

# William McKinley and the Rhetorical Presidency

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*William McKinley's important role in the development of the rhetorical presidency has been underappreciated. Based on his speeches during a fall 1898 tour and contemporaneous newspaper reports, this article argues that McKinley discussed controversial policy issues, attempted to sway public opinion, and engaged in partisan campaigning. These findings offer new evidence that contradicts Jeffrey K. Tulis's claim that chief executives avoided such activity until Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—embracing Progressive ideology—transformed the presidency into a more visible and popular institution rooted in public speaking. McKinley's rhetorical behavior is not fatal to Tulis's thesis, but it does suggest that McKinley belongs in the "middle way" category.*

The rise of the "rhetorical presidency" in the early 1900s is widely seen as a pivotal development of that office. According to the original rhetorical presidency theory, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson diverged from the traditional mode of presidential leadership and guided the institution in a starkly different, more visible, and popular direction rooted in public speaking. While Roosevelt and Wilson are certainly worthy of the attention they have received in transforming the office, William McKinley's status as a key player in the development of the rhetorical presidency has been overlooked. Jeffrey K. Tulis, the rhetorical presidency's standard-bearer, relegated McKinley to an unremarkable position emblematic of the nineteenth-century chief executive (1987, 87). Mel Laracey has employed evidence from an 1899 speaking tour to argue that Tulis's treatment of McKinley is wrong (2002, 134). While Tulis admits to making a mistake on certain points concerning McKinley, he maintains that, on the whole, McKinley's rhetoric still failed to meet modern rhetorical standards (2007, 487-88).

This article analyzes a set of speeches from the fall of 1898 that both Tulis and Laracey overlook. This new evidence reinforces Laracey's (2002) assertions regarding

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McKinley's policy rhetoric, demonstrates that such speech was not limited to a single tour, and casts further doubt on Tulis's (1987, 2007, 2008) treatment of McKinley. It also introduces a new, partisan aspect of his rhetoric. President McKinley's rhetoric during, and press coverage of, his speaking tour following the Spanish-American War and just ahead of the 1898 midterm election showcases a president immersed in the kind of popular leadership that became customary in the twentieth century—specifically, partisan campaigning and attempting to sway public opinion on a policy issue. Therefore, McKinley deserves a place alongside his two more heralded, Progressive successors as a central figure in the development of the rhetorical presidency.

### The Rhetorical Presidency Canon

Initially developed in the 1980s, the rhetorical presidency scholarship is central to the study of America's executive branch, as is evident in even a brief review of its vast literature (e.g., Ceaser et al. 1982; Dorsey 2002; Ellis 1998b; Garsten 2007; Lim 2002, 2008; Medhurst 1996; Mellow 2007; Rubenstein 2007; Sheingate 2007). The original thesis is rooted in the idea that the presidency underwent a key developmental shift during the Progressive Era.<sup>1</sup> Tulis's landmark work distinguishes between the "old way" and the "new way" of presidential speech. "Since the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson," Tulis asserts, "popular or mass rhetoric has become a principle tool of presidential governance" (1987, 4). "New way" presidents engage in practices that were once taboo: speaking directly to the people instead of Congress, giving more speeches and fewer written messages, addressing public policy issues, and routinely engaging in partisan politics (e.g., campaigning). This shift is important because popular rhetoric poses a dilemma for constitutional governance. Public appeals run the risk of undercutting the constitutionally deliberative function of the government, particularly Congress, and allow public opinion to become the source of presidential authority (Tulis 2007, 482-83).

This model runs counter to the founders' intentions. While the Articles of Confederation aptly demonstrated the need for executive power, the founders recognized its inherent danger. Alexander Hamilton's inaugural essay in *The Federalist* highlighted the concern:

[A] dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government. History will teach us that the former has been found a much more certain road to the introduction of despotism than the latter, and that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants. (1961, 3)

1. The rhetorical presidency scholarship is based in the political science discipline, but it is connected to and often overlaps with the larger, interdisciplinary "modern presidency" literature (e.g., Gould 2003; Greenstein 1988; Milkis 1993; Nichols 1994).

Therefore, the founders were wary of popular leadership based on public opinion and thought that excessive passionate appeals to the American people would result in the presidency being overly reliant on the mob's fickle and often ill-informed views. Again in the words of Hamilton, "The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and, however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right" (Lodge 1904, 401). Thus, rhetoric tailored to the public risked mob rule and threatened the president's ability to deliberate (Ceaser 1979, 2007; Tulis 1987).

