

Matthew Oyos. *In Command: Theodore Roosevelt and the American Military.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 456 pp. \$36.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61234-967-1.

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With *In Command: Theodore Roosevelt and the American Military*, Matthew Oyos has crafted a satisfying and insightful volume about the twenty-sixth president and the development of his views and policies on the military. It is not quite a traditional biography given its narrow scope, but rather, as Oyos acknowledges, a study of Roosevelt as the commander in chief of the armed services even though he prosecuted no major conflicts during his time in office. In this respect, it resembles David Jablonsky's excellent study of Dwight D. Eisenhower's evolving views on unified military command in *War by Land, Sea, and Air* (2009).

Oyos fuses military and cultural history to argue that Roosevelt—influenced by his family background, personal experience, and the prevailing cultural and intellectual trends of his day—came to associate both himself and the nation with vigor and military strength. The manifestation of this desire made him the most active peacetime president in military affairs in the country's history through an agenda of expansion and reform. Roosevelt instituted a number of technological, organizational, and manpower improvements in both the army and the navy, including creating the General Staff in the former and improving both the quantity and quality of battleships in the latter. Whereas many previous works have focused their attention on Roosevelt's association with the navy,

Oyos successfully positions his naval reforms within a broader effort to develop both services as part of his broader, nationalistic agenda.

One of the strengths of *In Command* is how Oyos clearly illustrates how Roosevelt was a “turn-of-the-century man” who sought to balance both the older, Victorian view of the world with the modern, industrialized mind-set that had recently taken hold in the United States. Supporting military growth and American greatness through empire abroad, Roosevelt reasoned, could provide a valuable counterweight to the forces of urbanization and commercialization that threatened to make the American people soft and otherwise unable to reach their full potential. This background helped inspire Roosevelt's policies and personal habits, especially his own extremely active personal life that he then extended into his controversial reform of the military's physical fitness standards during his presidency and also his support for the Plattsburg preparedness movement during the 1910s.

As Oyos demonstrates, Roosevelt struggled to balance these competing Victorian and modern forces. Even as he nurtured institutions capable of supporting American growth overseas, he simultaneously appeared to subvert his own goals. For instance, Roosevelt became an early proponent of promotion by merit in both services as a means of

increasing their efficiency and effectiveness. Yet he often provided ammunition to supporters of the contemporary apolitical system of promotion by seniority by intervening on behalf of officers with whom he was personally acquainted, such as Leonard Wood. Roosevelt often defended his actions by arguing that these were men of special talent, but he never fully grasped how he undermined those principles by making himself the final arbiter of talent.

Another fascinating contradiction that Oyos explores in Roosevelt is the latter's understanding of warfare. In raising the Rough Riders and achieving glory on the battlefield with his volunteer unit, Roosevelt sometimes stubbornly clung to a romantic vision of American warfare that relied upon citizen-soldiers. By his own admission, the carnage he witnessed on Kettle and San Juan Hills opened his eyes to the danger of modern firepower, and he later came to vigorously support the development of aircraft, submarines, and other modern weapons because he understood their value. Yet he often directed his ire towards the National Guard because he viewed this modern manifestation of the militia as too beholden to state interests to be effective. Later, during World War I as the Wilson administration sought to build an orderly system to raise manpower to send to France, Roosevelt lobbied the administration hard to create volunteer units akin to the Rough Riders without fully accepting that his vision of warfare had since passed. Roosevelt eventually had to settle for watching his sons go to war in his stead, but this ended in heartbreak when a German fighter shot down his son Quentin in July 1918.

The book occasionally feels repetitive thanks to its partial thematic structure, and it also suffers from some curious copyediting choices, such as allowing the General Board—the US Navy's primary advisory body from 1900 until 1950—to frequently appear uncapitalized in the text. These are but minor distractions to an otherwise thoughtful and engaging work that provides much material for

scholars focusing on civil-military relations, leadership, and innovation. Even with the breadth and depth of historiography on Roosevelt, Oyos has crafted a work that stands out in such a crowded field.

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