

American Manhood and Declaring War on Spain in 1898

Kristin L. Hoganson

On February 15, 1898, an explosion ripped through the United States battleship *Maine* as it sat anchored in the waters just off Havana, Cuba. The blast killed 266 American sailors and ignited a furious cry for revenge within Congress, the press, and the general public. They accused Spain of planting the explosives, and called for war. In April they got their wish. In addition to war, the *Maine* tragedy set off a year-long series of dramatic events that launched the United States on a course that many thought a betrayal of its anticolonial ideals. On February 9, 1899, the Senate approved a treaty that ended the war with Spain and made the United States a colonial power. It now controlled a group of overseas islands: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. What happened?

Cuba and Puerto Rico were the last remnants of a once-sprawling Spanish colonial empire in the Western Hemisphere. Cuban nationalists were especially resentful of Spanish control of their island and, over the decades, had staged periodic revolts. They did so again in 1895, and this one turned especially brutal. In 1896 Spain sent General Valeriano Weyler to put down the rebellion. To undermine the rebel's base of support among Cuban peasants, Weyler forced thousands of rural families to move into Spanish-controlled towns. This "reconcentration" policy led to the deaths of thousands from disease, starvation, and brutal treatment. It also created outrage in the United States and widespread support among Americans for Cuban independence.



This 1900 cartoon shows pacifist and presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan branding President William McKinley an imperialist. Based on evidence presented in the article, was that a fair description of President McKinley's role in events leading up to war with Spain?

Recently elected President William McKinley resisted calls for intervention. Although sympathetic to the Cuban rebels, McKinley was focused on reviving the American economy in the aftermath of the devastating depression of 1893. He also questioned whether the United States army and navy were prepared for war. In January 1898, however, as conditions worsened in Cuba, McKinley sent the battleship *Maine* to Havana in case Americans living there had to be evacuated.

When the *Maine* exploded the following month, chants of "Remember the *Maine*, and the Hell with Spain" were heard around the country. McKinley

again resisted a rush to war, instead appointing a commission to investigate the cause of the explosion. He suspected that the blast was accidental, caused by an internal explosion in the ship's coal bunkers. (Modern investigations of the explosion support this view.) And he knew that the last thing Spain wanted was war with the United States. But most were convinced the Spanish were behind the deed. When McKinley's commission concluded that the blast was external rather than internal, cries for revenge against Spain became irresistible. On April 25, 1898, Congress passed a declaration of war and McKinley signed it. It included an amendment stating that the United States had no territorial designs on Cuba and would not annex that island.

The war lasted about ten weeks and, despite nearly 3,000 American deaths, most agreed with diplomat John Hay when he called it "a splendid little war." But the proposed peace treaty generated controversy. McKinley said of his fellow Americans that imperialism was "foreign to the temper and genius of this free and glorious people." But in treaty negotiations in Paris, the United States insisted that Spain cede control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippine Islands. Also, despite its claim that Cuba would not be annexed, the United States insisted on gaining legal control of that island as well.

Those who favored these demands did so for a variety of reasons. Some believed the United States was now a world power and should join other major nations in the hunt for control of resources in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Caribbean. Others wanted overseas markets so American farmers and manufacturers could sell their surplus products. Still others insisted that the United States had a God-given "mission" to uplift the people of the world by bringing them the blessings of American institutions and values. "What America wants," said one, "is not territorial expansion, but expansion of civilization. We want, not to acquire the Philippines for ourselves, but to give the Philippines free schools, a free church, open courts, no caste, equal rights to all."

Opponents to the proposed treaty countered by organizing the Anti-Imperialist League in 1898. Like those who favored annexation, the League's members had diverse points of view. Some who opposed the treaty were racists; they did not want people of color from Asia and the Caribbean as potential citizens of the United States. Others, like the writer Mark Twain, the educator John Dewey, and the social reformer Jane Addams, argued that imperialism was a betrayal of American traditions. The proposal to gain control of the Philippines was especially vexing to this group. What value, they asked, did control of a cluster of islands 7,000 miles away have to Americans? Especially when the Philippine people were themselves intent upon independence. As Mark Twain put it, "We don't intend to free, but to subjugate, the people of the Philippines."

