

1-29-2007

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ScholarWorks Citation

Reagan, Patrick T., "Patience, Precision, and Persuasiveness" (2007). *Features*. 45.
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/45>

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Patience, Precision, and Persuasiveness

The Leadership of William McKinley

By [Patrick T. Reagan](#)

On January 25, 1898, battleship *USS Maine* arrived at Havana Harbor in hopes of easing tensions between Cuban rebels and their Spanish colonial overlords. Though Spain was wary of US intentions in Cuba it granted every courtesy to the men and officers aboard the battleship, which maintained an uneasy peace between the two nations. The peace, however, was shattered during the early morning hours of February 20, when the *Maine* exploded and sank to the bottom of the harbor.

In Washington, President William McKinley was awakened from a sound sleep and handed a telegram by Commander D.W. Dickens that forever changed his presidency: "*Maine* blown up and destroyed to-night at 9:40 p.m." Dickens reported,

The President came out in his dressing gown. I handed him the dispatch which he read with great gravity. He seemed deeply impressed with the news, handed back the dispatch to me, and took it again, two or three times, expressing great regret that the event had happened, particularly at that time. [i]

Racing down to his office, half-dressed and half-awake, he listened to Secretary of the Navy John Davis Long reading incoming cables from Havana. Afterward, all McKinley could say, repeatedly in a low tone, was: "The *Maine* blown up! The *Maine* blown up!" [ii] This tragic event, and the war that followed, would test the full compliment of McKinley's leadership skills, define his presidency, and leave a lasting mark on both the nation and its highest office.

William McKinley was born to a family of modest means on January 29, 1843, in Niles, Ohio. As a young man, he enrolled at Allegheny College in Meadville, Maryland, but was forced to dropout due to illness in 1860. A year later, McKinley enlisted in the Union Army and began his ascent to the rank of Brevet Major, which he achieved by the end of the Civil War. The rank followed him for the rest of his life -- even after he was elected commander in chief the president would often be addressed as "Major McKinley" by soldiers that had served under him.

After mustering out of the military, McKinley studied law and was admitted to the Ohio bar in 1867. He was a diligent worker and built up a fine record as a barrister by the time he entered politics and won a seat in the House of Representatives in 1877. McKinley lost in a bid for re-election four years later, reclaimed his seat in 1885, and in 1891 was elected governor of Ohio, where he served a term and a half. McKinley successfully climbed the ranks of state and national politics before winning the biggest prize of all in 1896 -- the presidency of the United States. It was during the period between his election and assassination that the 25th president best demonstrated his focused leadership style.

This essay will evaluate the presidential leadership of William McKinley using six traits of effective leadership as put forth by Gleaves Whitney, director of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies. An analysis of McKinley's inner drive, sense of mission, skill-set, communication/inspiration skills, courage, and luck will lead to a clearer and more focused understanding of his presidency. Though often undervalued and overlooked, the leadership William McKinley demonstrated throughout his life was marked by three distinct qualities: patience, precision, and persuasiveness. His leadership helped rally the country through economic crisis and a war with Spain, and launched the U.S. from regional hegemony to the world power status it maintains today.

Interior Drive

McKinley's inner drive to lead was already evident during his formative years. Historian H. Wayne Morgan noted that:

His most striking personality trait was a pronounced streak of fortitude. He seems to have sensed from youth, through some inner-intuition, that his path would be hard, that caution must be his keynote and that his lot would be perhaps tragic. If there was a central design in McKinley's life, it was epitomized by a belief in getting things done. [iii]

McKinley's leadership, in other words, was not fiery or caustic; he preferred to lead through patience, precision and persuasion. He was interested more in a solid outcome than in the credit he might receive.

A prime example of his inner drive to lead took place well before he was president. As a Union captain McKinley was entrusted with relaying orders from one unit to another. At a critical moment during the Battle of Opequan, he carried verbal orders to General Duval to move his men to a new position.

"By what route shall I move my column?" the general asked McKinley. The orders were vague and McKinley thought rapidly, quickly looking over the terrain before raising his arm and pointing up a ravine. "I would move up this creek," he answered. Duval declined to be advised by a junior officer. "I will not budge without definite orders." McKinley looked him squarely in the eyes and said: "This is a case of great emergency, General. I order you, by command of General Crook, to move your command up this ravine to a position on the right of the army." Disaster could have ruined McKinley and cost many lives, but his judgment was sound and the division made the maneuver without incident. [iv]

McKinley showed the inner drive required of all effective leaders -- once he understood the gravity of the situation, he reacted boldly and decisively, but also logically. Upon later review by superior officers, McKinley's orders were considered correct [v] His heroic action was indicative of his strength and determination.

