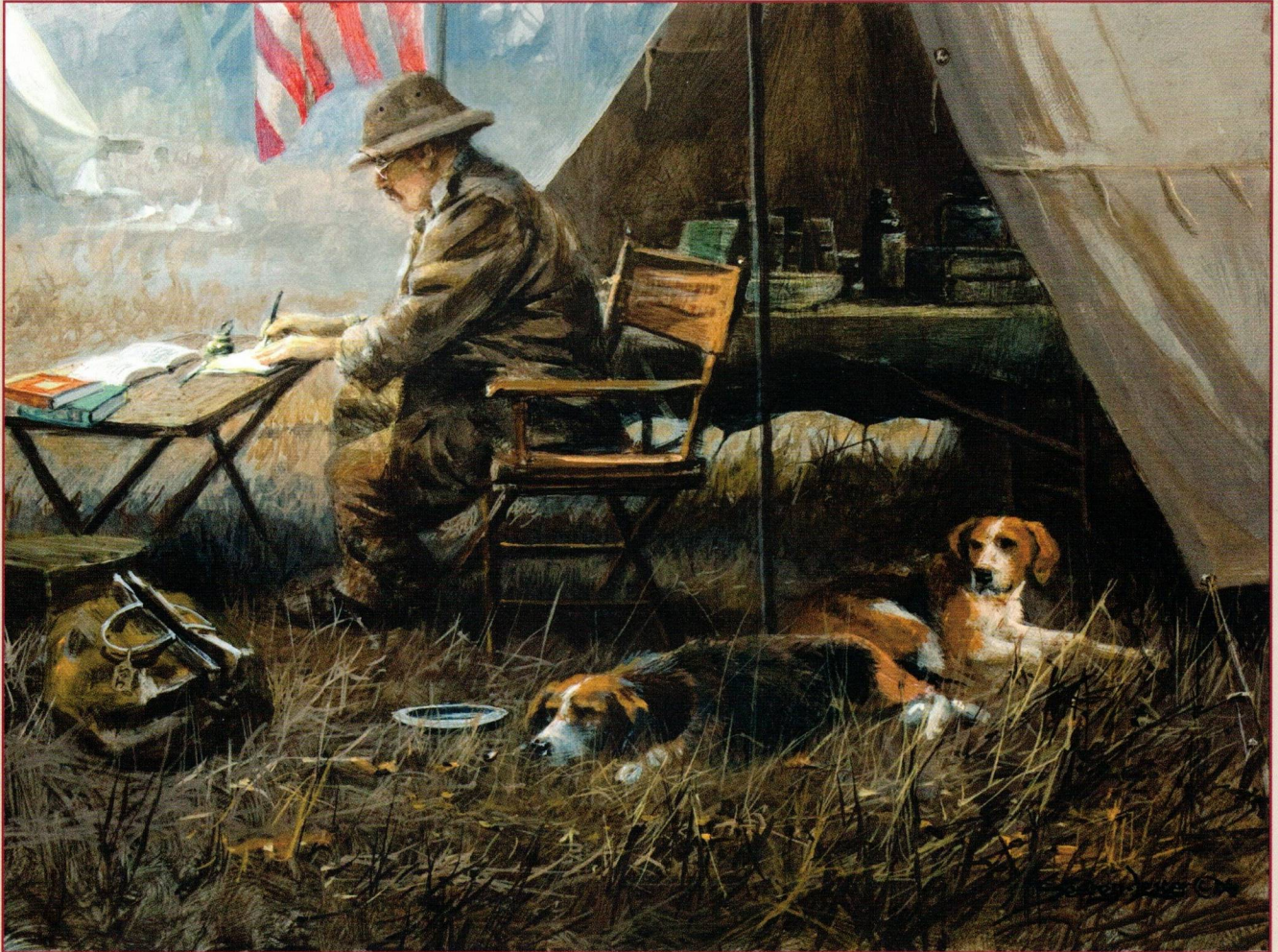
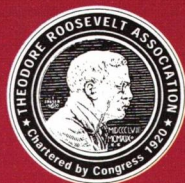


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Book Review

Geoffrey Cowan. *Let the People Rule: Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of the Presidential Primary*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016, 404 pp.

Reviewed by James Strock

Every once in a while, one's seamless immersion in a good read is intermingled with a rising realization: *The author was born to write this book*. So it is with Geoffrey Cowan and his memorable book on the 1912 presidential campaign: *Let the People Rule: Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of the Presidential Primary*.

