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## THE CODE OF A WARRIOR

“In the still fall nights, if we lie awake, we can listen to the clanging cries of the water-fowl,” Theodore Roosevelt wrote from the Dakota Territory in 1885. “[A]nd in cold weather the coyotes occasionally come near enough for us to hear their uncanny wailing.” He may have lain awake many a night in the fall of 1884 and ’85 thinking and remembering—the coyotes’ wailings a fitting accompaniment to his recollections.<sup>1</sup>

At the threshold of a promising career in the New York State Assembly, Roosevelt abandoned Albany for a story-high house of hewn logs hard on the banks of the Little Missouri. He went to the austere, wilderness beauty of the Badlands with its desolate purple gray rock and sudden, steep ravines, to the grassy uplands that swept on for leagues in all directions, where a traveler began to feel “as if the distance was indeed boundless.” He went there to forget. Roosevelt’s three years in Albany had begun in happiness but ended for him in great tragedy and political disappointment. Dakota was his refuge.<sup>2</sup>

In Dakota he occupied his mind, like his time, with other things: ranching, shooting, learning the habits of the cowboys, and exploring their cast of mind. These rough men of the high plains fascinated him; they were like the frontiersmen he had only read about. He wondered at their historical significance, at what they revealed about the American character and America’s destiny. As he spent more time with them, he began to sketch his ideas and explore their implications.

Yet try as he might, his time in Albany was never quite a thing of the past. It followed him west, and if he had paused to consider it later, he might have noticed a surprising continuity between his years in Albany and those in Dakota. The ideas he developed in the West, including his interpretation of the frontier and the settlers who came to it, were essentially *political*. They were analyses of the

American nation, American political institutions, mores, and liberty. Their consistent theme was character—the character necessary for greatness, for achievement in the community of men: political character and political righteousness. This had been his theme in Albany as well. In the West, he broadened its application. Whether he saw a future for himself in politics after 1884 or not, he was developing the mind of a political thinker, spurred by an ambition to make himself a leader of men and also, perhaps, by a despondent search for meaning.

Theodore Roosevelt announced his engagement to Alice Hathaway Lee on Valentine's Day, 1880. They were to be married in October. "I shall study law next year," he wrote on March 25, 1880, "and must there do my best, and work hard for my own little wife." When the time came, Roosevelt found the law boring. Though he had been serious about his decision to enter Columbia Law School, he never seriously considered the practice of law as a vocational pursuit. He discussed the matter with his uncle Robert, a lawyer, on at least one occasion, possibly more, and worked for a while in Robert Roosevelt's law offices. But on the whole, his uncle's political activities were more interesting. Robert, a Democrat, was an active member of the Anti-Tweed Citizens' Association. For much of Theodore's childhood he had been actively involved in trying to curb the power of the notorious Democratic boss. Robert owned, edited, and wrote for the Anti-Tweed Association's newspaper, the *New York Citizen*. He had also served a term in Congress as an independent, anti-Tammany Democrat, from 1871 to 1873. This was just the sort of political engagement, the sort of high-minded crusade for better government, that Theodore had in mind, and he envisioned a law degree as his portal.<sup>3</sup>

Another one opened first. Joseph Murray, a disaffected Tammany Democrat lately converted to the Republican Party, was looking in the fall of 1881 to mount a coup in the Twenty-First Republican District of New York, and he needed a candidate. Roosevelt had joined the district association the year before. Though uncle Robert was a Democrat, every other male member of the Roosevelt clan was a Republican. The Republicans were the party of Lincoln, the Union, and national development. In New York City, they were the party that stood against Boss Tweed. Maybe most importantly for Roosevelt, they were the party of his father. He had already demonstrated in favor of the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes in the election of 1876; Roosevelt would later explain his decision to join the Republican Twenty-First as practically preordained: "[A] young man of my upbringing and convictions could join only the Republican party, and join it I accordingly did." Murray saw the young Knickerbocker from the brownstone district as a perfect weapon with which to topple the local ward boss. Murray would

make Roosevelt his candidate and beat the local boss's own anointed in the primary, thereby securing for Murray control of the district.<sup>4</sup>

For Roosevelt, the race was nominally about garbage. The district representative, William Tremble, had voted for a bill awarding street-cleaning contracts to partisan Republicans, which Roosevelt opposed. Shades of his father, he wanted nonpartisan administration of city services as a step toward draining the clout of local bosses. Defeating Trimble, as Murray pointed out, was one way to make the point. But really, Roosevelt appears not to have needed any encouragement. Uninterested by his legal studies, the state assembly race offered a sterling opportunity to abandon the law and jump immediately into active politics. The law degree had never been much more than a credential anyway. If now the credential was not required, why wait? Murray's schemes and Roosevelt's ambition aligned.<sup>5</sup>

Their designs were not the only forces at work in the portentous election cycle of 1881, however. Roosevelt's rise was facilitated by the shocking implosion of his father's former nemesis, Roscoe Conkling. When President James Garfield, a Republican, attempted to make good the threats of his predecessor and wrest control of the party from the Stalwart state bosses, Conkling took the field. Garfield's play for control was a familiar one: he chose an anti-Conkling man to head the New York Customhouse. Conkling again made his stand in the Senate, but this time was forced to a desperation move. He resigned. His stratagem was to dramatize the gravity of Garfield's transgression and then be safely and swiftly returned to the Senate by loyal supporters in the New York state legislature. Under heavy pressure from the Garfield administration, however, New York assemblymen declined to support Conkling's ploy, and the one-time master of New York, the chief of the Stalwarts, was finished. His collapse reverberated from Washington to the New York City wards. Stalwart ward heelers, including Jacob Hess in the Twenty-First, got the message: the reign of Conkling was over. Reform was the order of the day. Though Theodore Roosevelt was not Hess's first choice for the New York Assembly, Roosevelt's candidacy began to look far less problematic in the light of Conkling's demise, especially when the young blue-blood won the endorsements of the city's reform-minded, wealthy elite.<sup>6</sup>

"Mr. Roosevelt," the *New York Evening Post* trumpeted, "has hereditary claims to the confidence and hopefulness of the voters of this city for his father was in his day one of the most useful and public-spirited men in the community." Most citizens in Roosevelt's district agreed. Roosevelt beat the Republican incumbent and then beat his Democratic challenger, a discredited former manager of an insane asylum, to become a New York state assemblyman at the age of twenty-three. He set out for Albany without any definable legislative agenda or, truth be

told, any particular political goals. He had a credo instead, one preached to him as a youth that he now set in a political key: politics needed to be cleansed of corruption. Politicians—like every real man—needed to observe the highest moral standards. This conviction was, initially, a purely procedural one. It tended to merge with his other favorite mantra that better, more able and honest men ought to run for political office. But in Roosevelt's brief time at Albany, his fixation on righteousness showed signs of becoming something more.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever Roosevelt was expecting, the New York State Assembly was not it. "Work both stupid and monotonous," he wrote in his diary when the new session opened in January 1882. He had no better opinion of his colleagues. "A number of Republicans, including most of their leaders, are bad enough, but over half the democrats, including almost all of the City Irish, are vicious, stupid looking scoundrels with apparently not a redeeming trait, beyond the capacity for making exceeding ludicrous bills." More than a third of the members he estimated were "thoroughly corrupt." Many of them—in 1881, "them" being thirty-five farmers, thirty-five lawyers, six liquor sellers, six carpenters and machinists, two bricklayers, a cooper, a butcher, a typesetter, and a pawnbroker—did not think much more highly of their new colleague. The *New York Sun* mocked him as a "blonde young man with eyeglasses, English side whiskers and a Dundreary drawl in his speech." He pitched his speaking voice at a high octave and chopped his words with loud clacks of his teeth, as if he were biting the sentences off a stick of taffy. Nor was he a particularly impressive parliamentarian. One friend told an early biographer that Roosevelt would sometimes offer such convoluted motions that even his own party could not follow him.<sup>8</sup>

