

William McKinley's Values and the Origins of the Spanish-American War: A Reinterpretation

NICK KAPUR
Harvard University

Prevailing interpretations of the causes of the Spanish-American War emphasize the role of yellow journalism, business interests, or congressional politics in forcing President William McKinley into a war that he neither sought nor wanted. This article reexamines McKinley's decision making in the months leading up to the Spanish-American War in the context of "Victorian" values, such as arbitrationism, pacifism, humanitarianism, and manly self-restraint, and argues that McKinley's actions were based more on these values than on external pressures. A closer look at the evidence suggests that McKinley's speech before Congress on April 11, 1898, may have been more a moment of unprecedented presidential power than a showing of personal weakness.

The Spanish-American War deeply divided the American people. Although its resounding success from a military standpoint and the astonishingly high ratio of heroes produced to casualties suffered led John Hay to deem it "a splendid little war," many Americans at the time and in the years since considered it an unnecessary, unwanted, and unwarranted conflict. In combination with the messy entanglements in the Philippines that directly followed, the Spanish-American War called cherished American ideals into question, spawned leagues of anti-imperialists, and fostered resilient strains of pacifism that would endure in American cultural and political life at least until World War II. Even though the heated contests surrounding the Spanish and Philippine conflicts gradually ebbed out of American politics as most Americans came to accept them as part of the past, these debates have remained alive to historians, who, after all, are in the business of keeping the past in mind. In what was a short and otherwise well-documented conflict, no aspect of the Spanish-American War has produced more debate among historians than the question of why it started in the first place. At the center of these debates stands President William McKinley. That a president who, in his own words and by all accounts, was profoundly in favor of a peaceful resolution to the Cuban crisis took

Nick Kapur is a doctoral candidate in history at Harvard University, where he is completing a dissertation on U.S.-Japan relations during the John F. Kennedy administration.

the final steps that made war unavoidable presents a basic problem of interpretation to any historian writing on the war or the origins of American imperialism.

The historical interpretations of McKinley's decision to make war on Spain in the spring of 1898 are exceedingly numerous. While the vast array of accounts vary greatly in nuance and subtle assessment of precise causes, certain trends and continuities can be observed. Early accounts of the war's origins reflected the ebullient mood of the nation in the wake of America's triumphant victory by praising McKinley as a strong figure who, in a wise and measured course, exhausted every avenue to peace before deciding decisively in favor of war. This glowing appraisal was taken to even further extremes in the hagiographical "Memorial Lives" of "our third martyred president" that appeared following McKinley's assassination in the fall of 1901. This interpretation of McKinley's decision making as virtually beyond reproach culminated in Charles S. Olcott's two-volume 1916 account, *The Life of William McKinley* (which remains to this day the fullest biography of the twenty-fifth president). Olcott writes that, despite the threats to his political career and the temptations of wartime popularity,

McKinley was . . . heedless of personal considerations. . . . No thought of self ever marred his devotion to duty. While congressmen stormed and threatened without knowing the real progress of affairs, McKinley quietly but aggressively pushed his preparations for war and at the same time held back the ever-increasing pressure while he exhausted the last chance to obtain a peaceful solution. (1916, 2:27)

Among McKinley's political enemies, meanwhile, the prowar Democrats harshly criticized McKinley for unnecessarily delaying an unavoidable conflict while the anti-imperialists argued that McKinley did not wait long enough, excoriating him as a devious expansionist who deliberately and willfully precipitated an unnecessary war following only cursory and halfhearted attempts at peace. In the final analyses, none of these early interpretations proves particularly reliable, as the authors were writing so soon after the events, and in the highly politically charged atmosphere of McKinley's recent assassination and the ongoing acrimony over the Philippines. Even Olcott, who had some perspective after the passage of 15 years and whose work was the most scholarly in composition, was impaired in his objectivity because of his status as the virtual official biographer who had the approval of McKinley's personal secretary and close friend George B. Cortelyou and whose access to documents and the recollections of McKinley's close associates depended on his taking a favorable view of McKinley (a view that, in any case, he was already disposed to take from the start).

Beginning in the 1920s, professional historians began to argue the primacy of public opinion and "yellow journalism" in causing the Spanish-American War. These accounts portrayed McKinley as weak and vacillating, a man who wanted peace but lacked the courage and fortitude to stand up to the crowd. Two apocryphal quotations are representative of this stream of interpretation. In one, William Randolph Hearst supposedly replied to the artist Frederick Remington's complaint that there was no war in Cuba: "You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war" (Wisn 1934, 459). Meanwhile, it was Charles and Mary Beard, in their 1927 history *The Rise of American Civilization*, who first popularized the alleged taunt by Theodore Roosevelt that "McKinley had no

more backbone than a chocolate éclair.”¹ In an interpretation that is still enshrined in numerous textbooks to this day, the Beards argued that “every congressman” had “two or three newspapers in his district—most of them printed in red ink . . . and shouting for blood” and that “many of McKinley’s advisors were equally bent on a resort to arms.” They concluded that, “overwhelmed by such pressure, the President surrendered such pacific intentions as he had entertained . . . without making public the latest concessions from Madrid” (1934, 2:371-72). Similarly, in a popular antiwar account of the conflict, Walter Millis deemed the war a “popular crusade” and asserted that McKinley had no hope of resisting a nation “afame with the martial spirit” (1931, 148).

Two other more scholarly studies concurred with the interpretation posited by the Beards and Millis. In *Expansionists of 1898*, Julius Pratt agreed that the war was “forced” on McKinley “by the popular reaction to the distressing situation in Cuba” (1936, 278), while Joseph Wisan presented perhaps the most compelling evidence in his detailed 1934 study of New York newspapers, arguing that McKinley’s hopes for peace were “made impossible by the high emotional pitch to which the public was raised” and that “responsibility for this state of mind rests primarily with the press.” Hearst’s role was central to Wisan’s understanding, and thus he boldly declared, “The Spanish American War would not have occurred had not the appearance of Hearst in New York journalism precipitated a bitter battle for newspaper circulation” (1934, 458).²

Interestingly, both Wisan and Pratt explicitly argued that business interests had not played a role in precipitating the war, and had in fact stood against it. “The leading commercial and financial interests of the nation,” Wisan wrote, “feared the possible effects of war” and therefore “sought not only to avoid war, but to minimize its possibility” (1934, 455). Similarly, Pratt asserted that until the war started, “American business, in general, had strongly opposed action that would lead to war with Spain” (1936, 233). The Beards, however, while identifying the yellow journals and the ensuing “popular tumult” as the primary causal factor in McKinley’s decision to war with Spain, granted secondary importance to “economic interest,” explaining that McKinley’s position as the leader of “the party of business enterprise” had given a certain “new tone” to American foreign policy.

