

Defeat and Aftermath

ALTHOUGH the claim was small comfort in the face of McKinley's victory in the election, the national Populist leaders were able to say with truth that Bryan's defeat was not to be attributed to any failure on the part of the People's party. The leading Populist states—Texas, North Carolina, Kansas—all went for Bryan, despite the failure of Democratic-Populist electoral fusion in the first of those. In fact, Bryan carried all of the southern states except Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and West Virginia; and there was fusion in the last two. In all of the deep South, where the failure of fusion was the joint responsibility of both Democrats and midroad Populists, Bryan proved victorious anyhow.

West of the Mississippi Bryan won all of the electoral votes except those of California, Oregon, North Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota; and there was electoral fusion in all five of those states. But Bryan and the cause of reform that he symbolized lost most decisively in those very states where the battle was hardest fought, in the north central states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Despite the fact that Democrats and Populists effected fusion in all of them and the additional fact that the number of midroad Populists in sympathy with Watson's sectional appeal was highly limited there, the Republicans won every electoral vote in those states.¹

More or less in defiance of his own wishes, Tom Watson

received twenty-seven electoral votes for the vice presidency, five more than General Weaver had received for the presidency in 1892. Watson's largest block of votes, ironically, was the five of North Carolina's eleven that had been assigned to the Populists in the fusion arrangement in that state, and all of Watson's other votes came from states where fusion had been effected. The 217,000 or so popular votes cast for Watson electors were no proper measure of Populist voting strength, not only because of the failure of Kansas and Colorado Populists to demand places on their fusion electoral tickets but also because of Watson's and the midroad Populists' refusal to allow fusion in a number of southern states. Many Populists, in other words, voted for the Democratic electors or, as in the deep South, midroad Populists sometimes voted for McKinley or simply stayed home on election day.

Despite the "we told you so" that came from Watson and the midroad Populists after Bryan's defeat, there is little probability that their disgruntlement had anything to do with the defeat of the national reform movement.² The real question about the outcome of the election is this: why was Bryan unable to win any of the north central states? With their relatively large number of electoral votes, the addition

¹ The most convenient summary of the election results is to be found in *Appleton's Annual Cyclopaedia*, 1896 (New York, 1897), 673, 770. McKinley received 271 electoral votes to 176 for Bryan; in the popular vote the former received over 7,000,000 votes and the latter about 6,500,000.

² In California the straight People's party electoral ticket polled 22,234 votes but the Republican lead over the Democratic-Populist fusion ticket was 23,613. In Kentucky, the Republicans won by a scant 277 votes; there was no separate Populist electoral ticket and the 5,084 votes for Palmer on the National (Gold) Democratic ticket obviously hurt Bryan there much more than any midroad Populist disaffection. Given California's nine and Kentucky's eleven electoral votes, however, plus the narrowness of the Republican victory in those states, those were the two states where midroad Populist sentiment could have been important. In Kansas and Texas, both of which voted for Bryan, midroaders polled, respectively, 1,240 and 77,985 votes. Edgar E. Robinson, *The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932* (Stanford University, California, 1934), *passim*.

of them—Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin—plus either Kentucky or California to the Bryan column would have meant a victory for reform in 1896.

Marion Butler, the Populist chairman, and his committee, no less than the leaders of the two major parties, fully appreciated the strategic role of the north central states from the outset of the campaign. Despite the fact that Populism's center of gravity, as determined by actual voting strength and membership, was in other sections of the country, the Populists opened branch headquarters for the campaign in Chicago and worked assiduously to help win support for the fusion electoral ticket in the surrounding states.

These were the states that clearly did not fit into the simple pattern of an alliance of South and West that some agrarians liked to talk about in 1896. The Democratic national convention itself in its initial preference for a vice-presidential nominee from the East and Bryan in his warm and courteous treatment of Sewall throughout the campaign displayed sensitivity to the sectional issue and a desire to escape the charge of ignoring the most populous part of the country. Most of the national Populist leaders likewise saw that a too simple geographical or sectional approach hurt more than it helped in the most crucial states, and they accordingly emphasized an economic and class analysis of the campaign issues.

Tom Watson, on the other hand, never seemed to discern the limitations of his sectional appeal as far as the states of the old Northwest were concerned. He occasionally mentioned the importance of Illinois or Indiana or one of the other states in his correspondence, but the approach more typical of him was illustrated by this declaration to an audience at Stone Mountain, Georgia, shortly before the state election: "I thought from the first that this campaign should be made on sectional lines—the south and west against the

north and east. That is the real issue, and why not be honest and say so? Our interests are opposed to those of the east.”³

A Republican wag quipped during the campaign that Bryan had “two vices to McKinley’s one,” and all enjoyed the joke. Bryan himself could hardly be said to have enjoyed the fact of the two running mates during the campaign, especially with the midroad Populists screaming as they did. But he reconciled himself to the anomaly and apparently opposed the idea of Watson’s withdrawing from the race in mid-October just as he had stood staunchly by Sewall during the Populist convention in St. Louis. Composing his still useful memoir of the campaign immediately after its termination, Bryan announced his own conclusion about the matter: “Looking back over the campaign I am now convinced that under the conditions then existing two Vice-Presidential candidates were better than one, and that, notwithstanding the embarrassment at the time, the silver cause made a better showing than it would have done if Mr. Sewall had withdrawn in favor of Mr. Watson, or Mr. Watson in favor of Mr. Sewall.”⁴

Bryan’s point may be conceded, but the fact remains that he was not strong enough to win in the north central states. Economically those states had long been drawing closer to the East, and with reference to the Civil War the dominant sentiment in them was certainly northern and Republican. The presence on the Democratic ticket of a New England businessman did not prevent some Republicans from harking back to the “bloody shirt,” the venerable type of sectionalism that had proved so useful to Republicans since 1865. One innovation in the pattern in 1896 was that the Gold Democrats too were not above resorting to the charge of neo-

³ *Atlanta Constitution*, October 2, 1896.

⁴ Bryan, *First Battle*, 298; the earlier quip is from Wayne C. Williams, *William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1936), 173.

Confederate aggression. J. Sterling Morton, for example, Cleveland's secretary of agriculture from Nebraska and a rabid foe of financial reform, declared that in "the Southern Confederacy the same leaders who are in command of the picket guards for free silver at 16 to 1 were leading financiers [in the war]." Morton charged that the "Confederate Generals now in command of the Bryan campaign seem to desire to accomplish, by false finance, that which they failed to bring about by arms, national dishonor and disgrace."⁵

Although McKinley himself carefully eschewed appeals to the "bloody shirt" in his front-porch speeches, lesser Republicans and other Gold Democrats besides Morton joined in the tried-and-true chorus that had for so long made reform impossible and furnished protection for economic conservatism. Even the *New York Times*, which criticized the Republican party's past record with reference to the South, warned that for "the old Confederate States to be massed together in a solid support of Bryan and the policy of disaster and dishonor which he stands for would make a very bad impression." Such a southern voting pattern, according to the *Times*, would "be evidence of a certain lack of patriotism and of loyalty to our institutions, and will be damaging to that confidence which has been slowly growing between the people of the North and South."

When various "goldbugs" attacked the Bryanites for being in league with former slaveholders and plotting "another scheme of secession more treasonable than the first," the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* pointed out that the "effort to 'fire the

⁵ *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 16, 1896. One of the Southerners whom Morton had named in his attack, Senator John T. Morgan of Alabama, replied: "I have never thrown any stones at that barn rat, and I do not see why he should refer to me by name as a rebel. I am not aware that in the army I had to fight any member of this administration. I may have had to fight Mr. Cleveland's substitute, and I have long since forgiven the substitute, because he was man enough to fight." *Ibid.*, October 17, 1896.

Northern heart' has the very obvious purpose of changing the subject." The St. Louis paper insisted that because southerners chose to "align themselves with Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Kansas rather than with Wall Street" they had again to face the old charges of disloyalty, but the "attempt to revive the old sectionalism is mere Wall Street imbecility."⁶

Whether an imbecility or not, the Republican and Gold Democratic appeal to the old sectionalism was merely one factor that hurt Bryan in the north central states. Probably much more important in explaining the reformers' loss of those states was their apparent inability to win massive support from the industrial workers who already crowded Chicago, Indianapolis, and the other cities of the region.

Failure to win the workers' votes was not due to any lack of effort on the part of the Populists. One of the reformers' most widely circulated documents was a petition for bimetallism which the heads of the various labor organizations had signed and presented to Congress in 1895. Demanding an "immediate return to the money of the Constitution as established by our fathers, by restoring the free and unlimited coinage of both gold and silver at the present ratio of 16 to 1," these allied leaders of farmers and industrial workers foreshadowed the political alliance of the campaign of 1896. Some of the signers and their organizations were: J. R. Sovereign, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor; Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor; Marion Butler, President of the National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union; H. H. Trenor, President of

⁶ *New York Times*, October 31, 1896; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 18, 1896. Ignatius Donnelly asserted that the popular prejudice against the Democratic party caused Bryan to lose Minnesota. "The Republican speakers claim[ed] that the Peoples' Party men have all turned Democrats, and then they raked over the Democracy during the War, and drove our Republican friends back to their 'first love.'" Donnelly to W. A. Bentley, December 29, 1896, Donnelly MSS.

the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners; P. M. Arthur, Grand Chief of the United Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers; C. A. Robinson, President of the Farmers' Mutual Benefit Association; Frank P. Sargent, Grand Master of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen; and John McBride, President of the United Mine Workers.⁷

In addition to the silver issue on which the organized farmers and workers had agreed long before the campaign, both Democrats and Populists included other planks in their platforms that were especially designed to appeal to the workers. The Democratic platform echoed one of the strongest demands of the labor groups in calling for the protection of American labor by the prevention of the "importation of foreign pauper labor to compete with it in the home market." The Populist platform called for a program of public works to relieve the unemployed during industrial depressions. Both parties endorsed the income tax and condemned "government by injunction" as it had been most conspicuously displayed in the Pullman strike of 1894 and the subsequent arrest, conviction, and imprisonment of Eugene Debs.

