

# A Critical Juncture: TR, the Press and the Challenge to Democracy

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Can democracy survive an uneducated public? Can it address the multifarious problems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century while depending upon the will of the people to negotiate complexity, nuance, and pick from the eclectic range of professional advice the proper course for an increasingly modern society?

This was the dilemma that lurked in the back of the mind of Walter Lippmann, the youngest of a handful of journalists who came of age in the era of Teddy Roosevelt and who embraced TR's progressive vision. They were Roosevelt's brain trust – well before the 26<sup>th</sup> president's cousin would popularize that phrase in describing his own cabinet – and they served to explain, articulate, and advocate for progressive solutions to modern problems. Their counsel proved crucial not only to TR's time in the White House, but to his post-presidency life and in particular to his attempt to recapture the presidency in 1912.

In a best-selling book he published in 1922, three years after TR's death, Lippmann utilized this experience to paint a worrisome picture. Democracy, he said, had a fatal flaw. The real world, he wrote, is "altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance." Therefore, the public is dependent upon those who can mediate between professional expertise and the popular will. That would be journalists, yes, but are they up to such a gargantuan task, Lippmann wondered? He was writing just as Europe was faltering into an age that would glorify the strong and authoritarian leader. And he worried that the reductive nature of popular journalism would make the facts harder and harder to determine with any clarity, that, in a sense, journalism would fail, encouraging the rise of tyranny.