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## Like Father, like Son: Modelling Masculinity for the Ethical Leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt

Elizabeth Summerfield  
*University of Melbourne*, [elizabeth.summerfield@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:elizabeth.summerfield@unimelb.edu.au)

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## **Like Father, like Son: Modelling Masculinity for the Ethical Leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt**

### **Abstract**

*President Theodore Roosevelt is frequently portrayed as a rugged, hypermasculine cowboy. But this depiction ignores the powerful modelling for masculine leadership provided by his father, Theodore Roosevelt senior. A closer examination of the private and public spheres that framed the latter's life offers another route into understanding the ethical and rational motivations that characterised his son's progressive Presidency, not least in the area of natural resource management, where his policy innovations were both unprecedented and sustained over time. What emerges is a more complex portrait than the above stereotype, a leader who used his heart, head and experience to think and act in and on the world in wholes, rather than in self-contained parts. As systems thinking becomes increasingly recognised by governments as an essential tool for effective leadership, including in environmental problems, the mentoring of Roosevelt junior by Roosevelt senior offers a case study of its first principles for learning and leading ethically.*



**ELIZABETH SUMMERFIELD  
MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA**

### **Introduction**

Since the 1930s Theodore Roosevelt (TR) has been a contested figure amongst historians and social scientists (Dalton, 2002). An earlier consensus praising his leadership of progressive policy innovation was challenged by negative assessments of his hypermasculinity and predilection for violence. His taste for combat and the exposure of a “dark” side to his rugged, manly approach, some writers believed, marked him as dangerous, if not insane (Hofstadter, 1955; Watts, 2003). But one area of national leadership less prone to such judgements is his conservation agenda. This is reflected in his continued title as the “Conservation President” (National Parks Service).

This paper takes a different route into the interrogation of his so-called dark masculinity by focusing on the origins of the first principles of his leadership in general and his conservation ethic in particular. It seeks to answer the question: can an examination of the origins of Theodore Roosevelt's leadership – through an exploration of his father, Theodore Roosevelt senior's, modelling of fatherhood and good citizenship – add to the debates on ethics, gender and leadership, particularly as these relate to current issues of environmental sustainability? In the present, which some describe as a resurgence of “strongman politics,” this paper looks at a leader, regarded by many as exemplifying hypermasculinity, and a policy area often thought of as representing the “feminine,” to uncover the ethical source of Roosevelt's decision-making (Obama, 2018; Brough, Wilkie, Ma, Isaac, and Gal, 2016).

It does so by employing the leadership lens of systems thinking, now widely regarded as an essential tool for leading and managing solutions to contemporary “wicked problems.” Issues of environmental sustainability represent one prominent example of one such problem (OECD, 2017; Australian Public Service Commission, 2007).

## Methodology

### *Systems Thinking and Historical Case Study*

Systems thinking provides both the framework and warrant for an examination of Roosevelt senior's modelling of leadership for his son. As a contemporary "wicked problem," environmental sustainability is by definition a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. Systems thinking has been validated nationally and internationally as a framework for considering the solutions to such problems. It is a method of problem-solving that aims to bring to the surface assumptions, "mental models," and ethical considerations, "caring," that can be overlooked in an overly rational, or purely economic, "scientific management" approach (Senge, 1990; Meadows, 2001; Scharmer, 2009). Peter Senge, a leading exponent of the field, speaks of a three-tiered interrogation to problem-solving: considering the individual's mind-body system (the inner landscape); the team or group's composition (the social landscape); and larger systems (ecology, economy, society – the collective landscape) (Senge, 2015).



Systems thinkers argue that the "who" has been traditionally overlooked in the leadership literature in favour of the "what" and the "how" (Presence, 2005, 5). They also argue that traditional scholarship favours a focus on the present in the service of future decision-making, but that systems include a temporal dimension which requires attention to the past (Meadows, 2001). In relation to the "who" of leadership this means paying attention to the individual's formative past, including the dominant gender role model for their approach to leadership and decision-making. In Roosevelt's case this was unquestionably his father (McCullough,

1981; Morris, 2001; Brinkley, 2009). Contemporary psychology on gender formation supports the general findings of systems thinkers, and further warrants an examination of the father as gender role model for male leaders (Biddulph, 2013; Frank, 1992; Samuel, 2015).

The paper takes an historical, narrative approach. It reconstructs a biographical scan of Roosevelt senior's life from his young adulthood, and points to its influence on his son's up to the father's death in 1878. It uses archival primary and secondary sources identified and analysed through the lens of leadership scholarship. It draws on the scholarship of prominent systems thinkers to develop a case study of the formation of President Roosevelt through the pre-conscious and conscious modelling of his father.

The paper aims to make a contribution to the historical scholarship on TR's leadership, to the cultural history of masculinity and leadership, and to the often invisible ethical and gendered foundations of environmental sustainability leadership. It adds to the scholarship on systems thinking for sustainability leadership by offering an historical case study to test concepts advanced in the literature on systems thinking and leadership.

