

• T H E •

WARRIOR

A N D T H E

PRIEST

Woodrow Wilson
and Theodore Roosevelt



JOHN MILTON COOPER, JR.

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Designed by Gwen Frankfeldt

To my father,
who introduced me to
the greatest sport in the world,
American politics

Preface

WOODROW WILSON AND THEODORE ROOSEVELT shaped the American presidency and altered the course of politics in the United States. Following a line of lackluster chief executives, they reinvigorated the office and thereby redefined the contours of political life. Both men were exceptionally gifted and resourceful; both were learned in theory and accomplished in the practice of democratic government. Their deep and sophisticated understanding of major issues and their success in bringing those issues before the public enabled them to leave a lasting imprint on history.

As presidents, they seized upon and expanded three powerful aspects of the office—public dramatization, education of the people, and party leadership. Theodore Roosevelt made himself the first truly contemporary American president by dramatizing himself through the mass journalistic media. He owed his rise to the fame he had gained through well-cultivated press coverage of his exploits as a reformer, rancher, hunter, police commissioner, war hero, and engaging personality. Exuberant and expansive, he epitomized the enjoyment of power. Roosevelt exploited the public dimensions of all his roles and offices with zest and skill. He capitalized upon the opportunities for public persuasion afforded by the presidency, which he called a “bully pulpit.” More important still, his overwhelming personal popularity gave him a power base apart from his party and other more traditional sources of support and restraint. That feat made him the progenitor of what has since been labeled the “imperial presidency.”

To contemporary observers and later interpreters, Woodrow

Wilson as president appeared to offer a sharp contrast to Roosevelt. Disciplined and controlled, he seemingly embodied a less joyful exercise of power. He pursued a more conventional style of politics with resourceful single-mindedness. Yet Wilson greatly admired Roosevelt and imitated some of his practices, especially in public persuasion. No president has spoken more often to Congress, and few have made more frequent direct appeals to the people. Fittingly for one who had been a professor and university president, Wilson regarded education of the public as the most important ingredient in political leadership. Further, acting as what he called a "prime minister," he worked through his party organization to draft, implement, and defend legislation. No president since has wrought such legislative and administrative achievements within the first term of his presidency. His accomplishments in educating the public and leading his party made Wilson one of the ablest practitioners of the dynamic presidency.

Roosevelt's and Wilson's most significant contributions lay in shaping the major ideological dimensions of twentieth-century politics. They lived in a critical period of partisan and ideological conflicts over issues arising from a newly industrial society and from involvement in power politics abroad. Roosevelt inherited from William McKinley a pro-capitalist Republican party, which he tried unsuccessfully to redirect toward a more nationalistic, less materialistic brand of conservatism. His failure had major consequences for Republicans and conservatives. Wilson inherited from William Jennings Bryan a reformist Democratic party, which he refined and solidified as a coalition of less advantaged groups seeking to advance their interests through the welfare state. His success had lasting consequences for Democrats and liberals. The criticism and dissent that the two men generated stimulated the development of other ideological positions. Pro-business and limited-government conservative doctrines at home and resistance to commitments overseas, often dubbed isolationism, developed apart from and largely in opposition to Wilson's and Roosevelt's policies.

In world affairs Theodore Roosevelt became the first president to act self-consciously as the leader of a great power, and he was a tireless evangelist for international activism. Woodrow Wilson also became an advocate of international involvement and world leadership, but he pursued a more pacific vision. He enlisted his party's

overwhelming support and led the Democrats in a direction on foreign policy that they almost certainly would not have taken otherwise. In foreign affairs the conflicts between these men established durable but complicated patterns of support and opposition. Although Wilson and Roosevelt both favored greater international involvement, their personal and philosophical differences ruled out cooperation during their lifetimes. Only a generation after their deaths, with the renewed international crises of World War II, did advocates of their respective views join forces to advance programs of world leadership and collective security. In the 1930s and 1940s Franklin Roosevelt gained much of his success at home and abroad because he could draw upon and partially fulfill the domestic and foreign policy legacies of both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

