

# Theodore Roosevelt:

## The Self (Re-) Made Man

In the 19th century, the author Horatio Alger wrote a long list of novels about young Americans who “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.” The main characters were always born into poverty, but by education, “smarts,” hard work, and ingenuity, they managed to become prosperous, even well-to-do. And they did it on their own. They had no wealthy parents to rely on. They didn’t win the lottery. They worked hard, saved their money, started businesses, and they did it all through their own efforts. Such a person came to be described as a “self-made man,” in other words, someone who made it on their own.

And the truth is there are lots of such people, and America is a place where this is more possible than any other country because Americans value opportunity, economic freedom, and the liberty to take risks and improve our lives for the better.

But young Theodore Roosevelt could hardly be described as someone who grew up in poverty. In fact, his father, Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., was a prominent businessman and philanthropist in New York City and his mother, Martha Bulloch, was from a wealthy family in Georgia. Teddy was born in 1858 with a “silver spoon in his mouth.”



Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Harvard College Library

**Young Theodore Roosevelt**



Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Harvard College Library

However, that wealth couldn't change the fact that he suffered from severe asthma, a lung ailment which left him wheezing and breathless whenever he exerted himself. His eyesight was also poor. As a result, his mother doted on him endlessly, encouraging him to live a life of idleness. Some would consider this attention combined with wealth (despite his illnesses) a free and easy life.

Well, TR refused to accept this future. Instead, he adopted an outlook on life that he called "the strenuous life," even writing a book on it later in 1901. He began exercising regularly, spending hours out-of-doors in fields and forest, pushing himself on forced marches, chopping wood, running, climbing, and gamboling about in every way possible. Slowly he found that the harder he worked, the harder he *could* work. His asthma abated and while he couldn't very well improve his eyesight, he decided to never let it interfere with what he wanted to do.

And what he wanted to do was everything. He applied to Harvard College and graduated magna cum laude, meaning he had excellent grades. Soon after he ran for the New York state legislature and, at the age of 23—a young whipper snapper who should have been silent before his wiser, older colleagues—went on the attack against “machine politics.” This was a corrupt system that provided people jobs and benefits based on their political party affiliation. TR was one of the leading reformers in the country, and people of both parties—the Democrats and Republicans—hated him for it. But he and his fellow reformers won the day in the end.

