

ELECTION OF 1912

Reviewed by Jonathan Cristol

1912:

Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft and Debs

The Election That Changed the Country

James Chace

Simon & Schuster/2004/\$25.95

336 pp.

On Monday, 14 October 1912, Theodore Roosevelt was scheduled to deliver a speech in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Against his doctor's advice, Roosevelt was determined to give the speech despite being hoarse from delivering up to twenty speeches a day during the campaign. He knew, however, that he was making progress in his bid to return to the White House and wanted the people in Milwaukee to know that he had at least attempted to speak. This decision nearly cost the former president his life.

As he began his oration, "a stocky man... pulled out a Colt revolver and fired one shot" at the candidate. Theodore Roosevelt did not immediately realize that he had been shot in the chest. When the commotion died down, the would-be assassin apprehended, and the extent of Roosevelt's injuries comprehended, his aides implored him to rush to the hospital. The former president would have none of it. He was determined to give the speech, and that is precisely what he did. With a bullet lodged in his chest, Roosevelt gave his regular stump speech to the Milwaukee audience.

After the speech, common-sense prevailed. Roosevelt went immediately to

the hospital for emergency surgery and a lengthy (especially in the context of a presidential campaign) recuperation. While he recovered, the other three major candidates announced that they would suspend campaigning— and that is exactly what two of them did (New Jersey Governor Woodrow Wilson continued to campaign, though in a less public manner).

This episode is perhaps the most fascinating anecdote to come out of the 1912 presidential election and is described vividly in James Chace's new book *1912: Roosevelt, Wilson, Taft & Debs — The Election that Changed the Country*. (Full Disclosure: This reviewer provided some assistance on the book and is acknowledged in its pages. James Chace is also the director of the Bard Program on Globalization, but did not see this text in advance of publication.)

The election of 1912 marked a historic turning point in American politics, just as the 2004 election does today. Both elections seem to mark a fundamental shift, almost a reversal, of long held views of both parties. Today, this reversal comes in foreign policy. The Republican party has gone from a realist vision of foreign policy— loathe to get involved in such idealistic pursuits as nation-building, or to be seen as the world's policeman— to an idealistic policy based on notions of global democratization.

The election of 1912 marked a historic turning point in American politics, just as the 2004 election does today.
Both elections seem to mark a fundamental shift, almost even a reversal, of long held views of the party.

In 1912, the Democrats were a party of idealists. In fact, it is the opinion of this reviewer that Woodrow Wilson's picture appears next to the definition of the word. The democrats were idealists abroad, but moderates at home, committed to only gradual steps in the economic reforms demanded by the times (and perhaps by the *New York Times*).

In the early 1910s, America was just beginning to see what effects the assembly line would have on the class structure of the country. Large companies and trusts were formed to cash in on the new industrialization and the westward expansion of the previous century. It was around this time that labor unions started to play more of a role in society. It was up to the two major parties to determine how this newfound power would be allocated. Would laws be passed to disempower the workers, or would a new "progressive" system be put in place?

Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican, had hoped that his progressive views would be carried out by his hand-picked successor, William Howard Taft. Unfortunately, he was to be disappointed as Taft, in the view of Roosevelt, did not do enough to limit the power of the trusts, and was even thought to kowtow to their interests. Roosevelt pleaded with Taft to change his views, even traveling to his sum-

mer home in Beverly, Massachusetts to try to come to some agreement, but Taft would not acquiesce. Once Roosevelt realized that Taft was steadfast in his positions, he decided to run for president once more on a platform of economic and social reform. The progressive “Bull Moose” party was born.

Although his positions were unsympathetic, Taft is portrayed by Chace as a somewhat sympathetic character. Taft, you see, never particularly wanted to be president, and was subject to the desires of a Lady Macbethish wife. He was far happier when he later became the chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Far less sympathetic in *1912* is Woodrow Wilson, the former president of Princeton University and then governor of New Jersey. Wilson was urged to run by the Democratic party bosses. Wilson, a conservative Democrat (and White supremacist) was seen as being in the pocket of the bosses. It was only when he was already on the campaign trail that his party realized that he was planning an active, reformist presidency. Wilson wanted social reforms at home and a more involved America abroad. He was a reformer, but his positions on the subject were not as progressive as Roosevelt, and certainly not as progressive as Eugene V. Debs.

Eugene Debs was the Socialist Party’s candidate for president, and garnered more of the vote than any socialist candidate for president in history (though still only a scant six percent). Debs was considered by the Taft Administration, and many others, to be a radical—so much so that he was repeatedly jailed in the years prior to the election. While less is known about Debs, his is perhaps the most interesting story to come out of *1912*.

While Debs’s is one remarkable story of the 1912 election, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the four-way race was that the Republicans abandoned the progressive wing of their party and the Democrats abandoned the conservative wing of their party (though the conservative Democrats would have a resurgence in the 1960s). What resulted was far more than simply the Wilson presidency, but a new alignment in the American political system. One that has existed until today.

It would be foolish to think that the 2004 election could result in a general change in alignment of the two parties. However, it seems quite possible, perhaps even likely, that it could result in a major shift in the parties’ general outlook on foreign policy. Democrats, forced by principle and circumstance to oppose the idealistic notion of democratizing the Middle East, have embraced classically realist principles. Republicans, against the Buchanan-wing’s better judgment, have abandoned calculations of interest for ideals.

For that reason, James Chace’s page-turner could not have arrived at a better time. Its vivid portrayal of the four men (it is obvious from the book that Chace does not discount the “Great Man” theory of history), and the way in which the election altered the American political landscape, is valuable for any student of politics or American history.

Jonathan Cristol is assistant director of the Bard Program on Globalization and International Affairs.