



The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism

Doris Kearns Goodwin

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Doris Kearns Goodwin, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and author of *Team of Rivals*, captures the Progressive Era through the story of the broken friendship between Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, culminating in their running against one another for president in 1912.

The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism Details

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From Reader Review The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism for online ebook

Steven Z. says

One of the most important friendships in American History was the relationship between Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. They had a strong bond that lasted for years and then over a short period of time their friendship began to sour resulting in a schism in the Republican Party that caused them to lose the presidential election of 1912 to the Democrat, Woodrow Wilson. Many historians have reached numerous conclusions as to why Teddy and Will went from being the best of friends to political enemies. In her new book, **THE BULLY PULPIT: THEODORE ROOSEVELT, WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT, AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF JOURNALISM**, Pulitzer Prize winning historian, Doris Kearns Goodwin goes beyond the issue of friendship between Roosevelt and Taft and has written three books in one that she masterfully integrates as she presents her narrative. First, the reader is offered a detailed biography of Theodore Roosevelt, next we are exposed to detailed biography of William Howard Taft, and lastly, and most importantly Goodwin explores the world of investigative journalism, what Roosevelt eventually referred to as the “muckrakers,” primarily through a history of McClure’s Magazine and their well known stable of journalists. Goodwin does a remarkable job synthesizing a vast amount of material as she merges the lives of S.S. McClure, Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker, William Allen White, Lincoln Steffens, and others throughout her narrative. The main strength of the book is her argument that it was the influence of these investigative journalists that fostered the Progressive reform era at the turn of the twentieth century. She argues further that Roosevelt’s colorful personality and drive allowed him to develop reciprocal relationships with these writers that fostered public pressure on a small group of conservative Senate Republicans that brought about the reforms of the Roosevelt era. Goodwin writes, “this generation of gifted reporters ushered in a new generation of investigative reporting that allowed Theodore Roosevelt to turn the presidency into the ‘bully pulpit’ to achieve reform.” (xiii) On the other hand, Taft’s personality and laid back approach to politics did not allow him to achieve the same type of working relationships with the press and he lost the ability to codify and expand upon Roosevelt’s legacy, “underscoring the pivotal importance of the ‘bully pulpit’ in presidential leadership.” (xiv) In the background, Goodwin tells the story of the friendship between these two men and why it did not survive the political theater of the day.

The narrative begins with the standard biographical information of both men. In terms of Roosevelt there is nothing that is really new as this story has been well mined by the likes of Kathleen Dalton, Edmund Morris, Henry Pringle and others. The information on Taft is more interesting in that fewer biographies of the twenty-seventh president have been written. In terms of Goodwin’s thesis what is important at the outset is how she compares the personality traits of the two men as they mature as individuals and politicians. We learn that as a child Roosevelt was a fragile and sickly and developed “a fierce determination to escape an invalid’s fate [that] led him to transform his body and timid demeanor through strenuous work. Taft, on the other hand, blessed from birth with robust health, would allow his physical strength and energy to gradually dissipate over the years into a state of obesity.” (34) At Harvard, Roosevelt was a “slender young man with side-whiskers, eyeglasses, and bright red cheeks. While Taft’s sturdy physique, genial disposition, and emphatic manner won immediate popularity at Yale.” (42) On the one hand was an individual who suffered from a inferiority complex who would work his entire life striving for superiority to overcome this self-perception, while Taft developed into a secure person who he was self-aware and accepted his limitations. According to Goodwin, these traits explain a great deal about the course of their careers and their successes and failures.

Goodwin's frequent verbatim entries into her narrative allow the reader to feel as if they are experiencing life with Roosevelt and Taft. Both men had the good fortune of growing up as favored children in close knit families. Where Taft "developed an accommodating disposition to please a giving father who cajoled him to do better," Roosevelt "forever idolized a dead father who cajoled him to do more and do better." (48) The correspondence that Goodwin includes between these sons and their fathers provide interesting insights into their formative years and development of their personalities. Roosevelt learned early on in his career as a New York State Assemblyman the value of the press as he sought a journalistic alliance when he went after a corrupt judge who was a puppet of financier Jay Gould, and learned about poverty from touring tenements with Samuel Gompers. The assembly and his stint as New York City Police Commissioner provided Roosevelt with an important education, as opposed to Taft who shunned the very spotlight that the future Rough Rider craved. Taft favored to fight his battles from the inside, trusting logic, reason, and facts. Taft always tried to avoid controversy, and would hardly ever compromise his principles as he tried to balance the rights of labor with the rights of capital as a superior court judge.

As both men evolved in their careers Goodwin relates the deeply personal details of their personal lives. Goodwin does a nice job exploring Roosevelt's emotional trauma whether dealing with the deaths of his father, mother, or his first wife Alice. Goodwin provides intimate details reflecting a side of Roosevelt that was not open to the public. His "recourtship" and marriage of his childhood friend, Edith Carow is especially enlightening as Roosevelt had pledged never to remarry, and reflect the author's insights and handling of their rekindled relationship, a topic that seems missing from most biographies of Roosevelt. For Taft, the love of his life was Nellie Herron who after their marriage would be the driving force behind her husband's career. At each level ranging from his role as Solicitor-General, a judgeship on the Federal 6th Circuit District Court, Governor-Generalship of the Philippines, as Secretary of War and then his presidential campaigns, Nellie was his most trusted advisor and confidante. Later, when she suffers a stroke and is incapacitated, Taft will make a series of mistakes that greatly affect his career.

