

# The Meddler's Trap

Aroop Mukharji

## McKinley, the Philippines, and the Difficulty of Letting Go

Why is it hard to let go? On October 28, 1898, U.S. President William McKinley struggled with this question. At the time, 14,200 U.S. troops were stationed in the Philippines, having recently defeated Spanish forces in Manila during the War of 1898.<sup>1</sup> Spain had previously held the Philippines, but after the U.S. victory, McKinley felt in control. For months he debated what to do with the archipelago. On that autumn day in 1898, as part of the postwar peace conference, McKinley ordered his negotiators to demand Spain turn over the Philippines to the United States.<sup>2</sup> Spain reluctantly agreed. McKinley grew up a radical abolitionist,<sup>3</sup> distrusted foreign markets,<sup>4</sup> and as a politician celebrated the virtues of a small military<sup>5</sup>—all reasons for why one might have expected him *not* to annex

---

*Aroop Mukharji is a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow (2022–2023).*

The author owes thanks to many for their thoughtful feedback and help: Nicholas Anderson, David Arceneaux, Paul Behringer, Polina Beliakova, James Boys, Don Casler, Thomas Cavanna, Michael Cohen, Michael Patrick Cullinane, Jessica Trisko Darden, Michael Eisenon, Valerie Eisenon, Eleni Ekmektsioglou, Karim El Kady, Caroline Gray, Mark Hannah, William James, Tyler Jost, David Kampf, Jeffrey Kaplan, Alexander Kirss, Brian McAllister Linn, Fredrik Logevall, Rose McDermott, Rachel Tecott Metz, Auyon Mukharji, Jhulan Mukharji, the National Security Affairs faculty at the Naval War College, Harris Paseltiner, Ariel Petrovics, Lucas Robinson, Ilana Rothkopf, Zia Saylor, Jeremi Suri, Monica Duffy Toft, Stephen Walt, Emily Whalen, Richard Zeckhauser, and the anonymous reviewers. Special thanks to Philip Zelikow, whose 2017 article and 2019 Clements Center Summer Seminar in History and Policy workshop helped inspire the arguments. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government or the U.S. Department of Commerce.

1. This number of U.S. troops varies slightly depending on the source. Francis V. Greene, "Original Draft of Report on the Philippines," September 1898, box 4, Francis Vinton Greene (FVG) Papers, 1776–1921, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, 46.
2. Hay to Day, Washington, October 28, 1898, doc. 818, *Foreign Relations of the United States, with the Annual Message of the President Transmitted to Congress December 5, 1898* (hereafter *FRUS 1898*) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1901), 937–938.
3. On McKinley growing up a radical abolitionist, see: Nancy Allison McKinley, "Raising a Boy to Be President of the United States," *New York Journal*, December 27, 1898, 3.
4. On McKinley distrusting foreign markets, see: Perry S. Heath, "McKinley's Speeches Party Platforms," box 1, Perry S. Heath Papers, 1890–1983, Library of Congress (LOC).
5. On McKinley valuing a small military, see: "Cheers for McKinley: Ohio's Governor Receives an Ovation," *Hartford Courant*, April 10, 1895, 1; William McKinley, "Pensions and the Public Debt: Address before Canton Post, no. 25, G. A. R., at Canton, Ohio, May 30, 1891," in *Speeches and Addresses of William McKinley, from His Election to Congress to the Present Time* (New York: D. Appleton, 1893), 516.

---

*International Security*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Fall 2023), 49–90, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00471](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00471)  
© 2023 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.  
Published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license.

the Philippines. But despite those intuitions, he felt that his best choice on October 28 was to keep the Philippines under U.S. control. He could not let go.

McKinley's decision reflects a recurring challenge for U.S. leaders. Three of the most significant U.S. foreign policies in the last half century—the lengthy wars in Vietnam, Iraq (2003–2011), and Afghanistan—feature a similar underlying theme. For each, U.S. leaders had great difficulty disentangling the United States from faraway military interventions, even when they had bipartisan support to do so.<sup>6</sup> Even presidents who inherited interventions with which they disagreed had that same difficulty.

McKinley's decision was one of the most consequential in the history of U.S. foreign policy. It led the United States to colonize a country the size of Arizona, with a population of nine million, located 7,000 miles from the California coast. It was, and remains, the United States' largest annexation outside its hemisphere. Yet McKinley's decision is as puzzling as it was significant. He did not go to war to colonize the Philippines. In fact, annexation had not occurred to McKinley until the four-month War of 1898. Moreover, McKinley did not believe that annexation would necessarily enrich the United States, and some of his closest foreign policy advisers counseled against it. Why, then, did he do it?

The literature offers some explanations for the United States' extended military presence abroad.<sup>7</sup> Many scholars have also analyzed McKinley's decision.<sup>8</sup> The most prominent explanation is foreign trade expansionism. This theory was so popular in the mid-twentieth century that it helped define a new school of diplomatic history, the Wisconsin School, squarely focused on U.S. imperialism.<sup>9</sup> According to this logic, the United States needed new overseas

6. See, for example: Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 73–107, 377–380; Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 227–228; Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, “A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered U.S. Public Support for War in Iraq,” Pew Research Center, March 14, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/03/14/a-look-back-at-how-fear-and-false-beliefs-bolstered-u-s-public-support-for-war-in-iraq/>.

7. See, for example, Monica Duffy Toft and Sidita Kushi, *Dying by the Sword: The Militarization of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Jacqueline L. Hazelton, *Bullets Not Ballots: Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

8. Most recently, see Philip Zelikow, “Why Did America Cross the Pacific? Reconstructing the U.S. Decision to Take the Philippines, 1898–99,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 1 (November 2017): 36–67, <https://doi.org/10.15781/T2N29PQ17>. Zelikow's remains the most thorough account to date of the annexation decision.

9. The Wisconsin School is named after its principal advocate, William Appleman Williams, who taught at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. See William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of*

markets to satisfy its overflowing domestic production, the Philippines offered that outlet, and McKinley saw his chance.<sup>10</sup> Scholars have advanced many other theories, highlighting the role of public opinion,<sup>11</sup> religion,<sup>12</sup> gender politics,<sup>13</sup> and imperialist conspirators.<sup>14</sup>

The most common problem with these arguments is that they impute popular societal attitudes to McKinley without sufficiently probing his mindset and decision-making. Foreign trade expansionism, for instance, had many avatars in U.S. politics, but at the time, like for most of his career, McKinley was skeptical of foreign markets. He thought they were unreliable and preferred focusing instead on growing domestic demand.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, in the fall of 1898, he ordered an analysis of the Philippines' financial and industrial conditions.<sup>16</sup> The investigation offered a lukewarm economic outlook for controlling the Philippines. Instead of predicting certainty about vast riches to come to the United States, the adviser admitted deep challenges, acknowledged incomplete information, and believed that annexing the Philippines would undercut U.S. labor and industry, especially regarding tobacco.<sup>17</sup> The scholarly neglect of this report and of McKinley's worldviews are some of the many sources of misreading of the president.<sup>18</sup>

I argue that what I term the "meddler's trap" best explains McKinley's decision to annex the Philippines. This explanation also contributes to an under-

---

*American Diplomacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), 91.

10. This logic is known as the "glut thesis." See, for instance, Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 37–38.

11. See, for example: Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), 255–259.

12. See, for example: Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 156–159.

13. See, for example: Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 133–179.

14. See, for example: Julius W. Pratt, "The 'Large Policy' of 1898," *Journal of American History* 19, no. 2 (September 1932): 219–242, <http://doi.org/10.2307/1891454>.

15. Heath, "McKinley's Speeches Party Platforms."

16. Edward W. Harden, "Report on the Financial and Industrial Condition of the Philippine Islands," U.S. 55th Cong., 3rd sess., Senate Document no. 169 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1898).

17. "Problems in the Orient: Government Has Many New Questions to Face: E. W. Harden Tells of His Investigation: Was Commissioned to Study the Industrial Conditions," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 11, 1898, 5.

18. One scholar, Stuart C. Miller, analyzes Edward Harden's report: Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation: The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899–1903* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 82–83.

standing of why leaders have difficulty letting go. The meddler's trap denotes a situation of self-entanglement, whereby a military intervention abroad (the deployment of troops) to solve one problem inadvertently creates a new problem that the leader feels they can solve. The leader values solving that new problem more because of the intervention that occurred in the first place. The meddling not only creates the new problem but also traps leaders into thinking that the new problem is more relevant to the country's national interests than they would have otherwise thought. This overvaluation occurs because of a cognitive bias called "the endowment effect."<sup>19</sup> Individuals tend to overvalue goods that they feel they already own (regardless of whether they *actually* own the good).<sup>20</sup> The deployment of troops encourages an expanded feeling of ownership over territory.<sup>21</sup> Before intervention, problems abroad may seem distant and unimportant. But after intervention, even minor problems abroad take center stage. Military intervention abroad, in other words, can drive perceptions of national interest, not just the other way around.

Drawing on untapped primary sources, I show how three beliefs—two judgments and one underlying cognitive bias—interacted to produce the meddler's trap and the 1898 annexation decision.<sup>22</sup> First, McKinley believed that if the United States, having displaced Spanish rule, were to leave the Philippines, a power vacuum would result in a great power war. This belief

19. For the originating article about the endowment effect, see: Richard H. Thaler, "Toward a Positive Theory of Consumer Choice," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 1, no. 1 (1980): 39–60, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0167-2681\(80\)90051-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0167-2681(80)90051-7). For more recent work, see: Carey K. Morewedge et al., "Bad Riddance or Good Rubbish? Ownership and Not Loss Aversion Causes the Endowment Effect," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45, no. 4 (2009): 947–951, <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2009.05.014>. For a literature review, see: Carey K. Morewedge and Colleen E. Giblin, "Explanations of the Endowment Effect: An Integrative Review," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 19, no. 6 (June 2015): 339–348, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2015.04.004>.

20. Jochen Reb and Terry Connolly, "Possession, Feelings of Ownership and the Endowment Effect," *Judgment and Decision Making* 2, no. 2 (2007): 107–114.

21. The endowment effect is conceptually separable from a feeling of commitment or some kind of moral responsibility or obligation, which is more akin to the pottery store rule.

22. I draw on four previously uncited William McKinley speech drafts and a previously uncited handwritten draft of McKinley's order of October 28, 1898, to his commissioners in Paris to demand all of the Philippines. In particular, the undelivered or crossed-out language in these drafts offers new insights into McKinley's mindset. McKinley, [Draft of undelivered speech], October 18, 1898, reel 83, William McKinley (WMK) Papers, circa 1847–1935, LOC (n.b.: this draft is mistakenly grouped with the October 1899 speeches); McKinley, [Draft of "Speech at Banquet of Board of Trade and Associated Citizens, Savannah, Georgia"], December 17, 1898, reel 82, WMK Papers; McKinley, [Draft of "Speech at Madison, Wisconsin"], October 16, 1899, reel 83, WMK Papers; McKinley, [Draft of address to have been delivered before the Manufacturers' Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio], January 24, 1899, reel 82, WMK Papers; [Draft of McKinley's instructions to commissioners in Paris], box 69, George B. Cortelyou (GBC) Papers, 1871–1948, LOC (n.b.: this document is mistakenly dated October 29, 1898).

answers a fundamental question about what mattered to McKinley about the Philippines' future: he wanted to avoid a major, adverse outcome. Second, he believed that U.S. governance would forestall that outcome. This belief answers another fundamental question about what difference he thought annexation would make. But a third fundamental question remains: Why would *any* outcome 7,000 miles away from California have mattered so deeply to U.S. interests in the first place? The answer is counterintuitive, self-fulfilling, and tautological.

At the time of his decision, McKinley felt that the United States already owned the Philippines, owing to a U.S. presence from the war. He used this framing often, in public and in private. The endowment effect thus helps answer why McKinley came to feel that the Philippines' future was so relevant to U.S. interests. His perception of U.S. national interests changed because his perception of the United States changed. Any outcome on Filipino territory was interpreted as an outcome on a territory of U.S. control, and, thus, on U.S. territory. Great power war had to be avoided because, in McKinley's mind, it was no longer 7,000 miles away. In this way, the two judgments and cognitive bias mutually reinforced one another, offering a problem (great power war), a solution (U.S. annexation), and an underlying value to annexation. The irony and tautology are that the problem, the solution, and the underlying value were all direct consequences of U.S. intervention in the first place, which produced the meddler's trap.

This article proceeds in four sections. It begins with a conceptual discussion of the meddler's trap and the three interacting beliefs that led to McKinley's annexation decision: the consequences of a U.S. departure, the solution of U.S. annexation, and a feeling of ownership. The second section analyzes McKinley's decision, tracing how his three beliefs unfolded throughout the summer and fall of 1898 to produce the meddler's trap. After this account, the paper discusses alternative explanations of McKinley's decision, and ends with some concluding remarks.

### *Conceptual Frameworks*

This section uses the analytical tools of the ideology of civilization, drawn from diplomatic history, and the endowment effect, drawn from decision science, to demonstrate how the meddler's trap operated in McKinley's case.<sup>23</sup>

---

23. The ideology of civilization is explained in further detail later in the article. Briefly, "civiliza-

The ideology of civilization informed McKinley's judgments of the problem and the solution to the Philippines' future, and the endowment effect was the cognitive factor that inflated the underlying value to those judgments.