## Case Study

### *Contested Images of President Roosevelt's Leadership*

In the unbroken maleness of the United States' Presidency, perhaps the president most characterised for his "strongman" approach was the twenty sixth, President Theodore Roosevelt. This view not only represents the popular representation of Roosevelt, but much of the scholarly biographical research too (e.g. Watts, 2003; Redekop, 2014). Sarah Watts goes as far as claiming that if Americans are to understand the continual renewal of "our own warrior caste" then Roosevelt's presidency holds the key. The motivating ethos of his administration, argues Watts, was his and the "collective psychic gratifications of exclusionary violence" (Watts, 2003, 241). Even in his signature field of conservation leadership, a policy arena that continues to be associated with a feminine ethic, Roosevelt is portrayed as an exemplar of exceptional masculinity. Benjamin Redekop identifies five defining personas adopted by Roosevelt in his quest to conserve the nation's natural resources: as 'proponent of "the strenuous life, as cowboy, as Rough Rider, as hunter and as naturalist' (Watts, 2003,1). Such critiques of Roosevelt's presidency are more recent versions of a trend which Kathleen Dalton, another of his biographers, identifies as beginning in the 1930s, when Henry Pringle and Robert Hofstadter sought to balance the hagiographic tendencies of earlier biographers. These influential historians characterised him as "the most adolescent of men" and worse as "emotionally overwrought, violent, unstable... and insincere" (Dalton, 2002, 8). Dalton fears that, as a consequence of particularly Hofstadter's prize-winning scholarship, the dominant memory of Roosevelt in the popular imagination could come close to the shared epithet of Henry Adams and Mark Twain of no less than "insane" (Dalton, 2002, 9). In similar vein, Eric Rauchway believes that had it not been for Roosevelt's initially accidental entry to the presidency and the constraints on his behaviour this compelled, then he may simply have become a bully (Rauchway, 2004).

It is this depiction of hysterical hypermasculinity that Dalton and others seek to correct (Brinkley, 2009; McCullough, 1981; Ricard, 2005). In various emphases on conservation, foreign affairs, early life, and personal relationships, these historians portray a more sympathetic because more humanly complex leader than either the hagiographers or their counterparts discern. These scholars pay more attention to the family context which shaped the adult leader, and especially the relationship the young Theodore had with his namesake father. In a much-contested view of Roosevelt the politician, a consensus seems to exist about the powerful affective and mentoring bond that existed between father and son. An early chapter or two at the beginning of their chronological narratives attests to the exemplary citizenship of Roosevelt senior in the midst of the Gilded Age of wealth-seeking New York City. And yet a focus of attention is often placed on the shame which the son harboured for the father's failure to enlist as a Union soldier in the Civil War. Much of the President's war-readiness, if not mongering, is retrospectively attributed to the redemption of this shame, as it is to the father's disappointment in his son's bodily manliness. Watts, in particular, uses the analytical tools of psychology to frame detailed evidence for the argument that the adult Roosevelt was defined by a perpetual quest to prove his manliness to his deceased father, and, in so doing, to repress a shameful effeminacy. Even the more sympathetic portrayal by Dalton, establishes Theodore senior as a dour, if loving, Victorian muscular Christian (Dalton, 2002, 19).

But primary and other secondary sources reveal a more complex man than is often depicted in the biographies of his son. The following evidence presents examples of the public citizen, Theodore Roosevelt senior, and the private, family man "Thee" Roosevelt. In line with both systems thinking's "inner landscape" and a women's history focus on the private as well as

the public sphere, as legitimate sources for revealing the individual, the evidence is divided into public and private categories.

### ***Theodore Roosevelt Senior: The Public Man***

Theodore Roosevelt senior was born in 1831 and died tragically young in 1878 of stomach cancer. Shortly after his death intimate friend and Civil War compatriot, William Dodge, wrote a letter of tribute to the members of the Union League Club of New York (Union League Club, 1878). In 1902, following President Roosevelt's inauguration, Dodge declared his motivation for arranging the printing and distribution of the twenty-four-year-old letter. There had been minimal acknowledgement of the formative role Theodore senior had played in shaping his more famous son. "Few men have...bequeathed to a son so splendid a legacy of earnest devoted and patriotic service," declared Dodge in 1902 (Union League Club, 1902). His friend's civic life, rich as it was, had been conducted much more quietly than that of his now famous son. Dodge sought to correct this.

Theodore senior's modest approach to public works was perhaps a result of his junior place in his family of origin. The fifth of five sons born to Cornelius and Margaret Roosevelt, he was last in a line of men who each differently made their mark in New York's commercial and civic life. He was not college-educated, his parents dispatching him instead at age 19 on a year-long tour of Europe and Russia, deciding he would gain more from an immersive experience in various cultural settings. He made his way into the family business which his father, through deft entrepreneurship, had grown to a highly profitable one by the 1850s. Commercial pursuit, in the solicitation of orders for the imported plate glass, or the family's banking business, was the means by which Theodore earned a living. But a devout Christian faith, encouraged by sympathetic sensibilities, meant that commerce was to play a reduced role in sustaining the soul of this young man (McCullough, 40).

Married to Mittie Bulloch by 1853, and with his financial future assured through the family business, he was able to give expression to his philanthropic proclivities, born of what he called a troublesome conscience. At the beginning of the Gilded Age he was a wealthy reformer who felt the plight of the poorer classes of the city. Tumultuous changes were being wrought by the rapidly industrialising metropolis, the fallout from which was starker poverty and social distress. By age thirty Roosevelt faced a different sort of troubled conscience with the advent of Civil War. Nor could he ignore the challenges of reconstructing a civil society in the wake of this "fratricidal war" (Sherman, 1875). Post-bellum New York crystallized even more dramatically the division between the rampant greed of profit-making and the social ideal of re-fashioning a society based on the renewed democratic, republican ideals of the nation's founders. Throughout the intense period of the 1850s, 60s, and early 70s, Roosevelt's overarching practical devotion to social well-being was unwavering. It may have been the Quaker influence of his mother that focussed his fiercely, disciplined efforts naturally on compassionate, conciliatory causes (Huddleston & Koehler, 2015). Indicative examples of his civic endeavours through these decades follow.