As Goodwin breezes along with the narrative through Roosevelt's presidency, coverage is not equally distributed. The emphasis of the first half of the book is on Roosevelt, followed by significant sections on investigative journalists, and the remainder on Taft. From my perspective I would have liked more emphasis to have been placed on the journalistic component of the story because Goodwin brings a great detail of refreshing new material to the fore. Her discussion of S.S. McClure, the founder of the magazine of that name is wonderful. Throughout the book the reader is presented with an egomaniac, who suffers from manic-depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, but despite these "limitations," the man is a literary genius. McClure travels the world to find writers for his new publication with emphasis on the literary, but also investigative articles that will propel a new generation of writers to the American reading public that will foster careers allowing them entrance into the corridors of power, particularly that of Theodore Roosevelt, and engender a tremendous amount of influence as they prepare articles that support major legislative reforms. The private lives of Tarbell, Baker, Steffens and White are chronicled as well as their personal relationship which created a family-like atmosphere at McClure's. Ida Tarbell's research and writings dealing with trusts, especially John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil, and examination of the tariff structure in the United States are thoughtful and set the stage for Roosevelt's reputation as a trust buster and a proponent of lower tariffs. John Stannard Baker's investigation into labor practices and political corruption are the basis for labor legislation and a movement to reform representative democracy. Lincoln Steffens' *SHAME OF THE CITIES* educates the American public about political bossism and corruption on the state and local level. William Allen White served as Roosevelt's eyes and ears in the Midwest from his perch as editor of the Emporia Gazette headquartered in the small town of Emporia, Kansas. Lastly, Upton Sinclair, who was not part of the McClure's team, novel, *THE JUNGLE* sent a message to congress about conditions in the meat-packing industry that culminated in the creation of the Food and Drug Administration and regulation of the meat-packing industry, and Jacob Riis, also not part of the McClure's family educated Roosevelt on the role of poverty in the United States. In all cases Roosevelt established a relationship with

these journalists, inviting them to the White House, sharing speeches with them in advance, and gaining their confidence that he proof read some of their articles. This relationship, along with the publicity that McClure's and other magazines engendered created a climate whereby the Republican conservatives in the Senate who were tied to different industrial trusts eventually had to compromise and give in. As a result Goodwin's conclusion as to the historical importance of this group of writers cannot be underestimated.

Much of the book is focused on domestic issues but certain important foreign policy problems receive coverage. The traditional story of the Spanish-American War and Roosevelt's role are related and its affect on the Rough Rider's growing political profile. As a result of the war the United States acquired control of the Philippines and it is here that Taft reenters the picture as Governor-General of the archipelago. It is at this juncture of his career that Taft is happiest. He enjoys the everyday intricacies of governing and he treats the Filipino people as fairly as possible when compared to the imperialists in the United States. It is interesting to compare Taft's views on race with that of the social Darwinists views of Roosevelt. Once he is recalled by Roosevelt, who succeeded to the presidency following the McKinley assassination, Taft delays his departure as long as he can until he takes over as Secretary of War. The other major foreign policy issue that the Roosevelt administration is known for is the building of the Panama Canal, or as Roosevelt stated, "I stole it!" Here Goodwin offers a perfunctory approach, but there is little to add to David McCullough's **THE PATHWAY BETWEEN THE SEAS**.

The best way to compare how Roosevelt and Taft approached reform and used the levers of presidential power is to compare a few of the many problems that Goodwin explores in depth. The best place to begin is to develop a definition of what progressive reform was in the eyes of Roosevelt which Goodwin does not do. For Roosevelt all trusts were not bad, and conservation was not radical environmentalism. In Robert Wiebe's **BUSINESS AND REFORM AND THE SEARCH FOR ORDER** we learn that Roosevelt believed in the concept of "efficiency." If a trust was deemed to be efficient and benefited the American people and they abided by certain government strictures, Roosevelt saw no reason to go after them. As far as conservation, Roosevelt wanted to conserve America's land and resources for future generations, but he also allowed their development, if done in a practical manner, and benefited society as a whole. It is interesting that most progressives were not wide eyed radicals, but mostly middle class individuals who wanted to grow the American economy for the benefit of all. In examining Roosevelt's anti-trust suit against the Northern Securities Company, the Beef Trust, and Standard Oil, we see an executive who uses the levers of power and the publicity generated by his investigative journalist compatriots. In gaining passage of his reform program which turned the 59th Congress into one of the most productive in American history Roosevelt had to overcome the opposition of a small group of Republican conservative senators who could block any legislation, sound familiar! Roosevelt fed information to Ray Stannard Baker who wrote a six part series for McClure's, entitled, "The Railroads on Trial." Goodwin provides interesting excerpts of their correspondence and the information that passed between the two was essential in creating a bill to set maximum rates railroad companies could charge. After wheeling and dealing, the Hepburn Act emerged that allowed the Interstate Commerce Commission to set maximum rates. After reading **THE JUNGLE** by Upton Sinclair, Roosevelt sent investigators to Chicago, which in the end resulted in the Meat Inspection Act. Finally, Roosevelt met with Mark Sullivan the author of a series of articles for Collier's Magazine that described the contents of the food Americans consumed as well as industrial practices in their preparation, the result was the Pure Food and Drug Act. As in most cases, Roosevelt would use the "bully pulpit" to gain public support for his reform legislation. As Goodwin describes further, it was not uncommon for the president to travel across the country by railroad to educate the American public and gain their support.

In comparing Roosevelt's approach with that of Taft after he assumed the presidency there are two glaring examples that reflect poorly on the Ohio native. The tariff issue has dogged most presidents throughout American history. Taft was seen as a conservative Republican who was tied to eastern corporate interests.

Taft himself wanted to lower the tariff on certain items and make it easier for the Philippines to export goods to the United States. Taft's approach was to gain support for legislation through personal relationships rather than "the big stick through the press." During the 1908 presidential campaign Taft promised tariff reform. When Ida Tarbell wrote a series of articles explaining how high tariffs plagued the poor Taft was in a political corner. Much like President Obama he had recalcitrant conservatives to deal with, particularly Speaker of the House Joseph Cannon. Taft feeling he had no choice decided to support Cannon as he believed it would be very difficult to oust him from the Speaker's chair. The Payne-Aldrich Tariff that emerged did little to satisfy Republican insurgents who had enough with the conservative minority in Congress. If that was not bad enough Taft's public declaration after meeting with Cannon that the "conservative leadership's promise to prepare an honest and thorough revision of the tariff" made him optimistic for the future reflected how weak he appeared. "Perhaps it was inevitable that Taft's temperament-his aversion to dissension and preference for personal persuasion-would ultimately lead him to work within the system rather than mobilize external pressure from the "bully pulpit." (588)