#### THE MEDDLER'S TRAP

The meddler's trap defines a category of cases wherein leaders inadvertently create a problem through military intervention, feel they can solve it, and value solving the new problem more than they would have before the intervention occurred in the first place. This self-created entanglement produced McKinley's decision to annex the Philippines. First, he believed that a U.S. departure from the archipelago would lead to a great power war. Second, he believed that U.S. annexation would forestall that outcome. Last, he felt ownership over the islands, and thus cared more about their future than he would have without a U.S. military presence. Together, these gave him a problem, a solution, and an underlying value to annexation: a potential bad outcome that he felt the United States could avoid in an area of perceived U.S. concern.

McKinley's military intervention from the War of 1898 created the conditions for each of his three beliefs. Had the United States not attacked Spanish forces at Manila and displaced Spanish rule, a U.S. departure could not have potentially triggered a great power war because there would have been no military presence (and thus no departure) in the first place. Further, had the United States not stationed 14,200 troops in Manila, using U.S. annexation to solve any problem in the Philippines would have been harder to envision, much less to execute. And finally, the very existence of a U.S. military presence in the Philippines gave greater underlying value to the problem. The threat of great power war in the Philippines would not have concerned McKinley before the war—it mattered because the United States was there.

The meddler's trap bears some resemblance and relation to other formal and informal concepts in foreign policy decision-making, including mission creep, the sunk cost fallacy, status quo bias, prospect theory, and the pottery store rule. But it differs from these concepts in many ways.

---

tion" was a term used in the 1890s to capture societal progress, and it featured a hierarchy of ranks. McKinley's ideology of civilization helps explain his annexation decision because it was an analytical framework for understanding global politics. McKinley's belief that a U.S. departure from the Philippines would result in chaos was premised on a civilizational worldview that categorized the Philippines as a lower-order civilization without the capacity to govern itself.

Mission creep is a phenomenon wherein the objectives of a military intervention change and result in an extended military presence.<sup>24</sup> The meddler's trap could thus be understood as one cause of mission creep. Sunk cost fallacy and status quo bias are two cognitive frameworks that imply an extension of ongoing policy and could lead to an extended military presence following an intervention.<sup>25</sup> In that sense, these two concepts complement the meddler's trap, but they differ in their underlying logics. The meddler's trap does not lead to an extended military presence because a leader feels that they have already invested in an issue (sunk cost fallacy), or because they find it easier to do nothing and continue on (status quo bias). Instead, they feel that they are confronting a different issue.

Prospect theory, another cognitive factor that might lead to an extended military presence, is baked into the logic of the meddler's trap. Prospect theory, discussed below, is one of a few contributors to the endowment effect, the cognitive bias wherein individuals overvalue things that they feel they own. And finally, the more informal pottery store rule ("you break it, you own it") involves a similar set of circumstances as the meddler's trap but differs from it in three ways.<sup>26</sup> Both are warnings, but the pottery store rule implies a moral obligation, whereas the meddler's trap does not. In the meddler's trap, the initial intervention is a purposeful action to solve a different problem rather than an accident like in the pottery store rule. That purposeful action creates an unintended consequence that then needs resolution. Perhaps most significantly, the meddler's trap implies an increased valuation arising from a feeling of ownership. Once the proverbial pot is broken, it *increases* in value.

#### THE IDEOLOGY OF CIVILIZATION

Two concepts are fundamental for understanding how the meddler's trap functioned in McKinley's case. The first is the ideology of civilization, a concept drawn from the field of diplomatic history. This ideology underpinned

---

24. "Mission creep" is a widely used but undertheorized concept that has a range of definitions. For example, see Gordon Adams and Shoon Murray, eds., *Mission Creep: The Militarization of US Foreign Policy?* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

25. Thaler, "Toward a Positive Theory," 47–50; William Samuelson and Richard Zeckhauser, "Status Quo Bias in Decision Making," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 1, no. 1 (1988): 7–59.

26. The term "pottery store rule" gained prominence before the 2003 Iraq War. Following journalist Thomas Friedman's use of the term, it morphed into the "Pottery Barn Rule" (i.e., the housewares store). Since this rule does not reflect Pottery Barn's corporate policy, I am using Friedman's original phrase. Thomas L. Friedman, "Present at . . . What?," *New York Times*, February 12, 2003, A37.

McKinley's twin beliefs about the problem and the solution, namely that great power war would follow a U.S. departure, and that U.S. governance would forestall that outcome.

The ideology of civilization, or a civilizational ideology, was a societal barometer especially popular among U.S. elites in the nineteenth century. Scholars consider it both a worldview that grouped different peoples in a hierarchy of civilizational progress and a process toward a globalized, modernized society.<sup>27</sup> At the low end of civilization were savages and barbarians—at the high end, the semi-civilized and civilized. This ideology drew from pre-nineteenth-century belief systems, and it was influenced by the evolutionary theories of two naturalists, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin. Elites applied Lamarck's and Darwin's scientific theories to social phenomena, either believing that civilizational rank was fluid (social Lamarckism) or fixed (social Darwinism).<sup>28</sup>

The civilizational pecking order varied from person to person and decade to decade. But in general, in the 1890s, U.S. elites tended to think of themselves (i.e., white Christian Americans of Anglo-Saxon heritage) as representing the apex of civilizational progress. Next, typically, were the British, then (sometimes) the Japanese, followed by the Germans, Russians, French, Irish, Slavs and Eastern Europeans, and Indians. Then were the Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, Central and South Americans, and the Chinese. Next, distantly, were the Turks. Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Africans tended to be last along the perceived line of advancement.<sup>29</sup> Of course, these images were deeply informed by prevailing racial, social, and cultural prejudices, stereotypes, inequalities, and attitudes. The relationship between race, racism, and civilizational ideology was especially deep, as races were believed to be the carriers of civilizational progress. But the relationship was as complex as it was

---

27. Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of "Civilization" in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 3–23; Frank Ninkovich, "Theodore Roosevelt: Civilization as Ideology," *Diplomatic History* 10, no. 3 (July 1986): 221–245, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1986.tb00459.x>; Frank Ninkovich, *Global Dawn: The Cultural Foundations of American Internationalism, 1865–1890* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Benjamin A. Coates, "American Presidents and the Ideology of Civilization," in Christopher McKnight Nichols and David Milne, eds., *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations: New Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 53–73.

28. Michael Patrick Cullinane, "Imperial 'Character': How Race and Civilization Shaped Theodore Roosevelt's Imperialism," in Hans Krabbendam and John M. Thompson, eds., *America's Transatlantic Turn: Theodore Roosevelt and the "Discovery" of Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 31–47.

29. This ordering varied, especially in the middle. See, for example, Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1987, repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 69–79.



deep. Racial progressives also had a civilizational ideology separate from, but related to, views on race.<sup>30</sup> Civilizational ideology drew from many belief systems but was not reducible to or interchangeable with any single one.<sup>31</sup> One might understand civilizational ideology as a precursor concept to contemporary notions of development, modernization, and globalization, and to associated terms such as the Global North/South, developed/developing countries, emerging economies, and the First/Third Worlds.

The criteria and thresholds for civilizational progress were ill-defined and contradictory.<sup>32</sup> It is ironic that U.S. elites considered violence abroad a mark of barbarism mere decades after a bloody, race-driven, civil war that claimed over 750,000 lives, and at a time when Black Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Chinese Americans, Irish Americans, and Italian Americans faced the threat of lynching and racist mob violence.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, these communities were often perceived by U.S. elites to be both inside and outside U.S. civilization. Despite these inconsistencies and contradictions, the many terms frequently associated with civilization included law, order, stable self-government, innovation, interconnectedness, prosperity, Christianity, modernization, industrial production, literacy, and education.

This ideology informed McKinley's belief that the Philippines was at risk of future great power war. He came to believe that Filipinos were of a low civilizational status, and, critically, that they lacked the civilizational capacity to self-govern.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, he worried that a U.S. departure would lead to a power vacuum. McKinley believed that the Filipinos' civilizational capacity would prevent them from maintaining order in the face of eager, imperial powers. At the time, great powers, such as Germany and Japan, had been increasingly taking control over Pacific territories. McKinley believed that they would fight for the Philippines.

---

30. David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 561.

31. Neither "race" nor "civilization" has a single definition. Reflecting the field of diplomatic history, this article treats race and civilization as distinct concepts. Coates, "American Presidents and the Ideology of Civilization," 54–55; Ninkovich, *Global Dawn*, 137–166. The field of international relations also treats civilization separately, though this subliterate is much smaller than the one in diplomatic history. See, for example, Martin Hall and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, eds., *Civilizational Identity: The Production and Reproduction of "Civilizations" in International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

32. Ninkovich, *Global Dawn*, 19.

33. "Special Forum: *Lynching in the New South a Quarter of a Century Later*," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 20, no. 1 (January 2021): 66–173.

34. Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?," 50.

McKinley's civilizational ideology also informed a solution to the issue: U.S. governance. For social Lamarckists like McKinley, civilization was malleable and thus teachable. Different cultures could move along the axis of progress. That fluidity lies at the conceptual core of "white man's burden," "civilizational uplift," and "the civilizing mission" (*mission civilisatrice*), corollary concepts of the time that were used to justify colonialism. Many U.S. political elites, drawing from their European counterparts, believed that it was their duty to conquer and civilize foreign peoples, concealing colonial subjugation with morality.<sup>35</sup> Civilizational ideology led other elites to be anti-imperialist; they feared a downgrade of U.S. civilization when incorporating foreign peoples into the U.S. body politic.<sup>36</sup> Civilizational ideology operated differently in McKinley's mind.<sup>37</sup> Veiled imperial lust was not the primary motivation for his annexation decision. Instead, civilizational ideology mingled with security forecasting of war and peace.<sup>38</sup> McKinley believed that U.S. governance would simultaneously not only ensure the short-term order needed to forestall conflict but also move Filipinos further along the road to self-government by teaching them the methods of U.S. administration. For him, civilization and security were interlinked.

35. David H. Burton, "Theodore Roosevelt's Social Darwinism and Views on Imperialism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, no. 1 (January/March 1965): 103–118, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708402>; Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998), 45–48.

36. Christopher Lasch, "The Anti-Imperialists, the Philippines, and the Inequality of Man," *Journal of Southern History* 24, no. 3 (August 1958): 319–331, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2954987>; Eric T. L. Love, *Race over Empire: Racism and U.S. Imperialism, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), esp. 45–46.

37. Scholars typically analyze civilizational ideology as part of McKinley's humanitarian impulse, as a sense of national mission, or as a fig leaf for imperialism. See, for example, Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation*; Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine, *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 17; Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *Malolos: The Crisis of the Republic* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1960), 343; Richard E. Welch Jr. "William McKinley: Reluctant Warrior, Cautious Imperialist," in Norman A. Graebner, ed., *Traditions and Values: American Diplomacy, 1865–1945* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 42; Paul T. McCartney, *Power and Progress: American National Identity, the War of 1898, and the Rise of American Imperialism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 199–223.

38. For broader studies on the relationship between ideas, belief systems, foreign policy, and security, see: Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

## THE ENDOWMENT EFFECT

The second fundamental concept for understanding how the meddler's trap functioned in McKinley's case is the endowment effect. How did a distant land previously of minor value to McKinley transform into a central national interest? This article argues that McKinley valued the Philippines more because the president perceived it as already being in U.S. possession. He never expressed that Filipino concerns mattered to U.S. peacetime interests until after U.S. Commodore George Dewey's defeat of the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay. By the time he made his decision in October, U.S. troops were already there, in control of Manila. He conceptualized leaving the Philippines as a *loss* of territory and international status; a "national mutilation," as his adviser later put it.<sup>39</sup> To McKinley, the choice was either keeping the archipelago or losing it, as opposed to gaining the archipelago or preserving the status quo.<sup>40</sup>

A feeling of ownership matters because perceived ownership of an item causes a higher valuation of that item. For example, an individual might be willing to pay \$5 for a coffee mug. As a seller, however, that same individual will tend to value the same mug for more than \$5. That phenomenon is called the endowment effect. Richard Thaler first theorized the endowment effect in 1980.<sup>41</sup> He drew from previous research by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky on "reference-dependent preferences" and "prospect theory."<sup>42</sup> Kahneman and Tversky write that individuals make different choices depending on whether they see themselves in the "domain of losses" or "domain of gains." If a gamble is seen as a potential loss, individuals tend to be risk-seeking. If a gamble is seen as a potential gain, individuals tend to be risk averse. Furthermore, individuals tend to dislike losses more than they enjoy corresponding gains (called "loss aversion"). Thaler built on this logic

39. "Washington Letter," *Worthington Advance* (Worthington, MN), December 29, 1898, 4.

40. Aroop Mukharji, "The Psychology of Stickiness: What America Can Learn from Its Annexation of the Philippines in 1898," *War on the Rocks*, May 5, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/the-psychology-of-stickiness-what-america-can-learn-from-its-annexation-of-the-philippines-in-1898/>.

