

THE WIDER WORLD

Neo-Adventurism: From McKinley to Trump

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Author Note: This is the third in a series about American history and contemporary events that will unfold for the next few months. It is intended as a lens through which to view the latest headlines appearing to be a disparate number of actions, which are all part of a single, articulated strategy that is not actually anathema to traditional American policy.

As part of the yearlong America 250 celebration of the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, President Donald Trump is making a series of addresses related to our history. On Jan. 29 this year, Trump issued a declaration commemorating President William McKinley's 183rd birthday, stating:

Today, we celebrate the birthday of the legendary President William McKinley—a true American trailblazer and titan of American greatness, who protected our people; expanded our blessings; and secured unprecedented growth, prosperity, and sovereignty for our beloved Nation...Tragically, President McKinley's devotion to America First principles ultimately cost him his life when, in 1901, he was viciously assassinated by a deranged left-wing anarchist. To this day, he lives on in our hearts as a martyr of American freedom.^[i]

Trump has made similar declarations about other presidents like [Andrew Jackson](#) on special occasions, but Trump seems to really like McKinley. This is not surprising as they had quite a bit in common. President McKinley presided over the sunset of “The Gilded Age,” a period of rapid industrial growth and industrialization in the late 1800s, which Trump has promised to bring back. The parallels between Trump and McKinley exemplify the cyclical nature of adventurism as it once again unfolds. Adventurism, or taking risks in business and policy with a focus on the outcome and not always potential downsides, has historically created vast economic inequality. Current policy changes represent a return to older patterns but also begs the question of what has changed in the 250 years that have passed.

Take for example: McKinley and Trump’s shared love of tariffs. With his 1890 Tariff Act, then-Congressman McKinley raised import duties from 20% to 50%, levels that dwarf most modern rates. Trump’s recent tariff escalations approach similar territory as the Yale University Budget Lab reports that average tariff rates rose from 2.4% in early January 2025 to 28% by the third quarter of that year following his April “Independence Day” announcements.

The context varies dramatically, though. In McKinley’s case, they were already 20% when his Act raised them to 30% (as shown in the graphic). At that time, such taxes were used to raise government revenues in place of income tax, unlike today. Although focused on corporate rather than individual income taxes, Trump’s 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act reduced the corporate tax rate to a flat 21% and lowered six of the current top seven income tax brackets, the most significant tax overhaul in three decades.^[ii] This combination of reduced tax revenue and tariff-based trade policy mirrors another Gilded Age hallmark: increasing economic inequality through policies that benefit corporations while raising consumer prices.

U.S. Average Effective Tariff Rate Since 1790



The Budget Lab. Source: Historical Statistics of the United States Ea424-434, Monthly Treasury Statement, Bureau of Economic Analysis, The Budget Lab analysis. Created with Datawrapper.

The 2025 One Big Beautiful Bill made the 2017 reductions permanent, which were set to expire in 2025. Trump also raised the pre-2017 standard deduction nearly three times its previous amount with the “beautiful bill.” Investopedia noted that as a result, “taxpayers can expect continued lower rates, bigger deductions, and new reliefs.”^[iii] The downside is that nearly \$1 trillion of the latest 2024 figures on government expenditures of \$6.8 trillion are earmarked to be paid as interest on borrowed funds. In addition, the overall national debt is now valued at 97.8% of GDP.^[iv] This means that our total debt would barely be possible to repay even if we used everything the U.S. produced this year; that is, the \$1 trillion payment only keeps it steady and does not pay it down.

Therefore, the U.S. government needs to continue to raise funds to remain in business. McKinley’s tariffs did not directly cause the financial Panic of 1893; its unpopularity and the instability caused by higher prices did.^[v] The Act was meant to protect farmers and shore up their political support for the Republican party. Agricultural prices were low, causing farmers to struggle, but the Act backfired, causing higher prices for consumable goods and materials that farmers needed to operate.

In Trump’s case, U.S. agricultural goods have become less popular abroad, notably soybeans, which has led foreign countries to buy elsewhere, further driving down the value of U.S. agricultural products. The costs of farm inputs again have risen. To overcome this, Trump announced the Farmer Bridge

Assistance (FBA) program of \$12 billion in farm credits, which will not help to reduce the national debt, but may not raise it if tariff income is used to fund it as promised.^[vi] In McKinley's case, the farmers revolted against McKinley's Republican party, giving a House majority to Democrats in the 1886 midterm elections.