Nevertheless, in February 1899, the Senate approved the Treaty of Paris—by a single vote. The people of the Philippines rebelled against American control, and the United States embarked upon its first—though

not its last—guerilla war in Southeast Asia. Three years of brutal warfare ensued between Philippine guerillas and well-armed American soldiers. More than 125,000 American troops saw combat, and 4,000 died. Approximately 20,000 Philippine combatants were killed, along with between 200,000 and 5 million Philippine civilians. Many of the civilians died in "relocation" camps set up by American forces. Like the Spanish reconcentration program in Cuba, Americans wanted to separate Philippine peasants from the guerilla forces many of them supported.

The next essay, by Kristin L. Hoganson, is a fascinating portrait of events leading up to war with Spain. Hoganson shows that many members of Congress wanted war with Spain (they were called "jingoos," or those who favor an aggressive foreign policy). Jingoos were convinced that President McKinley's reluctance to go to war indicated he was less than a "man"—and they were not shy about saying so. That McKinley had volunteered for service during the Civil War, and was cited for bravery in combat, did not matter.

Hoganson uses gender stereotypes that existed in the late nineteenth century as a means of shedding light on the debate leading up to war. For Hoganson, the various political and economic issues involved in the war debate, including sincere sympathy for the Cuban rebels, were real. She places those issues within the context of Victorian-era gender ideals as a way of demonstrating that cultural values, including ideas about gender, inform the ways in which politicians approach public policy issues, including war. Members of Congress did not want to appear "weak" or "unmanly" in the aftermath of the *Maine* disaster. And insofar as McKinley urged calm and caution, he was accused of being less than a man. As Theodore Roosevelt, an assistant secretary of the navy at the time (and soon to be president after McKinley's assassination in 1901), put it: McKinley had "no more backbone than a chocolate éclair."

Source: Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 68–69, 70–74, 76–78, 84, 90–94, 99–101, 105–106.

CONGRESS AND WAR

On the night of February 15, 1898, the U.S. battleship *Maine*, which had been sent to Havana to protect American citizens after an outbreak of riots, exploded and sank in Havana harbor. Two hundred and sixty-six men died in the disaster. President McKinley responded to the crisis by appointing a court of naval inquiry. The court's report, submitted on March 25, attributed the explosion to an external source. Although the commission admitted that it could not determine who was responsible, suspicion came to rest on Spain. Not only did Spain have a reputation for perfidy, but, to many Americans, it appeared that only the Spanish government had the technological capabilities

to commit such an act. Americans were outraged at the thought of the Spaniards striking in the dark without giving the sleeping crew a chance to fight. "Splendid sport, indeed! How chivalric!" exclaimed one senator, who, well-versed in the chivalric paradigm for understanding the Spanish-Cuban war, interpreted the incident as yet another manifestation of Spanish treachery.

Americans who blamed the disaster on Spain regarded it as a challenge to American men, particularly because Spain refused to apologize or offer reparations and instead suggested that the men of the *Maine* were at fault. Sen. Richard R. Kenney [Democrat of Delaware] captured the leading sentiment of the day in his response to the supposed Spanish insult: "American manhood and American chivalry give back the answer that innocent blood shall be avenged, starvation and crime shall cease, Cuba shall be free. For such reasons, for such causes, America can and will fight. For such causes and for such reasons, we should have war."

The desire to assert American manhood and chivalry was highly conspicuous in Congress, the most bellicose branch of government in the early months of 1898. As it waited for the investigators' report on the cause of the incident, Congress passed a \$50 million defense appropriation to move the U.S. military to a wartime footing. Congressmen were eager to show their support for the measure. The Senate did not debate the issue at all, passing the \$50 million bill without discussion or an opposing vote. In the House, which also passed the bill unanimously, one word surfaced repeatedly in the discussion over the appropriation—*honor*. On the Democratic side of the House, Rep. John F. Fitzgerald [Democrat of Massachusetts] announced he would vote for the appropriation "to defend the honor and maintain the dignity of this Republic. [Great applause.]" From across the aisle, Rep. Stephen A. Northway [Republican of Ohio] proclaimed that, if necessary, "we will vote to spend not only this appropriation, but millions more in defense of our country and our country's honor. [Applause.]" . . .