41. Thaler, "Toward a Positive Theory," 43–47. For a skeptical view of the endowment effect, see: Charles R. Plott and Kathryn Zeiler, "The Willingness to Pay–Willingness to Accept Gap, the 'Endowment Effect,' Subject Misconceptions, and Experimental Procedures for Eliciting Valuations: Reply," *American Economic Review* 101, no. 2 (April 2011): 1012–1028, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.101.2.1012>.

42. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (March 1979): 263–292, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>. See also Ted O'Donoghue and Charles Sprenger, "Chapter 1: Reference-Dependent Preferences," in B. Douglas Bernheim, Stefano DellaVigna, and David Laibson, eds., *Handbook of Behavioral Economics: Foundations and Applications* 1, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 2018), 2–77.

with the endowment effect, arguing that endowment creates a reference point for losses and gains.<sup>43</sup> People tend to dislike losing something more than they tend to enjoy gaining the same thing. The endowment effect also implies that individuals prefer something they feel they own over an alternative of equal value that they feel they do not own.

Since Thaler's pioneering work in 1980, repeated experiments have confirmed the robustness of the endowment effect, but scholarship no longer considers it to be a corollary to just prospect theory. Instead of loss aversion and reference dependence as the sole drivers of the endowment effect, scholars propose additional underlying causal mechanisms, including psychological ownership, memory (an emotional attachment reminding individuals of a positive experience or performance), evolutionary factors (especially among those of European descent), reference price theory (the context of the transaction), and biased information processing (recalling more positive attributes of a good as a seller).<sup>44</sup> It is probable that a mixture of reasons were at play for McKinley.<sup>45</sup> Each individual might experience the endowment effect differently, for different reasons, and to different degrees. But for the purposes of this article, isolating the specific drivers of the endowment effect for McKinley is less important than understanding whether he perceived ownership over the Philippines at all.<sup>46</sup> And he did.

43. In his 1980 article, Thaler mostly did not use the language of ownership, relying more on the language of loss. Carey Morewedge et al. disentangle the two concepts, arguing that ownership drives the endowment effect, not loss aversion. Still, they admit that in practice these two concepts often overlap, as I argue they did in the 1898 case. Relatedly, I treat phrases such as "control," "ownership," "power over," "possession," "having," "keeping," and "endowment" interchangeably. See Morewedge et al., "Bad Riddance or Good Rubbish?"

44. For a review article of the endowment effect, see: Morewedge and Giblin, "Explanations of the Endowment Effect," 339–348. For a small sampling of research on the topic since 1980, see: Morewedge et al., "Bad Riddance or Good Rubbish?," 947–951; Jack L. Knetsch, "The Endowment Effect and Evidence of Nonreversible Indifference Curves," *American Economic Review* 79, no. 5 (December 1989): 1277–1284, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1831454>; Reb and Connolly, "Possession, Feelings of Ownership"; Steffen Huck, Georg Kirchsteiger, and Jörg Oechssler, "Learning to Like What You Have: Explaining the Endowment Effect," *Economic Journal* 115, no. 505 (July 2005): 689–702, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3590453>.

45. This article contributes to the literature by a handful of scholars who apply intuitions from behavioral economics to state decision-making. See, for example, Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Relations: Prospect Theory in Post-War American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Barbara Farnham, ed., *Avoiding Losses/Taking Risks: Prospect Theory and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Luis L. Schenoni, Sean Braniff, and Jorge Battaglino, "Was the Malvinas/Falklands a Diversionary War? A Prospect-Theory Reinterpretation of Argentina's Decline," *Security Studies* 29, no. 1 (2020): 34–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1693618>.

46. As Jochen Reb and Terry Connolly argue, subjective ownership ("feelings of ownership")

Table 1. The Road to Annexation of the Philippines

April 11, 1898	McKinley requests congressional authorization for the power to use military force to end hostilities between Cuba and Spain and to set up a stable government in Cuba.
May 1, 1898	The first battle of the war takes place at Manila Bay.
June 22, 1898	The U.S. ground campaign in Cuba begins.
August 12, 1898	A peace protocol to suspend hostilities is signed in Washington, DC, between Spain (through its French representation in Washington) and the United States.
October 1, 1898	Peace treaty negotiations commence in Paris between Spain and the United States.
October 28, 1898	McKinley orders his commissioners in Paris to demand all of the Philippines.
December 10, 1898	Spain and the United States sign A Treaty of Peace between the United States and Spain (also known as the Treaty of Paris and the Paris Peace Treaty).
February 6, 1899	The U.S. Senate approves the Treaty of Paris.

### *McKinley's Annexation Decision*

This section traces how the meddler's trap gradually influenced McKinley's decision-making from the start of the war in the spring of 1898 until the fall of 1898 when he came to a final decision (see table 1).

#### MILD AMBITIONS: APRIL–AUGUST 1898

On April 25, 1898, the United States declared war on Spain, kicking off the War of 1898, better known as the Spanish-American War.<sup>47</sup> Brutal Spanish oppression of Cuban revolutionaries eventually convinced a reluctant President McKinley to pursue war against the declining European colonial power.<sup>48</sup> The war lasted just under four months, as the United States overwhelmed Spanish forces in Cuba, the central theater of war, as well as in other Spanish colonial

---

leads individuals to include the object "into their endowment." Reb and Connolly, "Possession, Feelings of Ownership."

47. On April 25, 1898, the U.S. Congress declared that a state of war had existed since April 21, confusing future historians on how to frame the war declaration.

48. Scholars mostly agree that the leading cause of the War of 1898 was humanitarian. See Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 44; Lewis L. Gould, *The Spanish-American War and President McKinley* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1982), 53; H. Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America*, rev. ed. (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2003), 286.

possessions—Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. Major powers mostly stayed out of the conflict, but all keenly awaited developments. France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, and Russia were all playing an imperial game of chess in the Pacific and were eager to know which Spanish colonies the United States would demand after its victory. The Philippines was at the top of that list.

The road to U.S. annexation of the Philippines thus began when the United States launched its naval attack against the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay on May 1, 1898, at the start of the war. McKinley did not order the Manila attack with the intention of annexing the Philippines. Over the course of his political career, he never expressed much interest in the archipelago, nor in the Far East in general. Attacking Manila originated in contingency war plans that preceded his presidency.<sup>49</sup> War planners believed that the U.S. West Coast (and its commerce) were vulnerable to a Pacific attack in a concurrent war between Spain and Japan, and the surge in European activity in the Far East intensified this forecasting of conflict. Strategically, war planners conceived of the Philippines as a potential bargaining chip in future peace negotiations.

The Manila attack itself was a massacre. Late at night on April 30, 1898, on McKinley's command, six U.S. warships arrived at the entrance to Manila Bay.<sup>50</sup> The next morning, Commodore Dewey, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, sailed west in pursuit of the Spanish fleet, uttering his famous command, "You may fire when ready, Gridley," after which his squadron rained down 6,000 shells on Spanish forces.<sup>51</sup> Within a few hours, and at the cost of zero U.S. lives, three Spanish ships were sunk, six were compromised, and 171 Spaniards were dead.

Soon after Dewey's victory, warships from France, Germany, Great Britain,

---

49. William W. Kimball, "Plan of Operations against Spain Prepared by Lieutenant William W. Kimball (1896)" [the Kimball Plan], June 1, 1896, Naval History and Heritage Command, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/united-states-navy-s/pre-war-planning/plan-of-operations-a.html>; Montgomery Sicard et al., "Plan of Operations against Spain (1897)" [the Sicard Plan], June 30, 1897, Naval History and Heritage Command, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/united-states-navy-s/pre-war-planning/plan-of-operations-a-1.html>.

50. John Long to George Dewey, April 24, 1898 (received April 25 in Hong Kong), see George Dewey, "Final Preparations for War," in *Autobiography of George Dewey: Admiral of the Navy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 195; Perry S. Heath, "President's McKinley's Share in the War with Spain," (Norwich, CT: Chas. C. Haskell and Son, n.d.), 9. Copy available at the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

51. Brian McAllister Linn, "The Battle of Manila Bay," in M. Hill Goodspeed, *U.S. Navy: A Complete History* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Foundation, 2003), 272–273; Dewey, *Autobiography of George Dewey*, 214.

and Japan descended on Manila. This reflected common practice at the time; countries deployed warships to areas of disorder when they held property or interests there. Nevertheless, it often increased tensions. The Germans were particularly intrusive, protesting some of Dewey's policies and interfering with the Filipino insurgents, with whom Dewey was partnering against the Spanish.<sup>52</sup> Dewey requested U.S. army reinforcements to hold Manila while the war effort centered on Cuba. Roughly 14,200 U.S. troops arrived over the following months.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, General Emilio Aguinaldo, a Filipino leader, declared Filipino independence on June 12, 1898, and lobbied for international recognition to little effect. In less than a day on August 13, the United States took control of Manila in a bizarrely staged battle against the Spanish (boxing out Filipinos in the process), unaware that a peace protocol had just been signed a few hours before in Washington, DC, where it was still August 12.<sup>54</sup>

As events unfolded over the summer, one of the three beliefs that guided McKinley's ultimate decision started to take shape. By defeating the Spanish in the Philippines and then occupying Manila, McKinley began indicating a feeling of ownership in private and in administrative interactions. On May 19, 1898, he ordered U.S. Secretary of War Russell Alger to establish order and security throughout the islands "while in the possession of the United States." Though he wanted the "occupation" to be "as free from severity as possible," he saw military governance as supreme and authorized the army to collect taxes, substitute new courts of his own constitution, and expel Filipino officials if they did not comply.<sup>55</sup> A White House memo on June 19 framed Manila as being in "the practical possession of the American squadron."<sup>56</sup> In recounting the July cabinet meetings regarding the peace terms with Spain, biographer Charles S. Olcott writes about McKinley: "He did not want the islands, but, once in our possession, he felt that the people would never be satisfied if they were given back to Spain."<sup>57</sup>

---

52. Gould, *The Spanish-American War*, 83.

53. Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899–1902* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 15; Greene, "Original Draft"; M. I. Ludington in *Annual Report of the Secretary of War for the Year 1898* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1898), 161.

54. Linn, *The Philippine War*, 23–25.

55. McKinley to Russell Alger, May 19, 1898, reel 18, WMK Papers.

56. "Reaffirm the St. Louis Platform," June 19, 1898, box 56, GBC Papers. William McKinley's handwritten edits appear on the document, indicating not only his awareness but also his approval.

57. Charles S. Olcott, *The Life of William McKinley*, vol. 2 (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 62. Charles Olcott had interviewed cabinet members to produce the biography.

After another cabinet meeting on July 30, 1898, U.S. Secretary of Treasury Lyman Gage recounted McKinley's thinking to Charles Dawes, a McKinley confidant. Dawes recorded about the president, "He wants the facts to be carefully considered, without the consideration involving the loss of any present advantage."<sup>58</sup> Two weeks later, in a cable to military leaders in the Philippines, McKinley again referenced the "possession of Manilla [*sic*], Manilla Bay, and Harbor."<sup>59</sup> The August cable that McKinley received announcing U.S. victory at the Battle of Manila Bay may have reinforced all of this thinking. "Manila ours few accidents," the U.S. consul reported.<sup>60</sup>

As this new framing was taking root, McKinley's ambitions regarding the Philippines were still mild.<sup>61</sup> In June, just one month into the war, McKinley made his first attempt at securing peace with Spain through a back channel in Europe. He expressed a willingness to allow Spain to retain the Philippines if the United States could keep a port and "necessary appurtenances" (presumably a coaling station).<sup>62</sup> But, McKinley warned, should the war continue, his demands might expand.<sup>63</sup> Spain spurned this secret offer.<sup>64</sup>

Coaling stations were valuable in McKinley's era. At the time, steamships ran on hundreds of tons of coal, supplied either at permanent stations or at sea by colliers, which were more unpredictable and limited. Coaling stations expanded a country's shipping radius. Of course, countries often coaled at stations owned and operated by foreign nations, but wars could complicate this access. International norms prohibited warring nations from coaling and repairing their ships in neutral harbors. Though countries often broke neutrality rules (during the War of 1898 itself, neutral governments in Britain and Hawaii

58. Charles G. Dawes quoted in Bascom N. Timmons, ed., *A Journal of the McKinley Years* (Chicago, IL: Lakeside Press, 1950), 166.

59. George B. Cortelyou to Wesley Merritt and Dewey, August 17, 1898, box 56, GBC Papers. General Wesley Merritt used this same framing four days earlier in his "Proclamation to the Filipinos," on which McKinley would also have had input. Wesley Merritt, "Proclamation to the Filipinos," August 14, 1898, reprinted in Murat Halstead, *The Story of the Philippines and Our New Possessions, Including the Ladrones, Hawaii, Cuba and Porto Rico* (Chicago: Our Possessions, 1898), 161.

60. Williams to Day, August 18, 1898 (recd.), box 56, GBC Papers.

61. In contrast, some scholarship asserts that McKinley had larger ambitions early in the war: George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 320.

62. An early draft of these peace terms from May 9, 1898, explicitly names a coaling station, but in later drafts it is vague. "Peace Terms," May 9, 1898, box 186, John Bassett Moore (JBM) Papers, 1866–1949, LOC; Day to Hay, June 3, 1898, box 192, JBM Papers.

63. See also: [Undated memorandum], box 192, JBM Papers; Alfred L. P. Dennis, *Adventures in American Diplomacy, 1896–1906 (from Unpublished Documents)* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1928), 99.

64. Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?," 47–49.



both offered the United States significant coaling help), coaling stations nevertheless served an additional purpose of self-sufficiency during conflicts.<sup>65</sup>

As the war continued, however, McKinley's ambitions regarding the Philippines did not expand much, if at all, beyond a coaling station or a port, despite his warning in June. Two months after the secret peace offer, George B. Cortelyou, McKinley's private secretary, recounted a meeting between McKinley and Senator John T. Morgan. Cortelyou celebrated that Morgan, who had "well known" and "radical" views, decided to support McKinley's position on peace terms; a "triumph" for the president.<sup>66</sup> Before the meeting, Morgan had begun to publicly support annexation and imperialism.<sup>67</sup> Given that Cortelyou called Morgan's public position "radical," the account suggests that McKinley's position was still mild in scope as of August 1898. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, an expansionist, confirmed Cortelyou's assessment. After meeting with McKinley, Lodge lamented that the administration was "hesitating" on the issue and that McKinley intended "to withdraw as much as possible."<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, once the fighting had ended on August 12, McKinley asked Secretary of State William Rufus Day—whose anti-expansionist view had been known to the president for months—to actually lead the Paris Peace Commission to negotiate the final peace with Spain.<sup>69</sup> In a note to Day as late

65. McKinley told a political appointee that Dewey had to stay in Manila after the Battle of Manila Bay, because no neutral harbors close by were open to U.S. ships. See: Ephraim K. Smith, "'A Question from Which We Could Not Escape': William McKinley and the Decision to Acquire the Philippine Islands," *Diplomatic History* 9, no. 4 (October 1985): 370, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1985.tb00544.x>; Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?," 43. Neutrality rules, however, were not ironclad. For British and Hawaiian accommodation, see: María-Dolores Elizalde, "Observing the Imperial Transition: British Naval Reports on the Philippines, 1898–1901," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 2 (April 2016): 226, <http://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhu106>; James A. Field Jr., "American Imperialism: The Worst Chapter in Almost Any Book," *American Historical Review* 83, no. 3 (June 1978): 666n53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1861842>; David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 275–276; John H. Maurer, "Fuel and the Battle Fleet: Coal, Oil, and American Naval Strategy, 1898–1925," *Naval War College Review* 34, no. 6 (November/December 1981): 60–77, esp. 64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44636057>; Rounseville Wildman, "Partial Report on the Conduct of the Consulate General during the War between Spain and the United States," April 6, 1899, Consular Despatches, reel 19, M108, RG 59, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at College Park, Maryland; John Bassett Moore to McKinley, June 29, 1898, box 56, GBC Papers.

66. Diaries of Cortelyou, August 1, 1898, box 52, GBC Papers.

67. Joseph A. Fry, *John Tyler Morgan and the Search for Southern Autonomy* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 172–173.

68. At the time, Henry Cabot Lodge only wanted Luzon. Henry Cabot Lodge to Andrew White, August 12, 1898, box 16, Henry White Papers, 1812–1931, LOC.

69. Olcott, *The Life of William McKinley*, 61–63; Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?," 52; Trask, *The War with Spain*, 466; Paolo E. Coletta, "The Peace Negotiations and the Treaty of Paris," in *Threshold to American Internationalism: Essays on the Foreign Policies of William McKinley* (New

as September 16, 1898, McKinley wrote openly about the chance of Spain keeping a portion of the archipelago.<sup>70</sup>

The secret peace offer, third-party accounts of his position, and McKinley's choice of Day to lead the peace commission together help prove that throughout the summer of 1898, McKinley was not planning on full annexation. He may have started to feel ownership over the Philippines, valuing it and its future more than he had before the war, when he had never given it much thought. Such a feeling would deepen over time, consistent with the endowment effect.<sup>71</sup> But McKinley still lacked a larger reason to annex the island chain. That reason, a belief that great power war would follow a U.S. departure, developed over August and September, as he collected more intelligence and advice about Filipino society and the intentions of competing powers.

#### GATHERING INTELLIGENCE: AUGUST–SEPTEMBER 1898

The fall of 1898 was critical to McKinley's annexation decision.<sup>72</sup> After the August peace protocol with Spain, McKinley had a handful of weeks to assemble a team to negotiate a final peace treaty in Paris. The primary question during negotiations was the future of the Philippines.

Coming into the war, McKinley knew little about the Philippines. Following the secret peace offer to the Spanish in June, Day wrote to U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain John Hay in London (who delivered the offer) about Filipino participation: "The insurgents there have become an important factor in the situation and must have just consideration in any terms of settlement."<sup>73</sup> Day could not have written such a note without McKinley's express direction. And the last line is critical: "It is most difficult without fuller knowledge to determine as to disposition of Philippine Islands."<sup>74</sup> McKinley was admitting ignorance.

To resolve this lack of awareness, McKinley sought intelligence and advice

---

York: Exposition Press, 1970), 124–125. McKinley's other top foreign policy advisor, U.S. Secretary of the Navy John Long, wanted even less than Day recommended. Long to J. H. Robbins, November 1, 1898, Private Journal 79, John Davis Long (JDL) Papers, 1820–1943, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

70. McKinley to William Day, September 16, 1898, box 68, GBC papers.

71. Jane Gradwohl Nash and Robert A. Rosenthal, "An Investigation of the Endowment Effect in the Context of a College Housing Lottery," *Journal of Economic Psychology* 42 (June 2014): 74–82, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2014.01.001>.

72. See, for example, Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), 101.

73. Day to John Hay, June 14, 1898, John Hay Papers, 1783–1999, Papers, republished in Dennis, *Adventures in American Diplomacy*, 99.

74. *Ibid.*

from experts on the ground. He began with writers. In early August 1898, McKinley asked his secretary, Cortelyou, to find him the July issue of *Contemporary Review* containing an “able article” (Cortelyou’s words) on the Philippines by John Foreman, a British writer, businessperson, and explorer living in the Philippines.<sup>75</sup> *Contemporary Review* was one of a handful of popular, long-form magazines. In the article, Foreman doubted the capacity and solidarity of the nationalist movement in the Philippines. “It would not be strong enough to protect itself against foreign aggression,” Foreman wrote, adding that there would be “complete chaos.”<sup>76</sup> Indicating his respect for Foreman’s analysis, McKinley invited Foreman to meet and brief McKinley’s peace commissioners in Paris. The Filipinos, Foreman told the Paris commissioners in October, were “unfit for self-government” with “ideas too undeveloped.”<sup>77</sup> This belief was common among the few observers of the Philippines who published for elite U.S. audiences. The several other monthly, long-form journals popular among McKinley and his peers echoed Foreman’s views, casting doubt on the ability of Filipinos to self-govern.<sup>78</sup>

McKinley’s close military advisers produced similar assessments. Major General Francis V. Greene, for instance, who led the second wave of U.S. troops to the Philippines in the summer of 1898, traveled to Washington in September 1898 to personally advise the president on the Philippines. From September 27 to October 1, 1898, McKinley met with Greene five times, totaling about ten hours.<sup>79</sup> Upon arrival, Greene presented a sixty-page report on the Philippines. “There is no reason to believe that Aguinaldo’s Government has any elements of stability,” it reads. Independent self-government was impossible in the near-term. “They have no clearly defined ideas at all” regarding many matters of civil administration.<sup>80</sup> “At present, incapable of self-

75. Diaries of Cortelyou, August 1, 1898, box 52, GBC Papers; John Foreman, “Spain and the Philippine Islands,” *Contemporary Review* 74 (July/December 1898): 20–33.

76. Foreman, “Spain and the Philippine Islands,” 30.

77. Day to Hay, Paris, October 9, 1898, doc. 799, *FRUS* 1898, 926.

78. Charles W. Dilke, John Barrett, and Hugh H. Lusk, “The Problem of the Philippines,” *North American Review* 167, no. 502 (September 1898): 257–277, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25119057>; Dean C. Worcester, “Knotty Problems of the Philippines,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* 56, no. 6 (October 1898): 873–879; Albert Shaw, ed., *The American Monthly: Review of Reviews*, vol. 17, January–June 1898 (New York: Review of Reviews, 1901).

79. McKinley’s meetings with Greene consisted of three extended interviews and two group meetings. Diary kept by Francis Vinton Greene (Greene Slipcase Diary 1898), FVG Papers; Francis V. Greene, “The Future of the Philippines,” March 20, 1915, box 5, FVG Papers, 19.

80. Francis Greene, “Memoranda Concerning the Situation in the Philippines, on Aug. 30, 1898,” September 30, 1898, box 69, GBC Papers.

government," the general warned.<sup>81</sup> McKinley then asked Greene to deliver the same report in Paris, to McKinley's peace commissioners who were negotiating a final treaty with Spain. Commodore Dewey, meanwhile, had more faith in the people from the main island of Luzon than did Greene. Still, reporting to Washington the month before, Dewey referenced the "limited amount of civilization" in most of the island chain, noting that the southern islands "are almost wholly given over to savages."<sup>82</sup>

General Greene, perhaps more than any other adviser, helped frame the decision for McKinley.<sup>83</sup> In addition to his report, he prepared another document for the president that laid out five strategic options: (1) return the Philippines to Spain, (2) turn them over to the Filipinos, (3) turn them over to Germany or Japan, (4) jointly occupy and administer them with one or more countries, or (5) keep them undivided.<sup>84</sup> Greene recommended the last option, and Dewey agreed.<sup>85</sup>

McKinley's private and public justifications for annexation reflected Greene's language and framing.<sup>86</sup> After the United States had attacked the Spanish, according to McKinley, neutrality laws would have prevented U.S. access to ports in the Pacific (given that the major ports for refueling would have been neutral British, Chinese, or Japanese ones), thereby necessitating the occupation of Manila.<sup>87</sup> Once McKinley decided he wanted a coaling station (located on Luzon, the largest island), Greene's logic led him to accept nothing less than the entire island chain. Retaining Luzon meant that the United States

---

81. Greene, "The Future of the Philippines," 17.

82. Dewey to Long, August 29, 1898, box 69, GBC Papers.

83. See, for example, Margaret Leech, *In the Days of McKinley* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 334–336; Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?," 53–60; Smith, "'A Question from Which We Could Not Escape,'" 371–372.

84. Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?," 57n70.

85. *Ibid.*, 55. Greene reported Dewey's concurrence. Dewey's language in his August 29, 1898 note was less straightforward. Dewey to Long, August 29, 1898, box 69, GBC Papers.

86. Chandler P. Anderson (1898) quoted in Smith, "'A Question from Which We Could Not Escape,'" 369; McKinley to Day, October 25, 1898, reel 4, WMK Papers; Hay to Day, October 28, 1898, *FRUS 1898*, 937; William McKinley, "Speech at Dinner of the Home Market Club, Boston, February 16, 1899," in *Speeches and Addresses of William McKinley, from March 1, 1897 to May 30, 1900* [hereafter *Speeches and Addresses 1897–1900*] (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1900), 187–188.

87. See: Smith, "'A Question from Which We Could Not Escape,'" 370; Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?," 43. As noted above, however, countries did not strictly observe neutrality rules. The British (in Hong Kong) and the Hawaiian government (before U.S. annexation) were willing to regularly break them to accommodate U.S. interests. Elizalde, "Observing the Imperial Transition," 226; Field, "American Imperialism," 666n53; Trask, *The War with Spain*, 275–276; Maurer, "Fuel and the Battle Fleet," 64; Wildman, "Partial Report on the Conduct of the Consulate General," April 6, 1899, Consular Despatches, reel 19, M108, RG 59, NARA; Moore to McKinley, June 29, 1898, box 56, GBC Papers.

would either have to give the rest of the Philippines back to Spain, sell it to another country, leave it open, or keep it entirely. McKinley felt that the first option would be hypocritical (and therefore dishonorable), given that the United States had attacked Spain precisely because of its oppressive governance. He also felt that selling the archipelago would further encourage great power competition in the Pacific and lead to a war "within fifteen minutes."<sup>88</sup> The geography of the Philippines meant that the United States could be surrounded by potentially hostile territory. And intelligence from Ambassador Hay in London suggested that European powers might intervene if Germany made any advances.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, McKinley's sources of intelligence (through Greene, Foreman, and other contemporary testimony) doubted the solidarity of the nationalist movement and the capacity of Filipinos to self-govern.<sup>90</sup> The resulting vacuum, McKinley believed, would invite other great powers, like Germany and Japan, to intervene.<sup>91</sup> Intelligence from Hay, not to mention Dewey's friction with the Germans in July, confirmed this outside interest.<sup>92</sup> Finally, there was the option of U.S. acquisition.

The expectation was that, left alone, the Philippines would collapse into a civil war among tribes for three reasons: Aguinaldo was weak and did not have widespread appeal,<sup>93</sup> the Filipinos were too diverse and jealous of one another,<sup>94</sup> and Filipinos needed civilizational tutelage in governance.<sup>95</sup> Of those three reasons, the third dominated the first two. The administration's perceptions of Aguinaldo's hold on the archipelago were largely accurate. In 1898, Aguinaldo did not lead a united Philippines.<sup>96</sup> Divisive sectionalism, demographic debates, and unrepresentative and unpopular leaders had led

88. Anderson quoted in Smith, "A Question from Which We Could Not Escape," 369.

89. Hay to McKinley, July 14, 1898, box 56, GBC Papers; Elizalde, "Observing the Imperial Transition," 229, 229n29.

90. *A Treaty of Peace between the United States and Spain*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 55th Cong., 3rd sess. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1899).