In the aftermath of the 2016 national election campaign, the hinge election of 1912 has renewed relevance. America's challenge in that historic year is similar to today's: how to reconcile unprecedented technological, economic, and social change with increasingly outdated political arrangements.

The 1912 campaign was also a human drama of Shakespearean dimensions. Larger-than-life personalities collided. Roosevelt was challenging his erstwhile friend and handpicked successor, incumbent President (and future Chief Justice) of the United States William Howard Taft. The Democratic Party was riven, with conservatives finally making way for New Jersey Governor—and son of the South—Woodrow Wilson. Eugene Debs's oratory ushered socialism into mainstream debate. Each of these remarkable individuals was consciously vying for the verdict of history.

Numerous authors have ably explored aspects of this hinge moment. They include John Allen Gable, James Chace, John Milton Cooper, Patricia O'Toole, Lewis Gould, and Edmund Morris. Nonetheless, amid the clash of personalities and ideas, there has been less attention directed to the momentous changes to the election process. Cowan's comprehensive and elegant work illuminates this critical area.

Geoffrey Cowan is uniquely suited for the task. He is a professor. He is a historian. He is a journalist. He is a lawyer. He was a storied activist in the 1968 Democratic Party rules debate that gave birth to the most significant alterations since 1912. The result is narrative history that is academically sound,

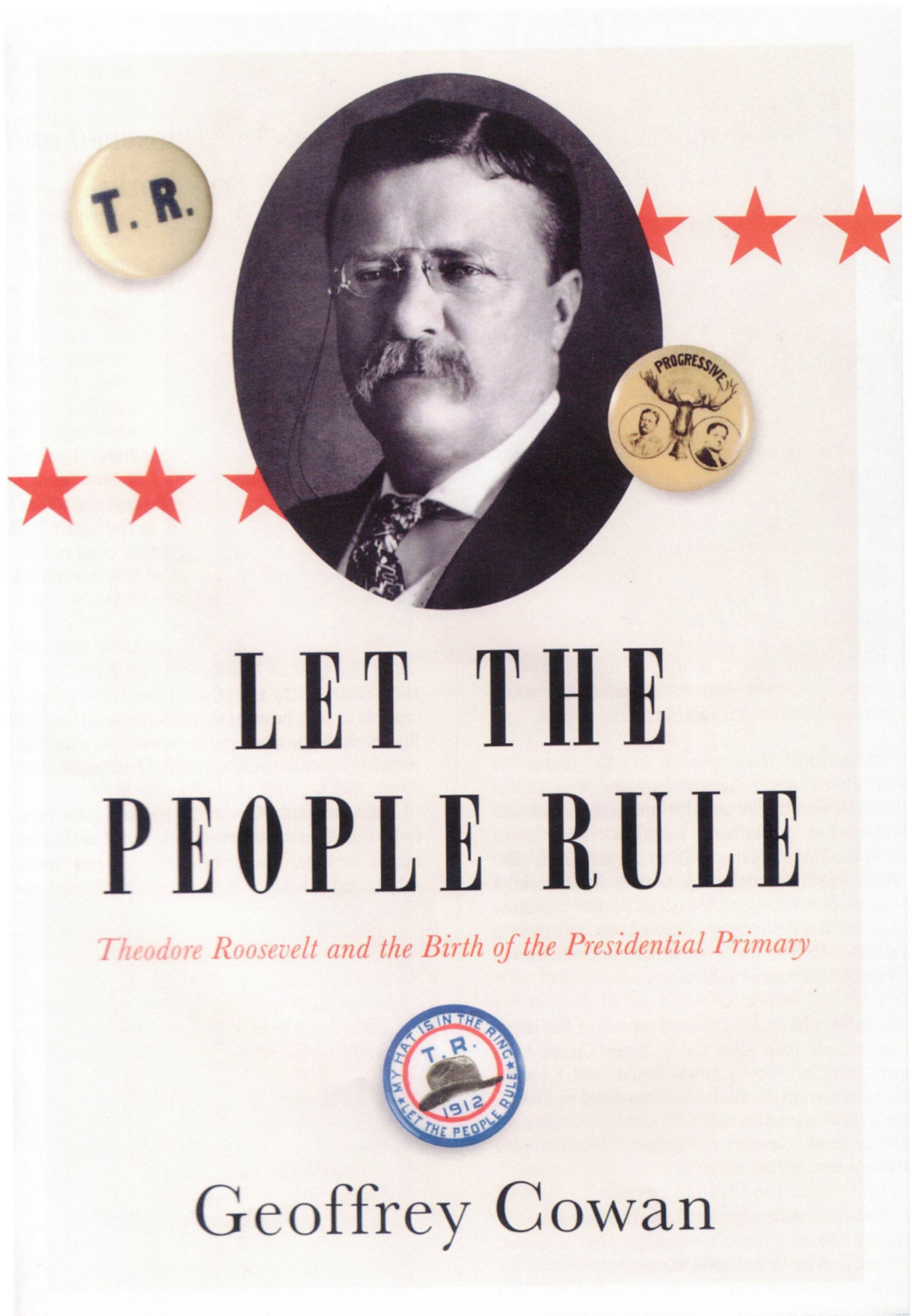
highly readable, and uncannily familiar.

