

The
Triumph of
William
McKinley



Why the Election
of 1896 Still Matters

Karl Rove

Author of the *New York Times* bestselling *Courage and Consequence*

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Sense of Duty



On July 24, 1864, a twenty-one-year-old Union first lieutenant was sent on a suicide mission near Kernstown, Virginia. An officer in General George Crook's Army of the Kanawha, he was ordered to ride across an exposed battlefield swept by Rebel musket and artillery fire and tell the men of the 13th West Virginia to withdraw before they were overrun and cut to pieces by Confederates under General Jubal Early who were close to splitting the Union left.

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

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

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

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

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

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

For much of the nineteenth century, the United States had been a nation divided. The period after the Civil War saw growing discord between the agrarian South and West and the industrialized North and East. There was friction between debtors worried about their mortgages and loans and the merchants, bankers, investors, and depositors who had lent them the money. There was increasing antagonism between labor and

management, and profound disagreements over how the economy should be organized and its benefits distributed. All this was reflected in brutal political battles over esoteric issues like tariffs and currency that nonetheless deeply affected the lives of ordinary people.

In many ways, these clashes weren't about economics—they were about competing visions for America. Through the nineteenth century, the United States filled the frontier with settlers and established firm control over the continent. Yet these pioneers were rocked by periodic financial panics and lived on loan from merchants and bankers until their crops came in, leading some to blame Eastern financiers for fleecing them as they carved out lives far from the Eastern seaboard's money centers. Some Americans resented those who appeared to dominate the nation's political institutions, and as the century drew to a close, these criticisms became increasingly vocal. While an agrarian protest movement was sweeping the South, the Plains, and parts of the Midwest, labor was also organizing across the country, a result of increased industrialization.⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

favorite hymn.¹⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AS A VERY YOUNG man, McKinley made a life-changing decision. When Southern cannons battered Fort Sumter, Lincoln called for volunteers for three-month enlistments. Recruiters spread across the North to encourage sign-ups. In Poland, Ohio, a young lawyer named Charles E. Glidden stood on the Sparrow

House tavern steps to urge the town's young men to enlist. "Our country's flag has been shot at," Glidden declared as women in the balcony above sang and prayed. "Who will be the first to defend it?" McKinley—then eighteen—attended the rally, but didn't rush to join, instead taking time to talk with his cousin William McKinley Osborne.²²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many people passionately believed the republic's very future depended on which party won and which policies were enacted. Campaigns were national educational efforts with lectures, debates, books, posters,

and pamphlets driving home the party's message, itself embodied in carefully drafted platforms that were widely circulated and discussed. Speeches—that era's equivalent to TV ads as a campaign's principal way to share its message—were particularly important, and parties covered target states with hundreds of orators.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the Old World.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

McKinley would have to master and make his own if he was to succeed in the politics of a rapidly industrializing, yet farm-rich state.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Early Beginnings



On April 9, 1865, when news of Lee's surrender reached Winchester, where McKinley and his comrades were bivouacked, two hundred cannons boomed. Recently named divisional chief of staff, Major McKinley ordered the town's lamps and lanterns lit that night to celebrate the war's end and the Union's salvation.¹

His regiment was quickly demobilized, leaving McKinley's future uncertain. He considered making the army a career but declined a commission after his father argued that prospects for advancement in the peacetime military would be poor. He was soon home in Poland, a small town eight miles south of Youngstown, wrestling with what to do with his life.²

McKinley decided on the law. It was a respectable profession, though Hayes wrote from Washington where he had taken his seat in Congress (to which he had been elected while still in combat) to say it was a bad idea. "A man in any of our western towns with half your wit ought to be independent at forty on his own business. As a lawyer, a man sacrifices independence to ambition which is a bad bargain at best." McKinley was not swayed. Hayes was a lawyer himself and McKinley had not spent four years away from Ohio to now move farther west.³

The twenty-two-year-old McKinley would train for the law as Lincoln had—by finding an attorney who would let him read law books in his office until he mastered the subject matter and could pass the bar. He was soon offered such an apprenticeship.

