

Though hardly regarded as one of America's greatest presidents, William McKinley (1897–1901) suddenly, if briefly, became the focus of heated political debate in the summer of 2015 after the Alaska mountain bearing his name was changed by President Obama. McKinley's supporters missed an opportunity to illuminate the president's environmental record.

MEASURED IMPACT

WILLIAM B. MCKINLEY AND
LATE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY CONSERVATION

Two things happened to the tallest mountain in North America in the late summer of 2015. On August 30, President Barak Obama announced that he was using his executive power to change Mount McKinley's name back to Denali, a term sacred to the native peoples of Alaska, and in regular use by

them and nonnative residents of the 49th state. Several days later the towering, snow-capped mountain's official elevation shrank by 10 feet; employing more precise measurement tools than those available in the 1950s, when it had last been officially measured, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) reported that Denali was 20,310 feet and not 20,320, as had been estimated 60 years ago. Only one of these alterations generated much controversy.¹

Among those perturbed at the presidential renaming was John Boehner, then speaker of the U.S. House and a congressional representative from Ohio, the state from which President William B. McKinley hailed. "I am deeply disappointed in this decision," Speaker Boehner declared in a press release. He then ticked off the reasons why the 44th president should not have summarily changed a designation that honored the 25th: "President McKinley's name has served atop the highest peak in North America for more than 100 years, and that is because it is a testament to his great legacy. McKinley served our country with distinction during the Civil War as a member of the Army. He made a difference for his constituents and his state as a member of the

House of Representatives and as Governor of the great state of Ohio. And he led this nation to prosperity and victory in the Spanish-American War as the 25th President of the United States."²

Other Ohio Republicans joined the fray, including Senator Ron Portman: "The naming of the mountain has been a topic of discussion in Congress for many years. This decision by the Administration is yet another example of the President going around Congress. I now urge the Administration to work with me to find alternative ways to preserve McKinley's legacy somewhere else in the national park that once bore his name."³

Far more intemperate were the reactions of some candidates for the 2016 GOP presidential nomination. Donald Trump tweeted, "President Obama wants to change the name of Mt. McKinley to Denali after more than 100 years. Great insult to Ohio. I will change back!" Not to be outdone was Senator Ted Cruz. "It is the latest manifestation of the megalomaniacal, imperial presidency that we have seen for six and a half years," the Texan fumed. "This administration has been the most lawless administration we have ever seen. And this president routinely

BY CHAR MILLER

disregards the law, disregards the Constitution, disregards the Congress.”⁴

The political agendas driving these verbal pyrotechnics meant that Cruz and crew missed an opportunity to use McKinley’s record on conservation to undergird their claims that his name should not have been stripped from the Alaskan mountain. But even if their staffs had had the time or inclination to develop a historical case for why McKinley deserved this honor, they would have found little evidence in the many biographies written about how the so-called Idol of Ohio supported the conservation movement of the late nineteenth century and defined some of its political options. There are several reasons for that lacuna in the historiography, the most significant being that McKinley was murdered early in his second term. His assassination—as has happened with the scholarship surrounding Presidents Lincoln, Garfield, and Kennedy—has loomed over the broader discussion of his presidency; his sudden demise has framed the narrative arc of his life and career. This was as true of memorial volumes that appeared shortly after he was gunned down in Buffalo on September 6, 1901, as in the more considered political biographies that appeared later in the twentieth century.⁵

McKinley’s contemporaries and subsequent commentators also have focused heavily on his central role in the runup to and the prosecution of the Spanish-American War, seeing in it the launch of a new stage in the evolution of the American nation-state—potent and imperial. Noting that foreign affairs “dominated McKinley’s presidency, and [that] he engaged them in a way that made his office far more powerful by 1901,” historian Lewis Gould drew a notable conclusion: “William McKinley was the first modern president.” This distinction is usually assigned to Theodore Roosevelt, who ascended to the presidency following McKinley’s death, but Gould makes a strong case for McKinley, not least because of “his important contributions to the strengthening and broadening of the power of the chief executive.” Those new authorities apparently did not extend to conservation, forestry, or forests, to cite some of the related keywords that are missing in the index to Gould’s study—and in those of his predecessors. On matters conservationist, President McKinley seems to have been a nonplayer.⁶

Yet from the very moment he was sworn in as president on March 4, 1897, McKinley was embroiled in a furious fight over



In this presidential campaign poster, William McKinley is celebrated and supported by representatives of labor, the military, industry, and others. This is the image his present-day supporters like Speaker Boehner alluded to in their remarks.

actions his immediate predecessor, Grover Cleveland, had taken two weeks before to expand the nation’s forest reserve system. No sooner had McKinley walked into the White House than he was immersed in a formative debate over forest policy and the role that conservation would play in the development of a more forceful executive branch in the management of domestic affairs.