### ***Brace and the Children's Aid Society***

William E. Dodge, Theodore's friend and eulogist first met him in 1855 when, at age twenty-four, he was a young husband and new father of first daughter, Anna. His most dedicated civic engagement at this time was with Charles Loring Brace, who had founded the Children's Aid Society in New York in 1853 (Brace, 1872). Brace, a Yale graduate and ordained scholar of

divinity, had redirected his work away from parish ministry towards the relief of the city's most vulnerable, its orphaned or abandoned children. In an era that preceded state welfare, it was left to private citizens to become social entrepreneurs, providing material, educational and spiritual support in the government's absence.

It was a time when the physical living conditions of rich and poor reflected the polarisation of their material states, a time that preceded reliable contraception, when children represented to impoverished parents an additional drain on scarce resources until they reached an age (not very advanced) when they could contribute the price of their labour towards the family's subsistence. Fending for oneself on the streets of New York was not then an outrageous expectation for young children. One means of subsistence for young boys, in an age when cheap, sensational newspapers proliferated, was to sell them. Newsboys sold papers by day and sheltered where they could by night. Safe, clean accommodation for these industrious waifs was vital. Brace conceived the Newsboys' Lodging House. Lads could pay a poultry, but symbolically significant sum for a night's shelter and weekly instruction in life skills for purposeful living.

Theodore offered that, acting each Sunday as a surrogate father to multitudes of boys. When demand became such that expanded premises were needed, Theodore turned his business acumen to securing a new building. His benevolence may have contained homiletic elements but it was without sanctimony or dourness. In fact, he evinced a contagious joy and enthusiasm for life, likely its own gift to the boys, and expressed in his own social circles as a delight in the pleasures of company. Brace offers this description of the man who was an unflagging partner in this social enterprise:

*To my great satisfaction, at this time a gentleman threw himself into the movement, who possessed those qualities which always command success, and especially the peculiarities with which boys instinctively sympathize. He was gifted with a certain vitality of temperament and rich power of enjoyment of everything human, which the rough lads felt immediately. He evidently liked horses and dogs; a drive four-in-hand, and a gallop "to hounds," were plainly things not opposed to his taste. He appreciated a good dinner (as the boys happily discovered), and had no moral scruples at a cigar, or an occasional glass of wine. All this physical energy and richness of temperament seemed to accompany him in his religious and philanthropical life. He was indefatigable in his efforts for the good of the lads; he conducted their religious meeting every Sunday evening; he advised and guided, he offered prizes, gave festivals and dinners, supplied reasonable wants, and corresponded with them. And, at length, to crown his efforts, he proposed to a few friends to purchase the house, and make it a home for the homeless boys forever. This benevolent measure was carried through with the same energy with which he manages his business, and the street-boys of the west side of New York will long feel the fruits of it (Brace, 325)*

Later, His son would emulate his father in both his unstinting commitment to Sunday schooling, before and during his Harvard years, and in balancing those instructive endeavours with a delight in a gay social life.

Theodore's nurturing and instructive proclivities in the 1850s were a prelude to his chosen occupation during the years of civil war, years during which he would feel keenly and personally General Sherman's description of the conflict as a fratricidal tragedy.

## ***Civil War***

Theodore is reported to have always regretted his choice not to take up arms (Morris, 2001). Some biographers of his son assert that his decision not to do so was a source of grave disappointment to him (Putnam, 1958). But when his compassionate sensibilities are considered alongside the genuine family friendship he had developed with James Bulloch, his contemporary and brother-in-law, and the responsibility he had assumed to house and care for his Georgian mother- and sister-in-law, the possibility of his taking up arms engagement jars with the authentic makeup of the man. But, at the same time, his powerful commitment to the Union's cause, and forceful sense of duty meant the conflict could not in conscience be left to others.

While many of his social class in New York made handsome profits from wartime commerce, his reform activities during this period assumed a national benevolent character. His skills in business and social enterprise were redirected. They were enlisted in political commerce to achieve a legislative outcome. His conception of a scheme to benefit soldiers' families, the subsequent passing by Congress of the Allotment Act, and its execution in New York State, speak to the integrity of a man committed to the aims of the war and principled enough to fight it on terms that would not do damage to his conscience.

## ***The Allotment Commission***

Well before the draft was instituted Theodore, with friends William Dodge and Theodore Bronson, conceived of an allotment system, which would enable soldiers to apportion part of their pay to be sent home to their families. It was a profoundly simple yet compelling concept. Its social good would be two-fold: it would be a chosen discipline by soldiers who might otherwise have squandered their pay on sutlers' wares, especially liquor; and it would ensure that families were not rendered destitute. But its political and practical execution proved as challenging as the protracted lobbying of Congressmen to get the bill passed.

The group took the plan to Washington to begin perhaps the most frustrating element of its eventual realization. Theodore's letters home make clear that this was a baptism for him in the busy circular inertia of government policy-making:

*Tomorrow I should say would certainly decide our fate if I had not so frequently hoped that previous tomorrows would do the same* (Huddleston & Koehler, 2017, 106).