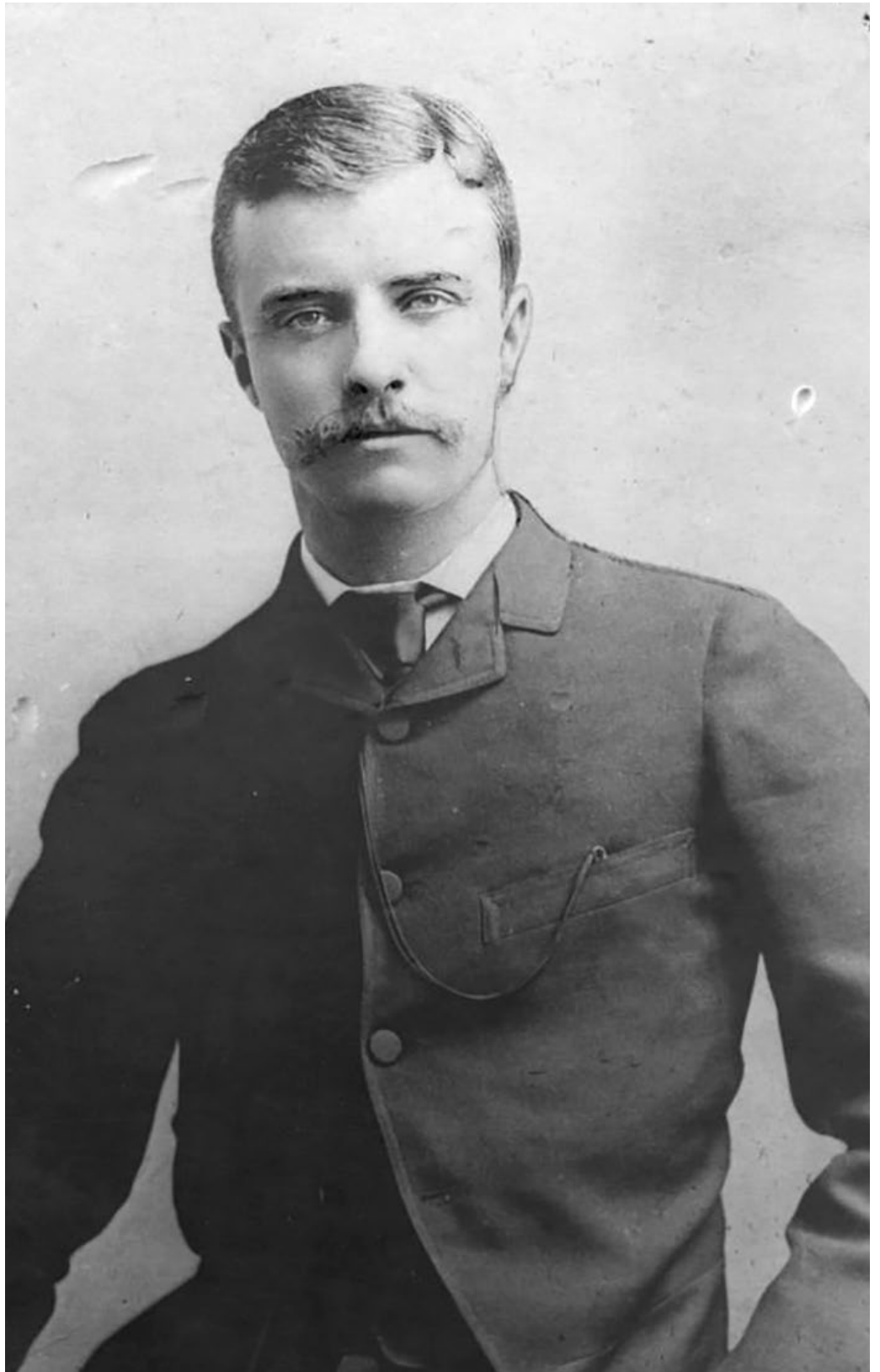


Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.



But then came the real test of his mettle. On Valentine’s Day, 1884, both his beloved mother, Martha, and wife, Alice, died—just hours apart. Alice’s death occurred just two days after the birth of their only child, Alice Lee Roosevelt. TR was inconsolable. He forbid those around him to even utter their names. Unable to cope, he headed out to the Dakota Territory in the Badlands. He purchased a ranch and ran a large herd of cattle himself, along with the help of a group of cowboys who first thought he was a soft easterner but soon learned he was anything but and earned their respect. When he wasn’t ranching, TR was hunting and gained an appreciation for wildlife and the environment. He loved his life in Dakota Territory but realized that running away from grief was no way to live. He returned to New York and ran for mayor of the City of New York. He lost. Soon after, he lost his whole cattle herd in a severe Dakota blizzard.

None of which kept him down. Soon after, he became New York’s police commissioner, an administrative post that saw him prowling the city streets at all hours of the day or night to make sure his officers were protecting the citizens of the city from crime. During this time, he was also writing books, which were very popular. (Roosevelt was, in fact, the most prolific American president, writing 28 books in his lifetime.) His first book, “The Naval War of 1812,” was so well thought of that President McKinley appointed him the assistant secretary of the navy.



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

When America declared war on Spain (1898), in order to free Cuba from that country's colonial rule, Roosevelt left that post in order to organize the 1st Volunteer Cavalry, better known as the Rough Riders, some of whom were his old cowboy friends from Dakota. Dashing into combat, the Rough Riders quickly defeated the Spanish in a battle, and Roosevelt became one of the biggest heroes of the Spanish-American War. At the end of the war, Roosevelt returned to New York and was elected that same year as governor of the state. He instantly threw himself into a crusade against corruption that was so successful that the party bosses in his state decided to nominate him for the vice presidency under McKinley, in order to strip him of power.

The plan backfired when President McKinley was assassinated and TR became president at 42 years of age, the youngest person to ever become president. As president he "busted trusts" (economic monopolies that prevented competition and kept prices high), pushed important laws through Congress on food and drug safety, set aside wilderness areas as national parks, settled strikes, kept European nations from interfering in the Western Hemisphere, built the Panama Canal, built a large navy, and made the United States a military and world power. He also negotiated an end to the war between Japan and Russia and earned a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. Not to mention he was shot during a campaign speech and kept speaking!

After retiring from the presidency, TR explored the Amazon River, continued writing books, advocated for the Conservation Movement, and, when America entered into World War I, requested that then President Wilson allow him to form a volunteer division of soldiers that he would lead into battle. the age of 58!



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

A “strenuous life” indeed.

So what made the difference? What turned a frail, spoiled little boy into a cowboy, soldier, police commissioner, governor, and president who pushed America onto the world stage? Fundamentally, it was Roosevelt’s belief, *and his acting on that belief*, that he was in charge of his own life. In other words, Roosevelt had an Internal Locus of Control.

So what does that mean?

- Locus of Control simply means what a person believes about who is in control of their life.
- People with an Internal (inside) Locus of Control believe they control their life.
- Those with an External (outside them) Locus of Control believe others, or other factors, control their life.

And it matters which of these you adopt for yourself and your life.

People with an Internal Locus of Control know that their decisions and their actions have a lot to say about how their life turns out. They assign or attribute blame or credit for their triumphs and their failures to their own decisions, actions, and abilities. People with an Internal Locus of Control tend to be self-confident and effective. They also plan ahead.

People with an External Locus of Control assign responsibility for their situation in life to factors outside of themselves. When they experience a reversal or failure, they tend to look for others to blame. Sometimes they don’t even give themselves credit for a success, assigning it, instead, to luck, random chance, or “knowing the right people.” People with an External Locus of Control also aren’t very assertive. They don’t tend to pursue opportunities. They are more passive and, at times, even feel quite helpless.

More basically, people with an Internal Locus of Control tend to be more successful in life, socially and economically. They rise higher and faster. They also tend to be happier.



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**Want to learn more?**

Visit Mount Rushmore National Memorial located in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Seeing it in person really brings home the grandeur of this massive, patriotic sculpture. The visitor area offers much more information about the four presidents memorialized there, including TR.