

The Strenuous Life

Teddy Roosevelt

Introduction

Theodore Roosevelt, born in 1858, descended from one of the original Dutch families to settle in the colony of New Amsterdam, now Manhattan, New York City¹. His mother, Marth Bulloch, grew up in one of the wealthiest and most prominent families in Atlanta, Georgia. The Bullochs owned a cotton plantation operated by over thirty enslaved persons (as well as a mansion in Atlanta) and fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War.

Roosevelt grew up with money, privilege, and pedigree. He graduated from Harvard University, then Columbia Law School. His political career began shortly after when he was elected as a New York State Assemblyman in 1881 as a Republican. He took on corrupt state politics and the power of the railroad monopolies in New York. As Civil Service Commissioner in the late 1880s, he tackled the patronage system which rewarded men loyal to the political party with Federal positions. During the 1890s, Roosevelt served as New York City Police Commissioner where he focused on ridding the city of “vices” like prostitution, saloons, and street fighting. He frequently walked the beat with police officers, usually late at night and always with the press in tow, invited by Roosevelt who understood the value of a public persona. He was Governor of New York before becoming Vice President in 1900.

Roosevelt took intermittent breaks from politics during the 1880s and 1890s to pursue other interests. He bought a ranch in North Dakota and trained with local cowboys, learning how to rope, steer, and herd cattle. He spent several years working as a rancher until he lost his entire herd during the winter of 1886, one of the most severe winters recorded in American history. He wrote dozens of books of history, primarily about the history of the West (he and Frederick Jackson Turner were friends), Naval history, subjects in British history and colonial American history, and of course, his own personal history. Roosevelt was a copious reader and writer throughout his life. He wrote 47 books and hundreds of thousands of letters. On average, he read a book a day, every day including while serving as President of the United States.

President William McKinley choose Roosevelt to run as his Vice President during his 1896 re-election campaign in large part because of Roosevelt’s new found fame as a hero of the War of 1898 (previously called the Spanish-American War). Roosevelt resigned as Assistant Secretary of War when the war broke out and

¹ Teddy Roosevelt’s great-great-great-great grandfather, **Claes Maartenszen van Rosenvel** arrived in New Amsterdam in 1650.

received special permission from Army leadership to form a voluntary cavalry unit and join the fighting in Cuba. The regiment fought in a few battles during the war, which lasted from April to August, 1898. Buffalo Bill immediately borrowed the regiment's nickname, the Rough Riders, for his Wild West shows.

Roosevelt staunchly advocated westward expansion and American imperialism, which began with the Treaty ending the War of 1898 which established the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam as colonies of the United States, and Cuba as a protectorate of sorts. Shortly after Congress ratified the treaty, Roosevelt delivered his famous Strenuous Life speech to Chicago's Hamilton Club on April 10, 1899. In the speech, Roosevelt's arguments in defense of American imperialism are rooted in national self-interest and defense, but connected to American masculinity, racial fitness, and American Exceptionalism.

He delivered this speech a couple of months after the Senate had ratified the treaty with Spain that established the Philippines as a colony of the United States. The Strenuous Life, exuberantly defended American imperialism using arguments rooted not only in American economic self-interest but also in notions of masculine vigor, racial fitness, and national destiny. Roosevelt delivered this speech to Chicago's Hamilton Club on 10 April 1899.²

Primary Source

In speaking to you, men of the greatest city of the West, men of the State which gave to the country Lincoln and Grant, men who preeminently and distinctly embody all that is most American in the American character, I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of effort, of labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires more easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph³.

A life of slothful ease, a life of that peace which springs merely from lack either of desire or of power to strive after great things, is as little worthy of a nation as of an individual. I ask only that what every self-respecting American demands from himself and from his sons shall be demanded of the American nation as a whole. Who among you would teach your boys that ease, that peace, is to be the first consideration in their eyes--to be the ultimate goal after which they strive? You men of Chicago have made this city great, you men of Illinois have done your share, and more than your share, in making America great, because you neither preach nor practice such a doctrine. You work yourselves, and you bring up your sons to work. If you are rich and are worth your salt, you will teach your sons that though they may have leisure, it is not to be spent in idleness; for wisely used leisure merely means that those who possess it, being free from the necessity of working for their livelihood, are all the more bound to carry on some kind of non-remunerative [sic] work in science, in letters, in art, in exploration, in historical research--

² Teddy Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life*, 1899, is believed to be in the public domain.

³ "The highest right of man is the right to be a man, with all that this involves," Merrill Gates, *Land and Law as Agents in Educating Indians*, 1885.

work of the type we most need in this country, the successful carrying out of which reflects most honor upon the nation.

