

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 16

### "Assassin's Creed"

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The United States presidential election of 1900 returned William McKinley to the White House for a second term and gave the nation a new Vice President. Americans were satisfied by the strong economy and America's new stature in world affairs. By all indications, the next four years were going to look a lot like the last.

But one man was about to change the course of American history, driven either by a radical political philosophy or a disturbed mind, or perhaps some ineffable combination of both.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 16. Assassin's Creed.

Last week, I promised you we would get caught up with Theodore Roosevelt, so we might as well get into it right now. You may recall that when we last saw Theodore Roosevelt, he had resigned from his position as Assistant Secretary of the Navy to volunteer for the Spanish-American War. Because in his own words, he didn't want to be an "armchair jingo". In today's English, I guess we would say "chickenhawk".

As a side note, the origin of this term "jingo" or "jingoism" goes back to British music halls of the 1870s. During this time, as is still true at the beginning of the 20th century, Russia is Britain's biggest rival, and during the Russo-Turkish War, there was a song that was popular in the music halls that included this refrain:

*We don't want to fight, but by jingo if we do,  
We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too.  
We've fought the bear before, and while we're Britons true,  
Russians shall not have Constantinople.*

And so, shortly after that song became popular, people (mostly anti-war people) began to describe pro-war people as "jingos", and a foreign policy based on saber-rattling and a willingness to go to war "jingoism". In the runup to the Spanish-American War, the term "jingo" was being bandied about in the United States, and some jingos were accused of an unseemly enthusiasm for, y'know, sending other people to fight in a war that they weren't willing to fight in themselves. And there was some truth to this, as there were in fact some people who urged America to go to war and then failed to volunteer to put

themselves in the line of fire. But you can't say that about Theodore Roosevelt, because Theodore Roosevelt is not "some people".

Roosevelt hoped to organize his unit, the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, but declined to command it, because he felt he lacked the military experience necessary. So command of the unit went to Colonel Leonard Wood, a Medal of Honor recipient who was President McKinley's personal physician, which is how he and Roosevelt had gotten to know each other in the first place. Famously, the unit would come to be known as the "Rough Riders".

Roosevelt's, and the Rough Riders', greatest moment was at the Battle of San Juan Hill on July 1, 1898. The Rough Riders captured Kettle Hill, which was one objective in the larger battle. Roosevelt was in command that day, and he had the only horse, in spite of the Rough Riders being a cavalry unit. He led them in a charge up the hill in the face of enemy fire into an entrenched Spanish position, which they successfully captured.

And yes, this is one of those frontal assaults against an entrenched enemy armed with modern weapons that I keep on complaining about, and that we've already seen fail on many occasions. But you know, if you had led the Rough Riders that day, it probably wouldn't have worked and you probably would have gotten yourself killed riding around on a horse out in the open encouraging your men to move forward. And if I had led the Rough Riders that day, it probably wouldn't have worked and I probably would have gotten myself killed riding around on a horse out in the open encouraging my men to move forward. But you know, that's the reason why neither you nor I have our faces carved onto the side of Mount Rushmore.

Not only were the Rough Riders successful, and Roosevelt uninjured, and a huge victory won, but Roosevelt would later mock people like me, who criticize commanders who order their men into frontal assaults, by saying:

*On the day of the big fight I had to ask my men to do a deed that European military writers consider utterly impossible of performance, that is, to attack over open ground an unshaken infantry armed with the best modern repeating rifles behind a formidable system of entrenchments. The only way to get them to do it in the way it had to be done was to lead them myself.*

In other words: Because he's Theodore Roosevelt, that's why!

Well, okay, there are a couple other things, too. The Americans had three Gatling guns, who were laying down heavy fire against the Spanish positions, which no doubt helped suppress what would otherwise have been devastating rifle fire from the defenders.

And it's also true, though seldom mentioned, that the Rough Riders weren't the only unit attacking Kettle Hill. Besides Roosevelt's volunteer unit, there were two regular Army cavalry units, the 3rd Regiment and the 10th Regiment, who also participated. The 10th Cavalry Regiment was an African-American regiment which had had experience fighting in the Indian Wars of the west. In those days, the U.S. Army was segregated, and African-Americans who served served in distinct African-American units. These units

were commanded by white officers, since African-Americans couldn't be officers in those days. In fact, one of the white officers serving in the 10th Cavalry Regiment that day was Lieutenant John Pershing, about whom I expect we'll be hearing more.