This argument was taken up and examined more closely in the 1960s by liberal historians. In his influential study *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, William Appleman Williams argued that American leaders, including William McKinley, generally believed that economic expansion into new overseas markets was necessary to sustain American prosperity. Williams claimed that American leaders consciously acted with economic ends in mind, not in a limited, “pocketbook sense,” but according to “a *Weltanschauung* that organized data around economic criteria.” Elaborating this concept, Williams asserted that

1. While this certainly sounds like something Roosevelt might have said, the Beards do not cite a source, and later historians have been unable to trace this quotation.

2. Other notable writers who later criticized McKinley along these lines include Thomas A. Bailey, Samuel Flagg Bemis, George Frost Kennan, and Ernest R. May.

Men like McKinley and other national leaders thought about America's problems and welfare in an inclusive systematized way that emphasized economics. Wanting democracy and social peace, they argued that economic depression threatened those objectives, and concluded that overseas economic expansion provided a primary means of ending the danger. They did not want war per se, let alone to increase their personal fortunes. But their own conception of the world ultimately led them into war in order to solve the problems the way that they considered necessary and best.

Fundamental to this conception of the world, Williams concluded, was an "inner logic" in which "both opportunity and difficulty, good and evil, are externalized," leading to the "assignment of responsibility for domestic welfare to a foreign power." Thus, to summarize Williams's not unconvoluted conception, American economic expansionism was the root of the Spanish-American War, and the engine of this expansionism was the belief that it would secure domestic economic prosperity (1972, 38, 42).

Although Williams offered little, if any, supporting evidence for his assertions, his argument convinced a number of historians, who turned to the archives and attempted to substantiate his ideas. The most notable of these was one of Williams's own protégés, Walter LaFeber, who put forward an argument for economic concerns as the primary cause of the war in his 1963 study *The New Empire*. LaFeber's biggest obstacle in making such an argument was the solid study that Pratt had made of the antiwar sentiments of the business community in the 1930s. LaFeber was unable to refute Pratt's argument entirely, and conceded that many businessmen had long opposed the war, but he strove to prove that at least "by the middle of March [1898] important businessmen and spokesmen for the business community were advocating war," and that at the same time, a larger "shift seemed to be occurring in the general business community" (1963, 385).

Both Williams and LaFeber explicitly repudiated the "yellow journalism" thesis that gradually had been falling out of favor for some time, but they also had to contend with a new school of interpretation that was portraying McKinley as a political pragmatist who tried to achieve a peaceful solution but ultimately chose war to avoid the disintegration of his party and a disaster in the upcoming fall elections. LaFeber described one of the "standard interpretations of the war's causes" as "a belligerent Congress," but argued that "Congress had more trouble handling McKinley than the President had handling Congress. The President had no fear of that body." Williams similarly dismissed interpretations that "have reduced the problem to a political issue, arguing that McKinley ultimately accepted war to sustain or save the influence and power of the Republican party (and his position within it)" (1963, 401-2). But whereas LaFeber denied that there was any significant political issue for McKinley, Williams took a different approach, attempting to subsume the political issue into his larger argument about economic expansionism and the quest for foreign markets: "The argument that politics was the key to the war . . . begs the real point about what provoked the political pressure. The agitation that scared metropolitan (and other) Republicans came from militant agriculturalists who wanted markets" (1972, 41).

While Williams and LaFeber were developing their economic explanations for the Spanish-American War, this stream of political explanations was taking shape during the

late 1950s in an unpublished but widely read doctoral dissertation by John L. Offner, a biographical sketch of McKinley's years as president by Margaret Leech, and in the writings of historian Ernest R. May. McKinley, Offner wrote, was "fundamentally" a "politician," and Offner emphasized his "adroitness in manipulating men" (1957, 56). Leech similarly emphasized McKinley's sensitive understanding of people and his stubborn political pragmatism. McKinley, she argued, was "a preeminently 'practical' politician, always ready to concede and take as much as it was possible to get" (1959, 35). May concurred, asserting that McKinley's ambition in politics was "to climb the greasy pole," and examining how, "in the early months of his administration," McKinley "temporized," "scattered balm in both directions," and "bought time from the jingoes with every coin that came to hand" (1961, 114, 120-21).

Although the political interpretations discovered little direct influence on McKinley from the yellow journals, they essentially posited a new form of the old McKinley as moral weakling argument. LaFeber and Williams granted McKinley a high degree of agency—LaFeber in his view of a dominant McKinley controlling Congress, and Williams in his insistence on McKinley's conscious awareness that his actions were economically based. The political interpretations, however, while they did grant McKinley a certain rationality and pragmatism, returned him to a position of abjection and weakness, not as a victim of a yellow journalism-spawned war frenzy, but instead as a slave to party politics. Offner identified a "Republican Revolt" in Congress in early April that forced McKinley's hand, and blamed his "unimaginative administration" for the inability to find an "acceptable American solution" that made him a victim of the congressional jingoes (1957, 286, 375-77). Leech spoke of "the roar of legislative revolt" and decided that "[t]he President . . . consummately failed . . . in restraining the belligerence of Congress," whereas "a more aggressive president might have broken with Congress outright, condemned the rabid warmakers, and declined to advise intervention" (1959, 178, 180, 185). May was the most derisive. "McKinley," he argued,

was not a brave man. In his whole political career, there had been no act of boldness. And the one resource he did not employ in 1898 was courage. . . . Rightly or wrongly he conceived . . . that his highest duty lay in keeping his own country united, and that the alternative to war might be a domestic crisis tantamount in his eyes to a revolution. For these reasons he led his country unwillingly toward a war that he did not want for a cause in which he did not believe. (1961, 159)

This general interpretation of McKinley as a pragmatic, if morally weak, politician who eventually deferred to an increasingly warlike Congress has gained increasing acceptance among informed historians in the last four decades, and it has found its way into such major works on the era as H. Wayne Morgan's *William McKinley and His America* (1963), Gerald F. Linderman's *The Mirror of War* (1974), Lewis Gould's *The Presidency of William McKinley* (1980), John L. Offner's *The Unwanted War* (1992), and David Trask's definitive history of the Spanish-American conflict, *The War with Spain in 1898* (1980). Although some of these scholars, most notably Morgan and Gould, have attempted to soften McKinley's inability to avoid the war by emphasizing just how close to peace he came, and how noble his ideals may have been, all have found a note of failure in McKinley's

“war message” of April 11, and they work from the assumption that the war was at least undesirable, if not avoidable.

