



THEODORE ROOSEVELT

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THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Preacher of Righteousness

Joshua David Hawley

Foreword by David M. Kennedy

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To my parents and to Lesley

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Roosevelt was the greatest preacher of righteousness in modern times . . . he made right living seem the natural thing, and no man was beyond the reach of his preaching and example.

—*Gifford Pinchot, 1919*

God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness.

—*II Peter 2:4–5*

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FOREWORD

David M. Kennedy

In death as in life, Theodore Roosevelt has both dazzled and rattled his countrymen. He was a luminous beacon of idealism to many contemporaries. The famed Kansas journalist William Allen White wrote of his first encounter with Roosevelt in 1897 that “Roosevelt bit me, and I went mad. . . . He sounded in my heart the first trumpet call of the new time that was to be. . . . [H]e poured into my heart such visions, such ideals, such hopes, such a new attitude toward life and patriotism and the meaning of things, as I had never dreamed men had.” But when Roosevelt became the Republican vice-presidential nominee in 1900, the same edgy incandescence that had inspired White prompted President William McKinley’s political manager Mark Hanna to warn that “there’s only one life between this madman and the White House.”

When an assassin’s bullet felled McKinley the following year, the madman—or the visionary—became president. With preternatural energy, Roosevelt set out to bust trusts, champion the working stiff, flourish the presidential knout over haughty robber barons, pioneer innovative conservation and reclamation programs, coin the word “muckraker,” father the Pure Food and Drug and Meat Inspection Acts, and create a new cabinet department of commerce and labor. With evident glee, he also brandished his fabled diplomatic Big Stick abroad. He dispatched the gleaming Great White Fleet on a globe-girdling show of force, rewrote the Monroe Doctrine to justify armed intervention in the Western Hemisphere, seized the Panama Canal Zone, arbitrated a settlement to the Russo-Japanese War, and, when a notorious brigand kidnapped U.S. citizen Ion Perdicaris, blustered to the Moroccan government that he would settle for nothing less than “Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead.” Love him or hate him, he was impossible to ignore.

It was said of Roosevelt that he had an ego so capacious and ambitions so grandiose that he wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral. From the time that he commanded the Rough Riders in Cuba in 1898 through his maverick third-party presidential candidacy in 1912, cartoonists endlessly caricatured his stocky, bespectacled, mustachioed, large-toothed figure. One such image, inspired by a hunting incident in Mississippi, helped trigger the creation of the “teddy bear”—among the most endearing items in Roosevelt’s copious legacy.

Small wonder that most Roosevelt biographers have focused almost exclusively on the near-frenetic activity that characterized the career of “TR,” the most kinetic and colorful of presidents. But now, Joshua Hawley’s uncommonly incisive biography gives Roosevelt his full due as a thinker. In a signal scholarly accomplishment, Hawley convincingly places Roosevelt in the same philosophical firmament with the most distinguished of the Founders, as well as with John C. Calhoun, Abraham Lincoln, Herbert Spencer, and Charles Darwin. A rarity among American presidents, rivaled perhaps only by Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, Roosevelt was a serious, lifelong student of nature both physical and human, of the foundations of the Western philosophical tradition, and of the economic, psychological, and political dimensions of human societies. A prolific author of more than thirty books, he straddled the domains of power and intellect as few presidents had done before him and none after. He deserves to be acknowledged at least as much for what he thought as for what he did, and with this book Hawley at last redresses the balance between Roosevelt the thinker and Roosevelt the doer. Those who read *Theodore Roosevelt* will never again be able to dismiss him simply as “pure act,” a legendary description archly tendered by Roosevelt’s learned friend Henry Adams.

Darwin figured especially prominently in Roosevelt’s intellectual formation. *The Origin of Species* was published just a year after Roosevelt’s birth in 1858. He had read and mastered it by the age of fourteen, a precocious achievement consistent with his abiding avocation as a naturalist. Darwinian notions of evolutionary progress through struggle informed both his major historical works, *The Naval War of 1812* (published in 1882, when the author was just twenty-four years old), and *The Winning of the West* (1889–1896). They continued to color his thinking about issues ranging from politics to warfare to racial categorization.

Roosevelt drew from other wells of learning, too. He drank deeply of the social gospel prescriptions of Washington Gladden and the geopolitical doctrines of Alfred Thayer Mahan, as well as the more dubious nostrums of several theorists of racial differences, like Houston Chamberlain and Joseph Arthur de Gobi-

neau. All this Hawley explains with exemplary lucidity, in supple and sinuous prose that Roosevelt himself would surely have admired.

Hawley is especially astute when he takes up the long-vexed question of Roosevelt's precise ideological identity—a question bound up with still unresolved debates about the character of progressivism, the early twentieth century reform movement with which TR is customarily identified. Was he a conservative disguised in reformer's clothing, a cunning trimmer who blunted the movement for transformative change, or an authentic progressive who genuinely sought to use the power of government to temper the wind to the shorn lamb and give the American people a true “Square Deal”? How did his own egregious individualism square with his unapologetically statist nationalism? How did he reconcile his support for immigrants, and his belief in their assimilability, with his often raw racialism? Was he a calculating advocate for America's national interests, or an interventionist busybody with no coherent strategic agenda? In the eternal efforts to balance liberty with equality, individual rights with the claims of the community, what were his dominant values? Did he believe, like Aristotle, that man was destined for society, or, like Benito Mussolini, that the individual must subordinate himself to the state? Was his incessant call for righteousness a heartfelt summons to civic virtue or merely sanctimonious posturing?

Like his subject, Joshua Hawley brings some formidable assets to bear in grappling with those questions—including an unusually questing intelligence, a breadth and depth of learning well beyond his years, and an intolerance for conventional thinking. Trained in both history and the law, Hawley has a historian's sense of context and proportion, and a lawyer's capacity for making fine distinctions. And like Roosevelt, too, Hawley has a rare gift for breathing life into ideas, for braiding a deep understanding of the role of formal thought into his account of the seething, teeming world we inhabit. He turns in his concluding pages to a trenchant examination of the relevance of TR's ideas for our own time, when, as in the progressive era, political identities are again confused and contentious, and when we once more yearn, like William Allen White, for righteousness in our private and public spheres alike, even while we remain, like Mark Hanna, reflexively skeptical of all who preach it.

