those fortunes "gained as an incident to performing great services to the community as a whole, and those gained in evil fashion by keeping just within the limits of mere law-honesty" (16). Again, Roosevelt drew a clear distinction between "good and evil." But beyond denouncing "enormous fortunes" gained by dishonest means, Roosevelt objected to the "inheritance" or "transmission in their entirety" of those fortunes that had "swollen beyond all healthy limits" (16). Hence, without "pretending to discuss the details or formulate the system" in this particular speech, he floated his idea for a "progressive tax on all fortunes" (16). Such a tax, of course, needed to be "imposed by the National and not the State government" (16).

To some modern-day revisionists, Roosevelt's advocacy of progressive taxation and federal regulation of large corporations engaged in interstate commerce signaled the rise of the imperial presidency and the era of big government.<sup>60</sup> Yet a close examination of "The Man with a Muck-Rake" speech reveals that the moral principles underlying TR's economic proposals applied to the poor as well as the rich, to working

people as well as the captains of industry. Invoking the Bible, for example, Roosevelt explained that the eighth commandment states, "'Thou shalt not steal.' It does not read 'Thou shalt not steal from the rich man.' It does not read, 'Thou shalt not steal from the poor man.' It reads simply and plainly, 'Thou shalt not steal'" (19). Elaborating further, Roosevelt called upon his fellow reform advocates to apply the same standards of right and wrong to the rich as well as the poor: "No good whatever will come from that warped and mock morality which denounces the misdeeds of men of wealth and forgets the misdeeds practiced at their expense" (19).

Finally, in his concluding paragraph, Roosevelt directly told his listeners that his speech was really about ethics, not economics. As he did in many of his presidential addresses, he concluded his speech by insisting that political and social problems ultimately boiled down to questions of moral character:

Materially we must strive to secure a broader economic opportunity for all men, so that each shall have a better chance to show the stuff of which he is made. Spiritually and ethically we must strive to bring about clean living and right thinking. We appreciate that the things of the body are important; but we appreciate also that the things of the soul are immeasurably more important. The foundation stone of national life is, and ever must be, the high individual character of the average citizen. (23)

As he concluded his speech at the laying of the cornerstone of a great new government building, Roosevelt thus returned metaphorically to a theme common in all of his presidential rhetoric: that the "foundation stone of national life" rested upon the high moral character of the everyday citizen (23). That theme, along with his critique of sensational journalism, his definition of "progress," and his moralistic tone, all shaped historical memories of "The Man with a Muck-Rake" as one of TR's greatest speeches.

### *The Legacy of "The Man with the Muck-Rake"*

Given the sermon-like tone and the subject matter of Roosevelt's "The Man with a Muck-Rake," it may come as a surprise to learn that the atmosphere surrounding the speech was light-hearted, even jovial. A *New York Times* reporter captured the spirit of the address and the enthusiastic reaction of Roosevelt's immediate audience:

In the very beginning, when he referred to some of the things that make for evil in the public life of to-day, Mr. Roosevelt swung his arm, with a wide sweeping gesture over the heads of the Senators and cried out: "It is about these things that I wish to speak." The Senators saw the joke and roared, and Mr. Roosevelt joined heartily in the laughter. On several other occasions, when his references to the Senate or to bills pending there now brought forth responsive laughter from the Senators, the President could not keep the smile from his face, and when he spoke of his hope for the Rate bill there was a shout in which he joined heartily.<sup>61</sup>

Reading the speech today, it is easy to imagine Roosevelt delivering it in solemn tones, more like a parental lecture. Reports that he actually provoked laughter and shouts from his audience cast the speech in a somewhat different light.

Yet however jovial the occasion, Roosevelt raised serious questions about the role and responsibilities of journalists in a free society. Coining the devil term "muckraking" to denounce irresponsible reporting, Roosevelt questioned the impact of such reporting on the public consciousness and worried about the impact of muckraking on the willingness of good people to enter public service. Roosevelt was not alone in his concern and his call for "sanity" had a significant impact on the role of muckraking. As Mark Neuzil observes, muckraking journalism slowed in the years following Roosevelt's address: "One examination of muckraking articles in magazines from 1901 to 1916 found the number dropped from 188 in 1906 to 112 by 1908."<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, "some muckrakers, including Lincoln Steffens and others on the *McClure's* staff, agreed the [Muckrake] speech marked the beginning of the end."<sup>63</sup> While the sensationalized journalistic style of muckrakers may have slowed after Roosevelt's speech, muckraking as an investigative reporting technique has certainly endured.