Still, he was earnest and zealously committed to high moral standards, though some found irritating his tendency to sermonize. Said one Democratic newspaper: "It is evident from his talk that he has no idea why he is a Republican." Worse, his lofty pronouncements indicated "a comfortable estimate of himself as a political providence which is extremely earnest and equally amateur. There is an increasing suspicion that Mr. Roosevelt keeps a pulpit concealed on his person." When Roosevelt proposed a bill to institute public whipping for any male convicted of harming a woman or boy under the age of fourteen, the newspapers howled with laughter. His penchant for appearing on the floor of the assembly in tails and a satin waistcoat didn't help. With his aristocratic airs, dandified dress, and holier-than-thou moral assertions, Roosevelt could be something of a self-parody. Certainly there was no mistaking him as the representative from the wealthiest district of the wealthiest city in the state of New York.<sup>9</sup>

Probably none of his critics would have been in the slightest surprised to read

in the *New York Times* October 13, 1882, that Roosevelt had hosted a meeting of “young men of the most prominent families of the city” in the Roosevelt manse on West Fifty-Seventh Street, for the purpose of organizing a city reform club. Roosevelt told the *New York Tribune* that the impetus for the group “was the deplorable lack of interest in the political questions of the day among respectable, well-educated, young men especially.” He put his aim bluntly. “The respectable, educated, refined young men of this city should have more weight in public matters than they do.” Perhaps predictably, the Harvard-trained New York Brahmin who lampooned his colleagues’ grammar and vocabulary — “there was a laboring man’s advocate in the last Legislature . . . whose efforts attracted a good deal of attention from his magnificent heedlessness of technical accuracy in the use of similes” — took as his great political prescription the need to increase the representation of his own class. Get the right men in politics, Roosevelt seemed to think, men like himself, and every other pressing public problem would resolve on its own.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, if Roosevelt’s first firm political convictions were both naïve and condescending, largely imported from the reformist rhetoric of his father’s class, they deepened quickly into more nuanced and perspicuous analysis. Roosevelt found he distrusted many of the lower-class legislators and the machine politicians for the same reason. “They are usually foreigners, of little or no education, with exceedingly misty ideas as to morality.” The last was the key point. Politicians from the city and the party machine routinely confused their own selfish wants with the needs of the public at large. And that, to Roosevelt, was an unforgivable sin. “Working men,” he came to believe, “whose lives are passed in one unceasing round of narrow and monotonous toil, not unnaturally are inclined to pay heed to the demagogues and professional labor advocates who promise if elected to try to pass laws to better their condition.” Roosevelt saw nothing wrong with trying to improve the conditions of the working poor, necessarily; the danger came in the laborers’ temptation to ask government to do their work for them. “They are hardly prepared to understand or approve the American doctrine of government, which is that the state has no business whatever to attempt to better the condition of a man or a set of men, but has merely to see that no wrong is done him or them by any one else.” Lower-class politicians and party bosses were all too likely to promise what Roosevelt regarded as handouts to the working poor in order to secure their votes, to promise them something for nothing.<sup>11</sup>

In March of 1882, Roosevelt voted against labor union–supported bills to increase the pay of policemen and firefighters in New York City. He opposed a similar proposal to establish a minimum wage for laborers employed by any city with a population of more than one hundred thousand. These measures offended his

sense of political propriety. The job of government was not to satisfy every want of the working class nor to remove every hardship, but only to see that “all alike are to have a fair chance in the struggle for life.” Roosevelt believed the laboring classes and their representatives shared a stunted political morality partly because they focused too much on material goods—on getting ahead and on getting government to help them get ahead, as if the whole purpose of political life was to improve one’s own economic fortunes. This was a deplorable, if understandable, frame of mind for those “struggling for the necessities of existence.” What scandalized the young Knickerbocker was the degree to which the middle and upper classes embraced the same mentality.<sup>12</sup>

Tipped off by a friendly reporter that financier Jay Gould was attempting to bribe Judge Thomas R. Westbrook of the New York Supreme Court in order to facilitate Gould’s acquisition of the Manhattan Elevated Railway Company, Roosevelt swung into action. He conducted his own investigation, pouring over reams of private correspondence and other information about the pending railway deal collected by the *New York Times*. Convinced Gould had broken the law, and Westbrook with him, Roosevelt took to the floor of the Assembly and demanded impeachment. “The men who were mainly concerned in this fraud are known throughout New York as men whose financial dishonesty is a matter of common notoriety,” Roosevelt alleged. He added, lest his listeners miss the force of the accusation: “I make that statement deliberately.” Gould was no day laborer; he did not struggle for the necessities of existence. Yet he, too, and numerous men like him, Roosevelt concluded, saw politics no differently from the average union boss. “A merchant or manufacturer works his business, as a rule, purely for his own benefit, without any regard whatever for the community at large.” The wealthy man, like the poor one, used his influence to secure benefit for himself. “Each views a political question . . . from the standpoint of how it will affect him personally; and private business is managed still less with a view to the well-being of the people at large.”<sup>13</sup>

The root of the illness Roosevelt diagnosed as a disjunction between political virtue and private morality. “Many a machine politician who is to-day a most unwholesome influence in our politics is in private life quite as respectable as any one else.” The problem was that the rich manufacturer no less than the machine politician “has forgotten that his business affects the state at large, and, regarding it as merely his own private concern, he has carried into it the same selfish spirit that actuates the majority of the mercantile community.” The trick was to get wage laborers and railway owners both to assess their political demands in light of their obligations, and to think of their duties to the body politic as a whole. In private life, an individual considered his family members’ needs before acting.

Politics should be no different, Roosevelt insisted. Personal morality and political duty were not separate spheres. The man who had an obligation in one had an obligation in the other. Expedience was not justified as a rule for public life. Only duty. The public good. Service. Implicit in Roosevelt's critique was a rejection of Benthamite political utilitarianism, the notion that politics consisted of maximizing the interests of the greatest number of people, with "interest" defined as whatever made individuals happy. Nor did he accept the Adam Smith-inspired celebration of individual selfishness. For that matter, it is not clear he would have thought much of James Madison's argument, in *Federalist* Number Ten, that the American republic could make do without public virtue by setting competing interests against each other, if he had paused to consider it. Roosevelt didn't believe politics had much to do with interests at all. Politics for him was about right and wrong, duty and obligation: righteousness.