To capitalize on these obvious bids for labor support, the Populist national executive committee assigned one of its members, John R. Sovereign of the Knights of Labor, to the Populists' branch headquarters in Chicago and gave him the special assignment of organizing the campaign among the industrial workers. Marion Butler too, despite his wholly agrarian background, revealed a clear awareness of the crucial nature of the workers' votes. When certain railroad companies distributed an antisilver circular among their employees, Butler prepared and had printed an answer. "If this is not the correct answer," he declared to Senator Jones,

⁷ Bryan, *First Battle*, 166-67. For evidence of this petition during the campaign and its cheering effect on Bryan's agrarian backers, see the *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 4, 1896.

“then we must have one. The only hope of the gold men now is to array the wage earner against the farmer, and we must meet it.”⁸

To Debs, who strongly supported Bryan and who consequently had refused to allow Henry Demarest Lloyd to nominate him at the Populist convention in St. Louis, Butler also sent a copy of his answer to the railroad companies’ antisilver appeal. Requesting Debs to publish the Populist answer in the newspaper of his American Railway Union, Butler also took the occasion to explain the part he had played in the Senate in attempting to pass legislation that would prevent such injustices in the future as Debs had allegedly suffered at the hands of the federal courts.⁹

John McBride, head of the United Mine Workers and former president of the American Federation of Labor, declared that “not one single bona fide labor paper in the United States” was supporting McKinley and that every labor organization of any consequence had declared for silver and against government by injunction. “When the moneyed men of the land all rush to the support of McKinley and the gold standard,” McBride insisted, “it is time for the labor leaders to get on the other side, because experience has demonstrated that there is nothing in common between the men who make wealth and the men who take wealth.”¹⁰

The loyal support of Bryan from Debs, McBride, Gompers, and other leaders of organized workers was clear enough, but

⁸ Butler to Jones, September 7, 1896, Campaign Letterbooks, Butler MSS.

⁹ Butler to Debs, September 12, 1896, Butler to the *Legal Adviser*, Chicago, September 7, 1896, *ibid*.

¹⁰ Raleigh *News and Observer*, September 6, 1896. McBride was attacking the views of Terence V. Powderly, former head of the Knights of Labor, who was one of the few labor leaders who campaigned for McKinley. Even the Republicans admitted that organized labor was against them. One of them wrote from Chicago: “The labor organizations are against us to a man. Impossible to teach them. They are more interested in the question of Federal jurisdiction over strikes than the money question.” New York *World*, September 12, 1896, as quoted in Josephson, *The Politicos*, 691.

the important question was about the views of the vast majority of the workers who were still unorganized. Henry George, famed author of *Progress and Poverty*, was in many ways the pioneer and giant among the reformers of the Gilded Age. Not only did he declare his enthusiastic adherence to the silver cause, but he also traveled around to various industrial centers during the campaign to write first-hand accounts for the *New York Journal*.

In Chicago George found that the leaders in the Bryan campaign were confident about support from organized labor but doubtful about the unorganized majority of workers, and he was especially interested in ascertaining if the same pattern held in Cleveland. As well as he could determine, George reported, pro-Bryan sentiment among the organized laborers was, if anything, even stronger in the Cleveland area than in Chicago. The National Plasterers' Association had held its annual meeting in the Ohio city a week earlier and the National Carpenters' Association met while George was there; the support for Bryan in both groups seemed to be strong and general. George also found that the workers in the Cleveland area felt some bitterness and suspicion about labor trouble in a local plant where, the workers believed, the company was determined to break the union. "There is an idea among the men that if McKinley wins this effort will be generally made," he added.

In one of the public squares of Cleveland, Henry George found another colorful facet of the campaign. Bryan had spoken there almost a month earlier, and "from that day to the present moment, a sort of perpetual discussion has gone on in this public square." The men who formed the changing audience, many or most of whom were unemployed, insisted on certain proprieties and on each side's having a fair hearing. The more or less permanent chairman who presided over the openair meetings was "a round, full-built man, named Orr,

who was a foreman of dock ore handlers in the employ of Mark Hanna until he attended the St. Louis Populist convention as a delegate” and was discharged upon his return. Mark Hanna’s agents would have been smart to retain the man, George asserted, for he devoted “his enforced leisure to the most effective work toward defeating McKinley, by acting as a sort of common consent chairman for this common people’s perpetual parliament.” All the information that George could get suggested that the unemployed men were nearly unanimous for Bryan.¹¹

Intrigued by the widely publicized accounts of the large delegations of workers who visited McKinley’s home, Henry George went to Canton, Ohio, then the Republican Mecca, to see for himself. He joined a delegation that had been brought in on a special train from a “tin plate mill” and marched up to the front yard of McKinley’s residence. “Governor McKinley is a very careful man in such matters,” George found. “The speaker who is to make the address [for the visiting delegation] is first called in, and if a copy has not been furnished in advance, the candidate learns what is to be said by him, in order to provide against such disaster as befell Blaine at the hands of Rev. Dr. [“Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion”] Burchard. He then comes out, listens to the address and reads his reply, which is afterwards revised before being sent to the press.” George concluded, after this carefully staged affair, that he had rather “travel around like

¹¹ Henry George to New York *Journal*, as quoted in Raleigh *News and Observer*, September 23, 25, 1896. When a government official suggested that Bryan’s unprecedented speechmaking tours were undignified and would cause him to be beaten badly, George asked Governor Altgeld his view and reported that the Illinois governor thought that: “Bryan was doing more for the success of his party than any other hundred of the ablest speakers could possibly do, and that the effect on the people of seeing and hearing the man they were asked to vote for, and even where it was impossible for them to do that, of knowing that he was doing his utmost to get among them, and talk to them face to face, was counting for more than an elaborate organization and an army of the best speakers.” *Ibid.*

Bryan, hard as that must be, than stay in one place and make speech after speech, especially if I felt it necessary to write and revise them."¹²

After talking with his own acquaintances in Canton and with silverites who gathered around the local courthouse, George believed that there was "the same coercion and the same reaction from it, and the same word goes about among workingmen to wear [McKinley] buttons or join clubs, or to 'spoil the Egyptians' by taking anything that is offered from the Hanna funds, but to express their real opinions at the polls." The Bryan workers in Canton were even optimistic about their chances for carrying the county; Populists and Democrats were cooperating, and the Populists were "working in their own way like beavers."

As for himself, Henry George declared on the eve of the election and after completing his tour that he would vote for Bryan "with firmer confidence and a clearer conviction of duty" than he had felt since his first vote was cast for Abraham Lincoln. "In form the struggle is on the currency question," Henry George wrote. "But these are only symbols, and behind them are gathered the world-opposing forces of aristocratic special privilege and democratic freedom. I can have no question of how I ought to vote."¹³

Another account of a workers' delegation at Canton, writ-

¹² *Ibid.*, September 28, 1896. Mrs. Mary E. Lease, the well-known Kansas Populist, obtained an interview with McKinley. She reported, no doubt with gleeful malice, that after desultory conversation about how weary McKinley was from all the visitors, she threw out a reference to "the octopus of mortgaged indebtedness." "A startled look, half fear, lest he had given utterance to an unguarded statement, leaped into Major McKinley's eyes," Mrs. Lease declared. Every effort to renew the conversation failed, and she concluded that, if a man could not act unless he first had knowledge, "then action cannot be expected from Major McKinley, for apparently he is not in possession of any knowledge." With his apparent lack of self-confidence, he impressed the female Populist as little more than "a mile-stone having engraved upon it the distance more or less from the National capitol." *Ibid.*, October 18, 1896.

¹³ *Ibid.*, September 28, 1896; St. Louis, *Post-Dispatch*, November 8, 1896.

ten from a perspective quite different from that of Henry George and by a reporter who apparently was unconscious of the ironies involved, suggests some of the obstacles that the reformers faced among the unorganized workers in 1896. Three special trains delivered 2,500 "brawny workingmen" from Homestead, Pennsylvania, which had earlier been the scene of one of the bitterest and bloodiest lockouts of the era. Marching up the streets "with military precision behind its own squad of Homestead policemen," the delegation was said to have made an imposing sight. After the "Homestead Glee Club sang lustily and tunefully several campaign songs," the superintendent of the transportation department at Andrew Carnegie's vast plant spoke first: "We are of the Homestead Steel Works, which employs over 5,000 men and turns out 90,000 tons of finished material per month and under the McKinley [tariff] law we could double that. It is too bad to see such men and such a plant lie idle, all caused by a lot of theorists. They surely do not expect to get something for nothing, or change the law of supply and demand; nor yet do they expect that Coxe and his hoboes will ever be made rich by an act of Congress. We are perfectly satisfied with the Republican platform and with you for our leader, and when you are elected, which you will be as surely as the sun shines, enact a tariff law that shall give us protection from the pauper labor of Europe, and pass a law declaring gold the standard money of the country, and the women and children who are now living on black coffee and bread, will say, 'God bless you, McKinley, and long may you live to bless mankind.'"

