Raymond Poincaré was born in 1860 at Bar-le-Duc in Lorraine of solid bourgeois stock; his father was a state-employed engineer and his cousin was the famous mathematician, Henri Poincaré. From his early youth Raymond demonstrated the fastidiousness that remained a dominant feature of his character for the rest of his life. Few schoolchildren of eleven would have kept a diary as regularly, nor marked the time of their entries so meticulously: ‘5.05: I played and I wrote this diary.’1 Too much has been made of his Lorraine origins, supposedly synonymous with revanche. Without question the defeat of 1870 had a profound effect on him, a ten-year-old boy uprooted from his home, forced to move from hotel to hotel for three months, only to return to live under German occupation for four years. It inculcated in him a profound mistrust of Germany, an ardent patriotism and a deep feeling of national pride. But this was tempered by his experience of the chaos and destruction of war. If anything, it made him wish to guard against further defeat and further war by ensuring that France would always be prepared militarily and diplomatically.

He obtained brilliant results in his baccalauréat at the Lycee Louis-le-Grand in Paris. His capacity for work was extraordinary. Gabriel Hanotaux, his friend for fifty years and a hard worker himself, recorded that Poincaré had ‘a passion for work, a persistency in toil which I have never seen surpassed nor even attained by anyone else’. He was said to rise at six or six-thirty and begin his day by reading a page of the four or five languages he knew.2 Not unnaturally he went on to study law and no doubt found satisfaction in the detail, rigour and order of French legal texts and codes. Having obtained at the age of twenty an arts and a law degree which he read concurrently, he set out on a career as a barrister, doing his articles and preparing a doctoral thesis on a characteristically dry subject. ‘On the possession of furniture in Roman Law’. But he also had literary aspirations, and began to write articles for a number of newspapers and literary journals, finally joining the Voltaire, where he ran a legal column. Called to the Bar with his friend Alexandre Millerand, he subsequently decided to stand for Parliament. Elected as a deputy in 1887 in his native Meuse, a seat he held until 1903 when he was elected to the Senate, he was able to combine an increasingly successful legal career with a similarly brilliant political career. His intellectual rigour, competence, industry and
incorruptibility earned him in 1893 at the age of thirty-three his first portfolio as Minister of Education and Culture. His management of the intricacies of financial matters won him a reputation and the post of Minister of Finance in the Dupuy cabinet of 1894 – a post he held again in 1906. This was to be his last cabinet office before 1912, but not before he had achieved further glory in 1909 with his election to the Académie Française.

Poincaré led his political career under a Progressist label, and championed secularism, but he followed the most tortuous paths in order not to stray from the middle-of-the-road position in politics. During the Dreyfus affair and the Church–State debate he carefully avoided taking an extreme position and was able to displease few people and emerge unscathed. In 1899 he declared his support for Waldeck-Rousseau’s government but soon found that his own moderate ideas clashed with its severe anti-clerical policy and he finally refused to vote for the 1901 Law on Associations. This desire for moderation drew Clemenceau’s barbed criticism in an article entitled ‘Poincarism’: ‘Fine reckoner, he excels in drawing up for himself and his ideas an account of debit and credit balanced according to all the rules of the art.’ And Clemenceau added that in this way all his energies were wasted in ‘stating the advantage of what is good or bad rather than what could be’.

This was perhaps the mark of a certain self-doubt, his greatest weakness, which led him to agonise for long periods when making crucial political judgements, preferring as often as not to stay as close as possible to the status quo. His longstanding friend and colleague, Alexandre Millerand, put it more strongly: ‘Civil courage was never the characteristic of Poincaré, he had to a degree which I have rarely seen, a phobia of responsibility.’ When his colleagues saw him rushing from the courthouse to the Chamber of Deputies they were said to remark: ‘He’s hurrying to abstain.’

Criticism pushed him into even greater self-doubt and even opened him to manipulation. The threat of a critical article in the authoritative newspaper Le Temps could seriously influence his decisions. Gabriel Hanotaux summarised the problem best: ‘He serves public opinion and he makes use of public opinion; it is his strength but he cannot do without it.’ It was largely for this reason that after his accession to the Elysée he slowly withdrew from overt intervention in foreign affairs.

His fear of responsibility was doubtless real when the question was one of conscience. Then, like Hamlet, he spent so long weighing the pros and cons of a problem that in the end he often eschewed all action, failing to come down on either side. When the problem was purely administrative his decisions were so precise and swift that they irritated some people. Paul Cambon regularly complained of this seemingly contradictory facet of his character when he attacked Poincaré, saying, ‘what M. Poincaré lacks most is guts’, but on another occasion could remark: ‘There is something Napoleonic in Poincaré’s ways.’ This could perhaps be explained by the fact that once Poincaré had finally decided on a course of action he was not easily moved from it.