



## The River of Doubt – Resource Kit

### Candice Millard



Candice Millard's mind explores the world on a daily basis. She's a former writer and editor at National Geographic magazine. She's written on [Ethiopian Christians and the lost Ark](#). Her latest work, [The River of Doubt](#), is an incredible adventure narrative and a penetrating biographical portrait - the true story of Theodore Roosevelt's harrowing exploration of one of the most dangerous rivers on earth. The River of Doubt is a black, uncharted tributary of the Amazon that snakes through one of the most treacherous jungles in the world. Indians armed with poison-tipped arrows haunt its shadows; piranhas glide through its waters; boulder-strewn rapids turn the river into a roiling cauldron.

#### About the Book:

"If it is necessary for me to leave my bones in South America, I am quite ready to do so." Those words, written by Theodore Roosevelt before he embarked on the most challenging expedition of his life, nearly became prophecy. Determined to chart the course of a mysterious waterway known only as **The River of Doubt**, he and a brazen team of explorers set off on a death-defying adventure that, until now, has languished as a little-known chapter in history. Drawing on never-before-seen diaries and extensive resources as a former writer for *National Geographic*, Candice Millard at last uncovers the startling details of Roosevelt's final, and arguably most fantastic, feat -- one that would forever change the maps of the Western Hemisphere.

A national bestseller that won coast-to-coast praise, **The River of Doubt** sets the stage with Roosevelt's stinging election defeat in 1912, a humiliation that would spur him to accept an invitation to South America. He soon spun the invitation into an elaborate plan to travel one of the planet's most dangerous rivers, which snakes through one of the planet's most dangerous jungles. Roosevelt and his men would face innumerable hardships, and not everyone on the team would survive. Cannibals, disease, and starvation were but a few of the threats, against a landscape where the flora and fauna were by turns gorgeous and nightmarish. Combining the suspense of **Into Thin Air** with the rich history of a presidential biography, **The River of Doubt** makes for an exhilarating journey. We hope that the following topics will enhance your experience of this riveting tour.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Chapter one, "Defeat," depicts dramatic scenes from Roosevelt's final election. What parallels exist between a risky political career and a risky Rain Forest expedition? What enabled him to survive both?
2. Compare Rondon's and Roosevelt's leadership styles. In what ways did these co-commanders

complement each other? In what ways were they at odds?

**3.** Discuss the very concept of survival as it shapes **The River of Doubt**. In choosing provisions, what items did Roosevelt's team consider necessary for survival? What aspects of survival (greater quantities of dry, mildew-free clothes, for example) did they overlook? What intangibles (especially in terms of emotions) are also necessary for such an expedition?

**4.** What aspects of humanity were represented by the various personalities in the group, ranging from exploitive Father Zahm and the rational Cherrie to the volatile Julio? Can such varied people coexist? How did you react to Roosevelt's belief that it was necessary for Julio to be found and shot after he murdered one of the team members?

**5.** Do any contemporary American politicians possess Roosevelt's public-speaking style? Why did he believe it was important to debate the former Chilean ambassador and deliver speeches refuting the protestors there?

**6.** Discuss the extraordinary medical history included in *The River of Doubt*. How was Roosevelt able to survive so much in his lifetime --- from gunshot and disease to a train wreck --- with only rudimentary medical care? What aspects of modern medicine would have made his expedition safer? Would safer conditions have undermined the thrill?

**7.** What did you discover about the intricate, sometimes surreal ecology and geography of the Rain Forest itself? What is the significance of the ancient history of South America's formation, such as the plate tectonics that sculpted the Andes Mountains? What was it like to read descriptions of a region where few humans have adapted to the environment? Why is it important to preserve rather than develop these ecosystems?

**8.** In the end, what do you believe Roosevelt's true missions were in this expedition? What was revealed about the nature of some geographic explorers when his success was met with deep skepticism? What motivates any explorer --- from ancient nomads to NASA scientists? What separates Roosevelt's brand of adventurousness from that of contestants on television shows such as "Survivor"?

**9.** Share your observations about the Cinta Larga, ranging from nutrition and family life to warfare. Does their self-sufficiency make them noble?