Cleveland had added five million acres to the forest reserves at the beginning of his administration and then stopped to wait for Congress to provide the means to protect them.⁷ After much debate, the National Academy of Sciences formed an investigative commission in February 1896. Its members included Charles S.

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This cartoon from 1896 shows President Cleveland standing on the right, holding an axe labeled “Political Wisdom,” in a forest where he has been cutting trees labeled “Gold Standard,” the hot political topic of the 1896 election. Approaching from the left is a procession led by Mark A. Hanna, as drum major, followed by William McKinley, Garret A. Hobart, Benjamin Harrison, and others. The caption reads: “President Cleveland. He blazed the path that they have got to follow.” The image can be seen as a metaphor for the forest reserves, with the trees marked “gold standard” standing in for the forest reserves.

Sargent, Henry Abbott, William H. Brewer, Alexander Agassiz, and Gifford Pinchot. The commission’s official title perfectly describes its charge: The Committee on the Inauguration of a Rational Forest Policy for the Forested Lands of the United States. Because the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 did not stipulate how the reserves would be managed, President Cleveland and other officials wanted the commission to identify a clear, “rational” set of managerial policies. After spending several months touring the western states to assess what is now called the ecological benefits and economic value of the 18 million acres then in the system (and other lands that might be included), the commissioners proposed a sharp increase in the number and extent of the reserves and recommended that these lands be actively managed, leading Cleveland to create 13 new reserves totaling upward of 21 million acres. Dubbed the Washington Birthday Reserves because his proclamation occurred on the first president’s birthday, the set aside came as a shock to local and state governments in the West as well as their congressional delegations, none of which were consulted in advance. The region erupted in anger. The Seattle Chamber of Commerce, for example, confidently asserted that if “there is a man within the boundaries of the State who favors [the reserves] or considers them of any value to the National Government or of any use to the coming generations, he has not been discovered” and denounced Cleveland’s act as “an amazing instance of the

indifference of the East to the facts, conditions, necessities, and rights of the people of the West.” This “galling insult to local sovereignty and its just pride” should not stand.⁸

This was hardly the most opportune time for McKinley to enter the White House, and his ascension was made all the more complicated by an amendment in a pending appropriations bill that revoked Cleveland’s forest reserve proclamation—legislation that Cleveland pocket-vetoed in his final hours in office, deepening the political turmoil. This forced the incoming president to call a special session of Congress, giving the proponents and opponents of the forest reserves an opportunity to plead with the White House, work the cloakrooms of Congress, and draft competing amendments to the new spending bill. Among those working at top speed were members of the National Forest Commission. Gifford Pinchot’s diary records his and others’ negotiations with administration officials, congressional leaders, and one another, a seemingly endless round of politicking, pleading, and persuading. Charles Walcott, director of the USGS, whom Pinchot credited with saving the reserves, made a game-changing presentation to the cabinet on April 2. On entering the cabinet’s meeting room, Walcott recounted, President McKinley “explained to me that [Interior] Secretary Bliss had told him of the legislation, and asked me to explain it to him and to the Cabinet. I did so, and before leaving was assured that it met with his approval.” Three days



By 1897, Presidents Harrison and Cleveland had set aside approximately 39 million acres as federal forest reserves. But 21 million of those acres were in dispute when William McKinley (inset portrait) took office in March of that year.

later, several members of the National Forest Commission also met with the president about the need for legislation to administer the national forest reserves. Pinchot wrote, “President strong for the reserves. He impressed me very favorably.”⁹

The impression was reflected as well in the redoubled energy of McKinley’s administration, particularly Secretary of the Interior Cornelius Bliss, General Land Office Commissioner Binger Hermann, and Director Walcott, in whose offices Pinchot and his peers gathered to rework proposed amendments. With strong signals of support from the White House, including face-to-face meetings with Republican Party stalwarts chairing key committees—notably Senator William Allison (R-Iowa) of the Appropriations Committee and Representative John Lacey (R-Iowa) of the Public Lands Committee—McKinley made it clear that he wanted to put this “bitter controversy” to rest. Presidential intervention thus opened the way for an amendment to the appropriations bill that would “suspend” the Cleveland reserves for nine months and, more importantly, provide the statutory authority for the management of these lands. The legislation that President McKinley subsequently signed on June 4, 1897, granted the secretary of the Interior the power to develop rules and regulations by which the reserves would be managed; the General Land Office was charged with protecting these landscapes so as “to improve and protect the forest within the reservation, or for the purpose of securing favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of citizens of the United States.” Without this legislation, and without McKinley’s stout support of it, the forest reserves as an idea and institution would have collapsed. It is hard to imagine, moreover, how out of this potential setback it would have been possible later to develop what we know today as the U.S. Forest Service and

