

The
Triumph of
William 
McKinley
Why the Election
of 1896 Still Matters
Karl Rove

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

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From *New York Times* bestselling author and political mastermind Karl Rove comes a fresh look at President William McKinley, whose 1896 campaign ended a bitter period of political gridlock and reformed and modernized his party, thereby creating a governing majority that dominated American politics for the next thirty-six years.

The 1896 political environment resembles that of today: A rapidly changing electorate affected by a growing immigrant population, an uncertain economy disrupted by new technologies, growing income inequality, and contentious issues the two parties could not resolve. McKinley found ways to address these challenges and win, which is why his campaign is so relevant to our politics now.

McKinley, a Civil War hero who preferred “The Major” above any other title he was given, changed the arc of American history by running the first truly modern presidential campaign. Knowing his party could only win if it grew beyond its base, he reached out to diverse ethnic groups, including openly seeking the endorsement of Catholic leaders and advocating for black voting rights. Running on the slogan “The People Against the Bosses,” McKinley also took on the machine men who dominated his own party. He deployed campaign tactics still used today, including targeting voters with the best available technology. Above all, he offered bold, controversial answers to the nation’s most pressing challenge—how to make a new, more global economy work for every American—and although this split his own party, he won the White House by sticking to his principles, defeating a charismatic champion of economic populism, William Jennings Bryan.

The 1896 election is a compelling drama in its own right, but McKinley’s strategies offer important lessons for both political parties today.

The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters Details

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From Reader Review The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters for online ebook

Jeff says

I really wanted to like this book. I have enjoyed Karl Rove's analysis on television and I believe he sees things from an interesting perspective.

But the history was dull, I gained no insights into McKinley as a man, and the narration--well, let's just say that the author needs to stick to his role in politics and not venture into something more suited for an actor.

I do believe the work was well-researched, but it was just not "searching" enough into the mindsets of the day or what actually made McKinley tick. I do not recommend.

Will says

Actually 4.5. Took a little while to finish it, but worth the time. Fascinating book about a very important election in our history. Extremely well-written, worthwhile because of Karl Rove's profession as a campaign manager and consultant. As opposed to a history professor's view, we get a political operative's view, which can be extremely different. He also brings into focus a great, and unduly forgotten, American President. As Rove says, it is ironic that more is known today about the man he beat - William Jennings Bryan - and the man who succeeded him after McKinley's assassination - Theodore Roosevelt - then this fascinating, successful, inspiring man. Highly recommended for anyone interested in American history, particularly political history.

November 17, 2016. This book is still topical, particularly after this amazing election season. Bryan's "capture" of the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party in 1896, masterfully described by Rove, gave me the knowledge necessary to view Trump's nomination and victory in an American historical perspective. Bottom line, there is nothing new under the sun.

Jean says

I have found McKinley an interesting president and have read a number of biographies about him. The topic of this book about McKinley caught my attention. But I hesitated reading it because the author was not a historian. After I thought about it, maybe the viewpoint of an expert in running political campaigns discussing running a 19th century campaign might be interesting.

The book is well written and researched. Rove does a good job of presenting both sides of the various issues of the day. Rove does provide some background about McKinley, but mostly the book is an in-depth analysis of the 1896 republican campaign. The book allowed me to look at McKinley from a slightly different viewpoint. Rove did outline why the election of 1896 still matters today. My only negative comment is about the narration; it would have been easier to listen to if done by a professional audiobook narrator.

I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. The book is fifteen hours twelve minutes. Karl Rove

did a fair narration of the book.

John Daly says

Book 2 of 40 for 2016

In this crazy primary season I figured it would be interesting to read about an election cycle that was not a freak show.

Karl Rove presents his version of Making of a President 1896 in this well presented and informed view of what Rove believes is the model of the first modern campaign.

McKinley and Mark Hanna his main backer put together a plan a two years ahead of the election that would pave the path to the presidency. The goal was to expand the GOP base and to be independent of the GOP party bosses like Platt in NY.