After mounting a chair to respond and being greeted with a "tumultuous outburst" by these happy, unorganized steelworkers, McKinley began: "The Republican party has always believed in 'Homesteads.' (Laughter and applause.) Whether it be the homesteads upon the public domain in the far West or whether it be homesteads in the busy centres of manu-

facturing industries. . . . If there is one day's labor for sixteen workingmen, you would not get as good wages as though there were sixteen days' work for one workingman. (Laughter and applause.) And that is the sort of 16 to 1 we want in the United States." Then as the delegation from Homestead left, "music of advancing bands announced the approach of a thousand employees from the office of the Pennsylvania Railway in Pittsburgh" and 700 workingmen from McKeesport, Pennsylvania.¹⁴

If industrial workers had been subjected only to railway excursions to Canton and McKinley's carefully censored platitudes, no Bryanite could have fairly complained. But the intensity of feeling about the issues involved in the campaign of 1896 led to a pattern of intimidation, some of it subtle and some brutally overt, that effectively robbed an incalculable number of citizens of their freedom of choice. This quickly becomes apparent to any one who spends some time with the newspapers of the period. There was no employers' conspiracy. Mark Hanna did not exercise vast and mysterious power to control factory owners scattered across the nation. Such measures were not necessary when the battle lines were as clearly drawn as they seemed to most Americans to be in 1896. To catalog all of the instances of the intimidation of workers would be as tiresome as it would be impossible, but perhaps a few examples may serve to suggest the situation that existed.

That a major depression had prostrated the economy was true enough. But a bad situation seemed to get drastically worse in the summer of the great campaign. The *New York Times*, then certainly no purveyor of stories slanted to arouse sympathy for underlings, reported that the last shaft of the

¹⁴ *New York Times*, September 13, 1896. When the Populist committee could not find funds to send out speakers, it is noteworthy that the Republicans could pay for large audiences to visit McKinley.

Rockefeller iron mines in Bessemer, Michigan, had been closed down, leaving fewer than 1,000 men with jobs out of the 8,000 who had once been employed there. The president of the company explained that, "Our regular customers have not bought their supply, and they tell us that they find it impossible to sell their pig-iron product because the agitation in favor of free silver has stopped investments in enterprises which would otherwise have enabled them to operate their works as usual."¹⁵

In St. Louis, Missouri, an iron works that employed about 700 men closed its door on August 1, and the president informed a newsman that he attributed the decline in orders "to the free silver agitation, and to the [Democrats'] Chicago platform." The reporter discovered that shortly before the mills were closed each worker had been given a copy of an antisilver speech, "How Free Coinage Will Affect the Workingman," by John G. Carlisle, President Cleveland's secretary of the treasury. At the end of August another factory in St. Louis that employed about 170 men closed down until after the election. On the night that it closed the vice president in charge of the factory's operation informed the Eighth Ward Republican Club that the agitation for free silver had led to the cessation of work and that he had made an "exhaustive explanation" of the evils of free silver to all the employees before discharging them.¹⁶

Although supporters of reform from Bryan and Senators Jones and Butler down to the humblest Democrat or Populist vigorously protested these widely repeated incidents, redress of the workers' grievances was rare. One blatant case, however, presented the rare spectacle of an overbearing employer

¹⁵ *New York Times*, August 4, 1896.

¹⁶ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 2, September 1, 1896. These stories were not written in the sensational, biased manner that characterized much of the journalism of the time but were calm and factual.

who had to back down in the face of public pressure. The owner of a department store in St. Louis discharged a dozen of his employees, including a department head or two, allegedly because they were advocates of free silver and therefore “anarchists” and unfit to work in the store. When the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published the story along with affidavits from the discharged employees and the Democratic state committee threatened legal action, the employer hastily bowed before a part of the public’s anger. He reinstated the twelve employees and took half-page advertisements to announce that the company had never paid any attention to the “Religious Belief, Politics or Nationality” of any person seeking employment there. Furthermore: “Our store will be closed on Election Day, Tuesday, Nov. 3d, at 1 P. M., so that all our employees will have ample time to VOTE AS THEY PLEASE.”¹⁷

Unfortunately for the reform parties, factories, mines, and railways were not so susceptible to the outraged opinion of a part of the public as a locally owned department store was. Consequently, the number of closed mills, discharged workers, and orders placed on condition of Bryan’s defeat increased as the campaign continued. The *New York Times* noted that in addition to hundreds of orders conditioned on McKinley’s election at the iron and steel mills in Pennsylvania, there was a long published list of proposed issues of municipal bonds which had been deferred until after the election. In most of the cases the money was needed to construct public works. The election of Bryan would deprive laborers of the much-needed employment but “the election of McKinley will give it to them with very little delay.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, October 11, 12, 13, 1896. The *Post-Dispatch* on October 16 reported that the *World* was the only newspaper in New York to mention the incident at the St. Louis department store—but the *World* had it that the discharged workers were for McKinley and that this was a “case of flagrant intimidation on the part of a free silver enthusiast.”

As opposed to Bryan as the *Times* was, even it speculated editorially that businessmen might be “aggravating a state of mind that is unhealthy in itself, and that will, after the election, produce a reaction that may easily be mischievous.” While nineteen out of twenty businessmen were confident of Bryan’s defeat, they were “waiting and hesitating, ‘taking in sail’ for possible stormy weather, or, at best, not letting out any.” The *Times* considered the business world’s “curious state of mind” as “a striking commentary on the character of Bryan and his party and their policy.” The Nebraskan possessed the “belief of an ignorant fanatic in the doctrine he represented” and was, moreover, “a demagogue and a revolutionist by nature without any anchorage of knowledge, or experience, or sober purpose to steady him.” The New York newspaper concluded that his election would not be a fatal disaster to the nation but “it would be terrible.” Still, businessmen for their own good as well as the country’s might “wisely act with more courage and decision.”¹⁸

Given the defenselessness of the vast majority of unorganized industrial workers, there is nothing surprising in the fact that Bryan was unable even to carry the larger cities of the Midwest, much less to pile up the large majorities there that helped elect Democratic presidential candidates after

¹⁸ *New York Times*, October 21, 22, 1896. The businessmen’s confidence apparently returned with something of a rush after McKinley’s victory. The “world’s largest” refrigerator company in Michigan announced that it would resume work after being closed all summer and would reemploy from 300 to 450 men. There was an order for 3,000 ice-boxes that had been conditioned on Republican victory. Silk mills in Hartford, Connecticut, were resuming full-time operation after running on short time for several months, and manufacturers in the area reported an “improved feeling in business” and confidence that as surely as it had been promised an era of prosperity was at hand. A textile mill in New York state resumed full operation with a single order that had been placed conditionally for “5,000 pairs of pants,” and in Terre Haute, Indiana, two rolling mills hired 400 more men than had been used during the summer. *Atlanta Constitution*, November 9, 1896. These are only a few of the instances of renewed business activity reported in one day’s issue of the Atlanta newspaper.

1932.¹⁹ Leaders who were sympathetic with labor hinted during the campaign that the unorganized workers constituted a highly vulnerable portion of the farmer-labor phalanx that was the hope of reformers in 1896. Eugene Debs, for example, declared early in the campaign that if the election were held then, Bryan would carry even the eastern states with the exception of Pennsylvania. "In Pennsylvania labor is more completely subjugated than in any other State of the Union, and corporate influences better organized," Debs explained. "The miners are largely Italians, Hungarians, and Poles, who have displaced American labor and they do not hesitate to vote according to the orders they receive." An Iowan Populist declared it was "a great fight" with silver "a mere bauble compared with the real bottom struggle now going on for human rights." But the outcome depended on the labor vote. "Will they have sense enough to see beyond a day's work?" the Iowan asked. "I think the plutes fear defeat and are playing a desperate game and risking all." Florence Kelley in Chicago feared that wholesale coercion in Chicago and elsewhere meant that Altgeld and Bryan would lose the state. "There may be more moral courage among the wage earners than I'm calculating upon," Miss Kelley realistically admitted. "But I see no reason for expecting much."²⁰

¹⁹ William Diamond, "Urban and Rural Voting in 1896," *American Historical Review*, XLVI (January 1941), 289-90, shows that in the east north central section—Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio—neither the cities nor the rural areas gave majorities to Bryan and there was, in general, little of the tension between urban and rural voting that Diamond found in most other sections in varying degrees. In the west north central section—Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri—Bryan carried the last three states but lost the cities in all.