It does not require acceptance of a “great man” theory of history to recognize that understanding McKinley is crucial to understanding the beginnings of the Spanish-American War. At a time when many elements of American society were undeniably clamoring for war with Spain following the insult of the De Lôme letter,³ months of sensational reports of Spanish brutalities, and finally the sinking of the USS *Maine*, the questions of when and if America would fight clearly hinged on McKinley’s decisions.⁴ Following the *Maine* disaster of February 15, McKinley asked for, and received, a suspension of judgment pending the report on how the vessel was destroyed. Following McKinley’s transmission of the report to Congress on March 23, McKinley informally requested that Congress forbear from making any warlike resolutions until he had adequate time to formulate an appropriate response to Spain. This request was granted. McKinley led Congress to believe that it could expect a message from him on April 4. McKinley then twice requested, and was granted, extensions—first until April 6 to complete his draft, and then once more until April 11, supposedly so that American citizens in Cuba would have adequate time to leave safely. Congress only moved toward war after McKinley’s April 11 message explicitly granted it leave to do so, and even then, McKinley and his allies in Congress were able to squelch the Turpie-Foraker amendment that would have forced Spain into war by recognizing Cuban belligerency.

That McKinley was under great pressure during these two months, there can be no doubt. But the fact that Congress moved so rapidly to make war on Spain, but only *after* it had secured McKinley’s stamp of approval, and *after* acceding to all of his stated wishes, illustrates that McKinley maintained a strong personal control over not just his administration, but the entire U.S. government during that time. The actions of the government during these weeks flow from decisions made by McKinley, and thus an understanding of his motives, his hopes, his plans, and his goals is crucial to any attempt at a complete understanding of the origins of the war.

Unfortunately, none of the numerous interpretations of the origins of the Spanish-American War has attempted to trace the influence of McKinley’s personal *values* on his policy toward Cuba and Spain in the spring of 1898 in any systematic way. Instead, they focus on his personal *characteristics*: what kind of politician he was, how much willpower or “backbone” he had, the methods he used, and the course of his policy. They tend to fixate on what his actions were, and why they failed, rather than *why* his actions were, and whether he thought of them as failures. Outside of a general recognition that McKinley

3. In December 1897, Enrique Dupuy de Lôme, the Spanish minister to Washington, wrote a private letter to a friend in Cuba calling the Cuban autonomy efforts “a waste of time” and criticizing McKinley as “weak,” “a bidder for the admiration of the crowd,” and a “would-be politician.” The letter was stolen by a Cuban partisan and turned over to the American press. First published by Hearst’s *New York Tribune* on February 9, the letter soon made front-page headlines across the nation and drew ire from many who cited it as evidence of Spanish duplicity and considered the insults to the president a grave affront to the nation’s honor. De Lôme resigned on February 11. Four days later, the *Maine* exploded in Havana harbor. (De Lôme’s letter is reproduced in U.S. Department of State 1901, 1007).

4. For a more extensive overview of the factors that influenced McKinley’s decision making during the lead-up to the war, see Offner (2004).

wanted peace and the debate over whether he was weak or strong, there has been little concerted effort to understand what type of man William McKinley was, and to apply that understanding to an interpretation of his actions. Instead, the focus has tended toward the external context of McKinley's actions—the pressures he faced (yellow journalism, congressional jingoism) and the interests he represented (big business, the Republican party). But men and women are more than just an amalgamation of interests or a litany of obstacles overcome (or succumbed to). They hold cherished beliefs, maintain lifelong habits, possess personal cultures, and adhere to ideologies, and these elements of personality undoubtedly influence the actions they take and the success or failure of their endeavors. Perhaps a careful application of a qualified, muted “great man” approach to history can have some value in those cases in which an individual really did make important decisions on which rather large contingencies hinged.

In one sense, it is understandable that historians have not delved deeply into McKinley's personal character. For many historians, McKinley is somewhat of a cipher. While in some ways, McKinley was exceedingly open, allowing ordinary citizens unprecedented access to his person, maintaining a wide circle of personal friends, and constantly attending and hosting social gatherings, in another sense, McKinley was a deeply private man. He rarely showed the full depth of his emotions, and he almost never shared his inmost thoughts with anyone. He left no personal diary, journal, or memoirs to record his ruminations for posterity, and he wrote very few personal letters. Even in the case of his closest political ally and personal confidant, Republican organizer Mark Hanna, only about 20 letters from McKinley and four telegrams are known to exist (Croly 1923, 156). What letters McKinley did write are in almost every case brief and, while cordial, express no deep personal emotion or private contemplations. Instead, he preferred personal, face-to-face encounters, and when that proved unfeasible, he worked through trusted personal emissaries. McKinley was also the first president to make extensive use of the telephone (Linderman 1974, 9).⁵

Despite McKinley's apparent aversion to committing his thoughts to paper, it is quite possible for the enterprising historian to reconstruct many of his personal beliefs, hopes, and goals. McKinley was a prolific speechmaker, and he personally wrote all of his speeches. Although McKinley's speeches were, of course, political documents aimed at particular audiences, much can be gleaned about his personal views from his oratory. Moreover, president McKinley personally read and approved, and often extensively amended, all important diplomatic correspondence emanating from the State Department to foreign nations and bearing the signature of his secretaries of state. McKinley worked very closely with his cabinet and kept a close eye on what his associates said, such that, so far as can be discerned, no important official document went out, either domestically or internationally, that did not have his entire approval, and thus can be accepted almost as if he wrote it.⁶ Most importantly, while McKinley was reserved in his letters,

5. Hanna's biographer, Herbert Croly, recounts that when McKinley and Hanna both lived in Ohio, McKinley had a special private telephone line run between Canton and Cleveland rather than send telegrams (1923, 157). Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland, meanwhile, were notoriously averse to the telephone.

6. In an example of McKinley's vigilance, the president was on vacation at Lake Champlain when he learned that John Sherman had given an interview to a newspaper in which he had expressed some views that

he often was not reserved in his conversation, especially with close associates, and even not-so-close acquaintances. In a great age of memoirs and autobiographies, innumerable colorful anecdotes of encounters with McKinley survive in the written recollections of his fellows. This article will use such sources to examine the impact of McKinley's personality and personal values on his decision to go to war with Spain in 1898, and to assess the nature of his authority.