Roosevelt is the inevitable protagonist. That is not to say that TR is invariably presented in the heroic light he sought. With Cowan, we see him in the midst of an existential struggle. His greatest foe is to be found not among his numerous adversaries and critics, but within himself.

TR's leadership gathered strength from his capacity to create energy from contradictory capacities. He was an actor and a critic, earthy and ethereal, sentimental and ruthless. The crucible of 1912 brought such binaries into sharp relief. We see Roosevelt the prophet and Roosevelt the politician, contending in real time for the achievement of "realizable ideals."

In evaluating Roosevelt's leadership in 1912, it is useful to recognize two distinct phases, based on the realities before him at the time. The first includes the early maneuvering that culminated in his candidacy, stretching through the Republican convention. TR was fighting in the first instance as a progressive against the entrenched conservatives of the Republican Party. If his luck held, he would also face a conservative Democrat in the November election. He sought to disrupt the coalitions of both of the great political parties of American history. Or, as his critics might have it, Roosevelt was audaciously attempting to reconfigure the entire political landscape in his own image.

Key elements of timing were not under TR's control, rendering his grand strategy precarious. In June, Taft broke Roosevelt's progressive insurgency at the Republican convention. Despite his undeniable endorsement by GOP voters in the new direct primaries, TR could not prevail against the "fraudulent" wire-pulling available only to a sitting President. Critics might well chortle that the preacher-militant from Oyster Bay had used the same party apparatus with corresponding ruthlessness when he was President. It was not an accident that some of TR's most valued former associates—including the



incomparable Elihu Root—were indispensable to Taft's narrow victory.

Having declared Taft's nomination illegitimate, in June 1912 Roosevelt offered to stand as a third-party candidate. Though he had failed to overturn the conservative domination of the Republicans, a narrow yet plausible path to the presidency remained. If the Democrats chose a conservative at their upcoming convention, TR could run against the "husks" of the legacy parties.

This time, the vaunted Roosevelt luck did not hold. The second phase of Roosevelt's 1912 campaign began on July 2, when the Democrats nominated Woodrow Wilson. When the New Jersey progressive prevailed on the forty-sixth ballot, Roosevelt knew that his path to the presidency was all but closed.

In the first phase, as chronicled by Cowan, we see TR, visionary prophet, grappling with TR, nuts-and-bolts politician. His unique place in American life allowed him an unmatched range of action. He was bigger than the political process. Unfortunately, his success in the primaries, combined with rhetorical excess, resulted in commitments and expectations from which he could not escape with his sense of honor intact. When Wilson was nominated, TR's fate was tied to the mast of a lost cause.

In the ensuing general election, TR was unplugged from conventional politics. He had the joy of not being circumscribed by ill-fitting party orthodoxy. He also had the challenges of crafting a national campaign almost single-handedly. His superhuman efforts could not counteract the disagreeable reality that his campaign would hand the White House to Wilson, whom he detested personally and politically. He would be accountable for breaking the Republican coalition that had dominated national politics since the Civil War. Long-standing charges of "Caesarism" would be ever harder to refute.

As if to justify—or obfuscate—the unsettled elements at the foundation of his campaign, Roosevelt's customarily crafted rhetoric veered to the erratic and vitriolic. After he was shot on October 14, he insisted, against medical advice and common sense, on delivering an extended speech. Roosevelt may have been addressing his own doubts as much as posterity when he declared, to a stunned audience, his readiness to die for the cause. Even the rash courage of that unforgettable moment could not efface doubts: Was TR's cause truly ours—or more his own?