²⁰ St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, August 8, 1896; A. W. C. Weeks to Lemuel H. Weller, October 22, 1896, Weller MSS, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Florence Kelley to Henry D. Lloyd, October 15, 1896, Lloyd MSS. Pollack, *Populist Response to Industrialism*, 61-63, suggests, correctly in this writer's opinion, that the reason for the failure of the farmer-labor coalition

Just as Populist and Democratic efforts to win support from the urban workers in the pivotal states apparently failed with the unorganized majority, Bryan and his associates in the campaign were likewise unsuccessful in persuading the majority of the rural farm population in those states to vote for reform. Not only were farmers in Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan traditionally Republican from the Civil War on, but historians agree that agriculture in the north central states never suffered as cruelly as it had in the drought-stricken regions farther west and in the South. As one historian has put it, "Bryan failed to carry the farmers with him where he needed them the most, in the Old Northwest and upper Mississippi Valley."²¹

Despite their traditional Republicanism, farmers in the pivotal states did suffer in the major depression that began in 1893. Plummeting farm prices coupled with other grievances shared with agrarians in other regions created unrest, and the Republican campaign leaders in 1896 concentrated on soothing the uneasiness of the farmers in the crucial states no less than the Populists and Democrats tried to capitalize on it. Professor Gilbert Fite has shown how the Republicans flooded the section with campaign material arguing the thesis that low farm prices had nothing to do with the gold standard but derived solely from domestic overproduction and foreign competition. The Republicans furnished no inkling as to how supply and demand might be brought into balance

in 1896 lay with labor and that historians have erred in regarding the agrarians as the stumbling block. Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (Chicago, 1957), 66, states that the largest of the labor organizations, the American Federation of Labor, had only 278,000 members in 1898.

²¹ Gilbert C. Fite, "Republican Strategy and the Farm Vote in the Presidential Campaign of 1896," *American Historical Review*, LXV (July 1960), 804-805. Professor Fite notes that Minnesota, Iowa, and Ohio had voted Republican in every presidential election between the Civil War and 1896 and Illinois and Wisconsin had voted Democratic only in 1892.

other than through the general prosperity that they promised with the return to the higher protective tariff which they perennially stood for. But their headquarters in Chicago, "the real centre of the educational part of the campaign" according to Mark Hanna's biographer, lavishly dispensed pamphlets and materials especially prepared for distribution to the rural weekly newspapers and farm journals and all stressing the theme of overproduction.²²

Farmers who could not be persuaded that overproduction and President Cleveland's trifling reductions in the tariff rates were the sources of agricultural depression might have been influenced in other ways. Farmers obviously could not be discharged or even intimidated about their political views in the way that industrial workers were. But the enemies of silver had other approaches that could be used in the hinterlands. A reporter for a British journal found that eastern insurance companies that owned mortgages on farms in Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, and surrounding states sent their numerous agents into the presidential campaign in October. The companies, "fearing things were running in favor of Bryan, sent these agents to see personally every farmer and come to an understanding that if McKinley were elected they would grant five years' extension of the loan at a low rate of interest."²³

²² *Ibid.*, 794-98. With regard to the political effect of the rise in wheat prices just prior to the election, Fite admits that the times were not actually improving for farmers late in 1896 but suggests, quite correctly, that many midwestern farmers may have thought they were. "Voters do not necessarily act on what is true, but on what they think is true. The possibility should not be overlooked that the widespread and intense prosperity-is-coming campaign may have won a sizable number of farm voters, many of whom were traditionally Republican anyway, but who had temporarily deserted the party in protest against low prices and hard times." *Ibid.*, 801. Hanna's superb organizational work is described in Herbert Croly, *Marcus Alonzo Hanna: His Life and Work* (New York, 1912), 209 ff.

²³ *St. James Gazette*, November 6, 1896, as quoted in Josephson, *The Politicos*, 702. North Carolinians, and probably others, received notices from their insurance companies that the free coinage of silver would result in

And for those farmers, and workers too for that matter, who displayed a stubborn interest in the possibility of relief from the grinding deflation through the free coinage of silver, the Republicans also had an answer. Its logic may have clashed with that of the theme of overproduction, but American politicians of whatever party have seldom paid much attention to logic. Not only did the Republican platform promise an effort for silver through “an international agreement with the leading commercial nations of the earth,” but McKinley himself had a strongly prosilver record during his earlier incarnation as a congressman from Ohio. “I have always been in favor of the free and unlimited coinage of the silver product of the United States, and have so voted on at least two occasions during the time I have been in public life,” he had declared in 1890. “With me political and economic questions are a conviction.”²⁴

Early in 1896, months before the conventions and campaign, a Republican senator had frankly asserted that to secure an international agreement for silver would be just as impossible “either now or hereafter, as to secure a railroad connection between here and the planet Mars.” Conservative eastern newspapers like the *New York Evening Post*, which frankly adhered to the gold standard, assailed the talk of international bimetallism as “solemn fooling, if not worse.” Another spoke of “chasing a moonbeam” which fed among the unemployed and the chronically poor “a restless fever, which is death to genuine prosperity.” Democratic and Populist editors and political leaders were, for once, quite in agreement with the candid advocates of monometallism about the essential unreality of any international agreement.

policies being paid in dollars worth only fifty cents. Raleigh *Caucasian*, August 13, 1896.

²⁴ Congressman Wm. McKinley, Jr., to E. S. Perkins, September 27, 1890, as quoted in *New York Times*, September 30, 1896.

England's attachment to the gold standard was too unshakable. But that did not prevent Mark Hanna and the Republican headquarters in Chicago from utilizing the idea of an international agreement to the fullest, wherever and whenever it was needed.²⁵

"The free-silver disease is yielding to treatment . . .," Hanna announced in New York at one point during the campaign. "A great deal more work is being done [in the Midwest] than in the Eastern States." Another and more famous remark of Hanna's was, "He [Bryan] is talking silver all the time, and that's where we've got him."²⁶ These remarks of the Republican generalissimo of 1896 have often been interpreted as evidence of Bryan's mistake in emphasizing silver, the issue that all the reform parties had agreed to push to the forefront.

Another and more likely interpretation is that Hanna and Republican campaigners treated the "free-silver disease" in the Midwest as in the South not by talk of the gold standard but by pushing forward the idea of an international agreement as the safest and surest route to bimetallism. The Republicans, in other words, could "get" Bryan for "talking silver all the time" because they could "talk silver" too. The lines were drawn more clearly and the issues posed more honestly in 1896 than in any campaign in many decades. But the Republican party's promise of an effort for an international agreement on silver, no matter how unrealistic the promise, furnished the precise and critical ambiguity that may have been one of the decisive factors in McKinley's victory in the north central states.²⁷

²⁵ *New York Evening Post* and other Republican newspapers as quoted in *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 3, December 25, 1896.

²⁶ *New York Times*, September 24, 1896; the second quotation is given, among other places, in Faulkner, *Politics, Reform, and Expansion*, 206.

²⁷ After the election the *New York Evening Post* deplored Hanna's statement that "farmers and laborers in the western cities were won over to the support of McKinley by explaining to them that we stood on the St. Louis

There is evidence, finally, that some shrewd observers at the time understood why Bryan had lost the election. Marion Butler explained to a prominent Populist in Kentucky that the “great northwestern states” had to be captured before the fight for reform could be won; they had been lost in 1896 when the Republicans succeeded in winning too much of the farmer-labor vote. Josephus Daniels, visiting Washington not long after the election, talked with Senator Jones and with other prosilver leaders. The Tarheel editor found that Jones and his allies “got exactly what they expected from the East—nothing.” They knew too that they “lost in the central West in the great cities, and in the disinclination of Republican farmers to break away from their party in view of McKinley’s votes in Congress for silver.”²⁸

In addition to the above reasons for Bryan’s failure in the pivotal states, the role of the churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, is an imponderable factor that should be at least mentioned. Professor Richard Hofstadter in his devastating essay on “Bryan: the Democrat as Revivalist” manages to convey the impression that the Nebraskan was uniquely naive and simple minded in thinking that morality had much to do with the issues in 1896. Declaring that the “Great Commoner was a circuit-riding evangelist in politics” and always a “provincial politician” who followed “a provincial populace in provincial prejudices,” Hofstadter argues that Bryan premised his whole political career on the belief that “social problems are essentially moral—that is to say, religious.” And from 1896 to the Scopes trial and his death, Bryan “was

[Republican] platform, which advocates bimetalism under an international agreement, and that we were not gold monometallists.” E. L. Godkin’s *Post* assailed Hanna’s frank explanation as “Bryanism pure and simple.” Quoted in *Atlanta Constitution*, November 16, 1896.

²⁸ Butler to Jo A. Parker, December 19, 1896, Campaign Letterbooks, Butler MSS; Daniels’ letter from Washington in *Raleigh News and Observer*, January 3, 1897.

simply carrying this variety of political primitivism to its logical end."²⁹

The truth is that most Americans in 1896, regardless of which side they were on, interpreted the campaign and its issues in moral terms. Ironically, it was neither Bryan nor any of his followers who cried, "At no time since 1860 have the issues of a Presidential campaign been so distinctively moral." That was the *New York Times* in an editorial demanding that the religious journals of the churches throw their full influence "on the side of honesty and right," which meant, to the *Times*, on the side of gold.

