

# *Theodore Roosevelt and the "Square Deal"*

Lincoln Steffens



---

## **OVERVIEW**

When Theodore Roosevelt became president in 1901 after the assassination of William McKinley, the nation's progressives were full of hope for the prospects of reform. Roosevelt, himself, was highly enthusiastic about his new role, as journalist Lincoln Steffens describes in these excerpts.

**GUIDED READING** As you read, consider the following questions:

- In what ways does the author suggest that President Roosevelt is selling out his principles?
  - Does the author show admiration for Roosevelt?
- 

**T**he gift of the gods to Theodore Roosevelt was joy, joy in life. He took joy in everything he did, in hunting, camping, and ranching, in politics, in reforming the police or the civil service, in organizing and commanding the Rough Riders. . . .

But the greatest joy in T. R.'s life was at his succession to the Presidency. I went to Washington to see him; many reformers were there to see the first reformer president take charge. We were like the bankers T. R. described to me later, much later, when his administration suddenly announced a bond issue.

"It was just as if we had shot some big animal and the carcass lay there exposed for a feast. The bankers all over the country rose like buzzards, took their bearings, and then flew in a flock straight here to—the carrion."

So we reformers went up in the air when President McKinley was shot, took our bearings, and flew straight to our first president, T. R. And he understood, he shared, our joy. . . . His offices were crowded with people, mostly reformers, all day long, and the president did his work among them with little privacy and much rejoicing. He strode triumphant around among us, talking and shaking hands, dictating and signing letters, and laughing. Washington, the whole country, was in mourning, and no doubt the president felt that he should hold himself down; he didn't; he tried to, but his joy showed in every word and movement. I think that he thought he was suppressing his feelings and yearned for release, which he seized when he could. One evening after dusk, when it was time for him to go home, he grabbed William Allen White with one hand, me with the other, and saying, "Let's get out of this," he propelled us out of the White House into the streets, where, for an hour or more, he allowed his gladness to explode. With his feet,

his fists, his face and with free words he laughed at his luck. He laughed at the rage of Boss Platt and at the tragic disappointment of Mark Hanna; these two had not only lost their President McKinley but had been given as a substitute the man they had thought to bury in the vice-presidency. T. R. yelped at their downfall. . . .

I had come to Washington to find out whether the fighting reformer president, who used to see things as I saw them, saw them now as I saw them now, and what he meant to do with them. I spent my afternoons in the press gallery of the Senate and the House, watching the senators and representatives I knew about in the States at work representing—what? . . . The Senate was the chamber of the bosses. Two senators from each State, one represented the political machine that betrayed the people of his State, the other represented the leading business men of his State whom the boss worked for there. The U.S. Senate represented corruption, business, as I saw it in those days; it was a chamber of traitors, and we used to talk about the treason of the Senate. . . .

"The representatives and the senators," I said, "those that I know, those who come from States that I have investigated are picked men, chosen for their tried service to the system in their States. They stand for all you are against; they are against all you are for. They have the departments filled with men they have had sent here to be rewarded for anti-social service, and as vacancies occur, they will want you to appoint rascals of similar records."

He nodded. He knew that T. R. saw the machine; he did not see the system. He saw the party organizations of the politicians; he saw some of the "bad" trusts back of the bad politics, but he did not see the good trusts back of the bad trusts that were back of the bad machines. He did not see that the corruption he resisted was a process to make the government represent business rather than politics and the people.

"I am on to the crooked machines," he said, "and the machinists, too. Yes, even in the Congress."

"What are you going to do about them and their demands for jobs for their heelers?"

"Deal with them," he snapped. "If they'll vote for my measures I'll appoint their nominees to Federal jobs. And I'm going to tell them so. They think I won't, you know. I'm going to call in a couple of machine senators and a few key congressmen and tell them I'll trade." . . .

That was his policy with the bosses, the political and the business agents in and out of the Senate and the House. He played the game with them; he did business with them; and he told them he would, from the very start. He did not fight, he helped build up, the political machine—and he made it partly his. I think that that was one of his purposes: to build up the party organization with enough of his appointees and to lead it with such an expectation of reward and punishment that it would nominate and help elect him to the presidency. T. R. was a politician much more than he was a

reformer; in the phraseology of the radicals, he was a careerist, an opportunist with no deep insight into issues, but he was interesting, picturesque.

I accused him of this superficiality once during his first term, when he was keeping his promise to carry out McKinley's policies. That was his excuse for doing "nothing much." He was "being good" so as to be available for a second term.

"You don't stand for anything fundamental," I said, and he laughed. He was sitting behind his desk; I was standing before it. He loved to quarrel amiably with his friends, and it was hard to hit him. So now, to get in under his guard and land on his equanimity, I said with all the scorn I could put into it, "All you represent is the square deal."

"That's it," he shouted, and rising to his feet, he banged the desk with his hands. "That's my slogan: the square deal. I'll throw that out in my next statement. The square deal." And he did.

**Source:** Steffens, Lincoln. *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*, Vol. 1. Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1931.