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PREFACE

It is a hard business, finding one's place in the world. But sooner or later every person comes to it. For most, this is the task of a year or a season. For Theodore Roosevelt, it was the work of a lifetime.

Roosevelt was a man always on the make. As numerous contemporaries noted, he seemed congenitally unable to sit still. Always writing, talking, adventuring, improving—Henry Adams called him “pure act.” His kinetic activity is legend and has made him a beloved figure in American lore. But what has proved less obvious to observers, in his lifetime and in ours, is the degree to which Roosevelt's strenuousness stemmed from the life of his mind. Roosevelt never came to rest in life because he never fully reconciled himself to the world as he found it or as he found himself within it. He was forever trying to understand better and experience more, to improve himself and his circumstances. Roosevelt was always reforming. In time, he would try to reform himself and his nation with his politics.

Theodore Roosevelt came of age and then to office in a country convulsed by historic change. Factories and railroads and coal mines and telegraphs transformed the American economy. The era of the small, independent producer, long an American ideal, succumbed in the fierce battle of prices and production to larger business conglomerations the press called “trusts.” The age of combination was at hand.

American society changed, too. Immigrants streamed to the country's shores in unprecedented volume, straining cities' social infrastructures and upending urban politics. Workers moved from the farm to the city, and everywhere Americans found new trades, enjoyed new domestic comforts, faced new economic perils, and felt connected—even crowded—like never before. As the century wore on, the old urban social elite found themselves increasingly overshadowed

and politically marginalized by the industrial *riche* and an upstart, professional middle class. The social strata of the nineteenth century crumbled away.

Social mores and the intellectual edifices that supported them felt the strain as well. New biological discoveries and finds in paleontology produced new scientific theories to explain them, first and foremost the theory of evolution. German higher criticism meanwhile suggested the Bible was itself just a product of evolution, a human work, filled with gaps and oversights and plain old-fashioned mistakes. Beneath the weight of these twin pressures and the industrial juggernaut, the mainstays of American Christianity began to give way. Its power to act as an integrating moral source, providing the framework for science, philosophy, politics, and the arts, would not last out the century.

Americans of all types and regions responded to this upheaval and its severe dislocations with a passion for reform. They called themselves by many names, including Grangers, Mugwumps, and Populists. Others were known less formally, as settlement house workers or good government reformers, as temperance advocates or believers in a social gospel. From wherever they hailed and whatever their cause *célèbre*, the reformers shared a common concern; their agendas were driven by a common fixation. They were, all of them, unshakably focused on the preservation of American self-government. The challenges of the era led them to take up again the fundamental problems of republican democracy. The health of the republic and the fate of democratic freedom constituted their grand refrain.

Foremost among them stood Theodore Roosevelt. More than any other figure of the era, he embodied the reformist aspirations of the American people. Roosevelt too followed the path of the industrial age to the enduring questions of free government. He too understood the meaning of liberty and the requirements of citizenship to be the central problems of his generation. He addressed these problems, and his age, with his politics.

Today Roosevelt's politics are claimed by all manner of controversialists from across the political spectrum. He is hailed by some as the patron of the modern welfare state, the first great twentieth century champion of social justice through government action. Others claim him as the original neo-conservative, pointing to his hawkish foreign policy and aggressive defense of American interests. There are elements of truth in both these characterizations, and in many of the other images of Roosevelt current in contemporary America. For all his popularity, however, for all the volumes penned about his life and essays appropriating his legacy, surprisingly few historians have paused to consider Roosevelt's political thought as a whole, to mine its origins or trace its effect on his era. Since the Second World War, in fact, most historians have regarded Roosevelt as merely an-

other pragmatic politician and his political ideas as a largely incoherent assortment of various nostrums, plucked up as the need arose and just as easily discarded. This view is mistaken. It is time that Roosevelt the thinker received his due.

Roosevelt's ideas certainly did reflect the major intellectual currents of the day—from the racialism and fascination with science to the abiding faith in human progress. They reflected his personal circumstances and his political needs. But Roosevelt was no crass intellectual opportunist. His political thought was a complex theme that unfolded over multiple movements, taking on subtlety and nuance, gathering depth and resonance, as it progressed. The dominant motif emerged relatively early and waxed grander as he went. In a word, that theme was righteousness. Roosevelt called the nation to live better. He insisted that neither economic systems nor class struggles set the course of history. Individual character did. He preached social reform through personal transformation. This was the gospel of an earlier age set to a new key, with influences buried deep in America's past.

Roosevelt's ideas were consequential. His preaching galvanized a national moment of reform that altered the trajectory of American politics and shaped the American character. In the preceding decades discrete smatterings of reform advocates had pressed for government intervention to meet the challenges of the industrial age. Their agitation was typically confined to the state and city levels. Roosevelt's presidency inaugurated a twenty-year period of reform politics on the national stage, a period that came to be known as the progressive era. In those years Americans acquired a larger, stronger, more activist national state. They acquired a more powerful presidency, a new national regulatory apparatus, a new administrative bureaucracy, and a new role in the world. From the debates of that period came the grammar of our contemporary politics, and from its battles our reigning public philosophy.

Roosevelt made the progressive era possible. His spirit became its ethos. His politics of virtue, his warrior republicanism, was a gauntlet thrown down to an entire country and to himself, a challenge to be better, to be more, to be righteous. It was a challenge that defined his life and his time.

Americans in the early twenty-first century again find themselves beset by bewildering social, economic, and technological change; embroiled in foreign wars; and wondering what it is government should do. We have come to a time, in short, when the purposes of our political life are again in question. All things considered, it is an auspicious moment to examine the ideas of a man who lived in an uncertain milieu much like our own, and whose answers to his era helped make the modern age what it is.

It should go without saying that Theodore Roosevelt's mind was too capacious to be expositied in one modest volume. No historian could hope to capture the teeming variety of his ideas in a few hundred pages, and I do not intend to try. What follows is not a biography of Roosevelt, of which many outstanding instances already exist, or a comprehensive study of his intellect. Instead, these pages are meant as an extended essay about one man's intellectual and even spiritual journey and the politics that journey produced.