Again, not Bryan but the *Times* asserted in a later editorial: "If there ever was a crisis in the history of this country when the teachings of the Gospel of peace and justice were involved in the duty of the citizen it is the present crisis." The metropolitan newspaper charged that the inevitable effect of Bryan's teachings was to "sow envy and uncharitableness in the hearts of large classes and to stir them to conduct which would imperil law and order." It was clearly the duty of religious teachers "in the pulpit or the press" to fight such evil influences.³⁰

Eastern clergymen needed no pushes from the *Times* about their anti-Bryan zeal. Both Protestant and Catholic spokesmen took highly partisan stands with surprising boldness in 1896. "The present political discussion is moral, rather than political," a leading Baptist divine in New York city an-

²⁹ *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (Vintage edition; New York, 1954), 186-205.

³⁰ *New York Times*, August 17, 23, 1896. It might be suggested here that some historians, who read backwards from the shabby and pathetic Bryan of the Scopes trial, do both him and millions of Americans who admired and voted for him an injustice. A great deal happened in and to the United States between 1896 and 1925, and H. L. Mencken's savagely witty portrait of Bryan, who was about to die, is not necessarily the truth about the younger presidential candidate. Bryan's simple but fervent Protestantism, for example, was not nearly as "provincial" in 1896 as it had become in 1925 and later.

nounced, "and no pulpit can keep silent when this country is threatened and the political situation casts a dark cloud over this great Republic." The same preacher soon asked from his pulpit whether "Americanism or Anarchism" should prevail. The Democratic platform threatened the stability of the republic and promised to revive Robespierre and the Jacobins. There were but two parties, this man of God concluded, "patriots and traitors."³¹

More important for the Midwest perhaps were the statements made by various prelates who were high in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church. Archbishop John Ireland of Minnesota declared that the Democratic platform and candidate represented a menace to the social order. Neatly introducing his own touch of the "bloody shirt," the Archbishop explained that he considered free silver, as bad as that would be, as of minor importance in comparison to the reincarnation of the doctrine of "secession" in the Democratic plank against arbitrary federal interference in local affairs. Worse than all, the Archbishop concluded, was the "spirit of socialism that permeates the whole movement that has issued from the [Democratic] convention at Chicago." It was "the 'International' of Europe, now taking body in America."

Bishop Francis F. Chatard of the diocese of Indiana then declared: "I consider that what Archbishop Ireland says about the Chicago platform . . . is exactly true." Bishop Chatard also joined in especially "deploring the arraying of class against class and the resulting bad and dangerous sentiments that may have the saddest consequences." And the Catholic bishop of Omaha, Nebraska, denied that he had called the Populists anarchists. "But I did say, and I now

³¹ *New York Times*, July 26, August 3, 1896. For example of equally partisan sermons by other preachers in other denominations, see *ibid.*, October 5, 12, 1896.

say," he explained, "that Populists, Anarchists, and Communists must not be permitted to destroy the financial credit of our country." The Nebraska prelate, who knew Bryan and described him as "light" and "tonguey," felt sure that the American people would be "keen enough to escape this silver mania" and vote for the candidates who respected American treaties and financial honor.³²

Republicans were naturally pleased with the clerical pronouncements, especially since they had come in the campaign's midwestern battleground. Concerning Archbishop Ireland's statement, the chief of the literary bureau in the Republicans' Chicago headquarters noted that Ireland was not a man "to be swayed by partisan prejudices" and whatever he said was "bound to carry with it a great deal of weight." Senator Jones merely commented that he had nothing to say about the matter beyond the fact that he had no desire to criticize the Archbishop or any other citizen "who sees fit to express his opinions concerning National issues." The prevailing opinion in Washington political circles was reported to be that the Archbishop's declaration would "increase the sound-money vote in Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois 50,000 or more."³³

George F. Washburn, the Populist leader in charge of the party's Chicago headquarters, was himself a Catholic. Apparently, neither he nor any other Populist spokesman publicly answered Archbishop Ireland. Although the People's party, especially in the South, had inherited a certain rural Protestant flavor and tone from the Farmers' Alliance, Populists

³² *Literary Digest*, XIII (October 24, 1896), 806, for Ireland; *New York Herald*, October 17, 1896, for Chatard; and *New York Times*, August 9, 1896, for Bishop Newman of Omaha.

³³ *New York Times*, October 13, 1896. James H. Moynihan, *The Life of Archbishop John Ireland* (New York, 1953), 261-63, describes Ireland's close association with the Republican party and mentions how he helped to keep a plank opposing any union of church and state out of the Republican platform in 1896 on the grounds that it was uncalled for and would be interpreted as a concession to the American Protective Association.

in 1896 were concentrating on winning vital economic reforms and were not in the least interested in being drawn into any quarrel about church-state relations. However much Populists might have regretted the statements of Ireland and the others, the voluminous correspondence to and from Chairman Marion Butler's office contains no evidence of anti-Catholicism.

Likewise the charge of anti-Semitism that various writers have recently leveled against the Populists is one for which absolutely no evidence can be found in the private letters that poured into Butler's office from Populists in virtually every state of the union. North Carolina's leading Populist newspaper, the Raleigh *Caucasian*, contained the usual stereotyped references to the Rothschilds but the emphasis clearly was on the fact that they were prominent world, and especially British, bankers rather than on their Jewishness.³⁴

If the Populists had been seeking scapegoats rather than rational, governmental cures for their grievances, certainly the irresistible target for them in the South would have been the Negroes. But, as Professor C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, "perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the whole Populist movement was the resistance its leaders in the South put up against racism and racist propaganda and the determined effort they made against incredible odds to win back political rights for the Negroes, defend those rights against brutal aggression, and create among their normally anti-Negro following, even temporarily, a spirit of tolerance in which the

³⁴ For example, the Raleigh *Caucasian*, September 12, 1896, carried a cartoon showing one of the Rothschilds in London sending congratulations to McKinley. For a recent article that attacks the view that the Populists were anti-Semitic, see Norman Pollack, "The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism," *American Historical Review*, LXVIII (October 1962), 76-80. The most impressive refutation of the charge of Populist anti-Semitism, however, is in Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago, 1963). Many of Professor Nugent's carefully researched conclusions concerning Kansas Populism parallel or supplement those of the writer concerning the national party.

two races of the South could work together in one party for the achievement of common ends.”³⁵

Populist efforts to win Negro votes were not, in general, successful in the South, since the Negroes, when left free to choose and to vote, usually voted Republican. The Negroes, like so many of the whites, were the victims of their history and of the traditions that clustered around Abraham Lincoln's party, the “party that freed the slaves.” But through Populist-Republican cooperation in state and local elections, cooperation that was either formal and open or informal and tacit in most of the Southern states, the Populists continued to have a vital stake in the Negro's vote.

In North Carolina, with its relatively strong Republican party and its vigorous Populists, fusion for state and local purposes was formally arranged in 1896. The Democrats in North Carolina, unlike those in Georgia and Texas, proved unable to win any significant number of Negroes from their traditional loyalty to the Republicans. When the Democrats began to realize that they might lose the governorship for the first time since Reconstruction, they made a desperate last-minute effort to arouse racial passions and prejudices against the Negro minority in the state.

Furnifold M. Simmons, who was destined to lead the Tarheel Democrats in their successful “white supremacy” crusades of 1898 and 1900 and then represent the state in the United States Senate for thirty years, was unable to prevent his party's defeat in the state election of 1896. But Simmons furnished a hint of the technique that would soon lead to a second “redemption” of the state by the Democrats and to disfranchisement and legalized, mandatory segregation for

³⁵ “The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual,” in *Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1960), pp. 156-57. This brief essay of Professor Woodward's is a cogent and dispassionate refutation of the charges of anti-Semitism, isolationism, McCarthyism, etc., that were made against the Populists in the last half of the 1950's. There is also a convenient list of many of the works in which the charges were made on page 146.

the Negroes. Although himself a late and none too enthusiastic convert to Bryanism, Simmons loyally labored for the Democratic party. In a speech delivered towards the end of the campaign in 1896, he warned: "At one time I thought I saw signs of a desire on the part of the colored people to vote intelligently and to be instructed as to their best interest, and I always took pleasure in trying to point out to them what I thought was to their interest. . . . The day is not come and will not come when the white people of North Carolina will permit the colored man to rule over them. The Anglo-Saxon neck has never yet been bended to such a yoke. . . . I am not drawing the color line, the colored man has already drawn it, and it is that fact, that danger, which I desire to impress upon the white people of this country and of North Carolina."³⁶

Another Democrat reported from the eastern part of the state, where the Negro population was concentrated, that "Hanna's black emissaries" were both numerous and effective in persuading the Negroes that the "free silver scheme was gotten up by the Democrats only to fool the negroes, and if the Democrats get in power, it will be good-bye Mr. Nigger." One of the Negro Republicans' themes was alleged to be: "With us, my colored brethren, it is a question of free silver or free nigger. You can take whichever you please. I am a free nigger man myself, and therefore I am against your free silver."³⁷

The Populists' motivation in defending the Negroes' right

³⁶ Raleigh *News and Observer*, October 15, 1896.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, October 22, 1896. The intense passion and frequent violence that characterized the election of 1896 in the South is illustrated by an incident in which the author's great-uncle was involved: "At the opening of the polls [for the Georgia state election] at Monte, Emanuel County, this morning, William Durden and a negro hand walked up to vote, when a Democratic ticket was snatched out of [the Negro's] hand by C. W. Williams, a negro third partyite. Several Democrats rushed for him and Williams pulled his pistol and killed S. S. Middleton. He made an effort to escape, but was overtaken and shot to death." *New York Times*, October 8, 1896.

to vote was clearly a mixture of self-interest and more generous purposes. At any rate, the leading Tarheel Populist newspaper said a great deal in a brief space when it announced to the Democrats: "This sort of [racial] business is too old, gentlemen. Stick to the issues."³⁸

The truth was that racism and nativism held little attraction in 1896 for the Populists. Desperate men in a sense, they were also politically oriented, and they hoped to capture the federal government and use it for a whole series of reforms beginning with the currency. Populists, many of whom were poorly educated and most of whom were poverty stricken, were certainly not any more immune to sin and shortcomings than anyone else. In other circumstances and times many of them, but by no means all, abandoned their hopes of reform and sought refuge in violent hates and morbid fears. But in 1896 Populists were in no mood for false issues that merely distracted from the great economic questions of the day.

