Theodore Roosevelt, Jr.’s one driving passion in life was to make the world a better place. The America of Teddy Roosevelt’s youth had grown bigger and more productive, but not more fair or just. The bespectacled man with the toothy grin and volcanic energy would change all that for good, and the influence of his busy public life would mark a new era in American history: the Progressive Era.

Born into a wealthy family in New York City in 1858, Roosevelt suffered from severe asthma throughout his childhood, which in time he overcame through adopting a regimen of vigorous physical exercise he later dubbed “the strenuous life.”

Ever the voracious reader, the young Roosevelt developed an early fascination with the world of birds, beasts and trees that almost led him to decide on a future as a natural scientist. Fate, however, had decided on a very different career path for Roosevelt: politics.

Popular opinion of the day considered politics a low occupation for young gentlemen of Roosevelt’s class, but Roosevelt saw it as a platform for public service. In his first elected office as a New York state assemblyman in 1881, Roosevelt scored some important victories against the corrupt business interests in the state as the head of reform faction of the Republican Party.

Sudden tragedy cut his ascent short in February 1884 when his first wife Alice, whom he had married on graduation from Harvard, died just days after giving birth to their first child, Alice Lee Roosevelt. Another setback came at the Republican Party’s national convention later that year when Roosevelt angered the reform faction by backing James G. Blaine as the party’s presidential nominee, which Blaine lost to James Garfield. Still racked with heartbreak and despair over Alice’s death and believing his career in politics was finished, Roosevelt left politics to run a cattle business in Dakota Territory.

Teddy Roosevelt’s three years facing hardship and danger in the saddle profoundly changed his character in a way that no other experience had done thus far. It tested his courage and developed the physical strength and health that had always eluded him, and won the respect of working men that would serve him so well in later years.

By 1886, Roosevelt’s cattle business had foundered. He returned east to return to politics with a new wife at his side, his childhood friend Edith Carow. A failed run for mayor of New York City in 1887, and a season stumping for Republican Party candidates during the election of 1888 brought him an appointment in the new administration of President Benjamin Harrison as a Civil Service commissioner. A hard-charging six-year dogfight against the corrupt political patronage system for filling government jobs followed.

Roosevelt took on a new task in 1895 with an appointment as police commissioner of New York, where again, he fought a running battle against official corruption in the face of entrenched resistance. During this time, Roosevelt made a name for himself by prowling the streets in disguise at night, on the lookout for criminal activity or policemen derelict in their duty, and often accompanied by journalists.

Eventually, public controversy over Roosevelt’s corruption crusade, despite successes, was bringing his time as commissioner to an end. A new opportunity opened up with the election of 1896, pitting the conservative Republican William McKinley against the Midwestern populist orator, Democrat William Jennings Bryan. After McKinley’s victory, Roosevelt lobbied hard for appointment as assistant secretary of the Navy, which came in 1897 despite McKinley’s reluctance over Roosevelt’s reputation as a trouble-maker.

McKinley was little interested in naval affairs. The new navy secretary had ambitions to make the United States a global power through building a strong navy. He also believed that this platform for projecting American power abroad could also form a basis for exporting American-style democracy. To this end, Roosevelt began clamoring for the construction of several new battleships and of a transit canal for American ships across the isthmus of Central America.

He also harangued his superiors and the public in favor of military intervention in Cuba’s insurrection then underway against its Spanish overlords. Roosevelt’s case for intervention was vindicated when the USS *Maine* mysteriously exploded in Havana harbor on the night of February 15, 1898. War fever swept the American public, resulting in the declaration of war against Spain in late April.

Roosevelt resigned his post to command a newly-formed regiment of mounted riflemen, the 1st US Volunteer Cavalry. Quickly nicknamed “Roosevelt’s Rough Riders” by the press, this motley gang of cowboys, miners, society clubmen, and tennis players played a decisive role in the American army’s dash from the Cuban coast to Santiago. Their great hour of glory came on July 1 when they and a number of other infantry regiments took San Juan Hill outside of Santiago in a frontal assault under withering enemy fire. Roosevelt returned home a war hero.

Elected governor of New York upon his return, Roosevelt set about erecting a progressive administration that proved to be a dress rehearsal for his future presidency, pushing through civil service reform, school desegregation, workplace regulations, natural conservation and environmental protection.

As 1899 was drawing to a close, talk of drafting Roosevelt to run for president had grown to a steady background roar in the press. Roosevelt’s own friends began to urge him to consider campaigning for a spot as McKinley’s vice president in the upcoming presidential election, certain that it would provide a sure route to the top.

Roosevelt’s fervently protested against his nomination (as did William McKinley), but Republican Party operatives pushed forward his nomination at the party’s national convention in June 1900 anyway, which won enthusiastic acclaim from party delegates.

The McKinley-Roosevelt ticket won the election, but the new vice president soon found himself bored with his duties. On September 6, 1901, Roosevelt’s enforced semi-irrelevance ended when assassin Leon Czolgosz shot President William McKinley, who died September 14.

At 42, Theodore Roosevelt had now became the 26th President of the United States, the youngest to hold that office. Past presidents had exercised the powers of their office with cautious, even passive restraint. In the hands of Roosevelt, the presidency would become a “bully pulpit” to fight for the better world he had always envisioned.