To ward off democracy's tendency toward demagoguery, the founders sought to establish two important statesman-like norms of behavior. One important way for presidents to avoid becoming demagogues was to avoid speaking directly to the people about policy matters (Ceaser 1979, 2007; Tulis 1987). George Washington codified this norm by quite pointedly refusing to propose legislation to the Congress, going no further than generic support for a Bill of Rights. Therefore, Tulis argues, presidential rhetoric was restrained in the nineteenth century. Presidents rarely addressed policy matters, and when they did, their statements were conveyed directly to Congress, often in writing (1987, 46). Rhetoric delivered to the public was general, focused on broad constitutional principles, and lacked policy specificity (47).

Establishing a presidency above partisanship and preserving the office's unique independence in American government—what Thomas Jefferson called a "view of the whole ground"—was equally central to the founders' vision (Ellis and Dedrick 2000; Ellis and Walker 2007; Ketcham 1984; Tulis 1987).<sup>2</sup> Most White House occupants valued the appearance of being above partisanship and focused their public speech on unifying themes. In election seasons, presidents eager for a second term and those desperate to win the office operated at a distance from the public and maintained a carefully orchestrated appearance of disinterest in their own personal political advancement. Presidents seeking reelection did not campaign on their own behalf, and speeches were seen as inappropriate. As Tulis notes, "By feigning disinterest, candidates exemplified a public teaching that political campaigns were beneath the dignity of men suited for governance, that honor attended more important activities than campaigns" (1987, 183). Throughout this era, presidential behavior emphasized the need for deliberation without emotion (Tulis 1987, 61-93).

According to Tulis, Andrew Johnson was the only exception to the "old way" orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> And this unusual president's "exceptional behavior supports the interpretation of the 'rule' of nineteenth-century doctrine" (1987, 88). Among other things, Johnson went on a three-week speaking tour to promote his Reconstruction plan and, in addition to this policy advocacy, directly appealed for public support and attacked Congress. The tour and the president's belligerent approach backfired, leading to his impeachment and near removal from office. Johnson's debacle only solidified the "old

2. In practice, Jefferson's presidency did not always live up to his theoretical ambitions for the office. Much of Jefferson's power was exercised through his leadership of the Democratic-Republican Party.

3. As is discussed later (see "Reconsidering the Rhetorical Presidency"), some scholars have argued that Tulis fails to acknowledge that other presidents such as Grover Cleveland (Hoffman 2002) and Zachary Taylor (Ellis and Walker 2007) also broke away from "old way" constraints.

way” rhetorical norms for his successors (Tulis 1987, 88). Before and for several decades after his troubled administration, presidents were firmly rooted in the “old way.”

Tulis argues that presidential rhetoric changed under the Progressives, Roosevelt and Wilson. TR’s “middle way” was characterized by paying lip service to the founders’ provincial sentiments while ignoring some of the established behavioral norms they inculcated. Most unseemly were Roosevelt’s overt “swings around the circle,” in which he openly went “over the heads” of Congress to campaign for passage of the Hepburn Act, a key pillar of his “Square Deal.” Notably, though, TR ceased his advocacy once Congress began deliberating the bill (Tulis 1987, 95-116).

Any such relics of the “old way” were dispatched under Wilson and the full realization of the rhetorical presidency, the core features of which endure to this day.<sup>4</sup> Under the “new way,” the need for presidential-led energy and action in government was seen as outweighing the risks associated with popular leadership and demagoguery. Now it is taken for granted that the president is the only true representative of the people. As such, presidential speeches are directed toward the public rather than Congress, and presidents are expected to set out their own political agendas. Failure to do so would now be seen as a major deficiency and a weakness in leadership. In this era of the rhetorical presidency, the ability to communicate effectively with the citizenry is critical (Tulis 1987, 117-44).

Many of Tulis’s assertions have been challenged by other rhetorical presidency scholars. Critics have argued that Tulis inaccurately characterized several nineteenth-century presidents. Richard Ellis’s (2008) work, for instance, demonstrates that presidents including James Monroe (32-39), Martin Van Buren (65-69), and Zachary Taylor (74-82; see also Ellis and Walker 2007; Laracey 2002, 91-93) exhibited “new way” behaviors at times. Karen S. Hoffman (2002) makes a similar case on behalf of Grover Cleveland. Finally, Laracey (2002) offers perhaps the strongest critique, arguing that many nineteenth-century presidents went public.

