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## Playing to the Press in McKinley's Front Porch Campaign: The Early Weeks of a Nineteenth-Century Pseudo-Event

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Playing to the Press in McKinley's Front Porch Campaign:  
The Early Weeks of a Nineteenth-Century Pseudo-Event

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Playing to the Press in McKinley's Front Porch Campaign:  
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In the summer of 1896 William McKinley, Republican candidate for the Presidency of the United States, remained at home while his opponent, Nebraska's brilliant orator William Jennings Bryan, conducted a vigorous railroad campaign. Nonetheless, McKinley was not idle; he was, in fact, campaigning in a striking manner. Numerous groups from around the country visited McKinley at his home to hear him give brief speeches on behalf of his candidacy.

This paper establishes, first, that the Front Porch campaign, even in its earliest weeks, consisted of a series of artificial events staged for the media, and, second, that this feature of the campaign shaped what McKinley said and how he said it, as McKinley created the impression of identification between the voters and himself.

Daniel J. Boorstin characterizes what he calls a "pseudo-event" by four criteria: (1) the event "is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it;" (2) "It is planted primarily (not always exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced;" (3) "Its relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous;" and, (4) "Usually it is intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Boorstin 11-12; see also Nimmo 26-27). McKinley's campaign, as we shall see, met all four of these criteria.

Rhetoric establishes identifications among diverse persons, ideas, and events (Burke 19-29). McKinley somehow created, out of the awesome mass of visitors, parades, and cheering, staged purely for purposes of the campaign, a feeling that he cared about each visitor, that he

welcomed each one warmly to his home, that their interests were identified with one another's and with the Republican cause. Thus, the pseudo-events of the campaign created in the news reports and campaign documents the strong impression of a candidate who was warm and caring, who sought to bring the entire nation together. In contrast, Bryan was divisively calling his opponents "enemies" (e.g. in "Bryan's Great Speech").

In general, rhetorical critics and rhetorical historians have paid regrettably little attention to the rhetoric of the American presidents of the late nineteenth century. There appears to be an unspoken attitude that these presidents were dull and unimportant, and, indeed, that little distinguishes one of them from another. This attitude is shortsighted, in that these presidents led the nation precisely during the period when many of the nation's rhetorical and political institutions came to their modern development. As this paper makes clear, McKinley's campaign foreshadowed in its construction and in its rhetoric many of the political methods of the modern technological, mass media age.

Only a few studies have examined McKinley's public speaking, and there has been little study of the rhetoric of either of his presidential campaigns (in Trent and Friedenber 78). There have been some studies of McKinley's war rhetoric (Ivie, "William McKinley," "Vocabularies of Motive" 37-42, "Presidential Motives," 343, and "Issues of Savagery"). One important issue that traditional methods of historical criticism do not address very well is the speaker's "choice of target audience" (Hill 384-385). Boorstin's theory of the pseudo-event, on the other hand, addresses precisely that question.

Boorstin seems to assume that pseudo-events originated in the twentieth century and came to prominence only in the age of radio and television (Boorstin 12). Trent and Friedenber similarly point out how television and radio have shaped present-day Presidential campaigns. As

a result, they argue, “candidates no longer had to be dependent on extensive national speaking tours to become well-known to the public” (62). However, even in the age of broadcasting, most candidates for nationwide office embark on a campaign tour. In 1896, long before the advent of broadcasting, McKinley accomplished the same purpose as a modern candidate, and did so without making a campaign tour.

In this light, McKinley's decision to stay home in 1896 may seem anomalous. Bryan was obviously conducting a massive speaking tour. McKinley's refusal to do so even created some impression that McKinley was not campaigning against Bryan at all. Indeed, on August 9, Bryan was speaking at Davenport, Iowa, when a voice cried out, “How about Republicans?” Bryan snapped back, “I do not think any Republicans can speak” (“Mr. Bryan's Trip”). This impression surely worked to McKinley's advantage by making him seem more dignified and more self-assured than his opponent. McKinley's 1896 campaign was, however, despite these perceptions, a remarkable series of seemingly newsworthy, but utterly artificial, events staged in large part to gain attention from the press. McKinley gave his speeches in a context that included parades, flags, demonstrations, and speeches by visiting dignitaries. By spreading information about these events, the wire services and newspapers served for the Front Porch campaign the same functions that the radio and television would fulfill many years later.

A presidential candidate in 1896 could speak in person only to a small portion of the electorate, but technology could spread the candidate's words across the land in short order. Brown points out that in the 1968 Democratic National Convention, which he categorized as a pseudo-event, events were “justified in their existence primarily (if not exclusively) by virtue of being eminently reportable” (Brown 241). Much the same was true in 1896. What developed in Canton, Ohio during the summer of 1896, indeed during the entire campaign, was a carefully

organized series of staged incidents. The parades, the American flags, the demonstrations, and the speeches all became part of a media circus.

