

THE REPUBLICAN ROOSEVELT



JOHN MORTON BLUM
SECOND EDITION

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ROOSEVELT

Second Edition

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PREFACE AND PROLOGUE TO THE SECOND EDITION

On the dedicatory page of the first of eight volumes of *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, 1951–1954), Elting E. Morison, the perceptive editor of those letters, quoted two comments of Roosevelt's about history and then, borrowing from them, dedicated the volumes "to those historians who try, from the facts of all sorts and kinds collected here, to construct ideas of their own that will have meaning for their own times; who seek as they write to make these ideas clear to the vision of others." In the ensuing quarter century Morison's hope has materialized. *The Letters* in that time have made his vision clear to others, and they have provided both a basis and a force for the historical reassessment of Roosevelt and of his era that has had particular meaning for American culture and politics in the period since World War II.

One early product of Morison's influence and inspiration was this book, *The Republican Roosevelt*, first published in 1954. As associate editor of *The Letters*, I spent substantially all of every working day for six years in the ambience of both the editor and the author. The original text of my resulting book, here reprinted exactly as it first appeared, elaborated certain themes that seemed to me inherent alike in the "facts of all sorts and kinds" that we examined and in the significance that we collectively attributed to them. There developed an essential identity between the process of editing the letters and of writing the book.

Since 1954, other historians have reached conclusions about Theodore Roosevelt and his times that reflect the continuing impact of *The Letters*, which is to say of Roosevelt himself, as well as the

ongoing effort to understand him and his contemporaries in the context of recent American public policy. The interpretations of my professional colleagues, often at variance with my own, nevertheless reveal our common interest in the central questions this book addressed, questions that neither Roosevelt in his day nor we in ours could properly ignore. This new preface provides an appropriate place for some reconsideration of my earlier comments about Roosevelt and of the issues he faced.

As Roosevelt observed the increasing consolidation of American economic institutions, of large corporations especially but also of labor unions and, in lesser measure, of farmers' associations, he identified consolidation as a central phenomenon of American industrialization; a crucial device by which individuals, managers in particular, attempted to impose stability on their environments; a portentous development in the concentration and reallocation of power in American society, and consequently of power in American politics. From his acute and prescient observations he concluded that the federal government, especially the President, had to exercise a superior, directive power that he believed the Constitution permitted. As he saw it, failure to use the executive power to effect change, to contain assertive wealth and to protect its victims, would invite militant dissent, even revolution—prospects that he dreaded. He proposed to preserve American capitalism as it was evolving by controlling it, by preventing its excesses and tempering its injustices. He was an activist but a gradualist, a reformer because he was essentially a conservative.

By and large so were the legions of American progressives, though they were probably never a majority of all Americans. Progressives emerged from all walks of life, from among patricians, enterprisers, industrial and agricultural workers of sundry ethnic backgrounds, and they joined each other in shifting coalitions in pursuit of various, often contradictory causes. With Roosevelt, these progressives shared the dominant sense of what their generation defined as moral social behavior, and they made that morality the basis for their understanding of social justice. Their moralism

recommended the kind of reform directed to the improvement of the existing, but presumably resilient, social, economic, and political system.

Of the dominant strains of progressivism, Roosevelt rejected that which proposed nostalgically to revivify the social and personal arrangements of a simpler, more agrarian past by reducing the size and growth of the giant institutions of advanced industrial capitalism. Instead he embraced those institutions, so long as they operated constructively, while he also attempted through government to impose upon them the virtues of that beguiling past. That effort entailed the clarification of two obvious ambiguities. Roosevelt believed in a responsible citizenry, to be sure now a polyglot citizenry affected as men had always been by the inherent presence of evil and susceptibility to demagoguery, but nevertheless educable, like the yeomen of the past in democratic reasonableness and decency. He believed that citizenry capable of selecting and entitled to elect its governors. Yet he also believed that those governors had themselves to be, or had alternatively to appoint, trained managers of superior talent to discharge the growing responsibilities of government. Woodrow Wilson was to assert that "free men need no guardians." Roosevelt held that free men needed expert and responsive guardians in order to preserve their freedom. He resolved the ambiguity implicit in the conception of a democratic meritocracy by assuming that the common people, left to their own devices, would freely elect him. He was, he felt, their kind of man, their champion, though as a politician he took pains to remind them of his availability.