But he remained undeterred, with a disciplined determination despite his personal preference to be at home with his young family:

*We have succeeded under any circumstances in doing much good by bringing the matter so prominently forward and will eventually I believe get it into shape* (Huddleston, 2017, 99).

His internal conflict between performing his national and familial duties is clear. He regrets, "I am so sorry not to be on hand to share your care of Elliot next week" (Huddleston, 2017, 103). And, in a later letter, "I long to be home again if only for one day to see you all" (Huddleston, 2017, 106).

Months were consumed lobbying powerbrokers for a cause which ought to have been self-evidently beneficial to the political and social economy of the country. Dodge later tried to account for the grindingly slow progress toward legislation. It demonstrated, he believed, that politicians were paralyzingly dumbfounded by a system from which no-one "could selfishly

secure an advantage” (Huddleston, 2017, 109). Theodore managed to hold his spirits in check by maintaining an active social life in Washington, including in Lincoln’s circle, learning the lessons of political persuasion and buoyancy in the face of politicians’ inertia. He believed these would be an asset in the future, not only for him, but for his children. He writes to Mittie that:

*If there is one quality we must try to cultivate in the children especially it is a hopeful disposition, it saves so much unhappiness and, never mind how dreary the present is, always gives a future to look forward to* (Huddleston, 2017, 219).

Whatever his son may have later felt about his father’s wartime occupation, he was undoubtedly to benefit from the legacy of these acquired skills no less than by the example of lifting philanthropic principle to policy-making levels. Theodore’s involvement in the Allotment Commission put his commercial skills of persuasion in the service of the political economy of war to generate outcomes for the public good. They were a demonstration of the “manly” virtues of physical and mental endurance, at the same time as they challenged his devotion as husband and father. This work was complemented by more “womanly” activity on the Advisory Board of the Women’s Central Association of Relief and the United States Sanitary Commission, which sought to care for the physically damaged soldier (USSC papers). But this nurturing activity led to the formation of the Union League Club of New York, an exclusively male organization supporting the Union’s cause.

### ***Women’s Central Association of Relief, United States Sanitary Commission and the Union League Club***

Suggesting the androgynous origins of a bastion of masculinity such as the Union League Club of New York may sound peculiar indeed to a contemporary audience. But the Club, founded in 1863, had its foundation in the Executive Committee of the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), which itself grew out of the initiative of the Women’s Central Association of Relief (WCAR). Both were established in 1861 (USSC papers). Each was a product of the early years of the Civil War.

By 1879 the philosophy underpinning the establishment of the Club was already at risk of being lost. The Reverend Henry Bellows, a founder and President of the USSC, assured its preservation by documenting the early history. He explains the Club as a political extension of the work of the USSC. The WCAR, of whose Executive Committee he was also Chairman, became an auxiliary agency of the USSC. The Commission was signed into existence in June 1861 by President Lincoln following representations from Bellows and his colleagues. The purpose was to procure supplies for the care of wounded soldiers from a range of charitable organisations. It enlisted and trained nurses to deliver that care in military hospitals and played an active role in helping returning soldiers and their families seeking employment and relief. The Centre’s founder, Louisa Lee Schuyler, was a member of New York’s social elite, a granddaughter of Alexander Hamilton, and a friend of the Roosevelts (USSC papers).

Bellows describes the WCAR and the USSC as political organizations though their work was that of healing, principally the work of women, as reflected in the name of the original agency. As with the work of the Allotment system, the personal was also political, the feminine and the masculine coalesced. In the words of Bellows, the overarching purpose:

*was not from its inception a merely humanitarian or beneficent association. It necessarily took on that appearance, and its life depended upon its effective work as an*



*almoner of the homes of the land to fathers, brothers and sons in the field. But its projectors were men of strong political purpose, induced to take this means of giving expression to their solicitude for the national life, by discovering that the people of the country had a very much higher sense of the value of the Union...of the value of a great common national life, than most of the politicians...seemed to recognize; that the women of America had at least half of its patriotism in their keeping, and that a great scheme of practical service, which united men and women, cities and villages, distant States and Territories, in one protracted, systematic, laborious and costly work-a work of an impersonal character-animated by love for the national cause, the national soldier, and not merely personal affection...for their own particular flesh and blood, would develop, purify and strengthen the imperilled sentiment of nationality, and help make America sacred in the eyes of the living children of her scattered States....* (Bellows, 1880, 6)

One of the five members of the Commission's Executive Committee, Professor Wolcott Gibbs, began in 1862 to formulate the idea of an organisation which would represent the philosophical premise on which the USSC and WCAR were based. He conceived a "National" or "Loyalist" club, which would recommit its members to the fight for no less than the republican ideals of the founders of the nation. Gibbs was a grandson of Oliver Wolcott, who "had been among the most vigorous...of the patriots who formed the Union and guided its earliest steps." His mother, Wolcott's daughter, had been known for her "profound interest in the honour and dignity of the country-intensely alive to all that concerned the purity of our politics and stableness of our institutions" (Bellows, 7).

Gibbs immediately sought the counsel of the USSC's Executive Secretary, Frederick Law Olmsted, who assumed the role, based in Washington, after the commencement of War, leaving behind temporarily his superintendence of the new Central Park in New York.

In a letter of advice to Gibbs in November 1862, Olmsted sought to define the difference between this and other men's clubs. Its purposes would be of a distinctly higher order of intelligent civic responsibility. He said,

*Your club...would be a club of true American aristocracy, men of substance and established high position socially...of good stock, or of notably high character...also, men of established repute in letters and science..., clever men, especially of letters, wits and artists* (Bellows, 10).