Although *honor* had a female component—in 1895 the *Century Dictionary* defined it as "loyalty and high courage in men and chastity in women, as virtues of the highest consideration"—in the context of the debate over war in 1898, *honor* implied male courage rather than female virtue. It referred to a male code of behavior; being honorable meant being manly. Congressmen showed that they connected the chivalrous standard of honor with ideals of manliness by declaring the opposites of honor were effeminacy and childishness. As Rep. John J. Lentz [Democrat of Ohio] questioned, would the nation defend its honor or "remain impotent"? Earlier Lentz had associated dishonor with childishness: "We have not yet awakened to realization of what 'national honor' means when we can go waddling and wabbling along, day in a day out, refusing to hear the cry of the people—'Remember the *Maine*!'"

That congressmen connected manliness and honor is also shown by their tendency to use the word *honor* alongside words that evoked manly qualities, such as *bravery*, *liberty*, *glory*, and *manhood* itself. Sen. George F. Hoar

[Republican from Massachusetts] implied that honor was related to manhood when he expressed fears that "manhood and courage and honor will follow athletes to Yale" if Harvard men did not repudiate Charles Eliot Norton, a professor who discouraged Harvard students from enlisting. At times, congressmen substituted the word *manhood* for *honor* with no perceptible change in meaning, as in a speech by Rep. James R. Mann [Republican from Illinois]: "We do not fight for a fancied slight; we do not fight for a commercial wrong; we do not fight for an increase in territory; we do not fight because our commercial spirit has been outraged; we do not fight because our land has been invaded; we fight because it has become necessary to fight if we would uphold our manhood." In sum, as used in Congress in 1898, *honor* referred to a male code of valorous and self-respecting behavior. Honor was an attribute of a potent, mature, and chivalrous man, of a man who wielded power, who was poised to fight.

The militant understanding of honor that guided the war debate reflected the new standards of passionate manhood that were in the ascendance in the late nineteenth century. As E. Anthony Rotundo and other men's historians have noted, at the end of the century, older standards of self-controlled manhood were giving way to ideals that exalted aggression, toughness, and physical prowess. Late-nineteenth-century standards of manhood valued combativeness; new words like *sissy*, *pussy-foot*, and *stuffed shirt* expressed the rising disfavor with self-restraint. According to the new standards, it was not so much his specific objectives that signaled a man's character but his willingness to fight for whatever he believed in. An advertisement published in the *Boston Journal* at the time of the war debate conveyed this point. The pitch for Dr. Pierce's patent medicine (which promised to cure white-livered men) ran as follows: "A woman judges a man from appearances. If he is energetic and forcible she doesn't always stop to reason why. She . . . applauds the man who fights bravely. He may win, he may lose; but he must never flag; he must fight." . . . The valorization of militant qualities in men benefited jingoists after the *Maine* disaster, as an appreciative editorial from the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* attests: "We may call these war orators 'hotheads,' but what would a nation be without hotheads?" . . .

The congressmen who cited honor as a rationale for war were highly vested in the term because it represented their self-worth and identity as men. They used the concept of honor to connect deeply held individual ideals to public policies. What made this tactic effective was the widespread conviction that the standards that guided individual men should be the standards that guided nations. This certainty led jingoist congressmen to draw on a man and nations analogy to argue for war. The analogy was often only implicit in jingoists' pro-war arguments, but at times they stated it straightforwardly. As Rep. Lorenzo Danford [Republican of Ohio] maintained, "No man ever went to the assistance of a weak and defenseless fellow-being who was being tortured by a brutal master and did not feel that he had done a good act, and did not receive the encouragement and plaudits of manly

men; and so, no nation that goes to the relief of an oppressed people but will grow in the respect of other nations, and what is better than all, in the self-respect of his own people." In his men and nations analogy (clearly a reference to U.S. intervention in the Spanish-Cuban War), Danford suggested that intervention would reflect positively on both American men and their nation, for the virtues admired in one were the virtues admired in the other.

