



Photo courtesy of Getty Images

# THEODORE ROOSEVELT

THE STORY OF HOW CIGAR SMOKING HELPED THE PRESIDENT WHO COINED “SPEAK SOFTLY AND CARRY A BIG STICK” OVERCOME CHILDHOOD ILLNESS. *by Elisa Jordan*

**T**heodore Roosevelt’s portrait sits alongside presidents George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson on the great mountainside carvings that adorn Mt. Rushmore. Washington helped guide the United States through the Revolutionary War and pioneered the role of a new nation’s presidency. Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, establishing the philosophy of the new United States. Lincoln steered the country through a nation divided by the Civil War and wrote the Emancipation Proclamation.

Theodore Roosevelt, who served as president from 1901 to 1909, similarly added to the United States’ legacy. Less may be known about his lasting imprint on his country, but thanks to TR, as he was sometimes called, our nation enjoys the national park system, a strengthened Navy, and anti-monopoly legislation. He also spearheaded the construction of the Panama Canal, which changed the way ships of all nations sailed around the world. But to understand his great skills as a leader, one must look at how his formative years shaped his adulthood.

## A CHILDHOOD OF WEALTH AND ILLNESS

TR was born into a world of wealth and privilege on October 27, 1858, on New York City's East Side. His father, Theodore Roosevelt Sr., was a successful businessman and philanthropist who was deeply involved in New York culture. TR's mother, Martha "Mittie" Roosevelt, was a socialite and refined Southern belle. When the United States broke out into the Civil War in April 1861, Theodore Junior found himself in the unusual position of having both a Northern and a Southern parent. It was a delicate balance, especially because Theodore Senior was a staunch supporter of the North, despite his in-laws on the other side of the Mason-Dixon line. The younger Theodore learned the importance of diplomacy from an early age.

Theodore and his older sister Anna (called "Bamie") were joined by a younger sister, Corrine, and brother, Elliott. The Roosevelt children received fine educations and were treated to extended trips in places like Egypt and Europe. Early on, however, it was clear that young Theodore was different. Despite his inquisitive mind and thirst for knowledge, his health proved a serious issue. Young Theodore suffered from debilitating asthma, for which there was no cure. When an attack hit, the sensation felt similar to being smothered. The little boy was terrified. And so were his parents.

## UNUSUAL MEDICINE

Medical treatments for asthma in the mid-1800s were minimal, even for a family with the means for quality health care. The Roosevelts followed doctors' recommendations and when need be, Theodore Sr. served his young son strong coffee and had him smoke cigars to help alleviate the effects of asthma.

How much cigars and coffee the little boy actually ingested is unknown, but at the time it was considered a viable and necessary treatment. Perhaps more importantly, a childhood plagued by illness and treatment shaped TR's later life and even his presidency. He was also significantly influenced by his father who, in addition to



Photos courtesy of Shutterstock.com



caring for his son, instilled the importance of family and duty. Theodore Senior, who helped establish the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, must have seemed like a larger than life character in many ways, even to his own children. "My father, Theodore Roosevelt, was the best man I ever knew," Theodore Roosevelt later said. "He combined strength and courage with gentleness, tenderness, and great unselfishness. He would not tolerate in us children selfishness or cruelty, idleness, cowardice, or untruthfulness."

TR Senior was a devoted parent who was determined to help his son overcome illness. In addition to cigars, the elder Roosevelt filled a room with weights and exercise equipment. The younger Roosevelt was instructed to begin a strenuous physical conditioning regime. The new fitness routine started paying off. On a family vacation, little Theodore was pleased to find himself keeping up with his father during a hike in the Swiss Alps.

Illness further dictated that much of TR's education be conducted at home instead of a traditional school. Much of the youngster's world was confined to the indoors, so naturally he started yearning for the outdoors.

## A LIFE OF SERVICE

When the Theodore Roosevelt started to Harvard, his father, Theodore Roosevelt Sr., reminded him, "Take care of your morals first, your health next and finally your studies." The elder Roosevelt came from a wealthy family and was one of the most influential men in New York. He was also devoted to philanthropy, helping the less fortunate and championing the arts. He was even known to scoop up stray kittens and place them in his pockets in an effort to rescue them from the streets.

The gregarious and politically connected father of four stressed to his children the importance of civic duty and feeling equally comfortable with everyone from millionaires to the homeless. It was a philosophy that shaped Theodore Jr.'s world outlook. Putting together all of his experiences, including a childhood filled with illness, and advice from his father, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. served his country in multiple ways.

### ROUGH RIDERS

Along with Army Colonel Leonard Wood, Roosevelt formed the 1st United States Volunteer Cavalry to serve in the Spanish-American War. Known informally as the Rough Riders, the Cavalry was instrumental in capturing Kettle Hill on July 1, 1898. Roosevelt was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor in 2001 for his role.

