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William McKinley — and Twenty Years After

By Nicholas Murray Butler

Address at Annual Celebration of William McKinley's
Birthday, by the Tippecanoe Club of Cleveland, Ohio,
January 29, 1920

Every circumstance of this gathering conspires to touch the heart of a life-long Republican and to inspire new faith in the ideals and principles of the Republican Party as a servant of the highest purposes of the American people. The greatest of Republican leaders have stood in the presence of this club. Its very name carries back to the years when the voices of Clay and Webster were still to be heard in the land, and when with the elder Harrison the forces of nationalism and freedom that were later to bring the Republican Party into being were already making themselves felt

This day is the 77th anniversary of the birth of William McKinley, a native son of Ohio and its chiefest ornament; a man who, as soldier, as citizen, as legislator, and as president has left upon American history a mark that will never be effaced. The tragic circumstances of his death at the very moment when his power and influence were at their height, when new and large plans were maturing in his mind, have written his name high on the sadly long roll of those who have fallen as martyrs in public service. Lincoln was killed by an assassin blinded by passion and sectional hate. Garfield was killed by a typical representative of the shiftless and irresponsible elements that move about in every large community.

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McKinley was killed by one who professed himself convinced, as far as his weak mentality was capable of conviction, that all government was an evil thing, and that to murder the highest officer of the Government of the United States would, in some mysterious way, advance the day when complete happiness and unbounded prosperity would be the lot of each and all. As John Hay so truly said in his eloquent and moving memorial address before the two Houses of Congress: "Against that devilish spirit nothing avails—neither virtue nor patriotism, nor age nor youth, nor conscience nor pity".

The murder of McKinley foreshadowed the great contest that now engages a world's attention—the contest between law and order and the established institutions which freedom has built on the one hand, and on the other the spirit of anarchy, destruction and ruin, that would find in chaos some new opportunity which order and liberty unite to deny.

It seems only yesterday that the shots of that little pistol, carefully concealed in the assassin's hand, were heard 'round the world, carrying horror and consternation to civilized peoples everywhere. For the third time in less than forty years a President of the United States was murdered. That very fact gives us pause. "Assassination," said King Humbert of Italy, "is the professional risk of kings." We had not supposed that it was also to become a professional risk of presidents. If one may be permitted to try to draw a helpful lesson from the shocking occurrence at Buffalo, it is that that occurrence threw into high relief, and forced upon the attention of even the most unthinking, the fact that violence is everywhere the enemy of peaceful progress under law and that it can contribute nothing to human advance.

In this presence there is no need to trace over again the familiar story of William McKinley's life. Every detail

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of it is well-known. It is the story of a youth of sound Scotch ancestry, of modest beginnings, of frank and earnest purpose, of courage in battle and of high standards in civil life, as well as of amazing competence to lead and to mould his fellow men. Whether as eager debater on the floor of the House of Representatives, or as eloquent orator directly addressing the people, or as President in close counsel over grave matters of state, William McKinley never failed to exhibit high and fine character, exceptional intelligence, and complete faith in the American people. He often succeeded where others failed, because of his capacity for getting on with men. He often carried a contest through defeat to final victory, because of his constant hold upon controlling principles.

It is unusual for American statesmen to show any real mastery of the facts of commercial and industrial life, or any capacity to make use of these facts in the formulation of public policy. The strength of American statesmanship has lain rather on the legal or juristic side of our public life, and in the development of underlying political principles in argument, in statute, and in executive act. Daniel Webster is a conspicuous illustration of notable achievement in this field of public endeavor. William McKinley was strong where Webster was less so, and he in turn rarely if ever entered upon the field which Webster made so largely his own. Alexander Hamilton is the one many-sided genius in our history who was equally at home in the juristic and in the economic aspects of political life and problems, and his place at the head of the list of constructive American statesmen is secure.

McKinley's keen study of the facts of industry and his special powers of clear exposition, have forever identified him with the cause of a protective tariff. Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay and William McKinley form the succession at whose hands this fundamental doctrine of the Re-

publican Party has been moulded and developed. Hamilton, Clay and McKinley alike would have resented the notion that there was anything fixed or sacred about any particular schedule or rates of duty, and they would have equally repelled the charge that they had in mind to care for the interests and privileges of any portion of the community, much less of a favoured class. These three statesmen, each in his own time, in his own way, and under the circumstances that surrounded him, urged the doctrine of economic independence as a necessary corollary to political independence. Each of them urged the imposition of tariff duties in order that industries might be developed and diversified and that an American standard of living might be established and maintained, not at all in the interest of those who might happen to be immediate beneficiaries, but because those policies were essential to the prosperity, the happiness, and the independence of the whole people.

