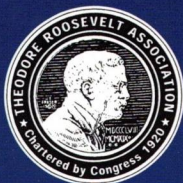


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Book Review

Jon Knokey. *Theodore Roosevelt and the Making of American Leadership*.
New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2015, 478 pp.

Reviewed by James M. Strock

The influence of Theodore Roosevelt's leadership is evergreen. While his legacy has had its ups and downs in academic evaluations, his unique personality and achievements render him unforgettable, a shooting star across the ordinarily gray skies of American political history.

This is as TR intended. While he was far from a "self-made" man, he was self-created to an extraordinary extent. His leadership was performance art of the highest order.

In the early twenty-first century, Roosevelt is experiencing a new burst of interest. In part this can be laid to widespread disappointment with contemporary leadership in large institutions, notably in business and politics. So, too, there is rising recognition that many of our challenges were presaged in Roosevelt's time. One senses that TR, born in 1858, could readily recognize our current conditions.

Enter Jon Knokey, a recent graduate of Harvard's Kennedy School, from the West, a former college athlete and current devotee of leadership. Knokey caught the TR bug in a well-worn way, as a child whose imagination was stirred by a book. Overcoming a hearing disability, he immediately felt the power of TR's project of self-creation, beginning with "making" his body.

Coming of age as 9-11 reset the national mood and agenda, Knokey found ever greater appreciation for Roosevelt's personal and political project. He recognized that TR's times were at least as polarized, venomous, and violent as our own. This prepared him to comprehend without condescension.

Perhaps surprisingly, given his subtitle, Knokey includes little discussion linking TR to "the making of American leadership." The connection is largely implicit. The book follows its subject from birth through the fateful call for Vice President Roosevelt to return to Buffalo as President William McKinley neared death.

Roosevelt's imprint on our notions of presidential leadership—indeed, leadership more generally—is so great that it

is easy to underrate in its entirety. His example endures because of the combination of self-creation and the fateful fit between his journey and that of America on the cusp of our emergence as a world power. TR personifies the mythic American national character as few others have ever personified it.

Roosevelt's character-based leadership renders him approachable to succeeding generations. Like Benjamin Franklin, he is a historical figure we can relate to. This can be both a lure and a snare. It is seductively easy to superimpose our individual and generational perspectives onto TR's life and times.

Knokey's recapitulation of Roosevelt's early years is thorough. His research reflects familiarity with a range of primary and secondary sources. His endnotes are useful to general readers and scholars alike. Surprising for a serious work of history, there is no index. This gap can be overcome to an extent by relying on the search function of the digital edition. The author's writing is sometimes a bit awkward but overall is serviceable.

Now and again, Knokey expresses conclusions about Roosevelt's experiences or thoughts, forgoing conditional modifiers. For example, while acknowledging that TR "was perhaps the greatest scholar to ascend to the White House," he writes that "nobody claimed him to be an impressive student" (pp. 62-63). In fact, Roosevelt graduated with Phi Beta Kappa honors. That he accomplished this while undertaking a range of extracurricular activities is indicative of an unusual combination of mental gifts and executive capacities.

In a related vein, Knokey passes over Roosevelt's expressed reasons for his declining interest in the law, notably his distaste for advocating on behalf of clients pursuing their self-interest to the detriment of others. Instead, the author asserts: "The real reason that he gave up law so quickly was his distraction with politics" (p. 74).

Such robustly expressed interpretations may well be correct—or not. Readers might be excused for drawing their

own conclusions.