That McKinley favored a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Cuba has rarely been questioned. Indeed, his strong preference for a peaceful solution was one value that McKinley was never shy about advertising. Although he generally is not remembered as a gifted wordsmith, McKinley did give a ringing affirmation of peaceful principles in his first inaugural address, in a brief passage that is the source of some of his most quoted lines. In a speech of nearly 4,000 words, it embodied almost the entirety of his statement on foreign policy. "It has been the policy of the United States since the foundation of the Government," McKinley said,

to cultivate relations of peace and amity with all the nations of the world, and this accords with my conception of our duty now. We have cherished the policy of non-interference with affairs of foreign governments wisely inaugurated by Washington, keeping ourselves free from entanglement, either as allies or foes, content to leave undisturbed with them the settlement of their own domestic concerns. It will be our aim to pursue a firm and dignified foreign policy, which shall be just, impartial, ever watchful of our national honor, and always insisting upon the enforcement of the lawful rights of American citizens everywhere. Our diplomacy should seek nothing more and accept nothing less than is due us. We want no wars of conquest; we must avoid the temptation of territorial aggression. War should never be entered upon until every agency of peace has failed; peace is preferable to war in almost every contingency. (Richardson 1912, 10:16-17)

While the appeal to the ideals of George Washington made for good rhetoric, and few informed listeners could have missed the veiled references to the Cuban situation that was on everyone's mind, the passage reveals little about McKinley's concrete plans for foreign policy or exactly what sort of "contingencies" might necessitate war.

One possible explanation for McKinley's eager solicitations for peace in his inaugural address, and the evident lack of concern for foreign policy affairs in the early months of his presidency, is that he wished to focus on his economic agenda. McKinley had built his 1896 presidential campaign around the slogan that he was "the advance agent of prosperity," and he strongly wished to make good on the promise that the slogan implied. Moreover, two economic issues had been the main focus of the most contentious campaign in recent memory. McKinley had endeavored to focus the debate around the tariff issue, from which he had traditionally drawn much of his popularity, while William Jennings Bryan had worked to turn the campaign into a nationwide fracas over the issue of free silver. McKinley hoped to address both of these issues as soon as possible upon taking office in 1897 by securing a tariff revision bill and legislation reaffirming the

McKinley did not fully approve of. Alarmed, McKinley immediately sent William R. Day back to Washington to keep Sherman from giving any more interviews until he could return to explain away Sherman's ill-chosen words (Morgan 1963, 335).

nation's commitment to the gold standard and international bimetallism. McKinley expressed these desires to Henry Cabot Lodge when they met for lunch on December 1, 1896. Lodge reported that McKinley "asked me about Cuba, and we went over the whole of that very perplexing question. It is very much on his mind and I found he had given it a great deal of thought. He very naturally does not want to be obliged to go to war as soon as he comes in, for of course his great ambition is to restore business and bring back good times." McKinley told Lodge that he hoped the crisis would come that winter, while it would still be on Cleveland's watch.⁷

But McKinley certainly had reasons to hope for peace other than merely avoiding the nuisance of dealing with a crisis as soon as he took office and his hope to have time to focus on his economic policies. Indeed, McKinley genuinely feared having to subject the nation to the horrors of war. McKinley had served in the infantry during the Civil War (in the same unit as Rutherford B. Hayes), and he had witnessed warfare firsthand. He had fought at Antietam, twice received citations for valor, and earned a battlefield promotion to major that gave him the nickname that would follow him for the rest of his life. McKinley rarely mentioned his wartime experiences in his later years, and he often downplayed his war record, arguing that he had been just like any other soldier, but he certainly had not forgotten what he had witnessed during the war. In the winter of 1898, when Leonard Wood, the future commander of the Rough Riders, joked with the president about starting a war with Spain, McKinley reminded him, "I have been through one war; I have seen the dead piled up; and I do not want to see another" (Hagedorn 1931, 1:141). Former President Grover Cleveland was very fond of recounting his last meeting with McKinley, in the winter of 1896, just before McKinley replaced him as president. Cleveland recalled,

The one question on Mr. McKinley's mind was the threatened war with Spain. . . . He adverted to the horrors of war, and was intensely saddened by the prospect incident to the loss of life, the destruction of property, the blows dealt at the higher morality, and the terrible responsibility thrust upon him. In parting he said: "Mr. President, if I can only go out of office, at the end of my term, with the knowledge that I have done what lay in my power to avert this terrible calamity, with the success that has crowned your patience and persistence, I shall be the happiest man in the world." (Parker 1911, 249-50)

Similarly, McKinley remarked to Indiana senator Charles W. Fairbanks in the days just prior to the war, "I do not care for the property that will be destroyed, nor the money that will be expended . . . but the thought of human suffering that must enter many households almost overwhelms me" (Fairbanks 1903, 7).

Indeed, McKinley seems to have genuinely felt the humanitarian concerns that he so often expressed, and he would cite them as the first of four grounds for armed intervention in Cuba in his April 11 message to Congress. In May 1897, McKinley sent a message to Congress requesting a \$50,000 appropriation to supply food and medicine to imperiled American citizens living in Cuba and to pay for the repatriation of any who wished to return to the United States, to which Congress promptly agreed. When these

7. Henry Cabot Lodge to Theodore Roosevelt, December 2, 1896 (Lodge 1925, 2:240).

funds proved of great benefit, McKinley gave a second message to Congress on December 24, this time calling for contributions from the general public to a fund administered by the Red Cross to assist all needy Cubans, not just those who claimed American citizenship. By the time he reported back to Congress four months later, the fund had already collected \$200,000 from private citizens. It was not discovered until more than 20 years later that McKinley himself had anonymously donated \$5,000—a huge sum for a man who, despite being president, was by no means wealthy (Richardson 1912, 10:23-24, 64; Olcott 1916, 1:396; Morgan 1963, 349).⁸

One of the aspects of McKinley's pacifism that has not received attention is his lifelong commitment to the principle of arbitration as the ideal way for resolving disputes. McKinley was exposed to arbitration ideas from the earliest days of his public life, when, as a young lawyer, he defended 23 coal miners involved in an arbitration-related scuffle. Later, as governor of Ohio, McKinley helped establish a state board of arbitration to deal with labor disputes. In July 1894, McKinley successfully arbitrated between striking railroad workers and the Hocking Valley Railroad. This success inspired him to serve as an arbitrator in several other decisions during his term as governor, although he did not publicize his role because he wished to avoid attentions that might compromise his ability to remain a neutral arbiter (Morgan 1963, 159). McKinley later spoke in favor of arbitration several times during his service in Congress.

