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EPILOGUE

Eulogists hailed Theodore Roosevelt with the reverence and earnest warmth reserved for men who have touched one's soul. They called him an emblem of American manhood, a scion of virility and strength. The New York Assembly praised his "indomitable will, unconquerable courage and power of mental and physical endurance." Many mentioned his laborious journey from fragile youth to energetic adulthood. Others noted his common touch despite his privileged upbringing. Nearly all praised his moral vision and capacity to inspire, invigorate, inspire. "Today," said Senator Frederick Davenport from the floor of the New York Assembly three days after Roosevelt's death, "there has been laid to rest a great prophet of the whole of the American people."¹

Yet from the glowing tributes of the New York Assembly to the learned paean by Henry Cabot Lodge—who managed to quote Shakespeare, Wordsworth, John Bunyan, Arthur Hugh Clough, and a medieval Moorish ballad in his forty-three page acclamation—perhaps the most insightful praise came in the homely verse composed for Roosevelt's funeral at Oyster Bay:

With something of the savant and the sage,
He was, when all is said and sung, a man;
The flower imperishable of this valiant age,
A True American.²

A child of wealth, a son of power, elite-educated and politically well-heeled: in so many ways, Theodore Roosevelt could not have been less like the great body of his countrymen. Still, he lent his character to an age and became an American icon because he had, above all, an American mind. The great concerns and preoccupations of his era were his preoccupations. His intellectual

and spiritual journey paralleled the trajectory of the nation's own into the twentieth century. The progressive era wrote its political autobiography in him.

Roosevelt captured the imagination of his countrymen with his spirited sermons for righteous living. He stirred them with his calls to focus anew on the meaning and practice of democratic liberty. Roosevelt was the emblematic progressive in part because his experience paralleled that of so many of his fellow reformers, in part because his intellectual development reflected that of the age, but really, for this reason foremost: more than any other national figure of the era, he caught the nation's sudden and intense concern for the preservation of self-government. And he embodied that passion in his politics. The industrial upheaval inspired Roosevelt, as it did so many of his fellow Americans, to grapple forthrightly with the fundamental questions of freedom. It moved him to ponder afresh the moral and intellectual requirements of democratic citizenship; to ask after the best institutional arrangements to sustain free life; to seek a way to reconcile the new industrial economy with republican equality and independence; to articulate the place of a free republic in the world. Roosevelt thought more deeply on these questions and saw farther than most any of his contemporaries, including Woodrow Wilson. He was alive to the basic and enduring problems of liberal democracy, and he practiced a politics to answer them. In an era that might have been dominated by petty squabbles over the distribution of prosperity between triumphant capitalists and a supine lower class, or by parceling out economic prizes to discrete groups to still their clamor, or by smug self-satisfaction about the rise of American industry to world prowess, or by willful failure to see the plight of the poor and dispossessed, Roosevelt and the American people with him refused to be waylaid. They addressed the discontent of their time and insisted, in the process, on considering how to preserve their free republic. Their answers may not always have been wise or consistent, but they had the courage and the character to ask the questions.

That courage and that insight, that refusal to mistake the conditions of liberty with the thing itself, is what made Roosevelt a national icon, and what makes him and his era so different from our own.

This is not to say Roosevelt's politics represent a political holy grail that, if only recovered, would set all things to right. Roosevelt's solutions to the unease of his day and to the permanent problems of free government were controversial even in his own lifetime, and for good reason. Their tendency toward statism, racialism, and coercion is enough to give even the most sympathetic admirer pause.

Roosevelt built his political thought on a philosophy of life as struggle. He be-

lieved that humans could wrest meaning from a chaotic cosmos only through self-initiated effort. Consequently, he emphasized conquest to an alarming degree. He tended to treat the most powerful as the most virtuous and equate civilization with superiority of force. His impatient dismissals of Native Americans' land claims, his refusal even to grant a fair airing of grievances, offer an unpleasant case in point. By locating the source of human purpose in human volition or will, Roosevelt ominously suggested there is no ethical structure or moral law embedded in the universe, discernable through well-formed reason and reflection. His life philosophy thus provided no internal restraint on the exercise of the will, and no guide for the proper use of power. While Roosevelt insisted one should fight honorably, and show fairness and even compassion in life's battle, these moral imperatives owe more to his synthesis of Christian thought and evolutionary theory than to his warrior philosophy itself. Roosevelt, left to his own devices, might sound a good deal more like Friedrich Nietzsche.

