

HISTORY: Theodore Roosevelt: A Study in Resilience

by Andrew T. Kania

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The renowned United States newspaper editor, William Allen White (1868–1944), writing at the close of the 19th century, declared: “There is no man in America today whose personality is rooted deeper in the hearts of the people than Theodore Roosevelt.... He is more than a Presidential possibility.... He is the coming American of the twentieth century.” (Quoted in Edmund Morris’s Pulitzer Prize-winning study, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* [1979], p.740).



*Theodore “T.R.” Roosevelt, Jr (1858-1919),
26th President of the United States (1901-1909)*

In academic assessments of the various presidents of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt finds himself, usually in the top five, bettered oftentimes only by Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson and his fifth cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Perhaps to those living outside the United States, Theodore Roosevelt attracts the imagination and memory because his nickname, “Teddy” (originally a family pet-name that Roosevelt actually despised being called by people outside of the family), has given him reflected glory — at least in the form of the cuddly children’s toy, the “Teddy-Bear”.

Yet there are many reasons why Theodore Roosevelt should be remembered, and not just for those related specifically to the office of the President.

True, he was a precocious child, who had a voracious appetite for reading. Biographers claim, that by life’s end, Roosevelt had read some 20,000 texts.

He was quite literally a cowboy, venturing into the Wild West to begin cattle-breeding and beef exportation.

Roosevelt was also a soldier, a colonel, who led his Rough Riders up San Juan Hill in a decisive battle against the Spanish in Cuba. He was Mayor of New York, Governor of the State, Vice-President of the United States and, after the assassination of William McKinley, President.

Roosevelt was also an author, writing texts that in his time became the standards for naval history and strategy, as well as for life in the newly opened lands of the United States.

But there is another side to Roosevelt's greatness that I wish to explore — something we can all learn from — his resilience to hardship and to those moments in life when obstacles seem almost insurmountable.

Roosevelt was born in 1858 in New York City. He was a sickly child. As a young boy and man, he would suffer from chronic and severe asthma. He also had poor eyesight and was teased for wearing glasses. Later in life, his pince-nez glasses became iconic; but, as a child seeking to mix it with the boys in boxing and shooting, he was constantly frustrated.

His father, Theodore Roosevelt Sr, seeking to cure his son of his asthma, or at the very least strengthen his physical constitution, encouraged the young Theodore to exercise. For the rest of his life, Roosevelt would challenge himself to arduous activity, in the hope that he could escape the life of the invalid.

This drive for physical fitness built up within him a mental and spiritual resilience. He did not want to be considered weak; he did not want others to take it easy on him because he was "sickly". Even as an undergraduate, while boxing at Harvard he was beaten more because of an inability to see clearly, rather than because he was out-boxed.

Theodore Senior walked side by side with his son, through these difficult times. Then the first tragedy struck Theodore Junior. While an undergraduate at Harvard University, his great hero and mentor in life — his father — passed away suddenly.

For many years after, Roosevelt would write in his diary, that as a young man he longed for his father's presence and advice. To Roosevelt, his father was simply "the best man I ever knew" (Morris, p.31). Theodore would now have to take on the role of the man of the family, looking after his mother, Martha (known as "Mittie").

Soon afterwards, love came Roosevelt's way in the form of a young lady, Alice Hathaway Lee. From the moment he first saw Alice, Roosevelt was determined that one day Alice would be his bride.

After a period of courtship that contained no small degree of cat and mouse, Alice accepted Roosevelt's proposal, and the engagement was announced on February 14, St Valentine's Day, 1880. On Roosevelt's 22nd birthday, October 27, 1880, Alice became his bride.

Theodore's diary entries are replete with his pride and love for Alice. Of his marriage Roosevelt would write, "My happiness is so great it makes me almost afraid" (Morris, p.113).

Four years of nuptial happiness passed, and during that time Roosevelt had become an Assemblyman for New York. One day shy of the fourth anniversary of his wedding engagement, February 13, 1884, Roosevelt was in New York celebrating at the Assembly the passing of a bill that he had sculpted.

It was morning and, just as the session began, Roosevelt received a telegram: he had become a father. Alice had delivered a baby girl.

The telegram informed Roosevelt that the baby was healthy, but that the mother was weakened by the labour. Roosevelt probably thought that Alice's physical state was normal for a woman having just given birth.

He stayed on at the Assembly to see other bills that he had proposed passed. He told his fellow Assemblymen that he was "Full of life and happiness". (Morris, p.228). In fact, on that day, life could not have been better for him.

Then Roosevelt received a second telegram. Witnesses recall how the colour of Roosevelt's face became ashen. In a split moment he looked old and worn. This time the telegram read that he needed to come home immediately: his wife was dying — and so was his mother.

He rushed home. Through the fog, the train slowly meandered. He sat pensive, re-reading the telegrams — one that had filled him with such joy, the other that informed him of shattered dreams.

Just six years before, he had taken a similar train journey home from Harvard, responding to a message that his father had been taken ill, and now the scenario was playing out again.

He hoped against the worst. As the train pulled into Grand Central Station, the giant clock ticked over to 10:30 pm. On muddied streets he walked to his home. One light shone on the third floor.

Now a tragedy of Sophoclean proportions played out. Going upstairs to his wife, he found Alice lying semi-conscious. He held his child-bride in his arms. His baby girl could be heard crying.

He had no time to fathom this scene, for he was called from downstairs to say farewell to his mother. Going downstairs he sat beside his mother's bedside. She looked as beautiful as ever to him. She was dying of typhoid. He waited with her, and held her hand. In the darkness of that winter morning, at 3:00 am, his mother passed away.

Roosevelt then went back to Alice. He stayed by her bedside and, as the clouds broke and the fog lifted, he felt Alice's hand chill and her pulse stop. It was 2:00 pm on February 14. The only words that he could muster in his diary on that day were: "The light has gone out of my life" (Morris, p.230).

Too often we hold up as heroes those who have excelled in some feat or skill in life, be these people sportsmen or musicians, actors or politicians. But we forget the great acts of bravery that take place in the simple act of daily living.

Most of the greatest heroes that we meet we pass by, because we don't know the story of their lives. We assume that they are doing well, because they look well, or that they must come from a privileged background. As still waters run deepest, so too the greatest courage is often belied by a serene visage.

One of the greatest lessons that we learn from history is that true greatness does not come from conquering tall mountains or grappling with ferocious creatures, but greatness lies in

how from day to day we can come to terms with the highs and lows of life — and still retain a hope and belief in the beauty of this world.

Theodore Roosevelt would marry again. He would become a good President. But before any of this could happen, the young widower, and the mournful son, had to struggle within himself and with God so as to walk through the dark night of his soul, in order to see a new light of day.

Roosevelt's life is a powerful study in resilience, and all of us can take hope from this.

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The man in the arena

by Theodore Roosevelt

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

“Shame on the man of cultivated taste who permits refinement to develop into fastidiousness that unfits him for doing the rough work of a workaday world. Among the free peoples who govern themselves there is but a small field of usefulness open for the men of cloistered life who shrink from contact with their fellows. Still less room is there for those who deride of slight what is done by those who actually bear the brunt of the day; nor yet for those others who always profess that they would like to take action, if only the conditions of life were not exactly what they actually are. The man who does nothing cuts the same sordid figure in the pages of history, whether he be a cynic, or fop, or voluptuary.”

From Theodore Roosevelt's speech, "Citizenship in a republic", delivered at the Sorbonne, Paris, France on April 23, 1910.