By the late 1890s, people around the world were increasingly coming to view binding arbitration as a promising alternative to warfare in settling international disputes. In January 1897, Cleveland's secretary of state, Richard Olney, and British Ambassador Sir Julian Pauncefote signed a treaty committing the United States and Great Britain to arbitrate all of their disputes for the next five years. The treaty had many enthusiastic supporters in the United States, who heralded it as "the crowning glory of this wondrous age" and believed that they were witnessing the "final end of the age of arms." McKinley was one of the most noted arbitrationists, and he urged Congress to approve the treaty in his inaugural address that March. His statement gives a taste of the heady idealism and moral appeal that arbitrationism embodied:

Arbitration is the true method of settlement of international as well as local or individual differences. . . . Since this treaty is clearly the result of our own initiative . . . and since it presents to the world the glorious example of reason and peace, not passion and war, controlling the relations between two of the greatest nations in the world, an example certain to be followed by others, I respectfully urge the early action of the Senate thereon, not merely as a matter of policy, but as a duty to mankind. The importance and moral influence of the ratification of such a treaty can hardly be overestimated in the cause of advancing civilization. It may well engage the best thought of the statesmen and people of every country, and I cannot but consider it fortunate that it was reserved to the United States to have the leadership in so grand a work. (Richardson 1912, 10:17)

8. Theodore Roosevelt once wrote to Lodge that McKinley was "a man of hardly even moderate means. He is about as well off say as a division superintendent of the New York Central railroad. He lives in a little house at Canton just as such a division superintendent who had retired would" (Lodge 1925, 1:499). Long felt that McKinley's donation was "far beyond his means to give" (1904, 1:130).

To McKinley's great disappointment, the 1897 arbitration treaty was rejected by conservatives from his own party in the Senate, who would not accept any limitations on what they saw as a national right to force of arms. McKinley's enthusiasm for the arbitration ideal, however, remained undimmed, and he consequently took great personal interest in the Hague Peace Conference convened in 1899 by Russian czar Nicholas II for the purpose of discussing the prospects of international arbitration. McKinley hand-picked the U.S. delegation of Andrew D. White, Seth Low, Stanford Newel, Alfred T. Mahan, William Crozier, and Frederick W. Holls, and he eagerly followed the daily progress of the conference proceedings (White 1905, 2:251, 285). Despite producing many resolutions, the conference resulted in little substantive change, but nevertheless McKinley continued to advocate arbitration until his death. In the final speech of his life, given at the 1901 Buffalo Pan-American Exposition just before he was assassinated, McKinley exhorted the peoples of the world, "No nation can longer be indifferent to any other. And as we are brought more and more in touch with each other, the less occasion is there for misunderstandings, and the stronger the disposition, when we have differences, to adjust them in the court of arbitration, which is the noblest forum for the settlement of international disputes" (Richardson 1912, 10:395).

A recognition of McKinley's commitment to the arbitration ideal is crucial to understanding one of the fundamental disagreements that precipitated the war between the United States and Spain. On March 26, 1898, McKinley wired the American minister to Spain, Stewart L. Woodford, a list of three demands that, although not worded as such, constituted an ultimatum and a final chance for Spain to avoid war. The demands were an armistice in Cuba until October 1, a revocation of the reviled *reconcentrado* policy, and an agreement that if peace was not achieved by October 1, Spain would submit the Cuban matter to American arbitration. The Spanish replied on March 31 that they would immediately revoke the reconcentration order and were willing to consider an armistice, but they categorically rejected the idea of American arbitration. McKinley continued to insist on the concept of American arbitration of the Cuban conflict, but Spain never acceded to the demand. When McKinley later added a demand for the complete independence of Cuba, war was virtually assured, but if Spain had been willing to accept American arbitration, or if McKinley had been willing to accept Spain's agreement to two of his three original conditions, war might have been avoided.

McKinley, so convinced of the perfection of the arbitration concept, was unable to see any reason why Spain would object to it. To him, its rejection could only be yet another sign of Spanish obstinacy, an obstinacy that might only be swayed by force.⁹ To the Spaniards, however, it was a point of national honor not to submit their internal affairs to the whims of another nation, just as the U.S. Senate had made rejection of the Anglo-American arbitration treaty an issue of national honor in 1897. McKinley was curiously double-minded about arbitration throughout these crucial final

9. On March 27 (the day after the ultimatum was wired to Woodford), William R. Day, acting Secretary of State, explained McKinley's position on the arbitration demand to Charles Dawes. McKinley felt that an armistice was not enough, that arbitration was the only way "to stop the suffering" that was "in accord with the dictates of humanity." The president did not want war, Day explained, but if the Spanish would not submit to arbitration, "he will use force and his conscience and the world will justify it" (Dawes 1950, 149).

negotiations—at the same time he was demanding that Spain submit to arbitration on the Cuban crisis, he refused to consider Spain's suggestion that the United States and Spain submit to outside arbitration regarding the *Maine* incident. Apparently, even to a devotee such as McKinley, binding arbitration seemed like a great idea when other people had to submit to it, but it was no longer so attractive when you yourself were submitting.

Another aspect of McKinley's character that has been all too frequently ignored is his religious beliefs. McKinley was a Methodist, and he had a very pious upbringing. His beloved mother, to whom he maintained a devotion second only to that he showed his invalid wife, was extremely devout and quite active in local church affairs; when McKinley was a boy, she urged him to become a minister, and even when he became president, she was still heard to exclaim that he would have made a better preacher (Morgan 1963, 11-12). Although McKinley was not known in his adult years to strongly proclaim his religious beliefs, he was quietly pious, attending church rigorously and reading to his wife from the Bible every evening. McKinley felt a deep personal relationship with God from his earliest years, and if anything, this relationship took on heightened importance when he became president.

It might be a stretch to say that McKinley held any theological conceptions of great depth, but he certainly believed that God had a divine plan for the American people and for himself in particular. In one of his early speeches, McKinley told a crowd of school-children, "You are all here to do something, to work out a destiny, to discover the forces of nature and make them serve man's uses and God's purposes" (Morgan 1963, 9). If McKinley's destiny was to be president, at times he felt that he needed to "work out" the exact details of that destiny. In both of his inaugural addresses, McKinley prayed for the "guidance" and "direction" of Almighty God, and in an interview, he suggested that when attempting to decide the question of whether America should keep the Philippines, God guided him to the answer:

When . . . the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confess I did not know what to do with them. . . . I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you . . . that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way . . . (1) That we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France and Germany— . . . that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could be them, as our fellow-men, for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed . . . and slept soundly, and the next morning I sent for the map-maker . . . and told him to put the Philippines on the map of the United States . . . and there they will stay while I am President! (Rusling 1903, 17)

It is not surprising, then, that William McKinley would conceive of the Spanish-American War and his role in the conflict in terms of God's will. In the winter of 1898, he declared to Leonard Wood, "I shall never get into a war until I am sure that God and man approve" (Hagedorn 1931, 1:141). By the beginning of April, it would be

abundantly clear to McKinley that “man” approved of getting into war, and at some point, God must have given his assent as well, because McKinley would later write, “Nor would I shirk the responsibility of a single step in the progress of our relations with Spain, from the beginning of my administration to the close of the war. I did what I believed was right in the sight of God and my own conscience, and accept all responsibility” (Morgan 1963, 284).