The United States Army was keen on sending its African-American units to Cuba because it believed black people were immune to the tropical diseases that were making so many white soldiers sick in Cuba — because of course, this was a time of endemic racism and stupidity. In fact, the first American on top of Kettle Hill that day was Sergeant George Berry, an African-American soldier from the 10th, who was carrying his regiment's battle flag, and also the battle flag of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, which had fallen and which Sgt. Berry had found and picked up. By some accounts, Sgt. Berry is the only soldier in U.S. Army history to carry two battle flags to victory. But hey, look over there! It's Theodore Roosevelt!

He returned from the war in triumph, a national hero. Now you can't deny that Roosevelt was a genuine hero, but you also can't deny that he was really, really good at self-promotion. He wrote a book about his war experiences called, inevitably, *The Rough Riders*. Finley Peter Dunne's fictional pub proprietor, Mr. Dooley, made a review of *The Rough Riders* in *Harper's Weekly* and declared: "It is the biography of a hero by one who knows. It is the daring exploits of a brave man by an actual eyewitness. If I was him, I'd call the book *Alone in Cuba*." Roosevelt wrote to Dunne in reply: "I regret to state that my family and intimate friends are delighted with your review of my book."

Theodore Roosevelt was nominated for a Medal of Honor for Kettle Hill, but the Army opposed it, apparently thinking he had gotten plenty of honors already. Roosevelt did eventually get his Medal of Honor, posthumously, in January 2001.

After mustering out of the Army, Roosevelt promptly got himself nominated as the Republican candidate for Governor of New York. Now, the Party didn't like him very much, but he was a war hero and he was their best chance (maybe their only chance) to hold on to the governor's mansion. Roosevelt won the election by about 1%, suggesting that he was indeed their only chance.

He approached the governorship of New York with his usual dynamism. He tried to maintain a good relationship with the party leaders, but one consistent position Roosevelt always held through his career was that duty to the people outweighed duty to the party. This is pretty out there for 1899, when political patronage is still very much the norm. Roosevelt consulted with the Party on appointments, but then he went ahead and appointed the people he thought best anyway. On the whole, it's remarkable he got along as well with the Party as he did.

One of the high points of Roosevelt's governorship was his advocacy for a corporate franchise tax, which horrified the Republican Party. They denounced it as the kind of socialism that William Jennings Bryan would have advocated. November 1899 would see the death of the vice president of the United States, Garrett Hobart. Roosevelt was happy as governor, although he had doubts about whether he could win reelection in 1902. He would have been interested in an appointment to Secretary of War, although by some accounts the job he was most interested in was Governor-General of the Philippines. Roosevelt had helped engineer an American takeover of the Philippines; now he wanted to see it work, and figured: who better for the job than Theodore Roosevelt?

The man who got the job was William Howard Taft. William Howard Taft was born in 1857 to a family that was prominent in Ohio politics. He became a lawyer, and then a prosecutor and then a state judge. In 1890, President Benjamin Harrison appointed him Solicitor-General of the United States when he was 32 years old, making him still to this day the youngest person ever to serve in that office. In 1892, President Harrison appointed him to the United States Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit in his native Ohio when he was just 34. It is a remarkable rise for a lawyer and a jurist to the second-most respected position in the American judiciary. For those of you who aren't familiar with the American judiciary, there is only one job more important than judge of a circuit court — or to be more accurate, there are nine of them, and that is the Supreme Court of the United States. Taft dreamed of a seat on the Supreme Court, and that was well-known. So when he got a telegram from the President of the United States in January of 1900 summoning him to Washington, the first thought that went through his mind was that he was being considered for the Supreme Court.

But there were no vacancies on the Supreme Court that Taft was aware of, and no pending resignations, so it was puzzling. He traveled to Washington and met with the president, and was astonished to learn that the president wanted him to chair a commission to govern the Philippines. He explained to the president that he had actually been an opponent of annexing the Philippines. McKinley told him that didn't matter. The annexation was now a fact, the job needed to be done, and William Howard Taft was the man to do it. As for the Supreme Court, well, do a good job in the Philippines and... we'll see.

As for Roosevelt, a movement began in the Republican Party almost as soon as the Vice President was laid to rest to nominate Roosevelt as his replacement in 1900. Roosevelt was not especially interested in the vice presidency. He saw it as a dead-end job. He was more interested in the War Department, or in Taft's job. But McKinley was not interested in having Roosevelt in his cabinet, and Taft's job was already held by, y'know, Taft. So Roosevelt agreed to run for Vice President in exchange for a promise that he would be considered for the position of Governor of the Philippines after Taft's commission had finished its work.