We do not admire the man of timid peace. We admire the man who embodies victorious effort; the man who never wrongs his neighbor, who is prompt to help a friend, but who has those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life. It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed⁴. In this life we get nothing save by effort. Freedom from effort in the present merely means that there has been stored up effort in the past. A man can be freed from the necessity of work only by the fact that he or his fathers before him have worked to good purpose. If the freedom thus purchased is used aright, and the man still does actual work, though of a different kind, whether as a writer or a general, whether in the field of politics or in the field of exploration and adventure, he shows he deserves his good fortune. But if he treats this period of freedom from the need of actual labor as a period, not of preparation, but of mere enjoyment, even though perhaps not of vicious enjoyment, he shows that he is simply a cumberer of the earth's surface, and he surely unfits himself to hold his own with his fellows if the need to do so should again arise. A mere life of ease is not in the end a very satisfactory life, and, above all, it is a life which ultimately unfits those who follow it for serious work in the world.

In the last analysis a healthy state can exist only when the men and women who make it up lead clean, vigorous, healthy lives; when the children are so trained that they shall endeavor, not to shirk difficulties, but to overcome them; not to seek ease, but to know how to wrest triumph from toil and risk. The man must be glad to do a man's work, to dare and endure and to labor; to keep himself, and to keep those dependent upon him. The woman must be the housewife, the helpmeet of the homemaker, the wise and fearless mother of many healthy children. When men fear work or fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom; and well it is that they should vanish from the earth, where they are fit subjects for the scorn of all men and women who are themselves strong and brave and high-minded.

As it is with the individual, so it is with the nation. It is a base untruth to say that happy is the nation that has no history. Thrice happy is the nation that has a glorious history. Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat...We of this generation do not have to face a task such as that our fathers faced, but we have our tasks, and woe to us if we fail to perform them! We cannot, if we would, play the part of China, and be content to rot by inches in ignoble ease within our borders, taking no interest in what goes on beyond them, sunk in a scrambling commercialism; heedless of the higher life, the life of aspiration, of toil and risk, busying ourselves only with the wants of our bodies for the day, until suddenly we should find, beyond a shadow of question, what China has already found, that in this world the nation that has trained itself to a career of unwarlike and isolated ease is bound, in the end, to go down before other nations which have not lost the manly and adventurous qualities. If we are to be a really great people, we must strive in good faith to play a great part in the world. We cannot avoid meeting great issues. All that we can determine for ourselves is whether we shall meet them well or ill. In 1898 we could not help being brought face to face with the problem of war with Spain. All we could decide was whether we should shrink like cowards from the contest, or enter into it as

⁴ Do not copy this sentence in your responses.

beseemed a brave and high-spirited people; and, once in, whether failure or success should crown our banners.

So it is now. We cannot avoid the responsibilities that confront us in Hawaii, Cuba, Porto Rico⁵, and the Philippines. All we can decide is whether we shall meet them in a way that will redound to the national credit, or whether we shall make of our dealings with these new problems a dark and shameful page in our history. To refuse to deal with them at all merely amounts to dealing with them badly. We have a given problem to solve. If we undertake the solution, there is, of course, always danger that we may not solve it aright; but to refuse to undertake the solution simply renders it certain that we cannot possibly solve it aright.

The timid man, the lazy man, the man who distrusts his country, the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues, the ignorant man, and the man of dull mind, whose soul is incapable of feeling the mighty lift that thrills "stern men with empires in their brains"⁶--all these, of course, shrink from seeing the nation undertake its new duties; shrink from seeing us build a navy and an army adequate to our needs; shrink from seeing us do our share of the world's work, by bringing order out of chaos in the great, fair tropic islands from which the valor of our soldiers and sailors has driven the Spanish flag⁷. These are the men who fear the strenuous life, who fear the only national life which is really worth leading. They believe in that cloistered life which saps the hardy virtues in a nation, as it saps them in the individual; or else they are wedded to that base spirit of gain and greed which recognizes in commercialism the be-all and end-all of national life, instead of realizing that, though an indispensable element, it is, after all, but one of the many elements that go to make up true national greatness.

No country can long endure if its foundations are not laid deep in the material prosperity which comes from thrift, from business energy and enterprise, from hard, unsparing effort in the fields of industrial activity; but neither was any nation ever yet truly great if it relied upon material prosperity alone. All honor must be paid to the architects of our material prosperity, to the great captains of industry who have built our factories and our railroads, to the strong men who toil for wealth with brain or hand; for great is the debt of the nation to these and their kind. But our debt is yet greater to the men whose highest type is to be found in a statesman like Lincoln, a soldier like Grant. They showed by their lives that they recognized the law of work, the law of strife; they toiled to win a competence for themselves and those dependent upon them; but they recognized that there were yet other and even loftier duties--duties to the nation and duties to the race.

