Larger than Life

by Sarah Achenbach

The Theodore Roosevelt remembered today is mostly caricature: a barrel-chested figure in a natty soldier's uniform, eyes glinting beneath spectacles and a toothy, mustachioed smile. But it is the uncompromising moral fortitude of the United States' 26th president—and exuberant sense of adventure and iron-class will—that marks the man who led a country in the throes of cataclysmic change.

When he became president in 1901, the Industrial Revolution was changing how and what the country produced and was pushing the United States into foreign markets. The immigrant flood and the development of the once-wild West were changing the American landscape. The poor were getting poorer, while men like Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan amassed great wealth and power. And post-Civil War segregation had given birth to the "separate but equal" Jim Crow laws. America needed a steady hand at the helm to usher the nation—and the American presidency—into the modern era.

From outdoorsman to Rough Rider, war hero to U.S. president, Theodore Roosevelt's blend of moral fortitude and sense of adventure is the stuff of legend

Every step he took seemed to lead to the White House. When he took the oath of office, Roosevelt was just a few weeks shy of his 43rd birthday, becoming the youngest U.S. president ever. He already had had several successful careers: New York State assemblyman, cattle rancher, conservationist, author, New York City police commissioner, assistant secretary of the Navy, war hero, governor of New York, and U.S. vice president under William McKinley.

Born on Oct. 27, 1858 to a wealthy New York family, "Teddy" (as his family called him) was sickly, frail and suffered from severe asthma. Young Roosevelt refused to succumb to his illness, and rode, swam, hiked and developed a love for the outdoors that would inspire him throughout his life. Taking his cue from his father, Theodore Sr., one of the founders of the American Museum of Natural History (as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art), Roosevelt created his own "Roosevelt Museum of Natural History," eventually collecting more than 1,000 specimens. The first of his 35 published works was a pamphlet titled *Notes on Some of the Summer Birds of Oyster Bay* (1877), and as an adult, he was recognized nationally as a preeminent mammal expert.

His legendary determination was evident during childhood. After losing a fight to two boys, his father urged him to improve his level of fitness and Roosevelt did just that with daily workouts. When fully grown, Roosevelt stood only 5 feet 8, yet his physique gave the appearance of a much larger man.

After graduating a member of Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard in 1880, he briefly considered a career as a naturalist, but pursued politics instead. He married his college sweetheart, Alice Lee, and they settled in New York City among the social elite. Roosevelt threw himself into the Republican Party, and at age 23, he became the youngest man ever to be elected to the New York State Assembly. He quickly earned a reputation as a champion for government reform, challenging and defeating the political corruption of New York's Tammany Hall.

Feb. 12, 1884, marked another joyous event, with Alice giving birth to a healthy baby girl. Tragically, his wife died on Feb. 14 of kidney disease gone undetected during pregnancy. A few hours earlier, in the same house, Roosevelt watched as his beloved mother died of typhoid fever. He rarely spoke of these events again, and by the fall of 1884, he left politics for the lure of the Dakota Badlands. After the blizzard of 1885, he sold his cattle ranch, returned to New York to marry his childhood friend Edith Carow (with whom he would have six children), and, unfortunately, failed in a mayoral bid.

Turning his attention to writing and conservation, he and friends formed the Boone and Crockett Club named for frontier heroes Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. With Roosevelt as its president, the club successfully lobbied Congress for the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 and the Park Protection Act (1894) to protect Yellowstone National Park, the nation's first national park, from the threats of railroad expansion.

In 1895, he was back in his natural element, fighting corruption as New York City's police commissioner with innovation: he shut down the practice of buying promotions, hired minorities, required physical exams and installed the department's first telephone system. Washington took notice and appointed him assistant secretary of the Navy.

When President McKinley declared war on Spain over Cuba in 1898, Roosevelt immediately enlisted in the newly formed First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry. He had wanted to be a soldier since he was 6, when he watched from the window of his family's New York brownstone as soldiers escorted Abraham Lincoln's casket on its way to Springfield, Ill. With the commission of lieutenant colonel, he took command of his new regiment, a colorful crew of seasoned marksmen that was used to riding over rough country—hence the nickname "Rough Riders."

On July 1, 1898, armed with only a pistol, Roosevelt led his Rough Riders on attacks on the Spanish strongholds of Kettle Hill and San Juan Hill. Victory was quick and stunning. Peace talks began several weeks later and Roosevelt returned to his Long Island home, Sagamore Hill, a hero. On Jan. 16, 2001, he was awarded the U.S. Medal of Honor posthumously for his bravery during the Spanish-American War.