Charles E. Glidden had stood on Poland's tavern steps in 1861 to urge the town's young men—McKinley among them—to enlist. Now thirty, he had been elected judge in Mahoning County and was in a position to help McKinley. By fall 1865, the Major occupied a desk at Glidden & Wilson, his head buried in law books until late at night. In school, McKinley had a reputation for "studying, studying, studying." That habit resurfaced, but he still found time to serve as president of the Everett Literary Society, a young men's self-improvement group that hosted debates and speech competitions. McKinley often won. He was a convincing speaker with a pleasant manner that engendered trust among listeners.⁴

In September 1866, encouraged by his sister Anna, McKinley entered New York's Albany Law School. His roommate recalled he "worked very hard, often reading until one or two in the morning." He ate ice cream for the first time at a reception after the dean's pretty daughter explained the concept. The Major left Albany in early 1867 after one term and that March was admitted to the Ohio bar. Again prodded by Anna, he moved to Canton, Ohio, where she was a school principal. The town had 5,000 people, was near coal mines and water, sat on three rail lines, and had a promising future as a manufacturing center. It was just the kind of rising place for a twenty-four-year-old lawyer to begin postwar life.⁵

At first there wasn't much legal work for the newcomer, but McKinley's diligence caught the attention of George W. Belden. One evening, the older lawyer came into McKinley's small quarters, complaining he was ill and unable to handle a case on the next day's docket. Would the Major step in? Unsettled by having so little time to prepare, McKinley agreed only when Belden said the case would not get heard if McKinley didn't take it. The Major spent all night prepping for his first appearance. As he opened his argument saying, "What we contend for in this lawsuit," McKinley glanced toward the rear of the courtroom. The

sat Belden with “a slight smile.” The Major’s well-organized presentation was persuasive and a few days later Belden dropped by with a \$25 fee. McKinley protested it was too much for a day’s work, until Belden replied he had received \$100. Not only did McKinley win the case and earn a handsome sum, but he demonstrated his ability to prepare and a talent for presentation. Belden invited him to become his partner and McKinley accepted.⁶

An ardent Democrat, Belden was an unusual mentor for McKinley, whose strong Republican views were already known. As U.S. Attorney for Northeastern Ohio in 1859, Belden prosecuted the “Rescuers.” They were townspeople, professors, and college students from Oberlin, Ohio, who helped a fugitive slave flee to Canada. But unlike many Ohio Democrats who opposed the war, Belden was dedicated to a Northern victory. It is unlikely that if he had been a Peace Democrat, he would have been attracted to young McKinley or the Major to him.⁷

Naturally tolerant and easygoing, McKinley joined more than a law firm. He regularly attended the First Methodist Church, teaching in the Sunday school and then becoming its superintendent. McKinley had become a Mason when he and other Northern officers reopened the Winchester Lodge after observing a Union doctor share his cash with Confederate POWs because they were fellow Masons. The Major not only joined the Canton Lodge and would remain active in Masonry the rest of his life.⁸

He became involved in the Knights of Pythias, a fraternity devoted to world peace. He joined the YMCA literary society, which hosted debates. He offered a particularly effective defense of women’s suffrage in one of them. He soon became the Y’s president. Like many comrades, he joined the nation’s largest veteran group, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), and the Loyal Legion, a group for Union officers. He regularly attended reunions of the 23rd Ohio.⁹

McKinley joined these groups because it was a common practice of the times and a way for him to improve his community. It also allowed the Major to develop a wide and eclectic circle of friends, even including Democrats and many Irish and German Catholics. This networking could help him land legal work and be an asset if he decided to run for office.¹⁰

IT WAS NOT ALL community service and law for the handsome young twenty-five-year-old. McKinley also took part in Canton’s social scene and in the summer of 1868 found himself at Meyers Lake, west of Canton. The town’s young people frequently gathered there at a lakeside inn.

Sitting outside with his sister Anna on a bright day, McKinley was taken with a slim young woman who was sitting at a picnic table. She had chestnut hair piled high and twisted in the Victorian fashion, large blue eyes, and a confident, athletic manner. Rather than daintily picking at her food as women of the time were expected to do, Ida Saxton was tucking into her creamed chicken and waffle with gusto. McKinley later said he fell in love right then. Anna knew Ida and introduced the Major to her. Later, Ida could recall only his title, not his name.¹¹

Nothing could come of their meeting. She was involved with another major, Joseph W. Wright, recently returned from the Confederate army. A Marylander without slaves, he had fought for the South as a matter of principle. After the war, he worked on an Arkansas newspaper before earning a law degree and moving to Canton, where he was a salesman for a farm implement manufacturer. Wright’s moonlighting as a lawyer brought him into contact with James A. Saxton, Ida’s father.¹²

