

# Interview: Candice Millard on tracing Roosevelt's path down "The River of Doubt"

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STEVE INSKEEP, host:

After he left the White House, President George H.W. Bush learned to parachute out of airplanes. That's a pretty dramatic retirement activity, just nothing quite like the risk embraced by one of his predecessors. Five years after leaving office, former President Theodore Roosevelt boarded a dugout canoe. He began a trip down an uncharted river in the basin of the Amazon. That episode in 1914 receives a passage in biographies of Roosevelt. The writer Candice Millard devotes a book to the adventure from which Theodore Roosevelt nearly failed to return. The book is called "The River of Doubt," which was also the name of the river the ex-president traveled.

And, Candice Millard, just the name of the river gives you a sense of how wild this terrain was.

Ms. CANDICE MILLARD (Author, "The River of Doubt"): Exactly. This river was completely unmapped. In fact, it was unknown to anyone outside of the Amazon, besides the man who found it. You can't be on this river in the jungle without coming away with just an overwhelming feeling of awe and respect for nature and the workings of it, and when you see these rapids and you think about what Roosevelt and his men had to work with, you know, they were basically in hulled-out tree trunks going down these, you know, Class IV rapids, you're struck by the fact that any of them survived when you see the river.

INSKEEP: What would drive him to such a perilous expedition as this?

Ms. MILLARD: If you look at Roosevelt's life, you see a pattern. Again and again, if he faced heartbreak or sorrow, he would turn to hard adventure as therapy. He did that when his father died when he was just a sophomore at Harvard and then, of course, when he faced that unimaginable tragedy when his mother and first wife died in the same night. That's when he went to the Dakota Territories. And again, you know, after losing the election of 1912, he's only 55 years old, he's humiliated, he's hated by many of his old friends and backers for putting a Democrat in the White House. And so here's a chance at redemption.

INSKEEP: What were some of the key people around him, and were they the right people to have for a mission like this?

Ms. MILLARD: They were. Well, it boils down basically to four principal figures. There's Roosevelt, of course. There's his second son, Kermit, an extraordinary, talented young man, you know, had finished Harvard in two and a half years, spoke half a dozen languages. There is the American naturalist George Cherrie, who had spent decades in South American jungles, somehow getting involved in all of these local insurrections. He was an incredibly tough and intrepid ornithologist. And then there's the extraordinary Colonel Candido Rondon who had mapped most of the Amazon and had made contact with its most isolated and most dangerous tribes.

INSKEEP: This sounds like people that you would feel fairly safe with if you were traveling down an uncharted river.

Ms. MILLARD: Yes, it's a good group of men. Unfortunately, they got to the river expecting to live largely off the land.

INSKEEP: Which didn't work out?

Ms. MILLARD: It didn't work out. You know, I think a lot of people think of the Amazon as this garden of plenty. But you know, it's amazing. When you're on--in the Amazon and when you're on this river, as I was, you don't see animals and you don't hear animals because over millions of years of evolutionary history, they have adapted to be nearly invisible in order to protect themselves and to get prey.

INSKEEP: Did Roosevelt know that he might not survive this mission?

Ms. MILLARD: He did certainly while he was on the river. He became gravely ill and he nearly died at several points. He had malaria, but he had a deadly bacterial infection and there came a point in the expedition when he felt that he was going to be a danger to the other men, and he decided to take his own life.

INSKEEP: At the bottom of page 266, there's a paragraph that begins, 'So determined was Roosevelt.' Could you read that paragraph to me?

Ms. MILLARD: Of course. 'So determined was Roosevelt not to endanger the life of anyone else in his expedition that he had made a secret provision for a quick death in the Amazon should it become necessary. Before he even left New York he had packed in his personal baggage, tucked in among his extra socks and eight pairs of eyeglasses a small vial that contained a lethal dose of morphine. "I've always made it a practice on such trips to take a bottle of morphine with me because one never knows what is going to happen," he told the journalist Oscar Davis. "I always meant that, that anytime death became inevitable, I would have it over with at once without going through a long, drawn-out agony through which death was the only relief."

INSKEEP: What kept him from killing himself?

Ms. MILLARD: His son. He knew his son very well. Kermit was his second son and very much like him in many ways, and he knew that he had raised him to be someone to take great responsibility. And he loved his father, and he would have found a way to get him out of the rain forest dead or alive, and Roosevelt understood that as long as he was alive, Kermit would risk everything.

INSKEEP: Meaning that President Roosevelt had to save himself in order to save his son.

Ms. MILLARD: That's right.

INSKEEP: How'd they get out?

Ms. MILLARD: Well, Kermit was the only man who was able to get around this incredible set of rapids. They had come to this seemingly impassable set of rapids and thought that they were going to have to leave their canoes and strike out into the rain forest, every man for himself. And Roosevelt was incredibly ill and knew that he wouldn't be able to do that. And so Kermit convinced everyone that he could lower their boats down with ropes, and he was able to do it. They did lose another canoe, and they lost precious time, but they did get through these rapids and were able to go on.

INSKEEP: What did this episode near the end of Theodore Roosevelt's life teach you about the man who had accomplished so much earlier in this life as a president and even before that?

Ms. MILLARD: I think what's unusual about this expedition--we're used to seeing Roosevelt as president, as a world leader, but I think this is a portrait of Roosevelt as a man, you know, a leader not on the scale of nations and armies but among this tiny besieged group of men who've just been driven to the limits of their endurance. And I think what you see is incredible leadership and incredible strength of character.

INSKEEP: Candice Millard is the author of "The River of Doubt." Thanks very much.

Ms. MILLARD: Thank you.

INSKEEP: The former president lived five more years after his exploration of the River of Doubt, now known as the Rio Roosevelt. After Roosevelt's death, one of his companions on that journey gave a speech. The naturalist George Cherrie said, 'You couldn't know Teddy Roosevelt without loving the man.' And as he recalled seeing a telegram announcing Roosevelt's death in 1919, the explorer said, 'When I read that message, the tears came to my eyes, as they do now.'

You can read an excerpt from "The River of Doubt" at [npr.org](http://npr.org) and also see archival photographs of Roosevelt during that expedition.

This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Steve Inskeep.

RENEE MONTAGNE (Host): And I'm Renee Montagne.

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