

THEODORE ROOSEVELT ASSOCIATION

JOURNAL



VOLUME XLI, NUMBER 4, FALL 2020



November 2020 E-mail Interview of 2020 Theodore Roosevelt Association Annual Book Award Winner John M. (Jack) Thompson by TRA Annual Book Award Committee Chair Gregory A. Wynn

EDITOR'S NOTE: The winner of the Theodore Roosevelt Association Annual Book Award for 2020 is John M. (Jack) Thompson, *Great Power Rising: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). Gregory Wynn's interviews with TRA Annual Book Award winning authors are now a regular feature in the *TRA Journal*.

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GREGORY WYNN: Why did you choose to write about Theodore Roosevelt and why this specific topic?

JACK THOMPSON: I stumbled onto TR by accident. As a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University SAIS, I wrote a research paper about media coverage of U.S.-Japanese relations in 1906-1907, especially the series of war scares that gripped the U.S. public. I so enjoyed writing this paper that I began to contemplate, for the first time, doing a Ph.D. in History. One thing led to another, and I eventually wrote my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Cambridge about the impact of public opinion on TR's foreign policy. Later, during my Ph.D. viva at Cambridge, Professors Jay Sexton and Andrew Preston gave me some shrewd advice about how to turn my dissertation into a book. They suggested that I engage with the body of scholarship that examines the relationship between U.S. foreign policy and domestic politics. At this point, I realized that I had chosen, really by accident, a fantastic subject. Many historians had touched on aspects of the relationship between TR's foreign policy and the U.S. political system, but no one had pulled it all together. In addition, there were some notable gaps in the historiography. More broadly, I have been interested



John M. (Jack) Thompson.

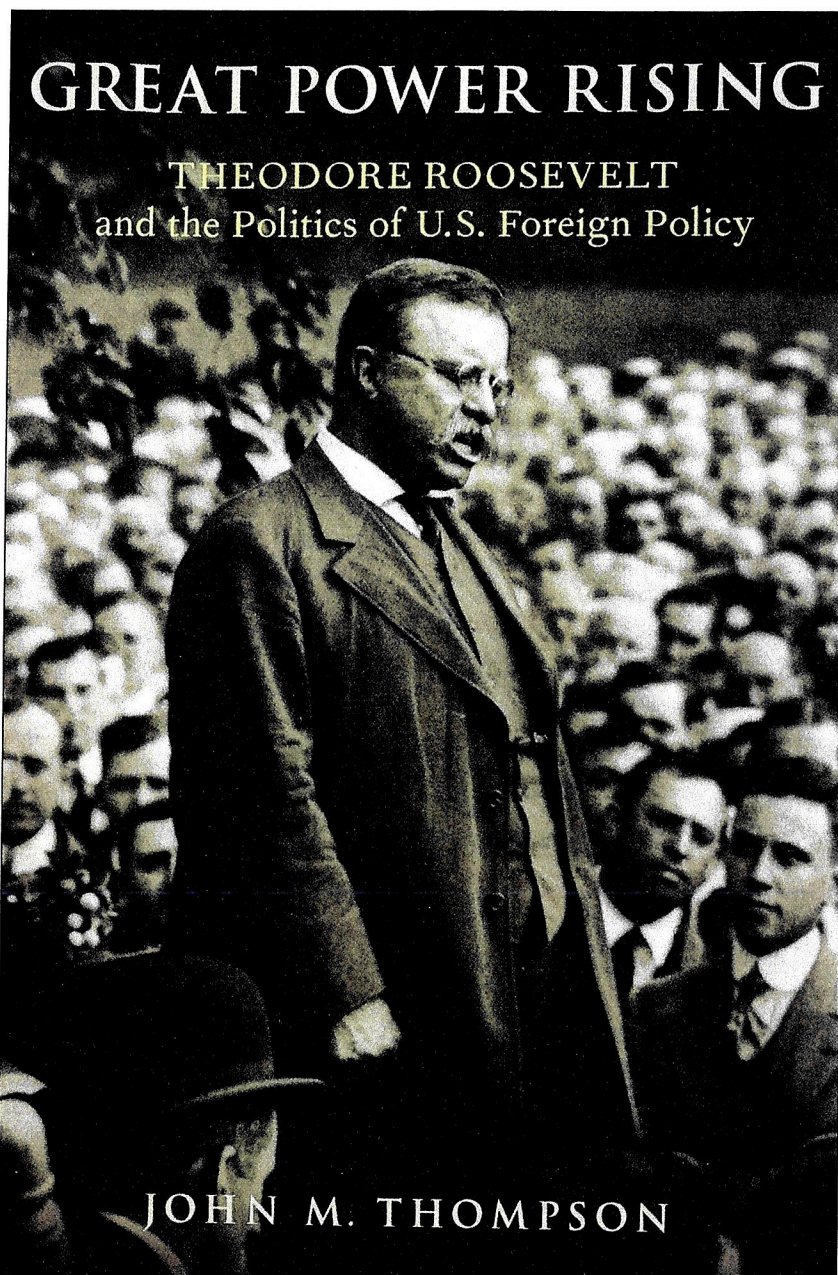
for years in the implications of history for policymaking, and on how policymakers—especially Presidents—deal with the complexities (and at times the absurdities) of the U.S. system. TR turned out to be a perfect vehicle for these interests. Unfortunately, this sort of work is increasingly unfashionable in academia. Hopefully, my book will, if only in a minor way, contribute to reversing this trend.

