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## A Headlong Life

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For my paternal grandfather, born in 1884, Theodore was the Great Roosevelt. He always regretted he'd been too young to vote for him in 1904, rushed to the polls to do so when Roosevelt ran as a Bull Moose in 1912 and to the end of his long life proudly called himself a "progressive Republican" in honor of his hero. For my father, who was born in 1910 and first went to the polls in the midst of the Great Depression in 1932, Franklin was the Roosevelt to admire; to him, the younger Roosevelt's dead fifth cousin seemed shrill and overwrought, a perpetual adolescent.

On the evidence offered in "Colonel Roosevelt," the third and concluding volume of Edmund Morris's monumental life of the 26th president, both of my forebears had a point. Morris is a stylish storyteller with an irresistible subject. The seismic personality that one White House visitor said had to be wrung from one's clothes when leaving Roosevelt's presence infuses every one of his trilogy's nearly 2,500 pages.

The first volume, "The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt" (1979), traces its subject's rocketlike rise from asthmatic infant to accidental president at 42, the youngest chief executive in our history. "Theodore Rex" (2001) chronicles Roosevelt's seven years and 196 days at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, during which he redefined the president's role at home and the United States' role abroad, while proving himself, as Morris writes, "the most powerfully positive American leader since Abraham Lincoln." More than a century later, polls of presidential historians continue to list him among the top five holders of that office, a fact that would have pleased Roosevelt himself but also might have surprised him: he was convinced no president could be considered great who had not met and mastered a grave national crisis. "If Lincoln had lived in a time of peace," he once said, "no one would have known his name."

"Colonel Roosevelt" covers the nine short years left to him after he left office. Morris has lost none of his narrative skill over the last 31 years. His new book is filled with vivid set pieces, from the train ride across the sunburned plains of East Africa with which it opens to the snowy graveside ceremony at Oyster Bay with which his story ends.

Morris sticks close to his fast-moving subject, managing to keep pace as Roosevelt blows away three giraffes and a family of rhinoceros in a single morning; attends the funeral of Edward VII, becoming the top-hatted symbol of democracy among the crowned heads present; dashes off a brisk, entertaining autobiography in which he admits to not a single error of substance; comes close to death while exploring an unmapped river in Brazil; and defends himself against a charge of libel with such exaggerated vehemence that the plaintiff's attorney tells him, "You need not treat me as a mass meeting." Morris admires Roosevelt, but does not venerate him. He has written elsewhere of the flaws he considers most grievous: a "blood lust impossible to excuse, . . . a tendency to preach, a need for enemies and an almost erotic love of the personal pronoun." All four were given free reign during Roosevelt's last years. While power almost always became him, powerlessness did not, and in his struggle to win back what he had voluntarily relinquished, his ego was increasingly inseparable from his principles.

"When you are dealing with politics," he told his friend the humorist Finley Peter Dunne, "you feel that you have your enemy in front of you and you must shake your fist at him and roar the Gospel of Righteousness in his deaf ear." As he got older, he had more and more difficulty differentiating between the Gospel of Righteousness and the Gospel of Roosevelt. The savagery with which he took out after his two successors had its roots in serious differences over policy: Taft's belief that power was properly enshrined in the judiciary was a betrayal of everything Roosevelt had tried to do as president; Woodrow Wilson really was slow to arm the country. But Roosevelt's animosity was also fueled by the fact, maddening to him, that each lived in the White House while he no longer did.

Morris recounts his battle first to wrest control of his party from Taft and the conservatives and, when that failed (only because of “naked robbery” by “the forces of reaction,” Roosevelt insisted), to lead a third-party campaign he understood to be doomed almost from the start. Roosevelt’s courage cannot be questioned. Who else would have insisted on delivering an 80-minute speech with a would-be assassin’s bullet freshly lodged in his chest? And the Progressive platform on which he ran was a bold, even visionary document: it recognized labor’s right to organize and promised to curtail campaign spending, promote conservation and provide federal insurance for the elderly, the jobless and the sick. But the evangelistic fervor with which he campaigned probably alienated more voters than it attracted. He had the satisfaction of swamping Taft on Election Day, but the victory went to Wilson, giving the Democrats the White House for the first time in a quarter of a century.

In 1916, Roosevelt gritted his formidable teeth and returned to the Republican Party. By then, the likelihood of war consumed him. He was proud that during his own administration “not a shot was fired at any soldier of a hostile nation by any American soldier or sailor.” But he also still believed what he had first told the Naval War College in 1897: “No triumph of peace is quite so great as the supreme triumphs of war.” Combat had made him a national hero, and he seems to have seen a return to the battlefield — almost any battlefield — alternately as a route back to power or a way of providing himself with a fittingly heroic end to his headlong life.

Twice, he volunteered to rally new regiments of Rough Riders and lead them into Mexico, only to be disappointed when border tensions eased. When the United States entered the Great War in 1917, he was half blind, overweight and already suffering from the host of ills that would combine to kill him two years later, but he nonetheless hurried to the White House without an appointment, to ask permission to raise a division of volunteers and rush them to the front in France. Wilson received him cordially enough, but his secretary of war, Newton D. Baker, issued a flinty rejection: despite whatever “sentimental value” there might be in sending a former president to the front, he wrote, command positions would be given only to regular officers who “have made a professional study of the recent changes in the art of war.”

Roosevelt wrote an 18-page protest: “My dear sir, you forget that I have commanded troops in action in the most important battle fought by the United States Army during the last half-century.” He had failed, Morris writes, to persuade Wilson to “grant him his desperate desire, . . . nothing less than death in battle: he knew he would not come back. Denied this consummation, he would have to cede it to one or more of his sons. ‘I don’t care a continental whether they fight in Yankee uniforms or British uniforms, or in their undershirts, so long as they’re fighting.’”

He tried to ensure that each of his four boys was not only in uniform but nudged as close as possible to the front line. “You and your brothers are playing your parts in the greatest of the world’s . . . crowded hours of glorious life” he told his eldest son, Ted. “You have seized the great chance, as was seized by those who fought at Gettysburg, and Waterloo, and Agincourt, and Arbela and Marathon.”

He presented a stoical public face when his youngest son, Quentin, was shot out of the sky over France: “Quentin’s mother and I are very glad that he got to the front and had a chance to render some service to his country, and to show the stuff there was in him before his fate befell him.” But privately, he was shattered; a friend came upon him “sobbing in the stable . . . with his face buried in the mane of his son’s pony: ‘Poor Quentyquee!’ ”

He never recovered. His health continued to decline. But he clung to the hope that he could regain control of his party, redirect its energies toward reform and retake the White House in 1920. When the editor William Allen White visited his hospital room in the winter of 1918 and happened to mention another potential presidential candidate, Roosevelt was quick to interrupt. “Well,” he said, “probably I shall have to get in this thing in June.” Then, Morris reports, “he produced an article he had dictated that amounted to an advance campaign platform.”

But in the end, my grandfather’s Roosevelt died, the country got Warren Harding instead, and it would be left largely to my father’s Roosevelt to make good on the promises in the Progressive platform.