In view of the denunciation of Bryan and all that he stood for by certain leaders of the Catholic church, perhaps it was not strange that in the last phase of the campaign a story began to be whispered around and finally published to the effect that the Democratic-Populist presidential candidate was in league with such anti-Catholic and nativist organizations as the American Protective Association. Actually, the A. P. A. itself had come on lean days by the time of the presidential campaign of 1896. For example, its newspaper in St. Louis, the *True American*, collapsed for want of subscribers as the campaign got underway.

But it is also clear that what was left of the organization supported McKinley and the Republicans. When John W.

³⁸ Raleigh *Caucasian*, October 15, 1896. On October 29 the Populist journal declared that the Democratic party in the state had remounted "its old 'riding hoss'—the howl of 'nigger' hoping that his old 'hoss' will carry them back from where they were driven. . . ."

Echols, the president of the A. P. A., was criticized by some Democrats for using the society and his office against Bryan, Nichols countered that he had only obeyed the orders of the A. P. A.'s Supreme Council in making public Bryan's attitude "toward the principles of the order." He had not done the same thing for McKinley, "because the Supreme Council had already passed upon him and his record and declared him unobjectionable to the order."³⁹

Bryan's position was peculiar. He had been severely attacked by various Catholic leaders. But in Kentucky the A. P. A. was reported to have distributed widely a circular charging that Bryan had sold out to the Catholics and would be under their control if elected. Meantime, in the upper Mississippi valley the story was that Bryan, as an alleged anti-Catholic and nativist, was a member of the A. P. A. To cope with this confused and distorted situation Bryan finally moved to clear the air at the very end of the campaign: "I have not attempted to answer all of the misrepresentations which have been circulated in this campaign, but in the closing days I feel that it is necessary to call your attention to an attack which has recently been made by the enemy. . . . I am not and never have been a member of the American Protective Association or of the Junior Order of American Mechanics, or of any other society hostile to any church, religion or race; nor have I ever applied for membership in any such organization. While I am a member of the Presbyterian church, I have always believed that there should be no religious test applied in the holding of public office, and I have not allowed religious differences to affect my conduct in the discharge of the duties of public office. . . . I have tried

³⁹ St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, August 4, 1896; New York *Times*, October 31, 1896. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1955), 80-87, discusses the pro-Republican bias of the A. P. A., and Donald L. Kinzer, *An Episode in Anti-Catholicism: The American Protective Association* (Seattle, 1964), 224-28, describes the organization's disarray in 1896.

so far as I could to conduct this campaign in an open and honorable way, and have insisted that those who are with us should refrain from personal criticism of my opponent and leave the people to pass judgment upon the principles which we represent."⁴⁰

BY ENTITLING his book about the campaign *The First Battle*, Bryan meant that one defeat did not mean the loss of the war. There would be, there had to be, another battle for silver and all the other reforms that it symbolized. Several million Americans, Democrats and Populists alike, shared this view. But opinions differed sharply as to just what form the campaign of 1900 should take and which party should lead the next great effort for reform.

Marion Butler staked out the Populist claim immediately after Bryan's defeat was clear. Deemphasizing the mid-roaders' disgruntlement, he insisted that the People's party was the only one that "supported solidly and unitedly the great and vital issues represented in the candidacy of Mr. Bryan." The Populist chairman suggested that "had it not been for the prejudice against the Democratic name, as well as want of confidence in Democratic promises, for which it must be frankly admitted past experience furnished ample ground, a majority of the voters of the country . . . would have cast their votes for financial reform and American independence." The defeat was not the fault of Bryan personally, for his "remarkable and brilliant campaign" would have aligned the majority of Americans who opposed all that McKinley stood for "if any candidate or leader in America could have done so under the Democratic banner." Butler's boldly partisan conclusion was clear enough: the Populists would be in 1900 "the nucleus around which the patriotic hosts must and will gather to redeem a betrayed republic and

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, October 31, 1896; Bryan, *First Battle*, 593.

to restore prosperity to an oppressed and outraged people.”⁴¹

Loyal Democrats could not be expected to accept Butler’s analysis and prognosis. Governor Stone of Missouri insisted that reformers had no reason for discouragement. “A year ago the Democratic party was nearer destruction and dissolution than ever before in its history,” Stone declared. “It was almost a wreck. Then the people revolted against the [Cleveland] Administration which was trying to betray the party into an abandonment of its principles.” With the full power of the Cleveland administration as well as the Republicans and Gold Democrats pitted against Bryan, reformers were left “an almost impossible task in the time and with the limited means” at their disposal to organize their previously antagonistic forces. “We relied almost wholly upon the plain people, widely scattered over the country, and almost wholly unorganized at the beginning of the fight in July,” the Missourian concluded. “In the face of all these advantages the goldbugs won only by the skin of their teeth.”⁴²

The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* optimistically asserted that the eastern people were fundamentally “all right” and would “vote with the plain people of the West as soon as they understand the issues.” If the Democratic party only had a half dozen newspapers in the East to discuss the issues and print the news fairly, the St. Louis editor argued, it could win there. Reformers in the meantime would not abandon the East but educate it “on the currency question as it was [educated] on the tariff.” Another prominent Democratic newspaper, the *Atlanta Constitution*, also took the long view and emphasized that the campaign had been a profoundly educational one in which many voters “who have been brought up on war issues have had an opportunity to receive much-needed instruction.”⁴³

⁴¹ St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, November 7, 1896.

⁴² *Ibid.*, November 8, 1896.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, November 7, 1896; *Constitution*, November 14, 1896.

In the East and among the antisilver newspapers in general across the country, rejoicing was great that the country had escaped "anarchy" and "dishonor." But one independent newspaper in the heart of New England had the courage to pay Bryan a gracious tribute. The Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican* declared that one could "dissent from many of his opinions and yet recognize the brilliant, persistent, desperate fortitude that has made his leadership pervasive beyond precedent." No other man, in the *Republican's* opinion, could have led the reform forces with their "disorganized and clashing interests with the same courage and untiring faith, or directed a crude campaign to any better results."⁴⁴

The Boston correspondent of the Springfield *Republican* dared to put the matter even more bluntly when he suggested that rather than saying that "the country rose as a man" against Bryan it would be more correct to say that the North-east rose as a mouse, for "a more frightened people as to the possible result of Bryan's election I have never seen in any of the Presidential contests that I remember." The irreverent correspondent guessed that "our Calvinistic and Federalist grandfathers were more alarmed when Jefferson was running in 1800, — and they slandered and voted against him." They had not been able to defeat the Virginian but "did their best by voting steadily for that pink of political wisdom and social morality, Aaron Burr, until wiser and calmer men further south allowed Jefferson to be chosen by the House."

Four years after that even Massachusetts had voted for Jefferson, and the newspaperman predicted that the future probably held in it a victory of the same sort for the defeated Bryan. McKinley's election had settled nothing except the breaking up of the older political parties; it certainly did not mean any permanent victory for the minority of the voters who adhered to the gold standard. Not only was Bryan's

⁴⁴ As quoted in the *Atlanta Constitution*, November 7, 1896.

record at the age of thirty-six more dazzling even than Lincoln's at the age of fifty but: "Bryan convinced the Chicago convention by his personal qualities that he was the best candidate; and as such he has dominated his party, held its discordant elements together, converted a million voters to the heresy of free silver, and got more electoral votes by 50, at least, than any other Democrat could have had in this year of party deliquescence and party treachery. He has done it too with the newspapers generally and impudently against him; with the financial interests of the country against him 10 to 1; with the whole force of the national administration wielded against him. . . . To have succeeded as he has done, under these circumstances; to have retained the respect of all his supporters, and forced the most impudent of his newspaper maligners to treat him better at the end of his contest than at the beginning—this is a personal triumph which ought to console him for the failure of too enthusiastic hopes."⁴⁵

Bryan probably was consoled by his strong showing in the face of unprecedented difficulties, and he definitely was looking ahead to the next battle in 1900. He wrote in longhand to Butler to thank him for his services during the campaign and to request a copy of Butler's "best" photograph for inclusion in the forthcoming memoir of the campaign. In his only reference to the vice-presidential matter in the letter, Bryan declared that he believed that Butler had "made as good use as it was possible" to make of the situation.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ As quoted in the *Raleigh News and Observer*, November 10, 1896.

