Diplomat in Khaki

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An Available Agent

Schooled in Cuba, Europe, and the Far East, McCoy had established himself as an able soldier whose competence extended well beyond strictly military matters. Thanks to his highly visible position as Wood’s aide, McCoy’s reputation reached beyond the army’s ranks, bringing him to the attention of civilian officials—most notably the president—who on occasion required the services of a discreet and politically astute military officer. Over the next several years, this reputation earned McCoy a series of assignments in which he functioned as the eyes and ears of officials charged with deciding matters about which they lacked adequate firsthand knowledge.¹

McCoy’s first chance to engage in this new role came while he was still in the Far East. In late 1905, the hero of the Ali expedition took a brief leave in Japan. On his first holiday since arriving in the Philippines, McCoy welcomed the chance to cut loose from all the ties of work and responsibility and to explore the Japanese countryside. That Japan was fresh from its triumph over Russia only added further interest. In Tokyo, McCoy called at the War Ministry, toured Japanese military installations, and dined with the American chargé d’affaires, Francis Huntington Wilson, and with the military attaché, Capt. John J. Pershing—both old acquaintances. In early December, however, a cable from Wood interrupted his vacation; it directed McCoy, without explanation, to Canton. Confidential instructions explaining his mission would await his arrival at the American consulate.²

Canton in December 1905 was the lone holdout in a boycott against American goods that since midyear had enveloped the principal cities of China.


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Although in a broad sense the movement reflected China's swelling nationalism, the immediate provocation for the boycott lay elsewhere—specifically, in American exclusionist immigration policies and in the mistreatment of Chinese living in the United States. After lengthy negotiations with a vocal anti-Chinese lobby at home as well as with Chinese officials (who sympathized with but did not sponsor the boycott), the Roosevelt administration partially defused the situation. Only Canton stubbornly persisted. And with the murder of five American missionaries near that city on October 29—the so-called Lienchow Massacre—the president began to contemplate more drastic action. He ordered the army and navy to prepare a punitive expedition against Canton. The soldiers who would actually occupy the offending city would be 5,000 men from Leonard Wood's Philippine Division. Wood himself looked forward to the prospect of action on the Asian mainland. Yet the operations of his force once it embarked for Canton—how it would land; what it would undertake to achieve; how it would sustain itself—were cloudy. To answer such questions, Wood diverted McCoy to China.  

McCoy arrived at Shanghai on December 20, two days after antiforeign riots rocked the city, to find “marines and blue jackets patrolling the streets and eleven war-ships lined up on the other side of the bund.” He quickly sensed the rapidly awakening national life of China, saw its connection to the boycott, and predicted that the privileges of foreigners, merchant and missionary alike, would be “fussed over and probably fought over sooner or later.” Traveling to Canton, he received his instructions from the American consul general, Julius Lay. For the next several days, accompanied by an American naval lieutenant, Clark H. Woodward, McCoy surveyed the city. He analyzed the local terrain, identified obstacles and probable points of occupation, assessed the likelihood of serious opposition to an American landing, and located potential sources of supplies. His work completed, he hastened back to Manila shortly after New Year’s to render his report to Wood. To his delight, he arrived to find “the expeditionary force . . . all on board ship awaiting final orders from Washington to proceed.” The final orders never arrived. Having ostentatiously waved his big stick, Roosevelt now withheld it. In the early months of 1906, he used less-drastic means to extract a Chinese commitment to end antiforeign agitation. But the proposed strike against Canton that McCoy helped prepare had been no bluff. Although in the end Roosevelt had not deployed the expedition, he told Wood, “I wanted to be sure that if it was needed we would not be unprepared.”

In June 1906, McCoy again departed the islands, this time on leave to the United States. Less than a decade out of West Point, he had accumulated about six years of overseas service. However exciting and rewarding, that service had interfered with McCoy’s obligations to the family which as first-born son he nominally headed. Although he had always been a faithful correspondent who shared his adventures with his family, he decided that it was time to go home. After an
extended visit in Lewistown, however, he fully intended to rejoin Wood. Yet no sooner had McCoy arrived home than Roosevelt got wind of his presence in the United States. The president requested that after his leave the army captain return to the White House as senior military aide. Throughout his career, McCoy treated any presidential request as tantamount to an order. Thus, Roosevelt’s action in this instance obliged McCoy to scrap his plan to return to Manila. 