McKinley would be the last president to have served in the civil war but the people through out the campaign of 1896 would all later play major roles in the 20th century. Beside McKinley's opponent in the general election William Jennings Bryan who would go on to be Secretary of State for Wilson we see the first appearances on the national stage of Teddy Roosevelt, Charles Dawes who managed the campaign from Chicago and later to become Vice President under Coolidge. An interesting side fact is that both Roosevelt and Dawes would later go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Rove does an excellent job of explaining how the conventions used to work before the rise of the primaries in the next century. Rove also guides the reader through how the McKinley campaign used the new modern tools to target voters that would be willing to listen to McKinley's message.

The main campaign issue in 1896 was the gold versus the silver standard an issues that McKinley did not immediately want to address but after the surprise nomination of Bryan became the main issue of the campaign.

I would defiantly encourage anyone tired of this dreadful primary year to pick this book up for a nice escape into a time where the system seemed to be working.

Jim says

With his newest book, The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters, Karl Rove has taken the past, in this case a past Presidential election of 120 years ago, and with insight as a political strategist and operative, demonstrated how that election, the election of 1896, has impacted American Political history from then to this day.

The result is a detailed and engaging study of how McKinley, considered by the GOP political bosses of that day to be a non-entity in the 1896 race built an organization in the year running up to the election and used it to gain control of the GOP and then the convention itself, and during the campaign made the risky decision

to reach out to new voting blocks of Catholic, African-American, and new immigrants thus expanding the base of the GOP.

While the first six chapters, chronicling McKinley's life and early political endeavors, are helpful they set the background for the heart of the book which begins with chapter 7, The Major's War Plan, in which the themes of unity and discipline are sketched out that formed the basis of McKinley's successful campaign. From there Rove sketches in detail the personalities of that campaign, the very divisive issue between gold backed and silver backed currency issue and its impact on the two major parties, the decisions of both McKinley and Bryan as to tactics used (Bryan's exhausting campaign across the country and McKinley's legendary "front porch" campaign) and the campaign itself between the charismatic and mercurial William Jennings Bryan and the steady William McKinley. In the final chapter, McKinley's Triumph, Rove suggests eight reasons McKinley won the election.

"...he conducted a campaign based on big issues, namely sound money and protection."

(McKinley believed in sound money and thus leaned toward maintaining the Gold standard)

McKinley "after hemming and hawing...took on his opponent's supposed strength-Bryan's advocacy of Free Silver."

"...he was a different kind of Republican who recognized his party must broaden and modernize its appeal or it would lose."

"...he broadened the electoral battlefield" because "McKinley and his managers understood the election would be fought in more states and among more voters than in past elections..."

"...he ran for the nomination as an outsider, undercutting the traditional role played by the party bosses in settling the nomination by deals at the convention itself... he refused to be bound by the practices that elevated party bosses..."

"...he was seen as a candidate of change..."

"He ran as a unifier, adopting the language of national reconciliation... McKinley understood that Americans thirsted for someone who could replace discord and rancor with optimism and unity."

Noting that "a campaign organization must complete three tasks: maximize turn-out among the party's traditional followers, target and persuade swing or non-voters, and push its message in the face of an opponent's attacks, " Rove notes that "McKinley won by accomplishing these tasks" and that "this was the eighth and most important reason for McKinley's victory: the quality of a candidate's campaign makes a critical difference..."

The Triumph of William McKinley is a great piece of and on American political history. In my very amateur opinion, Rove does a very good job taking the reader on a journey back in time to an election that, either direction, would shape America's entry into the 20th century.

If you are looking for a book about McKinley and a further study of his life and his Presidency, then this is not the book for you. Rove has several suggestions in his bibliography about some of those books (and I read the late Margaret Leech's Pulitzer Prize winning biography In the Days of McKinley several years ago).

But if you are looking for an insightful read of an election in a time of American life that has some similarities (notably a divided society in need of unity) today's society, then this book is a worthy read. I liked it for its thoughtful detail and its insights into the American political process.

My Goodreads' rating is 4 star.

Note: this book was given to me as a gift and I chose to write a review of it.