Taking the men and nations analogy to heart, jingoist congressmen applied their personal standards of behavior to international affairs. One congressman who concluded that violence was the only appropriate response to the *Maine* incident was Representative William Sulzer [Democrat of New York]. "I am no jingo crying for war for the sake of war," he said, "but there are things more horrible than war. I would rather be dead upon the battlefield than live under the white flag of national disgrace, national cowardice, national decay, and national disintegration." Sulzer invoked the specter of male cowardice and disgrace to convey the magnitude of the nation's cowardice and disgrace should it fail to intervene. . . . "I have no sympathy with those rash, intemperate spirits who would provoke war simply for the sake of fighting," said Rep. Joseph W. Bailey [Democrat of Texas], "and yet I would rather follow them, and suffer all the miseries and misfortunes their heedlessness would bring than to follow those other contemptible and mercenary creatures who are crying out for 'peace at any price.' [Great applause.]" Bailey elaborated on this point in a later speech: "If in order for a man to preserve his equanimity and to appear cool he must allow insults to pass unanswered, then I prefer to be classed with those who lose their heads. I would infinitely rather lose my head in resenting an insult than to lose my self-respect by submitting to be insulted." Believing that the nation should live up to his personal code of conduct, Bailey called for war.

The conviction that an affront to honor mandated combat led jingoist congressmen to conclude that submitting the *Maine* and Cuban independence issues to arbitration would be unacceptable. "There can not be and must not be any arbitration," Rep. William C. Arnold [Republican of Pennsylvania] said to loud applause. "Our honor is at stake and our flag insulted. If I insult any gentleman in this house should there be arbitration to decide and inform that gentleman whether or not he has been insulted?" . . .

What made a militant defense of honor particularly appealing to jingoes was their assuredness that such a noble undertaking would foster a greater sense of brotherhood in American men. Rep. Mason S. Peters [Populist of Kansas] conveyed this idea in his statement that war would bring men from different parties together "as one man in defense of our country's honor." Other congressmen predicted that war would lead wealthy men to enlist alongside poor men and northern men to serve alongside of southerners. The remarks of Rep. Reese C. De Graffenreid [Democrat of Texas] illustrate the conviction that war was an opportunity to foster brotherhood: "The boys who wore the blue and the boys who wore the gray, reconciled and reunited in the great and grand bonds of true brotherhood

and love, side by side, heart by heart, and hand in hand, will go marching on with the one purpose, the one intention, and one exclamation, that is, woe, irretrievable woe, shall betide that country, that nation, and that people against whom a brother American's blood shall cry to us from the ground." . . .

Along with reminding American men of their common citizenship, war promised to draw attention to the differences between men and women. . . . Rep. Joseph Wheeler [Democrat of Alabama] declared that war would enable American men to recapture a bygone era, an era in which mothers "taught their sons that the highest possible honor and greatest possible privilege was to fight for [their] country, its safety and its honor . . . that an ounce of glory earned in battle was worth more than a million pounds of gold." After the applause had died down he continued: "This is the teaching which we must continue to impress upon our children, and it is the best heritage we can give to those who are to follow us. This and this alone will cause the flag of our country to continue to soar higher and higher and the prestige of this great Republic to extend its power for good in the farthest corners of the earth. [Applause.]" Wheeler believed that war would restore an imagined past in which women dedicated themselves to their families and men won political authority on the battlefield, a past in which women respected men because of their fighting capacities and male honor reigned supreme in public life. . . .

