


**CRUSADERS FOR
AMERICAN LIBERALISM**

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IV. T. R.

THE profound truth about triumphant Republicanism toward the turn of the century is that it could not produce statesmen able to control the industrialization of the country. Its Presidents were inadequate and its governors and Congressmen were either pawns or, at best, upright men who were tolerated in the Party because they were ineffectual. The real political rulers of the country were of the stamp of Roscoe Conkling, Tom Platt, Marcus A. Hanna, Boies Penrose—men of personality and strength, “boss” prototypes of the rude industrial conquistadors whom they represented. Praiseworthy men of the quality of Samuel J. Tilden and Grover Cleveland, who were possessed of character and honesty, were in the minority among the “sound” citizens, and they had little understanding of the forces of evil they desired to fight. Tilden led the prosecution of Tweed, but he was not to be found among the opponents of monopoly. Love of honesty and fairness did not prevent Cleveland from breaking the Pullman strike, when it came; and his other decisions were no less colored by class bias: reverence for private property under all conditions was to him a first principle—and Cleveland was a Democrat.

Yet the common man's dissatisfaction during the past years had not been fruitless. Victories in Civil Service reform, the propaganda of third parties, the organizing campaigns of labor, the mounting power of the Socialist Party and other radical groups, these had operated along with other social processes to leash ruthless individualism. So far had opposition to the predatory capitalist progressed that, by the time of the muckrakers, any President of the United States who dared to order troops to fire on strikers would have had revolutionary disturbances on his hands. Times had indeed changed. It was well for industrial peace that Theodore Roosevelt now appeared to dull the edge of labor's bitter feeling.

Calumny followed every President, no matter how drab or mediocre, but in the case of Theodore Roosevelt it reached unprecedented proportions. He was charged with every conceivable crime by gossip-mongers and the extreme reactionary press. He was so openly accused of being a drunkard that he felt constrained to fight the allegations in the open himself. Throughout his campaigns against "the malefactors of great wealth," as he called them, it was generally whispered, among the highest circles of righteousness, that he was insane. To certain influential persons he was an incendiary who was ruining America, and every weapon that might be used to discredit him was justifiable. For conservatives sensed revolution, or at least genuine reform—which was just as bad—and Roosevelt, far from applying force to it, was trying to conciliate it. When contrasted with McKinley, in particular, Roosevelt appeared a prophet of doom to those who clung to the old economic traditions.

Roosevelt was generally held responsible for the appearance of the muckrakers and identified with them, despite the fact that he himself in anger gave them their opprobrious name. A hundred apologists for him have been unable to disentangle him from apparent kinship with the exposers he despised. How incongruous is the notion of his muckraking connections appears from the evidence. Still, it had its logic. It assumed that he had indicted only the "sensational fringe" of the reformers; but that the best of them were literary equivalents of the Roosevelt who wielded the "big stick."

Each year Roosevelt becomes less impressive in retrospect, and it is unlikely that he will ever resume the stature he enjoyed in his days of triumph. If Roosevelt dominated his era, it was only in the sense that he formed the most outstanding figure for attack and defense. The great social developments of the time made less sensational news. The growth of organizations which represented the diverse needs of a new and complex social order—consumers' leagues and associations for furthering child-labor legislation, social research, housing improvement, and the like—these were not widely publicized. Before anyone was aware of it they were functioning and mature. Labor groups of the modern variety were organized and energized without any assistance from Roosevelt. As for the muckrakers, who formed the very pivot upon

which all this social activity swung, they were consistently described in derogatory terms by Roosevelt and those whom he particularly represented.

To show that in these years popular victories—municipal reform, pure-food and social legislation, the exposure of infamy in business and finance, the triumphs of labor, and the rest—involved Roosevelt only incidentally is not to explain the role he actually played. That role is best suggested by a review of the opinions of Roosevelt that were then current.

Roosevelt was seen in three characters. The partisan, purely political opinion of Republicanism and Democracy, both party-bound, was to praise or blame him according to one's political affiliation. The more thoughtful dissident party members, Socialists, muckrakers, and political independents saw a man of mixed qualities. The Roosevelt Cult, to whom the Master's every word was sacrosanct, said "God bless him" whenever they thought of him. These three schools of opinion have passed into history; nothing remains of the passion which marked their differences. It has been the task of Mark Sullivan, who in his day was part muckraker and part cultist, and who subscribed to men of both parties, to weave tenderly the best tribute¹ that all the factions together could have prepared for T. R.—a more substantial tribute, at any rate, than the cultists could have prepared by themselves.