### The Effect of the Front Porch Campaign

Although Bryan's brilliant public speaking in this campaign has impressed generations of communication scholars (e.g. Ecroyd, Wood, Phillips), McKinley won the election rather handily. It is therefore ironic that scholars of rhetoric have slighted McKinley's rhetoric in this campaign.

This may be because scholars of rhetoric, enamored with Bryan and bored with McKinley, attributed Bryan's defeat entirely to the enormous financial resources that the Republican Party commanded in 1896 (see e.g. Oliver 485-486). McKinley indeed outspent Bryan's pathetically underfunded campaign (Ashby 67-68). Much of the money, however, was spent to organize his public speaking campaign and to distribute copies of speeches (Osborne, Letter, 11 August 1896; Osborne, Letter, 1 September 1896; Jones 279-283) so one must still look past the money to the campaign speeches to fully appreciate McKinley's appeal to the voting public.

Furthermore, any implication that Bryan's limited resources prevented him from conveying his message to the public is unsupportable. Bryan's railroad tours of the country garnered for his cause a tremendous amount of attention. Bryan himself boasted of estimates that he was able to deliver about 600 speeches to perhaps 4,800,000 to 5,000,000 persons during the campaign (Bryan, *The First Battle* 618). A staff of reporters and shorthand secretaries from the Associated Press and numerous newspapers accompanied Bryan's tours ("Associated Press Reports;" Bryan, *The First Battle*, 612-614). Democratic newspapers published his speeches and

described his campaign activities in detail (e.g. "Bryan Talks at Chicago;" "Bryan Back in Nebraska"). Even the Republican press generally gave Bryan good, albeit sometimes biased, coverage. A complete explanation for McKinley's victory must include the nature of the rhetoric, not just the enormous resources that his campaign exploited.

The ensuing argument shows that McKinley's campaign quickly evolved a sophisticated program of political rhetoric.

### The Importance of the Early Campaign Events

McKinley developed his rhetorical approach in speeches presented as early in the campaign as June, July, and August. Feeling his way through the early stages of the campaign with great ingenuity, McKinley drew together two seemingly unrelated issues, the gold standard and the protective tariff.

McKinley and Bryan each offered a solution to the economic depression that afflicted the economy. Bryan advocated the free coinage of silver at the fixed ratio of sixteen to one with gold. The intention of this plan was to increase the supply of money and permit farmers to pay off in inflated currency the crushing debts that they had accumulated since the Civil War. McKinley's bread-and-butter issue was the protective tariff, which he had favored during his years in Congress (Ecroyd 173; Jones 3-35).

McKinley's rhetorical task was to identify the interests of business with the ordinary industrial workers who made up a large part of the voting population. In doing so, McKinley conveyed a convincing impression that the nation's interests all hung together. During the summer, McKinley's New York campaign manager, William Osborne, wrote to McKinley on the money issue that ". . . it is the unanimous opinion of all of us here that our whole attention must

be paid to the masses—to the laboring classes. The people who have got property are all right and can take care of themselves” (Osborne, Letter, 11 Aug. 1896).

It is not entirely clear whether McKinley originally intended to campaign from his home. Even several weeks after his nomination he failed to suppress speculation that he might take to the stump (“People’s Choice”). On July 2, however, a newspaper reported, on the occasion of a visit from vice presidential candidate William Hobart, that neither Hobart nor McKinley was likely to hit the campaign trail (“Hobart Here”). On July 23, McKinley delivered three political speeches in nearby Alliance, Ohio (McKinley, “Major McKinley at Alliance;” “Speech on the Campus;” “To Alliance Workingmen”). He made, however, very few other campaign appearances outside Canton.

It is quite possible that, given the disastrous state of the economy under President Cleveland, the election of a Democrat seemed so unlikely that McKinley saw no reason to campaign at all. Perhaps he simply fell into the habit of speaking to various groups that visited him. He persisted in this practice even though numerous party officials were attempting to convince him to campaign around the country (“McKinley in the Campaign;” Herrick 64). When the Democrats nominated the anti-establishment Bryan, however, the Republicans suddenly had a fight on their hands. With his radical agrarian views, Bryan could campaign against the status quo with even more authority than McKinley could. McKinley may have had in mind to duplicate, but on a larger scale, Garfield’s 1880 campaign. Garfield stayed at home to receive visiting delegations because it was not at that time considered proper for a presidential candidate to canvass the people (Peskin 482-483; 498-500; Leech and Brown, 212-214). McKinley brought this approach to the height of enthusiasm and organization.



