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Theodore Roosevelt Is No One to Emulate **by Sheldon Richman**

We shouldn't be surprised that President George W. Bush's Svengali, Karl Rove, is an admirer of Theodore Roosevelt. TR is hot these days. He made the cover of *Time* magazine, heralding a series of hagiographic articles, including Rove's, that make him out to be the first modern American president. In *Time's* view, that means he saw the country's potential for big intrusive government at home and abroad — the first Imperial New Dealer.

Time's writers see what they want to see in TR. They see a trustbuster who favored government regulation of the economy to tame the excesses of big business. In fact, he was a mercantilist, a believer in a government-business partnership, which bestows privileges on favored businesses at the expense of workers and consumers. The economic regulations he favored were all backed, and even written and promoted, by the corporate elite, who never supported laissez faire. Historian Gabriel Kolko and others have shown that, as the nineteenth century closed, the American marketplace was vigorously competitive. The large older firms could not protect their market share from upstarts. When mergers failed to stabilize things, the corporate elite turned to government for protection. The result was the Progressive-era "reforms," which had the effect of tamping down competition and sheltering incumbents from challenge.

As for Roosevelt's trustbusting, with one exception he gave the interests of J.P. Morgan, who would later back his third-party presidential campaign, a pass, preferring to focus on the Rockefeller interests instead. More important, Roosevelt did nothing to end the source of the trusts' power: a variety of government interventions, the foremost of which were patents, subsidies such as railroad land grants, and the tariff. As was said back then, the tariff is the mother of trusts. Exactly so. If government taxes the entry of low-priced, competitive imports into the American market, domestic companies can charge higher prices to consumers. Roosevelt's proposed "reforms" did not touch this system of cartel and privilege.

TR also championed the American Empire. He favored the military-industrial complex, a world-girdling navy, and the extension of American power to the Pacific. As assistant secretary of

the Navy, he thrilled to the Spanish-American War and as President helped oversee the brutal suppression of resistance to the American occupation of the Philippines. He issued the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine for Latin America. As he put it, if we want to keep the Europeans out, “sooner or later we must keep order ourselves.” He loved war, believing that it made men, at least among those who were not slaughtered.

Most basically, Roosevelt was a nationalist and a collectivist, much more in the tradition of European fascists than the American liberal individualists. One cannot imagine a true individualist saying what TR said: “The first duty of an American citizen, then, is that he shall work in politics.”

Rove quotes this approvingly in *Time*, adding, “A century after he served as President, he still has many things to teach us.” He also quotes Roosevelt as saying, “We cannot avoid facing the fact that we occupy a new place among the people of the world.... Our flag is a proud flag, and it stands for liberty and civilization. Where it has once floated, there must be no return to tyranny.” In other words, to hell with the private plans of the American people; they must be forced to police the world.

So it’s hardly news that Bush’s chief advisor admires Roosevelt. So does another Republican champion of reducing the individual to fodder for national greatness, John McCain. As historian Arthur Ekirch wrote, “Roosevelt was a patrician reformer who frankly preferred the principles of Alexander Hamilton to those of Thomas Jefferson.... He had only the greatest scorn for the kind of middle-class individualism and liberalism that emphasized minding one’s own business both at home and abroad.”

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