Of all the cultists none was more sincere than Jacob Riis, whose voice of praise was not to be at all embarrassed by the good-natured or vicious fun which the cynics made of him. Roosevelt was to him true Americanism incarnate. For Riis was a naïve sentimentalist who had brought with him from Denmark something of the simplicity and idealism of the Scandanavian fairy tale. At the same time he was a journalist and a man of action who abhorred the dirt and grime of New York City, and was not afraid of confronting the Mauve Decade, which he was otherwise incapable of judging, with it. He lectured and wrote persistently of the dark corners of life in the East Side, and accomplished certain reforms. "The most useful citizen of New York," Roosevelt

¹ In the first several volumes of *Our Times*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1927-35.

called him, and there was much truth in that descriptive phrase. For Riis, unprofound and unsophisticated, was the typical successful reformer of that time, thoroughly of New York, with no understanding of the nation as a whole and no conception of national policy. The West was still the Far West to him; Populism was not so much a political credo as a violent aberration of Western ignorance; for him social maturity lay in the direction of New York civilization. He had no respect for the "yellow" press, no understanding of such individuals as Henry George, whom he considered beneath discussion. On the other hand, he could not help seeing that despite the best efforts of conservative reformers, social inequalities continued to produce unrest and to rouse the sections of the country against one another. Something, Riis concluded, had to be done.

And here was Theodore Roosevelt to do it, a shining young knight in the habiliments of chivalry, emerged from among the machine politicians! It was enough for Riis, who hated politics and did not care to acquaint himself with its realities, that Roosevelt spoke vigorous words and got things done. For him, Roosevelt was little less than perfect and he followed the man's career with frank delight. As the 1904 election approached, Riis was set to writing an informal biography of his friend and idol. Never was a political tract written with greater sincerity than *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen*. It was full of loyalty and conviction that could not have been bought at any price: the biographer, although older than his subject, was never able to discuss him in any other terms than those of reverence.

It was significant that Roosevelt should have had so selfless an admirer as Riis: the very fact described the radicalism which Roosevelt professed better than a hundred essays. Riis innocently gave the game away, for he was out of the running, old-fashioned, of secondary importance, when the muckraking era came; his work was done. The plain truth was that Roosevelt typified the new young man who was succeeding the old in politics. The new young man understood that labor could no longer be ignored, and that the West had to be conciliated, and that the inequalities among farmers and workingmen and capitalists required a new approach, concrete proposals, action. The new young men made no windy

appeals to abstractions: that had been the failure of their fathers, who had merely talked while the country was carved up according to the practical plans of industrialists and promoters. Among the newcomers Beveridge, from Indiana, had a quasi-Lincolnian dream of equal justice and imperial glory. La Follette of Wisconsin was gathering forces behind him for a revolution in state politics. In Oregon, U'Ren was building a reform machine that could fight the lumber and railroad interests on major issues; Hiram Johnson was doing the same in California. The senate and the House of Representatives, with these men up and coming, had a day of wrath ahead.

Roosevelt, too, had his principles, and they included first and foremost a strong desire for law and order. Law and order meant two parties, not three. And so, although Roosevelt knew that Blaine, "the plumed knight," was no chief to follow, because of his known traffic with corruptionists, he went along with "the party," that is, the Republican Party, on the candidacy of Blaine in 1884. He went along not with the cold, financial calculations of a Munsey but with sound and fury. Did this compromise make any difference to Riis? It simply proved to him that Roosevelt was not only a man of ideals but a practical man, a man who knew how to compromise at the proper time:

When Mr. Roosevelt's term [that is, in the legislature] was out [wrote Riis], he had earned a seat in the National Council of his party. He went to Chicago in 1884 as a delegate to the convention which nominated Blaine. He was strongly in opposition, and fought hard to prevent the nomination. The outcome was a sore thrust to him. Some of his associates never forgave him that he did not bolt with them and stay out. Roosevelt came back from the far West, where he had gone to wear off his disappointment, and went into the fight with his party. His training was bearing fruit. . . . He did not join in the revolution; the time had not come, in his judgment, to take the isolated peak.²