The constitutional and the theoretical issues, once so much emphasized in these debates, are no longer discussed among us. Facts have made such discussion unnecessary. The only questions remaining are those as to the practical application of the principles for which Hamilton, Clay and McKinley stood, to changed conditions of domestic and international trade. All three would have been the first not only to acclaim but to propose such adaptations. Their service lay in the fact that all three saw beneath and behind the purely theoretical and academic discussions of these practical questions, and took account of the stern facts of human life and human industry, which should alone control far-reaching public policy.

The unparalleled success of President McKinley in his dealings with the Congress of the United States is proof, if proof were needed, that our American government can

be made to work effectively if one knows how to work it. The frequent differences, rising sometimes to the dignity of quarrels, between the Executive and the Legislative Departments of the Government, are not, as the history of the McKinley administration shows, a necessary consequence of our constitutional system. They are rather the effect of inadequacies and peculiarities of the temperament of individuals. An executive who understands the constitutional rights and privileges of the Congress, and who respects the judgment and the convictions of its members, will be able to cooperate with the Congress as McKinley did, even in most difficult and controverted matters, without personal friction or public damage.

Strong men choose strong men as counsellors. Weak men are afraid to have strength in their neighborhood. A president who called John Hay to be Secretary of State, and Elihu Root to be Secretary of War, was conscious of his power to work with the best ability that the nation had. It would be difficult to recall an administration in which men of large ability worked more effectively and more harmoniously together in the formulation and execution of public policy.

McKinley's ways have often been described as winning, and winning they truly were. I recall an instance when I was asked by a group of business men to carry to President McKinley their vigorous criticism of his proposed policy in regard to Porto Rico. They objected in particular to some of the aspects of his fiscal policy regarding that Island. President McKinley listened to my exposition of those objections and criticisms with the utmost patience and with perfect courtesy and good feeling. When I had finished he said, in his quiet impressive way, "Now let me tell you how this Porto Rico matter seems to me." Then

in less than five minutes, in the simplest language, with complete mastery of facts and with cogent argument, he sent me back to New York with all objections and criticisms completely answered. The group whose spokesman I had been were at once won to his point of view and continued to give him ungrudging support. A man of smaller mould or quicker temper would have speedily grown impatient under these criticisms, and might not have taken the trouble to bring those who wished to be his friends and supporters into a full understanding of his policies. Wherever you touch the personal history or the personal record of William McKinley you find this gentle, kindly disposition always in evidence. They were wrong who mistook it for weakness. It was the gentleness of a strong and kindly man, conscious of his high purposes and clear as to his ruling principles. It was this trait, as much as anything else, which gave William McKinley his power over the House of Representatives, his influence over successive National Conventions of his party, and finally his hold upon the confidence and affection of the people of the United States regardless of section, of party or of creed.

When President McKinley was preparing his famous speech to be delivered at Buffalo on September 5, 1901, the very day before he was shot, he was perhaps unconsciously building a bridge between the policies which had been uppermost in his mind for twenty years, and those to which new conditions and new opportunities beckoned him. That speech contains conclusive evidence that President McKinley was looking forward and was preparing the public mind to follow him in new policies of national development and usefulness. The results of the Spanish War, with their new responsibilities, had greatly changed both the point of view and the temper of the American people. President McKinley felt this and was

pointing the way to new developments of policy. He particularly liked the sentence "Expositions are the time-keepers of progress," and he made it the text of his speech at Buffalo. When he went on to say: "Isolation is no longer possible or desirable;" "Our capacity to produce has developed so enormously, and our products have so multiplied, that the problem of new markets requires our urgent and immediate attention;" "What we produce beyond our domestic consumption must have a vent abroad"; "The period of exclusiveness is past"; "Commercial wars are unprofitable," he was pointing the way to just such policies as those upon which the conditions of this moment invite us to enter. The world of 1920 is an echo of these prophecies of 1901.