Another example of Taft's political implosion in relation to his relationship with Roosevelt took place while the former president was traveling in Africa. Gifford Pinchot, the Director of the Forest Service was a close friend of Roosevelt and shared his conservation views. When Taft became president he replaced John Garfield as Secretary of the Interior with Richard Ballinger. The first dust up occurred because when Roosevelt left the White House he had withdrawn 1.5 million acres of federal land along sixteen rivers in western states to prevent corporate takeovers of the land as the railroad and oil industry had done. Upon taking office, Ballinger who was a former corporate lawyer restored the land to the public domain leading Pinchot to publicly condemn the action that he felt would result in the creation of a "waterpower trust." Next, Ballinger allowed a Seattle syndicate access to 5000 acres of Alaskan land for development. It turned out that the spokesperson for the syndicate was tied to coal interests and before he was appointed as Interior Secretary Ballinger had been their legal counsel. Goodwin explores this situation in her usual detail and points out that Ballinger may have done nothing wrong, but insurgents led by Pinchot never forgave Taft for firing John Garfield and a political scandal ensued culminating in a nasty congressional investigation. Whether this was a true scandal is irrelevant because of the way Taft handled it. When Louis Brandeis the attorney for the Pinchot forces learned that certain documents were predicated by the Attorney General all was lost. Taft should have fired Ballinger, but instead kept him on even after the investigation. Goodwin is correct in stating, "The bitter struggle had consumed the attention of the country for more than a year. Reformers' faith in the president, already weakened by the tariff struggle, had plummeted." (627) Once Roosevelt was brought up to date by Pinchot as to what had occurred the Roosevelt-Taft relationship was at the tipping point. What would push it over the edge was the Taft administration's filing of an anti-trust suit against U.S. Steel. With Roosevelt's return to the United States and his embankment on a sixteen week tour of the west, a progressive-conservative split in the Republican Party was at hand.

The U.S. Steel issue angered Roosevelt because during the Panic of 1907 it was the work of J.P. Morgan in agreement with the then president that if Morgan assisted the government his company would not be the target of an anti-trust suit. This led to accusations and counter accusations headlined in newspapers across the United States between Roosevelt and Taft forces. By 1912 the Republican Party rupture was complete. Goodwin provides in depth analysis and details of the split that led Roosevelt to challenge Taft for the Republican nomination, and failing that, forming the Bull Moose Party that led to the election of Woodrow Wilson. The campaign was extremely nasty and one could never imagine that the two former presidents would ever rekindle their relationship. Goodwin does their relationship justice as she describes the emotional reunion before Roosevelt's death. In 1921, President Harding nominated Taft as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, a position he longed for his entire career.

Goodwin's final analysis of their Roosevelt-Taft relationship is accurate. When she states in closing that the

“two men had strikingly different temperaments [but] their opposing qualities actually proved complimentary, allowing them to forge a powerful camaraderie and rare collaboration” that during Roosevelt’s presidency brought progressive reform to the nation. Under Taft, that legacy may seem to have been tarnished, but there were many progressive reforms that seem to have slipped past the public’s awareness. After reading Goodwin’s encyclopedic narrative my opinion of Roosevelt remains the same, a man driven by a large ego who was responding to unconscious needs that revert back to his earlier life. For Taft my view has changed; he was exceptionally competent in many areas, and though limited by his own personality and loyalty to what he perceived to be constitutionally correct emerges as the larger man (not physically!) than his lifelong friend. Goodwin has mined an enormous amount of material as she has done in all her books. If you are interested in exploring an age in American history that is rich in substance and contains many interesting characters then sit back and enjoy Goodwin’s latest work.

Blaine DeSantis says

I am done! I started this book way back in March and 7 months later I closed the cover on this book for the last time. Why did it take so long? Well, this is truly a weighty book with lots to digest and lots of really small type to navigate. It is a book that, in my opinion, one needs time to reflect upon and digest all that was going on over 100 years ago. So many similarities to today and such wonderful characters.

The bigger issue is where to begin in this review? The writing – superb but a bit long. The characters – fascinating and yet flawed. The history – so wonderful to peel away some of the mystique that characterizes Teddy Roosevelt. The muckraking press – a lot like today, when the press makes itself part of the story instead of reporting the story. A thorough review would last thousands of words and bore everyone, I am sure.

Let’s start with a very well researched book that contains thousands of quotes. I cannot complain about the authors writing style, but I do think it could have been about 200 pages shorter and had the same effect. Goodwin writes as an academic which does not make for the easiest reading. For me the reader has to keep plugging away and when you do so you are rewarded with a lot of interesting history and you truly get a feeling for the time period.

Roosevelt – a fine US President but with an ego 10 miles long. A man who had to remake himself in order to try and run for President and challenge Taft in 1912. I truly believe that much of the new Roosevelt was an act, and when Goodwin points out that Teddy misread what the Democrats would do in 1912 you see the folly of his 3rd party run. He never expected the Democrats to run a Progressive Candidate like Woodrow Wilson since he says that if he had known that he would never have started the 3rd party. Teddy is an interesting character and there is a lot to like about him (and I think Goodwin really promotes Teddy), the later-years Teddy is not a person that comes across as genuine and instead it is all Teddy, Teddy, Teddy, as he personally destroyed the relationship with Taft.

Taft, on the other hand, comes across as a friendly and wonderful person. Maybe better suited to be 2nd in command, but nonetheless a President who has his principles and gets things done the proper way – no need for executive orders, he promoted bipartisanship and got things done the proper Constitutional way and actually accomplished a lot more than Teddy in terms of breaking up the Trusts and in Land and Water Conservation. But he did it his way and that upset Teddy and his supporters still in the government when Taft was President.

The muckraking press – very important. Teddy used them and they used Teddy. Some of the stories of McClure’s magazine are wonderful and the writers did a great job in exposing the problems in America. But they had an agenda – sound familiar?? After Teddy returned from Africa they almost appeared to goad him into challenging Taft who just was not Progressive enough for the muckrakers. I got a bad feeling about

them, however I think that the author does not share that feeling. By the way, why is it always OK if the liberal press pushes and promotes a point of view or candidate, but it is not the same when the conservative press does that same thing??