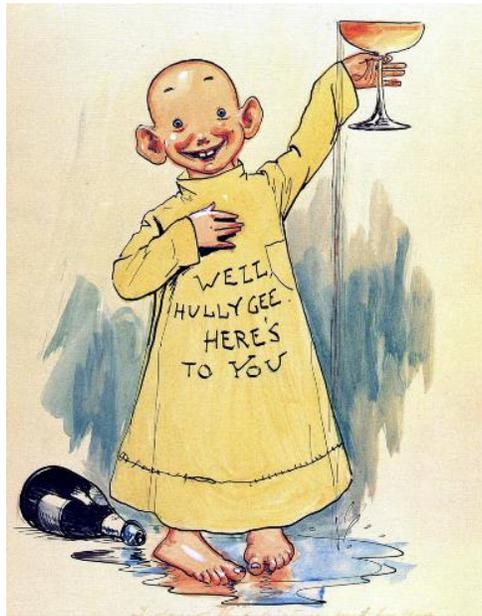
The American Gilded Age exploited resources, such as coal and oil, for economic gain, and saw intensive growth in transportation infrastructure such as roads and railroads. The American continent was considered to have been fully settled by 1890, so while the railroads created a national market for the first time, this was the start of the United States looking in earnest outside its contiguous borders to obtain natural resources and to identify and develop new markets for all these manufactured goods. We can see a parallel today with the rapid expansion of online infrastructure outpacing current energy sources' ability to manage the usage loads of datamining and artificial intelligence as well as the push to dominate sources of rare Earth materials, the building blocks of today's tech advancements.

The 1890 publication of U.S. Naval War College President Alfred Thayer Mahan's book, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, provided the strategic justification for rapid expansion abroad.^[vii] This reasoning was unwittingly underscored by the 1893 publication of Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," which argued that westward expansion forged American democracy and character,^[viii] but with the frontier closed, the argument was made beyond Turner that new outlets must be found for America's boundless energy. Proponents of expansion to new markets abroad used both to support continuation of Manifest Destiny abroad, while revisionist observers have called it a period of "adventurism."^[ix]

The contemporary military dogma of the folly of a multi-front war did not concern McKinley and company. as the president and his men strongly supported actions now exemplifying this spirit of adventurism. In 1898, the U.S. sought two distinct prizes belonging to the Spanish Empire: Cuba and the Philippines. They also threw in Hawaii for good measure. Apologies to my many military historian friends for this very brief overview in this limited space that so often pushes its dimensions to sag outward.

Certainly echoing the 1823 [Monroe Doctrine's](#) admonitions to keep the imperial powers out of the Western Hemisphere, Spain had been busy solidifying its hold

on Cuba just as the Americans were eyeing this sweet source of sugarcane only 90 miles off its coast. Beginning in 1895, Cuban revolutionaries fought for independence from Spain. That empire fought harshly to maintain its territory and word of atrocities committed on Cuban independence fighters and civilians alike began to find interested parties in American newspapers fighting as ardently for salacious stories to sell copies and advertising.



'Yellow journalism' named for Yellow Kid cartoon

By the 1890s, technological advancements made newspaper publishing much cheaper and easier, and literacy grew in U.S. cities, making this medium increasingly popular. New York City was highly saturated with papers. From 1883, Joseph Pulitzer enjoyed market dominance with his New York World thanks in no small part to Nellie Bly's fearless reporting and exclusive Sunday color features.

In 1895, wealthy upstart William Hearst purchased the New York Journal, and the battle quickly became soaked in yellow. The popular "Yellow Kid" cartoon published in both papers lent its hue to the enduring term "yellow journalism,"^[x] which means exaggerated and sensationalized coverage.

Unlike Trump — who, while creating and substantially using his own social media platform and holding impromptu press conferences, rather than using a traditional press secretary — has called the press "the enemy of the people,"^[xi]

McKinley was able to leverage the war between the wealthy news owners to support and drive his aims and actions. Both papers sent reporters to find atrocities in Cuba and wrote salaciously about them, paired with photographs of suffering Cubans and gallant revolutionaries yearning for freedom stirred up Americans' increasingly violent hatred of Spain.

Eventually, in February 1898, the U.S. sent the USS Maine battleship to Cuba. While it lurked in Havana Harbor, intending only to show that it could do so and then leave, it exploded. With 266 Americans dead from what was then considered an attack on the ship, the rallying cry "Remember the Maine and the hell with Spain," all but ensured a declaration of war on Spain for the alleged attack.^[xii]

In April, Congress declared war and McKinley demanded that Spain leave Cuba, while Spain severed diplomatic relations and declared war on the U.S. American forces landed in Cuba in June, with major battles including the Battle of San Juan Hill (made famous by Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders) and the Battle of Santiago de Cuba. The conflict quickly spread from Cuba as the U.S. launched a nearly simultaneous offensive in the Philippines and Caribbean, ultimately seizing Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

The Treaty of Paris was signed in December 1898, guaranteeing Cuban independence and forcing Spain to cede Guam and Puerto Rico to the United States. Spain also agreed to sell the Philippines to the United States for \$20 million. Prophetic future Secretary of State John Hay early on described the unfolding conflict as a "splendid little war."^[xiii]

Despite opposition from Native Hawaiians, who submitted petitions with roughly 38,000 signatures opposing the takeover, the U.S. still found time the same year to annex Hawaii in July as requested by sugar traders wanting to avoid U.S. tariffs. An 1875 trade reciprocity treaty had linked the two countries, allowing U.S. sugar plantation owners to dominate the economy and politics of the islands, but since it was not yet American territory, tariffs still applied. The growing U.S. Navy also coveted a base at Pearl Harbor. Queen Lili'uokalani attempted to consolidate her power over Hawaii's sovereignty, but Samuel Dole (presumably no further explanation needed) had asked President Grover Cleveland to intervene.