Roosevelt's conception of public virtue as private morality writ large depended on some account of political obligation—some story of why citizens owed each other respect and service in a way similar to what they owed their families. How exactly factory workers and financiers were related to one another, what it was that obligated them to consider each other's needs and the health of the country as a whole, Roosevelt could not yet say. But he was certain that a strong, morally relevant relationship bound them together, one more robust than mere economic convenience. He was not prepared to do without public righteousness—virtue, character, concern for the common good—in citizens or statesmen. He wanted more of it, in both.<sup>14</sup>

But he was also increasingly certain, as time wore on, that his own class was making matters worse. They were treating the poor as grist for the mill of money-making. He was sickened by a tour of city tenements where thousands of New Yorkers manufactured cigars right in their own homes. He saw small children—six, seven, eight years of age—working alongside their parents in filthy conditions, often suffering from contagious diseases. The small ones sometimes collapsed in exhaustion and, having nowhere else to sleep, sprawled on the stinking tobacco heaps. Mortality rates for children employed in the cigar trade were twenty percent higher than for other children of their age group, he learned, at a time when the general child mortality rate was already swollen from widespread child labor. Though he distrusted trade unions, Roosevelt supported the Cigar International's crusade to end tenement labor. And when Jay Gould's acquisition of the Manhattan Elevated won through despite Roosevelt's aborted efforts to impeach Judge Westbrook, Roosevelt called for an antitrust suit against the new company. These incidents were linked by a common political imperative. If government did not act here, Roosevelt feared further alienation of the upper



and lower classes, greater loss of sympathy between citizens, and hardening of selfish, interest-based demands. “There is a strong and growing feeling of indignation among the people at the actions of these great corporations,” he warned in calling for Manhattan Elevated’s prosecution. “It is incumbent upon us to see that this feeling takes a lawful shape. . . . For the sake of protecting honest capital, we ought to punish, if we legally can, the deed of the dishonest wealthy for fear that some day an uprising might come that will overwhelm innocent and guilty alike.”<sup>15</sup>

Gradually, Roosevelt pushed beyond the platitudes of his father’s 1870s New York Reform Club, beyond the classist calls for more educated, refined men in government. The machine politics he and many of his ilk so abhorred were not merely the product of mendacity, he realized. They were also partly the product of modern city life. “The pressure of competition in city life is so keen that men often have as much as they can do to attend to their own affairs,” he noted, “and really hardly have the leisure to look after those of the public.” Many of the individuals who were drawn to the political rough and tumble came because of what the local district association provided beyond the ballot. “The strength of our political organizations arises from their development as social bodies.” As Roosevelt knew from his evenings in the Twenty-First District’s Morton Hall, the party provided a place for men to socialize and, almost as importantly, receive social services. “The local political clubs also become to a certain extent mutual benefit associations. The men in them became pretty intimate with one another; and in the event of one becoming ill, or from any other cause thrown out of employment, his fellow-members will very often combine to assist him through his troubles.” Men who did not need the services these clubs provided, and who did not enjoy mixing with persons of different socioeconomic ranks—men, in short, from the Roosevelt class—did not usually become involved in local political associations. Consequently, they did not learn how to operate the “machine.”<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, Roosevelt concluded, both the well-to-do and the average citizen took only a sporadic interest in politics. The modern conditions of urban life simply did not encourage more. The challenge for the reformer was to capitalize on what limited public interest existed and facilitate further responsible, constructive political engagement by the common voter. Roosevelt continued his fervid support for civil service reform and the “destruction” of the spoils system. But just as importantly he decided “governmental power should be concentrated in the hands of a very few men, who would be so conspicuous that no citizen could help knowing all about them.” If voters knew exactly whom to reward and whom to blame for government actions, Roosevelt thought, they might pay more attention to political developments and demand better public officials. In

his final session at Albany he introduced legislation transferring to the mayor of New York sole appointment power of city department heads in an effort to inject greater accountability through greater political concentration. That the average citizen could be counted upon only to give intermittent attention to affairs of state was not to his credit, Roosevelt thought. He wondered if a system with so little public spirit could go on for long. But he determined to work with circumstances as he found them rather than as he wanted them to be.<sup>17</sup>

In his reformist aspirations, the young assemblyman from the New York Twenty-First was not so different from a klatch of fellow Republicans elsewhere in New York and Massachusetts trying to fight their way up the party ranks, young guns and a few elder statesmen disaffected with boss control and the old politics of the Civil War. These Mugwumps entered the party lists at about the same time as Roosevelt, and they were, like him, moral reformers above all else, mostly young men from the upper-middle and new professional classes who wanted to purify politics and take back control of their fathers' party from the boss-driven state machines. They were avid supporters of civil service reform and free trade, critics of the protective tariff. Roosevelt was all those things as well. And to a certain extent, his own thinking provides a window on the mind of the Mugwumps. Like them, he identified a lack of moral character and public-spiritedness as the chief ailments of American politics. Roosevelt called repeatedly, incessantly, obnoxiously for better political ethics. But his idea of political morality—and the Mugwumps' too—was not an ethic derived from a particular conception of the public good or the larger purposes of government, at least not explicitly. When it came right down to it, Roosevelt did not really advocate *civic* virtue at all; he advocated for private virtue—the Christian altruism and ethics of obligation preached to him in his boyhood—to be practiced in the public realm. This was his, and their, political righteousness.<sup>18</sup>

But Roosevelt's understanding of urban politics ran deeper than most of his Mugwump contemporaries. He grasped the importance of party organization. While his father's old friends and the Mugwump insurgents condemned the party machine as inherently malignant, Roosevelt concluded otherwise. "The terms machine and machine politician are now undoubtedly used ordinarily in a reproachful sense," he realized. But "the machine is often a very powerful instrument for good; and a machine politician really desirous of doing honest work on behalf of the community is fifty times as useful an ally as is the average philanthropic outsider." Roosevelt had reason to ponder the issue. The demise of Roscoe Conkling struck the death knell for the state-based Stalwart machine, but, as Conkling himself had foreseen, his passing merely facilitated the emergence of a new boss system, headed nationally by James G. Blaine. To Mug-

wumps, Blaine and his shady real estate ventures were anathema, and, when he won the Republican presidential nomination in 1884, they broke with the Republican Party. Roosevelt refused to go with them. He detested Blaine personally and was wary of the Maine senator's grand schemes to secure a lasting Republican majority with a national economic plan centered on the protective tariff. But Roosevelt by that time had decided he was a party man. He was a politician, not a social gadfly or amateur reformer, or even a well-meaning philanthropist like his father. He respected the Mugwumps' position and shared their moralistic, reformist aspirations. But he thought they were making a foolish, even sophomoric, mistake. Politics was a rough business; the political man must, to do any good, be willing to work with the less-than-ideal. And Theodore Roosevelt in 1884 had chosen a vocation in politics. He had become a man of the republic. But a regime man in America needed a party, and the Republicans were his. He might have gone on to be a state party leader or seek statewide office. But in the summer of 1884, tragedy intervened.<sup>19</sup>

On the thirteenth of February, 1884, Roosevelt received a telegram while on the floor of the Assembly. His first child, a girl, had arrived. This was his moment of triumph. The legislature was hours away from approving his bill, drafted in the committee he chaired, to strip the New York City aldermen of their power to confirm the mayor's appointments. This was the measure Roosevelt believed would bring new accountability to city administration. This was his most promising bid to help the cause of good government in New York. But there would be no celebrating. A second telegram found Roosevelt before the bill could be voted. He must come home, it read. He must come home at once.<sup>20</sup>

In the family mansion on West Fifty-Seventh Street his wife was dying, and his mother was dying, too. Roosevelt arrived just in time to say goodbye to Martha Bulloch Roosevelt, the first woman in his life, the source of his wit and storytelling charm, his "darling motherling," and then climbed to the third floor to hold his dying wife in his arms. She stopped breathing at two in the afternoon on Valentine's Day, four years exactly since the announcement of their engagement. Roosevelt's one-line diary entry that night bespoke his grief. "The light," he wrote, "has gone out of my life." The cries of his day-old baby girl, named Alice for her mother, echoed through an empty house. He would not seek reelection.<sup>21</sup>

He did go back to the state capital a mere three days after his wife's funeral, and worked tirelessly through the spring. At the end of April, New York Republicans elected him to serve as a delegate-at-large to the national convention in June. Roosevelt went there as well and campaigned for Senator George Ed-

munds. But his fellow delegates nominated James G. Blaine to be the next Republican presidential candidate, and Roosevelt, his tenure in Albany completed, his child safely in the hands of her Aunt Anna, turned his eyes to the West. There he would go, to a small Dakota outpost called Medora, to ranch and raise cattle and bury his grief.

