

The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters

By Karl Rove

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From *New York Times* bestselling author and political mastermind Karl Rove comes a fresh look at President William McKinley, whose 1896 campaign ended a bitter period of political gridlock and reformed and modernized his party, thereby creating a governing majority that dominated American politics for the next thirty-six years.

The 1896 political environment resembles that of today: A rapidly changing electorate affected by a growing immigrant population, an uncertain economy disrupted by new technologies, growing income inequality, and contentious issues the two parties could not resolve. McKinley found ways to address these challenges and win, which is why his campaign is so relevant to our politics now.

McKinley, a Civil War hero who preferred “The Major” above any other title he was given, changed the arc of American history by running the first truly modern presidential campaign. Knowing his party could only win if it grew beyond its base, he reached out to diverse ethnic groups, including openly seeking the endorsement of Catholic leaders and advocating for black voting rights. Running on the slogan “The People Against the Bosses,” McKinley also took on the machine men who dominated his own party. He deployed campaign tactics still used today, including targeting voters with the best available technology. Above all, he offered bold, controversial answers to the nation’s most pressing challenge—how to make a new, more global economy work for every American—and although this split his own party, he won the White House by sticking to his principles, defeating a charismatic champion of economic populism, William Jennings Bryan.

The 1896 election is a compelling drama in its own right, but McKinley’s strategies offer important lessons for both political parties today.



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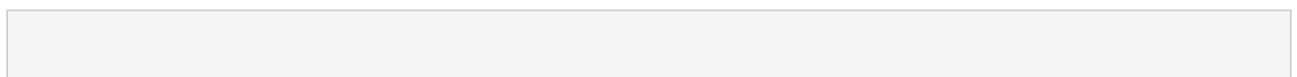
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Editorial Review

Review

"Having run--and won--two presidential campaigns, Karl Rove knows elections. *The Triumph of William McKinley* is a deeply informed and highly engaging account of one of the seminal elections in American history, the 1896 victory that ushered in more than a generation of Republican dominance. A vivid, intriguing and compellingly modern rendering of one of the most underappreciated episodes in American political history." (Charles Krauthammer, author of *Things That Matter*)

"*The Triumph of McKinley* is the Triumph of Karl Rove. This is a rousing tale told by a master storyteller whose love of politics, campaigning, and combat shines through on every page. Both the man and his times are brought to such vivid life that I felt myself catapulted back to the turn of the last century. And it was great fun to be there!" (Doris Kearns Goodwin, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Team of Rivals*)

"Either politics used to be more fun or Karl Rove just makes it seem that way. Whichever, his account of the 1896 election is written with great verve, even as it is informed by thorough research and illuminated by shrewd insight. This is political history at its most engaging." (H.W. Brands, Professor of History, University of Texas at Austin, and author of *Traitor to His Class*)

"Informed by his passion for history and by his love of strategy, Karl Rove has painted a colorful and detailed portrait of an important American moment. Highly recommended!" (Jon Meacham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *American Lion*)

"Karl Rove, who knows a thing or two about presidential campaigns, looks back at a watershed election over a century ago and shows how the winner, William McKinley, used it to change his party, the political process, and the nation. It's all here: the big themes, the backstage maneuvers, the personalities, the hoopla. A great read for historians, political junkies, and--in our own wild election cycle--Americans." (Richard Brookhiser, author of *Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln*)

"McKinley's rise to the presidency is one of the major turning points in U.S. history, but it has never received the attention it deserves. . . . To help his readers understand McKinley's accomplishment, Mr. Rove . . . must take on the herculean task of explaining the meaning of the tariff and monetary controversies to 21st-century readers. . . . Few readers will have any idea about these debates, and it is to Mr. Rove's great credit that he brings them to life. . . . Mr. Rove's narration of the fall campaign is lively and compelling. . . . A rigorous book that should be studied by anyone interested in following McKinley to the White House." (*The Wall Street Journal*)

"[Rove's] richly detailed, moment by moment account in *The Triumph of William McKinley* brings to life the drama of an electoral contest whose outcome seemed uncertain to the candidate and his handlers until the end. But there is more to this book than simply recounting the details of what was arguably the country's first modern presidential campaign. . . . The significance of Rove's book outruns this ambition. For it implicitly raises questions about the causes of electoral success and the rhythms of partisanship. . . . All that said, as Rove demonstrates, candidates and campaigns do matter. The durable electoral and policy outcomes produced by McKinley's victory over a dramatically dissimilar vision remind us how much can be at stake in a presidential election at a time of political polarization." (*New York Times Book Review*)

"A brilliant new book on the first modern presidential campaign. . . . It's a pleasure to read and piquantly relevant to today. . . . Rove delved deep into the primary sources and has produced a work that is meticulously researched . . . well written, and extremely discriminating with an eye for the telling detail. There are many fascinating, unjustly forgotten sagas from American political history revealed. . . . Rove provides a wonderful blend of narrative, scholarship, and knowing mastery of political campaign strategy. If you find politics, political intrigue, or American history compelling you will devour *The Triumph of William McKinley*." (*Ralph Benko, Forbes.com*)

"A superb book. . . . Rove achieves something new. He elevates McKinley's status to that of a historically important president. . . . Presidential candidates who read Rove's account of how McKinley won will be wiser." (*The Weekly Standard*)