Because Roosevelt's political ideas developed in a particular historical context, this story is also necessarily about his time, his teachers, and his intellectual forebears, including those he knew and those he did not. Following Roosevelt on his way we meet many of the grand ideas and figures of turn-of-the-century America. In many cases, we must understand them in order to understand him. To that end, I have attempted to place Roosevelt in conversation with the historical characters whose ideas he drew on and revised. And I have attempted to relate his thought to that of other important thinkers in the Western political tradition that was his own.

To trace the development of Roosevelt's political ideas is to find the story of his character and the character of his time. With any luck, the effort may help us understand the character of our own.

IN THE FATHER'S HOUSE

Toward morning the north wind slackened, and the dawn came milder than those before. Passengers on the ferry to Staten Island were relieved to find the bay relatively calm and the deck free of ice, though elsewhere the gale's handiwork lingered: tides in the East River, swelled to record levels by the October wind, remained high. Still, the morning of the twenty-seventh arrived as a reprieve, a temperate pause before the onset of a bitter season. The year was 1858. In a stately brownstone on East Twentieth Street, a young woman heavy with child set aside her breakfast and ordered a coach. Encouraged by the break in the weather, she would spend the day about town, while she still could.

New York was not a quiet city, not in cold weather or hot or at any time of the day. Over eight hundred thousand souls jostled and traded within its boundaries. Crowded factories clattered with activity hour by hour, slowing only when the workers stumbled home late to their tenements, those twenty-five-by-seventy-foot housing blocks on the city's lower east side that a working family might share with twenty-four others. The dockyards teemed with scores of newcomers fresh from Ireland, Scandinavia, central Europe, and other far regions of the globe, while vendors, panhandlers, and pickpockets roamed the streets between City Hall Park and lower Broadway. Merchants kept their offices farther downtown, and they could sometimes be seen in favorable weather walking about Battery Park with their wives between twelve and two in the afternoon.¹

Once near the heart of the thirteen states, New York sat now on the country's eastern periphery, its days as the nation's capital long past. It was a world unto itself, this city, profoundly different from any other place in America. Yet for all its difference—for the soot and smog of the wage-paying industries, for the working poor jammed together in makeshift housing, for the stunning ethnic diver-

sity—the fate of New York remained inextricably bound with that of the nation beyond its cobblestone streets. And in 1858, the future of that nation seemed uncertain indeed.

A vast frontier beckoned America in the West, but its promise deepened, rather than relieved, the country's crisis of identity. Would chattel slavery be permitted to spread into the Western territories? With that question's answer rode the fate of the Union. Two days earlier, on the evening of October 25, William H. Seward of the fledgling Republican Party warned a mass audience in Rochester that America harbored competing political systems, one based on slave labor, the other on free, and they could not survive together. Either the sugar plantations of Louisiana would be tilled by free men, Seward predicted, or the wheat fields of the North would be worked by slaves.²

He was not alone in his forecast. Northern preachers, abolitionists, free labor advocates, and unionists increasingly believed slavery to be incompatible with free government and healthy capitalism, while Southern slave owners and cultural apologists cast themselves as the defenders of order, aristocracy, and other social mores that made republican government possible. The independent gentleman essential in republican theory would disappear if Northern imperialism succeeded, charged John C. Calhoun and his intellectual apostles. Worse, every city would look like New York, crawling with foreigners and wage workers and municipal corruption. Chattel slavery was a bulwark against a future of deadening, soulless industrialism. It was a shield of the South's proud past, of its schools and churches and social structure. It was a defense of republican government against mass democracy.³

Though they were not yet ready to label their Northern brethren as traitors to the Constitution sunk in "erroneous religious belief," those charges leveled by the South Carolina Convention in 1860 were not far off. For their part, many Northerners—many New Yorkers—could not yet imagine a war between the states. That there would be a fight for America's future of some sort was clear to most, however, and while newsboys shouted the headlines and New Yorkers went about their daily tasks, the city, like the country, waited this day in autumn, suspended between past and future at the turn of history.⁴

In the early afternoon Martha Bulloch Roosevelt of East Twentieth Street cut short her shopping and returned to Number 28, suddenly tired. She took a light lunch of bread and butter with ginger preserves and climbed the stairs, heavily, to her bed. An hour later she was in the throes of childbirth. With some effort servants managed eventually to locate a neighborhood physician. He came to her bedside as darkness fell, in time to deliver a son—her first. The time was 7:45 in the evening, October 27, 1858. His name would be Theodore.⁵

If Theodore Roosevelt was, as he would later insist, a “straight New Yorker” by birth, he was first the child of another world: the house of Roosevelt. A member of the eighth generation of his family born in the United States, “Teedie” was named for his father, Theodore Roosevelt, Senior. As the choice suggested, the boy was expected from the beginning to follow his namesake in the Roosevelt world. This was a place of aristocratic leisure and high-minded charity, of uptown homes and European holidays, and of fervent, practiced religious devotion. Amid this world Teedie learned to walk and speak and read; he gained his first lessons in life and acquired the intellectual trappings that defined his later education and public career. “Most American boys of my age,” Roosevelt said in retrospect, “were taught both by their surroundings and by their studies.” This was especially true for him.⁶

By early twenty-first century standards, his education was unconventional, and even in his day, even among his class, somewhat unusual. Before the age of thirteen, Teedie received no formal education. He never attended primary or secondary school. Instead, his instructors were his parents, his books, his travels and cultural milieu, and, after his thirteenth birthday, a series of private tutors handpicked by his father. With them he studied English, French, German, Latin, and some Greek. He read a bit of European history and mathematics, and enough science to whet a lifelong appetite. But his more important intellectual acquisitions were the core life convictions that he would use to arrange all his other knowledge. In this sense, his early lessons on manhood and God, science, race, and history were among his most significant. Roosevelt’s instruction in these subjects in the years preceding his undergraduate career was neither discrete nor chronological. The areas of study overlapped and influenced one another; the lessons were given in various ways by multiple sources over Roosevelt’s childhood and youth. But he learned these lessons well. Their echo could be heard years later in the railroad rate debate of 1905 and the Bull Moose crusade of 1912, in his public sermons and his private letters.