The Saxtons were one of Canton’s oldest, most prominent families. This close-knit clan’s patriarch, John Saxton, Ida’s Scotch-Irish grandfather, arrived in Canton in 1814, shortly after the town’s founding. He wanted to be a publisher. After determining Canton could support a newspaper, he procured a press from his native Pennsylvania and printed the *Repository*’s first issue on March 30, 1815. When the enterprising

proved profitable, Saxton married his childhood sweetheart, Margaret Laird, daughter of Scottish immigrants, and brought her to the thriving village, where they raised six sons and a daughter in a brick home on South Market Street.¹³

Their oldest was James A. Saxton. He and his siblings were raised in comfortable prosperity. John's success as a publisher enabled him to build offices and a printing plant, and he and his brothers—James and his uncles—created a string of moneymaking businesses, starting with a nail factory. Their commercial spirit was passed on. James opened a hardware store in 1834 at age eighteen and followed with a dry goods business before marrying into another entrepreneurial family, the Dewalts. They were part of the original German Dunkers, an Anabaptist sect who had settled Canton. Since 1809 they had owned the town's Spread Eagle Tavern and brewed beer. George and Christiana Dewalt were contemporaries of John and Margaret Saxton. Their daughter Kate married James Saxton on August 20, 1846, in Canton's First Presbyterian Church. The couple then moved into her parents' family home at Eighth and South Market. Kate was pregnant with two months and on June 8, 1847, gave birth to a daughter, named Ida.¹⁴

The bright, happy girl spent her first three years in her grandparents' home, growing so close to both her mother and her grandmother Christiana that it was difficult when she and her parents moved out of the Dewalt house into their own home next door. A few years later, James Saxton sold his hardware and dry goods businesses and started the Stark County Bank.¹⁵

Ida also idolized her grandfather, John Saxton. He was an ardent abolitionist, committed Republican, and, even more unusual for the time, a staunch believer in women's education, beliefs shared by his son James. A committed Christian and an elder of First Presbyterian, John helped found Canton's public schools, served in local government, and tended to the city's poor, unemployed, and sick. His readiness to offer food, money, or a kind word was a powerful example for his children and grandchildren, especially Ida.¹⁶

She entered the Canton Union School in September 1853. For the next eight years, Ida studied English, math, science, drawing, and vocal music, the last complemented by piano lessons at home. The school's principal was Betsy Cowles, a gifted educator and, like James Saxton, an abolitionist and women's education advocate. The two organized the Canton Anti-Slavery Society before Cowles left town in 1857.¹⁷

Ida finished middle school in spring 1861, but because of the war, took a gap year to help the Union effort, making bandages while her mother served as the Soldiers Relief treasurer. In the fall of 1862, Ida entered the Delhi Academy, in Delaware County, New York, 160 miles northwest of Manhattan. The academy's principal was a familiar face, the formidable Miss Cowles. While Ida was pleased to be reunited with her mentor, both women found the area too Democratic and hostile to Republicans and abolitionists. Miss Cowles left after the 1863 spring term; Ida returned home, too, and enrolled at Cleveland Female Seminary. She graduated in June 1865 after finishing the school's rigorous curriculum of advanced mathematics, geography, grammar, history, and penmanship, as well as electives including French literature, music, singing, drawing, painting, sculpture, and piano. Ida excelled in languages, picking up French, Italian, and Greek.¹⁸

Ida's father, a practical man, wanted Ida to receive the best possible education. So Ida went off that fall to Brooke Hall Female Seminary in Media, Pennsylvania, a forerunner of a modern women's college. Brooke Hall emphasized not only academics but also physical fitness. Ida became an enthusiastic walker, leading hikes through nearby woods and hills. The girls also played cards and games weeknights, went to Friday night dances, regularly attended church, and visited nearby Philadelphia for weekend shopping, concerts, operas, and plays. Amid the daughters of some of the East Coast's great families, Ida flourished, growing into a person smart, opinionated, and confident young woman who made friends easily and seemed to be particularly empathetic. Ida graduated in June 1867 and returned to Canton.¹⁹

Unlike most other affluent young women then, Ida went to work. For two years, she played an increasingly vital role in her father's bank, calculating interest payments and dividends and handling loan applications, mortgages, and complicated financial matters. Her father enjoyed her company, trusted her judgment, and respected her abilities, but he also wanted her to be independent. "I have seen enough girls left stranded by sudden losses of means," he said. For her part, Ida later said she "never ceased to be grateful for the opportunity to become a "practical woman of experience."²⁰