"[A] fine new study of the 25th president and his election in 1896. . . . [Rove] proves a reliable guide to the machinations of gilded Age politics. . . . Much has been made of Theodore Roosevelt as the first modern president, but Rove convincingly shows that it was McKinley who helped usher presidential politics into the modern age. . . . Rove has done an admirable job of putting a historical spotlight on a once-beloved leader, reminding us that McKinley led his country into the 20th century in more than just the literal sense." (*National Review*)

"A good, brisk read. . . . [Rove] has a sure touch." (*Washington Post*)

"Rove draws shrewd lessons from McKinley's win for Republicans fighting the next general election." (*The Economist*)

"For guidance in understanding the twisting path to the presidency in an era of extensive change and divided government, Karl Rove makes a compelling case that we should examine the election of 1896. . . . Rove shows himself to be a sure-handed historian. He ably relates the story of McKinley's rise. . . . A gripping, blow-by-blow account [that] brings to life a late-19th-century America that is . . . eerily familiar." (*RealClearPolitics.com*)

"McKinley, perhaps best known by Americans for the Alaskan mountain that once bore his name and the infamy of being one of the few American presidents to have been assassinated, was a vital and critical link in the history of the presidency. . . . Rove proves himself a surprisingly nimble and adept writer, juxtaposing shrewd political analysis with narrative verve. He expertly breaks down the challenges of McKinley's 1896 campaign, which he calls 'the first modern presidential primary campaign.' . . . A well-informed and -researched dissection of McKinley's overlooked influence." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"This substantive book by a political practitioner will appeal to and inform all readers, especially aficionados of American political history." (*Library Journal (starred review)*)

"An incisive look at what veteran political strategist Karl Rove calls "the first modern presidential primary campaign," and astute advice on how the modern Republican Party could benefit from the examples set by the 1896 William McKinley campaign. . . . Rove puts his accumulated knowledge of history to use to craft a superb political read." (*The Washington Times*)

"*The Triumph of William McKinley* is not only readable but also engrossing, a rare relevant history of the mechanics of politics. It educates today's America about politics of another time that are important to understanding our own America and a past now almost completely lost to the public memory." (*New York Journal of Books*)

"A well-researched narrative infused with the insights of a shrewd partisan warrior." (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*)

"*The Triumph of William McKinley* ultimately is another reminder of the valuable lessons of the past, not to mention the reality that there is nothing in the world today that hasn't happened before, no matter the pesky belief that the world revolves around us." (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*)

"Rove's fascination with and understanding of how the [political] process has worked throughout our history shines through in his new book, *The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters*." (*Dayton Daily News*)

"A fascinating glimpse at 19th-century politics." (*Capital Gazette (Annapolis, MD)*)

"Rove [has] feeling for the personal, human cost of politics . . . Rove reminds us that presidential campaigns were no less grueling in the era before the direct primary than they are today, at least for candidates who hadn't sewed up the victory in advance, and he brings a professional's appreciation to McKinley's patient planning." (*The National Interest*)

"An interesting and well-researched book. . . . [Rove's] analysis of political strategy and reasons for McKinley's victory is excellent. . . . The book should please and interest political junkies of both parties." (*Richard Weigel, Professor, Western Kentucky University, in The Daily News (Bowling Green, KY)*)

"With his groundbreaking book, *The Triumph of William McKinley*, we gain deep insights into Rove's genius, an important episode in American history, and the fundamentals of modern politics. . . . [A] valuable contribution to the study of American history [and] practically a scientific manual any would-be "influencer" should digest deeply and thoroughly until the insights gained become instinctive reactions. One also discovers the deep insights which, love him or hate him, made and make Karl Rove himself a fixture in today's political scene." (W. R. Collier, Jr. *The Freedomist*)

About the Author

Karl Rove served as Senior Advisor to President George W. Bush from 2000–2007 and Deputy Chief of Staff from 2004–2007. He now writes a weekly op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal* and is a Fox News contributor. Before he became known as "The Architect" of President Bush's 2000 and 2004 campaigns, Rove was president of Karl Rove + Company, an Austin-based public affairs firm that was involved in over seventy-five campaigns for Republican candidates for president, governor and senator, as well as handling non-partisan causes and non-profit groups.

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The Triumph of William McKinley

CHAPTER 1

Sense of Duty



On July 24, 1864, a twenty-one-year-old Union first lieutenant was sent on a suicide mission near Kernstown, Virginia. An officer in General George Crook's Army of the Kanawha, he was ordered to ride

across an exposed battlefield swept by Rebel musket and artillery fire and tell the men of the 13th West Virginia to withdraw before they were overrun and cut to pieces by Confederates under General Jubal Early, who were close to splitting the Union left.

If the Rebels succeeded in driving Union forces out of the Shenandoah Valley, they might threaten Washington, D.C., further erode Northern support for the war, undercut Lincoln's reelection, and strengthen the South's chances of ending the conflict through a negotiated settlement with a politically divided North.