Roosevelt was also dedicated to the virtues of the rural America of his forebears, to hard work, self-control, duty, honesty, sobriety, bravery, to the sum of qualities he called character. Yet he was confidently proud of the America of blast furnaces, transcontinental railroads, burgeoning cities and expanding productivity, a country that even in his youth had passed metamorphosis. In that altered America, a place of new ideas as well as of new power, old virtues, especially in the perceptions of the avant garde, had begun to seem

at once quaint and irrelevant. Roosevelt sensed and denied those perceptions. He also felt the tension created by the skewered relationship between the values of his fathers and the world of his sons. That anxiety he dispelled by an act of faith not in some particular condition of society but in one particular process of living, what he called the vigorous life, a life of strenuous engagement. He described that life most often in masculine metaphors. The explorer, the homesteader, the cowboy, the iron molder, and emphatically, too, the author, the lawyer, and the executive, achieved, in this view, an equal dignity, so long as each executed his task gladly and manfully, so long as each also discharged his duties as husband, father, and citizen.

The foregoing propositions, explicit or implicit in Roosevelt's letters, as in less striking a manner in much of the rest of the extensive literature of the progressive era, determined the direction of the argument of this book. A critical recognition of the same propositions has come also to constitute something of an historical consensus, at least for the while, about the content and limitations of progressivism, a consensus to which a dozen or more scholars, each in his own way, has contributed his original part or twist or weighting. So, for one example, George E. Mowry has stressed the importance of the progressive sense of social justice for the architecture of reform. The moralism of the progressives, their elitism, and their proclivity for voluntaristic organization provided the bases for the elegant analysis of Richard Hofstadter. Samuel P. Hays has remarked the concern of the progressives' generation with efficiency and the elite nature of progressive leadership. Gabriel Kolko has recorded his case for interpreting progressive legislation as the product of collusion between big business with its need for stability and sympathetic federal officers, Roosevelt included. Yet there is no need to postulate collusion to identify the affinity of understanding between Roosevelt and some masters of industrial consolidation. Robert H. Wiebe has noted the divisions of purpose within the business community as well as the importance to progressives and their contemporaries, especially men of business, of social and economic

stability.* Those able and influential historians, whatever their disagreements with each other and with me, have found in Roosevelt and progressives of his stripe an informing impulse to discipline the uncertainties of American life by imposing upon it the related conditions that Brooks Adams prescribed before any of us were born—the conditions he defined as the objectives of modern business: consolidation, stability, and control. The prerequisite for that imposition was power, the power of high public office, which Roosevelt never feared to seek, to expand, and to use.

His use of that power to impose his definitions of order and morality on the foreign relations of the United States has also commanded the attention of historians, who agree substantially about what he did but not about its merit. *The Letters* again reveal the nature of his definitions. Rarely capricious, they were so arbitrary and self-serving as to occasion, even in his own time, grave reservations about the place he gave to power in any of his preferred social or political configurations. Roosevelt's contemporaries continually questioned his recourse, even when gentle, to power politics, and his intercessions, even when brief, in the affairs of small nations. Since that time, similar expedients have reached proportions of disaster beyond even Roosevelt's imagination. So, too, his disrespect, even disdain, while President for either public or congressional opinion about foreign policy set precedents, by no means his alone, that have had consequences he should have but did not foresee. Those consequences have generated current doubts about his conception as much as his use of power.