The new president wasted little time in going after what he would later call “the malefactors of great wealth.” Starting with his first message to Congress in December 1901, the president called for increased regulation of big business.

The timing was right for this domestic agenda (later dubbed the Square Deal), for Roosevelt’s ascension to the presidency coincided with the rise of the Progressive movement, a reform movement convinced that the concentration of power springing from the close relationships between big business and government threatened democracy.

Between 1902 and 1904, a series of actions by the Roosevelt administration resulted in the breakup of the massive railroad trust the Northern Securities Company, after the government charged the company with violating anti-trust laws. Another win came with the anthracite coal strike of 1902. Protesting wretched working conditions in the mines, the strikers caused coal shortages countrywide, forcing Roosevelt’s intervention. The strike was ended only after the mine operators agreed to negotiate rather than allow Roosevelt to bring in federal troops to supervise mine operations.

Republican successes in the 1902 midterm elections opened the door for further victories for Roosevelt. He established a new Department of Commerce and Labor for assisting with policing the trusts, as well as a new US Reclamation Service to build dams in the arid western states.

In the foreign affairs realm, Roosevelt urged an expansion of American power abroad. The war with Spain, he argued, had created for America global responsibilities that could not be shirked. New communications, transportation and weapons technologies were shrinking the world, but increasing the likelihood of war. Only a nation willing to resort to war, Roosevelt believed, could be effective in helping maintain global peace.

One legal tool which Roosevelt formulated in support of this goal in 1904, the so-called Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, claimed for the United States the right to block European interference in the Western Hemisphere through militarily intervention. An ever-expanding navy gave him tools of another kind, which he used in 1903 to support a revolution of Panamanian insurgents seeking to break away from Colombia. The new Panamanian government quickly gave the United States the favorable terms it sought for the land needed to build a cross-isthmus canal between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Following Roosevelt’s easy cruise to re-election in 1904, his conduct of foreign policy—up to then run according to his oft-quoted motto “speak softly but carry a big stick”—shifted towards the defusing of dangerous international crises through diplomacy.

A vigorous exertion of Roosevelt’s influence enabled the Russians and the Japanese to strike a lasting peace deal that ended the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, an accomplishment for which Roosevelt earned the Nobel peace prize. His efforts the following year to help resolve the Moroccan Crisis, in which France and Britain’s mutual recognition of each other’s spheres of influence in Morocco and Egypt almost provoked war with Germany is believed to have postponed World War I for an additional decade.

In domestic affairs, the president began his second term by highlighting the need to reform railroad shipping rates in response to complaints that large corporations were receiving favorable treatment. Months of exhausting wrangling with pro-railroad factions in Congress produced a compromise bill acceptable to Roosevelt. He was also able to push through another law designed to tighten notoriously lax food and drug inspection practices.

These laws constituted a great leap ahead in the establishment of consumer protections. Nonetheless, these reforms marked the high tide of Roosevelt’s legislative accomplishments. After the midterm elections of 1906, Roosevelt’s increasingly ambitious legislative agenda—a graduated income tax, a federal supervision of companies involved in interstate commerce, a ban on child labor, etc.—overreached the limits of what congressional opponents of reform would accept.

Despite the thwarting of his legislative priorities and a number of disastrous public missteps, Roosevelt managed to exit the stage on a positive note by staging a peaceful display of naval power in 1908. Two squadrons of sixteen battleships, dubbed the Great White Fleet, circumnavigated the globe on a goodwill tour, making stops at ports all around the Pacific Ocean basin, but also sending a message to potential aggressor nations.

Roosevelt left the White House for private life in early 1909 with no intention of fading quietly into retirement. Less than a month into private life, he embarked on a hunting expedition to Africa that lasted an entire year, followed by several months meeting with the crowned heads and intelligentsia of Europe.

During his prolonged absence, Roosevelt’s political allies grew concerned with the straying from progressive orthodoxy of Roosevelt’s chosen successor, President William H. Taft. By 1912, Roosevelt felt so alarmed at Taft’s performance that he felt duty-bound to run for president again. He ran as a third-party candidate, but lost to Woodrow Wilson.

Another jungle expedition in late 1913 followed, this time to South America, where he injured his leg in an accident and contracted dysentery and malaria. The party stumbled out of the jungle weeks later, Roosevelt weakened and having lost much weight, but alive.

The onset of war in Europe that summer pulled the old fighter into his last great public campaign. Initially neutral, Roosevelt came to back the Allied war effort and then loudly push for the United States to enter the war on the Allied side to defend itself and its rights. When war finally came in 1917, Roosevelt made a personal offer to President Woodrow Wilson to help raise a volunteer army division, but Wilson declined.

By now, Roosevelt was once again popular enough that he considered another run for president in 1920, but ill health and the devastating blow of his son Quentin’s death in combat in France took their toll, and on January 6, 1919, the old lion died in his sleep of an embolism.

The great Teddy Roosevelt, the magnificent maverick, was gone. During his lifetime, he had stirred the pot of controversy. Some loved him, others hated him. But few would disagree that the legacy Roosevelt left behind was the idea that, for better or for worse, government could be a powerful force for change.