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# The King & I. Book Review Of: Theodore Rex. by Edmund Morris

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## THE KING & I

**Theodore Rex** By Edmund Morris.<sup>1</sup> Random House, 2001. Pp. 864. \$35.00

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Last fall, while reading *Theodore Rex*, Edmund Morris's impressive second installment of his multi-volume biography of Theodore Roosevelt, I happened upon an article in *The New Yorker* by Malcolm Gladwell titled "The Talent Myth: Are Smart People Overrated?"<sup>3</sup> Gladwell describes the "talent mindset" that has become "new orthodoxy" of American management. As promoted by McKinsey & Company, the country's largest and most prestigious management-consulting firm, the "War for Talent" involves sorting employees in A, B, and C groups in a process known as "rank and yank." The A's are identified as the stars, they have "talent" and so must be challenged and disproportionately rewarded (a la mega-bonuses and stock options). The B's are competent. They need to be encouraged and affirmed. The C's need to shape up or ship out. The archetypical "talent" company of the 1990s was Enron, one of McKinsey's prime clients and whose CEO, Ken Lay, was a former McKinsey partner. Enron aggressively sought out people it considered to have special talents, freely raiding other corporations and promising huge windfall bonuses to this elite group. The underlying principle was that structure and organization count for far less in promoting corporate success than do the inspired efforts of a few special individuals.

Gladwell wrote the article, of course, in the aftermath of Enron's collapse and the ensuing corporate scandals at Arthur Andersen, Tyco, Global Crossing, Worldcom, etc. Morris's bi-

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3. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Talent Myth: Are Smart People Overrated?*, *The New Yorker* 28 (July 22, 2002).

ograph of Theodore Roosevelt, however, came out in 2001 and presumably he wrote it while these corporations were still flying high—or at least were airborne. It struck me, therefore, as I was reading the two pieces together, that what Morris has presented us with is a Theodore Roosevelt for the 1990s—a McKinsey & Company Group A president who rules by force of personality and deserves all the indulgence we can bestow upon him. In contrast to Halberstam's idea of the "best and the brightest"<sup>4</sup> of the Kennedy era, Morris's Group A T.R. is not an elitist know-it-all who presumes his superior intellect entitles him to make decisions for the rest of us. Rather, he is a force of nature, his strength lies not simply in his intellect or social position but in his distinctive array of talent, energy, and enthusiasm that wins over (or overwhelms) all comers: As Harvard President Charles William Eliot said after Roosevelt spoke at Harvard's commencement in 1902, "he has genius, force, originality;" (118) and as Morris concludes, "legislation . . . was not his forte. Public leadership was." (118). This T.R. is no mere manager bogged down in the details of daily governance. He is a charismatic giant among men, leading by force of will.

There is much to be said for this presentation of Roosevelt. It certainly makes for an engaging and well-paced work. (Much needed in a 500+ page biography that covers only eight years). In many respects Roosevelt's colorful personality and voluminous writings make him a biographer's dream subject. Morris has seized on these attributes with a vengeance and demonstrated a remarkable mastery of a wide array of primary sources to paint a vivid portrait of the man. Enron, however, collapsed, and in the end, so too does Morris's biography of Roosevelt. One reason, I believe, is that both relentlessly focused on the individual in the moment—on the exigencies of the here-and-now—and failed to step back to get a larger sense of perspective on their respective situations. This is perhaps understandable, but not forgivable, in the case of Enron and its wild ride during the go-go 90s. It is less understandable, but perhaps more forgivable in Morris, who himself seems a bit overwhelmed by Roosevelt's personal appeal. He has written, however, not only a biography but also a work of history that demands a broader sense of perspective on its subject.

The first decade of the previous century was a period of grand transition in America. At the heart of what is commonly

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4. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (Random House, 1972).

known as the Progressive Era, these years witnessed the emergence of the United States as a modern, urban, industrial nation and a world power. A new national state was being erected on the ruined foundations of Reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, the first of what historian John Morton Blum has called "the Progressive Presidents"<sup>6</sup> presided over and gave a distinctive character to this transition.

Two Supreme Court cases from 1896 may be seen as neatly setting the stage for this transition, one symbolically, the other with biting immediacy. In *United States v. Gettysburg Electric Railway Company*,<sup>7</sup> the Court upheld federal action to condemn land to enhance the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial as a constitutionally valid takings pursuant to a legitimate public purpose; that purpose being, *inter alia*, to preserve graves of soldiers, both Confederate and Union, and so "touch[] the heart . . . of every citizen, and greatly to enhance his love and respect for those institutions for which these heroic sacrifices were made."<sup>8</sup> That same year, the Court decided the far better known case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*,<sup>9</sup> which, in the context of affirming segregated railway cars, announced the infamous "separate but equal rule" that gave formal legal sanction to Jim Crow regimes that were emerging throughout the South.