Christopher Richardson says

First off, this book isn't really a biography of William McKinley. Its more of a biography of late Gilded Age politics and the currency wars of that era. Its also a subtle campaign book detailing the problems of the current Republican Party and what they can learn from the Republican Party of 1896 (or at least what Mr. Rove thinks they can learn). As an analysis of late Gilded Age politics, currency issues, and the divisions of the parties, its pretty good actually. The currency battles, which are so alien to today's readers, were the lifeblood of politics of that age (think abortion and gay marriage today).

Rove masterfully outlines the intricacies, political divisions, and men of that area while also explaining why the politics of gold and silver mattered to so many Americans (its some of the best writing I've seen on Gilded Age gold/silver politics in a while). I do like that the book also brings to life Ida McKinley (most books don't bother doing that) but after bringing her to life, her (along with McKinley himself) are pretty much buried and put on the back burner of gold/silver and convention politics. It feels like whole chapters go by without a mention of McKinley.

Throughout most of the book Rove subsumes his political biases and prescriptions but he can't help himself toward the end. William Jennings Bryan, who Rove portrays as a demagogue, comes across as either any current Democratic candidate (in Rove's view) or even Ted Cruz or Donald Trump. The book also plays up heavily the fact that moderate Democrats, so terrified by the prospect of William Jennings Bryan, bolted to form their own party so that moderate Democrats had a place to go and they could pick up the pieces after Bryan was crushed. Sounds eerily like what Bill Kristol and George Will have been saying should Trump get the nomination.

Some of the stuff in the book is laughable. McKinley, Rove argues, was an "outsider" and not beholden to political bosses unlike Speaker Thomas Reed. McKinley wasn't beholden to the same bosses as Reed, but Mark Hanna IS a political boss (which Rove seems to suggest he wasn't). Further, McKinley by 1896 had been in politics for nearly 20 years and had close contacts with just about every Republican who mattered in that area. There was a tariff act named after him. McKinley was many things (a war hero of unquestionable integrity) but an "outsider" he was not. On balance though, an good book by Rove.

Brian says

I have mixed feelings about this book. It is certainly a well-researched, detailed history of the 1896 presidential election contest between Republican William McKinley and young Democrat William Jennings

Bryan. And Rove makes some convincing arguments about the relevance of that election to present-day politics. But I think it is definitely a book more for political professionals or political junkies than for general readers of history.

Rove describes the 1896 election as a watershed moment in American politics, which led to a realignment of the political parties and Republican electoral dominance for the following 40 years. He demonstrates that U.S. political conditions in the 1890s were similar to the polarized political climate today, even though the issues dividing the country may not have been the same.

Accordingly, Rove asserts that today's political parties and candidates can learn valuable lessons from analyzing the factors led to McKinley's success in the election. In the final chapter of the book, Rove discusses what he believes are the eight reasons for McKinley's victory. The reasons were undoubtedly strategic, but they also reflected McKinley's character. Without giving everything away, Rove says one reason McKinley won was "because he was a different kind of Republican who recognized his party must broaden and modernize its appeal or it would lose." Rove also asserts that McKinley "ran as a unifier, adopting the language of national reconciliation." This was in direct contrast to Bryan's divisive campaign, which appealed to class and sectional differences.

Rove says further that none of the strategies employed in McKinley's campaign would have been enough if McKinley himself had not been an attractive, compelling candidate with stellar personal character. As Rove states, "His integrity, empathy, courage, and loyalty gave many voters ample reason to believe he cared deeply about them." His public persona was so positive that adversaries knew that attacking him would backfire.

I give Rove high marks for building his case for why McKinley won the election, and for showing how McKinley's victory can be instructive for people in politics today. (Maybe start with finding a candidate whose personal character is widely admired?)

On the other hand, I give him lower marks for storytelling, at least in parts of the book. I found certain sections of the book to be long slogs during which my eyes glazed over. Specifically, the detailed descriptions of the innumerable primaries and caucuses seemed endless and often indistinguishable from one another. Likewise, so many characters were introduced that I found it difficult to remember who was who, especially for the majority of them who played relatively minor parts. (At least there are some photos of major characters, which I found were helpful in keeping them straight.) I understand that it's difficult to weave together a complex story with many moving parts like this one (I often have the same problem with military histories), especially in a historical context where many of the concerns, like the long-dead Free Silver argument, are arcane. But in my view the book didn't make some parts of the story come alive as well as it could have.