These presidents were uniquely gifted to preside over the greatest transformation in American politics in the last century. In their early careers there was an uncanny congruence in their attitudes toward contemporary issues and approaches to politics, but by the time Wilson entered active politics in 1910, the two men had become rivals for leadership. When they ran against each other for president two years later, they were formidable antagonists. Over the next seven years—until Roosevelt's death and Wilson's physical and political collapse—their conflict engaged them so deeply and ranged so broadly that it has been compared to the clash of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical embodiments of the Will-to-Power, the Warrior and the Priest. Like Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton a century earlier, neither Wilson nor Roosevelt could have developed fully in his politics without the other as a foil. Out of their confrontations—first principally over domestic reform and later increasingly over foreign policy—emerged a series of passionately intense, wide-ranging, and philosophically rich debates about the purposes and directions of American and world politics. Except at a few points during the pre-Civil War controversies over slavery and sectionalism, the United States had not witnessed such a conflict since the days of Jefferson and Hamilton.

The apparent contrasts between the political personalities of these two men have made it tempting to ascribe their beliefs and actions mainly to psychological factors. Inner drives did have major effects on their public careers, but the two men and their conflicts

should not be viewed solely or primarily in terms of psychological compulsions. Social background, party circumstances, and political thought were more important influences on each of them. Two labels frequently applied to them—Roosevelt's affirmation of national self-interest, or "realism," and Wilson's pursuit of transcendent ideals, or "idealism"—are misleading and require further refinement. In foreign affairs Roosevelt often did welcome strife, and he frequently stressed practical limitations on diplomatic commitments. By the same token, Wilson did strive to reform international affairs in a more peaceful direction, and he justified his policies with exalted rhetoric that appealed to moral and religious values. But categorizing Roosevelt as a realist and Wilson as an idealist is a half-truth. In domestic affairs the two men professed to reverse these positions; in foreign affairs they were by no means polar opposites. In both realms Roosevelt continually proclaimed himself an idealist, appealed in even more exalted terms than Wilson to transcendent values, and scorned Wilson as the opposite of idealistic—as narrow, timid, and selfish. In both realms Wilson extolled what he called "expediency," argued for patience and caution, and rejected Roosevelt's approach as wrong-headedly and excessively idealistic—as quixotic and deluded. Wilson and Roosevelt were fathers of opposing schools of domestic and foreign policy, but their conflict was much more complicated and ran far deeper than a clash between realism and idealism. Their thought and actions exposed the deeper meanings behind their contemporaries' responses to the chief issues of the industrial age and shaped American and world politics for generations to come.

The stakes involved in understanding these men and their places in history are high. They brought a depth and sophistication to the exercise of power and to public debate that have had no equal in the United States in more than a century. Altogether, their contributions and conflicts made Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt the most significant presidents and political leaders since the Civil War.

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THE DUDE AND THE PROFESSOR

The idea that a Harvard-trained dude could make a career in the rough-and-tumble of politics appeared ludicrous, and it seemed equally unlikely that such a plunge could be taken by a middle-aged professor with no practical experience in government. Yet such was the force of each man's personality and such the force of his vision that each somehow made men and events serve his purpose, and the dude and the professor became respectively the twenty-sixth and twenty-eighth Presidents of the United States.

Henry W. Bragdon
*Woodrow Wilson:
The Academic Years*

THEODORE ROOSEVELT AND WOODROW WILSON followed different but parallel paths during the first forty years of their lives. They were born within two years of each other, Wilson on December 29, 1856, and Roosevelt on October 27, 1858. Each grew up in a family that felt the strain of divided loyalties during the Civil War. Those strains and the aftermath of the Civil War had profound effects on each man's later political views and career. But the most profound influence of their early lives on their engagement with politics was a shared personal circumstance.

Both Roosevelt and Wilson had heroic childhoods. As boys, they struggled to overcome handicaps that threatened to bar them from the adult roles they longed to play. For each youth the strongest outside influence toward overcoming his handicaps came from his father. Those struggles helped shape their views toward politics. The two young men received bachelor's degrees from leading colleges in succeeding years, Wilson from Princeton in 1879 and Roosevelt from Harvard in 1880. Each subsequently tried his hand briefly at the law. During the 1880s both drifted a bit before beginning their ascents, which took them to the peaks of their respective professions shortly after the turn of the twentieth century.

