

RIPPED APART



How Democrats Can
Fight Polarization to Win

Steven Stoft

Chapter 26

The Myth of the Bully Pulpit


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I have always been fond of the West African proverb "Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far."

—Teddy Roosevelt

"There are two dominant views," according to Robert Reich, "about how presidents accomplish fundamental change." He was making the case for Sanders over Clinton. "The first might be called the "dealmaker-in-chief"—he saw that as Clinton's approach.

"The second view about how presidents accomplish big things," the approach he prefers, is "by mobilizing the public to demand them." Teddy Roosevelt, he continued, won great victories "not because he was a great dealmaker," but rather because he used "his 'bully pulpit' to galvanize political action."



The Democratic Party has split between these two dominant views of what's most effective—dealmaking or preaching. Two candidates, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, represent the bully-pulpit view, and their followers sneer that the others are establishment dealmakers. But the dealmakers are less polarizing.

As I argued in the Introduction, the bully-pulpit myth has been believed until recently even by political scientists, but the evidence against it is persuasive. Still, the question is far from settled among nonspecialists and has a huge influence on how people think about candidates and our presidents.

Getting this wrong slows progressive change and causes many to condemn our presidents for not doing impossible things. This further polarizes the party and weakens us.

The Bully Pulpit Myth

The term “bully pulpit” was coined by President Teddy Roosevelt sometime early in his first term, perhaps in 1902. “Critics will call this preaching,” he told his preacher friend. “But I have got such a bully pulpit.” At that time, “bully” meant “first-rate.”



Of course, TR did make fundamental changes, and he did love to campaign for office more than any president before him. His personal popularity was, at times, enormous. So a myth has grown up that he accomplished what he did mostly by preaching from his bully pulpit.

Robert Reich served under Presidents Ford, Carter and Clinton. He is now Chancellor's Professor of Public Policy at U.C. Berkeley. To support his conclusion, in a 2016 op-ed Reich listed four accomplishments that he said resulted from TR's use of the bully pulpit. "Teddy Roosevelt got:

1. A progressive income tax,
2. Limits on corporate campaign contributions,
3. Regulation of foods and drugs, and
4. The dissolution of giant trusts.”

The first two of these were already discussed in some detail in the Introduction, and it turned out that neither supports the bully-pulpit myth. The progressive income take was unconstitutional while TR was in office, and he did not push for it. And he was opposed to limiting corporate campaign contributions.

Let's Keep Checking

It would be unfair to dismiss the bully-pulpit myth because it failed in the case of just two examples. So let's continue by checking the last two bully-pulpit accomplishments suggested by Reich.

Regulation of food and drugs. Upton Sinclair's blockbuster novel, *The Jungle*, was released January 25, 1906, and has never gone out of print. The book's hero worked in a meat-packing plant and became a socialist. Incidentally, the book described the unhealthy conditions in the slaughterhouses.

According to a popular but completely fictional story of the time, Roosevelt was “reading it at breakfast when he suddenly cried, ‘I’m poisoned,’ started throwing his sausages out the window and became a vegetarian.” In reality, Roosevelt was slow to catch on. After reading the book, he wrote to Frank Doubleday, the publisher, and berated him for publishing “such an obnoxious book.” A strange way to lead the progressive movement from your bully pulpit.

Doubleday, and eventually TR’s inspectors, confirmed the book did in fact accurately portray the meat-packing industry. The public outcry caused by Lewis’ book was so great that in 1906, Congress passed both a new Meat Inspection Act and the long-dormant Pure Food and Drug Act. Sinclair Lewis mobilized the public, not Roosevelt.

The “dissolution of giant trusts.” TR did have his justice department file 44 lawsuits based on the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. Two of the most well-known of these suits busted the biggest railroad holding company and Standard Oil. But where did the public pressure for such actions come from? The short answer is Ida Tarbell—not Teddy Roosevelt.

In a series of 19 lengthy articles published in *McClure’s Magazine* starting in November 1902,

Tarbell exposed the Standard Oil Trust. But it was her focus on John D. Rockefeller that won her a huge national audience. In 1904, she concluded, “We the people of the United States and nobody else must cure whatever is wrong in the industrial situation.”