“The cowboys form a class by themselves. . . . They are mostly of native birth, and although there are among them wild spirits from every land, yet the latter soon become undistinguishable from their American companions, for these plainsmen are far from being so heterogeneous as is commonly supposed. On the contrary, all have a curious similarity to each other; existence in the West seems to put the same stamp upon each and every one of them. Sinewy, hardy, self-reliant, their life forces them to be both daring and adventurous, and the passing over their heads of a few years leaves printed on their faces certain lines which tell of dangers quietly fronted and hardships uncomplainingly endured.”<sup>22</sup>

He wanted to be one of them. He had wanted it all his life, in one way or another, and he wanted it especially now. Their life was simple, uncomplicated. It was also virile and rugged and beautifully, mercifully unreflective. They rode for hours, sometimes days, without stopping, herded cattle, roped steers, braved the snow and the heat, built homes, cleared brush—made their lives, literally, with their hands. These men didn’t observe nature. They lived in it, with it, made by it. The land formed their character. Roosevelt was twenty-six in the autumn of 1884, when he turned his back on Albany politics and went West to remake his life. Or to finish the making he had begun as a boy. He had pushed and punished his body but never succeeded in transforming his frame: he was still thin and somewhat delicate as a young adult, given to fits of asthma and bouts of diarrhea, even after his marriage and his season in the Albany legislature. He had spent some time in nature but never became a true outdoorsman. He had been on a hunting trip with Elliott once, back in 1880, but his little brother had spent more time than him in the West. Elliott knew more about life on the trail and hunting big game. He had not yet managed the metamorphosis he had so earnestly imagined as an adolescent. Dakota was his chance.<sup>23</sup>

The work of the cattle roundup was the most physically demanding he had known. Forty or fifty cowboys rode together to assemble the cattle from the grazing land. They began at sunrise, scoured the open pasture for miles in a designated radius, then drove the cattle to a nighttime meeting point. Day after day it continued, mile after mile, sunup to sundown, the herd growing, the toil exhausting. This wasn’t just ranch work. This was competition. This was a test of manliness. “Clumsiness and, still more, the slightest approach to timidity expose

a man to the roughest and most merciless raillery,” Roosevelt remembered, “and the unfit are weeded out by a very rapid process of natural selection.” Natural selection was what he wanted—to be proved and to be made worthy. The conditions out there were harsh, even unforgiving, but so was life. Roosevelt had written after his father’s death that “nothing but my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ could have carried me through this, my terrible time of trial and sorrow.” No such professions grace his notes or correspondence while in the Dakotas. He sought now a redemption through strife; new life—his life—won by his hardship. The Badlands were his proving ground.<sup>24</sup>

Meaning through strife, wrought by human hands: this was the theme that occupied his thoughts during his months in Medora and those that followed. Were not the cowboys much like the frontier settlers, the mighty men of the race he had read about as a boy? Dakota was their frontier, and it shaped them as surely as the Western wilderness shaped an earlier generation of American pioneers. Roosevelt had spent years reading about the Anglo-Saxon people and their triumphs, about nature and its power to kill and renew, make and reform. On the ranch in Dakota his ideas and his experience began to draw slowly together. As a politician at Albany he had learned about practical politics and the need for reform. Now he lifted his gaze higher, to tell the history of the race that had made those politics, to find the history of America. He may have turned away from the New York legislature, but if his writing was any indication, he had not turned away from political life. The intellectual task he set for himself in Dakota and the years that followed suggest a man preparing, not retreating; a would-be statesman limning first principles in training to lead.

His thinking led to writing and then to books. The historical works he produced in the years following his stay in the West were grand tales, captivating yarns of adventure, conquest, and daring. They were also investigations into the beginnings and the development, into the very nature, of the American republic. They were in this sense works of political theory. And the secret of the story once told, the heart of his analysis, turned out to be the same as his core conviction in politics: character. Righteousness.

Before his thirty-eighth birthday, Roosevelt completed five major volumes on American history, beginning with his *Naval War of 1812*, published in 1882, the year he entered the New York legislature, and running through his fourth and final installment of *The Winning of the West*. It was brought to press fourteen years later in 1896, the year Roosevelt debuted in national politics. In all five books, Roosevelt addressed himself to explaining what he regarded as the central historical fact of the modern period, the dominance of the Aryan, Teutonic, Anglo-

Saxon, English-speaking race. He pursued the idea in other venues as well, from essays and book reviews to a collection of stories for children. The need to account for the historical fact of Anglo-Saxon racial preeminence was pressing to Roosevelt's mind, as it was to many of his contemporaries. For him, the reason was political. Only by understanding how the English-speaking peoples achieved their current ascendancy could wise leaders hope to preserve it. Even more to the point, only by accounting for the rise of America could Americans prepare to take their place among the great powers of history.<sup>25</sup>

For Roosevelt, a man steeped in social Darwinism and racial theory from his earliest youth, the English-speakers' success was obvious. The merest glance at a map told as much. When he cast his eye over the Western Hemisphere in the 1880s, he saw the English-speakers triumphant, ready to finish "the work begun over a century before by the backwoodsman, and dr[ive] the Spanish outright from the western world." Not that he held a grudge against Spain. Spain had once been a great power. It had won great triumphs for civilization in its day. But the Spanish merely did "as countless other strong young races had done in the long contest carried on for so many thousands of years between the fit and the unfit": they conquered militarily weaker peoples. This feat in itself was no telling accomplishment. Many nations had claimed foreign shores as their own. But the English-speakers had achieved something greater. "England alone, because of a combination of causes, was able to use aright the chances given her for the conquest and settlement of the world's waste spaces." England, not Spain, spread itself across the globe and became the world's leading power. Consequently, "the English-speaking peoples now have before them a future more important than that of all the continental European peoples combined."<sup>26</sup>

Roosevelt's historical method keyed on race, which hardly made him unique. A bevy of "new school" historians in the 1870s and '80s set out to explain the splendor of the Anglo-American peoples by tracing their racial development from Aryan antecedents. Inspired by Herbert Spencer's application of evolutionary law to social development, these new historians sought a scientific history based on biological facts. Edward Augustus Freeman led the way, linking England's social and political institutions to Aryan, specifically Teutonic, fore-runners. He imagined the Teutonic peoples, based first in Germany and then England, were descendants of an earlier, pan-Nordic race. The Teutons then birthed the Anglo-Saxons, who carried the banner of civilization. Freeman's chief disciple in the United States, Herbert Baxter Adams, introduced American institutional history, really the study of race-based political development, as a distinct discipline at Johns Hopkins in 1880. Not long after, Roosevelt's one-time professor at Columbia Law School, John W. Burgess, recommended historians

pursue such institutional studies comparatively to explain the racial origins of different nations and their politics. John Fiske did just that, arguing that the history of the United States began with the fall of the Roman Empire and the triumph of Teutonic principles of personal liberty over Roman despotism. This “Teutonic idea,” nourished for centuries in the Black Woods of Germany, eventually made its way to England, where it became the almost-exclusive domain of the Anglo-Saxons. From there the disaffected Puritans carried it to the New World, and the Teutonic race was reborn in the self-governing New England township.<sup>27</sup>

