



1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft & Debs - The Election that Changed the Country

[by James Chace]

James Chace's *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft & Debs - The Election that Changed the Country* tells the fascinating story of a unique event in American history, when four notable men fought for the presidency and debated the course of America's destiny.

During an election year, it is always interesting and often enlightening to read about presidential elections from America's past, if only to reflect on how the times have changed. Commenting on the 2004 election, pundit Ann Coulter recently wrote in *Jewish World Review*, "But for all their chicanery, vote-stealing, Hollywood starlets, fake polls and faux patriotism, Democrats were wiped out on Election Day."

As such, the 2004 election stands in contrast to prior presidential contests. On the other hand, many aspects of the recent election may very well resemble those from the past. Ultimately, the agenda of present as well as future elections is actually a reflection of the subtle changes that both political parties have undergone over the years.

Almost a century ago, Americans were faced with an unprecedented presidential election. The year was 1912, when four passionate men vigorously sought the presidency. Chace's book provides an illuminating look at what led up to the fascinating election of 1912 and offers detailed biographical sketches of each of the four great men who ran for this nation's highest office.

In 1912, Mr. Chace gives the reader an up-close view of the four candidates, by providing an array of anecdotal information about each man in the years before 1912. In this way, the stage is set for the election that he claims ultimately changed the course of American history. We not only learn how it came to be that these four candidates attempted to win the election, but we gain an understanding of the motivations and convictions of each candidate as he fought for the presidency.

So that readers might fully understand and appreciate the final outcome of the 1912 election, Mr. Chace portrays in great detail the fundamental beliefs and values that Wilson (Democrat), Roosevelt (Progressive), Taft (Republican) and Debs (Socialist) each brought to his own candidacy. *1912* weaves quotes from letters, conversations, and speeches to paint a vivid picture of American politics in the early years of the 20th Century.

Mr. Chace notes that the 1912 election was a pivotal moment in American history. The key issue at that time was reform—a topic pursued by all of the candidates to some degree. The direction America would take throughout the years to follow was thus established by the election of the Democrat, Woodrow Wilson. If not for Theodore Roosevelt's split from the Republican Party, the outcome might have been very different.

Throughout the book, Mr. Chace conveys the dramatic nature of the 1912 election, as it proceeded from the important primaries through the hotly contested conventions and ultimately concluded with Wilson's victory, which was accomplished with less than a majority of the popular vote. He offers readers an intriguing look at an exciting time in American politics.

According to Mr. Chace, the more important election result was the way that the Roosevelt split changed the future of the Republican Party. One can't help but wonder how different the Republican Party might have been if Teddy Roosevelt had been nominated as the Republican candidate in 1912 instead of William Taft, for he certainly would have defeated Woodrow Wilson.

Roosevelt was not like the conservative Taft, whom Chace calls a reluctant president. Roosevelt's Bull Moose platform, which Mr. Chace refers to as a "litany of social justice," included many reforms that would benefit the working class. Mr. Chace contends that Roosevelt's New Nationalism "remains one of the most radical covenants for idealistic reform ever offered in American history." Debs, the Socialist candidate, represented the laboring class and fought against the excesses of industrial capitalism.

Although Wilson was also in many ways a reformist, his focus was on promoting free competition and abolishing the trusts. One of the major issues of the 1912 campaign was how to regulate big business, with Roosevelt and Wilson essentially disagreeing on how this could best be accomplished. No matter what the outcome, however, according to Mr. Chace, both Roosevelt and Wilson helped to establish the activist modern presidency.

It is left to the reader to decide whether the course of American history was indeed altered to the degree that Mr. Chace asserts it was as a result of the exciting presidential race of 1912. In any event, his book is a wonderful excursion into politics the way it used to be practiced.