91. See also: William McKinley, "Third Annual Message to Congress, December 5, 1899," in Joint Committee of Printing of the House and Senate, eds., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 13 (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1917), 6397.

92. Hay to Day, July 14, 1898, in Dennis, *Adventures in American Diplomacy*, 93–94; Hay to McKinley, July 14, 1898, box 56, GBC Papers; Don A. Farrell, "The Partition of the Marianas: A Diplomatic History, 1898–1919," *ISLA: A Journal of Micronesian Studies* 2, no. 2 (Dry Season 1994): 273–301.

93. Francis Greene in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 374–375, 420, 424; J. Franklin Bell in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 380–381.

94. Frank S. Bourns in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 378; Foreman, "Spain and the Philippine Islands," 30.

95. Worcester, "Knotty Problems," 874; Charles A. Whittier in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 493, 502.

96. See Greene, "Memoranda Concerning the Situation," 38–46.

the United States to its own brutal civil war not four decades before. But no one in McKinley's administration would have argued that the United States lacked the *capacity* to self-govern, or that it needed tutelage. Aguinaldo's lack of widespread appeal mattered to U.S. observers because they did not believe that Filipinos could sustain a stable alternative. As for Filipino diversity, U.S. governance was believed to be easy, not because it could change Filipino demographics, but because it could teach Filipinos how to govern a diverse population.<sup>97</sup> Civilizational ideology was the primary concern.<sup>98</sup>

If, the belief went, Filipinos could learn how to self-organize and self-govern under law and order—that is, if they could become civilized—the rest would follow. Many tribes were “law-abiding,” but they lacked the capacity “and intelligence” to figure it out for themselves.<sup>99</sup> “The masses are decidedly too ignorant to be capable of voting intelligently,” wrote Foreman.<sup>100</sup> The necessary and sufficient reason, thus, was that the Filipinos were believed to be of a lower level of civilization. “For security and well-being,” one article reads, “they need simply a just and enlightened administration.”<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, this self-governance could only be accomplished by direct tutelage. Neither a diplomatic note to other powers, nor aid or advice, nor promised protection would suffice. The removal of Spanish suppression would not naturally restore a latent civilizational capacity. Self-governance had to be taught.

It is crucial to understand what the individuals informing McKinley believed.<sup>102</sup> Though those observers drew distinctions between various groups of Filipinos, Filipinos were generally assumed to be of a lower civilization and to lack the ability to self-govern. Some Filipinos were easily civilizable, others

97. Bourns in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 377; Greene in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 428; Joseph T. Mannix, “What an American Saw in the Philippines,” in Shaw, *American Monthly: Review of Reviews*, 689.

98. It is unlikely that by October 1898 McKinley would have genuinely believed that he would be universally welcomed as a liberator. Such a belief would have been contradicted both by Filipino leader Felipe Agoncillo's meeting with McKinley on October 1, 1898, and by Agoncillo's October 4 memo to McKinley stating that Filipinos wanted independence. Rounseville Wildman to Moore, July 18, 1898, Consular Despatches, reel 19, M108, RG 59, NARA; Bell in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 380, Greene in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 424; Felipe Agoncillo to Alvey Augustus Adee, October 4, 1898, series 1, reel 4, WMK Papers. See also: Greene, “The Future of the Philippines,” 12–15.

99. Mannix, “What an American Saw,” 689.

100. Foreman, “Spain and the Philippine Islands,” 30.

101. Shaw, *The American Monthly: Review of Reviews*, 652.

102. For two broader studies of civilization, race, empire, and U.S. colonization of the Philippines, see: Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Oliver Charbonneau, *Civilizational Imperatives: Americans, Moros, and the Colonial World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

were "an intractable, bloodthirsty set."<sup>103</sup> They lacked "education and experience."<sup>104</sup> Scientist Dean Worcester, writing in a popular monthly magazine, did recognize that a Filipino "believes himself quite capable of administering the affairs of his country," though the U.S. government would know better.<sup>105</sup> Day characterized the Filipinos to McKinley as "semi-barbarous,"<sup>106</sup> "ignorant," and "degraded."<sup>107</sup> Phrases like "wild tribes"<sup>108</sup> and generalizations that there were no "able and honest"<sup>109</sup> Filipino leaders fed the notion that chaos was inevitable with this lower civilization.

McKinley privately believed that the world was made up of a hierarchy of differing levels of civilization, with Anglo-Saxons at the top of the ladder. "It is our proud title to belong to the Anglo-Saxon race, the leaders in the march of civilization, in every age and in every quarter of the globe," he wrote in an undelivered speech in October 1898.<sup>110</sup> This general attitude did not imply a specific notion of the Filipinos. His awareness of Filipino society was essentially nonexistent before the summer of 1898, and he clearly did not come into the war thinking that the Filipinos were helpless, as indicated above in Day's June letter to Hay.<sup>111</sup>

McKinley's inclination to believe in a civilizational hierarchy would have thus been reinforced by the intelligence that he received from writers and officials advising him. His closest advisers offered similar intuitions about Filipinos' ability to self-govern. McKinley eventually came to think that either chaos or interstate conflict (or both) was inevitable because he was influenced by that advice. McKinley's civilizational ideology not only produced the belief that war would follow a U.S. departure but also bolstered the twin belief that chaos would *not* follow if the United States stayed involved. McKinley believed in a fluid civilizational hierarchy: peoples were not equal, but they could advance.<sup>112</sup> This fluidity was the difference between his belief system

---

103. Worcester, "Knotty Problems," 876.

104. *Ibid.*, 874.

105. *Ibid.*, 877.

106. Peace Commissioners to Hay, Paris, October 25, 1898, doc. 813, *FRUS 1898*, 934.

107. Day to McKinley, October 28, 1898, series 1, reel 4, WMK Papers.

108. Worcester, "Knotty Problems," 876.

109. Barrett in Dilke, Barrett, and Lusk, "The Problem of the Philippines," 262.

110. This kind of celebratory statement of Anglo-Saxonism was very uncharacteristic of McKinley. McKinley, [Draft of undelivered speech], October 18, 1898, reel 83, WMK Papers (n.b.: this draft is mistakenly grouped with the October 1899 speeches).

111. Day to Hay, June 14, 1898, John Hay Papers, republished in Dennis, *Adventures in American Diplomacy*, 99.

112. For McKinley's racial worldview, which informed his civilizational ideology, see: George

and that of anti-imperialists who argued against annexation on the basis of fixed inferiority.

This civilizational ideology drove McKinley's analysis of the situation. Even if McKinley did not have firm beliefs about the Filipinos before the war, already having a worldview that categorized societies within a civilizational hierarchy meant that he was more likely to slot Filipinos into that framework when receiving intelligence.<sup>113</sup> The analyses that he received from his advisers and monthly journals would have identified Filipinos as a lower-order civilization in a preexisting hierarchy that he already believed in. That categorization would have greatly strengthened his probabilistic judgments about future disorder. Self-governance would have appeared impossible without tutelage from the United States. In that undelivered speech referenced above, the full quote reveals more about McKinley's thinking:

It is our proud title to belong to the Anglo-Saxon race, the leaders in the march of civilization, in every age and in every quarter of the globe. Where that flag flies it is seldom lowered; where that race enters it always remains, bringing with it the blessings of greater health and happiness, of a larger and more perfect fertility and of freer interchange with the commerce and arts of the world. It proclaims liberty; it establishes law; it enshrines religion and hastens progress; it makes the world the better for its being.<sup>114</sup>

Scholars have tended to analyze McKinley's civilizational ideology with respect to morality, duty, and "uplift," which is the other side of the civilizational coin.<sup>115</sup> But before October 1898, and in contrast to his statements on Cubans, McKinley had voiced few concerns for Filipinos, who had also endured centuries of oppressive Spanish colonization. His orders to the War Department

---

Sinkler, *The Racial Attitudes of American Presidents, from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 289–307; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 180–223, 341–363.

113. In addition to race, many other factors (e.g., religion, philosophy, gender, education, and life experience) contributed to McKinley's civilizational ideology. See, for example, McCartney, *Power and Progress*, 199–223; Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 158–159; Robert Merry, *President McKinley: Architect of the American Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); Nick Kapur, "William McKinley's Values and the Origins of the Spanish-American War: A Reinterpretation," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 2011): 18–38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2010.03829.x>.

114. McKinley, [Draft of undelivered speech], October 18, 1898.

115. As noted above, scholars typically analyze civilizational ideology as part of McKinley's humanitarian impulse, as a sense of national mission, or as a fig leaf for imperialism. See, for example, Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation*; Hunt and Levine, *Arc of Empire*, 17; Agoncillo, *Malolos*, 343; Welch, "William McKinley," in Graebner, *Traditions and Values*, 42; McCartney, *Power and Progress*, 199–223.



in the summer of 1898 did indicate a desire to improve Filipino lives, but McKinley systematically blocked Filipinos from participating in peace negotiations about their future, and he blocked them militarily in Manila.<sup>116</sup> McKinley's private justifications for annexation were devoid of deep concerns for their welfare, and neither his advisers nor expert testimony before the Paris Peace Commission indicated that humanitarianism was the highest priority. The many references that he began to make publicly about civilizational uplift, a duty to humanity, and benevolent assimilation bolster the idea that he was shrouding his civilizational assumptions in a veil of altruism.<sup>117</sup> It was McKinley's assumptions about civilization rather than humanitarianism that affected his judgment about war, security, and the prospects for peace.<sup>118</sup> The less he believed that the Filipinos could self-govern, the more he would have to worry that their independence would result in chaos. Civilizational progress translated to greater stability and peace.<sup>119</sup>

Foreign interest also mattered, but McKinley's intelligence on the likelihood of great power intervention over the Philippines was less certain and consistent than his intelligence on Filipino civilization. On the one hand, the president had reason to believe that Germany and Japan were interested in controlling the Philippines. Dewey had some testy exchanges with the Germans during the War of 1898, for instance. And although Japan had given its blessing to future U.S. control of the Philippines, it had indicated interest in setting up a government were the United States to leave.<sup>120</sup> Yet that interest did not naturally translate to chaos and great power war in the event of a U.S. departure from either Luzon or all the islands. For instance, the advice of McKinley's chief negotiator, Day, was that the possibility of foreign acquisition of the Philippines could be averted with a carefully worded treaty.<sup>121</sup>

---

116. McKinley to Alger, May 19, 1898, reel 18, WMK Papers.

117. For example, McKinley, "Speech at Cedar Rapids, Iowa," October 11, 1898, in *Speeches and Addresses 1897–1900*, 87.

118. Scholars have previously connected civilization to capacity for self-government. For instance, see: Julian Go, *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico during U.S. Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 28. Julian Go does not focus his analysis on McKinley's mind, however, and he does not link the ideas to a concern for European war in Asia.

119. See, for example: McKinley, "Speech at Dinner of the Home Market Club," 193. "Civilizational peace theory" might be thought of as a precursor concept to the democratic peace theory, though the two theories differ in notable ways.

120. Dewey, *Autobiography of George Dewey*, 243–244; Gould, *The Spanish-American War*, 83, 101. Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?," 50–52.

121. Day to Hay, October 25, 1898, *FRUS 1898*, 934.

Ambassador Hay (who later became Day's successor as secretary of state), subtly advising McKinley against annexation, acknowledged Germany's interest but also implied that Germany might be deterred by the "danger of grave complications with other European powers."<sup>122</sup> Andrew White, McKinley's ambassador in Berlin, reported that concerns about Germany were exaggerated.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, in 1899, through Hay, McKinley merely circulated a letter to European and Japanese powers, requesting that they respect China's "open door" and territorial integrity (the so-called First Open Door Note) to persuade the same set of imperialists against land grabs and expanding their spheres of influence within China.

Yet in 1898, less than a year before the First Open Door Note, McKinley thought that the Philippines would be a disaster unless the United States were its sovereign. Why? Because he believed that the Filipinos lacked the capacity for self-government. McKinley, ever the cautious statesperson, was careful not to publicly say that the Filipinos were unfit for self-government. A draft of a speech in December 1898, however, gives a sense of his true intuitions: "Having done all that in the line of duty, is there any less duty to remain there and give to the inhabitants protection and also our guidance to a better government, which will secure to them peace and order and security in their life and property and in the pursuit of happiness and opportunities to demonstrate their capacity for self-government?"<sup>124</sup>

In the actual speech, McKinley struck the last clause "and opportunities to demonstrate their capacity for self-government," ending the sentence at "happiness."<sup>125</sup> In another draft of a speech in 1899, McKinley wrote (and later removed), "There is no government there but ours."<sup>126</sup> His many later statements that the U.S. purpose was to give the Filipinos a stable government imply a conviction that they would not have a stable government otherwise.<sup>127</sup> In November 1899, McKinley privately told a

---

122. Hay to McKinley, August 2, 1898, box 56, GBC Papers.

123. White to Day, August 12, 1898, in Adey to Pruden, August 30, 1898, box 56, GBC Papers.

124. McKinley, [Draft of "Speech at Banquet of Board of Trade and Associated Citizens, Savannah, Georgia"].

125. McKinley, "Speech at Banquet of Board of Trade and Associated Citizens, Savannah, Georgia," December 17, 1898, in *Speeches and Addresses 1897-1900*, 175.

