

# The Man in the Arena by Theodore Roosevelt

April 23 marked the anniversary of one of the finest speeches ever given, President Theodore Roosevelt's "Citizenship in a Republic," usually remembered as "The Man in the Arena." During my years teaching high school history, I received an annual reminder of the speech's stunning prescience and relevance in countless roundtable discussions with students. To be sure, Roosevelt can be a polarizing figure and he is not without his faults. But his insights into education, family, and politics are needed now more than ever.

In 1910, the year after he left the presidency, Roosevelt embarked on a whirlwind overseas tour that included everything from visits to major capitals and heads of state to expeditions into African jungles in order to collect specimens for the Smithsonian. On April 23 at the Sorbonne in the Grand Amphitheater of the University of Paris, he delivered a speech the world would simply remember as "The Man in the Arena." The amphitheater was jam-packed with professors and politicians, ministers of state and navy

officers in full regalia, nearly a thousand students and an additional two thousand ticket-holders. The vice rector of the Sorbonne welcomed Roosevelt to the stage and proclaimed that the greatest voice in the New World was about to speak. As he looked at Roosevelt, his final words of introduction epitomized the man: “you unite morality with politics, and right with might.” The address that followed would attempt to do just that.

As Roosevelt mounted the dais, a hush of anticipation spread over the crowd as he launched into an address of perennial significance and astounding breadth. Much like my students, his original listeners must have been struck by Roosevelt’s sheer versatility and wide-ranging intelligence, unpacking topics such as work, education, truth, family, politics, journalism, and community all in one speech. These disparate issues could have easily led to a confusing and disjointed address, but with Roosevelt’s unified worldview built on moral absolutes, there are deep connections between all the topics.

Roosevelt articulated a powerful vision of an education based not just on the acquisition of knowledge, but also on the cultivation of virtue and the importance of action.

Speaking at such a prestigious university, he accurately diagnosed the tendencies of the elites and intellectuals in the crowd, and a message of action and absolute truth was the prescription.

Roosevelt minced no words regarding the dangers of comfort bred by the Progress narrative of the Industrial Age that equated economic progress with moral progress. In his view, modern society “accentuates vices and virtues, energy and ruthlessness, all the good qualities and all the defects of an intense individualism, self-reliant, self-centered, far more conscious of its rights than of its duties, and blind to its own shortcomings.” Any member of the educated elite must fight against the “temptation to pose . . . as a cynic, as the man who has outgrown emotions and beliefs, the man to whom good and evil are one.”

Roosevelt sniffed out the root problem of relativism and the apathy it engenders and, in the most oft-quoted portion of the speech, urged his hearers to get “in the arena.”

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the

man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Roosevelt's call to action was not a call to activism, but a call to embrace challenges, the lessons learned through failure, and the importance of productive engagement for all members of society. "The average man must earn his own livelihood," Roosevelt said, "and he should be trained to feel that he occupies a contemptible position if he does not do so."

For Roosevelt, the role of education in this process is not primarily one of information, but one of human formation in wisdom and virtue. "Education must contain much besides book-learning in order to be really good," he

reminded us, for while “there is need of a sound body, and even more of a sound mind . . . above mind and above body stands character.” Character, or as Roosevelt called it, moral sense, includes things like “self-restraint, self-mastery, common sense, the power of accepting individual responsibility and yet of acting in conjunction with others, courage and resolution.”

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Roosevelt warned of the social and political dangers that arise if the “great and solid qualities” of character are lacking. Without them, “no people can control itself or save itself from being controlled from the outside.” Without them, “education only increases one’s pursuit of self-interest.” Without being “guided and regulated by a moral sense, then the more efficient he is the worse he is, the more dangerous to the body politic.”

As a man of words and deeds, knowledge and virtue, intellect and action, Roosevelt personified his own educational vision. Worthy of imitation is the man who was as much at home on the frontier roping cattle as he was in

the library writing one of his many books.

While work and education are important, Roosevelt argued that the creation and formation of the next generation is paramount, since our children will receive the benefits of our educational and professional efforts. He called us “to remember that the chief of blessings for any nation is that it shall leave its seed to inherit the land. It was the crown of blessings in Biblical times; and it is the crown of blessings now.”