If McKinley imbibed deeply of his mother’s Methodism from his earliest days, he imbibed equally of the Victorian ideal of rationality and self-restraint. The term “Victorian” is difficult to define precisely because it is so widely applied to so many different areas of society and culture. Nevertheless, historians generally agree that a certain set of values that have become known as “Victorian” were widespread among many Americans and British of the mid-nineteenth century, especially among the middle class. The Victorians, Daniel Walker Howe argued, placed a “high valuation on rational order,” and they sought to extend this order to their personal lives by practicing “humanistic self-cultivation, Protestant self-denial, and bourgeois self control, all in the name of regulated self-improvement” (1975, 522). Gail Bederman located the zenith of this ideology in the late antebellum period (when McKinley was coming of age), and asserted that the Victorians viewed “self-mastery” as the “primary source of men’s strength and authority.” Thus, “middle class parents taught their sons to build strong ‘manly’ character as they would build a muscle, through repetitive exercises of control over impulse” (1995, 11-12).

Queen Victoria’s reign from 1837 to 1901 very closely matches McKinley’s own life (1843-1901), and McKinley adhered closely to these Victorian ideals of manly self-control, moderation, and self-restraint. He was a teetotaler, ate in moderation, exercised regularly, never gambled, and eschewed all mention of sexual matters. His aversion to open displays of emotion was well known. He was a devoted husband to his invalid wife, and he supposedly was never once heard to complain about the incessant demands that she made on his time. He maintained the same daily schedule in the White House that he had adhered to in his home in Canton, Ohio: early to rise, dinner at 6:30, followed by a game of euchre with whomever was with him, and then a quiet evening of reading while his wife knitted (Linderman 1974, 30). In his Victorianism, McKinley was the opposite of his successor Theodore Roosevelt, who advocated a different conception of manhood—a “strenuous life” of virility, passion, and violence.¹⁰

McKinley’s Victorian ideals carried over into his politics. His commitments to peace and arbitrationism were natural extensions of his personal values. In extolling arbitration in his first inaugural address because it “it presents to the world the glorious example of reason and peace, not passion and war,” McKinley clearly felt it was

10. For an amusing discussion of the differences between McKinley and Roosevelt, see Gage (1937, 142-46). Roosevelt, of course, was a generation younger than McKinley; whereas McKinley had fought in the Civil War, Roosevelt always regretted that he had been a boy at the time and thus missed out on the fighting. Bederman argued that following the Civil War, there was a gradual shift in the middle-class conception of ideal manhood from the Victorian ideal of “manliness,” based on rationality and self-restraint, to a new ideal of “masculinity,” based on passion and strenuous exercise of male virility. McKinley and Roosevelt fit well into Bederman’s framework (see Bederman 1995, esp. 11-20, 170-215).

self-evident that the cool rationality of arbitration was superior to the emotionality of war. It was inevitable that his policy toward Cuba and Spain would follow a course of caution and moderation.

But McKinley's declaration to Leonard Wood that he would not make war until "God and man approve" suggests that inner ideals and religious inspiration account for only half of his motivations; he also sought outward approval from his fellow man. McKinley was obsessed with outward appearances and deeply concerned with maintaining propriety in all aspects of his life. He was meticulous about his dress, changing his vests three or four times a day when they became wrinkled. His one identifiable vice was that he smoked cigars, but he adamantly refused to be photographed holding one, and indeed, he closely supervised all formal photographs taken of him. He wore glasses in private, but refused to be seen in public with them (White 1946, 333; Morgan 1963, 314-15).

McKinley applied this sense of propriety and concern with appearances with equal vigor to political matters. His efforts to supervise closely the public utterances of his cabinet and members of his administration have been well documented. In a telling example, Secretary of the Treasury Lyman Gage recalled being invited in the early months of McKinley's presidency to speak at a banquet thrown by a commercial club with which he was affiliated. After first consulting with McKinley "as to the propriety of going" and obtaining McKinley's blessing, Gage received detailed instructions from McKinley on precisely what he should say. At the banquet, Gage "quoted, with all the emphasis I could command, the words I was authorized by the President to utter. The reaction on the hearers was phenomenal" (Gage 1937, 123-25).

As a lifelong politician, McKinley understood the necessity of compromise, and a spoils system of trading favors had always been a large component of his political successes. However, he was very careful to avoid impropriety in these matters as well. In his first year as president, he supported measures to open a greater percentage of civil service positions to competitive examination, thus removing them from the spoils pool, and in several instances, he acted to prevent the use of federal funds or resources for Republican Party purposes. McKinley has been criticized, however, for dramatizing these actions in a way that suggested he may have done so primarily for their public relations benefits, in what Ernest May called "virtue without character" (1961, 114).

For example, in one instance, Mark Hanna wrote a pair of informal letters to McKinley on behalf of Republican supporters who wanted federal contracts shifted from the Boston Navy Yard to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and on behalf of a member of the Department of the Treasury who could not understand why McKinley was not allowing him to use department funds for his Republican campaign travel costs. McKinley replied with a stilted, formal letter lecturing Hanna on the inappropriateness of awarding public contracts for partisan purposes and using public funds for party interests. He then marked the letter "personal" and placed a copy in the public White House file. Hanna reacted quite angrily, and reportedly hurled the letter to the floor upon reading it. What irked Hanna was not that McKinley had rejected his requests—indeed, he conceded that McKinley's decision was probably in their best interests and for their own protection. What he objected to was that McKinley had unnecessarily made the issue a matter of

public record, and thus a potential cause of embarrassment for Hanna. He later wrote angrily that McKinley's reply smacked of being written more for his biographer than for the occasion at hand (Croly 1923, 329-31).

However, while McKinley may have taken pains in displaying his virtue, it would be erroneous to suggest that he was lacking in character. It was not that McKinley did not believe in what he was doing and was merely going through the motions for public consumption—by all accounts, McKinley was truly a man of character and truly believed in the ideals he expressed.¹¹ He was not a phony. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that McKinley was deeply concerned with making sure that the character he truly possessed was well known to the world. It is not surprising, then, that McKinley was so vociferous about his desire for a peaceful resolution to the Cuban crisis when he was normally so reserved about revealing his opinions on matters. In the earliest stages of McKinley's Cuba policy, when he was still searching for a new minister to Spain to replace Cleveland's appointee, Hannis Taylor, McKinley remarked that even "if nothing could be done with Spain," he still wished "to show that he had spared no effort to avert trouble" (Morgan 1965, 23-24). Secretary of the Navy John D. Long wrote in his memoir that as soon as McKinley first heard the news that the *Maine* had exploded, "it was manifest that the loss of the Maine would inevitably lead to war" but "hasty action was inadvisable" because "the President desired to give the civilized world no ground for criticizing the American Republic" (1904, 1:141). Similarly, Andrew Dickson White concluded, based on his conversations with McKinley, that the reason he "did everything in his power to prevent the war" was that "the President clearly considered that his main claim on posterity would be for maintaining peace against pressure and clamor" (1905, 2:161).