Roosevelt's early membership of the Union League Club was a natural extension and synthesis of his fighting and healing proclivities. His alliance with both women and men who sought a conciliating rather than combative role in the national conflict, contained something more honourable than simply an upper-class male avoidance of the physical dangers of the battlefield through the purchase of a substitute. And, despite the political reality of male-only franchise, rendering men the inevitable actors in politics and policy, his can be seen as the exercise of an androgynous spirit.

### **Central Park, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art**

By 1871 Theodore and Mittie Roosevelt were planning a year-long family trip abroad, while their new home, a block back from Central Park on East 57<sup>th</sup> Street, was being built. Theodore had become actively involved in the development of the Park's precinct, and its representation

of the post-war reconstruction of democratic civic society. The Park was first conceived in the 1850s by men of letters, such as poet and journalist, William Cullen Bryant, and men of pragmatism, such as landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing. The execution of Frederick Law Olmsted's and Calvert Vaux's winning design began in 1857. Olmsted described his work, alongside partner Calvert Vaux, as "sylvan art" (Vaux papers). Apart from the oasis-like relief the park afforded the rapidly urbanizing Manhattan, the dedication of that much public land for the public benefit, was a substantial statement of democratic principle, before, but even more so after the War.

The civilizing and educative role the Park precinct could play in post-war reconstruction assumed greater momentum as prominent citizens, including Roosevelt, strove to realize the dream of its two monumental public institutions: the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the late 1860s. Theodore applied his significant management expertise to the membership of both establishing executive committees, through his affiliation with the Union League Club, though the first exercised more of his time and inherent passion (Bellows, Union League History). It seems no coincidence that the family trip included journeys along the Nile and in the Middle East, sites of ancient as well as natural treasures with which Theodore senior was becoming increasingly familiar, and which he knew would capture his son's natural science instincts. The return to the new family house, so close to the Park, and its renewed dedication to the civilizing influences of nature, natural science and art, created for the teenage Theodore a daily physical environment which left him in little doubt about the civic values that were the foundation of his father's being.

These indicative examples of the philanthropic and educational activism of Theodore senior before, during and after the Civil War can be seen through the lens of gender (as his son himself did), as an expression of the feminine through the masculine, in a public setting. To act in the service of civic ideals grounded in compassion and humanitarianism, was worthy yet unexceptional, as we have seen, within Roosevelt's cohort of like-minded, upper-class male reformers. In an examination of the provenance of President Theodore Roosevelt's progressive principles, an expanded version of this exemplary activity can stand as sufficient explanation. The public life of his father, with its absolute dedication to civic ideals of reform, establish him as one of the more modest reformers of the second half of the nineteenth century. That his son proceeded to embrace and embellish these same principles on a national stage seems a logical progression of his father's public aspirations.

The androgyny represented here is a familiar, public example of the nurturing male, manfully active in pursuit of humanising goals. But such a narrative perpetuates a false divide between the public and the private spheres, and in so doing gives more credibility and importance to the former. A more complete picture of the man's integrity includes the private, domestic influence of father in the formation of his son. It adds weight to the argument of the powerful possibilities for the public good in the balanced development of feminine and masculine qualities in male and female politicians, then and now.

### **The Private Man: Father and Son**

Walter Dodge, said of Theodore at the time of his death:

*What has been said has seemed to me to make a sort of outline sketch of the man. But there is a great deal to be filled in.... He was a singular compound of feminine and*

*masculine qualities; as lovable as a woman, and as strong as a man.* (Union League Club, 1902, 64).

The inextricable entwinement of the private and the public (the traditional masculine and the feminine spheres) in effective citizenship was articulated in TR's 1913 introduction to his autobiography:

*There is need to develop all the virtues that have the state for their sphere of action; but these virtues are as dust in a windy street unless back of them lie the strong and tender virtues of a family life based on the love of one man for the one woman and on the joyous and fearless acceptance of their common obligation to the children that are theirs. ...With gentleness and tenderness there must go dauntless bravery and grim acceptance of labour and hardship and peril* (Roosevelt, 26).

In the present era of a resurgence "strongman politics," it is hard to conceive of a President declaring in proud, glowing terms the following about his father:

*I was fortunate enough in having a father whom I have always been able to regard as the ideal man. It sounds a little like cant to say what I am going to say, but he really did combine the strength and courage and will and energy of the strongest man with the tenderness, cleanness and purity of a woman. I was a sickly and timid boy. He not only took great and untiring care of me...but he also most wisely refused to coddle me and made me feel that I must force myself to hold my own with other boys and prepare to do the rough work of the world* (Roosevelt, 23).

The national political success enjoyed by President Roosevelt, is testimony to the centrality of the integration of private and public, male and female, to the achievement of genuine, human power. The interaction of father and son in young Theodore's life, until the untimely death of the former in 1878, demonstrates the modelling of both traditional masculine and feminine attributes which would form the complex inner world of the youngest President of the United States.

### ***Family Context***

Mittie and Theodore Roosevelt welcomed their first-born son, also Theodore, on October 27, 1858 at the family home at 28 East 20<sup>th</sup> Street New York. His birth came more than two hundred years after the arrival of the first of the Roosevelt clans, Claes Martenszen van Rosenvelt, on Manhattan island in 1649. The generations of Roosevelt men since had been members of the successful commercial class, instrumental in civic affairs, or both. Mittie Roosevelt, by cultural and geographic contrast, came from the South, specifically from Roswell, Georgia, over 1,000 miles south of New York City. Her ancestors were plantation owners, though her family too contained politically active antecedents. Through family connections, Theodore senior and Mittie had met as teenagers, marrying in Roswell in 1853 and setting up house that year in 20th Street. Mittie's mother Martha, and sister Anna, later became members of the household, supporting, with paid help, the care and education of the children: Theodore, older sister, Bamie (Anna), and younger siblings Elliot and Corinne.