Yet as much as Roosevelt believed in power, he also believed in restraint, though he did not always exercise it, and in the obligation

* The references above are to Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1958); Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955); Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (Cambridge, 1959) and *The Response to Industrialism* (Chicago, 1957); Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism* (New York, 1963) and *Railroads and Regulation, 1877-1916* (Princeton, 1965); and Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform* (Cambridge, 1962) and *The Search for Order: 1877-1920* (New York, 1967).

of those who held political power to return it periodically and unconditionally to the whole people from whom it emanated. Indeed his lifelong involvement with the pursuit and use of power gave him an understanding of it that he expressed, at his best, with enviable subtlety and sophistication. So attest the titles and the focus of the outstanding full-length and short biographies of Roosevelt published since *The Letters*—William Harbaugh, *Power and Responsibility: The Life and Times of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1961) and G. Wallace Chessman, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Power* (Boston, 1969).

The authors of those biographies had the benefit, as the editors of *The Letters* did not, of access to the intimate diaries of Roosevelt's youth. His daughter, Alice Longworth, first opened those diaries, now deposited at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., for the inspection of Carleton Putnam while he was writing *Theodore Roosevelt, The Formative Years, 1858–1886* (New York, 1958). Since then, the papers of Eleanor Roosevelt, closed until after her death, have become available at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York. In that collection there are telling family letters, first utilized by Joseph P. Lash in his *Eleanor and Franklin* (New York, 1971), that enhance what *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* suggested about the private side of Roosevelt. His private experience led him, as the prologue that follows tries to explain, just as did his public experience, to his guiding judgments about morality and self-discipline, the essential conditions, as he interpreted them, both for the good life and for access to the power he sought and enjoyed. The prologue owes much to the work of Putnam and Lash, as well as to the sources cited along with their work.

* * * * *

Theodore Roosevelt was born in 1858, the second child of parents who provided him and his siblings with the advantages of their station and the support of their love. Younger than his sister Anna, he was older than his constant childhood playmates, his brother Elliott and his sister Corinne.

Their mother, Martha Bullock Roosevelt, with her dark hair and "moonlight-white" complexion, her melodious southern voice and her vivacious southern charm, adored her family as they adored her. Corinne recalled her mother's devotion "which wrapped us round as with a mantle"; Elliott thought of her as his "sweet little China Dresden" mother; Anna spoke of her "darling little mother's exquisite beauty"; Theodore referred to her as his "sweet Motherling." That she was, but she was also incapable of discharging even the limited duties expected of ladies of her breeding. "I never exactly keep my appointments," she wrote in a coy understatement of her constant tardiness. She could neither manage her household nor keep its accounts, tasks that her husband turned over to Anna when she was only fourteen. Martha Roosevelt was compulsively clean, given to taking two baths—one for washing and one for rinsing, eager to shield her person from dirt, even her knees while she prayed. Her health, in the phrase of her children and their day, was "delicate," but she was sufficiently robust to enjoy travel and parties and riding. If she was neurotic, her family never said so. Except as a loving wife and mother, no small role, she was simply ineffective.

"Don't be too hard on me," Martha Roosevelt once wrote her husband. Her older son was not. He never criticized his mother, and like the rest of her children, even before his fathers' death, he felt protective toward her. Obviously he recognized her inadequacies. Throughout his life he kept his appointments, managed his affairs, and let neither sweat nor dirt stay in the least his exuberant adventures. He may also have felt subconsciously about her, as he came to conclude openly about so many others, that her failures—at best her idiosyncracies—stemmed from the want of strength and the will to expunge them. In that event hers was a flawed character, a possibility he would have been loathe to admit even to himself.