The most vivid demonstration of the belief that action was the manly response to a slight of honor was the hullabaloo in the House on April 13. On that day, according to the *New York Times*, the House was in a state of "frenzied excitement as it considered the prospect for war. Representative Robert B. Henderson [Republican of Iowa] "made an impassioned appeal to the men of the American Congress to act like men. The remark was met with a storm of hisses." Democrats and Republicans accused each other of playing for political advantage. In the discussion, Rep. Charles N. Brumm [Republican of Pennsylvania] called Rep. Charles L. Bartlett [Democrat of Georgia] a liar. "Instantly," ran the description in the *New York Times*, Mr. Bartlett reached for a large bound copy of the *Congressional Record* in the desk before him, and, raising it aloft, hurled it at his adversary. It fell short and then the two antagonists rushed for each other."

The House was immediately in an uproar. Some of the ladies in the galleries screamed. Congressmen crowded into the aisles, "clinging, tugging, hauling at each other like madmen. It was like free fight in the street." Congressmen Bartlett and Brumm tried to "get at each other over the benches, but they were borne back by friends." In the end, the Speaker commanded the sergeant at arms to restore order. Armed with the great silver mace, he "repeatedly charged the thick mass of struggling members, but was as often swept aside." Another House employee was "felled by a blow on the jaw." Finally, a dozen "muscular members" of the House separated the belligerents and a semblance of order was restored. As the House again considered the resolution before it, Representative Henderson said the Republicans

were “overwhelmingly in favor of action, not talk.” His Republican colleagues applauded his pronouncement. The brawl in the House suggests that congressmen’s aggressive personal standards of honor helped make fighting seem a legitimate, if not a desirable, option for the nation. Congressmen who saw violence as an appropriate response to personal insults viewed war with Spain as an appropriate way to resolve international disputes.

Not surprisingly, those who opposed U.S. intervention in the Spanish-Cuban War responded to the outbreak in Congress with horror. After the incident, the Boston reformer Henry B. Blackwell questioned, “How can we expect a Congress which in grave national emergency resorts to blows and personal violence, to exercise national self-restraint and intelligent adaptation of means to ends?” Blackwell interpreted the nation’s path toward war as the result of misguided standards of manly behavior. An ardent women’s suffrage supporter, he thought the war debate demonstrated the need to enfranchise women. That, he opined, would shift the tone of political debate from aggressive posturing to intelligent reflection. As the language of honor drowned out other ways of viewing the war issue, thus leading the nation into war, his daughter, Alice Stone Blackwell, the editor of the pro-suffrage *Woman’s Journal*, cited the war debate to prove suffragists’ point that Congress did not represent American women. “Congress is composed exclusively of men,” wrote the younger Blackwell, “the chosen representatives of all the men of the nation. Assuming for the sake of argument that war is . . . utterly inexcusable . . . it is a Congress of men that has declared it. We must all admit that there is much division of opinion among the women of our acquaintance, while Congress is practically unanimous for war.”

Alice Blackwell’s assertion that the jingoist Congress did not represent American women appears well-founded, for women were more visible on the anti-interventionist side of the debate than the jingoist side. Politically active women who belonged to such groups as the WCTU [Women’s Christian Temperance Union] may have sympathized with the Cubans, but . . . activist women generally viewed the prospect of war between the United States and Spain as a reflection of male values. The lack of modern polling data for this period makes it difficult to gauge the sentiments of women (and of men, for that matter) who did not take public stances on the issue, but it does seem likely that women were less enthusiastic about war than men because women experienced the dictates of honor differently. If a women and nations analogy had guided political debate, war would have seemed absurd, for chivalric traditions did not teach women to respond to insults with violence. To the contrary, one mark of a true woman was that she did not engage in fisticuffs. Furthermore, as the protected class in the chivalric paradigm, women had little reason to think that the *Maine* issue had bearing on their self-worth and identity as women. Unlike men, they were under little pressure to assume a bellicose stance.

In contrast to women, men faced considerable pressure to assume a bellicose stance on the *Maine* issue because of the standard of honor. Jingoists

regarded honor not only as a guide for their own behavior, but also as a potent political tool. They realized that honor signified the manly character so necessary for wielding political authority and thus invoked the term to push their associates toward war. . . .