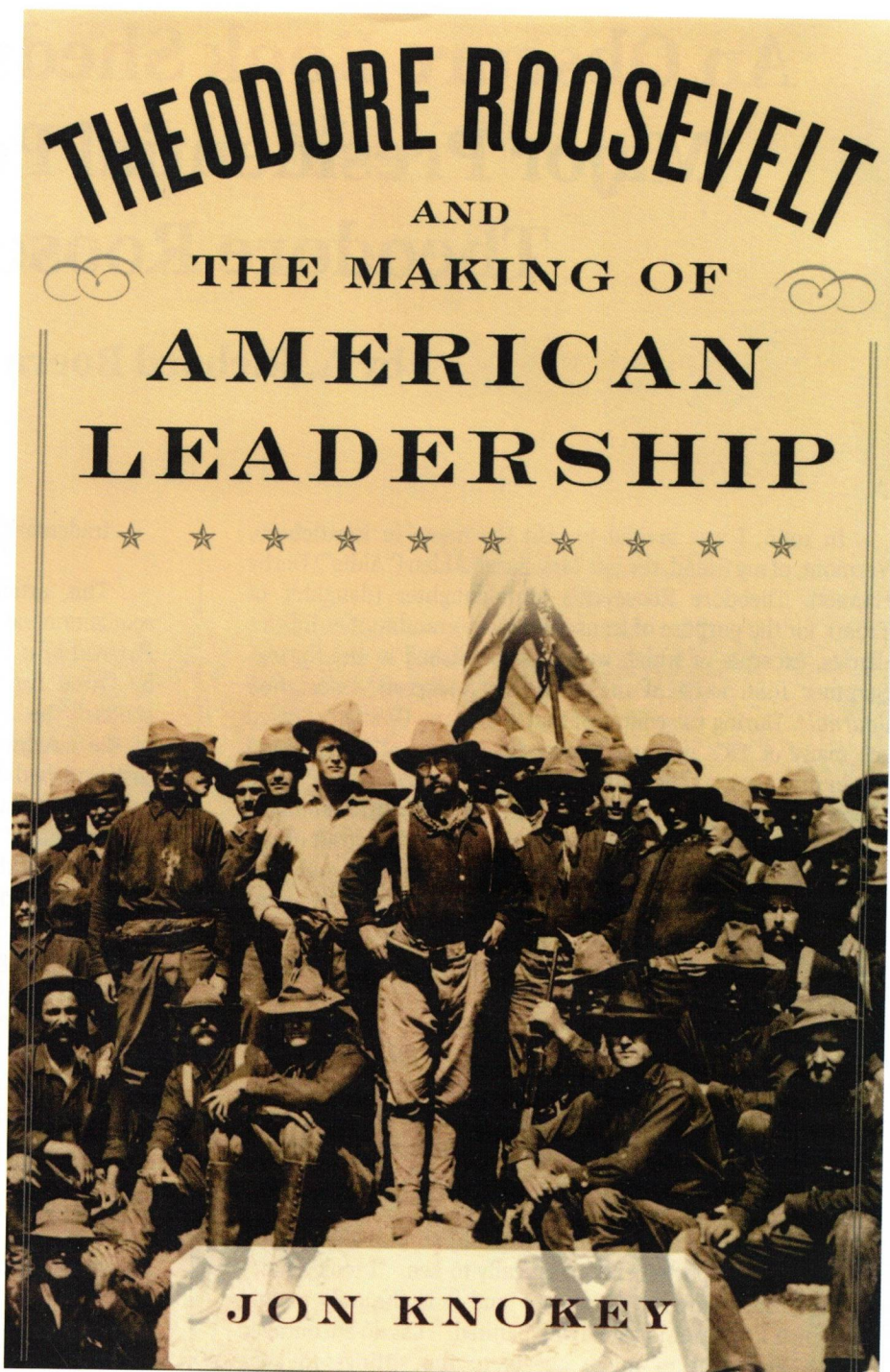
Knokey ably recapitulates TR's leadership of the Rough Riders. The "splendid little war" in Cuba has long since receded in our national memory. Nonetheless, Roosevelt's "crowded hour" continues to resonate.

In our time a quick glance at the Rough Riders might prompt some to dismiss them as a homogenous group of white males. To do so would be to slip into self-regarding presentism. Taking the context of that time, one discerns the challenge of crafting a battle-ready unit from individuals from various social classes that rarely interacted in peacetime—and certainly not on the intimate terms imposed by combat. So, too, Roosevelt—a product of the union of a southern mother and a northern father—succeeded in gathering and earning the allegiance of recruits from various sections of the nation amid the lingering shadow of the Civil War.

The ground covered by Knokey—the simultaneous emergence of Roosevelt and America, coming together in TR's presidency—is heavily tilled. Still, as Roosevelt might be the first to appreciate, the perspective of new generations invariably adds value.

For those unfamiliar with Roosevelt's early years, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Making of American Leadership* can serve as a readable, well-researched gateway into an extraordinary life. On the other hand, those who are familiar with other works in the crowded Roosevelt canon will appreciate Knokey's thorough use of letters and reminiscences from TR's contemporaries assembled in the Theodore Roosevelt Collection in the Houghton Library at Harvard, curated for decades by the invaluable Wallace Finley Dailey.

In another time of great domestic and international challenges, Jon Knokey locates inspiration in Roosevelt's "model of inclusive leadership that focused on embracing commonality and leading diverse peoples into a new frontier" (p. 412). His book is a compelling conductor of that vision and energy. One looks forward with anticipation to his future work, further advancing the Roosevelt leadership legacy.



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