The lieutenant probably wasn't concerned about these details as he mounted his horse. He was focused on staying alive. Comrades saw him charge "through the open fields, over fences, over ditches" as cannon fire and bullets sprayed the battleground. His tent mate thought he had been hit by an exploding shell, but a "wiry little brown horse" emerged from the smoke with its rider erect and unhurt. He reached the West Virginians and ordered them to withdraw.¹

The lieutenant, William McKinley Jr., was to become the twenty-fifth president of the United States. Upon returning from his ride, his commanding officer—Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes, himself a future president from Ohio—said, "I never expected to see you in life again."²

SOME HISTORIANS WRONGLY CREDIT McKinley's winning the White House in 1896 to Marcus Alonzo "Mark" Hanna, a wealthy iron and coal magnate turned political power broker. Others are content to overlook McKinley, instead spotlighting his second vice president and successor, Theodore Roosevelt.

Yet in 1896 McKinley outmaneuvered the political bosses within his own party to win the Republican nomination and then defeated the Democrats' young, charismatic spokesman for the rising Populist movement—William Jennings Bryan—for the presidency. In the process, McKinley modernized the Republican Party by attracting to it workers, new immigrants, and the growing middle class, allowing the GOP and its policies to dominate politics for the next thirty-six years.

McKinley was the first president in more than two decades to win with a significant popular majority. He took office during a severe, prolonged depression that was quickly replaced by strong growth and prosperity on his watch. He annexed Hawaii and waged a short, successful war with Spain that freed Cuba and gave America control of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. He instituted policies that ensured America would be recognized as a global economic and military power. Enormously popular, he was easily reelected, only to die at an assassin's hands six months into his second term.³

For much of the nineteenth century, the United States had been a nation divided. The period after the Civil War saw growing discord between the agrarian South and West and the industrialized North and East. There was friction between debtors worried about their mortgages and loans and the merchants, bankers, investors, and depositors who had lent them the money. There was increasing antagonism between labor and management, and profound disagreements over how the economy should be organized and its benefits distributed. All this was reflected in brutal political battles over esoteric issues like tariffs and currency that nonetheless deeply affected the lives of ordinary people.

In many ways, these clashes weren't about economics—they were about competing visions for America. Through the nineteenth century, the United States filled the frontier with settlers and established firm control over the continent. Yet these pioneers were rocked by periodic financial panics and lived on loans from merchants and bankers until their crops came in, leading some to blame Eastern financiers for fleecing them as they carved out lives far from the Eastern seaboard's money centers. Some Americans resented those who appeared to dominate the nation's political institutions, and as the century drew to a close, these critics

became increasingly vocal. While an agrarian protest movement was sweeping the South, the Plains, and parts of the Midwest, labor was also organizing across the country, a result of increased industrialization.⁴

In 1896, McKinley emerged as a political leader uniquely suited for the moment. He understood and championed blue-collar voters while drawing support from captains of industry. He was from a small town in rural Ohio, but as president presided over a rapidly modernizing urban industrial power. His economic concerns appeared parochial, but he viewed them through a national lens. The last of the Civil War generation to occupy the White House, he helped unite the country after decades of division.

A SHADOW HAS BEEN cast on McKinley's reputation by a remark he made that he learned more from people than from books. Though he was well read and well educated, biographers still assumed the throwaway line justified a narrative that William McKinley was not particularly thoughtful or intellectually curious. Yet his election is widely seen as one of the most consequential in American history, leading to a dramatic political realignment.⁵

So was McKinley a fortunate man who rose through luck and the guidance of others, as popular commentary suggests? Or was he a leader, very much in control of his own destiny, content to steer quietly but deliberately, focused on reaching goals more than on claiming credit?

In fact, McKinley was a principled man with strong convictions. He was ambitious—most who attain the White House are—but for him, his ambition seems to have been chiefly driven by principles.

Understanding McKinley starts with knowing his forebears, who sprang from Scotland, moved to Ireland, and then came to America, taking up residence in Pennsylvania and, finally, Niles, Ohio, where the future president was born January 29, 1843, the seventh of nine children.⁶

The Scotch-Irish made an impact on America that far outweighs their numbers. Settling on the frontier, many Scotch-Irish families cut farms out of dense forests while suffering hunger and deprivation and repelling Indian attacks. The story of McKinley's ancestors follows this narrative. He had men on both sides of his family who fought in the American Revolution, after which his forebears moved west to Ohio, when the state was still a fertile wilderness. His grandfather and father were ironmongers, digging ore out of hillsides, chopping wood, tending fires, and smelting metal in small furnaces.⁷

Hanna—who had a more mangled yet somewhat similar lineage—once said McKinley received all the Scottish reticence of their shared heritage, while he got all the Irishman's gregariousness. There was something to the remark. Hanna enjoyed politics' jocular side, while McKinley remained personally reserved from childhood to the White House.