McKinley's friend Myron Herrick quoted him as saying during the summer that "I might just as well put up a trapeze on my front lawn and compete with some professional athlete as go out speaking against Bryan. I have to think when I speak" (Herrick 64). Instead, the Republican National Committee organized trips--"pilgrimages"--to Canton. Newspapers over the United States published stories about and speech texts from the Front Porch campaign. The image could be projected of the candidate remaining at home with his invalid wife, whom the crowds might see peeking out the window, as he delivered heartfelt messages from his porch to the groups that spontaneously appeared.

### The Summer Campaign

Some of the first speeches of the campaign gave little impression of careful advance planning. They do, however, demonstrate a consistent pattern as McKinley rapidly evolved his campaign's procedures. McKinley quickly seized on the notion that the press would report every public act connected with the campaign. While staying at home during almost all of the campaign, McKinley eventually had the assistance of an at-home staff consisting of four secretaries, including James Boyle and Russell Chase, a shorthand reporter. Joseph Smith, a former newspaper reporter, also advised McKinley on publicity issues. A large Citizen's Committee and a group of local campaign managers also assisted McKinley's work in Canton. A group of 46 men formed the mounted, uniformed "McKinley Escort Troop," featured in many parades as various delegations marched from the train station to McKinley's home (Heald 75-77; Leech 89-90).

Since, as was common during that era, McKinley did not attend the Republican convention in person, an assorted group of mostly local supporters met McKinley at his home

right after the nomination on June 18. They presented Ida McKinley with a bouquet of flowers. McKinley climbed onto a store crate on his porch and briefly praised their communities (“Neighbors”). The use of the crate itself was contrived for effect, for the Republicans could surely have managed a more dignified podium. Another, larger crowd of local citizens gathered at his house. McKinley declared himself to be impressed by the “non-partisan character” of the demonstration, which “forbids political discussion.” The candidate promised that nothing honored him more than “to have the regard of his fellow townsmen” (“McKinley’s Response”).

The characteristic pattern of the campaign evolved further as early as June 19, when the McKinley League of New York State arrived in Canton on a chartered train. This League itself obviously had come into existence only to participate in the campaign. The event opened with a speech greeting McKinley by John E. Milholland, a New York newspaper editor. The speech of greeting, which became part of the campaign’s ritual, had several interesting rhetorical qualities. For one thing, these speeches were often full of partisan praise for McKinley. It would surely have been immodest for the candidate himself to praise himself so profusely. McKinley eventually adopted the practice of requiring speakers to forward advance copies of their speeches (Manning; also, the Library of Congress McKinley Papers, Series 1, Reel 1 contain manuscripts of speeches of greeting that were presumably submitted for review). This, presumably, made it possible for McKinley’s staff to screen them to ensure that they were free of offensive or divisive content that would look bad in the press. The press routinely printed many of these speeches in part or whole.

Milholland’s short speech assured McKinley that he would win in the November election by a large majority. Stating that his group had to return to the train in a few minutes, he

apologized that he did not have time for “making a speech” and assured McKinley that the Republicans of New York would support him (“Greetings” 10).

It is no surprise that a delegation from McKinley's boyhood home of Niles, Ohio, a local center of the tin industry, was among the first to visit Canton. Their factory had closed for the day so the workers could pay homage to McKinley (“From McKinley's Birthplace”). The delegates marched down Market Street carrying homemade tin signs. At first the candidate awkwardly remarked how few faces he recognized. Then, a familiar face catching his eye, he commented that “. . . I remember that he was kind to every boy--and I like a man who is kind to a boy. (Loud cheering)” (“Loyal Niles”).

It is difficult to say what role these early, fairly primitive speeches had on McKinley's thinking. The visit from Niles seems to have been more or less spontaneous, and McKinley was to all appearances not well prepared to speak to them on political issues. Indeed, a group of bicycle workers appeared later that day and heard McKinley present a brief speech about the tariff. In any case, the eagerness of groups to visit him and to hear him speak became obvious very early, as did the willingness of the press to report these visits in detail.

Within a day after McKinley was nominated, vendors were strolling around Canton selling “campaign badges and fans” (“Rush”). A Republican newspaper proudly reported that McKinley's small but well-tended lawn was quickly trampled “as bare and brown as a prairie swept by fire or trampled beneath the feet of a herd of buffalo” (“Rush”). On the other hand, on June 25 a group of three bicycle tourists dropped by to visit McKinley. At this early stage of the campaign, this trivial event made the afternoon newspaper (“More to Come”). It was becoming apparent that, at least to the Republican press, McKinley's every public action became news. The

rhetorical task, then, became to manipulate this seemingly natural process to the benefit of the candidate.