Who caused many of the later-life issues between Taft and Teddy? Gifford Pinchot who seems like a real jerk since he did not like the new Secretary of the Interior and kept lying and pushing problems with his friends in the Progressive press (muckrakers), along with a Forestry official named Glavis who outright lied to cause problems. Add the press to this who goaded Teddy, and seemed to truly assist his campaign instead of reporting on matters and you get a story of a friendship gone bad, a GOP that was permanently divided and a book that is truly fascinating.

I recommend this to readers who enjoy US history, but be prepared for a lengthy reading time. The first 250 pages and the final 250 pages are outstanding, but it is those middle 250 that dragged for me. And finally I can say that I have become a fan of William Howard Taft – a great administrator, President, person and judge.

Shawn says

Doris Kearns Goodwin is my favorite writing historian. In fact, she is one of my favorite writers period. Her intense love of detail and research flow through every piece of work she writes. However, what truly captures you, as a reader, is her writing style, which pulls you into the scene. She expertly weaves quotes in with her language seemlessly to provide a fully rich flow to her books.

This is one of her best. She does a lot in this book. We get a good history on the political lives of Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft. She shows us of their friendship and how it withered over the years. But she does more. She shows us about the progressive nature of reform that was happening in politics, at the time. And she shows us the importance and influence of four writers who all wrote for McClure. This was the most fascinating part of the book, how Theodore Roosevelt had such a working relationship with these journalists, like nothing before or since. And how this cultivated relationship helped form his Presidency the progressive cause. A great angle to take. Absolutely loved it.

Kristina says

If Howard Taft and Teddy Roosevelt were alive today, they'd be appalled at the state of America and the Republican Party. Reading *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism* by Doris Kearns Goodwin has been a treat. It's also a reminder of how bad things used to be and yet how much *better* they were. The political and economic similarities between then and now are astonishing.

Goodwin's wonderful book follows the life of two Republican presidents from their birth until their deaths. As a historian, she provides incredible detail of the politics of the time and as a writer, she flawlessly intertwines historical facts while bringing the lives of these two men and many other historical figures to life. Goodwin is a genius. She brings history alive by telling the lives of Taft and Roosevelt, their smart wives, and the journalists who helped bring about social change. I will not be able to do this book justice with this book review, and I will not try. It's wonderful—go read it. It is very long, but the pages fly by because of Goodwin's talent for writing a good story.

The main story of this book is the enduring friendship between Taft and Roosevelt, two men who share the same concern for the rights of workers, social justice and the role of government in helping to create a sustainable society. They differed in their temperament: Roosevelt is a fighter, impetuous, and has a big personality. Taft is more thoughtful, deliberate, and less self-assured. Together, their individual traits brought out the best in each other and they governed America successfully. There are two tragedies of the book: Nellie Taft's stroke and the split between Taft and Roosevelt. Nellie's stroke came soon after her husband ascended to the presidency, an ambition she had for him. Without her thoughtful voice and guidance, Taft faltered. When Roosevelt and Taft split and became enemies (I think this is due more to Roosevelt's giant ego and rush to judge his old friend than anything Taft did), it tore apart the Republican party and halted progress within the party.

The similarities between now and then are amazing. The Republican party of the late 19th and early 20th century is much more progressive than even today's Democratic party (bypassing the Dems on progressivism isn't too difficult these days). Taft and Roosevelt and other progressive Republicans were very concerned about social justice, the rights of working men and women, and giving women the vote. Compare that with today's GOP. Taft and Roosevelt would be horrified. The same concerns of today (the growing divide between the haves and have-nots, the impact of industry on the environment, overly large and powerful corporations and too much money in the political process) were the concerns of the Republican party and the American people. What is striking to me is that the public then seemed more engaged and aware of the facts and the level of discourse was smarter and more evolved. People read newspapers and magazines and some of these investigative articles were very long. The politicians were smarter and trusted the voting public to be smarter. They didn't patronize them or try to win votes by bowing with them or giving nonsense speeches repeating the same tired old lines. Their speeches conveyed actual facts and policies along with high-minded rhetoric. Now think about the latest speech President Trump gave—or his latest tweet. It doesn't take an 800 paged book for me to know that our political discourse is lacking in intelligence, substance and civility, but it is shocking to read the book and see the difference between then and now.

Anyone keeping abreast of today's political climate and worried about America's future should read this book. It helps put the awfulness of *now* into perspective. And because it's rare to hear a Republican speak about conservation in a positive way, I'm going to quote Roosevelt's eloquence on keeping the wilderness wild: "There is nothing more practical, in the end, than the preservation of beauty, than the preservation of anything that appeals to the higher emotions in mankind" (352). Roosevelt felt that regulating the industrial use of forests and land was smart because they provided a continuous supply of timber, grass and water that would foster the growth of prosperous communities. Wait—you can conserve the environment *and* maintain economic growth? That's crazy, Mr. President!

The Bully Pulpit is a wonderful book. It's extremely well-written and is paced better and much more of a page-turner than some of the latest fiction I've read. It's a bit of a time commitment, but it's well worth your time. Put down whatever else you're reading and start this!

Brina says

Doris Kearns Goodwin is one of this country's master historians, so it is always a treat to read her books. In this tome, she compares and contrasts how the muckraking journalists influenced the Roosevelt and Taft

presidencies. From a historical perspective, I get exhilarated by her writing to learn about the cast of characters and important issues of the day. I was captivated by Alice Roosevelt, leading me to read her biography later in the spring. I would think that originally Goodwin would have liked to write just on Roosevelt; however, much has been penned about him already, and she did not have the requisite information to fill an entire book. Thus, she chose President Taft, a lesser known, yet honorable man, who later went on to be the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. I followed up reading this volume with a trip to Taft's home, and again was dazzled with various snippets of information that is usually neglected in generic history books. As usual, Goodwin's writing was superb and I look forward even if forward might be another five years down the road to her next masterpiece.

John says

Written by the popular historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, "The Bully Pulpit" is an extremely engaging yet ultimately aimless book about the Progressive Era in American politics.

Like Kearns Goodwin's past books, "The Bully Pulpit" combines extensive research with lively writing and an eye for interesting characters in an attempt to illuminate the lives and times of particular American political leaders, in this case President Theodore Roosevelt and his friend and successor, President William Howard Taft. The book also devotes considerable attention to some of the "muckraking" journalists of the era, notably the key writers associated with McClure's Magazine.