It is interesting to note that both these cases involved modes of transportation, for even as the cases legitimize the social segregation of the races, they also herald the geographic integration of the United States as a polity and as an emerging economic powerhouse. By the turn of the 20th century, railroads and tramways both connected far-flung rural regions to the burgeoning cities and also allowed the cities themselves to expand along streetcar lines to accommodate the massive influx of immigration from rural areas and from abroad. At a deeper level, these cases mark the recognition that a new, unified national identity was to be built amongst white Americans on the backs of segregated African Americans. With his ascendancy upon McKinley's assassination in 1901, Roosevelt was the first chief executive to preside over this newly emerging national order. He was thus

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5. Stephen Skowronek, *Building A New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge U. Press, 1982)

6. John Morton Blum, *The Progressive Presidents: Roosevelt, Wilson, Roosevelt, Johnson* (Norton, 1980)

7. 160 U.S. 668 (1896)

8. *Id.* at 682

9. 163 U.S. 537 (1896)

not only the first "Progressive" president, but also the first truly "national" president, transforming that office into a focal point of national pride and identity.

Morris does a commendable job of laying out some of the main historical themes of Roosevelt's time at the outset of his volume. On the domestic front, it was a time of rising labor organization and continued conflicts between growing unions and the great new industrial combinations of the era. The trust question dominated political discourse. The 1890s had seen the passage of the Sherman Act and its subsequent construction by the Supreme Court in the *E.C. Knight*<sup>10</sup> case. As the new century dawned, the status of large corporations whose activities spanned the nation and the globe remained at the center of debates over the proper role of the state in economic affairs. Race-relations remained a central concern despite, or perhaps because of, the final demise of Reconstruction and the institutionalization of Jim Crow. Thus, it was during Roosevelt's first administration that W.E.B. DuBois famously declared "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."<sup>11</sup>

In the area of race relations, Morris does a very nice job of recounting Roosevelt's courageous and controversial invitation to Booker T. Washington to come to the White House early on in his administration. Morris notes that Roosevelt felt "entirely at ease" with Washington because "a black man who [had] advanced faster than his fellows should be rewarded with every privilege that democracy could bestow. Booker T. Washington qualified [as] *honoris causa* in the 'aristocracy of worth.'" (52) Here is Roosevelt, the savvy executive, bestowing indulgences upon a worthy man of talent. The people at McKenzie & Company could not have characterized it better. And indeed, Washington was an extraordinary individual. But aside from a discussion of Roosevelt's use of patronage to appoint some blacks to key posts and the curious assertion that "whoever commanded the loyalty of Southern blacks commanded the Republican presidential nomination" (38) (this despite Morris's own statement several pages later that "by the next presidential election, not one black man in a thousand would be able to vote." (48)), Roosevelt's relation with Washington comprises almost the whole of Morris's consideration of racial politics during this era.

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10. 156 U.S. 1 (1895)

11. W.E.B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Penguin Books, 1982) [1903].

In foreign policy, America had, in Page Smith's words "entered the world"<sup>12</sup> as an international player of considerable force in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. Roosevelt entered office with a new empire on his hands as America continued to occupy its new possessions in the Philippines and Cuba. A canal across the Central American Isthmus was already on the table but still a largely unresolved issue. Immigration and the Open Door framed policies in Asia, while European powers threatened to establish footholds of influence in the Western hemisphere.

Morris portrays these challenges through Roosevelt's eyes as embodying clearly defined oppositional interests that threatened to pull the country apart: "The consistent features of the political landscape as [Roosevelt] saw it, were fault lines running deeply and dangerously through divergent blocks of power. Potential chasms lurked between Isolationism and Expansionism, Government and the Trusts, Capital and Labor, Conservation and Development, Wealth and Commonwealth, Nativism and the Golden Door." (37) History here is contained in capitalized categories. Throughout the book, they become represented through portraits of representative individuals presumed to embody each interest. Thus, "Trusts" becomes the imposing figure of J.P. Morgan, (clearly Group A), and his shrewd minion, George Perkins, or James J. Hill and E.H. Harriman, two other powerful financiers who together with Morgan formed the Northern Securities Trust that was to become the focus of T.R.'s most renowned exercise in "trust-busting." "Capital" becomes the stubborn and willful George Baer, of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad who led the industrial interests in opposition to the United Mine Workers' great strike of 1902. Baer (Group C, haughty and indifferent to T.R. and labor alike—yank him!), is opposed by John Mitchell, the legendary leader of the United Mine Workers who is here brought down to size (Group B size), as someone who "calculated the coefficients of patience and time," (133)—hardly the dashing and bold initiative of a risk-taking Group A personality.

