Wars of the Roosevelts: The Ruthless Rise of America's Greatest Political Family

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Americans have a deep-rooted fascination with family sagas. Reality shows, TV series, popular movies, musical comedies, and novels have made extensive use of the family as a literary topos: family ties, indeed, tend to exalt affection as well as rivalry, raise expectations and spawn disillusionment, and often hang on a difficult trade-off between rigidly institutionalized social norms and longing for individual freedom. Luckily for them, American politics has had plenty of glamorous and controversial examples of powerful genealogies fully charged by these intrinsic tensions. The Kennedys, the Clintons, the Bushes are but a few of the most blatant illustrations. None of them, however, has generated the same level of public interest and academic research as the Roosevelt dynasty has done. Throughout the 20th century, people carrying the Roosevelt bloodline have largely reshaped American and world politics, and they have profoundly influenced American culture and society as well. So broad and long-lasting has been their legacy that a recent seven-part documentary on the three leading Roosevelts, Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor, aired on consecutive nights by PBS, gathered an audience of more than 33 million people, with an average of 9.2 million viewers per episode, making it one of the most successful TV series of the last 20 years.

No wonder then that renowned author William J. Mann has been able to publish an impressive 600-page volume scoping out the secrets, antagonisms, and feuds that characterized the story of the Roosevelt family from their entry into the national political arena with Theodore at the end of the 19th century. In *The Wars of the Roosevelts*, Mann offers an intimate account of this semi-royal family, and through an original approach that combines biography with social and cultural history, he gives the reader some fresh insights into the personal relationships of the most prominent members of this clan. Drawing on a set of previously unexplored sources, Mann sheds new light on the almost Machiavellian style adopted by those Roosevelts who looked for both public prominence and political power. In fact, Mann's main argument is that the family that gave the United States two presidents, one acclaimed first lady and a plethora of government officials, congressmen, businessmen, journalists, economists, intellectuals, bohemians, and writers has rarely acted in harmony or in a concerted way. Rather, envy, jealousy, competition, unscrupulous ambition, political shrewdness, and unwavering determination seem to have been the rule, smashing any sense of family allegiance and at times even bordering on wickedness.

Mann starts his account with the rising star of Theodore Roosevelt. In his quest to gain national prominence, the Teddy Roosevelt depicted by Mann is a bulldozer. Teddy wiped out of his way any obstacle to his personal fulfillment, any impediment to his political career. Rigorous physical training tamed infantile asthma, the wilderness of North Dakota assuaged personal grief, low-profile appointments forged an intransigent and reformative public image, the war in Cuba wrapped his persona into a heroic aura, and finally the vice presidency opened the doors to the highest office of the country. Teddy left almost no space for contingency: everything he did in his life apparently had a specific role and a specific place in the long road to the White House he paved for himself. Hence, a free-spirited brother whose character wasn't compatible with this design, whose lifestyle may have sparked off a huge scandal at any time, whose personal behaviors did not live up to the expectations of an upper-class, Victorian-age family, was just another hurdle that Teddy needed to overcome. Mann depicts very well Teddy's strategy to isolate his brother Elliot, who was put under all sorts of direct and indirect pressure, committed for treatment, deprived of financial resources and affective strongholds, and de facto condemned to a dishonored death. In doing so, as Mann reveals, Theodore was frantically busy in preventing one particular secret from falling into the public domain: Elliot had had an illegitimate son, named after him, whose existence might have spelled the premature end of Theodore's political career. Elliot Roosevelt Mann's story then, which Mann recounts with passion, runs in parallel with that of the Roosevelts. It is a bittersweet story perfectly embodying the American dream: Elliot's illegitimate son was raised by his mother, who promised Teddy in a dramatic encounter to never reveal the identity of her son, got a very basic education and yet successfully climbed the social ladder, secured a steady job for himself, and raised a normal, middle-class family. The triumph of this self-made man, however, is overlain with a deep sense of injustice, exclusion, and wasted opportunities, for Elliot Mann had to witness only at long distance his half-sister progressively transforming herself into the first lady of the world.

After the ruthless clash between Teddy and Elliot is over, Mann brings to the fore the rivalry between Ted, Theodore's favorite son, and an increasingly popular distant cousin coming from the far less rich and prestigious Hyde Park branch of the family, Franklin. Pushed by his mother and blessed by an innate political talent, FDR followed smoothly in Teddy's footsteps, while Ted struggled to live up to the expectations hanging on him. In the background, Mann places the competition between Alice, Theodore's first daughter, and Eleanor, Theodore's niece, his brother Elliot's daughter and, more importantly, FDR's wife. Reliant on her father's prestige, Alice tried tirelessly to conquer Washington, by establishing contacts with key officials, enhancing her personal network, and strengthening her backdoor politics. But it was the dramatic transformation of a previously gloomy, hesitant Eleanor that flabbergasted most people, both within and outside of the family. With her progressive vision, reformative spirit, humanitarian tendency, and remarkable political and communication skills she completely revolutionized the role of the first lady. In addition, as Mann notes, her independent spirit allowed her to break social norms and fully overcome the troubles of living with an unfaithful husband too.

Through the eyes of a couple of generations of Roosevelts, Mann is able to read the changing nature of American politics and society, the abandonment of Victorian impositions and limits, and the progressive consolidation of democratic capitalism, individual freedom, and international interdependence. In this regard, Franklin and Eleanor emerge as the most adaptive among the Roosevelts, and therefore the most successful, whereas borderline characters as Kermit (Theodore's son), Dick (Kermit's son), or Jimmie (FDR's nephew) are depicted as perennial outsiders. Since their extravagant and non-conformist lifestyle constantly risked bringing shame on the family name, these characters faced marginalization and isolation, a price they paid for to ensure the continued presence in the spotlight of more successful family members.

From a historiographical point of view, Mann's volume does not offer anything really innovative. Theodore is still regarded as the greatest progressive reformer of his era; FDR is still the juggling politician, the traitor to his class, strong as a lion and sly as a fox; Eleanor is still the liberal soul bridging them. A few points that Mann raises are, however, slightly misleading. Eleanor's relationship with her children does not easily fit the paradigm of the intestine, familiar wars that Mann proposes, and as a consequence it is narrated in a rather

dismissive way. Eleanor did try many times to involve her offspring in her activities, and many other times they spurred her into action. For instance, she hosted a very popular radio show along with her son Elliot, who also helped her to produce a high-profile TV show in the 1950s; Anna accompanied her and her husband for most of the 1932 electoral campaign; her son James acted as a sort of liaison officer between her and the Kennedy family in the early 1960s.

In addition, Mann ends his story by referring to a 1991 formal dinner that was, according to him and his sources, the first reunion 'to include both members of the Oyster Bay and Hyde Park branches'. Unbeknown to most, however, the two branches of the family had already signed their informal peace treaty almost a decade before in a much more neutral terrain than Oyster Bay, in precisely the Dutch southwestern province of Zeeland where the story of the whole family began back in the mid-17th century. In 1982, representatives from the two branches of the family and from the Theodore Roosevelt Association and the New York-based Roosevelt Institute gathered in Middleburg to open a research center which promoted the name of the family in Europe, further scrutinized its legacy in transatlantic relations, and honored some of its most cherished values by presenting a biennial international award named after FDR's Four Freedoms idea. Since then the Roosevelt Study Center, nowadays the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, has kept promoting research on, and exploring the linchpins of, what can be considered as a truly *Rooseveltian* century. Given the extent of this enduring and global interest in the Roosevelts, Mann's contribution is surely of great value, especially for those who want to delve deeper into their personas and the many overlaps between their public achievements and private struggles.

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