The development of the campaign's pseudo-events led to a strange tension between McKinley's instinctive desire to adapt to his immediate audiences, on the one hand, and to reach out to the national audience, on the other. It seemed to be fundamental to McKinley's personality to say something personal about each visiting group of voters. McKinley often mentioned that he had visited their town, or brought up some sort of information to show that he had researched the economy of their community. When it came down to campaign issues, however, McKinley stood by his bread and butter issues. He did not promise to serve the unique needs of the visiting delegation; rather, he professed that the protective tariff and sound money would benefit their community's unique interests. The visiting delegation, no matter who they were, became in McKinley's speeches symbols of the American worker. He could thus seem to adapt to the immediate audience, while in reality his campaign was artfully designed to generate interest for the national audience.

For example, in McKinley's early front porch speeches, bimetallism became a vague conspiracy to deprive the ordinary American worker of fair wages. This approach turned the issue toward the interest of the factory workers. Speaking to a group from eastern Ohio, McKinley phrased the point to demonstrate the depth of his concern for the factory worker: "And, my countrymen, there is another thing the people are determined upon, and that is that a full day's work must be paid in full dollars" (McKinley, "Zanesville Sends"). By this, McKinley implied that silver money would degrade a factory laborer's earnings.

A delegation from Wheeling, West Virginia visited McKinley on June 20 (the same day as the Niles group) ("From Wheeling"). The West Virginians presented McKinley with a banner

made of tin praising him as the “father of the tin plate industry in the United States” (“A Tinplate”). After the leader of the delegation lavished praise on McKinley, McKinley averred that he could receive no higher accolade than to know that he had contributed in any way to help provide “employment to American labor” or to bring “comfort to American homes.” The West Virginia group thus became, in McKinley's rhetoric, representatives of the American worker (“From Wheeling”).

Of course, no campaign event gains public attention as much as its official beginning. The campaign opened more or less formally on June 27 with a large parade and “ratification” organized by a group from Cleveland (“Rush on Canton Wires”). McKinley told the large group of visitors to the Canton area of his advocacy of “Honest money, a dollar as sound as the Government, and as untarnished as its flag.” Not missing a beat, in the next sentence he tied sound money to the needs of the ordinary worker: “A dollar that is as good in the hands of the farmer and the workingman, as in the hands of the manufacturer or the capitalist” (McKinley, “Canton Ratification”).

The Canton ratification was only the first of a number of events that opened the campaign. More would follow. No event could conceivably be more artificial than these repeated campaign openings (which continued even in the autumn), held and publicized only so they could be reported. There was no other need for any of them, really, since the Republican machinery started the campaign promptly and no formal launching of any kind was really necessary (see Dawes, 86-87).

McKinley officially launched the campaign again on July 2 when an official Notification Committee of some sixty persons arrived at his home. Such a visit was a normal practice in presidential campaigns. Senator John Thurston, who had opposed McKinley earlier in his career

but who had come over to McKinley's side before the convention, chaired the committee.

Thurston spoke first. He commented on the need for "Protection and Reciprocity" and ruded in biblical style the actions of those who repealed the McKinley tariff: "They sowed the wind. They reaped the whirlwind." Thurston compared the nation's endorsement of McKinleyism with the faithfulness of the Israelites to the Law of Moses (Thurston 23-24).

After referring to the great honor and solemn responsibility of the nomination, McKinley remarked that the issues in the campaign were serious, that they required "our sober judgment," and that they should be resolved without partisanship or excess emotion. He continued at some length about the tariff, which he argued should be raised to better provide for the government's expenses ("Governor M'Kinley's Response").

The notification clearly was a pseudo-event. Although the notification ceremony was common practice in that era, there was no need for a committee to notify McKinley, who obviously already knew that he had been nominated. The purpose of this event was to provide a newsworthy opportunity for Thurston to express his partisan views and for McKinley to offer a carefully prepared account of the issues, knowing perfectly well that whatever they said would be reported widely. McKinley's real audience was obviously not the group of Republican leaders who had come to Canton to notify him, but the national audience who would be paying special attention to this event.

At another large rally late June, a large but highly organized crowd showed up at the modest two-story frame house on Market Street, cheered McKinley and heard him speak. In the midst of parades, drum rolls, and fireworks, the Tippecanoe Club of Cleveland delivered their trademark yell:

“Hi-Hi-Hi

O-h-i-o

Tippecanoe, McKinley too.

