

**WILLIAM MCKINLEY;  
MEMORIAL ADDRESS; DELIVERED  
IN THE  
CAPITOL FEBRUARY 27, 1902 BY  
INVITATION OF THE CONGRESS**

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William McKinley; memorial address; delivered in the Capitol February 27, 1902 by invitation of the Congress by John Hay

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**JOHN HAY**

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# WILLIAM McKINLEY

## MEMORIAL ADDRESS

BY

JOHN HAY

DELIVERED IN THE CAPITOL FEBRUARY 27, 1902  
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## WILLIAM MCKINLEY.

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For the third time the Congress of the United States are assembled to commemorate the life and the death of a President slain by the hand of an assassin. The attention of the future historian will be attracted to the features which reappear with startling sameness in all three of these awful crimes: the uselessness, the utter lack of consequence of the act; the obscurity, the insignificance of the criminal; the blamelessness — so far as in our sphere of existence the best of men may be held blameless — of the victim. Not one of our murdered Presidents had an enemy in the world; they were all of such preëminent purity of life that no pretext could be given for the attack of passion; they were all men of democratic instincts, who could never have offended the most jealous advocates of equality; they were of kindly and generous nature, to whom wrong or injustice was impossible; of moderate fortune, whose slender means nobody could envy. They were men of austere virtue, of tender heart, of eminent abilities, which they had devoted with single minds to the good of the Republic. If ever men walked before God and man without blame, it was these three rulers of our people. The only temptation to attack their lives offered was their gentle radiance — to eyes hating the light that was offence enough.

The stupid uselessness of such an infamy affronts the common sense of the world. One can conceive how the death of a dictator may change the political conditions of an Empire; how the extinction of a narrowing line of kings may bring in an alien dynasty. But in a well-ordered Republic like ours, the ruler may fall, but the state feels no tremor. Our beloved and revered leader is gone — but the natural process of our laws provides us a successor, identical in purpose and ideals, nourished by the same teachings, inspired by the same principles, pledged by tender affection as well as by high loyalty to carry to completion the immense task committed to his hands, and to smite with iron severity every manifestation of that hideous crime which his mild predecessor, with his dying breath, forgave. The sayings of celestial wisdom have no date; the words that reach us, over two thousand years, out of the darkest hour of gloom the world has ever known, are true to the life to-day: "They know not what they do." The blow struck at our dear friend and ruler was as deadly as blind hate could make it; but the blow struck at anarchy was deadlier still.

What a world of insoluble problems such an event excites in the mind! Not merely in its personal but in its public aspects it presents a paradox not to be comprehended. Under a system of government so free and so impartial that we recognize its existence only by its benefactions; under a social order so purely democratic that classes cannot exist in it, affording opportunities so universal that even conditions are as changing as the winds, where the laborer of to-day is the capitalist of to-morrow; under laws which are the result of ages of evolution, so uniform and so beneficent that the President has just the same rights and privileges as the artisan; — we see the same hellish growth of hatred and murder

which dogs equally the footsteps of benevolent monarchs and blood-stained despots. How many countries can join with us in the community of a kindred sorrow! I will not speak of those distant regions where assassination enters into the daily life of government. But among the nations bound to us by the ties of familiar intercourse — who can forget that wise and high-minded autocrat who had earned the proud title of the Liberator? that enlightened and magnanimous citizen whom France still mourns? that brave and chivalrous King of Italy who only lived for his people? and, saddest of all, that lovely and sorrowing Empress, whose harmless life could hardly have excited the animosity of a demon. Against that devilish spirit nothing avails — neither virtue, nor patriotism, nor age, nor youth, nor conscience, nor pity. We cannot even say that education is a sufficient safeguard against this baleful evil — for most of the wretches whose crimes have so shocked humanity in recent years are men not unlettered, who have gone from the common schools through murder to the scaffold.

