

LESSON TEN

Roosevelt and the Battle of San Juan Hill

July 30, 2022

Key Themes: Military pride, service, and sacrifice

ACI Values: Faith, Liberty

Imagine, for a moment, that you have everything in the world you could ever want. You have as many snacks and video games as you can hope for – and play time anytime. You have enough money to buy any toy you want, go anywhere you want, or do anything you want forever.

Now imagine that you also love something so much that, you would place yourself in danger to keep it. Instead of leading a peaceful, comfortable, and happy life, you would voluntarily put yourself in harm's way, knowing that you may never come back.

What sort of person could make this sort of decision? Even if what he or she sought to protect was important enough, who would have the willpower and courage to do such a thing?

Theodore Roosevelt was that sort of person. He was born on Oct. 27, 1858, the second son of a wealthy New York businessman and philanthropist. It may come as a surprise to learn that while many Americans now consider Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt’s name to be synonymous with rugged outdoorsmanship, he was sick as a child. In an age before inhalers and other medicines, he had asthma. The disease made it hard for him to breathe and made even daily activities difficult.¹

To get better, he sought to become as healthy as he could possibly be. During his youth, Teddy often trained with weights and exercised outdoors by hiking, horseback riding, and swimming. He took a keen interest in the natural world, much like the explorers Lewis and Clark did. When he went to college, he studied natural history and zoology among other subjects.

In October of 1880, Teddy Roosevelt married Alice Hathaway Lee. He also got his start in politics, serving as a member of the New York State Assembly for two years. But in 1884, both his wife and his mother died within a few short hours of each other. This devastating loss made Teddy really sad for a long time. He retired from the New York State Assembly and left New York City altogether. He decided to spend his days on the frontier in the American West. To him, the hardships of the Dakota Badlands were a way to start a new life and escape from the painful memory of the loss of his loved

¹ <https://millercenter.org/president/roosevelt/life-before-the-presidency>

ones. Teddy bought a herd of cattle and would ride across the frontier for weeks on end. He started ranching and hunting grizzly bears. He also became a sheriff and started chasing outlaws on the frontier.

The winter of 1886 was very cold and there were many blizzards. After the hard winter, Teddy didn't have any more cattle, and he decided to return to New York and resume his life in the city. There, he reconnected with his childhood sweetheart, Edith Kermit Carow, and the two got married.

Teddy also reentered the world of politics. He served as a member of the U.S. Civil Service Commission and as President of the New York City Board of Police Commissioners. He also tried to be the Mayor of New York City, but he lost his election.²

Teddy was eventually chosen to become Assistant Secretary of the Navy by President William McKinley. This was a promising and important position. But tensions were growing between Spain and the United States. The small island country of Cuba, which is south of Florida, had been suffering under Spanish rule. Few people were more in favor of Cuban independence than Teddy Roosevelt. He built up the Navy and tried to convince the McKinley administration and Congress that America should help Cuba get its independence.³

To protect American interests in Cuba, the U.S.S. Maine warship was sent to the island. This warship was one of the world's first modern battleships, the pride of the American fleet at the time. It spent several months anchored in Havana Harbor before suddenly exploding in the dead of night. Two-hundred-and-sixty-two American sailors died in the explosion and others were injured. Spain denied attacking the American warship, but an investigation by the U.S. Navy concluded that it had been caused by a Spanish underwater mine.⁴

The United States then declared war against Spain in May of 1898. Rather than stay in the comfort of his government office, Teddy Roosevelt resigned his post and formed the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry to help fight the war. Alongside his friend Leonard Wood, an American war hero, Teddy sifted through nearly 25,000 applications to create the group that came to be known as the "Rough Riders."⁵

Ultimately, the Rough Riders was a rag-tag group of hunters, cowboys, polo players, sheriffs, glee-club singers, Native Americans, and athletic college buddies. But the group was key to winning two important battles against the Spanish in Cuba. The first of these victories was at the Battle of Las Guasimas on June 24, 1898. During the fighting, dozens of the Rough Riders were hurt or worse, but they managed to drive the Spanish away. After Wood and some of the Rough Riders flanked the

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodore-Roosevelt>

³ <https://www.nps.gov/thrb/learn/historyculture/tr-rr-spanamwar.htm>

⁴ <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-maine-explodes>

⁵ <https://www.nps.gov/thrb/learn/historyculture/tr-rr-spanamwar.htm>

Spanish army and forced them to withdraw, the American army prepared for an assault on the city of Santiago. Roosevelt's superior officer was promoted on the battlefield and sent to another unit. This left the Rough Riders entirely in Roosevelt's hands.

After the victory at Los Guasimas, the Rough Riders started to lay the groundwork to capture the city of Santiago, which was a major city in Cuba. Taking the city was key to freeing the island from Spanish rule. Roosevelt led a series of charges up a place called Kettle Hill to get to the San Juan Heights. Although Teddy and his men were off their horses and facing enemy gunfire, they bravely rallied and charged the hill. Other regiments continued alongside the Rough Riders, and the American flag was raised over the San Juan Heights shortly thereafter. This critical victory became known as the Battle of San Juan Hill. It cemented Roosevelt's reputation as a war hero and decided the outcome of the Spanish-American War.

Following the besiegement and subsequent fall of Santiago, the Treaty of Paris was signed. This made Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines leave Spain and become United States territory. It ushered an end to the remnants of the Spanish Empire and expanded the influence of the United States abroad dramatically.⁶

The Republican Party decided to capitalize on Roosevelt's newfound popularity, supporting him in his election to the governorship of New York state. He quickly became an energetic reformer, displeasing many in the establishment of his party as he sought to root out political corruption. His political enemies within the Republican party sought to remove him from the governorship by nominating him to be McKinley's Vice President in the election of 1900, believing that his role would be largely ceremonial.⁷

But then President McKinley was killed, and Roosevelt became the President himself. As President, Theodore Roosevelt took a deep interest in environmental conservation. He worked to establish America's first national parks to protect the natural beauty that he loved. President Roosevelt also proposed "square deal" policies between workers and business owners and worked at "trust busting" to break up monopolies which had dominated the American corporate sector for decades. He ordered the building of the Panama Canal, which would revolutionize global commerce forever. Finally, President Roosevelt established a strong American foreign policy that would change the way that America viewed the world going into the World War I.⁸

By the end of President Roosevelt's administration, his name was synonymous with the fighting American spirit. His strength and integrity have inspired generations of Americans. Though born into a wealthy family, Roosevelt's willingness to sacrifice his own luxury for the betterment of his country distinguished him as a true American hero and the embodiment of American resilience and

⁶ <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Encyclopedia/War-and-Military-Affairs/The-Spanish-American-War>

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodore-Roosevelt/The-Square-Deal>

⁸ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/theodore-roosevelt/>

determination. Furthermore, President Roosevelt's efforts to preserve America's natural beauty would earn him a place on Mount Rushmore, a monument in the Dakotas meant to honor remarkable American leaders for many future generations to come.

There have been few Americans as tough, loyal, and courageous as President Theodore Roosevelt.