

# FIRST WORD

BY DOUGLAS BRINKLEY

## Wilderness Warrior

**IN EARLY MARCH 1903, PRESIDENT THEODORE ROOSEVELT** was mired at Capitol Hill trying to push forward an anti-anarchy bill. But when he received a visit from a pair of prominent ornithologists, he nevertheless made time to meet with them. **A NEW "GOLD RUSH,"** which started after the Civil War, had fomented the massacring of wildlife for profit and sport. The glorious bison were nearly exterminated from the Great Plains, and jaguars along the Rio Grande had simply disappeared into the Sierra Madre of Mexico. The situation in Florida was particularly acute. Once deemed a vast swamp of little value, the state was experiencing a boom due to the fashion trendiness of its birds—especially their feathers. As a result, plume hunters poured into the state, guns in hand, determined to bag wading birds for the exotic feathers then in high demand. Roosevelt's visitors wanted to discuss Pelican Island particularly, a teeming bird rookery in a narrow lagoon off the Atlantic coast. **AFTER LISTENING ATTENTIVELY TO THEIR DESCRIPTION** of Pelican Island's quandary, and sickened by the update on the plumers' slaughter, Roosevelt asked, "Is there any law that will prevent me from declaring Pelican Island a federal bird reservation?" The answer was a decided "No;" the island, after all, was federal property. "Very well then," Roosevelt said with marvelous quickness. "I so declare it." **WITH THAT ONE SWEEPING "I SO DECLARE IT,"** President Roosevelt, the big game hunter, had entered John Muir's aesthetic preservation domain. And Pelican Island wasn't a passing whim of a president showing off to ornithologist colleagues. It was an opening salvo on behalf of the natural environment. **DURING HIS PRESIDENCY, ROOSEVELT QUADRUPLED** America's forest reserves and, recognizing the need to save the buffalo from extinction, he made Oklahoma's Wichita National Forest and Montana's National Bison Range big game preserves. Others were created to protect moose and elk. To cap it off he established five national parks, protecting such "heirlooms" as Oregon's iridescent blue Crater Lake, South Dakota's subterranean wonder, Wind Cave, and the Anasazi cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde in Colorado. Courtesy of an executive decree, Roosevelt saved the Grand Canyon—a 1,900-square-mile hallowed site in Arizona—from destructive zinc and copper mining interests. He also instituted the first federal irrigation projects, national monuments, and conservation commissions. **THE DOUGHTY SCRAWL OF HIS SIGNATURE,** a conservationist weapon, set aside a legacy for posterity (or for "the people unborn," as he put it) of over 230 million acres, almost the size of the Atlantic coast states from Maine to Florida. All told, Roosevelt's legacy has become almost half the landmass Thomas Jefferson had acquired from France in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. With the power of the bully pulpit, Roosevelt—re-

peatedly befuddling both market hunters and insatiable developers—issued "I so declare it" orders over and over again. He entered the fray double-barreled, determined to save the American wilderness from deforestation and duress. From the beginning to the end of his presidency, Roosevelt, in fact, did far more for the long-term protection of wilderness than all of his White House predecessors combined. **IN A FUNDAMENTAL WAY,** Roosevelt was a conservation visionary, aware of the pitfalls of hyper-industrialization, fearful that speed-logging, blast-rock mining, overgrazing, reckless hunting, oil drilling, population growth, and all types of pollution would leave the planet in biological peril. "The natural resources of our country," he warned Congress, "are in danger of exhaustion if we permit the old wasteful methods of exploiting them to continue." Wildlife protection and forest conservation, Roosevelt insisted, were a moral imperative and represented the high-water mark of his entire tenure at the White House. In an age when industrialism and corporatism were running largely unregu-

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lated, and dollar determinism was holding favor, Roosevelt, the famous Wall Street trustbuster, went after the "unintelligent butchers" of his day with a ferocity unheard of in a U.S. president. **BY REORIENTING WASHINGTON, DC'S BUREAUCRACY** toward conservation, his crusade to save the American wilderness can now be viewed as one of the greatest presidential initiatives between Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I. "There can be nothing in the world more beautiful than the Yosemite, the groves of giant sequoias and redwoods, the Canyon of the Colorado, the Canyon in Yellowstone, the Three Tetons; and our people should see to it that they are preserved for their children and their children's children forever with their majestic beauty unmarred." Roosevelt's stout resoluteness to protect our environment is a strong reminder of our national wilderness heritage, as well as an increasingly urgent call to arms.

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