At its best, "The Bully Pulpit" uses Kearns Goodwin's impressive literary gifts to create moving and engaging portraits of events that long have been forgotten. For instance, several of the chapters that discuss the deep investigations undertaken by writers like Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens are riveting. Similarly, Kearns Goodwin creates a very sympathetic portrait of William Howard Taft and shows him to be a fundamentally decent, likable person who cared about his family, who took his jobs--particularly his term as governor general of the Philippines--seriously, and who harbored progressive ideals.

Despite the quality of its writing and its willingness to shed new light on certain figures of the Progressive Era, "The Bully Pulpit" is a disappointing book, in part because it really is three books. It seems as if Kearns Goodwin set out to write a biography of Theodore Roosevelt, realized that there wasn't much of a market for another conventional biography of TR, and responded by writing a dual biography of Roosevelt and Taft. In the process, she became fascinated with McClure's Magazine and its journalists yet recognized that a book about that topic would not sell that well on its own and so decided to incorporate that book into her dual biography (which, incidentally, still really is a book about the larger-than-life Roosevelt). Kearns Goodwin then tries to link the three pieces together by saying that the book explores the ways in which Roosevelt and Taft interacted with the press to create popular pressure for the enactment of progressive legislation, but the book doesn't actually bear that claim out, especially since Taft appears to have had limited dealings with the reporters in question and because the influence of the journalists in question appears to have peaked by the time Taft won the presidency in 1908.

The second problem with the book is that it embraces "The West Wing" approach to politics. As in Aaron Sorkin's popular television show, all of the central figures in "The Bully Pulpit" come across as high-minded, nice, decent people who wake up every day thinking about nothing other than the public good. That depiction endures even when political figures like Roosevelt and Taft engage in ruthless, self-interested, or self-deceptive behaviors. After all, Roosevelt turned against Taft during the 1912 election, ran against him for the Republican nomination, formed a third-party after losing the nomination, and beat Taft in the

electoral and popular votes, thereby allowing for Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson to win the White House as a plurality candidate. And while Kearns Goodwin attributes Roosevelt's actions to his principles, it seems like the real reason was that Roosevelt was a relatively young ex-president who missed his job. Not too nice.

Finally, although "The Bully Pulpit" is roughly 900 pages in length, it offers no real conclusions or lessons. The book is essentially descriptive in nature, and while Kearns Goodwin's prose results in a book that is very enjoyable to read, the focus on description is unable to support a book of this length. By the time readers get to the 1912 election and the break between Roosevelt and Taft (which arguably should be the book's dramatic high point), they have been exposed to so many details about glorious garden parties, delightful summer vacations, gossipy letters, and unsuccessful weight-loss attempts by Taft that it is hard to care. Even the author appears to have run out of gas because the book then ends with a very short, platitudinous epilogue in which Taft and Roosevelt reconcile and niceness is restored to the universe. (It actually would make a nice, sappy ending to a movie version; in fact, much of the book's presentation of the relationship between Roosevelt and Taft seems mindful of a potential screenplay.)

At the end of it all, "The Bully Pulpit" is like a rambling Sunday drive in the country in which the individual sights are interesting and enjoyable while the overall trip leads nowhere in particular.

Jill Hutchinson says

This is not a biography of Roosevelt or Taft but an in-depth look at the political environment of the time with an extra added attraction of the role of journalism and muckraking that played a big part in shaping political opinion.

Roosevelt's dream was to be President.....Taft's dream was to sit on the US Supreme Court. These two men became fast friends and Roosevelt dragged Taft into his cabinet in his first term and as vice-president during his second. They were oil and water but seemed to complement each other when necessary. Roosevelt made the mistake of stating publicly that he would not seek a third term (there were no term limits at that time) and immediately regretted those words. Once Taft became President, Roosevelt began to waver in his support of his friend and began berating him in the press. At the next election, Roosevelt went back on his word and decided to run again. When he did not get the nomination, he formed a third party, nicknamed the Bull Moose Party....the result was, of course, a split in the Republican vote and Democrat Woodrow Wilson became President.

This is a 900 page book that is filled with anecdotes and carefully researched fact. It was intriguing and filled in some of the blanks of the political machinations that were swirling behind the scenes. The author makes it clear that Roosevelt was the loser in the long run and Taft was really the winner as he did realize his dream of being appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the only former president to hold that position. Highly recommended.

Ted Hunt says

I think I would rate this book more of a 3.5 than a 4. Doris Kearns Goodwin is a very fine writer and you can't go wrong with a book that has Theodore Roosevelt in it, but when I was finished, I found myself wondering what the thesis of the book was. She tells very well the story of the relationship between Roosevelt and Taft, bringing in details of their early friendship and Taft's time in the Philippines that I was

unfamiliar with. I also enjoyed reading about the history of McClure's Magazine and the relationship between its nationally renowned writers. However, the inclusion of the sections on the journalists seems somewhat "forced," and the book gives the impression that it was the exposure that the journalists gave to the social and economic issues of the day that led to much of the legislation of the Progressive Era. That particular approach to the "muckrakers" was left behind by American historians a couple of generations ago, and we now know that the incubus of reform was much more nuanced and paradoxical, as it was often the businessmen themselves who were pushing for regulation. I was also disappointed that there was not more mention of some of the more controversial policies of the Roosevelt Administration. The author takes more time to describe the details of Roosevelt's visit to the Panama Canal Zone than she does to explain the very controversial way in which we acquired the Canal Zone. Likewise, there is no mention of the Roosevelt Corollary, which changed forever the relationship between the United States and Latin America. Certainly, this was not intended to be a book about foreign policy, but to completely avoid these issues does a disservice to the analysis of TR. Finally, while Goodwin provides wonderful stories about TR and his children when they lived in the White House, she does not mention, in the Epilogue, the tremendous impact on Roosevelt of the death of his youngest son Quentin, who died in World War I when his plane was shot down over France. While TR's health issues derived from his time in the Amazon, other books note that his son's death sapped him of a lot of his "life force." The book is a good read, and will provide the reader with a lot of memorable tales, but as an analysis of the nature of the Progressive Era, it has some gaps.