Then, in the passage that generated my liveliest student discussions each year, Roosevelt lamented that “the greatest of all curses is the curse of sterility, and the severest of all condemnations should be that visited upon willful sterility.” Certainly, sterility is a sorrowful tragedy to be treated empathetically, and if the sterility is “through no fault of the society . . . it is a great misfortune.” But, Roosevelt warned, if it is willful sterility, by choice, “then it is not merely a misfortune, it is one of those crimes of ease and self-indulgence, of shrinking from pain and effort and risk, which in the long run Nature punishes more heavily than any other.”

At this point, it was my habit to ask my students what

Roosevelt meant by willful sterility and how that might relate to issues today. Light bulbs went off and genuine exchanges followed when the students made connections to current cultural practices like birth control, abortion, and delaying marriage. Roosevelt's conclusion always sparked further student reflection: "if we, the free people who claim to have emancipated ourselves from the thralldom of wrong and error, bring down on our heads the curse that comes upon the willfully barren, then it will be an idle waste of breath to prattle of our achievements, to boast of all that we have done."

Roosevelt envisioned the family as the life-generating and creative force of society. In it, men and women are molded for the present and future, as it brings humans outside themselves into the deeper satisfactions of sacrifice that develop character. With the fruitful family as the central unit, everyone is "in the arena" actively involved and participating in meaningful tasks of human formation, productively contributing to human society.

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return.

My students saw this as a sobering and intriguing counterbalance to the “change the world” and “make a difference” messages that countless teachers had delivered to them. But by the time they were in my eleventh-grade U.S. History class, they were starting to see that such idealistic visions were nearly impossible to achieve, difficult to measure, and abstract in nature, which easily led to jaded young adults.

By contrast, Roosevelt offered a compelling and concrete vision in which the real way to “change the world” is by bringing new people into it, and raising and molding them for meaningful lives in return. “The man’s foremost duty is owed to himself and his family,” Roosevelt noted, and “he must pull his own weight first, and only after this can his surplus strength be of use to the general public.”

Roosevelt’s understanding of the family informed his view of political community. It is from within the context of the family that men and women are best prepared for citizenship in a republic, which entails a set of duties first, then rights. Roosevelt saw no public life–private life



dichotomy that so many politicians use to excuse their private failings. The human being is a unity that cannot be so easily partitioned into spheres. Therefore, the traits forged in the crucible of the family prepare the way for meaningful service in community based on the same values and choices made first in the context of the home. To function properly, both family and community require ultimate commitments to truth, integrity, and others.

In his distinctive fashion, Roosevelt illustrated the point with a story from his days on the American frontier cattle ranching. One day when Roosevelt was riding the range with a newly hired cowboy, a maverick cow was found on someone else's property, and custom dictated that it should be branded with that property owner's insignia. Instead, the new cowboy tried to brand it with Roosevelt's mark. Roosevelt promptly fired the cowboy, explaining, "If you will steal for me then you will steal from me."

Roosevelt, even alone on the Great Plains, felt the call of virtue, refusing to live by two standards—one public, one private. What a stinging critique of the duplicity of living a hidden, secret life by different standards! He turned the screws further: "Now, the same principle which applies in

private life applies also in public life. If a public man tries to get your vote by saying that he will do something wrong in your interest, you can be absolutely certain that if ever it becomes worth his while he will do something wrong against your interest.”

As Roosevelt concluded, his French audience was overwhelmed by the challenge the most famous man on the planet had presented them. It was not a lofty, idealistic agenda of “change the world” or “dream big” as some celebrity might offer today. Rather, it was a message of everyday action, productive work, and earthy grit, grounded in the great virtues formed in the family and molded by a traditional education.

Within a few short days, copies of the speech had been sent to every schoolteacher in France, and translations appeared in cities across the European continent. The speech quickly became known as simply “The Man in the Arena”—and how fitting, for Roosevelt was the very man he described. What made the speech so powerful was that the ideas put forward were embodied in the speaker: a man powerful in words and deeds thanks to his education in knowledge and virtue, a man married and fruitful

despite great personal family tragedies, and a man who devoted his life to sustaining meaningful political community.

These themes are always relevant, thus making Roosevelt's speech worth returning to, time and again. Thanks to my students, I remember this speech every April and receive fresh inspiration to get "in the arena," and perhaps you will now too.