The Outlook, a publication aligned with TR, proclaimed Tarbell “a Joan of Arc among moderns,” crusading “against trusts and monopolies.” *The Washington Times* said she had “proven herself to be one of the most commanding figures in American letters.” *The Washington Post* facetiously suggested “that Mr. Rockefeller would be glad to pay the expense if some man should win Miss Ida Tarbell and take her on a leisurely tour of the world for a honeymoon.” She was the star of this show. She used *McClure’s Magazine* as her bully pulpit, and she galvanized public opinion.

Ultimately, Roosevelt sued Standard Oil, but not until 1906. This time Roosevelt did get on the progressive bandwagon. And this time Reich may have a bit of a point, although I found no evidence of this while reading *The Bully Pulpit*, by Doris Kearns Goodwin.

Searching for Other Evidence

Although Reich’s evidence for the efficacy of the bully pulpit falls flat, there may still be a case to

be made. If there is, we might expect to find it in Goodwin's biography. However, while Goodwin made an excellent choice for the title, it may have been an afterthought.

On the second page of the preface, she makes her case: "The essence of Roosevelt's leadership, I soon became convinced, lay in his enterprising use of the 'bully pulpit.'" That's it—no evidence, just an assertion. (This is not meant as a criticism of her book, which is highly informative and a joy to read.)

In the body of the book, the term "bully pulpit" is only mentioned once (thank you, Kindle search feature) with regard to Roosevelt: "He created the Palisades Park and used his bully pulpit to promote it." That's an awfully weak case for the power of the bully pulpit.

Besides this example, Goodwin's book does provide two other examples that clearly show TR's effective use of the bully pulpit, although she does not call these out.

Bully pulpit use #1. Roosevelt preferred corporate regulation to trust-busting. To achieve this, he created the Bureau of Corporations. He did so by relentlessly employing his legendary dealmaking skills. But in the end, that was not enough. So he tricked the press into believing that Rockefeller had sent six threatening telegrams to Congress-

men. Though no telegrams were ever discovered, the resulting scandal tipped the balance and pushed Congress to pass his bill.

No preaching was involved, but he did use (or misuse) the press very effectively, and without radio, they were his bully pulpit.

Bully pulpit use #2. Roosevelt's most memorable use of the bully pulpit occurred when he prompted the press to coin the term "muckraker," which we now apply as a badge of honor. But at the time, he was more than a little annoyed at the direction progressive journalism had taken. As explained in the next chapter, he took journalists to task in his famous "Man with the Muck Rake" speech. The conservative press exaggerated his criticism and basically put an end to the era of progressive investigative journalism. His most famous use of his bully pulpit was to accidentally sabotage the progressive movement. This is not what Reich had in mind.

A Firsthand Report. Ray Baker, a colleague of Ida Tarbell at *McClure's* magazine and perhaps the most politically astute of the era's investigative journalists, summarized Roosevelt's relationship to the public as follows:

The reforms he has advocated are really our reforms, not his. He has voiced them valiantly and fearlessly.

For Roosevelt never leads, but always follows. He acts, but he acts only when he thinks the crowd is behind him. His understanding of us leads him rarely astray; and when he goes astray, he instantly acts in the opposite manner—and gets in with the crowd.

Railroad reform was imminent in many states before he took it up. ... The Standard Oil Company and other trusts had been exposed before he framed the governmental machinery for exposing them.

Roosevelt has been an instrument in letting off a Revolution quietly in the form of evolution.

—Ray Baker, *The American* magazine,
1908

Goodwin's example. Concerning the Hepburn bill which enabled the government to set maximum rates on railroads, an unprecedented step toward regulation, Goodwin wrote:

However astute Roosevelt proved in dealing with Congress, he would doubtless have failed to secure a meaningful bill without a

galvanized public behind him. The combined efforts of Baker and his fellow journalists had generated a widespread demand for reform.

Note that she credits Roosevelt with being astute in dealing with Congress, while the journalists, not Roosevelt, had “galvanized the public behind him.” This is the opposite of Reich’s claim that “mobilizing the public” was done by Roosevelt using his “bully pulpit to galvanize political action.”