Reserved shouldn't imply disengaged. The wife of McKinley's principal Ohio political rival once said he was a man who wore many "masks," making it hard to read his emotions or intentions. McKinley's reserved nature wasn't just artifice. It was the deliberate approach of a disciplined man who went about his business in a systematic way. He didn't let his emotions cloud sound decision making or affect his relations with others.⁸

McKinley's parents were Methodists and held a deep faith common on the frontier. His father was especially religious, writing his then-forty-one-year-old son in 1884 upon hearing of a family medical crisis to ask, "Is your faith strong[?]" Reserved like his son, Father McKinley was a frugal hard worker with a reputation for integrity. While not well educated, the elder McKinley nonetheless read widely and was fond of reciting favorite lines from a prized volume of Shakespeare.⁹

Young William was close to both his parents—especially his mother, as his father was often away on business. Nancy Allison McKinley descended from Puritans who fled Old World religious persecution and helped William Penn found Pennsylvania. In the New World, her ancestors maintained their faith's quiet intensity. Nancy had charge of the Niles Methodist church, keeping it clean and well maintained as if it were her home. A neighbor remembered she "ran the church, all but the preaching." Mother McKinley (as she became known) tended to ailing friends and boarded traveling ministers and teachers in the family's home. She also served as the small town's peacemaker, resolving quarrels and neighborhood disputes.¹⁰

In Niles, where the family lived until William Jr. was nine years old, the McKinleys occupied a long, narrow wood-framed home with a general store on one side—close quarters where a mother could keep her children constantly engaged in constructive activity. All her children had chores and were expected to rise early and turn in early. As a boy and young man, William would return home from school to help his mother with her work around the house.¹¹

The McKinley home was not without education or culture. The family had a Bible and, unusual for the time, a small library that included David Hume's *History of England*, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Charles Dickens's early works. Family members regularly read many of the nation's leading periodicals, including *Atlantic Monthly* (reportedly favored by William) and Horace Greeley's *antislavery Weekly Tribune*.

McKinley developed a lifelong fondness for the poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Lord Byron, reflecting a romantic streak. The sentiments of these writers shaped his character. Whittier was a founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Longfellow was an active abolitionist and used his poetry to draw attention to the cruelty of treating people as property.¹²

Because the senior McKinley was not well educated, he wanted his children to be. So the family left Niles and resettled in Poland, Ohio, which had a better school. McKinley was a serious scholar who spent considerable time on his studies. Yet while working part-time at the post office or at other odd jobs, he still found time to help organize his school's "Debating and Literary Society," where he excelled at speaking and arguing. At seventeen, he graduated from the high school and, because of his grades and maturity, was accepted as a junior at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Sadly, he fell ill his first semester in 1860 and left after a few weeks.¹³

William's mother long desired for him to enter the ministry and insisted the family regularly attend church, Sunday school, tent revivals, and camp meetings. Young McKinley needed little encouragement. Enrolling in Sunday school even before starting regular school, he was always dedicated and sincere in his faith. "God is the being above all to be loved, and served," he once said. He studied the Bible with the "especial thoroughness" that would characterize his future work in law and politics. He picked up some Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and was "eternally asking questions" in Sunday school, going "to the bottom of the subject," as one acquaintance later recalled.¹⁴

At fifteen, McKinley felt strong enough in his faith to be baptized into the Niles Methodist Church at a camp meeting in 1858. For the rest of his life, through the Civil War's brutal combat, his wife's long illness, and in trying political battles that (on occasion) resulted in his defeat, McKinley's faith informed his character and his relationships with others. It gave him optimism that God's plan was working in his life and in the world. The Christian acceptance of life's tribulations in "Nearer My God to Thee" made it his favorite hymn.¹⁵

The *Weekly Tribune's* presence in the McKinley home hints at another force that shaped McKinley's character—an intense opposition to slavery. Ohio was a northern state, but McKinley grew up a short

distance from the Ohio River—and on the other bank was a slave state, Virginia, later home to the capital of the Confederacy. The Underground Railroad ran through northeast Ohio near where McKinley lived. Slavery's existence in a neighboring state gave people in Northern border states an intimate personal experience with the cruelty of human bondage that some came to deplore. Northerners like McKinley were incensed when the new federal Fugitive Slave Act required them to capture and return any escaped bondsmen. The senior McKinley was a staunch Free Soil man; he and his wife were passionately against slavery.¹⁶

As a consequence, so was young McKinley. Mother McKinley later described the family as “very strong abolitionists” and said her son “early imbibed very radical views regarding the enslavement of the colored race.” He even argued with pro-slavery Democrats who worked at a local tannery. It is unlikely that the teenager won them over, but he had formed a core principle that would govern his life. Slavery was wrong and must be resisted. Every person—regardless of color—ought to be free.¹⁷

Slavery wasn't the only social force to shape McKinley's views and character. He came of age as the world around him began to take off. Like in other states in the emerging Midwest, Ohio's population and industries boomed, especially as the opening of canal systems gave its farms, mines, and nascent factories access to global markets in the 1820s and '30s. When made a state in 1803, Ohio had 45,000 citizens. By 1850, there were 1,980,000.¹⁸

These Ohioans came from Ireland, England, Germany, and elsewhere in America, all drawn by fertile land, opportunity, and the promise of prosperity. Ohio became more politically critical, with an ever-rising number of congressmen as its population grew, and a new reputation as a battleground in which presidential elections were settled. Competition between the parties was fierce in this politically divided state. From the Civil War to the century's end, the five Republicans elected president were born in Ohio.¹⁹

Agriculture initially drove Ohio's economy. In the 1840s, Ohio was a leading producer of wheat, corn, and, because corn grows animals, livestock and wool as well. But by the Civil War, coal and iron had also become pillars of its economy and Ohio had more miles of railroad track than any other state. This was key to the state's prosperity. With railroads and waterways, farmers and manufacturers could reach and profit from global markets, and in war, the rails could deliver men and matériel to the front quickly.²⁰