Liz says

Phew! That was a long one. It was excellent, though maybe a bit TR heavy. But that is how the relationship between TR and Taft was, TR sprinting ahead and dragging everyone in his wake while Taft plods along but still makes progress. Very well written and researched with a bonus focus on the progressive journalism of the time and how much of mutual relationship they had with TR.

PopSugar Reading Challenge 2015 | Task 1: Book with more than 500 pages

Joe says

Book Thirty-Six of my Presidential Challenge.

I was ready to love this book. Ultimately, I fell in love with it. I read this book because I needed a book on Taft but because I'm all about overkill, it was also about Teddy Roosevelt and Muck-racking Journalism.

What I really enjoyed:

- The exploration of Taft and Teddy's friendship. I'd always known that Taft was the hand-picked successor to Teddy, but I'd always just assumed it had been a political marriage of convenience and nothing more. In reality, these two were thick as thieves. They were both Progressive with a capital P. They both wanted the Republican party to go farther than it was comfortable doing. The foundation of their friendship made the fallout that came later all the more tragic.

- Taft. His life was fascinating. All he ever wanted to do was be a judge. The bench is where he started and ultimately finished (as the only President to ever become a Supreme Court Justice). Politics was always an

arena he had to be reluctantly drawn into, first as Governor of the Philippines, then as Secretary of War under Roosevelt, then as President. He was a good man who had the misfortune of coming after one of the biggest Presidential personalities in history: Teddy Roosevelt. I don't think anyone could have pleased Teddy. The rift between the two began with Taft not keeping some of Roosevelt's cabinet. SOME of them! How dare you make your own decisions Taft! In the three way election with Roosevelt and Wilson, Taft came in dead last and he honestly didn't care at that point.

- Nellie Taft. Taft's wife was awesome. As I was reading about her, I wondered why I'd never heard about her before. She was funny, and loved being social. She was responsible for importing and planting all of the Japanese Cherry Blossom trees in Washington D.C. and then...tragedy struck. Just two months into entering the White House she suffered from a stroke that she never fully recovered from. She struggled with speaking and crowds for the rest of her life. I have no doubt she would have been one of the greatest first ladies ever seeing what she accomplished in just two months.

- Roosevelt. This is my fourth book on Teddy Roosevelt. I can't help it, he's just such an interesting personality. He honestly seemed to think that nobody else could handle being President but him. I don't think there's anything Taft could have done to please him. In many ways, the Republican party is so messed up today because of him. By starting the Progressive Party, Roosevelt basically took all the Progressives out of the Republican party. By handing the election to Wilson, he caused a lot of hard feelings with the Progressive cause for Republicans for many years to come. The good news is, this was a great boon to the Democratic party where the Progressives ultimately ended up. It's safe to say that Pre-Roosevelt and Taft, I would have been a Republican and post, I would have definitely been a Democrat.

As much as I love his personality, Roosevelt still all too often comes off as a power hungry, petulant child. I still cannot believe that he would not only challenge a sitting President, of his own party, who is his friend, in a Presidential Primary and then after losing, make a whole new political party just to challenge him again. I understand that Roosevelt had his reasons but that has to be one of the biggest dick moves in all of political history.

What I didn't enjoy:

- The Golden Age of Journalism. I should have enjoyed this, my background is in broadcasting. Unfortunately, this story simply didn't fit in this book. Sure, there were overlaps between this story and the Taft/Roosevelt story but there weren't many and the ones that were there all too often seemed like Goodwin was reaching. In a book that's over 900 pages long, there is no room for fat. I was debating this with a friend who loves this book. He said, "Come on Joe! Without this, when would you ever read a book about early 20th century journalism?" My response was, "If the answer to that question is never, then she should have absolutely not included it."

- I wanted more about the three way election between Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson. This conflict was given a surprising amount of short shrift. Again, given how long this book was, I refuse to believe I should be left wanting more with something like this.

So yes, a good but not great book. I probably came in with unrealistic expectations given how much I loved "Team of Rivals."

Joyce Lagow says

Compared with other periods in US history, the late 19th century is not popularly known very well. While most Americans have heard of Teddy Roosevelt (if for no other reason than Mt. Rushmore being a popular tourist attraction) and a good many of William Howard Taft, there was very little drama in the form of wars and other unnatural catastrophes to excite popular imagination. Yet that era was critical, forming the basis, really, of US society as we know it today. The Republican Party began its association with corporations and other forms of big business, an association that has lasted to the present moment. By partnering with businesses that became ever larger, every more monopolistic, it abandoned forever the principles of its founders, including Lincoln, and happily embraced the streams of money that poured into the party coffers, essentially buying legislators at all levels--Federal, state and local. At that time, US senators were chosen by state legislatures as set down in the Constitution. There were no such things as primaries for choosing presidential candidates. All candidates were chosen by party caucuses, and the all male (women did not have the vote) party Republican caucuses were bought by the owners of the massive trusts and holding companies, exemplified by John D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan, although they were hardly the only ones. The nation's natural resources--iron, copper, timber, oil--and even more importantly transportation, the railroads, were held by a few companies, driving out competition, allowing enormous profits by controlling profits and wages. There was no such thing as the 8 hour day, child labor, was common. The list goes on and on. While some big cities were controlled by Democratic bosses, the Democratic party was not strong nationally. Because of an increasing association with labor and small farmers, the Democratic Party had nominated William Jennings Bryan as its Presidential candidate in 1896, who ran on what was considered a radical platform, championing labor rights, currency reform, and protection for small farmers.

This is the background in which two remarkable men--Taft and Roosevelt, both Republicans and both reformers or progressives as those who called for control of the massive trusts and better conditions for workers were called--came to maturity and to governance. It was also the era in which investigative journalism really began, spurred by a remarkable Irish immigrant, Sam McClure, whose monthly magazine, McClure's, became a highly popular and very effective platform for the exposure of the political corruption of some of the most powerful Republican legislators and of the stranglehold that the trusts had on the US economy. McClure's employed some of the finest writers of the era, people who became legends: Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker, William Allan White, and Lincoln Steffens.

All this and more is brilliantly narrated by Goodwin in a book that is so well written that it reads like a novel. I never thought I would be interested in either the era or the Presidencies of Teddy Roosevelt or Taft, but I discovered that much of what I thought had happened under Teddy's cousin Franklin had actually either been legislated by Roosevelt and Taft or started by them. Probably the last two liberal Republican Presidents, the achievements of both men deserve broader recognition.