Another diplomatic crisis delayed the start of McCoy’s White House detail—and abruptly terminated his reunion with his family. Months of simmering unrest in Cuba culminated by mid-1906 in insurrection. Stemming from the disputed elections of December 1905, the troubles reflected the Liberal party’s determination to oust from office President Tomás Estrada Palma and his Moderate party, whose dominance the elections reaffirmed. In August 1906, a Constitutional Army raised by Liberal leaders took to the field, vowing to overthrow the government. Citing the provisions of the Platt Amendment, Estrada Palma requested American troops to restore order and support his government. The insurgents also hoped for American intervention, calculating that they would handily win the new elections that they expected the United States to sponsor. Roosevelt at first resisted pressures to interfere. Eventually, however, the danger that persistent disorder posed to American interests and the coaching of Frank Steinhart, Wood’s chief clerk during the first intervention and now U.S. consul general in Havana, prodded the president into more direct involvement. In September 1906, in a last-ditch effort to forestall a full-scale American takeover, he decided to send Secretary of War William Howard Taft and Assistant Secretary of State Robert Bacon to negotiate an end to the revolt. Unfortunately, neither of Roosevelt’s two envoys could claim more than passing familiarity with the situation. Writing to Secretary of State Elihu Root, Taft confessed that he was so “lacking in knowledge of Cuba” that it was “quite embarrassing” even to undertake the mission. Clearly, these senior officials would require expert advice if they were to succeed.

When it came to practical knowledge of Cuban affairs in American official circles, the U.S. Army at this time enjoyed a near monopoly. Taft and Bacon did not hesitate to exploit that expertise. When Roosevelt subsequently decided to impose direct American control over Cuba, army officers filled key positions throughout the provisional government. Even at the time of the Taft-Bacon mission, when the president still hoped to avoid reoccupation, the military provided information about Cuban politics and personalities and acted as a liaison to the contending armies. Given McCoy’s previous Cuban experience, his ready availability, and the regard in which Roosevelt and Taft held him (having known the secretary in the Philippines), the young officer was a logical candidate to assist the mission. It was not too surprising, therefore, when Taft, after conferring with the president at Oyster Bay on September 14, telegraphed McCoy with orders to report without fail to the War Department the following day.
For a junior officer to receive a direct and urgent summons from the secretary of war more than compensated for the disappointment of having a leave cancelled. McCoy responded with his usual alacrity and enthusiasm. Joining the mission in Washington, he accompanied it by train to Tampa on September 16. Along the way, he and Frank S. Cairns, another veteran of the first Cuban occupation attached to the mission, provided Taft and Bacon with a cram course on Cuban politics and the personalities they would encounter. After a brief stopover in Tampa, the party embarked for Havana on the cruiser Des Moines.

A twofold problem awaited the mission in Cuba. To avert an American takeover, Taft and Bacon had first to quell internal unrest. Then they had to negotiate a political settlement acceptable to both Liberals and Moderates. Progress had been made toward the first objective even before the mission reached Havana. According to McCoy, each party convinced itself that arrival of the American envoys promised to benefit its own cause. Therefore, a tacit ceasefire took effect as soon as Roosevelt announced the mission. Yet even though actual fighting had stopped, insurgent forces remained in the field, some of them located ominously near Havana. These troops Taft and Bacon hoped to disarm, thereby precluding the possibility of renewed violence. McCoy’s first assignment was to arrange a formal truce with Liberal commanders near Havana, a task completed within days of the mission’s arrival. With the truce established, Brig. Gen. Frederick Funston began disarming the rebels. McCoy assisted there as well. He and Bacon traveled through rebel lines to confiscate the weapons of General José Ruman Montero’s brigade, totaling 174 small arms.

In settling the larger political dispute, the mission enjoyed less success. McCoy personally entertained a low opinion of the entire affair. “In a nut shell,” he reported to Wood, “it was a fight between the ‘Ins’ and ‘Outs,’ with no principle at stake.” Estrada Palma “tried to adopt the Porfirio Díaz scheme of running a Latin-American Republic.” Lacking the authority or prestige of the Mexican dictator, however, the Cuban president “relied on the Platt Amendment, with its backing of the United States,” to prop up his position. Despite his disdain for Estrada Palma, McCoy believed that the United States should support the Cuban government, using force to crush the insurrection if necessary. In his view, a hard-line approach offered the best hope for ending Cuban political unrest. Taft, who in McCoy’s view sought peace at any price, rejected such a course. Still hoping for a compromise, Taft and Bacon consulted with both parties as well as with business leaders not directly connected with politics. Because, as Taft and Bacon noted, McCoy “knew all the public men of the island,” the army captain played a key role in deciding who the American envoys should see and in briefing them beforehand on each visitor.