The time never did come—a fact that was more apparent to those who did face the need for doing so squarely than to those who did not. Men took isolated peaks because of bold and personal analyses which they dared to make of social situations. There

² From *Theodore Roosevelt, The Citizen*. By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.

was never any danger that the Roosevelt who, in his history of New York, could write thus of the tragic draft riots, would ever feel called upon to stand alone:

The troops and the police were thoroughly armed, and attacked the rioters with the most wholesome desire to do them harm; . . . a lesson was inflicted on the lawless and disorderly which they never entirely forgot. Two millions of property had been destroyed and many valuable lives lost. But over 1200 rioters were slain—an admirable object lesson to the remainder.⁸

Riis approved every word of these remarks. He himself had witnessed the riots of 1877 and remembered the deeds of the striking workers with abhorrence. The question never crossed his mind whether there might have been provocation on both sides, provocation of which he had no inkling.

Roosevelt was absolutely honest in his passion for law and order; and that passion masked his political opportunism. Behind his hearty enthusiasm and earnest argumentativeness there was a shrewd political climber whom Riis was incapable of seeing. Roosevelt made a principle of party loyalty to the extent of holding on to Republicanism in its worst phases—its Hanna and Morgan phases. Riis himself quit the Democrats in order to support Roosevelt, and loudly voiced his “dream” that after Roosevelt had finished his “labors” in Washington he should sit “in the City Hall in New York as Mayor of his own city. . . . That year I would write the last chapter of my ‘battle with the slum,’ and in truth it would be over.” Roosevelt, he was certain, would crush Tammany and eradicate the slums of New York. . . . Roosevelt a Mayor, after having tasted kingship! Riis was indeed naïve.

How principled Roosevelt was in the alliances which dictated his policies we can see from his break with the Taft he had been unable to control. Taft, too, was Republicanism as Roosevelt had known it; a little less glamorous, a bit more pompous, but Republicanism. When Taft was renominated for the Presidency, Roosevelt did not go along, as he had gone along with Blaine. This time he bolted to the Progressives who, coincidentally, nominated him for a third term in the White House.

⁸ Quoted, *Theodore Roosevelt, The Citizen*. By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.

Roosevelt, then, was never the violent radical his enemies called him; he was still less the father of muckrakers and sponsor of Socialists. He was certainly less soundly based intellectually than others of his own time and place and general ideals. Still, he represented an enormous change from the Eastern politician who had so long ruled American government. He was, at least, someone to make a hero of, if hero there must be: a correct and acceptable hero. Roosevelt hunting big game, Roosevelt charging San Juan Hill, Roosevelt denouncing and exhorting, was a forceful and arresting personality. His career in the New York Legislature, as Civil Service Commissioner, as reform Commissioner of Police of New York, and as reform Governor of the State compared well with the histories of the more venal and unscrupulous politicians to which the East was accustomed. And this reformer really reformed. He made principled concessions, it was true; but he would never have risen if he had not done so. As it was, party bosses sought to bury him in the Vice-Presidency. Hanna, going to Washington to witness McKinley's second inauguration, remarked that he was hurrying to see Roosevelt take the veil. T. R. was potent political material.

And once T. R. was President, he presaged trouble. He talked too much; he had too much joy in life. He destroyed all the rubber-stamp dignity that financial America had labored to build up in its figureheads. He had opinions of his own which, to say the least, threatened to interfere with the smooth and usual movement of the politics of state. There was, for example, the affair concerning Booker T. Washington. The Negro leader—no revolutionary figure—had been invited to the White House for luncheon. The occasion had no significance, yet a veritable scream of rage went up with charges that Roosevelt had insulted the entire South. Roosevelt stuck to his guns, realizing perhaps that liberalism was here very much in order. He was, in fact, extraordinarily acute in those matters and rarely made decisions that might really weaken his conservative support. Only three years after, when Maxim Gorki's American visit had been turned into a tragic ordeal by the barrage of lies laid upon him, Roosevelt refused to see the Russian novelist.

Roosevelt was talkative, open, independent, with a gift for vigorous phraseology that was startling and real and as the times

gathered momentum these characteristics stood him in good stead. McKinley would never have been heard amid the clamor of the muckrakers; or, perhaps, he would have been heard as Herbert Hoover was heard when crisis came again to America. T. R. *was* heard. He invited the confidence of the journalists, he fraternized with them, and he won in this way the entire forum of the press.