Roosevelt, then, is cast as bridging these chasms. Striding large across the horizon, larger than life, he reconciles opposition and prevents the country from coming apart through force of will. He, with the aid of his proxies (John Hay, Elihu Root,

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12. Page Smith, *America Enters the World: A People's History of the Progressive Era and World War I* (McGraw-Hill, 1985).

and Philander Knox prominent among them), corral the obstreperous combatants and through cunning statecraft mixed with sheer charisma, entice, cajole and pressure them into mutual accommodations that stave off disaster. In this Morris presents a nice gloss on the well-established image of Roosevelt as a model of virile energy, passion, intellect, and will. Throughout, he makes Roosevelt likeable, even in the face of often harsh, typically ironic criticism from the likes of Henry Adams or Henry James, who in spite of themselves betrayed a fondness for Roosevelt and his irrepressible boyish enthusiasm. Indeed, perhaps it was this very enthusiasm that appealed to such world-weary intellectuals who were so deeply troubled by the uncertain prospects of a modern world that seemed to them cut off from the moorings of genteel Victorian society and adrift in a swirl of crass materialism and unwashed European immigrants.

Morris's Roosevelt plays the same role on the international stage, most notably in mediating the conflict between Russia and Japan in 1905. In this regard, Morris does a particularly nice job of reconstructing the day-to-day intricacies of diplomatic maneuvering behind resolving a conflict that threatened to engulf the entire Pacific region. After reading his account, one comes better to understand why Roosevelt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts the following year. Morris characterizes Roosevelt's success as "the result of . . . an inexplicable ability to impose his singular charge upon plural power. By sheer force of moral purpose, by clarity of perception, by mastery of detail and benign manipulation of men, he had become, as Henry Adams admiringly wrote him, 'the best herder of Emperors since Napoleon.'" (414)

This is all well and good, and insightful so far as it goes. But it does not go beyond the moment. Morris's accounts of T.R.'s feats of statesmanship, be they trust-busting, mediating domestic labor confrontations, or resolving clashes among nations, are so firmly, deeply and thickly rooted in detailing events as they unfold that he never steps back to provide a broader sense of the larger historical forces that are shaping and constraining these important events. Even in developing a portrait of Roosevelt's own policies, for example in the areas of trust regulation, Morris gives the impression that these are more a function of the great man's peculiar temperament ("he was never interested in money and could not understand why people would so wholeheartedly devote themselves to its massive accumulation" (117)) than of a coherent philosophy of governance. There is, therefore, no en-

gagement, even remotely, with historians such as Martin Sklar, who explore Roosevelt's "statist-tending corporate liberalism" that aimed to promote a "public-service capitalism under state direction, which would include public provision for distributive justice."<sup>13</sup>

This lacuna is particularly pronounced in Morris's treatment (or lack thereof) of the legal developments of the era. Morris does not even allude to foundational cases such as *Lochner*<sup>14</sup> and *Muller*.<sup>15</sup> He does do a good job of telling the story of the personalities behind the *Northern Securities Case*,<sup>16</sup> which won Roosevelt the (somewhat undeserved) reputation of a trust-buster. Morris's narrative, however, again reduces the case to a clash of titans—J.P. Morgan, E.H. Harriman, and James J. Hill, versus Roosevelt and his trusty (if pale) Attorney General, Philander K. Knox. This makes for a well-paced narrative but sheds little light on the larger significance of the case in developing legal doctrine or as it affected emerging conceptions of the federal state as an active intervener in social and economic affairs. Morris cultivates the reader's likes and dislikes of particular characters as a way to bring us into the story but he does not offer us insight so much as sensibility.

Nor is there any consideration of the fact that for all his supposed disinterest in finance and the petty details of legislation, Roosevelt laid the foundations for the modern administrative state with his creation of the Bureau of Corporations and the Keep Commission on Departmental Methods.<sup>17</sup> It is indeed a pity that Morris did not take the opportunity to address what John Morton Blum recognized years ago as a woeful inattention to Roosevelt's influence over the development of public administration.<sup>18</sup> A fuller consideration of Roosevelt's involvement with the mundane world of bureaucratic organization, however, would hardly lend itself to Morris's method of building a fast-paced biography around dualistic oppositions where titans clash.

More important, however, focusing on such issues would also undercut his portrayal of Roosevelt's presidency (and by ex-

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13. Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, The Law, and Politics* 36 (Cambridge U. Press, 1988).

14. *Lochner v. New York*, 198 U.S. 45 (1905)

15. *Muller v. Oregon*, 208 U.S. 412 (1908)

16. *Northern Securities Co. v. U.S.*, 193 U.S. 197 (1904).