### McKinley: An “Old Way” President?

William McKinley is not a central figure in the rhetorical presidency literature. For decades, the general perception—exemplified by his “front porch” campaigns—has been that he was a passive candidate and president who avoided public speaking (e.g., Coletta 1964, 167). But recent scholarship has argued convincingly that, as a candidate, McKinley was far from unengaged (Crenson and Ginsberg 2007; Harpine 2005; Troy 1996, 105-6). This important revision suggests that the popular image of McKinley as an unengaged president might also warrant reconsideration.

Elected in 1896 and again in 1900, the Ohio Republican served until his assassination in 1901 elevated Roosevelt to the White House. In Tulis’s (1987) book, McKinley is briefly mentioned three times and then receives half a paragraph of attention. All of

4. Many of the “new way” changes in the presidency are outgrowths of Wilson’s constitutional thought (1885, 1908).

these statements serve to place him firmly and unremarkably in the “old way” camp. Initially, McKinley is likened to Franklin Pierce as a president who “pushed against clearly perceived limits [but] nevertheless . . . shared a core fidelity to the legitimate constraints of nineteenth-century constitutional theory” (61). Later, he is lumped together with Rutherford B. Hayes and Benjamin Harrison as post–Civil War presidents who frequently appeared in public. Tulis acknowledges “that there were important developments or changes within the century. . . . Nevertheless, the activity of these presidents was fundamentally different from twentieth-century practice after Woodrow Wilson” (65). Tulis’s only multisentence treatment of McKinley comes in half a paragraph that, despite its brevity, is plagued by misstatements. Summarizing McKinley’s rhetorical approach, Tulis writes,

There is no speech that even alludes to the Spanish-American War, the sinking of the *Maine*, the problem of “Jim Crow” laws, or United States policy toward the Philippines, all major issues faced by McKinley. Indeed, much of McKinley’s rhetoric was characteristic of the century as a whole: expressions of greeting, inculcations of patriotic sentiment, attempts at building “harmony” among the regions of the country, and very general, principled statements of policy, usually expressed in terms of the policy’s consistency with that president’s understanding of republicanism. (87)

In fact, McKinley made many speeches that did much more than merely allude to the Spanish-American War and policy toward the Philippines.

Gerald Gamm and Renèe M. Smith (1998) codify Tulis’s brief outline of McKinley’s rhetoric but ultimately draw the same conclusion. In an effort to determine whether Tulis’s identification of Wilson as the key transformative figure in developing the rhetorical presidency is warranted, they examine several presidents’ speaking tours, including McKinley’s in 1897 and early 1898. Gamm and Smith note that McKinley occasionally and unenthusiastically spoke about partisan matters or policy issues, citing one indirect comment about the currency debate (104). They conclude that, like Grover Cleveland before him, McKinley experimented minimally with policy-oriented speech while also mentioning his relatively close working relationship with the press corps (93, 96-97). In these specific and limited respects, then, Gamm and Smith see McKinley as a transitional president (102, 104). But despite these “small, hesitant steps” toward a couple of facets of what became the “new way,” McKinley “generally continued to conform to long-established patterns of presidential behavior” (95, 97). These conclusions flow from Gamm and Smith’s random sample of newspaper articles covering nine days of the McKinley presidency (111). While such a methodology is effective for many purposes, it runs the risk of missing key evidence, particularly when a presidency of more than four years is reduced to less than 10 days. That is precisely what happened in this instance: those critical periods in which McKinley was giving partisan and policy speeches—and the press was covering them—simply were not included in Gamm and Smith’s study (Laracey 2002, 234).

Laracey refines McKinley’s place in the rhetorical presidency pantheon, accurately arguing that Tulis’s characterization is “highly inaccurate” (2002, 134). Noting that McKinley spoke frequently about policy initiatives, Laracey catalogs and classifies a series

of speeches the president delivered on tour in late 1899 that contained references to the Spanish-American War and the Philippines (136-37, 193-96). Laracey concludes that “[s]omehow, William McKinley’s intensive speechmaking on the most critical public policy issues of his time has escaped the notice of presidential scholars. This is unfortunate, because McKinley’s is a crucial presidency in the history of going public” (138).

In light of Laracey’s (2002) critique, Tulis has admitted that he made a “genuine error” with regard to McKinley. Yet Tulis is unwilling to concede Laracey’s fundamental points about presidential rhetoric in general, and that of McKinley in particular. Tulis cites Gamm and Smith, noting that they “found the same overall pattern” he did with regard to McKinley (2007, 488), and suggests that only after Laracey “scoured the nineteenth century for evidence” were any minor mistakes unearthed (487). The mistakes were minor because they ultimately served to demonstrate that McKinley merely “pushed against the boundaries of the nineteenth-century constitutional order” (487). Tulis notes that in Laracey’s evidence, McKinley failed to explicitly state the fact “that a treaty on that issue was pending business in the Senate, as Woodrow Wilson later did” (2008, 30). Additionally, Tulis reasserts that “Teddy Roosevelt began the modern practice of presidential campaigning for legislative policy initiatives” (2007, 488).