⁴⁶ Bryan to Butler, December 5, 1896, Butler MSS. Bryan's book was dedicated to "three pioneers" who were "the foremost champions of bimetalism in their respective parties," Richard P. Bland, James B. Weaver, and Henry M. Teller. It also contains photographs of most of the politically prominent figures in the campaign of 1896. Concerning Watson, Bryan wrote: "I had intended to present the picture of Mr. Watson . . . together with a biographical sketch and some extracts from his campaign utterances, but have refrained from doing so at his request. I may add here that, while I did not fully agree with him as to the methods to be employed during the campaign,

Butler continued to have cordial relations with Bryan, but the Populist chairman now saw his primary obligation as being to the People's party, an obligation that should now be fulfilled in a more partisan manner than had been possible during the campaign. To preserve the party's organization and prepare it for future campaigns would require not only the most tactful handling of the midroaders but also a careful keeping of distance from Bryan and the Democrats. Butler complied with the Nebraskan's request for the photograph and other material but in doing so took advantage of the occasion to suggest that the transportation question, which Butler thought was growing more and more important, deserved treatment in Bryan's forthcoming book. Butler conceded that finance and taxation would probably always be the most vital matters, but modern conditions had made the transportation question almost equal in importance. The activities of the railroad companies in behalf of McKinley and the gold standard in the campaign just concluded had forced to the front the question of private control of a vast natural monopoly. "In fact, it seems to me," Butler argued, "that this issue will have to be fought out along with the financial question in the next national campaign."⁴⁷

Aside from keeping his distance from Bryan and the Democrats, Butler believed that his and his party's largest problem was to stop the tendency of the southern and western wings of the party to pull further and further apart. Butler and the majority of the large North Carolina delegation to the

I never questioned his good faith or his right to pursue such a course as he thought to be best for the success of the reforms in which he was interested." *First Battle*, 622-23.

⁴⁷ Butler to Bryan, December 16, 1896, Campaign Letterbooks, Butler MSS. Bryan offered the Populist organization a portion of his royalties from *The First Battle* but Butler declined the offer on the grounds that Bryan belonged to the Democratic party, the Populist-Democratic alliance had been only for 1896, and the future alone would determine what course the People's party would take in 1900. Butler to G. L. Spence, April 10, 1897, *ibid.*

Populist convention at St. Louis had played an essentially national role in helping to prevent the open and final split between extreme midroaders and extreme fusionists that had been threatened. Butler still regarded the prevention of this split as his primary task.

Tom Watson, on the other hand, took his bitter grudge against Butler into the newspapers and charged that the Populist chairman was everything from “a liar and traitor” to a “selfish, unprincipled trickster.” “To be foxy, double-faced, false of tongue and treacherous at heart is natural to him,” the Georgian declared, “and when he betrays those who trust him and deceives those who are silly enough to take him at his word, he has no more sinned against his nature than does our friend, the ‘William goat,’ when it fights with its horns rather than mouth or feet.” Butler, on the advice of Reed and Washburn, refrained from answering Watson’s personal attack as well as from publishing a point-by-point refutation of Watson’s specific charges about the recent campaign. Instead, Butler sought help wherever he could find it in checking the sectional breach that still threatened the party.⁴⁸

In Nebraska, where most Populists accepted and even thrived under national as well as local fusion with the Democrats, J. A. Edgerton, the secretary of the Populist national executive committee, liked the idea of the nonpartisan silver clubs which Bryan had proposed as a means of keeping the educational work going and the various reform parties in harness together. Butler, fearful lest the autonomy of the People’s party might be further jeopardized, was cool to the idea for the time being. To a Populist leader in Missouri who was almost ready to abandon hope of reconciling the southern midroaders, Butler wrote: “You are entirely wrong in concluding that the only Populists there are [are] in the West,

⁴⁸ Raleigh *News and Observer*, December 9, 1896; Washburn to Butler, January 13, 1897, Reed to Butler, January 15, 1897, Butler MSS.

and I must submit that it is not in the interest of party harmony for the Western Populists to become parties to making divisions between Southern and Western Populists. Instead of deserting the Southern Populists, who are Populists from principle, the Populists of the West, where the organization is strongest, should join hands with us in the fight against Hanna's agents who are masquerading as Populists."⁴⁹

Butler was right in saying that the heart of midroad Populism was in the South, in the deep South in fact, but there were Populists in the West who, for various reasons, sympathized with and encouraged the midroaders in their angry determination to oust Butler from the party chairmanship and have the Populists nominate their own candidates for the presidency and vice presidency even if they had to do it as early as 1898, two years before the Democrats would again hold a national nomination convention. Paul Vandervoort, the Nebraskan president of the Reform Press Association, was still, as he had been during the campaign, one of the most prominent and active of the western midroaders.

Ignatius Donnelly of Minnesota hesitated and initially refused to join in the midroaders' demand for Butler's scalp, but he too eventually joined them. One of Donnelly's political allies in Minnesota was discouraged by the election results to see "the misguided fool farmers and laborers go back on their friends at the critical moment" and feared that Donnelly's grim prophesy of authoritarian rule in *Caesar's Column*, his earlier political novel, might be all too true. Donnelly obviously felt the same thing. In his melodramatic and pseudoliterary manner he confessed to his diary immediately after the election: "All our high-blown hopes have burst under us. . . . It seems useless to contest against the money-

⁴⁹ Edgerton to Butler, December 12, 1896, Butler to A. Rozelle of St. Louis, February 16, 1897, Campaign Letterbooks, Butler MSS. Butler called on S. F. Norton of Illinois, February 16, 1897, for help in stopping "at once this tendency of the Southern and Western Populists to pull apart."

power. Every election marks another step downward into the abyss, from which there will be no return save by fire and sword. The people are too shallow and too corrupt to conduct a republic. It will need a god come on earth, with divine power, to save them. And are they worth saving? Will they stay saved? . . . Never were the circumstances more favorable for success. We had a splendid candidate and he had made a gigantic campaign; the elements of reform were fairly united; and the depression of business universal, and yet in spite of it all the bankrupt millions voted to keep the yoke on their own necks. . . . I tremble for the future."⁵⁰

Donnelly's dire forebodings for the future were only slightly more pointless than all of Butler's efforts to preserve a national Populist party and all of the midroaders' efforts to force drastic and premature decisions on whatever fragment of the party that might follow them. Although men at that time could hardly be expected to have realized the fact immediately, the climax of Populism, the zenith of its impact on the nation's history, had been reached in the campaign of 1896. Events totally unforeseen at the time and certainly beyond the control of the Populists brought the gradual death of the party.

In the first place, prosperity did return to the nation in the last years of the decade, and Populism, which had reached its greatest national strength after the panic of 1893, could retain neither its militancy nor its membership without the sharp prodding of massive poverty. The brighter economic scene after 1897 did not mean that the fundamental ills which afflicted farmers and laborers had been cured in any perma-

⁵⁰ F. C. Culver to Donnelly, November 10, 1896, Donnelly's diary entry for November 6, 1896, Donnelly MSS. One of Henry D. Lloyd's radical friends was less philosophical when he wrote: "A really popular measure of reform would be one that would make the poor rich and the rich immensely wealthy. Any levelling up and down measure will meet condemnation from the top and bottom and be given the cold hands by the middle class." A. B. Adair to Lloyd, November 11, 1896, Lloyd MSS.

ment way, for they had not. Both groups still suffered from the grievances that had inspired the Populists' many-sided platform concerning currency and banking, transportation, the influx of cheap immigrant labor, and other matters. But the economy had ground its way through the painful cycle of deflation, mass unemployment, and bankruptcy and had finally come upon better times. The blunting of the sharp edge of the depression spelled death for the People's party as a major force in American political life.

On the specific issue of free silver, the denouement is well known. The increase in the volume of the currency and relief from the acute deflation which reformers had sought through silver came about in the years immediately after the election—but came through the decisive increase in the world's supply of gold. By 1897 the output of gold was double the total amount produced in 1890, and by 1899 it was on the way to trebling the figure for 1890. By 1900, when the Republicans enacted the Gold Standard Act, even the most ardent silverite of 1896 had to admit that the old issue had lost its political potency.⁵¹

The Spanish-American War was another development that hastened the disappearance of Populism. The humanitarian fever to help liberate the ill-treated Cubans hit Populists no less than most other Americans in 1897-1898. "The blare of the bugle drowned the voice of the Reformer," as Tom Watson put it, and with "the cannon-boom shaking the world, men had no ear for political economy—or economy of any other sort."⁵² Before the "splendid little war" with Spain could be decently concluded, the United States had embarked on the adventuresome course of making colonies out of the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii, and the nation was plunged into a great debate about imperialism.

⁵¹ Hicks, *Populist Revolt*, 389.