Cleveland declined and tried to support the Queen, but thanks to the power of yellow journalism proclaiming attacks on American plantations in Hawaii, U.S. Marines invaded in 1893 under the pretext of protecting American lives and

deposed the queen. McKinley was able to harness the nationalistic fervor engendered by the growing tensions with Spain and complete the annexation in 1900 with Dole as its first governor.^[xiv]

Arguments using the Turner Thesis — westward expansion forged American democracy and character — suggest Americans had begun to realize there were things of value in the world rather than land, which had been the mainstay of western wealth for a millennia before. McKinley supported American business through an expansionist approach that focused on gaining markets for American products, rather than acquiring land. Trump, with real estate as his business for most of his life, seems to have also made this transition to want to secure trade deals rather than expanding our real estate holdings, except for Greenland.

The fate of Hawaii demonstrates another similarity between Trump and McKinley, namely a preference for what is often described as a “transactional approach” to foreign policy that supports U.S. business interests over diplomacy or other traditional stated foreign policy objectives, such as promoting democracy or supporting human rights.^[xv] The effective pressure from Dole on McKinley is only one example of his support of American business interests and gaining markets for them over Cleveland’s apparent preference for diplomacy in that case.

Trump too has moved from trying to maneuver within the constraints of the system in his first term, to setting his own terms in his second term. He has shown a marked preference for people in business, such as making Steve Witkoff, a fellow real estate developer, his primary envoy on the Middle East and Ukraine. Trump also made a point of inviting top tech executives to sit in the front row during his second inauguration. His many meetings with them have caused an apparent shift in their political strategies toward greater support for Trump as he recognizes the benefits of supporting technology business alliances for increasing economic and political power.

The quest for naval bases were part of the 1898 adventures, and through them, the U.S. eventually gained important bases at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and several locations in the Philippines. These were critical for projecting U.S. power overseas to ensure the Spanish Empire would never recoup its losses and to protect growing American international trade. Acquiring Greenland would do the first vis á vis Russia and China, but that market itself is not likely worth the trouble with an economy of only \$3 billion in 2023,^[xvi] even with its estimated, yet thus unexploited, \$1.5 million in rare Earth reserves.^[xvii]

The ire of European Union and NATO members, especially Denmark, over Trump's planned acquisition of Greenland, also fails to magnify American power. In January, Trump doubled down on threats of tariffs up to 25% on Denmark, as well as France, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the UK. The EU retaliated by suspending trade talks and threatening to enact its "Anti-Coercion Instrument," often called a "trade bazooka," that could impose up to \$108 billion in retaliatory tariffs and restrictions on American companies.^[xviii]

Trump has been pressuring NATO to spend more on European security since his first term, but his beef with Europe is not his own invention. Before 9/11, during President George W. Bush's administration, Secretary of then-Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, often referred derogatorily to "old Europe," as if it was in decline. This language was tamped down as the first time Article V of the NATO Convention was activated, and NATO members adhered to the "attack against one is an attack against all" doctrine by supporting U.S. military actions in Afghanistan and elsewhere during the Global War on Terror. Quintessential neoconservative theorist and practitioner Jeane Kirkpatrick, the first woman vice presidential candidate to win a primary in 1984, said after the Cold War, "Most of the international military obligations that we assumed were once important are now outdated. Our alliances should be alliances of equals, with equal risks, burdens and responsibilities."^[xix]

Thus, Presidents Trump and McKinley had many similar views on how to wield and augment American power, suggesting the latest actions are less unusual on our part than media alerts might suggest. The difference lies not within their strategic impulses, but in their operating environments. McKinley's adventurism unfolded in an era of imperialism as world powers vied for territory with little institutional or popular constraint. Trump's neo-adventurism, by contrast, must navigate or dismantle the existing web of alliances, treaties, and international organizations.

This 80-year period of American global dominance, sustained by NATO, the United Nations, and overwhelming military and economic dominance has come to feel like the natural state of international affairs. However, it is actually the aberration from the norm of centuries of great power politics and warfare. The question facing policymakers today is whether 19th-century strategies can succeed in a 21st-century world where economic interdependence, nuclear

weapons, and instant global communications have fundamentally altered adventurism as an optimal policy approach.

Thus, it is not especially surprising that American interest in fighting wars on terrorism has waned and its ability to maneuver in the [Sahel](#) region — where the majority of Islamic terrorism is still occurring — has greatly diminished. In response, the U.S. has increasingly focused closer to home to shore up hegemony in its own backyard, à la the Monroe Doctrine.

What appears in today's news cycles as independent actions — sanctions, seizures, executive orders, military realignment — are part of a much older strategic pattern. The Monroe Doctrine is a foundation rather than a relic, and in 2026, it has become operational and updated. The question now is what shape it will take and what will it cost the region in years to come.

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