Roosevelt's father, in contrast, provided the example of character and purpose that his son strove always and ardently to emulate. Theodore Roosevelt Sr., a patrician and sophisticate, was gregarious, at home with nature, a devout Christian who witnessed through his good works, a "fine disciplinarian," and a steady support for his children. His young son Theodore, "sickly, delicate,"

asthmatic, found relief in the arms of his father who often walked him for hours at night until the boy's breathing became regular again. Whether or not the asthma was psychogenic, the method of relief was effective. So was the sympathetic discipline. "You have the mind," the father told his frail and precocious eleven-year-old, "but you have not the body . . . You must *make* your body." And the boy, as the story was later told, set his jaw and answered: "*I'll make my body*"; and he did. His father, Theodore Roosevelt recalled in his autobiography, "was the best man I ever knew," and "the only man of whom I was ever really afraid."

"I never knew anyone who got greater joy out of living than did my father," Roosevelt also wrote, "or anyone who more wholeheartedly performed every duty; and no one whom I ever met approached his combination of enjoyment of life and performance of duty." (Roosevelt's own children were to say much the same of him.) He was not gilding his recollections. While he was at Harvard he wrote his father that "I am *sure* that there is no one who has a father who is also his best and most intimate friend, as you are mine." When the elder Roosevelt died of cancer less than two years later, his son recorded in his diary his "dull, inert sorrow." In a letter to a friend, he described the few days after his father's death as "a hideous dream. Father has always been so much with me that it seems as if a part of my life had been taken away." He would still "*feel* his presence," he told his sister. He always felt it, because of his love and, as he suggested, perhaps because of his fear. That presence instructed him to go on, in spite of his sorrow, with his studies. It instructed him to control his feelings and to control himself as he had taken control of his body.

The descent from love and joy to loss and grief must rend the human heart. When his father died, Roosevelt responded with an act of the will that blocked the enervation that he, like his father, would have called weak and maudlin, the anger that he had learned to restrain. That response must have cost him more than he was conditioned to recognize or to confess. Because it was for him the right response, he would not count the cost, even when life dealt him another, more shocking blow.

Roosevelt was beginning his junior year at Harvard when he "first saw her . . . and loved her as soon as I saw her sweet, young face." She was Alice Lee, the seventeen year old daughter of a prominent Boston family, a young woman in Roosevelt's eyes "beautiful in face and form, and lovelier still in spirit." Her many beaux agreed but fell away as Roosevelt pressed his courtship until Alice agreed to be his bride. "I am so happy that I dare not trust my own happiness," he then wrote. ". . . It was nearly eight months since I had first proposed to her, and I had been nearly crazy during the past year . . . How she, so pure and sweet and beautiful, can think of marrying me I cannot understand, but I praise and thank God it is so."

They were married on October 27, 1880, in the autumn following his graduation, on his twenty-second birthday. She was just nineteen. After a delayed honeymoon, they set up housekeeping in New York City. Her gracefulness won the affection not only of their friends but also of his less polished new companions in the New York State Assembly. In 1884, expecting her first child, Alice moved in with her mother-in-law, and since the assembly was in session, awaited the weekend visits of her doting husband. On February 12, 1884, her child was born, a girl, also Alice, and at first the mother seemed well. But when Roosevelt, who left Albany in high spirits upon receiving the news, arrived at his home, Alice, a victim of Bright's disease, could barely recognize him. She died that night. Earlier within the day, by an awful coincidence, so had Roosevelt's mother.

"We spent three years of happiness," Roosevelt wrote in his memorial to Alice, "such as rarely comes to man or woman . . . As a flower she grew, and as a fair young flower she died. Her life had been always in the sunshine . . . None ever knew her who did not love and revere her for her bright, sunny temper and her saintly unselfishness. Fair, pure, and joyous as a maiden; loving, tender and happy as a young wife; when she had first become a mother, when her life seemed to be but just begun . . . by a strange and terrible fate, death came to her. And when my heart's dearest died, the light went from my life forever."