Michelle Lancaster says

AMERICAN HISTORY/POLITICS

Karl Rove

The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters

Simon & Schuster

Hardcover, 978-1-4767-5295-2 (also available as an e-book, audio CD, and on Audible), 496 pgs., \$32.50

November 24, 2015

So why does the election of a president more than one hundred years ago still matter today, you may well ask.

As it turns out, plenty. In an era when the nation was profoundly split between the South and the West, the North and the East, conflict between debtors and the financial class, sometimes fatal fights over how the economic pie should be allocated, and both parties employed procedure to gridlock Congress and caused the people to declare the whole place incompetent, McKinley circumvented the Republican party chiefs and “was the first president in more than two decades to win with a significant popular majority.” How did McKinley build a winning coalition out of these disparate interests?

The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters is Karl Rove’s lively, briskly paced, and meticulously organized answer to that question. But this book isn’t limited to the election; it is also a primer on American history, politics, and economics during the decades immediately following the Civil War. It compares and contrasts the politics of then and now and reminds us that history and politics are cyclical, and that there are patterns to be discerned and learned from, as is made evident in the modern campaigns of Nixon and Reagan. Perhaps someone should hide this book from Trump.

According to Rove, McKinley turned the system on its head and “ran the first modern presidential primary campaign.” Previously candidates had left the process to back room king-makers (“big dog Republicans”), rarely speaking publicly, but McKinley “began with an early, in-depth organization, structured, deliberate, and intense, run by men who were loyal to him.” McKinley’s strategy — “different as a modern factory was from a medieval workshop” — involved, for the first time, hand-picked audiences for the Front Porch, suggested talking points, and local color. Sound familiar?

Rove’s enthusiasm and appreciation for his subject results in an enjoyable reading experience, despite reams of facts, figures, and dates. This includes what is possibly the most easily understandable discussion of the usually esoteric realm of tariffs and currency that I’ve ever read. You don’t have to be a scholar to get it. The Byzantine machinations of convention politics and credentials challenges are rendered as comprehensible as is probably possible. The personalities of the major players — opponents and allies — are present on the page. Rove includes lighthearted leavening in descriptions of the conventions, where cocktails of bourbon, lemon juice, and sugar (called “the McKinley”) were sold, as well as canes “topped with a tin blob that resembled McKinley’s head.”

Rove concludes The Triumph of William McKinley with a look at why William Jennings Bryan lost the election, the three tasks that a campaign organization must complete, and an eight-point analysis of McKinley’s victory. It must be acknowledged, whether or not you agree with Rove’s politics, that he is one of the great political strategists of our time and an attentive, passionate student of history with command of massive amounts of data. He revels in the game and it shines through on every page of his book.

Originally published in Lone Star Literary Life.

Kinksrock says

I made it to page 154 but am not continuing. It takes a special writer to make tariffs and coinage interesting, and Rove (or whoever wrote this) is not that writer.

Lance Greenlee says

Prospective readers of this book should be advised that at least the first half of this book is not really about McKinley, his life, and his beliefs. The person of McKinley fades into the background of campaigns and campaigning, political conventions and maneuverings to get this or that candidate nominated, who supported who and when they switched support. Rove simply does not do a good job with characterization; historical persons do not "come to life" in his writing. Although the book includes several photos of major characters, in writing, Rove does not include excerpts from speeches or quotes from personal letters to illuminate personalities. Rove almost never gives a physical description, a description of mannerisms, or a character's way of speaking. The reader can't perceive disposition of important persons (Foraker would be an important exception). Rove is primarily interested in how many voted this way and how many that, and how many speeches were given here and how many there. His writing isn't opaque, or unnecessarily complicated or obscure in historical terminology, but this is still going to a tough read for many readers.

Alexw says

Karl Rove whom George W Bush called the architect that won him the election has brilliantly wrote a book and also an application to run the Republican Presidential nominator in 2016. By showing how McKinley won the election, Rove paints a picture how he understands election are won.

(spoiler alert) I never knew that McKinley was a Civil War Hero or had some family problems I feel his stature as one of our greater Presidents has been overlooked and Rove doesn't even delve into his 2nd term or when he got Theodore Roosevelt as his VP. I did enjoy this book but I enjoy most all political books.