In a post-Watergate era, we sometimes hear the term "muckraker" used in more positive ways--as a label describing investigative or "watchdog" journalism that brings about positive change.<sup>64</sup> Yet in an era of tabloid journalism that often treats gossip and rumors as "news," we may be well-advised to remember Roosevelt's distinction between "good" and "bad" muckraking. Hailing those who exposed genuine wrongdoing, Roosevelt had no objection to even to the most "merciless" exposés--so long as they were "absolutely truthful" (4). He *did* object to untruthful stories, however, for those only hurt the cause of progressive reform. Roosevelt's ultimate point, as summarized in perhaps the most famous line of the speech, still holds true today: "Hysterical sensationalism is the very poorest weapon wherewith to fight for lasting righteousness" (9).

Roosevelt's legacy also includes a particular conception of "progress" and "progressive" reform that many still embrace. Looking to the central government to assure fairness, justice, and equal opportunity in America, many of today's self-described "progressives" embrace Roosevelt's belief that the issues facing citizens today have become too complex or too far-reaching to be managed by individuals or even by local or state governments. Like Roosevelt, many of today's progressives consider the individual helpless against the power of the big corporations, and today's progressives embrace many of the same economic, social, and political reforms championed by Roosevelt, including federally mandated conservation and the "living wage."<sup>65</sup> Today's progressives tend to find Roosevelt's foreign policy rhetoric a bit too aggressive for their tastes, but his domestic reform efforts left a legacy of progressive politics that persists to this day.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, the moralistic rhetoric of Roosevelt and other Progressive-Era reformers still echoes in today's political discourse--for both good and ill. On the one hand, we hear echoes of Theodore Roosevelt in President Barack Obama's call for a "new era of responsibility"--an era in which a spirit of service and personal character still matter.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, moralistic rhetoric has led us to a seemingly endless War against

Terror in which black-and-white thinking and simplistic distinctions between "good" and "evil" sometimes substitute for more nuanced deliberation. Casting the War against Terror as a moral crusade, former president George W. Bush rallied the country after the 9/11 attacks to embrace a new spirit of service and sacrifice, as a number of scholars have noted, but that spirit soon gave way to a rhetoric of polarization and division.<sup>68</sup> Moralistic rhetoric, in other words, can be a double-edged sword; it can be used to unify and motivate people to do good things, but it also can function to oversimplify complex issues and silence dissent.

Theodore Roosevelt has rightly been called the first "rhetorical president"<sup>69</sup> and he pioneered many of the techniques used by modern presidents to manage relations with the press. Among the innovations that are often associated with Roosevelt include the press leak, the timed release of good and bad news, the use of unnamed White House sources, and the photo-op or media event. Like all modern presidents, Roosevelt also took his disagreements with Congress directly to the "the people" and many of his rhetorical strategies and techniques are still imitated today. Perhaps Roosevelt's greatest legacy is that we now take the "rhetorical presidency" for granted. We are not surprised when the president "goes public" with his political agenda, and we recognize that the presidency is not just an administrative post but an office of great symbolic power. We owe much of that, in large measure at least, to Theodore Roosevelt.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The middle ground was a typical position for Roosevelt. See especially Stephen E. Lucas, "Theodore Roosevelt's 'The Man with the Muck-Rake': A Reinterpretation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 461.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Don Brown, *Teedie: The Story of Young Teddy Roosevelt* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> In 1886, Roosevelt married his second wife, Edith Kermit Carow, with whom he had five children. He had one child from his first marriage.

<sup>7</sup> The White House, "Presidential Biographies, Theodore Roosevelt," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/TheodoreRoosevelt/> (accessed August 15, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Leroy G. Dorsey, "Sailing into the 'Wonderous Now': The Myth of the American Navy's World Cruise," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997): 447-465. Also see Henry J. Hendrix, *Theodore Roosevelt's Naval Diplomacy: The U.S. Navy and the Birth of the American Century* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> The White House, "Presidential Biographies, Theodore Roosevelt," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/TheodoreRoosevelt/> (accessed August 15, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Jon Paulson, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of Citizenship: On Tour in New England, 1902," *Communication Quarterly* 50 (2002): 124.

<sup>11</sup> William D. Lewis, *The Life of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: United Publishers, 1919), 439.

