Roosevelt Essay, Research Paper

Chapter nine of Richard Hofstadter s, American Political Traditions, is titled, Theodore Roosevelt: Conservative as Progressive. By this title Hofstadter is referring to how Roosevelt’s methods in government were very conservative when looking at the goals the Progressive Party was trying to achieve. He was a man of inferior physical stature and therefore, had a complex, which ruled his actions. There was always a sense of fear and insecurity in him and because of that, his actions were often rash or violent. When looking at the Progressive Party’s main objectives, Roosevelt doesn’t seem to fit because he didn’t hold the same beliefs and he only used the party as a way of bettering his own situation. Hofstadter recognizes that, in his earlier years, Roosevelt was a good man with a big heart and also that he was a masterful politician. He had abilities, which he used to manipulate the people and as a way of hiding his true self.

Theodore Roosevelt: The Conservative as Progressive, most likely refers to his almost hypocritical form of government. As a progressive, he was supposed to be working for the peoples’ best interest; but what he did was work to better his own situation and make it seem like he was helping the masses. Roosevelt’s conservatism came mainly because he was afraid to do anything radical because it could lead to him getting thrown out of office. It was said that, “While bigness in business frightened the typical middle-class citizen for economic reasons, it frightened Roosevelt for political reasons.” (Pg. 291) His position was conservative also because the economy was flourishing, unlike Bryan’s time. To destroy big businesses, like many wanted, would have destroyed the economy, so Roosevelt saw regulation as the best answer to the problem. The way in which Roosevelt acted was not progressive but the people followed him nonetheless.

The people accepted Roosevelt s ideas of government because his method was simple: “We shall have to do this in order to prevent that.” (Pg. 297) Followers of the progressive movement loved him even though he was not genuinely in it for their behalf, because he was a kind of mentor. He knew how the people thought so he kept his ideas simple and superficial; they informed the people of what would make them happy and that there was nothing to worry about. The conservatism of Roosevelt, however, did not seem to show in foreign policy. He was always ready for a war or drastic changes in European countries because here he didn’t have to worry about losing support. The involvement in foreign affairs is something that Progressives did not work for; they wanted to fix their own situation. But it was when dealing with American people and cities that Roosevelt became very reserved. “He held the conventional views of the big business Republicans and had no truck with political reforms, although he engaged actively in philanthropies.” (Pg. 279) His government held no intentions of real reform, but he sure liked to talk about them.

Roosevelt used the Progressive party to gain power and support but never actually tried to help it. He even once said, “What I have advocated, is not wild radicalism. It is the highest and wisest kind of conservatism.” (Pg. 300) By this, he flat out admitted that he wasn’t working along progressive lines and still, the people followed him. Not only did he not work for them; he was almost working against the Progressives. “Having aroused the hopes of the Progressives and having sidetracked their most effective leader, Roosevelt went on to use their movement for the purposes of finance capital.” (Pg. 302) He held the advantage over LaFolette in that he was a better speaker and politician and that he had control over the upper classes. But when the Progressive Party stopped benefiting Roosevelt, he quickly got out of it even began gashing the American Progressive by saying that they were “an utterly hopeless nuisance because of their incredible silliness in foreign affairs.” (Pg. 303) Roosevelt had no place in the Progressive movement because he didn’t care about their goals and he eventually ended up almost destroying them. He never actually made any positive advancement for the party; he just made it seem that way. New Nationalism, which called for strong leadership and central government, was one of Roosevelt’s “Progressive” ideas. It was believed that something was needed to hold society together since laissez-faire wasn’t working; they needed a democratically unified society. This idea was simply old ones all put together and given a new look. Elihu Root said, “I have no doubt he thinks he believes what he says, but he doesn’t. He has merely picked up certain ideas which were at hand as one might pick up a poker or chair with which to strike.”(Pg.300) Roosevelt was not a Progressive at all. His motives were simply for his own political gain.

According to Hofstadter, Roosevelt was a great politician and, in his early political life, a great man. Early on, he was instrumental in blocking demagogic measures in that he “required the cities of New York, Brooklyn, and Buffalo to pay their employees not less than two dollars a day or 25 cents an hour.” (Pg. 281) Also, “he opposed bills to abolish contract convict labor, improved the enforcement of the states’ eight-hour law, and to raise the salaries of New York City police and firemen.” (Pg. 281) But by doing things such as these, he convinced the masses he was a reformer, and businesses that he was sound. His political prowess and his manipulative ability began leading people in false directions. There were some thoughts of reform but, “reform in his mind did not mean a thoroughgoing purgation; it was meant only to heal the most conspicuous sores on the body politic.” (Pg. 291) The good reputation he had earned early on was used in his climb to power. He knew that he needed the big businesses and corporations in order to keep putting money in his pocket so, even though he regulated and broke up trusts, he didn’t accept the muckraker’s revelations of business unless they were absolutely true. Keeping most corruption or scandal under wraps was what he was going for and therefore, he had to control business without paralyzing it. Roosevelt’s political beliefs essentially became negative and