

A MAN OF VISION: THEODORE ROOSEVELT, THE AFRICAN PROVERB, AND WORLD WAR I

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As World War I erupted in Europe, Theodore Roosevelt sat down in his family home at Sagamore Hill with pen and paper and composed what would become one of his last historical works. In *America and the World War*, Roosevelt offered his opinions on the causes of the war and how American foreign policy should adapt to the volatile international environment. In assessing the global crisis, he noted “that it is necessary to be respectful toward all people and . . . refrain from wronging them, while at the same time keeping ourselves in condition to prevent wrong being done to us.”¹ Earlier in his political career Roosevelt had adopted the African proverb, “speak softly and carry a big stick,” as his mantra.² This mantra shaped both his view of the world and his foreign policy. He spoke softly in developing close personal relationships with foreign leaders to perpetuate peace while at the same time strengthening the U.S. Navy to reinforce that peace. Through this lens Roosevelt saw the decay of the European balance of power system and recognized the significance the Western Hemisphere and Asia would play in the near future. In response, he built up the U.S. Navy, established America as the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, brokered a peace in Asia, and cemented ties with Great Britain. During his presidency, Roosevelt anticipated the collapse of the existing world order that ultimately led to World War I and simultaneously prepared the nation and its Allies for victory.

Roosevelt first recognized the importance of wielding the “big stick” of the U.S. Navy at the age of twenty-four. In 1882 he wrote *The Naval War of 1812*, concluding that history’s strong empires survived because of their naval forces. In its preface he wrote that Americans were “beginning to realize that it is folly for the great English-speaking Republic to rely for defense upon a navy composed

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt: America and the World War; Fear God and Take Your Own Part* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916), 28.

² Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Modern Library Paperbacks, 2002), 185.

partly of antiquated hulks, and partly of new vessels rather more worthless than the old.”³ He further argued that the need for “an efficient navy” trumped the “cause for our keeping up a large army.”⁴ This work, which predates Alfred Thayer Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* by eight years, served as the foundation of Roosevelt’s perceived relationship between naval power and the new world order developing around him.⁵

While the majority of the content in *The Naval War of 1812* is quite technical, Roosevelt’s insights on the importance of naval power explain his world view and foreign policy. He attributed the tenure of the British Empire to its navy: “on every sea her navies rode, not only triumphant, but with none to dispute their sway.”⁶ However, cognizant of the shifting European balance of power system, he saw the decline of the British Empire relative to the growth of American power, noting that “since 1812 our strength has increased so prodigiously, both absolutely and relatively, while England’s military power has remained almost stationary.”⁷ In response to the developing naval arms race between Britain and Germany, Roosevelt, then as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, strengthened the U.S. Navy in case war erupted.⁸ While serving in this position at the end of the 19th century, he added modern cruisers, fighting vessels, and battleships to the American fleet.⁹ But Roosevelt’s beliefs of naval build-up were challenged by those eager to maintain peace at any price. Roosevelt, as both assistant secretary and president, had to contend with politicians, bureaucrats, and an American public “unwilling to prepare for war, because so many honest but misguided men believed that the preparation itself tended to bring on war.”¹⁰ Thus Roosevelt sharpened the “big stick” that he would use to reinforce his foreign policy as president and that America would later use in the Great War.

Roosevelt recognized the globalization of world affairs and pinpointed the strategic locations he would need to secure as well as the leaders with whom he needed to form both working and personal relationships. In a letter to his son Kermit the night before his nomination for a second term as President, he wrote that “[f]rom Panama down I have been able to accomplish certain things which

³ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812*, 3rd ed. (St. Clair Shores, Mich.: Scholarly Press, 1970), v.

⁴ *Ibid.*, x.

⁵ Kenneth Wimmel, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Great White Fleet: American Sea Power Comes of Age* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1998), 45.

⁶ Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812*, 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

⁸ Wimmel, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Great White Fleet*, xv.

⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1913), 226.

