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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gould, Lewis L.

Theodore Roosevelt / Lewis L. Gould.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-19-979701-1

1. Roosevelt, Theodore, 1858–1919.
2. Presidents—United States—Biography.
3. United States—Politics and government—1909–1913. I. Title.
E757.G685 2012 973.91'1092—dc22
[B] 2011004943

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Acknowledgments

Three friends, John Morton Blum, Stacy Cordery, and Thomas K. McCraw, read early drafts of the manuscript. Their wise suggestions strengthened the prose and the analysis. The two readers for the Oxford University Press offered timely criticisms that improved the narrative. Susan Ferber was a judicious and thoughtful editor.

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Preface

Theodore Roosevelt is enjoying a busy twenty-first century. A hundred years after he left the White House, interest in his life and times shows no signs of abating. Over the past decade, he has received the Medal of Honor from Congress for his bravery during the war with Spain in 1898. Major biographies from authors such as Edmund Morris and Kathleen Dalton have appeared.¹ Roosevelt has become a character in fiction, with the events of his life adapted for thrillers and mysteries.² Meanwhile, business executives can refer to a manual on Roosevelt's leadership lessons. Another author has stitched together from his writings an American history textbook.³ Finally, the perennial debate about whether Roosevelt was a progressive or conservative rages on, with conservative authors eager to convince their adherents that Roosevelt was the

dangerous architect of the welfare state.⁴ Much as he glares out at the world from Mount Rushmore, Roosevelt still commands attention and engenders controversy.

Writing about his presidential administration at its close, one critic said Roosevelt had “a sure instinct for the spectacular” and had achieved “unusual and sustained popularity” in office.⁵ While his reputation went into an eclipse after his death that lasted until World War II, since the mid-twentieth century Roosevelt’s historical stock has shot up, and he seems to have achieved a permanent level of adulation from academics and the general public alike. Amidst a vast literature on this most charismatic of presidents, however, there is no place where a reader can go to find a brief, reliable account of what made Theodore Roosevelt so important in American history. Recent short treatments of his career derive neither from wide original research nor a deep knowledge of the historical controversies surrounding him. It seemed a good time to assess Roosevelt the man, the politician, and the president. Roosevelt, said the critic quoted above, “loved to be noticed,” and what follows is one historian’s exploration of why this fascinating figure continues to enthrall modern audiences.⁶

In the attempt to capture Roosevelt’s significance in a short narrative, it became clear that his fame was a key to his impact on American history. From the time he entered