

Roosevelt and the Age of Photography

Narrator:

Even before Theodore Roosevelt took office, the medium of photography had become very popular. The high speed photographic systems developed in the 1890's produced much higher quality portraits than the earliest cameras and (for the first time) allowed photographers to record events that occurred outdoors.

The real game changer though, was the introduction of cameras that could be used by anyone, not just professional photographers. Most people have a smartphone nowadays, but in Roosevelt's time, a personal camera was a new and thrilling concept.

During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, newspapers began to include photographs in their stories. Roosevelt was the first president to use photographs as a tool for political gain, and he made the most of the opportunity.

Few presidents before or since have recognized the value of media publicity as well as Roosevelt did. In fact, there have been few leaders of any country who have made such an effort to take advantage of photography.

Of course, cameras weren't the only new technologies at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a noted progressive of the period, and also as a famous adventurer, Roosevelt managed to join Arch Hoxsey, one of the Wright Brothers' expert mechanics, for an early flight in 1910 at Kinloch Field in St. Louis.

Roosevelt also used state portraits as a way to portray himself in the best light possible. Well-known artists of the period such as Gari Melchers, Adrian Lamb and John Singer Sargent were invited to the White House to take a turn embellishing the Roosevelt legend.

Many of Roosevelt's portraits and photographs seemed styled to present the president as a member of the upper class, an identity that Roosevelt never shied away from. He was one of the few presidents to have a family crest, for instance.

Perhaps the most important photograph ever staged with Roosevelt as the centerpiece is this one, showing the US troops who followed Colonel Theodore Roosevelt up San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish American War. Later, it was Roosevelt's reputation as a military hero, a brave and exceptional leader of men, that propelled him into the White House.