Prior to their wedding the couple sustained their relationship through regular correspondence. Here Theodore's sensitive, solicitous, often paternalistic nature were on display, as were the powerful bonds of family, which Mittie and Thee were keen to forge. She wrote, for example, in June 1853 of her pleasure in his visiting her brother and sister-in-law:

*It gratifys [sic] me exceedingly that you have been to see brother Jimmy and Lizzie [Bulloch].... I was so anxious that you should meet, I think I told you how very much we love each other* (Huddleston, 2015, 33).

Theodore and James (Jimmy) would indeed go on to form a steadfast friendship in the years before the outbreak of war.

Theodore's own family were very close. Cornelius Roosevelt, Theodore senior's father, significantly expanded the family's wealth through his imported glass and banking businesses. At marriage, he presented each of his five sons with a matrimonial home, within walking distance of his own home on Union Square. Theodore worked in the family businesses downtown at 94 Maiden Lane and 33 Pine Street (now occupied by one of the Trump Buildings). His social status and material comfort were both assured. But Theodore's prosperity and enjoyment of the lifestyle it conferred, provided insufficient purpose to this young man of serious religious faith, witnessing the polarised wealth and poverty to which New York's burgeoning economy gave rise. He was particularly close to his mother, born Margaret Barnhill, who came from a family of Pennsylvanian Quakers. How much Quaker principles influenced his thinking and behaviour is unknowable. That he was devoted to, and greatly respected his mother, and subsequently mother-in-law, is evidenced in a letter he wrote "Dearest Little Mittie" in July 1853, several months before their marriage. After returning from a trip to Roswell, his close-knit family questioned him extensively about Mittie's, and about her mother. He said that he "could think of no other means than comparing her with my own mother; .... You know as far as my own views are concerned I could not pay a higher compliment" (Huddleston, 53). His respect for his mother inspired daily visits and conversations with her son, so her influence is highly probable.

Theodore senior's familial loyalties and conciliatory sensibilities were manifest in the household from the outbreak of the Civil War. From age three to six, Theodore began to bear witness to his father's practical, moral, and spiritual life during the national tragedy. Comprehending the complex reasons for his father's choices of wartime activity was of course impossible for the toddler. More accessible was an emotional apprehension of the compelling and conflicting familial loyalties at play.

His father's marriage to a Georgian wife and his filial regard for her half-brother were not the only considerations for Theodore senior. At the commencement of war James resigned his commission in the U.S. Navy to take up a senior role for the Confederate side. Mittie's younger brother, Irvine, also enlisted to serve in the Confederate navy. Martha and Anna Bulloch were residents of his household during the War, and their sympathies were both powerfully Southern and respectful of Theodore's opposing allegiance. Both worked actively in support of the Confederacy, raising funds from sympathetic New Yorkers to buy supplies for that army's soldiers. It is testimony to the household's capacity for mutual respect and loving conciliation that there was no breach in familial relationships despite the passionate divide in members' political sympathies. A letter from Martha Bulloch to her daughter Susan West in Philadelphia is indicative of the deliberate exercise of tolerance and understanding. Martha defends Theodore and Mittie's hospitality to Union men, saying:

*Susy darling Mittie cant help giving those little suppers to Thees friends – He wishes it and you know he does not fell as we do, and it is his own house – It jars upon my feelings, but of course I keep my room – Mittie cant do this, and it is to please her that Anna does not absent herself we will talk this matter over when we meet* (Huddleston, 2017, 219).

But while the tension was controlled, one biographer argues it as a possible contributing cause of young Theodore's asthma (McCullough, 1981). His grandmother's wartime letters refer regularly to trips taken by the sick toddler and his parents to seek relief from the boy's compromised breathing. For example, coincidentally with the Draft Riots in New York in July 1863, four and a half-year-old "Teedie" was unwell and needed to be taken to sleep closer to the sea air to improve his breathing. In his autobiography, Theodore indicates his early memories of his father as literal lifesaver:

*I was a sickly, delicate boy...and frequently had to be taken away on trips to find a place where I could breathe. One of my memories is of my father walking up and down the room with me in his arms when I was a very small person, and of sitting up in bed gasping, with my father and mother trying to help me* (Roosevelt, 15).

That the boy's early battle for survival coincided with the national one is one explanation of the adult Theodore's readiness to engage himself or his own sons in righteous warfare. Rather than atoning for his father's lack of action on the battlefield, the son can be seen as imitating his father's struggles for survival: of the union of states, of the union of his family and of the life of his small son.

Perhaps if Theodore senior had not played such an active role in the War, his son may not have been as "sickly." But he also may not have grown up with the stamina to balance complex, competing goods against a personal ethical framework. Theodore senior reminded Mittie of his need to reconcile powerful conflicting impulses when she complained of his absence from the family. In Washington, as he lobbied for the Allotment legislation, or when in the field persuading the troops of their financial obligations to their families, he wrote with empathy but an unwavering determination to exercise his personal ethical judgement. Such absences, he pointed out, would also attend a combat role, one in which he would feel compelled to undertake were he not doing the work of the Allotment Commission. This letter of 1862 from Washington DC typifies his response:

*Do take care of yourself and the dear little children while I am away and enjoy yourself as much as you can. I do not want you not to miss me but remember that I would never have felt satisfied with myself after this war was over if I had done nothing and that I do feel now that I am only doing my duty. I know you will not regret having me do what is right and I don't believe you will love me any less for it* (Huddleston, 2017, 118).