Ohio continued its rapid expansion after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox and, like other Midwest states, became a center of agricultural and industrial innovation as Ohioans developed “reapers, seed drills, steel plows, cultivators, binders, and steam threshing machines” and created a slew of innovative companies that became household names while transforming commerce, among them Procter & Gamble, founded in Cincinnati when William Procter (a candlemaker) and James Gamble (a soap maker's apprentice) joined forces in 1837; National Cash Register, founded in Dayton in 1884; and Standard Oil Company (which John D. Rockefeller took to national prominence), founded in Cleveland in 1870.²¹

In short, the Ohio into which McKinley was born and to which he returned after combat reflected America's changing condition. As in many rapidly expanding economies, the influx of people and uneven growth created controversies even as they fostered prosperity and created new fortunes.

AS A VERY YOUNG man, McKinley made a life-changing decision. When Southern cannons battered Fort Sumter, Lincoln called for volunteers for three-month enlistments. Recruiters spread across the North to encourage sign-ups. In Poland, Ohio, a young lawyer named Charles E. Glidden stood on the Sparrow House tavern steps to urge the town's young men to enlist. “Our country's flag has been shot at,” Glidden declared as women in the balcony above sang and prayed. “Who will be the first to defend it?” McKinley—then

eighteen—attended the rally, but didn't rush to join, instead taking time to talk with his cousin William McKinley Osborne.²²

The two young men decided they must enlist, so McKinley pled their case to his parents that night. Despite his mother's hesitance, they received permission to join the Poland men at Fort Jackson, near Columbus. When they arrived, they learned no three-month enlistments were available—the nation had already met Lincoln's quota. William, his cousin, and the other Poland men could go home, or they could enlist for three years or the duration of the war, whichever was longer. All but two Poland volunteers voted to fight through to the war's end.²³

William—mustered in as a private—explained three days later to his sister Anna that he enlisted “to serve my country, in this her perilous hour, from a sense of duty.” Since, he wrote, Americans were blessed to be citizens “of this highly favored land,” it is “our duty to throw ourselves at the altar of our Common Country.”²⁴

McKinley's faith underpinned that sense of duty. During his early days in training, he joined a regular prayer service for the soldiers and, in the diary he kept during the war's opening months, wrote this passage as he and his comrades prepared for combat in West Virginia's rugged mountains:

Tomorrow's sun will undoubtedly find me on a march. It may be I will never see the light of another day. Should this be my fate, I fall in a good cause and hope to fall in the arms of my blessed redeemer. This record I want to be left behind, that I not only fell as a soldier for my Country, but also as a Soldier of Jesus.²⁵

These beliefs led McKinley to display courage on the battlefield on more than one occasion. Two years earlier, McKinley's regiment was east of Antietam Creek, near Sharpsburg, Maryland, on the Civil War's bloodiest single day—September 17, 1862. McKinley's comrades and other Union troops went into action at 2 a.m. After twelve hours of brutal combat, they captured a key bridge and by early afternoon were over the creek, sheltered from Confederate fire, waiting to attack Sharpsburg.

Worried that his men were hungry, McKinley—then a commissary sergeant—decided to act when the army's supply train finally arrived near the front. He confiscated a pair of wagons, organized stragglers to load them with beef, pork, crackers, beans, and coffee, and recruited a volunteer to handle one wagon while he drove the other to take the food and drink to their famished Ohio comrades.

Making their way along a wooded road, the men were twice ordered to turn around: McKinley's comrades were across an open field, a killing ground raked by Confederate fire. He talked his way past the first officer and simply ignored the second. Rebel cannons opened up when McKinley's wagon burst out of the trees and roared onto the field and toward the bridge. Comrades saw the wagon charge forward “at breakneck speed, through a terrific fire of musketry and artillery” that “threatened annihilation to everything within its range.” A cannonball blew away part of his wagon, but McKinley safely reached the cheering men of the 23rd Ohio.

As he moved among the wounded, pouring coffee from a bucket, one badly injured soldier said, “God bless the lad!” McKinley later called that “the highest reward” he could have received. Soon sent home on a recruiting trip, he was awarded a second lieutenant's commission by Ohio governor David Tod. McKinley was nineteen. When comrades lobbied years later for him to receive the Medal of Honor for that day at Antietam, he blocked their effort.²⁶

Throughout the war, McKinley was often in the center of action and had at least two horses shot from

underneath him. His coolness under fire brought a final promotion after the Battle of Cedar Creek in the upper Shenandoah Valley.

As at Kernstown, the Confederates were attacking with the hope of driving the Federals out of the valley. But unlike at Kernstown, the commanding Union general—Philip Sheridan—was not on the scene. Returning from a conference in Washington, he spent the night in Winchester, about twelve miles away. Waking to artillery fire early on October 19, 1864, Sheridan realized his army was under a major attack. The small, scrappy, bowlegged cavalryman mounted Rienzi, his giant jet-black gelding, gathered his command staff, and galloped south.