Roosevelt's tendency to praise power, apart from the justice of its use, was only exacerbated by his racial doctrine. He was a well-educated man who had traveled the world and was known to admire other cultures and civilizations. Nevertheless, his preoccupation with bloodlines, and social evolution generally, skewed his cultural analyses. He drastically underestimated the importance of language, tradition, and religious practice in defining a people. He discounted—to the point of ignoring—the role of ideas in the formation of cultural life and social identity. His thought carries the ugly cast common to those who think all of human life is reducible to biological phenomena, which can, in turn, be manipulated by the wise and strong.

One of the most unsettling implications of Roosevelt's racial ideas is the place they give to the state. He drew no distinction between the race acting as a whole and the national government. The latter was a natural extension of the former, in his view. And if humans found their greatest meaning in the triumphs of the race, as Roosevelt believed they did, the nation-state came to be the focus of all human life. The American founders had countered such a statist view by pointing to natural rights as limits on the power of the political community, indicators of the person's destiny beyond the political realm. Roosevelt rejected this construction and eviscerated the notion of natural rights. For him, there was nothing natural—common to all humans by virtue of their humanity—about rights. They existed to protect the conditions citizens needed in order to achieve for the good of the race. They could be changed by the state from generation to generation.

Roosevelt's concomitant hostility toward private religion, local associations, and other possible sources of civic identity outside the national collective be-

trayed his troubling belief that race and racial interests were ultimately the only substantive things a people had in common. Besides his implicit denigration of the value of ideas, Roosevelt's conversion of the kingdom of God into the body politic is especially noteworthy. Religion in his hands ceased to circumscribe state action and became instead its impetus. The effect was to reverse the centuries-long trend of Western history and raise the aims of republican politics—dramatically. Roosevelt's politics sought to found on earth the righteous city, to get citizens who were more than independent, deliberative, and unselfish, as in traditional republican politics. Roosevelt sought to make citizens righteous.

The intersection of this inflated formative ambition and Roosevelt's racial ideas proved particularly perilous. Like the ideal republic of Socrates, which also strove to heal the human person in the polity, Roosevelt's warrior republic finally looked to eugenics to reform human nature. His political thought authorized the state to prune and perfect the nation's racial stock in a program of eugenic breeding and sterilization not entirely dissimilar to that pursued by the German Third Reich. The American government's brief foray into eugenic politics has been fiercely and justly condemned, and the demise of Roosevelt's eugenicist statecraft is no loss.

Many of these shortcomings were publicly identified by Woodrow Wilson. In his own brand of progressive politics, Wilson offered a contrasting interpretation of democratic freedom. He construed liberty as the ability of the individual to choose his own path and define his own destiny free of interference from others.³

Wilson's liberalism carried the day. In the years following his election in 1912, his Democratic Party gradually adapted Theodore Roosevelt's nationalist regulatory policies to the logic of Wilsonian individualism. As Wilson's campaign rhetoric in 1912 foreshadowed, Democrats became increasingly preoccupied with guaranteeing disadvantaged individuals and groups equal ability to choose their own ends and equal protection from interference when choosing. They turned more frequently to the federal government to provide the conditions of freedom in the form of social and economic security and through redistribution of wealth. This movement culminated with the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who once characterized his New Deal as a "satisfactory compromise" between his cousin's New Nationalism and Wilson's New Freedom. In fact, the New Deal represented collectivist nationalism in the service of procedural liberalism: an activist state to secure the conditions for meaningful individual choice, Rooseveltian means to Wilsonian ends.⁴

Wilson's political and intellectual victory affected the Republicans in no less noteworthy, and perhaps in more historically ironic, ways. Left intellectually

adrift after the defeat of William Howard Taft, Republicans continued their bitter infighting. Insurgents backed Wilson's regulatory efforts, which they welcomed as a belated conversion to their cause. Republican conservatives continued to question the wisdom of additional state regulation, pointing to its impact on business productivity and freedom of contract.