In a state of profound conflicting loyalties to family and to country, he reconciled proclivities to fight and to heal by being warrior-like in the exercise of compassionate principles, in public and in private.

### ***Nature: An Education Outdoors for a Robust Inner Life***

While young Theodore and his parents struggled regularly just to keep him alive, he and his father sustained a robust and vigorous interest in the world at large and in the natural world in particular. Coddling was not part of Theodore senior's parental lexicon. Books about outdoor pursuits and collections of species that could be fitted into household spaces became addictive activities early for this "sickly child." Regular attendance at school was impossible, so his intellectual and physical education was one directed by his parents. This young boy, often confined indoors in one of the most urbanised environments in the world, consumed avidly knowledge about distant frontiers and the world of nature.

In 1871, the family made its second, long trip abroad. The trip's demanding itinerary indicates his parents' active encouragement of a vigorous outdoor life, and an education that married



*Roosevelt and John Muir*

formal lessons indoors with experiential learning outdoors. Young Theodore's absorption by the natural world remained unabated from early childhood. After all, it was where he was taken to recover life. On this trip it was on display in ways that can seem puzzling given his future conservationist credentials. His father had given him his first gun in preparation for the trip, which began with a journey along the Nile in a dahabeah. The gift was a collection tool for the teenager. This was the era of Darwin, of an intensifying global interest in natural history, and of New York's realization of the civilizing precinct of Central Park, including the American Museum of Natural History.

The gun complemented young Theodore's scientific endeavours, especially his ornithological interests, and further enabled his

practice of taxidermy. Daily shooting and interrogation of these exotic species also complemented the project, instigated by his father, of building a body that would match physically the mental prowess of his mind. It was hoped that his considerable intellectual talent would find its complement in an equivalent physical vigour. This quest for manliness was itself true to the era (Whitman, 1858). The health-giving, educational and pure fun elements of the Nile voyage preceded an even more physically demanding family riding and camping trip through the Holy Land. In spite, or perhaps because, of the problematic health, not only of Theodore but his mother, older and younger sisters, Theodore senior planned the horseback trek for the whole family. Male and female family members were expected to engage equally in a rigorous outdoor life.

### ***Harvard and Maine***

In 1876, following intensive home tutoring, Theodore entered Harvard with the ambition of becoming a natural scientist (Brinkley). Theodore senior characteristically supported his son's choice but advised him of its financial consequences. His inheritance would be sufficient to provide a modest living, but with the prospects of a scientific career yielding little additional income, the young man would need to spend only what he could earn. But Theodore found distasteful the excessively laboratory-based scientific teaching offered at Harvard. His interest in natural history persisted, but as a self-directed amateur in the field.

As an undergraduate, Theodore maintained the friendship with Arthur Cutler, the tutor who had prepared him for entry to Harvard. In his term breaks Cutler introduced Theodore to Bill Sewall and the rugged pleasures of outdoor life at his property in Maine. These trips began Theodore's exposure to wild American nature and its spiritual, life-giving properties.

These testing encounters with the natural world were complemented by the traditional family summer break in a tamer natural setting. The extended Roosevelt family, along with Martha and Anna Bulloch, holidayed in various waterside locations throughout Theodore's childhood and youth. Oyster Bay became his grandfather's, his father's and finally his own favourite. Here Theodore undertook comparatively more sedate activities in natural surroundings: rowing, walking and horseback riding.

Such vigorous outdoor pursuits continued to complement the combination of both arts and sciences of the undergraduate's program. An expanding social life was a further element of the young man's life. But this busy, well-choreographed mix was not allowed to interfere with Theodore's weekly teaching of a Sunday School class. In this composition of an active, contemplative and philanthropic life, the son began to mimic the father.

But it was to the singular, physical demands of the natural world that Theodore turned in the summer following the death of his father in February 1878. Back at Sewall's property, the paradox of a nurturing and a challenging natural environment offered some relief for the extreme pain of this sudden loss. And that paradox reflected the duality of the parent he had lost, and the man he would become, at once kind, gentle, nurturing, and disciplined, vigorous and determined.

## Summary of TR Senior and His Influence



When Roosevelt senior died in February 1878, Theodore declared that he had lost the only person to whom he could tell everything. The impact of the father on the shaping of the son was without question. And the model of masculinity passed on was one that embraced opposites, straddled boundaries – except in its concept of what constituted goodness – across what Senge has named the individual, social, and collective landscapes. Roosevelt scholar, Serge Ricard has described the President as a complex man defined by a signature combination of dualities (Ricard). In his father this feature can be seen in much sharper focus because he lived it on a smaller stage.

On display are both masculine and feminine traits (as traditionally and persistently culturally defined), as his son declared; genuine compassion for poor, especially its children, and tough, manly pursuits like driving; intimate, unflinching nursing of his children and hard-nosed commercial, civic, and political pursuits; physical gentleness; and physical vigor. His inner landscape defied definition on one side of a binary divide, including in its gender. He thought and acted in systemic ways that aimed for the enactment of a whole human being. The legacy of the capacity to see and act as a whole, and on the whole, is exemplified in President Roosevelt's 1908 initiative to promote conservation of the nation's natural resources.

