



Theodore Roosevelt and American Realism

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By Colin Dueck

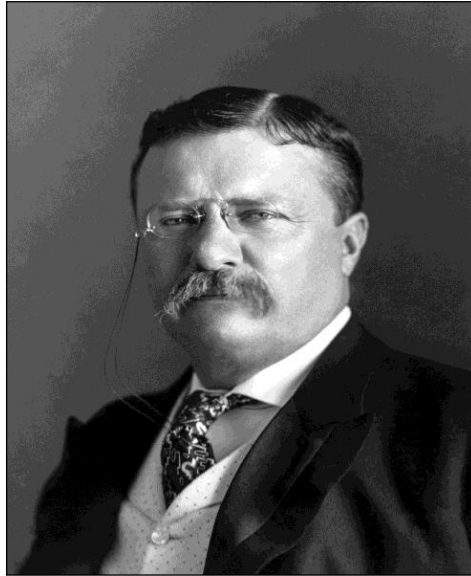
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Abstract: Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy as president was animated by a desire to see the United States play a leading role in world affairs. He utilized skillful diplomacy, energetic executive action, and credible naval capabilities to support this forward role, while avoiding strategic overextension. In Latin America, Roosevelt looked to forestall European intervention and secure U.S. predominance. In Europe and East Asia, he sought to promote regional balances of power, while working under strict constraints imposed by Congress and U.S. public opinion. In the end, Roosevelt navigated these constraints as well as international events with considerable success. His presidential tenure is a good example of American foreign policy realism in action.

From 1901 until 1909, Republican and U.S. foreign policy was under the leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt (TR). Roosevelt is generally, and rightly, understood to have championed American activism in world politics. Yet, the precise nature of that activism remains controversial. According to Henry Kissinger, TR was a realist, for whom “America was not a cause but a great power.” John Milton Cooper, on the other hand, calls Roosevelt a romantic and an idealist.¹ TR’s legacy is complicated further by the lasting impression he made as a cavalry volunteer during America’s war with Spain: a former rancher, hunter, and war hero, in love with empire and eager for battle. The great Republican strategist and Ohio Senator Mark Hanna reacted to Roosevelt’s ascension to the presidency by bemoaning the rise of “that damned cowboy.” But this image of an aggressive, bombastic Rough Rider bears little resemblance to Roosevelt’s actual foreign policy record as president—a policy characterized by considerable skill, care, and restraint.

¹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 40; and John Milton Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1985).

This practical restraint is all the more impressive, since it was obviously in tension with some of TR's personally combative instincts.²



President Theodore Roosevelt

Rough Rider

Roosevelt spent a lifetime celebrating the classical, soldierly virtues of duty, honor, and courage. His constant impulse was to demonstrate these virtues, plunge into activity and overcome limitations, like in his childhood struggle with poor health. He went to Harvard University, wrote a dozen books about American history, and worked as a rancher in the Dakota Badlands, where he gained a new appreciation for the heartland of the country. The Dakota locals were at first bemused by the bespectacled New Yorker. But they came to respect his sheer determination, and he, in turn, learned a great deal from them. One lesson from the Badlands he repeated years later is quite relevant to foreign policy: “Don’t bluster, don’t flourish your revolver, and never draw unless you intend to shoot.”³

TR became New York City police commissioner, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Governor of New York, and Vice President of the United States all at a very young age and in rapid succession. Those who met him were impressed by his

² For an especially unsuccessful attempt at retroactive psychoanalysis, see Evan Thomas, *The War Lovers: Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst, and the Rush to Empire, 1898* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 2010).

³ On TR's years in the Badlands, see William Hazelgrove, *Forging a President: How the Wild West Created Theodore Roosevelt* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery History, 2017). The best portrait of TR's public and private life before assuming the presidency remains Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 2001 edition).

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