



PRESIDENTS AND THE CONSTITUTION

FEDERAL POWER: THEODORE ROOSEVELT

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2009

OVERVIEW

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In this month's *Presidents and the Constitution* eLesson we examine how President Theodore Roosevelt brought a new attitude to the presidency, approaching it as a "bully pulpit." Where his predecessors believed that powers not granted were forbidden, Roosevelt asserted that powers not forbidden were granted. He was aware that he was shaping the Presidency in a way his detractors would criticize. In his autobiography, Roosevelt wrote that he did not "usurp" power, but that he did "greatly broaden" executive authority. What is your assessment of his presidency?

RESOURCES

- http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/troosevelt_film/trfsnd.html.
- <http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/frames.html>
- <http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.com/Cartoons.asp>

NARRATIVE

Theodore Roosevelt used what he called the "bully pulpit" ("bully" meaning "wonderful" and "pulpit" meaning "a preaching position") to spread his ideas and solve problems. He said: "I suppose my critics will call that preaching, but I have got such a bully pulpit!" His use of the bully pulpit contributed to the greatest expansion of federal power in the country's history to that time.

Roosevelt was concerned about "trusts," big corporations that damaged the general welfare by driving other companies out of business. He used the bully pulpit to persuade Congress that "the great development of industrialism means that there must be an increase in the supervision exercised by the government over business enterprise." Explaining his fight for a "square deal" for Americans, he used authority under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act to take on powerful consolidated companies. He also proposed laws to protect workers and end child labor. As a result, the Department of Labor and Commerce was created in 1903. He proposed laws regulating the nation's food supply. In response, the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 was passed, paving the way for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

President Roosevelt also expanded the reach of the federal government in conservation. He signed laws establishing five national parks, and broadened executive power by signing the Antiquities Act in 1906. This law gave the president the power to proclaim historic landmarks, structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest as national monuments. He interpreted this law broadly, and by the end of his term had reserved eighteen areas in this manner, including a large part of the Grand Canyon, Devil's Tower in Wyoming, and the Petrified Forest in Arizona. Later presidents claimed 105 areas under the Antiquities Act, forty-nine of which remain so designated today.

The Constitution requires the President to report to Congress on the state of the union and permits him or her only to "recommend measures" for their consideration. Roosevelt took these constitutional provisions much further, sending more than 400 messages to Congress. Critics objected to Roosevelt's energetic approach to the presidency. They believed his approach was in direct opposition to the Founders' belief, expressed in the Tenth Amendment, that powers not granted to the federal government were reserved to the states and the people. Roosevelt did not accept this criticism. He later said, "While president ... I have not cared a rap for the criticisms of those who spoke of my 'usurpation of power'... I have felt not merely that my action was right in itself, but that in showing the strength of, or in giving strength to, the executive, I was establishing a precedent of value."



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QUESTIONS

1. What did Roosevelt mean by “bully pulpit”?
2. What kinds of domestic reforms did Roosevelt propose to Congress? Why did his critics object to them?
3. The Founders believed powers not granted to the President in the Constitution were forbidden. Roosevelt believed powers not forbidden were granted. What are the implications of each view? Which do you believe is wiser?

EXTENSION

- A. In this lesson students have considered some of the uses of the “bully pulpit” in domestic affairs. Have students conduct additional research to trace the ways Roosevelt transformed the role of the President in foreign affairs. Results should include such events as the construction of the Panama Canal, prevention of the establishment of foreign military bases in the Caribbean, the sending of the navy “Great White Fleet” on a trip around the world, and his arbitration to end the Russo-Japanese War.
- B. At the Constitutional Convention, the Founders debated the advantages and disadvantages of a single executive. While Edmund Randolph regarded a single executive as the “fetus of monarchy,” James Wilson countered “unity in the Executive...would be the best safeguard against tyranny.” Have students assess each of these predictions in light of Theodore Roosevelt’s actions as President.



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ANSWERS

1. Theodore Roosevelt used what he called the “bully pulpit” (“bully” meaning “wonderful” and “pulpit” meaning “a preaching position”) to spread his ideas and solve problems.
2. “...supervision exercised by the government over business enterprise,” laws regulating the nation’s food supply, expanding the reach of the federal government in conservation, in general taking a more energetic approach to the presidency. Critics criticized these reforms as unconstitutional—outside the constitutional powers of the federal government.
3. The former view tends to produce limited government and a weaker executive; the latter tends to produce unlimited government and a stronger executive. Accept reasoned answers.