The same is true of the journalists. While I had known of Tarbell, White and Steffens, I had no idea that McClure's magazine even existed, never mind the role it played in raising public awareness of the corrupt association of the Republican Party with the trusts.

It's an amazing story and superbly told by a fine historian and writer. Highly recommended.

Melora says

I found this fascinating. The McClure's Magazine crew, Roosevelt, and Taft! Especially Taft. I really didn't know anything about him prior to this, and I was so impressed by what an utterly decent, dedicated man he was. Especially impressive in contrast with Theodore Roosevelt, who comes across here as dauntingly passionate and determined, but also as an egotistical warmonger. Taft, lacking Roosevelt's flash, was dutiful, but also loyal and forgiving. Goodwin does a wonderful job of presenting these men, their families, and their actions on the national and the world stages as a compelling narrative. The McClure's Magazine story was also new to me, though I'd heard of many of the writers before. Ida Tarbell, in particular, was intriguing. She was from the same town as my mother, Titusville, PA, and she stood out for me because one of my aunts always used to mention her with particular loathing. I'd always thought that that was just because of her work in exposing the shenanigans of John D. Rockefeller, but I suppose a "muckraker" from one's hometown is more obnoxious than one from elsewhere, assuming one dislikes muckrakers. *Anyway*, I think Rockefeller was a scoundrel, and was impressed by the devotion of Tarbell and her fellows at McClure's to their causes. With 750 pages, this was not a page too long. Or, more accurately a *minute* too long, since I listened to it, in an excellent recording read by Edward Herrmann. Highly recommended.

Tony says

I read about American Presidents - and I read a lot about American Presidents - in part because of the Shakespearean themes that confront them and the Shakespearean characters they become. Lyndon Johnson as Hamlet. Nixon as Macbeth. Kennedy as Lothario? What kind of person wants such a position? The Presidency is not being King, where, you know, you get tenure. One has to run every four years with brutal, often dishonest opposition and scrutiny. And, once there, people expect results. It's a rush, of course, of egotism, maybe narcissism, but certainly power. It should come as no surprise that Sigmund Freud wrote a book, a case study of (Thomas) Woodrow Wilson.

Theodore Roosevelt is as unique, as gifted, and as complicated as anyone America has produced. He was the quintessential man of action, even as he was perhaps America's best-read President. There are contradictions in virtually every stance he ever took. He is very easy to admire, or at least you think you should, until he disappoints. Which, to me, just makes him fascinating.

This contradictory nature, this existential inconsistency, is never more apparent than in his relationship with William Howard Taft. Taft and Roosevelt were both up-and-comers politically and became the best of friends. But by temperament, Roosevelt was a fighter, and when he fought for an issue, it was never enough that someone else disagreed; Roosevelt had to make the opponent's motives improper. Taft was a genial sort, with a judicial temperament. He was in fact a judge once upon a time and wanted only to be a judge again. He thought his reasoning, once uttered, should stand on its own.

These two men were thus in counterpoise, a perfect balance. And indeed, their friendship was real.

Taft was Roosevelt's most trusted advisor in the course of TR's presidency, and his hand-picked successor. But here's where that Shakespearean thing comes in. Almost as soon as Roosevelt left the presidency, his inner dark side wanted it back. Of course, when he actually *said* he wanted it back, he had to say it was for some noble reason, the championing of Progressivism. And, he needed a bad guy. So he made the Demon his best friend, William Howard Taft.

It's readable, very readable. And the quality of the physical book is superb. And yet, and yet.

The book must necessarily be compared to other treatments of the same topic. This comes shortly after Edmund Morris' concluding volume of his Roosevelt trilogy. Morris' work was History as Literature. *The Bully Pulpit*, by comparison, was storytelling. I typically keep loose pages in the back of a book as I read so I can write down particular rich written passages. I wrote down one half-sentence out of 750 pages (*he discovered that the past was not a list of dates to be memorized but a series of questions to be continually debated.*) I use the same loose pages to write down unfamiliar words. Here, again, I only captured one: *boodles*.

Goodwin makes no judgements. This saves analysis. No, it's just storytelling. But very good storytelling; and she does tell the story in such a way that the reader is left with plenty of the canvas to make his own conclusions.

So, Roosevelt is painted as more willful, more disingenuous, more motivated by egotism than you'll get in other paintings of him. Taft is treated very well. This has not been the case in most treatments of Taft. He suffers first for having the bad timing of being President after the charismatic whirlwind that was TR, only to be followed by the Liberals' darling, Woodrow Wilson. So Taft has traditionally been dismissed as a tool of Conservatives. He is kind and wise here, except for an inexplicable lapse involving blindly supporting one Cabinet member. Goodwin's portrait of Taft, in my view, was necessary, warranted and true.

But what of that title? I was explaining to an inquisitive European that a pulpit is a lectern used by preachers for sermonizing, but that in this usage it is secular and metaphorical, meaning an opportunity afforded by public position to argue for the advancement of human rights. *Bully* was an expressive term of brio used by the always enchanted Roosevelt. So 'Bully Pulpit' was a peculiarly Rooseveltian phenomenon. But that didn't seem to be what the book was about. And what about that 'Golden Age of Journalism'? That's covered here. In fact, it's covered a lot, so that a choice handful of writers are painted as having the same importance as Roosevelt and Taft. I'm sorry, but, well, they didn't. And, if you actually want to hear about it, I'd recommend Ron Chernow's *Titan* instead.

I said above that *The Bully Pulpit* was 'readable', which probably sounded like faint praise. And I suppose I meant it like that. Which brings me to Goodwin's style of writing. I started to notice that in each paragraph, there were quotes. Not usually lengthy quotes. Often just a phrase here or there, spoken by one of the principals or by some other writer of the same subject, usually identified by Goodwin as 'a historian' or 'a commentator'. In every paragraph. I started to find it peculiar, if not jarring. Here's just one example so you'll see what I mean:

"The ball rolls faster as it nears the bottom," Captain Butt observed as the Roosevelt administration drew to a close in early February. The White House calendar was "filled every minute" with brilliant but melancholy events--the last Army and Navy receptions, the last meeting with the diplomatic corps. Several of the ministers and ambassadors "actually wept as they said goodbye," Butt recounted. The wife of the Japanese ambassador "could not say a word, but burst out crying, and the Ambassador was not much better." Later that same afternoon, Edith Roosevelt finally "had a good cry" of her own, but when the president attempted to comfort her, he "broke down himself."