For Estrada Palma’s supporters, realization that the Americans had come not to rescue the government but to negotiate with its enemies came as a dreadful disappointment. Many of them thereafter “sulked in their tents,” making meaningful discussions impossible. Days of talks in late September produced
nothing. McCoy credited the Liberals with being “shrewd enough to be most reasonable” and blamed the Moderates for the lack of progress. “All the time thinkin[g] of their sacred honor and dignity,” government spokesmen refused to make concessions. Preferring an American takeover to compromise with the Liberals, Estrada Palma’s cabinet brought matters to a head on September 28 by resigning en masse, thereby throwing responsibility for governing Cuba into Taft’s spacious lap. With Roosevelt’s concurrence, Taft issued a proclamation the next day that established an American provisional government.14

Now the thrust of McCoy’s responsibilities shifted. The problem became one of rapidly staffing the new government with qualified Americans. Here again, Taft and Bacon turned to McCoy, consulting him on the personnel to be included in the government. Yet the two senior American officials themselves had no intention of remaining in Cuba indefinitely to oversee the new government. Having failed to restore political harmony in Cuba and having reluctantly assumed control to forestall chaos, the Taft-Bacon mission had exhausted its charter. Another novice to Cuban affairs, Charles E. Magoon, succeeded Taft as provisional governor on October 13, permitting the mission to depart.15

Magoon appreciated only too well his lack of firsthand experience in Cuba. To provide continuity between Taft’s short-lived administration and its successor, the secretary of war ordered McCoy to remain in Havana as the connecting link. Taft told McCoy that his job was to “put [Magoon] in touch with all the people whom you know, and . . . give him the same benefit you extended to me.” Although this additional stay was intended to be brief, McCoy made himself so valuable that Magoon repeatedly arranged for his extension. McCoy was soon
remarking unhappily that "it begins to look as though I might be with Governor Magoon all winter."16

McCoy's unwillingness to remain long in Havana reflected the limited purpose of the provisional government, especially in comparison with that of Wood's regime. The personal qualities that Magoon brought to his job hinted at those limits: However likable, Judge Magoon was a dull bureaucrat who had found shelter in the War Department's Bureau of Insular Affairs since the presidency of William McKinley. He was the last person to look to for imaginative policy or bold action. Although not presuming to criticize Magoon himself, McCoy observed that the governor did not face "the same problem of reorganizing the government and getting results as in the Military Intervention." Magoon's assignment was merely to make peace "between the expectant Liberals and the very disgruntled Moderates." For politicians and their squabbles, McCoy had no use. He warned Roosevelt, Taft, and Magoon in succession regarding "the very bad characters of every one of the leading lights of the Liberal Party," but American officials still acted as if the Liberals represented the people of Cuba. McCoy lamented that for Cuba, "universal suffrage will continue to be the root of all evils."17

Brig. Gen. J. Franklin Bell, who stepped down as army chief of staff to command the American troops in Cuba, told McCoy that Magoon could not "expect to find your equal in the Army for the place you are filling. I have repeatedly told him that there are not many McCoys and he must not expect to find them." Notwithstanding such flattery, McCoy remained anxious to leave. As soon as he found a replacement in November, he left Havana for home.18

McCoy's contributions during this second American occupation of Cuba earned the plaudits of Taft, Bacon, Magoon, and Bell. Unquestionably, participation in the affair enhanced his reputation. Yet, overall, he came away from the experience dissatisfied. Association with powerful officials even on a basis of trust and intimacy no longer turned his head. The purposes for which those officials labored impressed McCoy more than their personal prominence. However great the influence he had exerted as an adviser, McCoy regretted the cramped and timid goals of the cause he had served in Cuba. In comparison to what he had come to expect at Wood's side, the vision of a Taft or Magoon possessed neither scope nor grandeur. In the end, the second American occupation merely involved McCoy in politics without a worthy goal.

Once back in Washington, McCoy rendered a personal report to Elihu Root and to Taft, bringing each up-to-date on conditions in Cuba. He then reported to the White House to assume his much delayed duties as the president's military aide. As so often during his career, McCoy undertook his assignment at a propitious moment. During the era of Theodore Roosevelt, Washington shed its reputation for provincialism. The rising tide of progressivism and the lingering excitement
of having recently become an active world power were causing important changes in the nation’s capital.¹⁹

Not least among the legacies of the Spanish-American War was the emergence of a new breed of American public servant. The new frontier established by the victories of 1898 stirred the popular imagination and, by bestowing upon the United States weighty imperial obligations, generated heightened interest in government as a worthwhile career. In one sense, the ensuing migration of able and ambitious young men to Washington merely symbolized the overall shift of the nation’s attention from Wall Street, where it had rested throughout the Gilded Age, to the seat of an increasingly powerful federal government. Bored by the prospect of what William Phillips called a “pallid career” in business, sons of the American upper classes—many of whom had impetuously followed Roosevelt up San Juan Hill—now followed the Rough Rider to Washington.²⁰

This growing interest in federal service, especially pronounced during TR’s tenure in office, reflected the challenging ideals and boundless exuberance of the president himself. Roosevelt, recalled Phillips, “turned men’s thoughts from the localities where they lived to the dignity of the nation and our national problems.” He fostered “a new conception of what the United States stood for and of the responsibility involved [in] citizenship.” Many others could agree with this career diplomat that “it was T.R.’s call to youth which lured me to Washington.”²¹

