

Roosevelt Becomes President

At the age of 42, Theodore Roosevelt had accomplished more than most men would ever dare to dream. He had overcome childhood frailty with body building, had interests in every subject from art to zoology, and had been a New York state senator, Civil Service commissioner, cowboy, police commissioner, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, colonel of the Rough Riders, and governor of New York, and he was now vice president of the United States. Through it all, he had a talent for making headlines. Son of rich parents, he took an interest in the conditions of the tenement dwellers working in New York sweatshops. As Civil Service Commissioner, he demanded that the tests given to federal employees be practical for the job they were to fill. As police commissioner, he had fired policemen found sleeping on the job or drinking at bars. As the navy's second in command, he sent the orders to Admiral Dewey to attack Manila Bay in the Philippines if the United States and Spain went to war. He had thrilled the nation with his unrelenting charge up San Juan Hill, and he had angered New York politicians when he demanded social and political reform. Tom Platt, the state's Republican leader, suggested that Roosevelt be named vice president so he could no longer be governor. As vice president, Roosevelt would be forced to follow the policies of President McKinley and fall in line with the party's platforms. Mark Hanna, McKinley's closest adviser, was opposed to the idea, but the delegates to the 1900 Republican convention strongly backed Roosevelt. Even though he was not enthusiastic about the nomination, T.R. gave in to public pressure. Since McKinley was in good health, it appeared that there was little chance for Roosevelt to ever inherit the presidency, and for the first time in his life he was bored. On September 6, 1901, that would all change. While attending the Pan-American Exposition in New York, President McKinley was shot by an anarchist and died eight days later. After Roosevelt took the oath of office, Hanna remarked: "Now that damned cowboy has become President of the United States."



T.R.

When the Roosevelts and their six children moved in, the Executive Mansion suddenly became an exciting place, and for the first time, newspaper reporters were assigned to cover the president. Officially renaming the residence the White House, Roosevelt answered reporters' questions while he shaved, and he expressed opinions on many subjects. He had no use for the idle rich (whom he called "malefactors of great wealth") or radicals or the lazy. He and his children often went on romps through the woods, and he would camp with his friend, Gifford Pinchot. He also played tennis and rode horses. There was always something happening, and Roosevelt was the star.

He called the presidency a "bully pulpit" and acted even when he had no authority to do so. In 1902, coal miners went out on strike complaining that they worked ten hours a day in dangerous conditions for \$300 a year. Their leader, John Mitchell, won public support even though the nation relied heavily on coal for railroads, electricity, and the heating of homes, stores, and factories. The spokesman for the mine owners was George Baer, who refused to deal with the workers. Roosevelt persuaded the powerful banker, J.P. Morgan, to put pressure on the mine owners. A board was created to handle the problem and the workers were given a 10 percent increase in pay. T.R. said he was giving the workers a "square deal," and the phrase stuck. His enthusiasm caught on, and while many disagreed with him on issues, he made the presidency the center of national attention.

Roosevelt became convinced that the United States deserved to play a larger role in world affairs, and immediately began making major decisions. After arguments with Great Britain over the boundary of Canada and Alaska, a commission was formed with each country appointing three members. When the final line was drawn, Americans were satisfied. Like the United States, Japan was a newly emerging power, and it shared



President Roosevelt

American sensitivity to an insult. In 1904, Japan attacked Russia, and the Russo-Japanese War followed. Neither country could sustain a long conflict. By 1905, Russia had to send troops back home to put down a major uprising in Moscow, and Japan was running short on money. The Japanese asked Roosevelt to act as a mediator between the two sides, and he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

West coast sentiment against East Asians was almost as bad as southern racism against Blacks. In 1906, anti-Japanese sentiment in San Francisco led its school board to segregate all East Asian children. Roosevelt had no legal authority to override the decision. However, he worked out a deal with the school board to reverse the policy, and he would then persuade the Japanese to stop sending laborers to the United States.

The next year, Roosevelt sent the navy's battleships on a "good will" trip around the world, making a special point to visit Japan. Painted white, they were known as the "Great White Fleet," and their voyage let the world know that the United States had become a naval power second only to Great Britain.

One of T.R.'s mottos was, "Walk softly and carry a big stick." It was in Latin America that he most waved the stick. One of his great dreams was to build a canal across Central America to improve the navy's ability to move the fleet from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Several problems stood in his way: (1) We had a 1850 agreement with Great Britain promising that we would not exercise exclusive control over any canal we might build in the region. (2) Two foreign companies were already trying to build canals in the region. The New Panama Canal Company was working in Panama, and the Maritime Canal Company was working in Nicaragua. (3) While Panama was judged as the best place to locate a canal, it belonged to the country of Colombia.

The first problem was easily solved by the Hay-Pauncefote treaty in 1901 in which the British willingly gave the U.S. exclusive control over the canal. The second problem was overcome when the New Panama Canal Company lowered its asking price to construct the canal from \$109 million to a more realistic price of \$40 million. Unfortunately, Colombia refused Roosevelt's offer of \$15 million and \$250,000 a year in rent for the rights to build the canal in Panama, causing a major setback to the whole project.

On November 3, 1903, a revolution broke out in Panama City. Roosevelt ordered the American gunboat *Nashville* to the zone to block the landing of any Colombian troops within 50 miles of Panama. On November 6, the United States recognized the independence of Panama and Roosevelt gave them the same deal that had been offered to Colombia. They readily accepted the deal. T.R. denied that the United States had done anything wrong, but later he would boast: "I took the canal zone, and let Congress debate, and while the debate goes on the canal does also."

Roosevelt had paved the way for future U.S. involvement in world affairs, but his Latin American policy would also cause serious problems in the future.