Her life was not all banking and business, though. The attractive twenty-year-old was a bright presence at parties, church socials, and concerts. "Every man in town promised to be a brother to me," she later said. "And oh! I did have such a good time." While James Saxton had taught his daughters that the decisions of whom, and when to marry were theirs, he could not help being worried about unworthy suitors. It's not clear what he thought of Wright, but he did make it clear he had had enough of young lawyers swarming around Ida.²¹

Still, sometime in 1868, Ida and Major Wright became an item. She arrived at the Schaefer's Open House Halloween ball on his arm, costumed as the "Queen of Hearts." Friends considered this tantamount to an engagement.²²

Knowing marriage would profoundly change her life, Ida decided to have one last great adventure as a single woman. She and her sister Mary—nicknamed Pina—would take a six-month grand tour of Europe beginning in June 1869. They would visit England, Scotland, and Ireland, then jump across the English Channel to the Continent before returning to the States. Wright moved temporarily to Louisville for his employer. The two sweethearts pledged to write each other frequently, with Ida promising to buy him a special gift on her travels.²³

James Saxton engaged Miss Jeanette Alexander to serve as guide and chaperone for his daughter. Alexander found Ida headstrong, confident, and impossible to manage. In turn, Ida didn't trust Alexander. They clashed over Alexander's plan to bring her brother along to manage the group's money. Ida thought an attempt to rip off her generous father and felt herself fully capable of keeping meticulous track of her own two-thousand-dollar budget.²⁴

The trip was more than galleries and museums, cathedrals and monuments, natural wonders and mountains. It was also a liberating experience for the sisters. Ida pierced her ears, drank wine for the first time, walked ten to twenty miles a day, hiked the Alps, and, scandalously in Miss Alexander's eyes, allowed gentlemen friends to take Pina and her to the theater in Paris. In London, she was introduced to Rutherford B. Hayes's brother-in-law. Ida was not impressed with the unattached young doctor, who mentioned an old army comrade now living in Canton, Major McKinley.²⁵

Ida and Wright corresponded frequently, their letters warm and hopeful. She would find his missives waiting at the banks from which her father had arranged for her to draw cash. In August, Wright explained he was in Canton recuperating after becoming ill on a business trip. Ida wrote her mother, saying, "Mr. Wright is not so sick I think, but I want you to show him very marked attention and do all you can to make his stay in Canton pleasant."²⁶

The sisters and their chaperone arrived in Geneva on Saturday, September 25. Mary went to dinner but Ida went to the bank to get Swiss francs and pick up the latest letters from home. Mary returned to the hotel to find Ida weeping on its terrace. Joseph Wright had died of meningitis on September 2. The next morning, Mary told her parents that the news "was a fearful shock." Ida was understandably deeply depressed, writing, "I know I should not feel so, but I cannot help it."²⁷

A few days later, she pressed her parents for details, asking, "How long he was sick? If he suffered? Who took care of him?" "Mr. Wright spoke in his last letter he would be either in Canton or New York to meet me," she wrote. "Only think that now he is dead, and buried. I cannot realize it." Her life had changed

irrevocably with the death of the man she expected to marry. "Things will be very different from what expected when I get home."²⁸

Though Ida considered remaining in Paris to study French, the sisters were back in Canton before Christmas. Ida had presents for each child in her Sunday school class and "one ambition" for the New Year, namely to "master the intricacies of finance." She would bury her grief in work. In a way, that was welcome news to her father, who was content to pass more of the bank's operations on to his eldest daughter. Her extensive schooling, intelligence, and judgment gave him confidence she could handle its complex affairs. He thought her work in the bank "the most valuable course in her whole education."²⁹

THE WORK ALSO BROUGHT her back into contact with Major McKinley. After James Saxton brushed off suggestions from mutual friends that he consider the young lawyer for the bank's legal business, Saxton was added in November 1869 as a defendant to a case on which McKinley was already a member of the defense team. To the surprise of some defendants, McKinley won the case. When the Major personally delivered a substantial check for the banker's share of the award, Saxton was impressed.³⁰