Roosevelt-style national planning enjoyed a brief renaissance under the leadership of Herbert Hoover, the nation's first engineer president and a devotee of scientific management. Hoover criticized the adversarial relationship between government and business during the Wilson years and promoted instead state-sponsored cooperative associations designed to bring government and business together to foster economic stability, growth, and technological dynamism. Notably absent from Hoover's associationalism, however, was any aspiration to cultivate the warrior virtues or to achieve social transformation. Hoover's was a program of economic prosperity, a procedural politics in its own right. The onset of the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt's arrival in Washington curtailed the Hoover Republicans' experiment with positive government. As Roosevelt implemented his New Deal, the GOP adopted a principled opposition to activist government sounding in the rhetoric of individual freedom. They criticized Franklin Roosevelt's collectivist ventures with the logic of Woodrow Wilson. While they eventually accepted the major pillars of the Depression-era social welfare state, Republicans from the middle of the century forward usually opposed additional federal programs for economic regulation or redistribution of wealth as assaults on the individual's right to live his own life.⁵

Since the 1930s, then, most Republicans have embraced a Wilsonian-sounding skepticism about government as an agent of social improvement. They have largely eschewed Theodore Roosevelt's language of collective solidarity and promoted instead a politics of liberty. This emphasis became particularly pronounced after the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater and the rise of the Goldwater conservatives. Reacting against what they considered to be the excesses of the postwar welfare state and its tendencies toward waste and coercion, the Goldwater Republicans talked of liberty as the absence of governmental—or at least bureaucratic—power. Their rhetoric had a distinctly anti-paternalist, anti-government ring. Democrats, Republicans were charging regularly by the late 1960s, had become the party of “big-brother government.” The GOP, by contrast, wanted to “get the government off the backs of the people” and release popular energy. Perhaps the most articulate political spokesman for this libertarian liberalism, once deployed rhetorically by Wilson against Theodore Roosevelt, was the man who led Roosevelt's party but bore Wilson's name. Ronald Wilson Reagan famously told the American public that “government is not the

solution to our problems. Government is the problem.” Wilson could not have said it better himself.⁶

Yet strands of Theodore Roosevelt’s thought resurfaced in Reagan’s politics and in the work of his neo-conservative compatriots. Alongside his anti-establishment rhetoric of individual freedom, Reagan spoke of renewing national unity and fellow-feeling by making government again the agent of the common good. “It is not my intention to do away with government,” he said at his first inaugural. “It is, rather, to make it work.” The state, he went on, “can and must provide opportunity, not smother it; foster productivity, not stifle it.” Reagan’s political strength stemmed, at least in part, from his ability to articulate a vigorous sense of national purpose. He characterized the United States as a righteous city with a mighty mission. “For now it is our task to tend and preserve, through the darkest and coldest nights, that ‘sacred fire of liberty,’” Reagan said. He urged Americans to draw together to defeat the Soviet Union, which he called “the focus of evil in the modern world.” Reagan campaigned as an unabashed nationalist, and he governed that way, too. While he spoke frequently of cutting back the size of the state, Reagan as president famously grew the federal government rather than shrinking it; federal spending climbed to historic highs on his watch. The occasion for much of this spending was a major military buildup, the chief emblem of his reinvigorated nationalism. Reagan’s hawkish foreign policy and concomitant celebration of America’s virtues brought millions of former Democrats into the Republican ranks—“Reagan Democrats” they were called—and helped account for his large electoral majorities in the elections of 1980 and 1984. All of which is to suggest that Reagan succeeded politically as much because of his Rooseveltian emphasis on national strength and solidarity as because of his rhetoric of personal freedom.⁷

While Reagan resuscitated, in a gentler form, Roosevelt’s nationalism, neo-conservative intellectuals like Irving Kristol rediscovered the moral power of state action. Kristol famously questioned the moral consequences of the Great Society welfare state. He feared that, in the long run, welfare policies would worsen poverty rather than alleviate it by eroding the character traits necessary for personal success, just as they might undermine ordered liberty by destroying the qualities necessary for participatory self-government. This analysis shared Roosevelt’s moral concern, albeit from a different angle, and reflected his insight that politics can and does have moral consequences. Other members of the modern conservative coalition went a step further. After the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision legalizing abortion in 1973, evangelical Protestants and orthodox Catholics turned to the Republican Party in large numbers, a trend that accelerated over the ensuing two decades. These voters pressed for government to

set a moral standard, to become again through its policies a force for national moral renewal. The agenda of the social conservatives and that of the more libertarian Republicans have not always meshed well, and, as the twenty-first century began, party orthodoxy remained in flux, suspended between competing priorities and, if only implicitly, competing visions of democratic freedom.⁸