Roosevelt, then, was not the only one mining Anglo-American racial history. But the historiographical tradition he came to proved highly ambivalent on the meaning of the word “race.” In the novels Roosevelt loved as a child, “race” was often identified with particular linguistic groups, such as the French, the Irish, or the Germans. Roosevelt himself seemed at times to adopt this approach, referring to the Spanish and Portuguese as discrete races, or to the French as distinct from the French-Creoles. For Herbert Spencer and Nathaniel Shaler and the new school historians, race could mean “nation” or ethnic group. It denoted sometimes biological constitution, sometimes cultural heritage or social identity, or all of the above, all at the same time. Then there were more strict, genetic racialists like Joseph Gobineau and soon Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who downplayed the role of culture and language in constructing identity and emphasized almost exclusively common bloodline. In all cases, sweeping references to the “Teutonic race” were undergirded by a (mistaken) belief that the great majority of racial group members shared a common ancestry and further, that this ancestry was in some way determinative of group members’ behavior. According to this reasoning, English-speakers could be classed with their German-speaking brethren as joint members of the Teutonic race, itself a descendent of the Aryan peoples.<sup>28</sup>

Predictably, given the prevalence of such ambiguous race talk, Roosevelt’s own use of the category was far from consistent. In *The Winning of the West*, Roosevelt identified each group of historical actors as a separate race, calling Irish Calvinists, for example, “sturdy . . . enterprising and intelligent” settlers who displaced “Indians, French and Spaniards alike,” each of the latter represented as a distinct racial group. Yet in reviewing Francis Parkman’s history of the American frontier in 1892, Roosevelt referred simply to one homogenous “white race,” including all the European peoples. He scoffed in 1910 at those who “spoke of the Aryan and Teuton with reverential admiration,” as if those terms denoted “something definite,” while he had reverently invoked precisely that terminology in both his *Naval War of 1812* and *The Winning of the West*. Yet Roosevelt was not

merely parroting, in all its confusion, the racial terminology of his time. Rather, his ambiguous, shifting use of “race” revealed an ongoing effort, conscious or not, to express a political view of human identity in racial grammar, an assimilationist effort that hints at an interpretation of English power different from mere social evolution.<sup>29</sup>

Following those anthropologists who equated race with ethnicity, Roosevelt thought of race less as a strict biological category than as a shorthand for nationality or, even more fundamentally, for cultural similarity. But Roosevelt went yet a step further. He regarded a people’s form of government as indicative of their racial character, both cause and consequence of their identity. In some imprecise way, national character and political community were related. For example, “the backwoods Presbyterians,” he said, were “fitted to be Americans from the very start,” because for generations “their whole ecclesiastic and scholastic systems had been fundamentally democratic.”<sup>30</sup> Social practice determined racial identity. That idea, of course, was not unique either. In fact, its lineage reached farther back than the conjectures of Herbert Spencer. The ancient Greeks had believed a people were characterized by a shared polis, speech, and history. They regarded the polis—city—as the natural human social grouping. Their politics was based on it. The city’s organization or *politeia*, its “regime,” gave the individual citizens of the city their particular character. Prior to any ethnic division, a people were characterized by their regime, by the way they lived together. And in fact ethnic distinctions in the ancient world tended to coalesce around regime types, as evidenced by the Greeks’ distinction between their self-governing communities and the “lawless barbarians.”<sup>31</sup>

The Romans shared a similar conception of politics and identity, and Roosevelt would have encountered both versions in his Greek and Latin studies, not to mention his recreational reading of ancient history. Then, too, the American founders were heirs to this school of thought, and something of the ancients’ politics echoed in the nineteenth century American political tradition, in its concern for moral health and vigor and manly independence. In his own thought, Roosevelt retained the idea that forms of government and cultural tradition divided one group of people from another. He continued to believe that regime type and citizens’ character were related. But onto these older understandings of group identity Roosevelt superimposed the notion of inherent biological difference. The two explanations of community, one political and linguistic, the other biological, coexisted uneasily in Roosevelt’s mind, denoted by his ambivalent use of “race.” The English-speaking race had grown mighty partly due to the mixture of its blood, Roosevelt believed—the biological explanation. But just as he did not accept a purely biological account for the compo-



sition of various peoples, neither did Roosevelt accept genetics as the determination of “racial” greatness. Rather, drawing on the neo-Lamarckianism discovered in his undergraduate career and the moral lessons of his childhood, Roosevelt concluded that the strength of a race or a people depended ultimately on the makeup of its character. “If a race is weak, if it is lacking in the physical and moral traits which go to the makeup of a conquering people, it cannot succeed.” For Roosevelt, perhaps more than for most other theorists influenced by Lamarckian ideas, moral virtue was at the heart of the human evolutionary story. The ancients and the early Americans related regime and virtue. Roosevelt linked virtue and race.<sup>32</sup>

The English race had succeeded, he wrote, rising to rule a quarter of the earth, because it possessed the physical and, above all, moral traits of greatness. Individuals and nations proved these traits, they tested the quality of their inner resources, in the forge of conflict and battle. Fourteen hundred years before the founding of America, “the Saxon and Angle had overcome and displaced the Cymric and Gaelic Celts” in the fight for control of the British Isles. The Saxons and Angles proved their virility and their moral vigor in the key test of conquest. Americans on the Western frontier had done the same. In fact, if conquest were the test of virility, the English-speaking settlers scattered along North America’s Eastern seaboard in the late eighteenth century found themselves with a singular opportunity. An entire continent lay open before them. Englishmen had emerged as a united race in the Celtic wars centuries before the age of exploration. By the time the first Puritan colonists sighted the Massachusetts coast, Britain had been settled for several hundred years. North America, however, was not. And North America was no mere island. The scope of possible conquest circa 1770 was enormous.<sup>33</sup>

Races were like branches of a vine, Roosevelt thought; they gained new life when grafted onto a new host. Old racial “stock” that had existed relatively unchanged for generations might suddenly acquire new virtues and develop new attributes if brought into contact with a different race or, better still, if transplanted to a foreign environment. Nathaniel Shaler spoke of the race “stock which was nurtured in north-west Europe,” “invaluable seeds” brought to America and nourished, by the new surroundings, into new life. Roosevelt applied the theory. Great changes are produced, he summarized in a lecture at Oxford in 1910, when “the old civilized race is suddenly placed in surroundings where it has again to go through the work of taming the wilderness, a work finished many centuries before in the original home of the race.” American history was a case in point. Following Shaler, Fiske, Adams, and the new historians, Roosevelt believed the migration of the long-established English race to North American

shores brought fresh life to the aging English stock. To a far greater degree than his contemporaries, however, Roosevelt leaned on the importance of hardship for the acquisition of character. Geographic factors revived the Anglo-Saxon seed by providing new opportunities to develop the conquering character traits that made a race great. Races that did not move or migrate following their original settlement ran the risk of degenerating into physical and moral weakness. If the environment did not provide occasions to use the fighting character traits, they would be first abandoned, then forgotten, and would finally disappear from the race's character.<sup>34</sup>

Such was the fate of most races. "The nationality and culture of the wonderful city-builders of the lower Mesopotamian Plain have completely disappeared," Roosevelt pointed out. Similarly, the Roman Empire declined from its global supremacy and vanished forever. Other races gave way in the face of external threat—namely, harder, rougher conquerors, as the American Indians did to the white settlers. "[I]n but a few years these Indian tribes [of Oklahoma] will have disappeared as completely as those that have actually died out," as the remaining members of the Indian "races" fast melted "into the mass of the American population," Roosevelt thought. The winning of the West was historically decisive because it signaled that the English race, which Roosevelt regarded as the bearer of civilization, had avoided this fate. On the Western frontier, the English stock was rejuvenated. English-speaking settlers acquired in their struggles the fighting, virile character traits that made races great, and in the process of subduing their new environment, became a new people themselves.<sup>35</sup>

The site of the settlers' struggles was the frontier, and Roosevelt considered it the defining attribute of the American nation. The challenges of the natural environment and the battles Americans fought there formed the country's national identity, binding together in the crucible of conflict an otherwise disparate people. "A single generation, passed under the hard conditions of life in the wilderness, was enough to weld together into one people the representatives of these numerous and widely different races," Roosevelt wrote.<sup>36</sup>