But not, in spite of his great hurt, the will, the control. Two days after Alice's funeral he decided to "come back to my work at once." A day later he returned to his seat in the assembly. Three weeks after Alice's death he replied to a note of condolence from a friend: "It was a grim and evil fate, but I have never believed it did any good to flinch or yield for any blow, nor does it lighten the blow to cease from working." And then an unbroken silence about Alice. He did not speak about her again, even to her daughter. He did not mention her in his autobiography. Years later, in a letter to a sister whose daughter's fiance had died, Roosevelt delivered the advice he had clearly given himself: "The one and only thing for her to do now is to treat the past as past, the event as finished and out of her life; to dwell on it . . . would be both weak and morbid. Let her try not to think of it; this she cannot wholly avoid; but she can wholly avoid speaking of it . . . let her never speak one word of the matter . . . to you or to anyone else."

That counsel, like his own behavior, reached beyond mere self-control to obsessive self-denial. In the face of the unpredictable, the chaos that could visit life with pain, Roosevelt's love had not protected Alice. Yet he retained his zest for living, he even came to love again, for first he denied that pain by driving it out of mind. He denied that chaos by willing an artificial but an orderly control. Few others could have done so; perhaps fewer still have wanted so to do.

Years before Alice died, Roosevelt had had to begin to observe his younger brother surrender self-control. Elliott Roosevelt had been a strong, agile, beguiling child, afflicted by none of Theodore's physical frailties. When both boys were small, Elliott served sometimes as Theodore's protector. They remained companions in their youth. When Elliott visited Theodore at Harvard, he could, Theodore wrote, beat his older brother at rowing, swimming, and sailing. He may also, so one friend surmised, have been overwhelmed by an older brother who "thought he could do things a little better than anyone else." Yet Elliott, Theodore wrote at that time, was "a noble fellow, wonderfully grown-up in every way." That fond as-

essment was disingenuous, for Elliott was already behaving in ways Theodore at first joked about but never approved. In the summer of 1880 the two went hunting in the west. "Elliott," Theodore reported to Corinne from Chicago, "revels in . . . epicurean pleasures. As soon as we got here he took some ale to get the dust out of his throat; then a milk punch because he was thirsty; a mint julep because it was hot; a brandy smash 'to keep the cold out of his stomach'; and then sherry and bitters to give him an appetite."

Elliott was an alcoholic. He had earlier begun to escape life in other ways. At St. Paul's school in 1875, he was studying, he said, "as hard as I can," but he suffered "a bad rush of blood to my head" that left him "rather nervous and therefore homesick and unhappy," and Theodore had to come up "to take him home." Sent to regain his health at a frontier post in Texas, Elliott found that roughing it left him still unable to apply himself systematically: "I feel," he admitted, "like a general fraud." After his father's death he drifted, repentant but unreliable in spite of his marriage to Anna Hall, a wealthy New York beauty. He foundered in an effort at banking, but he frolicked at the hunt on Long Island and there lived extravagantly and rode recklessly and to exhaustion. "Poor, dear old Nell," Theodore wrote Corinne in 1889; "I suppose it is useless to wish that he would put himself completely under a competent physician; I did my best to get him to." "I wonder," he asked on another occasion, "if it would do any good to talk to him about his imprudence! I suppose not."

Elliott now drank excessively and when necessary surreptitiously, became violent, frightening to his family. His wife, assisted by Anna Roosevelt, confined him to an asylum for six months of treatment in 1891. The family, hoping to protect the balance of his estate, applied to the courts to have him judged insane and incapable of managing his property. Theodore in his affidavit attested that since 1889 he had observed Elliott's loss of memory and irrational behavior. Elliott had even threatened three times to commit suicide. When Elliott fought the suit, Theodore went to meet him in Paris. Elliott then reluctantly agreed, in return for termination

of the proceedings, to put his estate in trust for his wife and children, and to return to the United States to undertake another "cure."