Roosevelt enjoyed one of his great opportunities when the great anthracite strike broke out in Pennsylvania, and he stepped forward to act as mediator. It was a long time since the story of the Molly Maguires had come out of the mines, darkly, as from another and fiercer world. Labor had multiplied, and learned how to behave. The miners had struck in 1900, but Hanna had at that time run to the mine owners and forced a truce so that the disturbance would not interfere with McKinley's re-election. Conditions, however, had grown worse, and in May of 1902 the miners had struck again. Their plight could have been appreciated by less than passionate liberals. So certain was it that they could hold public sympathy that John Mitchell, who was no radical and who looked more like clergyman than labor leader, offered to arbitrate the case. The operators, however, wanted nothing to do with him or his union. They would not recognize the union and they had no intention of raising wages, reducing hours, or providing for the honest checking of coal mined. So the strike dragged on, and winter suffering seemed imminent not only for the strikers but for the city folk who needed coal. The miners having won the sympathy of the public with their excellent organization and discipline, an aroused public now demanded that the strike be settled and justice administered. As the situation stood, the strikers were in position to win; their opponents could win only with the help of strike-breaking government troops—if the public would stand for such intervention.

It was at this moment that Roosevelt stepped in. The operators were outraged and horrified, declaring that this was proof positive that the man was a radical. Riis and others like him spread the word far and wide that the country at last had a great President who could do things. Yet Roosevelt's actual achievement in the affair reveals facts that look neither like the charges of the mine owners nor the praises of Riis. Roosevelt first sent Hanna to George F. Baer, the leader of the operators, with a plea for

*arbitrates
coal strike*

conciliation. Baer was adamant: he would not give an inch to the union. There was a time-wasting and futile conference in Washington on October 3. Roosevelt then sent Secretary of State Root to New York to plead with Morgan for arbitration. What followed is not too clear. It is said that Roosevelt was determined to send troops to the mines and see that coal was sent out under government supervision, and that he had in preparation an order for the sending of such troops. It has been said that Morgan, under this threat, gave in to Root's pleas. It is possible that Roosevelt convinced Morgan of the senselessness of standing out against public opinion. In any event, the strike ended. There was arbitration and the award included several concessions to the miners but no union recognition.

Whatever labor thought of Roosevelt—and he was called a demagogue from many sides—there was no question as to what the conservatives would now make of him. The country rang with the sensation he had created. But today it is quite impossible to make startling and absorbing his role in the great strike. The sensation can only be “recaptured” as Mark Sullivan “recaptured” it by a furious concentration upon Roosevelt, upon what Roosevelt said, and said he said. Our retrospective interest is in the strike itself, in its demonstration of a power and maturity in labor organization which, unfortunately, did not fulfill itself at that time.

Much more original was T. R.'s unexpected prosecution of the Northern Securities Company. The Company had come into the world heralded like the United States Steel Corporation a little while before. It was the fruit of a sudden battle in which Hill and Harriman, the great railroad magnates, had become embroiled. These two, backed by Kuhn and Loeb on the one hand and by Morgan on the other, suddenly began to struggle for monopoly of the Western railroads. The violence of the struggle threatened to precipitate a national crisis. To save themselves the combatants finally called the battle off, and a compromise was agreed upon. The Northern Securities Company was organized, representing a division of shares which kept Harriman and Hill still strong and still enemies.

The Company was a gigantic trust, one of the most ambitious of the Morgan projects. When Roosevelt, through his Attorney-

General, struck at it and demanded its dissolution, it seemed as though the trusts, which had been multiplying so quickly since the beginning of the new century, had met a David at last. Roosevelt was actually doing what Bryan and the Populists had promised to do; Roosevelt was a sort of Populist. Again the country echoed with his name, and arguments concerning him waxed hot. Roosevelt was evidently no bluffer: he had the prosecution pushed to a conclusion, and the Northern Securities Company was dissolved. What more could any radical ask?

And yet, seen in perspective, the suit dwindles in significance. Roosevelt never carried out the promise it implied: of the several thousand trusts in the land only the merest fraction received the Rooseveltian rebuff. Several of the most important suits, as we shall see, did not originate with Roosevelt; on the contrary, he served, with full consciousness of what he was doing, as a brake upon the activities of more militant antitrust fighters.