The twenty years that have passed have carried us a long way from the world on which President McKinley looked out when he made his last speech. Since that time the growth of industry has been everywhere phenomenal. Agricultural production has advanced by leaps and bounds. New inventions have made the several nations many times more dependent upon each other than was the case at the time of our war with Spain. In the midst of all this came the Great War, which has already effected a dozen revolutions, some violent and some peaceful, with more yet to come. In what better spirit and with what sounder principles than those of President McKinley's last speech can we enter upon the new and severe tasks that just now open before us?

During the sixteen important years from 1897 to 1913, the Republican Party did great service to the nation. The Administrations of McKinley, of Roosevelt and of Taft mark a period of constantly expanding progress, of new and difficult problems wisely solved, and of large issues met in a spirit of finest patriotism and public service. What is to be said of our situation at this

moment when eight years of Democrat Administration are drawing to a fortunate close? Was our Government ever in so great confusion? Was there ever so much incompetence, extravagance and waste in the oversight of the public business and in the disbursement of the public funds? Was there ever so unscientific and so burdensome a weight of taxation? Was there ever so little thought for the morrow and so complete concentration upon the temporary political advantages of today? Was there ever so marked an exhibition of personal and autocratic rule as is shown by the stubborn unwillingness of the President to take into his confidence the Senate, a co-ordinate part of the treaty-making power, with the result that the whole world waits on the edge of chaos until the President consents to yield his purely personal views, so that a treaty of peace may be ratified under such conditions as shall both protect the independence and the sovereignty of the United States and better equip it for larger service to humanity and to the peace of the world? Was there ever a time when our foreign relations were in so great disorder, and when suspicion and unfriendliness were directed against us from every side? Was there ever a time when our Government looked with such calm condescension upon distress and rapine at our very door, or when it declined to raise a hand to check a great political and social pestilence which, having ravaged the helpless millions of wretched Russia, is now seeking ways and means of communication that it may infect with its poison healthy populations in other parts of the world? The spectacle is appalling, and it is wholly due to the incompetence which has marked the present Administration in its formulation and direction of public policy. What are we to expect when the ordinary processes of Government and of diplomatic intercourse are held in check, while personal and official agents of the Executive

travel about with secret messages to engage the attention of governments and of ruling groups in other lands?

If pitiless publicity could be had for but one-tenth of the happenings of the past eight years, the people of the United States would be aghast at the spectacle. When war was imminent and while war raged, no party voice could properly be raised in criticism of even the most outrageous acts. National unity in the face of national responsibility and national peril was then imperative; but war is over and the time has now come for the plainest of plain speaking in regard to the policies and acts of the Administration that we are so bent upon displacing as quickly as the provisions of the Constitution will permit.

But it will not be sufficient to content ourselves with criticism, however severe and however well merited, of the present Administration. The people expect of the next administration genuine progress in dealing with the problems that confront us. The Republican Party must, and I believe will, show itself capable of doing just this.

First, as to the international situation. By frank and fair dealing and by maintaining our traditional policy of urging the substitution of law for force in the settlement of international differences, we must repair the damage that has been done by the grave blunders and the purely rhetorical diplomacy of the present Administration. We must regain the confidence of other nations in our common sense and in our regard for the real facts of national and international life. We must come down from the clouds and walk on the earth. Whatever form the society of nations may take, America's part in it must be that of an independent, self-controlled and cooperating equal. We have no desire to dominate and we have no intention of being dominated. Least of all do we propose to allow our national policies to be put in commission, or to take any part in a reckless adventure into inter-

national socialism. The American people are ready to act with broad-mindedness, with sympathy and with generosity in helping their sister nations and in maintaining the peace of the world; for as McKinley himself said nearly twenty years ago: "Isolation is no longer possible or desirable."

Second, as to the domestic situation. Here the controlling questions are economic and industrial. Their solution involves a large increase in productive industry under just and humane conditions, greater economy and thrift, a steady contraction of our over-expanded credit system, a drastic reform in our methods of taxation, the development of a policy of cooperation rather than of antagonism between government and business, and a quick reduction in the amount of public expenditures. All those are in a large sense matters of business, and they effect not only every so-called business man, but every man, woman and child in the nation. The extravagance at Washington is something quite astounding and it cannot be cured until we have a well-ordered budget system, under the terms of which the Administration will have to become openly responsible to the Congress and to the people for recommendations as to how the year's revenue shall be raised and how it shall be expended. The Congress, in turn, will then become the constructive critic of the Administration, and the people will then be able to determine just where the responsibility lies for those things that are done and for those things that are undone, for those undertakings that are begun and for those undertakings that are refused.

