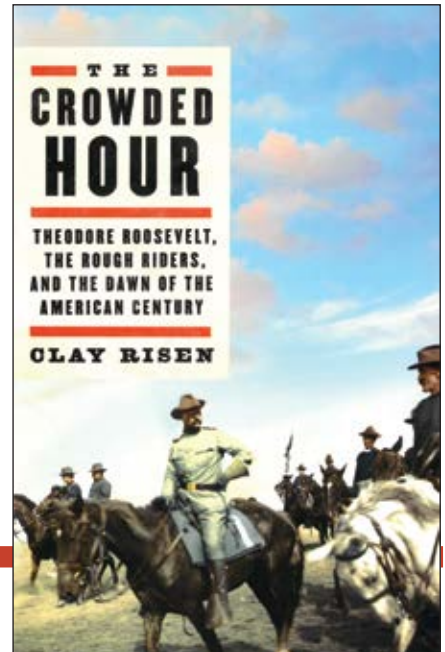


BOOK REVIEW

THE CROWDED HOUR

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, THE ROUGH RIDERS,
AND THE DAWN OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY

BY CLAY RISEN



Writing a non-fiction historical novel that is a page-turner is a rare achievement, but Clay Risen has accomplished this with his new book on Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders just released by Scribner on June 4, 2019.

On February 15, 1898, the 324-foot long warship Maine, one of the Navy's newest and best in its fleet, was blown up in the Havana, Cuba harbor, killing 266 men out of its crew of 374. On April 20, 1898, war was declared on Spain, the colonial ruler of Cuba since the 14th century.

Risen's rendition of TR assembling and commanding his Rough Riders, 1,000-strong, is riveting as the reader learns about the underlying causes of the Spanish-American War fought in both Cuba and the Philippines which ended 384 years of Spanish Colonial rule. We learn how Roosevelt, then assistant secretary of the Navy, negotiated with the War Department to recruit a regiment of 1,000 volunteer troops to be named the first United States Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, and thence to assemble, equip and train them near San Antonio, Texas, on an accelerated schedule. Thereafter he led them into battle in a Caribbean climate that harbored battle-hardened trained Spanish soldiers and gorilla snipers; malaria, yellow fever, and dysentery; daily rainstorms and humid temperatures well over 100 degrees; brutal battlefield conditions with limited food, fresh water, ammunitions, and medical support; carnivorous land crabs over a foot in diameter and aggressive vultures—both of which attacked corpses immediately after death—and poisonous snakes, tarantulas, and spiders the size of your hand.

Theodore Roosevelt had been seeking a battlefield assignment for years after his father had paid a volunteer to take his place in the Union Army during the Civil War (an accepted

custom at the time). It had been a scar on TR's conscience for decades. His Lieutenant Colonel's commission on May 7, 1898 required him to recruit volunteers for the war, including 1,000 volunteers to form a regiment of his own. He reached into his contacts throughout the West and into the wealthy families of New England. All total, 127,798 men applied, and 29,521 were accepted to make up the eight brigades for the war. The citizen-soldiers were from the best eastern colleges, social and professional ranks, Wall Street bankers and stockbrokers, football and tennis players, cowboys, guides and hunters, woodsmen, factory workers, miners and prospectors, plantation owners, ranchers and farmers, Indians and African-Americans. They represented all of America's diversity, proud to serve an honorable cause. The golden age of the Wild West and frontier America had passed, but its romanticism and mythology lingered. Coming to the aid of beleaguered Cuban rebels who had been fighting Spanish oppression for years after 384 years of a colonial yoke fulfilled the American ideal of liberty for the beleaguered, equality and idealism embodied in a romantic citizen-soldier. To quote the author, "The country was drunk on its feelings of national pride." (page 214)

After training for three weeks at Fort Sam Houston outside San Antonio, Texas, the regiment arrived at Tampa, Florida, on June 2 for deployment to Cuba. Eleven days later, 16,987 men, 2,295 horses and mules, 16 pieces of artillery and 10 million pounds of rations were loaded onto 31 transport vessel ships departing on June 13, 1898 for Cuba. From poor planning by the War Department, 7,000 troops were left behind in Tampa due to lack of sufficient ships, to form the second wave when transport was available. They sailed around the

eastern end of Cuba and Guantanamo Bay and off-loaded at a half-moon beach called Daiquiri, east of Santiago on June 23, 1898, and the war began.