The McKinley that emerges, therefore, is not only a McKinley who held high moral standards that urged him to strive for peace, but also a McKinley who was concerned with making sure the record showed that he held those moral standards. For McKinley, the perception of morality was virtually as important as the morality itself. McKinley had determined early on that the proper thing for an American president to do would be to exhaust every opportunity for peace before resorting to war, and he was very concerned with the appearance of propriety. He was the kind of man who, even were he to decide that war was necessary, would not have wanted to portray the war as his decision. Moreover, McKinley had a deft way of dealing with people and problems that was based on misdirection. When he wanted to get people to do things, he would convince them that it had been their idea in the first place. He would suggest alterations to drafts of speeches and documents so gently and subtly that people would hardly realize that he had suggested the changes and not themselves. In general, he had a way of dictating policy without seeming to have dictated anything, or perhaps making it seem as if others were responsible.¹²

11. For assessments of McKinley's character, see, e.g., Gage (1937, 110-15); Croly (1923, 366-67); and Morrison (1951, 1:714-17).

12. Many instances of these methods have been documented (see, e.g., Gage 1937, 112-15).

McKinley's April 11 message to Congress is a perfect example of this penchant for obfuscation, as well as McKinley's almost obsessive need to document his peace efforts for posterity. After Spain rejected his March 26 ultimatum on March 31, McKinley decided that America would go to war, and he began drafting a message to Congress to this effect, which he planned to deliver on April 4. McKinley then announced two delays—one until April 6, to give him more time to draft the message, and another, until April 11, when the U.S. consul in Cuba, Fitzhugh Lee, requested time for American citizens to evacuate. McKinley requested these delays, in part, to accommodate a flurry of last-minute peace negotiations, which ultimately failed.¹³

The message that McKinley finally produced was mostly a long-winded, detailed exposition of McKinley's tireless efforts at peace and Spain's increasing obstinacy. McKinley concluded by placing the decision to make war entirely on Congress: "The issue is now with the Congress. It is a solemn responsibility. I have exhausted every effort to relieve the intolerable condition of affairs which is at our doors. Prepared to execute every obligation imposed upon me by the Constitution and the law, I await your action" (Richardson 1912, 10:67). This was a profoundly disingenuous statement. McKinley knew when he was composing the message that if he were to turn over the decision Congress, Congress would vote for war. Indeed, this understanding was the very reason he delayed transmission of the message when he believed that the last-minute peace negotiations might succeed. Thus, declaring that "the issue was now with Congress" had the effect of making war inevitable, while ensuring that no one could claim that McKinley had chosen war.

However, suggesting that McKinley's April 11 message represented a deliberate move toward war should not call into question that McKinley genuinely hoped for a peaceful solution. In early April, after what he viewed as the failure of his late March ultimatum, McKinley began composing a message that he knew could only lead to hostilities with Spain, but all of his diplomatic efforts up until this time had been earnestly dedicated toward a peaceful resolution (albeit a peaceful resolution according to his own idealistic and perhaps unrealistic terms, which by April had come to include Spanish acquiescence to possible American arbitration and Cuban independence). Indeed, with the aid of allies in Congress, McKinley had repeatedly blocked all efforts to recognize Cuban belligerency, and his willingness to twice delay the April 11 message to accommodate last-minute peace overtures can only illustrate his openness to a peace along certain lines.

But to understand how McKinley could move toward war after a sustained and earnest effort for peace, it is crucial to recognize that the possibility of war had always inhered in McKinley's policy toward Spain. From the earliest stages, McKinley's diplomacy toward Spain explicitly created a context in which the threat of war was used to pressure the Spanish to accede to the American vision of an optimal resolution. McKinley's personal instructions to Woodford, for example, transmitted to the minister when he first assumed the post in 1897, alluded several times to a threat of armed American intervention in Cuba, which, while undesirable and hopefully avoidable, was clearly

13. For a detailed discussion of the events of these 11 days, see Offner (1992, 159-76).

viewed as a justified and viable last resort. In a prophetic passage that presaged the *Maine* disaster, McKinley foresaw that war (which he obliquely termed “issues”) might come whether he wished it or not, warning Woodford that “some untoward incident may abruptly supervene to inflame mutual passions beyond control and thus raise issues which however deplorable, can not be avoided.”

But McKinley went further than merely allowing for the possibility of war. He looked to this possibility as a diplomatic tool, proceeding to offer a series of veiled threats. The United States stood ready to assist Spain in securing a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Cuba, McKinley wrote, and would not recognize Cuban belligerency. But he then proceeded to mention in an offhand way that “beyond the question of belligerency,” there lay “the larger ulterior problem of intervention, which the President does not now discuss,” the inclusion of the word “now” implying the possibility of a future discussion of intervention. McKinley insisted that the subject had not been mentioned “with unfriendly intent,” but “simply to show that this Government does not and can not ignore the possibilities of duty hidden in the future, nor be unprepared to face an emergency.” McKinley then concluded with the final veiled threat that while the United States recognized a “moral obligation” to allow the “titular authority” to attempt to repress the rebellion on its own, it need only await “a reasonable time” before “alleging and acting upon” its “endangered interests.”¹⁴

These threats would underlie the entirety of Spanish-American diplomacy up to the start of the war. From the very beginning, McKinley conceived of war with Spain not only as a possibility, but even as a valid and justifiable last resort. McKinley’s decision to send the *Maine* to Havana harbor must be considered within the context of a diplomacy that fundamentally was based on the threat of war, and his concerted efforts to put the nation on a war footing in the wake of the *Maine*’s destruction must be considered as a sign of his willingness to carry out this threat if necessary. In early March, McKinley asked Congress for and received a \$50 million “national defense” appropriation, to be used at the president’s sole discretion to build up the navy. The bill was at least partially intended to appease domestic jingoists, but it certainly was also intended to increase pressure on Spain through a show of American unanimity and strength. Woodford triumphantly reported to McKinley that the Spaniards were “stunned . . . simply stunned” by the bill’s passage, and that he felt confident the Spanish would be rendered more pliable by the bill’s demonstration of American “wealth and power.”¹⁵ Similarly, Long wrote in his journal of his hope that the threat implied by the bill would “have a mollifying affect on Spanish public sentiment” (1923, 173). Fifty million was an outrageous sum whose advantages of being a large and round number pointed to its primary value as a diplomatic and public opinion tool. Only about half the money was actually spent, but McKinley took a great personal interest in its distribution, and he consulted frequently with Secretary Long on other preparations as well, personally overseeing

14. John Sherman to Steward Woodford, July 16, 1897 (U.S. Department of State 1901, 559-60). Although the document bore Sherman’s signature, McKinley himself was largely responsible for the text.