This commitment to national service carried many of Phillips’s contemporaries far beyond Washington to posts overseas. Just as domestic affairs in the progressive era increasingly became the realm of the nonpartisan expert, so also diplomacy—long the preserve of political hacks—seemed to require the attention that only a corps of skilled professionals could provide. Thus, in the words of one official of the period, there developed under Roosevelt’s tutelage a new generation of diplomatists “with their new American outlook on the world and their vision of a new American position and influence in it. They took charge of the new diplomacy wherein a man could hope to become one day a new kind of proconsul or procurator in some tropical province or tetrarchate.” Men such as Phillips, former Rough Rider Henry Prather Fletcher, and Joseph Clark Grew, who first commended himself to TR by shooting a tiger in China, “became the elite or legendary ‘inner circle’ of the Department of State . . . for the next twenty years.”²²

Before Roosevelt’s second term ended, an informal expression of this inner circle had appeared in the form of an exclusive bachelors’ club. The seat of this club was a stately Washington townhouse at 1718 H Street. Waldo Heinrichs described this establishment—located next to the Metropolitan Club and a short walk from the State Department—as a “club for the social elite of the Diplomatic Service.” According to Robert Schulzinger, the club’s members—who called themselves “the Family”—wielded so much influence that 1718 became “virtually a second foreign office.” For the military historian, this group holds a special
interest. Despite its predominantly civilian character, the Family not only included army officers as members but had actually been founded by soldiers in the first place. Indeed, 1718 was the brainchild of Frank McCoy.

When he finally assumed his White House duties in the fall of 1906, McCoy discovered that the demands of his assignment were strenuous and time consuming. In addition to his formal duties, the army captain was among those frequently enlisted by the robust chief executive to trek through Rock Creek Park, take long horseback rides, or engage in any of the combative sports that Roosevelt enjoyed. The Roosevelts even recruited McCoy to act as a companion for their children. The need to secure quarters close to the president soon persuaded McCoy (with two friends from the army general staff, Capt. Sherwood Cheney and Capt. James Logan) to undertake the considerable expense of renting the house at 1718 H Street, two blocks from the White House.

The three bachelors soon made 1718 a popular gathering place for many of the capital’s bright young career men. The house became, in the estimation of a frequent female visitor, “the most delightful bachelor quarters in the world.” After years of overseas service that thrust him largely into the company of military men, McCoy was delighted to discover how much soldiers shared with their counterparts in the diplomatic service and the federal bureaucracy. Recognizing the inevitability of being posted away from Washington but anxious to sustain 1718 on a permanent footing, the three officers began inviting other congenial spirits to take up residence.

The silk-stocking credentials of the Family’s diplomatic members testify to the group’s unabashedly elitist character. William Phillips (Harvard, ’00) and Willard Straight (Cornell, ’01) of Manchuria fame shared backgrounds of social respectability, inherited wealth, and superb education. Other early members and foreign service pioneers such as Basil Miles (Oxford), Leland H. Harrison (Eton and Harvard, ’07), and Frederick Sterling (Harvard, ’98) fit the same pattern. Eventually, the club’s State Department contingent included such notables as Fletcher, Crew, Joseph P. Cotton, James C. Dunn, Francis White, and Norman Armour. The first three career diplomats to serve as undersecretary of state all resided at 1718 at one time or another. Bound by intimate ties, these men regularly corresponded, consulted, and advised one another about professional as well as personal matters. Those at home cultivated the interests of those abroad; the latter, in turn, kept 1718 informed with inside information on the latest overseas developments.

Yet 1718 was more than an extension of the State Department. Family membership, for example, was by no means restricted to foreign service officers and soldiers. By 1914, the group already included men of such varied professional backgrounds as Benjamin Strong, governor of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York; Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Andrew J. Peters; and Arthur Wilson Page, editor of the popular monthly *The World’s Work*. Overall, social antecedents and vocations were less significant in uniting Family members than
was a common outlook—one that zealously supported an expanded role for the United States in world affairs and saw individual opportunity as concomitant with that expansion. Seventeen-eighteen’s habitués recognized the indivisibility of power. The successful projection of American influence overseas required the integration of economic, political, and military resources—the type of mutual support that the Family’s international bankers, diplomats, and soldiers regularly provided for one another as individuals.

