PIVOTAL DECADES

THE UNITED STATES, 1900–1920

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Big Stick Abroad

In contrast to his restraint in domestic policy, Theodore Roosevelt conducted a vigorous, assertive foreign policy during his first three years as president. Many contemporary observers and later historians have judged these years the high-water mark of American imperialism. Roosevelt frequently proclaimed himself an unabashed, unapologetic imperialist. The baldest statement of his convictions came in his December 1904 message to Congress, in which he enunciated what he had repeatedly said privately and in secret diplomatic messages. This was his Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. "Chronic wrongdoing," he announced, "or an impotence which results in the general loosening of the ties of civilized society may in [North and South] America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the western hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrong-doing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power." Even before becoming president, Roosevelt had repeatedly offered the motto of a West African tribe, "Speak softly and carry a big stick and you will go far," as the

Roosevelt wielding the "big stick" in the Caribbean.

best guide to foreign policy. The "big stick" quickly became the emblem of his diplomacy.

Within a year of taking office, Roosevelt intervened in a major way in Latin American affairs. For several months during 1902, the president engaged in elaborate diplomatic maneuvers, partly public but mostly private, to block Germany from intervening in Venezuela to collect debts owed to German banks. Similar problems of large debts to European lenders later prompted him to exert pressures on Haiti and, starting in 1904, to establish an American financial protectorate over the Dominican Republic. Later in 1906, Roosevelt confirmed the purely formal character of Cuban independence by sending in troops to begin a three-year occupation. These actions lent substance to boasts in the United States that the Caribbean was an "American lake."

Nor did Roosevelt's settled beliefs in Anglo-American cooperation prevent him from asserting United States primacy on the North American continent. For at least a decade, Roosevelt had been convinced that Britain and the United States had no serious conflicts of national interest and instead shared a great mission as the chief representatives of the "English-speaking races." Such solidarity, however, did not stop him from pushing around the British and their former colonial dependents, the Canadians. In 1902 a long simmering dispute with Canada over the southeastern boundary of Alaska, which had been an American territory since its purchase from Russia in 1867, heated up again when new gold discoveries were reported in Alaska. The president sent additional troops to patrol the border areas claimed by the United States. The disputed lands were not rich or extensive—only a few hundred square miles of wilderness—but they seemed essential to both countries because they controlled access to the sea. Roosevelt meanwhile engaged in another bit of complicated public and private maneuvering to gain permanent cession of the territory to the United States. After repeatedly refusing arbitration, Roosevelt relented during the summer of 1903 and, with a great show of reluctance, agreed to permit an international tribunal settle the dispute. This allowed the Canadians apparently to save face, although they and the British together appointed only three judges to the panel, while the Americans also appointed three. Through his friends Senator Lodge and Justice Holmes, the president pressed the British to favor the American claims, which their representative eventually did. Although the Canadians were incensed at the outcome, Roosevelt's behind-the-scenes moves actually strengthened amity between the United States and Britain.