Jingoists’ efforts to present war as the manly course of action can be seen in Rep. David A. De Armond’s [Democrat of Missouri] claim that warlike sentiments represented “as assertion of American manhood by American representatives.” It can also be seen in pleas exhorting men to act like men by supporting war. Representative Sulzer conflated fighting with manly character in his appeal: “Let us be men. Let us do our duty. Let us be true to our people and to our constituents.” Rep. Samuel B. Cooper [Democrat of Texas] suggested that fighting was as necessary to men’s honor as marriage was to women’s in his assertion that men from his state would “rush to the nation’s defense as swiftly and as cheerfully as ever maiden rushed to the marriage altar. . . .” By portraying themselves as honorable men and their opponents as “nervous old ladies,” jingoists inside and outside of Congress equated martial policies with manly character. . . .

Jingoists’ concerted effort to paint the *Maine* issue as a choice between fighting and dishonor proved so persuasive that few congressmen expressed strong opposition to war in congressional debate. Because congressmen faced so much political pressure to support war, much of the argument against it was developed not on the floors of Congress but in the press and among the wider public. When it came time to vote on a declaration of war, both houses of Congress voted unanimously in favor of it—the Senate in a closed executive session, the House in a resounding chorus of ayes that sparked a round of applause and some cheers from the floor and the galleries. The congressmen who had reservations put them aside lest they or their nation appear less than completely committed to honor.

PRESIDENT MCKINLEY’S “BACKBONE” AND WAR

Those who believed that the manly response to Spanish insults was war won a significantly wider following after the *Maine* disaster. . . . McKinley appointed a court of naval inquiry and urged Americans to suspend judgment until the investigators had reported on the cause of the explosion. Yet even after the investigators submitted a report saying that an external mine had triggered the explosion, McKinley continued to urge restraint. He praised the country for its self-control as he continued to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict. He told his callers that he wanted to avoid war. Instead of assuming a belligerent stance in his message to Congress of March 28, he asked for continued deliberation. Through the American minister in Madrid, McKinley tried to settle the issue without resorting to war. He asked Spain for an armistice in Cuba, negotiations between Spain and the Cuban insurgents mediated by the United States, and a revocation of the Spanish “reconcentration” policy [forced removal of rural Cuban peasants into towns controlled by Spanish forces] that

had caused so much suffering in Cuba. He hinted at the need for Cuban independence but did not demand it outright.

When the Spanish government replied on March 31, it offered to arbitrate the *Maine* incident, abolish reconcentration, and submit the Cuban problem to an insular parliament. But Spain would not suspend hostilities or accept American mediation. After the Spanish reply, McKinley prepared another message to Congress, which he delivered on April 11. In this message, McKinley still did not ask for war. He asked for discretionary power to use the nation's military force, but he kept the possibility of further negotiations alive. Jingoists voiced disappointment at his continued restraint.

McKinley's adversaries responded to the president's refusal to declare war by questioning his manhood. Editorials from the *Atlanta Constitution* illustrate this tactic. One described McKinley as a "goody-goody man" a disappointment in comparison to more militant versions of manhood. Another said that the Cuban crisis revealed McKinley's inability to fill the executive chair. "At this moment there is great need of a man in the White House," it opined. "The people need a man—an American—at the helm." A later editorial continued the theme. It said the people wanted a "declaration of American virility." Only the president, it concluded, was indifferent to the people's demands.

Across the country, anti-administration newspapers joined in the chorus. The *New York Journal* looked forward to seeing "any signs, however faint, of manhood in the White House." "There are manly and resolute ways of dealing with treachery and wrong. There are unmanly and irresolute ways," said a *New York World* editorial which argued that McKinley had not been manly and resolute in his speech to Congress on March 28. The *Chicago Tribune* called McKinley's Cuban policy "a weak, ineffectual, pusillanimous policy," thereby impugning the character of the president. . . . These papers wielded the aggressive working-class standards of manliness that were gaining popularity among middle-class men in the late nineteenth century to contend that the president's self-restraint indicated a lack of manly fiber. They downplayed the moral dimension to manliness and proposed that a real man settled disputes with force; he did not hesitate to use military power.