<sup>12</sup> For more on these rhetorical innovations, see David Ryfe, *Presidents in Culture: The Meaning of Presidential Communication* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, "Roosevelt, Theodore, and the Press: Recognized Importance of News in the Development of Public Opinion," in *History of the Mass Media in the United States: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret A. Blanchard and Carol J. Burwash (Chicago, IL: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), 596.

<sup>14</sup> Streitmatter, "Roosevelt, Theodore."

<sup>15</sup> See Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987). Also see Martin J. Medhurst, "Introduction: A Tale of Two Constructs: The Rhetorical Presidency Versus Presidential Rhetoric," *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1996), xi-xxvi.

<sup>16</sup> For more on TR's life, see H.W. Brands, *T. R.: The Last Romantic* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), and John M. Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> For more on the Gilded Age and the subsequent rise of Progressivism, see Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement, 1900-1915* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement*, 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement*, 8. Similarly, Ryfe distinguishes the rhetoric of the Progressive Era by its "essentially moralistic character." See Ryfe, *Presidents in Culture*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Leroy G. Dorsey, "Preaching Morality in Modern America: Theodore Roosevelt's Rhetorical Progressivism," in *Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era*, ed. J. Michael Hogan (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003), 53.

<sup>23</sup> J. Michael Hogan, "Introduction: Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era," in *Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era*, x.

<sup>24</sup> Hofstadter has characterized Roosevelt as a conservative masquerading as a progressive. See Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement*, 11. Also see Dorsey, "Preaching Morality," 76; and Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948), 206.

<sup>25</sup> Dorsey has argued that "The Man with the Muck-Rake" especially stands out as one of Roosevelt's "sermonic" speeches. See Dorsey, "Preaching Morality," 59.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Weinberg and Lila Weinberg, ed., *The Muckrakers* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001). Also see Fred J. Cook, *The Muckrakers: Crusading Journalists Who Changed America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972); and Herbert Shapiro, ed., *The Muckrakers and American Society* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1968).

<sup>27</sup> Cornelius C. Regier, *The Era of the Muckrakers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932), 203.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 208.

<sup>29</sup> John M. Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 60, 108.

<sup>30</sup> Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt*, 107, 108.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew A. Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Presidential Power: Unchecked and Unbalanced* (New York: Norton, 2007), 129.

<sup>32</sup> Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001), 437.

<sup>33</sup> In fact, Mark Neuzil argues that "the manifest function" of Roosevelt's "Muck-Rake" speech was "to slow Hearst politically" because he was Roosevelt's "most powerful opponent." See Mark Neuzil, "Hearst, Roosevelt, and the Muckrake Speech of 1906: A New Perspective," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73 (1996): 29.

<sup>34</sup> As quoted in, John Semonche, "Theodore Roosevelt's Muckraking Speech: A Reassessment," *Mid-America* (1964): 118.

<sup>35</sup> Neuzil, "Hearst, Roosevelt and the Muckrake Speech of 1906," 29.

<sup>36</sup> A. Craig Baird, *American Public Addresses, 1740-1952* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), 212. For more on Roosevelt's speech preparation, see William A. Behl, "Theodore Roosevelt's Principles of Speech Preparation and Delivery," *Speech Monographs* 12 (1945): 112-122.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald F. Reid and James F. Klumpp, eds., *American Rhetorical Discourse*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2005), 588.

<sup>38</sup> "Corner-Stone Put in Place: Notable Assemblage Witnesses Ceremony; President Roosevelt Makes Strong Address; New Building Will Add to Beauty of Capital," *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 1906: I4.

<sup>39</sup> "Corner-Stone Put in Place," I4.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Conrad, "The Rhetoric of the Moral Majority: An Analysis of Romantic Form," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983): 160.

<sup>41</sup> Conrad, "The Rhetoric of the Moral Majority," 160, 162.

<sup>42</sup> Conrad, "The Rhetoric of the Moral Majority," 161.