The peaks they climbed exposed the biggest divergence in their lives before 1900. Roosevelt became president of the United States in September 1901; Wilson became president of Princeton University in June 1902. Roosevelt went further sooner, and he triumphed at the calling that had originally attracted Wilson. From the time of his graduation from Harvard, Roosevelt was in the thick of politics

with almost no interruptions. His career had a few fits and starts, but he sought and held ever-higher offices and won growing fame and honor. In contrast, Wilson renounced his youthful yearning for active politics and entered academic life. He established himself as a renowned analyst and commentator on politics and government and a widely regarded public speaker, but he remained essentially a spectator and bystander. The divergence in their careers and the differences in their sectional backgrounds and party allegiances were obviously significant, yet the two men differed surprisingly little in their views on major public issues and in their basic approaches to politics during the first four decades of their lives.

Knickerbocker and Gray

BY THE TIME HE BECAME PRESIDENT in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt had already begun to enjoy the legend of the most famous childhood in American history. Like Abraham Lincoln's, his boyhood served as a legendary example to American youth. He, too, had overcome adversity and in the process had built the character that led him to achieve the world's greatest honor and success. Unlike Lincoln, however, Roosevelt basked in his legend during his lifetime and played the main part in its creation. As his friend and sympathetic critic Lewis Einstein observed, Roosevelt consistently skewed accounts of his early life to make himself appear as much of an ordinary person as possible. Although he did not magnify his handicaps or disadvantages, he did downplay his special gifts and advantages. Roosevelt acted in part to inspire the nation's youth. By insisting, as he always did, that his accomplishments had sprung from effort and perseverance, not from inborn or inherited superiority, he could urge others to emulate him. The Roosevelt legend did provide an inspiration to American youth, particularly boys, and it also proved politically profitable for him.¹

Roosevelt needed to make himself seem ordinary because he plainly was not. Two glaring distinctions, one intellectual, one social, marked him from birth. Abundant evidence attests to his gifted, capacious mind. From earliest childhood he showed a voracious, intense appetite for learning. After learning his letters, he became a reader of awesome speed and trancelike absorption. By all accounts, too, his memory bordered on the phenomenal. His parents evidently approved of and indulged their son's studies, and

their wealth and position allowed him the advantages of travel and education and assured him a level of cultivated taste. The boy demonstrated his intellectual bent by the time he was nine by becoming a dedicated amateur zoologist. His original ambition, which he did not abandon until midway through college, was to be a scientist. Clearly, Roosevelt had a mind that set him apart from his contemporaries and even from most presidents.

His other inborn distinction was social. On both sides his family had occupied positions of eminence for several generations. The Roosevelts were Knickerbockers, descendants of the early Dutch settlers. His father, Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., a successful importer and glass merchant, belonged to the innermost circle of New York society. He became a millionaire when he inherited his share in Theodore's grandfather's estate when the boy was twelve. Theodore's mother, Martha, or "Mittie," Bulloch Roosevelt, came from one of the leading families of Georgia. The Bullochs had long supplied their state and nation with military officers, judges, and legislators, and they had owned vast plantations worked by hundreds of slaves. In the Civil War the Bullochs' Doric-pillared mansion near Atlanta was looted though not destroyed. The family had already lost its fortune, and two of Mittie's brothers, who had fought for the Confederacy, went into exile in England. In contrast, Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., continued to prosper after the Civil War. In 1873, when they returned from a second extended tour of Europe, he moved the family into an elegantly appointed new home just off Fifth Avenue in Manhattan's most fashionable neighborhood.

But Theodore Roosevelt's childhood also had a dark side, which provided the occasion for his heroism. None of the four Roosevelt children, two boys and two girls, escaped some form of physical disability. Theodore, the older son, suffered from severe asthma and a nervous digestive system. He was nearsighted and belatedly began wearing glasses when he was thirteen. Weak and sickly, bookish and bespectacled, the youthful Roosevelt was almost a caricature of the pampered, protected rich boy. "I was nervous and timid," he later recalled, and he might have remained so except for a remarkable personal transformation. Starting when he was eleven, he pursued a five-year regimen of exercise and outdoor activity that made his body strong and robust. His asthma, which almost certainly had psychosomatic aspects, gradually subsided,