¹⁰ Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography*, 233.

will be of lasting importance in our history.”¹¹ Thus he understood the long term effects of his policies and how they would allow the United States to maintain its powerful identity in a rapidly changing world. Never one to focus solely on the short run, Roosevelt knew that America was approaching a crossroads at which it would have to decide how aggressive a role to play in world affairs to protect national interests.

Roosevelt’s cultured upbringing and social skills enhanced his ability to develop strong and lasting relationships with foreign heads of state and dignitaries. Because of his diverse experiences, he could find common ground with nearly everyone he met. Having grown up in an aristocratic family he was comfortable entertaining the elite, while his excursions in South Dakota and in the Spanish-American War as commander of the infamous Rough Riders Regiment made him feel at home with the average American. As a child his family embarked on two separate year long voyages across Europe, and young Roosevelt even lived with a German family long enough to learn the language and understand the culture, which later aided him in his dealing with Kaiser Wilhelm.¹² In his youth he suffered violent asthma attacks, and as a result crafted a rigorous physical fitness program to strengthen his body.¹³ For the rest of his life Roosevelt participated in a wide variety of physical challenges, frequently including his Cabinet members and foreign leaders.¹⁴ He often used these athletic events to relax with his American and foreign work partners and to draw on common interests which created a unique type of diplomatic bonds. As the ultimate embodiment of “the man’s man,” Roosevelt used masculine sportsmanship as a diplomatic tool. While most diplomacy at this time took place within the confines of executive mansions and palaces, Roosevelt departed from such conventional norms. He preferred to draw on his cultural knowledge and sing Dutch lullabies with the Minister of the Netherlands, discuss Voltaire with the French ambassador, and teach his newest jiu-jitsu moves to the Swiss Minister.¹⁵

Roosevelt pinpointed Great Britain for its diplomatic and strategic importance early on in his political career, and used his social and political savvy to create an alliance. Throughout his entire public life Roosevelt strove to cement ties with this nation, recognizing that it and the United States were destined to become allies in the new world order. As a young adult he befriended Cecil Spring Rice, a well respected British diplomat who would later become ambassador to the

¹¹ Joseph Bucklin Bishop, ed., *Theodore Roosevelt’s Letters to His Children* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919), 104.

¹² Howard K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 1.

¹³ Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1979), 60.

¹⁴ Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 46.

¹⁵ Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America*, 10-11.

United States.¹⁶ Rice also served as Roosevelt's best man at his wedding.¹⁷ These two men shared the same outlook on the international system: they "pondered together the ambitions of Germany, the destiny of Russia, and the uncertainties in the Orient, and in what best ways Great Britain and the United States, or the two nations working as one, must act to protect themselves."¹⁸ Another friend of his was George Otto Trevelyan, a British historian. As scholars of history, they understood the trend of world events and used their knowledge of the past to make sense of the present state of affairs. Their studies in history provided them with an understanding that the historical relationship between the two nations would solidify an alliance against world aggressors.¹⁹ In a June 1905 letter to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who shared the friendship of many British statesmen, Roosevelt wrote that "we intend to have the United States and England work together just as we are now working together in the Far East."²⁰ Roosevelt therefore befriended British diplomats who shared his vision of the world and solidified an alliance between the two English speaking nations, knowing that they would need each other in the event of global conflict.

However, Roosevelt also recognized that any alliance would be worthless if he did not bring America to a position of strength in its own region. Always an ardent patriot and nationalist, he embraced the Manifest Destiny ideology. The earliest proof of this lies in his multi-volume work, *The Winning of the West*. This series is filled with passionate language that echoes the Manifest Destiny ideology, the Monroe Doctrine, and a patriotic and nationalistic fervor which argued that America had the right and duty to expand its influence and dominance, at least in the Western hemisphere. This style of thinking became characteristic of Roosevelt and served as an additional foundation for his understanding of the world. In an address to the First Session of the 57th Congress in 1902, he stated that "[t]he Monroe Doctrine should be the cardinal feature of foreign policy" and that it was "the one sure means of securing the peace of the Western Hemisphere."²¹ As Roosevelt watched order give way to instability across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, he ensured that the United States maintained its dominance in the Western Hemisphere, immune from any European or Asian conflict that could seep into the region.