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- <sup>43</sup> Conrad, "The Rhetoric of the Moral Majority," 161.
- <sup>44</sup> Richard M. Weaver, *Language is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric*, ed. Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 224.
- <sup>45</sup> Weaver, *Language is Sermonic*, 211.
- <sup>46</sup> Weaver, *Language is Sermonic*, 88.
- <sup>47</sup> Weaver, *Language is Sermonic*, 99-100.
- <sup>48</sup> Similarly, Dorsey argues that, "Like a minister, Roosevelt preached to America about character, hoping to build a *moral* foundation for political, economic, and social progress, both at home and abroad." See Dorsey, "Preaching Morality," 51.
- <sup>49</sup> Paulson, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of Citizenship," 124.
- <sup>50</sup> Behl, "Theodore Roosevelt's Principles of Speech Preparation and Delivery," 115.
- <sup>51</sup> Leroy G. Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric: Theodore Roosevelt's Campaign for Conservation," *Western Journal of Communication* 59 (1995): 3.
- <sup>52</sup> Robert A. Bode, "President Theodore Roosevelt's Rhetoric and Symbolic Acts: Communication and Rhetorical Implications," *North Dakota Journal of Speech and Theater* 2 (1989): 32-33.
- <sup>53</sup> Leroy G. Dorsey, "Theodore Roosevelt and Corporate America, 1901-1909: A Re-Examination," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 25 (1995): 726.
- <sup>54</sup> Lynda Beltz notes the frequent references to "evil" in her essay, "Theodore Roosevelt's 'Man with the Muckrake,'" *Central States Speech Journal* 20 (1969): 101.
- <sup>55</sup> All of the remaining passages from Roosevelt's "The Man with the Muck-Rake" speech on April 14, 1906 are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the speech that accompanies this essay.
- <sup>56</sup> Book Rags, "The Pilgrim's Progress: Overview," <http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-pilgrims-progress/overview.html> (accessed August 24, 2009).
- <sup>57</sup> "Roosevelt for Tax on Wealth: Would Prevent Inheritance of Great Fortunes. Favors a Federal Law Congress Leaders Talk of a New Political Issue President on Muckrakes Condemns Indiscriminate Assaults on Public Men--Cornerstone of House Office Building Laid," *New York Times*, April 15, 1906, 1.
- <sup>58</sup> Lucas, "Theodore Roosevelt's 'Man with the Muckrake,'" 452.
- <sup>59</sup> Lucas, "Theodore Roosevelt's 'Man with the Muckrake,'" 460.
- <sup>60</sup> Jim Powell, *Bully Boy: The Truth about Theodore Roosevelt's Legacy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006).
- <sup>61</sup> "Roosevelt for Tax on Wealth," *New York Times*, 1. For more on Roosevelt's typical delivery style, see Behl, "Theodore Roosevelt's Principles of Speech Preparation and Delivery," 112-122.
- <sup>62</sup> Mark Neuzil, "Hearst, Roosevelt, and the Muckrake Speech of 1906," 36-37.
- <sup>63</sup> Neuzil, "Hearst, Roosevelt, and the Muckrake Speech of 1906," 37.
- <sup>64</sup> Burt Dragin, "Return of the Muckraker: Barbara Ehrenreich Follows in the Tradition of Investigative Journalists' Patron Saint, Ida Tarbell," *San Francisco Chronicle*,

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August 13, 2001, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2001/08/13/ED212458.DTL> (accessed September 2, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> Roosevelt exclaimed that "We stand for a living wage" in the "Address by Theodore Roosevelt before the Convention of the National Progressive Party in Chicago, August, 1912."

<sup>66</sup> For one perspective on today's progressive politics, see the Progressive Democrats for America's website at <http://pdamerica.org/index.php> (accessed September 2, 2009).

<sup>67</sup> Obama's rhetoric of responsibility is most explicitly stated in his Inaugural Address on January 20, 2009. See Barack Obama, "Inaugural Address," <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=44> (accessed September 2, 2009). Also see his 2009 federal budget plan titled, *A New Era of Responsibility: Renewing America's Promise*, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/fy2010\\_new\\_era/a\\_new\\_era\\_of\\_responsibility2.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/fy2010_new_era/a_new_era_of_responsibility2.pdf) (accessed September 2, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> For more on George W. Bush's rhetoric, see Douglas Kellner, "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the 'War on Terror'," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37 (2007): 622-645; David E. Foster, "Bush's Use of the Terrorism and 'Moral Values' Issues in his 2004 Presidential Campaign Rhetoric: An Instance of the Rhetorical Strategy of Polarization," *Ohio Communication Journal* 44 (2006): 33-60; Christian Spielvogel, "'You Know Where I Stand': Moral Framing of the War on Terrorism and the Iraq War in the 2004 Presidential Campaign," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8 (2005): 549-569; and Debra Merskin, "The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush," *Mass Communication & Society* 7 (2004): 157-175.

<sup>69</sup> For more on Roosevelt's development 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; Robert A. Kraig, "The 1912 Election and the Rhetorical Foundations of the Liberal State," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3 (2000): 363-395; and Dorsey, "Preaching Morality."