

"Beyond a Brother's 'Big Stick'"
by Steven Campbell

At the end of the Spanish American War, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt returned to his Oyster Bay, NY, home. The former U.S. Civil Service Commissioner, New York City Police Commissioner and Assistant Secretary of the Navy embarked upon his next challenge. In 1898 he was elected Governor of his home state of New York and right away “pitched in” fighting graft and corruption throughout the state government. Without doubt many of the “big wigs” in Albany and New York City did not relish his ideas of reform. Against his wishes senior members of the Republican Party put his name forth to run as President William McKinley’s Vice President. Theodore did not seek or desire the position, and commented that he could accomplish more as the Governor of New York rather than the useless position of Vice President. Reluctantly and for the good of the party, he “signed on” and he and incumbent President McKinley easily won the election of 1900. Realizing that the United States had emerged onto the world stage after the victory over Spain, Roosevelt strongly encouraged a strong sense of nationalism, and while speaking at the Minnesota State Fair in 1901 delivered his famous “speak softly and carry a big stick” speech. (Though initially a strong believer in an imperialistic American policy, he would “mellow” in the years to come.)

In September 1901 President McKinley was visiting the Pan American Expo in Buffalo, NY. Theodore had been speaking along the east coast before taking a short break to hike in the Adirondack Mountains. While touring the Expo, the President was approached by Leon Czolgosz. While reaching out to shake hands Czolgosz pressed a napkin-covered revolver to the President’s breast and fired twice. The assailant stated “I don’t believe one man should have so much service and another man should have none”. Initially the President rallied from his wounds, yet eight (8) days later, on Sept. 14, 1901, Brother William McKinley died, and at the age of 42 Theodore Roosevelt became the youngest man to serve as the President of the United States. (Shortly after McKinley’s death his assailant was tried, convicted and executed.)

With the same energy and zeal he had displayed as an Army officer and the Governor of New York, the new President began a positive crusade to reform, rework and improve government services. He negotiated the end of a national coal strike; granted limited autonomy to the Philippines; supported the laying of the Pacific cable and supported Panama’s revolution against Colombia resulting in the agreement to build the Panama Canal. Though rankling several big business leaders, as well as corrupt, power hungry politicians, Theodore Roosevelt was easily re-elected in 1904 by the largest popular majority vote to date. Along with his positive reform efforts, an international incident presented itself in Morocco just at election time. A wealthy U.S. citizen, Ion Perdicaris, (born in Trenton, NJ, and married into a prominent Charleston, SC, family) had been kidnapped from a villa outside Tangier by the Berber Chieftain Raisuli. President Roosevelt ordered the U.S. Navy to Morocco and under the veiled threat of U.S. military intervention, the Moroccan government succumbed to Raisuli’s demands. The carefully crafted U.S. position proved to be a catalyst for Roosevelt: “We want Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead”.

Now beginning his second term, Roosevelt pushed through legislation in the Congress to amend unfair railroad regulations, establish the pure food and drug law, and in 1905 orchestrated the end of the world shattering Russo-Japan War, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906. Being an outdoorsman and hunter, the President advocated and supported the development of National Parks and the U.S. Forest Service. The proactive style of government during his administration turned Washington upon its heels. Deciding that two terms were long enough to serve, Theodore “groomed” William H. Taft to succeed him. In 1908, Taft became the 27th President and Roosevelt embarked upon other adventures.

Touring the World

At the age of 50, “the Colonel”, as he preferred to be called, left the White House and began a Smithsonian Institute sponsored “scientific expedition” to the continent of Africa. The nearly year-long venture resulted in exploring, hunting and collecting natural samples. Sailing from the “dark continent” the former President visited royal families all across Europe where he was warmly received. In June 1910 he returned home to New York.

Another Run at It

Unsettled by President Taft’s “change of political course” Theodore’s attempt to obtain the Republican nomination in the election of 1912 failed. Not to be deterred, he ran as a third party candidate under the Progressive Party banner. While giving a speech in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on Oct. 14, 1912, Roosevelt was shot in the chest by John Shank. Fortunately, the gunshot wound was not serious enough to keep him off the campaign trail. The result was a fragmented election with the Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson claiming victory. Again in 1916 Theodore sought the Republican Party nomination, yet was denied, and though he supported the Republican candidate (Charles Hughes) Wilson was re-elected.

A Journey’s End

When not involved in politics, exploring, serving his nation, loving his wife and six children, Theodore Roosevelt had traveled throughout the world and penned forty (40) books and 1,500 articles. Though physically challenged when born, the impact that Theodore Roosevelt’s zeal and intellect left on our nation is still evident today. Over the years the physical demands that Roosevelt placed upon himself would have worn lesser men down: fatigue, malaria, gunshot wound, asthma, and near blindness. Yet his resolve and beliefs powered him onward. However, on the morning of Jan. 6, 1919, (as a result of an embolism) Brother Roosevelt died in his sleep at his home in Oyster Bay at the age of 60. “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Theodore Roosevelt was a member of Matinecock Lodge No. 806, New York.