His upbringing made virility and faith, science and race, Roosevelt’s enduring preoccupations, as they were his family’s and his father’s. The elder Theodore embraced a fervent Christianity of uncompromising piety and righteous works but worried that his children would be too weak to follow his way. As Teedie grew, the country’s cultural consensus was fraying, at least among the Northeastern elite. Torn by religious heterodoxy, by growing popular materialism and the utilitarian philosophical systems that justified it, by ethnic diversity and the revolution in the biological sciences, the amalgam of Protestant Christianity, late Enlightenment rationalism, and republican political theory that served as America’s public philosophy was coming apart. Philosophers, politicians, and scien-

tists alike searched for replacements of one sort or another. They struggled to reconcile an older American concern with civic virtue, individualism, and self-government with a new pluralistic, scientific, industrialized America. They sought to preserve biblical mores without biblical religion. Roosevelt lived amid this great cultural conversation. He imbibed its terms and learned its cadences. Like those ideas he found and embraced in youth, as a man he too would straddle old and new. He would speak of faith, but he believed in a salvation found only on earth. He would employ the words of republican liberalism, but in the phrasing of a racist. He talked as a conservative, but harbored the political ambitions of a radical. This assortment of paradoxes and projects Roosevelt shared with a number of other Americans from backgrounds similar to his, and he would lead them, these progressives, for a time. Their ideas—his ideas—would help make modern America and set the trajectory of twentieth century American politics, if perhaps in ways he did not quite expect. All of these consequences were products in one way or another of Roosevelt's education. It may have been unconventional, but it made the deepest of marks.

When he was small, still in dresses and his blond hair in bangs, Teedie learned to carry his father's Scriptures to him, in the evening, grasping the volume with his small hands. Theodore and his eldest son shared this ritual, and these moments, alone—Martha Roosevelt would not learn of this routine until war had taken her husband from the house and Teedie told the story, longing to see him. Twenty-seven years old when his first boy was born, the elder Theodore ever afterward strode across the landscape of his son's memory in the vigor of his early manhood, before the onset of the cancer that struck him down in middle age. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, handsome and gregarious, with a special gift for inspiring deep personal admiration, even awe. "My father," Roosevelt later attested, "was the best man I ever knew." He was also the man Teedie wanted most to please. "I am sure there is no one," he wrote his namesake from Harvard, "who has a Father who is also his best and most intimate friend. . . . I shall do my best to deserve your trust."⁷

Teedie had picked a daunting idol to emulate. His father was the fifth son of Cornelius Van Schaack Roosevelt, the latest in a long line of determined, resourceful, prosperous Roosevelt men. The family had come to Manhattan when it was still called New Amsterdam, and though they infrequently ventured beyond its bounds, they made quite a name for themselves there. The Roosevelts had been bank presidents, engineers, state senators. Cornelius's brother James had served in the United States Congress and had been a member of the New York Board of Aldermen, a leader of the New York City faction in the state legis-

lature, a Justice of the State Supreme Court, an ex-officio Judge of the State Court of Appeals, and a United States district attorney for the Southern District of New York. Yet even in the company of such distinguished forebears, Theodore Roosevelt, Senior, was a class to himself.⁸

To his radiant, forceful personality Theodore added physical vigor and a natural athleticism: he was given to long horse rides in Central Park and to driving his four-in-hand trap at an adventurous pace through the streets of New York. His physical stamina was legendary. His older daughter remembered outings with her father so exhausting she would have cried had she not been loath to disappoint him. Then there was the way he bore the Roosevelt legacy, wielding it with such élan. The house on East Twentieth Street where Teedie entered the world had been a gift to Theodore from his father. In a display of generous largesse, C.V.S. Roosevelt had given Theodore's brother, Robert, the house next door. The front was brownstone rather than red brick, in keeping with the upper crust vogue of the 1850s. And while the living space was relatively modest, the extensive library, black haircloth upholstery, French Empire furniture, and coterie of servants betrayed Theodore's social standing: Cornelius Van Schaack Roosevelt was an exceptionally wealthy man, the Roosevelt family a multigeneration New York fixture, and Theodore himself a veritable prince of Manhattan.⁹

He nominally found employment with his older brother James—there were five brothers in all—at the family's hardware business turned importing firm, Roosevelt & Son. But Theodore's most time-consuming activity was his philanthropy. The New York Newsboys' Lodging House, Miss Sattery's Night School for Little Italians, the Children's Aid Society, the New York Orthopedic Hospital, the Museum of Natural History, and the Sunday school program at the Madison Square Presbyterian Church all benefited from the copious attention, personal and financial, of Theodore Roosevelt. He had a particular way with children. The urchin, orphan newsboys, who could not have been more different from the heir to the Roosevelt fortune, thrilled to see him and could listen to his stories for hours. He helped find homes—and a new life—for many of them in the American West. He cut a striking figure, this great, bearded lion of a man, galloping through Central Park or dancing with his daughter in tailored evening attire at the Cotillion Club. He was perhaps the proudest—certainly the most inspiring—son of a storied family.¹⁰

Theodore was not one to dispirit his own family with constant demands or unrealistic expectations. Nevertheless, the standard set by his example was high, and he made few if any efforts to ease the pressure. If being a Roosevelt came naturally to him, it was not, for all that, such an easy thing to be. For Teedie, the famous stamina that undergirded all his father's activities and enabled his remark-

able works was particularly intimidating. The younger Roosevelt was a notoriously sickly child, plagued by asthma, poor eyesight, recurring headaches, diarrhea, fevers, and bad dreams, among other things. The man on horseback who carried all the city on his shoulders was a man Teedie could hardly hope to become. Yearn as he might to please his father and join him in his world, the path to Roosevelt manhood was closed to Teedie so long as physical fitness was the entrance fee.