Sense of Mission

President McKinley had the will and the drive to lead but he also had a plan for the nation as he entered the White House in early 1897. When he assumed office, Cuba was not the overriding issue facing the United States as terrible economic plagues had befallen the United States for more than a decade. Many different approaches had been taken in the name of stabilizing the economy, but McKinley was in favor of bimetallism and a protective tariff to ease the economic burdens of America: "I am a tariff man standing on a tariff platform. This money matter is unduly prominent," [vi] he had stated in 1896. McKinley believed that a protective tariff was far more important to national economic recovery than was the question of gold versus silver. While McKinley did have an eye toward foreign policy, his primary focus was the revival of the sagging U.S. economy. Presidential historian John Offner stated the following about McKinley's balancing of foreign and domestic issues:

Prior to assuming the presidency, McKinley had said little in public about Cuba. He never mentioned the island in his presidential campaign speeches. Close friends, however, understood that McKinley was sympathetic to Cuban independence and inclined to side with the Cubans against Spain. The new president, responsive to business interests, did not want to do anything that might adversely affect the economic recovery, and he opposed war. [vii]

McKinley had a distinct vision of what was important for America in 1897--economic recovery was and war was not. In response to this precarious situation, McKinley attempted to negotiate and mediate with Spain over the Cuba issue, thus holding fast to his mission while still attempting to end the death and bloodshed ninety miles south of Florida.



President William McKinley's leadership, "launched the U.S. from regional hegemony to... world power."

As the economy grew and strengthened, McKinley's outlook on "the Cuba question" evolved. During mediation and negotiation sessions, Spain made the promise to the United States government that it would re-evaluate its standing policies in Cuba. Given that, McKinley worked for an armistice between Spain and the Cuban rebels in hope of finding a peaceful solution to the crisis. However, the Spanish government proved indecisive on every matter as they often promised different approaches and, in the end, did little else than make promises that they had no intention of keeping. According to historian John Hofner, McKinley's position on the "Cuba question" was this:

McKinley personally did not want war, but he was willing to accept one if necessary. In public addresses, the president frequently referred to U.S. economic interests adversely affected by the Spanish-Cuban war, but he never saw them as justification for military intervention. The terrible human suffering in Cuba, however, convinced McKinley that war was justified, and he consistently attempted to place this issue at the forefront of his policy. To restore stability to Cuba, McKinley believed that Spain must leave the island.^[xviii]

McKinley's desire for a non-military solution demonstrated his patience which in turn, demonstrated his flexibility towards his mission--when many in government and the public wanted the United States to rush into war with Spain, McKinley *exercised all options* until the last and final course was armed conflict with Spain in Cuba and the Philippines.

True leadership is not just simply making bold decisions. More times than not, the best course of action for an effective leader is exercising a modicum of patience during high pressure situations in order to rationally and logically find the prudent answer. An effective leader must have a mission but must also be flexible in that mission so he can meet the changing needs of their country.

Skill Set

Having a mission is necessary, but does the leader have all of the skills to carry it to fruition? An effective leader must know what he can and cannot accomplish by himself. He must surround himself with individuals that compliment his skills and fills any gaps that he has in his own skill-set. Furthermore, an effective leader must be able to monitor his own decisions and make effective adjustments where necessary.

For McKinley, it was not so much the initial choices that he made for his cabinet as it is the *corrections* that he made once party politics proved unable to make sound choices for him. McKinley saw the error and fixed it; he refused to continue down a path that was failing both his administration and his country. Many of the men that he later chose successfully served in later administrations, helping to further shape the United States into the early twentieth century.

William McKinley was the consummate politician but he was also a gentleman; he was often described using words such as "dignity," "kindness," and "understanding."^[ix] He knew that it was better to have friends than enemies in politics which explains his style regarding his political opponents. Historian Lewis Gould wrote that "The president's adversaries usually lost, but after innumerable minor wounds rather than one decisive stroke."^[x] Gould further argued that President McKinley beat his adversaries not by blunt force but through the use of persuasion:

"He had a way of handling men," said Elihu Root, "so that they thought his ideas were their own." Listening more than he talked, patient with those who bored him, McKinley moved toward his objectives steadily and unobtrusively. "He was a man of great power," Root continued, "because he was absolutely indifferent to credit."^[xi]

These skills had served McKinley well as a Congressman and as the governor of Ohio. He could handle people who did not agree with him, and would leave them believing that it was McKinley, not they, who had transferred ideological positions.

