



**John M. Thompson.** *Great Power Rising: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 288 pp. \$23.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-19-085997-8; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-085995-4.

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## Theodore Roosevelt's Politics of Empire

Democracy and global empire make strange bedfellows, at least in theory. How can imperial diplomacy's need for executive discretion and secrecy be reconciled with mass participation and educated public opinion? Can a democratic electorate be counted on to consistently vote for higher taxes on itself to fund imperial wars waged on a global scale? Grappling with the United States' attempt to reconcile democracy and empire since the mid-twentieth century often results in one of two interpretations. The first simply rejects the notion that American foreign policy reflects democratic principles, contending, instead that an unholy alliance between the military industrial complex and foreign policy intellectuals has pursued a global interventionism out of public view and at odds with public desires. The second sees the American people as mostly willing collaborators in empire, with an interventionist mindset conditioned by a combination of propaganda, cultural attitudes, religious messianism, and racism.

Though the stakes were different in the early twentieth century when the United States first began to fashion itself as a global power, one can find similar debates among historians of that era. For some, the story is about the cultural politics of empire, the way that discourses of race and gender convinced ordinary Americans to support overseas military interventions.[1] For others, the story is about policymakers pursuing material or geopolitical interests in disregard or even in opposition to the

public.[2]

Theodore Roosevelt figures prominently in both narratives. He often serves as a central example of how gender anxieties and the politics of civilization encouraged imperial expansion among broad swathes of the American people.[3] Yet TR himself often talked about the public in ways that suggested a more fraught relationship. He frequently complained, in a colorful vocabulary, about a lack of popular support for his interventionism. "In Cuba, Santo Domingo and Panama we have interfered," he wrote toward the end of his presidency. "I would have interfered in some similar fashion in Venezuela, in at least one Central American State, and in Haiti already ... if I could have waked up our people so that they would back a reasonable and intelligent foreign policy which should put a stop to crying disorders at our very doors." [4] Such complaints have led some diplomatic historians to sympathize with Roosevelt as a proto-realist who found his prescient grand strategy encumbered by an isolationist public.[5]

In *Great Power Rising: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy*, John M. Thompson engages most comfortably with the latter, power-political interpretation. But he offers a nuanced corrective by challenging the existence of a fundamental conflict between TR and the people. Instead he suggests that Roosevelt successfully integrated democracy and great power politics. Roosevelt took public opinion seriously, and "public

sentiment was not nearly as inclined toward isolationism as many accounts of this period claim” (p. 5). By shedding new light on the political side of TR’s foreign policy, Thompson addresses important questions about the nature of America’s early twentieth-century empire.

After tracing Roosevelt’s political development up to 1900, Thompson devotes the rest of his book to a series of chapter-length case studies. Arranged mostly chronologically, these cover the US response to the Venezuela blockade in 1902-3, TR’s Panama Canal diplomacy, the Roosevelt Corollary and Caribbean policy, Chinese immigration and the Chinese boycott of American exports, Japanese immigration and the gentleman’s agreement, and TR’s post-presidential activism during World War I. Thompson offers a fairly standard but helpful overview of developments in each episode. He clearly explains TR’s thinking in a way that makes the book accessible to nonspecialists. Where he differs from past accounts is in his detailed recounting of TR’s attention to domestic politics. This analysis draws on extensive primary research. Thompson has not only thoroughly mined Roosevelt’s papers and those of his associates (including Henry Cabot Lodge, William Howard Taft, Albert Beveridge, and Elihu Root, among others) but also sampled diplomatic archives from the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. To track public opinion, Thompson also consulted twenty-eight newspapers and seventeen journals.

Thompson contends that TR carefully considered politics and public opinion both in conceiving and in implementing his policies. For instance, TR initially brushed off concerns that the British and German blockade in Venezuela threatened the Monroe Doctrine. But after the American public raised vociferous protest, TR recognized that he had been “mistaken” and sought a policy that would maintain pro-capitalist order while preventing European intervention (p. 79). His answer was the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine: a US pledge to police the hemisphere for US and European investors alike. Yet even here he moved carefully: when initial proposals for the corollary met a lukewarm response, TR waited until after his 1904 reelection to announce his plan. Political caution also explains his decision to pitch the corollary as a continuation of the Monroe Doctrine, thus hiding its fundamental reimagining of the original.<sup>[6]</sup> Similarly, TR concealed from the public his encouragement to Panamanian separatists. (Though he never explicitly gave a green light for the province to claim independence from Colombia, TR later remarked that separatist Philippe Bunau-Varilla “would have been

a very dull man” had he not recognized the president’s implicit pledge of US support [p. 59].)