The asthma was the worst of it. Teedie suffered his first attack in June of 1862 at three years old, while his father was away. He would battle the affliction the rest of his life. Once, while vacationing in Europe with his parents and siblings, his breathing became so labored nurses rubbed his chest until he coughed blood. Somewhat less severe but no less dismaying asthmatic fits regularly occasioned hurried trips out of the city and to the New York countryside or, better still, to the sea. The affliction disrupted family travel, ruined holidays, and largely prevented Teedie from attending school. Theodore thought perhaps a total change of climate would help his son and, partly for this reason, packed the family off to Europe for an extended vacation in 1869, six months after Teedie's eleventh birthday. Experience quickly exploded his theory. "On Saturday was exactly the fortnight since we reached Venice. *These entire two weeks* he has had nothing but diarrhea and threats of asthma," Martha Roosevelt wrote a friend from Italy. "[W]hat it is that keeps up the attacks is a mystery." Then, too, from the time he could toddle, Roosevelt had been thin and small for his age. While little brother Elliott grew tall and muscular, Teedie was still losing fistfights to younger boys at age fourteen.¹¹

Not surprisingly, Teedie evinced an early and lasting preoccupation with physical strength and prowess, apparent even before his adolescence. The journal the junior Roosevelt kept on his yearlong tour of the European continent from 1869 to 1870, among his earliest literary productions, makes vivid and repeated references to his conquests in war games and other physical contests. His playmates would be "forced to receive me as an honored soldier," after his victory in a romp of military make-believe, Teedie insisted to his diary while in Rome in January of 1870. February found Teedie reading a history of the Greek empire and directing imaginary imperial conquests in the parks of the Italian capital. The family left Rome in March, but Teedie's fascination with soldiers and conquest, military campaigns and other daring exploits involving physical strength, remained as intense as it had been throughout the trip.¹²

This fascination is understandable given his most esteemed role model. While Teedie was reading Greek history and reenacting military campaigns, his

father marched the family across Europe, planning exhausting visits to museums, palaces, and gardens, punctuated by rigorous hiking excursions and long country walks. Nor was Theodore's kinetic vacationing philosophy confined to his 1870 European holiday. His family took regular trips to the New York countryside, spending weeks there swimming, walking, and horseback riding in the summer months. A year after their return from the Continent, Teedie wrote that he, his father, siblings, and a handful of other extended family members were in the Adirondack Mountains on another hiking adventure. As if to consecrate the event, Theodore closed each evening in those mountains with the words of one of that era's foremost enthusiasts of battle and victory, James Fenimore Cooper. As the sun set, young Roosevelt told his journal, "Father read aloud to us from the last of the Mohicans [sic]." ¹³

Teedie came to understand the importance of bodily strength from other sources as well. The younger Roosevelt may have been physically small and sickly, but he was intellectually robust. By his tenth birthday, Teedie's literary consumption was impressive, though confined to two main staples: natural history books and adventure stories, often some combination thereof. Mayne Reid, J. G. Wood, R. M. Ballantyne, and James Fenimore Cooper were Roosevelt's early and constant literary companions, and they reinforced what his father exemplified: physical strength was the sine qua non of manliness. ¹⁴

But it was Teedie's favorite magazine that put the lesson most bluntly. Well into his fifty-sixth year, with a copy on his shelves of every issue of *Our Young Folks*, Roosevelt insisted that the periodical was "the very best magazine in the world." He doubted "if any magazine for old or young has ever surpassed it." Begun in the waning days of the War between the States, *Our Young Folks* contained tips on farming, appropriate dress, and, most importantly for Teedie Roosevelt, long, detailed, and even occasionally subtle adventure stories involving children. The settings ranged from the Revolutionary War to the Wild West, but always the moral was the same: the children who showed honesty and integrity, the boys who behaved bravely, won the day. ¹⁵

While most of the magazine's story lines were essentially similar to those of Roosevelt's other reading, *Our Young Folks* did something that Reid and Ballantyne and Cooper did not do. It made the quasi-republican premises behind its moral narratives explicit. "A great and good nation is made up of great and good men and women," an article in the January 1865 issue admonished. "A strong building cannot be composed of weak timber." In case the child missed the point, "a complete man," the article went on, "is composed of a healthy body, a cultured brain, and a true heart. Wanting either [sic] he fails." Here was Theo-

dore's life example summarized in the clearest terms. Intellectual knowledge and moral purpose depended on a healthy body to be made useful or, as the junior Roosevelt would put it later, "efficient." And on personal character all depended. So thoroughly did Roosevelt imbibe this logic that he would rehearse it regularly throughout his public life with almost precisely the same words used by *Our Young Folks* in the 1860s.¹⁶

This teaching shared striking similarities with republican political theory, a body of thought handed down to early Americans by their English forebears that emphasized the relationship between sound personal character and political freedom. The writers at *Our Young Folks*, however, gave the traditional republican reasoning a unique, mid-nineteenth century turn. They insisted that one needed to be physically fit in order to lead an active, involved life beneficial to others. More than that, the magazine directly suggested that physical vigor was a reflection of one's character and moral worth. The child had a moral responsibility to cultivate his or her body. Accordingly, small homilies offered as articles instructed readers on the posture and sleeping habits necessary to develop sound, healthy physiques. Personal happiness and usefulness to society were implicated in the way their bodies developed, children were told. Indeed, the fate of the nation was implicated, and the reader's responsibility to himself and his body was also a responsibility to the nation at large. "What magnificent expansion" awaited the country, one article exulted in 1865. "But what immense responsibilities! Soon they must rest upon you, — your manhood and womanhood. God and the nations will watch you."¹⁷

This was a weighty burden. And if Teedie found such expectations difficult to shoulder, there is evidence other members of his family did as well. Martha Bulloch Roosevelt, born in 1835, married in 1853, was a daughter of the South. She had been a high-spirited, if somewhat indulged, young lady when Theodore met her on her family's Georgia plantation—Bulloch Hall—in 1850. She was only fifteen. Their courtship, carried on almost entirely by correspondence, sparkled with the playful, coquettish enthusiasm of the woman all the Bullochs called "Mittie." "My dear Thee," she wrote her Northern fiancé in 1853, in a typical flash of debutante flair, "I kiss a great many different people and always expect to, I cannot allow you monopoly there, why, just think," she went on, fairly taunting, "what the world would be without my kisses, I could not think of depriving my friends of that pleasure."¹⁸