While McKinley was a persuasive politician, he was only an individual. There was a distinct limit to his time, knowledge and over-all skill. A president who's an effective leader must develop a working cabinet in order to correctly steer the republic. There is evidence to support the idea that McKinley was not always able to place the right people in the right positions mainly due to party politics. Men like John Sherman and Russell Alger, two purely political appointees,^[xii] are regularly brought to the forefront as distinct cabinet-level failures for McKinley.

Sherman, who had previously been named Secretary of State by Rutherford B. Hayes, was appointed by McKinley to the same post in 1896. He soon proved to be more of a liability than an asset and in 1897, presidential historian Lewis Gould states that McKinley took "the direction of diplomacy into his own hands":

Secretary Sherman showed his growing mental incapacity in several unfortunate interviews on sensitive topics. Deaf and forgetful, the secretary became an embarrassment to the administration.... Clearly, Sherman would have to go, but it was not easy to find the right time as war with Spain approached.^[xiii]

After being replaced by John Hay as Secretary of State, Sherman's forgetfulness was readily apparent when he wrote that McKinley had "deprived him of the high office of Secretary by the temporary appointment of Secretary of State." This runs counter to the facts as Sherman had eagerly accepted the appointment by McKinley; he was not forced into the post.^[xiv] McKinley may not have been perfect, but he was intelligent enough to recognize an internal problem and work to fix it so that it would best benefit his administration and the United States.

If McKinley didn't initially have the best people around him, he did have the good sense to replace them with advisors who proved to be competent individuals. Elihu Root replaced the political appointee Russell Alger. H. Wayne Morgan wrote of McKinley's admiration for Root: "He saw in Root a deep demand for efficiency and speed, two things that he always needed and prized in the men around him. Root was silent but strong; he could make policy and would carry it out. He was McKinley's kind of man."^[xv]

While McKinley made a few unfortunate initial choices in naming his cabinet, the remainders of his selections were sound. Men such as John Long and Lyman J. Gage were considered to be excellent choices as Secretary of the Navy and Secretary of the Treasury, respectively. Furthermore, the placing of William Day as Assistant Secretary of State proved favorable as he unofficially led the State Department when Sherman proved unreliable.

Ability to Communicate

Perhaps the skill that many historians believe McKinley lacked was the ability to inspire the masses. He was not a rousing speaker like either of the Roosevelt's; he did not inspire the nation to undertake fantastic achievements such as John F. Kennedy. From his days as a lawyer, McKinley said only what was necessary and he gave nothing more than what he could prove. His public speaking skills were like the man himself -- measured, calm and confident.

While never overly charismatic, McKinley could be counted on to not instill confidence in the nation. Morgan argued that "The quality of trying to see the total picture... cost him much in the history books. Historians who like dramatic, rhetorical, and daring portray him as a lifeless figure."^[xvi] He may have seemed dull but he was quite effective in his minimalist approach to public speaking which worked with regard to McKinley's methodical leadership style.

McKinley was often a stabilizing force in uncertain times and it's this skill that made him an effective speaker. Morgan wrote of McKinley's abilities:

He was "a marvelous manager of men," as Henry Adams noted. At the height of a legislative or party crisis, he often drew quarreling

factions together with a simple injunction: "Come on now, let us put the personal element aside and consider the principle involved." But the charm that many took for pliability was only a means, not the man's substance. He could be stubborn and forceful, as many men discovered when he conducted his diplomacy over the Cuban question or tariff reciprocity. "Back of his courteous and affable manner was a firmness that never yielded conviction," Robert La Follette noted, "and while scarcely seeming to force issues, he usually achieved exactly what he wanted."^[xvii]

He was not a "back-breaker" or a "glad-hander." McKinley worked to get the job done correctly and he took this same approach when dealing with the public as well. Gould wrote "charisma was not a quality that McKinley would have understood. If he pleased Americans, whose goodness he affirmed, he infrequently inspired them."^[xviii] Teddy Roosevelt he wasn't, but McKinley was a problem solver, not a salesman. He was a true pragmatist who placed his job and his country well in front of his own personal needs.