Along the way, Sheridan ran into retreating Union troops and urged the men to turn around. Upon reaching the front, one of the first officers he saw was McKinley, deploying a battery to pour grapeshot into the advancing Rebels. McKinley brought Sheridan to Crook. The two generals soon decided on a counterattack. After probing the Southern lines and discovering a weak point, George Armstrong Custer's cavalry division delivered a smashing blow to the Confederates.²⁷

For his heroism at Cedar Creek, McKinley was promoted to brevet major, giving him the rank, but not its pay. Still, he was content, preferring "Major" above any other title he was to have in life. "I earned that," he later explained. "I am not so sure of the rest." The comment was revealing—to his life's end, he remained proud of his military service, yet was remarkably modest about his exploits. This willingness to fight for his beliefs would emerge again later, when McKinley's political life was on the line.²⁸

Shortly after McKinley joined the army, an old veteran gave him advice: "Do little things not exactly under your supervision. Be conscientious in all your duties, and be faithful, and it will not be long until your superior officer will consider you an indispensable assistant." It was counsel McKinley took to heart, for in 1899 as president, he gave nearly identical advice to a nephew serving in the military in the Philippines. This attitude caught Hayes's attention, McKinley's commanding officer for most of the war's first three years. In a letter home, Hayes called McKinley "one of the bravest and finest officers in the army." Much later, Hayes explained, "I came to know him like a book, and love him like a brother." Having watched his protégé's time in the military, Hayes said, "Young McKinley was a man of rare capacity for a boy of his age."²⁹

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. once remarked, "The generation that carried on the war has been set apart by its experience." This, too, was true of McKinley. At the war's close, he was a twenty-two-year-old brevet major who had risen through the ranks from private. He had deeply held moral convictions and risked his life defending his country's existence. He was a quiet but determined man with a deep, abiding faith in God, the United States, and the capacity of hard work to change the world around him.

Like many veterans, McKinley had to decide on a peacetime career and where to settle. As he grappled with these questions, he also decided to become politically active. Like many in the generation of warriors who saved the Union, he was unwilling to trust the Democratic Party, which had opposed the conflict. McKinley had always been a Republican, but after the war, his passionate support for the GOP led him to consider running for office in a state filled with ambitious men who would dominate the nation's politics.³⁰

POLITICS DURING MCKINLEY'S LIFETIME was practiced with an intensity difficult to comprehend today. After the Civil War and perhaps because of it, Americans had deep emotional attachments to their political parties, which produced astounding turnout. In the twenty years between 1876 and 1896, an average of 79 percent of voters turned out in presidential elections, compared to 54 percent over the past two modern decades. Turnout was even higher in the North; for example, reaching 88 percent in New York State in 1876.³¹

Many people passionately believed the republic's very future depended on which party won and what policies were enacted. Campaigns were national educational efforts with lectures, debates, books, posters, and pamphlets driving home the party's message, itself embodied in carefully drafted platforms that were widely circulated and discussed. Speeches—that era's equivalent to TV ads as a campaign's principal way to share its message—were particularly important, and parties covered target states with hundreds of orators.

The scope of each party's efforts was enormous. When parties "canvassed," workers ascertained the outlook of every single voter in each precinct, producing a precise tabulation of the party's anticipated vote. To sustain these vast armies of workers, parties relied on patronage, boodle, and sometimes corruption.³²

After Ulysses S. Grant left office in 1877, the nation's political system became a mess for two decades. The Republican and Democratic parties were evenly matched, with the South solidly Democratic and most of the North and East Republican. Presidential elections were decided in a handful of perennial battlegrounds—Ohio, Indiana, New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. No president was elected with more than 50 percent of the popular vote in the five elections after 1872. Two Republicans—Rutherford B. Hayes and Benjamin Harrison—won the White House with fewer popular votes than their Democratic opponents by carrying the Electoral College. Hayes's election involved a dispute about Florida's results that lasted for months. A third Republican—James A. Garfield—won the popular vote by just 7,368 votes.³³

In the 1874 midterms, the GOP lost its Reconstruction-era dominance of the House of Representatives. Afterward, there was divided government for two decades, with each party controlling the White House and both houses of Congress for only two of the next twenty-two years. During this era, both parties used parliamentary maneuvers to gridlock Congress and block the resolution of major issues. Democrats in the House even refused to answer roll calls, thereby denying a quorum to consider any legislation. Antics like this caused Henry Adams to decry Washington as "more and more incompetent."³⁴

The country's political system grew increasingly preoccupied with two major issues. One pitted farmers and others who carried a lot of debt, and the politicians who represented them, against those who believed in stable and sound money. The issue they fought over was currency, or more precisely, which medium to use for money—paper, gold, or silver, with the last receiving more attention as years went by. As historian Richard Hofstadter asked, "Who today can understand without a strenuous effort of imagination the passions once aroused by the cry for free silver?" Yet the currency issue increasingly dominated the national debate in the Gilded Age, especially during times of economic adversity.³⁵

The second issue pitted manufacturers and those who worked in vital industries against consumers forced to pay more for life's necessities, such as sugar, cotton, wool, and cloth, as well as needed manufacturing goods. This issue—tariffs—also saw those who believed in a limited and constrained government fighting those who believed in a more activist national government.

Both issues were proxies for larger debates about how to grow the economy and ensure that every American benefited from it, and about what the proper role of government should be. McKinley's Ohio was a microcosm of the nation on these issues, with an electorate narrowly divided over them, especially currency.