Risen's vivid descriptions of the battle are captivating, taken from first-hand accounts in diaries and letters plus 89 embedded reporters and war correspondents and 11 foreign observers reporting directly from the battle scene. You can almost hear the Spanish bullets flying, making a high-pitched PHEWWWW, like the hissing of telephone lines, from their M1893 Mausers developed for the Spanish army by a German weapons manufacturer. They make a low, flat "chug" when a bullet hits a man's body at a velocity of 300 feet per second. These rifles were superior to the low-velocity America Remington or Krag-Jorgensen carbines that frequently jammed or misfired. Risen's descriptions put you right in the center of the action as the volunteer Rough Riders struggled to maintain momentum moving up the steep, muddy terrain of Kettle and San Juan Hills that afforded little cover from menacing enemy fire.

Communications and coordination with the surrounding eight brigades and 30,000 troops was non-existent due to poor strategic planning by commander Major General William R. Shafter. Shafter made no attempt in advance to assess the strength of the Spanish soldiers, their field positions or armament. Most of the heavy mortars, cannons, and Gatling guns were left behind in Tampa to make room for more troops being transported to the front. The same held for field hospitals and critical medical equipment, horses and wagons to transport the dead and wounded, cavalry horses, etc. Food, fresh water and sanitary needs, moreover, were unaccounted for in troop support. America hadn't maintained a regular Army since the end of the Civil War, limiting it to 28,000 men. The mindset in preparing for war was of the 19th century, even using some Civil War equipment and weapons. It was organized on paper, but its general officers were a few former Civil War generals, and most were West Point graduates with no field experience. America wasn't equipped or trained to fight a war, abandoning its newly recruited and untrained volunteer troops under the direction of its regimental officers left to fend for themselves in combat with the vague instructions to capture Santiago, the other side of San Juan Hill.

After 25 days of fighting and laying siege to Santiago, 13,000 Spanish troops surrendered on July 17, 1898, their naval fleet having been destroyed by the U.S. blockade when they tried to escape Santiago Harbor. Risen's descriptions of repeated acts of heroism and death amidst the fighting by the untrained and unseasoned volunteers is a remarkable testament to their patriotic and selfless bravery. Heroism was exemplary throughout the diversity of troops. Roosevelt's bravery won him the Medal of Honor, bestowed posthumously in 2001. The author's detailed descriptions of the battle, however, are difficult to follow due to the lack of illustrative field maps. At the

beginning of the book, two small-scale maps illustrate Cuba, and the general battle area around Santiago, Cuba. What is really needed to accompany the brilliantly detailed description of the battle area are large-scale maps of the immediate area described to grasp the magnitude, dynamics and character of each battle scene.

The book describes a time America stepped onto the world stage to defend its nationalistic ideals. "At a time when regional, political, racial and class differences threatened to rip the country apart," (page 283) the author concluded the Rough Riders deployed in the name of the national interest and ideals and gave this generation of Americans a new sense of purpose and unity to help heal the nation's differences. Confident, idealistic American warriors, ready to take on a world empire for the sake of humanitarianism and human rights, freeing starving, hopelessly oppressed people on our southern doorsteps to define American values, not American interests. This became a template for American foreign powers in the 20th century. Intervene under the guise of sugarcoated idealism, and ask questions later to overthrow tyranny, ignoring nuanced and inconvenient questions about a country's politics, demographics, culture, and how it should thereafter be governed, by whom, and to what end. Many of the journalists' accounts of the Santiago campaign could easily describe campaigns in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan over recent decades.

If you think you've read everything significant on TR's life and career, this page-turner is a must-read for students of TR's strenuous life. ■

The golden age of the Wild West and frontier America had passed, but its romanticism and mythology lingered. Coming to the aid of beleaguered Cuban rebels who had been fighting Spanish oppression for years after 384 years of a colonial yoke fulfilled the American ideal of liberty for the beleaguered, equality and idealism embodied in a romantic citizen-soldier.