Whatever Ida thought of McKinley's legal skills, she was more impressed when, as YMCA president, he introduced famed New York newspaperman Horace Greeley at an appearance. The Major was eloquent and captivating. Soon he was a regular guest at the parties in the third-floor ballroom of the Dewalt home, which, though Christiana Dewalt still lived there, was now full of Saxtons and was more often referred to as the Saxton house. Another frequent guest later remembered how the Major's "affable manner soon gained him admission to the upper crust of Canton society." McKinley "was the most handsome, dignified and graceful human being."³¹

The now-twenty-six-year-old McKinley had gained new stature in 1869 while Ida was abroad when he was elected Stark County prosecutor. It was an electoral upset. Stark County was Democratic and the GOP nomination for local offices was considered of little value. But McKinley's web of relationships and winning manner did the trick for him. The post was not a difficult responsibility and he could handle unrelated legal business on the side. The only significant public issue McKinley took on during his two-year term was illicit liquor sales, especially in the town of Alliance, among the young men attending Mount Union College. McKinley used the confession of a sixteen-year-old student from Pittsburgh named Philander C. Knox to convict some saloon owners, an action that linked McKinley with the temperance movement and won him his mother's approval.³²

His family was also gathering in Canton. First, some siblings relocated there, then his parents, though the senior McKinley was often in Michigan, where he had invested in a pig iron furnace.³³

The courtship between Ida and McKinley lasted a year. There were long walks. He became a regular caller, sometimes twice in an evening, once for conversation, a second time to say good night. She often visited McKinley's law offices above the First National Bank, the rival to her father's First Canton. They even paid a local boy to carry letters to each other. At a church social where Ida was scooping ice cream, he tried taking away a tray of bowls but succeeded only in dumping the desserts on her. He was horrified, but she laughed.³⁴

It was soon clear that Ida was in love again, but Wright's sudden death left a scar. Once when McKinley was late for a party, Ida became anxious, asking, "Have you seen the Major? Do you imagine the Major is sick? Has the Major been called to the city?"³⁵

Among their rituals was meeting on a corner near First Presbyterian, where Ida taught Sunday school at the First Methodist, where he was Sunday school superintendent. One Sunday, McKinley told her, "I do not like this separation every Sunday, you going one way and I another. Suppose after this we always go the

same way.” Ida replied, “I think so too.” Soon after on a carriage ride behind a team of bays and at the top of a hill outside town, McKinley proposed. Ida immediately accepted. “My fate was sealed,” McKinley fondly recalled, and James Saxton told his soon-to-be son-in-law, “You are the only man I have ever known to whom I would entrust my daughter.” The Major wrote Hayes, “It is now settled that Miss Saxton and I will unite our fortunes. I think I am doing the right thing. Miss S. is everything I could hope for.”³⁶

“Fortunes” might have been a poor choice of words. McKinley made \$1,000 a year as prosecutor and some from legal work on the side. He owned a modest house, but with his sisters. Ida came from one of Canton’s richest families and her father earned \$53,000 in 1869, nearly a million dollars today. Still, McKinley asked his brother David in San Francisco to buy a ring of California gold with small diamonds around a red ruby. A pall was cast over the young couple’s preparations for their wedding by the death in October of Ida’s grandmother, which hit Ida and her mother Kate hard. The widow Dewalt left her home to Kate.³⁷

Ida and William were married January 25, 1871, in the unfinished new building of First Presbyterian with a thousand guests, three hundred standing around the sanctuary. Ida wore an ivory satin gown with Mary in pink silk and a friend in yellow as maids of honor. McKinley’s brother Abner and his cousin William McKinley Osborne were groomsmen. McKinley’s father was absent, away in Michigan managing his furnace. (The senior McKinley’s finances were precarious: he was supported by gifts from his children William Jr. and Anna included.)³⁸

The newly married couple caught the late-night train east for a honeymoon in New York and Washington. They posed for photographs in Manhattan. In Washington, McKinley apparently shared the secret with his new bride. He hoped to follow his old commander, Hayes, into politics. Ida was thrilled soon telling family and friends “her husband would someday be president of the United States.”³⁹

The couple returned home on Valentine’s Day and moved into a residential hotel so they could consider their housing options. Ida was then battered by the third loss of someone close to her in less than two years. John Saxton, her grandfather, role model, and the family patriarch, died April 16 at the age of seventy-nine.⁴⁰