We cannot sit huddled within our own borders and avow ourselves merely an assemblage of well-to-do hucksters⁸ who care nothing for what happens beyond. Such a policy would defeat even its own end; for as the nations grow to have ever wider and wider interests, and are brought into closer and closer contact, if we are to hold our own in the struggle for naval and commercial supremacy, we must build up our power without our own borders. We must build the isthmian

⁵ Please spell Puerto Rico by it's correct contemporary spelling.

⁶ Quote from American poet, James Russell Lowell's satirical work, *The Biglow Papers*, series 2 (1862-66).

⁷ The Cuban people were in a decades long battle for independence from the Spanish Empire before their independence movement because the War of 1898.

⁸ Con-man

canal⁹, and we must grasp the points of vantage which will enable us to have our say in deciding the destiny of the oceans of the East and the West.

So much for the commercial side. From the standpoint of international honor the argument is even stronger. The guns that thundered off Manila and Santiago¹⁰ left us echoes of glory, but they also left us a legacy of duty. If we drove out a medieval tyranny¹¹ only to make room for savage anarchy¹², we had better not have begun the task at all. It is worse than idle to say that we have no duty to perform, and can leave to their fates the islands¹³ we have conquered. Such a course would be the course of infamy. It would be followed at once by utter chaos in the wretched islands themselves. Some stronger, manlier power would have to step in and do the work, and we would have shown ourselves weaklings, unable to carry to successful completion the labors that great and high-spirited nations are eager to undertake.

The work must be done; we cannot escape our responsibility; and if we are worth our salt, we shall be glad of the chance to do the work--glad of the chance to show ourselves equal to one of the great tasks set modern civilization. But let us not deceive ourselves as to the importance of the task. Let us not be misled by vainglory into underestimating the strain it will put on our powers. Above all, let us, as we value our own self-respect, face the responsibilities with proper seriousness, courage, and high resolve. We must demand the highest order of integrity and ability in our public men who are to grapple with these new problems. We must hold to a rigid accountability those public servants who show unfaithfulness to the interests of the nation or inability to rise to the high level of the new demands upon our strength and our resources.

...The army and the navy are the sword and the shield which this nation must carry if she is to do her duty among the nations of the earth. Our proper conduct toward the tropic islands we have wrested from Spain is merely the form which our duty has taken at the moment. Of course we are bound to handle the affairs of our own household well. We must see that there is civic honesty, civic cleanliness, civic good sense in our home administration of city, state, and nation. We must strive for honesty in office, for honesty toward the creditors of the nation and the individual; for the widest freedom of individual initiative where possible, and for the wisest control of individual initiative where it is hostile to the welfare of the many. But because we set our own household in order we are not thereby excused from playing our part in the great affairs of the world. A man's first duty is to his own home, but he is not thereby excused from doing his duty to the State; for if he fails in this second duty it is under the penalty of ceasing to be a freeman. In the same way, while a nation's first duty is within its own borders, it is not thereby

⁹ The Panama Canal. As President (literally two years after he gives this speech), Roosevelt oversaw a covert operation to destabilize the ethnic state of Panama then part of the country of Colombia. When Panama demanded independence from Colombia, Roosevelt threatened to send troops in support of the revolution. Once Panama was declared an independent state, political leadership gave the United States rights to construct and control a canal through the Isthmus of Panama.

¹⁰ Cities in The Philippines and cites of major battles during the War of 1898.

¹¹ "Medieval tyranny" refers to the Spanish Empire, long considered the most violent and brutal of the European Empires. In an effort to paint British colonialism as more humane than previous empires, English writers and explorers created what was known as the "Black Legend," which presented the Spanish as pagan (Catholic), naturally violent, and incapable of managing a true empire. The Black Legend remained part of how historians and intellectuals thought about European colonialism well into the twentieth century. Most people listening to Roosevelt understood "Medieval tyranny" represented the "Black Legend."

¹² Absence of government or state authorities resulting in disorder and chaos.

¹³ The Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam, and Cuba to a certain extent.

absolved from facing its duties in the world as a whole; and if it refuses to do so, it merely forfeits its right to struggle for a place among the peoples that shape the destiny of mankind.