Thompson provides plentiful evidence of TR’s careful attempts to sway public opinion and convince recalcitrant legislators. For instance, when TR feared that public anger with Germany might lead to a war scare that would endanger his electoral support from German Americans, he arranged a meeting between the German ambassador and a prominent reporter to present a more favorable view of Germany and reduce tensions. To ensure passage of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, he appealed to southerners by emphasizing the economic importance of a canal. This proved successful as twelve southern Democrats voted to confirm ratification. When callous enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act and West Coast anti-Japanese laws complicated relations with East Asia, TR engaged simultaneously in international diplomacy and domestic persuasion. He met with Samuel Gompers to promise his opposition to the immigration of Asian laborers—skilled and unskilled alike—even as he urged missionaries and pro-trade groups like the American Asiatic Association to lobby Congress more vigorously for fairer treatment of Japanese residents and Chinese diplomats, merchants, and educators. Meanwhile he bent the ears of newspaper editors and strategically released diplomatic dispatches to the press. Throughout we see TR maneuvering carefully through political space and usually winding up in an advantageous position. Though TR’s early calls for US intervention in World War I put him strikingly at odds with public opinion, America’s eventual entry in 1917 vindicated him. His frequent speeches and editorials during the war kept him in the public eye. Had he lived he would have been a strong contender and probably the favorite for the presidency in 1920.

Thompson finds TR’s foreign policy a success in both strategic and political terms. TR had a “mastery of the politics of foreign policy” and should serve as a model for “how to conduct an effective foreign policy” (p. 185). While his second-term diplomacy faced “considerable resistance” domestically, he nonetheless achieved most of his goals: an American-built canal, US supremacy in its strategic neighborhood, an expanded navy, and a rapprochement with China and Japan (p. 84). This is convincing so far as it goes, but I wish Thompson had probed a bit deeper.

While devoting numerous pages to TR’s political maneuverings, Thompson suggests that his foreign policy ultimately reflected democratic desires. Despite occa-

sional outbursts to the contrary, TR maintained a consistent “faith in the people,” Thompson assures us. Roosevelt had “a conviction that they would almost always support a sensible foreign policy, so long as the president provided leadership” (pp. 148, 182-83). Under TR, Thompson suggests, America reconciled empire and democracy (at least to the extent that an electorate that excluded women and people of color can be described as a democracy).

Yet what TR understood when he referred to “public opinion” is not necessarily the same thing that we understand the term to mean today. For men like TR, public opinion was often less about the collected weight of public preference and more about a quasi-mystical expression of the desires of “the people.”[7] As a result, it was easy for elites like TR to imagine the existence of a “true” public opinion that just so happened to be the opinion of TR and his allies. If the public disapproved of his policies, TR took this not as a prompt to change said policies but rather as evidence that proper opinion had been subverted, usually by the Hearst Press or New England anti-imperialists. TR’s engagement with public opinion may have provided the basis of a successful foreign policy but not a democratic one. Rather his policies for the most part went forward despite an at best indifferent public.

Evaluating TR’s foreign policy on the basis of its effectiveness also glosses over other questions of empire and militarism. Thompson does raise some of these in passing. He points out that TR’s “vigorous international engagement could also be problematic. Decades of imperialism in Latin America, for instance, ultimately benefited neither the United States nor its neighbors” (p. 181). Yet other questions remain mostly unaddressed. What were the intellectual and cultural conditions that made certain kinds of political arguments more feasible than others? What is the significance of TR’s gendered language, his deriding of opposition as “mere hysteria” from “shrill eunuchs” (pp. 71, 67)? How did the actions of transnational actors, especially business, shape both the strategic and political conditions of Rooseveltian diplomacy?[8] To pose these questions is to ask whether the early twentieth-century American empire (and perhaps by implication, post-1945 empire as well) reflected the desires of the public at large or the machinations of a small elite. Though Thompson does not provide a final answer to this question, his detailed analysis of Roosevelt’s political strategy moves us closer to one.

#### Notes

[1]. Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Bonnie M. Miller, *From Liberation to Conquest: The Visual and Popular Cultures of the Spanish-American War of 1898* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

[2]. Louis A. Pérez Jr., *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Robert E. Hannigan, *The New World Power: American Foreign Policy, 1898-1917* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); and Robert C. Hilderbrand, *Power and the People: Executive Management of Public Opinion in Foreign Affairs, 1897-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

[3]. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Frank Ninkovich, “Theodore Roosevelt: Civilization as Ideology,” *Diplomatic History* 10, no. 3 (1986): 221-45; and Sarah Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[4]. David Healy, *Drive to Hegemony: The United States in the Caribbean, 1898-1917* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 135.

[5]. See, for example, Howard K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956).

[6]. The doctrine of 1823 had pledged to defend a republican New World against the monarchical Old World. Roosevelt’s corollary promised to act on behalf of “civilized” Europe against the uncivilized states of the circum-Caribbean. See Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2011), 229-30.

[7]. Stephen Wertheim, “Reading the International Mind: International Public Opinion in Early Twentieth Century Anglo-American Thought,” in *The Decisionist Imagination*, ed. Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guillhot (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 27-63.

[8]. Cyrus Veaser, *A World Safe for Capitalism: Dollar Diplomacy and America’s Rise to Global Power* (New York:

Columbia University Press, 2002); Benjamin A. Coates, "Securing Hegemony through Law: Venezuela, the U.S. Asphalt Trust, and the Uses of International Law, 1904-1909," *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 2 (2015): 380-405; and Emily Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

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