



The Evil Teddy
Guest: Joel McDurmon
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Joel McDurmon is director of research at [American Vision](#) and the author of seven books, including [American Fascist: The Real Theodore Roosevelt](#).

WOODS: I am pretty sure you titled this book, *American Fascist: The Real Theodore Roosevelt*, the way you did because it is provocative, but at the same time you are able to defend that statement. So go ahead and do that. First of all, let's talk about what fascism is. It's not just a general term of derision. It has a specific meaning.

McDURMON: Yeah, unfortunately it has become a kind of watered-down colloquial meaning in our society, but historically it refers to this kind of conglomerate between a strong, centralized national government which has tight controls over national industry, fully integrated with the military, and historically has had a strong, national racial element with it, although I don't necessarily think that would be required.

WOODS: No, I don't, either.

McDURMON: Yeah, but the important part is the strong, centralized government fully integrated into the national industry and military, and that usually leaves the illusion of private property. On paper they talk about private property, individual rights and stuff, but in reality it's the collective, total government regulation and things of that nature. So that's the aspect we've built upon here. When we say American fascist, we had a guy at the turn of the century who was advocating things that would later be called fascism under Mussolini, under Adolf Hitler, and their economic and social policies almost across the board in the person of Theodore Roosevelt, and so it's a perfectly justifiable claim, especially when you get down to the technical meaning of the word.

WOODS: Well, the word also has other connotations. It also implies a system in which there is a charismatic leader at the head of the country who is thought to embody the spirit of the people, and so any institutional obstacle to the realization of his will is to be disparaged and

eliminated because the people, in effect, their spirit, speaks through him. Likewise, there is a special emphasis on the martial virtues, on war-making, on the flabbiness of peace, in effect, as Roosevelt would put it, and the way that war helps to forge a people and to make them stronger. Now, we see these ideas reflected, obviously, in the fascist regimes of the 1930s, but as I am describing them to you, they sound to me exactly like the views of Theodore Roosevelt.

McDURMON: Yes, absolutely. It actually may shock some people to read some of the direct quotations in which he says these things, but, he had all the things you just described—obviously a charismatic figure; so much so that when he decided to split the Republican Party in 1912 and form his own Progressive Party, there were tens of thousands of people not just following him but at the national convention. And worship him, literally almost worshipping him. So he obviously had that aspect, and that goes all the way back to the beginning of his terms as president as well. He openly spoke of increasing the power of the executive to the point where he could do end runs around Congress if necessary. He would find powers in the Constitution—new powers in the Constitution that broadened the executive power. And of course, we talk about all these things in the book, all the power grabs that he did with land, increasing the strength and size of the military, all of that kind of stuff. He was openly boastful about it—which was kind of funny, because he is always remembered as, you know, speak softly and carry a big stick. Well, he carried a big stick, but he didn't speak softly about it. He makes sure everybody knew he had a big stick, and he liked to boast of the fact that he used it on occasion.

So he had a big mouth to go with his big stick, and in doing so he won the hearts and minds of people—which is, you know, is another angle you could go at. But certainly also, as you said, he takes that spirit and that image of power, of projection of power, of the increase of power and uses that as a means to develop the social ethic, if you will, of all of society, and be the embodiment of the American spirit, if you will, such that people begin to think of manliness in terms of outward size, and strength, and power and of course, you'll see this as we go here a little bit if we get to it, that worked out in his own life—always with the emphasis on war, and strength, and exertion, things of that nature, and totally neglecting the other sides of manliness, which are devotion to family and taking care of your family and things of that nature. There was one anecdote in which he actually wrote that he had a sick child and a sick wife when the Spanish war began to ramp up, and he literally wrote and said, "I would have left her deathbed to go fight in that war." And so that, in this case particularly, that striving after that strong national spirit has other effects in what you neglect.

WOODS: I hadn't known about that. I have written quite a bit about Theodore Roosevelt, but I had not known about that statement. That is so revealing, just how warped his priorities are—that here he has a flesh-and-blood natural obligation to somebody in this world, and he'd rather go off and fight for an abstraction in a totally avoidable conflict. That speaks volumes about him. Now, of course, his whole personality was the personality of somebody who loves to be in the arena, as he put it, who loves to be involved in things, who wants to be in charge. Of course, one of his kids said that "father wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse

at every funeral.” This is the most dangerous kind of person of all to have in the presidential office because temperamentally, he’s got to have a hand in everything.