**10.** What did you discover about Roosevelt's parenting style? Is his approach--particularly his insistence that his children learn to conquer rather than avoid obstacles --- prevalent in many American schools today?

**11.** Do you believe that Kermit's later despondency, which eventually drove him to suicide, was related more to genetics or to his life's circumstances? Did his father expect too much of him? How did their relationship shift throughout this father-son expedition? How would you have fared on a similar mission with your mother or father?

**12.** How might Roosevelt respond to current concerns about the environment and climate change? How might he and his Progressive "Bull Moose" Party have fared in recent elections?

**13.** What separates **The River of Doubt** from other presidential narratives you have read? What writing techniques enabled the author to weave together science, travelogue, and history? What do the Notes and Acknowledgments sections reveal about her research techniques? If someone were to write a biography of you, what narratives could be constructed from your collection of letters and other

memorabilia?

**14.** Discuss the historical context of Roosevelt's trip, in terms not only of South American history but other aspects of world history from this time period, such as the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912? Would World War I have unfolded differently if Roosevelt had defeated Wilson?

**15.** How were the first chapters of Roosevelt's life, which were marked by poor health, resolved by this final South American chapter? Do his triumphs of endurance, from boxing at Harvard to valiant service during the Spanish-American War, form a timeline of progressively more dangerous challenges throughout his life? If so, did he finally meet his match with The River of Doubt? Why do you believe this expedition was, until now, less well known than his other triumphs?

Courtesy of BookReporter.com

[http://readinggroupguides.com/guides3/river\\_of\\_doubt1.asp](http://readinggroupguides.com/guides3/river_of_doubt1.asp)

Courtesy of New York Times Book Review:

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**'The River of Doubt': Cândido and Ted's Excellent Adventure  
By BRUCE BARCOTT**

Theodore Roosevelt was an enthusiastic advocate of the road trip as antidote to the blues. At 25, he lit out for the Dakota Badlands after his wife and his mother died of separate illnesses on the same day. After relinquishing the presidency to William Howard Taft in 1909, Roosevelt spent nearly a year on a high-style (260 porters!) African safari. Brooding wasn't his style. "Black care rarely sits behind a rider whose pace is fast enough," he once said.

So after he ran on the Bull Moose ticket in 1912, losing his bid to take back the presidency, Roosevelt needed some serious adventure to shake off the funk of defeat. He found it in South America.

As Candice Millard notes in "The River of Doubt," her vibrant retelling of Roosevelt's post-election expedition, it was supposed to be another African-style safari: a well-provisioned paddle up two known tributaries of the Amazon River. This time, though, Roosevelt demanded a more challenging itinerary. He wanted to push the boundaries of scientific knowledge, not be carried like a valise. His guide, the legendary Brazilian explorer Col. Cândido Rondon, suggested a survey of the Rio da Dúvida, the River of Doubt, an uncharted capillary of the Amazon that ran through some of the most treacherous terrain the great rain forest could offer. Bully to that, Roosevelt responded, brushing aside the warnings of field naturalists with firsthand experience in the region. "If it is necessary for me to leave my bones in South America," Roosevelt wrote, "I am quite ready to do so."

He very nearly did. The ex-president had survived Africa, the American frontier and the Spanish-American War, but the unexplored Amazon presented dangers of an entirely different magnitude. Out there every teeming inch of forest seemed to conspire against a man's survival. If the vipers, piranhas, jaguars, caimans or anacondas didn't get you, malaria or a poisoned arrow or a cut gone septic just

might. Colonel Rondon's previous Amazonian adventures had produced great geographic discoveries, incredible stories of bravery and suffering, and a notoriously high casualty rate. "In fact, so infamous were Rondon's expeditions into the interior that he had to pay his men seven times what they made anywhere else," Millard writes. "When the Brazilian colonel invited him to join the descent of the River of Doubt, the cook had replied in horror, 'Sir! I have done nothing to deserve such punishment!' "