The press was not alone in questioning the president's manhood. Constituents wrote to their congressmen to complain about McKinley's character. One voter heatedly declared, "It is the verdict of the people that we have an executive whose timidity and lack of nerve and bravery and appreciation of American honor and dignity unfit him for the presidency in such a crisis." Bellicose congressmen agreed that McKinley was not demonstrating enough manliness. Sen. John W. Daniel [Democrat of Virginia] accused the administration of having lost the "virile instincts of the American people." Sen. George Turner [Populist of Washington] described the administration's response to the crisis as "lame, halting, and impotent,"

characteristics that seemed as likely to refer to the president as to his policies. "He wobbles, he waits, he hesitates. He changes his mind," said Rep. William Sulzer . . . in disgust.

The critics' various complaints—that the president was weak, indecisive, effeminate, cowardly, and ineffectual—were encapsulated in the contention that he lacked backbone. Theodore Roosevelt's remark that "McKinley has no more backbone than a chocolate éclair" is the best-known evaluation of McKinley's spine, but it was by no means the only disparaging one. In early April the president of a Wisconsin savings bank grouched in a letter to Sen. John C. Spooner [Republican of Wisconsin], "Our president has no backbone." A few days later, a New Hampshire man wrote his senator, [Republican] William E. Chandler, that McKinley should step aside because he did not have "the nerve and the backbone to resent such damnable insults." After commenting that the president did not seem to have "sufficient backbone even to resent an offense as gross as this," the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* said all was not lost, for Congress could declare war without him. . . .

Realizing that the crisis lent weight to the aspersions cast upon McKinley, the president's allies responded by attributing to him qualities—such as bravery and strength—that even his opponents associated with manhood. The president's self-control, wrote one supporter, demanded more courage than "any which is needed amid the excitement of battle." The *Los Angeles Times* praised McKinley for his "stamina, nerve, and backbone," and the *Baltimore Sun* applauded his "firmness and strength of character" and said that at times the "moral courage not to fight" should be valued more highly than the "physical courage to fight." As the positive references to McKinley's courage, strength, and backbone indicate, McKinley's defenders drew on the same terms used by his critics. They, too, recognized the importance of appearing manly to wielding political power, and hence they tried to refute the slurs against McKinley. . . .

Significantly, those who championed McKinley drew on old middle-class ideals of manhood that placed more emphasis on self-control, moral virtue, courage of convictions, and strength of principle than on violent outbreaks or bellicose posturing. They applauded McKinley's "firmness and strength of character" and cited the president's "dignity," "firmness," and "statesmanlike" behavior to prove that he had the manly character necessary to lead. The restrained version of manliness that many McKinley loyalists endorsed was consistent with their circumspect approach to international relations. Those who valued mental and moral rather than physical power in the leaders were more likely to consider the president's course to be, as one adherent described it, "wise, manly and just."

As he contemplated how to respond to the sinking of the *Maine*, McKinley faced a number of issues: humanitarian concerns, the interests of American businessmen in Cuba, the impact of a war on the entire American economy, and the potential for coaling stations and strategic bases. Added

to these were concerns for his reputation and credibility as a leader and the implications of his image for his party. McKinley suffered the constraint of being a first-term president in a political system that valued a military style of manliness in leaders. McKinley was deeply sensitive to public opinion. As he assessed the tenor of the war debate, he undoubtedly realized that his perceived cowardice in foreign affairs was undermining his credibility as a leader, and that it threatened to sink his administration along with the *Maine*.

The president had good reason to be apprehensive about charges of cowardice because, regardless of his youthful Civil War record, he was not universally esteemed as a great military hero or forceful leader. The up-and-coming Theodore Roosevelt was not alone in thinking that despite his military record, McKinley was “not a strong man.” The sedate McKinley did not embody the new standards of active, athletic, aggressive manhood. He had never enjoyed hunting, and when he tried fishing once as president, in his frock coat and silk hat, he capsized the boat and ruined his shoes and pants. The clean-shaven McKinley was the only president between Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson not to have a beard or mustache, signs of masculinity.