### UNITED STATES NAVY

Roosevelt served as Assistant Secretary of the United States Navy. During his presidency, he expanded the navy from the fifth largest to the third largest in the world.

### NEW YORK GOVERNOR

When Theodore Roosevelt served as governor of New York (January 1899-December 1900), he improved labor laws, outlawed racial segregation in public schools and expanded park and forestry programs.

### UNITED STATES PRESIDENCY

Theodore Roosevelt served as president from 1901-1909. When President William McKinley was assassinated in September 1901, Vice President Roosevelt stepped into the role of president. He was 42, making him the youngest president to date. He later won reelection.

### ELKINS ACT (1903) AND HEPBURN ACT (1906)

During his presidency, Theodore Roosevelt sought to curb the railroad's monopoly over the United States. The Elkins Act imposed fines on the railroads and dictated that railroads could no longer give rebates to favored companies. The Hepburn Act regulated rates the railroads could charge.

### NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

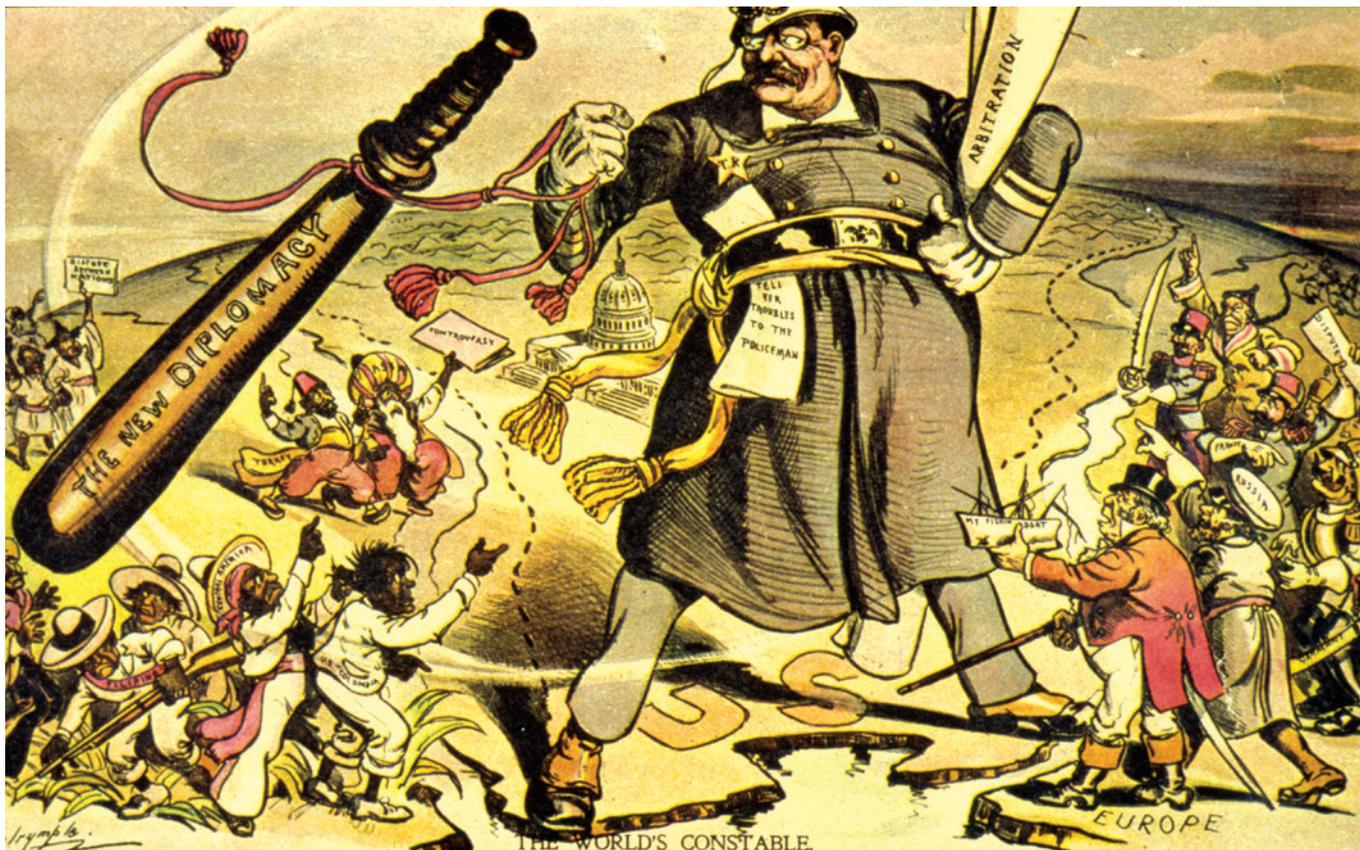
In 1905, President Roosevelt arranged and mediated a conference between the warring nations of Russia and Japan. His efforts led to a signed peace treaty on September 5. The 1906 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Theodore Roosevelt, making him the first American to receive such an honor.