Like their mentor, these heirs of Roosevelt did not differentiate between service in government or outside of it. What mattered was that Family members were enlistees in a common cause, a status unaffected by any shift in base of operations. In 1909, for instance, when Straight left the State Department for the investment banking firm of J. P. Morgan & Company, he remained a trusted member of the team. Thus, Fletcher’s appointment as ambassador to Mexico in early 1916 also carried with it implications of opportunity for Straight, the diplomat-turned-banker. Foreseeing the possibility of American intervention during Fletcher’s tenure, “in which case your position will be more interesting than ever before,” Straight predicted that “Seventeen Eighteen will surely then be very much in the front as always.” Straight expected 1718’s Wall Street branch to play an important role in making a success of Fletcher’s mission because “J. P. Morgan & Company and their associated groups will be the people upon whom you will have principally to rely.” To lay the basis for such cooperation, he urged Fletcher before assuming office to share with Wall Street “the benefit of your advice regarding the South American situation.”

The group’s influence, although difficult to measure with precision, was by no means negligible. Even before 1920 when Family members occupied the second or third tier of authority, typically as assistant secretaries or their diplomatic equivalent, they enjoyed ready access to the upper echelons and often exercised great latitude when assigned to the field. Strategically placed in government and well connected with higher-ranking officials, the Family worked with persistence and a minimum of publicity to put its own imprint on government policy. So effective were its members that the British scholar Graham Wallas, after visiting 1718, announced the “quite astounding” discovery that the U.S. government was “really run by a little group of young fellows mostly assistant secretaries who really do the work and suggest most of the things to be done to their bosses.” A more recent view by William Appleman Williams described Miles, Phillips, and Straight in 1917 as the nucleus of “a tightly knit team . . . unknown to the general public and tucked away safely beyond the reach of even an aroused congressman” that was chiefly responsible for the anti-Bolshevik cast of State Department policy.

The Family’s clout, although perhaps not as great as either Williams or Wallas suggested, was especially evident when 1718 rallied to protect the fortunes of fellow members. With the change of administration in 1913, for example,
CHAPTER 4

Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan’s determination to replace all Republican diplomatic appointees with “deserving Democrats” jeopardized Fletcher’s position as envoy to Chile. When McCoy picked up rumors in Washington that Bryan sought Fletcher’s post for some “long-haired apostle of free silver,” he immediately alerted Straight in New York. Straight later told Fletcher that as soon as “we got the news that the wolves were after your job,” 1718 began lobbying in the latter’s behalf. Straight arranged for a Family friend, Daisy Harriman, to call on Secretary Bryan and then went himself to see Col. Edward M. House. When House offered assurances, Straight cabled Santiago: “EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT SITITITE [sic] SAY NOTHING PERIOD SILENCE EMPHATICALLY EMPHASIZED.” The Family campaign apparently succeeded, for Phillips soon passed the word from inside the State Department that—in Straight’s words—“although the big noise [Bryan] wants to land your place for a friend, the President will not stand for it and you’ll be retained.”

Seventeen-eighteen remained an important part of McCoy’s life until it was finally sold in the 1950s. After 1914, he lived at the house for only short periods. Yet, in later years, he stayed there whenever his duties took him temporarily to Washington. Although marriages reduced the number of permanent lodgers at the house, McCoy made a point of keeping in touch with old Family friends. He attended their weddings, stood up as godfather at their children’s christenings, shared their vacations, and joined the periodic reunions at 1718. He always prized the camaraderie that the house signified. Yet, if McCoy appreciated the Family primarily because of its fellowship, he could not have failed to recognize how associations formed there would help advance his own career.

McCoy’s routine in Washington was not merely social, nor was his relationship with Roosevelt entirely recreational. Throughout his presidency, the commander in chief showed a sharp interest in modernizing the armed forces. Roosevelt found the army, in McCoy’s words, “dead on its feet.” In order to create a climate conducive to military reform, the president “stirred up trouble, pacifists and the old men trying to smother” any departure from tradition. Roosevelt made himself accessible to innovators such as Wood and the navy’s William S. Sims, whom he discovered “more or less lost among the great mass of mediocre men of both services.” McCoy encouraged the president’s interest in military affairs by funneling impressions and ideas coming to him from the field. Wood in particular called upon McCoy to reinforce his own ideas to the president.

In the spring of 1908, McCoy interrupted his White House duties to return again to Cuba at Taft’s behest. His new mission grew out of a controversy over an American public works concession that had become a bone of contention between local politicians. In June 1906, officials in Cienfuegos, a city suffering from a chronic water shortage, negotiated a $3 million contract with Hugh J. Reilly, an American, to construct a new municipal water and sewage system. This initiative
by the Moderate-controlled municipal council drew charges of fraud from the Liberal opposition, including allegations that Reilly had promised to funnel a portion of his profits to Moderate party loyalists. Thus, when control of the council changed hands following the American intervention, the Liberals revoked the contract. Reilly petitioned Magoon for assistance in reinstating the agreement, but the provisional governor rejected his appeal. With greater success, Reilly next appealed to Taft. The secretary of war suggested to Magoon that it would be more equitable as well as more expeditious to modify the Reilly contract in a way that would make it acceptable to officials in Cienfuegos. Still, Magoon hesitated. In a letter to Taft on April 8, 1908, he contended that too much political animosity existed in Cienfuegos to gain acceptance of a contract so laden with partisan feuding. The significance of this otherwise trivial dispute lay in its political implications. In the midst of preparing for elections billed as a prelude to American withdrawal, Magoon warned that "when the campaign gets hot the danger of disturbance will be increased and it is impossible for anyone to predict what will happen or what will cause it." The provisional governor feared that the Cienfuegos problem, if mishandled, might ignite unrest that could delay the American departure.  