126. McKinley, [Draft of "Speech at Madison, Wisconsin"].

127. A few examples of McKinley emphasizing the establishment of government as a guiding purpose include: McKinley, "Speech at Dinner of the Home Market Club," 189; McKinley, "Address at Minneapolis, Minnesota," October 12, 1899, in *Speeches and Addresses 1897-1900*, esp. 269; McKinley, "Speech at Waterloo, Iowa," October 16, 1899, in *Speeches and Addresses 1897-1900*, 306; William McKinley, "Upon the Occasion of the Visit of the Committee Appointed to Notify Him

general that civilizing the Filipinos was necessary because they "were unfit for self-government."<sup>128</sup>

FINAL ALIGNMENT: OCTOBER 1898

Why care at all about avoiding a great power war in the Pacific? What interests did McKinley believe he was protecting? The costs of governing a new territory as large and far away as the Philippines were significant. The United States could theoretically derive economic benefits either from controlling the Philippines and extracting its wealth or from gaining future access to other markets in Asia, enabled by a coaling station near Manila. The president had mixed evidence that either benefit would soon yield predictable and major profits.

McKinley had some intelligence that controlling the Philippines would enrich the United States. Observers such as Foreman and Max Tornow, a German businessperson who supplied a statement to the Paris commissioners, touted that possibility.<sup>129</sup> But others were less sure. Greene believed that the potential for commerce was large but admitted that "very little is known concerning the mineral wealth of the islands."<sup>130</sup> Perhaps indicating his lack of interest in the commercial element of the Philippines, Greene included just one paragraph in his sixty-page report that addressed potential growth in commerce for the United States. Greene furthermore calculated the archipelago's income to be roughly equal to its expenses—a paltry \$17 million. If McKinley wanted to reduce Spain's oppressive taxation policy on Filipinos, let alone to expend U.S. resources building a military presence and administrative state, the islands would run at a loss for the United States.<sup>131</sup> Additionally, the economic analysis McKinley ordered by Edward W. Harden in the fall of 1898 delivered only a lukewarm outlook. It revealed some of the major challenges of

---

of His Nomination for the Presidency by the Republican National Committee at Philadelphia," July 12, 1900, reel 83, WMK Papers.

128. On its own, this account should be treated with caution, as Ephraim Smith has elegantly argued. General James F. Rusling had reason to exaggerate, and he may have misremembered the exact details of the meeting, given the five-year time lag between the meeting and the interview about it. Nevertheless, parts of the recollection, like this quote, are broadly supported by the intelligence coming into the White House at the time. James F. Rusling, "Interview with President McKinley," *Christian Advocate* 78, January 22, 1903, 137–38, in Smith, "A Question from Which We Could Not Escape," 364.

129. Foreman, "Spain and the Philippine Islands," 31; Max Tornow in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 608, 619.

130. Greene, "Memoranda Concerning the Situation," 7.

131. *Ibid.*, 12–14.

development, including poor transportation links, corruption, and graft.<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, Harden believed that the growth in Filipino exports would *hurt* U.S. labor and industry, not help them.<sup>133</sup> McKinley's respect for Harden's analysis is indicated by his move to appoint Harden secretary to the first Philippines commission.<sup>134</sup>

McKinley might also have believed that the economic benefits from foreign market access to Asia outweighed the cost of governing a new country, but his intelligence was mixed here too. Earlier in 1898, for instance, McKinley's consul-general in Hong Kong submitted an industrial and commercial review to Day that acknowledged uncertainties and challenges regarding trade in the Far East. Overall, its optimism was muted.<sup>135</sup> More importantly, at the time, McKinley believed that foreign markets were generally unreliable. For years, and especially during his 1896 presidential campaign, he emphasized this belief.<sup>136</sup> A "nice-to-have," maybe, but not a "need-to-have."

On top of all that, McKinley had a less expensive alternative in the Pacific: a coaling station in the Caroline Islands archipelago (which Spain also held). An early draft of McKinley's June 1898 peace terms equates the value of a coaling station in the Philippines with one in the Caroline Islands.<sup>137</sup> At that point, a sense of ownership over the Philippines had not yet fully taken root, so perhaps McKinley was more open to this alternative. Over time, however, as his feelings deepened toward the Philippines—as predicted by the endowment effect—the Caroline Islands receded in importance.<sup>138</sup> McKinley never seemed to pursue that option very seriously, despite multiple mentions by

132. Harden, "Report on the Financial and Industrial Condition of the Philippine Islands," 14. Harden finished his reporting on October 8, 1898, and arrived in the United States on November 10. It is unknown whether he cabled any summary to Washington before McKinley's order to his commissioners on October 28, 1898 (as Greene had done). Nevertheless, Day's communication with McKinley about annexation throughout November indicates that the issue was still pertinent, so Harden's analysis should be considered within McKinley's decision-making timeline. "E. W. Harden Is in Chicago," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 16, 1898, 2.

133. Harden notes the potential harm of Filipino exports for the U.S. tobacco industry specifically, one of the principal industries of the United States. Harden, "Problems in the Orient," 5.

134. General Elwell Otis, the U.S. military governor of the Philippines, objected, pointing to disparaging remarks Harden made about him. Elwell Otis to Henry Clark Corbin, January 20, 1899, in *Correspondence Relating to the War with Spain*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1902), 884.

135. Wildman to Day, January 15, 1898, Consular Despatches, reel 19, M108, RG 59, NARA, 1.

136. Heath, "McKinley's Speeches Party Platforms."

137. Equal valuation of a coaling station in the Philippines with one in the Caroline Islands is implicit. Even if the draft reflected a close adviser's intuition (rather than the president's), at a minimum, it indicates that coaling stations in the island groups were in the same realm of perceived usefulness. "Peace Terms," May 9, 1898, box 186, JBM Papers.

138. Nash and Rosenthal, "An Investigation of the Endowment Effect," 74–82.

his advisers.<sup>139</sup> To be sure, the Caroline Islands are not equivalent to the Philippines archipelago. They are much smaller and farther away from mainland Asia. Though some believed that the Philippines had untapped coal reserves, for the foreseeable future, the coal that would have supplied either coaling station would have had to come from faraway U.S. vessels on the East Coast of the United States, not locally from the Philippines, which was a net importer of coal.<sup>140</sup> Back then, it was well-known that the best coal came from Wales.<sup>141</sup> As an additional Pacific Ocean coaling station, the Caroline Islands offered some similar refueling benefits to the Philippines, and, critically, would have avoided the burden of governing a new country.

What U.S. interests were so deeply at stake for McKinley to necessitate the annexation of the Philippines? The commercial argument has weaknesses. Greene's alternative logic about avoiding great power war may have appealed to McKinley, but it still lacked an underlying connection to U.S. interests. The answer is counterintuitive and tautological. McKinley wanted to avoid great power war because he already felt ownership over the Philippines. This feeling inflated how he valued the territory and its relevance to U.S. interests through the endowment effect. The Philippines mattered because the United States was already there and in control, not because of prospective trading opportunities.

Consider the following counterfactual. If Spain, after McKinley's election to the presidency but before the War of 1898, had folded in response to Filipino revolutionaries and left the Philippines, how much would McKinley have worried about the consequences of Spain's departure? Would he have worried enough to deploy tens of thousands of U.S. troops to avoid a potential

---

139. Commissioner William Pierce Frye believed the Caroline Islands to be "infinitely more valuable" than the Ladrões (containing Guam). Frye to Adey, October 30, 1898, box 67, GBC Papers; American Peace Commissioners [Moore] to Hay, Paris, November 11, 1898, doc. 831, *FRUS 1898*, 945–948. See also: Tristram E. Farmer, "Too Little, Too Late: The Fight for the Carolines, 1898," *Naval History* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 20–25; Trask, *The War with Spain*, 466–467; Hay to McKinley, November 23, 1898, box 57, GBC Papers; Day to Hay, December 8, 1898, box 57, GBC Papers.

140. Harden, "Report on the Financial and Industrial Condition of the Philippine Islands," 13, 17; Bourns in *A Treaty of Peace*, U.S. Senate Doc. 62, 375. The 1899 Navy Annual Report notes that Manila's coal came from the Atlantic coast (a sourcing need for the foreseeable future). John D. Long in U.S. Department of the Navy, *Annual Reports of the Navy Department for the Year 1899*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1899), 22. R. B. Bradford in *Annual Reports of the Navy Department for the Year 1899*, 307.

141. For decades after 1898, the U.S. Navy continued to supply its Philippines' station with coal from the Atlantic. Josephus Daniels in *Annual Reports of the Navy Department for the Fiscal Year 1913* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1914), 16.

great power war in the Philippines? Almost certainly not.<sup>142</sup> This alternative past differs from historical reality in one major way: a U.S. presence in the Philippines from the War of 1898. It is worth reemphasizing that McKinley did not deploy troops at the outset of the war because he hoped to conquer the islands. His interest in full annexation *followed* the deployment of troops. If Spain had left the archipelago before the War of 1898, its departure would not have troubled the president one bit.

The war had created a new reference point of perceived ownership. McKinley therefore framed a U.S. departure from the Philippines and a future without annexation as a potential loss rather than as a way to restore the status quo antebellum. Holding the Philippines was his starting point and *losing*—not gaining—the Philippines was the outcome. Perceived ownership is significant because it tends to inflate the value of something over time. McKinley evoked this framing with statements such as “taking down the flag,” “leaving,” “giving them back,” and “losing the fruits of victory.”<sup>143</sup>

McKinley’s October 1898 speaking tour, undertaken as he was making his final decision about annexation, offers glimpses into his thinking.<sup>144</sup> “The war was not in vain . . . the just fruits of our achievements on land and sea shall not be lost,” he told a crowd in Terre Haute, Indiana.<sup>145</sup> Three days later in an undelivered speech, McKinley wrote, referencing the star-spangled banner,

---

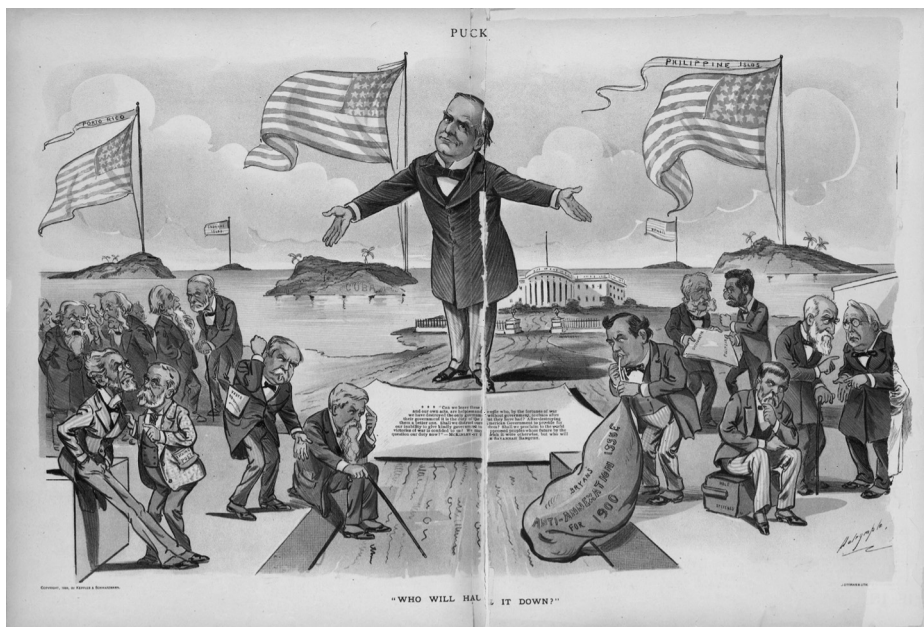
142. Coming into office, McKinley was a domestically focused president. Before the war, McKinley resisted entangling the United States in disputes in Asia. In March 1898, for instance, the British ambassador to the United States asked the president to publicly support open trade with China. The ambassador feared that other powers might start restricting trade and asked for solidarity if that were to occur. McKinley actually supported the British position, but he wanted to “[avoid] any interference or connection with European complications.” He rejected the ambassador’s invitation. Day [Memo], March 16, 1898, box 8, William R. Day Papers, 1820–1923, LOC.

143. McKinley rarely framed the Philippines as a gain. More often, he would frame it as a grave duty, an obligation, or as a burden. For instance, see: McKinley to Peace Commissioners, Washington, September 16, 1898, doc. 776, *FRUS 1898*, 907. Scholars have highlighted McKinley’s framing of leaving (rather than gaining) as unwittingly politically advantageous, though they have stopped short of analyzing what impact that framing may have had on McKinley’s calculus. For instance: Richard E. Welch Jr., *Response to Imperialism: The United States and the Philippine-American War, 1899–1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 6–7; Warren Lashley, “The Debate over Imperialism in the United States, 1898–1900” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1966), 102–109; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 167; Coletta, “The Peace Negotiations,” 146.