### PANAMA CANAL

President Roosevelt believed that commercial ventures and the U.S. military would benefit from a canal between North and South America. He negotiated with Panama and the project was dedicated in 1904. (It was finished in 1914.) The Panama Canal is considered not just a major accomplishment for Theodore Roosevelt, but for the twentieth century.

### SQUARE DEAL

The Square Deal was a domestic program noted for the "three C's." That is, conservation, control of corporations and consumer protection.



## THE GREAT OUTDOORS...INDOORS

At the age of 7, his life again took a turn when walking through a market, where he saw a merchant butchering a seal. Fascinated, young Teddy wanted to know all the circumstances about where the seal came from and how it was caught. He obtained the animal's head and took it home, proclaiming that he was starting the Roosevelt Museum of Natural History—in his bedroom.

Soon, the young boy began voraciously studying the outdoors and wildlife. He learned the skills needed for taxidermy and filled his “museum” with animals that he had obtained or killed in order to better understand the natural world. By age 9, the scope of his studies had expanded and he wrote a paper called “The Natural History of Insects.”

His physical prowess also grew. Although bodybuilding was helping, he still wasn't able to defend himself. In the summer of 1872, a humiliating incident led to him asking Senior for

boxing lessons, a request that was obliged. “Having an attack of asthma, I was sent off by myself to Moosehead Lake,” Theodore Roosevelt later wrote. “On the stage-coach ride thither, I encountered a couple of other boys who were about my own age, but very much more competent and also much mischievous...They found that I was a foreordained and predestined victim, and industriously proceeded to make life miserable for me. The worst feature was that when I finally tried to fight them I discovered that either one singly could not only handle me with easy contempt, but handle me so not to hurt me much yet prevent my doing any damage whatever in return.”

It was a harsh lesson that taught him exercise simply wasn't enough. He would also need to learn the skills necessary to care for himself in extreme situations. Around the same time he started boxing lessons, he also acquired his first gun.



Once suffering from ill health, he had learned to channel his experiences into another direction and to create the type of man he wanted to be as an adult. A sickly child and “predestined victim,” Theodore Roosevelt transformed himself not just into a politician, but also a wrestler, horseman, hunter, hiker, camper, cowboy and soldier.



Photos courtesy of Shutterstock.com



## CIGAR BILL

As an assemblyman in 1882, Theodore Roosevelt initially opposed a bill banning cigar manufacturing in New York tenements. Roosevelt later toured New York City slums and the squalid conditions in which families who manufactured cigars lived.

Roosevelt later recalled, "I have always remembered one room in which two families were living. There were several children, three men, and two women in the room. The tobacco was stowed about everywhere, alongside the foul bedding, and in a corner where there were scraps of food. The men, women, and children in this room worked by day and far on into the evening, and they slept and ate there. There were Bohemians, unable to speak English, except that one of the children knew enough to act as interpreter."

After seeing tenement life firsthand, Roosevelt changed his position and supported the cigar bill. Through his efforts, the bill was signed into law. That wasn't the end of the issue, though. Most likely influenced by cigar manufacturers, the Court of Appeals declared the cigar bill unconstitutional.

Roosevelt's faith in legislation was shaken but it also served as a turning point. First, he knew the importance of first-hand investigation. The judges who overturned the cigar bill, he reasoned, understood the legalities but not the realities. "The judges who rendered this decision were well meaning," he said. "They knew nothing whatever of tenement-house conditions; they knew nothing of the needs, or of the life and labor, of three-fourths of their fellow-citizens in great cities. They knew legalism, but not life."

Around this same time, Roosevelt spoke of the importance of investigating bills thoroughly to ensure whether they were not corrupt. He later explained, "We used to spend a good deal of time in industrious research into the various bills introduced so as to find out what their author really had in mind."

Theodore Roosevelt Jr. was a changed little boy. Once suffering from ill health, he had learned to channel his experiences into another direction and to create the type of man he wanted to be as an adult. A sickly child and "predestined victim," Theodore Roosevelt transformed himself not just into a politician, but also a wrestler, horseman, hunter, hiker, camper, cowboy and soldier. Although sometimes thought of as hyper masculine, almost comically so in some cases, he is, instead, a testament to the power of commitment and transformation. And step one for Theodore Roosevelt's transformation into a great leader and United States president came in the form of a cigar used as medication.

*Elisa Jordan is a freelance writer living in Southern California and writes for a variety of media outlets. She specializes in cultural history, architecture and pets.*