Reluctant either to overrule Magoon or to ignore Reilly, Taft asked McCoy to obtain a firsthand view. So, by mid-April, Roosevelt's aide was off again for Cuba. After brief stopovers in Havana and Santiago, McCoy reached Cienfuegos, where he spent nearly a week interviewing "the representative men of every class, color, and condition [while] purposely avoiding the politicians and interested parties." Hoping to gauge the political danger by broadly sampling public opinion about the Reilly contract, McCoy in practice gave disproportionate weight to the views of the propertied interests and foreign residents of the city. Still his investigation was a thorough one. Having completed it, he hastened to Washington to submit his report.  

McCoy agreed with Magoon that the Cienfuegos dispute revolved around politics rather than principle. "It is simply a bitter factional fight for the control of the City Government," he told Taft. The Liberals feared that restoring the Reilly contract would give the Moderates control of enough jobs to determine the outcome of the approaching elections. On the other hand, McCoy's survey of local opinion indicated that, apart from the politicians themselves, the local populace cared little about jockeying for partisan advantage. Although the people evinced no particular interest in protecting Reilly's investment, few would object if he resumed construction. "The people of Cienfuegos want a water and sewage system," McCoy reported, and they did not especially care who did the work so long as it was done. Concerning Magoon's fear of possible domestic unrest, McCoy offered categorical assurances: "The idea of public disturbance if the Reilly contractors were to proceed with the work was treated as a joke." Conceding the difficulty of forcing the Liberals of Cienfuegos into any direct dealings with Reilly, however, McCoy devised a new approach to break the
stalemate—let the provisional government contract with Reilly to do the work. The American authorities in Havana would furnish the funds to complete the Cienfuegos project, thereby skirting partisan sensitivities. After the fact (and long after the election), the municipality could reimburse the central government for its investment.33

Reassured that there was little chance of disorder and persuaded by McCoy’s suggestions, Taft recommended to Roosevelt that the provisional government negotiate a new contract with Reilly. Roosevelt concurred, as did the municipal government of Cienfuegos itself, promising to reimburse the central government for most of the cost. So this miniature crisis came to a satisfactory end. Magoon’s exaggerated fears inflated the problem completely out of proportion. In putting such fears to rest and in solving the main issue, McCoy demonstrated again his competence as a troubleshooter. That his assignment in this instance possessed no military implications whatsoever suggests how far he had travelled on the road to becoming a valued diplomatic operative.34

In the spring of 1908, the War Department directed all officers on detached service for longer than four years to return to their regiments. The order applied to the military aide of the president no less than to anyone else. Thus, the end of that year found McCoy far from the White House and his H Street companions at the remote, primitive cavalry garrison of Fort Wingate in eastern New Mexico. A vestige of the Indian-fighting army, Wingate served as the home of Troops I and M of the Third Squadron, Third Cavalry. Prior to McCoy’s arrival, the garrison’s complement of officers totaled six, none of whom ranked above first lieutenant. McCoy took up residence in an austere adobe structure that he found adequate though “a bit draughty and inconvenient for women in winter,” adding by way of sardonic consolation that “as there are only two women on post all is well.” Other than trips to inspect national guard units throughout New Mexico, McCoy remained at Fort Wingate for most of the next two years. With little to do but devote himself to the basic military chores of training, housekeeping and caring for horses, men, and equipment, McCoy was soon writing that “the experience I need is coming in chunks.” He even asserted that the routine at Wingate provided “the life . . . most to my taste.”35

McCoy meant what he said. He loved the peculiar joys of troop duty: the intimate contact with soldiers; the freedom provided by the none-too-taxing daily routine; the ample opportunities to ride, hunt, and fish. In his mid-thirties, the captain of cavalry was wiry and fit and exuded a quiet self-confidence. His military career had obliged him perforce to adopt a version of Roosevelt’s strenuous life, and he flourished in it. One doubts that the grudging surgeon who pronounced McCoy marginally fit for commissioning out of West Point would have recognized the same specimen a decade later. Only a receding hairline foretold the passing of youth.
That McCoy needed the tour at Fort Wingate to sharpen his skills in practical soldiering is beyond question. Eight years had elapsed since his last assignment to a troop unit. Not unexpectedly, McCoy’s commander judged him “somewhat rusty in line duties,” although in tribute perhaps to McCoy’s more recent experience, he also described him as “one of the most courteous officers I have ever known.”