The single act of his presidency, in domestic and foreign affairs, for

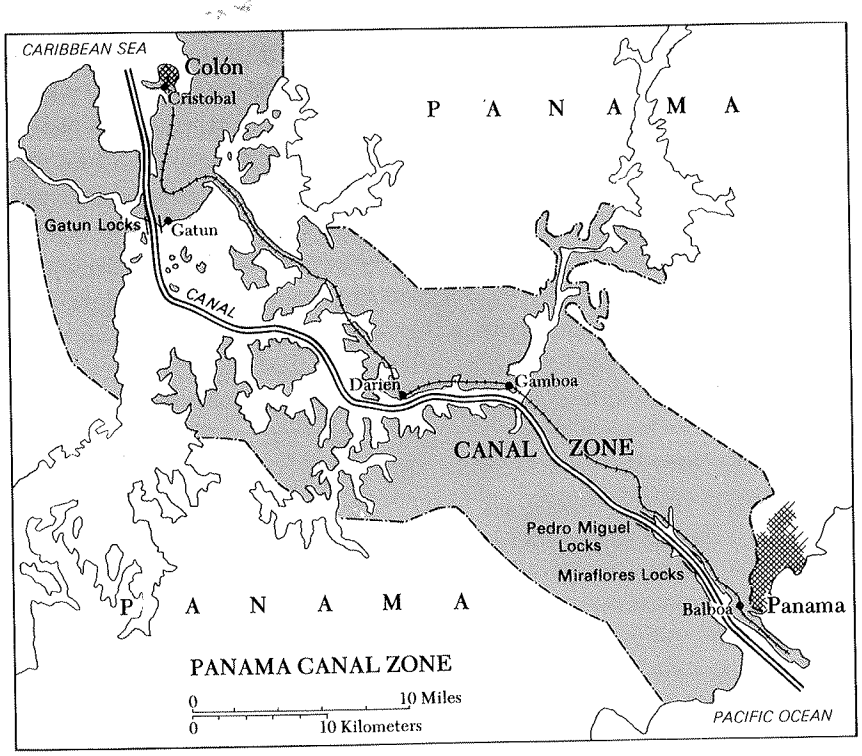
which Roosevelt always publicly professed greatest pride also came during 1903. No diplomatic move of any American president would do more to assert a dominant American stake in the Caribbean and Central America; at the same time, practically no action by any president ever did more to tarnish the United States's reputation for morality and straight dealing in the Western Hemisphere. This was Roosevelt's critical role in the armed insurrection of October 1903 that resulted in the secession of Panama from Colombia, and the cession to the United States of a swath of territory running through the middle of the new country. This territory came to be called the Canal Zone. It became the site of the inter-oceanic waterway and would remain under American rule for nearly all of the twentieth century.

Construction of a canal across Central America to link shipping on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans fulfilled a fifty-year-old American dream. Ever since the United States had expanded to the Pacific, the need had existed to shorten the time and distance required for maritime shipping between the two coasts. The California Gold Rush in 1849 and the Alaskan gold strikes in the 1890s had repeatedly shown how costly, time consuming, and dangerous it was to ship people and goods around South America's Cape Horn, or to transport them by land across the mountainous, jungled, yellow-fever-infested isthmus of Panama. The difficulties of maintaining and reinforcing fleets in the Pacific, even before the Spanish-American War, had demonstrated the strategic boon that an inter-oceanic waterway would provide to the United States Navy. Schemes for the construction of a canal had begun as early as the 1850s, and from 1879 to 1889 a French company, headed by Ferdinand de Lesseps, the builder of the Suez Canal, had tried and failed to dig a canal in Panama. This failure, together with reportedly gentler terrain and a chain of lakes in Nicaragua, prompted many canal advocates to favor a route there instead.

Diplomatic negotiations to secure a route for an American canal across Central America had dragged on for several years before 1903. The Panama route was finally chosen thanks in part to lobbying by investors in de Lesseps's company. American acquisition of the route would allow those investors not only to recoup their losses but also to realize profits of several million dollars. Further complications arose, however, when Colombia, of which Panama was then a part, refused to ratify a treaty ceding the territory and compensating the French investors. The Colombian government was holding out for a bigger payment. An infuriated Roosevelt demanded action. The United States then stationed naval vessels off the principal Panamanian ports, and

Panama's secessionist revolt swiftly followed. Troops from the American vessels helped block Colombian attempts to quell the uprising. Furthermore, the State Department recognized newly independent Panama within hours of the revolt, and already had treaties to acquire the territory for the canal prepared for signing and swift ratification. The representative of the French investors was immediately appointed the minister of newly independent Panama to the United States, and he at once signed the treaty that granted the United States the canal route under the previous terms.