144. McKinley used this framework both publicly and privately in the fall of 1898. To a presidential appointee in mid-November, McKinley privately used similar constructions (“keeping the islands under temporary control,” “abandoning”) that indicated a feeling of ownership. Anderson (1898) in Smith, “A Question from Which We Could Not Escape,” 370.

145. McKinley, “Speech in Terre Haute, Indiana,” October 15, 1898, in *Speeches and Addresses 1897–1900*, 123.

Figure 1. Annexation of the Philippines in Popular Visual Culture



SOURCE: Louis Dalrymple, "Who Will Haul It Down?," *Puck* 44, no. 1140 (January 11, 1899), centerfold. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, 20540 USA, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2012647455/>.

NOTE: Appearing as the centerfold in the popular magazine, *Puck*, this political cartoon features McKinley in the foreground towering over political allies and rivals with an excerpt at his feet from his speech in Savannah, Georgia, on December 17, 1898, about annexing the Philippines. The subsequent line to the excerpt from that speech reads, "It is not a question of keeping the islands of the East, but of leaving them." In the background, U.S. flags planted in Spanish colonial territories capture the feeling of U.S. ownership before formal annexation. The caption "Who Will Haul It Down?" (from McKinley's speech in Atlanta on December 15, 1898) also reflects this feeling. Together, the image and caption acknowledge the political reality that annexation was McKinley's decision, and his alone.

"Where that flag flies it is seldom lowered."<sup>146</sup> In December 1898, at a speech in Savannah, Georgia he said, "It is not a question of keeping the islands of the East, but of leaving them."<sup>147</sup> Two days earlier in Atlanta, he asked the audience, "That flag has been planted in two hemispheres, and there it remains the symbol of liberty and law, of peace and progress. Who will withdraw from

146. McKinley, [Not delivered], October 18, 1898, reel 83, WMK Papers (n.b.: this speech is mistakenly grouped with the 1899 speeches).

147. McKinley, "Speech at Banquet of Board of Trade," *Speeches and Addresses 1897-1900*, 174.

the people over whom it floats its protecting folds? Who will haul it down?”<sup>148</sup> His line “Who will haul it down?” was repeated in nearly 1,000 U.S. newspapers and in visual culture.<sup>149</sup> The phrase is the title of the centerfold for a January 1899 issue of the weekly popular magazine, *Puck* (see figure 1). Commenting on the speech in Washington, U.S. Treasurer Ellis Roberts asked the follow-up: “Truly, who shall perform that act of national mutilation?”<sup>150</sup>

McKinley’s language around “retreat” and “lowering the flag” suggests that he may have envisioned an additional loss, that of international status.<sup>151</sup> In a ciphered telegram, Secretary of State Hay cabled Day in Paris to repeat the president’s instruction to demand the whole island chain: “The President can not believe any division of the archipelago can bring us anything but embarrassment.”<sup>152</sup> McKinley’s later statements further imply that status mattered to him. In an undelivered speech in January 1899, McKinley noted his desire that the United States maintain its position “in the forefront of the nations of the world” and be “respected abroad.”<sup>153</sup> In February 1899, shortly after the U.S. Senate approved the treaty, he remarked to a crowd in Boston that if the United States were to leave the Philippines, it would either be “tossed into the arena of contention for the strife of nations” or be “left to the anarchy and chaos of no protectorate at all,” both of which were “too shameful to be considered.”<sup>154</sup> Such scenarios had never occurred to or concerned McKinley—despite the history of Filipino rebellions indicating the probability that those outcomes could transpire—until U.S. troops were actually in the area.

McKinley continued using this framing throughout his presidency, privately and publicly. In a meeting with an adviser, McKinley indicated that the Democratic opposition would have had an easier time criticizing a policy of

---

148. William McKinley, “Speech at the Auditorium, Atlanta, Georgia,” December 15, 1898, in *Speeches and Addresses 1897–1900*, 161.

149. I performed a search of the term “who will haul it down” on March 5, 2020. According to newspapers.com, the phrase appeared in 919 newspapers from December 1898 to January 1900.

150. “Washington Letter,” 4.

151. For a review article, see: Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “The Status of Status in World Politics,” *World Politics* 73, no. 2 (April 2021): 358–391, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887120000301>. On the endowment effect implicating nonmarket goods, see John K. Horowitz and Kenneth E. McConnell, “A Review of WTA/WTP Studies,” *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* 44, no. 3 (November 2002): 426–447, <https://doi.org/10.1006/jeem.2001.1215>.

152. Hay to Day, November 13, 1898, doc. 832, *FRUS 1898*, 948–949.

153. McKinley did not use these two phrases in reference to the Philippines. I draw attention to them to show that McKinley ruminated about international status, as a general idea, close to the time when he decided on annexation. McKinley, [Draft of address to have been delivered before the Manufacturers’ Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio], January 24, 1899, reel 82, WMK Papers.

154. McKinley, “Speech at Dinner of the Home Market Club,” 187.



"abandonment of the islands" rather than "our keeping them." "We had the islands, and as long as we had them we must be 'supreme' in the government of them," McKinley said.<sup>155</sup> "There will be no turning aside, no wavering, no retreat."<sup>156</sup> A few months later, he asked a group at Union Iron Works in San Francisco, alluding to the Philippine-American War, "We have expanded. Do you want to contract?"<sup>157</sup> These formulations imply that McKinley's reference point had been ownership of the Philippines. Given that he was using that notion back in 1898, it suggests that the Battle of Manila Bay and subsequent control over the city played a role in his perception. The Philippines question was not about gaining something new, it was about losing something the United States already had. And because of this feeling of ownership, McKinley valued the Philippines much more than he would have before the war itself. As head of state, McKinley embodied a sense of U.S. ownership.

By contrast, McKinley's closest foreign policy advisers, most of whom were against full annexation, used a different construction when discussing the future of the Philippines. While serving as the chair of the Paris Peace Commission, Day framed future Spanish control as "restoration status quo in Philippine Islands."<sup>158</sup> McKinley characterized that choice as giving the islands "back."<sup>159</sup> U.S. Secretary of the Navy John Long, in explaining to a confidante his position against annexation, referred to annexation as "expansion."<sup>160</sup> Expansion, the president believed, had already happened.

McKinley ultimately ordered his commissioners in Paris to demand all of the Philippines from Spain on October 28, 1898.<sup>161</sup> McKinley's handwritten draft of those instructions, buried in the manuscript collection of his secretary, reveals a final insight into how the president perceived ownership. As officially ordered, the first sentence reads: "While the Philippines can be justly

---

155. [Diary-like entry], September 20, 1900, folder 2, box 1, JBM Papers, 9.

156. McKinley, "Upon the Occasion of the Visit."

157. McKinley, "Union Iron Works, San Francisco, California," May 18, 1901, 4, reel 84, WMK Papers. The Philippine-American War was a colonial conflict between the United States and the Philippines. It officially lasted from 1899 to 1902, though it lingered on in scattered forms for several years afterward. For more, see: Linn, *The Philippine War*.

158. Day to Hay, October 3, 1898, box 57, GBC Papers.

159. Olcott, *The Life of William McKinley*, 62.

160. Long to Robbins, November 1, 1898, vol. 79, JDL Papers.

161. *FRUS 1898* has the date incorrectly as October 26, 1898. Hay believed the division between the commissioners on the question of annexation to be so deep that he forwarded the entire collection of their notes to McKinley, specifically highlighting Day's dissent. In doing so, Hay held off sending McKinley's drafted October 26 order, and cabled Day to wait another day for the official response, something the official record misses. Hay to McKinley, October 27, 1898, reel 4, WMK Papers; Day to McKinley, October 28, 1898, reel 4, WMK Papers.

claimed by conquest, which position must not be yielded, yet their disposition, control, and government the President prefers should be the subject of negotiation, as provided in the protocol.”<sup>162</sup> In the draft, however, McKinley had a very different opening clause. “The Philippines are ours by conquest,” he had scribbled.<sup>163</sup>

Although resistant, the Spanish ultimately acquiesced to the United States’ demands. The Treaty of Paris was signed on December 10, 1898, but it required the approval of the Senate before it came into force. McKinley’s decision was the critical factor; without it, Spain would have retained the Philippines or sold it to another country.

National debate exploded. Prominent anti-imperialists—such as the industrialist Andrew Carnegie and the writer Mark Twain—argued against annexation. Some invoked moral and constitutional principles such as self-determination to oppose annexation. Other arguments leaned heavily on racist logic, suggesting that annexing the Philippines implied more non-white U.S. citizens.<sup>164</sup> A mere three hours before the vote, McKinley was still short of a two-thirds majority.<sup>165</sup> The final tally came to 57 to 27, a one-vote winning margin for the annexationists.

### *Alternative Explanations for Why McKinley Annexed the Philippines*

Over the last century, scholars have contributed many alternative explanations for why McKinley decided to annex the Philippines. Above all towers foreign trade expansionism—that a desire to expand overseas trade dominated McKinley’s thinking. As noted above, this argument has weaknesses. First, it contradicts McKinley’s long-standing lack of enthusiasm toward foreign markets, something he repeatedly emphasized in the 1896 presidential campaign.<sup>166</sup> Trade expansion also cannot account for cheaper alternatives presented to McKinley, such as a coaling station in the Caroline Islands. Like Day, McKinley’s senior naval advisers believed that McKinley could fulfill the United States’ commercial (and naval) goals in less expansive ways.<sup>167</sup> Private

---

162. Hay to Day, October 28, 1898, *FRUS 1898*, 937.

163. [Draft of McKinley’s instructions to commissioners in Paris], box 69, GBC Papers (n.b.: this document is mistakenly dated October 29, 1898).

164. See, for instance: Love, *Race over Empire*, 159–195.

165. Gould, *The Spanish-American War*, 117. See also Diaries of Cortelyou, February 4, 1899, box 52, GBC Papers.

166. Heath, “McKinley’s Speeches Party Platforms.”

167. Robert Seager II, *Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Man and His Letters* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Insti-

industry also had prominent anti-annexationists, such as Carnegie, who wrote McKinley that there were much cheaper ways of securing trade advantages than territorial annexation. Carnegie's letter referenced a conversation with Charles Stewart Smith, the recent president of the New York Chamber of Commerce, who opposed annexation and claimed not to have met a single member of the chamber who supported it. Carnegie also appended a *Pittsburg Dispatch* article that quoted several industrial leaders opposing annexation, including the president of the Pittsburg Chamber of Commerce.<sup>168</sup>

In general, McKinley's intelligence on the economic cost-benefit analysis was more uncertain and mixed than scholarship often admits. To be sure, many people did promote full annexation as a means to expand overseas trade.<sup>169</sup> But focusing on those opinions overlooks the uncertainty expressed in other analyses that made it to the president's desk. The economic analysis McKinley commissioned in the fall of 1898, in particular, was lukewarm about annexation.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, once annexation was completed, McKinley did not expand trade with much fervor; indeed, export growth to Asia overall slowed during his administration, when there was only room to grow quickly.<sup>171</sup> McKinley also invested little time and energy negotiating reciprocity treaties with other countries, despite supporting them in rhetoric. Reciprocity treaties opened market access to U.S. producers in noncompetitive areas, preserving protectionist instincts to shield domestic labor and industry from cheaper alternatives abroad. They were popular among Republicans in the 1890s. President Benjamin Harrison (1889–1893) negotiated many of them, which Grover Cleveland revoked in his second term (1893–1897). When

---

tute Press, 1977): 393; Farmer, "Too Little, Too Late"; Long to Robbins, November 1, 1898, vol. 79, JDL Papers.

168. Andrew Carnegie to McKinley, November 28, 1898, box 57, GBC Papers.

169. For helpful studies of trade attitudes in the era, see: Michael Patrick Cullinane and Alex Goodall, *The Open Door Era: United States Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 12–34; Marc-William Palen, "The Imperialism of Economic Nationalism, 1890–1913," *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 1 (January 2015): 157–185, <http://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht135>.

170. Harden, "Report on the Financial and Industrial Condition of the Philippine Islands."

171. In 1898, less than 1 percent of all U.S. merchandise exports went to China. By 1904, all of Asia made up only 4.3 percent of global U.S. exports of raw materials. Those circumstances held for many years at a time when overseas trade constituted only a small fraction of the U.S. economy. U.S. Census Bureau, "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1904" (Washington, DC: GPO, 1905), 94, 111, 121, 292–341; U.S. Census Bureau, "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1917" (Washington, DC: GPO, 1918), 375, 388. The Philippine-American War and the Boxer Rebellion would have disrupted trade growth. Still, McKinley expended little political capital on other initiatives that would have enabled greater international trade, such as undersea cables or reciprocity treaties.