The New York Republican Party was delighted. Roosevelt would be out of their hair for good. But there was logic in Roosevelt as the vice presidential nominee. Everyone knew that the election of 1900 was going to be a rematch of 1896, McKinley vs. Bryan. Victory in the Spanish-American War and an economy that seemed to be on the move again after the Long Depression made McKinley popular, but the fact remained that he wasn't an especially gifted political candidate.

Also, in those days, presidential candidates, and especially incumbents running for reelection, were not expected to campaign too vigorously. It was considered undignified. Now obviously times have changed, and William Jennings Bryan is one of the reasons they've changed. He was a great orator, charismatic and energetic, and not afraid to get out and press the flesh. He's the one who broke the mold. And that's what makes Roosevelt the ideal vice presidential candidate, because in Theodore Roosevelt the Republicans have a popular, energetic and charismatic orator to match Bryan, and because he's running for vice president and not president, McKinley could keep his dignity.

And so it came to be. When Roosevelt arrived in Philadelphia for the Republican National Convention, the crowd sang the song associated with him ever since the Army played on top of San Juan Hill on the day of his glorious military triumph: Yep, you guessed it...

[Song: "There'll Be A Hot Time In the Old Town Tonight"]

The Republican Convention nominated Theodore Roosevelt for Vice President with just one abstention: Theodore Roosevelt. One of the few skeptical Republicans was Mark Hanna, the Ohio political boss who had masterminded McKinley's election as president. Hanna warned that now, "there's only one life between this madman and the White House."

McKinley and Roosevelt won the election by a larger margin than in 1896. They were sworn in on March 4, 1901, about the same time as Aguinaldo's capture and surrender in the Philippines. Roosevelt chafed in the vice presidency. The job was every bit as insignificant and frustrating as he was afraid it would be. He began telling his friends it should be abolished.

On September 2, 1901, at the Minnesota State Fair, Roosevelt gave a speech in which he first used the saying by which he is best remembered: "Speak softly and carry a big stick. You will go far." Roosevelt said he was just passing on a West African proverb, but no one's been able to find any record of it before Roosevelt started using it, so it seems more likely he invented it on his own. 1901 was the year of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, and on September 5, President McKinley paid a visit.

Another person visiting the Pan-American Exposition that day was Leon Czolgosz. Leon Czolgosz was born in Michigan in 1873. He was the son of Polish immigrants. His mother died when he was 10 years old after giving birth to his youngest sister. He got his first job at the age of 14, and by 17 he had found good work at the Cleveland Rolling Mill Company. But the factory closed when he was 20, and it's not clear what he did afterward. He reportedly had no friends and no romantic relationships. He may have been mentally ill.

In 1898, Leon moved back in with his father and stepmother, who were now living in Ohio, where they had purchased a farm. It seems Leon was not much help on the farm, he did not get along well with his stepmother, and he was hostile to his family's Catholic beliefs. It appears he spent most of his time in his room, reading. One of his favorite reads was Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, a proto-science fiction work about a young man who falls into a trance in 1887 and awakens into the utopia of the year 2000. Another was a newspaper clipping that Czolgosz had saved and read over and over again. It was an article about Gaetano Bresci, a 30 year old Italian-American anarchist from Paterson, New Jersey, who had assassinated the King of Italy in July 1900.

In May 1901, Czolgosz attended a speech by the radical Emma Goldman. He liked what he heard enough to have a chat with her afterward. He became interested in anarchism, and began to seek out anarchist organizations and ask questions. He appeared in so many places, and asked so many questions, that some of the anarchists began to suspect that this awkward young man no one knew, who had so many questions, was in fact a spy for the police. On September 1, a notice went out through anarchist circles to beware of this suspicious-looking young man.

But by that time, he was already in Buffalo, New York. The same day the Vice President had advised “speak softly and carry a big stick”, Czolgosz purchased a .32 caliber Iver Johnson revolver. It was the same model that Bresci had used the year before.