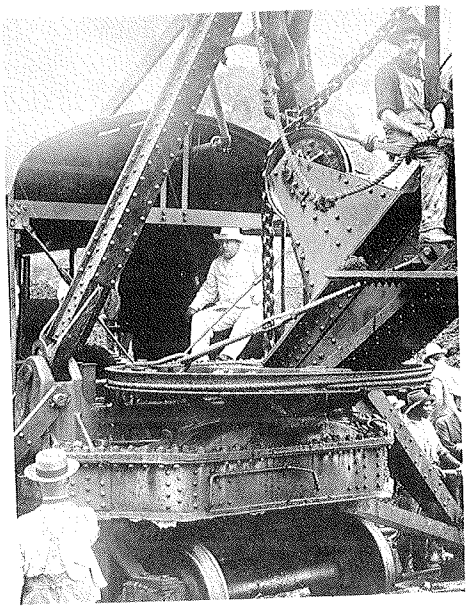
Roosevelt himself retained curiously mixed attitudes toward the Panama affair. The building of the canal, which was not completed until 1914, five years after Roosevelt left office, stood at the head of every list he made of his presidential accomplishments. This gigantic feat of engineering meshed perfectly with his appetite for grandeur and with the enthrallment of Americans and Europeans of that era with triumphs of technology. What better proof of human mastery over nature could be offered than the Panama Canal? It was a magic path between the seas that transported ships for fifty miles over mountain ranges and speeded them toward distant ports. For Roosevelt, the



emotional high point of his presidency was his trip to Panama at the end of 1906 to inspect work on the canal. On the trip he became the first president to leave the United States while in office, and he revelled at witnessing the massive earth-moving and lock-construction projects. A widely circulated photograph taken of Roosevelt showed him in a white tropical suit at the controls of a huge steam shovel. Nothing depicted him better as an empire builder.

Yet Roosevelt more than once betrayed a trace of guilt over the way the route was acquired. At the first hint of possible American collusion in the Panamanian revolt, the president issued thunderous private denials in letters and monologues to his cabinet, and he leaked his version of the story to sympathetic reporters. After leaving office, he made frequent public declarations of his righteousness, including a lengthy section in his *Autobiography*, published in 1913. "From the beginning to the end," he avowed, "our course was straightforward and in absolute accord with the highest standards of morality." Furthermore, he charged, "it is hypocrisy, alike odious and contemptible, for any man to say both that we ought to have built the canal and that

"The First Spadeful." A cartoon from the New York Herald *suggesting TR's role in securing the Panama Canal.*



Roosevelt posing at the controls of a steam shovel during his visit to the canal, 1906.

we ought not to have acted in the way we did." Those declarations, like earlier statements, had the overwrought quality that Roosevelt's language usually assumed when he was unsure of his moral ground. Elihu Root put his finger on the false note when, after a harangue to the cabinet on the subject of the canal, Roosevelt demanded to know whether he had defended himself adequately. "You certainly have, Mr. President," the secretary of state quipped. "You have shown that you were accused of seduction and you have conclusively proved that you were guilty of rape."

The activist diplomacy of Roosevelt's first term comprised more than bluster and assertiveness. Behind his overbearing public posture often lay more subtle, restrained, cautious dealings with other nations. Whereas Roosevelt bullied smaller, weaker countries, mainly in Latin America, he exercised caution and sensitivity toward nations of equal or greater power, especially in Europe. The mixed character of Roosevelt's diplomacy displayed more than an imperialist's disdain for inferiors and respect for peers. His warnings to Germany over Venezuela, acquisition of the Canal zone, and especially enunciation of the Roosevelt Corollary all sprang from a well-defined strategy of forestalling incursions by European powers in the Western Hemisphere. Roosevelt pursued that goal assiduously for the sake of both his country's security and the world's harmony and order.

With the 1904 presidential campaign on the horizon, Roosevelt

became more active still in foreign affairs. At the same time, he became more assertive on the domestic front. "Our place as a nation is and must be with the nations that have left indelibly their impress on the centuries," he declared in May 1903. At home and abroad, Roosevelt urged Americans to tread arduous paths of righteousness and challenge. "I ask that this people rise level to the greatness of its opportunities. I do not ask that it seek the easiest path."

In His Own Right

More than anything else, Theodore Roosevelt wanted to lead the American people further along the paths that he had preached, and that meant getting elected president in his own right in 1904. As a savvy professional, Roosevelt took nothing for granted. Much of his attention and energy during his first term went toward securing his nomination and election. In this, his caution served him well, as he avoided giving offense to his party's conservatives while at the same time he satisfied the insurgents.