Following the war, Roosevelt won his 1898 bid for governor of New York. With a savvy for good press that would put any modern-day politician to shame, Roosevelt campaigned in his uniform with fellow Rough Riders; a cavalry charge preceded each of his speeches. His reforms as governor included laws to regulate working conditions in factories and a ban on racial segregation in public schools.

When he went after corruption in the Erie Canal management, U.S. Sen. "Boss" Thomas Platt, head of New York's Republican Party and the man who championed Roosevelt for governor, became irate. Platt struck back by persuading New York delegates and McKinley to put Roosevelt on the Republican ticket as McKinley's vice president. Roosevelt saw the vice presidency as a dead-end, boring job and didn't want the position, but Platt's influence proved too strong. Roosevelt received the VP nomination, reluctantly took to the campaign trail for the 1900 presidential race (typically without McKinley), and the McKinley/Roosevelt ticket won in a landslide over Democrat William Jennings Bryan.

McKinley intentionally gave Roosevelt little notice. When the Senate adjourned in March 1901 for a long recess, the Roosevelt family took an extended vacation. Roosevelt was in Vermont when he received the shocking news that McKinley had been shot. Eight days later, on Sept. 14, 1901, the president died, and Roosevelt was sworn in to the office.

The country was in mourning, but Roosevelt's joy was unbridled, at least within the walls of the White House.

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Roosevelt's patriotism and determination never faltered as he led the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, the "Rough Riders," to victory during the battle of San Juan Hill.

Lincoln Steffens, editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, recalls seeing Roosevelt a few days after being sworn in: "He strode triumphant around us, talking and shaking hands, dictating and signing letters, and laughing … his joy showed in every word and movement. With his feet, his fists, his face and with free words he laughed … with glee at the power and place that had come to him."

Roosevelt's personal stamp on the White House has yet to be duplicated. Visitors might find the president laughing and lowering his children out second-story windows in baskets or being ambushed in the hallways by his pillow-wielding sons. The family's menagerie of cats, dogs, rabbits, flying squirrels, snakes, hens, parrots, ponies and kangaroo rats had nearly free rein of the grounds.

His approach to the job created the modern-day standard of executive leadership. He courted the press and used them to vet his ideas, an unheard-of practice at the time. In 1906, he created the country's first consumer-protection laws, including required labels listing all ingredients, and created the Food and Drug Administration.

Throughout his presidency, he widened his conservation efforts with programs in land reclamation, forest preservation, wildlife protection and safeguarding historic sites, persuading Congress to pass the Antiquities Act of 1906, which gave power to grant monuments. And Roosevelt wasn't afraid to meddle in the affairs of big business—he took on and won against J.P. Morgan and his railroad monopoly, the Northern Securities Co.

Roosevelt's famous "speak softly but carry a big stick" philosophy was never clearer than in setting the course for America's emergence as a world superpower. When he created the Panama Canal and expanded the U.S. Navy to a military force second only to Great Britain, nations took notice. When he deftly negotiated peace between the warring countries of Russia and Japan, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906, the first American to win a Nobel Prize in any field. But as the 1908 presidential elections loomed and Roosevelt's popularity at home and respect abroad grew, he could not seek a third term. He had given his promise years earlier to stop at two consecutive terms.

After his friend William Howard Taft was elected, Roosevelt settled into retirement as best he could. Taft proved a disappointment to Roosevelt, so in 1912, he threw his hat in the presidential ring. Bitter that the Republican nomination went to Taft, the Colonel—the name he preferred—formed a third party, the Progressive or "Bull Moose Party."

His platform was radical: voting rights for women; a national minimum wage and health care; and court reform. Friends abandoned him, and even his distant cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom he had encouraged in politics, would not support him. (Two decades later, President FDR championed Roosevelt's progressive ideas.) Roosevelt garnered more votes than Taft, but both lost to Woodrow Wilson.

Roosevelt retreated to Sagamore Hill to write, read, dote on grandchildren and take his sons exploring and big-game hunting. The consummate soldier, he watched with pride when nearly all his children served in World War I; when son Quentin's plane was shot down, Roosevelt presided over a hero's burial at the site.

He also prepared for one more run at the White House, setting his sights on the 1920 presidential election. This adventure would prove to be his last. On Jan. 6, 1919, fulfilling his words to "wear out, not rust out," Roosevelt died in his sleep at age 60 of a coronary embolism. Of his accomplishments, he once said, "I put myself in the way of things happening, and they happened." As it was during his storied life, Theodore Roosevelt remains larger than life today, still inspiring his nation to reach for the greater good, to seize its destiny, to make things happen.