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Harry Lembeck, *Taking on Theodore Roosevelt: How One Senator Defied the President on Brownsville and Shook American Politics*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2015. Pp. 544. ISBN 978-1-61614-954-3.

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Rancher, hunter, soldier, president, adventurer—Theodore Roosevelt inhabits a special place in the American popular consciousness. In the nearly hundred years since his death, he lives on in plays, films, documentaries, books, and even sports mascots. A man of many dimensions, Roosevelt read and spoke several languages, wrote over thirty-five books, and possessed a respectable knowledge of natural science. Yet he had his flaws and made his mistakes. His conduct in the Brownsville affair of 1906 was perhaps his greatest blunder. Roosevelt summarily dismissed 167 black soldiers from the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Regiment for either shooting up the town of Brownsville, Texas, or protecting those guilty of the act. He proceeded without adequate evidence or military due process. Roosevelt's actions haunted the remaining years of his presidency, sowed divisions between African American leaders, and weakened black support for the Republican party. In 1972, President Richard Nixon, on the basis of an Army finding, pardoned the troops and issued honorable discharges. By then, only two remained alive.

Two notable books returned Brownsville to public consciousness in the early 1970s. John Weaver's *The Brownsville Raid*<sup>1</sup> explored the shootings and the treatment of the soldiers afterward. Ann Lane's *The Brownsville Affair*<sup>2</sup> concentrated on the reaction of the African American community. Weaver's book spurred particular interest in the episode and inspired President Nixon's pardons.

Now, in *Taking on Theodore Roosevelt*, lawyer and freelance author Harry Lembeck examines anew the events that left one citizen dead and a police officer wounded; he reconstructs the emotional and racial environment in Brownsville, and across the United States, that made it so hard for the soldiers to persuade others of their innocence. He is more circumspect about their culpability than Weaver, who strove to exonerate the men on the evidence of shell casing studies conducted at the time. Weaver maintained that community members who resented having black soldiers in their town may have framed them with planted evidence. By contrast, Lembeck is much more concerned with the political complexities that resulted from Roosevelt's dismissal of the soldiers, whose careers were ruined and records tarnished, despite their years of faithful service.

Lembeck's central contribution, as the title of the book indicates, is his examination of the political contest of wills between Roosevelt and Sen. Joseph B. Foraker (Ohio), a fellow Republican and party leader who championed the soldiers' cause. The author describes in detail the maneuvering of these two great political tacticians competing for advantage on the state and national stages. At stake were the fortunes of Roosevelt's anointed successor, Secretary of War William Howard Taft, in the 1908 presidential election, and Foraker's status as a US senator. Foraker's motives have been questioned, because he may have been hoping to weaken Taft's position and strengthen his own chances for the Republican nomination. As a member of the conservative Old Guard, he may also have sensed a chance to diminish a second-term Roosevelt and his reform agenda. Lembeck, however, identifies two alternative impulses: a fear of political defeat and high-minded principle. From this view, Foraker was a man working at cross purposes against himself. Lembeck claims Foraker did not really aspire to the Republican presidential nomination but wanted mainly to save his Senate seat, which an insurgency among Ohio Republicans had jeopardized. Though he offers no hard evidence to confirm this notion, Lembeck does make a persuasive if circumstantial case

1. Subtitle: *The Story of America's Black Dreyfus Affair* (NY: Norton, 1970).

2. Subtitle: *National Crisis and Black Reaction* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Pr, 1971).

that Foraker may have been seeking to keep his senate seat through a bargain by which he removed himself as a potential rival to Taft. In addition, although Foraker may have hoped to attract black voters by taking up the soldiers' cause, his persistence suggests that he genuinely wished to see justice done. But his dogged advocacy hurt his political fortunes. In defying the president over Brownsville, he pushed himself farther into the political wilderness. At a time when state legislatures still elected senators, Foraker needed the firm backing of Republican Party leaders. This he apparently sacrificed for another purpose.