Cleveland

O-ho” (“Big Gathering”)

Already McKinley was beyond the point of seeking a familiar face in the crowd; the Front Porch speeches were rapidly becoming part of a series of manufactured events, full of freshly generated enthusiasm, that came into being to stir up ardor for his campaign.

This process continued in the middle of July when a group from the Cleveland Foraker Club dropped by McKinley's home. This group supported Ohio's powerful senator Joseph Foraker. Perhaps they had heard that the campaign was to be dignified. If so, this had little effect on their spectacle. A local committee met them at the train station. A military band escorted the group of over 200 men, plus, the newspaper noted, eighteen women, to Market Street. When they reached McKinley's home, Kirk's Military Band performed the “Star Spangled Banner” and cheers for McKinley were heard. D. H. Lucas, the Foraker Club's president, announced to McKinley that “We have followed you, and will put our armor on . . .” (“Foraker Club”).

The group then heard a carefully reasoned speech in which McKinley set out his views about sound money and a protective tariff. Bryan had just been nominated on a platform that featured the unlimited coinage of silver money (“Bryan”), which aroused in McKinley a forceful response. After his customary warm salutation, and a word of praise for Foraker, McKinley compared the issues of the 1896 campaign with those of the Civil War: “Then it was a struggle to preserve the government of the United States. Now it is a struggle to preserve the financial

honor of the government of the United States. (Cries of 'yes' and applause)." In 1861-1865 the war of which McKinley was a veteran preserved the Union; today he campaigned to ". . . save spotless its credit" ("What He Says of It").

Taking advantage of the split between the Gold Democrats and Silver Democrats, McKinley announced that "In this contest patriotism is above party, and national honor is dearer than any party name" ("What He Says of It"). McKinley depicted free trade and free silver as a conspiracy against the ordinary worker: "Not content with the inauguration of the ruinous policy which has brought down the wages of the laborer and the price of farm products, its advocates now offer a new policy which will diminish the value of the money in which wages and products are paid" ("What He Says of It"). With minor variations, this argument, phrased more or less in this way, would appear in many subsequent speeches.

On a rainy July 16 a group of women from the Cleveland area arrived on a special train. They paraded toward Market Street, various men joining them as they marched. The crowd gathered at McKinley's home. Ida McKinley was joined by the wife of McKinley's adviser Joseph Smith on the front porch to meet the visitors. Mrs. Elroy M. Avery came forward to present the speech of greeting. She said more about the issues than did the candidate: "We come from Cleveland; Cleveland, the beautiful; Cleveland that still lives; the queen city of the lower-lakes; the great heart of the western reserve that gave Giddings, Wade and Garfield to the nation. . . ." Avery delivered her political punch line: Cleveland, she said, was ". . . a city of great American industries that are suffering from un-American legislation. . . ." by which, presumably, she meant the Democrats' low tariffs. She mentioned her lack of appreciation for "man-made political platforms." Avery assured McKinley that every woman has an interest in the money issue: "If our husbands earn the money, we spend and intend to spend it" ("Many Women").



McKinley then responded with a speech in which he praised the contributions of women and the influence that they have in society. He assured Avery that "It is in the quiet and peaceful walks of life where her power is greatest and most beneficial." Birdelle Switzer, the society editor of the *Plain Dealer*, the leading Democratic paper of the region, then presented Ida McKinley with a bouquet of flowers. Switzer commented that "We cannot all hope to win presidents for husbands, but your example as a wife is before us. . . ." Mary Ellsworth Clark, a member of the delegation of Cleveland women, then sang "A Prayer for Our Nation," which had been composed for the occasion. The song began, "Ring out, bells of freedom. . . ." and concluded "McKinley, McKinley, our captain shall be". At the conclusion of these ceremonies, the women marched with an equestrian escort to a hall where a group of Presbyterian women served them lunch; they then enjoyed some music and sightseeing ("Many Women").

A few days after the Cleveland women took the train home, a visit by Civil War veterans from Cuyahoga County offered McKinley another opportunity to drive home the relationship between patriotism and sound money. After noting their common experience with the war, McKinley carried the theme of patriotism from the past to the "living present." "The devotion to discipline and duty" that the soldiers practiced during the war remained alive, McKinley said, in 1896. The soldiers ". . . have not faltered and will not falter now." Then, in a single brilliant, if astonishing, passage, McKinley announced that ". . . all men who love their country must unite to defeat by their ballots the forces which now assault the country's honor." He was proud to announce to their cheers that the soldiers would stand today against any assault on freedom or the flag, including, one presumes, Bryan's assault on the honor of American currency.

