

Week Four: The White House Years of Theodore Roosevelt Mick Chantler, Instructor

While president for nearly two full terms—McKinley's assassination brought him to the executive office after serving just six months as vice-president—Teddy gained a reputation as a “fighting radical,” determined to end the unholy alliance between unfettered capitalism and the nation's political leadership that had existed since the Civil War. Many Wall St. financiers feared that “the cowboy president” was threatening to undermine the economic assumptions and structures that had created such fantastic prosperity for millions of Americans, and propelled the country into the ranks of the major world powers. Perhaps worst of all, Teddy was—as would be said later of his cousin Franklin—a traitor to his class. An Oyster Bay aristocrat wasn't supposed to side with muckrakers, grubby workingmen, and idealistic conservationists. He was one of *them*, the captains of industry who contributed lavishly to Republican Party campaigns. But once in office, he turned on his natural allies. As industrialist Henry Clay Frick put it, “We bought the son of a bitch, and then he did not stay bought.”

But President Teddy was never really as progressive as his public rhetoric would have it, at least not until much later when he had left the office and had briefly become a political independent. His florid denunciations of “malefactors of great wealth,” and attacks on “the criminal rich” gave followers emotional satisfaction, and made them feel that at last the nation had a true reformer in the Oval Office. But in practice, Roosevelt was adamant that his primary goal as president was to save capitalism from its own short-sighted tendencies toward self-destruction. He was convinced that unless some *moderate* adjustments were made to the prevailing Laissez-Faire economic model, violent revolution would ensure. Populists and socialists were gaining strength, and many otherwise reasonable, sober Americans were calling for public ownership of the railroads and utilities. Unless the titans of business made some concessions to the common man at the bottom, unrest would boil over into anarchic upheaval, leading to social discord that would spell disaster for all. That, TR vowed, would never happen during his watch.

Teddy felt that he represented the golden mean in the struggle between the giant trusts that held the American economy in a vice grip and their enemies: militant labor unions and radical agrarian agitators. He asserted repeatedly that “we Republicans hold the just balance and set our faces as resolutely against the improper corporate influence on the one hand as against demagoguery and mob violence on the other.” Always he sought to defuse rising tensions in the land by giving the public at least the impression that the government was acting on behalf of everyone, and not just the “masters of capital.” This was his operating philosophy of government he carried into the White House. He liked to think of himself as standing above the contending classes, a third force acting as a disinterested umpire acting

solely for the national good. Naturally, this did not go over well with the Mark Hannas of the world, who weren't interested in having an impartial arbiter at the helm. Conservatives wanted a compliant tool in the office, one who would reflexively do their bidding. So they screamed bloody murder when Teddy instituted such mild band-aids as the Hepburn Act. When they did, Teddy would reply scornfully, "Look, you pig headed fools, it's either me or William Jennings Bryan or Eugene Debs. Take your choice!"