Even so, in a milieu where the meaning of political labels is still fixed largely by reference to one's position on the New Deal and Great Society programs, almost all Republicans have remained wary of the social welfare state and ambivalent, if not hostile, to its progressive antecedents. Theodore Roosevelt is himself an ambiguous figure in this context. He does not fit well on the contemporary spectrum as either a conservative or a liberal, and while modern Republicans often admire his style, they just as often balk at his politics. Given the history of the party and its current struggles, there is a certain paradox in Republicans' ambivalence toward the progressive era and its iconic leader. It was the Republican Party after all, that, before Woodrow Wilson and even before Theodore Roosevelt, led the nation toward government regulation of industry and social melioration. Republicans are, historically speaking, no strangers to the use of government power. And the party is historically no stranger to internal competition between pro-business, pro-market, laissez-faire partisans on the one hand and moral reformers on the other. Republicans sustained a similar debate at the turn of the last century, one that was resolved for a season by the synthetic politics of Theodore Roosevelt, who sought to make the market good for democracy. In this connection, he and his fellow progressives are the people from whom contemporary Republicans may be apt to learn most.

In the end, despite his political failures and personal shortcomings, despite his repulsive racialism, his statism, and his obsession with power, Roosevelt's politics still hold a kernel of promise for the American future. Roosevelt knew two things worth remembering that contemporary Americans have forgotten.

He knew that liberty is a fundamentally social undertaking. Like ours, his age prized personal freedom, and Woodrow Wilson bested Roosevelt at the polls by making personal choice the end of his political program. But Roosevelt understood that the individual's highest capacities are realized in society. Laboring and learning, creating and worshipping, deliberating and governing: if the individual is able to pursue these activities, we say that she is free. Each requires a particular social context. Roosevelt rightly worried that freedom understood primarily as the right to choose, or as the U.S. Supreme Court has put it more recently, as the "right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, [and] of the universe," would obscure the institutional arrangements that made individuals'

most important life activities possible. For that matter, liberty-as-choice failed to differentiate between individuals' highest callings and their more base desires; the theory eschewed such "normative" social judgments. Against all this, Roosevelt insisted that some pursuits *are* more worthy than others, and the most important ones—from political deliberation to family life—are possible only in a stable society governed by law and sustained by a healthy sense of the common good. Under the influence of Wilsonian-style liberalism, contemporary Americans have come to think of liberty in a way that is vaguely antisocial. We are vigilant for individual rights, but we have trouble saying what it is that social, political life is affirmatively good for. Roosevelt and the progressives remind us that political life is about practicing and protecting the activities that make us human and make us free.⁹

Roosevelt also knew that politics is a profoundly moral enterprise. For better or worse, the laws a people adopt shape the type of citizens they become. Roosevelt was attentive to this formative relationship from his earliest days as a politician and historian. His study of the American frontier convinced him that only a certain type of citizen can sustain democracy. He spent the rest of his political life attempting to secure the conditions that made for responsible, independent citizens. He warned again and again that an economy that rewarded dishonest gain and exploitation of workers would ultimately undermine the moral rectitude and mutual sympathy between citizens necessary for democratic government. He cautioned that poor working conditions and weak families made for bad citizens. The descent of American politics since the Second World War into a banal project of economic management has encouraged us to forget that political choices implicate citizens' characters. Questions about what economic or social welfare policies we should adopt are really questions about what sort of people we want to become, or that ought to be what the questions are about, anyway. Our politics would benefit if we recovered the link between civic character and liberty.

Long after Roosevelt's death, his rhetoric continues to thrill his countrymen with its exhortations to live better, to be more, to aspire to something nobler. If politics is, as Bismarck said, the art of the possible, Roosevelt's politics illumine possibilities not currently realized on the American political scene. His career, and the career of the era he led, demonstrates that the statecraft of economic growth need not be the sum and substance of democratic life. Politics can be about more than distributing the proceeds of the gross national product or balancing the wants of competing interest groups. If a return to Roosevelt's warrior republicanism is both untenable, given the fading of the moral sources that informed its principles, and undesirable, given its statist, racist, and coercive incli-

nations, his example may yet help Americans imagine a substantive politics of another kind. It may help them go forward to a new public philosophy attentive to the institutional arrangements and moral requisites necessary for liberty, to a politics focused once more on the practice of self-government and its meaning for our lives.

“Roosevelt was the greatest preacher of righteousness in modern times,” Gifford Pinchot once claimed.¹⁰ We could stand to hear his sermons again.