King of the wild frontier

Historian celebrates Roosevelt as conservationist

By Glenn C. Altschuler

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"The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America"

Douglas Brinkley (HarperCollins, $34.99)

Published in 1902, The Deer Family was packed with field observations of mule deer and elk herds and tales of derring-do. It also had a policy agenda. "All men who care for nature, no less than all men who care for big game hunting," Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed, should see to it that government preserves wilderness.

Roosevelt did his part - and more. In his magnificent and magisterial biography, The Wilderness Warrior, Douglas Brinkley, a professor of history at Rice University, celebrates Roosevelt, a Harvard-trained zoologist, as a "pro-forest, pro-buffalo, cougar-infatuated, socialistic land conservationist." Between 1901 and 1909, he set aside 234 million acres of Wild America for posterity, creating hundreds of federal bird reservations, national game preserves, forests, parks and monuments. More than his trust-busting or his Nobel Peace Prize, Brinkley demonstrates, these actions should secure Roosevelt's reputation as one of the greatest presidents in American history.

By mixing Darwinian analysis with cowboy campfire yarns, and establishing himself as a gun-toting Easterner embodying a Westerner's ethos, Brinkley writes, Roosevelt was able to convince congressmen, bureaucrats in the departments of agriculture and interior, and millions of Americans that saving "natural wonders, wildlife species, timberlands, and diverse habitats was a patriotic endeavor." When he couldn't, he went beyond his legal authority (to preserve the Grand Canyon as a public park) or issued executive orders.

Brinkley is too good a historian to ignore inconsistencies and contradictions in Roosevelt's conservationist philosophies and policies. But he tends to play them down. Acknowledging, for example, that the president's penchant for big-game hunting "was troublesome" to Americans concerned about cruelty to animals, he indicates that the justification - hunters participate directly in ecological cycles of birth and death - was "more intellectually honest than all the bleatings" of critics. Despite his "blood lust," he adds, Roosevelt fought for wildlife refuges, seasonal hunting, hunting licenses, bag limits and strict regulations against killing young animals or females during the mating season.

Even more important, Brinkley seems ambivalent about the environmentally destructive engineering projects that Roosevelt approved. Critics, he suggests, have "gone too far." Roosevelt's "utilitarian approach" - and his goal of turning arid lands into fields of green - might well have been "right for the times." But he claims as well that "when push came to shove," Roosevelt should not have chosen growth over preservation quite so often.

Putting Roosevelt on the couch, Brinkley speculates that the president's masculine side wanted to hunt big mammals while his feminine side was inclined to nurture songbirds. Perhaps. More likely, as environmental historian Daniel Worster has argued, Roosevelt's preference for big things - big dams, big government and big national forests - tended to predominate.

Roosevelt was, no doubt, a larger-than-life figure, large enough to contain contradictions, and arrogant enough to ignore them. Although he didn't always take into account the consequences of hyper-industrialization, he deserves the
appellation Brinkley bestows on him in this splendid biography: "a conservation visionary" who entered "the fray
double-barreled," at a time in which hunting, drilling, population growth and pollution were unregulated, and who used
the powers of the presidency, as none before him had, to preserve America's precious resources "with their majestic
beauty unmarred."

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