Our whole administrative machinery at Washington needs to be overhauled and reorganized on modern lines. We have mended and patched our administrative machinery for more than a century, but conditions have now become such as to compel the scrapping of much that

has been and introducing new and modern machinery in its place. Only a few days ago the senior Senator from Colorado related in the Senate the number of steps that had to be taken and the amount of red tape that had to be unwound by constituents of his who desired permission, under the statute, to divert a certain amount of water from a small tributary of a river in Colorado that is classed as navigable but that is never navigated. Imagine the constituent's despair when, having found it necessary to run the gauntlet of a half dozen Government bureaus in three different departments, he finally found himself engaged in negotiations with the Government of Mexico; and this is but one instance among thousands.

The domestic questions are business questions, to be handled in accordance with business principles and under the protection of the principles of the American Government and its ideals.

Many are justly disturbed at the concerted attacks upon the principles of our Government, and even upon our form of government itself. These attacks, so often made in the name of democracy, are without exception not only undemocratic but anti-democratic. The Bolshevist rule in Russia is even more autocratic than the Tsar ever dared to be. It denies every principle of democracy, and it would, if it could, invade other nations and destroy democracy wherever it is to be found. Let us give solemn and severe warning that while we shall maintain and earnestly defend the constitutional rights of free speech, free press, and free assemblage, we shall not permit these rights to be turned into an instrument for doing wrong either to other citizens or to the Government itself. Common sense draws the line between liberty and license. Clear thinking indicates the point at which harmless and futile talk becomes a direct incitement to disorder and mob violence. Let us maintain the

fundamental principles of American civil liberty, but for every one who abuses those principles let the law take its swift and sure course.

One of General Garfield's most important public speeches was made here in Cleveland on the night before the Ohio election in 1879. After reviewing the history of the Democrat Party, with its amazing inconsequences and contradictions, he stated that that party had in its later history given to this country no great national idea or doctrine that had lived to be four years old. He asserted that whenever that party started in a campaign it looked at all the political barns to see how the tin roosters were pointing, to learn from the political weather-cocks which way the wind was likely to blow, and then made its doctrines accordingly. In what respect has the Democrat Party changed in the last forty years? When conditions were favourable it has seized upon a Republican policy, notably the reform of the banking and currency system, and enacted it into law. But which one of its policies is consistent and certain for, let us say, eight years? Has the Democrat Party any policy toward Mexico other than one of wanton waiting? Has that party any policy in international affairs save blindly to support the latest recommendations of the President, regardless of their soundness and regardless of their effect upon the future of the United States and of the world? What policy has the Democrat Party in regard to public finance? Its latest exploit is the amiable suggestion of the Secretary of the Treasury that the excess profits tax be abolished and the deficit made good by an increase of the income tax. The objections to the excess profits tax are overwhelming, but one wonders whether the Secretary in making his suggestions had taken pains to calculate the result. The highest authority in this country tells us that if the whole of the deficit caused by the abandon-

ment of the excess profits tax were to be met by income tax, the normal rates of the lowest incomes would have to be 30%, and people with incomes of \$15,000 would have to give up about one-half of their income each year. What is to be said of the business capacity of an Administration that solemnly brings forward proposals like these?

General Garfield in the speech to which I refer called upon the young men of Ohio to come out of the camp of the Democrat Party. He described it as looking far more like a graveyard for the dead than a camp for the living. Such a spot is no place in which to put the life of a young American who is just beginning to discharge his public responsibilities as citizen. Come out of that camp. Come over into a camp whose army of occupation is dedicated to liberty, to order, to law, to justice and to progress. Come over to a camp where no parley is held with the enemies of America, and from which no half-Bolshevists are sent on messages of public business. Come over to a camp where confident hope for the future is built upon the deeds of the past. Come over to a camp where Lincoln and Grant, and Garfield and Harrison, and McKinley and Roosevelt and Taft have been captains, and join the great army of American men and women that is at this very moment awaiting the bugle call and the order Forward, March, to a new campaign of victory and public service.

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