



In Command: Theodore Roosevelt and the American Military by Matthew M. Oyos.

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In 1910, Theodore Roosevelt traveled through Europe as a former president, contemplating his place in history. He told a Cambridge audience that “if Lincoln had lived in times of peace no one would have known his name now. The great crisis must come, or no man has the chance to develop great qualities.” In his own case, Roosevelt lamented that his tenure had lacked a great war, and believed it would keep him from the national pantheon of “great” presidents. Roosevelt inherited a guerrilla war in the Philippines, but never initiated or declared war, and for that reason scholars have paid little attention to his leadership of the armed forces. Instead, most historians focus on his “crowded hour” in the charge up Cuba’s San Juan Heights as a Rough Rider or his delight in being called “colonel.” His career as commander in chief, however, has figured little in the historiographical record. That gap in the literature makes *In Command: Theodore Roosevelt and the American Military* a welcome, long overdue assessment of the twenty-sixth president’s military leadership.

The great strength of the book is its comprehensive account of Roosevelt’s military ideology, leadership roles, and strategic thinking. Historian Matthew Oyos (Radford Univ.) has trawled Army and Navy records, the papers of leading officers and cabinet members, and Roosevelt’s voluminous correspondence. In so doing, he reveals two Roosevelts: one we know a great deal about and another who seems to have escaped us. For example, Roosevelt’s advocacy of naval expansion based on Alfred Thayer Mahan’s theories has featured in most books about the Rough Rider. But Oyos gives us more. We learn how Mahan’s logic came to be implemented through negotiations with Congress and Roosevelt’s management of Navy sub-departments. We can see common themes in Roosevelt’s leadership style, especially in his mediation of disagreements between line officers and engineers in the US Navy. His administration of a compartmentalized Navy resembles his handling of the anthracite coal strike and the disputes between miners and mine owners.

In Command also provides keen insights into Roosevelt’s views on international arbitration, military education, civil service restructuring, technological advances, war preparedness, and reform of the Army officer corps, which Oyos has written about elsewhere.¹ But another Roosevelt emerges here, one whose rather obscure experiences played a significant part in shaping presidential decisions. How many of us remember the Roosevelt who joined the New York National Guard in 1880 and so learned from his own inadequate training experience that the national guardsmen who enlisted in the Spanish-American War were inferior soldiers? His consequent negative disposition toward his fellow guardsmen had political implications that could well have lost him the New York gubernatorial race in 1899. Roosevelt’s experiences with the military led him to care about seemingly mundane matters as well as the critical military imperatives of the age. He insisted, for example, on redesigning Army uniforms, testing a submarine and airplane, and valuing preparedness as an instrument of diplomacy as much as the big stick he so often spoke of.

1. See, e.g., “Theodore Roosevelt and the Implements of War,” *Journal of Military History* 60 (1996) 631-55.

Beyond Oyos's extensive research, the reader is rewarded with an honest and forthright assessment of the man: "Roosevelt did not accomplish all he set out to do, but during his presidency he cemented the foundation of a thoroughly modern military establishment" (5). Roosevelt has tempted many biographers to extreme portrayals, but Oyos gives us a balanced representation of a leader with a clear vision for the Army and Navy and fully cognizant of political and strategic constraints. Instead of a fearless colonel or juvenile delinquent, we behold a complicated man, who could swing between enthusiasm and antagonism, who could be conservative or progressive, a peacemaker and man of letters or empire-builder.

In Command illustrates these distinctions and apparent hypocrisies through Roosevelt's military policies, including his lifelong commitment to appointment and promotion based upon merit. Rising through ranks in the armed forces had long been a matter of seniority and spoils. Though, to be sure, Roosevelt still lobbied for his preferred candidates, he also created new promotion boards that transformed the military's culture. On the other hand, his mismanagement of the Brownsville affair and disregard of the Bud Dajo massacre involved poor decisions made by a stubborn leader for political purposes. In stressing these kinds of contradictions, Oyos avoids making Roosevelt a caricature of heroic masculinity or incessant exuberance.

In 1909, when Roosevelt left the White House to his hand-picked successor William Howard Taft, the United States had become a leading world power with a growing, world-class Navy. The Great White Fleet's circumnavigation of the globe just before Roosevelt departed Washington, showcased American might. Roosevelt lacked a crystal ball with which to perceive the future of twentieth-century international relations:

Like most leaders, Roosevelt was propelled, in large measure, by a desire to carve out a legacy. He wanted to establish precedents that his successors would find hard to reverse, especially when it came to an expansive role for the United States in the world.... Roosevelt could not foresee how the aircraft and submarines of his day would evolve. He was more farsighted in establishing overseas military bases to project power and protect interests. Later conflicts, chiefly World War II and the Cold War, would make that overseas architecture very elaborate, but the principles that guided Roosevelt endured.... [A]dvanced stations remained necessary, crews needed rest and replacement, and ships required refit. Moreover, forward bases provided the intangible quality of presences that assisted national foreign policy. (301, 370)

While some scholars, like James Bradley, have reproached Roosevelt's administration for militarizing the Far East or playing an imperial game that drew the world toward war, Oyos reaches a more measured conclusion. For him, Roosevelt was certainly an agent of change, but hardly the person we should hold responsible for Japanese imperialism or German despotism.² He was only one agent of history and the American military only one among others that mobilized, and never on his watch. Oyos carefully avoids the gross anachronism of blaming Roosevelt for two World Wars.

Theodore Roosevelt's relationship with the American military extended well beyond his crowded hour in Cuba. *In Command* is an astute exploration of a many-sided commander in chief. Its author's thorough research and evenhanded portrayal should make this book the standard treatment of a president who revered the nuances of military management, weaponry, and strategic thinking.

2. Bradley claims the president secretly green-lighted the Japanese military expansion and set the stage for war in the Pacific, Chinese communism, and the Korean hostilities of the Cold War—see *The Imperial Cruise* (NY: Little Brown, 2009).