In the West Indies and the Philippines alike we are confronted by most difficult problems. It is cowardly to shrink from solving them in the proper way; for solved they must be, if not by us, then by some stronger and more manful race. If we are too weak, too selfish, or too foolish to solve them, some bolder and abler people must undertake the solution. Personally, I am far too firm a believer in the greatness of my country and the power of my countrymen to admit for one moment that we shall ever be driven to the ignoble alternative.

The problems are different for the different islands. Porto Rico is not large enough to stand alone. We must govern it wisely and well, primarily in the interest of its own people. Cuba is, in my judgment, entitled ultimately to settle for itself whether it shall be an independent state or an integral portion of the mightiest of republics. But until order and stable liberty are secured, we must remain in the island to insure them, and infinite tact, judgment, moderation, and courage must be shown by our military and civil representatives in keeping the island pacified, in relentlessly stamping out brigandage, in protecting all alike, and yet in showing proper recognition to the men who have fought for Cuban liberty.

The Philippines offer a yet graver problem. Their population includes half-caste and native Christians, warlike Moslems, and wild pagans¹⁴. Many of their people are utterly unfit for self-government, and show no signs of becoming fit. Others may in time become fit but at present can only take part in self-government under a wise supervision, at once firm and beneficent. We have driven Spanish tyranny from the islands. If we now let it be replaced by savage anarchy, our work has been for harm and not for good. I have scant patience with those who fear to undertake the task of governing the Philippines, and who openly avow that they do fear to undertake it, or that they shrink from it because of the expense and trouble; but I have even scantier patience with those who make a pretense of humanitarianism to hide and cover their timidity, and who cant about "liberty" and the "consent of the governed," in order to excuse themselves for their unwillingness to play the part of men. Their doctrines, if carried out, would make it incumbent upon us to leave the Apaches of Arizona to work out their own salvation, and to decline to interfere in a single Indian reservation. Their doctrines condemn your forefathers and mine for ever having settled in these United States¹⁵.

England's rule in India and Egypt has been of great benefit to England, for it has trained up generations of men accustomed to look at the larger and loftier side of public life. It has been of even greater benefit to India and Egypt. And finally, and most of all, it has advanced the cause of civilization. So, if we do our duty aright in the Philippines, we will add to that national renown which is the highest and finest part of national life, will greatly benefit the people of the Philippine Islands, and, above all, we will play our part well in the great work of uplifting mankind. But to do this work, keep ever in mind that we must show in a very high degree the qualities of courage, of honesty, and of good judgment. Resistance must be stamped out¹⁶. The first and all-important work to be done is to establish the supremacy of our flag. We must put

¹⁴ The Philippines is an archipelago consisting of over 7,000 islands, in Southeast Asia (south of China and Vietnam, and Japan, north of New Zealand and Australia). Filipinos are overwhelmingly Catholic, a legacy of Spanish colonialism, and Muslim.

¹⁵ What this about the Apache? Remember Wounded Knee was nine years before this speech.

¹⁶ Resistance must be stamped out.

down armed resistance before we can accomplish anything else, and there should be no parleying, no faltering, in dealing with our foe. As for those in our own country who encourage the foe, we can afford contemptuously to disregard them; but it must be remembered that their utterances are not saved from being treasonable merely by the fact that they are despicable.

When once we have put down armed resistance, when once our rule is acknowledged, then an even more difficult task will begin, for then we must see to it that the islands are administered with absolute honesty and with good judgment. If we let the public service of the islands be turned into the prey of the spoils politician¹⁷, we shall have begun to tread the path which Spain trod to her own destruction. We must send out there only good and able men, chosen for their fitness, and not because of their partizan [sic] service, and these men must not only administer impartial justice to the natives and serve their own government with honesty and fidelity, but must show the utmost tact and firmness, remembering that, with such people as those with whom we are to deal, weakness is the greatest of crimes, and that next to weakness comes lack of consideration for their principles and prejudices.

I preach to you, then, my countrymen, that our country calls not for the life of ease but for the life of strenuous endeavor. The twentieth century looms before us big with the fate of many nations. If we stand idly by, if we seek merely swollen, slothful ease and ignoble peace, if we shrink from the hard contests where men must win at hazard of their lives and at the risk of all they hold dear, then the bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and will win for themselves the domination of the world. Let us therefore boldly face the life of strife, resolute to do our duty well and manfully; resolute to uphold righteousness by deed and by word; resolute to be both honest and brave, to serve high ideals, yet to use practical methods. Above all, let us shrink from no strife, moral or physical, within or without the nation, provided we are certain that the strife is justified, for it is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness.

This work by Jennifer Nardone at Columbus State Community College is licensed under [CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/), except where otherwise indicated.

¹⁷ Reference to Roosevelt's earlier campaigns against doling out federal positions to political cronies.