Frederick Jackson Turner would suggest something quite similar in his famous 1893 thesis, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Generations of schoolchildren would learn his claim: that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advancement of American settlement westward explain American development." But, in fact, Roosevelt pioneered the idea. For one thing, he wrote first. The opening two volumes of *The Winning of the West* appeared in 1889, four years before Turner's thesis. Turner read them. He reviewed them and used the occasion to preview his own frontier-based analysis. In the West, he wrote, recapitulating Roosevelt, "a new compos-

ite nation is being produced, a distinct American people, speaking the English language, but not English.” Turner’s genius lay partly in his impressive ability to grasp the implications of Roosevelt’s arguments, drawing together themes and ideas only hinted at in Roosevelt’s volumes, and express their consequences with greater clarity and precision than did Roosevelt himself. The *New Yorker* acknowledged as much when he wrote Turner after reading his thesis, “I think you have struck some first class ideas, and have put into definite shape a good deal of thought that has been floating around rather loosely.”<sup>37</sup>

A good deal of thought indeed. The effect of environment on racial stock was a well-worn topic by the time Roosevelt put pen to paper in the late 1880s. German Friederich Ratzel had published the first of his two-volume opus, *Anthropogeographie*, seven years earlier, in 1882, arguing a refined version of the Roosevelt thesis, that environment acted directly upon geographically isolated groups to shape their racial characteristics and way of life. Ratzel’s was only the latest, most scholarly incarnation of the environmentalist idea. The masterly adaptation of the Anglo-Saxons to their new home in North America was a standard trope of the Teutonic myth. The contribution of Roosevelt and Turner to this well-established body of thought was their emphasis on the West, the frontier specifically, as a crucible. But it was Roosevelt only who stressed the seminal importance of battle and warrior struggle—violence—for the development of American character. He reveled in it. “It was a war waged by savages against armed settlers, whose families followed them into the wilderness. Such a war is inevitably bloody and cruel.” Or: “The war was never-ending, for even the times of so-called peace were broken by forays and murders.” And again: “[A] man might grow from babyhood to middle age on the border; and yet never remember a year in which some one of his neighbors did not fall victim to the Indians.”<sup>38</sup>

The violence Roosevelt recounted, even celebrated, flared between white settlers and Native Americans. He was dismissive of the latter, which he regarded as a lesser race. “The Appalachians were in the barbarous, rather than in the merely savage state,” Roosevelt opined in his first volume, appropriating Shaler’s stages of racial development. Elsewhere his pointed references to “red savages” were quite deliberate. He meant to say that American Indians had hardly progressed beyond the first, primal stages of race advancement. They were backward, underdeveloped peoples who had to give way before the march of civilization. What Roosevelt did admire was their courage and physical hardihood, and, in a way, their violence. One of the most striking features of the Cherokees, he wrote, was their “tests of tremendous physical endurance.” They had the physical gifts of warriors. The native tribes may have practiced, in Roosevelt’s judgment, “hideous, unnamable, unthinkable tortures” on their victims—foremost among

them, supposedly, the rape of white women — but this made them fitting foes for the English-stock settlers. The Native Americans were battlers and warriors, and, on Roosevelt's retelling, they taught the settlers to conquer, passing to the white men their virility and violence even as the whites triumphed over them. It was as if one race drew strength, drew power, from the other. This was racial regeneration through violence.<sup>39</sup>

Among his contemporary historians, it was Roosevelt, the sickly child once diagnosed with effeminacy, the Eastern dandy come West to make himself a cowboy, who saw the frontier drama as a violent morality play. Western conquest was about more than environmental influences. "It has often been said we owe all our success to our surroundings," Roosevelt acknowledged in the first installment of his Western history. But other nations had once possessed similar opportunities and failed to use them. On Roosevelt's interpretation, Americans showed themselves a hardier, sterner, stronger race than either their European contemporaries or their Indian enemies, and this moral strength precipitated American success. Character equaled destiny.<sup>40</sup>

Even when settlers were brutal, oppressing native inhabitants and otherwise failing to observe the ethical standards of their supposedly advanced civilization, Roosevelt still praised their virtue. This was because for him, battle was more than the primary fact of history. It was the foundation of morality. Others looked to natural law or the commands of a righteous God as the sources of moral imperatives. Roosevelt looked to battle. In battle, individuals proved their worth, and nations refined their character. In battle, humans wrestled with their destinies and found meaning for their existence. It was a dark vision. Theodore Roosevelt made it his personal code.

Roosevelt placed men who lived strenuously and embraced conflict, men like the first border settlers and the Dakota cowboys, at the front of his personal pantheon. Maybe it was because he was trying to make himself into one. The first time Roosevelt met William Merrifield, his long-time ranch hand and hunting guide, a man most other men in the region couldn't stomach for his insufferable arrogance and overbearing attitude, Roosevelt was taken. He described him as "a good-looking fellow who shoots and rides beautifully; a reckless, self-confident man." When he recounted his Western adventures for East Coast audiences, Roosevelt portrayed himself in much the same way. "I have two double-barrelled shotguns: a No. 10 choke-bore for ducks and geese, made by Thomas of Chicago; and a No. 16 hammerless, built for me by Kennedy of St. Paul, for grouse and plover." Better than all the rest was a "half-magazine Winchester. The Winchester, which is stocked and sighted to suit myself, is by all odds the best weapon I

ever had, and I now use it almost exclusively, having killed every kind of game with it, from a grizzly bear to a bighorn.” Of course, every ranchman carried a revolver and hunting knife in addition to his other weapons, and that included Roosevelt. As for clothing, “the ordinary ranchman’s dress is good enough: flannel shirt and overalls tucked into alligator boots, the latter being of service against brambles, cacti, and rattlesnakes.” No more satin waistcoats or walking sticks, no more silk or smoking jackets or gold pocket watches. Roosevelt was one of the cowboys. He hunted like them, worked like them, ate and lived with them.<sup>41</sup>

To the reading public, and to himself, he had become a rancher, one of the Western men. In his ranching books he helped Easterners see inside this life, but he never identified himself in print as an Easterner, only as a ranchman, a man of the prairie and the frontier. A man of physical courage and hardihood, as well—those two things above all—and of some physical skill in roping, shooting, and riding. He was a literate rancher, hunting by day and reading by night. In short, he portrayed himself as something of a Western Thomas Jefferson, though given his low opinion of the Virginian, he would have hated the comparison. Even when he described his blunders, his hunting mishaps and mistakes, he described them as committed by one who was, on the whole, well-practiced and competent, as the blunders not of a small, somewhat sickly, nearsighted East Coast Brahmin struggling to be someone else, but the blunders of an old ranch hand who knew better. He did not lead the reader to the edge of some circle of cowboys, to observe from afar. He invited the reader to join the circle of which he was already inside.<sup>42</sup>

As Roosevelt knew, one may be “a consummate diplomat, and a born leader,” and yet possess “neither the moral nor physical gifts requisite for a warrior.” Behind this historiographical concern with conquest lay a distinct moral view of life, one centered on the battlefield and its warriors. If battle was life’s core reality, as Roosevelt believed it was, then warriors were the human ideal type, and their moral code the universal guide to behavior in a strife-riven world.<sup>43</sup>