Tariffs were the form of taxes by which the federal government funded itself in the nineteenth century and often the subject of passionate debates. Many people in the Gilded Age saw tariffs as a way to grow the economy by protecting American businesses against foreign competition. They believed high tariffs were necessary to produce a prosperous modern industrial economy and create innovation and competition. Their opponents believed tariffs reduced the spending power of every consumer, hitting farmers and rural communities hardest, and transferred money from the deserving poor to the greedy rich.

Because they are taxes, tariffs have been a contentious issue since 1816, when then–House Speaker Henry Clay made them a core element of his “American System,” which sought to strengthen the new republic by promoting economic growth. The American System was pitched as “an act of national resistance” to overseas powers, a scheme that would make the United States economically as well as politically independent from the Old World.

Nonetheless, tariffs sparked bitter political conflicts, including the nation’s first secession crisis in 1830, when South Carolina’s John Calhoun asserted a state could nullify federal laws it considered unconstitutional. Calhoun had in mind the 1828 “Tariff of Abominations,” which slapped steep duties on commodities desperately needed by Southerners. South Carolina responded to the tariff by threatening to block federal revenue collectors at its ports. Congress ended the emergency in 1833 by reducing tariffs to 20 percent while authorizing military force to put down nullification efforts, if necessary.³⁶

During the Civil War, tariffs were raised five times to fund the Union war effort, reaching an average of 47 percent on most items. They remained high after the South’s defeat, in part to pay off the war debt. Opinion about them remained divided, largely along sectional lines. Many Northern manufacturers—including those in McKinley’s Ohio—favored high tariffs for protecting their industries, while Southern (and increasingly Plains and Midwestern) farmers opposed them because they didn’t benefit from them, but instead paid higher prices for goods. Tariffs also provided funds to the federal government to pay pensions to Union veterans, which didn’t sit well with Southerners since Rebel veterans were ineligible for federal pensions.³⁷

Some people strongly believed tariffs benefited the wealthy, enriching well-to-do business owners at the little man’s expense with a system so opaque, it was hard to tell who was benefiting and by how much. Decrying protection as “unfair and tyrannical,” a Democratic congressman in the 1880s charged tariff schedules were “sired by a lobby of hired agents of monopoly” and written “in a secret conclave,” not in the Capitol. A battle over a copper tariff led an observer to complain that Washington was so corrupt that the entire Congress should be in prison.³⁸

There was also a fundamental disagreement over protection’s role in promoting competition. Its opponents believed protection led to “vicious combinations” of “industrial monopoly” and was responsible for the rise of trusts, industry-wide monopolies that robbed consumers through higher-than-justified prices. Advocates of protection said it promoted more-robust domestic competition, pointing to declining prices for manufacturing goods protected by higher tariffs. In reality, neither trusts nor declining manufacturing goods’ prices were caused by protection. They were more likely the result of the nation’s rapid industrialization and the introduction of new technologies and production methods that dramatically increased productivity.³⁹

The parties could not resolve this issue because there were profound differences in their ideologies. Republicans favored an activist national government that ensured the rights of freed slaves, enabled white and black Republicans in the South to vote, made permanent the political and social gains made in the Civil War, and promoted American industrial expansion. Tariffs provided revenues that made a more energetic government possible, especially when they produced government surpluses, as they frequently did in the postwar period.

On the other hand, Democrats favored states’ rights, limited government, and tax cuts. Their leaders like President Grover Cleveland assailed protective tariffs as a “vicious, inequitable, and illogical source of unnecessary taxation.” While the party was solidifying white rule in the South by systematically extinguishing black voting rights there, it recognized its weakness in the North. So the Democrats tried restoring their national dominance by standing up for the little man at a time of rapid industrialization.⁴⁰

The battle over tariffs reflected a much larger, anxious debate over how wealth would be distributed in an America still inventing its economy, who deserved protection in this tumultuous new world, and how the federal government should be financed. This contentious issue also added to tensions lingering from the Civil War. Depending on who was talking, tariffs either led to prosperity, good jobs, and high wages, or they eroded prosperity by robbing from the poor and giving to rich manufacturers. It was an issue that McKinley would have to master and make his own if he was to succeed in the politics of a rapidly industrializing, yet farm-rich state.

The other issue dominating post-Civil War politics was the volatile question of currency, specifically the demands of an increasing number of Americans for an expansion of the money supply by minting an unlimited amount of silver coins that would be accepted for debts on the same basis as gold. This issue was similarly fraught with risk for politicians from closely divided battlegrounds like Ohio.

Farmers were especially interested in the money issue, because so many were debtors caught in a vicious system. In the South, many farmers were forced into the crop lien scheme where local “furnishing merchants” supplied them with necessities in return for title to their crops. At “settlin’ time,” the farmers’ debts routinely exceeded the value of their harvest, adding to their outstanding loan balance.⁴¹

In the Midwest, farmers were squeezed by declining grain prices offered by buyers and mills and exorbitant freight and grain warehouse rates. Those who owned their own land tended to do better, but half of Midwestern farmers in the Gilded Age had mortgages or were tenant farmers and had to get credit each spring from the furnishing merchants or a local or private bank. Mortgages came from far-distant Eastern insurance or mortgage companies that charged high interest rates. While farmers were hammered by declining commodity prices, their creditors benefited from an appreciating currency as tariff duties paid in foreign gold bolstered the U.S. dollar.⁴²

The currency debate revolved around explosive questions of what constituted money, how much of it there should be, and who should control its creation. Over the Gilded Age, the country divided between advocates of “sound” or “hard” money based on the gold standard, and those who favored “soft” money through currency inflation.