Gamm and Smith (1998) and Laracey (2002) are correct to suggest that the shift from the “old way” to the “new way” was more gradual than Tulis portrays and that McKinley was a player in that transformation. But by focusing on McKinley’s speaking tours in 1897 through early 1898 and in 1899, respectively, they overlook more persuasive evidence that encapsulated more of the characteristics associated with the rhetorical presidency.

McKinley’s “new way” rhetoric actually began earlier than previously noted. In late 1898, in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War and during the run-up to that year’s midterm election, McKinley delivered numerous speeches on a Midwest swing that centered on the war and the policy dispute over the Philippines. Gamm and Smith do not discuss this tour, and Laracey only gives it a passing mention (2002, 136). Laracey likely chose to focus on McKinley’s later statements because his rhetoric was more clear at that time. Indeed, by 1899, McKinley had formally announced his position on the Philippines and, as Laracey documents, spoke frequently about his desire to acquire the islands. However, Laracey’s contention that McKinley only “entered the controversy” and “began the defense” of his position in February 1899 is inaccurate. It was clear during his fall 1898 tour that McKinley wanted to retain the Philippines and was attempting to sway public opinion to that end. Additionally, the fall 1898 tour is important because as the tour wore on, McKinley spoke more frequently about the Philippines and with increasing resolve. This tour, then, was a key turning point in McKinley’s rhetoric regarding Philippines policy. Finally, the fall 1898 tour is important because it was also a thinly veiled campaign swing for McKinley’s fellow Republicans—another aspect of “new way” presidential rhetoric that Laracey’s work does not address. In short, this speaking tour—unlike those that Gamm and Smith and Laracey highlight—featured McKinley engaging in partisan campaign appeals with reference to policy, which Tulis says that “old way” politicians avoided.

## McKinley's Fall 1898 Speaking Tour

President McKinley's fall 1898 tour included 57 speeches in six states and took place from October 14 to 24, less than nine weeks after fighting in the Spanish-American War ended and before the formal peace treaty was signed in December. In addition to highlighting the successful military campaign, McKinley focused on a controversial policy issue that emerged in the conflict's aftermath: the status of the Philippines. While Cuba was the war's primary theater, an American fleet was also sent to challenge Spain's colonial holdings in the Philippines. When the Spanish forces surrendered and Commodore George Dewey took control of the archipelago, McKinley had to decide whether to annex the islands, grant Filipinos their independence, or work out a governing solution with the European powers.<sup>5</sup> The domestic debate surrounding this policy issue was heated (Gould 1982). The timing of McKinley's tour was also critically important. Occurring in the weeks leading up to the 1898 midterm elections, the president was effectively campaigning for GOP candidates. Simply put, McKinley's speeches, contemporaneous media reports, and historians indicate that McKinley used the bully pulpit to discuss policy issues, sway public opinion, and engage in partisan campaigning.

### Policy Advocacy

McKinley clearly addressed the question of the Philippines and sought to sway public opinion. Prior to the tour, McKinley had not announced his intentions regarding the Philippines, but over the course of the swing, he advocated for expansionism and annexation. During nearly every speech on the tour, he alluded to the policy decision he faced. In Omaha, Nebraska, paraphrasing his remarks at several earlier stops, McKinley stated, "We did not seek war. To avoid it . . . was our constant prayer. The war was no more invited by us than were the questions which are laid at our door by its results" (1898d, 105).

In addition to this constant refrain, McKinley's rhetoric regarding America's place in the world was markedly different than it had been prior to or during the war. He adopted the language of manifest destiny and expansionism, talking openly about new settlements and territory and alluding to the role of God. "That hostilities have ceased upon terms so satisfactory to the people of the United States," McKinley said in Cedar Rapids, "calls forth sentiments of gratitude to divine Providence for those favors which he has manifested unto us" (1898a, 87). America's inevitable expansion was also alluded to in Clinton, Iowa. McKinley said that the nation has "the courage of destiny." Impressed by the way the country had united in support of the war, McKinley urged his audience to "continue to act together until the fruits of our war shall be embodied in solemn and permanent settlements" (1898b, 85).