In view of his upbringing, one might have thought religion would supply the substance of Roosevelt’s moral code. Roosevelt did embrace his father’s Christianity as he understood it, a faith of duty and service and high standards. Yet especially after Alice’s death, he thought of God as an impersonal Providence, a being perhaps beyond discursive knowledge. “To appreciate that the great mysteries shall not be known to us, and so living, to face the beyond confident and without fear—that is life,” he once told a friend. That was his life, anyway; his peace with the world. He would live for the present moment and for the treasures humans made, for honor and respect, glory. Whether heaven waited or

not, this could be a high calling, one that linked him with generations gone before. He feared to fail them. "Were I sure there were a heaven my one prayer would be I might never go there, lest I should meet those I loved on earth who are dead," he confessed in a moment of self-hating despair. The God of the Bible may have revealed himself in the person of Christ and the written Scripture, but for Roosevelt, life, like history, remained a swirl of chance and indiscernible fate, as the realities of the natural world, especially the realities of evolution, attested. Evolution was more than theory; to Roosevelt's mind, it was fact, and he spoke confidently of "the establishment of the doctrine of evolution in our time." The evolutionary facts, as Roosevelt knew them, left little room for orthodox Christianity.<sup>44</sup>

By casting doubt on the biblical explanation of mankind's origins, Darwin's theory of evolution, and scientific naturalism more broadly, cast doubt on the god the Bible described. One might reject the book of Genesis as myth and discard later biblically recorded supernatural interventions as apocryphal, but not without cost to biblical Christianity. Clerics and theologians who warred on these issues during Roosevelt's adolescence realized the stakes involved, and while some Americans, typically from more evangelical Protestant denominations, wholly rejected Darwin as incompatible with Scripture, most opted for some sort of rapprochement along liberal lines. Roosevelt decided that science quite adequately explained the physical or material realm, but that "beyond the material world lies a vast series of phenomena which all material knowledge is powerless to explain." The natural world was a closed system, he thought. It could be comprehended, or at least described, through empirical study, without recourse to supernatural explanations. But in the realm of the mind and the soul, science had little explanatory power. Here, outside of the natural environment, lay "a wholly different world, a world ordered by religion."<sup>45</sup>

Though religion may provide meaning, however, it was not therefore true in any strong sense. Roosevelt held that Christianity was "the greatest of the religious creations which humanity has seen," but it was still a human creation. God did not form man—quite the opposite, although Roosevelt occasionally took others to task for saying so explicitly. At best, religious systems were edifices of inspiration that expressed humans' attempts to understand the cosmos. These systems naturally had to adjust to accommodate the latest scientific discoveries, for after all, in the dualistic categorization of knowledge Roosevelt postulated—a categorization that assumed the primacy of the natural world—religion was confined to the unverifiable category. Religion was not grounded in "reality," if reality was understood, as Roosevelt certainly understood it, as the empirically demonstrable.<sup>46</sup>

But however quantifiable, the natural world offered no solace either for the seeker of meaning. Roosevelt the amateur naturalist knew this well enough. He was a son of his age, whose intellectuals expected progress in human affairs through the objective application of scientific knowledge. But science was not, any more than religion, cosmically, really, take-it-to-the-bank true. The idea accepted by the ancients and their early modern counterparts that the universe and each of its components had an appointed purpose or end, a *telos*, late nineteenth century intellectuals dismissed out of hand. Progress came about via random meetings of unknowable forces, which might possibly be explained or at least quantified by artificial, man-made scientific formulas, but nothing more. The universe was not, ultimately, intelligible. Humans could not really explain why it worked as it did, though they could devise formulas useful for categorizing their own recurring perceptions and in that way, paradoxically, assert their mastery over nature.<sup>47</sup>

Roosevelt's cosmos was therefore an uncertain one. Forces beyond human control and even perception dominated the fields in which he acted or studied. He took comfort ultimately neither in religion nor in empiricism, but in battle. In the idea of deliberately chosen struggle, Roosevelt found an arena of moral meaning compatible with his racial, evolutionary world. As the ancient Greeks wrote in their epics Roosevelt so admired, the battlefield was where man could become his own sovereign, master in an otherwise masterless universe. Greek warriors fought sometimes in conflicts of their own making, sometimes in those made by the gods. But whatever precipitated the fight, the warrior battled under his own volition and for his own honor. Though he could not know the outcome or control his ultimate destiny, he fought. The battlefield was a place where his wits, his wisdom, and his will mattered. The choices he made there had real effects. The way in which he fought determined how he was remembered.

Roosevelt appropriated this romantic warrior mentality and folded it into neo-Lamarckian evolutionary theory to create a personal code of conduct. Humans might not be able to alter the laws of nature. They might not be able fully to understand or even describe them. But humans did possess the capacity to adapt to their circumstances, and those adaptations were effected through consciously made decisions. These decisions revealed the individual's personal character, and character, in turn, shaped the unfolding evolutionary drama. Moreover, a person's decisions and choices held some value simply because the individual consciously, deliberately made them. Humans would never master their world or know its meaning, but as reflective beings they could choose the actions they took. They could behave as the warrior who, fate notwithstanding, chose to fight. For Roosevelt, the battlefield was the great moral arena, the place

where humans asserted their agency and struggled to make their lives matter. For a select few, like the Greek warrior or American frontiersman, actual physical battle was an experienced event. For most, however, the struggle for meaning took place in the “battle of their own lives,” the daily maelstrom of choices and interactions.<sup>48</sup>

Roosevelt invested these commonplace decisions and pedestrian activities with imaginative consequence, as he had since he was a boy. In his mind, a man strove to prove himself each moment by living strenuously and for a worthy cause. Life was a battlefield, and the fundamental virtues were “the fighting virtues.” “However the battle may go, the soldier worthy of the name will with utmost vigor do his allotted task, and bear himself as valiantly in defeat as in victory,” Roosevelt believed. In the end, it was the character the battle tested and revealed that mattered most. “The chief factor in any man’s success or failure must be his own character—that is, the sum of his common sense, his courage, his virile energy and capacity.”<sup>49</sup>

These sentiments inspired his most famous and oft-quoted speech, his address to the Sorbonne in the spring of 1910, which was, in a certain sense, an oblique response to the snide languor of George Pellé’s 1880 class day poem. “It is not the critic who counts,” Roosevelt insisted. “The credit belongs to him who is actually in the arena”—to the warrior, the mighty fighter—“whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood,” the man who “knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause.” The man who struggled deserved credit, whatever the outcome, because in struggling he proved himself fully human. He was no mindless organism to be buffeted about by animalistic impulses; he was a man who could think and reflect and attempt to control his own fate, even if he proved ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>50</sup>

His view of life as an ongoing struggle, where “the strife is well-nigh unceasing and the breathing spots are few,” provided Roosevelt both an account of personal virtue and a set of general ethical imperatives. The virtues of the warrior praised by Roosevelt arose from his appreciation for battle’s significance—indeed, its sanctity. According to him, humans needed conflict. They needed a sphere of action to assert their agency, however ephemeral, and a place where their choices would matter. Great causes, campaigns, athletic contests, and wars provided space for human agency and were therefore an integral part of human life. Beyond agency, however, humans needed the triumphs that conflict provided. Triumph was a source of meaning humans could create for themselves by choosing to honor those who achieved it. Great deeds marked the hero as worthy of the acclaim of his fellow men. They brought him what the ancients called glory, the earned acclaim of one’s peers. The quest for this man-made glory helped shape



the person's identity by ordering his ambitions and life goals. It also defined a hierarchy of virtues. Strength, virility, courage, and hardihood were, to Roosevelt's way of thinking, the most praiseworthy of personal character traits because they were the traits that made triumph possible.<sup>51</sup>