It can be argued that William McKinley's greatest strength, with regard to communication, was his lack of communication itself. McKinley had a knack for saying little more than what needed to be said. Of the many problems that William McKinley faced while in office, the explosion of the *USS Maine* in Havana harbor was a firm test of his diplomatic skills. Many in the yellow press and the general public cried out for immediate action to be taken against Spain. McKinley however, chose the more rational path of establishing a court of inquiry into the explosion and waiting for the results before taking any action.

With this understanding, he said little on the explosion. In an address to the people of Philadelphia on the occasion of Washington's birthday, McKinley stated that "the exercise of a sober and dispassionate public judgment was the best safeguard in the calm of tranquil events, and rises superior and triumphant above the storms of woe and peril."^[xix] McKinley felt that the wisest course of action for him as a leader was to say little before he knew all of the facts. Getting caught up in the clamor for war was not central to his mission. Similar to the master chess player, McKinley was playing the game moves ahead of everyone else.

Courage

While McKinley possessed an innate ability to speak cautiously, courage was one of the real guiding strengths of his leadership. Presidential courage can best be described as performing the necessary actions regardless of its popularity. Many important accomplishments by effective leaders were initiated by actions that went against the grain of acceptable thought and behavior.

McKinley demonstrated his courage well before his presidency. As a Union Commissary Sergeant in 1862, the probability of any action that would demonstrate McKinley's courage was remote at best. But during the Battle of Antietam, McKinley seized his moment and demonstrated that courage was needed by all soldiers, regardless of rank or duty.

The Battle of Antietam was the bloodiest single day of the war, one on which more men were killed or wounded than any other. It still remains the day on which the most American lives were lost in armed conflict. To put into proper perspective, 23,000 men were killed or wounded at the Battle of Antietam which is nine times as many men or wounded as on D-Day, the "longest day" of WWII.^[xx]

McKinley's outfit began fighting early in the morning, without the opportunity to eat or re-supply. As the fighting lasted through the day and into the early evening, McKinley knew that swift action was needed or his Union brethren wouldn't be able to fight much longer. Morgan writes:

Looking around, (McKinley) saw a number of stragglers and an inspiration passed quickly through his mind. Hastily hitching two mules to two wagons, he filled them with supplies, enlisted the aid of the first two privates he saw to help drive and began a dash that made him famous in his regiment. It was almost dusk, but when the men saw that he was trying to bring them supplies, they raised a tremendous shout. Previously The noise was such that other units sent scouts to investigate. They returned with the astonishing story that Sergeant McKinley had driven his commissary wagon into the front lines and was serving hot coffee and rations to his exhausted men.^[xxi]

It was this type of courageous action that endeared McKinley to his men. Furthermore, this deed illustrated the kind of leader McKinley was as he did what was necessary for the good of his troops, not what benefited him personally.

McKinley's courage can also be seen in the tumultuous times before the outbreak of war with Spain in 1898. McKinley knew the horror of war and was hesitant about taking up arms against Spanish forces in Cuba. This is the key to understanding the courage of William McKinley with regard to his foreign policy. A slow process of negotiation, ending in the removal of all Spanish forces or perhaps even purchasing the island directly from Spain would trump any military action that may have resulted in American bloodshed.

McKinley could have vaulted into the hearts of citizens and historians had he prematurely lashed out at Spain over the tragedy of the *USS Maine*. Many cried out for swift and immediate action. Theodore Roosevelt, then Secretary of the Navy, wrote that he "would give anything if President McKinley would order the fleet to Havana tomorrow. ... The *Maine* was sunk by an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards."^[xxii] But McKinley acted courageously and went against public sentiment, doing what he knew was the prudent and best action for the nation. It is interesting to note here that many historians believe that McKinley lacked courage. Theodore Roosevelt went so far as to say that McKinley's backbone was similar to that of a "chocolate éclair."^[xxiii] However, TR's assessment of McKinley misses the point; it takes even greater courage to remain patient and make calm, rational decisions under pressure than to succumb to a weakness of ego when lives were at stake.

Luck

While all effective leaders must work both hard and smart to get to the top, they must also possess a good deal of luck. Often this luck manifests itself when a future leader arrives at "the right place, the right time," or meeting that certain person who assists them in the transition from regional politician to national politician.

If one needs to be lucky rather than good, then it is probably feasible to look at McKinley's service record during the United States Civil War. Being up close in battles such as Antietam and performing heroic actions, McKinley was never wounded. The lessons he learned in battle hardened his skills and fortitude. These lessons served him well with regard to his future leadership of the United States. It could also be argued that seeing this massive amount of bloodshed and inhumanity shaped McKinley's views on warfare and caused him to seek every option that might have prevented it with Spain.