McKinley's attempts to sway public opinion were well received by large crowds. Such ostensible success led to a rhetorical style that was less reserved and marked by

5. There is an extensive debate among historians regarding this decision and whether McKinley was an eager or reluctant expansionist and imperialist. For an overview of this literature, see Smith (1993).

increasingly explicit statements regarding the Philippines. On the third day, he specifically mentioned the new territory that had come to the United States and, for the first time, hinted that the United States might retain the Philippines. At a stop in Chariton, Iowa, he said, "Territory sometimes comes to us when we go to war in a holy cause, and whenever it does that banner of liberty will float over it and bring, I trust, blessings and benefits to all the people" (1898e, 114). Later that same day in Illinois, he again alluded to possible annexation: "The army and the navy from Manila to Santiago have nobly performed their duty. It is left for the citizens of this country to do theirs. May God give us the wisdom to perform our part with fidelity, not only to our own interests, but to the interests of those who, by the fortunes of war, are brought within the radius of our influence" (1898f, 116). The following passage from his Chicago speech offers an extended example of McKinley arguing for expansionism and annexing the Philippines:

The war has put upon the nation grave responsibilities. Their extent was not anticipated, and could not have been well foreseen. We cannot escape the obligations of victory. We cannot avoid the serious questions which have been brought home to us by the achievements of our arms on land and sea. . . . Accepting war for humanity's sake, we must accept all obligations which the war in duty and honor imposed upon us. . . . The war with Spain was undertaken, not that the United States should increase its territory, but that oppression at our very doors should be stopped. This noble sentiment must continue to animate us, and we must give to the world the full demonstration of the sincerity of our purpose. . . . Looking backward, we can see how the hand of destiny builded for us and assigned us tasks whose full meaning was not apprehended even by the wisest statesmen of their times. Our colonial ancestors did not enter upon their war originally for independence. Abraham Lincoln did not start out to free the slaves, but to save the Union. The war with Spain was not of our seeking, and some of its consequences may not be to our liking. . . . The progress of a nation can alone prevent degeneration. . . . There must be a constant movement toward a higher and nobler civilization, a civilization that shall make its conquests without resort to war, and achieve its greatest victories pursuing the art of peace. (1898g, 133-35)

Such comments were characteristic of the tour. At Cedar Rapids, McKinley said, "We can accept no terms of peace which shall not be in the interest of humanity" (1898a, 87). This quote is telling because one of the primary arguments for annexation was that it supposedly was in the best interest of the Filipinos, who were seen by many as unchristian savages. At another stop, the president said, "We do not want to shirk a single responsibility that has been put upon us by the results of the war" (1898c, 90-91). Again, this "responsibility" refers to what many saw at the time as a humanitarian obligation to save and civilize the Filipinos. It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate the legitimacy of such contentions. What is important here is that this humanitarian argument was prominent and taken seriously at the time (Gould 1982; Smith 1993).

Unquestionably, McKinley was addressing a key policy issue, letting his views be known, and attempting to sway public opinion in a manner that was highly unusual at the time. As historian Lewis L. Gould notes,

[T]his speaking tour is usually depicted as the time when a pliable chief executive heard the voice of the people on the subject of expansion and returned to Washington with his doubts removed and his commitment to the acquisition of the Asian islands crystallized. The

opposite was true. . . . Outside the precise political context of October 1898, the speeches seem stuffed with generalities. When read in tandem with the epochal events of that year, they become masterful examples of how an adroit leader can set the terms of a public discussion in his own favor. (1982, 104)

Contemporaneous accounts also highlighted McKinley's focus on Philippines policy. One newspaper noted that "[a]s the train moved eastward, the tenor of the President's speeches to the various crowds seemed to center more and more on the question of the foreign policy of the government, and, judging by the applause of his auditors, they were largely in accord with his sentiments" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1898b, 3). Charles Emory Smith, one of the era's prominent journalists, also recognized that McKinley was pointedly trying to lead public opinion regarding the Philippines and expansionism: "He led public sentiment quite as much as public sentiment led him, and the popular manifestations on that journey were in response to the keynotes he struck" (1902, 7).

The common misperception to which Gould refers may have developed because McKinley's tour was so unusual. It also may explain why Tulis (1987) overlooks McKinley's role in the development of the rhetorical presidency. In any event, the president's fall 1898 speaking tour involved discussions of a major policy issue and attempts to sway public opinion. McKinley's rhetoric was not as blunt and straight forward as that of many twentieth-century presidents, but his message was clear, and out of keeping with "old way" norms.