In time, no American would be more famous for his exaltation of "primal needs and primal passions" than Theodore Roosevelt. From the way he wrote, it could seem virility was morality, and morality virility. But Roosevelt believed strength was not an end in itself but rather for use in the battle, and the battle implied its own universal moral obligations. "A gentleman," Roosevelt said, appropriating the term used both by the Greeks and contemporary Englishmen to describe the man of high character and excellence—"a gentleman scorns equally to wrong others or to suffer others to wrong him." A gentleman's awareness of the importance of struggle, and his personal quest to become worthy of distinction led him to be jealous for the fairness of the contest, and for the ability of others to struggle as he did. A strong man "will demand liberty for himself, and as a matter of pride he will see to it that others receive the liberty which he thus claims as his own." In other words, the individual who struggled to win and create meaning for himself would want others to be able to do the same. Insisting on a framework of fairness and opportunity that would allow other people to work to make something of their lives was, for the true gentleman as for the true warrior, a point of personal honor. The ethical imperative sprang from the person's self-respect.<sup>52</sup>

Yet Roosevelt's ethics had another foundation, one with an important link to his racial ideas. In private life, Roosevelt noted, many of the "men of strongest character"—which is to say, those most courageous and virile—"are the very men of loftiest and most exalted morality." As the ages went by, he held, this would only become more commonplace. "Rugged strength and courage, rugged capacity to resist wrongful aggression by others, will go hand in hand with a lofty scorn of doing wrong to others." Ethical behavior, as it turned out, was an evolutionary attribute. Struggle lay near the heart of Darwinist doctrine, and Roosevelt's romantic, almost Homeric vision of battle was imaginatively compatible with evolutionary theory. As he had learned from Nathaniel Shaler, races, like species, progressed through conflict and adaptation, and this was another reason the character traits that facilitated victory over other races could be called virtues: they at once enabled the person to perform the tasks that made him human and helped the evolutionary cause of the race. Making certain that members of the race could participate in the struggle of life equally, "fairly," one might say, emerges in this account as another moral, because universal, obligation in that it maximized racial advantage. Thus it was firmly grounded in the race's evolutionary needs as discerned by empirical science.<sup>53</sup>

Roosevelt's evolution-based ethical system had a certain internal consistency. Virtues were the personal qualities that helped the individual or race survive and progress; the needs for fairness and equal treatment of others obligated all persons because without them the battle could not occur, at least not in a manner that tested the true abilities of all contestants. Further, a race whose members did not have the opportunity to develop the conquering character traits was not likely to go forward in the long run, so fair dealing with one's fellows was a race-specific obligation. If it was fairly consistent, this warrior, evolutionary morality had significant problems nonetheless, and tellingly, Roosevelt did not advocate it unalloyed.

For one thing, constructing an ethical system on the edifice of evolution depended on investing the evolutionary process with a moral significance the theory did not support. Evolution was an empirical, and therefore materialist, doctrine. Attempts to make the evolutionary process an end in itself, a sort of moral lodestar, begged questions about the process's moral significance. Why should the evolutionary development of the human race be valued? Because it is inevitable? Yet evolutionary theory, especially in its modern variants, also foretells the eventual extinction of the human race, if not the planet on which humans live. Why should a strictly scientific morality, then, not seek to hasten human extinction? Actually, evolution as an empirical doctrine contains no moral imperatives; they must be imported. Darwin described an ongoing series of events in the natural world that required no special help from human beings or any other species. The notion that natural selection must afford its human subjects a fair, equal chance to compete for survival is one entirely unknown to evolutionary theory as such, and entirely dependent on the extraneous idea that human life is intrinsically valuable.

Roosevelt's moral code included many such extraneous ideas, standards of value outside his warrior worldview that he superimposed on an otherwise evolutionary, racist intellectual system. "We cannot afford to deviate from the great rule of righteousness which bids us treat each man on his worth as a man," Roosevelt often said in one form or another.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, he praised groups of frontiersmen for their "straight-forward effectiveness [in] right[ing] wrongs," while excoriating various Native American tribes for their "outrages" upon morality. Indeed, the "laws of morality" governing individuals should, Roosevelt concluded, be "just as binding concerning nations." All of this language suggests some morally significant standard or series of standards distinct from human experience and biological necessity, principles that obligated Indian and frontiersmen alike, for example. Yet the origins of these standards is unclear, to say the least. If Roosevelt actually believed the advancement of the race was the first,

foundational moral principle, then presumably racial advantage and moral obligation could never clash. His statements above, however, as well as his repeated admonitions to his fellow Americans to live and progress “honorably” as a people—as if the evolutionary process should conform to a moral ideal—suggest he thought a clash was possible.<sup>55</sup>

What happened when moral imperative and racial advantage collided Roosevelt never said. He acknowledged that frontier settlers were, to put it delicately, less morally refined than those who followed after them. But he did not condemn them. So blinded was Roosevelt by the pseudo-science of racial determinism, he argued that war between settlers and Native Americans was just. And he treated natives’ Western land claims with utter contempt. “During the past century a good deal of sentimental nonsense has been talked about our taking the Indians’ land. . . . The simple truth is that the latter never had any real ownership in it at all,” he said. Pressed to defend acts of violence and rapacity on the part of individual settlers, Roosevelt shied away but insisted the behavior of the “red savages” had been far worse.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, Roosevelt’s moral system was saved from complete depravity only by importing the Christian ethics of his childhood. His homilies on the need to cultivate a “high standard of character for the average American” pointed to an ethical criterion exterior to his evolutionary ideas, one that Roosevelt did not theoretically account for and to which he was not, strictly speaking, logically entitled. Really, like his teachers at Harvard and the neurasthenic theorists of his youth, Roosevelt regarded certain actions as moral and others as immoral because he embraced a Christian ethical code. His was yet another attempt to account for Christian mores with a scientific theory. And like many of the theories he encountered in his boyhood, Roosevelt’s ultimately succeeded in preserving Christian ethics only by predicating them on narrow, intolerant cultural and racial prejudices. As Nathaniel Shaler had done before him, Roosevelt envisioned personal and national evolution—fueled by struggle—toward ever greater moral excellence, culminating in a supposedly glorious day of worldwide peace brought by the triumph of the English-speaking race. This was his moral vision, such as it was.

He was a member of that great English-speaking race, and, like his forebears, he was frontier-tested in the West. “When he departed for the inhospitable wilds of the cowboy last March, he was a pale, slim young man with a thin, piping voice and a general look of dyspepsia about him,” the *Dickinson Press* noted in October of 1885. “He is now brown as a berry and has increased 30 pounds in weight.” It was true. Though he spent only a portion of his time in Dakota between 1884 and 1886—the high water mark was twenty-five weeks on the ranch

in 1885 — Roosevelt found new life there and forged new ideas that occupied him for years to come. “Here, the great romance of my life began,” he said as president years later. The West was for him an end, and a beginning.<sup>57</sup>

July 4, 1886, was the one hundred and tenth anniversary of independence, and the residents of Dickinson, Dakota Territory, located just to the east of Medora, asked the once and future politician to be their speaker. “We have fallen heirs to the most glorious heritage a people ever received, and each one must do his part if we wish to show that the nation is worthy of its good fortune,” Theodore told an assembled crowd on the day. “Here we are not ruled over by others, as in the case of Europe; we rule ourselves. . . . When we thus rule ourselves, we have the responsibilities of sovereigns, not of subjects. We must never exercise our rights either wickedly or thoughtlessly,” he concluded; “we can continue to preserve them in but one possible way, by making the proper use of them.” This was the politics of duty for the good of the race, the politics of manhood and manly righteousness and national glory. This was the politics of Theodore Roosevelt. On the train to Medora later in the day, Roosevelt sat next to Arthur Packard, editor and proprietor of *The Bad Lands Cow Boy*. As the train steamed along, Roosevelt, perhaps buoyed by his speech or just in a reflective mood, remarked to Packard that he believed he could now do his best work “in a public and political way.” “Then, you will become President of the United States,” Packard said. Roosevelt made no reply.<sup>58</sup>