On September 5, President McKinley gave a speech at the Exposition. Czolgosz stalked him, but found no opportunities. The next day, the president was receiving the public at the Temple of Music on the Exposition grounds. Czolgosz took his place in line, revolver in hand, with a handkerchief covering it. It was a hot day, and many men were holding handkerchiefs in their hands. When Czolgosz reached the president, McKinley offered his hand. Czolgosz pushed the proffered hand aside and fired two shots. The first ricocheted off the president’s sternum. The second penetrated his abdomen. McKinley collapsed, the crowd cried out, and police and private citizens attacked Czolgosz. They might have killed him right there on the spot, but McKinley himself intervened, saying: “Go easy on him.”

They took McKinley to the first aid station at the Exposition. The doctor there attempted to remove the bullet, but was unable to find it. There was an x-ray machine on display at the Exposition, but as you may recall, by this time experimenters were reporting hair loss and burns and other symptoms associated with x-ray machines, and the doctors were afraid to use it on the president. No one was sure what long-term effect it might have.

McKinley seemed to improve at first, and news reports were optimistic. Vice President Roosevelt felt confident enough to take his family off on a previously-scheduled camping vacation. But the bullet remained inside McKinley’s body, and in an era with no antibiotic drugs, risk of a fatal infection was always present. A few days later, he took a turn for the worse, and early in the morning of September 14, McKinley passed away. For the third time in 36 years, the President of the United States had been killed by an assassin.

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 3 in E ♭ Major*]

If you’ve been listening to *The History of the Twentieth Century Podcast* from the beginning, you’ve probably already noticed how many times I have had to say “assassinated by an anarchist”, “assassinated by an anarchist”. Here’s a list of heads of state who were assassinated by anarchists during this period:

President of France Sadi Carnot, 1894  
Prime Minister of Spain Antonio Cánovas, 1897  
Empress Elizabeth of Austria, 1898  
King Umberto of Italy, 1900  
President of the United States William McKinley, 1901  
Prime Minister of Spain José Canalejas, 1912  
King Georgios of Greece, 1913

And that is just royalty, presidents and prime ministers. I’m not counting other assassinations, or unsuccessful assassination attempts or bombings. If I were, I would have a much longer list.

Anarchist violence was a fact of life in those days, and anarchists were to the turn of the 20th century what terrorists were to the turn of the 21st century. They were regarded as a special and unique horror, the bane of the civilized world, a mysterious group of people who challenged the world order. In the United States, the assassination of President McKinley led to the Immigration Act of 1903, which banned anarchists from immigrating to the United States. For the first time since the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, prospective immigrants to the United States could be refused entry based on their political beliefs. The ban on anarchists immigrating to the United States is still on the books today.

Who were these people? What is anarchism? Well, simply put, anarchists reject the state. Anarchists believe that property is the source of all evil, and that states themselves enforce property rights and represent acts of violence against ordinary men and women. There is not, and can never be, such a thing as a “just government”. Justice can only come when the state is eliminated, property is abolished, and no one profits from the work of another person. Instead, all will work together voluntarily for the common good.

Until now, I have only occasionally alluded to the fact that the beginning of the 20th century was a time of stark economic inequality; not only between western nations and the rest of the world, but also between citizens within the richest and most advanced countries. Appalling poverty and deprivation were present in even countries like Britain, Germany and the United States, let alone less developed economies like Italy and Spain and Russia. The great political debate of the 19th century, between conservatives and liberals, seemed to have run its course without ever addressing the depredations of capitalism. It is not just that the richest human beings on the planet and some of the most miserable human beings on the planet were living in the same country, it was often that the most miserable were laboring in the service of the very richest, who profited far more conspicuously from their 14-hour days and 7-day weeks than were the people living these lives of endless, backbreaking drudgery.

The conservative answer to this was that society had different classes of people, that this is how it always was, and this was how it would forever be. The liberal answer to this was that freedom of contract and an expanded right to vote that included the working classes would in theory, someday, lead to more equal economic relationships. Except that 50 years of economic liberalism had left the working poor more miserable and desperate than they had been before it started.

And so a third political force begins to appear. You can call it the left; you can call it socialism. But it’s hard to give it a name because there are so many different flavors. Some were new political parties, like the Labour Party in Britain, which championed legislative solutions within the existing democratic order. More radical elements of the left dismissed democracy as a failed experiment and advocated revolution.

But revolution toward what end? There were socialist revolutionaries, there were communist revolutionaries, there were syndicalist revolutionaries. And then there were the anarchists, perhaps the most extreme of the lot. We’re going to talk more about socialism in a future episode, because of course it’s going to become a potent political force in the 20th century. But for now, let’s focus on anarchism.