the 193 million acres of national forests it stewards.¹⁰

McKinley also set the context for the manner in which Gifford Pinchot, who joined the executive branch in July 1898 as the fourth head of the Forestry Division in the Department of Agriculture, would pursue his most important goal: the transfer of the forest reserves from Interior to Agriculture, or in the more tactful language that Pinchot employed at the time, the “consolidation” of all the nation’s forest work in his home department and under his bureau’s supervision. In late 1899, Pinchot had begun sounding out colleagues inside and outside government about the feasibility of his idea, even drafting a proposed amendment that would serve as a talking point in these conversations. Although the responses were mixed, James Wilson, secretary of Agriculture, brought the possibility to the cabinet in late January 1900, returning with a piece of good news. The new Interior secretary, Ethan Hitchcock, was “in favor of consolidating in Agriculture Department & McKinley also.” In a follow-up conference between the president and the two relevant cabinet secretaries the next day, McKinley gave Pinchot and Walcott the green light: “Saw Secretary Wilson,” Pinchot wrote, “who said that he & Hitchcock had agreed, after a conference with the president, that Walcott & I should see interested senators.” Their lobbying was set within strict bounds the president established: “The matter would not be passed in the face of determined opposition.” By which McKinley, who had long experience reading the legislative tea leaves, signaled that although he supported the transfer, he would not push Congress further than it wanted to be pushed. As it turned out, neither the House nor the Senate had much interest in pursuing the matter, as Pinchot discovered when he and Walcott made the rounds on Capitol Hill. On February 2, 1900, after ally Senator Addison Foster (R-Washington) conveyed how many negative votes he

PHOTO COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; CAT. #9632589/MAP BY JUDY DERSCH & RUTH WILLIAMS, USDA FOREST SERVICE

had tallied, Pinchot conceded: “This kills it for this session.”¹¹

Much of this jockeying was out of the public eye, as was President McKinley’s strategic approach to the management of federal politics. This is consistent with what Pinchot, for one, appreciated about the chief executive, who emerges in the forester’s accounts as thoughtful, well informed, and unflappable. About one of the strategy meetings Pinchot attended in the White House, he observed, “As McKinley, quiet and unruffled, came into the Cabinet Room where we waited, almost the first thing he said was: ‘Everybody who comes here brings a crisis along.’” Defusing such tensions was among McKinley’s virtues, Pinchot believed. Another was that the president did not shirk from the opportunity to expand the forest reserves, despite knowing that vocal opposition to them remained in the nation’s capital and out West. In the spring of 1898, McKinley redesignated portions of the public lands along the central coast of California, creating what in time became Los Padres National Forest, and in central Arizona, establishing the forerunner of the Prescott National Forest. One year later, McKinley added three more forests, the Gallatin in south-central Montana, the Gila in southwestern New Mexico, and the Tahoe in the central Sierra of California. Although these additions were much smaller in number and extent than those of his predecessors—Benjamin Harrison put the initial 13 million acres into the system, and Grover Cleveland added 26 million—McKinley’s five forests, which totaled a more modest seven million acres, marked a significant turning point in the history of public lands management in the United States. These were the first forests that at their origin were under direct regulatory control of rangers employed by the Department of the Interior, as required by the 1897 Organic Act. Theodore Roosevelt would add upward of 150 million acres to the National Forest System, building off his predecessor’s precedent.¹²

One of the forests Roosevelt enlarged was the Los Padres, where a scenic feature offers a rebuttal to those decrying President Obama’s decision to erase McKinley’s name from a very tall Alaskan mountain. Deep in the forest’s rugged backcountry rises McKinley Mountain, located in the San Rafael range in Santa Barbara County. Though smaller than Denali (it tops out at 6,220 feet), it lies in a national forest that McKinley actually established, noted Roy Harthorn in the *Los Angeles Times*. “Instead of lamenting the renaming of Mt. McKinley to Denali in Alaska—a place far removed from any of his actual accomplishments—those seeking geographical recognition of President William McKinley’s environmental record can find a more meaningful one here at home in our own backyard.” After all, Harthorn explained in a fittingly measured epitaph for a president whose conservation record has not always received its due, what “matters more than the name is McKinley’s contributions, which are the longer lasting.”¹³ □

