



Theodore Roosevelt

Theodore Roosevelt, the youngest person ever to assume the American presidency.

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Theodore Roosevelt: The Accidental President Who Transformed the Office

President he succeeded: William McKinley

Term of office: September 14, 1901–March 4, 1909

Republican political boss Mark Hanna reportedly warned his colleagues against placing Theodore Roosevelt in the vice presidency. “Don’t any of you realize,” he asked, “that there’s only one life between that madman and the presidency?”

That life ended when William McKinley died after being shot by an assassin. At forty-two, Roosevelt became the youngest person ever to assume the presidency.

Roosevelt brought remarkable energy to the office. He believed the president should act as a steward of the people and could do anything the Constitution did not specifically forbid. His “Square Deal” promised fairness for workers, consumers and businesses.

He challenged powerful corporate combinations, earning a reputation as a “trust-buster,” although he distinguished between corporations he considered beneficial and those that abused their power. During the 1902 coal strike, Roosevelt intervened to encourage negotiations between mine owners and workers—an unusual step for a president.

Conservation became one of his defining causes. Roosevelt protected approximately 230 million acres of public land and greatly expanded national forests, wildlife refuges and national monuments.

After winning a full term in 1904, Roosevelt supported the Hepburn Act, which strengthened federal regulation of railroads. The Pure Food and Drug Act and Meat Inspection Act responded to public concern about unsafe and deceptively labeled products.

His foreign policy was equally energetic. Roosevelt supported construction of the Panama Canal and expanded American influence in Latin America. His Roosevelt Corollary asserted a broad American right to intervene in neighboring countries, a policy that left a controversial legacy. He also helped negotiate an end to the Russo-Japanese War, earning the 1906 Nobel Peace Prize.

Roosevelt declined to seek another consecutive term in 1908 but later regretted the decision. In 1912, he challenged his former ally William Howard Taft and ran as the Progressive Party candidate, dividing the Republican vote and helping Democrat Woodrow Wilson win.

Roosevelt transformed an office that had often been subordinate to Congress into the center of national political life. Unlike many accidental presidents, he did not merely complete his predecessor's term. He redefined what Americans expected a president to be.