15. Steward Woodford to William McKinley, March 9, 1898 (U.S. Department of State 1901, 684).

various orders to have squadrons supplied, coaled, and in position should war with Spain come (Long 1904, 1:150, 164; 1923, 174).¹⁶

No one is willing to argue that McKinley truly “exhausted every effort” for peace, so historians have focused on why he was unable to achieve his long-standing and well-publicized goal of a peaceful resolution. The pressure from Congress was too strong, they argue. Influential business interests changed their minds, or public opinion fed by yellow journalism was just too overwhelming. All of these arguments are based on the a priori assumption that when McKinley delivered his April 11 message, he still wanted peace. Moreover, none of these explanations accords with the evidence. While Congress as a whole was in favor of war, and everyone knew that, it is not clear that McKinley was in immediate danger of the “Republican Revolt” posited by Offner and Leech. While some congressmen were pressuring McKinley for war, many others were pressuring him for peace. Many of the most influential congressmen, including the powerful Speaker of the House, Thomas Reed, were deeply opposed to war. With the exception of Secretary of War Russell Alger and Vice President Garret Hobart, McKinley’s entire cabinet was in favor of peace, including his closest friend, Secretary Long. Long and Gage later said they thought McKinley should have pressed on longer for peace, clearly indicating that they did not believe all alternatives had been exhausted.

As for public opinion, Long recorded in his journal on April 5 that “most of the letters I get are very earnestly in favor of peace,” and even the most cursory perusal of Long’s correspondence proves this assertion correct (1923, 177).¹⁷ Nor were these letters only from an elite group of Long’s friends. Quite to the contrary, he received letters and calls from all classes of people, both known and unknown to him, including the wives and mothers of sailors pleading for peace so that their loved ones would not be endangered. Similarly, the virulently prowar Theodore Roosevelt complained to Elihu Root on April 5, “You would be amazed and horrified at the peace-at-any-price telegrams of the most abject description which come in multitudes . . . to the President and Senators,” and McKinley’s personal secretary George Cortelyou noted in his diary on April 16 that “on a most conservative estimate ninety per cent of the entire correspondence” addressed to the President expressed “an emphatic appeal for peace” (Morrison 1951, 812-13; Olcott 1916, 2:53).

The LaFeber thesis that an opinion change among influential business interests drove McKinley’s decision is equally dubious. It has been well documented that in the months leading up to the war, business interests were largely against war on the grounds that the uncertainty it would produce would be detrimental to the economy, so the onus is on LaFeber to prove his contention that there was a shift in business opinion just prior to the start of the war. LaFeber hangs much of his argument on a prowar March 25 telegram to McKinley from *New York Herald* editor W. C. Reick, which he links to McKinley’s ultimatum of March 26 (which LaFeber erroneously places on March 27). LaFeber calls Reick “a trusted political adviser” to McKinley, although there is no evidence that they had any significant relationship. There is also no evidence that

16. For a detailed account of preparations for war, see Long (1904, 146-64).

17. For examples of these letters, see Long (1939).

McKinley or his cabinet attached any importance to the telegram. Moreover, just to take one illustrative counterexample, Theodore Roosevelt recorded on April 5 that his close friend and fellow warhawk, Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge, was “for a week past . . . receiving “twenty to thirty letters and telegrams a day from men who consider themselves to be the best and most representative citizens of Boston—its leading bankers, merchants, and lawyers” expressing “abject fear” of war (Morrison 1951, 812).

A better understanding of McKinley’s personality, beliefs, and political tactics illuminates the objectives he sought, the nature of his hopes for peace, the deception in his maneuvering, and the ways in which he justified his policies. In early April 1898, William McKinley decided that he would be unable to secure peace with Spain on his terms, which had come to include the possibility of American arbitration, and Cuban independence. A misunderstanding of McKinley’s evasive April 11 message and an uncritical acceptance of McKinley’s well-publicized pacifism have led historians to emphasize a failure in McKinley’s peace policy. In attempting to explain this failure, they have looked to outside sources of influence and pressure that may have forced McKinley’s hand, such as congressional revolt, business interests, and public opinion. While McKinley certainly did face a strong pressure for war, he also faced great pressure for peace, and he maintained a large measure of control over his situation. In truth, the April 11 message represented not a policy failure, but merely a policy change. Moreover, this policy change was not a rupture with McKinley’s past policy toward Spain, but a transition to a contingency for which McKinley had been preparing ever since the *Maine* disaster, and the threat of which he had employed in diplomacy since his earliest dealings with Spain.

The many historians who have emphasized the failure of McKinley’s peace policy have assumed that McKinley must have been bitter and frustrated as he delivered his April 11 message. But this assumption ignores the fact that McKinley, by all accounts, threw himself wholeheartedly into the war that ensued and never showed any sign of regret for any “failure” to secure peace, as shown by his statement that he would never “shirk the responsibility of a single step in the progress of our relations with Spain, from the beginning of my administration to the close of the war,” because he had done what he “believed was right in the sight of God and my own conscience” (Morgan 1963, 284). Indeed, McKinley had achieved his primary goal of ending the conflict in Cuba, which he viewed as detrimental to his own economic concerns and antithetical to his humanitarian convictions. By early April 1898, McKinley had reconciled his personal values of moderation and self-control with his economic and humanitarian interests in a way that allowed him to move his nation toward war while maintaining the rhetoric of peace. If McKinley had not truly expended “every effort” for peace, he had expended every effort he was willing to expend. His lack of regret over the start of war is thus revealing in attempting to understand the moment of decision represented by McKinley’s April 11 message. To many historians, the message represents a tragic failure and an admission of weakness, but in its subtle misdirection, McKinley concealed his own strength. Theoretically, Congress could have passed a war resolution at any time, but McKinley created a situation in which Congress could not start a war before he asked for one, and thus he

and only he could decide when the nation would go to war. The April 11 message was a moment of great, even unprecedented, presidential prerogative and power. It is ironic, then, that a message that McKinley clearly intended to secure his greatness for posterity has been so often misread as a sign of weakness.

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