Yet once removed to the North, to New York City, the fiery young Mittie, who had unilaterally chosen her husband's groomsmen, who fed his romantic insecurities, and who dictated his schedule down to the day of their wedding, some-

how faded. While Theodore grew increasingly confident, lively, and magnanimous, never again to reveal in correspondence the emotional vulnerability captured in his early letters to the belle of Roswell, Georgia, Mittie seemed to retreat into wistfulness and expensive indulgence. Her daughter Corinne told of hours spent before the vanity mirror, applying makeup, nurturing her glossy, ebony black hair; of repeated baths and pink satin and French hairdressers and a horrible, fastidious hatred of dirt. Daniel, the Roosevelt coachman, was ordered to prepare the coach every weekday at three; many an afternoon, after hours of pacing, he was simply sent away—Mittie could not complete her beautifying routine.¹⁹

Her financial extravagance grew so extreme that Theodore insisted their eldest child, Anna, take over day-to-day management of the household, though the girl was just fourteen. His wife had become rather a mystery to him, and occasionally a trial, though by all accounts Theodore was a patient man. He seems not to have considered the possibility that his life and his family's expectations might have had something to do with Mittie's transformation. "Goodbye, dearest Thee," she wrote to her husband, almost forlornly, from Paris in 1873. "Don't forget mittie, who loves you very, *very* dearly and devotedly, tho she sometimes troubles you and suffers remorse for afterwards." She signed the note, "One of your babies." Indeed she was.²⁰

If she had once captivated Bulloch Hall with her laughter, her witticisms, and her vivacity, now she held her husband's attention with her many needs and delicate health. A tendency toward physical frailty apparent from her early teen years became a pronounced disposition in New York. "Mittie is not well," her mother wrote from East Twentieth Street in 1863, a sentence that would have been true any number of days during the year. "She does not have much palpitation but at times has much pain about the region of the heart. The Dr. thinks it neuralgia."²¹

Neuralgia—clinical nervousness—the bane of the urban upper class, afflicted Theodore's wife with apparently escalating severity. His family was not alone in the suffering. In the years immediately following the outbreak of civil war, concern about physical vitality and mental wellness became so pervasive among segments of the Northeastern elite that it spawned a new field of medical research. Neurologist George M. Beard, an acquaintance of the Roosevelts, and like-minded researchers feared the urban industrial boom was shifting the country's demographic patterns and cultural habits in ways detrimental to physical strength and moral well-being. Beard diagnosed the country's cultural dissensus as a medical condition and prescribed a medical cure to achieve moral renewal.

Theodore had good cause to follow the research and study its recommendations. His wife suffered. More alarmingly, his elder son and heir did too.

Medical professionals eventually settled on “neurasthenia” as the catch-all term to describe the slew of symptoms they believed America’s new industrial age was prompting, at least among certain portions of the population. Migraine headaches, insomnia, dyspepsia, depression, alcoholism, hysteria, and asthma were a few of the disorders that field-leader Beard saw as part of the “neurasthenic” condition. Idiosyncratic in the late 1860s and early ’70s, Beard’s theory of neurasthenia had become widely accepted and its terminology ubiquitous by the time Teedie left home for Harvard in 1876. Part of the theory’s attraction was its ability to explain medically—and therefore, with an air of objectivity—the somewhat strange and seemingly recent physical and mental phenomena besetting the upper classes. Neurasthenic studies responded to Americans’ concerns about the effects of the urban industrial world on health and character by offering a broader, scientific narrative about the development of American civilization.²²

“American nervousness is the product of American civilization,” Beard wrote in his magnum opus, *American Nervousness*, published in 1881. This neurasthenia was the direct result of modernity. Defined as a progressive disease of the nerves, Beard postulated that neurasthenia began with general nervous excitement which, if unchecked, could end in exhaustion, “brain-collapse,” insanity, or even death. The basic contentions sounded plausible enough: every person had a “nerve force” balance, the account of energy one needed to work, think, and conduct common, everyday tasks. If that balance was overtaxed or not properly “re-invested” and thereby resupplied, a nerve force deficit might result, leading to neurasthenia. Larger deficits produced severer neurasthenic symptoms, and the lower the nerve force account balance fell, the harder it was to resupply.²³

The theory got interesting when Beard specified who was at highest risk, and why. The neurologist-cum-moralist held that the disease attacked only those with the most refined sensibilities: the well-educated and well-read, business owners, salaried workers, artists, and those who did not work for a living at all. In other words, though Beard characterized the affliction as widespread, and though it had, by the late nineteenth century, inspired a whole literature of medical articles, newspaper reports, fiction, and poetry, neurasthenia was confined almost exclusively to members of the upper classes living and working in America’s industrial centers, principally Boston and New York. This class of Americans, the Roosevelt class, was most susceptible to neurasthenia, the theory went, because of their work and lifestyles. “Brain workers”—and apparently one could not work with both brain and hands—required more nerve force for their toils

than did manual laborers, skilled or unskilled. This was because brain work, according to Beard, or what Americans now might call “white collar” or “desk work,” was more intellectually tasking than the most strenuous physical exertion. Factory workers and farmhands might collapse in exhaustion at the end of a day’s labor, but their nerve force supply was relatively unaffected.²⁴

Tellingly, workers could deplete their nerve force in ways other than mental exertion. Moral vices were the primary examples of this sort of energy-wasting activity. Illicit sex, drinking, gambling, card-playing, and, in the case of adolescent boys especially, masturbation, consumed nerve force to no benefit, short- or long-term. The socioeconomic elite were again more likely to fall prey to these vices because of their greater leisure time as well as the unique social and mental pressures they suffered.²⁵

In the peculiar susceptibility of wealthy, white, established urban families to neurasthenia, both Beard and the writers at *Our Young Folks* detected a grave threat to American civilization. According to their view, Northeastern, upper-class families like the Roosevelts who had lived in the United States for a century or more were the caretakers of American culture. As wave after wave of immigration broke over American society, the “native born” elite became increasingly important bridges between the America of the past and that of the future. Should they as a class become enfeebled, the treasures of the country’s culture might be submerged and the ship of state robbed of necessary ballast.²⁶

On the whole, neurasthenic doctrine was less a medical theory than a moral one, a late nineteenth century iteration of Protestant biblical morality removed from its source and plated with the language of scientific empiricism. As such, it reflected a sharp concern for the decline of social mores coupled with a reluctance to try to rejuvenate those norms through religious commitment. Earlier generations of Americans sought to reform social behavior by proselytizing society’s members, by converting them to the straight and narrow way. The loss of the culturally distinct, visible community of Puritan elect in the mid-1700s helped spur the Great Awakening. Concern for the viciousness of life on the frontier—for the drinking and whoring and wanton violence—birthed a generation of circuit riders in the 1820s and ’30s and stirred one of the largest, culturewide religious revivals in history.²⁷