According to Goodwin, the mobilizing was done by “hundreds of magazines and newspapers following every aspect of the debate and clearly outlining what was at stake.” And by Ray Baker, who “published the most consequential piece in his railroad series, an exposé of the techniques the railroads employed to malign and falsify the Hepburn bill. ... The sensational article heightened public demand for regulation.” Goodwin spends over a page describing how this article galvanized the public.

After the bill’s passage, Roosevelt himself wrote to Baker, saying: “It is through writers like yourself, Mr. Steffens and Miss Tarbell, that the country as a whole is beginning to understand.” And the press gave Roosevelt full credit for all the dealmaking and compromising it took to get the

bill passed. Goodwin spends five pages describing Roosevelt's dealmaking and not one sentence on his use of the bully pulpit.

In other words, fundamental change occurred because there was a progressive movement with its own leaders and lots of support from the press. Ray Baker had long conversations with Roosevelt, resulting in a more effective bill. And Roosevelt used his political talents to push the bill through Congress. That's how fundamental change usually happens—as Reich says in the title of his op-ed, “It Takes a Movement.” It also takes a dealmaking politician that the movement trusts.

In a letter to muckraker Lincoln Steffens, Roosevelt reminded him that results “must be gotten by trying to come to a working agreement with the Senate and House and therefore by making mutual concessions.”

The Political Science of the Bully Pulpit

As discussed in the Introduction, President Reagan, aka the Great Communicator, completely failed to move public opinion in his direction during his eight years in office. This was demonstrated by the results of 10 years of research presented in *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (2003) by political scientist George Edwards.

The bottom-line conclusion from all this research and much more is that presidents can sway members of their own party a bit, but the other party sees what they're up to and heads in the opposite direction.

After learning this the hard way, Obama was careful not to mention a payroll tax cut in the run-up to the November 2010 midterm elections. But after the election, it appeared in the tax deal. Obama's senior advisor explained: "We didn't put the payroll-tax cut into our speeches [because] if we included it in our rhetoric it might impair our chances of getting it done after the election."

In short, political science tells us that using the bully pulpit gets in the way of dealmaking—and dealmaking is usually the only path to progress. It does require a movement, but not one led from the presidential bully pulpit.

Conclusion

Teddy Roosevelt was a great "dealmaker-in-chief," and proud of it. And we should be proud of him for being who he was. Modern political science has proven his approach correct.

In a primary, there is no need of or chance for dealmaking, but Warren and Sanders can shift their followers' expectations to the left. This gives them the appearance of power, without any need to

show they can actually get results. But if one of them were to become president, they would prove less able to get results than those with real political skills.

Why You Will Find Teddy Roosevelt on Mount Rushmore

Don't judge Teddy Roosevelt by today's far-left mythology. Judge him in his own historical context. He grew up as an elite conservative, and he transformed himself into a progressive who could operate effectively inside the system. He did this through tough-minded honesty that was as rare then as it is now.

He did not approach politics through the lens of socialist economic analysis: "My problems are moral problems, and my teaching has been plain morality. ... People are going to discuss economic questions more and more ... I am not deeply interested in them."

He applied his "square deal" standard equally to the rich and the poor. In his context, that was the way to make progress. He railed against the populists, socialists and independents as much as against the Republican bosses. Those like the strident Wisconsin populist La Follette, who fought "the system in the abstract," Roosevelt said, accomplished "mighty little good."

According to Ray Baker, a journalist and confidant of Roosevelt, “Roosevelt never leads; he always follows.” That was a smart strategy, which strengthened his hand in the heart of the party of big business.

With a lot of help from the progressive movement, he shifted America’s politics from a belief in laissez-faire economics and social Darwinism to a belief that the central purpose of government is to make society fair to all.

Taft may have been as good or better at moving Roosevelt’s agenda forward once it was set in motion. But at that point in history, only the volcanic force of Teddy Roosevelt could have harnessed the power of the progressive movement to launch their programs from inside the party of big business.