'Will Rogers: A Political Life' examines entertainer's impact on public opinion

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Sunday, June 05, 2011
6/5/2011 4:20:32 AM

The United States needs "cleaner minds and dirtier fingernails," Will Rogers declared in 1928, as he announced his candidacy for the presidency on the Anti-Bunk Party. His platform had one plank: "Whatever the other fellow don't do, we will."

Will Rogers was seriously funny. The most popular entertainer in America before his death in a plane crash in 1935, he was the top male box-office attraction at the movies. Rogers was also an incisive political commentator, reaching tens of millions of Americans in syndicated newspaper columns and regular radio broadcasts.

In "Will Rogers: A Political Life," Richard White Jr., a professor of public administration at Louisiana State University, examines Rogers' improbable journey from a ranch in the Indian Territory that became part of the state of Oklahoma in 1907, to rope-twirling monologist on Broadway, to national and international acclaim. Too often dismissed as a "hayseed cowboy," White argues, Rogers "provided a critically honest appraisal of American politics" and had a greater impact on public opinion than any entertainer, before or since.

Rogers' appeal, while demonstrates, rested on his uncanny ability to get at the nub of the matter, simply, sincerely and sensibly. A satirist, but not an iconoclast, he was not mean-spirited.

In analyzing the Scopes Trial of 1925, for example, he was an equal-opportunity critic. Instead of trying to prove he didn't come from a monkey, Rogers wrote, William Jennings Bryan should have demonstrated he didn't descend from a Democrat. Intent on demonstrating to jurors that although the sun was shining, it was actually raining, and they were "too cock-eyed to see it," Clarence Darrow should have taken the time to disprove that he came from Chicago.

Despite White's claims, however, Rogers wasn't all that prescient about politics. To be sure, he noticed early on that the Soviet Union had as many class distinctions as Charleston in South Carolina. But he also thought Mussolini "a knockout" who had done more for Italy than "any hundred men in any other country."

Liking to be liked, he often pulled his punches with people - including President Warren G. Harding, the Teapot Dome miscreants and John D. Rockefeller - with whom he had a personal relationship.

White's claims about Rogers' impact on public opinion stem more from a tendency to equate popularity with influence than from any measurable evidence.

 Presidents probably did not listen "with rapt attention" to his appraisal of foreign leaders - nor did his opposition "spur" the U.S. Senate to reject membership in the World Court. It is unlikely that Rogers "did more than any other American" to promote civil aviation and a modern, large air force - or play a greater role than anyone except Franklin Roosevelt in convincing Americans to accept the New Deal.

Beyond a condemnation of political corruption and predatory economic practices, Rogers, like millions of his fellow Americans, didn't really have a clearly delineated political philosophy. They trusted him because he was Anti-Bunk, with few axioms and axioms to grind - and, of course, because he could make them laugh.

Original Print Headline: Author examines Will Rogers' political journey

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Will Rogers (right) introduces Franklin D. Roosevelt at the Hollywood Bowl during Roosevelt's 1932 campaign. Courtesy

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By Richard D. White, Jr.
Texas Tech University Press.
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