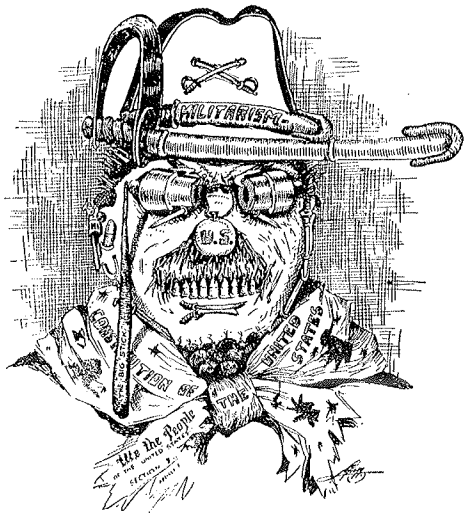
Roosevelt's intraparty maneuverings mirrored his diplomacy on the international scene. While operating quietly and subtly behind the scenes, he supplied plenty of noise and spectacle. This was mainly instinctive on his part, but Roosevelt also aimed at cultivating the press. He was attentive to reporters and editors, with whom he carefully planted leaks and floated trial balloons, and he set up the first facilities for correspondents in the White House. Roosevelt meanwhile manipulated patronage and factional rivalries to gain tight control of his party and shut out possible rivals. A stroke of personal good fortune aided him when his Republican rival, Senator Mark Hanna of Ohio, died suddenly early in 1904. By then, however, not even McKinley's old partner could have stopped the man he had once derided as a "damned cowboy."

Skill and luck conspired together to make 1904 Roosevelt's year of supreme political triumph. By the time the Republican convention met that June he had tightened his control of the party machinery and assured his nomination by acclamation. The 1904 Republican convention and campaign added little new to discussions of public issues. Roosevelt coined a catchy phrase, the "Square Deal," to advertise his program, but he avoided specifics on most issues. Bowing to precedent, he did not appear at the convention, and he followed McKinley's example by staying off the campaign trail. The president also steered clear of prov-

ocations to the party's conservative leaders. He allowed them to pick one of their own, Senator Charles W. Fairbanks of Indiana, as his running mate, and he kept the platform noncommittal on controversial issues.

The Democrats obliged Roosevelt even better than his own party did in 1904. William Jennings Bryan cheerfully stepped aside as the standard-bearer, and his followers permitted Northeastern conservatives, who had been blaming the Commoner and his faction for previous Democratic defeats, to take a turn at nominating a candidate and framing party appeals. The Democrats settled on Alton B. Parker, a little-known New York judge and party loyalist. Parker immediately repudiated previous Democratic stands on free silver and other domestic issues, but on the whole, the Democrats vied with the Republicans at ducking controversial questions. There was no mention of the currency or business-regulation issues in the Democratic platform. Only on the well-worn ground of tariff protection did the two parties take opposing positions. The Republicans rehashed the benefits to domestic jobs and wages of high tariffs on imported goods, and the Democrats once more lambasted high prices in their call for lower rates. Parker attempted to shift the focus of debate to Roosevelt himself, especially his "usurpation of authority" and thirst for "personal power." Parker also used his own conservative background and appeals to big business to try to reverse the recent ideological alignment of the two parties.

The effort failed. No noticeable defection from Roosevelt occurred among conservatives. The pro-big business, anti-reformist newspaper,