But the medical moralists of Teedie’s boyhood did not preach repentance, at least not biblical repentance in the sense of a return to God in Christ. Beard and his apostles preached a piety of good behavior, clean living, and social altruism. Intriguingly, they felt compelled to endorse evangelical mores only by grounding them in the apparently neutral material of scientific fact. In this light, Beard’s theories were one attempt to answer to the loss of a shared public philosophy by

recasting one of its central pillars, biblical morality, in a more defensible, scientific form. Neurasthenia was also a cultural theory, as most moral theories eventually are. Neurasthenic doctrine subtly deprecated manual labor, slandered immigration and immigrants, and anointed as worthy the urban elite. Its prescriptions aimed to renew that class, the Northeastern professional and leisured class, reaffirming their cultural authority even as proponents criticized many class members' behavior.²⁸

The solution to the gathering crisis menacing America's cultural protectors, and thus America, was also the solution to Teedie Roosevelt's crisis of manhood. The answer to both was to build moral fiber by building physical strength. Exercise and physical fitness helped ward off the debilitating effects of neurasthenia. Moreover, if unhealthy bodies often betrayed unhealthy moral behavior, the converse seemed true: sound bodies reflected sound morals, because morality was good for you, literally. The elder Theodore Roosevelt knew of George Beard, and sometime after 1868, probably following the family's first trip to Europe, took Teedie to his clinic. Beard's colleague Alphonso D. Rockwell diagnosed the boy as suffering from the "handicap of riches." He found the boy effeminate. Teedie had been too weak to attend school with his brother and too weak for sustained physical exertion, and the asthma attacks were unrelenting.²⁹

Theodore was determined that Teedie not suffer like his wife—or flounder like her. Apparently the junior Roosevelt came to the same conclusion. He gladly inherited his mother's rapier wit and gift for storytelling. Certainly he always spoke of his mother and her family with warm affection. He deeply admired the courage of his Bulloch uncles who fought in the Civil War. Yet from the time he was ten he habitually and dismissively referred to her as "darling little motherling," a habit he may have taken from his father. She was small, delicate, easily exhausted, and ineffective—everything his father was not, and everything he did not want to be. If his father's example was hard, Teedie would struggle rather than retreat. He would win his father's approval, and win his manhood in the process. "Theodore," the elder Roosevelt addressed his son in the fall of 1870, just shy of the boy's twelfth birthday, "you have the mind but you have not the body, and without the help of the body the mind cannot go as far as it should. You must make your body. It is hard drudgery to make one's body, but I know you will do it."³⁰

Theodore Roosevelt, Junior, nodded at his father and through clenched teeth replied, "I'll make my body."³¹

Physical virility was the doorway to manhood and also, Teedie learned, the path to salvation. The purpose of a man's life was not, after all, to gratify his own

desires or to bask in luxury. The purpose was to do God's work on earth. Proponents of neurasthenic theory may have been reluctant to seek moral renewal in religious fervor, but the senior Theodore Roosevelt felt no such qualms. "Dear-est One," he wrote to Mittie one Sunday afternoon after their marriage, "I have just returned from hearing Dr. Dewitt preach one of his beautiful sermons. . . . His subject was the ascension of Christ and he persuaded us to turn our thoughts above, where he now is." Theodore's thoughts seemed permanently fixed there. He prized the Scripture and apparently spent a portion of each day in prayer and Bible reading. Indeed, he was frustrated when he could not. "I forgot to bring my Bible," he lamented to his wife while traveling on business, "and delayed buying one, hoping that Dodge would get the room next to me and I could use his."³²

He encouraged intimates to follow his example and make time for prayerful devotion, beginning with his wife. Even before their marriage, Theodore showed a tender concern for her spiritual wellness. He took great delight in sending his fiancée a prayer book to help her in her daily devotions. "Dan has got the prayer book in his trunk," he told her in a letter from New York. "It is a present that gives me great pleasure to give you, always remembering your promise never to think of it as compared with the bible." In the same letter in which he praised the Reverend Dr. Dewitt, he urged his new wife to consider carefully where she would most like to attend services. "Think over it Darling One. [W]e both of us want a settled place of worship. . . . [W]e will talk it over when we meet."³³

Mirroring his own devotional life, Theodore propounded spiritual exercises for his children. Every morning of the week began with family prayers, which he led. He taught them to memorize Bible verses and frequently offered brief homilies on their meaning. Corinne Roosevelt's daughter would later remember that her mother spoke of Jeremiah's lamentations, King David, the tombs of the Judges, and all manner of events connected with the life of Christ in the most intimate way, "as if they were friends." Young Teedie encountered his first descriptions of war and battle in the Old Testament, and could soon offer detailed analyses of their action. There were prayers before bed, too, led this time by Martha Roosevelt. On Sundays, Theodore took the family en masse to church, and all four children were expected to spend the hours thereafter in quiet reflection and then to recount the sermon that evening to their father's satisfaction. In time, Theodore gave each child his or her own Bible from which to read.³⁴

Theodore's faith did not manifest merely in personal piety, however. He turned his famous physical vigor to righteous works. His considerable philanthropic activity flowed directly from his commitment to living God's goodness, and even in addition to his numerous, regular charitable obligations—from the Newsboys' home to the Orthopedic Hospital—he found time to do more. After

teaching Sunday school one winter morning in 1860, he told his wife he found one of the boys from another class who had been dismissed for bad behavior. "I gave him a tract on condition that he would go home and read it, which I found an hour or two afterwards he had done by dropping in and examining him on the contents." Not content with this burst of missionary activity, "I laid myself out to see how many I could persuade to meet me at the Mission Church in the evening who would not have come otherwise. About ten came which I thought a pretty good afternoon's work." Still, the elder Theodore often felt he was not doing enough. After hearing a sermon on Luke 12:47-48 — "[E]veryone to whom much was given, of him much will be required" — Theodore wrote that he might devote "all the time and much more than I was now doing to God's service and I would still fall far short of any hope of salvation except through His divine mercy."³⁵

