

Volume 12

Number 044

**Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough
Riders- I**

Lead: Overcoming physical weakness Theodore Roosevelt became a highly effective reform politician, intellectually acute historian, and instinctive amateur military leader of the Rough Riders in the Spanish-American War.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Born to privilege in New City before the Civil War, Theodore Roosevelt, who would become the 26th President of the United States, grew up a physically weak, asthmatic

child, with weak eyesight. Through sheer force of will and determination became physically vigorous and intellectually acute young man.

After graduation from Harvard in 1876 he married and began law school at Columbia. Simultaneously with his legal studies he began his political career, serving three terms in the New York State Assembly. Almost immediately Roosevelt established himself as a governmental reformer and political irritant who challenged the power, policy and position of party leaders and corporate interests. At the loss of his first wife he retired to the solace of his Western Dakota Ranch and continued his literary career.

In 1886 he returned to politics in a failed attempt to become mayor of New York City, remarried, and served as a highly effective and reform minded chairman of the U.S. Civil Service Commission, two years as president of the New York City Police Board, and the year as assistant Secretary of the Navy. In Washington he argued vigorously behind the scenes for war against Spain. After the sinking of the *USS Maine* and the declaration of war, Roosevelt resigned and assumed deputy command of the first US Regiment of Volunteer Cavalry soon commonly known as "Roosevelt's Rough Riders."

For Roosevelt the war was long overdue. Spain's tenuous control over Cuba and other colonial powers weakened with every passing decade. For more than a generation Spain had reacted to attempts by Cuban patriots to achieve independence with a long series of incompetent, shortsighted and brutal policies.

There was very little sympathy for the Spanish in the US. In 1895, Cuba again revolted and Spain sent in General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau to deal with the rebels. His cruel campaigning led to the deaths of thousands in eastern Cuba and earned him the nickname in the US press of Weyler the Butcher. Spain finally withdrew Weyler and instituted

mild reforms, but this too little, too late. Every slight, every act of cruelty actual or fanciful, was magnified by muck-raking American journalists into a major incident.

Many Americans identified with the Cuban patriots as revolutionaries akin to their own founders. When the *Maine* was destroyed, under suspicious circumstances, the public outcry was instant and insistent. The demand for became irresistible.

For more than a year Roosevelt had been a lonely voice in the McKinley Administration, quietly insistent that war was inevitable and frustrated over the President's passivity. T.R. excoriated the

McKinley to a friend, as one who "has no more backbone than a chocolate éclair."

Roosevelt's decision to resign and join the Army confused his colleagues, but anyone who knew him well, understood why this was a logical extension of his ideas and life. He responded to McKinley, "one of the commonest taunts directed at men like myself is that we are armchair and parlor jingoes who wish to see others do what we only advocate doing. I care very little for such a taunt, except as it affects my usefulness, but I cannot afford to disregard the fact that my power for good whatever it may be would be gone if I didn't try to live up to the

doctrines I have tried to preach.”

Much of his life brought him to this point. He was ready to indulge his restless energy and become a manly man of action. Next time: San Juan Hill.

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

Hutton, Paul Andrew. "T.R. Takes Charge," *American History* 33(3, August 1998) : 30-41.

Mattox, Robert J. "Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders," *American History Illustrated* 12 (7, 1977): 8-19.

McCullough, David G. *Mornings on Horseback*. New York, 1981.

Morris, Edmund. *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*. New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, Inc., 1979.

<http://www.bartleby.com/51/10.html>

Copyright by Dan Roberts Enterprises, Inc.