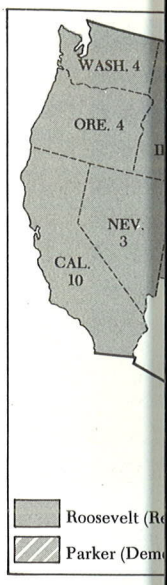


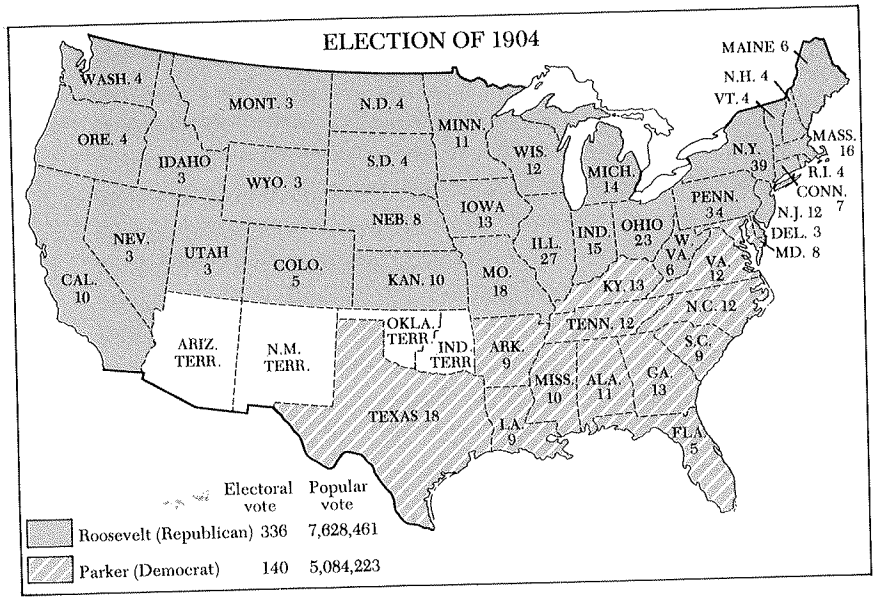
"FOR PRESIDENT!" An Atlanta Constitution *cartoon depicting the bellicose Roosevelt, 1904.*

the *New York Sun*, rationalized support for him this way: "We prefer the impulsive candidate of the party of conservatism to the conservative candidate of the party which the business interests regard as permanently and dangerously impulsive." At the same time, Parker's attempt to portray the president as an incipient radical endeared Roosevelt still more to Republican insurgents. A few of them, most noticeably Robert La Follette, already distrusted the president as a lukewarm progressive, but most of the growing company of reform Republicans harbored an uncritical devotion for him. Another leading party insurgent, George W. Norris, then a congressman and later a senator from Nebraska, recalled long afterward, "I followed Mr. Roosevelt implicitly in the liberal views that he took, and was impressed always with his sincerity and integrity." Norris even followed Roosevelt, he confessed, "when I had some doubts as to the righteousness of his course." To win the support of the *New York Sun* and of La Follette and Norris was a remarkable political feat.

Although Parker's attacks evidently changed few votes in 1904, they did have important effects in the long term. The aspersions on Roosevelt's love of power stung because they contained more than a grain of truth. Conservatives in the president's own party privately agreed with those charges. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, Joseph G. Cannon of Illinois, once reportedly joked, "Roosevelt has no more use for the Constitution than a tom cat has for a marriage license." Equally discomforting for Roosevelt were disclosures that the president's campaign managers had threatened several trust magnates with government investigations unless they contributed heavily to his campaign fund. With some exaggeration, the Democrats repeatedly charged the Republicans with "blackmailing Wall Street." Roosevelt blasted back by branding their allegations "unqualifiedly and atrociously false"—another example of his inclination toward overstatement when caught with his morals down.

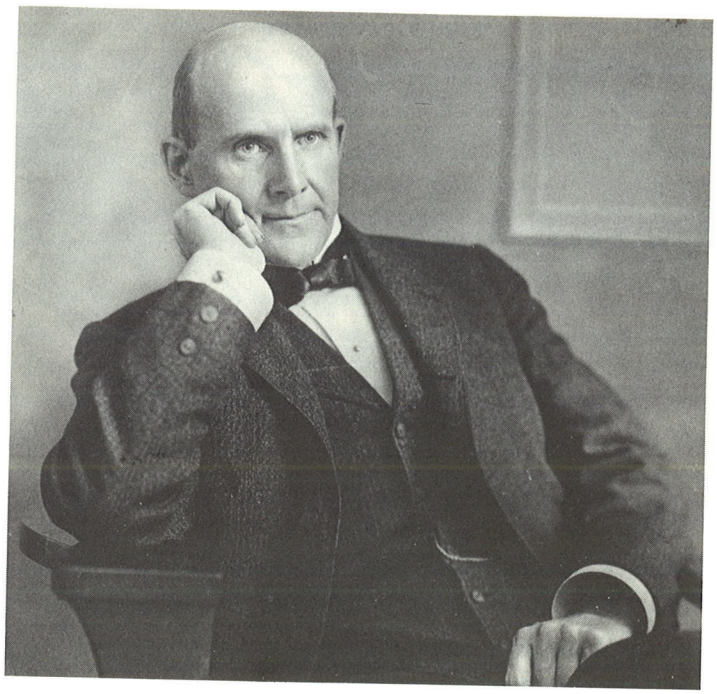
As it was, nothing could hurt Roosevelt in 1904. He won a smashing victory on November 9. He carried thirty-two states for 336 electoral votes and took the popular vote by a margin of more than two-and-a-half million, over 57 percent of the total. Turnout in 1904 fell far below that in 1900: half-a-million fewer people voted in 1904, a decline of eight points in the percentage of eligibles voting. Even so, Roosevelt bettered McKinley's showing four years earlier by more than half-a-million votes, eight percentage points of the total, and five states. Parker carried only his party's Southern strongholds, and even there the president narrowed the margins in eight states.





