

# Theodore Roosevelt and American Racism

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“I don’t go so far as to think that the only good Indian is the dead Indian, but I believe nine out of every ten are, and I shouldn’t like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth. The most vicious cowboy has more moral principle than the average Indian.”

— Theodore Roosevelt

It is true today and was true in the past. The most celebrated political figures in this country, including those called blue blooded, elite or patrician, were mostly criminals. The descendants of the Mayflower ought to be ashamed of their heritage instead of bragging about their ancestors who began the genocide of indigenous people. The earliest American presidents Washington, Jefferson and Madison, earned their wealth through slave holding. Their successors in the office of the presidency either acquiesced to the slave holding interests or actively protected them until a bloody civil war put an end to their dirty work.

The Roosevelt family was no exception to this pattern of gaining wealth through thievery and then parlaying it into positions of influence for themselves. These are simple facts but the American desire to believe in cherished myths is not easily ended. This dynamic is obvious in a new PBS [documentary](#) series, The Roosevelts: an Intimate History, which chronicles the lives of Theodore Roosevelt, his niece Eleanor and her husband and distant cousin Franklin.

Every American has grown up with tales of the rough riders, teddy bears and walking softly but carrying a big stick. These well worn stories, like George Washington’s cherry tree, serve the purpose of spreading propaganda about the nation’s history and covering up the information we ought to know.

Theodore Roosevelt began his life as the child of a criminal class. His mother came from a slave holding Georgia family. In fact her father sold some of his human property in order to pay for her elaborate wedding to Theodore Roosevelt, Sr. Mrs. Roosevelt actively campaigned against her husband’s plan to enlist in the union army while also smuggling aid to confederate soldier relatives. Her son said that she remained an “unreconstructed” confederate her entire life.

As the title of James Loewen’s [book](#) indicates, the American history we are taught is nothing but Lies My Teacher Told Me. The men with their face on the currency, the pantheon of presidents and others deemed “great” are rarely people who should be admired and Theodore Roosevelt is no exception.

He played a major role in every act of American aggression that took place in the late 19th and early 20th century. The Spanish American war was an effort to steal the remnants of

Spain's empire, keeping Cuba a vassal of the United States and forcing the Philippines and Puerto Rico to become American territories. Panama was a Colombian territory until president Roosevelt encouraged a "revolt" which led to a newly independent nation and a better deal for the construction of the canal.

In the Philippines from 1901 – 1911, the United States killed more than 250,000 people in order to end their struggle for independence. First as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1898 and then as vice president and president, Roosevelt made clear that he lusted for death on a mass scale. "[I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one.](#)" Roosevelt opined. He said that war stimulated "spiritual renewal" and [emphasis mine] "the clear instinct for racial selfishness." He defended the imperial project in the Philippines by declaring Filipinos "Chinese half-breeds" and surmised that the bloodshed was "the most glorious war in our nation's history."

Roosevelt also urged white people to make babies in order to conquer the colored masses of the world. In a lengthy discourse that has come to be known as the "[race suicide letter](#)" he stated that anyone who didn't reproduce was "in effect a criminal against the race."

It isn't shocking that a man born in the 19th century to wealth and privilege who was raised by a slave holder would turn out to be so loathsome. It should be shocking that in the 21st century there is still such an inclination to sweep this easily accessible information under the rug.

George Washington did not have wooden teeth. He took teeth from other human beings, his slaves, who endured this and other excruciating experiences under bondage. When the United States capital was briefly located in Philadelphia, Washington had to shuttle his slaves back to Virginia for periods of time, lest they be able to appeal for their freedom under Pennsylvania law. The southern planter class settled this inconvenient matter once and for all by creating a new capital city located safely between two slave states.

It is high time for Americans to grow up and that means eschewing tales of teddy bears in favor of telling the unvarnished and ugly truth. Those who feel the need for hero worship shouldn't look towards Mount Rushmore or the dead presidents on currency. These people are invariably disreputable and should be remembered only as cautionary tales of how human beings should not behave. Theodore Roosevelt is definitely in that category.

**Margaret Kimberley's Freedom Rider column appears weekly in BAR, and is widely reprinted elsewhere. She maintains a frequently updated blog as well as at <http://freedomrider.blogspot.com>. Ms. Kimberley lives in New York City, and can be reached via e-Mail at [Margaret.Kimberley\(at\)BlackAgendaReport.com](mailto:Margaret.Kimberley(at)BlackAgendaReport.com).**

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