WYNN: Please discuss your background.

THOMPSON: I grew up in Green Bay, Wisconsin. However, my father spent the first part of his career in the air force, so I was actually born in South Carolina and spent most of the first four years of my life on an air force base in Bitburg, Germany. I suspect that this

early experience fueled an interest in international relations and cultural exchange. In graduate school, in Washington, D.C., I met a Czech woman, who is now my wife. One thing led to another, and for the majority of the last twenty years I have lived abroad, mostly in Europe, though I also spent a year teaching English in Japan. I spent several years as a lecturer (assistant professor) at University College Dublin, in Ireland. Though I loved teaching college students—it remains my first passion—I missed policy, and when the chance to work at a think tank arose, I moved to Switzerland. I currently live in the Netherlands, where I work at the Hague Centre for Security Studies on U.S. foreign policy and transatlantic relations, among other issues.

WYNN: What is the central idea or impression that you would like a reader to take away from your work?



THOMPSON: In theory, given the structure of the U.S. political system, Presidents have much more freedom for maneuver in the foreign policy realm than they do on domestic issues. However, in reality, Presidents face many potential constraints—the national security bureaucracy, Congress, the media, public opinion—so the domestic context is incredibly important in determining the direction of a President’s foreign policy. Some Presidents navigate this aspect of the job well, others have a mixed record, and a few are not good at it. TR was better than just about any other President in this respect, and it was a key reason for his overall success as a diplomatist.

WYNN: Tell us where you conducted some of your research and where you found the most valuable sources?

THOMPSON: Most of my research was conducted in the Washington, D.C., area. I spent countless hours at the Library of Congress, as well as at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. In the later stages of my research, I was fortunate to be able to travel further afield. I spent a week at the Massachusetts Historical Society, looking at the Henry Cabot Lodge Papers and the TR-Lodge correspondence. When I was working in Ireland, I was able to visit the Churchill College Library, in Cambridge; the parliamentary archives, in London; the U.K. national archives, in Kew; and the Political Archives of the German Foreign Ministry. The collections at the Library of Congress are the cornerstone of my book, and the LOC is a national treasure—not to mention one of my favorite places—but some of the most interesting tidbits I found were in the

foreign archives. For instance, the political reporting from British and German diplomats stationed in Washington offered a unique window into the politics of U.S. foreign policy—one that previous books about TR had overlooked.

WYNN: You dispel some entrenched historical positions regarding public opinion and perceptions of foreign policy. What did you find revealing about this?