17. See, e.g., Jonathan Kahn, *Budgeting Democracy: State-Building and Citizenship in America, 1890-1928* (Cornell U. Press, 1997).

18. John Morton Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt* (Harvard U. Press, 1954).



tension, of energetic and creative governance) as primarily a matter of individual talent. Structure and organization have no place in this scheme—even if they are the result of Roosevelt's own talented insights into how to build a new national state. As such, Morris's engaging portrayal of Roosevelt ironically undercuts the larger significance of his presidency. Roosevelt, the larger than life force of nature, makes for good reading but he is *sui generis* and hence his impact dies with him. Roosevelt the state-builder is less colorful but has enduring significance whose impact is still felt today. Roosevelt was the first Progressive president because he was the first president fully to impart to the American nation a sense that the federal government could be an active force in shaping the world for the common good. He was the first president fully to establish his position as a national figurehead, as someone who truly represented and spoke for that nation in world affairs. He was also the first president fully to appreciate the importance of building a coherent bureaucratic structure within government sufficient to manage its expanding roles in society and the economy. These, more than his force of will or personal genius, are his lasting legacy. Surely, his distinctive personal gifts allowed him to accomplish these great things, but those gifts should be valued as they contributed to his accomplishments. In Morris's biography, the reader gets the impression that the accomplishments matter primarily as indicia of his personal gifts.

This all brings me to one final frustration and disappointment with this book that, I believe, underlies many of my other criticisms: It sacrifices considered analysis and perspective on the altar of "readability." Morris clearly believes that to bring his story to life he must be novelistic, or at the very least journalistic, in rendering his characters and their surroundings. This is most evident in his relentless attempts to create "atmosphere." Morris takes the idea far too literally, for the reader is constantly subjected to description of the day's weather conditions and terrain. Moreover, these descriptions are typically melodramatic. A few taken at random (literally letting the book fall open to them) include: Morris's account of TR on McKinley's funeral train, where "16 September dawned so bright that Buffalo's heavy black drapery looked inconsequential, even tawdry, against the overwhelming blueness of lake and sky," (19) or, later, "[p]illars of hemlock and pine rose on either side of [Roosevelt's] train, suffusing it in cool gloom," (32) or setting the scene for Alton B. Parker to be notified of his nomination by the Democrats to run

against TR in 1904, "Once more, fog shrouded Esopus [Parker's New York country estate], and rain fell in sheets on Parker's steep lawns, bleeding mud into the river." (349) (Yes, we know Parker will be walloped by Roosevelt in the election, but "bleeding mud" carries foreshadowing a bit far.) All this is well enough in measured doses, but it begins to feel like Weather-Channel prose as throughout the book Morris seems to use every available contemporary account of clouds, sun, wind, and rain to frame unfolding events. Fortunately the "atmosphere" seems to "thin" a bit as the book progresses; nonetheless, I found myself grateful that Roosevelt lived before the age of satellites; else I feared Morris would subject me to recitations of isobars and low pressure fronts.

Similarly, Morris, who clearly has a firm command of the English language, floods the reader with an array of adjectives that leaves the impression he is trying just a bit *too hard* to show us that history can be as colorful as a novel. Thus, for example, in an otherwise fine account of Roosevelt's first message as president, he describes TR's oratory—in one sentence—as "impassioned," "firm;" and "galvanic." (76) I particularly liked "galvanic," but thought it a bit much. To be fair, Morris himself is having a little fun with Roosevelt in this section, but it nonetheless indicates a certain excessive drive to make his subject colorful. For Morris, more is always better. Indeed, a good editor could probably have cut the volume down to a far more manageable size simply by taking out redundant adjectives and descriptions of the weather.

Despite the prose that occasionally approach the purple end of the spectrum, the reader comes away from the book with a strong sense of the author's impressions of Roosevelt, of his distinctive strengths, his charms, and his comparatively few apparent shortcomings. Indeed, the story feels driven throughout by the author's personal encounter with Roosevelt. The result is a well-rounded portrait of the man, drawn with will-picked anecdotes layered upon a foundation of extensive engagement with primary sources of memoirs and letters. But it is a portrait drawn on a relatively flat, two-dimensional backdrop. Morris engages Roosevelt as a subject with verve, but he merely sketches out the times and places in which he lived as a sort of scrim in front of which the main drama plays out. Overall, the book is entertaining and provides a measure of insight into Roosevelt's personality. In the end, however, it leaves the reader without a firm sense of the man's relation to the larger world around him, (beyond

the immediate sphere of his personality's reach), its impact on him, or his on it. Morris's Roosevelt may have been king, but only of the subjects in direct contact with his willful presence. Morris simply fails to explore the significance of T.R. reign beyond the narrow sphere of politics as ego.