And the cook hadn't even met the Americans. Roosevelt left the organization of the expedition to an old chum, the Rev. John Augustine Zahm. Zahm was a remarkable man of faith and science, a Roman Catholic priest who taught physics at Notre Dame and published a book defending Darwin and the theory of evolution. Expeditionary planning was not Zahm's forte, however. He hired as quartermaster an eager sporting goods clerk, Anthony Fiala, whose ineptitude was well known in exploring circles but, sadly, not to Father Zahm. (Ten years earlier Fiala had led a disastrous North Pole expedition that left his men trapped on the ice for two years.) Fiala provisioned Roosevelt and his men with crates of "gourmet condiments" - stuffed olives, Rhine wine, olive oil, mustard - but packed very little meat, a fact that wasn't discovered until midexpedition. Fiala was ultimately dismissed from the expedition, as was Father Zahm, whose highhanded treatment of the Brazilian Indians lugging the Americans' load proved so offensive (at one point Zahm suggested the Indians carry him the rest of the way in a divan chair) that Roosevelt was forced to send his friend home.

It took two months of hard travel through the Brazilian highlands just to reach the River of Doubt. Once there the men of the Roosevelt-Rondon Scientific Expedition found themselves tired, hungry and boatless. The vessels imported for river travel had been abandoned as too heavy for overland travel. (See under: Zahm and Fiala, planning of.) Undaunted, Roosevelt, Rondon and their 20 men pressed on. They bought seven crude dugouts from a local tribe, lashed their gear and hurtled down the river.

None would have survived were it not for Rondon. Roosevelt graces the book's cover and subtitle, but the Brazilian colonel emerges as the story's true hero. Millard does a splendid job of both introducing American readers to this extraordinary man and depicting the subtleties of his relationship with Roosevelt. The expedition was Roosevelt-Rondon in name only. Rondon led the entire way, held the men together in ever-deteriorating conditions and ensured their safety through the territory of hostile tribes. Roosevelt happily fell into the role of morale booster and raconteur. The two men got on relatively well, though at times even Rondon wearied of T.R.'s endless chatter. "I never saw a man who talked so much," Rondon wrote. "He would talk all of the time he was in swimming, all of the time during meals, traveling in the canoe and at night around the campfire. He talked endlessly and on all conceivable subjects."

ROOSEVELT wasn't the only one talking. The River of Doubt was uncharted but not unpopulated, and as the expedition made its way slowly down the river, a fierce debate raged just out of earshot. Cinta Larga tribesmen, alarmed at the intruders in their midst, considered whether to kill the strangers or let them pass through unscathed. "Given the tribe's tradition that all decisions of war be made by consensus, the very existence of this debate became the thin thread on which the lives of Roosevelt and his men would ultimately hang," Millard writes. Here was where Rondon's visionary thinking paid off. One of the earliest and boldest advocates for Brazil's indigenous populations, Rondon believed that peace beget peace. His men were under standing orders never to attack an Indian, even if provoked. When he sensed the eyes of the Cinta Larga watching him, Rondon placed gifts on the ground and walked away. Those gifts reinforced the benign nature of the expedition and may have swayed the final vote. In the end, the Cinta Larga let the 22 men float by unharmed.

Although "The River of Doubt" sheds new light on one of the more exciting years in Theodore Roosevelt's life, bookstore clerks ought not to shelve it under biography. In her debut book, Millard, a former writer and editor for National Geographic, combines high adventure well told with dazzling

passages of nature writing that illuminate the darkest, steamiest sections of the Amazon forest. Her analysis of the role that concealment plays in the lives and deaths of all creatures in the Amazon, for instance, not only allows us a glimpse into one of the forest's many behind-the-scenes dramas, it also answers the question of why Roosevelt, the famous hunter, went hungry. The animals he wanted to shoot were there all around him; he just couldn't spot them. Closer in spirit to Joe Kane's first-descent classic "Running the Amazon" than to Edmund Morris's biography "Theodore Rex," "The River of Doubt" would be an exhilarating story even if an ex-president weren't involved. The fact that one was must heighten our admiration for Roosevelt, especially looking back from an era in which a failed presidential candidate is able to make news simply by growing a beard.

*Bruce Barcott is a contributing editor for Outside magazine.*