Of the Northern Securities case a number of pointed remarks can be made. Before the suit the Company was in the public consciousness as a vivid reminder of the nerve-shaking duel between Hill and Harriman; it foretold future trouble in the railroad councils; it was known to be seriously overcapitalized; its formation impressed people as a truculent gesture on the part of the big financial interests involved. The prosecution of the case was therefore an obvious necessity and did not require particularly radical motives. Morgan himself was less outraged by the government's action than were some of the smaller fry in the business. Morgan was said to have remarked mildly that abrupt counteraction had not been needed; if he had known that the President was against the combine, he would have been glad to talk things over. At best the suit against the Northern Securities Company was a pledge of further action, further prosecutions under the Sherman antitrust laws: a pledge Roosevelt did not keep.

One could view Roosevelt as a product of social forces. One could show that he had been reared amid wealth and was both cultured and virile; that he was likely, therefore, to dislike brutality and coarseness either from labor or from capital. His ideal would be a kind of benign but firm capitalism that would strive to render justice and make sure, at the same time, to keep all

classes in correct order. But Roosevelt was also very much an individual, with a mind of his own, with personal ideals concerning national welfare. He sponsored the Reclamation Act with real enthusiasm. The Newlands Act of 1902 set aside the proceeds of the sale of public lands in sixteen states for use in the development of irrigation. Such measures were due, were demanded, for the bitter competition among the lumber barons and mine operators was laying waste expanses of territory which it had seemed would require hundreds of years to develop, let alone exploit. The nation's soils, too, were being impoverished and eroded away. The long, sad story is being told only now of how the national resources were being squandered.⁴ Government intervention was necessary if physical debilitation of the nation was to be checked.

And so again Roosevelt was a radical and a leader of radicalism. The Newlands Act, it was true, took only a step in the direction of control; it left loopholes for recalcitrant capitalists. Roosevelt took not one step toward reclaiming for America any of the numberless acres of which the nation had been brazenly robbed. The muckrakers, not Roosevelt and his followers, were those who told the American people about those facts.

There was a Rooseveltian Era; there was, at the same time, a Muckraking Era, and this was more solidly based in social conscience. From it stemmed the reforming zeal that was to leaven future American politics. The crux of muckraking was the realistic analysis of the deeper maladjustments of society. Future crusaders for pure-food laws would turn for guidance to the muckrakers rather than to the Roosevelt caucus which passed the compromise measures which we shall soon examine. Labor experts, too, turned to the muckrakers for their information, rather than to Roosevelt's National Civic Federation which was a poor substitute for a Labor Department. Foreign-policy experts were not likely to turn to the Hero of San Juan for light on peace, nor to the man who sent the American fleet about the world as the emblem of American culture, nor even to the arbiter of the Russo-Japanese War.

Roosevelt's mark was, however, inevitably upon all the agita-

⁴ *Holy Old Mackinaw*, by Stewart H. Holbrook (Macmillan, New York, 1938), one such story, tells vividly how the great trees fell, a billion feet a year. With the donkey engine, the highball, and the double-cut bandsaw the lumberjacks did work that had been better left undone.

tion and reform that attended muckraking and Progressivism. He balanced himself upon that movement; he even managed to represent it at Armageddon. He was, in fine, the Average Man: ambitious, well-to-do (as the Average Man hoped to be), enthusiastic, wordy. Whether the Average Man was poor or rich, Roosevelt's illusions were his. Roosevelt was therefore bound to influence the ideas and achievements of men who were more bold than he, more sincere and principled, who dared to see and think what he could not.

Roosevelt was a promise rather than a fulfillment. The excitement that attended him was mainly the excitement of anticipation. But there was never any danger that T. R. would do more than he promised: he was settled and complete; he did no more than he meant to do. Detached observers who have looked back on the Rooseveltian Era for light to cast on the present and future wonder at the storm and controversy that attended so much of T. R.'s career. But when they examine the records carefully, they are likely to become aware of a gleam of teeth and a flash of glasses symbolizing something intensely dynamic and explaining in part the hold that T. R. had on the citizenry. If he warranted no more than Riis was able to make of him, he warranted, surely, no less. Even those muckrakers who anticipated least from him, who had fewest reasons to accord him wholehearted admiration recognized this.