### Partisan Campaigning

McKinley also used popular support for the war and its successful outcome to advance partisan interests during the midterm election campaign. The president used the successful war as a campaign tool. The critical point is that to undertake such a trip in the final weeks of the 1898 midterm campaign was an overt act of partisan electioneering. Today, this would not be considered untoward, but at the time, party surrogates—not presidents—engaged in campaign banter. Andrew Johnson was the lone exception, and his 1866 effort to this end was a disaster (Ceaser et al. 1982, 238; Gould 1982, 95-96). Therefore, McKinley's tour was highly unusual and foreshadowed further developments in the rhetorical presidency during the Roosevelt and Wilson years.

By all accounts, the trip was a remarkable success and arguably marked the high point of the McKinley presidency. The crowds he encountered were consistently larger than expected and unusually unified in their support of the president and the war. One newspaper report offered a glimpse of the early portion of the trip: "At every station at which the Presidential train stopped on its way to Omaha the crowds were so dense that hundreds could not even gain a glimpse of the President" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1898a, 2). Upon arrival in Omaha, McKinley was greeted by a typical audience:

President McKinley probably never received a more enthusiastic greeting than that which awaited him at the Exposition grounds. By far the greatest crowd in the history of the fair—so large a crowd that its numbers are almost impossible to estimate—thronged about

the platform from which the President made his address. Hardly a sentence was spoken by him which did not evoke from the people cheer upon cheer . . . it was fully five minutes before the subsiding of the applause permitted the President to begin speaking. (*New York Tribune* 1898a, 1)

The rest of the tour was marked by similarly receptive audiences. “In Western Iowa the crowds were large and clamorous at every point, but when the eastern part of the State was reached their magnitude seemed to swell at every stopping place” (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1898b, 1). Even bad weather could not suppress turnout. The *New York Times*’s account of McKinley’s speech in Columbus, Ohio, notes that “notwithstanding the heavy downpour of rain an immense crowd had assembled at the depot, and the building resounded with cheers” and further documents that the president’s address was “frequently interrupted by enthusiastic applause” (1898b, 1). Likewise, in Indianapolis, “all of the city itself turned out to give him welcome” (*New York Times* 1898c, 1).

The successful war became the tour’s defining theme. McKinley’s initial speeches included the war as one of several discussion points. Encouraged by the enthusiastic response to mentions of the war at the beginning of the tour, McKinley’s comments—as well as those of the people joining him onstage—became increasingly focused on it and the issues that emanated from its conclusion. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on one event in Chicago that captured the spirit of the tour: “Rev. Dr. Thomas P. Hodnett, a Catholic clergyman, caught the fancy and applause of the audience by repeated references to Dewey, [other Spanish-American War luminaries], and the Rough Riders, and when he mentioned President McKinley by name the people became so demonstrative that the President was compelled to rise in his box and bow his acknowledgments” (1898c, 1).

While McKinley never directly asked people to vote Republican, his speaking tour was, in part, a direct effort to bolster GOP prospects ahead of the election. The *New York Times*, for instance, cited the obvious partisan activity:

It is a long time since the assistance of a President in a political campaign was so candidly admitted to be necessary as it is now by the Republican Party managers here. They acknowledge that the assistance of President McKinley is essential to the stimulation of the voters of the country. Since the President’s trip across Iowa and back was reported to have stirred up the hitherto languid voters of that State, and his appearance in Nebraska was asserted to have had a decidedly favorable effect upon the prospects of the Republicans there, every state that is affected by the common “off year” apathy has been making itself heard in requests that Mr. McKinley pay it a visit, and thus help out the cause. (1898a, 1)

*The Literary Digest* also saw “the president’s tour as clever political campaigning” (1898a, 510). In addition, the fact that the tour was undertaken at all so close to an election was audacious. Nineteenth-century presidents did not typically participate in this kind of preelection activity. Tulis notes that “Wilson was the first victorious presidential candidate to have engaged in a full-scale speaking tour during the campaign” (1987, 182). While this statement is true insofar as it pertains to *presidential* campaigns, McKinley did exactly that on behalf of his party ahead of a midterm election. By today’s standards, McKinley’s tour seems mild and unremarkable, but at the time, this was an example of blatant and highly unconventional electioneering.