Having completed his requisite tour with troops—and having tasted something of the isolation that military service implied for the average officer—McCoy returned from idyllic exile early in 1911. His mentor, Leonard Wood, had become army chief of staff and summoned McCoy to join him. Assignment to the general staff brought McCoy into contact with Henry L. Stimson, secretary of war in the Taft administration that was now in office. A principled Republican lawyer-statesman just beginning a long career as heir to the mantle of Elihu Root, Stimson admired soldiers and the virtues they represented. Although he never developed a popular following, Stimson’s record as a shrewd attorney, patriot, and outspoken advocate in diverse causes earned him respect throughout the elite establishment. The army came to hold him in especially high regard. To officers as far apart in temperament as Leonard Wood and George C. Marshall, Stimson exemplified the ideal of a public servant. Frank McCoy shared that view. Despite the disparity in their positions, he and the secretary were drawn to each other as kindred spirits. From the time that McCoy escorted Wood and Stimson on a relaxed and fondly recorded tour of army posts in the Southwest during the autumn of 1911, he and the secretary became lifelong friends. Of all McCoy’s associations with civilian officials, Stimson’s would be the one that he cherished most and that would prove most valuable in later years.

While on the general staff, McCoy became an ardent proponent of Wood’s crusade for military preparedness. In the years leading up to World War I, the officer corps—its enthusiasm for colonialism spent—began to give increasing attention to the prospect of all-out conflict with another great power. McCoy’s own views illustrate this trend. Without abandoning his interest in Asian or Caribbean affairs, his correspondence began to reflect a new emphasis on modernizing the army to improve its capacity for waging war on a massive scale. Having endured the mismanagement of the Santiago campaign, having seen for himself the armies of Europe, and having recently returned from a posting with his own country’s fragmented, irrationally deployed forces in the field, McCoy entertained few illusions about the American army’s ability to conduct such a war. He understood that other tasks had long preoccupied the army, but with other forward-looking officers, McCoy now wanted his service to fasten its attention on threats previously considered too distant to be taken seriously. As McCoy commented to Felix Frankfurter, then a War Department official: “War is still and must be the real reason for an Army and Navy. It may be a good war or
a bad war, but the Army must always be ready.” In operational terms, readiness translated into what McCoy characterized as “effective fighting power” immediately available and capable of prolonged sustainment. Yet stating the principle was easy; transforming a tradition-bound institution into a responsive instrument for waging wars presented a far more formidable challenge. If McCoy’s commitment to this task earned him a place in the army’s reform tradition, his contribution in truth was not an especially original one.

Neither as soldier nor as diplomatist did McCoy ever show much evidence of creative thought. A man of his time, he possessed little capacity to see beyond its confines. On the other hand, he was sensitive to the ongoing interplay of ideas in the contemporary United States. And he paid particular attention to those ideas that applied to his own pursuits. Thus, in describing the army that he hoped would come into being, McCoy with other like-minded officers easily—perhaps glibly—evoked the reigning concepts and language of American progressivism. The hallmark of such an army, remarked McCoy, would necessarily be “constructive efficiency.” Besides being effective in war, the army needed to be affordable and politically acceptable. Mindful of those requirements, McCoy realized the
drawbacks of relying upon a large standing army to provide that fighting power. Economically and politically, the cost of such an establishment would be prohibitive. "As business men and the country's representatives," McCoy thought, military planners should seek alternatives that "will give efficiency with the least cost." McCoy's solution—like Wood's—was to depend upon a mass citizen army, well trained and well led but maintained in reserve until called upon in an emergency.  

While on the general staff, McCoy also acted as Wood's spymaster. He assigned, paid, and collected reports from a network of agents in Cuba, Mexico, the Far East, and even California and Hawaii during a period of anti-Japanese agitation. McCoy's value to his clients stemmed from his access to Wood. Intelligence provided to McCoy was funnelled directly to the army's senior leadership. Directives from McCoy reflected the priorities and interests of the army chief of staff himself. McCoy's proximity to Wood enabled him to solve the problems confronting operatives in the field. One agent writing in May 1911, for example, acknowledged receipt of $25,000 and called on McCoy to find out "what Gen[eral] Wood wants in Manchuria. I have got to let my man know as soon as I can." Nor was McCoy's involvement in intelligence strictly administrative. On one occasion, he became a covert agent himself.  