The two main issues, the tariff and sound money, still dominated this speech. It was a ticklish task to appeal so shamelessly to the patriotism of Union veterans without offending the

South, from whom McKinley may have hoped for at least a little support. As it turned out, McKinley was to be the first Republican candidate since the end of Reconstruction to break up the Democrat's solid South by carrying Delaware, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Maryland, all former slave states (Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan* 1:191; Diamond 291-292). Thus, McKinley concluded the speech with a comment that "Honesty, like patriotism, can neither be bounded by state nor sectional lines."

Shortly before lunchtime on August 10, William Jennings Bryan himself whirled through Canton on the Pennsylvania Railroad and gave the large crowd a brief speech from a flatcar about free silver. He promised the "toilers" of the nation that he would make his campaign their own ("Through Ohio"). The two candidates did not meet that day, but McKinley did not, as it would soon turn out, overlook what Bryan had said.

A day or two after Bryan's brief visit, McKinley stepped out again onto his front porch to meet a group of a few hundred citizens from Geurnsey County, Ohio. Many of them were Union army veterans. After hearing a formal greeting from the group's senior retired officer, a Colonel Taylor, McKinley clambered up on a chair. He spoke of friendship: "I have made many visits to your county in years gone by. . . ." He congratulated his visitors on their community's success in the tin-plating industry: "I am glad to know," McKinley stated, "that Republican legislation gives to this country an industry that gives work and wages to American workingmen and brings happiness to American homes. [Great cheering.]" He reviewed the pensions paid by the government, pensions delayed, he said, by the Democratic government's policies. McKinley informed his visitors that the government carried "970,000 pensioners on the honored pension roll" and paid "in pensions over \$140,000,000 every year to the soldiers and sailors, the widows

and their orphans" ("M'Kinley Talks"). Doing so, McKinley exhibited what may have seemed like abstruse knowledge of the unique struggles that the veterans faced.

Then came the key point: "Every dollar of that debt must be paid in the best currency and coin of the world. [Great cheering and cries of 'The Republican party will see to that']. To drive his point home, he pointed to a nearby American flag. He told them that they, his comrades from the Civil War, would no more allow an attack on the integrity of the nation's currency than they would permit an attack on that flag ("M'Kinley Talks"). Thus, McKinley moved seamlessly from the simple act of offering a warm greeting to his houseguests to a political issue of national import. He used the seemingly meaningless statistics about the value of Civil War pensions to stress the importance of sound money.

When a group of glass workers came to visit, McKinley responded to Bryan's recent speech in a very subtle way. He continued to equate his cause with patriotism and the will of the American people. McKinley called his visitors "the strong and sturdy men who toil." McKinley avowed that in his "battle" he would be aided not only by Republicans but also by ". . . thousands of brave patriotic and conscientious political opponents of the past. . ." who now stood together against the tide of repudiation and dishonor ("Glass Workers"). With this surprisingly bold oratory, McKinley implied that Bryan's "toilers" would stand firmly against silver money. Once again, a group of workers heard themselves transformed into representatives of the American worker.

In August, McKinley stressed to an African American group, the L'Overture [*sic*] Rifles of Cleveland, that "We are all political equals here--equal in privilege and opportunity, dependent upon each other . . ." ("Speaks to Colored Men"). The members of the rifle team had arrived in Canton accompanied by hundreds of African Americans from Cleveland and Akron.

Giving the speech of greeting, Harry C. Smith, a noted African American leader and a member of the Ohio legislature, stated that "The Afro-American has watched with the eye of the American eagle every act of special interest to him of your wonderful career. . . ." Smith awarded McKinley honorary membership in the rifle team ("Afro-Americans").

McKinley then took a few moments to discuss in a highly upbeat tone the Civil War, the importance of equality, and the benefits of racial progress. McKinley called the L'Overture Rifles "My countrymen." He turned their attention to the tariff and sound money. McKinley warned the rifle team, in an echo of the speech to the Foraker group, that "Having reduced the pay of labor, it is now proposed to reduce the value of the money in which labor is paid" ("Speaks to Colored Men"). McKinley endorsed racial justice but did not champion any issues directly related to racial justice. Instead, he sought to convince them that his policies, the same policies that he advocated with every other group, would bring betterment to them. Thus, once again, the specific concerns of the audience were subsumed under the banner of McKinley's central campaign issues.

Only rarely did McKinley's numerous statistics really prove anything, but they were always adapted to the visiting delegation. They were a subtle aspect of the pseudo-event, permitting McKinley to appeal to the delegation while actually speaking through them to the national audience. Yet this human touch had no impact on the heart of McKinley's message. For example, in August McKinley spoke to a group from East Liverpool, Ohio, a center of the pottery industry. McKinley mentioned that before the Democrats took office, the pottery industry had ". . . fifty-five potteries and two hundred and forty-four kilns, twenty-six of which were decorating kilns, with a capital invested of \$5,076,000 . . ." ("Business and Politics"). This established little about the Democrats' policies. It showed that McKinley cared enough about

East Liverpool to learn a little bit about them. It conveyed, however, no hint that he would advocate any special interest on their behalf. Once again, the only issues that McKinley discussed were sound money and the tariff. It is interesting to look, next, at how McKinley evolved these two issues.