¹⁶ Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, 371.

¹⁷ Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography*, 36.

¹⁸ David H. Burton, "Theodore Roosevelt and His English Correspondents: A Special Relationship of Friends," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 63, no. 2 (1973): 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁰ *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge 1884-1918* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 138.

²¹ *Addresses and Presidential Messages of Theodore Roosevelt 1902-1904* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 321, 324.

In order to protect U.S. autonomy in the Western hemisphere, Roosevelt proactively worked to establish naval bases in Cuba and the Philippines as well as a cable to Hawaii that would augment communications with China.²² Before rising to the presidency he had supported the use of military force in Cuba and the Philippines, and argued for the annexation of Hawaii.²³ Now that these islands were under U.S. control, Roosevelt sought to make use of them in defending the hemisphere's perimeter from European and Asian powers. Once in office he expedited the process of obtaining a canal in Panama that would allow for passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.²⁴ Additionally, he arbitrated a crisis in Venezuela over unpaid debt to Britain and Germany, narrowly avoiding war with the Kaiser.²⁵ This event did much to solidify Anglo-America relations, as Britain acquiesced to American dominance in the Western Hemisphere.²⁶

Roosevelt also turned his eyes towards affairs beyond the Western Hemisphere. His settlement of the Russo-Japanese War serves as one of the best manifestations of his diplomatic savvy and his intuitions that projected an imminent global conflict like World War I. On February 8, 1905, Japan attacked Russia's naval fleet at Port Arthur in response to Russian aggression in Manchuria and Korea.²⁷ Within days Japan had annihilated most of the Russian fleet but Russia displayed no signs of surrender; the latter was determined to expand.²⁸ The world watched as the war dragged on and took its toll on both sides. Roosevelt, aware of the rising power of these two Far East nations, decided to intervene. On May 31, he extended an invitation to the belligerents to join in peace negotiations directed by the United States.²⁹ As he dealt with Russian and Japanese leaders, he also consulted the dignitaries of France, Great Britain, and Germany, each of which had an alliance with one of the belligerents.³⁰ In doing so he maintained his broad and all encompassing view of world affairs, fully understanding that events in Asia created ripple effects in Europe as a result of these entangling alliances. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth on September 5.³¹ After months of deliberation neither side was too pleased with the results, but both belligerents acknowledged his fairness during the negotiations.³² Had he not

²² *Ibid.*, 140-141, 319-320, 413.

²³ Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, 456, 526, 718.

²⁴ Douglas Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 575.

²⁵ Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America*, 145.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁷ Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 311.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 312.

²⁹ *Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge*, 139.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

³¹ Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior*, 618.

³² *Ibid.*

thought that Japan and Russia's military might and expansionist desires would shape future world events, Roosevelt would not have had the same sense of urgency to intervene.

During his presidency Roosevelt could not predict exactly when and where a world war would erupt, but he detected warning signs and calculated how to best protect America from foreign threats. While many Americans clamored for isolationism and peace at any cost, Roosevelt remained realistic and rational. In his autobiography he wrote, "[j]ustice among the nations of mankind . . . can be brought about only by those strong and daring men who with wisdom love peace, but who love righteousness more than peace."³³ This mindset guided him in his more aggressive actions like building up the navy and advocating intervention in Cuba and the Philippines; he knew that these actions, as the "big stick," would successfully ensure peace for the nation. But Roosevelt also developed "softer" approaches to diplomacy by cultivating personal relationships with foreign statesmen. With this carrot and stick approach he distanced the dangerous volatility of the international system from the Western Hemisphere and arbitrated disputes. Roosevelt's vision, intuition, and adherence to the African proverb guided him in shaping and implementing policies that anticipated large-scale world conflict and prepared America and its allies for victory in that fight.

³³ Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography*, v.