By 1912, the Panama Canal, then two years short of completion, had become the focal point of American defense planning. Any threat—however remote—to the security of the canal or American control over the isthmus sent ripples of concern through the War Department. A somewhat improbable threat surfacing during Wood's term as chief of staff was the possibility of a competing European canal along the so-called Atrato route in northern Colombia. Informants in London claimed that a Chilean engineer, Luis Arturo Undurraga, had acquired a concession for "an entirely new and feasible route, over which a canal could be constructed at a fraction of the cost of the Panama Canal." Furthermore, Undurraga was offering to resell his concession, and "certain German bankers were negotiating to purchase it." This hint of German involvement obliged Wood to examine the proposition's feasibility. Various schemes for a canal along the Atrato River had surfaced in the past. Did there exist a route, as Undurraga claimed? Or was this merely an attempt to stampede the United States into purchasing a "concession" whose only value was as a scheme to enrich its current holders? To answer these questions, Wood dispatched McCoy and Sherwood Cheney, McCoy's classmate and a Family member, to investigate.  

To act as a guide through the jungles of Colombia, Father Henry Collins, a Catholic missionary familiar with the area, was hired to accompany the Americans. Concerned lest the expedition raise the suspicions of local authorities, Wood proposed that McCoy and Cheney imitate Father Collins and "go
disguised as priests, tonsured, robed, and so on.” Even more than Colombian officials, Wood saw Indians as a threat. As he noted privately, “They kill everyone who has tried to get across.” All in all, the chief of staff anticipated “an extremely dangerous and hazardous trip.” Undaunted by Wood’s melodramatic fears, McCoy and Cheney made their way absent tonsures and cassocks from New Orleans to Panama and then by tug to Cupica Bay, Colombia, arriving on January 6, 1912. Here, they encountered a Colombian official who was less impressed by their claim to be British subjects on a missionary trip than by their inability to produce any passports. The official ordered them to remain at Cupica until higher authorities cleared them to proceed. He also posted a guard over the American officers to insure their compliance. For two weeks, McCoy and Cheney waited. Their hammocks strung from large trees next to the beach, they swam, fished, loafed, and read the books and magazines that McCoy, with foresight, had packed. Finally, on January 21, with Cheney complaining that they had “generally exhausted the role of Lotus eaters,” permission came for them to move on.

The Atrato River flowed generally north-south with its mouth on the Atlantic side of the isthmus at the Gulf of Uraba. Approximately 130 miles up the Atrato, a tributary, the Napipi, sheared off to the west, entering the Pacific at Cupica Bay. The premise of the Undurraga claim was that shipping would navigate each of these streams and easily pass from one to the other—a scheme that on a map appeared at least plausible. But on January 22, as the Americans began moving up the Napipi, they found it virtually unnavigable. Not Indians but nature threatened their mission. Dragging their canoes over rocks, shoals, and fallen trees, looking like the “victims of some fell disease” as a result of attacking insects, the Americans advanced only 40 miles in three exhausting days. Dense undergrowth crowded the small stream, making it difficult to gain any perspective on the surrounding terrain. Although the promoters of the route claimed that nowhere did its height exceed 36 meters above sea level, McCoy and Cheney estimated that they finally crossed the continental divide at an altitude of over 150 meters. After a brief rest at the entrance of the Napipi, the weary officers started down the Atrato. It, too, showed little potential for ocean-going traffic. Blocked by sandbars and silt deposits, the Atrato would require enormous effort to prepare and maintain.

When the officers reached the Gulf of Uraba on February 2, they made no attempt to conceal their relief. Recovering their strength as they returned to the Canal Zone by steamer—“God bless the U[nited] F[ruit] C[ompany],” wrote Cheney, “the only efficient thing in Central America”—the two Americans prepared their report. Emphasizing the difficulty of crossing the divide and the near impassability of the Napipi, they characterized the route as “impractical as compared to that of Panama. [In short,] the government need not be concerned over any scheme for rival canals from this river to the Pacific.” With that, worry about the Undurraga concession was put to rest.
McCoy remained on the general staff until the end of Wood's term as its chief in April 1914. He then accompanied Wood to his next assignment as commander of the Eastern Department with headquarters at Governor's Island in New York harbor—a strategic location from which Wood could carry on his preparedness campaign. After several months in New York, however, McCoy and Wood again parted ways. McCoy fell victim to the so-called Manchu law of August 1912, which restricted the time that an officer could spend on detached duty and mandated McCoy's return to his regiment by early 1915.

For McCoy, the years from 1906 to 1914 were eventful ones. With the exception of his interlude at Fort Wingate, he remained close to the center of power. Thanks to his background, reputation, and growing network of influential friends, he received opportunities for service unavailable to most officers. In no single instance had McCoy's role as yet assumed independent significance. Cumulatively, however, his activities in the years preceding the outbreak of World War I suggest the extent to which members of the political elite viewed their military counterparts not as alien to mainstream American society but as valued adjuncts in implementing national policy.