Initially, many who favored inflating the currency supported paper money, even though America’s paper money experiment with “Continental” during the Revolutionary War failed. Continentals had depreciated rapidly, causing massive inflation and undermining the revolutionary cause’s credit. The sentiment “Not worth a Continental” led the new nation to rely on gold and silver coins and banknotes redeemable in specie. After 1836, silver appreciated beyond its statutory ratio with gold and fell out of use as debtors paid in the more abundant and therefore proportionally cheaper gold. Mints stopped coining silver dollars except for trade with countries that had silver currencies, such as China, and America operated on a de facto gold standard.⁴³

That changed when the Civil War caused people to hoard any available coins, gold or silver. The nation left the gold standard in December 1861 when the Treasury followed banks in preserving its dwindling gold supplies by refusing to redeem notes in the yellow metal. In February 1862, Congress authorized the use of unsecured paper money, quickly dubbed greenbacks, as legal tender. Additional paper money was authorized in June 1862 and January 1863. The scarcity of metal coins also caused the issuance of fractional paper notes for pocket change. By war’s end, \$372 million in greenbacks and \$18 million in fractional notes were circulating, more than 30 percent of the nation’s money supply.⁴⁴

While paper money allowed Lincoln to finance the war effort, greenbacks—like Continentals—depreciated

in value, raising costs for goods and services. People held on to the gold and silver coins that they still possessed and resorted to bartering and even using postage stamps encased in small metal frames to pay for purchases. Fiat paper money bred inflation, and by the end of the war, the cost of living had nearly doubled for ordinary people.⁴⁵

The national debt, which stood at \$2,808,549,437.55 at war's end, also complicated matters. Roughly \$1.6 billion of that debt came in the form of "5-20" gold bonds, which required 6 percent interest paid in gold in five years and the balance paid off in twenty years. Servicing and retiring that debt threatened to significantly decrease the government's gold supply, which led to raucous and bitter political fights.⁴⁶

Two camps emerged. One was composed of Americans—especially farmers in the South and Midwest, mostly debtors—who felt they were being crushed by low prices for what they raised and who wanted more money in circulation, believing that would enable them to earn more for their products and to afford life's necessities. They believed the amount of money in circulation was inadequate and that the federal government must expand the quantity of currency to keep the economy growing.⁴⁷

While united in backing inflation as a concept, there was disagreement on how much was necessary or how the federal government should inflate the currency. Some wanted to issue more greenbacks; others supported maintaining the Civil War level of paper money. Still others favored allowing local banks to issue notes or redeeming only some of the fiat currency. Over the postwar period, many inflationists came to believe the answer was to let all the growing riches of silver being ripped from mines in Nevada, Colorado, Montana, Idaho, and elsewhere be coined into money.

Opposing them were those who favored stopping inflation and strengthening the government's credit with a currency based on gold. These hard-money advocates argued government must retire fiat paper currency and return to gold and paper redeemable in gold. They argued if America retained its wartime unsecured paper currency, it would not attract foreign investment, manufacturers and farmers would be unable to compete with foreign producers, and inflation would erode consumer purchasing power. The greenbacks must be retired quickly to wring inflation out of the system. In other words, shrink the money supply.

Inflationists were dealt a setback in April 1866 when the Republican Congress passed the Contraction Act, permitting the Treasury to withdraw \$10 million in greenbacks over six months, then \$4 million a month at its discretion. A recession turned public opinion against the contraction of the money supply and led to the act's repeal in February 1868, but only after \$44 million of greenbacks had been withdrawn.

For the next several years, hard- and soft-money men kept debating how and how fast to repay the war debt, when Washington could resume redeeming greenbacks in gold, and whether to contract or expand the money supply. Each faction grew more determined to fight it out in Congress and at ballot boxes across America.

At the beginning of his political career, McKinley cut his political teeth on the currency issue and tariffs. He straddled on currency. He believed in sound money, but like many Midwest Republicans, hoped the country could reach a balance allowing for mild inflation that relieved the problem for farmers and debtors of too little money without creating one of too much.

He did not hedge on high tariffs. He favored protection as the way to create good jobs and high wages. For McKinley, the protective tariff was partly an economic issue of how America could cope in an increasingly global world. It was also an issue of nationalism, of protecting American workers and companies from unfair foreign competition. And it was a moral issue: how best to promote general prosperity and reap the benefits of a society where work was valued and safeguarded.

Through the decades that followed the Civil War, McKinley understood economic issues were part of a broader fight over what kind of country the United States would be. The animating principle of McKinley's political career was a concern for creating conditions that would allow ordinary people to rise. His combat experiences provided him with an intimate connection to Americans from all walks of life, and he never insulated himself from them. He understood the larger moral dimensions of these issues and how to explain them in ways people could grasp. This ability would help make him an important actor in the nation's story as the United States moved toward the twentieth century's dawn.

But in April 1865, he was an army major hoping the war was drawing to a close.

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