Also in August, it was time to open the campaign again. McKinley published a carefully prepared written response, his "Letter of Acceptance." Far more printed copies of this document survive in libraries than of any other material connected with the campaign. The party's New York office alone sent out half a million or more copies of the letter in early September (Osborne, Letter, 1 September 1896). McKinley's Letter thanked the committee for the honor of the nomination. The statement reviewed McKinley's positions on a number of the issues of the day: bimetallicism versus the gold standard, the protective tariff, immigration, veteran's benefits, civil service reform, and so forth (McKinley, "Letter of Acceptance"). McKinley had apparently intended to write a short letter, but instead prepared a full discussion of the issues at the suggestion of William Osborne (Osborne, Letter, 11 August 1896). McKinley ended with an argument entitled "Sectionalism Almost Obliterated." McKinley's "Letter" laid out a moderate, judiciously phrased, comprehensive discussion of the issues that the 1896 campaign, as fate had it, would never see again. McKinley's speeches in September and October would drop almost all reference to these issues and zero in on the gold standard and the protective tariff. The "Letter" established McKinley's mood, but the speeches gave the campaign its emphasis.

Few political speakers have ever mastered to such a high degree the ability to make everyone present feel the warmth of his personality. Perhaps no one outside McKinley's family ever really knew his private thoughts and emotions. When McKinley spoke in public, however, he was able to convey to the audience with great immediacy a feeling that he knew the working

people and understood them, that he cared about them, that he earnestly desired to be their friend. He expressed a strong identification between himself and his audience. This impression carries through strongly in the press reports of the campaign, which often discussed McKinley shaking hands with the crowd and otherwise interacting with the people.

He invariably opened his speeches with charming little pleasantries. McKinley stressed to a delegation of Pittsburgh workers, "I bid you warm and hearty welcome" ("Gives Warm Welcome"), and to a group from Lawrence County, Pennsylvania, ". . . It gives me very great pleasure to welcome the citizens of a neighboring state to my city and to my home" ("Answers Pennsylvania"). Over and over McKinley reminded his audiences that they were visiting his home. In the first few months McKinley conveyed the distinct impression that he was welcoming, not a swarm of unruly political supporters whom he had never before seen, but rather a group of newly made friends who enjoyed his warmest regards. He told the veterans of his old Civil War regiment that "Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to meet at my home my comrades in the Civil War" ("His Old Comrades"). With only a little variation he told a group visiting from Cleveland that ". . . It gives me very great pleasure to welcome you to my home city and to my home . . ." ("What He Says of It").

### Conclusion

McKinley's Front Porch campaign was a pseudo-event, or series of pseudo-events, in Boorstin's sense, and became so early in the summer. First, the events of the campaign occurred because they were carefully planned. Although the speeches often gave the impression of spontaneity, a great deal of advance organization went into manufacturing the situations in which they were given. McKinley's staff screened the speeches of greeting. A committee of local

organizers met each visiting delegation and organized them into a parade. The visiting delegations often arrived with drill teams and marching bands. This does not mean that the campaign's events were organized like clockwork, which they were not, but rather than they were organized deliberately.

Second, the Front Porch's campaign existed for, in Boorstin's words, the "purpose of being reported or reproduced" (Boorstin 11-12). Representatives of the press reported almost every speech. McKinley's intentions were made clear, however, by the content of his speeches. Although every speech made some polite reference to the identity of the visiting group, and often cited some fact or figure about the group's home town or state, McKinley almost without exception zeroed in on his key national issues: sound money and the protective tariff. Thus, he could convey the impression that he cared about each group, an impression so vital to McKinley's image as a man who cared about the ordinary worker, while at the same time expounding only on issues of national import. This, more than anything else, shows that the Front Porch campaign existed to be reported in the press. Even the sometimes-bizarre speeches of greeting existed to be reported. What other explanation can we have for Avery's speech about "Cleveland, . . . the queen city of the lower-lakes" except her realization that she would, for a few brief moments, bask in the national spotlight?

Boorstin's third criterion for a pseudo-event was that "Its relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous" (Boorstin 11-12). This may be the most troubling, since the Front Porch speeches were unambiguously a part of the reality of the campaign. Yet the campaign itself bore a fundamentally ambiguous relationship to reality. The parades up and down Market Street, the brass bands, the cheers were not celebrating a holiday, but existed merely because it was convenient for the campaign's organizers for them to exist.