McDURMON: Yeah, and this is a very interesting point. What makes it even worse in his case is he had a deep, psychological need based in his childhood, deeply rooted in his childhood. And I think Thomas Evans talks about this in his book on the war lovers, and we’re able to document it very well. Roosevelt’s father was a wealthy industrialist, and he bought his way out of the Civil War as many wealthy men did, by the way, especially from the North—instead of going to submit to the draft to go fight, they would pay for a substitute or two to go fight for them. This was such a sense of shame for Teddy Roosevelt, that his father did not complete the rite of manhood of going to war and essentially bought his way out of it that he spent his entire life, if you will, trying to atone for what he considered that shameful evasion. So you see him as a child even playing war, as we’re told in some places—he would dress up in rags and pretend like he was in combat uniform, war-torn combat uniform, and as a soldier. As he grew up, he couldn’t wait to get involved in things like the military and things like that. By the time he’s 30, we find him desperately trying to get into some position where he could affect national policy in that regard and he does. By the time he’s 31, I believe, he’s the Secretary of the Navy. Well, he’s not content to sit there and just do his duty. He wants to make the military bigger and stronger, and the means of doing that is by getting us involved in the war. So over and over again he’s constantly trying to get us involved in a war.

At first it was with Germany. He writes to one of his friends and says [paraphrase], “I don’t care if some of our sea coast cities get bombed and burned. It would be a good object lesson to us that we need to build our defenses up.” He says it again: after that war scare with Germany is gone, he does it with Britain. He says, “I don’t care if New York gets burned. It would be a good object lesson.” He does this kind of stuff over and over. He’s constantly agitating, trying to get us into a war. So then when you finally get to about 1896, we find him writing—and he is not content that his only the Assistant Secretary of the Navy because he doesn’t have that little bit of extra power to affect what he wants—to a friend, “I wish I just had the extra power for two days. Two days is all I need, and then I would resign it because by that time I would have things set on course that couldn’t be reversed, and we would be going to war.” And of course he doesn’t get that chance, but he does get the chance for war a couple of years later when the Spanish-American War takes off. He effectively resigns his spot in the bureaucracy and goes and starts the so-called Rough Riders Brigade. He couldn’t wait to get involved with his own hand. And I document a long narrative in the book that he gets to Cuba; he uses all kinds of machinations including disobeying orders and outright lies in order to get on the ship to actually assure that he gets to Cuba. He gets there. He does the famous charge up San Juan Hill. That turns out victorious. He can’t wait, though, just to win that battle. He wants to shed blood with his own hands, and so he chases these Cubans down the hill, catches them as they shoot at him, they turn to retreat. As they turn to retreat, he shoots the guy in the side, and then he’s not content that he’s killed a man; he has to write home about it. So he writes this great then-

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who is another great imperialistic statist, and brags to him that he killed a man with his own hands.

Finally, he achieved the goal of his last hunt, as he said, the most dangerous game, which, of course, is mankind, and so he writes this letter. And then he's not content with that. He thinks he deserves the Medal of Honor, and so he spends the next decade or more agitating with Congress and with the Pentagon to give him the Medal of Honor, and of course, they never do it. It gets awarded to him posthumously under Bill Clinton, which is a great honor in and of itself. But anyway, you've got this image of guy who spends his entire life with a focus on getting involved in the war for the sole purpose of proving his manhood and building the nation's defenses, not necessarily any kind of a just cause, not a defensive cause, but solely out of these twisted psychological needs that he had. His entire life from childhood, adolescence, manhood, and even after that, he's wanting to be awarded the highest award possible for what he's done. So what I try to document here is the twisted personality—who, as you said, got into the highest office of the land eventually, and even after he had achieved all those things, the lust for war never abated. Even up until he was out of office. In 1915, he is condemning Woodrow Wilson for not getting us into World War I over and over until he's even trying at age 60 to go start his own private brigade of volunteers to go fight in France. Wilson actually rebuffs and wouldn't let him do it, but he was trying. He wanted to die on the battlefield. So again, twisted psychology, twisted personality, and in very dangerous positions of power.

WOODS: Joel, what would you say to a defender of TR who might say, for all his over-the-top bluster and his obvious enjoyment of combat, during his presidency the U.S. really didn't get involved in that much in terms of military conflict, so he may have talked a lot and may have enjoyed individually being involved in war, but he didn't carelessly thrust the country into war.

McDURMON: Well, maybe not as president in any major war, but any time he was even close and the issue was up, he was trying to get the nation into a war, so it wasn't bluster. It wasn't just a personal, private thing. He was always trying to get the whole nation into a war so that he could be part of it.

WOODS: Well, yeah, so what do you think would have happened if he had been president during World War I?