McKinley's partisan efforts on this tour also stand out because they seem to have been successful. The GOP did better than expected in the election. After the ballots were counted, the GOP had picked up seven U.S. Senate seats and lost 21 House seats (much better than average for the incumbent party). At this time, U.S. senators were indirectly elected by state legislatures. Nonetheless, the literature concludes that U.S. Senate elections were still representative of public opinion (Riker 1955; Rothman 1966; Stewart 1992).<sup>6</sup> Just weeks after the first Tuesday in November when state legislative elections were held, the newly elected legislators met to select their U.S. senator. Thus, there was no significant time lag—public opinion was registered in state-level elections, and the winners of those contests promptly chose their U.S. senator. Furthermore, as Rothman notes, “[c]onstituents demanded that a candidate for the legislature declare his allegiances [for a U.S. Senate candidate] well in advance, and state laws often compelled him to respect the pledge. Invariably the Washington contest entered every election district” (1966, 160-61).

Prior to the election, Republicans were expected to fare much worse (Gould 1982, 105-6; Stanley and Niemi 2003, 38).<sup>7</sup> Many press accounts highlighted what were widely seen as positive midterm results for the White House—controlling Republicans. For instance, *The Free Press*, a Democratic paper in Detroit, noted that “[f]or an ‘off year’ election the Republicans appear to have come through yesterday’s ordeal very well indeed. . . . This result in favor of the party in power at a congressional election immediately following a Presidential campaign is rather unusual, and on this account will be all the more gratifying to the Administration, by whom it will naturally be taken as a splendid indorsement” (*Literary Digest* 1898b, 598). Indeed, McKinley’s tour likely helped the GOP cause. Gould contends that “the trip immediately made a favorable impact upon Republican fortunes in the campaign” (1982, 105). This election result, then, is similar to others, such as 2002, in which a governing party gained an advantage because of military events or a national security crisis that was used by the president on the campaign trail (Jacobson 2003). As Secretary of State John Hay told McKinley after the election, “You have pulled us through with your own strength” (Gould 1982, 105).

## Reconsidering the Rhetorical Presidency

The findings presented in this article are in keeping with other recent work that has questioned aspects of the rhetorical presidency thesis. Two critiques have emerged. First, quantitative or qualitative overviews have suggested a more gradual transformation than Tulis’s dichotomy allows (Bimes 2007; Ellis 1998a; Korzi 2004; Laracey 2002, 2007; Teten 2007). A second mode of critique—like that presented here—has been to employ case studies to demonstrate that nineteenth-century presidents other than Andrew Johnson appear to have broken from “old way” constraints (Ellis and Walker 2007; Hoffman 2002). For some, this two-pronged critique merely “raises broader questions

6. For some partial caveats to this conventional understanding, see Schiller and Stewart (2004).

7. This seems to be the consensus view, but it is not unanimous. For another perspective, see *New York Times* (1898d, 6).

about the accuracy of Tulis's description" (Ellis and Walker 2007, 266). For others, Tulis's "demarcation weakens the intrinsic value of studying presidents," "allows scholars to dismiss many presidents who may make incredibly valuable contributions to understanding the presidency and executive communication," and "is dangerous" (Teten 2007, 680).

Tulis has persuasive answers for most of his critics. The key to his response is his assertion that "*The Rhetorical Presidency* is primarily an analysis of the meaning and significance of constitutional change," as opposed to a comprehensive account of the presidency (2007, 482). As such, it is not particularly important that a handful of early presidents exhibited occasional rhetorical innovations so long as it is still the case that nineteenth-century presidential behavior adhered more closely to the founders' view of the constitutional order than to the Wilsonian challenge (487). Tulis, for example, emphasizes that while presidents such as Monroe and Taylor occasionally mentioned policy issues, such rhetoric was "cursory," contingent on being drawn out by a particular audience, and "far more restrained than nowadays" (487). For Tulis and his supporters (e.g., Crockett 2007; DiIulio 2007; Friedman 2007; Pangle 2007; Pious 2007), then, critics are unable to upend the key claim that nineteenth-century presidential rhetoric was different than that of recent presidents.

The only problem is that this explanation fails to account for McKinley. His rhetoric greatly exceeded that of other nineteenth-century presidents. McKinley routinely made policy-oriented speeches over the course of numerous tours (Laracey 2002). These speeches were intended to influence public opinion. In addition, and as demonstrated here, McKinley was a partisan campaigner. These activities are much more in keeping with those exhibited by Roosevelt and the "middle way" than they are with the nineteenth century's "old way." This insight does not overturn Tulis's most fundamental argument, but it does suggest that McKinley, like Roosevelt and Wilson, was different from his predecessors in crucial respects.