Cowan focuses on the often grubby engine room of electoral politics. He recognizes, as one must, Roosevelt's extraordinary

skill in applying the levers of power. Nonetheless, TR's spectacular "sweetness" or charm holds little magic for the author. His sympathies are far more engaged by prophets (such as the electoral reformer and U.S. senator from Oregon, Jonathan Bourné) and selected activists.



Theodore Roosevelt with journalists at Sagamore Hill.

From Geoffrey Cowan, *Let the People Rule*

Cowan makes fine use of previously neglected primary sources. The most notable revelation may be his account of Roosevelt's vexed relationship with his African-American allies and supporters. From the founding of the nation, race was an area where our practice had failed to approach our ideals. Roosevelt was more than once bloodied as he wandered into the unfamiliar terrain of early twentieth-century racial politics. Tellingly, in his post-election *Autobiography*, TR failed to mention the Booker T. Washington dinner at the White House in October 1901, much less his discreditable inflexibility in the Brownsville incident.

Cowan, who took part in the Freedom Rides in Mississippi in the 1960s, brings passion to this underreported aspect of the history of American progressivism. Roosevelt was supported by a notable contingent of African Americans. He committed himself to bringing them fully into the Progressive Party campaign. However, under pressure from southern whites,



from Geoffrey Cowan, *Let the People Rule*

Geoffrey Cowan's caption: "The boisterous California delegates, convinced that Taft had stolen the nomination, were anxious to walk out of the convention and create a new party."

TR retreated, leaving the matter to the state campaigns. The consequences for his black southern supporters were complete marginalization.

One may regret that Cowan does not provide more contemporary context on racial matters. Roosevelt's record, mixed as it was, was broadly consistent with efforts to advance toward racial equality. By contrast, Woodrow Wilson's record was defiantly racist by any standard. His appointees, such as the notorious Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson, reversed TR's progress in integrating the civil service.

Even if Roosevelt's racial attitudes can be comprehended through the lens of his time, his betrayal of African-American supporters is a disappointment by any reckoning. Cowan brings this to life, providing telling details about the remarkable individuals involved and the misfortunes that ensued.

If there are weak points in Cowan's work, they may be seen as flowing from its manifest virtues. His use of contemporary quotations and references at times appears to conform more to the standards of journalism than to those of history.

For example, Cowan lays great store on a young Boston lawyer's contemporaneous account of a private conversation with Roosevelt. Arthur Hill, who would become a pillar of the Massachusetts bar, recorded that Roosevelt failed to comprehend the implications of his controversial advocacy of popular review

of judicial decisions. Hill's view may be apt, though it is easy to imagine other interpretations. Effective politicians at a high level often know far more than they choose to reveal. Some of the most effective achieve this while appearing transparent. Roosevelt might well have seen little value in a detailed debate with elite lawyers (all the more since he was a law school dropout). He might have looked at the issue more from a non-legal vantage point. It might also be that Hill brought bias to the conversation. One wonders if Cowan's book would have been better served by an acknowledgement of the limitations as well as the usefulness of such contemporary accounts.

This may relate to another aspect of the narrative. Cowan's sympathy with activists may incline him toward a corresponding skepticism toward leadership,

at least positional leadership. Thus, for instance, he joins those who diminish Roosevelt's trust-busting record. That his successor, Taft, prosecuted more cases is held as an indictment of TR and his ongoing evolution on trust regulation in 1912.

That point of view is tenable. It is not indisputable. Roosevelt had done the pioneering work that institutional stewards such as Taft would elaborate. TR's contribution was to forge new realities. Taft's was to manage the altered circumstances. Each of these roles can add value. And each relies on the other.

To the author's credit and the reader's benefit, Cowan's work is extensively sourced. The endnotes are comprehensive and clear. Combined with the bibliography, they themselves constitute a useful resource.

One expects that *Let the People Rule* will find its place on the select shelf of books to be read by anyone seeking to comprehend Theodore Roosevelt and his era. Geoffrey Cowan has indeed produced a very admirable and very valuable work of historical scholarship.



James Strock, a longtime member of the Board of Trustees of the Theodore Roosevelt Association, is the author of Theodore Roosevelt on Leadership (2001).