McDURMON: Oh, I have no doubt he would have pushed us into it as early as possible. This ties into another chapter of the book, by the way. He was condemning Woodrow Wilson as early as 1912. Of course, they were campaigning against each other, but Wilson at that time was more of a Cleveland Democrat, more of a peace-loving, limited government guy who had some peculiar ideas on that, but he was not the big progressive we know him today. Roosevelt was hammering him for this because he didn't believe in strong centralization, because he didn't believe in defending us at all costs and getting involved in the wars of intervention, being the world's police as he would—he would almost coin that type of foreign policy. He was condemning Wilson for these things. So if he had won that election, I have no doubt he would

not have waited until what was 1917 to get involved. We would have been involved much sooner, and even around 1915 you can see Roosevelt—he has no real power anymore, but he is writing books, he is publishing newspaper articles, he's publishing in German tabloids—which is a very interesting anecdote in the book—trying to get America involved in the war, trying to condemn the president for keeping out of it. So I have no doubt we would have been in it much earlier had he been president.

WOODS: Now, what about TR the trust-buster? What's the truth about that?

McDURMON: (laughs) Yeah, that's one of the interesting things. He is known as the trust-buster. There's a couple of points there. The first one is, relative to the other presidents around him, he wasn't much of a trust-buster, especially if you compare him to his successor, Taft. Taft disbanded more trusts through the application of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. He disbanded about twice as many as Roosevelt did in about half the time. So if anybody deserves the label trust-buster, it's Taft, and not Roosevelt. And of course, that became a point of contention between the two. Roosevelt had supported Taft early in his presidency, but he turned against him when Taft applied an act against one of the Carnegie trusts, and that's the second point. Roosevelt did bust a few trusts but almost, with one exception, all the major trusts that he busted were all from the Rockefeller interests and not from the Morgan banking interests and Carnegie, and the reason for that is because those are the great political supporters of Theodore Roosevelt. So he used the act to go after his political enemies and other people, and he did not apply it evenly to the Morgan trusts. When Taft gets in, he goes a little more consistent. He starts applying it to some of the Morgan trusts also, and Teddy Roosevelt blows up, breaks friendship with him, and then never supports him again. And of course, in the following election he runs against him as a Progressive. So yeah, the trust-busting—it's a myth that itself needs to be busted.

WOODS: But beyond that, though, let's say that none of these political factors—let's leave those to the side, as interesting as that is, and just ask the question: didn't he, though, by busting those trusts, improve the condition of the consumer?

McDURMON: Well, no, absolutely not, and that really ties into a lot more of his legislation and his regulatory mentality in addition to the trusts. What he actually did was, he busted more of the smaller guys and regulated a lot more of the smaller guys out of competition, and that leaves a lot of the larger corporations, the major corporations and financial interests in power because they could afford to deal with this stuff. They could afford to hire the lawyers to find the loopholes. They could hire the accountants to shift money around however it needs to be to create the smoke and mirrors. What happens is this type of regulation and this type of adjudication works inevitably to support the large trusts and to support the big corporations and to drive the smaller guys out, and so this hurt the little guy and the average guy, but it works also to help the state because here you've got the mechanism in place for that strong national centralization over industry that Roosevelt wanted, and of course, this is how national corporate business still works today, if you will. The national chambers of commerce and things

like that. So no, it doesn't help at all. It doesn't help the little guy. It doesn't help the consumer because by imposing all the speculation and whatnot, you add costs to the cost of doing business, and what does that do? That cost just gets passed onto the consumer, so no, this hurts small businesses, and it hurts consumers.

WOODS: And also we have empirical evidence that the targets of TR's activities were in fact lowering prices to consumers, so it's not a question of consumers being fleeced, and "monopoly power" being exerted. There's absolutely no evidence of that. It's just the opposite.

You mentioned Bill Clinton, which is quite interesting. Clinton said that TR was his favorite Republican president, which is really all you need to know. Yesterday, when I was telling people about this program, I was saying we're going to be talking about Theodore Roosevelt—who is universally beloved as a great American hero, which is how you can be sure he was a villain. Today they all love him. I hate to ask you such a simple question, but what purpose is served by the apotheosis of Theodore Roosevelt?

McDURMON: Well, nothing but he increased the size of the state, period, nothing but that. And with that the subsequent reduction of individual freedom. And you see the same—look at Mount Rushmore. You've got TR right up there next to Lincoln, and again, Jefferson is on there too, right? You might be able to give him a pass on some things, but Washington, he's almost untouchable. But honestly he belongs in the same group, and he is apotheosized, by the way, in the White House, or in Congress, congressional building. What purpose is served by deifying any of these guys with these policies of strong, central, national government? It can be nothing but the deification of their policy, which means the deification of the state, and when the state is deified, you are destroying all the foundations of freedom, all the foundations of freedom which I believe ultimately are religious. But even if you don't look at it that way, to deify the state is to diminish any other possibility of foundations of freedom in society, which means there are no foundations of freedom left. So what purpose is served? The purpose of growing the state, period.