Our minds cannot discern the origin nor conceive the extent of wickedness so perverse and so cruel; but this does not exempt us from the duty of trying to control and counteract it. We do not understand what electricity is, whence it comes or what its hidden properties may be. But we know it as a mighty force for good or evil — and so with the painful toil of years, men of learning and skill have labored to store and to subjugate it, to neutralize, and even to employ its destructive energies. This problem of anarchy is dark and intricate, but it ought to be within the compass of democratic government — although no sane mind can fathom the mysteries of these untracked and orbitless natures — to guard against their aberrations, to take away from them



the hope of escape, the long luxury of scandalous days in court, the unwholesome sympathy of hysterical degenerates, and so by degrees to make the crime not worth committing, even to these abnormal and distorted souls.

It would be presumptuous for me in this presence to suggest the details of remedial legislation for a malady so malignant. That task may safely be left to the skill and patience of the National Congress, which have never been found unequal to any such emergency. The country believes that the memory of three murdered comrades of yours—all of whose voices still haunt these walls—will be a sufficient inspiration to enable you to solve even this abstruse and painful problem, which has dimmed so many pages of history with blood and with tears.

Before an audience less sympathetic than this I should not dare to speak of that great career which we have met to commemorate. But we are all his friends, and friends do not criticise each other's words about an open grave. I thank you for the honor you have done me in inviting me here, and not less for the kind forbearance I know I shall have from you in my most inadequate efforts to speak of him worthily.

The life of William McKinley was, from his birth to his death, typically American. There is no environment, I should say, anywhere else in the world which could produce just such a character. He was born into that way of life which elsewhere is called the middle class, but which in this country is so nearly universal as to make of other classes an almost negligible quantity. He was neither rich nor poor, neither proud nor humble; he knew no hunger he was not sure of satisfying, no luxury which could enervate mind or body. His parents were sober, God-fearing people; intelligent and up-

right; without pretension and without humility. He grew up in the company of boys like himself: wholesome, honest, self-respecting. They looked down on nobody; they never felt it possible they could be looked down upon. Their houses were the homes of probity, piety, patriotism. They learned in the admirable school readers of fifty years ago the lessons of heroic and splendid life which have come down from the past. They read in their weekly newspapers the story of the world's progress, in which they were eager to take part, and of the sins and wrongs of civilization, with which they burned to do battle. It was a serious and thoughtful time. The boys of that day felt dimly, but deeply, that days of sharp struggle and high achievement were before them. They looked at life with the wondering yet resolute eyes of a young esquire in his vigil of arms. They felt a time was coming when to them should be addressed the stern admonition of the Apostle, "Quit you like men; be strong."

It is not easy to give to those of a later generation any clear idea of that extraordinary spiritual awakening which passed over the country at the first red signal fires of the Civil War. It was not our earliest apocalypse: a hundred years before the nation had been revealed to itself, when after long discussion and much searching of heart the people of the colonies had resolved that to live without liberty was worse than to die, and had therefore wagered in the solemn game of war "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor." In a stress of heat and labor unutterable, the country had been hammered and welded together; but thereafter for nearly a century there had been nothing in our life to touch the innermost fountain of feeling and devotion. We had had rumors of wars, — even wars we had had, not without

sacrifices and glory, — but nothing which went to the vital self-consciousness of the country, nothing which challenged the nation's right to live. But in 1860 the nation was going down into the Valley of Decision. The question which had been debated on thousands of platforms, which had been discussed in countless publications, which, thundered from innumerable pulpits, had caused in their congregations the bitter strife and dissension to which only cases of conscience can give rise, was everywhere pressing for solution. And not merely in the various channels of publicity was it alive and clamorous. About every fireside in the land, in the conversation of friends and neighbors, and, deeper still, in the secret of millions of human hearts, the battle of opinion was waging; and all men felt and saw — with more or less clearness — that an answer to the importunate question, Shall the nation live? was due, and not to be denied. And I do not mean that in the North alone there was this austere wrestling with conscience. In the South as well, below all the effervescence and excitement of a people perhaps more given to eloquent speech than we were, there was the profound agony of question and answer, the summons to decide whether honor and freedom did not call them to revolution and war. It is easy for partisanship to say that the one side was right and that the other was wrong. It is still easier for an indolent magnanimity to say that both were right. Perhaps in the wide view of ethics one is always right to follow his conscience, though it lead him to disaster and death. But history is inexorable. She takes no account of sentiment and intention; and in her cold and luminous eyes that side is right which fights in harmony with the stars in their courses. The men are right through whose efforts and struggles the world is helped