Editor tells compelling tale of war-loving men

by: GLENN C. ALTSCHLULER
Sunday, June 06, 2010
6/6/2010 4:06:27 AM

After the surrender of Spain, Theodore Roosevelt wrote to his friend Henry Cabot Lodge that Yellow Fever had ravaged his Rough Riders in Cuba. Many of his men were dressed in tatters and had not changed their underclothes in a month. But then, abruptly, Roosevelt changed his tone: "Enough of grumbling. Did I tell you that I killed a Spaniard with my own hand?"

For Roosevelt and Lodge, and for William Randolph Hearst, publisher of the New York Journal, the conflict with a Catholic monarchy of the Old World in 1898 had been "a splendid little war." They agitated for it and, in its aftermath, endorsed America's scramble for imperialist dominion in Cuba and the Philippines. Fascinated by the human dynamic, "the eternal pull of war" on these men, Evan Thomas, editor-at-large of Newsweek magazine, tells their stories in War Lovers. While reminding us, through sketches of Harvard professor William James and Speaker of the House of Representatives Thomas B. Reed, that not everyone was swept up by war fever.

Skillfully written, "War Lovers" provides compelling and colorful portraits of its cast of characters. Thomas' narrative, however, contains few fresh facts. Nor does his analysis stray far from conventional wisdom. Convinced that the frontier spirit was giving way to effeminacy, Thomas indicates, Roosevelt, Lodge and Hearst believed that Anglo-Saxons could reinvigorate America and civilize others by conquering. Like most professional historians, he admires their moxie but not their judgment.

In contrast, James and Reed were suspicious of sweeping theories of history and notions of racial superiority. "Peering into the global abyss of the next century," these "patriots" condemned the "waterboarding" of Filipino rebels and insisted that by acquiring colonial possessions and opposing the independence of native peoples America would betray its ideals. In their own day, Thomas writes, their warnings were but a "small candle flickering in the gusts of a darkening sky."

Thomas gives President William McKinley less "credit" than he deserves for taking the country to war and deciding to annex the Philippines. And, at times, his "doves" seem too good to be true. While Lodge and Reed were willing to "make common cause with some fairly crude characters to advance their ambition," he claims, Thomas Reed "would not compromise his integrity" in pursuit of a presidential nomination, "no matter much he desired it."

The anti-imperialism of James and Reed has remained a factor in American political discourse. But more often than not, Thomas implies, the war lovers have carried the day. Especially when what James called "the howling press" stirs up public opinion.

Just a few years ago, Thomas observes, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby toiled way at the Eisenhower Old Executive Office Building, the very structure that Theodore Roosevelt occupied as assistant secretary of the Navy in the McKinley administration. As he sat at his desk, doing the bidding of his boss, Vice President Dick Cheney, Libby often looked up at a portrait of Roosevelt he had hung on the wall for inspiration before getting down to the business of making war against Iraq a slam dunk.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Associate Images:
The War Lovers
Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst and the Rush to Empire, 1898
By Evan Thomas
Little, Brown & Company, $29.99

Copyright © 2010, World Publishing Co. All rights reserved

Return to Story