Finally, Boorstin specifies that a pseudo-event is by design a “self fulfilling prophecy” (Boorstin 12). McKinley's supporters created a vision that McKinley was not campaigning, but that the Front Porch speeches and the associated hoopla were ceremonial ratifications of inevitable victory in the election. Enormous throngs of voters steamed into the train station and paid homage to their “advance agent of prosperity”. The campaign gave birth to unspoken sentiments of great power: that McKinley did not even act like a campaigner in a usual sense, that his popularity had achieved such heights that voters gave up their Saturdays to come to him, that the voters did not come to elect him, but to ratify him. The people did not come to be persuaded; they came to bask in the greatness of their nation's future leader. They came, as for a holiday, to celebrate by waving flags, blowing whistles, and collecting souvenir spoons and walking canes (see W. D. Caldwell).

The visiting delegations were not, however, the main audiences. They were, instead, just part of the show. McKinley adapted to these audiences, but in a peculiar way that the critic can only understand by seeing the speeches as part of the artificial events. McKinley's speeches repeatedly *implied* inductions something along these lines:

- McKinley cares about the ordinary working people of X, Y, and Z delegations.
- These ordinary working people are typical of the American population.
- Therefore, what benefits them will benefit the general public.
- Vote for McKinley to obtain these benefits.

This enables us to grasp what McKinley was really saying in these speeches. Why did he repeatedly cite meaningless statistics about how many kilns a town had, or how many acres of farmland were found in a state, or what was the dollar value of Civil War pensions? Why did he invariably mention any occasion on which he had visited the town or state from which the



delegation hailed? How could it affect national policy to realize that Niles is a center of the tinplate industry, or that East Liverpool has a pottery factory? Why did he make a point of welcoming them all to his home? McKinley's rhetorical objective was to convey the impression that he cared personally about the members of the delegation, and by implication that he cared about all of the nation's working people. In this way, he made an implied argument for the identification of the diverse members of the nation's population. It is a remarkable accomplishment that McKinley conveyed, in so artificial an atmosphere, such a strong sense of his warmth and unity with the audience.

Similarly, in discussing the campaign's two principal issues, McKinley did not address the delegations as special interests. At least in public, he never made a promise that he would perform special acts on their behalf once he took office; instead, he assured them that the actions that he would take about the tariff and the money standard would benefit their special interests. It was an interesting twist, and one that only makes sense in the context of a mass media pseudo-event. To advocate a group's special interests would have implied that the candidate would be blind to the interests of the whole country. McKinley instead appealed to the audience that the main issues, national in scope, on which he focused would benefit them particularly. Especially in contrast to Bryan, who stressed regional and class divisions (e.g., "A Bryan Day"), McKinley sought in his speeches McKinley to integrate the interests of the entire nation.

Thus, as he launched his front-porch campaign, McKinley adapted to the national audience in a carefully calculated series of media events. The pseudo-event was not a unique creation of twentieth-century political communication. Nor was it an invention of McKinley's. Building on his long experience in politics and the example of previous candidates, McKinley made the most of the technology of his time. He ran a campaign in which the railroads could

bring large crowds to his home to hear him speak, and in which the wire services and newspapers could publish accounts of the events and texts of the speeches shortly after the incidents occurred. In this respect his campaign oratory differed from that of the televised speeches of today mostly because print, not television, technology brought the campaign into the voters' homes. McKinley created some impression that he was, in the fashion of pre-Civil War candidates, waiting casually at home for the people to elect him. Yet, McKinley during the summer of 1896 initiated a vigorous, carefully crafted campaign that employed all of the resources available to him to reach and persuade the national voting public.

Although the speeches that McKinley delivered during the summer of 1896 were just a tentative beginning to the campaign, all of the major elements that would mark the Front Porch Campaign were, nonetheless, already present. There was something folksy about campaigning so casually from a modest, middle-class home. When the throngs of voters stepped off the train in Canton, they discovered that McKinley was to all appearances one of them. It was in large part this quality, the ability to project a warm personality through these groups to the press, that led to the success of the Front Porch campaign.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> No one source collects every Front Porch speech. The *Canton Repository* published almost all of the speeches. They were also collected, revised, and cheaply printed in Republican campaign documents (e.g., McKinley, *McKinley as a Candidate*, *McKinley's Speeches in August*). Newspaper accounts often include what appear to be transcripts of the speeches based on shorthand records. Most of these transcripts appear to be complete, while others contain selections from the speeches.

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