⁵² Watson's *Jeffersonian Magazine*, V (October 1910), 817.

The return of prosperity, the increase in the gold supply and the decline in appeal of the reform groups' common denominator of free silver, the popular crusade to liberate Cuba, and the ensuing imperialism—all of these things combined to kill Populism on the national scene. On the state level there were other developments that helped destroy the third party. In the West local fusion was the bridge by which many Populists gradually moved into the Democratic party, but in the South such a step was one that many Populists could never bring themselves to take. The fate of the Populists in the southern states is perhaps best illustrated by what happened to the vigorous party in North Carolina.

There in 1898, when Cleveland Democrats and Bryan Democrats could cooperate in the absence of a presidential election, Furnifold M. Simmons, aided by Josephus Daniels and others, led the "white man's party" in a "white supremacy crusade" to regain control of the legislature. Populist-Republican or "Fusion" rule in the state had brought with it a highly limited amount of office holding by Negroes, mostly in the eastern counties and in minor local offices. But the mere fact of large-scale Negro voting combined with the office holding allowed the Democrats to revive the Reconstruction cry of "nigger domination." Making a calculated play on racial passion and prejudice and using mounted and armed "Red Shirts" in various counties, the Democrats succeeded in recapturing the legislature.

In 1900 the Democrats not only recaptured the governorship but, through an even more violent and revolutionary process than in 1898, secured the enactment of a state constitutional amendment that effectively disfranchised most Negro voters. Butler and many other Populists joined with Republicans in the state to fight these Democratic measures. Butler even secured help from some of the Texas Populists, such as Harry Tracy and "Stump" Ashby, in the crucial state

election of 1900. But Tarheel Democrats were ruthless in their determination to “redeem” the state once and for all and to end all threats to the hegemony of the “white man’s party.”

Butler received hundreds of letters in the closing years of the century that poignantly suggest how the fate of the southern Populists and that of the Negroes had become intertwined. Requesting strict privacy, one rural Negro wrote: “A large number white men Democrats come to my little store & drove me inside & said not come any more, but my wife heard what they were doing & she & her aunt come down to the store & demanded that they [stop] it & I be let to go home with her, & so they let me go home & and all night they were shoting around my store, & run a rope from my store across the street & made a coffin & put on the rope & marked on [it] dead negro, this morning I cut the rope into, & they cursed & abused me, & I went in store & they demanded that I not come out any moore, & said that I had to leave here, did’t I would see what become of me, that one O’clock today that they were going to bury me in that coffin & preach my furnerl, & so on, that I could *leave* & live, or *stay* & be *burried*. So what must I do? & what can I do? Is there a place you could put me in or give me something to do? I am in a terrible con-dision now, & must do something.”⁵³

Another foe of the disfranchising amendment reported that about fifty Redshirt Democrats visited Negro homes in the community, warned the Negroes not to dare to try to register, and shot a hundred or more pistol shots in the air. The Democrats were said to “swair vengins against any Justice of the peace that offers to assist or help the negro to register or . . . to fill out the blanks that the Populist and Republicans has been sending out.” The frightened registrar was said to

⁵³ S. S. Strother of Eureka, Wayne County, North Carolina, to Butler, August 3, 1900, Butler MSS.

keep a pistol lying on the table beside him but “if there is any federal law to resort to he ought to be attended to at once.”⁵⁴

The white Populists in North Carolina who followed Butler in vigorously fighting the Democrats and their disfranchisement of the Negroes did not do so out of liberal convictions on the race question. Political circumstances and expediency led the white Populists to side with the Negro. Thus, one Populist wrote: “I am not in favour of the negro but I do beleave in giving the pore negro his dues. I live in Dunn N. C. where they say you [Butler] wold never be aloud to speak in no more. And this negro that I want to tel you [about] went to register and [they] wold not let him and he come to me and told me about it.” Another white Populist reported that the local “white supremacy” clubs admitted boys from age twelve on up and trained them “to have prejudice towards his fellow man who differs in opinion with him.” “I have thought this was a God fearing people,” he concluded, “but it seems as if the devil has gotten possession of their minds and hearts.”⁵⁵

The frauds and violence that accompanied the return to complete political power of the Tarheel Democrats and their victory for disfranchisement in 1900 threw the remaining Populists into despair. One declared after the state election that he felt he had “nothing to vote for and don’t know that I ever shall vote again.” Another requested Butler to send a copy of the national Republican platform. The irony of the total political situation in 1900 was not lost on the Populists:

⁵⁴ A. D. Sprivey of Ellerbe, North Carolina, to Butler, July 20, 1900, *ibid.* N. C. Cooper of Nashville, North Carolina, wrote Butler on August 4, 1900, immediately after the state election, that the Democrats refused to let Republicans register and walked around on election day with pistols showing. “I hope my dear Senator when Congress meets that you will pass a law that soldiers shall count the votes of every county in the state. . . . It was a shame and disgrace to see how Christian people did in this election.” *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Neal A. Butler of Dunn, North Carolina, to Butler, July 16, 1900, W. H. Brown of Rosemead, North Carolina, to Butler, July 5, 1900, Butler MSS.

while Bryan and the national Democratic party staunchly opposed the denial of liberty to the Filipinos, Bryan's party in North Carolina and other southern states resorted to violent, even revolutionary, tactics to disfranchise the Negro.⁵⁶

Despite the irony, Butler did not immediately join the Republican party, as many other Populists did in North Carolina after the state election of 1900. Unwilling to ignore the national issues that were before the country, Butler continued to serve as a leader in the national Populist party and campaigned in South Dakota and other western states for the Populist presidential nominee in 1900, who was once again William Jennings Bryan.⁵⁷

Butler had helped earlier in the year to have the Populist national convention nominate Bryan, even before the Democrats could do so, and to name as his running mate Charles A. Towne, a Silver Republican of Minnesota. When the Democrats nominated Adlai E. Stevenson of Illinois as Bryan's running mate and Towne withdrew, Butler and other Populist fusionists stuck to Bryan in preference to McKinley or the midroad Populist ticket that consisted of Wharton Barker of Pennsylvania and Ignatius Donnelly of Minnesota for the presidency and vice presidency respectively.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ J. E. Avery to Butler, August 5, 1900, Joseph W. Farabow to Butler, August 4, 1900, *ibid.* The Raleigh *Caucasian* on August 16, 1900, declared that Josephus Daniels' *News and Observer* was so mesmerized by the race issue that "if it should stumble upon a single truth, it would fall over it and then get up and swear she had been assaulted by a 'nigger.'"

⁵⁷ The Aberdeen, S. D., *Sentinel*, as quoted in the Raleigh *Caucasian*, October 25, 1900, reported that Butler emphasized in his speeches the necessity of controlling the trusts and anti-imperialism. The same issue of Butler's paper carried a story entitled "Cotton Is King" about the high price commanded by the southern staple. After the feverish state election, the *Caucasian* often referred to the widespread apathy toward the national election.

⁵⁸ The best account of the quarrels between the Populist factions after 1896 is still Hicks, *Populist Revolt*, 380-403. Ridge, *Donnelly*, 366 ff., traces the Minnesotan's role, and Woodward, *Watson*, 355-63, treats the 1904 campaign when the midroaders finally had what little was left of the party to themselves and nominated Tom Watson for the presidency.

That some Populists “soured” in the twentieth century and became hatemongers or reactionary demagogues is a familiar fact. Tom Watson, with his later career as baiter of Negroes and Jews and Catholics, is the most famous example of the degeneration of Populism. But the case of Watson and a few others like him should not lead to the conclusion that this was the typical pattern. Although statistical and biographical information is not available to prove the point, there were probably just as many or more Populists like Butler who remained interested in reforms, especially for the farmers of the nation, and who never resorted to hate campaigns against religious or racial minorities as an outlet for frustration and despair.

By 1904 Butler had become a Republican, both in North Carolina and the nation. Theodore Roosevelt was president and was nominated to succeed himself, while the Democrats in running Alton B. Parker of New York had in one sense reverted to their habits of the Cleveland era. Butler and the several thousand other Tarheel Populists who became Republicans enthusiastically supported Roosevelt, even in the famous split in the party in 1912. And after Woodrow Wilson’s victory, as the Progressive Movement approached its climax in the New Freedom, Butler’s wife remembered the 1890’s when an earlier reform effort had failed and wryly noted: “Twenty years ago, when we were advocating the things that the whole country is standing for now, we were called ‘long-haired cranks.’ Does it not seem funny how soon people forget, or, rather, I might say, how long it takes them to learn?”⁵⁹

Though too many complacent observers at the time, as well as some historians, did see the Populists as mere “long-haired cranks,” from the climax of Populism in 1896 to the begin-

⁵⁹ Mrs. Butler to F. H. Hoover, November 9, 1912, in the Mrs. Marion (Florence Faison) Butler MSS, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library.

nings of Progressivism in the early Twentieth century was not so long a period. The Populists, caught in the changed economic and international circumstances of the last years of the old century, had finally been forced to “close their academy.” But they had provided political education for many Americans, leaders as well as the led, education about the need for expanded governmental action, state and federal, to redress the economic grievances that afflicted both the old majority who were farmers and the rising class of the nation’s future who were urban industrial workers.