In the early 19th century, the French politician and thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon first coined the word “anarchism”. By the way, he also coined the word “capitalist”. Proudhon wrote:

*If I were asked to answer the following question: What is slavery? and I should answer in one word, it is murder, my meaning would be understood at once. No extended argument would be required to show that the power to take from a man his thought, his will, his personality, is a power of life and death; and that to enslave a man is to kill him. Why, then, to this other question: What is property? may I not likewise answer, It is theft, without the certainty of being misunderstood; the second proposition being no more than a transformation of the first?*

In other words, as his argument is most commonly summarized: “Property is theft”.

Proudhon also famously said:

*To be GOVERNED is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, checked, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so. To be GOVERNED is to be at every operation, at every transaction noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, prevented, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished. It is, under pretext of public utility, and in the name of the general interest, to be placed under contribution, drilled, fleeced, exploited, monopolized, extorted from, squeezed, hoaxed, robbed; then, at the slightest resistance, the first word of complaint, to be repressed, fined, vilified, harassed, hunted down, abused, clubbed, disarmed, bound, choked, imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed; and to crown all, mocked, ridiculed, derided, outraged, dishonored. That is government; that is its justice; that is its morality.*

Needless to say, anarchists did not try to change the laws. They did not run for public office. They did not vote, at least not with the expectation that electoral change would reform the system. They did not believe in political parties. They believed in revolution.

And here we come to the paradox of anarchism: In order to have a revolution, you have to have a revolutionary movement, don't you? Well, that's how anarchists saw it. Communists advocated revolution, to take over the power of the state so that the state might one day wither away. Anarchists believed that states were inherently corrupting, and that to seize control of the state would be to betray the cause. The state was not a thing to be taken over, the state was a thing to be abolished.

No, the revolution would be a spontaneous uprising of the oppressed masses that would annihilate the government. It would not, and could not, be led from above. Hence the anarchist concept of “propaganda of the deed”. By this they meant that anarchists should set an example to inspire the coming revolution. They didn't come out and say it in so many words, but in many cases what that meant was: Go kill some enemy of the people.

Czolgosz was blunt and frank about why he killed McKinley. McKinley was an enemy of the working people. McKinley had just won reelection by proclaiming prosperity, but there was no prosperity, not for the hungry masses of working poor. In the popular imagination of the time, and in the popular press, anarchists were viewed as shadowy organizations meeting in secret, plotting their crimes, drawing lots to



see who would kill which world leader. The truth was much more frightening: Anarchists didn't have an organization. Anarchist leaders spoke out against injustice, and anarchist followers, like Leon Czolgosz, decided on their own to take up the gun. It was just the sort of model of people working together voluntarily for the common good without an organization, without coercion, that the anarchists held up as our utopian future. It might have been an inspiration, if it wasn't so bloody.

Was Czolgosz an idealistic anarchist extremist? Or was he a mentally ill man for whom anarchism gave him a peg on which to hang his violent inclinations? It's a question that can't be answered, I think. He was tried for murder, convicted, and executed on October 29, just weeks after his crime was committed.

Emma Goldman, whom Czolgosz had cited as his inspiration, was arrested and interrogated for two weeks. While many Americans believed that Goldman was the mastermind of the McKinley assassination, she steadfastly denied it, and it was probably not true. Goldman, a Jewish Russian immigrant, was an ardent anarchist, feminist, and atheist. She advocated free love, legal contraception, and an end to legal and social sanctions against lesbian and gay people, which made her pretty out there, even for an anarchist. She was called the most dangerous woman in America, and was ultimately deported to what was by then the Soviet Union in 1920.

We'll have to stop there for today, but I hope you'll join me next week for *The History of the Twentieth Century* as (I can't believe I'm saying this) Theodore Roosevelt becomes President... of the United States! Oh... my... God! That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. After the McKinley assassination, there was a public outcry over the need to provide better protection for the President of the United States. The following year, the United States Secret Service, an arm of the Treasury Department that had originally been created to investigate counterfeiting, was informally designated to provide protection for the President of the United States. In 1906, Congress passed legislation making this official. The United States Department of Justice created what was then called the Bureau of Investigation in 1908, partly for the purpose of monitoring the activities of anarchists. It would later be known as the Division of Investigation, and since 1935, the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

[music: Closing Theme]