

Teddy Roosevelt

Narrator:

When President McKinley was assassinated in 1901, vice-President Theodore Roosevelt ascended to the presidency.

Roosevelt was the youngest president ever -- 42 years old.

But the new leader was already incredibly accomplished.

He had graduated top of his class from Harvard, written 23 books and was considered one of the foremost authorities of America's wildlife.

Despite physical drawbacks, as a youth, he dedicated his life to physical fitness. He was an avid horseman, hiker, and exerciser.

When the Spanish American war broke out, he formed a group of volunteers called the Rough Riders. The success of the Rough Riders fighting the Spanish in Cuba gave him visibility which propelled him to be elected the governor of New York.

When Roosevelt became took over the presidency, the office had lost some of its prestige.

Congress, along with big business, seemed to be running things.

Roosevelt believed that no one should have control of the peoples' elected representatives.

He was also convinced that if the plight of the workers did not change, if they did not get better wages, hours, and working conditions, that a violent worker revolution was a distinct possibility.

Roosevelt wanted the presidency to project strength.

He wanted to show Americans that he was not afraid to get his hands dirty. He had no fear of taking on large corporations for their monopolistic practices as well as their poor treatment of workers.

He went everywhere with his photographer as well as journalists who found his personality charismatic.

In one instance, the press was present when Roosevelt refused to shoot a tied-up bear during a hunt.

From that episode, the toy called the Teddy bear was born.

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Roosevelt was a fine orator who traveled often speaking to the American people. He came off as a man of action and one unafraid to lead.

Roosevelt took on the robber barons who he believed were competing unfairly and that there mega-corporations were not good for America.

He went on the attack using the Sherman Antitrust Act passed in 1890.

Previously the U.S. courts sided with business when the Sherman Anti-Trust Act targeted them.

The first baron Roosevelt set his sights on bringing down was the mega-wealthy and powerful owner of U.S. Steel, and the Northern Securities Railroad Company, J.P. Morgan. Through the rail company, Morgan controlled most of railroad shipping in northern United States.

In 1902, Roosevelt and the federal government sued the railroad for raising rates unfairly.

Morgan lost. A few years later his U.S. Steel was forced to cede its monopoly.

Another way Roosevelt intervened in labor-business conflicts was to order direct negotiation.

The head of the United Mine Workers was a soft-spoken man named John Mitchell.

In 1902, Mitchell called for coal operators to receive better wages, shorter hours and for the coal companies to recognize the validity of their union.

When the owners refused, 140,000 miners went on strike.

Mitchell tried negotiating but to no avail. As time passed, violence between strikers and mine-owners broke out.

Roosevelt decided to step in. This was unheard of – presidents before him did not broker deals.

He invited Mitchell and the coal mine owner George Baer to meet at the White House.

Mitchell offered to compromise if Baer would do the same -- but Baer refused.

Roosevelt feared escalating violence and the potential for all out class-based civil war.

He ordered his War Secretary, Elihu Root to prepare the army to seize the coal mines and make the coal available to the public.

Finally, Baer submitted to a commission and the strike ended. The miners received a 10 percent increase in pay and the work day was shortened to eight or nine hours.

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Again, Roosevelt was applauded by the public.

As the U.S. population grew, it took a toll on natural resources such as forests and farmlands that were being destroyed.

Overworked soil was losing nutrients, over-mining led to land erosion and the nation's forests and wildlife were being depleted.

The Sierra Club was formed in 1892 by John Muir to stop the sale of public lands to private corporations.

As an avid outdoorsman, Roosevelt was committed to protecting America's natural resources.

He backed the Newlands Reclamation Act of 1902. The act set aside money from sales of semi-arid public lands https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_domain_%28land%29 for the construction and maintenance of irrigation projects.

The newly irrigated land would be sold and money would be put into a revolving fund that supported more such projects. Millions of acres were reclaimed under this act.

Roosevelt also worked to make national forests and national parks such as Yosemite safe from private development.

His support of conservation and preservation spread.

By 1916, 16 national parks were created.