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NOTES

1. Michael A. Memoli, “Mt. McKinley, America’s Tallest Peak, Is Getting Back Its Name: Denali,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-alaska-mckinley-denali-20150830-story.html>, accessed

September 7, 2015. The story is complex and the issue longstanding. In 1975, the Alaska Board of Geographic Names changed the mountain’s name to Denali, and that year the Alaska State Legislature formally asked the U.S. Board of Geographic Names to follow suit. Five years later, through the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (1980), which President Jimmy Carter signed into law, McKinley National Park was absorbed into the much larger Denali National Park and Preserve: <http://www.npsa.org/news/media-center/fact-sheets/anilca.html>, accessed September 8, 2015. Between 1975 and 2015, Ohio representatives repeatedly blocked all efforts to rename the mountain; see, for example, “New Effort to Rename Denali,” *Juneau Empire*, August 20, 2001, http://juneauempire.com/stories/082001/sta_denali.shtml#.Ve4y1lpKfoA, accessed September 7, 2015.

2. Niels Lesniewski, “Boehner’s Latest Fight with Obama? Renaming Mount McKinley,” *Roll Call*, August 30, <http://blogs.rollcall.com/white-house/john-boehners-fight-with-obama-renaming-mount-mckinley/?dcz=>, accessed September 5, 2015.
3. Ibid.
4. Robert Schroeder, “Trump Says Mount McKinley Name Change ‘Insult to Ohio,’” *Market Watch*, September 1, 2015, <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/trump-says-mount-mckinley-name-change-insult-to-ohio-2015-09-01>, accessed September 5, 2015; Sylvan Lane, “Ted Cruz: McKinley Renaming Is Latest Act of Obama’s ‘Megalomaniacal, Imperial Presidency,’” *Dallas Morning News*, September 2, 2015, <http://trailblazersblog.dallasnews.com/2015/09/ted-cruz-mckinley-renaming-is-latest-act-of-obamas-megalomaniacal-imperial-presidency.html/>, accessed September 5, 2015. The Alaska congressional delegation, all Republicans, did not feel disregarded—it was in full support of the president’s decision: Matthew Smith, “Murkowski Thanks Obama for Restoring Denali,” *Alaska Public Media*, August 31, 2015, <http://www.alaskapublic.org/2015/08/31/murkowski-thanks-obama-for-restoring-denali-obama-directs-his-gaze-on-climate-change/>, accessed September 5, 2015.
5. Marshall Everett, *Complete Life of William McKinley and Story of His Assassination: An Authentic and Official Memorial Edition* (Chicago: C.W. Stanton, 1901); John Hay, *William McKinley: Memorial Address* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1902); Alexander K. McClure and Charles Morris, *The Authentic Life of William McKinley, Our Third Martyr President: Together with a Life Sketch of Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1901); Charles S. Olcott, *William McKinley* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916); James Ford Rhodes, *The McKinley and Roosevelt Administrations, 1897–1909* (New York: MacMillan, 1923); Margaret Leech, *In the Days of McKinley* (New York: Harper, 1959); H. Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1963); Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1980).
6. Gould, *Presidency of William McKinley*, vii, 231–53.
7. Harold K. Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976; Durham, NC: Forest History Society, Centennial Edition, 2004), 28.
8. Ibid., 30–34; *A History of the First Half-Century of the National Academy of Sciences, 1863–1913* (Baltimore: Lord Baltimore Press, 1913), 314–20; “Memorial of the Chamber of Commerce and the Citizens of Seattle, Relative to Forest Reserves in the State of Washington, March 12, 1897,” 55th Congress, 1st Session, Document 68, 8–11, in *Pamphlets on Forest Influences, Volume 9*, accessed at books.google.com on September 25, 2015.
9. Harold K. Steen, ed., *The Conservation Diaries of Gifford Pinchot* (Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 2001), quote: 77; Pinchot’s account of the frenetic activity surrounding the forest reserves debate, 75–78.
10. Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1998), 113–14; *55th Congress, 1st Session, Chapter 2*, 35–37, <http://uscode.house.gov/statviewer.htm?volume=30&page=34#>, accessed September 6, 2015; Char Miller, *America’s Great National Forests, Wildernesses, and Grasslands* (New York: Rizzoli, in press, 2016).
11. Steen, *Pinchot Diaries*, 98–99; Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, 115.
12. Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, 115;
13. McKinley Mountain, topo, <http://www.hundredpeaks.org/guides/06f.htm>; *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/readersreact/la-le-0903-thursday-denali-mckinley-20150903-story.html>, accessed September 7, 2015. There is one other peak named for McKinley in Southern California, in the Angeles National Forest; this Mount McKinley has an elevation of 4,926 feet.