A few days later, the young couple settled into a house on North Market Street, a gift from James Saxton. There was talk of moving into the Saxton house, but Kate said, “no young woman does as well under her own roof.” Regardless, Ida was soon under the Saxton roof: pregnant, she spent the late summer and fall under her mother’s watchful eye. A baby girl arrived Christmas Day. They named her Katherine after Ida’s mother and grandmother, and called her Katie.⁴¹

The baby was a Christmas gift that more than compensated for McKinley’s narrow defeat that fall for reelection as county prosecutor. That itself was only a small setback for McKinley. His law practice was on solid ground even before James Saxton had begun steering more of his legal and bank business the Major’s way.⁴²

By late summer 1872, Ida was pregnant again. The good news was paired with bad. Ida’s beloved mother, Kate, was dying, probably of cancer, and in terrible pain. At Christmas, Ida and McKinley gave their daughter Katie the small rocking chair Ida’s parents had given her. It was Kate Saxton’s last Christmas; she died March 14, 1873. Because of the closeness of the relationship with her mother, “the shock was too great” for Ida. “Her nervous system was nearly wrecked.”⁴³

Two weeks later, Ida gave birth to a second daughter and named her Ida. It was a very difficult end to a troubled pregnancy for mother and daughter. The child was sickly from the first, and as her mother struggled to regain her own health, the baby grew weaker and then died of cholera on August 20, 1873. Having already been devastated by the loss in a very short time of Joseph Wright, grandparents to whom she was very close, and her mother, this unexpected and premature death was a heavy blow. For Ida and

William, baby Ida's death marked "the beginning of the great sorrow that was to hover like a cloud over the remainder of their lives."⁴⁴

Ida herself was sick, bedridden for nearly six months. It is likely that her immune system and that of her daughter were compromised during the pregnancy, leaving both vulnerable to infection and disease. Ida may have also suffered some kind of fall that led to a concussion or even more traumatic brain injury, which injured her spine.⁴⁵

Ida's father, alarmed by her condition and alone in the Saxton house except for his ne'er-do-well twenty-three-year-old son, George, invited the McKinleys to leave their home and live with him. They accepted. A platoon of maids, servants, and cooks would make Ida's life easier.⁴⁶

Overwhelmed, Ida became severely depressed and "hysterically apprehensive" about Katie, holding her in her lap for hours in a darkened room, crying. When Abner McKinley found Katie swinging on the garden gate and invited her for a walk, his niece replied, "No, I mustn't go out of the yard or God'll punish Mammy some more."⁴⁷

In addition to depression, Ida suffered severe headaches and an acute sensitivity to light, rapid motion, and sound. Even the hairpins used to hold her coif in place could bring on agony, so she cropped her hair short. On an August 1877 camping trip, some young boys began banging out music on homemade instruments, causing McKinley to fly out of his tent and ask them to stop: Ida was being tormented by a headache. Yet a few weeks later, she hosted a piano recital at her home with no ill effects.⁴⁸

She began suffering epileptic fits, probably the result of brain trauma from a fall. Headaches often signaled one was imminent. Her body would stiffen; she would become oblivious to her surroundings, make a hissing sound, and shake uncontrollably. Often she did not know she had had a seizure and would pick up the conversation in midsentence. She sometimes fell out of her chair or, if walking, slumped to the ground. She had facial tics and contortions. It is difficult to diagnose more than a century later, but doctors now believe Ida suffered a central nervous system injury to her left frontal lobe that resulted in epilepsy and partial paralysis or muscle weakness on her right side. The headaches and seizures lasted the rest of her life.⁴⁹

If a seizure came on in public, her husband would cover her face with a handkerchief until it passed. William Howard Taft was once talking with McKinley with Ida present and as he asked the Major for a pencil, Ida began hissing and suffered a seizure. McKinley reached for his handkerchief with one hand while giving Taft the pencil with his other. It left Taft discombobulated.⁵⁰

Ida's persistent weakness on her right side caused her to hide her right hand in photographs and public appearances. In addition, she had phlebitis, which made it painful to walk or stand, likely aggravated by a spinal injury that caused nerve damage that made her mobility issues worse. Still, after being virtually hospitalized in her own house for six months, these maladies did not keep Ida from traveling and entertaining in the years ahead.⁵¹

By March 13, 1874, Ida felt well enough to attend her first party. In the meantime, as the McKinleys lived under James Saxton's roof, little Katie grew into an outgoing, animated young girl and McKinley's law practice flourished, in part because of his father-in-law's needs or referrals. Saxton encouraged him and Ida to purchase a large office building across the street from the Saxton home, even lending them the money. McKinley moved his law office there and rented out the remaining space for income.⁵²