E says

Rove clearly wrote this book hoping that those involved in the 2016 electoral process, and I will say that, after reading the book, I share that hope.

Little did I know that Rove is a good historian. This is not some second-rate piece of political history. It is meticulously and thoroughly footnoted. Thankfully he holds off discussion of the subtitle (the "so what") until the end and mostly gives us a straight-up (and engrossing) narrative of the 1896 election. And a lot more, in fact. The work fills in McKinley's backstory quite nicely, illustrating why the man was so beloved for his character and graciousness.

The election itself was a bit nuts, thanks to screwy William Jennings Bryan (that day's version of Bernie Sanders, except even ruder) and the strange obsession with "free silver" that many Democrats had at the time. McKinley was for strong (gold-backed) currency, but in fact his main plank was protectionism via import tariffs. This is interesting because of how they have fallen out of favor today (and no honest free-marketeer could support them). And yet they were a winning issue for McKinley time and time again, even along Eastern businessmen.

So why does McKinley's resounding 1896 victory still matter today? Because McKinley build a large coalition (including Catholics and immigrants). Because he was optimistic. Because he tackled the big

issues. Because he widened the electoral battlefield. Because he attacked his opponent's strength. Because he resisted the party machinery when necessary. Because he focused on unity, not us-versus-them.

T.R. Cross says

Certainly one of the most unique Presidential biographies I've read. In fact, it may be inaccurate to even call it a biography, though it does share some narrative similarities. The book is almost closer to a military campaign analysis than a biography. Laying out the political battles, the field they were fought, and the strategy that was crucial to victory. Unsurprisingly, given the author, the book concentrates on the political campaigns of McKinley instead of his time in office. Rove provides rich details on the primary and general elections that propelled McKinley to office in 1896. In general, I found the book interesting and enjoyable. Though I may read another book about McKinley to get a picture of his Presidency.

Jessica says

McKinley ran the first modern campaign. He started about two years before placing key people in every state, small meetings and door to canvassing. For the first time the candidate was picked by the people and not so much the party or the favorite son. The campaign was also focused on the person and not the party.

McKinley once was gerrymandered out of his district, but went win the presidency when the demographics were against him. He used a message of unification and reconciliation. He held front porch speeches (literally on his own front porch), where he attracted supporters. His opponent Bryan barnstormed the country where he attracted only spectators. McKinley enlarged the party, talking to people Republicans previously ignored (we could use a few lessons today), which helped the GOP to hold the White House the next 28 out of 36 years.

Biggest pet peeve about this book: Rove needs to decide he would like to call McKinley: McKinley or Major, not both in the same paragraph. DECIDE!

Neil Pierson says

This book has to answer two obvious questions:

1. Why should I care about the successful presidential campaign of William McKinley, who was elected in 1896 (other than the obsession all of us feel about the 25th president)?
2. And if I *do* care, why would I rely on Karl Rove* to satisfy my curiosity?

As for #1, it sure isn't because the campaign issues are relevant today. The main issues were whether our currency should be based on a gold standard only and whether we should maintain high protective tariffs on foreign goods. In fact, part of the controversy about tariffs was that the federal government was collecting so much, it was running a huge surplus.

Problem solved!

While today's issues are different, the author probably sees some similarities between the political climate of the mid 1890s and today: A federal government so politically polarized that it could accomplish nothing; an alienated electorate that was bitterly divided and not along party lines; concentration of wealth; fear of immigrants. McKinley succeeded by acting in a principled way, stressing inclusion and unity instead of inflaming divisions, and by appointing campaign managers who were canny and exceptionally well organized. His Democratic opponent did none of these. Perhaps this provides some guidance for 2016 candidates, but does it justify 375 pages?

As for #2, why Karl Rove: Sure, he thinks McKinley was a splendid fellow, but he thinks George W. Bush is, too. Karl has a cred problem here. I thought he might have some unusual insight into the mechanics of a successful presidential campaign, but based on the above, his observations are pretty mainstream.

** My personal belief is that Karl Rove lies about everything, including whether he really wrote this book. I refer to him as the "author" for convenience.*