McKinley came into office in 1897, he never renegotiated the major Harrison reciprocity treaties.<sup>172</sup>

Commercial interest was one of the factors that affected McKinley's decision, but it was not the dominant one. His initial desire for a coaling station near Manila did start the logical chain that led to full annexation, and coaling stations could help expand trade. But the slide from coaling station to entire archipelago was caused by a set of factors that represented the meddler's trap far more than they did economic greed. McKinley did not annex all of the Philippines to protect the projected economic benefit of a single refueling station. Moreover, his initial interest in a coaling station might have been influenced by the endowment effect. Finally, if trade expansion had been primary for McKinley, he had options short of annexing the Philippines. The Caroline Islands, which his advisors suggested, was one option. But he need not have annexed anything else. Owning a coaling station was not necessary for trade expansion; the option to use a foreign coaling station in peacetime was always open. Even in wartime, including during the War of 1898 itself, countries regularly flouted neutrality laws for coaling. The government of Hawaii, for instance, authorized the United States to store 12,000 tons of coal in Honolulu during the war. A member of Congress felt this allowance was routine enough to reference publicly on the House floor.<sup>173</sup> Additionally, McKinley's consul-general in Hong Kong recounted that "hardly a day passed" that he did not ask for "some favor . . . for our Transports" or "solicit some modification of the neutrality laws in our interests" during the war. Had the British "wished to have made Hong Kong impossible as a base for Manila, it would have been very easy, and quite within the letter of the law," he confessed.<sup>174</sup>

In addition to trade expansion, other explanations of McKinley's decision in-

172. David M. Pletcher, "Reciprocity and Latin America in the Early 1890s: A Foretaste of Dollar Diplomacy," *Pacific Historical Review* 47, no. 1 (1978): 53–89, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3637339>. For more on attitudes toward the home market, see Paul S. Holbo, "Economics, Emotion, and Expansion: An Emerging Foreign Policy," in H. Wayne Morgan, ed., *The Gilded Age* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1970), 199–222.

173. This statement preceded U.S. annexation of Hawaii. At the time, the United States had leased Pearl Harbor (not Honolulu), but a sandbar made Pearl Harbor inaccessible. U.S. Congress, Congressional Record, 55th Cong., 2nd sess., June 14, 1898, vol. 31, pt. 6, H 5924.

174. Wildman, "Partial Report on the Conduct of the Consulate General," April 6, 1899, Consular Despatches, reel 19, M108, RG 59, NARA; Moore to McKinley, June 29, 1898, box 56, GBC Papers. Another subtle indication that leaders did not view neutrality laws rigidly was U.S. Admiral William Sampson's belief that his Spanish counterpart (Admiral Pascual Cervera) might be allowed to re-coal at Martinique, a French territory. Cervera did not re-coal at Martinique, but Dutch authorities allowed him to purchase 600 tons of coal at Curaçao. Trask, *The War with Spain*, 114–116.

clude public opinion, religious awakening, gender politics, and imperialist conspirators. Centering on McKinley's October 1898 speaking tour, the public opinion argument claims that he tested pro- and anti-annexationist arguments, documented the applause level for each, and based his annexation decision on the findings. Though his speeches did include applause annotations, this reading of the evidence has the politics in reverse, and it misrepresents McKinley's speeches. One cannot determine public support from applause annotations in those fifty-nine speeches, because all but two of his speeches received applause, neither of which were anti-imperialist.<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, McKinley distributed his speeches to newspapers to publish with applause annotations, indicating a desire to lead the public rather than follow it.

Scholars who argue that religious faith played the greatest role in the annexation decision tend to cite an account of divine intervention as a central piece of evidence.<sup>176</sup> McKinley, as the story goes, told a visiting Methodist delegation in 1899 that, night after night, he paced around the White House seeking guidance from above. One night, he finally got down on his knees, prayed to god, and the answer came to him.<sup>177</sup> This account relies on a single, flimsy piece of evidence: a recording of that 1899 meeting with McKinley that did not appear in print until years later, by an individual who had an interest in promoting religion as a decisive factor. Scholarship tends to cite little else to corroborate that individual's story.<sup>178</sup> Scholarship is on firmer ground in arguing, at a more general level, that religious values were important to McKinley. But *how* religion might have influenced McKinley's annexation preference is left to speculation. From my reading, religious values do not provide straightforward answers. One of McKinley's closest religious associates, Archbishop John Ireland, for instance, made a direct and forceful appeal to McKinley *against* annexation during the late summer of 1898, as McKinley was gathering intelligence.<sup>179</sup> It is more likely that McKinley's religious values, like all of his values, contributed to his civilizational ideology, and in that way affected his judgment.

The gender politics explanation argues that a political concern about manhood led McKinley to annex the Philippines. Regrettably, the primary work in

---

175. May, *Imperial Democracy*, 255–259. See also: *Speeches and Addresses 1897–1900*, 84–156.

176. Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 156–159.

177. *Ibid.*, 156.

178. For refutations of that account, see Smith, "A Question from Which We Could Not Escape," 364; Gould, *The Spanish-American War*, 108–109.

179. John Ireland to McKinley, July 30, 1898, box 56, GBC papers.

this line of argument does not deeply engage McKinley's sense of manhood and focuses excessively on the "jingo," who were not McKinley's closest foreign policy advisers and who had a different sense of manhood than did McKinley.<sup>180</sup> McKinley's manhood was an important part of his identity, but it was far more complicated than any published work has uncovered, and it did not singularly point toward a quest to annex the Philippines.<sup>181</sup> Further, there is very little evidence that McKinley himself worried about public perceptions of his manhood and annexed the Philippines in response to such political attacks.

In one sense, the prevailing gender politics argument and the imperialist conspirators argument (that a nexus of annexationists influenced McKinley's decision) suffer from the same weakness: they do not directly account for McKinley's mindset in explaining the Philippines annexation. Instead, they tend to impute the beliefs of others to the president, overlooking his personal opinions. Partly, this misreading occurs because McKinley has proven to be an extraordinarily difficult historical figure to understand, given his secretive style of diplomacy and the dearth of records that he left behind. Historian Ernest May called McKinley, "one of the most enigmatic figures ever to occupy the White House."<sup>182</sup> Arguments about McKinley's motives, another lamented, "ultimately must be based on conjecture."<sup>183</sup> Consequently, for decades scholars have exaggerated the effects of other prominent officials on McKinley's decisions, especially those of Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Alfred T. Mahan.<sup>184</sup> But Roosevelt was a subcabinet official who left the administration in April 1898, Lodge was not a part of McKinley's inner circle at the time, and neither was Mahan (nor did Mahan, via the Naval War Board, advocate full annexation). Each of these arguments has elements that greatly enrich our understanding of the times. But they insufficiently capture the complexities of McKinley's decision-making during 1898, such as McKinley's initial uncertainty, his information-gathering, his private framing of the problem, and, especially, intelligence from his closest advisers.

In contrast, some scholars offer a more thorough examination of the contin-

---

180. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 133–179.

181. Nick Kapur provides a detailed study of McKinley's "manly self-restraint," but inexplicably neglects to engage (or even cite) Kristin L. Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood*. Kapur, "William McKinley's Values."

182. May, *Imperial Democracy*, 112.

183. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 105.

184. See, for example, Pratt, "The 'Large Policy' of 1898," 219–242.

gent factors and processes that led to McKinley's annexation decision.<sup>185</sup> The most detailed and comprehensive of these is Philip Zelikow's 2017 article, which surpasses prior treatments in its archival breadth and depth.<sup>186</sup> My account aims to build on this microhistorical approach by bridging those detailed studies of annexation and the larger ideas driving McKinley's thinking. Why did McKinley believe that the Philippines' future would most likely include chaos and war unless the United States annexed this archipelago? And more importantly, why would McKinley suddenly believe any of that mattered to the United States, the California coast being situated so far away? These are the open questions in the historical literature that this article aims to answer.

### Conclusion

October 28, 1898—the day that McKinley ordered the annexation of the Philippines—was one of the most significant days in U.S. history. Not only was that annexation the United States' largest outside its hemisphere, but it also initiated the Philippine-American War, America's longest overseas war until World War II. Largely as a result of disease and starvation in U.S. concentration camps, roughly 200,000 Filipino civilians died in that conflict.<sup>187</sup> Millions more suffered.

McKinley's decision had many other long-term consequences. Annexation instantly made the United States a regional power in Asia for the first time. Sustaining and defending a far-flung colony in the Pacific, furthermore, demanded an expansion of the U.S. military, which had been limited in size by statute until the War of 1898. Concurrently, annexation reshaped the United States' relationship with the Pacific Ocean. Once a source of security, the Pacific Ocean became a source of vulnerability, by drawing the United States into a global imperial competition a hemisphere away. This affected U.S. interest and activity in Asia. That U.S. forces and assets were stationed nearby in the Philippines enabled U.S. power projection elsewhere on the continent.<sup>188</sup>

---

185. Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?"; Smith, "A Question from Which We Could Not Escape,"; Coletta, "The Peace Negotiations." Coletta focuses more on the peace negotiations but includes a wealth of information about McKinley.

186. Zelikow, "Why Did America Cross the Pacific?"

187. Linn, *The Philippine War*, ix, 262–263, 279, 327–328.

188. Woodrow Wilson, for instance, drew on U.S. troops in the Philippines when he intervened in the Russian Civil War.

Second, annexation turned U.S. territory into a potential target, heightening the sensitivity to regional security threats.<sup>189</sup> McKinley's successor, Roosevelt, admitted to William Howard Taft in 1907, "The Philippines form our heel of Achilles. They are all that makes the present situation with Japan dangerous."<sup>190</sup> In today's political environment, the importance of Pacific affairs to the United States is a given, but in 1898 it was a debate. McKinley's decision changed the course of U.S. relations in Asia; his order turned China into the United States' next-door neighbor.

This article has argued that three beliefs coalesced and interacted to produce McKinley's decision. First, especially after his autumn 1898 meetings with General Greene, McKinley believed that a power vacuum would lead to a great power war following a U.S. departure from all or part of the islands. He wanted to avoid that. Second, he believed that U.S. governance would forestall that outcome. Both of these beliefs were premised on his ideology of civilization and the intelligence that he collected over August and September 1898. To act, however, McKinley also had to care. Last, he believed that the Philippines mattered to U.S. interests because he already felt ownership over the Philippines. That feeling of ownership produced the endowment effect, leading McKinley to overvalue the Philippines. Not only did McKinley seek to solve the problem that the original act of intervention created in the first place, but he also *valued* solving that problem more because of the intervention.

The counterintuitive idea that McKinley valued the Philippines primarily because U.S. forces were already there captures the self-entangling essence of the meddler's trap. National interests may often drive a military presence abroad. But McKinley's decision illustrates that a military presence abroad can also drive national interests.

McKinley's motivations can be easily reimagined in another era. The exact political circumstances of 1898 and McKinley's ideology of civilization may have been anchored to his time, but the avoidance of power vacuums, belief in the need to develop governance structures, and feelings of ownership are not. The meddler's trap is a broader phenomenon. As President Barack Obama admits in his memoirs, he felt that the simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were inheritances. Endowments. "These were my wars now," he

---

189. See: Mukharji, "The Psychology of Stickiness."

190. Theodore Roosevelt to William H. Taft, August 21, 1907, in Elting Elmore Morison et al., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt: The Big Stick, 1905–1909*, vol. 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), 4413.



recalls feeling.<sup>191</sup> Early in his presidency, in a meeting in the White House Situation Room, Obama reportedly noted a desire to avoid abandoning Afghanistan.<sup>192</sup> Even the U.S. military presence in Iraq, which Obama had opposed, inflated Obama's sense of national interest, making leaving more difficult. "As firmly as I had opposed the original decision to invade," he wrote, when he was considering a plan to withdraw U.S. forces later than he had proposed during the presidential campaign, "I believed America now had both a strategic and humanitarian interest in Iraq's stability. . . . It made sense to use the presence of residual forces as a kind of insurance policy against a return to chaos."<sup>193</sup>

Needless to say, many other factors explain the longevity of these wars.<sup>194</sup> The point is not that the meddler's trap comprehensively explains why wars endure. Rather, it is that *any* intervention, however justified in the first instance, runs some risk of generating unintended consequences and inflating perceptions of national interest, ensnaring leaders to dig in. The meddler's trap offers a framework for understanding what motivates that phenomenon, and how it plays out in practice.

The meddler's trap may help not only scholars make sense of the past but also decision-makers avoid costly choices that appear to (but do not) materially advance U.S. national interests. Few historians in one hundred years will wonder why the United States did *not* stay longer in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Vietnam. Instead, it will appear bizarre that leaders could not have just let go earlier, much like it appears bizarre today that McKinley felt he *had* to annex the Philippines after U.S. victory in the War of 1898. But he did, and the consequences were significant.

In that way, scholarship has drawn the wrong lessons from McKinley's decision to annex the Philippines. Grouping McKinley with the jingoes, as many have done, confuses an imperialist outcome with imperialist motivations. For most observers, it is more straightforward to critique the expansionist attitudes of McKinley's contemporaries, such as Roosevelt, Lodge, and Albert

---

191. Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020), 314.

192. Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 401.

193. Obama, *A Promised Land*, 315. Of course, Barack Obama may have felt a moral obligation to keep U.S. troops in Iraq longer. But he distinguished between a humanitarian interest and a strategic interest, which indicates that he felt more than a moral obligation.

194. Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

Beveridge. What is more difficult to grasp with McKinley—and far more uncomfortable—is how mundane his motivations seemed to be, when taken in the context of the times, and how they translated into imperial policies with devastating consequences. It is that element of McKinley’s leadership that should most shock the conscience and teach us the value of prudence and humility about U.S. power in the world.

Why is it so hard to let go? One answer: grabbing on in the first place.