THOMPSON: For me, one of the most interesting things about the politics of TR's foreign policy is the two-way dynamic. In other words, the U.S. system poses numerous potential hurdles, but for skilled politicians such as TR it also offers opportunities. Do well on the foreign stage—all the while ensuring that the press and the public are properly informed—and foreign policy can even be a political asset. TR very consciously used the foreign policy victories of his first term to bolster his prospects in the 1904 election. Of course, I am hardly the first person to highlight this two-way aspect of politics and foreign policy, but to my knowledge few historians have ever investigated this aspect of a presidency in detail. Doing so revealed some fascinating and theretofore unknown aspects of TR's approach. For instance, he spent an enormous amount of time worrying about the German-American vote—which at the time was crucial—and this played an important role in how he approached relations with Germany. He even sought to help the Germans improve their image in the United States, because he understood that an increase in anti-German sentiment would alienate German-Americans and, in the process, politically damage him.

WYNN: Similarly, could you explain your use and the importance of newspapers in your study?

THOMPSON: In TR's time, there was no opinion polling, so newspapers were widely considered the best barometer of public sentiment. TR's papers are filled with newspaper clippings; he kept a close eye on key papers, not just in New York and Washington, but also around the country, in an effort to figure out what people were thinking. But it wasn't just about tracking public opinion; newspapers were also the most important tool he used to shape public debate. What people read in the papers—and not just the headlines, but also the editorials, which carried a lot more weight in TR's era—influenced what they thought. So TR used his relationships with reporters and editors to build support for his policies and to boost his political standing.

WYNN: You write about TR's "coaching" of the press to "capture the narrative" to align with his goals. How effective was he, and how amenable was the press?

THOMPSON: TR was a genius in this respect, as far as I know more so than any other President. Partly, his close relationship with the press was the product of political calculation: He understood how important the press was for facilitating the implementation of his agenda and for furthering his political

ambitions. But there was also an element of genuine fascination that drove the immense amount of time he spent with reporters. Like every politician, TR could be pretty cynical, but he never lost sight of his ideals. The young, increasingly college-educated reporters he spoke with on a daily basis identified with his passion and idealism, and their reporting usually reflected this. To be sure, he had some implacable foes in the press—he loathed William Randolph Hearst, and the feeling was mutual—but even many Democrats found it difficult to resist him.

WYNN: What lessons can be drawn from your book with regard to statecraft today?

THOMPSON: Idealism mixed with political skill can be an enormously effective combination for policymakers seeking to navigate the challenges of the U.S. system. Unfortunately, we don't see that combination in Presidents enough. All too often, you get some of one or the other, but not both, which is usually a prescription for drift—or worse.

WYNN: While TR is consistently considered to have an exceptional foreign policy record (and legacy), what do you consider to be his missteps?

THOMPSON: I would think about this in two ways. One is the burdens that came with imperialism. We should be cautious about the language we use to describe the role played by TR and public figures in imperialism and other dark aspects of U.S. history. I mostly oppose the move to remove monuments and adopt monochromatic understandings of historical figures; we should put them in context and use their legacies to educate, not eradicate them from our collective memory. But we should not whitewash them either. TR's record on imperialism, for instance his refusal to acknowledge atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers in the Philippines, is not spotless. The other aspect of TR's record we should discuss is his post-presidency. He achieved some remarkable things after he left the White House, most notably his (ultimately successful) efforts to impress upon the people and their political leaders the need to prepare for entering World War One. However, he also engaged in the type of demagoguery that he had often condemned earlier in his career. His public statements about antiwar activists such as Robert M. La Follette and about German-Americans were, at times, dangerous and even—to be blunt—disgraceful.

WYNN: What's next for you? Will you miss TR?

THOMPSON: I won't miss TR, because he'll always form the baseline for how I think about the politics of U.S. foreign policy, and because he has given me a lifelong fascination with the ways in which domestic politics intersect with the U.S. role in the world. As circumstances permit, I plan to continue working on a project that investigates the relationship between U.S. conservative political culture and the dramatic changes we are seeing in the international order.