Teedie observed his father's strenuous righteousness and accepted wholeheartedly his stern moral code. But there is reason to suspect he may not have understood the elder Theodore's perspective. To be sure, Teedie followed his father's example strictly—even severely. He rejected playmates who failed his moral standards: "Did you hear Percy Cushion was a failure? He swore like a trooper and used disreputable language." Teedie cast him out of the children's circle. Later, he refused to smoke at Harvard, drink to excess, or engage prostitutes. He would teach Sunday school for much of his life and regularly read the Bible. But Teedie did not apparently grasp in his boyhood or later understand the personal devotion to a personal savior from which his father's actions sprang. To him, the senior Theodore's religion, with all its activity, its demanding routine, its emphasis on service, may well have appeared as a piece with his commitment to masculine virility—both were about action, about redemption through doing, righteousness by works. "To love justice, to be merciful. . . . That is my religion, my faith," the younger Roosevelt said once grown. "To me it sums up all religion, it is all the creed I need." Faith, on his interpretation, became a high call to right living, and thus like his father's example of manliness—or perhaps synonymous with it—a high standard to be met.³⁶

Mittie Roosevelt might well have encouraged this view of religion, if somewhat inadvertently. Although a lifelong Presbyterian, she did not share her husband's evangelical fervor. Her letters contain virtually no references to private devotion beyond that prescribed by her husband. And though she participated in the familial exercises, and said prayers with the children and by herself each night before bed, a white sheet spread beneath her knees to guard her from any dirt, the children make no reference to regular religious instruction from their mother. Theodore had worried about Mittie's spiritual health before their mar-

riage, and, tellingly, Mittie's mother worried too. Martha Stewart Bulloch lived in the Roosevelt brownstone almost continuously from Teedie's birth until her death in 1864 and was a devoted Christian. She frequently attended midweek prayer meetings in the city and recommended religious tracts to friends; she thanked God in her prayers for revivals in Ireland and longed for one at home. Though an unrepentant Southerner who loathed Abraham Lincoln and all he stood for, she possessed religious sensibilities that had more in common with her Northern son-in-law than with her daughter. She fretted over Mittie. "If she was only a christian, I think I could feel more satisfied," she told a family friend. "Susy dearest," she added in a perhaps oblique comment on Mittie's love of luxury, "this world is a great enemy to grace."³⁷

"Grace" was not a word Teedie heard much from his mother or, though Theodore meditated on God's mercy in his personal writings, apparently from his father, either. But then, "grace" was not a concept in great favor in the religious conversation of the day. It had come to seem superfluous—or worse, ominous, a faint suggestion of incurable human sin and divine wrath. Instead, many Christian ministers and popular writers in the 1860s and '70s emphasized the personally and socially meliorative possibilities of "Christian" behavior: they spoke of Jesus's masculinity and urged believers to improve their souls, and the world, by improving their bodies. Sin was something to be overcome by sustained exertion, and the human being, like the human world, perfected through concerted action. Theologians also downplayed human depravity and stressed instead the person's altruistic capacities. It was the age of theological liberalism in America, another engine of cultural dissensus, and though Teedie's family members were hardly disciples, their faith and the new, muscular Christianity could sound a lot alike.

By the late 1860s established Northeastern churches had been drifting from Christian orthodoxy for some time. The heterodox creed common to Teedie's youth was Unitarianism, a faith that denied the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth and emphasized instead his moral example and teachings. Thomas Jefferson numbered himself in the Unitarian ranks toward the end of his life, as did a number of other prominent Eastern deists by the 1830s, including Ralph Waldo Emerson. Unitarianism shared a philosophical mooring with Emerson's burgeoning Transcendentalist movement, a North American cultural-literary-philosophical phenomenon that glorified the human spirit and human reason. Both Unitarianism and Transcendentalism challenged the traditional structures of orthodox Christianity, particularly the Protestant evangelical emphasis on the Bible as the revealed and incontrovertible word of God. By the 1830s and '40s, even those

Northeastern denominations with roots in Puritan and Lutheran theologies had begun to feel the Unitarian influence. Episcopalian, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, and Northern Presbyterian denominations were all placing rather less emphasis on the Bible and the person of Christ and more on the importance of moral behavior and Christ's general moral teachings. Talk of the exclusive nature of salvation—a merciful act of God effective only for those who accepted Christ as savior—was increasingly spare.³⁸

Then came the new theology from the European continent. As a doctrinal school it originated in Germany, in the divinity faculties of that country's vaunted university system and the writings of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher wanted to adapt the Christian gospel to modern culture, to rescue religion from the ethical idealism of Kant and the speculative metaphysics of Fichte. Religious faith is not dependent on ethical systems or contemporary philosophy, he contended, but on a raw feeling of dependence on the infinite—the Great, the Beyond—a religious intuition common to all people. By the mid-1800s German theologians were pioneering a new method of biblical criticism consonant with the latest developments in natural science and philosophy. This “uniformitarian” approach treated the Bible like any other historical text. Miracles and other supernatural interventions it rejected as mythical in light of modern science. Instructed by German historicist philosophy, and with influences as far back as Benedict Spinoza, members of the uniformitarian school interpreted canonical books as products of particular time periods and reflections of the historically rooted consciousness of specific groups.³⁹

If, as this higher criticism taught, the Bible was not the historical record of God's supernatural dealings with his people, liberals tended to regard it instead as a record of man's moral growth. From the severity and even barbarism of Old Testament sacrificial law to the emphasis on compassion and service in the New, liberals discerned real moral progress. Jesus's teachings, in particular, they took as the highest expression of human altruism, the product of several millennia of moral development. Liberals found that treating Jesus of Nazareth as the literal Son of God was understandably problematic, having ruled out supernatural interventions in human affairs. But they were eager to embrace him as an ethical role model, and the bolder among them claimed that Jesus's moral excellence was precisely why the evangelists called him the messiah, or Christ, in the first place. He embodied the full ethical potential of the human person, and his example would “save” others by encouraging them to realize their potentials. Jesus's divinity, then, was something akin to a metaphor—an expression of the highest human capacities within all people.⁴⁰

Having reconceived sin and savior, liberals described a different road to salva-