A President's Vision

"We must treat each man on his worth and merits as a man. We must see that each is given a square deal, because he is entitled to no more and should receive no less."

— Address to the New York State Agricultural Association, September 7, 1903

Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency in 1901, when an anarchist assassinated William McKinley. As the youngest president in U.S. history, Roosevelt possessed remarkable physical vigor and a keen instinct for publicity. He expanded presidential power through assertive action and his influence on public opinion, using his office as "a bully pulpit."

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Americans struggled with the effects of industrialization. Corporations wielded vast economic and political power, and the gap between rich and poor widened. Underpaid workers toiled in hazardous conditions while living in crowded cities. Roosevelt, a patrician activist leading a conservative Republican Party, espoused a moderate but progressive agenda to preserve capitalism by reforming it. He supported federal regulation of railroad rates, pure food and drug legislation, and anti-trust lawsuits against harmful corporate monopolies. An ardent outdoorsman, he also advanced the conservation of natural resources, establishing the U.S. Forest Service and preserving seven million acres of public land from development.

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Roosevelt promised a government that would serve as an impartial referee between corporations and citizens, providing a "square deal." He supported the rights of workers and taxes on the wealthiest citizens. He was overwhelmingly reelected in 1904 and served until 1909. In 1912, he came out of retirement to run as a third party candidate but lost to Democrat Woodrow Wilson.