Foraker emerges as a sympathetic character, a moral crusader of the sort Roosevelt liked to imagine himself to be. The senator lost his struggle but ended up on the right side of history. In Lembeck's presentation, he is unblemished, apart from a controversy involving Standard Oil that harmed his chances for reelection. Such a portrayal of Foraker depends, however, on the contrast provided by Theodore Roosevelt, who treated the soldiers arbitrarily and unfairly. He dismissed them on the grounds that they were involved in the shooting and that the three companies engaged in a conspiracy of silence in not turning in the guilty. Roosevelt harbored prejudices about blacks' supposed propensity for violence and for shielding each other from legal consequences. His stipulation that the guiltless could reenlist only if they proved their innocence ran counter to the traditions of American jurisprudence.

History has judged Roosevelt's actions harshly; the president himself chose not to mention Brownsville in his 1913 autobiography. Lembeck does not, however, scrutinize Roosevelt's actions as closely as he does those of the other principals in the book. Roosevelt remains a distant, one-dimensional figure, almost as if a fuller treatment would undermine the author's depiction of him as Foraker's nemesis. For example, Lembeck glosses over his self-righteousness and judgmental nature. This, unfortunately, obscures the motives behind Roosevelt's stubborn refusal to reconsider or change course. Throughout his career in government, he saw himself as combatting forces he deemed unenlightened and self-interested, be they business trusts, inefficient bureaucracies, political machines, or sensationalist journalism. A more thorough consideration of Roosevelt's philosophy of moral and executive power would have helped explain his defensiveness over his actions.

Besides elucidating the contest over Foraker's Senate seat, Lembeck highlights the political interplay in Congress over Brownsville. He relates at length, for example, how Sen. Boies Penrose (R-Pennsylvania), one of the great machine politicians of the age, worked with Roosevelt against Foraker's attempt to launch a Senate investigation. He also looks at how the removal of Interior Secretary Ethan Allen Hitchcock pleased the chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, Francis Warren (R-Wyoming), whom Hitchcock had nettled over investigations of land fraud involving Warren's business interests. Warren could be a helpful ally to the administration in a Senate investigation of Brownsville.

Accounts of politicians jockeying for position, Congressional speeches, and parliamentary tactics can be tedious, but Lembeck has a knack for capturing the drama of such matters. Also, he makes clear how the reaction of African Americans became one of the larger historical consequences of Brownsville. Roosevelt's dismissal order and obstinacy may have weakened African American loyalty to the Republican Party, but in the end, given the Solid South base of the Democratic Party, black voters had no real alternative. Lembeck argues, however, that Brownsville was pivotal in shifting support from Booker T. Washington's accommodationist approach in race relations to W.E.B. Du Bois's more activist stance against discrimination.

Lembeck does sometimes exceed the boundaries of serious scholarship. In one instance, in the absence of firm evidence, he resorts to speculation. In recreating a meeting between Roosevelt and Foraker at the White House in late 1906, just as Congress was beginning to be interested in the dismissal of the soldiers, Lembeck simply puts forward his own version of who, besides Roosevelt and Foraker, was in attendance and what they discussed.

The author's writing style reflects his love for history and a laudable intention to make the Brownsville affair available to a wide readership. For example, he gives a vivid account of the Gridiron Dinner of 1907, where Roosevelt lost his temper in a famous confrontation with Foraker. Too often, however, the writing slips into colloquialism, overstatement, clichéd phrases—"did the trick," "getting [him] out of his hair" (162, 196)—and jarring similes: "the differences between Foraker and Roosevelt burst like overripe Ohio buckeye

nuts in the spring and summer of 1906," "[Senator Penrose] calmed the Senate in the way an itching palm would be greased to tranquility by a fifty-dollar bill slipped into it" (176, 213). An inflammatory message from Roosevelt is "a tirade by the generalissimo in a banana republic junta" (240). And Lembeck ought, early on, to have alerted his readers to his use of terms current at the time that are now potentially offensive. The word "Negro," for instance, passed out of common usage after the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.

Infelicitous writing apart, Harry Lembeck succeeds in his larger purpose of illuminating Senator Foraker's actions in the Brownsville matter in the context of the political strife of the last two years of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. His study adds much to our understanding of race relations and politics at that moment in American history.