On March 30 McKinley burst into tears as he told a friend that Congress was trying to drive the nation into war. He remembered the Civil War [in which he fought] as a horrible conflict and had hoped that international arbitration would replace war as a means of settling international disputes. McKinley did not want war, but neither did he want to wreck his presidency. Aware of his growing reputation as a spineless leader and recognizing that Republican legislators would be unwilling to go along with his new peace initiative, McKinley drafted a message in early April that put the Cuban matter into the hands of the infamously bellicose Congress. . . .

On April 19 Congress submitted a resolution to the president authorizing him to intervene to end the war in Cuba. McKinley felt he had no choice but to sign, although he knew the resolution would surely lead to war. Spain immediately severed diplomatic relations with the United States. On April 22 the United States imposed a naval blockade of Cuba; on April 24 Spain declared war; and on April 25 McKinley asked Congress to declare war. Congress did so eagerly, predating the start of war to April 21.

McKinley’s scanty personal records mean that arguments about his motives (gender-based or otherwise) ultimately must be based on conjecture. But even though McKinley did not record his rationale, the debate over his backbone shows that gendered ideas about leadership limited the range of politically viable options available to him. McKinley’s backbone became a central issue in the debate over war because political activists, whether Republicans, Democrats, or Populists, believed that manly character mattered in politics. Men from across the country agreed that the character of the nation’s leaders attested to the acceptability of their policies, and following the *Maine* disaster, increasing numbers of men demanded a militant leader. Aware of the links between manhood, military prowess, and political power (indeed, eager to take advantage of them in the campaign of 1896), McKinley

reached the logical conclusion that war was politically imperative. His decision to join the jingoes was less a reflection of his courage or cowardice, strength or weakness, than an acknowledgment that the political system he operated in would not permit any other course of action.

Questions for Discussion

1. According to the author, how did congressmen’s views about honor and manhood help lead the United States into war with Spain? Do you agree with her argument?
2. How were ideas about honor applied differently to women and men?
3. Both the defenders and detractors of President McKinley used terms such as “manhood” and “backbone.” How did each group define these terms?
4. As described in this essay, the executive and legislative branches acted as though they had a co-equal role to play during the *Maine* crisis, the war debate, and the declaration of war. In your opinion, would that be true today?

For Further Reading

Michael Adams, *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I* (1990); Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Woman’s Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women’s Rights* (1993); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Race and Gender in the United States, 1880–1917* (1995); Benjamin Beede, ed., *The War of 1898 and U.S. Intervention, 1898–1934* (1994); Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve Against War: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898–1900* (1968); H. W. Brands, *Bound to Empire: The United States and the Philippines* (1992); Brian Damiani, *Advocates of Empire: William McKinley, the Senate, and American Expansionism, 1898–1899* (1987); John M. Dobson, *Reticent Expansionism: The Foreign Policy of William McKinley* (1988); Peter Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America*, 3rd ed. (1998); Frank Freidel, *The Splendid Little War* (1958); Lewis L. Gould, *The Spanish-American War and President McKinley* (1982); Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, eds., *Gender and International Relations* (1991); David Healy, *Drive to Hegemony: The United States in the Caribbean, 1898–1917* (1988); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996); Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899–1902* (2002); Paul T. McCartney, *Power and Progress: American National Identity, the War of 1898, and the Rise of American Imperialism* (2006); G. J. A. O’Toole, *The Spanish War: An American Epic—1898* (1986); Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877–1919* (1987); David Pugh, *Sons of Liberty: The Masculine Mind in Nineteenth-Century America* (1983); Harvey Rosenfeld, *Diary of a Dirty Little War: The Spanish-American War of 1898* (2000); Anthony E. Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (1993); Joseph Smith, *The Spanish-American War: Conflict in the Caribbean and the Pacific, 1895–1902* (1994); David Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (1981); David Traxel, *1898: The Birth of the American Century* (1998).