Further signs of trouble for the Democrats came from radical splinter parties. The reconstituted Socialist party garnered over 400,000 votes (3 percent of the total) behind their attractive candidate, Eugene V. Debs. This slender, forty-nine-year-old former railway fireman and union leader was an impressive, impassioned orator who combined infectious compassion for the downtrodden with fierce denunciations of capitalist "exploiters." Debs campaigned from a flag-draped train called the "Red Special," and his vote indicated the small but growing appeal of radical alternatives to an economic system dominated by big business. Even the moribund farmers' protest movement, the People's Party, which had been eclipsed when their platform was taken over by Bryan and the Democrats in 1896, revived to capture over 100,000 votes in the South and West, triple their 1900 showing. The Prohibitionists also gained substantially with over a quarter of a million votes, nearly 2 percent of the total.

The overwhelming endorsement by his fellow citizens moved Roosevelt deeply. On election night he issued a statement in which he observed that although he had not previously been elected he had already served nearly a full term as president. "The wise custom which limits a president to two terms," he announced, "regards the substance and not the form. Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination." Roosevelt was not speaking impulsively. He genuinely believed that no person should hold such a powerful office



Eugene Debs in 1904.

as the presidency for too long. Yet he also showed an unmistakable need to give the lie to charges that he was power hungry and to square a troubled moral conscience. His promise not to run again was one of the noblest deeds of Theodore Roosevelt's life; it was also the biggest blunder of his public career. From this promise and his steadfast adherence to it over the next four years flowed momentous consequences not only for him but for the development of twentieth-century American politics.

Roosevelt made his pledge at a critical time in his presidency. The vicissitudes of international politics had already launched him on his most significant diplomatic venture. In February 1904, war had broken out in the Far East between Russia and Japan, whose expansionist incursions met head-on in Korea and Manchuria. After sensational Japanese victories, the conflict had degenerated into a stalemate, and the ties of both belligerents to major European powers were straining the international balance of power. For several months, even while managing his nomination and election, Roosevelt conducted delicate, usually informal negotiations with half a dozen world capitals. He was

setting the stage for his greatest diplomatic coup—mediation of the Russo-Japanese War—which came in 1905. At the same time he was preparing to enunciate the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monore Doctrine, which he delivered in his annual message to Congress in December 1904, one month after the election.

Roosevelt's pledge was the prelude to equally significant domestic actions. The December 1904 message to Congress opened with observations on "the enlargement of scope of the functions of the National Government required by our development as a nation." Roosevelt also noted that "the relations of capital and labor, and especially organized capital and organized labor, to each other and to the public at large come second in importance only to the intimate questions of family life." He specifically called for further, careful investigation of labor and business conditions and for new, stronger legislation to regulate railroad rates and practices. Privately, Roosevelt hailed his election victory because, "A well-defined opinion was growing up among the people at large that the Republican party had become unduly subservient to the so-called Wall Street men—to the men of mere wealth; and of all possible oligarchies I think an oligarchy of colossal capitalists is the most narrow-minded and the meanest in its ideals. I thoroughly broke up this connection, so far as it existed." Perhaps so, perhaps not; but the president would discover that social discontent was to persist "among the people at large."