But then on June 25, 1875, the McKinleys suffered another misfortune. Ida's worst fears were realized: Katie died of scarlet fever. It was almost too much to bear. Friends worried about Ida, buried under her grief and praying for her own death. McKinley would not let her go, even though he too felt keenly the loss of his "favorite Christmas present."⁵³

Ida's pregnancies, her illnesses, and the rapid deaths of so many people to whom she was so close transformed her from the spirited, self-confident woman McKinley had married two years earlier into a ne-

invalid. McKinley understood what the death of six of the closest people to her in less than six years must have done to his wife.

Ida became his constant focus. She clung to him fiercely and demanded much of his time, which he gave willingly. McKinley did all he could to assure her of his continuing love. He stopped riding horses and came back on walking because these activities took him away from Ida, preferring instead to take her on carriage rides. He was quick to attend without complaint to her every whim and need. He would excuse himself from meetings or visitors to periodically check on her and sit in the darkened parlor at night, talking with her. When the two were apart because of business or politics, he would write her frequently.⁵⁴

Ida's illness kept her from his swearing-in as a congressman. When it took place in March 1877, she was in Philadelphia's Infirmity for Nervous Diseases under the care of Silas Weir Mitchell. He was a neurologist whose remedies required forced bed rest and a high-caloric, milk-based diet. His patients were isolated in darkened rooms, prohibited from entertainment or reading. His methods were used on Virginia Woolf and are thought to do more harm than good. At least Mitchell viewed epilepsy as a physical, not a mental, disease, unlike most doctors of the time. Ida was in Mitchell's care for perhaps three months and McKinley wrote her as many as three letters a day.⁵⁵

McKinley offered to sacrifice his political dreams, telling her, "If you would suffer by the circumstances surrounding me in a competition for public station, I will devote my ambition to success in private life." But she strongly supported his career, perhaps even saw in it a way to some of the happiness denied her by the death of her children and the onset of ill health. So she responded, "Your ambitions are mine."⁵⁶

He gave her the support the grieving mother needed. "Ida would have died years ago," one friend later remarked, "but William would just not let her go." The couple would have no more children. For the rest of her life, she kept Katie's photo on her dressing table and hung a larger version on her bedroom wall, the image hand-tinted with yellow hair, pink cheeks, red lips, and blue eyes. Ida took to displaying Katie's rocking chair next to her own childhood chair, often draping them with Katie and little Ida's clothes.⁵⁷

Ida could be challenging. She was—for a period—intensely jealous. In summer 1881, after Ida and McKinley returned from their tenth-anniversary California vacation, she felt neglected when the Major went out of town and accused him of an affair. It ended in "a frantic scene." Soon after, McKinley and two of his brothers were walking when they met an attractive neighbor woman. As they neared the Saxton house, McKinley pleaded, "please don't walk into the yard with me. Ida might see you." Later that fall, after a memorial service in Cleveland for President Garfield following his assassination, McKinley mentioned seeing "a handsome lady" friend of the family's. Ida erupted in a jealous outburst ended only by an epileptic seizure.⁵⁸

Even in calm waters, Ida could be demanding, especially in private around family and friends. Major Hanna's precocious Boston nephew, David Rhodes, spent the summer of 1896 at his uncle's Cleveland home. When the McKinleys stayed a week there participating in the city's centennial celebration, the teenager reported to his father, Hanna's brother-in-law, the historian James Ford Rhodes, that "Mrs. McKinley has been somewhat more flighty than usual during the last few days . . . to the great annoyance of Aunt Gussie and Aunt Mary Phelps whose nerves are on the point of entire collapse from their constant effort to fulfill her outrageous whims."⁵⁹

But McKinley accepted Ida's condition and behavior without complaint or bitterness. It was part of God's plan and his faith was deepened rather than shaken. "His first consideration was to soften the blow for Ida as far as he could," a contemporary observed. "His devotion to her grew with her dependence on him. Ida's reliance on him, suggests McKinley's preeminent biographer, "fulfilled his need to be loved, and that mattered most." The Major reacted stoically to his daughters' deaths and his wife's deteriorating health, hardly ever speaking of either and never complaining about the latter. In a rare reflection years later, he

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