## **Taking the Inner to the Outer Landscape in Conservation**

Some contemporary environmental scholars have identified the reluctance of men, especially white men, to support sustainability initiatives because of their perceived potential to emasculate (Brough et al.). Environmentalism and feminism can be coupled in political activism and policy-making as much now as during Roosevelt's presidency in ways that challenge a cultural perception of traditional manly power and authority (Testi, 1995; Mallory; 2018). Roosevelt's championing of progressive conservation policy can be seen as a willingness to express his alignment with his own 'feminine' side.

Another binary present in contemporary sustainability debates is the biocentric and anthropocentric. Alexander argues that this constructed divide as the most significant debate in conservation ethics (Alexander, 2013, 107). But he notes that some scholars, rather than argue one or other side of the binary, advocate instead a position of "convergence," of both/and rather than either/or. Theodore Roosevelt, with the architect of his conservation policy, Gifford Pinchot, are commonly cited in negative ways as counterpoints to the preservationist, John Muir. But environmental historian Char Miller, argues that this is a false divide (Miller, 2001). Each man was a powerful advocate of the natural world, while Roosevelt and Pinchot also championed the voice of vulnerable men and women as part of the entirety of the natural world (Pinchot, 1910). They combined what they saw as a false binary in their policy-making.

In 1908, Roosevelt, supported by Pinchot, convened a national meeting of state politicians, bureaucrats and professionals with a stake in the conservation question. Roosevelt named conservation as "the weightiest problem now before the Nation," with the natural resources of the country at risk of exhaustion if "we permit the old wasteful methods of exploiting them longer to continue" (Proceedings, 1908). He understood that natural resource management was a fundamental problem that needed to be addressed by the country as a whole, and that it was not only a matter of preserving the environment for its own sake but for the sake of human sustainability. In his opening speech, he declared that:

*...the prosperity of our people depends directly on the energy and intelligence with which our natural resources are used. It is equally clear that these resources are the final basis of national power and perpetuity. Finally, it is ominously evident that these resources are in the course of rapid exhaustion,*

and that

*...the time has come to inquire seriously what will happen when our forests are gone, when the coal, the iron, the oil, and the gas are exhausted, when the soils shall have been still further impoverished and washed into the streams, polluting the rivers, denuding the fields, and obstructing navigation.*

His ethical position not only merged the biocentric and the anthropocentric view, but asserted the justice of sustainability, of what was owed by the present generation to the next:

*...this Nation as a whole should earnestly desire and strive to leave to the next generation the national honor unstained and the national resources unexhausted.*

And, while he refrained from a lengthy exposition of the spiritual and ethical basis for his thinking, he did allude to this, saying,



*So great and so rapid has been our material growth that there has been a tendency to lag behind in spiritual and moral growth....*

Where some proponents of the contemporary conservation movement pit the interests of man against nature, Roosevelt as the “Conservationist President,” and Pinchot as his principle advisor, saw man and nature as inextricable, complementary elements of a civilized society. Such a holistic vision was unsurprising in a man whose childhood had been filled with opposites which his father had demonstrated to be reconcilable components of complex wholes. Where simpler thinkers saw the world in either/or terms, he was able to embrace the greater complexities and contradictions of the both/and. He saw things in whole systems, not as self-contained parts.

The defining feature of Roosevelt’s ethical leadership was the egalitarian ethic that shaped it. This comprised a rationally examined, yet deeply felt compassion, vigorously fought for. It had been absorbed pre-consciously before being consciously witnessed by the young child in the behaviour of his father, “the best man” he ever knew. He had seen it seamlessly manifested in both the private, domestic and public, business man. The model of his father was the foundational enabler of Roosevelt’s unprecedented success in conserving the nation’s natural resources for the greater human good.

## **Conclusion**

Systems thinking is increasingly recognised as an essential leadership tool for addressing contemporary complex problems, including global environmental issues. And prominent systems scholars argue that it is not only the what and the how of leadership that counts but the “who” of the leader (Senge et al., 2004, 5). The lasting impact of Theodore Roosevelt’s conservation policies can be seen to be outcomes of non-binary, non-linear complex thinking. He was an example of a leader able to think across the boundaries of physical, social, economic and political matters in tackling. He was also able to engage his head and his heart in measure decision-making. The genesis of this capacity lies at the very core of his upbringing, specifically in the hard-wired modelling of his father. And at the core of his father’s makeup was a deep humanity that straddled the boundaries of masculine and feminine. If systems thinking sits at the heart of solving the world’s most pressing problems, then the integration of the attributes typically ascribed to male and female may be the very first socially constructed binary that needs to be thought of in more systemic terms. Roosevelt and Roosevelt senior offer a historical case study of ethical, systems thinking mentoring and leadership. While theirs is a unique story and a unique relationship the first principles of that mentorship and leadership are universally accessible.

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## About the Author

Lizzie Summerfield is an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She uses the discipline of history as the foundation of interdisciplinary research into current policy leadership and education in environmental sustainability issues, and has published in science and education journals. She is currently developing a comparative, cross-cultural case study of western and Chinese sustainability leadership in collaboration with colleagues in China. Her PhD is from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

Dr. Summerfield can be contacted at [elizabeth.summerfield@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:elizabeth.summerfield@unimelb.edu.au).

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