Recognizing McKinley's important role may not refute Tulis's primary assertion, but it does weaken his implicit argument that Roosevelt's and Wilson's adoption of Progressive ideology—which emphasized a break with the founders—was at the heart of the "new way" and its potentially harmful rhetorical approach. Tulis notes that Laracey's findings concerning McKinley's policy speeches "do indeed complicate my account of the turn-of-the-century constitutional development" (2008, 30). The partisan campaigning documented in this article further complicates that account. Tulis insists that McKinley remains an "old way" president. But this rigidity seems arbitrary in light of what we now know about McKinley. It is no longer clear why McKinley should be relegated to the "old way" while Roosevelt is classified as a "middle way" president. Tulis argues that "Roosevelt's 'middle way' may have acclimated the polity to the rhetorical presidency before Wilson reconstituted the office" (2007, 486). But McKinley has a strong claim to having played that kind of an acclimating role, too. Part of the reason for Tulis's insistence on this demarcation may have to do with his claim that the emergence of the rhetorical presidency was linked to Progressivism. McKinley was certainly not a Progressive. Therefore, his rhetorical behaviors serve to undercut this aspect of Tulis's argument.

While McKinley's rhetoric does not necessarily mean that Progressivism played no role in the rise of the rhetorical presidency, it certainly suggests that there was something beyond the decisions of TR and Wilson to transpose the Progressive creed onto the presidency that was pushing toward this transformation. Various scholars have addressed other potential factors. Technological changes are said to have played a role. The development of the railroad network throughout the nineteenth century made whistle-stop tours increasingly feasible and cost-effective as the century wore on. Thus, it was easier for mid- and late nineteenth-century presidents to travel the country and interact with the American people (Ellis 2008, 137). Another factor might have been the development of the modern campaign (Ellis 1998a). In particular, the 1896 election between McKinley and William Jennings Bryan broke new ground. Bryan, rather than speaking extemporaneously, read his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention, which allowed the press to publish the speech in full based on advance copies given to reporters (Ellis 1998a, 120). Bryan also openly campaigned throughout the country in support of his own candidacy (Harpine 2005; Pollard 1947, 544). Meanwhile, McKinley also broke with tradition by focusing his acceptance speech on a campaign issue, the protective tariff (Ellis 1998a, 120). In addition, what appeared to be a detached "front porch" campaign in Canton, Ohio, belied elaborate backroom meetings and speeches tailored to reach a mass audience (Harpine 2005). The media was changing, too. The partisan press gradually declined in the late nineteenth century, giving way to the ideal of objectivity (Kaplan 2002; Laracey 2002). Finally, the changing nature of the president's relationship to his party has been identified as a factor in the rise of the rhetorical presidency (Ellis and Walker 2007; Laracey 2002; Milkis 2007). These alternative explanations for the rise of the rhetorical presidency all warrant further consideration in light of McKinley's rhetoric and the failure of the Progressive-based argument to account for it.

### Conclusion: McKinley as a "Middle Way" President

Tulis misreads and underappreciates McKinley's critical role in shaping the rhetorical presidency. His benchmark account placed McKinley squarely in the "old way" category with little discussion. Laracey (2002) presented evidence from an 1899 McKinley speaking tour that countered that assessment. In response, Tulis (2007, 2008) argued that the speaking tour Laracey examined was anomalous and that McKinley still failed to meet "new way" standards. This article has presented new evidence that reinforces Laracey's claims regarding McKinley. This new evidence demonstrates that McKinley was making policy-oriented and partisan speeches a year before Laracey claims and undermines Tulis's (2007, 2008) recent rationalization for maintaining McKinley's "old way" status.

Tulis's account of McKinley is incomplete for two reasons. First, contrary to Tulis's contention that premodern presidents' "policy rhetoric . . . [was] written, and addressed principally to Congress," (1987, 46, 27-33), McKinley did talk about policy frequently. In fact, his fall 1898 Midwest tour was marked by discussions of the Spanish-American War and attempts to sway public opinion regarding his imperial plans on the Philippines

before an official policy was declared. The evidence presented here, combined with that discovered by Laracey, makes it clear that such policy-oriented rhetoric was not limited to a single speaking tour, but rather was common. Second, Tulis argues that premodern presidents avoided taking partisan positions or doing anything that could be construed as campaigning. Yet press reports clearly indicate that McKinley's fall 1898 speaking tour served as a platform for political campaigning in support of his Republican Party in the campaign's final weeks. This is a key aspect of McKinley's rhetoric that Tulis and Laracey neglect. In sum, McKinley's actions on this tour have been overlooked in the rhetorical presidency literature by its adherents and critics alike. McKinley's presidency should be considered as an important step in the transformative "middle way" category ascribed to Theodore Roosevelt.

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