

John M. Thompson, *Great Power Rising: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. ix + 288 pp. \$35.00 US hardcover, ISBN 978-0-19-085995-4



John Thompson's new book grapples with the relationship between domestic politics – public opinion, partisan wrangling, contesting elections – and the construction of foreign policy in the American political system. He uses Theodore Roosevelt as a valuable case for investigating this dynamic, promoting a revised view of Roosevelt and his presidency as a result. Examining key stretches of Roosevelt's career, Thompson argues that TR developed a successful approach to foreign affairs, persistently but cautiously leading a public he accurately saw as broadly aligned with his vision of the United States as a great power, empowering Roosevelt to carry out his foreign policy agenda. This narrative unfolds themes of complex domestic politics, elite agency in shaping popular opinion, and America's wide-ranging global entanglements. The result is an insightful, well-researched interpretation of early 20<sup>th</sup> century American policymaking and Theodore Roosevelt's influence on it.

The author unfolds his argument through a series of episodes, assessing the influence of domestic politics on TR's pursuit of various foreign policy objectives. First, Roosevelt's early political life demonstrates the rapid rise of newspapers as mass media and TR's ability to gain support for his reforms through public opinion by befriending journalists and courting ethnic voting blocs. Later, confronting as president a blockade of Venezuela by the United Kingdom and German Empire, Roosevelt not only encouraged articles restraining popular indignation but also responded by rethinking and expanding his understanding of US Monroe Doctrine responsibilities, aligning with an assertive populace. Ultimately threatening intervention as public pressure rose, Roosevelt also worked to smooth relations with German-Americans offended by the US restraining Germany. Later, after the Colombian senate delayed US construction of an isthmian canal, President Roosevelt secretly encouraged Panamanian secession,

understanding that Americans generally disapproved this move. To ratify a canal-facilitating treaty with Panama, TR and his administration successfully cultivated senators by reaching out to newspapers and public opinion leaders among their constituents. Finally, when Roosevelt revised the Monroe Doctrine, he carefully framed his ideas as a "corollary" rather than new doctrine, revealing it gradually to test public response and waiting to implement it until after reelection in 1904. Thus, early events in Roosevelt's diplomatic positioning, centered on Latin America, generally displayed successful maneuvering heavily influenced by domestic politics.

Thompson goes on to examine later foreign policy activity regarding Asia and World War I where Roosevelt struggled to manage public opinion and partisanship. When harsh US restrictions on Chinese immigration caused a Chinese boycott of American goods, TR reacted to business lobbying, engaging Chinese-American leaders and press support for immigration reform, but legislation failed as Roosevelt could not muster enough public approval to overcome opposition from labor groups and western states. Similar tensions arose later with Japan, so TR dropped unpopular immigration reform legislation, opposing war-scare journalism but nurturing public enthusiasm for the Great White Fleet cruise to achieve naval expansion for defense against Japan, compromising with a hostile Congress. Finally, after leaving the White House, Roosevelt still sought to guide the public toward military preparedness and American international assertiveness. He succeeded somewhat, but his bitterness toward Woodrow Wilson and William Howard Taft tainted his advocacy, and his harsh rhetoric alienated German-Americans. For Thompson, the complexities of American democracy, including popular opinion and partisan politics,

caused even skilled statesmen like Roosevelt to stumble at times.

Thorough research and consistent scholarship support this political and diplomatic history of TR's career. A wealth of newspapers, correspondence, and primary monographs by leading statesmen comprise a strong array of source material, notably including German archives and German language papers in America. Thompson does not apply this information haphazardly, but judiciously develops relevant perspectives, such as using Southern papers to gauge Southern opinion, Democratic papers to track Democratic views. He also argues convincingly that studying the American press provides an effective foundation for analyzing public opinion's influence on US foreign policy, not because the papers perfectly represented popular thinking, but because policymakers, Roosevelt included, themselves studied and interacted with the press to understand what the country felt. The book's approach is therefore well thought-out and implemented, upholding the linkage between political history and diplomatic history the author advances.

*Great Power Rising* makes a meaningful contribution because of its nuanced view of the ties between the American democratic environment and US foreign policy. An extensive historiography on Roosevelt's foreign policy already exists, and Thompson engages with it, but he argues that this scholarship underestimates the importance of domestic politics by portraying TR as a visionary US practitioner of Realpolitik. Several works have also studied the connection between diplomacy and public opinion in the United States, but this book opposes the consensus view developed by Walter Lippmann and Gabriel Almond, which understands US public opinion as volatile and incoherent, only relevant to good foreign policy as a potential impediment. Thompson's argument that domestic politics significantly influenced Theodore Roosevelt's diplomacy, and that Roosevelt cultivated public opinion as a tool to achieve his goals, challenges these older views, presenting a refreshing interpretation of TR's presidency and the formation of American foreign policy.



Overall, *Great Power Rising* is a concise, well-researched treatment of diplomacy and democratic process in the United States throughout the career of Theodore Roosevelt. The episodic organization is a bit problematic, as key events in TR's foreign policy, including mediating peace concluding the Russo-Japanese War, are left out, hindering a full assessment of President Roosevelt. This structure also leads Thompson away from broader geopolitical shifts impacting US foreign affairs in this period, such as the "great transformation" toward a special relationship with the United Kingdom and growing hostility toward the German Empire. Still, this book is a valuable addition to the history of early 20<sup>th</sup> century American diplomacy, public opinion, and Roosevelt, providing a helpful model and influential argument for future studies in these fields.

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