One of the most fortuitous events of McKinley's life took place in Ohio in 1876. Miners had been striking over what they considered unfair labor practices. When violence erupted, mines belonging to Rhodes and Company had been set afire. Mark Hanna, a prominent Cleveland businessman, owned a large quantity of shares in the mines that had suffered through the violence. As these mines were worth millions of dollars to the owners and investors, the men responsible were sought out for justice.

The miners were arrested and put on trial for these acts of arson and were represented by a young lawyer named William McKinley.^[xxiv] From this trial, a friendship developed that changed the course of presidential history in the United States as Mark Hanna is often touted as the visionary mastermind behind McKinley's successful political career.

Conclusions

William McKinley was loyal and dedicated to any task that he undertook but he was also intelligent and calculating. He understood when to speak and when to listen. He realized that it was important to think and act in both a logical and reasonable manner. McKinley was not prone to

making lapses in judgment or action. Furthermore, his ability to correct his mistakes made him a leader who was not as interested in personal glory as he was in the prosperity of his country and his fellow Americans.

To view William McKinley as a slow and ineffective leader is to look too much at his successor, Teddy Roosevelt. Roosevelt was everything many historians fault McKinley for not being; outwardly self-assured and full of stories of daring and intrigue, often acting out of a combination of bravado and machismo. Roosevelt spoke from his "bully pulpit" and took an aggressive stance on many different policies of the United States. Whereas Roosevelt is complimented for "taking the initiative," McKinley is faulted for moving too slowly. This view undervalues McKinley's precision as a leader. He and his cabinet perceived problems from all angles to find the best solution to any crisis, foreign or domestic. He understood the virtues of patience and precision with regard to public leadership.

McKinley's ill-gotten legacy, however, is owed mostly to his lack of charisma. As a somewhat distant president, he did not make the larger-than-life speeches about the abilities of the country or the spirit of its citizens. He did not "speak softly and carry a big stick"; rather he worked to open lines of communication and to let reciprocal dialogue be his main tools with regard to foreign and domestic policy. McKinley was not "pushed" into the Spanish-American War; he waited until every peaceful option had expired before sending troops off to battle. McKinley was not a believer in "instantly engaging" in conflict but rather he was unduly patient in all of his affairs. McKinley was much more comfortable using persuasion first and open aggression second.

It is said that it is better to be lucky than good, but the life and presidency of William McKinley seems to ignore this phrase. McKinley did owe a certain amount to the forces of luck; he wasn't wounded during the Civil War and had the good fortune to meet Mark Hanna, the man that helped him during his entire political career. But more than luck, McKinley was a hard worker and a team player in a sport comprised of many individuals. His personal drive was not flashy and overarching. Rather, he was diligent and detailed oriented and understood his own strengths and weaknesses. McKinley must have known that simple patience was often more appropriate than foolish bluster. McKinley was effective because of who he was: a patient, precise and persuasive leader.

[i] Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1980), 74.

[ii] H. Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963), 360.

[iii] *Ibid.*, 34-35.

[iv] *Ibid.*, 29-30.

[v] *Ibid.*, 30.

[vi] *Ibid.*, 224.

[vii] John L. Offner, "McKinley and the Spanish-American War," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1), 54.

[viii] Offner, 61.

[ix] Gould, 8.

[x] Gould, 9.

[xi] *Ibid.*

[xii] Morgan, 433.

[xiii] Gould, 50.

[xiv] Gould, 18.

[xv] Morgan, 432.

[xvi] Morgan, 423.

[xvii] *Ibid.*, 422.

[xviii] Gould, 9.

[xix] Gould, 75.

[xx] United States National Park Service, "Battle of Antietam," *United States National Park Service*, <http://www.nps.gov/archive/anti/battle.htm>, (October 30, 2006).

[xxi] Morgan, 24-25.

[xxii] Richard E. Hamilton, "McKinley's Backbone," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, No. 3, Vol. 36, September 2006, OCLC FirstSearch, (October 25, 2006) 483.

[xxiii] Paul S. Holbo, "Presidential Leadership in Foreign Affairs: William McKinley and the Turpie-Foraker Amendment," *The American Historical Review*, No.4, Vol. 72, July 1967, JStor (September 29, 2006) 1321.

[xxiv] Francis Weisenberger, "The Time of Mark Hanna's First Acquaintance with McKinley," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, No. 1, Vol. 21, June 1934, JStor (September 29, 2006).