Elliott's deterioration quickened after his return. In Paris he had taken up with a woman, a liaison Theodore never discussed but surely despised. Separated from his wife, Elliott wrote her now conciliatory, now threatening letters. He was not allowed to be with her when she died in December 1892. Her will made her mother, not Elliott, guardian of her children, a decision Theodore endorsed, for Elliott, he had concluded, was irremediably irresponsible. Elliott's continuing erratic behavior, his affair with a woman in New York not the least, served to confirm that judgment. "He can't be helped," Theodore wrote Anna in July 1894, "and he simply must be let go his own gait. He is now laid up from a serious fall; while drunk he drove into a lamp post and went out on his head." A month later a further letter reported "Elliott is up and about again: and I hear is drinking heavily; if so he must break down soon. It has been as hideous a tragedy all through as one often sees." Two years later Elliott fell again, was knocked unconscious, and died. Theodore, as he wrote Corinne, felt a great relief: "There is one great comfort I already feel; I only need to have pleasant thoughts of Elliott now. He is just the gallant, generous, manly boy and young man whom everyone loved. I can think of him . . . the time we were first in Europe . . . and then in the days of the dancing class . . . or when . . . he first hunted; and when he visited me at Harvard."

Roosevelt had observed Elliott as a drunkard, as an unfaithful husband, as a feckless father. Their mother had been harmlessly ineffective because of her idiosyncrasies, her small weaknesses of the will. Elliott had become a disgrace because of his total failure of the will. He had let himself go entirely out of control. No one could explain why. His daughter Eleanor and his Paris mistress believed, probably correctly, that more sympathy from his family would have helped him. But Theodore Roosevelt never sympathized with weakness, not weakness in his brother any more than weakness in himself.

As much as Alice's death, Elliott's disintegration also underscored the uncertainties of life. As love had not protected Alice, so good blood and good breeding had not saved Elliott. By permitting his standards to decay, Elliott had abandoned his duty to order the vagaries of experience. So, at least, Theodore seemed to believe. The terror of private excesses, he also seemed to suggest, resembled the terror of social excesses. Elliott's life, writ large, recalled the chaos of the French revolution. Its leaders, in Roosevelt's view destructive renegades, had lost control of themselves just as Elliott had lost control. Those fit to govern, those fit to hold the power that checked the potential chaos of social experience, had first to govern themselves, to check the potential chaos of private experience.

"Buck-fever," Roosevelt wrote in his autobiographical discussion of hunting, meant "a state of intense nervous excitement which may be entirely divorced from timidity. It may affect a man the first time he has to speak to a large audience just as it affects him the first time he sees a buck or goes into battle. What such a man needs is not courage but nerve-control, cool-headedness . . . this is largely a matter . . . of repeated effort and repeated exercise of will-power. If a man has the right stuff in him, his will grows stronger and stronger with each exercise of it."

Roosevelt's did. As Elting Morison put it, "the energies and talents he possessed were not placed at birth in some natural harmony; they were through passing years organized and directed by a sustained and splendid act of the will." Those energies and talents could also be misdirected. The courses they took, the act of the will that guided them, and the approach to politics and government that rested on Roosevelt's confidence in that act, together constitute the subject of this book.

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The data on which this book is based and the quotations it contains are taken almost exclusively from *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, National Edition, 20 vols. (New York, 1926), Charles Scribner's Sons; and *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, 8 vols. (Cambridge, 1951-1954), Harvard University Press. *The Letters* perpetuated the errors in Roosevelt's holographs in order to reveal his dismal spelling. For the sake of clarity these errors have here been corrected. For permission to quote from *The Works* and *The Letters* I am indebted respectively to Scribner's and to the President and Fellows of Harvard College. The latter have also kindly consented to let me republish parts of essays which appeared as appendixes to Volumes II, IV, and VI of *The Letters*. For permission to quote from Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York, 1950), I am grateful to the Viking Press. In an appendix to the eighth volume of *The Letters* I have discussed the primary sources and some secondary sources on which this book, like *The Letters*, is based. The notes in *The Letters*, furthermore, list other secondary sources, many indispensable for information on or interpretations of Roosevelt.

J. M. B.