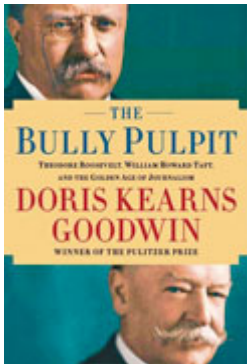


Crusading Teddy Roosevelt would be aghast at today's GOP

Lewis Wolfson | Apr. 9, 2014



THE BULLY PULPIT: THEODORE ROOSEVELT, WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT, AND

THE GOLDEN AGE OF JOURNALISM

By Doris Kearns Goodwin

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Today's Republicans are unlikely to read *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism* or understand how great leaders project a vision of an even greater America. Like Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt understood that strong central government was essential to a growing America. Lincoln knew that a country rent by sectional anger and "half slave and half free" could not be a nation.

Roosevelt was a one-of-a-kind president who turned the White House into a "bully pulpit," and his greatest sermons echo to this day.

He was a Republican who believed in big government and used it to break up the concentration of power in the hands of a few rapacious tycoons, expand the American dream and preserve the wilderness.

Roosevelt had crusaded for reform as New York City's police commissioner, led a famous charge in the Spanish-American War as the feisty Col. Roosevelt, and was elected governor of New York. But he thought that his progressive vision of America's future had been sidetracked when he became vice president.

When President William McKinley was assassinated 1901, Roosevelt took over the government, determined to "bust the trusts" -- the oil monopoly as well as rail and steel fiefdoms run by what he called the "industrial overlords" who, as one journalist wrote, had greater power than the people or their government.

Roosevelt cracked down on the "malefactors of great wealth" and promoted the middle-class dream that is what really made America great. But he needed "a seismic shift in national consciousness" to accomplish this, as Doris Kearns Goodwin writes, and courted the journalists who produced it.

A Steve Jobs-like media genius named Sam McClure put together a group of investigative journalists who electrified the country at the beginning of the 20th century by exposing the plundering of America. Ida Tarbell

detailed in McClure's magazine how John D. Rockefeller had plotted with rail barons to create his Standard Oil monopoly; Ray Stannard Baker went after J.P. Morgan, Wall Street and big steel; and Lincoln Steffens described how party bosses and officials in cities all over the country made corrupt deals.

Roosevelt brought the "muckrakers" into the White House and at one point even gave Steffens a personal card instructing government officials to tell all. Roosevelt and his successor, William Howard Taft, both believed that big government could be good government.

A likable Midwestern conservative with more a judicial than political temperament, Taft saw Roosevelt as his mentor and bosom friend. In their first encounter after Taft succeeded him in the White House, Roosevelt said, "How are you Mr. President?" Taft urged him to drop the formality. But Roosevelt insisted, "You must be Mr. President and I am Theodore."

But he could never be just Theodore. He broke his vow not to seek a third term and, in what Goodwin calls an ugly personal estrangement, fought a losing battle with Taft for the GOP nomination in 1912. He went on to run as a Progressive Party or "Bull Moose" independent. In the end, both men were swamped by Democrat Woodrow Wilson.

Goodwin's brilliant *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, which inspired the film "Lincoln," gave us a rich picture of our greatest president's warmth and political skillfulness. *The Bully Pulpit* similarly weaves together the stories of the people who created another transcendent American political moment.

The lesson is inescapable. By ignoring history, we keep reliving it. Franklin Roosevelt had to use big government to save the country and the dream from our most devastating financial meltdown. Now another crash has dramatized the widening gap between comfortable and struggling Americans.

Progressivism can be a powerful political force. As muckraking editor McClure said when the robber barons seemed unstoppable, "There is no one left ... but all of us." If Teddy Roosevelt were still around, he likely would be growling that it is time to pull up our socks and use our talents and technology to create an American renaissance.

Though we may have a lot to be mad as hell about, so far no one is taking to the streets. Too many of us have a stake in Wall Street, and others who triggered the crash continue to fight tougher regulation. Food, drug and auto companies chase profits at the expense of the public's health and safety. Angry as we are about politics, we feel helpless to change a corrupt campaign-spending system. And now we are learning how much government business and even high-tech heroes are tracking our lives and destroying privacy.

Could we see another Teddy Roosevelt in our lifetimes? He had an "uncanny ability to gauge the changeable pulse of the American public," as Goodwin writes. Just as Lincoln talked about the better angels of our nature, Roosevelt sought to save us from our worst instincts for unbridled development.

Roosevelt would be aghast at the Republicans' closing down government and trashing his and Taft's conciliatory conservatism. One wonders what onetime Republican heroes George H.W. Bush and former Senate leader and presidential candidate Bob Dole -- whose trademark was making government work -- feel about having their party stolen from them.

We need fiscally sound government. But we also expect it to chart America's continuing global leadership and keep the dream alive.

The party of Lincoln, Roosevelt and Taft is in a struggle for its soul. And while no one knows who its next presidential nominee will be, if it should come down to a choice between a Chris Christie -- who has some of

Roosevelt's swagger and Taft's waistline, but also signs of Nixonian vindictiveness -- versus the prophets of Know- Nothingism like tea party favorites Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio or libertarian Rand Paul, the GOP could risk becoming irrelevant to America's future.

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