It reminded me of having a paper assigned in grade school, dutifully going to the library, getting three or four books on the subject, writing passages down on 3 x 4 index cards, shuffling them up into some order and

then filling up a few pages, with a quote here or there to convince the teacher I actually did some research.

Maybe the author just wants to make damn sure she uses enough quotation marks to avoid, you know, earlier charges. But there's plagiarism, where you actually lift another author's writing and pretend it's your own. And then there's just a reshuffling of index cards.

This is good, but there's so much better stuff out there.

Steve says

<http://bestpresidentialbios.com/2015/...>

Doris Kearns Goodwin's "The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and the Golden Age of Journalism" was published in 2013. Goodwin is a Pulitzer Prize winning author and historian whose 2005 "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln" remains enormously popular. She has also authored biographies of John F. Kennedy, LBJ and Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.

After completing "Team of Rivals" Goodwin set out to write a history of Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Era. During the course of her research she discovered that William Taft played a more important role in TR's life and in the evolution of America's political culture than she had previously believed. As a result, her book morphed into a dual biography of Roosevelt and Taft – with a significant focus on their relationships with each other and with the press.

Despite its sprawling 750 pages of text, Goodwin's book is quite readable and often extremely interesting. Not surprisingly, the book is underpinned by thorough research and boasts 115 pages of notes. But this dual biography is primarily fact-oriented rather than colorfully descriptive or penetratingly insightful and, as a result, provides a less vibrant account of its main characters – and less analysis – than I would prefer.

After an initial chapter highlighting Roosevelt's return to the US following his post-presidential African safari, the book skillfully alternates its focus between the early lives of Roosevelt and Taft. As the narrative shifts between these two future presidents, Goodwin highlights the surprising similarities – and the spectacular contrasts – in their lives and personalities.

Once their respective threads converge (when they meet in Washington D.C. in 1890), Goodwin's book becomes, at its core, a story about the growth of an extremely close and constructive friendship between these two men. But once Taft replaces Roosevelt in the White House two decades later, the story follows the tragic destruction of that personal and professional devotion...only to see it fortuitously revived just weeks before Roosevelt's death.

The spotlight Goodwin shines on the relationship between Roosevelt and Taft is by far the most valuable and revealing aspect of her book, and it exposes nuances in the personalities of both men not obvious in the dozen other biographies I've read of Roosevelt. Otherwise, no meaningful revelations about Roosevelt appear in these pages and there are a few noteworthy moments in TR's life that hardly receive coverage at all.

For example, some of the defining events of TR's early career in public service (and much of the background that adds texture to his portrait) are missing or receive scant attention. This is also true for his years in the

Badlands, his service with the Rough Riders and several of his foreign policy successes while president. As a result, “The Bully Pulpit” is unable to replace a traditional, comprehensive biography of TR for someone seeking a thorough review of his life.

The book’s focus on Taft, however, seems proportionately more enlightening. And in the absence of a wide selection of biographies on the 27th president I would not be surprised to learn that Goodwin’s coverage is additive to the body of Taft-oriented scholarship. However, too much of his life is skimmed past for this to qualify as a full-scale biography of Taft. For example, his nearly twenty-year post-presidency (including a decade spent as Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court) is rushed past in the book’s final few pages.

In addition to her primary focus on TR and Taft, Goodwin maintains a sub-narrative focusing on the rise of the press during this period – and of investigative (“muckraker”) journalism, in particular. She contrasts Roosevelt’s skill with Taft’s failure in managing the press, and the book is accented with interesting mini-narratives of several muckraker journalists of the era.

Unfortunately, apart from the book’s unique focus on the relationship between TR and Taft, it provides almost no special insights, lessons or observations. Instead, it seems designed to convey facts and allow (require) the reader to draw conclusions. The book also tends to digress into minutiae on topics which frequently seem tangential to its main thrust...while excluding details that would enhance the reader’s understanding of the two main characters.

Further, it seems as though Goodwin cut-and-pasted thousands of quotes together – carefully gathered by an army of researchers – with well chosen literary glue in the construction of her narrative. It is not uncommon for a single sentence to contain two or three (or more) separate items embedded within quotation marks, and for a paragraph to contain a dozen or more of these creatures. While possibly responsive to issues that have dogged Goodwin in the past, their relentless ubiquity ultimately proves distracting.

But the fundamental challenge facing this book is that it tries to cover too much ground. Not only does it focus on TR and Taft but, in varying degrees of depth, Goodwin also applies her “Team of Rivals” multiple-biography format to TR’s wife (Edith), Taft’s wife (Nellie), and a host of politicians and reform-minded journalists. Depending on your perspective, the book either undertakes too broad a mission, or simply too many missions – but it is rarely dull or pointless.

Overall, Doris Goodwin’s “The Bully Pulpit” is an interesting and often compelling exploration of the intersection of the lives of Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. At times its execution is imperfect but despite its flaws there is something fascinating about this tale of friendship built, destroyed, and eventually renewed. As a result, “The Bully Pulpit” is a must-read for serious fans of these two former presidents.

Overall rating: 4 stars

Jaylia3 says

Two men with very different temperaments but similar political goals are the best of friends and then bitter and public enemies in this dual biography of former presidents Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft that’s as gripping and deeply moving as a novel. Doris Kearns Goodwin, who also authored the Lincoln bio Team of Rivals, seems to have a knack for finding fascinating angles on history. The Bully Pulpit brings

back to life the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century American Progressive Era, when the merits of unions, giant corporations, women's rights, and big government were passionately debated, and the Republican and Democratic parties were very different, sometimes with roles reversed, than they are today. This was also the "Golden Age of Journalism" so the "muckrakers" who played a crucial role in the political upheavals of the time are also a large part of the book. Entertaining, instructive, and occasionally heartbreaking, *The Bully Pulpit* tells great story.
